

Where Gravity Sleeps

12 – Escape

“Where are we? Where are we going?” Someone asked from the darkness.

“We’re somewhere in the infrastructure of Luna Linda, but I haven’t a clue where.” Jennifer sounded tired.

“Are we heading in the right direction?”

“At least nobody is following us. We’re where the voice is leading us, that’s all I can say.”

They were in a huge, open area, dimly lit, with what looked like an oil refinery attached at odd angles to every exposed surface. The low thrumming of machinery could be felt more than heard, punctuated by the frequent snapping, clicking or slamming of a valve opening or shutting. The air smelled vaguely like rotting meat, but it was breathable. Occasionally a rat or small bird or bat would move across the very low gravity space from one outcropping to another.

“I wonder what they all eat?” Jennifer said absently.

“Each other, I think.” Said Chuck Ingalls.

“Something must be at the bottom of the food chain.”

“Yea, I suppose.” His stomach growled. “If we don’t find a way out of here it’s going to be us. Which way from here?”

“Well, the last message I heard from the voice was that we were supposed to cross this space and find a ventilation conduit labeled 41R22D.” She looked across the space. There were at least a hundred conduits and nothing could be read because of the distance.

Everyone was tired and filthy. The warm air of the station interior made everyone perspire, making the ubiquitous dust run in streams when they moved until everyone looked like they’d been hiking in the desert for a week. They felt like it too.

They rested a few more minutes. Then Jennifer said “We’ve got to find the air conduit labeled 41R22D. I think we should split up and look for it. We don’t know if anyone is following us. So if you find it, don’t yell. Instead, rap something hard three times quickly, then wait about 10 seconds and repeat it. Then repeat the sequence a couple of minutes later. Everyone should be able to find their way. OK?”

The expanse looked frightening, or it would have under normal gravity. But the very low gravity of the innermost station core meant they could literally fly across simply by pushing off with enough momentum. Jennifer steadied herself and pushed off hard, shooting out over the open area. She felt a moment of vertigo, but it passed quickly enough. One by one the rest of the Bartlett’s crew flew from their perch in different directions. One person didn’t push hard enough and spent the next few minutes slowly floating across the space, helpless, with the station rotating slowly around him. All he could do was wait until his spiral course finally intersected something solid. Several of the others chuckled as they watched him float slowly by, swearing under his breath.

After about half an hour three distinct raps could be heard, followed by three more ten seconds later. Everyone moved toward the direction of the sound. By the time the second set could be heard everyone was within 30 meters. Someone was standing gingerly on a narrow support column next to a vertical ventilation conduit one meter in diameter. It was labeled 41R22D and a large blue arrow pointed down, toward the outside of the station.

They all congregated near it. “This is it. I wonder how we get in?” Someone said. “Jennifer, do you hear anything from the voice?”

“Not yet, but I remember it said we should go down this conduit. So, lets follow it down until we find a way in.”

“Are you sure we are supposed to be inside it?” The long crawl through the last conduit had left most feeling somewhat claustrophobic.

“Yes, but I don’t...” She stopped because she could hear the interior voice again. She’d learned not to turn her head or even speak when she heard the voice, because it made the voice fade in and out. “...about two hundred meters until you find an access door. The door is locked, but the combination is 31882176. Go inside and follow it for exactly 1257 meters. Then knock on the wall. I’ll signal you when you are there.” She repeated the instructions out loud for all to hear.

They descended along the outside of the main airway, holding onto a small parallel power conduit anchored to it. After a while they found the

access door and the code allowed them to open it. As soon as the door was opened cooler, fresh air rushed out. It was refreshing, but people realized it would be chilly inside. Beginning with Jennifer they went in one-by-one. There were step-rings around the inside that they used to control their descent. At first they descended easily in the light gravity, but after a while the gravity built to nearly 1/2 G. It became more difficult to control their descent and their circumstances gradually transformed into one where there was a palpable feeling of risk, like climbing down an elevator shaft.

“Why are you here, Ishmael? Really?” Said the careful man.

“To meet some friends. I told you.”

“And why did you send Dougie away to steal some worthless uniforms for 50 times their worth?”

“So my friends will have something to wear.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Ishmael looked up from his cards. The careful man had his hand on the table. In it was a small laser pistol, pointing at Ishmael. The man’s finger was on its trigger.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re *really* here? Did you think we were defenseless without Dougie?”

Ishmael laid two cards face down. “I’ll take two.” He looked at he dealer, who obliged him. Ishmael picked up the two cards and filed them in his hand, holding a polished poker face. He put out three red chips and said, “Pay to stay, boys.”

“OK, who are these friends? When are they going to get here?”

“I’m not sure. Hopefully before I win all your money and have to resort to drinking up your luvuts.” He said and everyone laughed, except the careful man.

“The thing is, Ishmael, I don’t think you even have 20 friends. What are their names?”

“I don’t know. I only know I’m meeting them here.”

“You don’t know the names of your friends?”

“No.”

Just then the front door flew open and Dougie stumbled in carrying a big bag over his shoulder. He slammed the door behind him. He was sweating heavily. “Here they are, now pay up!” He said forcefully.

“Gladly! Here you go.” Ishmael counted out 1000 in chips and handed them to Dougie, who almost seemed surprised.

Dougie looked at everyone else at the table. Everyone shrugged except Ishmael, who was looking at the careful man’s gun.

The round of betting was over and the careful man had won the hand and the new deal was his. He shrugged and put his gun away. “Well, if you’ve come to rob us then you have a funny way of doing it. But, who are these friends you don’t know, assuming you’re telling the truth and that’s a big assumption. Why are they naked and how do they even know to meet you here. How do we know who to open the door for, anyway? You know we don’t let just anyone into this yankspace.”

Ishmael looked at him squarely, trying to judge whether to tell him the truth. “Who runs things on Luna Linda?”

“What do you mean?”

“Who has all the power?”

“Cosmo. You know that.”

“Yes, I know. Are you in with Cosmo these days?”

Now the careful man took a long look at Ishmael, trying to decide what to say. “I don’t think I need to tell you anything.”

A round of betting was completed and the careful man dealt out more cards. “But, you already know I’m not in with Cosmo. And, I know you’re not either or you’d have had his men come by and pick me up.”

“How do you know I haven’t?” said Ishmael.

“Because they’d have been here already. So, I’m guessing you’d rather not see Cosmo right now any more than I would.” Said the careful man.

“Yea? Well, who does? But these people, my friends... They can hurt him and he knows it.”

