

Where Gravity Sleeps

13 – Eye to Eye

Aboard Hermes the crew of the Bartlett began to recover from their ordeal. There was not as much room on Hermes as there was on the Bartlett, but nobody complained.

Moses and Betty had already arrived at their location and Betty and Hermes were kissing. Everyone was taking time to rest.

Captain Jim Richardson had done some catching-up while his crew rested and learned what was going on at Luna Linda, or at least, what the officials there were saying was going on. He was shocked. He also studied the Bartlett's research banks that Hermes had preserved. After everyone had a dose of sleep and food they gathered in the main hold to discuss their situation.

"Folks, there is something seriously wrong at Luna Linda. The captain there, a Mr. Walter Barthes, claims that the diamond eyes have attacked the station, using laser blasts. I can't reconcile that with what we observed in Earthspace. I think he's lying, but I can't imagine why."

There were murmurs among the group. Ishmael spoke up, "He's a wily one. He's always scheming for a profit. All I know is that Luna Linda is locked down tight. No ships are allowed in or out."

"That's for sure." Added Jennifer.

"Why were they trying to kill us all?" Someone asked.

"I don't know, but I think it's because we know about the diamond eyes." Said Jim.

"What are diamond eyes?" Asked Tig.

"They are creatures we discovered in Earthspace. Several of them followed us back to Luna Linda."

"Oh! I saw one of them! It came to check out my ship." Said Tig. "It seemed mostly curious."

“Well, we have reason to believe that they were responsible for hurling Heccat at the Earth. I mean, we think they destroyed the Earth.”
Responded Jim.

There was a moment of silence. Tig looked shocked. “Maybe that explains why the Luna Linda Captain was looking to attack them. Except, these diamond eyes weren’t attacking anything. It was the Luna Linda station craft that were attacking the station. I doesn’t make sense to me...”

“Nor me.” Said Rose. “You say that the diamond eyes destroyed earth, but they weren’t attacking Luna Linda? Seems like if their intent was to destroy humanity they wouldn’t have stopped to sniff at Tig’s ship. They would have just destroyed it.”

“We don’t think they are malicious at all.” There were some murmurs among his crew. “Well, we don’t all agree, but some of us believe the diamond eyes were surprised to find intelligent life on the Earth. Once they realized we were intelligent their behavior changed radically. In fact...” He paused and wondered if he could really trust Rose, Ishmael and Tig. He noticed that Jennifer was holding Tig’s hand and based on that he decided that they could be trusted. “In fact, we developed a primitive shared language. We have almost 200 words, mostly nouns and a few active verbs. We learned how to talk with them using microwave frequency patterns. All the details are in the research banks which Hermes downloaded from the Bartlett.”

“Who else knows this?” Asked Rose.

“Nobody. We were never able to broadcast our findings because all our long-range transmitters were sabotaged while we were in Earthspace. The rest of the ships were destroyed as far as we can tell. We would have been too, but the diamond eyes protected us.”

“Destroyed by whom?”

“Some kind of deep space cruiser — flying dark. We never saw it until it hailed us and then it started firing. The diamond eyes deflected their shots. We wouldn’t be here now if they hadn’t protected us.”

“Seems to me that someone is trying to create the impression that the diamond eyes are a threat.” Said Rose.

“Barthes.” Said Ishmael. “A.K.A. Cosmo.”

“Captain Barthes? of Luna Linda? Why?” Asked Rose. “What would he gain by firing on his own station?”

“Profits. Right now he has a captive audience. Rooms are going at a premium, I’m sure. But, it won’t be crowded for very long. Last I checked people were lining up for flights to the Spinworld. But, nobody can go anywhere while they hold onto their 1.3. And they can’t maintain it without a cause...” said Ishmael.

“Where did you dream that up?” Rose asked.

“It crossed my mind while Barthe’s men were throwing me out an airlock.”

She stared at him for a moment and then continued coolly. “So, you’re saying he manufactured a crisis and these... diamond eyes... they just happened along by coincidence?”

“Maybe he created them...” Ishmael suggested.

Jim interrupted. “I can’t really tell you what those things are, but I can tell you that Captain Barthes didn’t create them. They have their own free will and their own language.”

“So, these things are real, huh. That’s pretty damned amazing! I don’t know, maybe he’s just seizing the opportunity. So, why does he want to kill you all anyway?” He motioned to the crew of the Bartlett, who were still dressed in their blue maintenance uniforms.

