

Between the Lines

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Eventually, after many months of work, the investigators from Naval Intelligence were able to piece together the story from the beginning.

I.

Galen Navarek, a boy from the colonies, is brought to Earth for the first time at the age of eight. A luxurious vacation for his parents; nostalgic for their homeworld, they assume that the trip will also be a treat for their son.

In fact, the visit to Earth is a miserable experience for a child raised in the domes. Natural gravity is a crushing weight on his body. The thick, unfiltered atmosphere attacks him in several ways; he develops a dozen minor infections and allergic reactions, none of which seem to respond to the standard treatment. The climate and the crowds oppress him. He complains constantly of noise and headaches.

One morning the Navareks wake to find Galen sprawled unconscious on the bedroom floor. Panicked by his rapid, shallow breathing and unresponsive pupils, they call paramedics. He is taken to the children's hospital in Los Angeles, but the emergency room is flooded by a recent outbreak of Mombasa Fever. Since his condition is judged stable at the time, the boy is placed in a recovery ward with nearly two hundred other children and left until the following day.

In the next bed, a local girl is struggling to breathe. Thera Mendosa has been lucky, according to the doctors; her fever has not entered the toxic phase. They predict a full recovery, with very little organ damage and scarring—only the nerve damage is irrecoverable. As she lies on her side, panting beneath an oxygen mask, she sees the orderlies put Galen down beside her, his mattress only inches from hers in the crowded room. His thin white arms dangle, boneless, from the bed.

For hours he lies with his face turned toward her, his strange wide-open eyes never blinking. Sometime during the night, the older girl reaches out toward him and takes his hand, entwining his fingers with her own.

The next day, Galen is tested by staff from the division of clinical immunology. A senior resident quickly recognizes his symptoms and places a call. Men in black uniforms come to take him away, packing his inert body into a coffin-like case.

Later that day, a homeless boy dies of Mombasa Fever in the same hospital. His coloring and build are roughly similar to that of Galen Navarek, and his features are a red ruin—sixty percent of his skin surface has been ravaged by the angry burst blisters of the terminal fever. The grieving Navareks are guided to a leaded window and shown the corpse lying on a slab. A sad-eyed, weary intern tells them that they cannot have the body for burial at home; his remains are still considered contagious, and quarantine procedures are strict. The boy will be cremated the following morning.

Sasha and Mariid Navarek return to their homestead with a sealed canister of ashes. Galen Navarek is remanded to a training academy on Mars. Thera Mendosa is released from the hospital a few days later; her father and brother roll her out of the hospital in a wheelchair, which will be her only means of locomotion for nearly seven years.

II.

Galen Navarek is an exceptionally gifted student; his talents as an esper always score off the charts. Even with minimal training he shows a profound and detailed clairvoyance, an uncanny grasp of spatial relations, unusual empathic skills as both a transmitter and a receiver, and a powerful coercive ability. His instructors say that he could excel as a pilot or a special interrogator.

Rather than devoting himself seriously to his studies, however, the boy distinguishes himself in the early days of his career at Mars Dome by a series of desertion attempts, which grow increasingly daring and ingenious as the years pass. Despite punishments which range from solitary confinement to lashing, his determination to escape never wavers-until his final run, at the age of twelve.

During the week of the midterm exams, Navarek coerces a pair of guards to open the doors of the upper classmen's armory. After clumsily wiping the memories of both men, he steals a slicksuit and seals himself into an outbound weapons container. Loaded into a cargo ship headed for the outer colonies, Galen survives for several days in the thin, sub-zero atmosphere of the hold, using the meditation techniques he has been taught to sustain himself on a minute supply of oxygen and water.

He makes it as far as Port Europa before being caught. After a struggle with three military police, leaving one woman in critical condition, the boy is subdued and returned to Mars in a drug-induced coma.

The academy's esper commander, Captain Spake, is less than amused by Navarek's steady refusal to accept his commission. A list of the boy's known associates turns up only a handful of names: the lab partner in a class on organic chemistry, the three bunkmates who share his berth, and a non-commissioned officer who gives special instruction in zero-gee combat. All five are deemed non-essential personnel; when young Navarek is brought before Spake, aboard the Captain's personal cruiser in Mars orbit, the twelve-year-old is made to watch while his "friends" are spaced one by one.