“How?”

Ishmael raised the bet substantially and stood pat.

After a pause, the careful man asked, “Terrorists?”

“Scientists.”

“What? Huh?” Everyone at the table had been content to let the careful man query Ishmael, but everyone was surprised by this answer.

“Scientists?” Several said with disgust.

“Yea, you know. White suits, glasses: technobodies.”

“What do they have on Cosmo?”

“I don’t even know. I just know I’m going to meet them here and that they will need a disguise.”

“Well, why meet them here?”

Ishmael laid his cards down. He had a full house, aces over jacks. The other men winced and folded their hands. Ishmael reached out and pulled in the sizable pot. “Why, for the pleasant conversation, what else?” Everyone laughed and the careful man did too.

“If you’re lying... you won’t make it out of this room alive.” He said cheerfully.

“I’m not lying, and I’m just as curious as you about what these scientists might have on Cosmo. We’ll just have to wait and see. Say, Dougie, can you give me a refill on my luvuts?”

Dougie got right up and filled his cup, still surprised and embarrassed to be grateful for the generous deal Ishmael had made him. He walked around the large conduit running down the center of the room, which gave the The Downpipe its name.

Just then, there was a knock from within the pipe. Everyone looked up. Dougie was standing by the Downpipe, watching the game. He looked left, and right, and then at each player. Then they all looked at him. “It wasn’t me.” He said.

Then they all heard the knock again.

“Your friends?” Asked the careful man.

“Maybe. Were *you* expecting anyone?” Ishmael asked pleasantly.

They all got up. The downpipe had a removable section. It wasn't built that way, but the various people who had owned or occupied the room had found it useful to escape into the ventilation system and from there into the interior of the station. The careful man motioned to Dougie, who removed the section. There was a rush of cool, fresh air. Then the room pressure reached equilibrium and the cool breeze ceased. Everyone instinctively took a deep breath of the fresh air.

Out climbed Jennifer, covered in dust and dried sweat. She was shivering from the cold of the ventilation conduit. At first she didn't see Ishmael and she felt a moment of panic. “Um, hi. Uh, maybe I have the wrong room...” She looked around and began to back into the downpipe again.

“No, this is the Place, Jennifer.” Said Ishmael.

She relaxed noticeably when she heard her name. “Who is that?”

“I'm Ishmael, Tig's friend. I was beginning to wonder about you all. Is everyone here?”

“We... lost two...” She looked around at the scary group playing cards.

“This is one of your scientist friends?” Asked the careful man. “I thought you didn't know their names.” He looked at her lustfully. “Aren't you going to introduce me?”

“Wasn't planning on it. She isn't one of the scientists. She's just helping them too. She's a friend of a friend. Let's get everyone in here and we'll see who's who.”

One at a time the exhausted crew of the Bartlett climbed into the relative warmth of the room. Several made a quick dash for the bathroom while the others removed their excursion suits and donned the maintenance uniforms. They talked among themselves.

Jennifer grabbed Ishmael and looked into his face. “How did you... Who led us here?”

“What do you mean?” Ishmael asked innocently.

Jennifer was struck with another moment of panic. “You mean, you didn’t. But, I heard...”

“What?”

“I heard voices. They led me here.”

“Oh, those. That was Rose.”

She looked at him with an expression of shock and anger. She tried to punch his chest but he caught her cold hand. “You bastard, you knew exactly how we got here.”

Suddenly she was exhausted and she slumped down to the floor.

“How...?”

“Your dental work.”

“How”.

“Actually, you’ll have to thank Hermes. He looked up your dental record and figured out how to broadcast an audible frequency radio signal tuned to your dental work. The trickiest part was figuring out how to broadcast it inside the station without making it apparent to anyone else on the station.”

Her mouth opened as if to ask how again, but she just stared at Ishmael.

“I don’t know how he did it. He broadcast something called a scalar wave using a caduceus coil... you’ll have to ask him.” Rose sent you messages that you heard through your dental work. Nobody else could hear because the signal was precisely tuned to your teeth.”

She got up again. “Thanks. This Hermes fellow sounds like he’s pretty smart. I, uh...” She looked around. “Maybe we should leave?”

“No, please stay and refresh yourselves.” Said the careful man. “We have plenty of food and you all look like you could use a shower. Ishmael, I misjudged you. I’m sorry I doubted your word.”

“It’s OK, Mike. I’ve got plenty more.” He smiled.

The crew cleaned up and ate. The room was crowded with people dressed in the dull blue Luna Linda maintenance uniforms. Then they rested — laying down wherever there was space. Ishmael contacted Rose but unfortunately the station emergency was still in effect. That meant it

was impossible for them to re-dock at the Alpha floatland. “How are we going to get the crew on board Hermes, Rose?”

“I’m not sure yet, but Hermes and I will think of something. We’ll call you when we’re ready.”

The crew slept for a couple hours, while Ishmael continued to play cards with the careful man and his friends, and to keep watch over the crew of the Bartlett.

All the Floyd bubbles had six massive exterior arches. These contained transport tubes and energy conduits and they supported the interior facing daylights. They also supported many huge deflector field generators on their outer sides that protected the station from rocks and anything else that might strike the bubbles. Luna Linda was not a Floyd bubble, but it still had huge deflector field generators attached to the exterior of the station to protect it from debris in space. It was to one of these field generators that Rose instructed Ishmael to bring the crew of the Bartlett. They were to pose as a maintenance crew on assignment.

Jennifer and the crew of the Bartlett left the Downpipe in twos and threes and made their way to the designated field generator alcove about a kilometer away. Ishmael stayed until the last of them had left.

“It’s been a pleasure gentlemen.” Ishmael said and got up and walked toward the door.

“Watch your back, Ishmael. Cosmo’s men are everywhere.” Said the careful man.

Ishmael left the Downpipe and walked through the nearly empty corridors toward the field generator alcove. His mind wandered as he walked. He remembered his former life in Luna Linda, his many deals there, some old friends and enemies. He clicked a few buttons on the arm of his flight suit and spoke into a small lapel microphone. “Darling, are you there?”

“Yes, dear, are you coming to the meet me now?”

“I’m on my way.”

He walked onward and then rounded a corner. Then he jumped back because he saw three station security officers. He recognized two of them and knew he didn’t want to meet them. He peered around the corner to see if they were leaving but they seemed to be waiting.

Just then he heard a voice behind him. “You there, come here.”

Ishmael turned around to see another security officer. Me? he indicated pointing to himself. The officer nodded and walked toward Ishmael.

