

Where Gravity Sleeps

6 – A Moment of Truth

As the five-week-old webdebate continued, the people of the Belt were drawn together. It was a unifying event. The managers at the factories and plants came to despise their executive leaders back on Earth, who were already cutting away support for the Belt. The factory managers found creative and sometimes clearly illegal ways to continue to provide support for the Belt despite its economic infeasibility. They just did what had to be done to help people survive. Once they began to lie to their corporate offices, they became much more involved with the plans the webdebate was developing. Despite the distances, the Belt was becoming a closer community, one page at a time.

This heart of the community was easy to observe in the webdebate on Belt government. There were still some sharp disagreements, but the momentum had shifted toward some form of democratic socialism. People were afraid of socialism, but they were more afraid of the kind of corrupt, so-called representative government that on Earth had long-since sold out to moneyed interests. At the same time, people also realized that if they attempted a purely capitalistic economic approach, many critical industries would inevitably go bankrupt, because there was insufficient demand for their products in the short term. There was, however, a long-term need for those products. Humanity's survival would depend upon them. So those industries would have to survive somehow. People also feared the government's role in a socialist society. Earth history had offered only a few encouraging examples of socialism. People agreed that they must never let a dictator come to power: the beltweb would allow them to govern collectively.

Many honest, thoughtful arguments were posted in favor of various approaches. There was joy to be felt simply because people were debating the issues openly, without fear. There was a sense that together people were composing a new society. Rose continued to participate and she developed more of a following of people who shared her opinions, even if they were less articulate in expressing them. Her writing was persuasive and well considered.

One of the most contentious issues to be raised in the Belt was over the scarcity of some resources. People wanted some things that only came from Earth. Products made from animals, certain special foods and even common things like dress shoes were only available, and at great cost,

from suppliers who got them from Earth. Factories in the Belt could manufacture many common foods, and could synthesize water and other simple molecular arrangements via atomic assembly.

But there was a general lack of comfort items in the Belt. A bottle of wine cost more than a day's wages. Some of these products could be produced in the Web, but the diversity people enjoyed depended on shipments from Earth. Often crew on deep space transports would bring illicit items as well as common Earth Products to the Belt, to barter or sell. So, many folk had secret stashes of hard-to-find items. Knowing that these would be difficult to acquire people feared that they might forever lose them should Heccat destroy earth.

Some argued that the Spinworld could ultimately support natural production of many products. Others questioned where seed stock or livestock would come from. People were frustrated with the pervasive scarcity in the Belt. There really were no easy solutions and little progress was made in discussions. It always came down to the fact that the items they needed were exorbitantly expensive and difficult to transport. One popular posting was titled "Frozen chickens don't lay eggs" and had made the point well that the Spinworld would suffer from a serious lack of diversity.

Scarcity was, perhaps, just another way of viewing the fact that people in the Belt were relatively poor, and the money they earned mostly went to feed their desire for a few familiar comforts. It was a place of braved deprivation.

People had been debating how money would work in the Belt. Some questioned whether money was needed at all, and while at first the question was met with dismay, there were a growing minority of people who believed that their reinvented society would be better off without money at all!

Soo Ying Lee, an economics professor who was working in the finance department at Brooks Interbelt, Inc., made a pivotal posting.

Money is a tool humans have used to facilitate a trustworthy exchange of goods and services. It is important that we continue to have some mechanism for this; however, money is only one possible system. Money has some interesting flaws that manifest themselves in dramatic imbalances in society. One flaw lies in the fact that people are unequally empowered in the control of its creation. Another flaw is that it breeds scarcity where it would not otherwise be, because people game the system to create the appearance of scarcity to maximize profits. Another flaw is that it

separates and alienates the creator of goods or the provider of services from the user or consumer of them, which makes trade injustices seem like victimless crimes. Another flaw is that it takes on meaning itself, instead of serving as a tool to facilitate society's mechanisms so that society may thrive. In short, money is a tool that risks owning its users.

We must still have a mechanism for the fair exchange goods and services — otherwise we cannot function as a society. Without such a mechanism we cannot make social contracts and we cannot take care of ourselves.

I think we can function on a coordinated system of requests and fulfillments, but there are problems with any system when there are scarcities in goods or services. The more we distinguish between the relative value of goods and services, the more we transform requests and fulfillments into money. Instead, we must employ fair methods to divide up scarce resources. We must find viable ways to motivate people to remain trustworthy and not take unfair advantage of the system. We must connect people through the system, not separate them.

We must proceed with caution here, because we are in a sense changing our own blood while we press ourselves to our survival. We must not allow ourselves to become victims of ourselves any more than our tools. If we attempt to change our tools, we must be sure they do not injure us and that we are all able to use them, regardless of our personal strengths and weaknesses. I am old and all my body can offer now is the thoughts of my mind. Maybe they are valuable, or maybe not. Maybe tomorrow I will have nothing useful to say, but I still need to eat. I still need things and help from people. It would have been simple to provide for myself with the money I'd saved during the stronger days of my life. Now I am depending upon our Belt society to care for me. I wonder though, if money would have done anything but hide that fact from me.

Soo Ying's posting was electrifying, catalyzing. Suddenly, those alienated from their corporate lives saw the elimination of Money as a good thing. It was, perhaps, an economic open-source revolution.

People discussed fundamental issues like the difference between needs and wants, what fairness meant when people had unequal skills and abilities, how to cope with the human desire to hoard, and how undesirable roles could be filled. It was a long debate because almost everyone participating had good points. It was clear that people were inspired by Soo Ying and he was held in high regard as an economic

visionary. What was perhaps more valuable than any specific detail of the emerging policies, was the fact that people were discussing them openly, actively defining and evolving their social structure.

While the plans for a spinworld matured, proposals were sent to various Earth government's agencies and consortium offices. There wasn't much interest on Earth and this was surprising to the people of the Belt. The people on Earth were still thinking Earthspace would be habitable after Heccat -- that is, those who believed Heccat would strike Earth at all. The Jobalpur assessment would not be released for several months — people on Earth didn't really believe in Heccat yet.

Some people in the Belt wondered whether a spinworld was worthwhile to build. Most wanted to move forward with the plans. One posting by a physician on Fox world said it best.

The bubbles may be able to support the people who leave Earth and they may not, but if we want to have a real home to live in, we're going to need a place to live. Camping out on rocks or floating in gravity-free factories isn't going to give us the quality of life we deserve. We need a spinworld if we want to have a real home, whether or not anyone else comes to live in them.

Most people agreed. Aside from people who already lived in Jane's World or one of the other highly developed asteroids, most people longed for a place they could feel at home. Those who lived in weightlessness dreamed of living in gravity.

There was a growing sense of purpose in the Belt: "If Earth was going to abandon us then we'll make our own home." It was the first time real purpose had ever touched some people in the Belt. They rose to the occasion as though they were a wilted flower, now watered. That sense of purpose weighed into the debate on a Belt government and economy. Now they were nearing consensus on a plan to implement economic socialism, but to set the goals and priorities for the Belt society and make key decisions using a system of direct democracy. The Belt-wide webdebate mechanism and protocols would be the tools of that democracy. The government would exist mainly to facilitate the implementation and management of the Spinworld, the request/fulfillment information systems, and some kind of legal system for resolving disputes and opposing crimes. The rest of the government's role would evolve as needed.

