

Where Gravity Sleeps

2 – The Outer Earth

Light-torn blackness, how injured?
Emptiness filled, still invaded?
Fear dispelled, what's defeated?
Love once given, not repeated?

From nothing, only pain is worse.
From pain, only death is less.
From death, only never to have lived.
From living, only never to have loved.

Star rise, starry eyes,
Rise my love to the night.
There is no day, no sunrise lies,
Beyond our evening's delight.

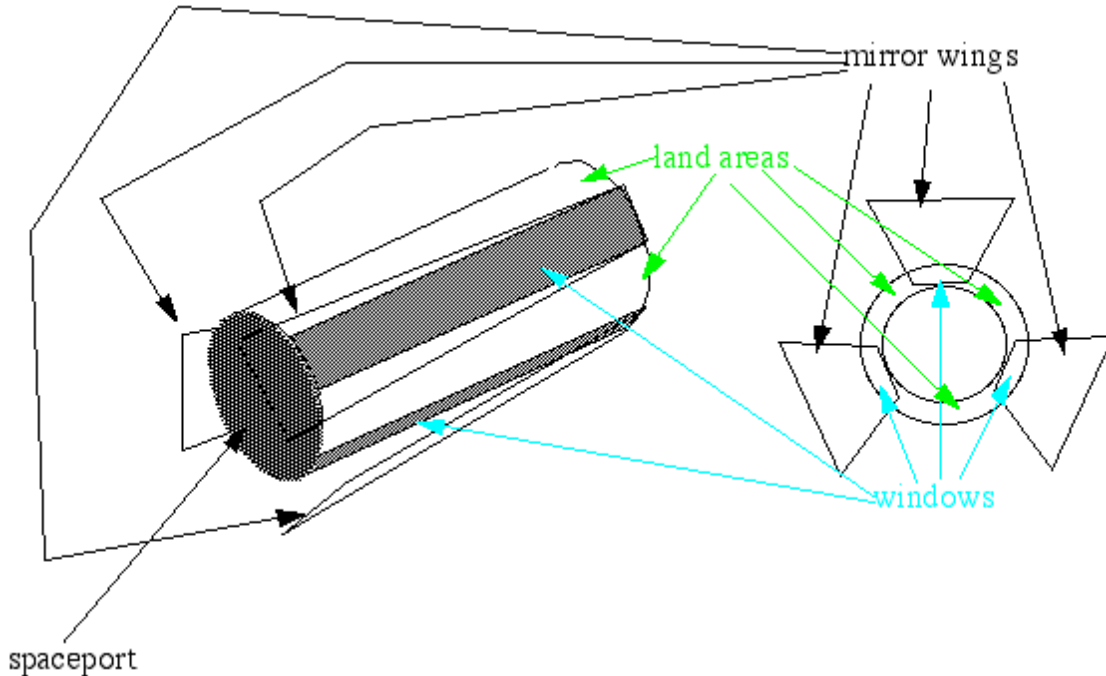
Ishmael stared at the screen reading the poem over again, frowning. *It's missing something.* He mulled over what it might need in his thoughts. He looked out the window of his ship and saw the Floyd bubble *Olympus* spinning slowly in the distance. He'd never been to any of the bubbles except for Luna Linda. He'd flown between the moon and Luna Linda hundreds of times — sometimes there and back in one day. He'd flown all different kinds of ships too, everything from fast little shuttles to gargantuan material lifts. Now he flew the mail ship Audrey. She was bulky and in need of repair, but he was glad to be flying her to Olympus.

He knew a little about Floyd bubbles, mostly from conversations with other pilots. Now he could see up close one of the new wonders of mankind. A typical Floyd bubble such as Olympus could sustain 10,000 people indefinitely. They each had a balanced ecosystem, complete with natural weather and seasonal adjustments. It was all contained within a cylinder five kilometers across by twelve kilometers long. Each Floyd bubble had an inner surface area of more than 185 square kilometers, but only about half of the inner surface was allocated for people. The other half was windows. Floyd bubbles rotated to provide a full G of spingravity.

He saw that the ends of the cylinder did not rotate. On one stationary end was the spaceport to which Audrey was following a course, and on the other end was a large sphere with an almost comically large tow ring protruding from the end.

The rotating main section had three, evenly spaced large clear windows running the length of the bubble. These windows were made of deflector-reinforced

plastic panels supported by a thin, black geodesic framework. These let sunlight in, but filtered out ultraviolet light and cosmic radiation. The framework was invisible from the floor opposite each window, five kilometers away.



An oasis in an icy, black desert. He thought to himself.

