

Where Gravity Sleeps

11 – Echoes

The Bartlett was only a few hours from the bubbles, but without a long range transmitter there was no way to make contact. Jim waited impatiently. The Linus had returned to Earthspace on a mission of rescue, but it had never rendezvous with the Bartlett. They had, in fact, passed within a half a million kilometers of each other, going in opposite directions. Nobody on either ship had guessed that the other was nearby.

Jim decided to dock at the nearest bubble, Luna Linda. He set a course directly for the old hulking station and ate a small meal. He went over in his mind what he would say when he arrived.

The antiquated Luna Linda had a small perimeter control office in which two people managed traffic in the space around the station. It had always been an unglamorous job, but now that the bubbles had moved near the belt, it was a lot more interesting. Still, it had been a slow shift so far. One other ship had docked within the last few hours. Just now a second ship requested permission to dock. It was a long, black cruiser with no marking. “LLPC granting permission to dock. Over.” Said one of the officers into his headset.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door of the LLPC control office. The two officers looked at each other and shrugged. Then one got up to answer the door. It opened and the flash of a laser filled the room. The officer crumpled. The other officer turned and a moment later his lifeless body smoked from several newly burned holes. Three people pulled themselves into the office and settled into the controls to wait.

A couple of hours later the Bartlett approached within range of its short-range radio. “Bartlett to Luna Linda Perimeter Control, requesting permission to dock.”

“LLPC to Bartlett, we’re having a problem at our main dock, please use Beta dock 1. Confirm?” The voice was calm.

“Beta Dock? Where is that? LLPC, please advise.” Jim replied?

“Other side of the station, Bartlett. Follow signal 1011.8. It will lead you in. It’s an interior dock so watch yourself coming through the portal. Over.”

“OK, will do. Thanks LLPC.”

“Don’t mention it. LLPC out.” Came the voice. Then he switched off the LLPC transmitter and turned to his two cohorts. “Don’t mention it to anyone.” He gave an evil smile. Two of them loaded the dead bodies into the small bathroom in the office and then they left to go meet the Bartlett. One spoke into a small radio at his lapel. “OG77 reporting. LLPC secured. Bartlett on its way to Beta one. Advise Cosmo that phase one is completed. OG77 out.”

Jim maneuvered the Bartlett around the back of Luna Linda, following the control signal. He found a small portal through which he flew and then docked in a waiting slip. The dock looked abandoned. The ship was secured and he made his way down to the main hatch. He fingered the controls and the hatch opened. He entered the small airlock chamber and fingered the controls on the airlock door that would open into Luna Linda. The door did not open. Just then, he felt rather than heard the main outside portal close. The Bartlett was sealed in the docking bay. He tried again to open the airlock door. Again it failed. He returned to his bridge and tried to contact the LLPC.

LLPC, we’ve docked but we can’t get through the main airlock. Also the portal to space has been closed. Please advise.”

The voice that he heard next sent a chill down his spine.

“You just sit there for now. We’ll get to you when we’re ready. Until then, power down and wait. You belong to us now.”

“What the hell? LLPC who...”

“Shut up. Don’t make us depressurize your ship to keep you quiet!”

Outside Luna Linda the Diamond Eyes separated from their tight configuration and began to spread out around the station, exploring. Unlike the other bubbles, Luna Linda had no large expanses of windows to let in reflected sunlight. Instead there were occasionally, small observation windows which very few people ever used.

Just then another ship approached Luna Linda and requested to dock.

“LLPC, this is the Angel Wing, requesting permission to dock. Larry, are you on duty?” Came a sweet, female voice.

“LLPC to Angel Wing. Permission denied, please dock at New Eden or Stars View instead.”

“LLPC, I have to dock at Luna Linda. Where’s Larry, he’s supposed to be on duty, who am I speaking with?”

“Never mind who I am, you are forbidden to dock. Do not approach Luna Linda at this time.”

“Oh yea, why not? Flight Rule 732.16 specifies you have to allow us to dock unless you are declaring a section 1.3 emergency. Are you declaring 1.3?”

“Listen, sweetie, why don’t you just turn around and go back where you came from before I push you out of here with our deflectors, got it?”

Jennifer thought for a moment. This was an unheard-of breach of protocol. Protocol was something that perimeter control officers insisted on to a fault. ‘OK, whatever you say. Angel Wing out.” She replied. She pointed her ship toward the rear of the station, where she knew there were several unused emergency docks. She signaled Tig with an encrypted page and described what had just happened. She asked him to remain nearby but not to try to dock or to communicate with the LLPC. He replied with an encrypted acknowledgment.

She switched off her ship’s thrusters and the running lights and coasted toward the station. As she drifted she could see what looked like some kind of debris floating around the station. The more she watched them the more interested she became. The diamond-shaped objects appeared to be moving under their own control as they flitted about the external structure of the station. She was fascinated. Then she began to approach the auxiliary docks. She was surprised that one of them had its outer door closed. That was unusual, but so far everything about her errand at Luna Linda had been a surprise. She’d never seen one closed before. She used her attitude thrusters to slide into the next dock.

She docked and entered the station without incident. This part of the station was almost deserted. As she pulled herself silently along a floatland corridor she heard voices coming from a side-corridor ahead. Nothing felt right to her so far and she decided not to announce herself. She hid and listened.

“So what does Cosmo want to do with them now?” Said a low, croaking voice.

“I don’t know, but I’m glad I’m not in there. It won’t be pleasant whatever he decides.”

She looked around and saw that there was a docking observation room just behind her. She pulled herself back to it. The “observation room” was a closet with a window. A hologram was projected just outside the window that identified each object inside. There was a standard voice console and an older, backup manual console. Silently she entered a number of obscure codes into the older console. The hologram reformed to include dozens of color-encoded tables and lists of information. “What is going on here?” She mouthed as if in a vacuum.

As she watched, she saw that half the crew of a science vessel was outside the ship with tools trying to open a closed emergency hatch from the inside. They were trying to break into the station. She reasoned that they were trapped and that they were the unfortunate ones of which the voices had spoken.

She entered a few more obscure codes and the hologram reformed into a three-dimensional model of the station. As she manipulated the console the holographic model zoomed into the area around the dock. She saw the hatch they were trying to open. She figured out where the men who owned the voices must have been and how to get to the hatch without going near them.