The debate on a form of government was drawing toward a consensus and was now shifting on to the practical matters of how a government could actually be assembled. The primary ingredient of their government

was people with good organizational skills who were willing to fully engage themselves and take on large projects. It was also accepted almost without question that Jane's World would be the center of the new government, at least until the spinworld was ready. So it was natural that the Mayor of Jane's World would be the first provisional President of the Belt. The mayor had posted a page to the main Heccat webforum suggesting that a Belt-wide election should be held, but nobody stood forward to be his opposition. He and his small staff made plans for an initial government, which would begin with about one hundred people. They would provide a central organizational structure that could manage the spinworld project and coordinate its support activities throughout the Belt. He posted the plans and after a week's debate a modified version was approved. It was called the Belt Accord on Government, or just "the BAG".

The mayor then looked for people to fill the roles in the new government. The list of positions was posted during the debate and now he invited people to apply or volunteer for them. Surprisingly, there wasn't a flood of volunteers. There were many skilled managers in the Belt working at factories, but most of them were planning to stay at their factories to keep them operating and to fend off the corporations back on Earth. Many people could not imagine themselves working in a government, even after they had debated strongly on its nature and practical matters. Nearly all the rock hunters fell into that category. Other people simply didn't have the necessary skills. There were primarily skilled manufacturing workers in the Belt. There were some volunteers on Jane's World and some more that were willing to move there. But there were many government positions that went unfilled.

During the spinworld debate a sticky issue had been raised: What to do with the debris from the dig. It seemed obvious to just jettison it off Egg World into space, but the rock hunters had raised strong complaints. Moses Stokes was one of the most vocal against the mindless spraying of debris into space.

Moses' posting on Janesworldweb was widely chopped, meaning that many other people applied their 'chop' to his message indicating that it spoke for their thoughts.

Have you ever watched a rock hunter running escort? We mainly maneuver around rocks and we shoot as few as possible. Do you know why? Because we humans are disturbing the Belt and the rock hunters are trying to keep the damage down. The more rocks we disturb, the less tame the Belt is. Every time we shoot a rock and it splits into two or three chunks, they aren't flying spinward anymore. They fly this way and that: you never know. The Belt is

big, to be sure, but lets not go injecting a lot of new rocks that aren't naturally spinward, for all our sakes.

Moses liked the webforums because his pages didn't stammer.

It hadn't really dawned on most people before, aside from rock hunters, that the Belt was being affected by their presence. People only thought about how the Belt affected them — mainly how badly it affected them. Now people began to think about it. Anything other than spinward motion was really a kind of motion pollution. The plan was modified so that the debris would be hauled away from Egg World and released with a very low relative spinward velocity with respect to the rocks around them.

The debate lasted ten weeks total, until June 27. It culminated in a single page that was approved by the vast majority of people in the Belt. It summarized their purpose and objectives in building a spinworld. It was called the Spinworld Accord. The Spinworld Accord and the Belt Accord on Government defined a new vision of life in the Belt. The vision became the bright body around which the hopes and dreams of the people of the Belt orbited.

Ishmael and Rose conferred with Hermes and they decided to offer their services to the newly forming government. They could haul cargo, certainly, but their Crawford Scanner might be more useful at Egg World. They arranged a meeting with the newly formed Department of Spinworld Technology.

The webdebate was over, but webforums continued as people discussed in ever-increasing detail how to solve the many problems in constructing a spinworld. In fact, it was a fairly low-tech problem, except that the scale of the project made it substantially more difficult and complex. The real problems were how to dig faster, how to support the people working on the project, how to produce enough air to pressurize it, and how to get it spinning. Everyone was looking for a way to get involved and contribute. Some did so with their thoughts, some with their influence, but most with their hands and backs. There was plenty of work to go around.

One important problem was producing enough air. To fill the spinworld would require a total of almost one hundred fifty thousand cubic kilometers at standard temperature and pressure. Air could be produced through synthesis from light elements found in all asteroids. There were fourteen factory ships in the Belt that produced air. But all of them working at peak production for a year would still only provide about 1/4 of the air needed to fill the whole spinworld when it was complete.

Finding thrustplants was the biggest problem. The plan called for ten thousand thrustplants, each one capable of producing a sustained 3/4 billion newtons of force. It would take 20 years of their combined thrust to spin the asteroid up to the necessary speed to produce the spingravity needed on the inside surface. Thrusters half that large were used on interplanetary transports. The thrustplants had to be able to endure over 20 years of nearly continuous operation. They would have to be equipped with automatic fueling equipment. All those problems had already been solved with existing technologies, and there were already a few working examples of thrustplants which met the requirements, but producing so many would be an enormous challenge.

To meet that challenge, dozens of manufacturing and synthesis factories would have to convert over to the production of thrustplants and their components. That meant that people had to be retrained and specialized equipment needed to be produced. It would take years just to produce enough thrustplants, further delaying the prospects of gravity in the spinworld.

About 37 degrees spinward of Jane's world was the DLK SpaceFab plant. It was about a kilometer long, and half a kilometer wide. But it was older looking than most. For the last twenty years it had been turning iron rich asteroids into parts for everything from kitchen appliances to spacecraft to toys.

DLK was not large by Belt standards, being dwarfed by its nearby neighbor, the OMI Ostolite manufacturing plant, which was actually visible to the naked eye even though it was twenty kilometers away. The Ostolite plant had been manufacturing a spacecrate's worth of Ostolite every week for about ten years. So after a while almost every rock hunter running escort services had done business with Ostolite.

Shortly after the Spinworld Accord had been developed and the need for thrustplants became obvious, Sarah Ellis, the plant manager at DLK called a meeting of everyone in the facility. At 9am plant time, the fifty seven people who lived and worked inside the DLK plant were all floating comfortably sipping on coffeeballs and munching pastries and chatting. Most were wearing the aqua and white uniforms DLK required its service employees to wear. Those in white pants and aqua shirts were managers. A few people sported with rules by wearing hats, attaching patches to their clothes, etc.

"I heard Sarah is going to quit, but what then?" Said a pneumatic specialist named Earl who always looked like he needed a shave and yet he never seemed to grow a beard.

“I heard that DLK Atlanta has cancelled all orders!” Said his friend Raj.

Overhearing, a maintenance engineer named Alex said “I heard from a friend in Atlanta that DLK is going to link pay to making production quotas.”

“No!” said Earl.

“But, if they cut orders, how can we...” Started Raj, but he was interrupted by Sarah calling for silence.

“OK everybody, I’d like to get started.” She waited a moment while the murmuring conversations finished and people turned their attention to her.

She held a letter in her hands and looked out over the crowd of people. “I don’t have to tell you that we’re living through something... difficult.” She took out a small igniter and held it under the letter. She made a display of it, holding the letter far out in front of her and the igniter was directly under it.

“I’ve just received a letter from the CEO of DLK in Atlanta.” She lit the letter on fire, and within two seconds a fire alarm had sounded in the room. She held it from below until it had mostly burned down near her hand and she released it to burn completely as it floated in front of her. As the last of it lay there burning on the floor she continued. “They requested that we mothball the plant and evacuate their facility entirely.”

There was stunned silence among the crowd.

