

Call Him Moses
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Rumors were seldom of any concern to Haviland Tuf. For one thing, he seldom heard any. Tuf was not averse to acting the tourist on most of the worlds he visited, but even when he was mingling with others in public places he remained somehow apart and unapproachable. His chalk-white skin and utterly hairless face and body usually made him conspicuous among the peoples of the planets on which he plied his trade, and even on those infrequent occasions when his complexion might have allowed him to pass, his size made him stand out. Thus, though people might stare at Tuf and talk of him everywhere he went, few of them talked *to* him unless they had business to transact.

Given his nature, then, it was hardly remarkable that Haviland Tuf had never heard of the man called Moses until the evening that he and Dax were assaulted by Jaime Kreen in a restaurant on K'theddion.

It was a small shabby place just off the spaceport. Tuf had finished a plate of smokeroots and neogress and was relaxing with his third liter of mushroom wine when abruptly Dax raised his head from the table. Tuf shook a bit, slopping some wine on his sleeve, and ducked his head quickly to one side, barely far enough so that the bottle Kreen was wielding smashed open against the back of Tuf's chair instead of the back of Tuf's skull.

Glass exploded, and the liquid within—a smelly local liquor—went everywhere, soaking the chair, the table, the cat, and both men. Jaime Kreen, a thin blond youth with drunken blue eyes, stood blinking stupidly, holding the broken bottle in a bleeding fist.

Haviland Tuf rose ponderously to his feet, his long white face singularly impassive. He glanced at his assailant, blinked, and then reached down to pick up Dax, who was wet and unhappy. "Can you fathom this, Dax?" he said in a deep bass. "We have here a mystery, albeit an inconvenient one. Why does this odd stranger attack us, I wonder? Do you have any ideas?" He stroked Dax slowly as he cradled him in his arms, and only when the cat began to purr did he look at Jaime Kreen again. "Sir," he said. "It might be wise of you to release the fragments of that bottle. It appears to me that your hand is full of glass and blood and that particularly noxious brew, and I have severe doubts that the combination will enhance your health."

The stricken Kreen seemed to come alive. His thin lips drew back in anger, and he flung the bottle away from him. "Are you mocking me, criminal?" he said in a slurred, dangerous voice.

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf. The restaurant had grown very still: the other patrons were quiet and staring, and the proprietor had vanished. Tuf's deep voice could be heard in every corner of the room. "I would venture that the title 'criminal' is more applicable to you than to myself, but perhaps that is not to the point. No, I am not mocking you. You appear to be upset. Under such conditions it would be folly to mock you, and I am not given to folly." He placed Dax back on the table and scratched the tomcat behind the ear.

"You *are* mocking me," Jaime Kreen said. "I'll *hurt* you!"

Haviland Tuf betrayed no emotion. "You will not, sir, although I believe you are thinking of attacking me once again. I do not approve of violence. However, your boorish behavior leaves me with little choice." So saying, he stepped forward quickly, and lifted Jaime Kreen high off the floor before the younger man could react. Then, carefully, he broke both of his arms.

Kreen emerged pale and blinking from the tomblike dark of Kytheddene Prison into the bright street. His arms were in slings. He looked baffled and tired.

Haviland Tuf stood by the curbside, cradling Dax in one arm and petting him with the other. He looked up when Kreen came forth. "Your mood appears to have quieted somewhat," Tuf commented. "Moreover, you are now sober."

"You!" Kreen looked more baffled than ever; his face was so screwed up that it threatened to collapse in upon itself. "Do I understand that *you* bought my freedom?"

"You raise an interesting point," Haviland Tuf said. "I did indeed pay a certain sum—two hundred standards, actually, if we want to be precise—and upon that payment you were handed over to me. Yet it is incorrect to say that I bought your freedom. The crux of the matter is that you are not free. Under Kytheddene law, you belong to me, a bound servant whom I may work as I see fit until such time as you have discharged your debt."

"Debt?"

"I calculate it as follows," said Haviland Tuf. "Two hundred standards for the sum I paid to the local authorities in order to bask in your presence. One hundred standards for my suit, which was genuine Lambereen cotton, and which you quite ruined. Forty standards for the damage to the eatery, which damages I paid in order to settle the proprietor's claims against you. Seven standards for the delightful mushroom wine that you gave me no opportunity to drink. Mushroom wine is a noted specialty of K'theddion, and that was a particularly choice vintage. These total some three hundred forty-seven standards in actual damages. Furthermore, your unprovoked assault made Dax and myself the center of a highly unpleasant scene, and much disturbed our tranquility. For that I am assessing you an additional fifty-three standards, which is a generously low sum, to bring your total to an even four hundred standards."

Jaime Kreen chuckled maliciously. "You'll have a hard time getting even a tenth of that out of me, animal-seller," he said. "I have no funds, and I won't be good for much in the way of work. My arms are broken, you know."

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf. "If you had any significant funds of your own, you could have paid your own fines, in which case my assistance would not have been necessary. And since I myself broke your arms, I am aware of that condition as well. Kindly do not belabor the obvious with statements that convey no meaningful information. Despite your handicaps, I intend to take you with me back to my ship, and work you until your obligation has been discharged. Come."

Haviland Tuf turned and took two steps down the street. When Kreen made no move to follow, Tuf stopped and turned back to him. Kreen smiled. "If you want me anywhere, you can carry me," he said.

Tuf stroked Dax dispassionately. "I have no intention of carrying you," he said in even tones. "You forced me to touch you once, and that experience was sufficiently unpleasant that I have no intention of repeating it. If you decline to follow me, I will return to the authorities and hire two guards to take you bodily where I wish you to be. Their wages will be tallied to your debt. The choice is yours." Tuf turned again and moved off toward the spaceport.

Jaime Kreen, suddenly docile, followed behind, muttering under his breath.

The ship that waited for them at K'theddion Star Port was impressive enough to Kreen's eyes. An ancient, deadly looking craft of pitted black metal, with small rakish wings, it loomed half again as tall as the modern big-bellied trading ships that surrounded it. Like virtually all of Haviland Tuf's infrequent visitors, Kreen was awed (though he did not admit it) to discover that the *Griffin* was only a shuttle, that the *Ark* itself waited above, in orbit.

The shuttle deck of the *Ark* was twice the size of the landing field at K'theddion Star Port, and full of ships; four other shuttles identical to the *Griffin*, an old cargo ship with the teardrop shape characteristic of Avalon sitting on its three bent landing legs, a wicked-looking military flyer, an absurd golden barge with baroque ornamentation and a primitive harpoon gun mounted atop it, two craft that looked alien and vaguely untrustworthy, another that appeared to be nothing but a large square plate with a pole in its center. "Do you collect spacecraft?" Jaime Kreen asked, after Tuf had docked the *Griffin* and they had emerged onto the deck.

"An interesting concept," Tuf replied. "But no. The five landing shuttles are part of the *Ark* itself, and I retain the old trader for sentimental reasons, since it was my first ship. The others I have acquired along the way. Perhaps I should clean out the deck at some point, but there is the possibility that some of these vessels might have some commercial value, so I have refrained up to now. I will have to give the matter some thought. Now, come along with me."

They moved past a series of reception rooms and down several corridors, to a motor pool where several small three-wheeled vehicles were parked side-by-side. Haviland Tuf ushered Kreen into one, set Dax between them, and drove them down a great echoing tunnel that seemed to go on and on for kilometers. The shaft was lined by glass vats of many different sizes and shapes, each filled with fluids and gels. In some vats, dark shapes moved sluggishly within translucent bags, and seemed to peer out at them as they passed. Kreen found the suggestive motions somehow terrible and frightening. Haviland Tuf never noticed; he looked neither right nor left as he drove.