“I think because we could challenge this Barthes fellow. We can prove that the diamond eyes aren’t a threat to his station.” Jim said.

“And he thinks he’s got you trapped in his station.” Ishmael laughed.

“How long could he keep up the pretense? A few days? A week?” Rose asked.

“You don’t know Barthes the way I do. He’s resourceful. He’ll create a way to keep those people there for a long time,” Ishmael shook his head slowly.

“Wait, wait. Let me get this straight. He’s trying to kill us to make more room profits?!?” Someone said. There was a buzz of alarmed and angry voices.

“Everyone, please. Let’s stay together here.” Said Jim and he waited for the murmurs to quiet. “He didn’t succeed. We’re alive.”

“Except for Dr. Oldfield and James. For all we know they’re dead.”
Someone said.

“Maybe – we don’t know. But I hope they’re OK. Anyway, we’ve got to decide what to do now. Where are we?”

“We’re near New Eden. We wanted to wait until you had all woken up and eaten before we went anywhere else or entered New Eden.” Said Rose.

“At the moment, we’re just outside of their perimeter control.” Added Ishmael.

“I think we will be safe there.” Said Jim. “In the mean time, I think we should consider publishing some of our findings. We can let our research fight the lies this Barthes is creating. If we work together with Hermes we can produce a summary report quickly. We can blast it on the bubble webs.”

“And the beltweb.” Said Rose. “A lot of people in the Belt need to know about this.”

“Yes. Everyone should know.” said Moses.

“OK, then. People, you know what to do. Let’s get to work.” Jim knew it would be the most important report they had ever produced.

Two days later, Ian and Helen were waiting in line to pick up food. Life on New Eden had been pleasant enough, but crowded. They didn’t have any money at all and there was no work they could do. So, like many other refugees, they had to take what they could get in a kind of unofficial welfare system that had evolved shortly after they had left Earthspace. People needed to eat and they needed medical supplies. Everything else came through cash, bartering or begging.

“God, I hate waiting in line.” Helen whispered into Ian’s ear. The line stretched on for a hundred meters. They watched people leaving the front of the line with a bag of groceries each. It was enough to last a couple days and then they’d be back in line again. Ian held Athena to his chest while she slept. It had been a hard night and Athena had cried a lot. Ian and Helen were tired, but they knew they had to wait in line or they’d be hungry tonight.

“I hate it too, but what can we do?”

“Let’s move to the Spinworld. I mean, what are we waiting for?” She said.
“How much worse could it be?”

“Well, it could be a lot worse.” The line moved forward three inches. “On second thought...” He laughed. “How? We don’t have access to a ship. Even if we did, I’ve heard it’s really dangerous to fly in the Belt. Anyway, right now there’s all these rumors of a war with the space birds. I heard they aren’t letting anyone fly who isn’t involved with the war.”

“Well I know people are moving there. There’s a waiting list of people who want to go.”

“How? Are there shuttles or something?”

“Not sure... I think ships from the Belt come and take people there. The rock hunter pilots are used to flying in the Belt.”

“So, where do we sign up? I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“When we get home lets search through the beltweb to see if we can find out how to get to the spinworld.”

“Yea.” Ian looked around. “I need space... This place is stifling and I’ve heard ours is one of the nicest bubbles. I can’t imagine what it must be like on Luna Linda.”

“Have you heard anything about the war?”

“No. You?”

“Nope.”

“You expect me to believe this? Barthes, you must be solid out of your mind!” Carmine said out loud. She was alone in her office reviewing the report Captain Barthes had sent to all the bubble Captains. It was plausible enough, but again it lacked crucial details that would prove the aggressive nature of the space creatures. She was in the middle of composing a scathing reply when her office buzzer went off. Someone wanted in. She looked at the door display and saw a young man, wearing the uniform of a message courier.

“Can I help you young man?” She asked.

“I have a package for you ma’am. I need your signature.” He had a higher than usual voice and very fair features.

“All right, come on in.” She pressed a button on her desk that allowed the door to open.

The courier stepped in carrying two boxes, one small and one large. He held a clipboard in one hand. “Sign here please?”