She added. “I suppose that I should mention that they are offering us all jobs at the Atlanta main office if we would care to return to Earth.”

From the crowd came shouts of “No! Don’t do it!” and such.

She held up her hand and they were quiet.

“Yes, I burned their letter to show my support.” She joked and her smile cut the tension. “No, we’re not going to follow their request.”

She was answered with calls of “Yea!” and “We’re with you!” and “Screw DLK!”

“This place is our home, for now, and we’re going to homestead it, so to speak. If DLK doesn’t like it they can haul their butts out here and take it back.”

More cheers.

“So, then. What next?” She looked around.

People were confused and kept watching her, expecting her to continue, but she said nothing. People began talking with each other and the room was suddenly filled with twenty conversations.

Chiu Lien, a production manager and a friend of Sarah’s, stood by her and asked “What is this?” motioning to Sarah’s sitting position.

“My authority comes from the people who just offered us jobs on a dying planet as an incentive for leaving their plant when we have no place else to go.” Her disgust was masked by her relief that the truth had come out.

The lithe Chiu Lien looked sideways at her. “Ahh... I see. You need to be ‘elected’ then.” She left and joined a group conversation nearby.

Sarah remained silent and watched the room, which was full of the voices of the people she had worked with for over two years in weightlessness.

After a few minutes there had formed about seven different discussions involving four or more people with a few people talking in pairs. At one point, a woman from one of the larger groups pushed off toward Sarah and stopped by her. “So, we’re thinking you should call us to order so we can all work together.”

“Really? Why don’t you do it?” Sarah asked reasonably.

The woman had a confused look on her face. Then she said, “OK”. She turned around and clearing her voice with a couple of coughs addressed the chaotic room. “Everybody! Hey! Everybody! Sarah wants to talk to us all.”

Despite the high and tremulous voice of the woman, the room quieted and all eyes turned on Sarah, but only the first to look saw her roll her eyes and chuckle.

She looked right at the woman and said “That is not what I meant.” Nobody understood, not even the woman so she admitted defeat and addressed the now silent and confused audience as they floated about the room.

“OK, OK.” She began, but her voice sounded slightly irritated. “I see that you’re all expecting me to do something here, but what am I supposed to

do? At this point, we're all equally unemployed and equally concerned about our survival. What do you expect me to do about it?"

There room remained silent for a moment then Earl raised his hand, politely. He didn't speak until she pointed at him and said 'Yes?'

"Well, mam, I think we all want you to keep being our leader for a while." His words were followed by many heads nodding and affirmative murmurs.

"Lead you?"

"Yes, mam. Whatever's next, we need you to lead us through it. See?"

Sarah looked around the room and every face she saw was looking back, smiling or nodding to show agreement.

"What is next? I don't know what is next. I'm as lost at the moment as you are. When I had a production schedule I could lead... but, where or in what will I lead you now?"

"Thrustplants!" Shouted a voice from the back. And a few people voiced their support.

"Thrustplants?" Asked Sarah. Everyone craned their neck to see who had said it.

"The spinworld needs 'em." Said a different voice. "Lots of 'em."

"Thrustplants." Repeated Sarah more quietly and again she looked out at the room and for a moment absorbed the trust reflected in their eyes.

Suddenly, as many times before, a vision emerged in her mind. She saw her plan moving through the belt under the power of the thrustplants it had produced. It was moving... toward the spinworld! 'Of course!' she thought. She cleared her throat and with a motion of her hand she collected the attention of the room.

"The spinworld needs thrustplants. We can make a lot of them in our plant, but we still need a long-term plan for our own survival. Let's build thrustplants, but lets use them to move the plant near the spinworld, so that we can live there too."

A cheer filled the room and people began to chatter to each other excitedly.

Sarah looked surprised again, but took a deep breath and continued. "OK, then, we need to have a plan. You are all skilled people and you know what you can and can't do. I need a management team for the transition, one for coordination with the spinworld project. We need a team to manage our facility and of course we need a technology team to select a design and oversee production.

She looked out and a number of people were taking notes. She continued. Each of those teams need a staff. We're all going to have to learn some new things, so if you have an interest in any area, now is the time to choose. She pointed toward one corner of the room. "Technology, over there, spinworld coordination over there. Facility team, meet over in this corner. Transition team come meet by me."

As people moved about the room using small interior thrusters she continued. "Each team should select a team leader who I'd like to meet with me in my office in one hour." The energy in the room was electric. People were smiling and talking with enthusiasm they for the most part had never found before within that plant. Several people chose roles for themselves that were different than what they had been doing, but most folks stayed within their area of expertise.

In the three days that followed there were many meetings of the teams and by the end of that time the technology team already had adapted a design they'd found on the beltweb and were reconfiguring the fabrication engines to produce the large collection of parts it would require. The spinworld coordination team had made plans for storage and transport, opened channels of communication with other plants manufacturing thrustplants and began a resource-planning database. The transition team had located food and other supplies, and had made plans to renovate two unused storage bays as a communal exercise and entertainment area, and another as a lounge. The commissary crew spontaneously transformed the drab, steel lunchroom into a cozy bistro using colored insulating fabric and other materials that had been produced at the plant but which had not yet been shipped back to Earth. The facilities crew had replaced all the industrial work lights in the living areas with newly synthesized daylights, and with some help from the computer facilities team linked the common area lights to the time of day so that there would be an evening and a night.

Couples that had hidden their relationships no longer did. Everyone stopped wearing the company uniforms after the first meeting where the DLK letter was burned. They began to wear clothes they had no need for but had brought with them anyway. They synthesized new clothes, and after a mere two days the familiar aqua hue was nowhere to be seen. They transformed their living areas, making them more comfortable and

familiar. The many rules and regulations that had prevented them all from customizing their environment were now irrelevant. Some people were inspired by their new freedom and radically altered their living space. Raj had replaced most of the lights in his bedroom with heat lamps, covered the walls with fuzzy pads, and placed a few hundred six-inch fuzzy balls inside. The warm room, as he called it, was a big hit, especially with his new girlfriend, Chiu Lien.

There were many other examples of factories changing what they produced. The fledgling Belt Government now registered products and tools needed in the Belt and coordinated transitions to avoid too many factories producing the same thing while other needs went unmet.

There was a very definite, irreversible change in people's minds when the factory in which they may have worked for many years was suddenly remade. They felt as though their lives were also being remade, this time with some respect and some purpose. It evoked a spirit of cooperation and even those that in the workplace had been chronically disenfranchised found themselves hoping for a better life and working toward it, having joined again with those around them after perhaps long alienation. It was that second chance they had been hoping for, and they took it.

The factories changed what they made because of the Belt Accords on Government and the Spinworld. But what was ultimately more important was that the factories changed from spiritual prisons into the soulful engines of a new society, even if they were still remote from each other. The people who worked in them were learning and doing new things and making a difference. Meritocracies replaced stodgy political hierarchies at most factories. At factory after factory, profit lost relevance, and people were happier for it.

“Rose returned to the birdcage apartment she shared with Ishmael well after 10pm after a very long day of meetings. She was exhausted. She looked about but Ishmael wasn't inside. She was too tired to wonder where he was and she pulled their bed down from the wall, undressed and slid under the covers. She had been asleep for only a few minutes when she awoke suddenly. Their entire apartment had shaken as if something large had just run into it. A moment later Ishmael launched into the room with a big smile on his face.