Tuf stopped the vehicle in a room identical to the one that they had started from, gathered up Dax, and led his prisoner down another corridor into a cramped, dustily comfortable chamber full of overstuffed furniture. He motioned Kreen to a seat and took one himself, setting Dax in a third chair since, when seated, he had no apparent lap. "Now," said Haviland Tuf, "we shall talk."

The vast dimensions of Tuf's ship had left Jaime Kreen somewhat subdued, but now a bit of spirit returned to his face. "We have nothing to talk about," he said.

"You think not?" said Haviland Tuf. "I disagree. It was not simply the generosity of my soul which bid me to rescue you from the ignominy of imprisonment. You pose a mystery to me, as I remarked to Dax when you first assaulted us. Mysteries disturb me. I desire some clarification."

Jaime Kreen's thin face took on a calculating look. "Why would I help you out? Your false charges put me in prison and now you've bought me as a slave. And you broke my arms, too! I don't owe you anything."

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf, locking his large hands together on his immense paunch, "we have already established that you owe me four hundred standards. I am prepared to be reasonable. I will ask you questions. You will give me answers. For each answer, I will deduct one standard from the sum you owe me."

"One standard! Absurd. Whatever you want to know is worth more than that! Ten standards for each answer! Not a tenth less!"

"I assure you," said Haviland Tuf, "that whatever information you possess is probably worth nothing at all. I am merely curious. I am a slave to curiosity. It is a fault of mine, one I am helpless to correct, and one that you are now in a position to take advantage of. Yet you should not attempt to press me too far. I refuse to be cheated. Two standards."

"Nine," said Kreen.

"Three, and I will go no higher. I grow impatient." Tuf's face was completely emotionless.

"Eight," said Kreen. "Don't try to bluff me."

Haviland Tuf was silent. He sat unmoving except for his eyes, which wandered over to Dax. The big

black tomcat yawned and stretched himself.

After five minutes of silence, Kreen said, "Six standards, and that's cheap. I know a lot of important things, things that Moses would want to know. Six."

Haviland Tuf said nothing. Minutes passed.

"Five," said Kreen, swearing.

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

"All right," Kreen said at last. "Three standards. You are a cheat and a scoundrel, as well as a criminal. You have no ethics."

"I will ignore your bombast," said Haviland Tuf. "Three standards is the agreed sum, then. A sudden hunch comes to me that you may attempt to give evasive or confusing answers, so that I would have to ask many questions in order to elicit a small particle of information. I warn you that I will brook no such nonsense. Nor will I tolerate any deception. For each lie you attempt to tell me, I will add an additional ten standards on to your debt."

Kreen laughed. "I have no intention of lying, Tuf. But even if I did, how would you ever know? I am not that transparent."

Haviland Tuf permitted himself a smile, a tiny tight-lipped smile that barely touched his face and then was gone again. "Sir," he said, "I assure you that I would know at once. Dax would tell me, in precisely the same manner that he told me how far you would come down from your absurd demand for ten standards, and warned me of your cowardly attack on K'theddion. Dax is a feline, sir, as no doubt even you will perceive. All felines are at least partially psionic, as mankind has known throughout history, and Dax is the end product of generations of breeding and genetic manipulation that have greatly strengthened this trait in him. So you will save all of us a good deal of time and effort if you will give complete, honest answers. While Dax's talents are not sufficiently sophisticated to pluck difficult abstract concepts from your mind, I assure you that he can easily tell if you are lying or holding something back. So, with this in mind, shall we begin?"

Jaime Kreen was glaring at the big tomcat with venom in his eyes. Dax yawned again. "Go ahead," Kreen said sullenly.

"First," said Tuf, "there is the mystery of your assault upon us. I do not know you, sir. You are utterly a stranger to me. I am a simple merchant, and my services benefit all those who employ me. I had in no way given you offense. Yet you attacked me. This raises several questions! Why? What was your motive? Did you know me in some way? Had I given you offense in some action I have since forgotten?"

"Is that one question or four?" Kreen said.

Haviland Tuf folded his hands against his stomach again. "A point, sir. Begin with this: do you know me?"

"No," said Kreen, "but I know *of* you, by reputation. You and your *Ark* are unique and widely famed, Tuf. And you were easy to recognize, when I chanced across you in that slimy Kytheddene restaurant. Gross hairless white giants are not exceptionally common, you know."

"Three standards," Tuf said. "I will take notice of neither your insults nor your flattery. You did not know me, then. Why did you assault me?"

"I was drunk."

"Insufficient. It is true that you were drunk. But there were a number of other patrons in the eatery, any of whom might have obliged you if you were simply looking for a brawl. You were not. You chose me out of all those others. Why?"

"I dislike you. You are a criminal, by my standards."

"Standards vary, of course," Haviland Tuf replied. "On some worlds, my size itself would be a crime. On

others, the fact that you wear boots made of cowhide would be punishable by long imprisonment. So in that sense, we are both criminals. Yet it is my feeling that it is unjust to judge a man by any laws save those of the culture in which he lives, or is presently moving. In that sense, I am no criminal, and your answer is still insufficient. Explain your dislike of me. What crimes do you charge against me?"

"I am a Charitan," Kreen said. He coughed. "Or perhaps I should say I was formerly a Charitan. In fact, I was an administrator, although only sixth grade. Moses destroyed my career. I charge you with the crime of assisting Moses. It is well known. Do not bore me with your denials."

Haviland Tuf glanced at Dax. "You appear to be telling the truth, and your answer contains a fair amount of information, although it raises several questions as well, and is far from clear. Nonetheless, I will do you a kindness and count it as an answer. Six standards, then. And my next questions will be simple ones. Who is Moses and what is a Charitan?"

Jaime Kreen looked incredulous. "Do you want to give me six standards? Don't pretend, Tuf. I won't buy it. You know who Moses is."

"Indeed I do, in a sense," Tuf replied. "Moses is a myth-figure associated with the various orthodox Christian religions, a figure alleged to have lived on Old Earth in the vast distant past. I believe he is somehow associated with or related to Noah, whom my *Ark is* named after, in a fashion. Moses and Noah were brothers, perhaps. The details escape me. In any event, both of them were among the earliest practitioners of ecological warfare, a field with which I am quite familiar. So, in a sense, I do know who Moses is. However, that Moses has been dead for a period sufficiently long to make it unlikely that he had destroyed your career, and even more unlikely that he would care a whit about any information you cared to convey to me. So I must judge that you are speaking of some other Moses, one I do not know. And that, sir, was the thrust of my question, the very point."

"All right," Kreen said. "If you insist on feigning ignorance, I'll play your silly game. A Charitan is a citizen of Charity, as you know perfectly well. Moses, as he styles himself, is a religious demagogue who heads the Holy Altruistic Restoration. With your aid he has conducted a devastating campaign of ecological warfare against the City of Hope, our single great arcology, the center of Charitan life."

"Twelve standards," said Tuf. "Explain further."