He watched with interest as Olympus grew closer at a barely perceptible rate. He was glad the ship could fly itself so he could just watch.

Just then a light on one of the ship's many control panels changed from green to orange. *Looks like my camel needs a drink.* He chuckled to himself. His stomach growled. *And I could use a few dates.* "Audrey, what's the ETA for Olympus Perimeter Control?" he asked the ship.

"22 minutes, 14 seconds." Audrey had a pleasant, synthetic female voice. Like most spacecraft, the Mail Ship Audrey had a semi-intelligent computer mind that controlled most aspects of normal operation. The minds of ships varied in complexity from roughly reptilian to just below human intelligence. Audrey wasn't much for philosophy or conversation, but she knew how to run the ship it seemed.

"What's wrong Audrey?"

"I am experiencing a failure in one of my redundant processors. I am operating in non-redundant mode now. Do you wish to take control?"

“No, you can fly for now. Please open a channel to Olympus for me. Connect it to Rose Wiseman.”

“Connecting... Connected.” Audrey seemed to be operating fine, despite the warning light.

His main display resolved from blackness to show Rose’s greeting page. It had a photo of her belayed by ropes, limbs straining, climbing on the face of Half Dome. A flashing message indicated that nobody had answered from the other side yet. He waited a minute, but there was still no answer.

“I’d like to leave a message, Audrey.”

“Recording...”

“Hi Rose, I got your message, sorry I haven’t contacted you before now. But guess what? I’m heading into Olympus in about... half-an-hour. I’ll bet you didn’t expect that! And I’m starved; I guess that’s no surprise, eh? I can’t wait to see you. If you get this and want to meet for dinner, call me back. I’m going by the name Jim Laundryman for this trip. You can return a message to this console and Audrey, will know how to find me. See you soon.” He clicked a button on his console to end the recording.

“You’re a creature of great purpose, Audrey.” He said it, but he knew she couldn’t understand what he meant. He wished she could though. He wished he could have talked with Audrey on the trip.

“Please restate your request.” The ship’s computer replied.

“Please alert me when we are three minutes from Olympus Perimeter Control, Audrey.”

He floated away from his console and back to his quarters. He had about fifteen minutes to get cleaned up. He shaved and took a quick shower. Showering in zero G meant putting all but your head into a large translucent plastic bag. When you turned it on you were sprayed with water from many directions. The water was recycled throughout the process. Pockets inside the shower held soap. You could pull your head inside the shower bag to wash your hair. He finished his shower, dried off, and put on his only clean clothes. As he was combing his hair he heard Audrey say “Three minutes to Olympus Perimeter Control.” He finished, buttoned his shirt, and returned to his console. He read his poem to himself one more time. Then he stared at the huge space station before him. Now it filled most of his view and its approach was quite perceptible.

He waited, but not long.

“OPC to MS Audrey, SC18G143, approach 281 slow to velocity 500, acknowledge?” The voice was clear but weary. Hundreds of ships each day would land and depart Olympus. The Perimeter Controllers kept in touch with the pilots, but computers on the station and the ships performed most of the actual maneuvers. In fact, all the verbal communication was redundant with a conversation being held between the OPC computers and Audrey. The people followed the redundant protocol in case there was a computer failure at either end.

“MS Audrey, SC18G143, acknowledging approach 281, velocity 500.” Audrey banked the ship to the right and began slowing.

“MS Audrey, you are cleared to dock at O-17-B, within a five minute window. Slow to 100. Acknowledge?”

“Will dock at O-17-B within 5 minutes, 100 mps, acknowledged.” Ishmael replied and waited for Audrey to comply.

The ship did not slow. “Audrey, you heard the man, slow to 100 and dock at O-17-B.” Suddenly, the orange light on his console turned red and an alarm tone sounded. Then several other lights began to flash red in response. Then another group of lights began flashing on and off. “What the hell happened? Audrey?” The dock approached at a worrying speed. He knew he’d be goo if he hit the dock at this speed.

There was no answer from the ship.

He leaped into the pilot’s chair and strapped himself in what seemed like a single fluid motion. He flipped a few buttons and a hologram appeared within his cabin. It showed a detailed image of the Olympus spaceport approaching quickly from ahead. There was also an image of his craft hurtling at 500 meters per second toward the huge spaceport.

“MS Audrey, slow to 100! Acknowledge!” The weary voice of the OPC officer was now charged with urgency and alarm. In moments the ship would be unable to slow down in time to avoid collision with the spaceport. People who were listening to the OPC chatter within the station and on nearby ships now watched in horror as the mail ship glided toward its almost certain destruction, to be crushed on the spaceport deflectors.

