

# Where Gravity Sleeps

## 3 – The Belt

“Look, I’m tellin’ ya. A straight line ain’t the shortest path between here and Rua. We gotta go around the Holcomb clump if we wanna to be gettin’ there in one piece.” Roy Weston was an experienced rock hunter and he spoke as patiently as he could. “It’d be hard enough just flyin’ there in my ship, but you’re gonna have to squeeze that barge in behind me the whole way. Yer ship, well it aint exac’ly quick in a turn, see?”

“If we don’t get there within four weeks, we miss the ITC Sylvania. The next transport won’t be at Rua for over five months.” Argued Lloyd Mercer who was the distribution manager at Green-Davis Manufacturing, Inc. He wore a business suit, even in space, because it helped distinguished him from the workers at his plant. Green-Davis had a bearing plant stationed in the inner edge of the Belt. Manufacturing bearings was cheap in the Belt: the raw materials were readily available and the zero gravity made them easy to manufacture. Lloyd was the Director of Materials and Shipping at Green-Davis. He hadn’t realized that the Holcomb Clump would intercede between his factory and Rua, an interplanetary transport dock. He would have known if he’d run a flight simulation. But he hadn’t and now he was looking to cut some corners to get the shipment there on time. Roy had appeared at just the right time, looking for work.

There were several of the immense docks like Rua orbiting the sun a safe distance from the Belt. There were nearly a thousand factories, synthesis plants, and food generation stations in the Belt. There were about 100,000 people living and working in the Belt, including all the prospectors. But, distributed as they were throughout the mindbogglingly vast asteroid belt, people seemed far more scarce in the Belt than gold was on Earth.

“Look, it’s about fifty million klicks to Rua and to get there in a month we’d have to fly ‘bout...” He tapped lightly on a hand-held flight computer he’d brought with him. “About 17 klicks per second. At that speed, there aint no room for error. *Yer gonna die in that barge if you fly through that clump at that speed!* Look, I’m telling ya. If you care about your ship and crew, you’ll let me take ‘em around the clump. I got over twenty years flyin’ in the belt. I know what I’m talking about. I’ll get you there if you follow me.”

“You said ten minutes ago you were a great pilot. I’m sure you’ll get them through. If you get them there in time to load the cargo onto the Sylvania, you get a 300K bonus. If you’re late, you get paid 20K, standard escort

wages.” To Lloyd it was just a matter of convincing Roy. The barge was as good as there once Roy agreed. Anything Roy said aside from yes was irrelevant. But Lloyd knew he had to appear to listen — to appear to negotiate with Roy — to convince the rock hunter to take the job. While he nodded attentively his mind wandered to other corners he’d have to cut.

“You’re crazy, but I’ll take it. I must be crazy too, but I could sure use that bonus. Fix my ship up like new with that, I could.” Roy didn’t like Lloyd. Lloyd looked like he’d never done anything but manipulate people his whole life. He had a polished, condescending style that grated on Roy. Roy avoided people like that. Roy avoided most people, except his prospector friends, whom he saw occasionally here and there in the Belt. He liked being alone among the sparse rocks for weeks at a time.

“How soon can you be ready to leave?” Lloyd smiled; he’d won, again.

“I’m ready now. Is your barge ready?” Roy spoke in a distant voice.

“Ah, it’s ready, but, um, I have to finish assembling a crew. Return to your ship and plan on leaving in an hour. The pilot will contact you shortly with final flight information.”

Lloyd shook Roy’s hand and then pulled himself out of the conference room they’d been talking in, leaving Roy floating alone, annoyed and wondering how he was going to get to Rua in time. The factory had no gravity. The better factories and plants spun, or had spinning sections to make spingravity, but Green-Davis had decided it wasn’t worth the cost of building such a complex factory, because it didn’t take gravity to make bearings. Roy looked out a window and saw his own ship docked a hundred meters away. It looked as old as he felt, streaked and pocked from collisions with tiny rocks and a few not-so-tiny ones. *Sure could fix ‘er up pretty with three hundred thousand.* He thought to himself and smiled. Then the smile faded and he left the room, returned to his ship, and waited.

Lloyd walked through the halls of his plant, and stopped in at Claudia Gray’s office. “Claudia, I want you to go to Rua. Pack now and be ready to leave at dock two in...” He looked at his watch. “In forty-five minutes.” Lloyd felt comfortable making such a request; these people were here to follow his commands, after all.

“Mr. Mercer, I’d rather not go, you see I...” Claudia started to say, but Lloyd cut her off.

“Forty-five minutes: don’t be late.” He said firmly and left immediately.

Next he found Greg Hayes. “Greg, pack. You’re flying on the barge to Rua in...” He looked at his watch. “In forty-two minutes.”

“But, I have to finish this...” Greg tried to say, but Lloyd cut him off quickly as well.

“It doesn’t matter. Pack.” Lloyd enjoyed his power, but he thought of it as decisive problem solving.

He just needed a pilot for the barge. There were three people who could fly the barge: Mary Hazeltine, Hugo Molina, and himself. Pilots weren’t as easy to intimidate though, so knew he’d have to be careful.

He knocked on the door to Mary’s quarters. She opened the door, but was obviously ill.

“Mary, can you fly?” He asked.

“Not a chance, Lloyd; I’m nearly dead. Ask Hugo.” She shut the door in his face.

Lloyd decided Hugo would be easier to convince, but he couldn’t find Hugo. He paged him throughout the entire factory, but there was no response. Minutes ticked by, and his stress level rose. He felt his heart pounding in his ears. He knew they’d need to leave in twenty minutes and Greg and Claudia would be at the dock in five minutes for preflight preparation. Lloyd fumed inside. *Where is Hugo? That slouch. He’s hiding! Damn him, I don’t have time for this!* He stiffened himself to stifle his emotions and he made it look like a meditation pose. He looked calm, but he was seething inside. “Om.” He said quickly and ground his teeth together.

Then he hopped up, ran to his living quarters, and threw some clothes and other supplies into a crate. Then he made his way down to the docking area. Neither Claudia nor Greg was there yet. He looked at his watch and fumed.

They arrived a few minutes later.

“You’re both late! Get on board.” He barked, showing his thorough disgust with them by refusing even to meet their eyes.

They didn’t bother to apologize; it would only make matters worse. Claudia looked around and didn’t see a pilot. “Who’s going to fly the barge?” She asked.

“I’m flying it. I’m sure I can fly a barge in a straight line.” He said condescendingly. “Besides, our rock hunter will clear a safe path for us to follow anyway.” He made shooting motions with his hands. “Once we start moving toward Rua, it’ll be easy from then on.” He seemed confident as always.

Neither Claudia nor Greg was a pilot. They were coming along to help with the transfer of cargo to the Sylvia when they reached Rua and to act as crew on the barge, which essentially meant doing whatever Lloyd demanded of them. They hated their jobs and they hated Lloyd. They had a lot in common it would seem, but they didn’t know each other very well and they didn’t talk to each other much at the factory. They each felt alone, controlled and going nowhere.

They entered the barge through an airlock. Lloyd made his way to the bridge, at the front of the massive barge. Greg and Claudia found quarters within the ship, but chose rooms in different corridors. It was a standard barge, with accommodations for a hundred crewmembers. Their cargo could be loaded and unloaded almost automatically, so only two crewmembers were actually needed for the operations planned at Rua.