Kreen sighed and shifted in his chair. "The Holy Altruists were the original settlers of Charity, centuries ago. They left their original planet because their religious sensibilities were offended by its advanced technology. The Holy Altruistic Church teaches that salvation is obtained by living a simple life close to nature, by suffering and by self-sacrifice. So the Altruists came to a raw planet and suffered and sacrificed and died quite happily for a hundred years or so. Then, unfortunately for them, there was a second wave of settlers. The newcomers built the arcology we call the City of Hope, farmed the land with advanced robotic machinery, opened a star port, and generally sinned against God. Worse, after a few years, children of the Altruists began to desert to the City in droves, to enjoy life a little. In two generations, nothing was left of Altruists except a few old folks. Then Moses appeared, leading this movement they call the Restoration. He marched into the City of Hope, confronted the council of administrators, and demanded that we let his people go. The administrators explained that none of his people *wanted* to go. Moses was unmoved. He said that unless we let his people go, closed the star port, and dismantled the City of Hope to live close to God, he would bring down plagues on us."

"Interesting," said Haviland Tuf. "Continue."

"It's your money," said Jaime Kreen. "Well, the administrators threw Moses out on his hairy ass, and everybody had a good laugh. But we also did some checking, just to be safe. We had all heard ancient horror stories about biological warfare, of course, but we presumed those secrets were long lost. Our computers confirmed as much. Techniques of cloning and genetic manipulation such as were employed by the Earth Imperials survived on only a handful of planets, those much scattered, and the nearest some seven years from us even by ftl drive."

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “Yet no doubt you also learned of the seedships of the Federal Empire’s vanished Ecological Engineering Corps.”

“We did,” said Kreen, smiling sourly. “All gone, destroyed or lost or crippled centuries ago, of no concern to us. Until we learned otherwise from the captain of one trading vessel that put down at Port Faith. Rumors travel, Tuf, even from star to star. Your fame precedes you and condemns you. He told us all about you, you and this *Ark* you stumbled on, and used to line your pockets with standards and your gut with layers of fat. Other crews from other worlds confirmed your existence, and that you controlled a still-functioning EEC seedship. But we had no idea that you were in league with Moses until the plagues began.”

A single thin furrow appeared on Haviland Tuf’s massive bone-white brow, and then was gone again. “I begin to grasp your complaint,” he said. He rose, a slow ponderous movement that was almost tidal, and stood towering above Jaime Kreen. “I will credit you with fifteen standards.”

Kreen made a rude noise. “Only three standards, for all that. Tuf, you—”

“Twenty standards, then, if only to quiet you and restore some tranquility to the *Ark*. I have a beneficent nature. Your debt is now three hundred eighty standards. I shall ask you one further question, and give you an opportunity to reduce it to three hundred seventy-seven.”

“Ask.”

“What are the coordinates for your world, Charity?”

Charity was not so terribly far from K’theddion, as interstellar distances go, and the voyage between took but three standard weeks. For Jaime Kreen, they were busy weeks. While the *Ark* silently ate up the light years, Kreen worked. Centuries of dust had accumulated in some of the most desolate corridors. Haviland Tuf gave Kreen a broom and told him to clean it out.

Kreen begged off, citing his broken arms as a more-than-ample excuse. Haviland Tuf then sedated him, and confined him within the *Ark*’s chronowarp tank, where the same great energies that warped the fabric of space could be used to do strange things to time. It was the last and greatest secret of the Earth Imperials, Tuf claimed, and had been lost virtually everywhere else. He used it to bring his clones to full maturity in a matter of days, and now he used it to age Jaime Kreen, and incidentally heal his broken arms in hours.

With his newly mended arms, Kreen set to sweeping at the rate of five standards an hour.

He swept kilometers of corridors, more rooms than he could count, all manner of empty cages where more than dust had accumulated. He swept until his arms ached, and when he did not have broom in hand, Haviland Tuf found other things for him to do. At mealtime Kreen played the butler, fetching Tuf pewter mugs of brown ale and platters heaped high with steamed vegetables. Tuf accepted them impassively in the overstuffed armchair where it was his custom to take his leisure and read. Kreen was forced to feed Dax, too, sometimes three or four times over, since the big tomcat was a fussy eater and Tuf insisted that his preferences be indulged. Only when Dax was satiated was Jaime Kreen allowed to see to his own meal.

Once Kreen was asked to make a minor repair that the *Ark*’s machinery had not attended to, for some reason, but he bungled the job so badly that Haviland Tuf promptly relieved him of all future assignments of that kind. “The blame lies entirely with me, sir,” Tuf said when it happened. “I failed to remember that you are by training a bureaucrat, and thus good for virtually nothing.”

Despite all his labors, Jaime Kreen’s debt dwindled with excruciating slowness, and sometimes it did not dwindle at all. Kreen very quickly discovered that Haviland Tuf gave absolutely nothing away. For mending his broken arms, Tuf tacked a hundred-standard “medical services” charge onto Kreen’s

obligation. He also charged a standard a day for air, a tenth-standard for each liter of water, a half-standard for a mug of ale. Meals were fairly cheap; only two standards each if Kreen ate basic fare. But basic fare was an unpalatable fortified mash, so as often as not Kreen paid higher prices for the tasty vegetable stews that Tuf himself favored. He would have been willing to pay even more for meat, but Tuf refused to provide it. On the one occasion that he asked Tuf to clone a steak for him, the trader simply stared and said, "We do not eat animal flesh here," then went on his way as unperturbed as ever.

During his first day on the *Ark*, Jaime Kreen asked Haviland Tuf where the toilet could be found. Tuf charged him three standards for the answer, and an additional tenth-standard for the use of the facility.

From time to time, Kreen thought about murder. But even in his most homicidal moments, when he was drunk as a dog, the idea never seemed quite feasible. Dax was always about when Tuf was, prowling down the corridors by the giant's side or riding serenely in his arms, and Kreen was certain that his host had other allies as well. He had glimpsed them on his travels around the ship—dark winged shapes that wheeled above his head in the more cavernous chambers, furtive shadows that scrambled away between the machines when surprised. He never saw them clearly, any of them, but he was somehow certain that he would see them all too well indeed were he to assault Haviland Tuf.

Instead, hoping to reduce his debt a bit faster, he gambled.

That was not perhaps the wisest course of action, but Jaime Kreen had a bit of a weakness for gambling. So each night they consumed hours playing a ridiculous game that Tuf enjoyed, shaking dice and moving counters around an imaginary star cluster, buying and selling and trading planets, building cities and arcologies and charging other star travelers all manner of landing fees and taxes. Unfortunately for Kreen, Tuf was much better at the game than he was, and usually ended up winning back a fair portion of the wages he had paid Kreen during the day.

Away from the gaming table, Haviland Tuf seldom spoke to Kreen at all except to set him tasks and haggle about payments back and forth. Whatever intentions he had toward Charity, he certainly did not volunteer them, and Kreen did not intend to ask, since every question added three standards onto his debt. Nor did Tuf ask any questions that might have tipped his hand. He simply continued in his solitary habits, worked alone in the various cloning rooms and laboratories of the *Ark*, read dusty ancient books in languages that Kreen could not comprehend, and held long conversations with Dax. Thus life went on, until the day they entered orbit around Charity, and Haviland Tuf summoned Kreen to the communications room.

The communications room was long and narrow, its walls lined with dark telescreens and softly shining consoles. Haviland Tuf was seated before one of the blackened screens when Kreen entered, with Dax on his knee. He swiveled at the sound of the door panel sliding shut. "I have attempted to open channels of communication with the City of Hope," he said. "Observe." He touched a playback button on his console.