“Don’t you know the outer levels are restricted? We’re having a station emergency! What are you doing here?”

Ishmael searched for a good excuse. “I’m lost. I was just trying to find a place to get some food that didn’t have a huge line.” He sounded nonchalant.

The officer looked at him squarely, “Show me your ID”.

Ishmael patted the breast of his flight suit and said “I, uh, seem to have left my ID in my other flight suit. Shall I go get it?”

“No. Just stand there.” Then the officer spoke into his own lapel. “OG131 reporting. I’ve found someone in level 2 after the evac. He claims to be lost. Has no ID.”

Just then the other three security guards appeared from around the corner. “I know who he is. I’ll take it from here.”

“Yes sir!”

“Well, Ishmael, it has been a long time.”

The field generator alcove was really just a heavily armored room underneath the large deflector field generator array. Actually, the alcove was structurally on the outside of the station. They had to pass through two separate sets of air-lock/blast doors to enter the alcove. The array created a field which hovered ten meters above the skin of the station and met the fields from other generators distributed evenly across the entire surface of the Luna Linda. The floor had several access ports that allowed maintenance of the external array and there was a view portal which allowed observation.

Jennifer looked down through the observation portal and saw a ship hovering just at the edge of Luna Linda’s deflector field layer. She admired the smooth flowing form of Hermes, though she’d seen many fine ships. His engines were running at their peak to create enough thrustgravity to hold his position just above the field generator. Like his survey of Rose World, this was a challenging trajectory, but one at which he was very well practiced.

Ishmael was half an hour late and Jennifer was getting worried. She contacted Rose using a console in the alcove. "Rose, Ishmael's not here yet. What should we do?"

"We can't wait any longer. Ishmael can take care of himself. OK, here's what we're going to do. You're going to open the access portal to the outside. And then one by one you're going to let the station throw you out and we'll catch you and bring you inside. We'll create a temporary hole in the deflector field for you to fall through. Got it?"

"Um, Rose, we don't have excursion suits on. Are you suggesting we brave the vacuum of space for this little journey?"

"We're going to create an annular deflector field corridor between your portal and Hermes, about 1 meter in diameter. It will keep you from drifting and it will be pressurized with air from the station. It will be a little chilly, especially for the last people through. But you won't freeze on the way over."

"Have you ever done this before? If this doesn't work..."

"No, but Hermes says he can do it and I believe him."

"Hermes again? I'm going to have to thank him in person!"

"Um, yea, when you get here, OK?"

"OK, Rose, what do we do?"

"First, we have to agree on which access portal you're going to open. Then Hermes will build the deflector corridor. Then you'll open the portal to pressurize it. Do you see portal number 3?"

"No, there are no numbers in here."

"Do you see someone standing near a window?"

"Yes."

"He's standing under Portal number 2. Lets use that one."

"OK."

"Stand by."

Jennifer watched through the view portal. Hermes slid slowly overhead and a light bluish column formed between the bottom of the ship and the skin of Luna Linda. The horizontal station deflector field was cut where the two intersected.

“OK, Jennifer, we’re almost ready. But listen, as soon as you open that portal, a decompression alert will be sent to the main control room. They’re going to know something is up. So your people will have to move quickly. Are you ready?”

“Just about. Stand by.” Jennifer explained the plan to everyone who didn’t already know. There were some concerns, but it seemed like the only way off the station. There was no way to leave through either floatland because they were well-guarded and no ships were allowed to come or go. Everyone lined up next to the portal in the floor.

“We’re ready now. By the way, we’re going to be falling about 20 meters. Do you have something soft for us to land on besides each other?”

“Yes, Hermes arranged a series of weak deflector fields through the column which will decelerate you in stages. It will feel like you’ve fallen about four feet. The last one is at an angle and is rotating to distribute you all through the cargo bay, onto foam plastic mats.”

The portal had two surprisingly large pneumatic rams to force it open against the internal air pressure. Air blew out immediately with a sudden, urgent, crescendo as soon as the portal was opened. Then the pressure stabilized and everyone noticed the drop in air pressure and temperature. Jennifer stared down the hole in the floor and saw Hermes 20 meters away. “Here goes.” She helped each person into the opening. It was disturbing to sit on the edge of the station and let go. Some people had to wait a moment to get used to the idea of letting themselves be thrown off the station, through a blue tube of light, trying to land inside a three meter wide hole in a ship 20 meters away. The hole looked so small compared to the vastness of space outside. One by one the entire crew of the Bartlett took a drop of faith.

Ishmael feigned ignorance. “Ishmael? I think you have me confused with someone else. My name is Roger.”

“Save it.” The man drew a laser pistol and a moment later the rest of the security officers did too. “I’m sure Cosmo would like to speak with you, Ishmael. Now don’t do anything sudden, OK? Give me your weapon.”

“What weapon?”

The man pistolwhipped Ishmael, cutting his lip. Ishmael looked up in pain and stared into the shiny end of the man's laser pistol. Ishmael handed him his own pistol.

Two security officers walked behind him and another in front. They led Ishmael deeper into the station, toward the core. The station's spingravity receded as they moved until their gait was mostly long floating strides. Ishmael saw more and more security officers and his heart sank.

Finally they arrived at a heavily guarded and fortified door. He was led inside and told to sit in a metal chair. He waited for several minutes, during which time he tapped out an S.O.S. on a red button on his arm while casually crossing his arms. Then a heavy man floated into the room through a sliding side door. It was Cosmo. "Ishmael Kalim, what an unpleasant surprise! Where have you been hiding. I'd hoped you were dead along with everyone else. I so hate to be disappointed."

Ishmael tried to act confused. "I don't know who this Ishmael guy is or why you're mad at him, but I'm Roger Akimbu. I'm sure you've mistaken me for him."

"I don't think so, Ishmael. Say, we can make this easy if you want. If you tell me where I can find my shipment of Nova 7 then I'll let you go."

"I don't know what Nova 7 is or who this Ishmael character is either. Please, let me go. I haven't done anything wrong. I have a right to see a lawyer, don't I?"

"I'm a lawyer, you're screwed." Said one of the security officers standing by. Everyone laughed except Ishmael.

"It is easy enough to prove who you are with a DNA scan. Shall we take a DNA sample?" Cosmo nodded to one of his officers. The man pulled a shiny blade from his jacket and held it up to Ishmael's nose.

