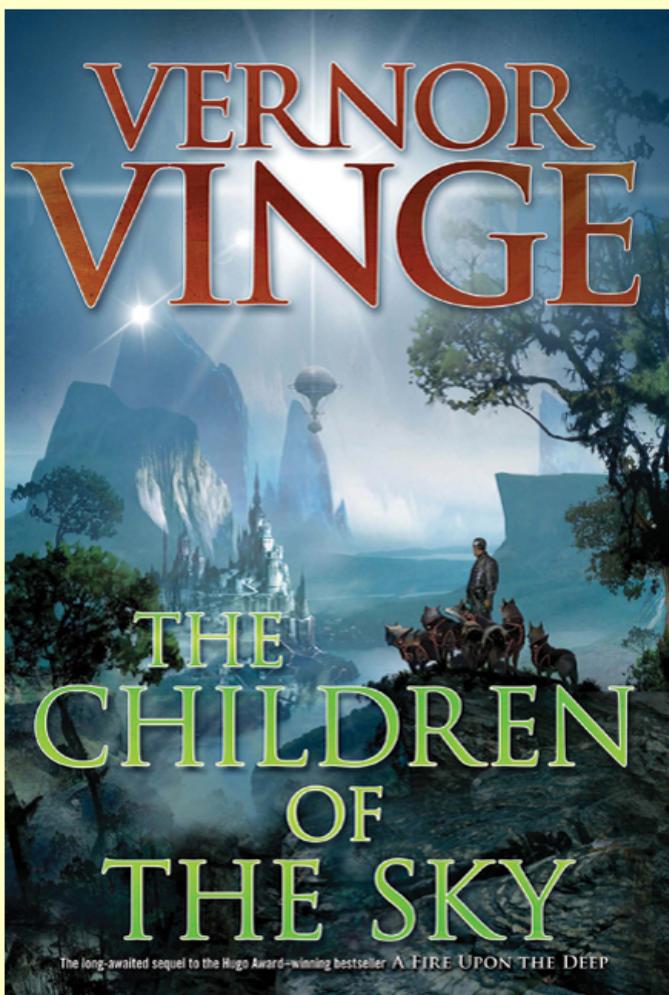


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THE CHILDREN OF THE SKY

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A Tor Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vinge, Vernor.

The children of the sky/Vernor Vinge.—1st ed.

p. cm.

“A Tom Doherty Associates book.”

ISBN 978-0-312-87562-6 (hardback)

1. Life on other planets—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3572.I534C47 2011

813'54—dc22

2011024210

First Edition: October 2011

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER 00

How do you get the attention of the richest businessperson in the world?

Vendacious had spent all his well-remembered life sucking up to royalty. He had never dreamed he would fall so low as to need a common merchant, but here he was with his only remaining servant, trying to find a street address in East Home's factory district.

This latest street was even narrower than the one they had left. Surely the world's richest would never come here!

The alley had heavy doors set on either side. At the moment, all were closed, but the place must be a crowded madness at shift change. There were posters every few feet, but these were not the advertisements they had seen elsewhere. These were demands and announcements: WASH ALL PAWS BEFORE WORK, NO ADVANCE WAGES, EMPLOYMENT APPLICATIONS AHEAD. This last sign pointed toward a wide pair of doors at the end of the alley. It was all marvelously pompous and silly. And yet . . . as he walked along, Vendacious took a long look at the crenellations above him. Surely that was plaster over wood. But if it was real stone, then this was a fortified castle hidden right in the middle of East Home commercialism.

Vendacious held back, waved at his servant to proceed. Chitiratifor advanced along the alley, singing praise for his dear master. He had not quite reached the wide doors when they swung open and a hugely numerous pack emerged. It was nine or ten and it spread across their way like a sentry line. Vendacious suppressed the urge to look up at the battlements for signs of archers.

The huge pack looked at them stupidly for a moment, then spoke in loud and officious chords. "Employment work you want? Can you read?"

Chitiratifor stopped singing introductory flourishes, and replied, "Of course we can read, but we're not here for—"

The gatekeeper pack spoke right over Chitiratifor's words: "No matter. I have application forms here." Two of it trotted down the steps with scraps of paper held in their jaws. "I will explain it all to you and then you sign. Tycoon pay good. Give good housing. And one day off every tenday."