As Jaime Kreen slid into an empty seat, light flared on the viewscreen in front of Tuf, and coalesced into the face of Moses, a man in late middle age, with features that were regular and almost handsome, thinning gray-brown hair, and deceptively gentle hazel eyes. "Move off, starship," the recorded voice of the Altruistic leader said. His tones were deep and mellow, even if his words were harsh. "Port Faith is closed, and Charity is under new government. The people of this world wish no traffic with sinners, and have no need of the luxuries you bring. Leave us in peace." He raised his hand in a gesture that might have meant "Blessings" and might have meant "Halt," and then the screen went blank.

"So he has won," Jaime Kreen said in a tired voice.

"This would appear to be the case," said Haviland Tuf. He scratched Dax behind the ear and began to stroke him. "Your debt to me presently stands at two-hundred and eighty-four standards, sir."

"Yes," Kreen said suspiciously. "What of it?"

“I wish you to undertake a mission for me. You will descend to the surface of Charity in secrecy, locate the former leaders of your council of administrators, and bring them here for a consultation. In return, I will credit you with fifty standards toward your outstanding debt.”

Jaime Kreen laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Tuf. The sum is absurdly small for such a perilous mission. And I wouldn’t do it even if you were to make me a fair offer, which I’m sure that you would not. Something like canceling out my entire debt, and paying me some two hundred standards besides.”

Haviland Tuf stroked Dax. “This man Jaime Kreen takes us for absolute fools,” he said to the cat. “Next I suspect he will also ask for the *Ark* itself, and perhaps title to a small planet or two. He has no sense of proportion.” Dax gave a small purr that might or might not have meant something. Tuf looked up again at Jaime Kreen. “I am in an uncommonly generous mood, and I may allow you to take advantage of me in this single instance. One hundred standards, sir. It is twice what this small task is worth.”

“Bah,” Kreen replied. “Dax is telling you what I think of your offer, I’m sure. This scheme of yours is nonsense! I have no idea whether the council members are alive or dead, to be found in the City of Hope or elsewhere, free or imprisoned. I can hardly expect them to cooperate with me, either—not when I come bearing a summons from you, who we know to be an ally of Moses. And if Moses captures me, I will spend the rest of my life grubbing for turnips. Likely as not, I *will* be captured. Where do you intend me to land? Moses may have a recording set up to answer approaching starships, but he will certainly have posted guards around Port Faith to keep it closed. Think of the risks, Tuf! I couldn’t possibly attempt this for anything less than the cancellation of my entire debt! All of it! Not a single standard less, you hear!” He crossed his arms stubbornly against his chest. “Tell him, Dax. You know how adamant I am.”

Haviland Tuf’s bone-white features remained impassive, but a small sigh escaped his lips. “You are truly a cruel man, sir. You make me rue the day when I carelessly told you that Dax was more than an ordinary feline. You deprive an old man of his one useful bargaining tool, and swindle him mercilessly with this inflexible stubborn attitude. Yet I have no choice but to give in. Two hundred eighty-four standards, then. It is established.”

Jaime Kreen grinned. “At last you’re being sensible. Good. I’ll take the *Griffin*.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf. “You will not. You will take the trading ship you noticed on the shuttle deck, the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, the ship wherein I began my own career many years ago.”

“That! Absolutely not, Tuf. That ship is in obvious disrepair. I am going to have to make a difficult landing in some wilderness area, and I insist on a craft capable of surviving a bit of rough treatment. The *Griffin*, or one of the other shuttles.”

“Dax,” said Haviland Tuf to the quiet tomcat, “I fear for us. We are shut up in this small place with a congenital idiot, a man with neither ethics nor courtesy nor comprehension. I must explain every obvious ramification of a task that was childish simple to begin with.”

“What?”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf. “The *Griffin* is a shuttle. It is unique in its design, and it has no stardrive. Should you be caught landing in such a craft, even a person with less intellectual equipment than yourself might deduce that a larger ship such as the *Ark* remained above, since shuttles frequently need something to shuttle from, and seldom materialize from the vacuum of deep space. The *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, in contrast, is a common model Avalon-made starship, complete with drive, albeit dysfunctional in this case. Do you understand the point, sir? Do you grasp the essential differences between the two craft?”

“Yes, Tuf. But since I don’t intend to be captured, the distinction is academic. Still, I’ll humor you. For an additional fifty standards above and beyond my debt, I will consent to use your *Cornucopia*.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

Jaime Kreen fidgeted. “Dax is telling you that I’m going to give in if you wait, isn’t he? Well, I’m not. You can’t trick me that way any more, do you understand.” He crossed his arms more tightly than ever. “I am a rock. I am steel. I am adamantine in my resolve on this matter.”

Haviland Tuf stroked Dax, and said nothing.

“Wait all you like, Tuf,” said Kreen. “Just this once, I’m going to fool you. I can wait, too. We’ll wait together. And I’ll never give in. Never. Never. NEVER.”

When the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* returned from the surface of Charity a week and a half later, Jaime Kreen had three others with him, all former top administrators of the City of Hope. Rej Laithor was an elderly hatchet-faced woman with iron-gray hair who had formerly chaired the council. Since Moses had taken over, she had been undergoing retraining as a spinning-wheel operator. She was accompanied by a younger woman and a large man who looked as if he had once been very fat, although now his skin hung from his face in loose yellow folds.

Haviland Tuf received them in a conference room. He was seated at the head of the table when Kreen ushered the Charitans in, his hands folded neatly in front of him, and Dax curled up lazily on the polished metal.

“I am pleased that you could come,” he said as the administrators took seats. “You appear hostile, however, and I regret this. Let me begin by assuring you that I played no role whatsoever in your vicissitudes.”

Rej Laithor snorted. “I interrogated Kreen when he found me, Tuf, and he told me of your protestations of innocence. I believe them no more than he did. Our city and our way of life were destroyed by ecological warfare, by the plagues that this Moses let loose on us. Our computers tell us that only you and this ship are capable of waging such warfare.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “I might suggest that you consider reprogramming your computers, if they frequently make such errors.”

“We have no computers now,” the formerly fat man said dolefully. “I was chief of programming, however, and I resent the inference that I was less than capable.”

“You *are* less than capable, Rikken, or you never would have let those lice infest the system,” Rej Laithor said. “That makes Tuf not one whit less guilty, however. They were his lice.”

“I do not have a monopoly on lice,” Haviland Tuf said simply. Then he raised a hand. “We should desist from this squabbling. It takes us nowhere. Let us, instead, discuss the sad history and plight of the City of Hope, and of Moses and the plagues. Perhaps you are familiar with the original Moses, the Old Earth Moses whom your own antagonist patterns himself after. This elder Moses had no seedship, no formal tools for biowar. He did, however, have a god, who proved to be equally effective. His people were being held in captivity. To free them, he sent ten plagues against his enemies. Did your Moses follow this selfsame pattern?”

“Don’t answer him for free,” Jaime Kreen said, from where he lounged against the door.

Rej Laithor glanced at him as if he were insane. “We looked up the original Moses story,” she said when she turned back to Tuf. “Once the plagues started coming, we wanted to know what to expect. Moses used the same plagues as the original, but he varied the order a bit. And we only got six of them, at which point the council gave in to the Altruistic demands, closed Port Faith, and evacuated the City of Hope.” She held up her hands. “Look at them—look at those blisters, look at that callus. He has us all scattered through these rotting Altruistic villages, living like primitives. Hungry, too. He’s mad.”

“First Moses turned the waters of the river into blood,” said Haviland Tuf.