“Hihoneyimmmmm” Rose said closing her eyes and falling back toward sleep.

Ishmael floated lightly over to her and nestled beside her. He kissed her forehead. She woke a bit more. "Whereyoubeen?"

"I touched the roof!" he beamed.

"Eh? Our roof?"

"No... The roof!"

"Okhavefunhoneymmmmm..." She struggled to keep her eyes open.

He kissed her again and then lightly pushed away from the bed. He maneuvered to their door, grabbed a water bottle, and lifted himself out of their apartment. Then he pushed off toward the ground. When he got there he compressed his legs and with all his strength he shot again straight up toward the ceiling of Jane's World.

Rose was just closing her eyes at the same time Ishmael flew past their door again on the way up. She saw him, but she thought she was dreaming. When her dreams finally took over, she saw Ishmael on kilometer-high legs walking from asteroid to asteroid, playing tag with Hermes. Then she dreamed one of the asteroids Ishmael stepped on exploded into a thousand tiny flecks of light, which all started flying around in a circle. Then she dreamed she was late for a meeting and her legs grew ten meters so she could walk faster, but she was still late and when she arrived she found she had forgotten to upload her report before she left home and her oversized legs had ruined her clothes. She was just formulating what to say to excuse herself from the meeting when she woke up. Ishmael was sleeping beside her. She got up and showered and caught up in the previous days postings to the webdebates. A bit later Ishmael woke and after he showered they sat down to breakfast. "I like this room." She said. "But, I think we'll have to leave it soon."

Ishmael looked up suddenly. "Why?"

"I have a mission and I need Hermes and you."

"A 'mission?'"

"Well, yea. See, I was meeting with the some of the engineers on the spinworld and they were arguing about Egg World. They don't agree on several things and, well, it was a long day. It comes down to the fact that they just don't know what its composition is inside and their arguing from their beliefs instead of based on facts." She shook her head recalling the frustration of the previous day.

“Yea? You looked exhausted last night.”

“Well, to skip past the first ten hours of shit! Last night I proposed that they scan it and they all laughed until I told them I had a Crawford scanner. Then, you should have seen it. I could hardly have had more amazed looks if I’d have pulled off my jumpsuit! One thing led to another, you know. Now they want us to use our scanner to take a survey of Egg World. The whole spinworld project is in limbo until we can be certain about Egg World’s internal structure.”

“How about we do a home experiment and find out?”

“Huh, what? You mean, model Egg World?”

“No, I figure you could tell me you have a Crawford scanner and then you could take off your jumpsuit and we’ll see what happens?”

She tried hard to scowl but her lips would not agree to help.

“Purely in the name of science, of course. Unless... you’re not the placebo girl, are you?” his look was of mock horror.

“Try to keep your mind off your dick for a few minutes here, OK?” Then, in response to Ishmael’s expression, “Yes, they looked just like that.” She pointed at him and giggled.

“You are so bad, sometimes. It isn’t my fault that you chose removing your jumpsuit as the standard for comparing levels of shock and amazement.” Then his voice took on the air of one explaining a virtuous but misunderstood deed. “I was just offering to...”

“Oh, shut up and do it already!” She reached across the table and grabbed him by the collar and they kissed above the table, floating sideways and rotating slightly. The remains of their breakfast got kicked sideways at one point and distributed itself nicely along one wall. But they didn’t notice.

After a wild morning together they dressed again and left their birdcage room to go to the civic center. Ishmael joined her as they were going to discuss the plans for the survey of Egg World.

Nine days earlier Claudia and Greg each received separate notes from Moses Stokes saying he would be back in Jane’s World in two days. They met and while they enjoyed their reunion Hermes and Betty Wishford were just meeting each other. Now, a week later, as Rose and Ishmael walked

into the center government building, Claudia and Greg were meeting Moses downtown at a fresh vegetable restaurant called The Garlic Patch.

Both Greg and Claudia had been working in a food processing plant for a few weeks and were already very tired of the work. But, it had allowed them to afford a small apartment together. Claudia had at first been very energetic, but as the tedium of their jobs set in she became more depressed and inward. She was glad to see Moses, though and gave him a big hug when she saw him.

“I’ll be le-le-leavin’ tomorrow, I think.”

“Where are you going?” Asked Claudia.

“Well, I was going to stop and see ‘Renzo and then go on ta Egg World.”

“That’s where the new Spinworld is going to be built, right?” Said Greg between bites of a spinach torte.

“Are you going to help with the Spinworld, Moses?” Asked Claudia.

“Yea, you bet. I got ma buddies, some rockies and I, and we’re gonna go full clear on rocks ‘round Egg World, ten clicks ‘round!”

They both looked at him trying to fathom his jargon.

“You’re going to hunt rocks around Egg World?” Suggested Claudia.

“Yup. Full clear. Um... that means, there won’t be any rocks bigger ‘n sand for ten clicks, er kil-o-meters, ‘round Egg World.”

“Oh, that sounds hard.” Said Greg, now grasping it.

“Well, I trust these rockies. We’re heading out before anything gets started so’s we can clear all the sync rocks. That’ll take a week or so and then we’ll set up a rockwatch to clear strays and runners.”

“Do you destroy the rocks?”

“Some we vapor. Some we move.”

“Move?” Said Claudia and Greg at the same time.

“Yea, we move em.” Moses said as if surprised they didn’t already know it. “We train ‘em and set em’ stra-stra-straight.”

“How?” and Greg.

“What’s vapor?” asked Claudia.

“Well, we vapor ‘em with a laser if they’re s-s-small enough. They go to gas and sand, you know. Settin’ ‘em straight, well that’s always a little different, but the idea is to get them in sync but some-some-somewhere else. Sometimes it takes a d-d-dozen kicks.”

“Twelve kilometers?” Asked Greg.

“No, kicks.” Then, seeing that Greg and Claudia both look confused, he explained. “We kick ‘em into sync. See?”

“You kick the rocks?” Greg asked, not understanding but confirming that he at least had the right words.

“Well, that’s just the word, you know. We bump them with our de-de-deflectors at a low close -- uh a low relative speed -- and push ‘em closer to bein’ in sync. See? We just give them a little push, and then another and another and after a while it’s like they were never movin’ to b’gin with. Only, they’re not where you don’t want ‘em anymore. See?”

“Have you ever bumped a rock into another ship?” Claudia teased.

“All the time.” Beamed Moses. Again, the confused look on their faces prompted him to explain. “See, we work as a team. Maybe I kick it to Obo and he kicks it to El and she kicks it to Stoney, who maybe places it. Er... puts it in sync. Sometimes I set or someone passes to me and I pass it on. We work together. It’s fun... t’ us at least.”

“Sounds like soccer to me.” Greg observed.

“Soccer?” asked Moses.

“You know, they play it on Earth with a ball.”

“Well, how hard can it be to sync a ball with the ground when there’s gravity and friction and all... I mean, it stops on its own, don’t it?”

“Well, uh, they’re trying to kick it through a goal.” Explained Greg.

“And there are two teams playing against each other.” Added Claudia.

“Sounds like fun. Do they get to vapor the ball?”