The Captain assures him that any further insubordination will result in a similar fate for Sasha and Mariid Navarek, who are still alive and well at the Epsilon colony.

For several years thereafter, Galen pursues his education at Mars Dome with grim determination, passing several times as the head of his age division. Over the years, many of his fellow students have become introverted and inclined to isolate themselves. Given their special sensitivity, few of them feel the need to communicate with the spoken word; generally their thoughts and feelings are conveyed with quick telepathic shorthand.

Even among espers, however, Galen's shyness is remarkable. He has been known to go for weeks or months at a time without uttering a sound-even when injured. He avoids even empathic contact, shielding himself from shared jokes and mental intimacy.

The only crack in his infamous reserve is seen on his twenty-first birthday, when a tragic rip-drive accident interrupts the annual Martian Air Review. The AFS *Fletcher* is lost with all hands, tearing a spectacular hole in the violet sky over Mons Olympus with a bizarre misfire of its Jump engine. Flaming debris rains down on the crowd below; most notably, half of the corvette's molten hull drops onto the viewing platform for visiting dignitaries. Several high-ranking officers are lost, including Rear Admiral Spake.

At the evening's mess, the chaplain requests a moment of silence for the departed. Second Lieutenant Navarek is officially reprimanded later for muttering, in the ensuing quiet, "Wish I could have seen his face."

III.

In 2616, a new intern is assigned to the medical staff at Mars Dome. Thera Mendosa is a specialist, trained in the design and fitting of artificial nervous tissue. She has been brought to Mars to assist the chief medico-engineer as he fits a new generation of starship pilots with an experimental control system.

At age twenty-eight, Mendosa herself is a striking example of bionic engineering. Half paralyzed and stricken with ataxia in childhood, she's had artificial nerves grafted throughout her legs that allow her to walk and move with unnatural grace. She is introduced to many of the pilots during her tour of the facilities, and quickly becomes a popular topic of telepathic conversation in the mess. More than one young flyer decides to try his rusty speaking skills in the face of her towering, heavy-boned, copper-skinned homeworld beauty . . . but only one stands utterly transfixed when she passes, staring at her with eyes gone wide and liquid and black.

Soon thereafter, Lieutenant Galen Navarek shows the first real initiative of his military career, and asks to be considered as a subject for the new experimental airframe. Although reluctant to part with one of his most gifted pilots, the wing commander nevertheless bows to Navarek's request for a letter of recommendation. When brought before a board of inquiry recently, the man chose to ignore the advice of his counsel, and shrugged in the face of hostile questioning. His statement was simple: "Lieutenant Navarek came into my office and said, 'Will you nominate me for the new deep-space destroyer program?' Since it was the longest sentence I had ever heard him string together, I figured it must be important to him. And there was no question that he had the skills."

Impressed by Navarek's almost surreal aptitude for flight, the selection committee accepts him immediately. During his initial trials, they are also delighted by his rare feel for the rip drive; Navarek never fails a Jump, and can often make several Jumps in one session—a feat that even the most experienced men on the flight line can't match.

When he receives an upgrade to his security clearance, Galen is finally briefed on the details of the new control system. It is immediately clear why so many top guns have washed out of the program at this stage of the game. In order to fly the new deep-space destroyer, the pilot must have his own nervous system spliced with the wiring of the ship; the procedure will be long, gruesome, painful, and permanent. If he agrees to it, he will never walk away from his vessel again. He and the AFS *Finne Ronne* will become a single unit.

When offered the usual grace period to consider his answer, Navarek shakes his head. He signs a number of forms and waivers, receives an honorary rank of Lieutenant Commander, and reports on the following morning to the office of the chief medico-engineer and his new assistant, Thera Mendosa.

IV.

In the years that follow, the Navy finds many uses for its new fleet of deep-space destroyers; the Explorer-class vessels effectively double the length of the Navy's arm. Able to Jump many light-years at a time and refuel themselves by skimming the upper layers of any convenient gas giant, ships like the AFS *Finne Ronne* are used to respond quickly to a turbulent frontier.

Galen sees action in several campaigns against the rebellious outer colonies, but never rises above a rank of Commander. His reluctance to open fire on undefended domes goes on record three times in a decade, limiting his opportunities for promotion.

