

"The smartest evolutionary
world-building you'll ever read."

—Peter F. Hamilton

CHILDREN OF TIME



ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY

Synopsis

Winner of the 30th anniversary Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Novel.

Adrian Tchaikovksy's critically acclaimed novel *Children of Time*, is the epic story of humanity's battle for survival on a terraformed planet.

Who will inherit this new Earth? The last remnants of the human race left a dying Earth, desperate to find a new home among the stars. Following in the footsteps of their ancestors, they discover the greatest treasure of the past age – a world terraformed and prepared for human life.

But all is not right in this new Eden. In the long years since the planet was abandoned, the work of its architects has borne disastrous fruit. The planet is not waiting for them, pristine and unoccupied. New masters have turned it from a refuge into mankind's worst nightmare.

Now two civilizations are on a collision course, both testing the boundaries of what they will do to survive. As the fate of humanity hangs in the balance, who are the true heirs of this new Earth?

1.2 BRAVE LITTLE HUNTRESS

She is Portia, and she is hunting.

She is eight millimetres long but she is a tiger within her tiny world, fierce and cunning. Like all spiders, she has a body of two parts. Her small abdomen holds her book-lungs and the bulk of her gut. Her head-body is dominated by two huge eyes facing forwards for perfect binocular vision, beneath a pair of tiny tufts that crown her like horns. She is fuzzy with hair in broken patterns of brown and black. To predators, she looks more dead leaf than live prey.

She waits. Below her formidable eyes her fangs are flanked by limb-like mouth-parts: her palps, coloured a startling white like a quivering moustache. Science has named her *Portia labiata*, just another unassuming species of jumping spider.

Her attention is fixed on another spider at home in its web. This is *Scytodes pallida*, longer-limbed and hunchbacked and able to spit toxic webbing. Scytodes specializes in catching and eating jumping spiders like Portia.

Portia specializes in eating spider-eating spiders, most of whom are larger and stronger than she.

Her eyes are remarkable. The visual acuity of a primate peers out from those pinhead-sized discs and the flexible chambers behind them, piecing together the world around her.

Portia has no thoughts. Her sixty thousand neurons barely form a brain, contrasted with a human's one hundred billion. But something goes on in that tiny knot of tissue. She has already recognized her enemy, and knows its spit will make any frontal assault fatal. She has been playing with the edge of the Scytodes's web, sending tactile lies to it of varying shades to see if it can be lured out. The target has twitched once or twice, but it will not be deceived.

This is what a few tens of thousands of neurons can do: Portia has tried and failed, variation after variation, homing in on those that evinced the most response, and now she will go about things differently.

Her keen eyes have been examining the surroundings of the web, the branches

and twigs that hang over and below it. Somewhere in her little knot of neurons a three-dimensional map has been built up from her meticulous scrutiny, and she has plotted a painstaking course to where she may come at the Scytodes from above, like a minute assassin. The approach is not perfect, but it is the best the environment will allow, and her scrap of brain has worked all this out as a theoretical exercise ahead of time. The planned approach will take her out of sight of her prey for much of the journey, but even when her prey is beyond view, it will remain in her tiny mind.

If her prey was something other than Scytodes, then she would have different tactics—or would experiment until something worked. It usually does.

Portia's ancestors have been making these calculations and decisions for millennia, each generation fractionally more accomplished because the best hunters are the ones that eat well and lay more eggs.

So far, so natural, and Portia is just about to set off on her quest when movement attracts her gaze.

Another of her species has arrived, a male. He has also been studying the Scytodes, but now his acute eyes are locked on her.

Past individuals of her species might have decided that the little male was a safer lunch than the Scytodes, and made plans accordingly, but now something changes. The presence of the male speaks to her. It is a complex new experience. The crouching figure there at the far side of the Scytodes's web is not just prey/mate/irrelevant. There is an invisible connection strung between them. She does not quite grasp that he is *something like her*, but her formidable ability to calculate strategies has gained a new dimension. A new category appears that expands her options a hundredfold: *ally*.

For long minutes the two hunting spiders examine their mental maps while the Scytodes hangs patiently oblivious between them. Then Portia watches the male creep around the web's edge a little. He waits for her to move. She does not. He moves again. At last he has got to where his presence changes her instinctive calculation of the odds.

She moves off along the course that she had been plotting out, creeping, jumping, descending by a thread, and all the while her mind retains its image of that three-dimensional world, and the two other spiders inside it.

At last she is in position above the Scytodes's web, back in sight of the motionless male. She waits until he makes his move. He skitters on to the silken strands, cautiously testing his footing. His movements are mechanical, repetitive, as though he is just some fragment of dead leaf that has drifted into the web. The Scytodes

shifts once, then remains still. A breeze shivers the web and the male moves more swiftly under cover of the white noise of the shaking strands.

He bounces and dances abruptly, speaking the language of the web in loud and certain terms: *Prey! Prey here, trying to escape!*

The Scytodes is instantly on the move and Portia strikes, dropping down behind her displaced enemy and sinking her fangs into it. Her poison immobilizes the other spider swiftly. The hunt is concluded.

Soon after, the little male returns and they regard one another, trying to build a new picture of their world. They feed. She is constantly on the verge of driving him away and yet that new dimension, that commonality, stays her fangs. He is prey. He is *not* prey.

Later, they hunt together again. They make a good team. Together they are able to take on targets and situations that, alone, either would have retreated from.

Eventually he is promoted from prey/not-prey to mate, because her behaviours are limited as regards males. After the act of mating, other instincts surface and their partnership comes to an end.

She lays her clutch, the many eggs of a very successful huntress.

Their children will be beautiful and brilliant and grow to twice her size, infected with the nanovirus that Portia and the male both carry. Further generations will be larger and brighter and more successful still, one after the other selectively evolving at a virally accelerated rate so that those best able to exploit this new advantage will dominate the gene pool of the future.

Portia's children will inherit the world.