"No. That won't be necessary." Said Ishmael. "It was never on board as far as I know. I gave Scotia the money and double checked the cargo, but he'd made a switch and it wasn't there when I got back to the Moon."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

"Oh, I believe *you*, Roger."

“Last chance Ishmael: where is the Nova 7?”

“I haven’t got it! Ask Scotia! Damn it! Cosmo, listen to me!”

“I was sorry to hear about your... accident.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, the one that will cost you your life, of course.” Cosmo smiled.

“Please, Cosmo. Don’t kill me. Its just money, we can work together and get you your money back. You know I’m good enough. Cosmo, I was set up!”

“Too bad you don’t have your helmet with you.”

“Why, do you have a job in mind? I can get a helmet!”

“I’ve heard tell that if your brain freezes cold enough it keeps thinking like some kind of superconductor.”

“Cosmo, don’t... don’t throw me out an airlock, Cosmo.” Ishmael sobbed.

Cosmo turned to his officers. “C114,” he said and floated out of the room.

“Let’s go, Ishmael.” A serious looking officer said, holding a pistol in front of Ishmael’s face.

Ishmael got up. He looked defeated. He moved a little slowly and seemed to savor each moment, even under the circumstances.

They led him back to the outer levels of the station. On the way he tapped out several more S.O.S. patterns on the same red button. The spingravity grew as they moved. Finally, they stopped in front of an airlock. “I’m sorry, Ishmael, end of the line. Get in.”

Ishmael looked at the airlock and at the laser pistols. “You don’t really want to kill me, do you?”

“No, I don’t. But I have orders. It’s basically you or me.” He pressed a button on the wall and the airlock door slid open. The man motioned toward the airlock with his gun.

Ishmael walked into the airlock. The man pushed another button on the wall and the airlock door closed.

Ishmael looked around the inside of the airlock. He tried to override the controls but they were locked out. Then he tapped out an S.O.S. one more time. The officer stared through the window and held his finger over the button that would open the exterior door and blow Ishmael out into space. Ishmael stared at him, locking his eyes for a moment. "Don't do this." He mouthed. The security officer could only read his lips because no sound penetrated the heavy airlock door. At the same time, Ishmael crossed his arms and the fingers on his right hand came into contact with a row of buttons on his left arm. He placed his index finger on a green button and waited.

Then the security officer looked away and pressed the button. An alarm sounded and the station's protective deflector shields outside the airlock deactivated. Ishmael pressed his green button and then the outer door began to open. The air was blown out and Ishmael was blown out into space along with it. He waved his arms wildly for a moment and then was completely still and floated away from Luna Linda.

The security officer pressed the button to close the outside door and watched Ishmael's body writhe. From the officer's perspective Ishmael's body moved in a curved course away from the station. Then the rotation of the station eclipsed his view of the body. He left to return and report his success to Cosmo.

Jennifer's heart was pounding while she waited for her turn. She expected armed security guards to come through the airlock at any moment, shooting at them. She wondered what happened to Ishmael and to the injured man and the doctor. She hoped they were all right. She watched one person after another drop silently out of existence from the maliciousness of Luna Linda. She still didn't know if they could trust the strange gambling clique in the Downpipe. When it was her turn she stood at the portal and looked down. There was no way for her to know if it was real or a hologram projected outside the station. But she had no choice, so she stepped over the opening and sat on the edge. Her legs dangled into space, protected only by the glowing column. She was stunned at how cold the air was. She pressed a button on the portal door and then dropped through. The portal closed slowly behind her.

She saw the station retreat above her quickly. Then there was a blue flash as her eyes passed the half-way point, where, outside the narrow umbilical column, the station's main deflector field hovered thick and blue. Then a split second before she entered Hermes' lower hold she felt like she hit a thin, viscous layer like an inch of water. It slowed her slightly. She hit eight more such layers in the next three meters of her fall, each one slowing her further. The last one was a bit stiffer and it deflected her

to the side and into a pile of expanded foam plastic. It was a soft landing and she came to a rest on the ceiling of the hold. She looked around and saw the remaining crew of the Bartlett neatly placed one next to another in a circle on the ceiling directly above the spacelock in the floor.

That's everyone." Jennifer said aloud, seemingly to the walls. "I closed the portal door behind me. Let's get out of here, Rose!" Jennifer shouted, her heart pounding from the thrill of the fall.

It felt to Jennifer like she'd fallen through a barrier of fear and toil into another world. She watched the spacelock close above her and she realized that she was indeed inside another ship. The nightmare possibility of a decompression death vanished.

Just then the ceiling, which had so firmly gripped them with the thrustgravity of Hermes's careful but powerful flight seemed to disappear behind them slowly and the floor began to approach them steadily. The crew of the Bartlett were used to in-flight course corrections that, from the inside of a ship, appear like gravity shifts. Nonetheless, people drifted in all directions. When they all landed on the floor and steadied themselves, Hermes began a bit more acceleration away from the station by reducing the thrustorbit.

"What about Ishmael?" Jennifer asked.

"We'll find him." Rose moved over to the Crawford scanner console and began manipulating its controls.

Ishmael's body floated away from Luna Linda, tumbling slowly. His excursion suit automatically engaged heaters and air purifiers within moments after the spacelock door had opened. The green button Ishmael had pushed activated his face-shield deflector generator. Ishmael had never needed a helmet.

He remained motionless and watched the station spin on its axis and revolve around him as he floated. It was dizzying. He slowly moved his arm into position so his hand could activate his radio controls while he would still look like he was a frozen corpse. He continued to tumble.

"Tig, can you hear me?" He said.

"Yea, where are you? Are you with Jennifer?"

"No, I'm alone. I'm floating outside the station."

“What ship?”

“I’m just in an excursion suit. Can you come pick me up?”

“Yea, I’ll find you. Leave this frequency open... OK. I’ve located you. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, Tig.”

A few minutes later Tig opened his small ship’s airlock and maneuvered so that Ishmael floated inside. Then he closed the outer airlock hatch and pressurized the airlock. Once pressurized it opened automatically and Ishmael pulled himself into Tig’s small rock hunting ship. He turned off his facemask deflector and took a deep breath of the ship’s air.

“It’s big out there...” Ishmael said, then he shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Have you heard from Rose or Hermes?”

“Not yet. Let’s check in. Rose? Hermes? This is Tig. Are you there?”

“We’re here, Tig. The crew of the Bartlett is on board now, but we still haven’t been able to locate Ishmael. We received his S.O.S. and we’re scanning the station for him now, but we haven’t been able to find him yet.”

