

Where Gravity Sleeps

9 – Diamonds in the Night

Five days after birth of the neobelt the objects following Heccat arrived in Earthspace. They had ceased to capture much attention from anyone outside of Earthspace. The people in the bubbles and the belt were all too distracted by their own present and future to be bothered with space debris. But the scientists in the four research vessels still in Earthspace were keenly interested. Five days of intensive, nearly sleepless research had convinced them beyond any doubt that the objects contained some form of life. They were dismayed that nobody cared, but that dismay didn't distract them from their work. They accumulated volumes of data and transmitted some of it back to New Eden, but only people familiar with the science behind the data were able to understand it. In fact, their surmise that the objects contained some form of life was not in the transmitted data at all.

The four scientific research ships in Earthspace were the Annabelle, the Nolan, the Olivia and the Linus. They were, the crews believed, the only ships remaining in Earthspace and the only humans alive for many millions of kilometers in any direction.

The followers slowed outside of Earthspace and stopped for a while. The research ships maneuvered to within a thousand kilometers of them. The Annabelle was selected to approach them closer after a brief discussion among the captains. Captain Susan Mercer of the Annabelle expressed caution to her crew before they got underway. "We're a long way from any help, so we have to be very careful. Don't direct any energy toward them more powerful than a scanner without my clear approval. If these really are ships containing creatures, then we don't know anything about them. We don't know what they might perceive as a threat. Remember, our ship has very limited defenses." She looked around at the crew of scientists and believed that each of them would willingly give their life in pursuit of the new knowledge they expected to find. Her mind flashed back to her own combat experience and she felt a moment of camaraderie with her crew for the first time since her commission as captain of the Annabelle. She felt sad too. She swallowed it.

"Ok, lets go." She fired up the main thrusters and began to approach one of the objects that had been following Heccat. Just then a warning alarm sounded at the communications station in the Annabelle. "What's wrong?" she asked the communications expert, Andy Steiner.

"I don't know -- but we're deaf and dumb until I can figure it out." Andy replied.

"OK, lets stop and get it straightened out. Can we get a visual on the other ships so we can see what they're doing?" asked Susan. The main holodisplay revealed that the other ships had not moved much from their positions either. "Do we at least have ship-to-ship?" She asked. She pulled herself over to the communications station to see for herself what was happening. An array of red and orange lights flashed silently.

After several minutes Andy finished a set of diagnostics. "The main communications processor is completely dead. I don't know why, but it's like it isn't even there. I'll have to open it up to see what's happened." He said, annoyed. "These things are supposed to be ultra-reliable. I just don't understand it..." He muttered as he pulled himself over toward an access panel and prepared to climb into the superstructure of the ship.

"I know you'll figure it out, Andy. In the mean time lets move closer to one of the other ships. We can signal them with a portable PTP transmitter and tell them what happened to us." The PTP was a short-range, point-to-point, line-of-sight transceiver that was typically used in environments where normal datastreams were impractical, such as inside some ferrous asteroids where there were high levels of electromagnetic interference. They were one step away from using hand signals and written notes and a few billion steps from the nearest repair facility.

Susan maneuvered her ship over toward the nearest other ship, the Olivia. She was surprised when the Olivia also moved toward the Annabelle. When they were facing each other Susan grabbed the transmitter and floated up to the main observation window. She could see inside the other ship. Someone was also looking out at her ship and that they too carried a similar portable transmitter. She pointed hers at the other. "That's odd." She thought to herself. "How could they know I wanted to communicate with a PTP, unless..."

Susan turned the unit on and hailed the other ship. "Annabelle to Olivia, can you hear me?"

"Olivia to Annabelle, yes, you're coming in clear. Our communications processor is down and we don't know why yet. What is your condition?" The transmitter squawked.

"Our condition is identical. Our transmitter is down too and we are investigating. How could they both have gone down at the same time?" She asked. "It can't be a coincidence."

“You know that’s true! What about the other ships?” The voice asked.

Susan looked at the main holodisplay and saw that the other ships were moving in on their position. “It looks like they’re coming to join us. Stand by -- our com engineer will have more information soon.” Susan said.

The other ships maneuvered into positions so that each could see into all of the other main observation windows. In each window someone floated with a portable transmitter. At first communications between the ships was challenging because each ship could only communicate with one other ship at a time. After some fumbling they developed a simple protocol to coordinate their group conversation. Susan was stunned to find that all the communications processors on all the ships had failed completely at the same time.

Then Andy pulled himself out of the access port. His white clothing was covered in black soot and he coughed as he emerged. “It’s gone -- it’s all gone.” He coughed some more and hung awkwardly upside down catching his breath.

Susan turned to look at him. “What, the com processor? What happened to it?” She asked.

“If I had to guess I’d say it was a thermal bomb. We’re probably lucky we didn’t burn up with it. Whatever it was, the com processor is completely destroyed. Uh... I can probably hook up the pod transmitter to our ship’s com net and we can use it for short range communications, but there is no way to send any signals strong enough to reach back to the bubbles.

It was the same story on the other ships. The communications processors had all been destroyed at almost exactly the same moment. “It was obviously coordinated... it had to have been set up before we left. But why?” What motive could there possibly be? Why not just destroy our ships? Unless, there was something on board that they still wanted...” Susan looked around as people worked urgently.

Two hours passed and the crews on each of the ships had managed to improvise short-range transmitters so they could communicate with each other. The captains tried to fathom what happened and decide what to do next.

After much discussion it was agreed that one ship would return to the now distant bubbles to get help and the rest would remain to observe the followers and continue monitoring the evolving neobelt. The research ship Linus set course for the bubbles and departed. It would arrive at New

Eden in about 11 days, which was 16 days after Heccat destroyed Earth. The remaining three ships moved away as a group to a position ten thousand kilometers from the cluster of followers. There they waited and with a wide variety of methods the crews watched the strange, new space around them and the intriguing alien objects, wondering what, or who, they might be.

Another hour passed during which the captains of the research vessels discussed contingency plans and tactical issues. It quickly became clear that Susan had by far the most strategic and tactical experience and that the other captains were willing to follow her.

Then suddenly the followers began to emit a massive diversity of microwaves. The crews watched as all at once the objects began to disintegrate. The scales on the outside began to flake off, revealing a layer below. Layer after layer separated from the objects until there was a cloud surrounding each one. Within the space of thirty minutes the objects were gone and only the clouds of flakes remained.

“I wonder what destroyed them?” Susan wondered. Her crew and the crews of the other ships used high bandwidth, short range dynamic frequency transceivers to share their research data.

