

A photograph of a dark, abandoned hallway. The walls are covered in graffiti and red paint splatters. The floor is littered with debris, including a yellow pipe and a red object. A doorway is visible in the distance, leading to a darker area. The overall atmosphere is grimy and desolate.

CARNAGE AFTER THE END

VOLUME 2

Edited by Gloria Bobrowicz

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AFTER THE END
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Sirens Call Publications

Carnage: After the End – Volume 2

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Sampler

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Jaundice

Zachary O'Shea

Cara nearly lost her footing as she stumbled backward into the hallway. Even after two years of working salvage she still couldn't ignore how slippery every surface was in the infected zone like the crew's veterans. At least she didn't really hear the squelching under boot anymore; had become deadened to the stench of rot. The lost second was almost enough time for the Yellow lurching after her, but she managed to level her shotgun at its center of pulpy mass and fire. The clear plate of her helmet was splattered with jaundiced viscera as the muzzle flash faded. She'd become numb to the horror of hundreds of ropey spores squirming inches from her eye. On reflex she aimed blind a few inches higher before shooting again. Only then did she wipe off the faceplate with a sleeve, and confirm the kill.

Not that one ever killed a Yellow just by gunning it down. The lumpy masses festering in what remained of a corpse rolled pitifully back and forth trying to stand. The first shot had caused enough mechanical damage to what muscle and spongy bone remained, rendering its arms useless. The second vaporized a good portion of pilfered skull. Spilled like a rotten egg, the ruptured head was little more than fuzzy gunk and half-severed shoots. The animate wore tattered jeans and a t-shirt. Its fingers, covered with hundreds of thin yellow cilia, writhed knowing that warm flesh and fresh marrow was near.

Cara suppressed the urge to pump another few rounds into the 'man' as an act of mercy. Yellows weren't human anymore; rather corrupted meat. She took a quick scan of the room for other shamblers. Another Yellow dragged itself around the edge of a corroded table. Its lower half had sloughed away long ago leaving a tangle of putrid intestines and fungal growth trailing behind. One of its eyes had been replaced with a ruffled *flower*. The other eye stared out at a fresh nest for its spores with an almost canine hunger. The scavenger erased all that with a well-placed slug. The desecrated dog kept slithering so Cara spent another shot taking off an arm. That would be enough to make the space safe.

She pulled back to the door, brushing her shoulder along the deteriorated frame. "Clear." Then Cara waited for a response that never came and worry curled its fingers around her heart. Jerry had been covering the stairway up while she found cover. The two of them had gotten separated from everyone else when things went to hell. The power station ended up having unexpected pockets of Yellows – like everywhere else. That was why salvage crews were sent out heavily armed to get what the Casino needed to stay alive. Cara hissed under her breath. If Jerry was playing another damn joke she would shoot him.

"Jerry?" She eased out into the hall fully and looked toward the stairs. No animates were currently crawling their way up, nor was the thick-shouldered lug there to answer her. Despite the hot perspiration that now clung to inside of the wetsuit, Cara felt suddenly chilled, her skin pebbling...

Hoolies

Harper Hull

I was searching for artifacts with Harry in the rubble near where the railway bridge used to stand when they appeared across the debris-filled water. Harry saw them first, much to my shame when I look back on it. I was supposed to be the smart one, the alert one, the veteran eyes, ears and nose always wary of intrusions and possible danger. Not this time. No, it wasn't until Harry pulled at my sleeve and I looked up, following his gaze, that I noticed them. They were seven, staring at us blankly with their awful yellow star banners flying behind them. I quickly scanned the landscape behind us, already knowing that there was no-one else within a few miles of us, but it was instinctive, that last look for help. Just collapsed buildings as far as I could see, which was exactly what I knew would be there. I turned back and faced the river with one hand moving to Harry's shoulder, the other to my belt.

"The eight points of death" whispered Harry, his small frame shaking slightly beneath my softly placed palm.