Chitiratifor bristled. "See here, my good pack. We are not seeking employment. My lord"—he gestured respectfully at Vendacious—"has come to tell the Great Tycoon of new products and opportunities."

"Paw prints to suffice if you cannot write—" The other interrupted its own

speech as Chitiratifor's words finally penetrated. "Not wanting to apply for work?" It looked at them for moment, took in Chitiratifor's flashy outfit. "Yes, you are not dressed for this doorway. I should have noticed." It thought for a second. "You are in wrong place. Business visitors must visit to the Business Center. You go back five blocks and then onto the Concourse of the Great Tycoon. Wait. I get you a map." The creature didn't move, but Vendacious realized the pack was even more numerous than he had thought, extending back out of sight into the building; these Easterners tolerated the most grotesque perversions.

Chitiratifor shuffled back in Vendacious' direction, and the nearest of him hissed, "That's a two-mile walk just to get to the other side of this frigging building!"

Vendacious nodded and walked around his servant, confronting the gatekeeper directly. "We've come all the way from the West Coast to help Tycoon. We demand a courteous response, not petty delays!"

The nearest members of the gatekeeper stepped back timidly. Up close, Vendacious could hear that this was no military pack. Except at dinner parties, it probably never had killed a single living thing. In fact, the creature was so naive that it didn't really recognize the deadly anger confronting it. After a moment, it reformed its line, and said "Nevertheless, sir, I must follow my orders. Business visitors use the business entrance."

Chitiratifor was hissing murder; Vendacious waved him quiet. But Vendacious really didn't want to walk around to the official entrance—and that wasn't just a matter of convenience. He now realized that finding this entrance was a lucky accident. Woodcarver's spies were unlikely this far from home, but the fewer people who could draw a connection between Tycoon and Vendacious, the better.

He backed off courteously, out of the gatekeeper's space. This entrance would be fine if he could just talk to someone with a mind. "Perhaps your orders do not apply to me."

The gatekeeper pondered the possibility for almost five seconds. "But I think they do apply," it finally said.

"Well then, while we wait for the map, perhaps you could pass on an enquiry to someone who deals with difficult problems." There were several lures Vendacious could dangle: "Tell your supervisor that his visitors bear news about the invasion from outer space."

"The what from where?"

"We have eyewitness information about the *humans*—" that provoked more blank looks. "Damn it, fellow, this is about the mantis monsters!"

Mention of the mantis monsters did not produce the gatekeeper's supervisor; the fivesome who came out to see them was far higher in the chain of command than that! "Remasritlfeer" asked a few sharp questions and then waved for them to follow him. In a matter of minutes, they were past the gatekeeper and walking down carpeted corridors. Looking around, Vendacious had to hide his smiles. The interior design was a perfection of bad taste and mismatched wealth, proof

of the foolishness of the newly rich. Their guide was a very different matter. Remasritlfeer was mostly slender, but there were scars on his snouts and flanks, and you could see the lines of hard muscle beneath his fur. His eyes were mostly pale yellow and not especially friendly.

It was a long walk, but their guide had very little to say. Finally, the corridor ended at a member-wide door, more like the entrance to an animal den than the office of the world's richest commoner.

Remasritlfeer opened the door and stuck a head in. "I have the outlanders, your eminence," he said

A voice came from within: "That should be 'my lord'. Today, I think 'my lord' sounds better."

"Yes, my lord." But the four of Remasritlfeer who were still in the corridor rolled their heads in exasperation.

"Well then, let's not waste my time. Have them all come in. There's plenty of room."

As Vendacious filed through the narrow doorway, he was looking in all directions without appearing to be especially interested. Gas mantle lamps were ranked near the ceiling. Vendacious thought he saw parts of a bodyguard on perches above that. Yes, the room was large, but it was crowded with—what? not the bejeweled knickknacks of the hallway. Here there were gears and gadgets and large tilted easels covered with half-finished drawings. The walls were bookcases rising so high that perches on ropes and pulleys were needed to reach the top shelves. One of Vendacious stood less than a yard from the nearest books. No great literature here. Most of the books were accounting ledgers. The ones further up looked like bound volumes of legal statutes.