“It was disgusting,” the younger woman said. “All the water in the arcology, the fountains, the swimming pools, the taps. You turned on the faucet or stepped into the shower and suddenly you were covered with blood. Even the toilets were full of blood.”

“It wasn’t real blood,” Jaime Kreen added. “We analyzed it. Some organic poison had been added to the city water supply. But whatever it was made the water thick and red and undrinkable. How did you do it, Tuf?”

Haviland Tuf ignored the question. “The second plague was a plague of frogs.”

“In our yeast tanks, and our whole hydroponics section,” said Kreen. “I was the supervising administrator. It ruined me. The frogs gummed up all the machinery with their bodies, and they died and rotted and spoiled the food. Laithor gave me a summary discharge when I couldn’t contain them—as if it was my fault!” He grimaced at his former superior. “Well, at least I didn’t wind up slaving for Moses. I left for K’theddion when it was still possible to leave.”

“Third,” said Haviland Tuf, “was the plague of lice.”

“Everywhere,” muttered the former fat man. “Everywhere. They couldn’t live inside the system, of course, so they died there, but that was bad enough. The system went down. The lice just moved on. Everybody had them. You couldn’t stay clean enough to avoid it.”

“Fourth was the plague of flies.”

The Charitans all looked glum. No one said anything.

“Fifth,” continued Haviland Tuf, “Moses set loose a murrain that killed all the cattle of his enemies.”

“He skipped the murrain,” said Rej Laithor. “We had our herds out on the prairies, but we put guards around them, and down in the cellars around the meatbeasts, too. We were expecting him. Nothing happened. He skipped the boils, too, thank goodness, and the hail. I would have liked to have seen him make it hail inside the arcology. He went straight to the locusts.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “The eighth plague. Did these locusts eat your fields clean?”

“The locusts didn’t touch our fields. They were inside the city, in the sealed grain storage compartments. Three years’ worth of surplus was gone overnight.”

“The ninth plague,” said Haviland Tuf, “was darkness itself.”

“I’m glad I missed that one,” volunteered Jaime Kreen.

“Every light in the city died,” said Rej Laithor. “Our repair crews had to fight through piles of dead flies and live locusts, scratching at their lice all the while. It was hopeless, and the people were already leaving by the thousands. I ordered the city abandoned once it became clear that even the secondary power stations were full of bugs. After that, everything went very fast. A week later I was living in an unheated cabin in the Hills of Honest Labor, and learning how to operate a spinning wheel.” Her tone was savage.

“Your fate is a sad one,” Haviland Tuf agreed in a placid voice. “Yet you should not despair. When I heard of your plight from Jaime Kreen, I resolved at once to help you. And here I am.”

Rej Laithor looked suspicious. “Help us?” she said.

“I will win back your City of Hope for you,” said Haviland Tuf. “I will smite Moses and his Holy Altruistic Restoration. I will free you from your spinning wheel and give you back your vocoder.”

The young woman and the former fat man were beaming. Rej Laithor continued to frown. “Why?”

“Rej Laithor asks me why,” Haviland Tuf said to Dax, stroking the cat softly. “My motives are always imputed. People have no trust in this hard modern age, Dax.” He looked at the top administrator. “I will help you because the situation on Charity moves me, because your people are obviously in pain. Moses is no true altruist, as we both know, but this does not mean the impulse to self-sacrifice and benevolence

is dead in humanity. I deplore Moses and his tactics, his use of innocent insects and animals in an unnatural manner to impose his will on his fellow human beings. Are these motives sufficient for you, Rej Laithor? If not, say as much, and I will take my *Ark* and depart.”

“No,” she said. “No, don’t do that. We accept. I accept, on behalf of the City of Hope. If you succeed, we will build a statue to you, and set it atop the city to be seen for kilometers.”

“Passing birds would relieve themselves upon such a statue,” said Haviland Tuf. “The wind would abrade and erode it, and it would be placed too high for any to see its features clearly. Such a statue might tickle my vanity—I am a small man, for all my size, easily pleased by such things—but I would want it set in your largest public square, safe from all harm.”

“Of course,” Laithor said quickly. “Anything.”

“Anything,” said Haviland Tuf. It was not a question. “In addition to the statue, I will also require fifty thousand standards.”

Her face went pale and then red. “You said,” she began in a sort of a choked whisper.

“You...benevolence...altruism...our need...the spinning wheel...”

“I must meet my expenses,” said Haviland Tuf. “Certainly I am willing to donate my own time to this matter, but the resources of the *Ark* are too valuable to squander. I must eat. Surely the coffers of the City of Hope are sufficient to meet this small sum.”

Rej Laithor made a sputtering noise.

“I’ll handle this,” Jaime Kreen interjected. He turned to Tuf. “Ten thousand standards. No more. Nothing. Ten thousand.”

“Impossible,” said Haviland Tuf. “My costs will surely exceed forty thousand standards. Perhaps I can diet for a time, take only that sum, and content myself with a small loss. Your people do suffer.”

“Fifteen thousand,” Kreen said.

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Oh, hell,” said Jaime Kreen. “Forty thousand then, and I hope that damned cat dies of gout.”

It was the habit of the man called Moses to walk each evening along the rugged footpaths of the Hills of Honest Labor, to watch the beauty of the sunset and contemplate in solitude the problems of the day. He would stride along briskly at a pace few younger men could match, his long crooked staff in hand and a peaceful look on his face, his eyes fixed on far horizons. Often he would cover a dozen kilometers before turning back toward home and bed.

The pillar of fire first appeared to him on such a walk.

He had just topped a rise and there it was—a twisting, writhing funnel of orange flame, shot through with flickers of blue and yellow, tracing a path through the rocks and the dust straight toward him. It was easily thirty meters high, crowned by a small gray cloud that somehow paced it.

Moses rested on the crest of the hill, leaning on his staff, and watched it come.

The pillar of fire stopped five meters from him, on slightly lower ground. “Moses,” it said in a booming thunderous voice from above, “I am the Lord God, and you have sinned against me. *Give my people back!*”

Moses chuckled. “Very good,” he said in his rich tones. “Really, very good.”

The pillar of fire trembled and spun. “Release the people of the City of Hope from your cruel bondage,” it demanded, “lest in my wrath I bring down plagues upon you.”

Moses scowled and pointed his staff at the pillar of fire. “I am the one who brings down plagues around

here, I would thank you to remember.” There was a hint of irony in his voice.

“False plagues from a false prophet, as both you and I know full well,” boomed the pillar of fire. “All of your feeble tricks and travesties are known to me, the Lord God whose name you have profaned. Give my people back, or you shall look upon the terrible face of genuine pestilence!”

“Nonsense,” said Moses. He began walking downhill, toward the pillar of fire. “Who are you?”

“I am who I am,” the pillar of fire said, retreating hastily as Moses advanced. “I am the Lord God.”

“You are a holographic projection,” Moses said, “emanating from that silly cloud above us. I am a holy man, not a stupid one. Go now.”

The pillar of fire stood its ground and rumbled threateningly. Moses walked right through it, and continued smartly down the hill. The pillar remained, writhing and spinning, until long after Moses had vanished. “Indeed,” it boomed in its vast thunderous voice to the empty night. Then it shuddered and winked out.

The small grey cloud scuttled across the hills and caught up to Moses a kilometer down the road. The pillar of fire snaked down again, crackling with ominous energy. Moses walked around it. The pillar of fire began to follow him.