She signed and he gave her the small box. Then he turned around and walked out briskly. He walked around the corner and into a women’s bathroom. It was empty and he walked into a stall and shut the door. He removed his clothing and had anyone been watching they would have seen that he was in fact a woman. Her breasts fell out of her tight uniform as she pulled it off. She opened the large box and removed a fresh set of women’s clothes. As she put them on she heard an explosion nearby. She smiled and finished dressing. Then she stuffed the old courier’s clothing into the end of a portable incinerator she’d brought with her. In seconds the clothing dissipated as hot gasses and excess heat into the bathroom. She left the box in the stall and walked out.

There were guards and emergency crews already running to the scene in a panic. She heard someone wailing in agony inside the office. Then she donned a look of surprise and shock, and disappeared into the crowd of emergency crews and onlookers in the New Eden Management complex.

That night Ian and Helen searched and found details on spinworld immigration. There was indeed a long list and they added their names. But they also learned that all space travel in bubblespace was currently restricted; nobody was able to get to the spinworld. All the bubble Captains had signed an agreement declaring a state of emergency. They also learned that their own bubble’s Captain, Caramine Ogalla, was horribly injured in a suspicious explosion in her office. Her replacement was a very vocal supporter of the war effort.

“Looks like we won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.” Ian said.

Helen looked down at Athena, who was playing with her foot. “I hope we’re safe here.” Their small apartment didn’t have a window. She looked at the walls as if they might collapse in on them at any moment.

They searched for details on the war but they couldn’t find any. There was plenty of official propaganda. There were horror scenarios about what the creatures might do when they arrived en-masse to attack the bubbles. People were asked to restrict their use of all resources. There were holos of blast sites on the surface of Luna Linda. There were holos of casualties. There were interviews with haggard, exhausted fighters. It was all very

frightening and effective in a population where most people didn't know anyone else but their own family and had to take news on faith from official sources.

Ian and Helen knew more people than most because of Athena's posting. The next day they tried to find out about the war from friends. They asked if anyone knew anyone involved. Nobody did. They tried to find out more about the propaganda holos themselves, but all the information was restricted, because of the current state of crisis. Everywhere they went it was obvious that the tension level in New Eden was high.

The next day the tension rose another notch when a few space birds, as the creatures had come to be called in the bubbles, appeared near three of the other bubbles. For the first time live holos were broadcast of the creatures floating around, doing little else but watching and flying close to various portions of the stations.

Suddenly there were lots of ships flying around the stations, but only the ones at Luna Linda were under Cosmo's control. It was too risky now for them to attack the station, so they watched and waited.

Cosmo supplied creative intelligence suggesting that the space birds were massing for an attack. Many powerful telescopes and sensors were focused on various sections of Earthspace, searching for the imminent attack.

After a couple days of intense propaganda without any real activity people were beginning to wonder if there really was a war. People, even high-level officials and corporate leaders, resented the travel and information restrictions. Just when it seemed that the war would be disbelieved, observers saw thirteen objects moving against the pull of the sun directly toward the new bubblespace. They could not possibly be any kind of natural astronomical phenomenon.

As the news spread tension turned into panic. The space birds were coming. The New Eden Earthspace research center confirmed that they had lost contact with all ships in Earthspace, including the Linus that had returned briefly for supplies. There were rumors that the Linus had encountered the space birds in Earthspace and had not survived.

Indeed, the fear of war pressed heavily on everyone's hearts and minds. Most people in the bubbles had escaped with only their lives from a doomed world. Now they felt like that doom was hunting them down to finish the job. The bubbles now seemed fragile. Despite their titanium alloy structure, their impossibly strong deflector fields and inexhaustible supply of energy, and their covetous, attentive protection by the remaining

humans, they were bubbles of life that could be popped. Like eggs, life remained viable inside only as long as they remained whole. Now everyone was keenly aware of the shell of life that protected the majority of the human race and they wondered if these dangerous space birds were coming to crack those shells.

Within an hour of the news, the first ship broke the 1.3 restrictions and flew away from Luna Linda. It had been docked there since before the crisis. The pilot had knocked out a guard to escape the station. Less than an hour later, a mob of passengers and pilots stormed the spaceports on most of the bubbles and almost every ship that could navigate space was pressed into service. In the confusion, Ian, Helen and Athena managed to get on board one of the ships. Everyone who could, headed toward the Belt, believing that they might be safer there than in the bubbles. The terrible space birds were coming and it was time to flee. But still, only a small fraction of those who wanted to go were able to find a ship that could take them.