First contact with the Black Fleet occurs at Kapteyn's Star in the year 2630. Survivors of this first brush with an alien task force report that the enemy ships were virtually unstoppable, decimating an entire carrier group in minutes. Those who limp away from the action report that the enemy vessels "fight like

living things-they just ripped us apart.” Although the Navy was able to inflict only minimal damage on the enemy with their own weapons, the ships destroyed yield a strange, powdery residue, which proves to be of great interest to the Department of Science and Technology.

Over the next few months, several destroyer groups sweep a widening grid of space, following reports of the Black Fleet and searching for its possible base of operations. The enemy does not appear to be aggressive or even unduly interested in the human race; defenseless civilian colonies often see blackships pass within a hundred kilometers without incident, and even warships are not attacked if they remain outside a perimeter of several thousand clicks.

Eventually a pattern of migration is deduced, and the Navy’s 2nd Flotilla is sent to intercept the Black Fleet at Stein 2051. Over fifty ships of the line are lost in the battle that follows, among them four deep-space destroyers-including the AFS *Finne Ronne* and its pilot, Galen Navarek.

By the time the first relief ships arrive, three days later, all possible witnesses to the battle are dead. The last survivors of the fleet action have suffocated in their slicksuits, after spending their last hours clinging in vain to floating wreckage, praying for rescue. Recovery crews spend weeks sorting through the flotsam and jetsam of the fleet, trying to piece together the action. Eventually, they are able to account for most of the ships and personnel lost-but in all the material sorted, over a period of several months, not one fragment of the four missing destroyers is found.

V.

In spring of 2634, dockworkers at the Kapteyn’s starbase show the first symptoms of a mysterious malady. It begins with numbness and tingling in the fingertips; the initial symptoms are easily mistaken for carpal tunnel syndrome by the station’s medical officer. Over the next few days, however, the sufferers show an increasing lack of coordination. Their fingers and toes take on a bluish tinge. By the end of a week, they return to the sick bay with slurred speech and reflex responses severely diminished; a few days later, the photoreceptors of the eyes have been affected.

The station’s doctor, having dismissed many of the first complaints as a union scam, is genuinely alarmed to see that the corneas of several workers have become speckled with black pinpricks. Those still able to speak describe blurred vision and a strangely distorted color palette-as if the data to the brain had become somehow corrupted.

In a pattern that quickly repeats itself throughout the neighboring systems, the first subjects enter the “crisis phase” of the disease within two weeks. Their eyes turn completely, eerily black-corneas and sclera alike. Spidery blue-black formations become visible beneath the skin, growing darker and darker as the hours pass. They have psychotic episodes, babbling words and phrases that seem at first to be meaningless nonsense, but are eventually revealed to be typical of the ravings which espers mutter as they descend into shield shock.

Far too late, the doctor begins performing exploratory surgery on his patients; he is the first to see the crystalline formations of the new contagion under a microscope, wrapped like a crust of black diamonds around the nerve fibers.

When the first victims begin to scream, their brains flooded with information which they can only process as physical pain, the doctor initiates top-level quarantine procedures and sends out a general alert to all systems within hailing distance. Unfortunately, ships arriving and departing from the starbase in the intervening days have already touched down at a hundred others, spreading the highly communicable disease to every human settlement within a dozen light years. The only thing the man is able to achieve, before his own death a few weeks later, is to give the new plague a name: Kapteyn’s Syndrome.

VI.

By the time the first cases appear on Earth, three months later, Thera Mendosa has become a high-ranking bionic engineer in Los Angeles. Her father, Theodor Mendosa, is the first member of the family to begin working seriously on a possible treatment for Kapteyn's Syndrome. It is his hope that the nerves destroyed in the course of the infection might eventually be replaced by artificial ones, like those which he once created for his daughter's legs.

Unfortunately, the elder Mendosa is unable to pursue his work for more than a few months before he contracts the Syndrome from one of his patients. Dying, he passes on his research to his son, Lorenzo, who continues working on the problem for several weeks until he too falls ill. Thera Mendosa is barred from her brother's bedside in his final days; she watches him die from behind a leaded glass window, and stands by, swathed in a full anti-contamination suit, while the terms of his last will and testament are carried out.

After seeing her brother's body consigned to a fusion torch, Thera returns to his office to sort out his belongings. She discovers, to her surprise, that Lorenzo Mendosa had abandoned the notion of treating the infection by nerve replacement; he had discovered that the disease would coat and destroy artificial nerve fibers even more quickly than natural ones.