"Turn around, take your colours and run toward home as fast as you can." I clenched his shoulder once after delivering my instructions and let go, keeping my eyes on the enemy. If they chose to charge us, they could be across the huge pieces of stone and brick that stuck up from the black water in a couple of minutes, sense of balance permitting. They didn't move; not even when Harry made his swift and inelegant escape across the broken concrete. I couldn't resist and glanced back over my shoulder to watch him run. His golden moon flag flapped in the air above his head, the pole it swung from bouncing in its strapping at the small of his back. By the time I faced the seven again they were moving, only away from me, to the west, not even glancing back in my direction. Taking the time to clip my own banner-pole to the back of my belt, I studied them before they disappeared behind broken buildings. All seemed to have some kind of blade attached to their waists, legs or arms, but not one of them carried a firearm as far as I could tell. My own weapon was quite prominently holstered against my right hip, a wide-barreled shooter that would cut them all to bloody chunks at close range but be lucky to hit the sky from a distance, and I patted it softly before wiping my cold forehead dry and running after Harry, the rough fabric of my banner snapping in the strong breeze above and behind me. The fact that they didn't even look at me as some kind of threat seemed a bit offensive. I paused just once and looked back – safe from view in the burned out stripped interior of a toppled red and blue bus – they had not returned; they had not crossed.

We were trained from birth how to interact with the Eight-Pointers. If there were more of them; run. If there were less; fight. Simple really...

Juliana

Angel D. Callido

Kenshiro Ramirez knew many things.

He knew that he was tired of seeing the abandoned husks of buildings as he wandered alone through his city. The emptiness just added to his sense of isolation.

He realized that a name that still haunted his dreams at night. A child's whisper in his ear still brought an acid burn to his sharp brown eyes.

"Shiro, my hero."

Kenshiro was certain that at least two assholes were trailing him as he traversed what might have been the Verrazano Bridge. *Or was it the Brooklyn Bridge? Fuck it!* He'd never been good at directions. The last time he'd checked, the signs that were left intact indicated that the street numbers were decreasing. *Brooklyn was downtown from Manhattan, wasn't it?*

Damnit!

He knew much; but lately, he thought of the strangeness of modern conspiracy theories.

Kenshiro grew up with parents who were hard working business owners in New York City's midtown area. A Caribbean/Japanese restaurant wasn't something anybody would really have expected to work out. But in a place like 21st century Manhattan, it flourished. There was no denying that New Yorkers' tastes were too eclectic for the business to remain unnoticed. People of every different nationality were always crammed together like sardines at Times Square. Tourists and residents were becoming harder and harder to distinguish. Kenshiro's parents were tourists who'd become residents. His mother finally convinced his father to help in the pursuit of the dream of sharing her extraordinary cuisine with others for money.

As hard as they both worked at the business, each parent handled things differently. Asuka Ramirez was a patient, yet headstrong Japanese woman who honed her culinary skills to the point of infusing them with a fierce, samurai spirit. Asuka married Raphael Ramirez years before she ever thought to own a restaurant. But as impatient and impulsive as he could be, Raphael was also a strong and encouraging man. The ruggedly handsome smile that spread across his face whenever his wife spoke of her dream made her fall in love with him over and over again. It was the same infectious smile he gave Kenshiro when he learned to ride a bike, or recited the alphabet for them as a button-nosed kid.

But it was Raphael who began to discuss conspiracy theories two years after the business opened. Talk of a new, AIDS-like disease was becoming wide spread in the United States. It was bad enough that the Avian Flu once had such an adverse effect on Americans' perceptions of Asians. It only took one poorly timed conspiracy theory from some metal militia nutcase in Arkansas to get Raphael's blood boiling on the issue of American Xenophobia...

The Mouse Ran Down

Adrian Tchaikovsky

Will Kempe was just starting his comic turn when Ellie pushed her way through the crowd to prod me in the shoulder.

“It’s time,” she hissed. “We’ve got to go.”

I missed Kempe’s standard opener, the joke about lawyers, and the whooping roar of the groundlings around us obliterated Ellie’s next words.

“Give me five minutes, come on,” I slipped into the next lull. “I never get to hear this. I’m all packed.”

Ellie prodded me again. “Move, John.” She was dressed up as an apprentice; a young lad with the first growth of moustache feathering his lip, out on the prowl in his master’s cast-off doublet. A man’s clothes made it easier to move about London in the Year of Our Lord 1598. Small wonder Shakespeare had cross-dressing on the brain.