They all noticed that the clouds were dispersing and moving toward the chaotic, infant rockfield of Earthspace. Captain Jim Richardson of the Bartlett asked whether they should follow and Susan decided that only one ship should follow. Captain Richardson volunteered.

Jim Richardson was originally a diplomat on Earth before he fell in love with spaceflight. He had learned to be a pilot very quickly and his interpersonal skills had facilitated his speedy rise to become Captain of the Bartlett. He was used to using his personality to solve problems. He felt confident as he moved the Bartlett toward the neobelt. He watched the ship's main holodisplay as it presented a model of the nearest edge of the rockfield. The individual flakes were shown as tiny red dots among the blue dots which were Earthspace matter. The red dots seemed to spread evenly among the neoasteroids and assorted debris in Earthspace. They moved purposefully, as if they were searching.

Jim moved the Bartlett cautiously closer — finally to within 100 meters of one of the flakes. The rest of the crews watched low-resolution versions on their own holodisplay displays. There was not enough information bandwidth in their improvised radio network for a better image.

“I can see one of them moving toward a fragment of Earth's crust. I can make out some features on the surface. I think those are splintered trees

and some other plants. They look like they were frozen while they were still on fire. There's some chunks of... of ice, I think, floating around there too. It seems to be offgassing. There's a lot of rock debris. One of the flakes is settling in on that chunk of ice there...."

One of his crew broke in. "It's changing -- the flake. It's generating some thermal energy and its EM reflectivity is increasing. Now it's... It's emitting some microwaves."

Then Jim continued. "It's moving off the ice chunk now, back toward the crust fragment." He maneuvered his ship in closer so he could maintain direct visual observation. "It's moving toward the fragment. Oh, there's a rock on a collision course with it. I wonder... My god, it moved the rock from a distance! That rock has five hundred times the mass of the flake and it moved it without any deflection of its own course! Is that even possible? It's almost there now... Now it's settling in next to the fragment. It's moving right on the fragment. It's found the tree."

Again, a crewperson broke in. "It just emitted a complex burst of microwaves. It seems to be attacking the tree somehow. The tree is disintegrating inside of some kind of field."

Another crewperson broke in, "I think I've figured out how it moves. Somehow it creates gravity and antigravity and it uses the mass around it to pull and push against. But I can't determine its energy source. Also, no, this can't be right. It seems to have a net negative magnetic field."

The air was dead for a moment. "Check that, is your scanner OK?" Jim asked.

The crewperson replied, "Either my scanner's busted or It's... It's a monopole. That would make it about a hundred trillion times more powerful than the largest stable monopole ever observed. I... I'm cross checking now with the electrostatic scanner. My god. It is a monopole!"

The other research vessels confirmed on their own that the flakes were indeed powerful monopoles. Susan broke in. "Jim, has it noticed your ship? Do you perceive any danger?"

"No to both. We'll keep watching from here." He answered. He maneuvered the Bartlett still closer to get a better view. Now his ship was only two dozen meters from the flake as it seemed to consume the remains of the tree. He had to fly carefully to match the slow lumbering roll of the crust fragment. Suddenly, the flake flew off the tree and directly toward the Bartlett.

“It’s coming at us!” Jim barked. Susan gripped the arms of her chair. The crew of the Bartlett exploded into a frenzy of activity. The flake came within range of the navigational deflector field and it flickered blue at the point of contact. The flake halted and again emitted a flash of complex microwaves. Then it began moving around the Bartlett, coming briefly into contact with the field at various points.

Jim described it. “It’s kind of like a diamond about a meter across with rounded points. There’s a bulge in the middle. It’s less than half a meter thick. It isn’t really a flake. Oh, what’s that? It’s opening some kind of flap on its back and an appendage is coming out. I’d say its some kind of... sensor, like some kind of strange eye. It’s yellow with a dozen different colored shapes on it. Maybe they’re pupils. It’s pointing it right at us...”

Susan watched from the Annabelle as a hundred other flakes closed in on the position of the Bartlett. “Jim, get out of there right now! You are being surrounded. Get out now!”

“Yea, we’re moving.” He engaged the thrusters but the Bartlett didn’t budge. He moved them to full thrust and it began to slowly move. “The creature’s eye has disappeared back into its body.” He added.

“It’s getting warmer, the flake, or creature, I mean.” Said a flustered crewperson on the Bartlett. Then the ship halted after a few more creatures arrived. Then more arrived and they took positions a few meters outside the navigational deflector field.

“What’s wrong Jim, why are you delaying?” Susan asked urgently.

“We can’t move. The thrusters are on full but we’re not moving. I’m gonna shut them down for now. We don’t seem to be in any danger yet -- we just can’t move. I think...” He said smoothly.

Susan cut him off. “If you can’t move how will you avoid debris in the rockfield? You’re in danger all right but aside from using cutting lasers on them I don’t know what to suggest. What are they doing now?”

“They’re moving around the ship, just outside the deflector field. They don’t seem to like it. It’s keeping them off the ship. We can see them really closely now. Several more have opened their ‘eyes’ to look at us and then moved off. They definitely seem to be alive though. In fact, they seem to be social.”

“How’s that?” Susan asked.

“Well, many of them came in groups and have stayed in those groups. Others seem to explore our shield surface and then form up into groups. The groups exchange microwaves and then either go off together or return to explore our ship together. And, one more thing... There seems to be a few smaller creatures. I think they might be children in this species. Oh, now they all seem to be moving away from the ship. I guess we’re not very interesting.” He laughed a little nervously.

The flakes moved a few hundred meters away and congregated. Just then a large nearly spherical neoasteroid drifted between the Bartlett and the group of creatures. Then it stopped. “Did you see that? They stopped that big rock. Now they’re hiding behind it. I wonder if they’re afraid of us... No, they’re throwing it at us!” He instinctively tried to move the ship out of the way and was surprised to find that the ship responded to his controls. The big rock flew past the little ship at a surprisingly high speed. “That was close. We’re leaving now!” He pegged the thrusters and within seconds they were a few hundred meters away. The creatures pursued. “They’re following us. I’m going to fly away from you so they don’t latch onto you too.” He maneuvered the Bartlett out toward open space, away from Earthspace and the other ships. Half the group of creatures broke off pursuit, but fully fifty continued after the Bartlett. Then the Bartlett began to slow and finally stop.

“They’ve stopped us. They’re dragging us back toward the rocks.” Jim said. “I don’t like this at all...”

“Use your cutting laser on one of them. We need to know if we have a weapon we can use to defend ourselves.” She realized the risk this posed to the crew of the Bartlett and themselves. If they harmed one of the creatures there was no way of knowing what the result might be. As far as Susan was concerned the creatures had already tried to destroy the Bartlett once, so they were already acting in a hostile manner. She hoped it would be effective and frighten the creatures away.