Instead, Lorenzo was performing experiments with the black crystals formed during the course of the infection. According to his notes, he had become interested in their "rectifying properties." His last entries speculate that the formation of the crystals, rather than being an accidental side effect of the bacteria's life process, might be a purpose for which the organism was deliberately designed.

"This bacteria is not the product of natural selection. It's much smaller, more cleverly designed than our own nano-machines, but it *was* engineered—I'm sure of it. My instinct tells me that if we could only find the right tuner and output mechanisms for these crystals, we would have a receiver of some kind. The crystals are made to rectify an unknown frequency . . ."

Several days later, Thera Mendosa looks down at her hands and notes the first symptoms of Kapteyn's Syndrome. Quietly she marks the probable date of her death on the calendar beside her, and then turns back to the computer to continue her work.

VII.

On April 17, 2634, Thera Mendosa makes a trip to the Beckman Institute to be examined by the city's quarantine authority. As she descends the staircase outside the building, she loses her footing; the nerves of her feet and legs, made of artificial fiber, are succumbing more quickly to Kapteyn's Syndrome than she had anticipated.

The fall is traumatic, resulting in a fractured skull and several internal injuries. As Thera Mendosa lies at the bottom of the stairs, bleeding and unconscious, a rip-portal forms in the air thirty meters above her. Windows shatter and circuits fuse for a kilometer in all directions as the AFS *Finne Ronne* emerges from the resulting hole in the sky, hovering low over the streets of Los Angeles.

Witnesses to the event suffer a complete loss of voluntary control over their bodies at this time. A crowd of nearly two hundred people gathers around the prone form of Thera Mendosa and cooperates to build a stretcher for her transport. While the *Finne Ronne* hovers above them, they carry Mendosa en masse to the nearby emergency room of Cedars-Sinai Hospital and relay Galen Navarek's psionic commands to the ER staff in a single roar, which emerges from all two hundred throats at once:

HELP HER.

NOW.

VIII.

Once the staff of the emergency room has begun treating the injuries of Thera Mendosa, Galen Navarek releases the members of the crowd. Four men and two women collapse immediately, suffering from minor brain hemorrhages; the majority of the rest survive with nothing more than a nosebleed or a black eye to mark the occasion, although several emotional breakdowns are later reported.

A trio of corvettes is dispatched from San Clemente Naval Base; they meet Navarek in the sky over the city. Ordered to stand down, he peacefully surrenders to the smaller ships and follows the course laid for him. While accompanying the former Commander to the landing field at San Clemente, the crew of the AFS *Spruance* remark upon the condition of his ship, its hull bleached and warped by exposure to unimaginable extremes of pressure, heat, and cold. The fuselage of the *Finne Ronne* is also severely dented in a strange corkscrew pattern-as if it had been wound in the grip of a great crushing tentacle, and then released.

Navarek lands without incident at San Clemente. The base commander sends an immediate request for orders to Mars Dome. The *Finne Ronne*, missing and thought to be destroyed for the past three years, is of great interest to the high command. Not only is Galen Navarek the only known survivor of the Battle of Stein 2051, but the Earth's planetary defense systems have measured the energy released by his rip-portal and calculated the distance which the Commander must have Jumped to make his spectacular arrival in Los Angeles. The readings suggest an almost inconceivable fold in space-time-thousands of light-years traveled in a single bound. If the numbers don't lie, Navarek has made the longest Jump ever recorded.

While coded communications buzz invisibly through the ether between Earth and Mars Dome, the AFS *Finne Ronne* sits quietly on the pad, its cameras focused on the sea. Forbidden to interact with him in any way, the corvettes cruise nervously on a tight patrol, making slow sweeps over Navarek's head. Should the Commander attempt to take off, open a weapons port, or activate his rip drive, they are instructed to open fire immediately with their gauss cannons. Although his ship is heavily armored, the three lighter, faster ships will rip Navarek apart like a pack of dogs if he so much as fires a thruster.

For several hours, the Commander offers no resistance or comment. Only twice does he send a transmission to his captors. Once he requests a channel to the medical library at Bethesda; the base commander, instructed to humor him if necessary, does not allow Navarek to access the system himself, but freely uploads all the available information on Kapteyn's Syndrome to the *Finne Ronne*'s computer.