“You won’t find him on the station.” Tig said and smiled at Ishmael, who remained silent but smiled.

“Do you know where he is?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s sitting in front of me.”

“Well, that’s a relief. You might have mentioned that a little sooner. Can he speak?”

“I’m here.”

“Ishmael! What happened to you? How did you get off the station?” Rose said. She sounded angry but Ishmael knew she wasn’t.

“I had some help... I’ll fill you in later. Is everyone else off the station?”

“Yes, we’re ready to go. We were just looking for you.”

“Let’s rendezvous.” He nodded to Tig, who fired up the thrusters and began a course to rendezvous with Hermes.

A few minutes later the ships docked. Tig and Ishmael joined Rose, Jennifer and the remaining crew of the Bartlett on board Hermes.

“Where to?” Asked Hermes.

“New Eden?” Asked Ishmael.

“ETA to New Eden is about two hours.”

“Rose, will you contact Moses and Betty see if they want to join us? Ishmael asked.

“Wait!” Said Jim. “We still need our research data, on board the Bartlett.”

“Well, there’s no way to get it now. You saw how it was secured in the Beta Floatland.” Said Jennifer. “Along with my ship.”

“I think we can get the data.” Said Rose.

“How?” Asked Jim.

“We’ll download the Bartlett’s data into Hermes memory.” Said Rose.

“Why not just remote control the Bartlett?” Asked Jim.

“Because we don’t want them to know you have left. We want them to keep looking for you on Luna Linda. If the ship is gone they might figure you left in it. Jim, I know how you must feel about losing the Bartlett, but...”

“It’s OK. How do you plan to download the Bartlett’s data without a datapipe, Rose?”

“Well... short of blasting a hole through the docking bay doors, I think we can use the Crawford scanner.”

“Really? How?”

“We’ll just ask the Bartlett to broadcast a holographic datastream outside itself and we’ll scan that.”

“Ahh... Sound’s good, but how are you going to contact the Bartlett?”
Asked Jim.

“You mean, we can’t just use a radio connection?”

“They’ve shut down all radio contact at the docking level. We know because we weren’t able to contact anyone from the Bartlett when we were in the dock. Someone is going to have to be on board to tell the computer to begin the display dump.” Said Jim.

“I think all we need is your voice inside the Bartlett, not your body.” Said Rose.

“How will we do that?” Asked Jim.

“Does the Bartlett have any dental work?” Asked Jennifer, and everyone laughed.

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do. But for the Bartlett, we just need to find a suitable reflector near a voice control mic.”

“Why not just use the mic itself?” Asked Jim.

“Oh, yea, that would be perfect. But no matter what we use, we won’t be able to hear what the computer says. Can you work with that?”

“Yes, I know what questions it will ask in response to my commands.”

“Hermes, can you find the specs on the voicecom mics for the Bartlett? When we get nearby I’ll locate one using the Crawford.” Said Rose.

“What about my ship?” Asked Jennifer.

“I think we should leave it behind for the same reason.” Said Ishmael.

“But, they don’t know I was part of this.”

“We don’t know what they know and what they don’t. We can try to retrieve it later if it’s safe. But for now, I think it should remain.”

Jennifer hated to lose that ship. It was her independence. “Promise to help me get another?” She asked hopefully.

“I’ll help you get your ship back, or I’ll help you get another, but I can’t promise when we’ll succeed. Fair enough?” He asked.

Jennifer nodded agreement, but she didn't say anything. She turned and left, looking for a place to rest.

By the time they were in position outside the Beta Floatland docking bay Hermes had found a suitable voicecom microphone using the sensitive Crawford scanner.

Inside the dark and quiet Bartlett the last voice commands it would ever receive from its captain came quietly from within the sensitive voice command microphone in its bridge command chair. Jim commanded it to dump its entire Earthspace research database to a holographic data stream projected outside the ship. Hermes absorbed the data for about twenty minutes until the transfer was complete.

"We should probably erase that research", said Jim. "We don't want it to fall into the wrong hands."

"Whatever you say, Captain." Said Ishmael.

"Bartlett, erase all research banks and fill with randomized data. Then encrypt all research banks." Said Jim. Then aside to Ishmael and the others he said. "It should be asking for a confirmation code -- that's a restricted command." Then to the Bartlett he said "Authorization London 77G4 Thorn."

"How do we know if it worked?" Asked Ishmael.

"We can request a preview of the research banks and see if they are still intact." He did so.

"Hermes, what does the data look like?"

"It's random as far as I can tell."

"I wonder how long they'll hunt for a decryption key?" Rose asked.

"A long, long time, I hope. But I can make it harder for them." Said Jim. "Bartlett, delete all command logs for the last thirty minutes." Again he waited for the Bartlett to request authorization, which he then provided. "The perfect crime." He smiled.

"There's no such thing." Said Ishmael. "Lets get out of here!"

People resettled to the back of the hold as Hermes ramped up the thrustgravity and began the journey to New Eden.

The explosions had stopped and people in Luna Linda were feeling a little safer. Captain Walter Barthes, known as Cosmo to his underworld associates, contacted the other bubble Captains and requested a private meeting. He left Luna Linda in secret on a darkship bound for the da Vinci, which had a small habitable area used for the construction workers.

It was very rare for more than two or three of the Captains to meet in person. Even before Heccat they were considered powerful far beyond their rank. Now they had become the unofficial political leaders of the Earthspace survivors. The bubbles had become the new countries. Since very few people had access to spacecraft the space between the bubbles was a great ocean, foreboding and ultimately powerful. Some of the Captains exploited their positions more than others. Luna Linda had always been the center of corruption in the Outer Earth and Cosmo was among the most skilled at it.

When the other captains had arrived they all met in a makeshift office created for managers of the da Vinci project. In attendance were Wayne Arnold, captain of the da Vinci, Caramine Ogalla captain of New Eden, Rubio Guitterez, captain of Stars View, Yamada Kyoko, captain of Olympus, Paul Farmer, captain of New Atlantis, and David Owen, captain of Floyd. Each one wore a distinctive uniform with insignia showing both their rank and the bubble they “served”.

When they had all greeted each other and taken a seat Walter Barthes summoned his most diplomatic voice and stature and said, “Thank you all for coming. I don’t need to tell you how strange is this twilight place we now call home, nor the gravity of our situation. I’ve asked you all together so we can discuss how we can work together to deal with our present danger.”

Captain Yamada Kyoko of Olympus spoke up first. “Captain Barthes, will you fill us in on what is happening at Luna Linda? We’ve heard that your station is being attacked by some kind of space creature? Is this really true?”