“OK. Here goes.” Jim said. The beam struck a nearby creature and in an instant it became almost completely reflective. The beam scattered in all directions and the creature seemed unharmed. A moment later the Bartlett was wrenched from its position, back toward Earthspace. The sudden change in direction threw the crew against the walls of the ship. The creatures guided the Bartlett directly into the path of an 800-meter diameter rock. “Oh my god...” Said Jim. He tried in vain to maneuver his ship out of the course of the rock. The shields could not possibly defend against a collision with so large a rock. The cutting laser would take several minutes even to cut it in half -- way too long. The Bartlett would surely be crushed in a few moments. Jim dropped the deflector shields.

“Jim, why did you drop your shields?” Susan demanded anxiously as she watched helplessly.

Jim watched the big rock approach and believed he was about to die. “Maybe they are just curious...” Then, a few hundred meters from the ship the rock abruptly slowed and stopped. “Maybe they were just curious and couldn’t get through our shields. Maybe they think its a shell and they want to see what’s inside.” Jim said with some relief.

Now the Bartlett was motionless and a crowd of a couple hundred of the creatures swarmed over it. Every person still in Earthspace was watching and wondering what would happen next. The creatures surrounded the ship and came in contact with the hull. Inside the ship the crew could hear the bumps and scraping on its exterior. For the first time, fear spread among the crew and several of the scientists were noticeably agitated, white knuckles gripping the familiar armrests as much for security as for stability. Some looked frantically about, as if to find some escape. A few were weeping or trying not to.

Susan spoke. “Jim, see if your folks can rig a microwave transmitter. Maybe if you can convince them you are alive they might behave better. Can you mimic their transmissions?” She asked hopefully.

“I’ll get my people on it now.” He replied. Everyone had heard and they were already working on it. “Any other ideas?”

“Yes, get everyone into an environmental suit immediately. In case they breach your hull.” She said.

“OK, will do. But if they breach the hull we can turn on the shields again to save our air.” Then it struck him. “Hey, the creatures are inside the shield now... I wonder what would happen if they were trapped inside with us...” We’ll wait until everyone is in a suit first though.” After a few minutes everyone was in an environmental suit. The microwave transceiver was almost ready. They had modified a scanner to transmit, but it would have a very limited range -- maybe a few kilometers depending on the sensitivity of whatever received their signal. “We’re ready, Susan. Everyone is in an environmental suit. We plan to play some of the discrete microwave transmissions we recorded from individual creature. Should we communicate first or turn on the shields first?”

Susan thought for a moment. Then she said, “Communicate first. If they appear hostile or begin to attack the ship, raise the shields immediately and hope we capture some of them inside.”

“OK, transmitting now.” Jim said. “Well, they noticed that!” Now all the creatures nearby approached the ship with their eyes open. Many had their eyes only slightly open, no more than a slit in their backs. As they approached the ship their pseudopod eyes were fully extended. They seemed to be examining the Bartlett in great detail and there was a flurry of microwaves directed at the ship. “I wonder what we said?” Jim mused. “I think we should first try to convince them that we are intelligent and then maybe we can establish some kind of primitive language we both understand.”

“OK, folks, lets show them we know math. Broadcast groups of pulses — like we’re counting up to ten. Then wait and see if they respond.” He instructed his crew. “No reply. Wait, we’re getting something back. One of the creatures is broadcasting pulses to us. Three groups of three — now a group of four. What does it mean?”

“It means they’re trying to communicate with us instead of kill us, for the moment. I’d say that’s a step forward.” Susan replied. “Broadcast the same pattern back to them.” She suggested.

“Right. Hmm. They are moving off our hull now -- I guess we won’t be trapping any of them with our shields. Anyway, that’s a good gesture on our part. I’m gonna raise our shields so we don’t get killed by rocks.” That brought no reaction from the creatures. “I think they know we’re intelligent. Lets try to learn some words.”

Jim aimed the Bartlett’s cutting laser on a slowly passing ice chunk. Just long enough to boil off some vapor but not long enough to damage it. Then he had the crew broadcast a simple pattern of microwaves. They recorded the pattern as the “word” for ice. The creatures made no response. He flashed another chunk of ice and made the same pattern. This time the creatures echoed the pattern. Then he flashed a passing rock and broadcast a different pattern. To his surprise, the creatures captured the rock and brought it in front of the ship. Then they broadcast the same microwave word for “rock” that the Bartlett had broadcast. “So far so good.” Jim said. “Are you following all this Susan? I’m going to try some new words now.”

Jim flashed more nearby objects and gave them names in the same manner. The names were nothing more than frequency patterns, which the crew arbitrarily chose and then consistently used.

Then one of the creatures approached the ship closely, hovering right in front. It then changed its appearance by emitting a range of colors from blue to violet for a few seconds. Then it broadcast a complex but brief burst of microwaves. “I think it just introduced itself to us. I’m going to do

the same.” He pulsed the ship’s shields on and off a few times in rapid succession, and then broadcast a sequence of microwaves patterned after base ten prime numbers. “I think I just introduced us to them.”

Then the creature pulled a ten-centimeter rock from its course and brought it right in front of the Bartlett. The creature spun the rock and broadcast a pattern. Then it stopped the rock from spinning and broadcast another pattern. Over the next couple of hours thirty-two different objects were dragged in front of the Bartlett and given names by the creatures. Jim flashed each object and repeated the microwave name the creatures had given it.

After a while Jim said, “We’re doing pretty good with nouns it seems. I’m going to try to learn some verbs.” It was harder, but after a few more hours they had established common words for movement, pushing, striking, breaking and eating. The latter was the most startling. One creature arrived pulling a frozen, torn, fragment of a fin, possibly from a shark or porpoise, and a branch from some kind of plant now stripped of all bark and foliage. It positioned them in front of the Bartlett. The Bartlett flashed each and gave them names. The creature echoed the same name for each. Then the creature showed its underside to the Bartlett, and the stunned crew watched as the fin was reduced to a gas and absorbed by the creature. Then the creature broadcast a simple pattern. Then it pushed the branch toward the Bartlett.

“It ate that fin, I think. Maybe it wants us to eat the branch.” Jim speculated. The research vessels had ports for collecting samples. The ship could create a gap in the deflector shield so that samples could be collected through the port using a small gravity beam. They drew the branch inside the ship. Then the Bartlett broadcast the same signal the creature had when it had eaten the fin. On a whim, Jim rolled the ship through 360 degrees. It confirmed that the creatures were no longer freezing the ship in position and it also showed that “eating” the branch had had an “effect” on the ship.

