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NIGHTFLYERS



NIGHTFLYERS

The Illustrated Edition



GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



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to Gardner Dozois
“Manatees!”

NIGHTFLYERS

WHEN JESUS OF NAZARETH HUNG DYING
on his cross, the *volcryn* passed within a year of his
agony, headed outward.

When the Fire Wars raged on Earth, the *volcryn* sailed
near Old Poseidon, where the seas were still unnamed
and unfished. By the time the stardrive had transformed
the Federated Nations of Earth into the Federal Empire,
the *volcryn* had moved into the fringes of Hrangan space.
The Hrangans never knew it. Like us they were children
of the small bright worlds that circled their scattered
suns, with little interest and less knowledge of the
things that moved in the gulfs between.

War flamed for a thousand years and the *volcryn*
passed through it, unknowing and untouched, safe in a
place where no fires could ever burn. Afterwards, the
Federal Empire was shattered and gone, and the Hran-
gans vanished in the dark of the Collapse, but it was no
darker for the *volcryn*.

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When Kleronomas took his survey ship out from Avalon, the *volcryn* came within ten light-years of him. Kleronomas found many things, but he did not find the *volcryn*. Not then and not on his return to Avalon, a lifetime later.

When I was a child of three, Kleronomas was dust, as distant and dead as Jesus of Nazareth, and the *volcryn* passed close to Daronne. That season all the Crey sensitives grew strange and sat staring at the stars with luminous, flickering eyes.

When I was grown, the *volcryn* had sailed beyond Tara, past the range of even the Crey, still heading outward.

And now I am old and growing older and the *volcryn* will soon pierce the Tempter's Veil where it hangs like a black mist between the stars. And we follow, we follow. Through the dark gulfs where no one goes, through the emptiness, through the silence that goes on and on, my *Nightflyer* and I give chase.

They made their way slowly down the length of the transparent tube that linked the orbital docks to the waiting starship ahead, pulling themselves hand over hand through weightlessness.





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Melantha Jhirl, the only one among them who did not seem clumsy and ill at ease in free fall, paused briefly to look at the dappled globe of Avalon below, a stately vastness in jade and amber. She smiled and moved swiftly down the tube, passing her companions with an easy grace. They had boarded starships before, all of them, but never like this. Most ships docked flush against the station, but the craft that Karoly d'Branin had chartered for his mission was too large, and too singular in design. It loomed ahead; three small eggs side by side, two larger spheres beneath and at right angles, the cylinder of the driveroom between, lengths of tube connecting it all. The ship was white and austere.

Melantha Jhirl was the first one through the airlock. The others straggled up one by one until they had all boarded; five women and four men, each an Academy scholar, their backgrounds as diverse as their fields of study. The frail young telepath, Thale Lasamer, was the last to enter. He glanced about nervously as the others chatted and waited for the entry procedure to be completed. "We're being watched," he said.

The outer door was closed behind them, the tube had fallen away; now the inner door slid open. "Welcome to my *Nightflyer*," said a mellow voice from within.

But there was no one there.

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Melantha Jhirl stepped into the corridor. "Hello," she said, looking about quizzically. Karoly d'Branin followed her.

"Hello," the mellow voice replied. It was coming from a communicator grille beneath a darkened view-screen. "This is Royd Eris, master of the *Nightflyer*. I'm pleased to see you again, Karoly, and pleased to welcome the rest of you."

"Where are you?" someone demanded.

"In my quarters, which occupy half of this life-support sphere," the voice of Royd Eris replied amiably. "The other half is comprised of a lounge-library-kitchen, two sanitary stations, one double cabin, and a rather small single. The rest of you will have to rig sleepwebs in the cargo spheres, I'm afraid. The *Nightflyer* was designed as a trader, not a passenger vessel. However, I've opened all the appropriate passageways and locks, so the holds have air and heat and water. I thought you'd find it more comfortable that way. Your equipment and computer system have been stowed in the holds, but there is still plenty of space, I assure you. I suggest you settle in, and then meet in the lounge for a meal."