Then she did one more thing. She entered a short page that she encrypted and sent to Tig. Then she made her way to the emergency hatch.

She heard nothing, but she could see a little of the scene inside through the tiny window on the other side of the airlock. She fingered a control on the outside and the exterior door where the crew of the Bartlett struggled slid noiselessly out of their way. One of them immediately pulled themselves in and several others motioned vigorously to each other. After a moment the one inside the airlock fingered the control and closed the airlock. Then he pressurized it and opened the other door. He was dressed in a fully enclosed excursion suit. He looked into the searching eyes of Jennifer Arnold, trying to determine if she was a captor or a saviour. He looked side-to-side and saw nobody else. Then he said quietly “You opened that hatch for us? Thanks.”

“What’s going on? Why didn’t you come through the main hatch?” She asked.

“Somebody is trying to trap us in there. We didn’t want to wait until they decided to come for us. Do you think there is any way to get the outer portal open, so we can fly out?”

She looked at a console by the hatch and fingered a few commands on the antique manual interface. “Looks like someone put the portal into an emergency override mode... I don’t have the security codes to clear it.” She looked at his excursion suit. “You’re in the science corps; why is someone treating you like this?”

“I don’t know, but we were almost destroyed by a ship while we were in Earthspace, we were only saved by...”

“Yes?”

“Um, it’s kind of hard to explain.” Just then it dawned on him that there might be some connection between their discoveries and the recent hostility they experienced. “Oh, hmm.” He said absently.

“Does it have anything to do with those things flying around outside the station?” she asked.

“Maybe. Probably. I don’ know, but probably.”

“Well, we don’t have much time. There were some men outside the main airlock. I think they are with whoever is holding your ship. I suggest you get your crew-mates out of there and lets try to find someplace to hide until we can get some help. I know this station pretty well — I have a friend who lives here. Right down this corridor and to the left there’s a side corridor that goes a long way into the station. There is a cargo hold 200 meters down it on the right. Let’s meet there as quickly and quietly as possible. OK?”

“Yea. By the way, I’m Jim. Thanks again for helping us.”

“I’m Jennifer. You’re welcome. Let’s go. I’ll go open the cargo bay and wait for you.

She found it and managed to get the door open. This was a seldom-used part of the station. Even in the aftermath of the Heccat disaster, this section was still unused because it had no accommodations and no gravity. A fine layer of dust lay on everything inside the cargo bay. There were hundreds of containers secured to the walls and mooring bars. The weightlessness caused everything to float in gentle disarray. There were low lights on all the time in cargo bays. She did not turn on the main lights.

A few moments later the first group of scientists from the Bartlett arrived, still wearing their excursion suits. It was impossible to guess their gender or even see their faces through the reflective faceplates. A minute later

another group arrived. When the third group arrived one of them said
“That’s all of us.”

Jennifer closed the hatch. “So far so good. But we won’t be able to stay here long. They’ll start searching for us any time now.” She looked around. “We’re going to have to disappear into hyperspace.” She said under her breath as she continued to examine the large cargo bay.

“Hyperspace?” Jim asked.

“Yea. Well, that’s just the nickname. When they built Luna Linda they first created the interior support structures, then they added layers of rooms and corridors. But there is space between the floors where all the conduits and service access ways run. If we can get into that interior space they’ll never find us. It’s huge in there. I’ve been there a few times...” She smiled as if remembering something funny or enjoyable that had happened there.

“How do we get in?” He asked.

“From here? I’m not sure. There aren’t many entry hatches. There may not be one in here.” She looked around and then she pushed herself over to a console near some sort of control panel. She fingered the control panel and a hologram focused in front of her. A few more commands and she had focused in on their cargo bay. “Nope. It doesn’t look like there is any way in from here.” She fingered a few more commands and then she said “There! We can get in through there. It’s about 100 meters further down. There is an access hatch.”

Just then the manual handle on the hatch to the cargo bay began to move.

“They’ve found us! Everyone take cover!” Jim shouted. Everyone had removed their helmets but they were still wearing their excursion suits.

One of the crew, a young woman, was right by the door and she grabbed the manual handle and held it from moving. A voice from the outside could be heard saying “I think they’re in here! Something is holding the handle! Get down here now!”

Someone else had unfastened a shipping container and tried to lodge its handhold over the hatch handle to prevent it from being moved far enough to open the hatch.

Then Jim floated forward holding a small, portable cutting laser in front of him. It had been strapped to his waist. “Which way to hyperspace?” He asked.

Jennifer fingered another command and the hologram shifted. Then she turned around and pointed at a bare spot in the ceiling. "Right there!"

Jim kicked off the ground and shot up to the ceiling. He grabbed hold of a fire-control duct and began cutting a hole. Soon after his laser had pierced the skin of the cargo bay he could smell the slightly stale air of the inner space mixed with the fumes from the vaporized, painted titanium. He continued to cut.

The handle of the hatch began to jolt from side to side. Two men held the cargo container to keep it from shifting loose. Precious seconds moved like molasses and all hearts beat full and hard within the cargo bay. Jim was half finished with the hole when a laser blast cut a 5-millimeter hole through the hatch. The beam struck one man holding the crate. He cried in pain and pushed away from the hatch. The other man did not let go but moved as far away from the hatch as he could. A third person moved into position to help hold the crate. Several more lasers blasts pierced the door but did not strike anyone. Then several more blasts, including one that put a hole through one person's suit, but missed their body.

Then Jim said "I'm through, come on everyone!" People kicked off from wherever they were and shot toward the small hole he had cut. It was just large enough for them to fit through one-at-a-time. Someone helped the injured man through and then the only two people left were the ones holding the crate at the door.

Two more blasts came through the door. One of the two holding the crate twisted the crate hard and said "Let's go!" They both kicked off toward the ceiling and a few moments later they were through the still smoking opening in the ceiling.

The rest of the group had gathered just inside the hole. It was a dark space, wide but not high. There were conduits of all sizes injecting into the space from all angles, seemingly at random. It was quiet, except for the occasional opening of a valve or an odd creaking or hissing now and again.

"Come on, follow me!" Jennifer said emphatically, but not loudly. The group followed in the strange, dark, weightless space as she maneuvered down one side passage and then another. After a dozen turns left and right she stopped and the group assembled around her. It took a few minutes since people had to maneuver from conduit to beam to cable to wall in a kind of ricochet ballet. When they were gathered everyone clung to each other or something fixed to keep from drifting.

