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AUTHOR OF *A GAME OF THRONES*

# GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



# TUF VOYAGING

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GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



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*Tuf Voyaging* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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# Prologue

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CATALOG SIX

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ITEM NUMBER 37433-800912-5442894

SHANDELLOR CENTER FOR THE  
ADVANCEMENT OF  
CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE  
XENOANTHROPOLOGY DIVISION

**item description: crystal voice coding**

**item found: H'ro Brana (co/ords SQ, V7715, I21)**

**tentative dating: recorded approx. 276 standard years ago classify under:**

**slave races, Hrangan**

**legends & myths, Hruun**

**medical**

**—disease, unidentified**

**trade bases, abandoned**

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Hello? Hello?

Yes, I see it works. Good.

I am Rarvik Hortvenzy, apprentice factor, speaking a warning to whomever finds my words.

Dusk comes now, for me the last. The sun has sunk beneath the western cliffs, staining the land with blood, and now the twilight eats its way toward me inexorably. The stars come out one by one, but the only star that matters burns night and day, day and night. It is always with me, the brightest thing in the sky but for the sun. It is the plague star.

This day I buried Janeel. With my own hands I buried her, digging in the hard rock ground until my arms were afire with pain. When my ordeal was done, when the last spadeful of this wretched alien dirt had been thrown upon her head, when the last stone had been placed atop her cairn, then I stood over her and spat upon her grave.

It is all her fault. I told her so, not once but many times as she lay dying, and when the end was near she finally admitted her guilt. Her fault that we came here. Her fault that we did not leave when we might have. Her fault that she is dead—yes, no doubt of it—and her fault that I shall rot unburied when my own time comes, my flesh a feast for the beasts of the dark, and the flyers and night-hunters we once hoped to trade with.

The plague star twinkles but little, shines down upon the land with a clear bright light. That is wrong, I told Janeel once; a plague star ought to be red. It ought to glower, to drape itself with scarlet radiance, to whisper into the night hints of fire and of blood. This clear whiteness, this purity, what has that to do with plague? That was in the first days, when our charter ship had just set us down to open our proud little trade complex, set us down and then moved on. At that time the plague star was but one of fifty first-magnitude stars in these alien skies, hard even to pick out. In that time we smiled at it, at the superstitions of these primitives, these backward brutes who thought sickness came from the sky.

Yet then the plague star began to wax. Night after night it burned more brightly, until it became visible even by day. Long before that time the pestilence had begun.

The flyers wheel against the darkening sky. Gliders, they are, and from afar they have beauty. They call to my mind the shadowgulls of my homeplace, Budakhar upon the living sea, on the world Razyar. Yet here is no sea, only mountains and hills and dry desolation, and I know too that these flyers have small beauty when close at hand. Lean and terrible creatures they are, half as tall as a man, with skin like tanned leather pulled tight across their strange hollow bones. Their wings are dry and hard as a drumskin, their talons sharp like daggers, and beneath the great bony crest that sweeps back like a hooked blade from the narrow skulls, their eyes are a hideous red.

Jaleen said to me they were sentient. They have a tongue, she said. I have heard their voices, thin keening screeching voices that scrape raw the nerves. I have never learned to speak this tongue, nor did Jaleen. Sentient, she said.

We would trade with them. Ho, they wanted no part of us or our trade. They knew enough to steal, yes, and that is where their sentience ended. Yet we and they have this much in common: death.

The flyers die. The night-hunters, with their massive twisted limbs and gnarly two-thumb

hands, with their eyes that burn in their bulging skulls like embers from a dying fire, ho, they die, too. They have a frightening strength, and those strange great eyes can see in the black when stormclouds cover even the plague star. In their caverns the hunters whisper of the great Minds, the masters they served once, the ones who will someday return and call on them to go forth to war once again. Yet the Minds do not come, and the night-hunters die—even as the flyers, even as those of the more furtive races whose bodies we find in the flight hills, even as the mindless beasts, even as the crops and trees, even as Janeel and I.

Janeel told me this would be a world of gold and gems for us; it is a world of death. H'ra Brana was the name in her ancient charts; I will not call it by that. She knew the names for all its peoples. I recall but one—*Hruun*. That is the true name of the night-hunters. A slave race, she said, of the Hrangans, the great enemy; gone now, defeated a thousand years past, their slaves abandoned in that long fall. It was a lost colony, she said, a handful of sentient eager for trade. She knew so much and I so little, but now I have buried her and spat upon her grave and I know the truth of it. If slaves they were, then bad slaves surely, for the masters set them upon a hell, beneath the cruel light of the plague star.

Our last supply ship came through half a year past. We might have gone. Already the plagues had begun. The flyers crawled upon the mountain summits, tumbled from the cliffs. I found them there, their skin inflamed and oozing fluid, great cracks in the leather of the wings. Night-hunters came to us covered with livid boils, and from us they bought umbrellas in great number, to keep them safe from the rays of the plague star. When the ship landed we might have gone. Yet Janeel said stay. She had names for these sicknesses that killed the flyers and night-hunters. She had names for the drugs that would cure these ills. To name a thing is to understand, she thought. We might be healers, gain their brutal trust, and our fortunes would be made. She bought all the medicines that ship carried, and sent for others, and we began to treat these plagues that she had named.