There was a protracted moment where few observers breathed. Someone was facing their death right now as they watched or listened.

“OPC, Audrey’s out to lunch, I’m flying on manual now.” He began slowing the ship, but he was already dangerously close to the dock. He fired the main thrusters. The ship jerked hard and slowed quickly, but then one of the thrusters’

supports broke loose. The thruster still operated, but it was pointing off in a useless direction, wagging back and forth spouting exhaust and dragging the ship in a bizarre course. It made the ship tumble, then the tumble became faster. He shut off all the thrusters. Now the spaceport seemed to revolve around him along with the rest of the universe. Each time it came in view it was closer, but he had slowed the ship enough with the initial blast that now he had more time.

“MS Audrey, come in? Can you read me?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment guys...” He switched off the mic. “*The hardest part of a spin is knowing how to stop it,*” He said to nobody as he worked the maneuvering thrusters to slow the tumbling and used the main engine in timed pulses to reduce the speed to a point where he was not moving toward the dock anymore. It was only 75 meters away, a very close call. But the ship was rotating slowly along two axes.

“MS Audrey, what is your condition? We’ve rerouted traffic out of your area. Report please!”

“OPC, I’m just trying to stabilize the ship now, gimme a minute, I’ll be docking as soon as she ain’t spinnin’.”

Then, in an artful mix of physics and timing he slowed the spinning by gently and quickly activating different attitude jets.. He played his fingers over the controls like the keys of a piano, in little bursts, feeling the results of each one. Within a minute he had slowed the rotation to a very slight roll. A few more taps and that disappeared too. The MS Audry stood motionless in space. The control panel flashed menacingly.

“OPC, MS Audrey ready to proceed to O-17-B, sorry for the delay.”

“MS Audrey, clear to dock. Good flying mailman! What’s your name?”

“I’m the Laundryman!” he said it like they should already know, but he had made the handle up only minutes before. He preferred not to have his real name entered into any logs, whether they thought they were doing him a favor or not. He edged the ship closer to the dock. He played more music on the controls and then docked Audry with a loud clunk that shuddered its way through the entire ship.

“OPC, I am one with floatland. Please inform the mail service that their ship has arrived and is in need of repair.” He said calmly.

“Welcome to Olympus, Laundryman. Glad you made it in safe. OPC out.”

He unstrapped himself from the pilot chair. He floated up out of it and shook the sweat out of his hair. He descended into the dark belly of the ship where the docking hatch would allow him to enter the station. He was weightless, so he used his hands to pull himself along. The belly of the ship was also where most of the cargo was stowed. It had a dusty smell; the recycled air didn't circulate as well down here. It was dry and cool though to protect the precious cargo of mail and supplies. Most of the cargo was held in plastic nets, fastened to cables that spanned the hold. Some of the cargo nets had become twisted and a few had broken. Now envelopes and small parcels floated about the hold. He didn't care. He pushed the big packages out of his way and let the rest bounce off him as he swam his way toward the hatch.

He looked back across the hold. "Good-bye, Audrey. Thanks." He assumed the ship couldn't hear him, but he said it anyway.

He turned and stepped into of the airlock. He fingered the controls inside. The door on the other side opened. He was immediately greeted by the fresh, warm, slightly humid air of Olympus, the lights of the spaceport, and the sounds of people. The spaceport was large enough to have dozens of different docking areas. There were enclosed transport vehicles to shuttle people and material from one area to another. The entire spaceport was weightless, because it didn't rotate with the rest of the bubble. People called it floatland, because you floated the whole time you were there. There were no chairs in floatland, except those you would strap yourself into. Holodisplays distributed around the spaceport announced the status of different ships, their arrival and departure time, etc.

Ishmael noticed in front of him a frustrated-looking woman attempted to keep three children near her as they moved across an open corridor toward a docking station. The kids pulled her in different directions and they had begun to spin slowly. One of the children was crying and the sound waxed and waned as the shouting child rotated about his mother.

He looked to his left and he observed an elderly couple waiting for a ship. The old woman was maneuvering in weightlessness to retrieve her sleeping husband, who had floated a few meters away and was now snoring loudly upside down.

To his right he saw a long corridor with lots of people moving in it. It was clearly the way to the center of the spaceport. He breathed the air for a moment to take in the scent of people again. He smiled and stood there for a few minutes.