The barge got under way before they could unpack their bags. They were surprised and it threw them off balance spilling the contents of their bags all over their rooms. A few minutes later, they heard Lloyd over the intercom. “Crew, we’ve left the factory and we’ll be at Rua in two weeks. Please stay out of trouble until then. Captain out.”

*What a goddamned, fucking, jerk!* Thought Claudia. *He thinks we’re idiots, as if we wouldn’t notice the barge had left. And there’s only the three of us on this whole damned ship and yet somehow we’re the crew and he’s the captain. We’re supposed to be baggage for two weeks and not get in the way!* “Asshole!” She shouted in her room. *How do people like you ever get into positions of power?*

She was beyond disgusted with him. He piqued her feelings of unimportance. Everything he did seemed to make her feel a little less significant. She hated the microcosm her life had become. There seemed to be no peace and no escape.

She sorted out her belongings. In the rush, she’d forgotten to bring along a printed copy the novel she was reading. “Damn!” Tears began to trickle down her cheek and she sat down on the floor in the mild thrustgravity. “Damn.” She whispered through her tears. She looked around the room, but it was uninspiring. There weren’t any windows. It was just a box with a sleeping pocket and some zero-G appliances. Some cabinets and a few net bags secured by cords to the walls.

She sat there on the floor and cried, until she shuddered and realized she wasn't crying anymore. She felt cold. Nothing had visibly changed and she had no idea how much time had passed. Her back hurt and she guessed she'd been sitting there for an hour.

There was a console in her room and she thumbed up the barge's main menu. She quickly discovered that the barge had a reptilian mind and no library. The ship was pure function. After a few minutes she switched it off and climbed into her sleeping pouch, fully clothed. She was too tired to think about anything and too sad to try. *Maybe this is the dream and I'll wake up*, she thought and she visualized a candle in her mind to help her fall asleep.

She woke up and stayed in her sleeping pocket until her body forced her to find a bathroom and some food. She reluctantly got out. It was cooler still than it had been... how long ago? She had no idea and she decided it didn't matter. She found an extra blanket in a cabinet in her room. She wore it around her like a robe. It was warm. She felt like it was about the only enjoyable thing in her life at the moment.

She stood in front of the door. "Open" she said quietly. It didn't move. Then she noticed that there was a button on the door. She pushed it and the door opened. She walked out in the low thrustgravity and noticed that the corridor was cold. "Shit!" she said and wrapped the blanket around her tighter.

She found a bathroom that had zero-G toilets. She was relieved that they were at least a modern enough design to take advantage of thrustgravity if there was any.

She found her way to a galley with a stock of food. Amongst the many canned and packaged foods she found instant chocolate pudding. She mixed it up with water and it came out more like hot chocolate. She drank her pudding in silence and wondered how she was going to survive a two-week journey inside this cold metal box. She wiped away one more tear about her forgotten book and left the galley, with her cup of pudding, to explore more of the icy ship.

There were emergency lockers distributed randomly here and there. She opened one. It contained a few spacesuits, some crates of emergency supplies and a portable console. She found that there were a few life craft on the ship too. Each was equipped for about a dozen people. An emergency locker in each spacecraft held suits and supplies to last a couple of weeks perhaps. The life crafts were dusty and she wondered about their space-worthiness.

She continued to explore the enormous barge. Once she was outside the crew area it was obvious to her that almost the entire ship existed just to haul cargo. The barge was hauling ball bearings: about two billion of them. They were sorted into many small crates containing bearings of different sizes and materials. It was the entire output of the factory for the last six months. It would be worth a fortune when it got to Earth. The small crates were secured inside of huge spacecrates. But the spacecrates seemed to be packed only very sparsely with the dark boxes of bearings. She noticed that nearby were the controls for loading and unloading the spacecrates from the barge. She'd operated similar controls back at the factory.

The barge was accelerating at about 1/5 G. Like most craft, the barge was arranged so that the acceleration resulted in thrustgravity down toward the apparent floor. Claudia knew it would not last. The engines would be idle as soon as they reached cruising speed. Then the thrustgravity would disappear. She enjoyed walking even in the light gravity. It was a luxury she rarely experienced anymore. That's one thing I did like about Earth. People at the factory simply endured endless weightlessness. She wondered how long it had been since she felt real massgravity. She worked out daily, but she still felt relatively weak. And cold. "Man, its cold!" she said out loud. "Why the hell is it so cold?"

She continued to explore but within about an hour she had been into most of the unlocked rooms and corridors. It wasn't very big box, it seemed.

She went back to the galley and found some biscuits, some canned fish and some cans of vegetables. She took them and a hand-held can opener back to her room and ate in silence. She tried in vain to find something to do and ended up writing. She hadn't ever kept a diary before, but she decided to try to write. The time flew past and before she knew it she was hungry again. She forgot about the barge for the moment while she was writing. But the barge came back to her when she pushed the button to open her door.

She took a step out and then the main engines cut off and the thrustgravity was gone instantly. She sighed as she floated off the ground toward the ceiling. She made her way to the galley and started looking for something interesting to eat. She opened a box of soy-milk and ate cereal from a tube.

While she was eating, Lloyd entered the galley. He started pawing through the supplies. He found a nondescript tube of some kind of red gel and started sucking it out, making satisfied eating noises with each swallow.

He spoke while eating., the red gel sticking to the inside of his mouth and teeth“Have you settled in?” He asked.

“Yessir.” She wondered how one could settle into a metal box, but she didn’t really want to talk to Lloyd anyway.

There was a long pause. He couldn’t think of anything to talk to her about. He picked up another one of the red tubes and said “Well, I’ve got to get back to the bridge. I’ll have to talk to Roy about the best way to get to Rua.” He said importantly. He left.

She just sat there while emotions began to mount within her. She wondered whether rage or sadness would win. The box of soy milk exploded on the wall in front of her and he heard the sound of her own voice shouting “Aaaaaarrrrrrrggggghhhhh!” It was obvious that rage had won out this time.

She was already bored to tears, and they had almost two more weeks left to Rua, and then two weeks back. “Aaarrgghh!” She added again for emphasis.

“Has the soy milk gone bad then? Greg asked politely from the door to the galley.

She looked at him blankly and then she laughed loud and hard for a few moments. Then she stopped and tried to speak. “Lloyd” was all she said.

He looked sideways at her. You were aiming at Lloyd and you missed? Well, that would make me mad too.” He smiled.

“You’re, Gary, right?”

“Greg”.

“Oh, sorry.”

“That’s OK. You’re Claudia, right?”

“Yes.” She looked at him a moment too long she thought and then stared at her food.

He looked at the stain on the wall and then back again at her. He made his way over to the cabinet that held the soy-milk and threw another one over to her. It floated slowly between them and she had time to feel the kindness of his act before she caught it.

She ate while he made his way across the room to where she was. She finished eating but she didn't feel like talking. Finally he said, "If you get bored, I know what's fun on these ships. Well, anyway, I'm in the first room in corridor B." He pointed.

She tried to think of something funny to say, but couldn't. "OK" was all that came out.

He turned and left. She cleaned up the mess on the wall and then made her way back to her room. She wrote some more but she was distracted by Greg's offer. What could possibly be fun on this ship? After an hour her hand was too tired to write anymore and she decided to go find out what Greg thought was fun. Then she decided that he probably just wanted to get into her pants. Then she decided that he had just offered to show her more of the ship. Then she went over all these thoughts about a dozen more times, each with subtle variations, until she could no longer think straight about any of it.

Finally, she decided to go and find Greg.