The unseen speaker continued, "Come forward where I can see you all! Why in hell couldn't you use the business visitor entrance? I didn't build that throne room for nothing." This last was querulous muttering.

Vendacious percolated through the jumble. Two of him came out from under a large drawing easel. The rest reached the central area a second later. He suffered a moment of confusion as Chitiratifor shuffled himself out of the way, and then he got his first glimpse of the Great Tycoon:

The pack was an ill-assorted eightsome. Vendacious had to count him twice, since the smaller members were moving around so much. At the core were four middle-aged adults. They had no noble or martial aspect whatsoever. Two of them wore the kind of green-tinted visors affected by accountants everywhere. The other two had been turning the pages of a ledger. Pretty clearly he had been counting his money or cutting expenses, or whatever it was that businesscritters did.

Tycoon cast irritated looks at Vendacious and Chitiratifor. "You claim to know about the mantis monsters. This better be good. I know lots about the mantises, so I advise against lies." He pointed a snout at Vendacious, waving him closer.

Treat him like royalty. Vendacious belly-crawled two of himself closer to Tycoon. Now he had the attention of all Tycoon's members. The four small ones,

puppies under two years old, had stopped their pell-mell orbiting of the accountancy four. Two hung back with the four, while two came within a couple feet of Vendacious. These pups were integrated parts of Tycoon's personality—just barely, and when they felt like it. Their mindsounds were unseemly loud. Vendacious had to force himself not to shrink back.

After a moment or two of impolite poking, Tycoon said, "So, how would you know about the mantis monsters?"

"I witnessed their starship *Oobii* descend from the sky." Vendacious used the human name of their ship. The sounds were flat and simple, alien. "I saw its lightning weapon bring down a great empire in a single afternoon."

Tycoon was nodding. Most East Coast packs took this version of Woodcarver's victory to be a fantasy. Evidently, Tycoon was not one of those. "You're saying nothing new here, fellow—though few packs know the name of the flying ship."

"I know far more than that, my lord. I speak the mantis language. I know their secrets and their plans." And he had one of their *datasets* in his right third pannier, though he had no intention of revealing that advantage.

"Oh really?" Tycoon's smile was sharp and incredulous, even unto his puppies. "Who then are you?"

An honest answer to that question had to come sooner or later, fatal though it might be. "My lord, my name is Vendacious. I was—"

Tycoon's heads jerked up. "Remasritlfeer!"

"My lord!" The deadly little fivesome was clustered around the only exit.

"Cancel my appointments. No more visitors today, of any sort. Have Salimiphon take care of the shift change."

"Yes, my lord!"

Tycoon's older four set their ledger aside and all of him looked at Vendacious. "Be assured that this claim will be verified, sir. Discreetly but definitively verified." But you could see Tycoon's enthusiasm, the *will* to believe; for now, the puppies were in control. "You were Woodcarver's spymaster, convicted of treason."

Vendacious raised his heads. "All true, my lord. And I am proud of my 'treason.' Woodcarver has allied with the mantis queen and her maggots."

"Maggots?" Tycoon's eyes were wide.

"Yes, my lord. 'Mantis' and 'maggot' refer to different aspects of the same creatures, *humans* as they call themselves. 'Mantis' is the appropriate term for the adult. After all, it is a two-legged creature, sneaky and vicious, but also solitary."

"*Real* mantises are insects, only about so tall." One of the puppies yawned wide, indicating less than two inches.

"The mantises from the sky can be five feet at the shoulder."

"I knew that," said Tycoon. "But the maggots? They are the younglings of the grown monsters?"

"Indeed so." Vendacious moved his two forward members confidingly close to the other pack. "And here is something you may not know. It makes the anal-

ogy nigh perfect. The actual invasion from the sky began almost a year before the Battle on Starship Hill.”

“Before Woodcarver marched north?”

“Yes. A much smaller craft landed secretly, thirty-five tendays earlier. And do you know what was aboard? My lord, that first lander was filled with maggot eggsacks!”