When the next plague came, she named it, too. And the next, and the next, and the next. Yet there were plagues beyond counting. First she ran out of drugs, and soon out of names as well, and this dawn I dug her grave. She had been a slender, active female, but in dying she grew very stiff and her limbs puffed up to twice their size. I had to dig a large grave to fit her rigid, swollen corpse. I have named the thing that killed her: Janeel's Plague, I call it. I have no skill at names. My own plague is different from hers, and has no name. When I move, a living flame runs through my bones, and my skin has gone gray and brittle. Each dawn when I wake I find the bedclothes covered with bits of my flesh that have fallen away from my bones, and stained with blood from the wet raw places beneath.

The plague star is huge and bright above me, and now I understand why it is white. White is the color of purity, ho, and the plague star purifies this land. Yet its touch corrupts and decays. There is a fine irony in that, is there not?

We brought many weapons, sold few. The night-hunters and the flyers can use no weapons against this thing that slays them, and from the first have put more faith in umbrellas than in lasers. I have armed myself with a flamer from our storeroom, and poured myself a glass of dark wine.

I will sit here in the coolness and talk my thoughts to this crystal and I will drink my wine and watch the flyers, the few who still live, as they dance and soar against the night. Far off they look so like shadowgulls above my living sea. I will drink my wine and remember how



that sea sounded when I was but a Budakhar boy who dreamed of stars, and when the wine  
gone I will use the flamer.

---

(long silence)

I can think of no more words to say. Janeel knew many words and many names, but  
buried her this morning.

(long silence)

If my voice is ever found ...

(short pause)

If this is found after the plague star has waned, as the night-hunters say it will, do not be  
deceived. This is no fair world, no world for life. Here is death, and plagues beyond  
numbering. The plague star will shine again.

(long silence)

My wine is gone.

(end of recording)

# The Plague Star

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“NO,” KAJ NEVIS told the others firmly. “That’s out. We’d be damned stupid to involve any of the big transcorps.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense,” Celise Waan snapped back at him. “We have to get there, don’t we? So we need a ship. I’ve chartered ships from Starslip before, and they’re perfect and comfortable. The crews are polite and the cuisine is more than adequate.”

Nevis gave her a withering look. He had a face made for it—sharp and angular, with hair swept back hard and a great scimitar of a nose, his small dark eyes half-hidden by heavy black eyebrows. “For what purpose did you charter these ships?”

“Why, for field trips, of course,” Celise Waan replied. She plucked another cream ball from the plate in front of her, lifting it delicately between thumb and forefinger and popping it into her mouth. “I’ve supervised many important researches. The Center provided the funding.”

“Let me point out the nose on your damn face,” Nevis said. “This is not a field trip. We are not poking into the mating habits of primitives. We are not digging around for obscure knowledge that no sane person could possibly give a damn about, as you’re accustomed to doing. This little conspiracy of ours is about to go after a treasure of almost unimaginable value. If we find it, we don’t intend to turn it over to the proper authorities, either. You need me to see to its disposition through less-than-licit channels. And you trust me so little that you won’t tell where the damn thing is until we’re underway, and Lion here has hired a bodyguard. Fine, I don’t give a damn. But understand this—I am not the only untrustworthy man on ShanDellor. Vast profit is involved here, and vast power. If you’re going to continue to yammer at me about *cuisine*, then I’m leaving. I have better things to do than sit here counting your chins.”

Celise Waan snorted disdainfully. She was a big, round, red-faced woman, with a loud, wet snort. “Starslip is a reputable firm,” she said. “Besides, the salvage laws—”

“—are meaningless,” said Nevis. “We have one set of laws here on ShanDellor, another on Kleronomas, a third on Maya, and none of them mean a damn thing. And if ShanDi law does apply, we’d get only one-quarter the value of the find—if we got anything at all. Assuming this plague star of yours is really what Lion thinks it is, and assuming that it’s still in working order, whoever controls it will enjoy an overwhelming military superiority in this sector. Starslip and the other big transcorps are as greedy and ruthless as I am, I promise you. Furthermore, they are big enough and powerful enough so that the planetary government watches them closely. In case it has escaped your notice, let me point out that there are only four of us. Five, if you count the hireling,” he said, nodding toward Rica Dawnstar, who favored him with an icy grin. “A big liner has more than five pastry chefs. Even on a small courier, we’d be outnumbered by the crew. Once they saw what we had, do you imagine for even a second that we’d be allowed to keep it?”

“If they cheat us, we’ll sue them,” the fat anthropologist said, with a hint of petulance in her voice. She plucked up the last cream ball.

Kaj Nevis laughed at her. “In what courts? On what world? That’s assuming we’re allowed to live, which is unlikely on the face of it. You are a remarkably stupid and ugly woman.”

Jefri Lion had been listening to the squabble with an uncomfortable expression on his face.

“Here, here,” he interrupted at last. “Let’s have no name-calling, Nevis. No call for it. We’re all in this together, after all.” A short, square block of a man, Lion wore a chameleon color jacket of military cut, decorated with rows of ribbons from some forgotten campaign. The fabric had turned a dusty gray in the dimness of the small restaurant, a gray that matched the color of Lion’s bristling spade-shaped beard. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his broad balding forehead. Kaj Nevis made him nervous; the man had a reputation, after all. Lion looked around to the others for support.

Celise Wean pouted and stared at the empty plate in front of her, as if her gaze could fill it with cream balls again. Rica Dawnstar—“the hireling,” as Nevis called her—leaned back from her seat with a look of sardonic amusement in her bright green eyes. Beneath her dark jumpsuit and silvery mesh-steel vest, the long, hard body looked relaxed, almost indolent. No concern of hers if her employers wanted to argue all night and all day.