The creature moved away from the Bartlett, back toward the growing crowd of flakes that was hovering half a kilometer away. There was an intense flurry of microwave activity within the crowd that lasted for half an hour. During that time the crowd became a cloud, as thousands more of the creatures arrived. Many of them were dragging bits of biological matter with them, or chunks of ice or soil. It was still only a small fraction of the total number of the creatures in Earthspace.

Jim and the other captains conferred during the time that the creatures were gathering. They all agreed that the remaining ships should still not become involved yet, since it wasn’t clear that the Bartlett would be

allowed to leave. However, the mood of the Bartlett's crew had lightened and they returned to the comfort of their science. The creatures were given a name: diamond eyes, based on their shape and their only distinguishing physiological feature. People soon just called them diamonds.

Jim and his crew watched as the diamonds dragged forth a 50-meter diameter, mostly spherical rock. They positioned it about 1500 meters away from the Bartlett and set it spinning slowly on its vertical axis, like small planet. Then they collected another mostly spherical rock about 35 meters in diameter and positioned it a few kilometers away. Several dozen of the diamonds formed up into a small, solid, football-shaped object like they had originally done when they were following Heccat. Then two more groups of diamonds formed up similarly and the three combined objects hovered behind the smaller rock. Suddenly the small rock shot forward with great speed directly at the larger rock and they followed behind, somewhat slower. The smaller rock picked up speed very quickly and then slammed into the larger rock. Both were pulverized by the impact. A few moments later the three grouped diamonds arrived and broke up into individual creatures again. They quickly corralled some of the debris from the larger rock and pretended to eat the debris while broadcasting the microwave word for "eat".

Jim understood exactly what they had meant. He flashed the cutting laser into the debris field and broadcast the microwave name he had given the Bartlett. He repeated the name focusing the beam on a different piece of debris each time. The diamonds didn't seem to understand. Then Jim flashed the laser across an exposed portion of the Bartlett's hull and broadcast the name again. Again he flashed more debris and broadcast the name. Then he flashed the hull again. Then he started flashing the laser onto one after another of the nearby rocks and debris of Earth. A scrap of twisted metal, probably from a building, came floating by and he flashed that and broadcast the name. The creatures tried to name the objects he flashed. He echoed the microwave names they broadcast, but he would always finish by broadcasting the name of his own kind. "I wonder if they understand that we came from what was Earth. I think that these creatures threw Heccat at the Earth so they could eat its remains." He said sadly.

"What are they doing now?" Susan asked.

"Nothing. They're just sitting out there gabbing it seems."

"Jim, I'd like to have a word with you... in private. Are your quarters secure?"

“Sure, I’ll contact you on an encrypted channel in a minute.” Moments later Jim left the main deck and made his way to his cabin. He closed the door and engaged a blanking field before turning on his console. He contacted Susan. “Is your end secure?” He asked. He munched a couple of muscle maintenance tablets. Everyone who lived and worked in space had to take them to prevent muscle and bone loss due to weightlessness. They tasted salty and vaguely sweet.

“Yea, it’s secure. Jim, I want you to know that I’m really proud of the way you have handled the situation so far — really first class work. I don’t have to tell you that what you’ve done here matters. We’ve all asked a lot from you and your crew and I realize I’m in no real position to give orders to you or any of the other captains. But I want to ask you to help us all some more.”

“Well, what did you have in mind?”

“Jim, do you really believe these things destroyed the Earth so they could... eat it?” She asked point blank.

“Well, it seems like it to me.”

“How does that make you feel?” She asked.

“Pardon me?”

“How does it make you feel? Don’t you feel anything now that you know these creatures have destroyed the Earth?”

“I think we need to see it in perspective. They meant no harm, they were probably hungry and saw our planet as food. They don’t seem malicious.”

“All the same, I’d like to know how to defend ourselves in case we have to. See, we’re the only ships out here, and we don’t want to lead the diamonds back to the bubbles or even into the belt yet, until... Look, we need to learn as much as we can before we risk... We need to know how to defend ourselves. We need to develop a weapon that will work against them. Now I’m thinking...”

“Hold on a moment there. You want me to find a weapon to use against them?”

“Yes.”

“No.” He said emphatically. “I won’t help you start a war!”

“I’m not starting a war; they started it! I’m sorry, Jim, but I can’t appreciate their innocence the way you seem to. Billions of people died for their “meal”, including all of my family! Humans may well become extinct for their meal!” She said angrily.

“Look, maybe they never encountered intelligent life before.” Jim replied. “Maybe they never imagined that sentient beings might be on the planets they eat. I think it’s important here that we...”

“So what? It doesn’t make any difference. The Earth is still dead. Are we going to let them get away with that? They seem to eat biological matter, so they must have some understanding of life. I’m sure they’ve never met anyone like us before though...” There was pride and vengeance in her voice.

“Susan, I don’t think we should personalize what they did to Earth. We don’t want to...”

“They killed everything on the planet! How much more personal could they get?” She practically screamed. “How can you defend them like this! How can you...”

“Hey, Ms. Carnivore, we kill things and eat them, remember? It’s natural, OK? Sure, the eatee doesn’t like it, but it isn’t a personal conflict over ideology or prejudice or profit. Now listen, this is important. Because of that...”

“Don’t you lecture me on ideology! I’ve fought in dozens of corporate wars. The corps manufacture whatever ideology suits their needs that day.”

“I’m not lecturing you on ideology, I’m saying this situation is devoid...”

“How can you...”

“Will you shut up for a minute and let me finish what I’m saying, damnit!” He shouted back. “Now listen, what you do here matters. There isn’t a personal conflict with the diamonds yet. Because of that, we win if we convince them not to eat us. We don’t need weapons to achieve that. Once we introduce weapons and hatred... then we create a war.”

Susan started as calmly as she could. “How can you just rationalize some kind of peace after your species has been all but exterminated by these things! We should go to war with these monsters! We should destroy every one of them! You... you’re a coward. Your service is no longer required. I’ll take over contact with the creatures from here on.” She said dismissively.

“You’re not in any position to relieve me of duty, Susan. I think we need to come to some agreement on how to proceed here.”

“Look, I don’t care what you do, Jim. You’re irrelevant now that you aren’t willing to help.”

“Hey! I am helping! I’m helping to prevent a war we can’t afford to wage!” He said angrily.

“I don’t listen to cowards. Mercer out.” She ended the communication abruptly.

The remaining research vessels were positioned over fifty kilometers away, just at the edge of the range of their makeshift transceivers. Their crews had been following the activities of the diamonds very carefully, recording the new vocabulary as it developed. They didn’t have as clear a view of the events as those on the Bartlett, but Jim had filled them in on the details.