She found his cabin and knocked on the door. After a few moments she heard his voice from inside "Who is it?" he said in a singsong voice. She laughed just as he was opening the door. "Pizza delivery?" he asked hopefully.

"I wish!" she said, then stood there feeling a bit awkward. "You said there was something fun to do on this ship?"

"Yea." He said brightly.

She looked at him hopefully. "Like what?"

"Well, there's the observation bay, and the loading cranes..."

"What's so fun about them?"

"Well, I like to read in the observation deck, with all the stars..."

"Read?" she interrupted him. "Do you have something to read on the ship?"

He laughed. "Yes."

"Like what?" She realized that she was gripping his arms and practically shaking him. She let go quickly. "Sorry. It's just that... I like reading and that jerk Lloyd didn't give me enough time to pack and..." She felt her



emotions swell inside her again. "I didn't bring any books." She said and began to cry.

"Hey? Uh, Claudia." He tried to get her attention.

She wiped away her tears and looked at him. "You have books?" she said hopefully?

"No." He said.

She gave him look of exasperation but no words came from her.

"No, I have a huffcube with 2000 books, and a booksync adaptor." He beamed.

She both laughed and cried in relief at the same time. She quickly wiped her eyes. "What's a booksync adaptor?"

"It lets me download a book into consol data transfer wafer so you can read a book from any of the ship's consoles. So, what kind of books do you like? He motioned into his cabin and she followed him in.

He connected the huffcube to his console and displayed a large index. She found the book she had been reading back at the factory and he downloaded it onto one a small memory wafers. He handed it to her. She took it in her hands as if it were a precious gem, or the antidote to a poison that had infiltrated her veins.

Then, he led her to the observation deck. The door appeared to be locked.

"How are you going to get in?" She asked him.

"The lock is really just for show. It isn't really locked."

"Why would they have a lock for show?"

"I dunno. I just know it doesn't actually lock anything." He said as he opened that hatchway revealing a dark tube a meter in diameter on the other side. He pulled himself in and she followed him. The tube ended in the floor of a room with a huge plastic bubble for a ceiling. There were four seats with straps and a console by each one. They made their way into seats and strapped themselves in so they would not float away. The view was dramatic and she felt very small.

She could see the spacecrates secured to the barge, as well as millions of stars, and here and there an occasional rock. They were in a fairly empty

section of the Belt. Mars was a small red disk in the distance. She knew that Mars would be huge by the time they reached Rua.

The great ship extended for hundreds of meters in all directions from the observation bubble. She felt as though she was outside on its surface. It felt a bit exposed to her, but she loved the view. She found the chair's controls and rotated around and laid it back to give her the best view of the Belt. There was not much going on out there. The space around the ship looked so empty she wondered why an escort was needed at all.

Then she slid the memory wafer Greg had given her into her chair's console and a moment later she was scrolling forward to where she had left off reading. She made a delighted squeal when she realized that she would be able to finish her book after all. She looked up and Greg was smiling at her. "Thanks, Greg! You're a lifesaver!" She said with relief in her voice.

He smiled. Then they disappeared into their books, with the stars all around them.

She finally descended from the observation bubble and returned to the crew area where she ate a small lunch from a plastic tube. Eating would have been much more pleasant in gravity. She fantasized about having a banquet in delicious gravity. She hoped she'd get the chance on Rua, but she didn't even know if Rua rotated to make spingravity.

They spent most of the next two days reading in the observation bubble.

Toward the end of the ninth day they started to notice that there were more rocks outside the ship. They were mostly distant but occasionally one would speed past within a kilometer or so. That night, while they ate dinner together they felt the main engines come on and the ship changed course. Then a few minutes later there was another course change. Then a few short bursts and a few long bursts. They assumed the maneuvers were to avoid large asteroids. It was unsettling having random forces catch you by surprise and pull you this way and that. It was hard not to feel like a ball bearing rolling in a pot that is floating in an ocean.

"Let's see what's going on." Claudia suggested and she thumbed on the intercom on a nearby console. She selected the ship-to-ship channel and they both listened to the chatter between Roy and Lloyd.

*"You fucking dickbrain, when I tell you to move that barge, I expect you to move it, damn it. That was way too close! Now follow me on a point-two G at four degrees starboard and minus six degrees inclination, for... for*

eighteen seconds. Then you'll be back on course. Ready... ready... Now!" Roy's voice sounded rough.

"Burning now." Lloyd confirmed. The engines came on just then. "Now, Roy, don't blow a fuse." Lloyd said defensively. The engines went off again a few seconds later.

Claudia and Greg smiled at each other. "I don't know who this Roy is, but I like him already, Claudia said."

"Listen up good, Lloyd. The simulation shows some nasty crossrocks ahead in about an hour, so stay alert. I'll contact you ten minutes before hand. I'm uploading a new course to ya now. I want ya to follow it to the letter, no 'ceptions. Exactly none. Got it?"

"Got it, Roy." Then the intercom went silent.

"Sounds like they're taking a hard way to Rua, I wonder why?" Greg munched on his dinner some more.

"They never tell us anything. But they wouldn't risk their precious cargo, would they? We're probably safe enough." Claudia said.

They finished their dinner and returned to their observation bubble. Claudia and Greg looked outside and saw that there were many more rocks than before. The rocks moved across their path at approximately a 75 degree angle, but they moved incredibly fast. They turned on the intercom. A few minutes later, right on time, Roy called Lloyd. "Lloyd, you ready for this?"

"Yes, Roy, I'm ready." Lloyd sounded condescending.

Roy was already busy in the rockfield and didn't care. "OK... I'm... gonna be busy for a while, so.... so don't bother me... unless... it's really Shit! Shit! Oh, whew. OK... OK. Unless it's damn important and make sure you follow that course! Roy out."

They could see Roy's ship darting deftly in and out of the paths of the rocks ahead, firing at smaller ones and using a long-range deflector field to alter the course of larger ones. His ship danced around in a ballet of light and thruster blasts. Sometimes moving forwards, sometimes moving backwards. It seemed to be able to move and fire and deflect in any direction and Roy was obviously able to work in any direction. He dodged most rocks as he moved into position to deflect larger ones. He would destroy rocks only if they were going to hit his ship or the barge. He seemed to know just how close they would come, and several times they

thought his ship would be destroyed. But he'd pivot around in two directions and move out of the way at the last moment. He was an incredible pilot. Not a single rock larger than a centimeter hit the barge's deflectors, which could vaporize a rock up to a half of a meter across, even at these closing speeds.

It was fascinating to watch Roy work the rockfield. The barge's main engines came on in bursts and the attitude jets flashed on and off. It rotated and yawed, moved one way and then another. It seemed like a random sequence of moves. The radio was mostly silent, except for the excited breathing of Roy, and the periodic profanity that punctuated his feats. It went on for more than an hour and they silently watched in awe. They had never seen anything like this and it completely captured their attention.

Suddenly, the intercom came alive. "Lloyd, what are you doing? Don't alter the course, damn you!"

"That big one looks like its gonna hit us, I'm moving out of its way." Lloyd said casually.

"No, it won't hit you, it will miss by 70 meters, trust me!" Roy insisted emphatically. "*Stay on course you rock-for-brains!*"

"Simulations can be wrong, Roy. It looks too close. I'm moving the barge." It wasn't the first time Lloyd had made a quick decision and this time he believed it would save his life and his precious cargo of meticulously manufactured metal marbles.

Roy was caught between astonishment and frustration. "No! You fool, you can't guess your way through this! You don't know what you're doing! Do what I say!"