"Will you join us?" asked the psipsych, a querulous hatchet-faced woman named Agatha Marij-Black.

"In a fashion," Royd Eris said, "in a fashion."

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* * *

The ghost appeared at the banquet.

They found the lounge easily enough, after they had rigged their sleepwebs and arranged their personal belongings around their sleeping quarters. It was the largest room in this section of the ship. One end of it was a fully equipped kitchen, well stocked with provisions. The opposite end offered several comfortable chairs, two readers, a holotank, and a wall of books and tapes and crystal chips. In the center was a long table with places set for ten.

A light meal was hot and waiting. The academicians helped themselves and took seats at the table, laughing and talking to one another, more at ease now than when they had boarded.

The ship's gravity grid was on, which went a long way towards making them more comfortable; the queasy awkwardness of their weightless transit was soon forgotten.

Finally all the seats were occupied except for one at the head of the table.

The ghost materialized there.

All conversation stopped.

"Hello," said the spectre, the bright shade of a lithe, pale-eyed young man with white hair. He was dressed

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in clothing twenty years out-of-date; a loose blue pastel shirt that ballooned at his wrists, clinging white trousers with built-in boots. They could see through him, and his own eyes did not see them at all.

"A hologram," said Alys Northwind, the short, stout xenotech.

"Royd, Royd, I do not understand," said Karoly d'Branin, staring at the ghost. "What is this? Why do you send us a projection? Will you not join us in person?"

The ghost smiled faintly and lifted an arm. "My quarters are on the other side of that wall," he said. "I'm afraid there is no door or lock between the two halves of the sphere. I spend most of my time by myself, and I value my privacy. I hope you will all understand and respect my wishes. I will be a gracious host nonetheless. Here in the lounge my projection can join you. Elsewhere, if you have anything you need, if you want to talk to me, just use a communicator. Now, please resume your meal, and your conversations. I'll gladly listen. It's been a long time since I had passengers."

They tried. But the ghost at the head of the table cast a long shadow, and the meal was strained and hurried.

* * *

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From the hour the *Nightflyer* slipped into stardrive, Royd Eris watched his passengers.

Within a few days most of the academicians had grown accustomed to the disembodied voice from the communicators and the holographic spectre in the lounge, but only Melantha Jhirl and Karoly d'Branin ever seemed really comfortable in his presence. The others would have been even more uncomfortable if they had known that Royd was always with them. Always and everywhere, he watched. Even in the sanitary stations, Royd had eyes and ears.

He watched them work, eat, sleep, copulate; he listened untiringly to their talk. Within a week he knew them, all nine, and had begun to ferret out their tawdry little secrets.

The cyberneticist, Lommie Thorne, talked to her computers and seemed to prefer their company to that of humans. She was bright and quick, with a mobile, expressive face and a small, hard boyish body; most of the others found her attractive, but she did not like to be touched. She sexed only once, with Melantha Jhirl. Lommie Thorne wore shirts of softly woven metal, and had an implant in her left wrist that let her interface directly with her computers.

The xenobiologist, Rojan Christopheris, was a surly,

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argumentative man, a cynic whose contempt for his colleagues was barely kept in check, a solitary drinker. He was tall and stooped and ugly.

The two linguists, Dannel and Lindran, were lovers in public, constantly holding hands and supporting each other. In private they quarreled bitterly. Lindran had a mordant wit and liked to wound Dannel where it hurt the most, with jokes about his professional competence. They sexed often, both of them, but not with each other.

Agatha Marij-Black, the psipsych, was a hypochondriac given to black depressions, which worsened in the close confines of the *Nightflyer*.

Xenotech Alys Northwind ate constantly and never washed. Her stubby fingernails were always caked with black dirt, and she wore the same jumpsuit for the first two weeks of the voyage, taking it off only for sex, and then only briefly.

Telepath Thale Lasamer was nervous and temperamental, afraid of everyone around him, yet given to bouts of arrogance in which he taunted his companions with thoughts he had snatched from their minds.

Royd Eris watched them all, studied them, lived with them and through them. He neglected none, not even the ones he found the most distasteful. But by the time