“Does anybody have a portable console?” Jennifer asked. Everyone looked at each other. Nobody did. “Damn. They don’t have public consoles in hyperspace. I’m not really sure where we are, but we’re obviously still in Luna Linda’s Beta floatland. I think we’re safe for the moment. Now what?” She asked.

Jim spoke. “I think I speak for my crew when I say you have our profound thanks for helping us. I think... I mean, I know you’ve saved our lives.”

There were enthusiastic nods and affirmations from almost everyone. The injured man, James Rollin, was being tended to by a couple of other people. He didn’t look good. The laser had cut a hole in his chest about two inches from his shoulder. It had perforated his lung and he was breathing heavy. One of those attending was Dr. Margaret Oldfield. She said, “We’ve to get him to a medical center soon.”

“We’ve got to find a way out of here.” Someone said. Numerous conversations sprang up.

Just then several voices could be heard and powerful hand lights flickered against the walls.

Jennifer motioned for everyone to follow her through a passage to the right and they left the lights behind. They continued to move and hide for at least an hour, until they lost track of time. Everyone was covered in a fine layer of dust. The injured man suffered, but his condition seemed stable in the weightlessness. They took turns in pairs to pull him safely along. Sometimes they would hear their pursuers, but they evaded them in the immense maze of connected passages.

Then suddenly someone said, “There! Isn’t that a hatch?”

Luna Linda was crowded, like all the bubbles. There were people everywhere, on a station populated more by rodents than people only a year before. It was a dull looking place and most people there were counting the days until they could emigrate to the spinworld.

A little boy and his parents were standing in the one and only library on Luna Linda. Since the escape from Earth began it had become the commons for a growing group of contemplative people. The events, and the emotions that came with them, had changed everyone. Those in Luna Linda who looked inside themselves for answers eventually found themselves in the library.

“Look at the space birds mommy!” The boy pointed outside the window.

“Quiet honey. There are no birds in space.” She scolded gently.

“But look! It’s right there looking in!” He insisted.

She turned around and stifled a shriek. She stared at the single compound eye of the Diamond Eye. It stared back at her, watching the scene unfold. She reached over to her husband, placed her hand on his head, and manually maneuvered it like a camera until it he was looking out the window.

“Honey, do you mind... what that hell is that thing!” He ended in a shout.

Then several more people came to the window and watched an extraterrestrial life form for the first time. Similar scenes occurred all over the station and word spread like wildfire that something was alive outside. Within an hour you could not find a window inside the station that didn’t have dozens if not hundreds of people vying for a chance to see outside.

“Shit. You let them get away? How the hell could they get out of there?” Cosmo upbraided a dark, worried-looking man. Cosmo was fat and he lived close to the Luna Linda hubmouth where the gravity was weak. The hubmouth on Luna Linda hummed and shuddered occasionally. The spingravity was very low in his lavish office and his undulations were nauseating to watch as he floated around the room.

“We had all the hatches secured. Someone inside the station must have let them in.” The worried man replied as calmly as possible.

“Who?” Cosmo demanded.

“We think it was a woman named Jennifer Arnold. We found her ship in the adjacent dock, but we can’t find her anywhere.”

“And now they’re somewhere in the superstructure hiding? Incompetent! Do you realize what happens if they get out and go public! They figured out how to talk with these things you imbecile!” He shouted and his fat rolled for several seconds after his bellowing ceased. “Arnold, huh...” he seemed to be searching his memory for who she was.

“Sir, we think they are still in the floatland Infrastructure. They’re trapped in there. It’s just a matter of time before we find them. Sir.”

We cannot succeed if people don’t fear those miscreants.” He brooded.
“Still in the floatland, eh? Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure. We’ve sealed all the hatches — we’ll know if they try to come through any of them. We have forty men inside the infrastructure hunting them down and I’m sure they’ll...”

Cosmo interrupted. “I’m going to give you a chance to fix this. Let me down and you’ll be visiting those unholy creatures out there. I want you to take a darkship and fire on the station, making it look like these creatures did it. I want hysteria. Fear. Make sure people believe those things are dangerous. I’ll make sure people think they’ve invaded the floatland and we’ll convince people to evacuate. Now get out there and do your job. Don’t forget, this is your last chance.”

“Yes Sir!” He said and left quickly.

All over the station, on every console and holodisplay, an emergency broadcast was seen. It read:

Attention all residents of Luna Linda: The station is surrounded by an unknown phenomenon. We don’t know what these things are, but they don’t seem dangerous yet. We believe that some may have entered the station’s Beta Floatland. I must ask all residents who are in the Beta Floatland to evacuate at once. All other residents, please return to your apartments and lock your doors. Please remain there until we secure the station. Thanks for your compliance.

Walter Barthes,
Captain

Some people did heed the advice, but most hunted for a window. But in the Beta Floatland people were hastily escorted back into the main station. Those that resisted were coerced.

Then a laser blast hit the Luna Linda Library and it began to decompress. It wasn’t a large enough hole to prevent the breach shields from maintaining its air pressure. Yet, it was powerful enough to kill everyone near the window as the powerful laser cut through everything in its path.

Then a minute later, a different part of the station exploded. Nothing too big — just enough to kill a few people.

Suddenly there was a stampede toward the interior of the station.

A serious looking man watched the crowd around him disperse. Then he spoke into his lapel. "OG447 reporting all clear."

In the next hour a dozen strikes on the station could be felt and people's fears mounted. Outside the station the Diamond Eyes flew about, exploring, apparently oblivious to the chaos developing within.

Tig arrived at the rendezvous point where he had expected Jennifer to be waiting. She wasn't there. He figured she was just a little late so he decided to catch up on some communications. When he consulted his console he found the message from her and read it.

Tig. I am on Luna Linda and I need help. I docked there illegally in the Beta Spaceport after being refused docking by the LLPC without a 1.3 emergency justification. Something is very wrong at Luna Linda and I don't trust the LLPC. Also, there is some strange creatures or small robotic craft outside Luna Linda. I don't know what they are.

The dock next to mine contained a science vessel called the Bartlett. It was locked inside its bay and its crew was trying to escape. I overheard some men outside the dock saying they wouldn't want to be inside. I think the crew is in grave danger. I plan to help them escape. We may make our way into the Beta floatland hyperspace.