“So that will be the real invasion,” said Tycoon. “Just as insect maggots burst from their eggsacks and overrun the neighborhood, these humans will overrun the entire world—”

Chitiratifor popped in with, “They will devour us all!”

Vendacious gave his servant a stern look. “Chitiratifor takes the analogy too far. At present, the maggots are young. There is only one adult, the mantis queen, Ravna. But consider, in just the two years since Ravna and *Oobii* arrived, she has taken control of Woodcarver’s Domain and expanded it across all the realms of the Northwest.”

Two of Tycoon’s older members tapped idly at an addition device, flicking small beads back and forth. A bean counter indeed. “And how do the mantises—this one Ravna mantis—manage such control? Are they loud? Can they swamp another’s mindsounds with their own?”

This sounded like a testing question. “Not at all, my lord. Just like insects, the humans make no sounds when they think. None whatsoever. They might as well be walking corpses.” Vendacious paused. “My lord, I don’t mean to understate the threat, but if we work together we can prevail against these creatures. Humans are stupid! It shouldn’t be surprising since they are singletons. I estimate that the smartest of them aren’t much more clever than a mismatched foursome.”

“Really! Even the Ravna?”

“Yes! They can’t do the simplest arithmetic, what any street haggler can do. Their memory for sounds—even the speech sounds they can hear—is almost nonexistent. Like insect mantises, their way of life is parasitic and thieving.”

All eight of Tycoon sat very still. Vendacious could hear the edges of his mind, a mix of calculation, wonder, and uncertainty.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Tycoon finally said. “From my own investigations, I already know some of what you say. But the mantises are superlative inventors. I’ve tested their exploding black powder. I’ve heard of the catapults powered by that powder. And they have other inventions I can’t yet reproduce. They can *fly*! Their *Oobii* may now be crashed to earth, but they have a smaller flyer, barely the size of a boat. Last year it was seen by reliable packs just north of town.”

Vendacious and Chitiratifor traded a glance. *That* was bad news. Aloud, Vendacious said, “Your point is well taken, my lord, but there is no paradox. The mantis folk simply stole the things that give them their advantage. I have . . . sources . . . that prove they’ve been doing that for a very long time. Finally, their victims tired of them and chased them out of their original place in the sky. Much of what they have, they do not understand and cannot re-create.

Those devices will eventually wear out. The *antigravity* flier you mention is an example. Furthermore, the creatures have stolen—and are continuing to steal—our *own* inventions. For instance, that exploding black powder you mentioned? It might well have been invented by some creative pack, perhaps the same one who truly invented the *cannon catapults*.”

Tycoon didn't reply immediately; he looked stunned. Ever since Vendacious had heard of Tycoon, he'd suspected that this pack had a special secret, something that could make him a faithful supporter of Vendacious' cause. That was still just a theory, but—

Finally, Tycoon found his voice: “I wondered. . . . The blasting powder and the catapults . . . I remember . . .” He drifted off for a moment, splitting into the old and the young. The puppies scabbled around, whining like some forlorn fragment. Then Tycoon gathered himself together. “I, I was once an inventor.”

Vendacious waved at the mechanisms that filled the room. “I can see that you still are, my lord.”

Tycoon didn't seem to hear. “But then I split up. My fission sibling eventually left for the West Coast. He had so many ideas. Do you suppose—?”

Yes! But aloud, Vendacious was much more cautious: “I still have my sources, sir. Perhaps I can help with that question, too.”

CHAPTER 01

So many impossible things. Ravna is dreaming. She knows that, but there is no waking. She can only watch and absorb and choke on horror. The Blight's fleet hangs all around her, ships clustered here and there like bugs stuck in slime. Originally, the fleet was a hundred fifty starships, and clouds of drones. The drones have been cannibalized. Many ships are gone, some cannibalized. Where it serves the Blight, crews have been cannibalized, too, or simply cast out. Her dreaming eyes can see hundreds of corpses, humans, dirokimes, even skrodeless riders.

The Blight's prey is almost thirty lightyears away, an ordinary solar system . . . where Ravna and the Children have fled. And that is part of the reason this vision must be a dream. Thirty lightyears is impossibly far in this part of the universe, where nothing goes faster than light. There is *no way* she can know what is happening in the enemy fleet.