“You city-dwellers begin to try my patience,” Moses said as he walked. “You seduce my people with your sinful, slothful ways, and now you interrupt my evening reflections. I have had a hard day of holy toil. Be warned that you are near to provoking me. I have forbidden all this traffic with science. Take your aircar and your hologram and be gone with you, before I bring down a plague of boils upon your people.”

“Empty words, sir,” said the pillar of fire, trailing close on his heels. “Boils are well beyond your limited abilities. Do you think to deceive one such as I as easily as you deceived that pack of small-visioned bureaucrats?”

Moses hesitated, and cast a thoughtful look over his shoulder. “You doubt the powers of my God? I would think that my demonstrations had been ample enough.”

“Indeed,” said the pillar of fire. “Yet the things demonstrated were your own limitations, and those of your opponents. It is clear that you planned long ahead, and well, but your only powers were in that.”

“No doubt you believe the plagues that swept the City of Hope were coincidence, bad fortune?”

“You mistake me, sir. I know full well what they were, and there was nothing supernatural in any of them. For generations the young and the disaffected among the Altruists had been emigrating to the City. How simple and obvious to plant among their numbers your own spies, saboteurs, and agents. How cunning to wait a year or two or five until each among those had been fully accepted into the City of Hope, and given positions of responsibility. Frogs and insects can be bred, sir, and easily, whether in a cabin in the Hills of Honest Labor or in an apartment complex within the City itself. Release such creatures in the wild, and they will dissipate and die. The elements will slay them, natural enemies will hunt them down, they will perish for want of food; the complex merciless mechanism of the ecology will set them in their natural place. But how different within an arcology, the veritable architectural ecology that is truly no ecology at all, for it has a niche for no animal but humanity alone. The weather within is always fair and gentle, no competing species or predatory enemies exist, and it is an easy enough thing to find a proper source of food. Under such conditions, the result is inevitably a plague. Yet a false plague, looming large only within the confines of the City. Outside, your little plagues of frogs and lice and flies would be as nothing to the wind and the rain and the wild.”

“I turned their water into blood,” Moses insisted.

“Indeed, your agents placed organic chemicals in the City’s water supply.”

“I brought down a plague of darkness,” Moses said. His tone had grown quite defensive.

“Sir,” said the pillar of fire, “you insult my intelligence with the obvious. You turned out a light.”

Moses swung about to face the pillar, glaring up at it defiantly, his face red by reflected light. “I deny this. I deny all of it. I am a true prophet.”

“The true Moses brought down a grievous murrain upon his enemies,” the pillar of fire boomed in an even voice, as much as thunder can be even. “You brought none. The true Moses set upon his enemies a festering sweat of boils, so that none could stand before him. You did not. Your omissions give you away, sir. True pestilence is beyond your powers. The true Moses devastated the lands of his enemies with hail that rained down day and night. That plague too defeated your own limited capacities. Yet your enemies, beset by your tricks, surrendered the City of Hope before the tenth plague, the death of the first-born, and that was to your great good fortune, for by that time you were of a certainty plagued out.”

Moses smote the pillar of fire with his staff. There was no apparent effect on either staff or pillar. “Move off,” he shouted. “Whoever you are, you are no God of mine. I defy you. Do your worst! You have said it yourself: in nature, plagues are less simple things than inside an arcology. We are secure in the simple life we live in the Hills of Honest Labor, close to our God. We are full of grace. You cannot harm us.”

“Indeed,” boomed the pillar of fire. “You are wrong, Moses. *Give my people back!*”

Moses was not listening. He walked through the fire again and, furious, began to race back toward the village.

“When will you start?” Jaime Kreen asked eagerly after Haviland Tuf had returned to the *Ark*. He had remained aboard after taking the other Charitans back to the surface, since—as he had pointed out—the City of Hope was uninhabitable and there was no place for him in the villages and work camps of the Altruists. “Why aren’t you working? When will—”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf. He was sitting in his favorite chair, eating a bowl of creamed mushrooms and lemon-peas. A mug of ale sat on the table by his side. “Do not presume to give me orders, unless you chance to prefer the hospitality of Moses to my own.” He sipped at his ale. “Such work as needs be done has been done. My hands, unlike your own, were not entirely idle during our voyage from K’theddion.”

“But that was before...”

“Details,” said Haviland Tuf. “Most of the basic cloning is done. The clones too have kept themselves occupied. The breeding tanks are full.” He blinked at Kreen. “Leave me to my dinner.”

“The plagues,” said Kreen. “When will they begin?”

“The first,” said Haviland Tuf, “began some hours ago.”

Down through the Hills of Honest Labor, past the six villages and the rocky fields of the Holy Altruists and the sprawling barren work camps where the refugees were quartered, ran the wide slow-flowing river that Altruists called God’s Grace and other Charitans the River of Sweat. When dawn broke on the distant horizon, those who had gone down to the riverside to fish or fill their jugs or wash their clothing returned to the villages and work camps with cries of horror. “Blood,” they shouted. “The river is blood, as the waters of the City were.” Moses was sent for, and he went to the river reluctantly, wrinkling his nose at the smell of dead and dying fish, and the stink of blood itself. “A trick of the sinners of the City of Hope,” he said, when he looked down on the sluggish scarlet stream. “The Lord God renews the natural world. I will pray, and in a day the river will be clean and fresh again.” He stood in the mud, at his feet a bloody shallow pool full of dead fish, stretched out his staff over the diseased waters, and began to pray. He prayed for a day and a night, but the waters did not clear.

When dawn came again, Moses retired to his cabin, and gave orders, and Rej Laithor and five other top

administrators were taken from their families and questioned most intensely. The questioners learned nothing. Patrols of armed Altruists went upstream, searching for the conspirators who were dumping chemical pollutants into the river. They found nothing. They traveled for three days and three nights, as far as the great waterfall in the High Country, and even there the tumbling waters were blood, blood, blood.

Moses prayed without surcease, both day and night, until he finally collapsed from exhaustion, and his lieutenants took him back to his simple cabin. The river remained red and murky.

“He is beaten,” Jaime Kreen said after a week, when Haviland Tuf had returned from scouting out the situation below in his airbarge. “Why does he wait?”

“He waits for the river to cleanse itself,” said Haviland Tuf. “It is one thing to contaminate the water supply of a closed system like your arcology, where only a finite amount of contaminant will be sufficient for the task. A river is an undertaking of a higher magnitude. Inject any amount of chemical you please into its waters, and sooner or later it will all flow past and the river will be clean again. Moses no doubt believes we shall soon run out of chemicals.”

“Then how are you doing it?”

“Microorganisms, unlike chemical substances, multiply and renew themselves,” said Haviland Tuf. “Even the waters of Old Earth were subject to such red tides, the ancient records of the EEC tell us. There is a world called Scarne where the corresponding lifeform is so virulent that even the oceans themselves are perpetually stained, and all other creatures must adapt or die. Those who built the *Ark* visited Scarne and took cloning material.”

That night the pillar of fire appeared outside of Moses’ cabin, and frightened away the guards. “*Give my people back!*” it roared.

Moses staggered to the door and threw it wide. “You are a delusion of Satan,” he screamed, “but I will not be tricked. Be gone. We will drink no more from the river, trickster. There are deep wells we can take our water from, and we can dig others.”

The pillar of fire writhed and crackled. “No doubt,” it commented, “yet you only delay the inevitable. Release the people from the City of Hope, or I will set the plagues of frogs upon you.”

“I will eat your frogs,” Moses yelled. “They will be fine and delicious.”

“These frogs will come from the river,” said the pillar of fire, “and they shall be more terrible than you can imagine.”