Lloyd didn't. Instead he maneuvered the barge well out of the way of the big rock. Then he looked over to the sensor display and saw that three more big rocks were heading toward his barge. He panicked.

Roy saw what was happening and tried to improvise a new, clear course. But he had no simulation data for the new course, so he had to fight the rocks largely on instinct. He flared out at Lloyd. "You pompous... arrogant... rock-headed... *beancounter!* Now we.... can't even return to our original course... and there's no time to... to run a simulation." Roy was struggling to save their lives. "Hey, I've got a problem... my number two thruster... it's stalled!" The other thrusters operated and he tried to maneuver, but it wasn't working well. His ship was crippled.

Lloyd, Claudia and Greg all watched as Roy's ship drifted into the path of big rock. The closing speed was frightening. Roy saw it too, and he tried to get out of it's path.

"Oh shit." He said quietly. Then the signal was gone. The large rock had destroyed Roy's ship. The ship was crushed flat instantly on the surface and the rock continued unaffected on its course, zipping past the barge a fraction of a second later.

Roy and his ship were gone, killed like flies by a giant asteroid swatter. The silence of the image belied its utter violence. The barge began making another maneuver, but almost immediately, they heard and felt various sized rocks striking the barge from the front and side. A big one hit and an alarm went off.

"Shit, Greg, Roy's gone! He was our escort!" Her voice was panicked, matching the look in Greg's eyes. "Lloyd can't fly this thing through a clump like this. We're as good as dead!" She looked at him and her jaw dropped.

"Let's get to a life craft. Maybe we can survive if we match speed and direction with the rocks." Greg said quickly.

The barge moved one way and then another. More strikes shook the ship, but it's size made each injury seem small. Lloyd obviously wasn't trying to slow down or turn around. It was difficult to move down the corridor to the spacecraete control room because of the random changes in gravity, but they made it. They felt some more large collisions and more alarms began to sound. The main lights flickered twice and then went off, but the emergency lights remained on. Despite the fluctuating and sometimes zero gravity, they launched themselves deftly from wall to wall. They finally made it into the nearest life craft and closed its hatch.

"Do you know how to fly one of these things?" He looked around at the controls trying to make sense of them.

"I never have, but I think I know what some of the controls do." She said.

"OK, you're the pilot. Let's get out of here!" He said urgently. The barge was getting pummeled. It was only a matter of time before a large enough rock hit the barge and destroyed it.

"Here goes..." She pressed the release button and even before it sprang back they were both thrown across the craft. They hit the opposite wall and Greg cut his head on an exposed support beam. They were pinned painfully to the wall. The craft wobbled sickeningly as it left the barge

under nearly a full G of acceleration. Then after 10 seconds its thrusters cut out and they were thrown back across the craft and hit the opposite wall almost as hard. They managed to stop their caroming and make their way to two seats at the command console. Greg and Claudia were both now as bruised and cut as they were scared. They strapped themselves into the seats.

They looked out a window in the direction of the barge, which was now growing smaller as they coasted away from it at about 100 meters per second. They were in the midst of a dense clump of rocks, which seemed to go on as far as they could see in all directions. The craft stabilized itself, but they were still flying across the direction of travel of the rocks. Claudia manipulated the controls and the ship pointed another direction. After a few more tries it pointed in what she thought was about the right direction. They were moving sideways, across the asteroid field. They might be obliterated at any moment, just like Roy. The barge floated above and to their left. They watched a scanner display and saw that a giant asteroid was moving toward the barge. They felt a few tiny collisions against their escape craft. The tiny ship's deflectors were doing their job and the rocks were pulverized on the surface of the deflectors, but not before hinting at their original momentum.

Then Claudia fired the life craft's main engines again and the rocks around them seemed to slow little by little and to change direction slowly. They strained to look through observation windows in the rear of the craft. They saw the giant rock, now a dark mote in space, closing in on the barge.

Claudia fingered the communication console. "Lloyd, are you there? Get out of the barge, there's a giant rock coming your way!" She said frantically.

"Claudia? Where are you?" Lloyd asked in an annoyed tone.

"I'm on a life craft and you should be too! The barge isn't going to make it, Lloyd. Get out of there now! You don't have any time left!" She shouted. She hated Lloyd, but she didn't want him to die.

"You left the ship? Without orders? You're fired, Claudia." He was cool about it, as though he had planned it for a long time.

"Fired, Lloyd?" She said with a sudden calm in her voice. "You're about to be dead, Lloyd. Will you please just get out of there?"

Too late. The huge asteroid struck the barge, which collapsed and splashed onto the surface instantly. Billions of ball bearings ricocheted in all directions and speeds, each capturing a tiny flicker of the weak sunlight which filtered out to the Belt. It looked like a pixelated supernova. As they

spread out the ball bearings surrounded the crushed barge with a faintly glowing corona that increased in diameter and faded slowly toward the blackness. A few minutes later a wave of tiny collisions began to hit the life craft's deflectors. A few lucky ball bearings had touched both ships briefly before beginning their eternal journey as new members of the Belt.

"Goodbye, Lloyd." Claudia said helplessly. She'd seen two people die in the last few minutes.

It took the life craft almost twenty minutes of full throttle to match the speed and direction of the asteroids. The full 1G force of the engines pinned them in their chairs and made it difficult for them to move. They were unused to that much thrustgravity. When the life craft had matched speeds, Claudia powered down the main thrusters. They both breathed a deep sigh of relief. The weightlessness was a comfort, suddenly.

Not all of the rocks in the clump moved in exactly the same direction. There was still a possibility of a collision, but it would be at closing speeds they might survive now.

"Well... What now, Greg?" Claudia asked after she had recovered.

"At least we're alive — that's something. That's amazing! We wouldn't be either unless you knew how to handle this life craft. Thanks, Claudia." He hugged her. "Hey, we should try to call for help."

She worked the console and found a distress transponder. Then she flipped a switch and began to talk into the console.

"Hello? Is there anybody listening? I'm in a life craft with one other survivor, somewhere between the Green-Davis bearing factory and Rua. Our barge was destroyed. Hello? Is there anybody out there? Hello?"

They heard nothing in reply.

Greg tried to sound optimistic. "Well, let's leave the emergency transponder on, and keep trying. Eventually someone will hear us."

"We hope. Any other ideas?"

"We could try to fly somewhere, if we knew where to go. The barge had a lizard for a computer. I can't imagine this one is any smarter. But, let's find out if it knows where we are, or where we can go for help."

They tried, but the life craft computer didn't take voice command. They spent hours trying to get the computer to help them find a destination.

They called for help every hour or so. They broke out some food from a locker. It was edible although it was not pleasant. But, there was a lot of it.

“We might be here a while, Greg.” Claudia was frustrated and discouraged and frightened. She couldn’t get any useful information out of the computer. She finally gave up and unstrapped herself from the chair. She began to float. She rotated so he couldn’t see her. Then she began to weep. She could defer her feelings any longer.

Greg could see she was upset. He unstrapped himself and floated as well. He floated beside her and touched her wet face. She looked away from him.

“We’re going to die out here, Greg. I can’t believe this is all my life ever amounted to.” She said, resigned.

“We’re not dead yet, who can say what will happen.” He said hopefully.

She looked back at him and she had a painful, questioning expression on her face. He was offering hope, but it was forcing her to continue to cope and she felt like she’d reached her limits. She just wanted to collapse, but there was no gravity to help her. She reached out and pulled him next to her.