The fleet floats in death, but is not dead itself. Look closer at the clustered ships. Things move. Construction proceeds. The fleet was once the hand of a living god; now it exists to resurrect that god. Even trapped here, in this encystment of pain, it plans and builds, second on second, year on year, working as hard as its living crews can be driven. If necessary, it can do this for centuries, breeding more crew to replace natural losses. This program will eventually produce ramscoop vessels. They will be the best that can exist Down Here, capable of reaching near-light-speed.

Now perhaps none of that effort is necessary, for the Blight can see Ravna as she sees it, and the encysted god is saying to her: *Rules change. I am coming. I am coming. And much sooner than you think.*

Ravna woke with a start, gasping for breath.

She was lying on the floor, her right arm painfully bent. *I must have fallen. What a terrible dream.* She struggled back into her chair. She wasn't in her cabin aboard the *Out of Band II*. The automation aboard *Oobii* would have turned the floor soft before she ever hit it. She looked around, trying to orient herself, but all she could remember was the dream.

She ran her hand across the side of her chair. It was wood, local Tinish manufacture, as was the table. But the walls had a greenish cast, gently curving into the equally greenish floor. She was inside the Children's landing craft, under Woodcarver's new castle. That took long enough to recognize! She leaned her head into her hands, and let the cabin spin around to a stop. When her dizziness had passed, she sat back and tried to think. Except for the last few minutes, everything seemed reasonable:

She had come down to the catacombs to inspect the Children's caskets. This part of the castle spanned a range of technology from the pre-gunpowder to fallen transcendence, the walls carved with chisels and mallets, the light provided by lamps from *Oobii*. Two years ago, the coldsleep containers had been removed from the Straumer Lander and laid out with enough space between them to dissipate the waste heat of the refrigeration.

Half the caskets were empty now, their passengers awakened. That included almost all the oldest Children. Nowadays, the kids lived in or near the new castle; some were in school classes here. If she listened carefully, she could hear occasional shrieks of laughter mixed with the gobble of Tinish packs.

So why did I enter the Lander? Oh yes. She'd spent a only few minutes outside, looking through the casket windows at the faces of little ones who still slept, who waited unknowing for there to be enough grownup caregivers. Most of those revivals would be routine, but some of the caskets tested as borderline defective. How could she save the kids in those withered caskets? *That* had been the reason for today's visit, to review the results on Timor Ristling, her first attempt with the withered caskets.

The Lander was originally Top-of-the-Beyond technology. Much of that could not function down here in the Slow Zone; she'd never been able to transfer the Lander's maintenance records to the stable technology of her own ship. She *had* to come onboard to access those records. Her gaze slid uneasily around the Lander's freight cabin. Too much had happened in this green-walled room. The Lander wasn't just Top of the Beyond. It had been at the High Lab, in the Low Transcend, and it had been . . . modified. If she looked up she would see some of that, the fungus hanging from the ceiling. The magical Countermeasure. Nowadays, it seemed to be as dead as a dusty cobweb, but Countermeasure had dimmed the sun, and killed her dearest love, and maybe saved the galaxy. The remains of the fungus bothered even the Straumer Children.

This was not a surprising place to have a really bad dream.

But now she remembered what she had been doing just before the crazy dream overtook her. The last two days had been a nonstop guilt trip, with far too little sleep. It was clear that she had screwed up Timor's chances. Not deliberately, not through incompetence. *But I did pick him for the first damaged-casket revival.* The problem wasn't the boy's twisted leg, it wasn't the fact that he might not be quite as brilliant as the other children. The problem was that in the tendays since his revival, Timor had not grown.

Ravna Bergsndot was thousands of lightyears from reliable advice. *Oobii* and this strange Lander were all she had. She remembered pounding on the data for almost an hour, combining Timor's casket records with *Oobii's* latest medical tests, and finally understanding what had gone wrong. No one and no machine Down Here could have known that ahead of time. In cold, cruel truth, Timor had turned out to be a very valuable . . . experiment.

When she'd finally realized that, Ravna had put her head in her arms, too tired to look for any more technical fixes and raging against the possibility that she had become a player with other people's lives.