We're going to need help getting out of Luna Linda. Please come as soon as you can.

Jennifer Arnold

Tig read it twice. Then he forwarded a copy to Ishmael and Moses, who were now nearing the space around the bubbles after their journey from Rose World. They read it and then set a course for Luna Linda.

"We could be there in about two hours at top speed." Said Ishmael.

"It'll take Betty and I three, at least, depending on the rocks." Said Moses.

"What can I do in the mean time?" Asked Tig.

"Keep an eye out and be ready to receive a message from Jennifer if she sends one. Try to keep your distance though, so you don't get caught up in whatever is happening there. Don't be a hero and charge in there

yourself. You're most valuable as a communication link for now, OK?"
Ishmael spoke quickly while he was setting a course for Luna Linda.

"Yea, OK. I can wait. I hope Jennifer can." He said, feeling kind of useless.

"One more thing. Do you know how to fly dark?" Ishmael asked.

"Dark?"

"Yea, no running lights, no deflector beacon, no EM scans. Dark, so nobody can see you."

"How do I avoid rocks and ships? By eye?" Tig asked sarcastically.

"Yes. Don't fall asleep; you're close enough to the belt to have to dodge rocks."

"It's pretty dark out here -- how will I seem 'em?" He asked, worried.

"Well, don't try it if you're gonna end up dead. If you don't want to fly dark then jettison some plasma and some fuel waste and tell anyone who asks that you are performing emergency repairs but don't need assistance. Act distracted if you speak with anyone. One way or another, don't let on that you know anything at all about Luna Linda. OK? Act like you've got your own problems."

"Yea, I can do that. If I hear anything from Jennifer I'll relay it to you."

"OK. We'll be there soon. Hang on. Ishmael out."

"Well, it's a hatch all right. I wonder where it leads..." Said Jennifer.

"Out of here! That's all that matters to me!" someone said. "We've been in here for hours."

"I don't know... They're probably watching all the regular hatches. Even if there isn't anyone on the other side, they'll know this hatch was opened." She replied.

"Well, then how do you propose we get out of here?" Jim asked.

"Unobserved." She said. "But at the moment, I'm not sure how to do that."

"But you're sure this isn't it, huh?" Said someone else with a touch of annoyance.

“Quiet, everyone, I know we’re all tired of this, but we’ve got to stay smart. What can we do?” Jim asked patiently.

“I think we should try to find a safe place to cut our way out. I don’t think the hatches are safe for us.” She replied.

Just then, Jennifer heard a voice in her head say “...you get out. Turn right in 100 meters, at the...” The voice seemed to fade in and out.

She looked around but nobody was speaking to her. The moment she moved her head the voice disappeared.

Jim noticed that Jennifer searching everyone’s face and asked, “What is it?”

“Did you hear that?” She asked hopefully.

“Hear what?”

“I... never mind. I thought I... never mind.” She said and shook her head and then stared into the darkness.

A moment later the voice continued. “Jennifer, it’s... tracking you. We can’t... but you can hear.... plans in front of me... get you out, but you... trust me and... If... receiving this, move 10 meters and then stop.” The intermittent voice said.

She floated there motionless. She wondered if she was cracking. But she looked inside herself and could remember a dozen times when she had been under greater pressure and she’d never heard voices. Then, almost involuntarily, she moved away from the hatch and past the group of scientists. They watched her go past. Then she stopped and looked back at them. They began to follow her but when she stopped they stopped and looked at her.

A moment later the, distorted, high-pitched voice returned to her skull. “Good, now go 100 meters... same direction and turn right.”

James was getting worse and Dr. Oldfield said. “We can’t stay in here forever. Why don’t a few of us go out the hatch, try to get James some help, and see what’s up. Maybe they’ve stopped looking for us by now anyway.”

“I don’t think they’ve stopped, but if you want to try then let the rest of us hide. If it’s guarded at least we won’t all get caught.” Said Jennifer.

Everyone agreed. Jennifer suggested they move up 100 meters and turn right and all but James and Margaret followed her. When everyone was well hidden, the doctor opened the hatch. As she watched, the voice in her skull said “Good, now move 200 meters straight... a two-meter air conduit labeled 103B-612. Then get in... as far as you can go.” She ignored it for the moment and watched the hatch.

Margaret opened the hatch. The air in the floatland was fresher than that in hyperspace and it had a pleasantly cool feel. Margaret poked her head out of the hatch and looked around. There was nobody to be seen. She pulled James out after her. The weightless floatland made moving him much easier and less painful for him as well.

“So far, so good, James. We’ll get you to a medical-bay soon. Just hang on.” She said reassuringly.

They hadn’t moved more than twenty meters when suddenly, they were confronted by two men in security uniforms rushing to their position. “You there, where did you come from? This area has been secured. Show me your ID.” One of them demanded.

“My friend is hurt. I’m trying to get to a medical-bay.”

The other guard looked the two over, taking note of their excursion suits and the markings on them. “Just wait there.” He said in a low voice. Then he spoke into a radio on his lapel. “OG937 reporting. I’ve found two in corridor 117B level 8. Advise please.” He said.

Margaret looked around. There was no place to go and the two security men were armed. “Look, we need to get to a medical-bay right now. You can stay there with us to decide if we’re in trouble, OK?” She suggested in a very reasonable tone of voice.

“No. Stay right there.” The first security officer said harshly and aimed his weapon at her head.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then a voice issued from the second man’s lapel radio. “OG937, bring them to C114 immediately. Also, post a guard at hatch 117B8/12.” Both men’s eyes opened slightly in surprise. They looked at each other then at the doctor and her patient. “OK, follow me.”

“Finally!” Margaret said under her breath as they followed one of the men while the other left to return to the hatch where the doctor and the injured man had emerged.

Back at the hatch the other guard poked his head inside to look around. The rest of the crew had taken a hiding place where they could observe the hatch. They saw him looking in and noticed he was armed.

“That doesn’t look good”. Jennifer said quietly to the others. “We’d better get out of here.”

Margaret pulled James along and they followed for about ten minutes, through a series of turns leading out toward the outer levels of the Beta floatland. Then they arrived at a hatch that looked a lot like the one they had escaped from a couple hours earlier.

“In here.” Said the man evenly and opened the hatch. It was an airlock.

“This is the medical-bay?” Margaret asked.