“I’m afraid it is true. We don’t know much about these terrible creatures, but they aren’t all-powerful. We are repelling them with laser fire and we are defending the station. They have some sort of energy beam or laser weapons too and they have been attacking the station. We have located our people further in the interior and so far we have only sustained minor damage and less than a dozen people have been killed.”

There was a murmur among the other captains as the incredible news unfolded. For a moment everyone shook their heads or dropped their jaws in disbelief.

Caramine Ogalla, captain of New Eden, spoke next and said. "I've heard an unofficial report that a fleet of ships flying dark are attacking the station and not these creatures. Can you comment on this?"

"What fleet? There's nobody but us, and these creatures out here. Why would anyone attack our own stations for god's sake? Who started this reckless rumor?"

"It was reported through a network of belt pilots in the vicinity," she replied.

"Well, I don't trust them. I think they resent our being here in their space. If anyone would attack our stations, I think it might be them. But the attack isn't coming from any ships. My station craft have been in combat with these creatures and they clearly are the aggressors."

Rubio Guitterez, captain of Stars View, asked with concern, "Do you have them under control? Are they moving toward any of the other bubbles?"

"Yes, we have them under control for now. I don't think these creatures are going to attack any of your stations, but I recommend putting your crews on alert. Tell them not to wait to be fired on. If they see any of these creatures they should just vaporize them. Our station craft are containing them off our Beta floatland. It's like some kind of nightmare... first the Earth, now these creatures attacking... These are truly strange and dangerous times. Our survival as a species is at stake. We can't afford to take *any* chances."

More murmurs. Caramine Ogalla asked, "OK, what do you propose?"

"That we all work together to protect our people."

"Specifically, what do you want us to do that we're not already doing?" She pressed him.

"I propose we declare a fleet-wide 1.3 Emergency Status until we have eliminated all the alien creatures."

There was suddenly an outburst of expressions and side conversations.

"Is that... Is that..." Caramine waited until the voices were silent. "Is that really called for? No freedom of transit? Communication limits?" She challenged.

"I believe it is and that is what I have invited you here today to discuss."

“Well, I’m against it. We don’t need a neo-military state.”

“I think we do, to protect our people. We can’t protect them if they are freely flying here and there. We don’t have the ships!”

“How long would the 1.3 condition be maintained?” Asked Wayne Arnold, captain of the da Vinci.

“As long as needed.”

“I thought you said you had them under control?” Captain Guitterez asked.

“There were a number of scientific research vessels in Earthspace. They reported seeing many thousands of these creatures, shortly before...” He stopped and looked down.

“Before what?” Captain Guitterez asked.

“Before they were all destroyed, as far as we know.” He said solemnly. “We don’t know what happened, but none of the research ships in Earthspace came back. We think these creatures destroyed them. I’m afraid this was just the first wave. We’ve got to prepare ourselves for a full-scale invasion!”

There was a look of obvious shock on most of the faces. Cosmo had played their fears well and had them just where he wanted them. There was an uncomfortable silence. “Shall we vote? Is there any debate?” He asked seriously.

“Yes. So far all we have to go on is the information you’ve provided. I for one want to see some corroborating evidence before I’d be willing to agree to your proposal.” She didn’t say it but her tone was clear enough. Caramine Ogalla thought he was a liar.

“What if we declare the 1.3 while we are corroborating Captain’s Barthes’ claims? That would seem to be erring on the side of caution at least.” Said Captain Guitterez.

“It also makes us accessories if it doesn’t bear out under scrutiny. It lends our credibility to it. I do trust the belt pilots. I want proof first.” Caramine insisted.

“Caramine, you’re a careful soul, as always. I respect that. I’ll provide you all with the proof you desire. If you are satisfied that I’m telling the truth will you all agree to declaring a fleet-wide 1.3 Emergency?” He looked around the table and everyone nodded except Caramine.

“Caramine?”

“We’ll see.”

“We need to be united in this, Caramine. Can we count on you?” Cosmo’s voice was gentle and hopeful.

“I am not as convinced of that as you are, Walter. If I’m convinced that declaring a 1.3 in New Eden is warranted then I’ll do it. But I won’t declare a 1.3 without due cause, just to go along with all of you. I’m going to open communication with the belt pilots and find out what they know. There is no evidence they have any ill will toward us or any motivation to lie. Your hostility towards them makes me wonder what they really saw.”

“Are you suggesting I’m lying, Captain? That I want to declare a 1.3 for some other reason?”

The air was charged between Captains Ogalla and Barthes. Everyone stared.

“Tell me, Captain, what does it cost for a room in Luna Linda these days? Has the exodus to the spinworld been hurting your bottom? Line, that is.”

It was barely noticeable, but Walter Barthes’ lips curled slightly into a sneer and he ground his teeth together, causing his temples to flex. “We don’t all live in a luxurious paradise like New Eden, Captain. How’s the tourist trade these days? Are you worried about a drop in profits?”

“Captains, please. I don’t think this is about profits. You clearly both care deeply about the well being of your people. Let’s agree to investigate further before we decide what to do. Can we agree on that?” He was looking right at Caramine.

“Yes, I agree to look into it before deciding about declaring a 1.3 Emergency.” She smiled agreeably.

There was another uncomfortable moment of silence. Cosmo thought to himself this is the best I’m gonna get. “Thanks for coming everyone.” Said Captain Barthes. He nodded to everyone except Caramine. Then everyone left to return to the bubbles. They left in small groups talking urgently but quietly.

When they had all gone Captain Barthes moved over to a console and thumbed up a secure connection to one of his Lieutenants, Max Antonio, on Luna Linda. “We don’t have a 1.3 yet. Captain Ogalla wants more

proof. She claims some of those rock hunters saw your ships firing on the station. Didn't your crews clear the area first?"

"Yea, we didn't see anyone out there."

"Well someone saw you! Idiot! Find out who and change their minds. When I get back I'll want to meet with you and Rog. We're going to have to produce some kind of unquestionable proof. Have you eliminated the Bartlett's crew yet?"

There was a pause. "No sir. We haven't been able to locate them in the Beta floatland yet, but it is just a matter of..."

"You fool! Maybe they aren't even in the floatland anymore. Forge a security alert. Make them out to be dangerous and armed. Search every room! Find them and eliminate them!"