Jim returned to the bridge and sat there a moment, annoyed and distressed. He set a course toward the sun and began to move the ship slowly away. At first only a couple of the diamonds followed, but then hundreds more joined them. Jim felt no interference while flying. “They seem to be following me, but they aren’t stopping me.” He broadcast to the other ships. No more of the diamonds approached but those following continued after the ship. After a few minutes, about half broke off the pursuit and returned toward Earthspace. Every few minutes, another small group or an individual would break off pursuit and fly back. He set a course to fall into a Mercury-level orbit and then he retired to his cabin.

He was deeply upset by his conversation with Susan. In his system of values, there was no greater evil than to feign negotiating a peace as a prelude to war. After a few hours, and a narcotic, he fell into a restless sleep.

He dreamed of the stars, as if his ship evaporated leaving him floating. He saw millions of stars. They all seemed to be falling toward him and as they got bigger he could see that they were eyes. Then he realized that they were diamond eyes, all rushing toward him. But he didn’t feel afraid. They got so close they formed a sphere around him. He stared out into a sky that stared back at him. He was naked, and he turned around as if space were a pool, with water against which to push.

Then the eyes formed up into one huge, unblinking eye. Then he dreamed that the eye was part of a female face, but he couldn’t recognize it. Then

he could see that the face was part of a body whose arm was extended, palm upward.

Just then his dream turned into a nightmare when a faceless soldier in an assault suit approached her from behind. Jim tried to warn her but he couldn't speak and he couldn't move. He struggled to speak and in his dream he heard his own fitful grunts instead of his voice. At the last moment the woman turned around and put up her hands to ward off the attack. Then his perspective changed and he was looking out through the woman's eyes, at the lunging soldier.

Then he awoke, sweating and panting. He looked around his cabin to regain some calm. Then he prayed to God and asked that he not be made an instrument of evil, but inside he knew that he alone had the power to control his own actions. He felt trapped between the inevitable anger of an injured human race and the diamond eyes. He feared he'd be squashed between them until he was impossibly thin. He knew that many people would feel the way Susan did. He wondered if there was any way to stop it. "If I can get back to the Belt and introduce the existence of the diamonds appropriately, maybe I can stem the reactionary flood... maybe." He thought to himself.

He used his console to observe the space behind the ship. There were still a dozen diamonds following the Bartlett. He decided not return to the belt until they had given up the chase. He would try to wait them out.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of a sleek, black space cruiser somewhere nearby in Earthspace a captain was awakened by an urgent sounding voice. "Captain, one of the ships has broken off from the rest -- heading toward the sun at the moment. Shall we pursue it?"

"No, but track it. Send a message to Cosmo. Advise him of the situation and ask for his instructions." He replied wearily, fighting off the thick, weightless sleep.

He fell back to sleep. When he awoke a message was waiting for him. He listened to the crackling voice. "Well, I'm surprised that they split up. Listen, I want you to make sure they don't make it back to the bubbles. Keep them in Earthspace, clear? I don't care if they go elsewhere, just not back here. The Linus was a big mistake. Don't let me down again. Clear?"

Clear, he thought to himself. "Follow them," he said to his pilot over the intercom, then he went back to sleep.

People in the bubbles were fascinated with the Belt, its people, its culture, and its spinworld. But almost everyone was confused or uncomfortable about the idea of life without money. In particular, there were people who had always gotten what they needed using money. For many people money was a way of life and the source of their freedom and power. Money was their tool and without it they felt helpless or angry.

There were still plenty of people in control of resources who were trying to figure out how to retain that control and make their lives better too. It wasn't necessarily just simple greed. Some people genuinely believed that there should be strata in society — so that people would have something to strive for. It naturally followed that if there were such strata, then someone had to be better off and why not them.

Some important conditions had changed though in this new age of diaspora. Energy was practically free now and it meant that processes and products that used to be thought of as rare or expensive were not any longer. Suddenly there was a manufacturing capacity which completely overwhelmed any conceivable demand now that the Earth and its billions of consumers were gone. Now everyone knew there were issues of basic survival at hand which required broad cooperation, such as the production and distribution of food and other supplies and of course the production of the spinworld. There was also convenient, free, uncensored, equally accessible mass communication. The vast majority of the population, all the refugees from Earth, had practically no possessions or any role yet in society. And last but not least: now people realized that their species would not survive unless they cooperated. Now they had left their mother Earth and the space they did not directly control was lethal.

It was a confusing time where the very fabric of society was being questioned in the midst of a struggle for survival. How could a system of requests and fulfillments replace something as fundamental as money? Would people still work? What would be the motivation? What would stop someone from requesting one of everything? Questions like these were the topics of conversation in all the bubbles as people tried to understand the plans in the Belt.

There were people in the bubbles who believed that money was freedom because it permitted anonymous transactions; however, others argued that anonymous transactions were only needed when there were laws or artificial morals which either criminalized some transactions or discriminated against people participating in them. If there were no illegal transactions then people wouldn't require the anonymity of money to protect themselves. Conversations on topics like these cropped up anywhere and everywhere in the bubbles. One distinction was abundantly

clear: people with no money liked the idea a lot more than people who already had a lot of money.

It was a confusing time. The wealthy and powerful re-engaged their propaganda campaign against the belties, but it only made people more interested in the Belt economy model. The knee-jerk propaganda wasn't subtle enough, or maybe people just saw it for the callous power-play that it was. It backfired and many people were enraged by it.

Yet not everybody was moved positively by the times. Along with the grateful living from Earth and the moon, there came people still hungry for money and power. Rose had come to the Belt with that kind of ambition, but she had adapted to the plight of Earthspace and the Belt and she had put her ambition to a more constructive use. Not everyone was as willing to adapt.

Luna Linda wasn't a Floyd bubble. It was essentially fifty levels of nearly identical living quarters with occasional commercial and very occasional recreational areas. It was made of titanium girders and plates, frequently joined at right angles. It's main section rotated like a Floyd bubble, but it had no large windows and no mirror wings. A hubmouth on one end separated the rotating main section from the Luna Linda spaceport.

The apartments in Luna Linda were all about four meters by five meters with an enclosed toilet and shower room. The nondescript furnishings in the rooms had faded into various shades of gray and brown, punctuated by the stains left by a long string working-class dormers. Each room also had a desk with a console equipped with virtual workgloves, a kitchen, a bed, and some drawers in the wall. The workgloves allowed many workers to do some (or all) of their job from their rooms.

The more interesting and desirable apartments had ductwork or structural members running at practically any angle and through any wall, the floor or ceiling. It afforded the occupant a chance to do something unique with the room. Since the walls were titanium it wasn't possible to pin a poster to the wall. So the walls were usually covered with tape marks and spots where adhesive residues had collected dust over the years. All the rooms with anything distinguishing at all had been given names long ago. All the rest were simply referred to by level and room number.