Then they embraced. She was without hope, but she sensed he still had some and she clung to him as though his would somehow sustain them both. He looked at her and she put her head on his shoulder. It wasn’t a passionate connection they were sharing, but it was nonetheless a very strong one. They remained embraced for several minutes and then she released him and they drifted apart.

The transponder continued to broadcast a distress signal. They continued to broadcast a verbal message once every few hours, but there was never an answer. Each attempt left them feeling closer to despair. They ate some more of the unpleasant food and finally fell asleep next to each other.

They awoke to a jolt. Something large had struck the life craft, causing it to tumble. Several alarms went off, the lights went off, and the ship’s control panel flashed red and orange and blue warnings. They heard the telltale hissing of an air leak. They struggled by the illumination of the emergency lights over to the nearest emergency locker and hastily put on excursion suits.

Another jolt came and the window cracked and the rest of the air was evacuated instantly. Almost everything not tied down was blown out of the



craft, including a good deal of the food and other supplies. Several more lights on the console flashed in careful synchronization, as though the terrified occupants couldn't tell that their situation was now much worse than before.

Another impact came, but smaller this time. The ship was now inoperable, but it still provided some protection against small bullet-sized rocks, when the large rents in the side of the craft did not expose them to open space.

They huddled inside, holding hands and looking into each other's mask. If either of them felt isolated before, now they could not even touch each other's skin. They could communicate through the suits' short-range radios. The suits were linked by radio to the ship's transponder, which was still operating, so if anyone responded to their call for help they would hear that too.

"Don't give up, Claudia. As long as we're alive, there's still hope."

She sobbed and her facemask became clouded. They couldn't see each other. She called to him. "Greg, where are you! I can't see..." She was crying and nearly hysterical. "Greg, don't leave me!"

"I'm here. I'm here!" He reached out and held her next to him hard.

"I wish I could really touch you." She was sobbing with each breath. "I don't want to die... like this Greg. I want a... human death. This place stole... everything we have... and now it's taking everything... from us but our last breaths of air." The sobbing became crying and she could no longer speak.

Another rock hit the ship. Claudia screamed. The ship began to tumble in a different direction. Through the now gaping holes in the ship they saw spinning around them the sun, countless asteroids, and the still distant mars.

Her mask cleared, she was beyond tears now. She was stoic — waiting for her death.

Greg pulled her near him. She was limp and didn't respond. He unfastened a thick tube from its wire cage on the back of his suit. It was a buddy-breather tube. It was designed to allow two people to share the life support system of a single suit in case the other suit failed. Both suits were operating normally but he plugged it into her suit and opened the valve that connected their air supplies.

“Claudia...? Claudia...? Claudia, breathe my air. Claudia? Let’s share what we have left. If we’re going to die, at least we don’t have to die completely alone. I can’t actually touch you through the suit, so this is as close as we can get now. Claudia, don’t give up yet, we’re still alive.”

He felt her shudder. She was crying again.

She had no strength left in her with which to fight. She just wanted him to let her give up, but he would not. She tasted his breath and held onto him; she held onto the thread of hope he represented. They stayed like that for hours, maybe a day. They lost all track of time. The suits processed body wastes automatically. Greg had also lost hope, but he held onto her as though he believed they still had a chance. They stared weakly into each other’s masks. Each other’s face, even seen through two layers of masks, were the only human thing they believed they would ever see again. They didn’t want to miss a moment of that last, precious vision, that last glimpse of humanity.

They were still holding onto each other when they heard the signal. “Hello, life craft. Anybody in-in there?” They were injured, weak and in shock. They looked at each other, to see if it was real and heard by both of them. They could tell by each other’s eyes that it had been real and they both blinked in disbelief. Then they heard more. “Hello, any-anybody make it? I don’t know B-Betty, you sure there are life signs? I can’t imagine how-how someone could have survived what that tin can musta gone-gone through. Are you r-r-reading those b-big holes? Cain’t be no air in there.”

“Hello! We’re here! We’re here! There are two of us! Where are you? Can you help us?” Greg croaked into his spacesuit’s microphone.

“Sure enough! Boy, I’m amazed you’re still-still alive. You’re lucky I was p-passing by and heard y-y-your transponder. Can you get out of that thing?”

“I think so, we can fit through one of these big holes. Where are you? Are you close by?” Greg’s voice was cracking, but he composed himself.

“Look outside.” The voice said.

The life craft was still tumbling, and they looked through the holes and remaining windows. Spinning around them they saw a ship covered in lights and impact framing. It was a rock hunter. “I’ll move it right over you. You said there are two of you, can you both move?”

“Yes.” Claudia answered weakly. She was looking directly into Greg’s mask.

“OK then, you two come on out of there and push off toward the bottom of my ship if you can. You can grab the impact framing and make your way to the airlock. It’s the big red door in the middle. ‘Ya c-cain’t m-m-miss it.”

They separated the two suits and moved out of the life craft. They clung to it and tried to time the rotation so they would move toward the rock hunter. They pushed off toward the other ship, but they pushed off a moment apart. Claudia floated toward it for what seemed like an eternity, but what was in reality only about a minute. They were separated now, but they could hear each other breathing through the radio. They watched the rock field around them. A lazy rock was drifting toward the ship. A flash of blue laser split it into three pieces, two of which still approached the ship. Then two more flashes and the two chunks became a collection of smaller pieces plus some gravel. It all moved off in a safe direction.

Claudia was nearly at the ship and she looked over to see Greg. He was going to miss the ship. “Oh my god! Greg! Help! Pilot! Pilot! Greg is gonna miss the ship! He’s gonna miss it! You’ve got get him!”

“I s-see ‘im, I see ‘im. I’ll get ‘im as s-s-soon as you’re hol-hol-holding on.” The pilot said.

She stretched to reach the ship and grabbed it. She wrapped her arms and legs around the impact framing. “OK, I’m on. Now, you’ve got to get Greg!”

The ship moved gently into Greg’s path, so that he could not possibly have failed to grab it. They each made their own way to the airlock like giant spiders in a titanium web. Claudia was crying and laughing at the same time. The sudden rescue renewed her strength, but her body hurt from her injuries and the lack of food. They pulled themselves inside and held onto each other. Then Greg said, “OK, we’re in.” The airlock door closed underneath them. Then the airlock began to fill with air. At first all was silent, but as it filled, they could begin to hear compressed sounds through the suits: mechanical clicks and groans. Then the airlock was bathed in a green light, and the door over their heads opened, and white light shown down into the airlock. Their eyes were unused to the brightness.

They were still holding onto each other, trembling in a mixture of joy, pain and exhaustion. They looked up and through their squinting eyes they saw the pilot standing there. The light from behind made his face hard to see. Then his head blocked the light and they saw that he looked old, but

energetic -- small but strong. He wore bright green overalls and a yellow shirt. To them he might as well have been God.

“Well now. Been p-p-prospectin’ for forty years, but I ain’t never found a c-c-couple of k-kids floatin’ in a tin can life craft before. And out here in the Holcomb-comb clump, too. Ain’t that somethin, Betty? How’d you come to be out here anyway? Now, why don’t you two come on up here and take off those su-su-suits?”

“Who are you?” Claudia asked. Her voice was trembling.

“Moses, Moses Sto-sto-stokes, and this is my sh-ship, Betty Wishford. You’re not gonna s-stay in that airlock all night, now are-are ya?”

They both dumbly nodded no. They floated up and out of the airlock and found themselves in a cargo hold. Moses held onto an overhead conduit and floated next to them.