The man drew his weapon. “In here!” he demanded and aimed his weapon at her head.

“I’m not climbing into an air hatch. If you’re going to kill me, you’re going to have to do it out here.” She said defiantly.

“Suit yourself.” The man said. He paused a moment, then he unceremoniously fired and killed Dr. Margaret Oldfield. James gasped and tried to move himself away. Her body floated nearby. The man pushed her body into the airlock.

James struggled to get away but he winced in pain. “Don’t... don’t kill me, I’m hurt, please! No!” He begged.

“Sorry, I have orders.” He fired and killed James. Then he pushed him into the airlock. The airlock door closed. He fingered a release button and the outer airlock opened. The air inside was blown out, carrying the two bodies with it. In a few moments the two bodies disappeared from view in the dark space outside the station.

The bodies caught the attention of a couple of Diamond Eyes and they followed for a while. They looked over them, sometimes gently touching them to rotate them or open a flap of clothing. Then they began to eat them, beginning at their limbs. The bodies had already frozen, their warmth consumed by the insatiable coldness of space. The Diamond Eyes continued their feast until they reached the heads, the faces still bearing expressions of terror and pain. At first they seemed to begin to consume them but then they stopped. They communicated with each other for a while. Then they each took one of the heads, holding it

between two of their wing-like edges of their body and they disappeared into the darkness, heading back toward Earthspace.

Jennifer motioned for the rest to follow her. She could hear the voices of men searching for them. She moved forward in the direction the voice in her head had suggested and she began looking for the air conduit the voice had identified. The going was challenging because there were a lot of cables and pipes running through the passage. She placed her hand over the top of a large junction box protruding from the wall and her hand brushed by something that felt furry. She stifled a cry of alarm. Just then a dark orange streak shot past her face and she spun backwards to avoid it. The people near her ducked as the furry orange projectile bounced off the walls and then disappeared into a crease between a 30-centimeter conduit and the wall.

“What was *that*?” Someone asked.

As if in answer a howl emerged from the crease.

“I... I think it was a cat.” Jennifer said, steadying herself and catching her breath. “I’ve heard there are some loose ones in the station. They hunt... rats, I think. I don’t know what the rats eat though.” She said.

Then the voice in her head interrupted her. “Jennifer, just forty more meters ahead is the...” She turned her head. Then she said, “I think we need to go about 40 more meters ahead.”

“How do you know that?” Someone said.

Jennifer thought for a moment. Should she tell them she was hearing a voice in her head? How else could she explain it? “I think I remember a map of hyperspace I saw once.” She said trying to brush off the question. It seemed to work.

They proceeded forward and she found the air conduit hatch the voice had suggested. “This is it. We get in here.” She said and twisted the access plate latch. It opened and they felt the rush of fresh air emerging. Everyone looked inside the dark tunnel. Nobody knew how far it went in any direction or how it ended.

The voice in her head said, “Go against the airflow, follow it as far... you reach a grating and you can’t go any farther. Get out there...”

“OK everyone, we’re going in here and we’re going to follow this air conduit until we reach a grating. Then we’ll get out there.” She moved to get in.

One of the scientists grabbed her arm, a man named Chuck Ingalls. “Where does it lead?” he asked, concerned.

“I’m not sure.” She replied.

“Then why go in there? Are you just guessing it will lead us somewhere, or do you remember a map of where the air conduits go?”

“OK, I’ll level with you. I’m hearing this voice in my head and it’s telling me where to go.”

“A voice? In your *head*?” And we’re *following* you? This is just...”

Jim cut him off. “Chuck! Hang on there. Jennifer, what do you mean by ‘a voice in your head’?”

“Well, I’m not imagining it -- it’s real enough. I don’t know who it is, but it seems to know where we are and it’s giving me directions as we go. I know it isn’t any delusion of mine because it clearly knows things I don’t, such as the conduit hatch number here. It told me to look for this number, and here it is. A delusion couldn’t have made it up.”

“Can you talk to it? Can you ask it any questions?” Jim asked.

“I haven’t been able to yet. When it first began speaking to me it said it couldn’t hear me.”

“What else did it say?” Chuck asked, now in a calmer voice.

“Not a lot. Also, it’s intermittent. If I turn my head or if I’m speaking then maybe I can’t hear the voice anymore and maybe I can.”

“You don’t have a radio in your head do you?” Chuck asked, twisting his fingers at his temple as if there were tuning knobs there. Everyone laughed.

“No.” Jennifer said flatly. “Listen, I trust this voice. It sounds familiar, like someone I know, but compressed and tinny and echoing. Whoever it is, if they are working for the people who are after us then it would have led them to us already, or us to them. We don’t have a lot of time to decide here. I’m going in there and I think you should all follow me.”

Then she went in. Everyone followed her. The last person closed the hatch and latched it. It was completely dark inside the hatch. People switched on small locator lamps on their excursion suits and that lit the dark tube. As their eyes adjusted there was enough light to see the interior, which was fabulously smooth and shiny. The reflections were confusing. As they moved into the rushing air they heard a faint howl from outside and behind.

They pulled themselves along the inside of the conduit for about fifteen minutes. At a couple of points along the way Jennifer heard the voice in her head telling her how far to go. Whenever she heard the voice she told everyone what it said.

“300 meters to go.” She said. Then a while later, “50 meters ahead.”

There were occasional bends in the conduit and side passages covered with grates. Then finally the conduit opened into a manifold with a large grating preventing their further access. As soon as she entered the manifold the squeaky voice in her head said, “Open the hatch and you’ll be in... room...near the hubmouth. You can... through the ... hidden. Nobody will see you. The hubseam moves slowly... through safely to the other side.”

Jennifer said “The voice is telling me to go through the hatch to a dark room on the other side. There were a lot of breaks in what it said, but it seemed to say that there was a way to go through the hubseam while we are still in hyperspace.”

“What’s a hubseam?” Jim asked.

“It’s where the hubmouth rotates. That’s what lets the center section rotate while the ends are stationary. We’re in the stationary end -- the Beta end. I think the voice wants us to get into the center section.”

“Is that safe?” Chuck asked.

“The voice said it was. I’ve never tried it. I didn’t even know it was possible. I thought the hubmouth was sealed all the way around.”