Rooms were sometimes used for unofficial business too, as well as gambling, prostitution, drugshops, and fights. Luna Linda had been the living quarters for the workers when Earthspace was being actively developed. In its time almost any form of pleasure or pain could be found on Luna Linda. However, the pace of development slowed after the fourth

bubble had been created and the demand for rooms on Luna Linda plummeted. The operating corporation lost money and Luna Linda changed ownership every few years after that. Maintenance went undone and the station suffered. The outer layers had been abandoned for many years until the space was suddenly needed for the refugees from Earth. Now Luna Linda was packed and practically every room was in use. A few rooms went unassigned though, either because they had been deemed unsafe or uninhabitable, or because over the years they had been yanked.

Once a room had been yanked the station operators lost track of it -- it ceased to exist as far as they knew. There were hundreds of legitimately yanked rooms in Luna Linda. They were yanked because they really didn't exist. The space for those rooms was instead occupied by the superstructure of Luna Linda, by transportation or material conduits, or larger chambers, etc. The rooms were numbered based on their position within the station, so there were plenty of unpredictable gaps in the numbering sequence of rooms. For enough money or the right influence a real room could be yanked and these rare, untracked rooms were put to very creative and often blatantly illegal uses.

In a yanked room known as the Downpipe a group of ex-moonies sat around a an empty cable spool playing cards and drinking yuvutz, a synthetic alcohol similar to vodka. The Downpipe was dark, seeming to match the spirit of the characters it attracted.

"Can't play no cards without no money. Them belties must be craaaaazy ta think they can live without it. They'll just go broke and come a'whinin' ta us just like the committee says." Bud Pressley chewed on an unlit cigar and scowled at the pot in the middle of the table.

"Well, if they do not want their money, then they can give it to me!" said Zhou Huang.

"What if there ain't enough a sumpin' to go around? Maybe we could brawl over who gets what." Dougie Anderson said hopefully and smiled. He was over 240 pounds Earthweight and seldom lost a fight.

"What if I want more than my share, or what if what I wants ain't legal?" said Eddy Barr.

"What's illegal mean if there ain't no government makin' laws?" Bud asked, displaying a rare feat of comprehension.

The room was quiet for a moment as they thought about life without laws. Then Zhou added, "Yea, but if you can't get money out of it, what's the point of breakin' the law anyway? If there's no profit, then why bother?"

“Not everythin’ illegal makes money.” Dougie replied. “Some of it’s just fun.” He cracked his knuckles and smiled.

“It ain’t gonna happen. Ain’t no way people can live without money. It’s just a matter of time before they come ‘round ta realizin’ it.” Bud was beginning to take the conversation more seriously. He didn’t understand why, but the notion of eliminating money threatened him like nothing else ever had.

“Yea, well, they’re Belties, what do they know, eh? They’ve been out in the cold so long they don’t know what hot is anymore.” Eddy added.

“Nothin’! They don’t know nothin’ at all!” Bud said loudly. “And I’ll tell you what else, if they try to take my money, they’ll be sorry they tried it, for sure.” He stood up and put his hands on his hips. When nobody stood up to meet his challenge he sat back down and chewed on his cigar and snorted and blinked too frequently for anyone’s comfort.

They continued their game in the Downpipe on Luna Linda. Elsewhere, on Floyd and Stars View, the same kind of conversation was taking place among small groups of the elite. The words they used were different, but the sentiments and degree of understanding were the same. The threat they felt was the same. They simply used more syllables when they spoke.

The bubbles and the now more distant Earthspace factory ships continued their journey. Christopher Floyd became ill about two weeks from the end. He had a progressive and degenerative heart condition and he was weak and short of breath. The medical facilities in the bubbles were among the most advanced that ever existed in human history and offered extraordinary care despite being overwhelmed by the sheer number of people now depending upon them. His doctors decided against surgery for the time being and they suggested he live in a floatland for a while to reduce his exertion. He declined, but he could do little more than stay in bed and rest. He used the time to find out more about the spinworld and the Belt. However, he was always so tired that he could only read for half an hour at a time between naps.

Meanwhile, more and more people in the Belt were learning about the bubbles and the people there. Almost everyone in the Belt knew Athena’s name and face by now. She was already a celebrity of sorts. The belties learned about each of the bubbles and admired their diversity. Belties had a hard time comprehending that New Atlantis was actually filled with water. People who worked at a factory that used water in manufacturing or synthesis saw plenty of water, but water was scarce to everyone else in the Belt. Most belties hadn’t seen any more water at one time than they

needed to bathe themselves since they left Earth. The alluring thought of recreational swimming sprang into the mind of anyone who had ever done it before. Some people had no concept that such a thing could even exist!

The artists in Jane's World were eager to see Stars View, meet the artists there, and exchange works. Jane's World's artists were a very close, connected group of individuals. They had always felt alone and isolated — since long before Heccat was discovered. Jane's world appealed to them precisely because it was so far out of the influence of Earth and its aged, conservative art society. Their art benefited from the freedom and the low massgravity; however, many shared darker feelings of alienation and loneliness too.

The prospect of Stars View's arrival shook the Jane's World artists from their feelings of isolation. They felt an immediate connection to the artists there and artists sent some of the most intimate, poignant pages welcoming either the bubbles or the belties to other artists. Artists in both places cared little about the BAG. All that mattered was art and their fellow artists — soon there was going to be more of both in the Belt.

The more belties learned about the bubbles, the more they began to appreciate the potential of their own spinworld. There were people in the Belt who had never been on a planet before in their entire lives. For them, Jane's World had been the ultimate. The bubbles seemed fantastic beyond belief to them. So was the spinworld, but relatively few belties had seen it yet. Other belties had come from Earth as little as two years earlier; nevertheless, even they looked forward to visiting the bubbles to feel again the openness and light that they dearly missed.

And then, as if it were the purse string for the fate of humanity, the Linus approached New Eden.

The captain of the Linus was Vernon Martin. He had called ahead but the upload of data would occur only after docking, which he was still in the process of doing. As he gently maneuvered the Linus into the docking slip he wondered what happened back in Earthspace for the last eleven days. He was worried about the people he'd left behind there. He opened the ship's main egress portal from his command console. Then he launched himself through the corridors of the Linus and down into the main hold through which he could enter the spaceport. He swung out of the hold, through the main egress portal, and into the floatland of New Eden's spaceport. Moments later he slammed into a crowd of half a dozen well-dressed floating scientists. People and portable consoles went flying in all directions like pins in an alley, with Vernon as the ball. There was complete confusion for a few moments.