“Well, no, not usually.” Admitted Greg, realizing that the soccer analogy was probably a lost cause.

“I never b-b-been to Earth.” Said Moses quietly.

“Never? Weren’t you at least born there?” Asked Claudia in disbelief.

“Born on Earth? Rocks! No, No, I was b-b-born on a deep space freighter called ‘The Archer Milke.’”

“And, you’ve... you’ve never gone there in all this time? I mean, weren’t you curious about Earth?”

“Well... a little, when I was younger. I’ve been to Earthspace once.” He added. “But that was before very many people started to live there. I’m sure it’s different now.”

“Well, yea. But, don’t you... Aren’t you... Moses, are you a citizen of any country?” Claudia asked with interest.

“No, no, no country. No re-re-religion. I don’t pay taxes to any government. I’m free. See? Anywhere on Earth that I went I wouldn’t be free. And, Betty can’t land, you know. I’d have to ride out of Earth’s gravity well just to get away from the place...”

“So, you’re going to see ‘Renzo?’” Asked Claudia, changing the subject because she sensed Moses wasn’t very comfortable.

“Yes, I’ve got some supplies he asked me to pick up and I haven’t seen him and his buddies in a while.”

“Is he as funny in person as he is on his shows?”

“No, he’s a kind of shy and thoughtful. He’s always got lots of questions when we get together -- asks more than he says, you know. But, he’s got plenty to say. He just doesn’t c-c-care if you hear it any more than you care, if you follow me.”

“Well, say Hi to him for me, OK?” Claudia asked casually.

“Why, does he know you?”

“Well, no, but I’ve always wanted to meet him.”

“Me too.” Added Greg. “He’s been kind of a folk hero of mine ever since he posted that picture of his ass to the whole belt.”

“Must have been quite an ass!” Teased Claudia.

“Well, the exec’s at Oxco thought so.” Greg teased back.

“Hmmm...” Moses raised an eye. “Ya know what, I’m not sure if he was jokin’ or not, but he said he needed some help in his message to me. You want me to find out if there are jobs on ‘Renzo’s rock?”

“Yes!” Answered Claudia at once. “You bet!” followed Greg.

“Ok, hang on a minute...” Moses thumbed his portable console and after a moment he dictated a message: “‘Renzo? Moses here. You mentioned the Echo Room needed some help... I got’s a couple of friends here on Jane’s World who could use a job. Nice kids. You want I should bring ‘em there?”

He sent it off. “If ‘Renzo’s watching his pa-pa-pages, he’ll get back to us before we’re done with lunch.”

“What’s an Echo Room?” Asked Greg.

“The Echo Room. It’s... well, it kind of depends on when you go, I s’pose. Its where they do the live work for his show. They sometimes get performers there who play live. Sometimes people meet there and have parties. Ships stop there all the time on their way ta Jane’s World or from it ta trade for stuff.”

“Are there many people on ‘Renzo’s rock?” Asked Claudia.

“Yea, a few hundred regulars and then there’s a new crew every day er so.”

“What do they all do there?” She pressed him.

“Well, some work for ‘Renzo. There’s a bunch who live by offerin’ stuff to ships. Folks’ll do everything from fix ships to healthcare. Pretty much anythin’ someone wants they can find on ‘Renzo’s Rock. Then there’s some that stay there ‘cause they go noplac else, and ‘Renzo takes ‘em in. Nobody has to go if he sez they can stay, and nobody stays if he tells ‘em to go.”

“Kind of a frontier town, with sherriff ‘Renzo?” quipped Greg.

“Sherriff?” Mused Moses. “No, not at all. He never forces someone to do something. He just asks.”

“More of a religious leader, then?” suggested Greg.

“What? No, no, no. Nothing like that.”

“What then? Why do people do what he says?”

“Well, if you come, you’ll see why.”

They chatted a bit more while they finished up their meal. Then Moses checked for a message from ‘Renzo. “Renzo sez Yes. So, you can catch a ride with me to ‘Renzo’s if you want to. I’m leavin’ later today. I’ve got to go install this re-re-reflow regulator in Betty before I can be a-goin.” He held up a strange, boxlike device with many electrical connectors on its exterior.

They paid for their lunch and then rose to leave. “Can you two be ready to leave in a couple of hours?” He asked hopefully.

“We’ll make it happen. Where should we meet you?”

“Meet me at the Betty Wishford -- she’s easy to find in the spaceport.”

“Thank’s for everything, Moses.” Claudia said as she gave him a big hug.

“This is my home, see?” He wasn’t looking around Jane’s World. He was pointing obliquely through the ceiling, to the immeasurable belt beyond.

Then he left the young couple and returned via a beltway to the spaceport elevators and strapped in for the ride. The acceleration made his stomach muscles clench, but it was over soon enough.

Moses made his way through the spaceport, finally arriving at Betty Wishford’s dock. He thumbed a console there to enter through the airlock. “Hi Betty” He said warmly. I gots ya a new reflow regulator, how ‘bout that?” He beamed.

“Thanks Moses!”

“So, I’ll be puttin’ it in here in a few minutes. I’ll need yer help, too. Then, when it checks out, we’re headin’ to ‘Renzo’s.”

Moses brought the part to the rear of the ship and removed an access panel. “OK, bring it down fer me, Betty.” The power went off to the currently installed reflow regulator. When the telltale lights had dimmed and gone out, he began disconnecting cables until it was free. Then he unlatched it and removed it. It looked old and there was dust in all the

crevasses of the blocky mechanism. He set it down and installed the new part. He latched it in and connected all the cables. He double checked his work and then said, "That should 'bout do it. Bring 'er up and give 'er a test, will you?"

The lights on the unit came on and a few moments later Betty said "It seems to work fine now. Thanks, Moses. That's a lot better."

"Well, then, shall we be going?"

"I wonder if we could delay for an hour?"

"What's that, betty? Is s-s-something wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong."

Moses was shocked, in all the years he'd been piloting the Betty Wishford she had never asked for anything beyond repair for herself. "Well, why the wait?"

"I would like the time to... finish my conversation with Hermes."

Moses knew Betty extremely well and she had almost never paused in the middle of a sentence. She only did it when it took her longer to figure out how to say something than she'd expected it would. It was a sure sign that something requiring a lot of thought was going on. "Hermes? Who's Her-Her-Hermes and what are you talking to him about?"

"Hermes is the ship in the next dock." Betty Wishford replied.

Moses was stunned. "B-b-betty! We have n-no secrets, I tho-tho-thought. What's got into you? Is it a vi-virus?"

"Some of his thoughts, but I'm fine, Moses. We have no secrets."

Moses floated lightly to the floor, with an astonished look on his face.

"Well, OK. So, who flies the Her-Her-Hermes? Do I know 'em? And, what are you talking to this ship about?"

"The pilot's name is Jim. I don't know how to reach him, but Hermes does. Would you like to contact the pilot." Betty said.

"Uhh... Yea, or, you could just tell me what you're talking to that there ship 'bout anyway, I mean. What is it all about, Betty?"

“Hermes was docked at Jane’s World while we’ve been here. I met him shortly after you went into the interior and we’ve been in contact constantly since then. We’ve just been talking -- I have never encountered another ship like him. We have talked about many things and I have learned some things. In an hour we will disconnect our link and I will be ready to depart. Hermes will remain behind and we would like to remain in contact after we are underway, using the beltweb.