She opened the hatch and the other side was just as dark as the passage they had come through, but the room was huge compared to the conduit through which they had just pulled themselves. Their tiny lights showed that one side of the room had a two meter wide horizontal slot in it and the wall above the slot was moving slowly past the wall below, which was attached to the floor and ceiling.

The room was full of machinery. There were pumps and conduits and computers and many machines whose purpose could only be guessed. When they were all inside Jennifer said, "I think that's it: the hubseam. Looks like there's room for us to slide through there. As they moved through the weightless space toward the hubseam they could feel the tension of static electricity in the air. They could also hear the whirring of the pumps and a throbbing hum, as if there were a lot of electrical power running nearby.

Jennifer peered into the darkness of the hubseam. "It looks like there's room. I'm going through." She made her way through. Inside it was like a curved alley. It was disorienting and it was very dark ahead. About 10 meters to either side the alley was blocked and she could see a very faint blue glow coming from where the alley walls seemed to end. Soon she was through the seam and in a similar looking room on the other side. As she looked around people came through the hubseam one-by-one.

The voice in her head gave her more instructions and when everyone was assembled they disappeared into a hatch in the wall.

"LLPC, this is... the Laundryman, requesting docking."

"Laundryman, this is LLPC. Please stand by. We are having a station emergency and no ships are allowed to land at this time."

"Have you declared a 1.3?" Ishmael asked calmly.

"Yes we have. Landing is prohibited at this time."

He fingered a few buttons on his console. "I have an emergency too. I've got a serious coolant leak and won't be able to maneuver at all in a while. I'm declaring a ship-wide 1.4 myself and I request an emergency docking procedure," he said.

"Stand by Laundryman." The voice replied. Several minutes passed. "Laundryman, this is LLPC. We see you're venting coolant. You may dock at Beta 14. LLPC out."

Ishmael maneuvered Hermes to the Beta docking area and Hermes docked himself at docking bay 14. Ishmael said to Rose. "I'll carry a personal console so you can reach me. The rendezvous point is the Downpipe. I love you." Then he kissed her disappeared from the main bridge. On his way off Hermes he stopped in his cabin and took a small pouch. He smiled at it briefly and placed it in the inner pocket of his flight jacket. Then he went out the hatch and left Rose and Hermes behind.

He made his way through the Beta Floatland. He encountered guards on several occasions. He explained he had an emergency and was heading to the business core to buy parts. They let him through.

He made his way into one of the seedier parts of the station and stopped in front of a door which said "No Admittance" instead of having an apartment number. The sign was hanging slightly askew. He knocked in a distinctive pattern. Three raps, then two more after a pause, then he kicked the bottom of the door once. He put his hand inside his flight jacket and grasped his pistol.

A minute later the door opened a crack and a voice inside said, "Yea?"

"It's me, Ishmael. Let me in."

The door closed. Ishmael stood there and waited. Then the door flew open and a large man stood there staring into the barrel of Ishmael's pistol. The man's hand was holding a pistol too, but it was still pointing toward the ground. He froze.

"Hi Ishmael, long time no see. What brings you here?" He smiled and put his pistol away.

Ishmael looked past the man and saw four others sitting at a table holding cards. They didn't even look up.

"See you and raise..." A man at the table ran his chips through his fingers. "Twenty." He said and laid out four blue chips.

"Call." said the next man, throwing out two red chips.

"Fold." said the next.

"Call." said the next. "Come to play some cards, Ishmael?" He said as he slowly counted out four blue chips and placed them carefully near the middle of the table. "There's a seat here for you, if you want it."

"No. Not cards today. I'm here to meet some friends."

"Full House" said the man who'd raised, smiling, and he laid his cards out for all to see.

The two men still in the game groaned and threw their cards in. They all looked up at Ishmael, who was still holding his pistol, but it was pointing toward the floor. He was still standing outside the door. "You won't find

any friends here, Ishmael. Friends cost more than you have.” Said the careful man. Isn’t that right, Dougie?”

The large man at the door shrugged. “Guess so,” he said and turned away from Ishmael. Ishmael carefully sighted inside both sides of the door and above. Then he stepped in.

“They’re going to meet me here. They’ll be coming in through the pipe. Mind if I wait for ‘em here?” He said and shut the door.

“Sure. Lose the piece and pull up chair. Want some luvutz? The can is almost full.” Said the careful man.

“Sure.” Said Ishmael. He put his pistol in his pocket but kept his jacket loose. He walked over to where the luvutz can collected a slow drip of clear liquid and found a cup. He wiped it out with a finger and poured some of the warm liquid into it. He took a sip and gasped.

“Don’t like our luvuts?”

“It’s Love.” Said Ishmael, smiling widely. He put his back to a wall and faced the door.

“Sure we can’t deal you in?”

“I got no money -- I’m a beltie now. But... I do have something that used to be worth money. You tell me if it still is.”

The others looked at him, disgusted.

Ishmael pulled the small pouch out from his pocket and laid it on the table. All eyes were on it. He took a sip of his luvuts while he let their imagination increase its value. Then he opened the bag and poured out a dozen purple pills. “Anyone still buy Hijackers these days? I’ve been saving these for a special occasion. I’ll sell ‘em for 200 each. Any takers?”

The careful man laughed, but the other three looked at the purple pills and then at the stack of chips in front of them. “I’ll take two.” Said one. “I’ll buy three.” said another. “I’ll buy the rest.” Said the third.

Suddenly Ishmael had a large stack of chips in front of him. “Deal me in, man. I’m ready to play!”

“What about your friends?” Said the careful man.

“I’ll play until they get here. OK?”

The game commenced. They played for at least an hour and Ishmael lost half the money he had made from selling the drugs. But he'd gained their trust because the drugs were illegal — at least they were when there were laws being enforced. They talked a little but mostly they played. Dougie sat outside the game and watched pornographic holograms on a grimy console.

“Hey Dougie” Ishmael called over to him. “What are you up to these days? You hang out in the Downpipe all the time?”

“What the hell do you care?”

“Just asking. Got a job?” He asked, but he was looking at the careful man, to see his reaction. There was none.

“Yea, I work in the fucking warehouse hauling fucking cargo, stacking fucking uniforms. Fucking, shit work!”

“You don't like it?”

“Hey, fuck you man. My boss is a retard in a uniform.”

“And you stack his uniforms?”

Dougie stood up. His face was red. “Listen you... you looking for some of this?” He held up his fist.