“Oops.” Vernon said absently. “Yea... Well anyway, Glad to see you didn’t forget about us out there.” He shook off what would otherwise be a humiliating experience. “Look, we flew here right after all our long range transmitters were destroyed. We need to dispatch new transmitters right away and... and any other help we can muster. And we...”

“Excuse me, Captain.” Interrupted Vincent Hedding, a newly appointed scientist on the Outer Earth Survival Committee. “Are we to believe that you have definite proof of extraterrestrial life on board your ship?”

“Well, they’re more like huge oblong balls than little green men, but before I left we all believed they were alive, yes.” Thousands of people watched on holodisplays as Captain Martin gave impromptu answers to questions. Several members of the Linus’ crew emerged from the docking portal to watch the dialogue.

“Did they seem threatening in any way? Did they intentionally destroy your transmitters?” Asked a dry voice from the crowd.

“I don’t know what their intention was. It might simply have been an attempt to communicate with us.” Vernon explained. “We really don’t know what caused our transmitters to blow.”

“But you don’t know. Maybe you’re lucky you survived at all. And you don’t know what happened to the rest of the ships you were with either, do you?” The dry voice accused.

“Yea, so what? You don’t know either and speculating is a waste of time. We need to return to aid those people back there. We can’t just...” Vernon was again interrupted.

“You said these things were following Heccat? What for? Are they responsible for Heccat?” Another voice asked and was met with several approving sounds from other members of the crowd. “Maybe we don’t want these things to know about us.”

“I don’t know. I mean... Look, we’re wasting time!” Vernon tried to dismiss the questions with a decisive chop of his hand. “We’ve got to start working on a supply mission.” He looked through the crowd, then his face relaxed noticeably as he saw the Director of New Eden’s Earthspace Department, Dr. Ankur Privanda. “Ah, Dr. Privanda. Isn’t the Earthspace Observation Project still alive? What do you think we should be doing?” Vernon asked in the most reasonable tones he could manage.

Dr. Privanda had originally coordinated the research vessels including the Linus. "Captain, you know very well that the project was always scheduled to end a month after Heccat's passing. We really don't have the budget to continue it. Certainly the crews are not trained for contact with extraterrestrials anyway, if that's really what you saw." He looked aside briefly. His eyes were caught by a stern looking face. His vague smile disappeared and he continued. "We will be happy to provide you with a supply of long range transmitters and other supplies for your return journey. But we can't spare any more ships. When you return you will inform the other captains that the project is terminated and that they are to return here for their next assignment immediately."

"No, no, no! That makes no sense at all!" Vernon shouted in frustration. "We may have found bona-fide extraterrestrial life and you're saying you want to cancel the project? What are you thinking?" Vernon hit his hands against his head. "Don't you want to find out?" He said quietly and a few tears welled in his eyes. They could not roll down his face in the floatland. He let them hang thick against his eyes, distorting his vision to match this disturbing experience.

Now an older man floated forward. Vernon didn't recognize him but as soon as he spoke Vernon recognized his dry voice from the earlier questions. "If it's true that they destroyed the Earth then we should not invite them here for a talk, I think. You may have led them right to us. Did you think of that?"

"I can't believe what I'm hearing..." Vernon shook his head in disbelief. "Isn't anyone curious about what kind of creatures might be in our solar system now besides us?" He stared into the crowd.

Dr. Privanda answered him. "Sure we're curious. We're afraid they're dangerous. But right now we need all our resources here. Then he softened and smiled. "Congratulations on your discoveries, Captain. I look forward to reviewing your data. Order what equipment you think the other ships will need for a safe return journey and you can pick it up at the University spacedock later today. We'll honor you all properly when you return with the other ships. Until then, good day, Captain."

"No, it isn't." Vernon just floated there watching as the crowd dispersed into the spaceport in all directions. He punched the air furiously. The effect turned him slowly around and sideways. He pulled himself back into the Linus' shipping bay. He floated there a moment and tried to get calm. He was shaking with anger. He wouldn't be here long so he needed to keep a clear head. He released most of his crew for a few hours of shore leave. He started the transfer of his ship's data into the New Eden Central Science Network. He asked his communications engineer to repair the

ships damage. He transmitted an order for equipment and supplies. On a whim he requested a few extra things for himself and his crew. He recalled his crew and picked up the cargo the moment it was ready for transfer. He smiled briefly when he found that all his requests had been filled.

“Thumbprint here, Captain. Please?” A young clerk held out a clear disc, glowing faintly green. Vernon hesitated and then grasped the disc firmly between his thumb and forefinger. He squeezed it until the tip of his thumb turned beet red while he held it up to his eye turning the shipping bay an eery green. Then he handed it back to the clerk.

He returned to the Linus and made his final flight checks. His crew reported ready to fly and he released the docking clamps. Then he opened a communications channel to the New Eden Perimeter Control. “This is the Linus requesting clearance for departure”

“Linus this is NEPC. You are cleared for departure at 50 meters per second directly away from your slip for 2000 meters.

“Oh, you mean like this?” He blasted out of the spaceport at his ship’s top speed to a chorus of complaints and threats from the New Eden Perimeter Control personnel. “One More thing, NEPC.” He said just before he was outside of their control range. He paused for a dramatic moment. Then he fired all his rear-facing positioning thrusters to increase his speed a little bit, just for emphasis.

Vernon settled in for the twelve-day journey back to Earthspace. “Idiots. What could be more important than finding out more about what is happening back in Earthspace?” He asked aloud in his empty quarters. Then he shrugged, knelt, and then reclined against the middle of the floor in the gentle thrustgravity. He closed his eyes. Then he realized that his ship was now repaired and he opened a channel on his console to catch up on the news of Humanity for the last two weeks.

On his way back to Earthspace he learned a lot about the Belt and the situation on the bubbles. He began to realize how distracted everyone was. He wondered how the pieces of mankind’s existence would reform, and he wondered how the diamond eyes would affect that new form.

On his way back to Earthspace Vernon did something he had not done for a very, very long time — not since he his pet cat had died when he was a child. He did something he had convinced himself could never make a real difference, something which made him feel more humble than he ever had before. On his way back to Earthspace Vernon prayed that things might work out and that humanity would survive and that he would find his

friends in Earthspace again, alive. Then, locked in his cabin, he used the precious thrustgravity to pull his tears down his face.

The bubbles closed in on their destination. There were enough people who had connected between the bubbles and the Belt that the status and arrival plans of the bubbles were well-known facts in the Belt. The bubble's final destination had always seemed like a long way away, so people were a little surprised when they learned that the interplanetary craft had reversed their engines. It meant that the bubbles were less than a week away from their final orbit. There was an unmistakable, conspicuous and contagious excitement in the Belt and in the bubbles. People in both places wanted to meet each other and share the wonders of where they lived.