Some time later, a private message is sent to the pilot of the AFS Briscoe. Recorded for posterity, Navarek's voice is a string of metallic syllables, haltingly strung together . . . as if by a man struggling to recall the English language: "The lit-tle . . . black . . . birds . . . with gray . . . faces. What . . . are they . . . called?"

Relaying the message to her commanding officer, the pilot of the Briscoe is eventually ordered to give the following answer: "*Finne Ronne*, your little gray bird is probably the San Clemente loggerhead shrike. It's a rare subspecies. The entire breeding population is only about fifty birds, and they all live on this one island."

"Thank . . . you," says Navarek, and falls silent once more.

IX.

A contingent from Mars Dome arrives the following day, led by Vice Admiral William Bishop,

commander of the home defense fleet. Bishop's chief of security, Captain Castavet, is dispatched to the surface to take Galen Navarek into custody.

Castavet is a careful man, not given to charge blindly into the unknown. Before making his way to San Clemente Island, he lands in Los Angeles and visits the site of Navarek's spectacular rip. His team quickly goes to work, tracking down and interviewing a number of witnesses. Within a few hours Castavet has gathered all planetary and military records on Thera Mendosa, and received official permission to have the woman interrogated.

Captain Castavet and his team arrive at Cedars-Sinai at 12:15 p.m. on the afternoon of April 19th. Citing his credentials as an officer of the home defense fleet, Castavet gains access to the new ward for victims of Kapteyn's Syndrome. Thera Mendosa is still comatose as a result of her injuries; nonetheless, the Captain orders his adjutant, Leiko Juzo, to perform a terminal scan of the woman's mind.

Julianna Neal, the nurse on duty, displays an unfortunate grasp of professional ethics at this moment. She attempts to intervene, and prevent Lieutenant-Commander Juzo from administering the necessary interrogation drugs through her patient's IV. Unwilling to wait for a review of his clearance, Captain Castavet shoots the RN in the back before she can reach the intercom to call hospital security, and orders Juzo to proceed.

Nevertheless, the resulting scan does not go as planned. When Leiko Juzo makes contact with the mind of the unconscious woman, she is met with a powerful psionic defense. Juzo's interrogation technique, designed to scour the subject's mind and leave it tabula rasa, is somehow turned on the interrogator herself. Instead of gathering information from her intended victim, Leiko Juzo is reduced to the level of an autistic infant in a matter of seconds.

Deprived of a valuable member of his command staff, unwilling to risk further exposure to Kapteyn's Syndrome, and uncertain of how dangerous the Mendosa woman might be to those in her immediate vicinity, Castavet retreats from the room, dragging Juzo with him. He leaves Thera, still seemingly asleep, under heavy guard. At 12:30 p.m. he returns to his cruiser to make a report to Admiral Bishop.

X.

At 3:00 p.m. on the same afternoon, Castavet's cruiser group rips open the sky over San Clemente. The corvettes assigned to guard the *Finne Ronne* are not warned in advance of the planned assault; caught in a sudden hurricane of wind and energy, all three ships are hurled violently aside and smashed to pieces on the beach, killing their crews instantly.

As the fighters begin a rain of flash bombs onto the pad below, a surge of energy is detected aboard the *Finne Ronne*. Fearing that Navarek is about to cook off the destroyer's fusion reactor, Castavet opens up with the starboard gun of his command ship. A ten gigawatt x-ray laser lances down through the clouds like a burning spear, carving neatly through the fuselage of the *Finne Ronne* and severing all connection between the cockpit and the rest of the craft.

Certain that his prey can offer no further resistance, Castavet sends in a recovery team to pull the Commander from his gutted ship. The engineers approach the smoldering wreck of the *Finne Ronne* cautiously, dousing fires as they go. Within moments of entering the gaping black breach in the ship's hull, they discover that Galen Navarek has eluded them: half the ship's interior has disappeared, including the cockpit and most of the engine room.

Meanwhile, at Cedars-Sinai, a sudden explosion rocks the hospital. Glass shatters throughout the structure, and a massive surge of electricity tears through the building. The KS ward proves to be the epicenter of the blast. Firemen arriving on the scene a few minutes later find that the entire third floor has

been destroyed. Sixteen staff and eight patients have been killed; a hundred more are injured. Only the occupants of a single room seem to have been spared: Thera Mendosa, still lying comatose in her hospital bed, and the strange, terribly wasted torso of a quadruple amputee.