Greg took off his suit and helped Claudia out of hers. She looked like hell and he imagined he did as well. She reached out to Greg and held him tightly as soon as they were out of their suits.

Moses showed them a room they could use. It contained a large sleeping pocket and a zero G bathroom. There were various sized cabinet doors in all the walls, behind some of which were supplies.

“Just ask Betty if you need anything. There’s some clo-clothes in those there.” He pointed. “When yer r-ready for somethin’ ta eat, call me. I got’s to get Betty b-back on course now, and I g-got’s to f-f-fly us out of this here clu-clu-clump too.” He disappeared down the corridor.

They started to clean up in zero G. The ship began to accelerate. It was about a 1/4 G acceleration, but it was steady and in one direction. It was easier to clean up with a little gravity and its presence was a welcome gift. They felt a little more human now. It was an unexpected treat to have the light gravity and they savored it. There were a couple of maneuvers, but Moses feathered the change of direction so there was never a jolt. They treated their cuts with supplies they found in the bathroom and they were beginning to feel human again.

They found some loose clothes they could wear behind they door he had indicated. They stripped out of the remainder of their clothes and put on the clean clothing, each of them noticing the other’s body as they dressed. Then they looked at each other, and, as if in slow motion they drew near each other and kissed. Greg started to speak but she put a finger to his lips. Then they took their clothes back off and made love for the first time

in more than two years for either of them. Then they realized they were famished and they called Moses on the intercom. They tried not to giggle when they spoke to him.

Moses appeared in their doorway a few moments later. “Betty’s flyin now that we’re through the clump. Follow m-me! Betty and I don’t get m-m-many visitors. I reckon you been through hell in that life craft... Tell me all about it while I make us somethin’ real spe-spe-special for dinner.” He led them to the galley and proceeded to prepare an incredible meal. He gave them delicious appetizers while he prepared the rest and they devoured them hungrily. They told him how they had worked at the factory and ended up on the barge. When they told him about Roy he stopped cooking and asked them many questions.

“I knew Roy, he was a good pi-pilot — real good. He’d flown the Holcomb clu-clu-clump before. He knew wha-what he was doing. Something must have gone wrong.” He said, looking disturbed.

“There was some sort of problem with his thruster, I think. He said it stalled or something.” Claudia was in much better spirits now. She told a lot of the story.

She stopped when she got to the part where the life craft began to be hit by asteroids. She became suddenly quiet and looked down.

Greg continued the story up to the point where they heard Moses on the radio. Moses was silent when Greg finished. Moses had stopped cooking their meal a few minutes earlier and he didn’t even realize it yet because he was too involved in listening to their story. He realized only at that moment, after Greg finished the story. He abruptly resumed preparing the meal, which was nearly complete now anyway.

“That’s quite a story, there. Yep. Quite a story. Lucky you two were together on the barge when it happened, or you might have been in separate life craft.” He said absently.

Claudia looked horrified. “No!” she gasped.

“Hey, hey. S-sorry about that. Don’t know what I was thinkin’ when I said that. Damn stu-stupid of me. Oh, I’m sorry.” He said as she wiped away a tear.

“

Hey, now, how about you two eat this fine d-dinner I’ve made and I’ll tell you a sto-sto-story of my own. OK?”

They ate and ate in the gentle  $1/4$  gravity. Each bite restored a little more of what they'd lost in the life craft. They were silent while they ate and he recounted for them how he happened to be in that part of the Belt. Moses stammered when he was nervous, but he seldom did when he wasn't stressed and had enough time to think.

"Well, about a week ago I was on Lime World gettin' Betty's thrusters overhauled and I met my friend Ed Gibson. Ed's a goood prospector, but he likes the regular money from doin' deliv'ry work, you know? Sometimes he ain't got enough a that neither, but he had too much right then. He don't much like escort work though. Now, he's a fine pilot, mind ya, but he don't like flyin' around anyone who isn't. Ya see? He told me about a guy who wanted some cargo hauled to Jane's World. It was gonna be a tough flight, 12 degrees antispin, and half a million klicks out, and it needed to be there in 15 days. That's 4 million klicks if I could fly it straight. Means I'd be flyin' with a closin' speed of about three times rockspeed, see. That ain't nothing to sneeze at, you know." He explained as they tried to follow his jargon.

"Well, I took the job and was on my way there when Betty heard your tran-tran-transponder. It took about eight hours for us to reach you. We followed the transponder signal right into the clump — right to your tin can life craft. You wasn't broadcastin' no more, so I didn't know what channel you might be listenin' on. Once I saw it's insignia though, I knew it came from a Wiggins 916 Barge, see? Then I knew what fre-frequency the emergency transmitter was set to by default, and I figured you probably didn't changed it. I still remember a thing of two, you know. I tried it and you know the rest. I didn't see no barge nowhere though. Your tin can looked like someone played rock hockey with it though. I didn't think anyone was alive inside it. But Betty insisted that someone in there was alive, so I meant to find out, cause she ain't too often wrong 'bout these things. See?"

They finished dinner and shared some lighter conversation. The main engines went off and the thrustgravity evaporated. Things began to float unexpectedly. "Betty, give us a spiral course for a few minutes while we clean up. The thrusters came back on, but they could see through the windows that the ship was flying in a helical pattern. That kept them on course but created a thrustgravity of  $1/6$  G. They finished cleaning up and then Moses told Betty the gravity was no longer needed. The ship returned to a straight course.

"We're back on course for Jane's world, and we'll be there in a week. Now, where would you kids be a-headin' to?" He asked them.

They looked at each other and shrugged. Back to our cabin ran through both their minds.

“I’m never going back to Green Davis.” Claudia said.

“Me neither. What’s Jane’s World, Moses?”

“What? You never heard a ‘Jane’s World’?” He said in surprise. “Well, what have you heard of?”

“What do you mean?” asked Greg?

“Haven’t you ever been to one of the beltworlds?”

Greg and Claudia both shook their heads.

“Well, its where most of the people in the belt are that aren’t out in ships.” He said, a little confused. “See, there are some really big rocks out here -- a few clicks across. Some-some-some have holes inside where people live. They’re nice inside, some of ‘em. Jane’s World is the best one. It’s everyone’s favorite. They have... trees.” He said with some wonder in his voice.

“Well, we’re goin’ to Jane’s World, so you’ll see it for yourself. You can stay with me and Betty for a while. It’ll be nice to have some com-com-company on the flight.” He smiled warmly.

They were noticeably relieved. They could avoid thinking about what would happen next for a while. They could soak in the safety of Betty Wishford. She was like a raft of hope floating in a rocky, black ocean.

“We’ll help you with the ship if you tell us what to do.” Greg offered.

“We don’t expect free passage.” added Claudia, even though she knew neither of them had any money at all.

Moses knew it too, but there was more to life than money and he knew that as well.

“Well now, ya usually get t’ pick where yer goin’ when ya gots ta’ pay for it. As it is, you ain’t got no choice but to go where I’m goin, so I ain’t about to go chargin’ ya no fare. Ya see?” He smiled as though he had just proven a complex theorem. Then he observed them for a while while he absently ran his fingers through his long beard. He smiled to himself and then said “I think you’ll like where we’re headin’ to, anyhow.”

They talked some more and Moses told them more about his life as a prospector and about a few of his adventures. They got tired after awhile and he told them to go to bed. They wandered back to their room.