“They’ve got the Complete Works back at Permian One.” Ellie’s finger jabbed even harder. “Besides, you could have gone to see it yesterday.”

“It’s Will Kempe. He does a different skit each night. No-one wrote it down.” But I was letting myself be dragged off, as Ellie drove a path through the crowd, leading with her elbows.

I never did get to hear that routine of Kempe’s. You could keep the rest of the play, the stuff Shakespeare wrote, but Kempe was a comedian’s comedian, and I was always having to move just as he got into his flow, hearing the joke but never the punch line.

But we were running out of time, approaching the jagged end of history. Ellie was right: we had to get out.

There was a warehouse near the river that was the subject of a furious inheritance lawsuit. It was piled high with crates and boxes, imperishable goods brought in from the Indies and tied up in the courts until one of seven warring brothers would finally prevail over the others in around 1603. It was our home, for the nine months between 1597 to 1598 that history had snapped off and preserved. We always arrived in the bitter cold of December, laden with our meagre possessions, hurrying through the snow-scattered streets to our makeshift sanctuary. We left in a September that was just being leached of the heat of summer, just as Will Kempe was making them laugh at the Curtain.

Four times. I had crept into this London four times with Ellie and Marcus, with a handful of families at our heels, living in the untenanted spaces of history by borrowing and theft and subterfuge, then moving on.

We got back to the warehouse double time, by all the secret ways of that close-pressed, cluttered London; roofs and alleyways and connecting cellars. We were dressed as locals, but we were not supposed to be there, surplus to temporal requirements. It was best to avoid being noticed...

Rock Garden

L.E. White

"Oh my god," I said when I looked up at the sky.

When I heard the screech, I expected to look up and point out a hawk. Instead, a fireball streaked overhead. The bright green flare raced across the clear blue sky of a July afternoon while leaving a trail of smoke through the heavens. "Did you see that?" I pointed the trail out to both my girls as it faded from view but we never stopped walking.

The tall grass of an Indiana hay field brushed my knuckles as we made our way to the lake. My daughter's tiny body rode on my hip, while she held my wife's hand. The wind blew their hair back and had I been standing off to the side, each would have had a halo of spun gold behind them. It was far too windy for me to fish, but I never turned down a request to catch frogs and skip rocks. So instead of mending fence or putting a new roof on the chicken coop, I was going with my girls to play in the water.

The day had started as it always did. I fed the animals while my wife made breakfast. My daughter had played with her pets and we checked the weather to help plan our day. As far as we knew, today wasn't supposed to be special, just hot.

"Shawn, turn on the news. There is stuff all over the web about that shooting star you saw. It hit Hawaii."

I jumped up at my wife's request and flipped on the TV so that we could listen from the kitchen.

"...nexpectedly shifted course. NASA officials have stated that there are no other meteorites close enough to the planet to pose a threat of impact at this time."

The image of the anchor disappeared as pictures of destruction were splashed across the screen. "Estimates suggest that the meteorite was the size of a large office building. It is believed to have impacted Honolulu with a force equivalent to the largest nuclear bomb currently in existence."

"I wonder how close we came to that being a planet killer like the one in that movie?" Wren asked.

"I don't know."

"The internet says that there might be enough dust thrown up to change the weather."

"For how long?"

"I don't know," she said as she closed her laptop and turned to look out the window.

I rubbed my chin while looking at the same window, "I just hope we aren't close enough to see any big changes."

The Silence of the Dead

Wednesday Silverwood

The Silence seemed to blanket the world as if a thick layer of cotton covered everything. It cushioned the remains of the buildings, and the crumbling walls reaching skyward into the darkness. Small pieces of ash floated down through the blackout, their ragged edges catching in the pale light. It looked a little like snow.

The Silence smothered Jon. It smothered the city. It felt like a pressure inside his ears; inside his mind. It had taken his thoughts, filling-up the world with whiteness; with nothingness. It was the Silence of a future that would never happen. It was the final exhalations of the dying; their last breaths caught and left behind in the world. It was the silent screams of those who did not want to die.

The Silence was the Silence of the Dead.

The thing was, that it had happened so suddenly.