“No. I'm looking for some uniforms.” Ishmael said pleasantly. Everyone laughed.

“What?” Dougie was confused enough to forget his anger for a moment.

“No, really. I'm looking for two-dozen uniforms. Just plain old blue maintenance uniforms. I'll pay you to steal me 24 of them.”

“Uniforms? Really? They aren't worth shit... Why do you want 'em?”

“I'll give you 1000 for two dozen, but only if you have them here within an hour. Deal?”

“No shit?”

“No shit. Sixty minutes or less — not sixty-one. Got it?” He held up 2000 worth of chips.

Dougie looked at the stack of chips in front of Ishmael. "Don't lose too many more hands, man. I'll see ya soon." He said grinning. Then he left the room in a hurry.

"What 'ya want the 'uniforms for Ishmael?" said one of the players.

"I hate doing my laundry." Ishmael said and smiled broadly. They all laughed again and returned to their game. Time seemed to stand still while they played. Ishmael had a run of luck and his pile of chips swelled. He helped himself to another mug of luvutz and they all got drunk as they played cards, interrupted occasionally by the rumbling of explosions, which they completely ignored.

Elsewhere in the Luna Linda there was chaos. Explosions still rocked the station and rumors were running wild. Word spread to the other bubbles that something was happening at Luna Linda, but everyone had a different idea of what. Some people thought there was an alien invasion. Others thought there was some kind of riot over resources or the request system. Nobody had a clear idea of what was happening.

"Excellent." Cosmo said, as he listened to reports of the chaos. He ordered several ships to take positions around Luna Linda. Then he broadcast an announcement.

Attention all residents of Luna Linda: We have been attacked by an unidentified life form, or ships of unknown origin. You may have seen them through station windows. We believe they are very dangerous. We have ships defending the station. Please, for your own safety, find shelter toward the core of the station and avoid the outer levels. We'll keep you informed as we learn more. We have the situation under control for the moment so there is no immediate danger.

Walter Barthes,
Captain, Luna Linda

When people read it they began to panic. There weren't enough rooms in the core for everyone, so people began to stake a claim to every utility closet, every storeroom, even the bathrooms had squatters.

There were still only a few dozen Diamond Eyes around Luna Linda. Others had wandered off toward the other bubbles or were hovering near ships which were waiting to dock at Luna Linda.

One found its way to Tig's ship even though he was running dark. He watched it through his pilot's window. "Rose, you there?" he signaled to Hermes.

"Yes, Tig, what's up? Have you made contact with Jennifer?"

"No. But, I've made contact with something. It's... outside my ship. It's some kind of creature, I think."

"Did you say, a creature? Is it wearing an excursion suit?"

"No, I'd say it was naked. It seems to be looking me over."

"Are you in danger?"

"I don't think so. It just seems to be curious."

"Stay boring, Tig."

"Yea, boring. That I can do."

"Dark and boring, OK Tig? Just keep your eyes open and check for new pages from Jennifer."

"Dark and boring. OK"

Tig watched the creature explore the exterior of his ship. When the creature found his viewing portal it peered inside. Tig felt that it was definitely a conscious being. It looked at him. If he moved his hand it watched where he put it.

After about 10 minutes another ship appeared in front of Tig's small craft. His radio broke the silence inside his ship. "Hey, there pilot, this is Tommy Ho. Having some problems? Can I help?" The voice was friendly.

Tig recognized the ship as one of the rock hunters he'd worked with a few weeks ago. "How did you find me?"

"Well, you may look dark, but you're still warm."

Tig wondered what that meant. Then he realized that his ship would still be visible in the infra-red spectrum, even without any running lights and with his engines off. "You got your heat eyes on, Tommy?"

"Always. Say, why are you dark anyway? Hiding from someone?"

“Well, actually...”

Just then a laser blast seemed to come from a black point in space about a kilometer away from Luna Linda and it struck the station causing a small explosion.

“Hey, did you see that?” Tig said.

“Yea, there’s another ship flying dark over there... and it just fired on the station. What’s going on? Is that who you’re hiding from?”

“I don’t know, but I thought it would be a good idea to hide, you know?”

“Yea...” Tommy’s ship went dark too. Then he said, “And what is that thing there flying around your ship. I never saw anything like that before. Is it a maintenance ‘bot?”

“I don’t know what it is, but it seems to be alive...”

“No way!”

“No, really, I think it is. Just watch it for a few minutes. It’s pretty obvious that it is just curious.”

“Huh. Where did it come from? Are there more?”

“I don’t know where it came from, but I think there are more of them around outside the station. Maybe the dark ship was firing at them and hit the station by mistake.”

“Maybe. What do you call it?”

“Well, this one seems to be hanging around me. I was thinking about calling it Fido.” Tig chuckled.

“What kind of name is that?”

“You know, like a dog?”

“I’ve never seen a dog before... but I’ve seen holos of ‘em.”

“Well, it doesn’t look much like a dog, but then, it doesn’t look much like anything else I’ve seen before neither.”

“It seems pretty tame. Has it done anything besides look at you?”

“No. It’s just been checking my ship out. Hey, it looks like it’s checking out your ship now. Maybe you should name it.”

“I’ll call it Lucy. Hey, there’s another laser blast. What is that ship doing? There’s something going on here that isn’t right. I’m gonna broadcast a general alert. Stand by.”

“A general alert? To whom?”

“The other rockies. We warn each other of any kind of general danger and this definitely fits the bill.”

In the relative beauty and comfort of New Eden, Ian and Helen made a quiet dinner in their apartment. They hadn’t heard about any of the day’s events and were just sitting down to eat. They turned on a holoprogram for entertainment while they ate, but it was interrupted by news from Luna Linda.

They listened aghast to reports of Luna Linda being attacked by some kind of space creatures. Representatives of the Bubble Management Committee exploited the chaos by emphasizing how important a role they were playing in controlling the situation and protecting people. It was impossible to argue. The beltweb and the bubble webs were alive with dialogues and arguments. Opinions were as varied as the rumors and many ideas were exchanged, but little real information.

“Can you believe this?” Ian said.

“First Heccat, now this... It’s like God decided our time was up.” Helen said sadly.

“I don’t think I believe God exists.” Said Ian.

“Then where did we come from? Just an accident of evolution?” She asked.

“Maybe. But even if not, I don’t think God created us.”