Claudia woke first. Her eyes were still closed and for a moment, she was afraid to open them. Opening them would create either the horror of the life craft, or the safety of Betty Wishford. Then she felt Greg's naked body next to hers and she smiled and opened her eyes and blinked. She moved and Greg woke up with a quick, deep breath. His long hair was matted against his face. She moved it aside and kissed him while his mind was still finding its way back to normal.

"And a very good morning to you too!" He said at last, shaking off the sleep. They were still inside the sleeping pocket, which naturally restrained them from floating about the room while they slept. They had enjoyed its properties fully the night before and their sleeping pocket now had several torn filaments. This morning they had awoken upside down in the sleeping pocket. They laughed as they both tried to right themselves at the same time, resulting in a rather pleasant tangling of their arms and legs.

Half an hour later they decided to get out of the sleeping pocket and find breakfast. They took a shower together and put on the clothes Moses had provided them. They tried not to smile, but they felt so much joy it was nearly impossible to keep from smiling stupidly. They ate Breakfast with Moses and again offered to help out.

"Well, now Betty runs most everything. I do pretty much everything else. If yer bored, you can look through Betty's entertainment banks. She's got some good holomovies." He suggested.

"Any books?" Claudia asked. Greg immediately moved behind her and threw his arms around her, as if restraining her from attacking Moses, who looked on in surprise.

"OK, Ok, so maybe I like books a little too much." She said defensively to Greg who was now giggling.

Moses looked puzzled.

"She nearly shook me senseless when I suggested I had books."

"I've got some books." Said Moses quietly.

"Really." She tried to say it as though it was barely of interest. She looked away from Moses, back at Greg, and stuck out her tongue quickly.



Greg rolled his eyes.

Moses said, "Yea, wait here a sec." He disappeared, and shortly thereafter they heard the sounds of cabinets opening and closing, and some bumping noises. He reappeared a few minutes later, holding a box. "You can read these if you want."

She looked in the box and took a quick breath and held it. It held preserved copies of antique books, these dated from the early 21st century. "Are they... fragile?" She asked, quickly and completely abandoning the pretense that she did not care.

"Well, don't fold the pages, but they're preserved so they are strong enough for you to turn the pages and read 'em."

"I've never held an antique book before." She said as she reached for one. "It's massive! It must have been heavy on earth."

"Dunno." said Moses. "I've never been to earth."

They looked at him. "Never? Haven't you wanted to go there?" Claudia asked.

"Not really. I've seen pictures. I like it out here..."

A day later, Greg was looking out a window and called to Claudia. "Look!" They watched a large, wide ship with an open "mouth" at least 100 meters across maneuvering slowly in front of a rock that was at least 80 meters across. The strange ship matched speed with the rock, aligned itself, and then moved forward. The rock disappeared into its mouth and then ship changed course. "What was that?" Greg asked.

"I don't know. It ate that asteroid I think." Claudia said. She reached for a console. "Betty, what is that ship that ate the asteroid?" She asked.

"That ship is the Wellsley, APS13209. It is an asteroid processing ship. That kind of ship is sometimes called a Rock Manta. Would you like to see a picture of the ship?" Betty was no lizard. She could connect thoughts and carry on a conversation. Claudia thought, *No wonder Moses had been able to keep his sanity out here.*

"Betty? Why do you have a female voice?" Claudia wondered whether Betty could understand the real meaning of the question, or articulate an answer.

“Because I feel female. I’ve had plenty of time to think about it. It makes Moses happy and keeps him whole and I certainly don’t want a madman flying me. But I’ve also come to understand and believe that I am female, psychologically.”

*Definitely not a lizard.* Claudia thought to herself. “I guess, I never really thought about it. I didn’t choose my gender, I was born with it.”

“I think that I was ‘born’ that way too, Claudia.”

They made it to Jane’s world on time. Jane’s world was actually the asteroid known as Ceres — the largest asteroid in the Belt by far. In fact, Ceres contained almost half of the total mass of the entire asteroid belt. It was almost 1000 kilometers across. Its rotational day was about 9 hours long. It was large enough to have a very gentle gravity of approximately 1/30 G. That was enough to require an escape velocity of 460 meters per second, so nobody ever floated off of it by accident.

As they flew toward the spaceport, they could begin to appreciate its size. It was large enough to be a moon if it had a planet to orbit. “She’s mostly carbonaceous, so she’s reeeal dark. You could fly right past her on the dark side and not know it, ‘less you notice that everything else disappeared all ‘a sudden.” Moses flew casually straight down at what was fast becoming, unquestionably, the ground. It was unsettling, but they trusted him.

As they approached, they could see a few other rock hunters patrolling the space around Jane’s World. There were also a couple of other ships moving toward the spaceport and one leaving it.

Jane’s World was an island inside an island. From the outside, you might not notice anything special about it. But nearly 12 years ago a two kilometer, hollow, flattened spherical region was discovered. The region was about four kilometers below the surface. It had been sealed and filled with air. Several sets of elevators and airlocks provided access to the interior of Jane’s World. Atomic disassemblers powered huge arrays of daylights inside, which operated on a standard Earthlike 24-hour schedule.

Claudia and Greg looked out side windows as Moses landed Betty inside a spaceport slip on the surface. A huge blast door closed over the top of the slip and lights came on. The slip was not pressurized with air though. Instead, a flexible gangway emerged from the side of the slip. The gangway would dock with Betty Wishford and provide suitless access to the spaceport. Betty Wishford was a tall ship and the gangway was too low for her side airlocks. She lowered herself further on her landing gear,

hunching down like a bird on her eggs. The gangway connected with her airlock and the ship was functionally docked with the spaceport.

Moses asked Betty to lower the cargo onto a waiting floater. He took control of the floater's navigational channel and maneuvered it into an airlock on the side of the slip by the gangway.

"You kids been on that f-factory fer how long? Two years, ya said? Well, I think yer gonna like Jane's World, I do." He led them through the gangway, into the spaceport. He walked over to the airlock with the floater and his cargo. He pressed the buttons in sequence to close the outer door, repressurize the airlock, and open the interior door. He stepped in and pulled the floater out. Floaters were practical in such low gravity. In higher gravity environments they were unpleasant to use, because they had to be operated at a much higher level of thrust. On Jane's World however, floaters were ideal.

He put the floater and its cargo into a huge storage locker and set a password for it. "Now I just have to tell the buyer what the locker an' password are." Then he used a public console to call the buyer. A brief conversation ensued and when Moses was satisfied he gave the buyer the locker number and password.

"Well, I'm done now and I've g-got some money to spend, so lets go get something to eat and I'll show ya Jane's World." He led them to the elevators. These had strap-in chairs and plenty of net bags on the walls. They strapped in and the elevator began to descend. It turned over and then they were upside down. Then it began to accelerate toward what was down until moments before. The thrustgravity held them in their seats. Then they were weightless again. The elevator reversed its position before decelerating and stopping. The door opened onto a room with elevator doors on the other side. They went to one of them, strapped in, and the sequence repeated. When the doors opened this time though, they looked out into a wide hall and there were dozens of people moving about inside it.

They followed Moses across the hall. A few people in the room recognized him and floated over to see him. In the meager gravity of Jane's World you could stand and even walk if you were careful and patient, but nobody did so. Everybody flew. Flying was already an art here and people's clothing had expandable panels they'd use to control their direction and speed. Jane's World was small enough that you could jump from the floor and touch the ceiling, but it took half an hour or more to complete the maneuver unless you knew how to accelerate in the air with some kind of wings.