So then I just fell asleep and had the nightmare? She stared at the greenish bulkheads. She had been very tired, and totally beaten down. Ravna sighed. She often had nightmares about the Blighter fleet, though this was the most bizarre yet. A tip of the hat then to the subconscious mind; it had dug up something that could distract her from Timor, if only briefly.

She disconnected her tiara interface from the Lander, and climbed down from the freight cabin. Three years ago, when Sjana and Arne Olsndot had brought the Children here, this ground had been open meadow. She stood for a moment by the spidery pylons, looking round the cool, dry catacombs. Imagine a spacecraft with a castle built over it. Only in the Slow Zone.

She would have to come back here again and again until all the Children were revived—but she was grateful to be done with this place for today. Up two flights of stairs and she would be in the castle yard, in the summer sunlight. There would be the Children just leaving class, playing with each other and with their Tinish friends. If she stayed to chat, she would likely be in the new castle all afternoon. It might be the sunny evening before she had to be back in her cabin aboard the *Oobii*. As she started up the steps, she could imagine feeling light-hearted. She would take some time off, just to play with the Children. Somehow she would make things right for Timor.

She was still in the dark of the stairs when she remembered something else about the dream. She paused, steadying herself with a hand against the cool stonework. The mind in the fleet had said, "Rules change." Yes, if the Zone shifted and faster-than-light transport became possible again—well, the Blight could arrive very soon indeed. It was a possibility she obsessed upon both awake and in her dreams. She had zonographs aboard the *Oobii* that monitored the relevant physical laws, had done so since the Battle on Starship Hill. There had never been an alarm.

Still leaning against the wall, Ravna queried *Out of Band II*, requesting a

window on the zonograph. The graphic came up, a stupidly self-formatted plot. Yes, there was the usual noise. Then she noticed the scaling. That couldn't be right! She slewed her gaze back five hundred seconds, and saw that the trace had spiked. For almost ten milliseconds, Zone physics had shot above the probe's calibration, so high it might have been Transcendent. Then she noticed the pulsing red border. It was the Zone alarm she had so carefully set—the alarm she should have received at the instant of the spike. Impossible, impossible. This had to be some sort of screw-up. She rummaged in diagnostics, horror rising. Yes, there had been a screw-up: she had only enabled the Zone alarm for when she was local to *Oobii*. Why hadn't ship logic caught that stupid error? She knew the answer to that question. She'd explained it to the Children dozens of time. The kids could not understand that when you scrape your knee, it might be your own fault. *We're living in the Slow Zone. We have virtually no automation, and what we have is painfully simple, devoid of common sense.* Down Here, if you wanted something done right, you had to provide the good judgment yourself. The kids didn't like that answer. Where they came from, it was a far more alien idea than it was even for Ravna Bergsndot.

She glared at the displays that hung in the dark all around her. This was clearly a Zone alarm, but it could be a *false* alarm. It had to be! The spike had been so brief, less than ten probe samples. An instrumental transient. Yes. She turned and continued up the stairs, still searching back and forth along the timeline's trace, looking for evidence of an innocuous explanation. There were a number of system diagnostics she could run.

She thought about this for five more steps, making a turn from one flight of stairs to the next. Up ahead she could see a square of daylight.

Since the Battle on Starship Hill, the Zone physics had been as solid as a mountain's roots . . . but that was a comparison with fatal consequence. Earthquakes happen. Foreshocks happened. What she was seeing could be a tiny, sudden slip in the foundation of the local universe. She looked at the times on the Zone trace. The spike occurred about when she took her odd little nap down in the Children's Lander. So then. For almost one hundredth of a second, maybe *c* had not been the ultimate speed, and the Lander could have known the current state of the Blighter fleet. For almost one hundredth of a second, Countermeasure could have functioned.

And her dream was simply *news*.

Even so, she still didn't know how much time they had left. It might be just hours. But if it were years, or decades—then every moment must be made to count. Somehow.

"Hei, Ravna!" came a childish shout from across the yard, in the direction of the school. They would be around her in a moment.

I can't do this. She half turned, retreating toward the stairway. Nightmares can be the truth. It wasn't just villains who had to make the hard decisions.

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