Two diamond eyes flew toward earthspace at an incredible speed. Each pushed along a single, frozen human head, as if it were a soccer ball. Within two days they had reached the neobelt that was once Earth and rejoined their swarm. They used their microwave language to contact those around them and within a few hours they had located an enclave of grayish colored diamond eyes.

The gray ones were obviously special. They moved little and other diamond eyes brought them food or objects to examine. The other diamond eyes always approached from the front and a group of diamond eyes surrounded the gray ones in formation on all sides, like guards or attendants.

The two diamond eyes brought the human heads to the gray ones after a brief exchange of information with the attendants. There was another brief communication between the two and the gray ones and then the gray ones began to examine the heads. At first they looked them over. Then they began to absorb them, very, very slowly. Within a few minutes the color of gray ones began to fluctuate quickly from purple to red, black to aqua, and many other variations. There was suddenly a lot of activity and more and more diamond eyes began to arrive, like an audience.

The gray ones returned to their gray color with occasional outbursts of various colors and sometimes patterns. Sometimes the shapes were just patterns or gradients of color. Other times objects, faces, and recognizable human-related images would be displayed on the smooth skin of the gray diamond eyes. This continued, non-stop, for a period of

almost a week as they continued to absorb the human heads, while many thousands of diamond eyes hovered close by during the entire process.

They formed a sphere around the gray ones. The edges of their bodies nearly touched and their eyes all pointed inward. As new diamond eyes arrived, the sphere got bigger and bigger to make room for the new arrivals. No diamond eye was behind any other that joined the sphere. Occasionally, a diamond eye would pull its pseudopod eye into its body and it would protrude from its other side, looking at the space around the growing sphere.

Finally, one of the gray ones uttered a short series of microwave language, which the sphere seemed to amplify and echo. Then, from throughout Earthspace all of the diamond eyes began to converge on the location of the gray ones. It took nearly a day for them all to arrive.

They all finally assembled around the gray ones in a sphere about 1 kilometer in diameter. The sphere rippled subtly and slowly, like waves on a quiet lake in very low gravity. All over the surface of the sphere diamond eye pseudopod eyes would poke out at random. It looked like tiny eruptions.

Then there was a period of intense communication. If microwaves were visible it would have looked like a stadium filled with a hundred thousand flash cameras going off rapidly and nearly simultaneously, all focused on the gray ones. The gray ones responded with microwave flashes of their own, at an incredible rate. At first the communication was chaotic, then the pattern of microwave flashes seemed to settle down and fewer and fewer flashes were seen, but they lasted longer. Occasionally, nearly all the diamond eyes would flash simultaneously.

The communication continued for almost ten hours and then abruptly stopped.

Almost immediately the diamond eyes began to move to one of a dozen points. They closed their single pseudopod eye by pulling it down into their bodies, making them look like a playing-card diamond shape one meter long and two thirds as wide that looked like it had swallowed a bowling ball. These laid on top of each other, one after another, until their combined form looked like a football. Each of the footballs grew as layer after layer of diamonds joined the formation.

After about an hour of gathering, twelve footballs of various sizes began a journey toward the new bubblespace between Mars and the Belt. They would make the entire trip in two days.

On the day the two diamond eyes arrived in Earthspace with their unusual cargo, Cosmo returned to Luna Linda. He was in a terrible mood after his meeting with the other captains. He called a meeting of his top lieutenants, several of whom attended remotely using holographic projections.

“OK, you guys, what have you got for me?” Cosmo’s intensity made everyone tighten up a notch. Cosmo could see them square their shoulders slightly and breathe a little deeper.

Max Antonio spoke first. “We’ve contacted the belt pilots, uh, rock hunters, and we know who reported seeing the weapons fire. A Tommy Ho, flying a ship called Cupris. We told him the Captains wanted to thank him for his help and that we were all planning the resistance strategy here on Luna Linda. He seemed to believe it. We asked him to come in and tell us what he saw. He trusts us I think. He said he would come tomorrow. We traced his signal and identified his ship. I sent a darkship to intercept him. We’ll reach him in a few hours if he turns around to meet us. Or, if he runs, it could be a day or more before we catch him.”

Rog spoke next. “We haven’t found the crew of the Bartlett yet, but we’re looking. We think they’re somewhere in the main station infrastructure. We’ll find them. We decided to scan their ship’s records for any clues to where they might be going, but... we’re having trouble reading them. They seem to be encrypted, but none of our cracking tools has broken it yet. I think they’ll crack it soon though, sir, and...”

“What the hell *is* working, Rog?” Interrupted Cosmo.

“Sir?”

“What the hell have you done right in, say, the last day?”

“Sir, we successfully attacked the station and we...”

“Oh, was it hard to hit? You were supposed to clear the area first, but someone saw you shooting at the station even though you were supposed to be dark!”

“We were dark sir, I don’t know how they could have seen us.”

“This Tommy Ho was using an IR scanner, Sir.” Said Max.

“There’s no way to hide heat, sir. Flying dark isn’t really invisible. The situation inside of Luna Linda is just as you requested, sir. People are worried and willing to make compromises. The room charge has risen

twenty percent in the last day and the premier suites have almost doubled in price.” Added Rog, riding a wave of redemption, he hoped. *Make your best stand while you can still stand*, he thought to himself.

Cosmo looked away, angry. “Anyone *else* have anything to report?” He asked and looked at each of the three other lieutenants. They didn’t say anything. “All right, let me know as soon as you find anything.” Then he flipped the switch like it were a trigger and summarily terminated the meeting. The message was clear.

A few hours later the Cupris was hailed by a sleek station cruiser, near the edge of the belt. “Captain Ho?” Said a friendly sounding voice from the cruiser.

“Yea, who’s that?”

“Yes, ah, I’m Captain Evans, of the Luna Linda station guard. I’m here to escort you back to Luna Linda.”

“Why’s that? Don’t ya think I can make it there myself?”

“Of course, we had no doubt. We just wanted to make sure you were... safe. Your knowledge is very valuable, sir.”

“Really?” Tommy didn’t trust the hesitant voice. He checked his scanners and saw that the ship was flying dark. “Why are you dark?” He asked.

“Ah, station protocol, Sir.”

“Damn stupid if you ask me. Don’t ya run into each other all the time?”

“We do that until we have established contact, Sir. Standby.” The sleek ship’s lights came on and it glowed in space, dwarfing the Cupris.

“That’s better. Now, I can find my own way to your, Luna London. You just run along and I’ll meet you there, OK?”

“We’re going to escort you, Sir. We have orders.”

“Oh, yea? From who?”