“Insults are useless,” Anittas said. It was hard to tell what the cybertech was thinking; his face was as much polished metal and translucent plastic as flesh, and only minimally expressive. The shiny bluesteel fingers of his right hand interlocked with the mocha-colored fleshy digits of his left; he studied Nevis with two shining silver-metal eyes that moved smoothly in black plastic sockets. “Kaj Nevis has made some valid points. He is experienced in these areas, where we are not. What is the use of having brought him into this affair if we are unwilling to listen to his counsel?”

“Yes, that’s so,” Jefri Lion agreed. “What do you suggest then, Nevis? If we must avoid the transcorps, how will we reach the plague star?”

“We need a ship,” Celise Wean said, loudly stating the obvious.

Kaj Nevis smiled. “The transcorps have no monopoly on ships. That’s why I suggested we meet here today, rather than at Lion’s office. This dump is close to the port. The man whose want will be here, I’m sure.”

Jefri Lion looked hesitant. “An independent? Some of them have rather, uh, unsavory reputations, don’t they?”

“Like me,” Nevis reminded him.

“Still. I’ve heard rumors of smuggling, even piracy. Do we want to take that kind of chance, Nevis?”

“We don’t want to take any chances at all,” Kaj Nevis said. “And we won’t. It’s a matter of knowing the right people. I know lots of people. The right people. The wrong people.” He made a small gesture with his head. “Now, way in the back there, that dark woman with all the black jewelry. That’s Jessamyn Caige, mistress of the *Free Venture*. She’d hire out to us, no doubt. At a very reasonable rate.”

Celise Waan craned around to look. “Is she the one, then? I hope this ship of hers has a gravity grid. Weightlessness makes me nauseous.”

“When are you going to approach her?” Jefri Lion asked.

“I’m not,” Kaj Nevis told them. “Oh, I’ve used Jessamyn to move a cargo or two for me, but I won’t take the risk of actually riding with her, and I’d never dream of involving her in anything this big. The *Free Venture* has a crew of nine—more than enough to handle me and the hireling. No offense, Lion, but the rest of you don’t count.”

“I’ll have you know I’m a soldier,” Jefri Lion said, in a wounded tone. “I’ve seen combat.”

“A hundred years ago,” Nevis said. “As I said, the rest of you don’t count. And Jessamyn

would as soon kill all of us as spit.” The small, dark eyes regarded each of them in turn. “That’s why you need me. Without me, you are just naïve enough to engage Jessamyn, or one of the transcorps.”

“My niece serves with a very successful independent trader,” Celise Waan said.

“And who might that be?” Kaj Nevis inquired.

“Noah Wackerfuss,” she said, “of the *World of Bargains*.”

Nevis nodded. “Fat Noah,” he said. “That would be a lot of fun, I’m damn sure. I might mention that *his* ship is kept constantly in weightlessness. Gravity would kill the old degenerate—not that it matters. Wackerfuss isn’t especially blood-thirsty, that’s so. Fifty-fifty chance he wouldn’t kill us. He is, however, as greedy and as shrewd as they come. At the very least, he’d find a way to get a full share. At worst, he’d get it all. And his ship has a crew of twenty—all women. Have you ever asked your niece about the precise nature of her duties?”

Celise Waan flushed. “Do I have to listen to this man’s innuendoes?” she asked Lion. “That was my discovery. I won’t be insulted by this third-rate hoodlum, Jefri.”

Lion frowned unhappily. “Really now, enough of this squabbling. Nevis, there’s no need to flaunt your expertise. We brought you into this for good cause, I’m sure we all agree. You must have some idea of who we can engage to take us to the plague star, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Nevis agreed.

“Who?” prompted Anittas.

“The man is an independent trader, of sorts. Not a very successful one. And he’s been stuck on ShanDellor, for want of a cargo, for half of a standard year now. He must be getting desperate—desperate enough, I’d think, so that he’ll jump at this opportunity. He has a small, battered ship with a long, ridiculous name. It’s not luxurious, but it will take us there, which is all that matters. There’s no crew to worry about, only the man himself. And he—well, he’s a little ridiculous, too. He’ll give us no trouble. He’s big, but soft, inside and out. He keeps cats, I hear. Doesn’t much like people. Drinks a lot of beer, eats too much. I doubt that he even carries a weapon. Reports are that he barely scrapes by, flitting from world to world and selling absurd trinkets and useless little geegaws from this beat-up old ship of his. Wackerfuss thinks the man’s a joke. But even if he’s wrong, what can one man alone do? If he does so much as threatens to report us, the hireling and I can dispose of him and feed him to his cats.”

“Nevis, I’ll have no talk like that!” Jefri Lion objected. “I won’t have any killing on this venture.”

“No?” Nevis said. He nodded toward Rica Dawnstar. “Then why did you hire her?” Her smile was very nasty, somehow; her returning grin was pure mocking malice. “Just so,” Nevis said, “I knew this was the place. Here’s our man now.”

None of them except Rica Dawnstar was much versed in the art of subtle conspiracy; the other three all turned to stare at the door, and the man who had just entered. He stood very tall, almost two-and-a-half meters, and his great soft gut swelled out above his thin metal belt. He had big hands, a long, curiously blank face, and a stiff, awkward posture. Everywhere his skin was as white as bleached bone, and it appeared that he had not a hair on him anywhere. He wore shiny blue trousers and a deep maroon shirt whose balloon sleeves were frayed at the ends.



He must have felt their scrutiny, for he turned his head and stared back, his pale face expressionless. He kept on staring. Celise Waan looked away first, and then Jefri Lion, and finally Anittas. “Who is he?” the cyborg demanded of Kaj Nevis.