It was a Saturday. Jon and his girlfriend Tracy had been hanging out, doing very little. In the afternoon, his best friend Simon had called and asked them to go round to his basement flat. He had a new computer game, something about zombies, and he wondered if they wanted to go round and play it with him. Tracy had shrugged and said 'okay,' so they had picked up a six-pack and taken it over to Simon's.

Simon's flat was small and cramped with the three of them in it. Still, they had been having a good time. They were laughing and joking and everything was totally and completely normal. Then, suddenly, everything had changed. There was just this huge, massive, jolt. At first he thought it was an earthquake or something. But really, he knew it was just too big. Part of the ceiling had fallen in and they found themselves choking in the dust and smoke.

Jon had recovered first. He had scrambled out from some of the fallen plasterboard and put out a hand to Tracy to help her up. There was a bright, red gash on her forehead and a look of frozen fear in her eyes. It was then that he tried to say something, to comfort her, but when he spoke, he couldn't hear anything. He could feel his lips move, but there was no sound. He realised that Tracy couldn't hear him either. She was looking at him blankly, confused. He looked around for Simon, and found him wedged under a piece of metal piping. Simon was screaming but it just looked like his mouth was opening and closing like a fish. It was almost comedic. Everything felt unreal.

He thought he might have gone deaf, perhaps temporarily as a result of the boom, but he soon realised it was more complex than that.

They had climbed up out of the rubble to see the fire and the silent screaming...

A Birthday to Remember

Harry Manners

Pain.

Alexander was staring at the ceiling. As the room materialised around him the cold arrived, raw and gnawing. His back arched as tendrils of ice bit at the base of his skull and his fingers curled of their own accord while the chill stole along his limbs. Air sailed from his mouth as a puff of vapour, twirling upwards.

He winced, drawing his legs upwards until he was curled into a ball and his teeth were bared. His forehead became coated in perspiration, whilst his head pulsed and something burned behind his forehead.

Beyond the cold, there was little else. Time crept along lethargically, without purpose, and all the while his fingers clutched at his palms, and a storm of light flashed before his eyes.

And then the pain was gone. Suddenly, immediately, it was absent. Alex blinked, the air shuddered from his mouth, and he looked around.

His bedroom lay around him, untouched. The unmade bed lay below him, torn into disarray. For a moment he lay still, afraid to move, lest the pain return, and then he turned his head and looked at the vast ocean of adolescent detritus.

He sat up and looked down at his body. Clad in untarnished nightwear, his skin bore no sign of the cold, nor sign of injury, but the flesh was taut and the hair along his limbs stood on end.

The air was still cold, but the chill was odd; lacking in true substance, instead little more than a feeble sensation attacking his face and hands.

Standing hesitantly, his breathing calmed and he ambled through the masses of discarded shirts, books and empty bottles until he reached the window and looked out onto the street.

The sun had risen and the birds were singing, but a heavy mist had descended, shielding the road and surrounding homes from view. The driveway below sat as it always had, but there was something else there now, something new.

A small red car, beaten and stunted, was parked haphazardly beside the hedge in a poor attempt to disguise it. He frowned at it as something akin to revelation stirred within his stomach and then he took a step back from the window, moving for the door.

It was his birthday.

The corridor was cold too. He looked to the closed doors of the other bedrooms and stopped. Seeping through their hinges and beneath their frames were faint trails of vapour.

He shivered, turned to the staircase and descended. The air seemed to warm as he stepped onto the ground floor. He stopped, turning back to look up the stairs. The crawling of his flesh dissipated rapidly and was gone.

The air at the top of the stairs seemed thicker somehow, heavier. He looked at it until the dog crept from underneath the staircase and nudged his hand...

An End for Some

Jason Lairamore

The sky was real blue. The morning was a little cool. It was a nice day to work and make some money. I'd already changed into some of my light bibs, some boots, and a cut-off tee.

My grandpa, Pa, was on his knees off his back porch looking at an inset square of concrete. Beside him was a new, bright red, hand pump.

"I'm looking for work," I said. He hauled his gangly self up and squared up proper to face me, his six feet three to my five feet eleven.

"What's the first thing I told you about work, Jerol?" Pa was the go-to guy when I needed a job. He was always doing something. He'd been retired over ten years and still worked every day.

"Set a price," I said. I needed money. School had just let out and I wanted new traps. Dad's old ones were about rusted through.