The mayor of Jane's World posted a request for as many available rock hunters near Rose World as possible to rendezvous with the bubbles to provide escort for any ships that might want to enter the Belt. Seventy nine pilots accepted the request, including Moses. Ishmael, however, had chosen to remain at Rose World.

The escort armada arrived at the rendezvous point a day before the bubbles. They had hauled along with them a small collection of 1 meter rocks. They bounced these off their ship's deflectors in the soccer-like game they played in three dimensions.

Finally, the first bubbles arrived. The escort armada silently matched speed. All the rock hunters were in awe of the bubbles — even those who had seen them once before. The bubbles seemed larger than life and infinitely ordered compared to the utter randomness of the belt and everything originally in it. Since they spent so much time flying in the belt they shared a kind of hunger for order, flat planes, right angles and regular curves -- the kinds of shapes one didn't see much in the belt.

The rock hunters flew next to the bubbles and looked through the huge windows at the land and water below. They could see people and vehicles and buildings and equipment and trees and mountains, then a moment later the window would pass by and they would be staring at the outside of the floor section of a station. There was very little ship-to-ship chatter at all. They were simply transfixed by the sheer size and the concentration of life. Each bubble was like a hundred Jane's Worlds, but the bubbles had gravity — a full 1G. The bubbles were breathtakingly beautiful and real. The daylights on the inside edge of the main arches shown through the windows and made the land or sea beneath glow. The Belt was a dark place; the bubbles were an exquisite candelabra in the perpetual night.

The effect could only be appreciated from outside the bubbles. It left most of the rock hunters speechless.

The rock hunters were invited to dock at Floyd bubble, which they did. They were eventually led into its gravityland, where they met in person with many of the members of the Outer Earth Survival Committee and thousands of enthusiastic people. There were many handshakes and tears of joy. The rock hunters offered their services as escorts for ships wanting to enter the Belt. The committee thanked them and asked them to wait for a day while the process of assembling crews and supplies was completed. The pilots of some ships didn't wait.

That night the rock hunters enjoyed the naturally fresh, mildly humid air, the fresh foods and sights of Floyd bubble. They stood out because of their unusual clothing. Rock hunters usually wore their flight suits even in pressurized places. Many of the suits had interesting but obscure markings and decals. None of the suits looked new and only a few looked like they'd been cleaned in the last month. Everywhere they went, people wanted to shake their hands, find out who they were, and learn first-hand about life in the Belt. They stayed up much of the night eating unusual foods, imbibing intoxicating potions, and talking. The rock hunters would sometimes stop to just look up and around — still dumbfounded by the magnificent and enormous bubble they were in. They didn't walk around much because the full G of gravity was exhausting even for those pilots in excellent condition.

By the end of the next day, twelve large shuttles carrying two hundred people each and fourteen barges full of equipment and materials began the journey to Rose World escorted by over fifty rock hunters. That large of an escort was overkill; a quarter as many rock hunters could have kept the ships safe. The belties wanted to leave no doubt that the bubbles were welcome. The remaining rock hunters stayed on the bubbles. A lot of pilots living in the bubbles wanted to learn about flight in the Belt. An impromptu discussion turned into a training exercise. Within two days, each rock hunter who had remained at Floyd bubble had three or more private students. They were all experienced pilots and learned quickly, but most knew nothing about flying in rockfields.

The student pilots went back and told their friends and family how amazing the rock hunters really were and how willing they were to share their knowledge. It was what people wanted to hear — that the belties were here to help. Even the interplanetary shipping pilots came to respect and admire the rock hunters. That public respect was a frightening blow to the shipping consortium owners.

The group of 26 rock hunters who stayed behind captured the hearts of people in the bubbles within a week. One morning as Tig was walking along a pathway toward the elevators which would take him to the spaceport. He was approached by a woman walking from behind, as he was admiring the trees that grew in abundance. She touched his arm. "Rockman?" She asked.

"Uh, it's Tig." He observed that she was carrying a space suit and had a backpack on.

"Tig... will you take me back to the Belt with you?" She looked him straight in the eye. She was unquestionably as serious as she was beautiful.

"What? I don't even know you." He was surprised. She looked young to Tig, maybe 20 years old -- ten years younger than himself.

"I'm Jennifer. Will you take me away from here? I can fly anything." She said confidently.

He looked around at the incredible life in the bubble. "Why would you want to leave this? It's... it's so beautiful here." He looked at her questioningly. "Are you running from something? What is it?"

She paused and then spoke slowly. "Yes, I'm running from something. I'm running from the sheriffs, because I stole this suit. I'm running from the helpless, anonymous life of a refugee. I'm running from the boredom of a sheltered life. I don't belong here. Take me with you, please?" She asked urgently.

He half expected her to start looking around to see if anyone was watching. "How old are you?" He asked her and crossed his arms.

"I'm twenty six." She lied. She looked around to see if anyone was watching.

"You don't look twenty six." He said and looked at her sideways.

She shrugged. "How old do I have to be to want a better life?"

"You think life in the Belt is better than here? You're wrong. This place is... it's incredible! You have gravity all the time! Don't you realize how lucky you are?" He said and shook his head.

She looked at him — top to bottom — sizing him up. "Were you always a pilot?" She asked, changing the topic.

“No, I learned how to fly ten years ago. Before that I worked at a water synthesis plant.” He said a little embarrassed.

“How would you like to still be at the plant, instead of being a rock hunter? If you knew then what you know now, would you have reached for it?” She asked, believing he could not deny it.

He looked at her. She was ready to leave right now. “What are you running from? Am I going to get killed if you come with me?” He asked, wresting the subject back from the her.

“No. He won’t kill you.” She said reassuringly. “But he might kill me.” She laughed. “No, I’m too precious too him now — he’d never hurt me again.”

“Who?”

She looked down. “Captain Arnold.” She said quietly.

“Who’s that?”

She looked noticeably relieved. “He’s my father and he hates the Belt. As long as I stay here, I’m supposed to hate the Belt too, but I can’t. That’s where I belong — I know it — not here. He’ll never let me go there. He’s powerful, but only here. He knows that he can’t control the Belt and he knows if I go there, he can’t control me anymore either. He’s made sure I can’t even get onto any of the shuttles or help with the spinworld.” She sounded sad. She looked around the bubble. “This is beautiful place. I know and I’ll miss it. But it’s a prison for me. Do you understand, Tig? I can’t stay here and be happy. Please take me with you.”

“Yea. Ok, let’s go.”