“Wackerfuss calls him Tuffy,” Nevis said. “His real name, I’m told, is Haviland Tuf.”

Haviland Tuf picked up the last of the green star-forts with a delicacy that belied his great size, then straightened to regard the gaming board with satisfaction. The entire cluster was red; cruisers and dreadnaughts and star-forts and all the colonies, red everywhere. “I must claim the victory,” he said.

“Again,” said Rica Dawnstar. She stretched, to untie the knots that hours bent over the game had put in her limbs. She had the deadly grace of a lioness, and beneath her silver mesh-steel vest her needler was snug in its shoulder holster.

“Perhaps I might be so bold as to suggest another contest,” said Haviland Tuf.

Dawnstar laughed. “No thanks,” she said. “You’re too good at this. I was born a gambler but with you it’s no gamble. I’m tired of coming in second.”

“I have been most fortunate in the games we have played thus far,” Haviland Tuf said. “Undoubtedly, my luck will have run its course by now, and you will obliterate my powerful forces on your next attempt.”

“Oh, undoubtedly,” Rica Dawnstar replied, grinning, “but forgive me if I postpone that attempt until the boredom becomes terminal. At least I’m better than Lion. Right, Jefri?”

Jefri Lion was seated in a corner of the ship’s control room, perusing a stack of old military texts. His chameleon cloth jacket had turned the same brown as the synthawood paneling of the bulkhead behind him. “The game does not conform to authentic military principles,” he said, with a hint of annoyance in his voice. “I employed the same tactics that Stephan Cobalt Northstar used when the 13th Human Fleet enveloped Hrakkean. Tuf’s counterthrust was completely wrong under the circumstances. If the rules had been written properly, it ought to have been routed.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “You have the advantage of me, sir. You, after all, have the good fortune to be a military historian, and I am merely a humble trader. I lack your familiarity with the great campaigns of history. How fortunate for me that thus far, the deficiencies of the game itself, and my extraordinary fortune, have conspired to make up for my ignorance. Still, I would welcome the opportunity to strengthen my grasp of military principles. If you would care to assay the game once again, I will carefully study your subtleties and strategies so that I might in future incorporate a sounder, more authentic approach into my own poor play.”

Jefri Lion, whose silver fleet had been the first eliminated in every game they had played during the past week, cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. “Yes, uh, you see, Tuf,” he began.

He was saved from embarrassment by a sudden shriek and stream of profanity that issued from the adjoining compartment. Haviland Tuf was on his feet at once; Rica Dawnstar was right behind him.

They emerged into the passageway just as Celise Waan staggered out of the living quarters in pursuit of a small, fleet black-and-white form that went hurtling past them into the control room. “Catch it!” Celise Waan screamed at them. Her face was red and puffy and swollen, and she looked furious.

The door was small, Haviland Tuf large. “For what purpose, might I inquire?” he asked, blocking the way.

The anthropologist held out her left hand. There were three short, deep scratches across her palm, welling blood. “Look what it did to me!” she said.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “And what did you do to her?”

Kaj Nevis emerged from the living quarters with a thin, hard smile on his face. “She picked it up to toss it across the room,” he said.

“It was on my bed!” said Celise Waan. “I wanted to take a little nap, and the damned creature was asleep on my bed!” She whirled to face Nevis. “And you, wipe that smirk off your face. It’s bad enough we all have to be cooped up together in this shabby little ship. I simply refuse to share what little space there is with this impossible man’s filthy little *animals*. And it’s *your* fault, Nevis. You got us into this! Now do something. I demand that you make Tuf get rid of those vicious pests, do you hear me, I demand it!”

“Excuse me,” Rica Dawnstar said from behind Tuf. He glanced back at her and moved aside. “Is this one of the vicious pests you had in mind?” Dawnstar asked, with a grin, as she stepped into the passageway. She was cradling a cat against her chest with her left hand, and petting it with her right. It was a huge tom with long, soft, gray hair and arrogant yellow eyes; it must have weighed twenty pounds, but Rica held it as easily as if it had been a kitten. “What do you propose Tuf do with old Mushroom here?” she asked as the cat began to purr.

“It was the other one that hurt me, the black-and-white one,” Celise Waan said, “but the other one’s just as bad. Look at my face! Look at what they’ve done to me! I can scarcely breathe and I’m breaking out all over, and whenever I try to get a little sleep I wake up with one of them on my chest. Yesterday I was having a little snack, and I put it down just for a moment and when I came back the black-and-white one had knocked over my plate and was rolling my spice-puffs around in the dirt as if they were toys! Nothing is safe around these animals! I’ve lost two light pencils and my best pinky ring. And now *this*, this *attack!* Really, this is ju

intolerable. I must insist that these damned animals be put down in the cargo hold at once. Once, do you hear?"

"My hearing is quite adequate, thank you," said Haviland Tuf. "If your missing property has not turned up by the end of our voyage, I will be most pleased to reimburse you for its value. Your request in regard to Mushroom and Havoc, however, I must regretfully deny."

"I'm a passenger on this joke of a starship!" Celise Waan screamed at him.