“Nothing lives in that poisoned gutter,” Moses said. “You have seen to that.” Then he slammed the door, and would listen no more to the pillar of fire.

The guards that Moses sent to the river at dawn came back bloody and hysterical with fear.

“There are *things* there,” one of them testified, “moving around in the pools of blood. Little crimson wrigglers, ’bout as big as your finger, but their legs was twice as long. Looked like red frogs, except when we got closer we saw that they had teeth, and they was ripping up the dead fish. Hardly any fish was left at all, and them that were had these frog things crawling all over them. Then Danel tried to pick up one of these frogs, and it snapped at him, right into his hand, and he screamed and all of a sudden the air was full of the damn things, jumping around like they was flying, biting people, tearing at you when they got hold. It was terrible. How are you going to fight a frog? Stab it? Shoot it? How?” He was shaking.

Moses sent another party down to the river, armed with sacks and poison and torches. They came back in total disarray, carrying two of their number. One man died that morning, his throat torn out by a frog. Another went a few hours later, from the fever that many of those bitten had developed.

By dusk, all the fish were gone. The frogs began to move up from the river, into the villages. The Altruists dug trenches and filled them with water and flame. The frogs leaped over the trenches. The Altruists

fought with knives and clubs and fire, some even with the modern weapons they had taken from the cityfolk. Six more people were dead by dawn. Moses and his followers retreated behind closed doors.

“Our people are out in the open,” Jaime Kreen said fearfully. “The frogs will come into the camps and kill them.”

“No,” said Haviland Tuf. “If your Rej Laithor can keep her charges calm and quiet, they have nothing to fear. Scarnish bloodfrogs are carrion eaters chiefly. They attack living creatures larger than themselves only when attacked or frightened.”

Kreen looked incredulous, then slowly smiled. “And Moses hides in fear! That’s rich, Tuf.”

“Rich,” said Haviland Tuf. There was nothing in his tone to indicate either agreement or mockery. But Dax was in his arms, and Kreen noticed suddenly that the cat was still and stiff, his fur slowly bristling.

That night the pillar of fire came not to the man called Moses, but to the refugees from the City of Hope, huddled in fear in their ramshackle camp, watching the frogs prowl beyond the fences that kept them apart from the Altruists.

“Rej Laithor,” the pillar of fire said, “your enemies have imprisoned themselves behind barred doors. You are free—Go. Take your people in hand and lead them back to your arcology. Walk slowly, watch where you set your feet, make no sudden moves. Do these things without fail, and the frogs will leave you unharmed. Clean and repair your City of Hope, and ready my forty thousand standards.”

Rej Laithor, surrounded by her junior administrators, stared up at the writhing flames. “Moses will attack us again as soon as you depart, Tuf,” she shouted. “Finish him. Unleash your other plagues.”

The pillar of fire said nothing. It turned and crackled for long minutes, and then it was gone entirely.

Wearily, the people of the City of Hope began to file out of camp, being very careful where they set their feet.

“The generators are working again,” Jaime Kreen reported two weeks later. “The City will soon function as before. But that is only half our bargain, Tuf. Moses and his followers still sulk in their villages. The bloodfrogs are nearly all dead now, for want of any carrion to eat except each other. And the river shows signs of clearing. When are you going to unleash the lice on them? And the flies? They deserve to scratch, Tuf.”

“Take the *Griffin*,” Haviland Tuf ordered. “Bring Moses to me, willing or no. Do this and one hundred standards of your City’s funds will be yours.”

Jaime Kreen looked astonished. “Moses? *Why*? Moses is our enemy. If you think you can turn around and make a deal with him now, sell us back into slavery for a better price...”

“Contain your suspicions,” Tuf replied. He stroked Dax. “Always people think the worst of us, Dax. Perhaps it is our sad fate to be ever suspect.” He addressed Kreen again. “I wish only a conference with Moses. Do as I have told you.”

“I am not in your debt any more, Tuf,” Kreen said sharply. “I assist you only as a patriotic Charitan. Tell me your motives, and I may do your bidding. Otherwise, do it yourself. I refuse.” He crossed his arms.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “are you aware of how many meals and mugs of ale you have taken aboard the *Ark* since our balance was adjudged even? Are you aware of the quantity of my air you have breathed, and how many times you have used my sanitary facilities? I am abundantly aware of all of these things. Are you further aware that the usual charge for a voyage from K’theddion to Charity is some three hundred seventy-nine standards? All of these amounts could easily be added to your account. I have foregone this, to my great financial disadvantage, only because you have afforded me certain minor conveniences. I can see now that my forbearance was an error. I will rectify the mistakes in my

bookkeeping.”

“Don’t bluff me, Tuf,” Kreen said stubbornly. “We’re even, and we’re a long way from Kytheddene Prison, and any claims you have to me under their absurd laws are null and void on Charity.”

“The laws of K’theddion and Charity are alike to me, except when they serve my purposes,” Haviland Tuf said very quietly. “I am my own law, Jaime Kreen. And if I should determine to make you my slave until the last days of your life, neither Rej Laithor nor Moses nor your own bravado could help you in the least.” Tuf delivered the words as always, evenly, calmly, in his bass voice, with hardly a hint of emotion in his flat inflection.

But Jaime Kreen suddenly felt very cold. And he did as he was bid.

Moses was a tall, strong man, but Tuf had told Jaime Kreen of his nightly reflections, and it was an easy enough thing to wait one evening in the hills beyond the village, in the brush with three others, and overcome Moses as he passed. One of Kreen’s assistants suggested killing the Altruistic leader then and there, but Kreen forbade it. They carried the unconscious Moses back to the waiting *Griffin*, where Kreen dismissed the others.

Shortly after, Kreen delivered Moses to Haviland Tuf, and turned to take his leave.

“Stay,” Tuf said. They were in a room that Kreen had never seen before, a vast echoing chamber where the walls and ceiling were of the purest white. Tuf was seated in the center of the chamber, at a horseshoe-shaped instrument panel. Dax sat atop the console, looking quite alert.

Moses was still groggy. “Where am I?” he demanded.

“You are aboard the seedship *Ark*, the last functioning biowar ship of the Ecological Engineering Corps. I am Haviland Tuf.”

“Your voice,” Moses said.

“I am the Lord God,” Haviland Tuf said.

“Yes,” Moses said. He stood up suddenly. Jaime Kreen, standing behind him, grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him roughly back into his seat. Moses protested, but did not try to rise again. “You were the one who brought the plagues, the voice from the pillar of fire, the devil who impersonated God.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “Yet you misunderstand. You are the impersonator in this company, Moses. You sought to impersonate a prophet, to pretend to vast supernatural powers you do not have. You employed tricks, and waged a primitive form of ecological warfare. I, in contrast, am no pretender. I am the Lord God.”

Moses spat. “You are a man with a starship, and a host of machines. You played the plague game well. But two plagues do not make a man a god.”

“Two,” said Haviland Tuf. “Do you doubt the other eight?” His large hands moved over the instruments before him, the room darkened, the dome ran with light, and it seemed they were out in space, looking down on Charity. Then Haviland Tuf did something else to his instruments. The holograms shifted and they were moving, sinking, soaring, until the blurs resolved themselves. They floated above the settlements of the Holy Altruists, in the Hills of Honest Labor. “Watch,” commanded Haviland Tuf. “This is a computer simulation. These things were not, yet could have been. I am confident that you will find this enlightening.”