"Close," he said. "I got four hours of easy labor. Going to reopen the well house. Pays three dollars an hour."

"I'll take it," I said and stuck my hand out.

"Done." Pa didn't take my hand. He put on his work gloves.

"Could have got five dollars an hour out of me easy, boy." He shook his head. "Know your worth Jerol. That's the first thing to know when setting out to work. You're fourteen years old. Don't sell your time cheap when you know you deserve more."

He met my eye and held it. "Don't ever let others say you aren't worth your salt. You get me?"

"Yes, Sir."

He handed me a shovel and set me to digging a shallow lateral line down the hill to the garden. I got to it. Easy job.

My grandma, Nan, came out on the porch a while later. I was at least a hundred feet away, still digging the line. Pa was up taking him a drink of sweet tea from his mason jar. It'd got hot today.

I waved, but Nan wasn't looking. She talked to Pa. I stuck the shovel back in the dirt and heard Pa's Mason jar break.

Pa stared at Nan.

"What's going on?" I called.

"Jerol, you need to get home," Pa yelled.

That didn't sound good. I shouldered the shovel and walked back to the house.

"Go Jerol. Hurry," He said. I looked at Nan. She looked like she'd been crying, but it was hard to tell. She kept looking at the ground...

Knock Knock, Who's There?

Magda Knight

Even as the three of us are discussing the potential merits of running past the thing in order to make a break for the supermarket, Lisbet's eyes begin to change.

Shit, I think. It's a selfish thought, but then again, it's not as though I really know her. She's only here because she knocked on my council flat's door minutes before the Hadron Collider collapsed in on itself and created a doorway for all the things to come through. She didn't knock on my door to tell me about that, of course. None of us yet knew. She'd come to introduce herself as the ex-tenant and make arrangements for the forwarding of mail. She wasn't even in my house long enough for me to offer her a cup of tea. As soon as I'd started to rake through the tottering pile of unopened bills on the welcome mat we heard shrieks from the flat above, coming through the thin ceiling in a vile stream of what initially sounded like domestic abuse, swiftly followed by the screams from the street outside. Lisbet's a national Tae Kwon Do champion, she says, or used to be before the door opened. She's someone we need. She's someone we can't afford to lose.

Now that Lisbet's on the verge of turning into one of those unwanted visitors from the other side of the doorway herself, there are only two left out of our little group of five: me and Gremovski. If I survive this and end up on my own, I'll try to join another group, if I can find one. Hell, I'll tell them *I'm* a national Tae Kwon Do champion. That way they might even keep me around.

"You okay?"

Even as I mouth the platitude her eyes darken to a midnight blue, suffused with a stare I've only seen once before on an unchanged person, back in the old days, on my baby brother as he lay still and watchful two months premature in the incubator. Full of a cold knowledge of things a human isn't meant to know. The objective perspective of something vast and nameless, looking on the world from inside its little house of meat and finding it wanting.

My baby brother never made it out of the incubator, and it was a desperately sad state of affairs, and it wasn't his fault. It's not Lisbet's fault, either. She just drew the short straw. Even so, as her eyes grow brilliantly dark and cold I tighten my grip on the crowbar. My baby brother was born, but not born. Not fully. Gremovski hasn't noticed Lisbet's eyes yet; he's focusing on the thing trapped in the flats ahead, so it's up to me to make sure that Lisbet goes the same way as my brother: born, but not born.

Even as she reaches forward, her mouth gagging as if she isn't used to having one and wants to find out how it works, I whip the crowbar round with all of my strength and try to focus on just the heft of it, not what I'm actually doing. Lisbet tracks the curved end as it embeds itself deeply and clumsily in her eye, and it's the last thing she sees...

Clean World

Charlie Fish

With my bolt cutter I clipped the last few struts of the grill and kicked it out. Waited for the sound – longer than I expected before the grill hit the ground with a metallic clang that vibrated in the air. Even through the helmet of my bio-suit it was pin sharp, like a musical triangle. I stood on the sill to take in the view. Above, marshmallow clouds sat languid in the poisoned sky, tinged golden-brown like an Impressionist painting. Far below, the Thames flowed gently upstream.