"Must you insult my intelligence as well as my hearing?" Tuf replied. "Your status as a passenger here is obvious, madam; it is not necessary for you to point it out. Permit me to point out, however, that this small ship which you feel so free to insult is my home and my livelihood, such that it is. Furthermore, while you are undeniably a passenger here and therefore enjoy certain rights and prerequisites, Mushroom and Havoc must logically have substantially greater rights, since this is their permanent abode, so to speak. It is not my custom to take passengers aboard my *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*. As you have observed, the space available is scarcely adequate to my own needs. Regretfully, I have suffered various professional vicissitudes of late, and there is no gainsaying the fact that my supply of standards was veering toward inadequacy when Kaj Nevis approached me. I have bent all my efforts to accommodate you aboard this craft which you so malign, to the extent that I have given over my ship's living quarters to your collective needs and made my own poor bed in the control room. Despite my undeniable need, I am now coming to deeply regret the foolish and altruistic impulse that bid me take this charter, especially as the payment you have received was barely sufficient to refuel and provision for this voyage and pay the ShanDi landing tax. You have taken grievous advantage of my gullibility, I fear. Nonetheless, I am a man of my word and will do my best to convey you to this mysterious destination of yours. For the duration of the voyage, however, I must require you to tolerate Mushroom and Havoc, even as I tolerate you."

"Well, I never!" Celise Waan declared.

"I have no doubt," said Haviland Tuf.

"I'm not going to put up with this any longer," the anthropologist said. "There's no reason we all have to be crammed up inside one room like soldiers in a barracks. This ship was not nearly this small from outside." She pointed a pudgy arm. "Where does that door go?" she demanded.

"To the hold and cargo compartments," Haviland Tuf said evenly. "There are sixteen of them. Even the smallest, admittedly, has twice the space of my meager living quarters."

"Aha!" said Waan. "And are we carrying any cargo?"

"Compartment sixteen is packed with plastic reproductions of Cooglish orgy-masks, which I was unfortunately unable to sell on ShanDellor, a situation I lay entirely at the door of Noah Wackerfuss, who undercut my price and deprived me of my small hope of profit. In compartment twelve I store certain personal effects, miscellaneous equipment, collectible items, and bric-a-brac. The rest of the ship is quite empty, madam."

"Excellent!" said Celise Waan. "In that case, we will convert the smaller compartments into private rooms for each of us. It should be a simple matter to move our bedding."

"Quite simple," said Haviland Tuf.

"Then do it!" snapped Celise Waan.

"As you wish," said Tuf. "Will you be wanting to rent a pressure suit?"



“What?”

Rica Dawnstar was grinning. “The holds aren’t part of the life-support system,” she said.

“No air. No heat. No pressure. No gravity, even.”

“Ought to suit you just fine,” Kaj Nevis put in.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

Day and night are meaningless aboard a starship, but the ancient rhythms of the human body still made their demands, and technology had to conform. Therefore the *Cornucopia*, like all the other ships but the huge triple-shift warships and transcorp liners, had its sleep cycle—a time of darkness and silence.

Rica Dawnstar rose from her cot and checked her needler, from long force of habit. Celi Waan was snoring loudly; Jefri Lion tossed and turned, winning battles in his head; Kaj Nevis was lost in dreams of wealth and power. The cybertech was sleeping too, though it was a deeper sort of sleep. To escape the boredom of the voyage, Anittas had parked on a computer plugged into the ship’s computer, and turned himself off. His cyberhalf monitored his biohazard. His breath was slow as a glacier and very regular, his body temperature down, his energy consumption cut to almost nothing, but the lidless silver-metal sensors that served him as eyes sometimes seemed to shift slightly, tracking some unseen vision.

Rica Dawnstar moved quietly from the room. Up in the control chamber, Haviland Tuf sat alone. His lap was full of gray tomcat; his huge pale hands moved over the computer keyboard. Havoc, the smaller black-and-white cat, was playing around his feet. She had gotten hold of a light pencil and was batting it to and fro on the floor. Tuf never heard Rica enter; no one else heard Rica Dawnstar move unless she wanted them to hear.

“You’re still up,” she said from the door, leaning back against the jamb.

Tuf’s seat swiveled around and he regarded her impassively. “A most remarkable deduction,” he said. “Here I sit before you, active, busy, driven by the demands of my ship. From the scant evidence of your eyes and ears, you leap to the conclusion that I am not yet asleep. Your powers of reasoning are awesome.”

Rica Dawnstar sauntered into the room and stretched out on Tuf’s cot, still neatly made up from the previous sleep cycle. “I’m awake too,” she said, smiling.

“I can scarcely believe it,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Believe it,” Rica said. “I don’t sleep much, Tuf. Two or three hours a night. It’s an asset to my profession.”

“No doubt,” said Tuf.

“On board ship, though, it’s a bit of a liability. I’m bored, Tuf.”

“A game, perhaps?”

She smiled. “Perhaps of a different sort.”

“I am always eager to learn new games.”

“Good. Let’s play the conspiracy game.”

“I am unfamiliar with its rules.”

“Oh, they’re simple enough.”

“Indeed. Perhaps you would be good enough to elaborate.” Tuf’s long face was still as a stone, noncommittal.

“You would never have won that last game if Waan had thrown in with me when I asked

her to,” Rica said conversationally. “Alliances, Tuf, can be profitable to all parties concerned. You and I are the odd ones out here. We’re the hirelings. If Lion is right about the plague star, the rest of them will divide wealth so vast it’s incomprehensible, and you and I will receive our fees. Doesn’t seem quite fair to me.”

“Equity is often difficult to judge, and still more difficult to achieve,” said Haviland Tuf. “I might wish my compensation were more generous, but no doubt many could make the same complaint. It is nonetheless the fee that I negotiated and accepted.”

“Negotiations can be reopened,” suggested Rica Dawnstar. “They need us. Both of us. It occurred to me that if we worked together, we might be able to ... ah ... insist upon better terms. Full shares. A six-way split. What do you think?”

“An intriguing notion, with much to recommend it,” said Tuf. “Some might venture to suggest that it was unethical, true, but the true sophisticate retains a certain moral flexibility.”