The man's case of Kapteyn's Syndrome is extremely advanced, so profound that every inch of his skin has turned jet black. Tangled nests of twisted, spitting wire trail from the ports along his spine, and bundles of wire emerge from his eye sockets, ears, and temples. The firefighters assume that he must have been thrown onto the woman's bed by accident, caught in the fury of the blast, but it takes them several minutes to disentangle the woman's body from those wires; they entwine her arms and legs like clinging vines, and sometimes penetrate her skin so deeply that they must be clipped away, in order to separate the two.

XI.

Within the hour, Captain Castavet receives word of the events at Cedars-Sinai. Impatient, he forces his pilots to Jump a second time, emerging in the high clouds over the city with a shattering boom.

As he prepares to close on Navarek's last known position, Castavet receives an emergency burst from the home defense fleet. Rip-portals are being detected throughout the system. Over a hundred have appeared in low Earth orbit alone, and the energy pouring from these rips is beyond calculation.

The transmission ends abruptly with a scream of static. Castavet looks up from the deck of his cruiser to see a dozen red wounds open in the blue sky above him: the Black Fleet has arrived.

Throughout the solar system, espers and KS patients alike suddenly freeze in place, like puppets operated by a single hand. Weeping tears of blood, they turn without exception to the nearest unaffected party and open their mouths to speak with the same terrible, resonant voice:

WHERE IS HE? WHERE IS LITTLE BROTHER?

XII.

In the following conflict, later known as the Three Minutes' War, most of the home defense fleet is destroyed. The Earth's planetary defenses are left an orbiting layer of crumpled debris, and several military installations surrounding the city of Los Angeles are reduced to steaming pools of green glass.

Although there are surprisingly few civilian casualties, it is impossible to say what becomes of Galen Navarek and Thera Mendosa in the ensuing chaos. Several witnesses claim that they are "taken," along with numerous others, by the questing tendrils of the protean blackships. Similar kidnapping reports are logged all over the solar system. In most cases, the victims of this system-wide "rapture" can be identified later: they appear to be KS patients or high-functioning espers, without exception. Where they are taken, and what becomes of them, no one knows for certain. The last enigmatic transmission of the blackships is spoken by the few espers who remain conscious, after suffering massive cerebral hemorrhages:

NOW WE WILL RETURN THESE NAKED ONES TO THE FLESH.

XIII.

At this juncture, it is difficult to draw any solid conclusion from the available data—although some recent events have given rise to a great deal of speculation.

1. Since the Rapture of April 18th, observers have reported many new additions to the Black Fleet. The alien armada has nearly doubled in size; over a hundred newer, smaller blackships have joined the ranks.

2. Kapteyn's Syndrome has almost completely vanished among the human population. No new infections have been reported since the Three Minutes' War-and even in those previously infected, the disease appears to have gone into remission. All available samples of the bacteria have descended into some kind of permanent hibernation; the crystalline spores will not grow or reproduce themselves even in controlled laboratory conditions. Nerve grafts have been successfully implanted in several former patients, however, and eventually it may be possible for all the survivors to live relatively normally lives.

3. Several of the so-called "Black Speakers" have been gathered at Mars Dome for the past few months, and many of them have been extensively interrogated. Very few have any memory of April 18th, or the things they said and did while under the influence of the Black Fleet.

4. Lieutenant Commander Leiko Juzo will very likely spend the rest of her life afflicted by severe autism; her former personality appears to be irrecoverable. She has shown some savant tendencies, however, which her therapists find encouraging. In recent weeks she has begun painting, producing a whole series of images like the one included here.

Black Speakers respond very powerfully to the images painted by Juzo. When one subject was exposed to the image included in this file, he became very excited, and seemed suddenly to remember a great many thoughts and impressions that he had during his contact with the Fleet.

To quote the interview: "This is what we are, to them. Just a brain, naked, without a body . . . swimming unprotected in the universe."

5. No further data is available on Galen Navarek or Thera Mendosa, both of whom were specifically targeted for this investigation. The only additional information found in recent weeks was produced by the recovery team working on the remains of Navarek's ship, the *Finne Ronne* .

A few words were found burned into one of the inner hull plates, scored with the tip of a laser pen. After a little careful cleaning, the engineers were able to make them out; Navarek must have written them some time during the construction of the ship.

His message was: "Stephen Crane. The Black Riders, lines 10 and 23."

We have yet to decipher the code.