There were cars on the bridge, boats on the river. Many of the traffic lights still worked. Some of the windows in the buildings across the river had shutters down, as if there was someone left to operate them. Except for the bodies, I could take a picture and believe that London was still alive.

It was, in a way. I could hear the ticking of the giant clock beneath me, the mechanical pulse of the city, boasting of power and iron, each tick a satisfyingly Victorian whirr-CHUNK; that, and my own breathing inside the mask. No more sirens. No more public address. The screams and sobs were silenced.

This city, this world, belonged to me now. I could explore every niche until I had consumed the entire metropolis. I could travel and let my mind grow fat with the vestiges of all human endeavor. The world and time stretched out before me.

The quarter bells sounded their familiar tune to mark the passing of the hour. I heard giant cogs engaging below me, wheeling together in a symphony of silken engineering that spurred the swell of emotion in my gut. After a protracted moment of anticipation, the Great Bell – Big Ben – struck noon. Each gong seemed to shake the very fabric of the tower, or perhaps it was my eyes shaking in my skull. I crouched on the sill to be sure of my balance.

As the stentorian chimes continued, I cautiously regained my feet until I stood proud against the sky, head back, chest brimming. Punctuated by the deafening toll, I let out a primal roar that rose and sailed across the barren scape, leaving a film of mist on the inside of my mask.

Silence again. But as I waited for the condensation in my mask to clear, I heard something else, on the fringes of perception. I tried to persuade myself I had imagined it, but it came again. An unmistakably human sound. Once more. A distant scream, echoing my roar.

I scanned the opposite bank, looking for signs of movement, wishing I had a scope. There. Near the far end of Westminster Bridge, emerging from Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospital, was a stumbling figure. I stepped down from the sill and hastened to the stairs, abandoning my tools.

The bio-suit, oxygen tank, and pralidoxime-atropine-diazepam dialyzer severely limited my freedom of movement, but the rush of adrenalin saw me halfway down the tower before I ran out of breath...

About the Author

Angel D. Callido

Angel D. Callido currently resides somewhere in New York City. He walks the streets in content silence, taking in the many sights and sounds. Few know of the chilling thoughts and visions that inspire his writing.

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Harper Hull

Born and raised in the mystical wastelands of northern England amongst harpies and dragons, Harper now lives in the sultry, sweaty southern United States with his Dixie wife, fighting off the giant spiders and man-eating vultures. He has work published or about to be published in 4 continents and can't wait to hit that dark, mysterious fifth. His most recent credits include a zombie anthology alongside big names like George R.R. Martin and David Moody and a website where people walk around with flash fiction pinned to the back of their jackets. He has fallen off a boat, been hit by 2 cars, literally been scared of his own shadow and traveled in an elevator with Kirsten Dunst. Favourite things include the writings of JG Ballard, the music of (the) Pixies, Scapa Flow, tiramisu, winter coats and microbrews. If you ever read anything he is responsible for he just hopes you enjoy it.

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The founder and editor of popular alternative feminist website Mookychick.co.uk, Magda Knight regularly writes in the realms of horror, speculative fiction, steampunk and YA. Her work

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Harry Manners

Harry Manners was raised in the quiet county of Bedfordshire, England. Currently taking a gap year from his studies to focus on writing, he spends his time working on his second novel and indulging in reams of short stories. Harry lives with his parents, two siblings and their Labrador pup Ludo.

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Zachary O'Shea was born in the refinery belt of California and lives in the neon desolation of Nevada. When not trying to avoid one armed bandits and the tides of tourists he enjoys various activities: running and occasionally playing table-top RPGs, reading, writing, war-gaming, and eating out too often with great friends. While he has been writing for several years now '*Jaundice*' is his first published story. He maintains a writing blog at www.lastslicestudios.com, can be found on twitter at <https://twitter.com/BoxofTeeth>, and on Facebook as ZacharyW.O'Shea.

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Adrian Tchaikovsky was born in Lincolnshire, studied and trained in Reading and now lives in Leeds. He is known for the Shadows of the Apt fantasy series starting with Empire in Black and Gold and currently up to Book 8, The Air War. His hobbies include stage-fighting, and tabletop, live and online role-playing. More information and short stories can be found at www.shadowsoftheapt.com.

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