“From Luna Linda’s Captain, Walter Barthes.”

Now Tommy was worried. “Mind if I invite some friends along?” He asked pleasantly. He pressed a button on his command console. The

conversation was immediately broadcast live to all rock hunters monitoring their shared emergency channels.

“We’d prefer that you didn’t. We don’t want to share your knowledge with anyone, in case they are collaborators.”

“Collaborators?”

“Yea, you know, those creatures?” Captain Evans voice was sounding slightly frustrated.

“What do you mean?”

“You saw ships attack Luna Linda. They were collaborating with those creatures. Look, we need your help. We just want to make sure you make it safely back to Luna Linda. OK? Those are my orders.”

“It was a ship just like yours that I saw attacking the station. Flying dark, too, like your standard protocol. I never saw those creatures do anything hostile at all.”

“We saw them, Captain Ho. Now, please come with us.”

“And if I don’t?”

“My orders are to bring you back to Luna Linda, one way or another. I’d like it to be voluntary, but either way, you’re coming with us.”

“I don’t want to go with you. What are you going to do about it?” Tommy said defiantly and he began maneuvering his ship evasively. It was a good thing because a moment later a cutting beam crossed his previous position. “Stop firing at me! You have no good cause!” Tommy shouted as he flipped his ship unexpectedly, making for a nearby field of rocks.

Elsewhere nearby other rock hunters listened to the brewing confrontation. Several of them set a course for the Cupris.

Tommy continued to dodge shots and remained out of range of their tractor field. After half an hour of nauseating, nearly random evasive flight he made it to the rockfield. He flew behind a rock large enough to hide his ship. He locked onto it with landing claws. The cruiser flew past a moment later, looking for him. Suddenly the cruiser started firing at the nearby rocks. It was travelling fast for a rockfield this dense.

Tommy watched as the cruiser tried to cut a clear path through the rockfield. For a while it succeeded, but then it was struck by a fast rock

about two meters in diameter. It was too much for the ship's deflector field and it breached the side. The ship swerved and hit several more smaller rocks. They didn't penetrate the shields, but they probably knocked the crew around inside. More rocks struck the cruiser and it began to look crumpled in several places. Tommy could see inside the ship through holes in its skin. Only the ship's deflector shields held its air inside.

"Now, you boys look like you could use some help. If you apologize real nice I'll help you out of this mess." Tommy said cautiously.

The response was a laser blast that struck the rock he was clinging to. It blew apart a section of the rock, which threw shrapnel-like rocks at his ship. But the shields of the *Cupris* safely deflected them. "Suit yourself boys. Take a real deep breath now," he said. Then the cruiser was hit consecutively by two rocks from different directions. The ship rolled out of control and was pummeled by a third. Then the shields blinked off and Tommy watched as the contents of the ship were blown out the various hull breaches. He could make out bodies among the debris, because they writhed wildly for a few seconds before floating stiffly. Then after a little while the ship was struck by a large, fast rock that ripped it in two.

Tommy scanned the area and set a safe course back into the belt. He flew very carefully and slowly through the dense rockfield and back toward Rose World. He spoke to the other rock hunters. "He flew like flypaper and looked like shit. Now his ship is dust. These guys were up to no good. Whoever gave them their orders, this Captain of Lunacy Limbo, he's behind it. I know what I saw there and these guys were firing on their own station. Don't ask me why. But these creatures — I saw one. Looked like a pointy hat with a big eye-like bulge on top. They seem harmless enough. My advice is to stay in the Belt and let the bubblied handle this on their own. Tommy Ho, out."

A reply came within minutes, from a friend of Tommy's a couple of light-minutes away spinward. "Hey Tommy, it's Alonzo. You OK man? Hey, I'm heading over there but it will be a day before I get there, at least. Let me know where you're heading and I'll meet you on the way. Alonzo out."

Tommy replied and continued flying toward Rose world.

About an hour later another voice broke the silence of his small ship. "Mr. Ho, this is Caramine Ogalla, Captain of New Eden bubble. I'd like to speak with you, if you're willing."

Tommy checked his scans but saw no ships. "Why should I want to? The last of you bubblied who wanted to talk to me tried to kill me. Are you here to guarantee my safety too?"

There was an eighteen second delay while his signal reached New Eden and then another similar delay while her signal made its way back to his ship. “No, we just want to talk. Who tried to kill you?”

“Some fool captain named Evans. He’s a fleshpop now, bouncing off rocks until he’s ice dust. He was working for the captain of that Lunar bubble.”

After about a minute the reply came back. “I thought so. I suspected Captain Barthes was behind it. So, you’re safe? I’m glad. I know you probably don’t trust people from the bubbles right now, but I’m asking you to trust me. I’m fighting Captain Barthes. He’s trying to control the bubbles with his false emergency. Will you tell me exactly what you saw? If you have visual logs, will you transmit them to me?”

Tommy pondered the request. He had a good feeling about this Caramine. Not only was she a long way away, she hadn’t asked him to come to her. All she wanted was information, to know the truth about what he saw. He decided to oblige her. “Yes, I’ll tell you what happened and I’ll send you my scan logs too, although you can probably get a close enough look at these creatures if you want. They’re buzzing around all over around there.” Then he relayed his experience, including the conversation with Tig, although he didn’t mention his name. He just called him another rock hunter. “So, any questions?” He finally asked.

There was a long delay, maybe an extra minute. Then Caramine said, “You have our deepest gratitude, Mr. Ho. We need to digest what you’ve said, so for now that’s all we need from you. May we reach you on the beltweb, in case we have more questions?”

The beltweb was a safe way to communicate because, among other things, it didn’t reveal where you were the way direct radio transmissions did. It further added to the perception that Caramine meant no harm. “Yes, of course. I’m Tommy Ho and my ship is the Cupris. That’s all you need to know to reach me. Good luck, Captain Ogalla.” Then after a pause, he added. “I’d like to come visit your New Eden some time.”

Thirty six seconds later the reply came, “You are always welcome. Our bubble is for everyone to enjoy. Ogalla out.”

Nice woman, he thought to himself. Then he thumbed up information on New Eden, downloaded from the bubble’s scienceweb. He read and watched for hours. Then, he turned his ship around and set a course back to the bubbles. He contacted Alonzo and told him of the change of course. “Sorry Alonzo, but I’m going to check out this New Eden. It says they got

all kinds of animals there. I'm... I'm gonna go see if they got dogs. I never seen one and I always wanted to. Meet me there? Tommy out."