The Belt exploded with activity as well. As soon as it became apparent that a flood of pilots inexperienced with the Belt were making a mad dash to Rose World, all available Belt pilots made a mad dash to meet them. Unfortunately most rock hunters would not arrive before the new exodus would meet the Belt. But a few would arrive before anyone reached the dangerous portion of the Belt that lay between the bubbles and Rose World. A few pilots would be there to help them through. As luck would have it, Tommy Ho would be one of the first Belt pilots there.

The crew of the Bartlett was just finishing their summary of their experiences. Ishmael and Rose spent most of their time together. Tig and Jennifer got to know each other better. Hermes and Betty were almost completely preoccupied with each other. While Hermes had recorded the data from the Bartlett, he had not yet analyzed it, and it lay there in his memory banks like so much wallpaper, while he and Betty communicated with each other about how they might interest mankind in making more intelligent ships.

Everyone was preoccupied except Moses. He had been watching the events unfolding in the bubbles with growing alarm. He'd heard about what happened to Tommy Ho and this made the situation seem near to him. He used his console more in the past few days than at any other time he could remember.

"Betty, are you watchin' the bubbles at all? What do you make of them Space Birds?"

“I haven’t been.” There was a brief pause and then she continued.
“Hermes says they are real according to the Bartlett’s crew, but they are not hostile.”

“We’ll, I do-do-don’t know what ta say, now. Ya know th-there’s a dozen and one ships full o’ them space bir-bir-birds on their way to the bubbles now.” He was watching a time-delayed live-broadcast holo of the congregation of diamond eyes approaching the bubbles. “Betty, I think we all need ta ta-ta-talk about this.”

“I’ll get Rose and Ishmael.”

A few minutes later Rose, Ishmael, Moses, Betty and Hermes met with Jim on board Hermes. “It seem that these here Space Birds are com-coming to the bubbles and people are flyin’ in any old ti-ti-tin-can ta the Belt. There’s some rock hunters gonna meet them before it gets thick and lead ‘em to Rose World. I think I should go too.”

“Wait! What do you mean the space birds are coming?” Ishmael asked, startled.

“See?” Moses linked Ishmael’s console to the telescopic view of the arriving football-shaped objects.

“My god, Moses. How soon do they get there?” Ishmael asked.

“It says si-six-six hours. No, here, follow the com-commentary path. There, see?” Moses showed them what little data was being broadcast about the event.

Jim was stunned. His mind raced. Maybe I led them to the bubbles and they’re coming to... No. That can’t be. He was thrashing inside.

Ishmael noticed the far-away look in Jim’s eyes. “Jim? Jim!”

Jim shook it off.

“Jim, you guys have got to go public with what you know about the diamond eyes now!”

“Yea. Yea... I’ll get the crew to publish it right now.” He thumbed his console and broadcast an announcement throughout the ship. “Listen everyone, we have to publish this report in the next thirty minutes or it won’t make any difference anymore... to anyone. There are thirteen congregations of Diamond Eyes approaching the bubbles and everyone in

the bubbles believes they are coming to attack! We're broadcasting in twenty minutes so get it together."

"I should be there, Ishmael." Jim said soberly. "I know more about communicating with the Diamond Eyes than any other Human.

In space, time is more of a personal experience than a shared phenomenon. After a few days people have developed their own waking and sleeping schedules. As it happened, half the Bartlett's crew was asleep when Jim made his announcement. But they jumped out of bed and flew to work within minutes. People were standing half-naked, working with any console they could find. Fortunately, Hermes never slept and he could listen to and talk with everyone at the same time.

And so, a few hours before thirteen packages of fate slowed to enter bubblespace, people everywhere were in one kind of shock or another. Everyone stopped what they were doing unless they were involved with the war effort. There were about a hundred station craft standing by with weapons charged, waiting at a point about an hour from the bubbles, ready to intercept the thirteen supposed objects approaching. Those who flew from bubblespace in a last dash toward the Spinworld were on the edge of the Belt, about to meet Tommy Ho and seven other rock hunters. Hermes was uploading to the beltweb, the scienceweb and the bubblewebs the watershed report by the crew of the Bartlett, complete with details of how they were hunted by the security personnel on Luna Linda.

Within the St. Augustine Chapel on Stars View the reverend Arturo DeAngelino spoke in a quiet but powerful voice, trying to comfort his sometimes weeping flock.