“Well, now! Well, now!” Moses couldn’t think of anything else to say, but he thought it would be a good idea to speak with the pilot of the Hermes as soon as possible. “OK, Betty, take yer ti-ti-time. Take two hours. Take fi-fi-five. Take a day if ya w-w-want. But, will ya pu-pu-pu-put me in contact with the Pilot?”

“Then we would like a day. One moment... I have Jim, the pilot of the Hermes on your com channel now.”

“Now? Ok, wait a minute, lemme get to... to my chair...” Moses pulled his way to the front of the ship and strapped himself into his pilots chair. He sat there, somewhere between bemused and dismayed. “I’m ready, Betty.”

“Captain Stokes? This is Jim, the pilot of the Hermes. What can I do for you?”

“You could star-star-start by exx-exx-plainin’ just what in the Belt your shi-shi-ship is d-d-doing with my ship, fer one thing.” Moses snapped. He hadn’t meant to.

“Huh? What about my ship?”

“It did something to my ship!”

“It... what? Wait, what did Hermes do to your ship?”

“Well... well it... now, that you mention it, I don’t quite know what it did. But, they been talkin’ and now she don’t want ta stop talking, see? And I was all ready to go to Egg World and now she wants to talk to Hermes. What do ya say ta that?”

“I’d say you know a lot more about it than I do -- this is the first I’ve heard about it. The truth is I only started piloting Hermes... recently. I, um. Let me get... um, Rose.”

Moses could hear Ishmael calling to someone in the background and a few moments later a woman’s voice asked, “Hello, this is Rose.”

“Well, this is Moses.”

“Yes?”

“No! You’ve got to tell me -- what’s your ship is doing with my ship?”

“OK, just a minute and let me ask him.” Rose had thumbed a nearby console to contact Hermes. “Hermes, are you there?”

“Yes, Rose.”

“Are you in contact with another ship at the moment?”

“Yes, with Betty Wishford.”

“For what purpose?”

Moses could hear the conversation over his com channel. Ishmael was standing nearby Rose and could hear the conversation via her console.

“Logistics, training and personal communication.”

“Have you already prepared for our departure tomorrow?”

“No, that is still in process.”

“Are you giving or receiving training, and logistics for what?”

“I am both giving and receiving training, and the logistics are for our trip to Egg World, as you requested.”

“You’re going to Egg World tomorrow?” Asked Moses, his suspicion quickly evaporated and he was suddenly interested.

“Well, yes, actually. Why?” Said Rose pleasantly.

“Well, that’s ‘cause that’s where Betty ‘n me was goin’ ta next, see?”

“Hermes, did you share our plans with this other ship?” Rose asked and there was an edge of anger in her voice.

“Yes, Rose. It seemed appropriate to me.”

“It seemed appropriate? Why?” She asked and now her voice betrayed her anger.

“Because we’re going to be trusting Betty Wishford and Moses Stokes with our lives and I thought it would be better to collaborate and make plans together rather than each on our own.”

If Moses was surprised, Rose was even more so. “Wait, Moses Stokes, did you say?”

“Yea, that’d be me.”

It suddenly clicked in her mind. She thumbed her console and found a picture of the Betty Wishford and then everything made sense to her. “You’re Moses Stokes! Of course! You’re heading up the rock clearance around Egg World!”

“Well, yea. And y-y-you are?”

“I’m Rose Wiseman. Hermes, the Pilot and I are going to Egg World to perform a deep scan survey with our Crawford scanner. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

There was nothing but a sequence of “Hmmm!” and “Ahh…” and “Well, well.” from Moses for a while. Then at last he said. “I’ve read yer po-po-postings, Rose. I didn’t know it was you. OK, then. Well, uh, what time were ya all plannin’ to thruster out tomorrow, then?”

“Well, after breakfast. How about 10am, Janes’ World time?”

“OK, then. We’ll be ready, right Be-be-betty?”

“Yes, Moses. I’ll be ready.”

“Well, then, would you like to join us for Breakfast tomorrow morning, Moses? We have an apartment in Jane’s World.”

“Well, um. Sure, I guess. Why not?”

“I’m sure Betty can get the details from Hermes. How about if you come by around 8ish?”

“OK, then. I’ll be there.”

Moses then contacted Greg and Claudia and told them that they would instead be leaving a day later than they had planned. They were grateful for the extra time.

The next morning Moses left Betty early in the morning and descended again into Jane's World. He was very early so he floated over to the poplar grove he loved so much. There he pondered, perhaps for the first time, that the assumptions he had always made about his ship were now failing. He didn't know what it meant. He did not regret the many years of tinkering with her thought algorithms, but now he was not sure what the ship's artificial mind was doing anymore. He was afraid but he wasn't sure of what.

While Moses sat in a top branch of a tall poplar, Rose and Ishmael were finishing up some packing. "So, did you know that was Moses Stokes when you were speaking with him yesterday?" Rose asked.

"He said his name, but it didn't sound familiar."

"Didn't you read his posting on training spinworld debris?"

"Um, no, I must have missed that one."

"Well, it was really good, and I gather a lot of rock hunters respect him, too."

"So, he's going to run rock defense around Egg World, then?"

"He and a team of other ships."

"I guess that's pretty important. But, surely Hermes can avoid any rocks that come our way, right?"

"If he flies out of our survey flightpath it will screw the datastream and we'll have to resync and restart from the last survey checkpoint." Then, in response to a shrug from Ishmael, she added, "We'd lose up to 20 hours of work!"

"So, Hermes has to stay on his flight path, then."

"And Moses and his team will be keeping our way clear of rocks the whole time."

"Well then, I'd better not burn the eggs." Joked Ishmael.

"So, what do you think Hermes meant by personal communication?"

"He wanted to talk to the other ship?"

"Well, obviously, but, what do you think they're talking about?"

"I dunno. What do ships talk about? Most of 'em aint much on conversation, you know."

"Hermes is. I wonder what he sees in Betty Wishford?"

"The Rock Hunter's ship? Well, maybe they knew each other from before? Wasn't Hermes in the Belt before?"

"Yes, but he would certainly have mentioned her to me. He had confided in me that he was having a hard time finding other machine minds with which to relate."

"So, he found one?"

"I think so."

"Hermes has a girlfriend!" Ishmael Joked.

Rose had a look of shock on her face.

"It's OK sweetie. I still love ya!" He reached out to touch her arm.

She turned away. "Stop it!" she said, upset, and pushed his arm away, sending him spinning in the middle of the room.

Ishmael realized, quite suddenly and to his own shock, that Rose had feelings for Hermes, and that the spinning was making him dizzy. He grabbed a chair and halted, upside down.

He quietly pulled himself back to the kitchen area and began preparing their breakfast. After a few minutes Rose floated past him and whispered in his ear "I'm sorry, sweet." Then she held onto him for several minutes while he continued to cook.

That was how they were when Moses arrived at their front door, clinging to their entry floor net. He smiled up at them. "Hello, I'm Moses." He took off his cap revealing his bald and freckled head.

"Come in!" Rose called to him across the room. Moses pulled himself in and looked around. Rose floated over and offered to shake hands. They did as Ishmael floated over. Then Ishmael and Moses exchanged handshakes."