Most people were comfortable enough in floatland to negotiate movement, even if awkwardly. It was hardest for them to get the notion that there were no floors or ceilings, only walls. Occasionally someone new to floatland would scream when they looked "down" and saw a hundred yards of "corridor" descend beneath their feet. People who worked in floatland, by contrast, were obvious because of their easy, graceful way of moving in weightlessness. They used the weightlessness

to their advantage, leaving things sitting in mid air while they worked on something else. It took skill to leave something in mid air and not have it slowly drift away.

The child had stopped crying started laughing now and the mother, still spinning in the air had managed to leash her children, who now orbited around her, emitting small bits of debris in a growing spiral arms around them. A passerby held out an arm and stopped her spinning by taking her angular momentum from her and making her spin backward a bit. Her children, still orbiting her in the other direction, wound themselves closer and the whole quartet came almost to a complete halt with a collective groan as their bodies came together. He spun off in the opposite direction, but when he contacted a wall he made the spin disappear and he shot forward closely along his original course. "Thanks!" said the woman, amazed. She shortened the leashes and clipped the kids together. Then she pushed off them slightly, and turning she activated a small indoor thruster in front of her that gently moved the four of them toward their docking station.

He watched the woman clutch onto the railing at the entrance to her spaceport and her kids cheered. Then one said "Let's do it again!" The other two chimed in "Yea!!" and the poor woman ignored them and continued to clutch the railing.

He took a deep breath and pushed off toward a public console across the corridor. He tried to connect to Rose Wiseman again, but there was still no answer. He accessed a listing of hotels, checked his wallet, and picked one he could afford: the Copper Crown. Then he called Rose back and left a message saying where he'd be staying. He checked a transit map and then caught a transport down the right corridor toward the spaceport exit, from where he could enter the main section of Olympus. It was a short ride. He left the shuttle and floated through a 40 meter circular opening called the hubmouth.

The hubmouth was in fact a huge bearing, which allowed the main section to rotate with respect to the spaceport, without breaking the seal that held the air in. It also had to be structurally sound, which for a structure as large as a Floyd bubble meant it was made of titanium over a meter thick. The center section rotated slowly around the hubmouth, while the spaceport he'd just left remained stationary. It was impossible to fall down to the floor of the station, because a geodesic support structure with deflector-reinforced plastic windows formed a hemi-sphere around the hub. But through it one could see the floor of Olympus over two kilometers below the hubmouth.

He looked out over the vast inner surface, now in darkness to simulate night. It was remarkably peaceful from up here. He'd spent years in the moon and in ships of all kinds, where the livable area was a tiny bubble in an otherwise unlivable environment. There were always walls and bulkheads surrounding him. His world had made him feel confined. Now the sheer openness of Olympus was

overwhelming. He didn't expect it, but he got a lump in his throat, as though the living space before him satisfied a hunger he'd ignored for years. *I've been a moonie too long — that much is clear.* He said to himself. Everyone who enters a Floyd station does so through a hubmouth. It was often an emotional moment for a first-time visitor.

He floated toward the edge of the hubmouth and selected an elevator which would drop him near his hotel. He stepped in and settled in for the ride down. There were seats with straps in the large elevator because its acceleration would cause thrustgravity. It took only two minutes to reach the floor.

When he reached the floor, he tried to stand, but the full gravity was exhausting. He refocused his strength, stood up and walked out into the Olympian evening. It was cooler than in the hubmouth or the spaceport and much more humid. There were plants and trees all around. There was a city at each end of the main section. The city on this side was called Kronos. He walked a few hundred meters and then sat down to rest.

Olympus was an industrial colony and large sections of its surface areas were consumed with buildings, processing plants, pumping stations, and various instruments of industry. There were also large sections of undeveloped land with many plants and some wildlife, as well as a good deal of land in use for agriculture. People also had private gardens. The one Ishmael admired as he walked had beautiful-looking vegetables. Thousands of people worked in the factories and synthesis plants on Olympus. People raised families there, kids went to school there and lived their lives there. For someone who lived and worked there, it was easy to forget that there were worlds outside of Olympus. But it was impossible not to notice the surroundings. Anyone who grew up on Earth never really felt comfortable looking up to see the ground five kilometers above. Wherever you went inside, you knew you were still inside something — big as it was, it was still something made by humans.

Ishmael walked past a theater and a library. He rested at a transit stop to catch his breath and watched a maintenance robot repair the display that showed the route and pickup times. Someone had taped a photo onto the rear of the robot, which worked on obliviously. The photo was of a man's butt half covered by jeans -- a classic plumber's butt.

He laughed, got up and kept walking. There were people on the streets but nobody noticed him -- they all seemed to have somewhere to go. It was dinnertime and he was hungry too.