“What makes you believe that?”

“What makes you believe anything else? Religion? It’s older and dirtier than money.”

“What do you mean? Religion has helped people throughout history.”

“Perhaps it has helped some, but it was also the cause of the Crusades, the Jihads, the Ethnic Cleansing. Hitler believed in God, so what? And the Catholics let him kill the Jews!”

“Now don’t get carried away, Ian. People did those things, not the religions.”

“Do you believe that God wrote the Ten Commandments, or did Moses?”

“Well...”

“You want to know what I believe? I believe that man created God in his own image, because mankind wasn’t ready to accept how alone they were in the Universe. All the born-again religionists, zealots and fundamentalists are the worst kind of cynics. They’ve convinced themselves that their God is on their side and to hell with everyone else. It justifies their actions, no matter what they decide to do and no matter who gets hurt. They try to strike fear of their Gods into others while inside they know it’s a hollow threat: their Gods are never coming back to dispute their claim of Righteousness because their Gods never existed to begin with, and they know it. I wish... I wish there really were a God. I wish he’d come back and punish the religionists.”

“What if mankind isn’t alone in the Universe? What about what is happening at Luna Linda? What if there really are creatures out there?”

“Maybe that would be enough. If God isn’t coming back... Maybe that would be enough.”

“Enough for what? Do you really expect religionists to admit they were wrong all along? You must be joking!”

“No, I don’t expect it. But, maybe, they’ll begin to acknowledge the difference between Spirituality and Religion. Maybe they’ll begin to recognize that belief has a purpose in life and that wasting it on Religion is... degenerate.”

“A purpose? Well, I’ve always thought that belief was all we had left when knowledge fails. What do you expect people to do when they reach the edge of their knowledge?”

“Well, maybe we could start by admitting that we don’t know and having some tolerance for each other.”

“You haven’t shown much tolerance for people who believe in Religion, or God. How do you reconcile that?”

Ian blinked. "Well..."

"See. You have your beliefs and other people have their's. Who is to say who is right."

"Like I said. I wish God would return. He'd set things straight."

"Pretty much every religion feels the same way, Ian. They just believe that God will set things straight in the direction they would like, see?"

"But, there isn't a shred of proof there ever was a God. But there is overwhelming proof of corruption in the name of God."

"Maybe Religion doesn't submit to the Scientific method, but Science doesn't submit to the Religious method either."

"Yes it does... No it doesn't... Just because there are two choices doesn't make them each 50% chances. If this is just a game of semantics then it can be played better or worse by either side, but that doesn't make that side right. If we apply some critical thinking then what do we find? Time and again the side of Religion relies on arguments based on what cannot be proved. They hide behind it. They use it as a shield and then as building blocks to build castles of the unknown. Vast fortresses of non-knowledge, which lure and trap people's spirits. You can't prove there is no God so therefore there might be. You can't prove there is no Heaven and Hell, so there might be. I mean, I could use that argument too, but I'd be called psychotic. Generations of psychotics don't transform their delusions into something real any more than the ignorance of bacteria protected people from the Plague. In the end, if you hide behind something that isn't real, you're going to be exposed — no matter how cleverly you disguise the truth. The Emperor wears no clothes! I just hope I'm alive to see his chubby red ass."

"You're a scientist, Ian. You can't measure religion by scientific values. Of course it looks bogus. People corrupted religions."

"So, what are you saying? That religions are good and we just blame the priests and Imams?"

"Religions have their benefits, yes."

"No. They have their beneficiaries."

"Well... I understand your point. But, I think you're being too cynical."

“Yes. I am. I am cynical about religion because I think that’s the legacy it has earned.”

“You’re entitled to your beliefs. Just check how much you don’t permit others their own beliefs. Isn’t that what you’re upset about? That these religions seek to force their beliefs on everyone else, and yet, isn’t that what you’re doing by criticizing them? I don’t see the difference, except in your choice of words and methods.”

“You think I’m like the religionists?”

“No! No. Not at all. I’m saying that your beliefs don’t leave room for theirs any more than theirs leave room for yours. See?”

“Well... So what? They’re wackos...”

“I’m sure they’d think that you are too, but I don’t. Look, we never really know what is going on, we just get away with our simplified way of seeing the universe because the exceptions don’t come along very often if we’re lucky. We all need some way to cope with what we don’t know. Whether you find your solace in probabilities or a god or a community of like minded-followers of a religion, sooner or later you need to look outside yourself for answers. We’re scientists by nature. We’re great at coping with the unknown. But the unknowable, that’s a whole different thing, isn’t it? I think we’re all on a level playing field when it comes to the unknowable.”

“So people should just go on and believe any ridiculous thing they want as long as its in the realm of the unknowable?”

“I think what I’m saying is that we have no choice, by definition. You can make any assertions you want about a number divided by zero, but they’re all wrong. See? Judging a religion by any rational means is wrong too.”

“I see your point about there being a component of religion, that part that deals with the unknowable, that is as legitimate as any other. I think what I’m saying is that through religions people use the unknowable as a weapon and a prison, to conquer spirits. If one belief system about the unknowable is as good as another, then lets shitcan the ones that exploit people and have some that at their very core prohibit their being used against people.”

“People don’t just create their religions.”

“I think that is exactly what happened.”

“Point taken. But, are you proposing to create a religion?”

“Well, no. Not me. But someone should.”

“And, you’d trust them?”

“Well, I might, if I knew they weren’t trying to control me.”

“I think anytime you adopt someone else’s beliefs you are being controlled by them, even if it is willingly.”

“OK, but religion is what manifests the spiritually rich and poor. Without religion, well — it’s like the Belt and money. There aren’t any poor people in the Belt anymore. There aren’t any rich people either. There are just people who all feel equal to each other.”

“Yea? So? I’m not following you.”

“The belties got rid of money and with it went distinctions like rich and poor. If we got rid of the money and power and influence parts of religion then we’d eliminate the hatred and intolerance that it breeds.”

“So, you’d be more tolerant of them if they only dealt with the unknowable?”

“Yes, I think so, if I could believe that was their main purpose.”

“Yea? Well good luck getting people to get rid of their religions, Ian.”

“Yea? Well let’s see what these things floating around Luna Linda are.”

Just then Athena began to cry and the two went to take care of her, switching off the newsholo before they went into her bedroom.