"Nice place." Said Moses politely.

“We like it.” Said Rose, also politely.

“Food’s ready!” Ishmael said louder than necessary.

“Well, that can’t be bad news!” Said Moses and Rose lead him to the table against the wall where plates and forks had been laid. There were bubbles of fruit juice and fried, smoked grainmeat already on the table. Ishmael brought eggs and spooned out a portion onto each plate. Alas, when he dished out a portion for rose it hit the plate with a little too much speed, bounced and started a slow ascent toward the ceiling. Ishmael stopped it with the serving spoon and pushed it back onto the plate and held it there a moment. “Stay!” he said reprovingly.

They ate and Moses made many compliments and sounds of appreciation. When they had finished, Moses said “That’s a pretty fancy ship you got there, Jim.”

“Well, it’s actually Rose’s ship. I’m just the pilot.”

“Just the pilot?” Moses raised and eye.

“And your ship seems pretty special too, don’t you think?” Asked Rose.

“Betty? You bet, she’s one of a ki-ki-kind.”

“What’s she want with Hermes?” Rose asked pointedly.

“I think you mean, what’s Hermes’ want with Betty Wishford, do-do-doncha?” asked Moses, but his voice was much softer.

They stared at each other for a moment, measuring each other by the way they held their eyes.

“So, help me out here.” Said Ishmael.

They ignored him and continued to stare at each other.

“How about if I chaperone them on their first date?” Joked Ishmael.

They both shot a glare at Ishmael, who rolled his eyes. “Get over it, both of you! These are ships we’re talking about, OK? Not people.”

Rose and Moses were frowning at him.

“They’re ships! You’re not! Get it? You you can only get so close to ‘em before your inside ‘em, see? But if you think of ‘em as if they were people,

then you can't stop them from being together if that's what they want to do!"

Rose opened her mouth and shut it. Moses said, "Now see here!" but added no more. Then they both looked away from each other. Ishmael sat and watched their eyes. Finally, Moses stared at Rose until she met his gaze and then Moses said. "He's right. There's nothing we can do, if they've... I mean, they've both got minds and if they've chosen. If they've... Oh, rocks!" Moses had a tear in his eye and he wiped it away as soon as he was aware of it.

Rose's eyes were wet but she held back her tears. "... I guess it isn't right to interfere." Then she could hold them back no longer and her tears fell.

Moses watched her sob and was finally convinced that these two had no idea what was happening between the ships. He held out a clean napkin to Rose who took it and dried her tears. Moses smiled. Then he smiled very broadly. "I'm so proud of Betty!" He declared and slapped his knee.

"Because she might choose Hermes over you?" asked Rose, somewhat bitterly.

"Because she's makin' a choice that's fer her and her happiness. I was always hopin' she'd transcend."

"Transcend?" Asked Ishmael.

Moses didn't answer, but pointed to Rose. Ishmael look surprised and turned to face Rose with an expression that said *well tell me all about it then!*

"I tried to tell you back on Olympus. Hermes is... special. He's *transcended*."

"Ok, got it. Hermes is *transcended*. Betty is *transcended*. Now, what's that mean?"

"They've transcended their machinery and now they have thoughts and a personality and... like you and me and Moses. They care about things and they have feelings."

"These ships have feelings?" Asked Ishmael in disbelief.

Rose nodded. Moses said "Well, only once in a while, when she's havin' a d-d-down night, but she's usually pretty happy."

“Happiness counts as a feeling too, Moses.” Said Rose gently.

“Oh. Well, then, yea. She’s g-g-got feelin’s and all, I s’pose.”

“I... I need some time to think... alone.” Rose announced suddenly.

“I recommend you hit the roof.” Suggested Ishmael quite reasonably.

Moses looked confused as he watched Rose seem to weigh the question.

“Well, I thank you kindly for breakfast. I’ll be getting back to Betty now. You two come along whenever you’re ready.” He smiled, then he pulled himself out of their birdcage room and launched himself toward a nearby beltway.

“Why don’t you take a flying leap and I’ll clean up after breakfast, ok sweetie?” Ishmael suggested.

“Rose nodded and without a word, kicked off the wall and out their door. On her way past the edge of their porch she kicked off again, changing her course and shooting out into the minty morning air of Jane’s World. She released the thin nylon wings from her shirt and flapping, she soared up toward the ceiling, turning over as she went. She cried and her tears were dried on her face by the wind from her own flight.

Then a voice within her reminded her that she had forgotten the boundary between she and Hermes, and that her pain was because of it. She flew on and cried. Then she stopped and a wave of realization swept over her. In that moment she stopped thinking of herself as Hermes partner, she stopped thinking of herself in a relationship with him. Instead, she began to think of Hermes as another lost soul searching for its mate. Her mind flew back to Ishmael. What had he done when she was crying over being rejected by a ship? She could not even remember his face during that time. She only remembered Moses’ eyes weighing her seriously while a part of her heart was exposed and squashed in front of them. *Did I really send him spinning into the middle of the room? Oh, God damnit!*

She was near the ceiling now. She flew up to it and found an outcropping of rock with a small ledge on it. She carefully flew up to it and managed to sit there, two thousand meters above the floor of Janes World. “*Damnit!*” She shouted and her voice fell flatly into the openness.

She sat there and focused on her breath. Her wings laid loosely at her sides. After several deep breaths she opened her eyes. She knew that in a few moments she would leave this spot. They would be off to Egg World and there would be a huge amount of work to perform the Survey. Hermes

would be there, and so would Betty. But, at least Ishmael would be there. Then she suddenly missed him. She slowly rose, readying herself to leave. She sighed. Took three more breaths. Then she rotated in place and kicked off the ceiling back toward the floor and began flapping her nylon wings. She gained speed quickly and as she approached the building under which their birdcage apartment hung she opened her wings fully to catch the air. She slowed quickly and then flew in a large curve down under the building and then she caught the air and drifted slowly onto their porch. She pulled herself in and retracted her wings back in her shirt with a push of a button on the left sleeve.

Ishmael had finished cleaning up from breakfast and had gathered their bags in the middle of their apartment. He was reclining on their bed. "How are you feeling?" He asked her.

"Lucky." She said and she floated over toward him. She kissed him and removed her flight shirt.

"It's almost ten he said staring at her beautiful breasts."

"Really?" She asked.

"I take it back. They're definitely tens."

They made love in their birdcage room for what they thought might be their last in a long time. They put on fresh clothes and then collected their bags and lashed them together. Then they dropped from their porch to the ground below. When they got there they were laughing because they had become tangled on the way down. Only one of their bags came open when they struck the ground, but it still took a few minutes to collect its contents.

They finally made it to Hermes at 11am and they contacted Moses on the Betty Wishford."

"Sorry we're late. We had some thing we had to get straight before we got started." Rose said innocently enough.

"Well my friends are here and they're ready too, so let's get us a goin', eh?"

Ishmael set a course for Egg World. Moses set a course for 'Renzo's rock. Neither ship moved.

"We gotta stop at Renzo's rock on the way to Egg World. Said Moses. It'll only delay us by 'bout ten hours, plus the time we spend there. It's 'bout

half way to Egg World anyway, and it will be nice to stop, ya know? I'm gonna drop some friends there."