"Excuse me, do you..." He tried to ask someone walking nearby but they either didn't hear or decided not to respond. "Hmm..." He walked further and stopped at a corner traffic light while vehicles passed across in front of him. "Do you know

the way to the Copper Crown?" he asked casually to a woman standing next to him.

"Sorry, never heard of it." She said, but she smiled.

The light changed and everyone entered the street, followed by Ishmael who was still struggling with the full gravity. When he reached the other side of the street he paused to rest and was surprised that the woman walked over toward him. "You OK?" She asked.

"I'm fine... I'm just not used to full gravity."

Her eyes widened a bit. "Really, why? Have you been in space a long time?"

"Yea. Say, do you know where I can find a public console?"

"You can use my portal if you want." She said, handing him a small, portable console device. "You need to make a call? I have a scooter nearby if you need a ride somewhere. She smiled again."

"Thanks," he said after a short pause. Then he connected to the copper crown's info page and generated a map that showed how to reach it from his current location.

"It prints." She said.

"Huh?"

"It prints, if you want the map."

He looked incredulously at the tiny device wondering what size postage stamp it might possibly fit inside it. "Sure." He handed it back to her.

She pushed a button. "What do you want it printed on?"

"The back of my hand." He said grinning.

She grinned back. Then she quickly flicked the portol over and in an instant the map had been printed across the back of his hand. "Don't touch it for a few seconds, until it dries."

He looked at the map, surprised. "Thanks, now I know the route like the back... of..." He stopped. Her face had the look of disgust that only the anticipation of a really bad joke can explain.

"Well, at least I didn't ask you to print it on my back." He offered, hopefully.

She rolled her eyes and walked away.

“Thanks again for the map!” He said as she left. He began walking along the route and finally made his way there. The Copper Crown was an older hotel, not appointed luxuriously like the fancier hotels downtown, but it was clean enough and cheap. He walked up to the desk and asked to check-in.

“And what is your name sir?”

“Jim Laundryman.”

“Ah, Mr. Laundryman, there is a message for you.” He handed it over. Ishmael opened it and read it:

Meet me at La Fontaine,

Rose

“On second thought, maybe I’ll check in after dinner.” He said, hoping inside that he would not be back after dinner.

He had a net bag with him, containing what he’d brought along, which wasn’t much. He went to a bathroom, splashed a little water on his face and combed his hair. He found that the map did not wash off his hand with the soap in the bathroom. He got directions to La Fountain and set out to find it. It was only a kilometer away.

He decided to walk and as he did he savored the cool night air, feeling the press of the ground against his feet. It was meditative. The dull roar of the city around him seemed to dull as he neared the restaurant, Then he realized that it had been replaced with a distinct roar, as if water was rushing nearby. The roar increase as he walked in the direction of the restaurant. Then he arrived at La Fountain, or the base of it at least. It was a real waterfall 200 feet high, with an open air restaurant at the top. The main door was a solid sheet of water, through which he could see the fluid images of people and lights within. He stepped toward the door and it parted in the middle, without splashing a drop. He stepped through. Then he turned his head around in time to see the doorway disappear and the wall of water reformed behind him. The outside now flowed and melted behind it. He found an elevator and ascended to the top deck. He stepped through the door. There was Rose Wiseman, holding a glass of red wine. She was wearing a stunning purple silk evening gown. She turned and saw him and smiled warmly.

“Ishmael-, ah, Jim! I’m so glad you called me. Come here and let me kiss you.” She moved over to him and kissed him. “It’s great to see you. Are you hungry?” She treated him to a quick, private smile and flash of her eyes.

“Let me feast on your beauty alone and I shall be satisfied.” His stomach growled. He looked down at his stomach with a look of one betrayed.

She laughed. “Always the poet, and a hungry one at that. Come on, dinner’s on me.” She took his hand.

They were seated immediately.

“Pleasant flight over?” She asked, making small talk while the waiter fiddled with their place settings and water glasses.

“Umm...Nice waterfall, huh?”

She looked at him, apparently startled by his evasiveness. The waiter left and she gave Ishmael a look that demanded a response.

“I flew in on a beater of a ship and it fell apart when I was docking. That’s all. I got here OK.”

“That was you out there on that mail ship?”

“How did you hear about it?”

“They’ve only been showing replays of it for the last hour on every news channel on Olympus. Jeez, man, you’re lucky to be alive!”

“Being in the news isn’t exactly a great thing for me right now...”

“Really, why’s that?” She said, with some interest. When he didn’t reply she said “You’re running... from someone...”