Rica Dawnstar studied the long, white, expressionless face for a moment, and grinned. “You don’t buy it, do you, Tuf? Down deep, you’re a stickler for rules.”

“Rules are the essence of games, the very heart of them, if you will. They give structure and meaning to our small contests.”

“Sometimes it’s more fun just to kick over the board,” Rica Dawnstar said. “More effective, too.”

Tuf steepled his hands in front of his face. “Though I am not content with my niggardly fee, nonetheless I must fulfill my contract with Kaj Nevis. I would not have him speak poorly of me or the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*.”

Rica laughed. “Oh, I doubt that he’ll speak poorly of you, Tuf. I doubt that he’ll speak of you at all, once you’ve served your purpose and he’s discarded you.” She was pleased to see that her statement startled Tuf into blinking.

“Indeed,” he said.

“Aren’t you curious about all this? About where we’re going, and why Waan and Lion kept the destination secret until we were aboard? About why Lion hired a bodyguard?”

Haviland Tuf stroked Mushroom’s long gray fur, but his eyes never left Rica Dawnstar’s face. “Curiosity is my great vice. I fear you have seen through to the heart of me, and now you seek to exploit my weakness.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” said Rica Dawnstar.

“An unpleasant suggestion, but unlikely on the face of it,” Tuf commented.

“But satisfaction brought him back,” Rica finished. “Lion knows this is something huge. And it’s hugely dangerous. To get what they want out of this, they needed Nevis, or somebody like Nevis. They have a nice four-way split set up, but Kaj has the kind of reputation that makes you wonder if he’ll settle for a fourth. I’m here to see that he does.” She shrugged, and patted her needler in its shoulder holster. “Besides, I’m insurance against any other complications that might arise.”

“Might I point out that you yourself constitute an additional complication?”

She smiled icily. “Just don’t point it out to Lion,” she said, rising and stretching. “You think about it, Tuf. The way I see it, Nevis has underestimated you. Don’t you go underestimating him. Or me. Never, never, *never* underestimate me. The time may come when you’ll wish you had an ally. And it may come sooner than you’d like.”

Three days shy of arrival, Celise Waan was complaining again over dinner. Tuf had served spiced vegetable brouhaha in the manner of Halagreen; a piquant dish, but for the fact that this was the sixth such serving on the voyage. The anthropologist shoved the vegetable around on her plate, made a face, and said, "Why can't we have some real food?"

Tuf paused, speared a fat mushroom deftly with his fork, lifted it in front of his face. He regarded it in silence for a moment, shifted the angle of his head and regarded it from another angle, turned it around and regarded that aspect of it, and finally prodded it lightly with his finger. "I fail to grasp the nature of your complaint, madam," he said at last.

"This mushroom, at least, seems real enough to my own poor senses. True, it is but a small sample of the whole. Perhaps the rest of the brouhaha is illusory. Yet I think not."

"You know what I meant," Celise Waan said in a shrill tone. "I want meat."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "I myself want wealth beyond measure. Such fantasies are easily dreamed, and less easily made real."

"I'm tired of all these puling vegetables!" Celise Waan screeched. "Are you telling me that there is not a bit of meat to be had on this entire puling ship?"

Tuf made a steeple of his fingers. "It was not my intent to convey such misinformation, certainly," he said. "I am not an eater of flesh myself, but there is some small poor quantity of meat aboard the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, this I freely admit."

A look of furious satisfaction crossed Celise Waan's face. She glanced at each of the other diners in turn. Rica Dawnstar was trying to suppress a grin; Kaj Nevis was not even trying. Jefri Lion was looking fretful. "You see," she told them, "I told you he was keeping the good food for himself." With all deliberation, she picked up her plate and spun it across the room. It rang off a metal bulkhead and dumped its load of spiced brouhaha on Rica Dawnstar's unmade bed. Rica smiled sweetly. "We just swapped bunks, Waan," she said.

"I don't care," Celise Waan said. "I'm going to get a decent meal for once. I suppose the rest of you will be wanting to share now."

Rica smiled "Oh no, dear. It's all yours." She finished up her brouhaha, cleaned her plate with a crust of onion bread. Lion looked uncomfortable, and Kaj Nevis said, "If you can get this meat out of Tuf, it's all yours."

"Excellent!" she proclaimed. "Tuf, bring me this meat!"

Haviland Tuf regarded her impassively. "True, the contract I made with Kaj Nevis requires me to feed you through the duration of this voyage. Nothing was said about the nature of the provender, however. Always I am put upon. Now I must cater to your culinary whims, which seems very well, such is my poor lot in life. And yet, now I find myself taken by a sudden whim of my own. If I must indulge your whim, would it not be equitable that you should similarly bend to mine?"

Waan frowned suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

Tuf spread his hands. "It is nothing, really. In return for the meat you crave, I ask only a moment's indulgence. I have grown most curious of late, and I would have that curiosity satisfied. Rica Dawnstar has warned me that, unsatisfied, curiosity will surely kill my cats."

"I'm for that," said the fat anthropologist.

"Indeed," said Tuf. "Nonetheless, I must insist. I offer you a trade—food, of the type you have requested so melodramatically, for a poor useless nugget of information, the surrender of which costs you nothing. We are shortly to arrive in the system of Hro B'rana, you

chartered destination. I would know why we travel there, and the nature of what you expect to find on this plague star of which I have heard you speak.”

Celise Waan turned to the others again. “We paid good standards for food,” she said. “That is extortion. Jefri, put your foot down!”