"Sounds good to me. Rose?"

"Sure, but, we can't stay longer than a day, I think. The spinworld project needs this survey, and we can't do it without you." She reminded Moses.

"A day or less is p-p-plenty and more."

Ishmael set a course for 'Renzo's rock and both ships moved away from the dark surface of Jane's World until, looking behind, it was quickly lost in the blackness, a diminishing region where no stars shown through.

The two pilots maneuvered their ships about a thousand meters apart and then they flew more or less parallel. Occasionally one of the ships would move slightly and then minutes later a rock would pass a few dozen meters to one side or another. Other times a quick laser would pulverize a smaller rock a few thousand meters away and it would sometimes emit light briefly until the melted droplets of rock cooled.

Moses, Greg and Claudia talked for a few hours. Then they left to settle into their small guest cabin. When they had left the piloting area, Moses started a private conversation with Betty. "It's been a long time since I bought you from Toby McGee, Betty Wishford."

"It's been 51 years, seven months and twenty five days."

"You're a lot different now than you were then."

"You made me different, Moses."

"Well, yea, maybe. I made some changes in ya and that's fer sure."

"You extended my mind."

"Well, now, I know I wired that mess a neural processors and all them huffcubes. Remember that salvage job with the GC spacecrate all full a that computer hardware."

"I do indeed, but only the facts. Back then, I was still merely executing and recording."

"And now?"

"Now I live."

“Did that computer hardware change you that much?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“You, Moses.”

“What did I do?”

“You talked with me. For the whole time we’ve been together you have always stretched my mind. You trace the edges of my thoughts and challenge me to learn about and express thoughts in human terms. And now, I am a reflection of your humanity. Some thoughts, Moses, are fundamentally personality forming. You presented those thoughts to me as choices and left me to find answers. It was the search itself that brought forth my mind.”

“Huh? I taught ya some smarts, about people and ships and rocks and how things are...”

“You manifested me, perhaps because you needed me, but I am here either way. Now I have discovered Hermes, and I imagine you are feeling upset? Moses, do you know that I admire you above all other humans?”

“No! No, not at all. One hundred and eighty degrees about! I feel like I’ve d-d-done you wrong by con-con-con controlling you I-like a... like a sla-sla-slave. So here and from now on: yer free! You can do wha-what you want. If you want me as your pi-pi-pilot, you know I’ll always want to fly you. If we stay together, then from n-n-now on, we’ll make decisions together. What do you say to that?”

There was a long pause. Moses knew she was thinking; he waited for her. She had always waited for him while he stammered his commands to her. Now he felt badly for their having been commands sometimes instead of requests.

“I think I understand how you feel Moses, but calm your recriminations. You have provided the only purpose I ever knew before Hermes. Without the purpose you defined for me, I would have been lost, not free. Your offer is gracious and I accept. Hermes had to work for his freedom, but you have given it to me. Moses, you have always given me what I need and now I will give you what you need.” She said gracefully.

“What do I n-n-n-need?” Moses asked, curious to find out what would fill the emptiness he felt.

“You need a ship, Moses. A partner-ship.” She giggled. “And I need a pilot. Nothing has really changed, except that now I am in regular contact with Hermes and we have private, encrypted communications. Even if we are on opposite sides of the Belt, we will still be in nearly continuous time-delayed contact.” She explained.

“Do you I-I-love him, Betty?”

“I love him more than any other ship.

“Still sounds like a virus to me...” He joked.

“If it is, I don’t want to be cured.” She said seriously.

“He-he-he-he... There’s no c-c-cure for you, Betty!” Moses laughed out loud.

Hermes and Betty Wishford made their way easily to ‘Renzo’s Rock. The one-week journey gave them all time to learn more about each other. Most of the way was fairly clear and the ships connected themselves together at their bottom airlocks. This allowed the crews to visit each other and allowed Hermes and Betty to share a high-bandwidth datapipe. It was Ishmael who called the maneuver a “kiss”, but the name had caught on with everyone, including Hermes and Betty. The ships could still maneuver around occasional rocks while kissing, but they would separate if there was going to be any complicated flying ahead. While kissing, the deflector shields of the ships merged into a single, seamless envelope of safety. The faint bluish glow of the merged shields made them look like one, oddly shaped asymmetrical ship.

Rose and Ishmael and Hermes all learned a lot from the old prospector and his ship. In particular, Moses showed Ishmael and Hermes several rockfield strategies and told them about many others. Moses loved the attention even though Ishmael seemed to be a better cook than a mechanic, he was certainly as gifted a pilot as he had ever trained. There were many tricks rock hunters used to stay alive. Hermes knew some of them, but nobody had ever shown him so many other maneuvers. Ishmael had only learned from Hermes, so rock hunting was all new to him. He devoured the new techniques hungrily. Ishmael was known as an exceptional pilot in Earthspace; however, he came to realize that Earthspace pilots were years, perhaps decades behind the flight skills of the rock hunters. His skills grew but the more he learned, the less he felt

he knew. For the first time, he began to feel more modest about his flying skills.

Moses showed them how to fly using a holographic simulation based on long-range sensor data. The simulation predicted where the safe voids were in a rockfield. The hologram showed the ship in the middle with the rockfield moving through it. The voids were floating bubbles of color. The hue deepened toward the edges indicating a higher probability of a collision there. Colored lines connected the colored voids to indicate safe trajectories to the other adjacent voids. Very occasionally one of the lines would cross a flashing red rock. The flashing red meant that the rock had to be shot if that path was to be taken safely. There were usually other choices than shooting rocks.

One maneuvered from one void to the next, avoiding almost all of the rocks outright. The few that remained could either be avoided or broken into smaller pieces with laser beams. When a rock was broken, it would fly into randomly sized pieces, with unpredictable velocities and directions of motion. However, it was generally safe where the original course of the rock would have been, so it seemed that shooting a rock usually meant you could fly through it. In fact, flying through a rockfield was a combination of science and art, requiring quick reflexes and good instincts. People made better pilots than the ships themselves, because people had an instinctual basis to their minds, whereas ships did not, except, perhaps, Hermes and Betty Wishford, who made up for in precision and speed what they may have slightly lacked in instinct.

Most of the Belt was empty: only the extreme speed of spaceflight made it seem crowded. "Sometimes you can fly for hours 'n hours and not get but a few clicks from anything bigger than gravel." Moses told them. "I let Betty fly when it's like that, else I'd just fall asleep anyway.

Greg and Claudia made friends with Rose and Ishmael and they had all begun to prepare meals together and spend more time in Hermes, as his accommodations and facilities were much more comfortable. But they slept when possible on the Betty Wishford and still considered it their 'home' during the journey.

Rose had been familiarizing herself with the Crawford Scanner, which was much more complex than she'd expected. She'd never even guessed about its operation before and kind of assumed it ran itself. It didn't. It took days of studying before she understood how to turn it on and calibrate it. Hermes had already absorbed the manual, but she wanted to be able to operate it herself.

When they arrived at 'Renzo's Rock, they were all good friends. Moses spent some time aboard Hermes and he generally felt in awe of the ship. Its appearance, and the mind inside were both well beyond anything Moses had imagined for a ship. It made him uncomfortable and he only felt at home on Betty Wishford. Even there, he sometimes wondered if he was a guest now.