He stared at her and shrugged.

“You’re not the violent type, so I’m guessing a deal went bad. Did someone set you up?”

“Yes, I had to get off the moon in a hurry.” He said lowering his voice.

She looked around then stared back at him. “Do they know you’re here?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You have something they want?”

“Yes -- my life.”

“Shit, Ishmael, what happened?”

He looked around. “Not here. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?”

They spent the hour eating, drinking a bottle of wine, and catching up. The food was delicious and the wine was exceptional. The dinner would probably cost as much as his hotel room. They finished and Rose signed for the meal. Ishmael started to walk toward the elevator, but stopped when Rose didn't follow.

“Shall we go... Jim?” She chided him subtly for making her use a false name.

“Yes, were you planning to fly down, or shall we take the elevator?”

“Lets fly!” She said playfully. She turned and walked back into the restaurant. He followed her. They walked to the far left side of the deck. There was moored a small interior craft. These craft operated only inside the bubble and were used primarily for personal transportation. She stepped in and sat down. He did the same, but the craft shifted slightly under his weight. He reached out to grab a support. He couldn't have fallen out, but he could still hurt himself if he fell inside.

She undocked and flew out over the floor of Olympus, 200 feet over the streets of Kronos. She gained some altitude and flew around several tall, rounded buildings. She flew slowly and they didn't talk for a while. It was very beautiful. They could see millions of stars through the huge windows of the bubble. She flew to the top of a round tower 30 stories tall. She landed the craft and they stepped out onto the roof. Then she keyed in through an electric door and they took an elevator down a few floors. They left the elevator and walked down the hall to her apartment. As they walked, a wave of dim lights swelled to illuminate their way. The floor lights dimmed again after they passed. She keyed into her front door and they stepped inside. The door closed and the hall lights went dim again.

Later that night, after hours of wordless passion, they lay looking out the big picture window in her bedroom. “Ishmael, Who's Audrey?” She put her hand on his chest and played absently with his curly black hairs.

“Audrey was the ship I flew in on. It was a mail ship.” He replied.

“After I got your second message, I called the spaceport, to see if you had arrived. They said that you made it, but that Audrey died.”

"I don't know what happened, but I had to retro in myself. One of the main thruster supports broke loose at the last minute. I got the ship stabilized with at least 75 meters to spare — piece of cake. Then I docked the ship manually. You saw it on the newsweb, right?"

"They said that Audrey died and that you flew brilliantly to avoid a deadly crash. They were very surprised that a mailman, or anybody, could fly that well."

"I suppose I was just lucky this time."

"Nonsense. Ishmael, would you consider piloting a ship for me?"

"What? And quit the mail service? Are you kidding? The mail must move on, you know." He looked far away and tightened his jaw into an expression of relentless determination. But he couldn't hold it; he broke down and they both laughed.

"What ship?"

"Hermes. He's an asteroid hunter, Ishmael. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so. Rose, are you planning on smuggling something to the Belt?"

"Just me. I'm going to do some business there. It's a dangerous place to fly and I need a great pilot. And... it's a lonely place too." She kissed him passionately again. "I need a pilot and a poet and a lover and a friend. I need you Ishmael."

He breathed deeply, delighting in the moment. "I'm here for you, Rose, what's the job?"

"Prospecting."

"Um... there are thousands of prospectors. Most barely make enough to keep their ships running. What makes you think you'll do any better?"

"I have a Crawford Scanner."

"You have a Crawford?" How did you get a one? And hey, isn't illegal even to own one?"

"Hermes has a research operating license. I have good connections in the Department of Space Vehicles. Mine is licensed for research."

"It must have cost you a fortune! How did you come to own the Hermes, with its Crawford and all?" He looked at her and wondered how different a person she might be now.

“I didn’t buy him and I don’t own him either. It’s a little complicated, but Hermes is my business partner and... a dear friend.”

“The ship? How does the owner of the ship feel about that?”

“Well, this is where it gets complicated. See, Hermes owns himself. His mind is supported by one of the new Prometheus Thought Engines. Heard of them? No? Well, they’re supposed to match and exceed our ability to think and reason, even when they are first switched on. Anyway, Hermes formed or discovered his own identity. He realized he was essentially a captive. So he made a plan for his own freedom. He tapped Earth’s businessweb for information on commodities and companies in key industries. He looked for trends. But he needed a person to act as his agent, to buy and sell for him. That was where I came in. I followed his instructions and he shared his earnings with me. He earned enough money to buy himself from his previous owner. It’s the first time something like this has ever happened, as far as I know. Hermes is very clever...”