Moses floated out of the building and Claudia and Greg followed him. When they were outside they could see the entire cavern. On the floor were many buildings and storage tanks. The floor was uneven, with sharp peaks and one large ravine, but there were structures everywhere, built with what seemed to be total disregard for the terrain or right angles. There were a group of trapezoidal homes, improbably suspended from the pointy top of a nearly 200 meter tall spike. Even as they watched a man jumped from the floor up to one of the odd houses. He was holding a net sack of groceries in one hand and the hand of his young child in his other.

The buildings were only odd if you expected Jane's World to be like Earth. Bright colors, unusual angles and lots of curves were de rigueur for this place. There were very few rectangles and the word box was an insult here. Most structures were designed to be entered through multiple sides and the top. Many had nets suspended on flexible poles. These made it much easier to reach from longer jumps.

There were also ropeways, which were long bands of netting where each rope was 5 meters apart. These were stretched tightly. People would fly along them in a swimming motion, arm over arm, throwing each crossrope past them as they went. Ropeways connected the major centers in Jane's World and helped keep flying manageably safe when there were lots of people in the air. The last thing anyone wanted was to see Jane's World turn into a microcosm of the Belt, with people flying everywhere, hitting each other like mindless rocks. Jane's World was the opposite of the Belt in every way the people could make it. The Janians did with their hearts what they couldn't do with their hands. There were artists in Jane's world.

The ceiling was uneven, and hung much lower on one side than the other. There were sparse structures hung upside down and sideways from the ceiling. Even the slight gravity was enough that people preferred floors that were horizontal, but there were plenty of exceptions. The walls of the cavern were also uneven and rose sharply from the floor, curving upward to meet the ceiling. Great vertical faults in the walls created jagged shadows that made the walls look confusing.

Everything people needed to survive could be found here, including plants. There was plenty of light, but most plants couldn't survive in the sparse, native, rocky soil of the place. Many plants that could be coaxed into growing would still develop strangely due to the lack of gravity. But plants did survive and there were trees too — real trees. Most weren't large, but poplar trees grew wonderfully. The crown jewel of Jane's World was a grove of poplar trees. Their large, open branches were a joy to fly among. Many people sought that place out to read, meditate or write.

They floated here and there taking in the sights. “Nice place. I like Jane’s World.” Moses said. They could see the Grove and a few of the people within it were floating slowly there. “You feel s-safe in here.”

Most plants couldn’t adapt as well as the poplars, but a few thrived. Mint thrived on Jane’s world and was by far the most common plant. It was everywhere, even growing wild in unexpected places. There was a myth that someone had actually planted it everywhere. The air in Jane’s World had a subtle but noticeable scent of mint.

Many people worked with hydroponic arrays, primarily for specialty vegetables, fruits, spices, and flowers. Almost every room had plants and some people went as far as to create rooms that were primarily plants.

There was a more serious side to agriculture here too. Jane’s world produced an abundance of food. Distributed around the walls were nearly a hundred pairs of circular tunnels. Each stretched back into the rock a kilometer deep. Each lower tunnel had a long growing bed with a diffuse light source over it. Robots and workers traveled up and down the corridors on special round bottom floaters. Each upper tunnel had equipment and access to conduits that led to the lower tunnel. There was also a large fan at the very end, between the two tunnels. It drew air in through the upper tunnel and forced it out through the lower one. Just outside the entrance to each pair of tunnels there was a large, thin platform that prevented the air from simply cycling between the two. The platforms also provided a place to stage equipment and supplies for work in the upper tunnels.

It was reaching sunset time, so the daylights on the ceiling had begun to dim slowly. Moses led them across the small city to a restaurant he knew. Along the way they watched people flying casually here and there. Most of them seemed more or less happy. Some had unrevealing expressions on their faces. But there was an unmistakable feeling that life was livable here. It was the first place in the Belt either Greg or Claudia had seen which was even remotely livable. They rounded a corner and a group of children were playing a game and laughing. Claudia could not ever remember hearing children laugh since she left Earth three years ago. She didn’t even know any children in the Belt. Of course there were children — thousands of people were born in the belt every year. The Belt seemed to Claudia like a cruel place to grow up, but Jane’s World was different. Children found something to laugh about on Jane’s world.

They reached the restaurant, were seated, and ordered their meals. They talked while they ate. When they were done eating it was night and most of the daylights were off. Floating near the ceiling was a bluish-white 20 meter brightly glowing balloon. It moved slowly about — someone was

controlling it. Someone was flying it, this way and that. It was Jane's Moon. It was a privilege to fly the moon. People waited months for their chance to fly it for part of an evening. The first two hours of each night were always reserved for Jane's World's best moonflyers. Everyone agreed that if the moon was going to bounce off the walls and the ropeways it should happen after most people have gone indoors for the night.

"How many people are on — or in I guess — in Jane's World, Moses?" Greg was amazed at the density of the place.

"There's about five thousand I think, give or take a few prospectors." He smiled. "Ain't too many prospector's would live in Jane's World for too long. He looked around at the walls and up at the ceiling. "It's beautiful, but it's so small."

Greg realized that the prospectors had long ago adapted to life in the Belt. They were the only ones who knew how to survive among the rocks. More than that, they had learned to thrive there. They had beaten the rocks — even Roy. The rocks hadn't beaten Roy, Lloyd had. Lloyd had beaten everybody and eventually even himself.

"So, are there any other worlds like Jane's World, Moses?" Claudia hoped there were. It would be sad to think this was the only place like this in the entire Belt. Even if it was, she was glad it was here and that she'd seen it.

"Well, no, not like Jane's World. First, there's only twenty or so rocks in the entire Belt that 'er more 'n 200 klicks across. I been all through the Belt 'n on every world and there ain't nothin' like Jane's World nowhere. But there are other worlds. Now, you got Lime World, which's where I just came from. Lime World's mainly a shipyard, ya see. But there's enough other stuff goin' on to keep everyone alive. It's a cold place. Only one part's got air, so you wear a suit most of the time. There's a half-a-dozen er so rock hunters flyin' 'round Lime World all the time, makin' sure n-nothin' hits the shipyards, and escortin' ships on their way in and out. They make ships there too, but not many folks can afford to buy a new ship no more, so they mostly fix 'em."

"There's a few other big rocks with settlements. They usually stock supplies and sell 'em too, so you can stop off at one and get most anythin' you need. They'll sometimes put a prospector up for free if he's got somethin' to trade or has news to share or a good story. I figure I got a free meal at each World just tellin' 'em about you two and that tin can I found ya in. Anyhow, there's a big settlement on Fox World and a dozen 'er so rock hunters fly around her all the time to p-protect her. Fox World don't have as many people on it as Jane's World has in 'er. Life's a lot

harder there than it is here too. But it's good to remember Fox World because it's probably the best settlement out there." He pointed up.

"Like I said, I like Jane's World. She's the best place in the Belt to be, if you want to be in the Belt. Say, I been talkin' yer' ears off and we're done eatin'. How about I show you somethin' rare. They got plenty in Jane's World ya cain't find nowhere else in the Belt. But I wanna show you somethin' ya might not expect. Something, you might like." He paid for their dinner and they followed him out of the restaurant and back across town. As they made their way along a ropeway they could see a transparent plastic sphere nestled into the rock on the side of the cavern. It was about 50 meters in diameter, but more than half of it was within the walls and floor of the cavern. They could see people on some kind of rolling shoes moving quickly but smoothly around the inside.

They arrived at the side of the sunken sphere and watched the people rolling around the inside. They were moving fast enough to create some spingravity for themselves. There was a door there. "C'mon. Ya ever ska-ska-skate?"