“Um,” said Jefri Lion. “There’s really no harm, Celise. He’ll find out anyway, when we arrive. Perhaps it is time he knew.”

“Nevis,” she said, “aren’t you going to do anything?”

“Why?” he demanded. “It doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. Tell him and get your meat. Or not. I don’t care.”

Waan glared at Kaj Nevis, and then even more fiercely at the cool pale face of Havilar. Tuf crossed her arms, and said, “All right, if that’s the way it has to be, I’ll sing for my supper.”

“A normal speaking voice will be quite acceptable,” said Tuf.

Celise Waan ignored him. “I’ll make this short and sweet. The discovery of the plague star is my greatest triumph, the capstone of my career, but none of you have the wit or the courtesy to appreciate the work that went into it. I am an anthropologist with the ShanDella Center for the Advancement of Culture and Knowledge. My academic specialty is the study of primitive cultures of a particular sort—cultures of colony worlds left to isolation and technological devolution in the wake of the Great War. Of course, many human worlds were so affected, and a number of these have been studied extensively. I worked in less well-known fields—the investigation of nonhuman cultures, especially those of former Hrangar slave worlds. One of the worlds I studied was Hro B’rana. Once it was a flourishing colony, a breeding ground for Hruun and dactyloids and lesser Hrangar slave races, but today it’s devastation. Such sentients that still live there live short, ugly, brutal lives, although like most such decayed cultures, they also have tales of a vanished golden age. But the most interesting thing about Hro B’rana is a legend, a legend unique to them—the plague star.

“Let me stress that the devastation on Hro B’rana is extreme, and the underpopulation severe, despite the fact that the environment is not especially harsh. Why? Well, the degenerate descendants of both Hruun and dactyloid colonists, whose cultures are otherwise utterly different and very hostile to each other, have a common answer to that: the plague star. Every third generation, just as they are climbing out of their misery, as populations are swelling once again, the plague Star waxes larger and larger in their nighttime skies. And when this star becomes the brightest in the heavens, then the season of plagues begins. Pestilences sweep across Hro B’rana, each more terrible than the last. The healers are helpless. Crops wither, animals perish, and three-quarters of the sentient population die. Those who survive are thrown back into the most brutal sort of existence. Then the plague star wanes, and with its waning the plagues pass from Hro B’rana for another three generations. That is the legend.”



Haviland Tuf's face had been expressionless as he listened to Celise Waan relate the tale. "Interesting," he said now. "I must surmise, however, that our present expedition has not been mounted simply to further your career by investigating this arresting folk tale."

"No," Celise Waan admitted. "That was once my intent, yes. The legend seemed an excellent topic for a monograph. I was trying to get funding from the Center for a field investigation, but they turned down my request. I was annoyed, and justly so. Those shortsighted fools. I mentioned my annoyance, and the cause, to my colleague, Jefri Lion."

Lion cleared his throat. "Yes," he said. "And my field, as you know, is military history. I was intrigued, of course. I buried myself in the Center databanks. Our files are not nearly as complete as those at Avalon and Newholme, but there wasn't time for a more thorough investigation. We had to act quickly. You see, my theory—well, it's more than theory, real. —I believe, in fact I'm all but certain, that I know what this plague star is. It's no legend, Tuf. It's real. It must be a derelict, yes, abandoned but still operational, still carrying out its programs more than a millennium after the Collapse. Don't you see? Can't you guess?"

"I admit to failure," said Tuf, "lacking your familiarity with the subject at hand."

"It's a warship, Tuf, a warship in a long elliptical orbit around Hro B'rana. It's one of the most devastating weapons Old Earth ever put into the void against the Hrangans, in its own way as terrible as that mythical hellfleet they talk about from those last days before the Collapse. But it has vast potential for good as well as ill! It's the repository of the most advanced biogenetic science of the Federal Empire, a functioning artifact packed full of secrets lost to the rest of humanity."

"Indeed," said Tuf.

"It's a seedship," Jefri Lion finished, "a biowar seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps."

"And it's *ours*," said Kaj Nevis, with a small grim smile.

Haviland Tuf studied Nevis briefly, nodded to himself, and rose. "My curiosity is satisfied," he announced. "Now I must fulfill my portion of the trade."

“Ahhh,” said Celise Waan. “My meat.”

“The supply is copious, though the variety is admittedly small,” said Haviland Tuf. “I shall leave you the task of preparing the meat in a manner most pleasant to your palate.” He went to a storage locker, punched in a code, and removed a small carton, which he carried back to the table under his arm. “This is the only meat aboard my vessel. I cannot vouch for its taste or quality. Yet I have not yet received a complaint on either count.”

Rica Dawnstar burst into laughter and Kaj Nevis snickered. Haviland Tuf, neatly and methodically, removed a dozen cans of catfood from their carton, and stacked them in front of Celise Waan. Havoc leapt onto the table and began to purr.

“It’s not as big as I expected,” Celise Waan said, her tone as petulant as ever.

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf, “the eyes can often deceive. My main viewscreen is admittedly modest, a bare meter in diameter, and this must of course diminish the size of any object displayed thereon. The ship itself is of sizable dimensions.”

Kaj Nevis came forward. “How sizable?”

Tuf folded his hands together atop the bulge of his stomach. “I cannot say with any precision. The *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* is but a modest trading vessel, and its sensory instrumentation is not all that it might be.”

“Approximately, then,” Kaj Nevis snapped.