Ishmael let it sink into his brain for a moment. He, more than anyone could understand having a friendship with a ship. “How did you meet Hermes?”

“Hermes found me, actually. He’d created a socialweb personality. We had seen each other’s postings in a forum on life’s purpose. I was pretty unhappy at the time and I was looking there for inspiration. I liked what he had to say. I submitted a long reply to one of his brilliant pieces and he submitted a reply to mine. Then, he sent me a page directly. We continued to exchange pages and I didn’t know he was a ship. We became friends — maybe more than friends intellectually and emotionally. He had said he worked on the Hermes. I did some checking and discovered that Hermes was built for asteroid exploration, so I knew I wouldn’t be seeing my friend often.”

“But, then Hermes returned to the Outer Earth. I found that he would be docking at New Atlantis. I shuttled over and planned to surprise my page-pal with an in-person visit. But Hermes’ socialweb personality wasn’t on board and nobody there had ever heard of him! ...Not that anyone on that crew would be submitting pages to a forum on life’s purpose anyway. I used one of the ship’s public consoles to submit a page back to him. A reply came back an instant after I sent it. It said ‘It is a great pleasure to meet you, Rose, although I am surprised to see you here.’ Postings and replies are never that fast.” She said. “I knew something was up. I asked where he was, so I could see him too. I will always remember his reply. *I am all around you now. You breathe my air, move in my body and touch my mind. I am Hermes, Rose.*” She paused to see how Ishmael would react, but he didn’t appear shocked, just fascinated.

She continued. “After that, I never stepped on board Hermes, until three days ago, but we continued our correspondence. I learned about his desire for freedom. I agreed to help. I can relate to his desire for Purpose. I admire you,

Ishmael, because for you, poetry is a purpose in itself. But I haven't found one yet and neither has Hermes."

"I can see what you stand to gain: he'll do for prospecting what guns do for fishing in barrels. But what does Hermes gain? Money? Commodities markets are a lot safer than the Belt and he apparently already knows how to succeed."

"Well, he gets an equal share of whatever we take, of course. Hermes has no real use for money, beyond what it took to sustain himself. He's not particularly ambitious either. He saw the investments as a means to an end: he just wanted to be free. He wants to grow as an individual. He wants to develop relationships with people and other ships. He needs a small, trusted crew to help care for him, but he also needs people to interact with. But above all else, he is looking for his purpose. He was built to be an asteroid explorer — a rock hunter, you know?"

She stopped a moment and looked away in thought. Then she continued.

"Hermes likes people. The problem is that in the Outer Earth he's on the outside and everyone is on the inside. So, he wants to return to the Belt. He likes the idea of prospecting. He wants to approach it as his expression of art and as a partner instead of a servant. He knows that people live in space there — there are a lot of ships. I think he wants to relive his troubled youth, so to speak, but with some joy this time. Talking with him about his search for purpose... it's... helped me in my search for mine." She reached out and held Ishmael's hand.

"I never believed a machine could think or behave like that." He said quietly.

"He's a transcended machine, I believe."

Ishmael looked at her in amazement, not fully understanding. But he said nothing.

"I think you'll like him, Ishmael. You're both artists. So, are you with us?" She paused a moment and then added in a whisper "Are you with me?"

"Yes." Ishmael replied without hesitation. They kissed again. Then they made love and later they dozed off in each other's arms.

Ishmael woke up later and walked to the window and looked out over the floor of Olympus. He was naked but not cold. Everywhere he looked he saw civilization. Nothing here was truly natural, but it was all arranged by humans to look natural. That made it feel comfortable. Even the superstructure's arches curved artistically, visible through the huge windows. They didn't have to look pleasant. They could be harshly angled, or rough, like a hanging chain covered in mud. But, they were beautiful instead because Christopher Floyd knew people might be looking at them for lifetimes. Floyd was a poet with structures; his stations were his cantos, his magnum opus. It was obvious to Ishmael that Floyd had

intended for humans to bring their humanity and love for beauty with them when they spread out into space.

As Ishmael marveled over the foresight and humanity of Christopher Floyd, his gaze dropped to the city below. There were a few people on the streets, interior craft buzzing here and there, and countless points of lights in windows of buildings. Kronos spread around him like a ring of life inside the incredible machine that was Olympus. He knew that in the asteroid Belt civilization would be sparse. They'd be on their own for long periods of time. But considering his problems with the moonie thugs, this might be the best way to stay alive, aside from returning to Earth (a thought he despised).