In the domed room, all about them, they saw the villages, and shadow-faced people moving among them, shoveling the carcasses of dead frogs into pits for burning. They saw within the cabins, too, where weaker people burned with fevers. “It is after the second plague,” Haviland Tuf announced, “even as now. The bloodfrogs have spent themselves.” His hands moved. “Lice,” he said.

The lice came. The dust itself seemed to burst with them, and suddenly they were everywhere. All the shadow-folk were scratching, and Jaime Kreen (who had scratched a good bit himself before departing for K'theddion) chuckled. Then he stopped chuckling. The lice seemed more than lice. The people broke out in a scarlet rash, and many of them took to bed, screaming of the itches, the horrible itches. Some scratched themselves so badly that they drew blood, scratched deep gouges in their skin, and tore their fingernails loose in their fury.

"Flies," said Haviland Tuf. And the flies swarmed, flies of all kinds—the swollen stinging flies of Dam Tullian, the flies of Old Earth with their ancient diseases, the black and grey fleshflies of Gulliver, the sluggish flies of Nightmare who plant their eggs in living tissue. They settled on the villages and the Hills of Honest Labor in immense clouds, and covered them as if they were but a particularly large dung heap, and left them black and thick and stinking.

"The murrain," said Haviland Tuf. They watched the herds die by the thousands. The gross immobile meatbeasts in the cellar of the City of Hope turned to rot and corruption. Burning could not check the pestilence. Soon, no meat was left, and those people who still lived grew gaunt and bitter-looking. Haviland Tuf said other words—anthrax, Ryerson's Disease, roserot, calierosy.

"Boils," said Haviland Tuf, and again disease raged, but this time among the people and not their animals. They sweated and screamed as the boils covered their faces and hands and chests, each swelling until it burst, so the blood and the pus ran free. Then new boils grew as fast as the old ones vanished. Men and women staggered through the streets of the simple villages, blind and pockmarked, bodies crusted and covered with open sores, the perspiration running like oil over their skin. When they fell in the dirt, among the dead flies and lice and cattle, they rotted there, with none to bury them.

"Hail," said Haviland Tuf, and it came, a great thundering pounding hail, the stones fists of ice, for a day and a night and a day and a night and a day and a night, and on and on, and fire mingled with the hail. Those who went outside died, the hailstones smashing them to the ground. And many of those who stayed within died, too. When the hail had stopped at last, there was hardly a cabin left standing.

"Locusts," said Haviland Tuf. They covered the earth and the sky, clouds of them, worse than the flies. They landed everywhere, crawled over the living and the dead both, and ate what little food was left, until there was nothing at all.

"Darkness," said Haviland Tuf. Darkness moved. It was a gas, a thick black gas, drifting with the wind. It was a liquid, flowing, moving like a sensuous stream of jet, gleaming, shining. It was silence. It was night. It was alive. Where it moved, no life remained behind it; the weeds and grasses were dry and dead, and the soil itself looked raw and ravaged and bruised. It was a cloud larger than the villages, or the Hills of Honest Labor, or the locusts. It settled over all of them, and nothing moved for a day or a night, and then the living darkness rolled on, and behind it was only dust, and dry decay.

Haviland Tuf touched his instruments, and the visions were gone from them. The lights came on again. The walls were very white.

"The tenth plague," Moses said slowly, in a voice that no longer seemed rich or large. "The death of the firstborn."

"I admit to my own failures," said Haviland Tuf. "I cannot make such fine distinctions. I would point out, however, that all of the firstborn *are* dead, in these scenes that never were, even as the lastborn. I am a gross and clumsy god in that; in my awkwardness, I must need kill all."

Moses was pale and broken, but within him was still a strong and stubborn man. "You are only human," he whispered.

"Human," said Haviland Tuf, in his voice without emotion. His huge pale hand was stroking Dax. "I was born human, and lived as such for long years, Moses. Yet then I found the *Ark*, and I have ceased to be a man. The powers I may wield are vaster than those of many gods that humans have worshipped. There

is not a man I meet but I could take his life. There is not a world I pause on that I could not waste utterly, or remake as I choose. I am the Lord God, or as much of one as either of you is ever likely to encounter.”

“It is a great fortune for you that I am kind and benevolent and merciful, and too frequently bored. You are counters to me, nothing more—pieces and players in a game with which I have whiled away a few weeks. It seemed an interesting game, this plague business, and so it was for a time. Yet it quickly grew dull. Even after two plagues, it was clear that I had no meaningful opposition, that you, Moses, were incapable of anything that might surprise me. My objectives were accomplished—I had taken back the people of the City of Hope, and the rest would be meaningless ritual. I have elected instead to end it.

“Go, Moses, and plague no more. I am through with you.

“And you, Jaime Kreen, see that your Charitans take no further vengeance. You shall have victories enough. In a generation, his culture and his religion and his way of life will all be dead.

“Remember who I am, and remember that Dax can look into your thoughts. If the *Ark* should pass this way again, and find that you have disobeyed me, it will be as I have shown you. The plagues will sweep your little world until nothing lives upon it.”

Jaime Kreen shuttled Moses back to his people in the *Griffin*, then—on Tuf’s instructions—collected forty thousand standards from Rej Laithor and took it back up to the *Ark*. Haviland Tuf met him on the shuttle deck, with Dax in his arms, and took his payment with only a stately blink.

Jaime Kreen was thoughtful. “You are bluffing, Tuf,” he said. “You’re no god. Those were only simulations you showed us. You could never have actually done all that. But you can program a computer to show anything.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“*Indeed*,” said Jaime Kreen, warming now. “You frightened Moses out of his head, but you didn’t deceive me for a minute with your picture show. The hail gave you away. Bacteria, disease, pests—all that is within the sphere of ecological warfare. Maybe even that darkness creature, although I think you made that up. But *hail* is a meteorological phenomenon, it has nothing to do with biology or ecology. You slipped up, Tuf. But it was a nice try, and it should keep Moses humble.”

“Humble,” agreed Haviland Tuf. “I should have hesitated and planned more thoroughly before attempting to mislead a man of your perception and insight, no doubt. At every turn you frustrate my small schemes.”

Jaime Kreen chuckled. “I have a hundred standards due me,” he said, “for bringing Moses up and back.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I would never forget such a debt. It is not necessary to chivvy me.” He opened the box that Kreen had brought up from Charity, and paid out one hundred standards. “You will find a convenient personal airlock in section nine, just beyond the doors marked Climate Control.”

Jaime Kreen frowned. “Airlock? What do you mean?”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I would think it obvious. I mean airlock, a device by which you may depart the *Ark* without my valuable atmosphere departing with you. Since you have no spacecraft, it would be foolish to use the large airlock here. A smaller personal lock, as I said, may be found in section nine.”

Kreen looked aghast. “Are you going to jettison me?”

“Not the best choice of words,” said Haviland Tuf. “They sound so harsh. Yet I can hardly keep you aboard the *Ark*, and were you to depart in one of my shuttles, there would be no one to bring it back to me. I can hardly afford to sacrifice a valuable piece of equipment simply for your personal convenience.”

Kreen frowned. “The solution to your dilemma is simple. We will both board the *Griffin*. You will take

me down to Port Faith. Then you will return to your ship.”

Haviland Tuf stroked Dax. “Interesting,” he said. “Yet I do believe it might work. You must understand, of course, that such a trip would constitute a distinct annoyance for me. Surely I should receive something for my troubles.”

Jaime Kreen stared into the still white face of Haviland Tuf for a minute, then sighed, and handed back the hundred standards.