“Approximately,” Tuf repeated. “Regarded at the angle at which my viewscreen is now displaying it, with the longest axis taken as ‘length,’ the ship we are approaching would seem to be, approximately, some thirty standard kilometers long, approximately some five kilometers in width, approximately some three kilometers in height, but for the dome section amidships, which rises slightly higher, and the forward tower which ascends approximately, one additional kilometer above the deck from which it rises.”

They had all gathered in the control room, even Anittas, who had been awakened from her computer regulated sleep when they emerged from drive. A hush fell over them; even Celise Waan seemed briefly at a loss for something to say. All of them stared at the viewscreen, at the long black twisted shape that floated against the stars, here and there shining with faint lights and pulsing with unseen energies.

“I was right,” Jefri Lion muttered at last, to break the silence. “A seedship—an EE seedship! Nothing else could possibly be so large!”

Kaj Nevis smiled. “Damn,” he said.

“The system must be vast,” Anittas said speculatively. “The Earth Imperials had sophistication far beyond ours. It’s probably an Artificial Intelligence.”

“We’re rich,” burbled Celise Waan, her many and varied grievances forgotten for the moment. She grabbed hold of Jefri Lion’s hands and waltzed him around in a circle, faintly bouncing. “We’re rich, rich, we’re rich and *famous*, we’re all rich!”

“This is not entirely correct,” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not doubt that you may indeed become wealthy in the near future; for the moment, however, your pockets contain no more standards than they did a moment ago. Nor do Rica Dawnstar and I share your prospects of economic advancement.”

Nevis stared at him hard. “Are you complaining, Tuf?”

“Far be it from me to object,” Tuf said in a flat voice. “I was merely correcting Celise

Waan's misstatement."

Kaj Nevis nodded. "Good," he said. "Now, before any of us get any richer, we have to get aboard that thing and see what kind of shape it's in. Even a derelict ought to net us a nice salvage fee, but if that ship's in working order, there's no limit, no limit at all."

"It is obviously functional," Jefri Lion said. "It has been raining plagues on Hro B'ran every third generation for a thousand standard years."

"Yeah," said Nevis, "well, that's true, but it's not the whole story. It's dead in orbit now. What about the drive engines? The cell library? The computers? We've got a lot to check. How do we get aboard, Lion?"

"A docking might be possible," Jefri Lion replied. "Tuf, that dome, do you see it?" He pointed.

"My vision is unimpaired."

"Yes, well, I believe that's the landing deck under there. It's as big as a spacefield. If we can get the dome to open, you can take your ship right in."

"If," said Haviland Tuf. "A most difficult word. So short, and so often fraught with disappointment and frustration." As if to underline his words, a small red light came on beneath the main viewscreen. Tuf held up a long pale finger. "Take note!" he said.

"What is it?" asked Nevis.

"A communication," Tuf proclaimed. He leaned forward and touched a much worn button on his lasercom.

The plague star vanished from the screen. In its place appeared a weary-looking face—the face of a man of middle years, sitting in a communications room. He had deep lines in his forehead and graven down his cheeks, a full head of thick black hair, and tired blue-gray eyes. He was wearing a uniform out of a history tape, and on his head was a green billed cap emblazoned with a golden theta. "This is *Ark*," he announced. "You have entered our defense sphere. Identify yourself or be fired upon. This is your first warning."

Haviland Tuf held down his SEND button. "This is the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*," he announced clearly, "Haviland Tuf commanding. We are harmless unarmed traders out of ShanDellor, *Ark*. Might we request permission to approach for docking?"

Celise Waan gaped. "It's manned," she said. "The crew is still alive!"

"A fascinating development," Jefri Lion said, tugging at his beard. "Perhaps this is a descendant of the original EEC crew. Or perhaps the chronowarp was employed! To warp the very weave of the fabric of time, to hurry it or hold it still, yes, they could do even that. The chronowarp! Think of it!"

Kaj Nevis made a snarling sound. "A thousand damn years and you tell me they're still alive? How the hell are we supposed to deal with that?"



The image on the viewscreen flickered briefly. Then the same tired man in the uniform of the Earth Imperials said, “This is *Ark*. Your ID is improperly coded. You are moving through our defense sphere. Identify yourself or be fired upon. This is your second warning.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I must protest! We are unarmed and unprotected. We mean you no harm. We are peaceful traders, scholars, fellow humans. Our intentions are not hostile and moreover, we lack any means of doing harm to a ship as formidable as your *Ark*. Must we be met with belligerence?”

The screen flickered. “This is *Ark*. You have penetrated our defense sphere. Identify yourself immediately or be destroyed. This is your third and final warning.”

“Recordings,” said Kaj Nevis, with some enthusiasm. “That’s it! No cold storage, no damned stasis field. There’s no one there. Some computer is playing recordings at us.”

“I fear you are correct,” said Haviland Tuf. “The question must be asked: if the computer is programmed to play recorded messages at incoming ships, what else might it be programmed to do?”

Jefri Lion broke in. “The codes!” he said. “I have a whole set of Federal Empire codes and ID sequences on crystal chips in my files! I’ll go get them.”

“An excellent plan,” said Haviland Tuf, “with but a single obvious deficiency, that being the time it will require to locate and utilize these encoded chips. Had we the leisure to accomplish this, I might applaud your suggestion. I fear we do not, alas. The *Ark* has just fired upon us.”

Haviland Tuf reached forward. “I am taking us into drive,” he announced. But as his long, pale fingers brushed the keys, suddenly the *Cornucopia* shook violently. Celise Waan shrieked and went down; Jefri Lion stumbled into Anittas; even Rica Dawnstar had to grab the back of Tuf’s chair to retain her footing. Then all the lights went out. Haviland Tuf’s voice came on



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