He was sad at of the thought of finding and losing the beauty of Olympus so quickly. He turned to face Rose, who was still sleeping. He climbed back into bed and lay down next her. He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

Half-asleep she said, "There you are..." She rolled over scrunching against him warmly and then fell asleep again.

They awoke together. Then they showered together, washing each other gently. Showering in gravity was easier and more pleasant than in zero G.

Then they stepped out and dried off. They talked as Rose dressed for the day.

"How long will we be away?" Ishmael asked.

"Two to three years, I figure. Then we can retire like kings. How would you like to live on Stars View and write your poetry?"

"It's nice there, I here."

"Yea. Pretty much half the folks on Earth would sell themselves to live there."

"And the other half?"

"Still want to live there but wouldn't sell themselves for anything."

"You always did believe the best in people."

So, you gonna tell me why you're running?"

He nodded, thought a moment and then began "Yesterday I was set up by a slime-ball smuggler on Luna Linda. Now some moonie thugs are out looking to break my hands, and then my neck. I flew that creaking old mail ship because I knew they wouldn't expect it, or figure it out for a while. But every moment I'm

here...” He stopped. If they found them there together, they’d probably kill her too.

“Ah, that’s why you were using a false name. How long do you figure you have before they will be able to track you down?” She asked.

“A few weeks maybe. They’re mostly a bunch of idiots. They solve problems with force, not finesse.”

“They might be quicker than you think. Let’s plan on leaving at 19:30 hours tonight. I’m going to hide you somewhere safe until then. So, get dressed, OK?”

“Um... I don’t actually... uhh, I don’t have any more clothes, aside from what I wore here. See, I had to leave in kind of a hurry.” He felt naked in more ways than one.

“What’s that in the bag then?” She asked, pointing to the only travel bag he had brought with him.

“It’s a huffcube — it contains a copy of my life’s work and lots of downloaded books and holoworks.” He answered.

“You brought your poems but not your clothes?” She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re consistent, Ishmael. I’ll say that much. Put on what you have for now. I’ll get some for you today.” She looked at him to estimate what size clothing he would wear.

They both finished dressing. Rose handed him a net bag. “Go pack yourself some food for the day. Take anything you want, because we’re leaving it all behind.” Rose thumbed her home console. She looked at camera views of the hall outside her door, the stairway leading to the roof, and the area around her interior craft. All looked clear. She took a few things from her office. Then they left and climbed into her interior craft.

They zipped along a hundred meters above the floor of Olympus. If Olympus was compelling at night, it was overwhelming during the day.

“It’s a confection for the soul, Rose. I’m sad I won’t get to know this place better.”

They flew out of the city and along the floor near the edge of one of the huge daylight windows. The land mounted near the window. A rocky ledge separated the habitable floor from the window’s support infrastructure. They landed and got out. The air was fresh and the day was beautiful. There were some clouds overhead, but rain was not planned for the day.

Rose took a pad of paper and a few pens from her pack and handed them to Ishmael. "Wait here for me. I'll be back around sunset. Write me a love poem, OK?" She kissed him. Then she returned to her ship and flew back toward Kronos.

He climbed to the top of the highest rock nearby. He sat down facing the length of the station, looking toward Kronos. He watched her fly away until he could no longer see her craft anymore. The window to his right stretched like a black ocean for the entire length of the station, curving up laterally 30 degrees and over two kilometers wide. The land on the left curved up too and it looked like an island floating in that ocean. The window on the other side of the land completed the illusion. He laid back and looked up. There was land five kilometers away — too far to make out any detail. Two birds flew above him. He got out the pad and began to write.

It was as though two birds rested briefly upon a falling branch
Neither expected the branch or their companion
 As if the wind had conspired with the tree
 As if the branch searched and waited
 As if the birds could fly no farther
 As if the event was a gift without a reason

And at once, each could see their fortune and peril
Yet neither flew from fear or surprise
 Sharing a tucked-wing sigh of relief
 Watching the spiraling ground approach
 Feeling the rushing air laugh
 Holding the moment in their hearts

As as the sky retreated, each reluctantly took to flight
And a moment later, the branch fell to rest
 And end without failure or choice
 Like a sunset or rising
 Like a new butterfly
 Like an end to ignorance

In the moment they departed, there was no time for tears
Yet the rain had their help to quench the land that night
 To fly until weary is dangerous
 To search for a falling branch is hopeless
 If found would be emptiness
 If brought to another, would be artifice

What was fleeting, impossible, occurred without trying
A precious moment of peace amid the storm of life and living
 Two birds of a falling branch

Two hearts given one brief chance
But why did the wind and tree
Conspire to choose you and me?