"...and now, turn to Psalm 67, a psalm of a canticle for David himself. May we find strength in these words and belief in our God.

Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered: and let them that hate him flee from before his face.

As smoke vanisheth, so let them vanish away: as wax melteth before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.

And let the just feast and rejoice before God: and be delighted with gladness.

Sing ye to God: sing a psalm to his name: make a way for him who ascendeth upon the west. The Lord is his name.

Rejoice ye before him: but the wicked shall be troubled at his presence, who is the father of orphans, and the judge of widows.

God in his holy place: God who maketh men of one manner to dwell in a house...

In all the bubbles, people gathered in the streets. Hiding inside a space station offered little protection. The air was thick with polarized fatalism, as some people were resigned to the end and some firmly disbelieved the threat. Either way, there had been enough time for people to think about it and the boldest ones stood calmly, staring out the huge windows of the massive Floyd bubbles, watching out the viewpoints of Luna Linda, or watching holoprojections of the remote encounter now developing.

Deep inside Luna Linda, Cosmo sat watching the image of the approaching diamond eyes. Practically everyone in bubblespace believed them to be ships full of space birds. "Shit! What the hell is going on? I mean, what the hell are these things?" He looked around at his top aids, most of them remotely attending from their ships. "How long until they get here?"

"Five and a half hours, sir". Someone said.

Cosmo wondered to himself, Maybe I don't need to pretend there is a war. Maybe there'll be one anyway.

He took the opportunity to feel righteous. "I may have saved all of humanity by alerting everyone to the danger. If we'd only had the Captain's council support sooner... But alas, it is too late for poor Caramine. I wonder if she can think clearly enough to recognize the error of her ways? Lets find out, shall we?" He smiled, relishing a chance to gloat over one of his victims.

Cosmo fingered his console and contacted the hospital where Caramine clung to what remained of her now very fragile life. After impressing a nurse with his importance he managed to open a connection directly to Caramine's room. She lay in a continuous-care life-support bed, with most of her body covered in synthetic skin and gauze bandages. She was conscious and struggled to turn her head to look at the console near her bed.

"Hello Caramine, it's Walter Barthes. How are you doing, my dear?"

She tried to speak but she could only whisper a couple of words. Cosmo turned his audio volume up as far as it would go so he might hear her

whispered words. "I thought you might want to know that the space birds are only a few hours from reaching the bubbles now. We're going to do everything we can to protect you and everyone else. If we'd only had more time to prepare, instead of all that... debate." He smiled wickedly.

She strained to speak. A nurse came over to comfort her. He brought the console's microphone close to her mouth so she could whisper her reply into it.

"Fuck... you... Walter... I hope you're... the first one... to... die." She said and passed out. The instruments in the room kept her alive and stable or those would certainly have been her last words.

"Really, now! That's no way to speak to..." He started, but then he realized she couldn't hear him anymore. It was unsatisfying and he flicked off the connection angry that she had for the moment gotten the last word. His eyes shot around the table to see if anyone was laughing, or even smiling. They all knew better. "What the hell are those things?" He repeated. Cosmo felt something he didn't often experience in his very long adult life. Cosmo was confused and worried and not in control. These space birds were beyond his influence and that chafed him as much as he feared them. Now all he could do was watch. *With luck*, he thought, *I can protract a war with these things for a long time.*

The Bartlett report hit the webs and spread like the news of Heccat. By the time Cosmo had been informed of its presence the webs were alive with commentary on the report, dialogues, discussions and inquiries. The crew of the Bartlett did what they could to respond to the flood of questions and accusations.

Cosmo hit his desk with his hand. He quickly posted a page decrying the Bartlett report as seditious and generated by collaborators with the space birds. He called on everyone to ignore the report and help find the perpetrators.

He was surprised to see dozens of different postings appearing soon after his accusing him of lying, perpetrating a false war, murder and extortion. All his enemies and victims jumped on the opportunity. Cosmo was next to tears. The other bubble Captains were on the line within minutes, wanting an explanation. He told them all it was just a plot to overthrow his Captaincy and that there was still a real threat as the space bird ships were very near now.

Cosmo sat in his office, stunned. It was now about one hour before the grand rendezvous and everything was crashing down around him. His

desk buzzed indicating someone was trying to reach him. He didn't answer it. He just stared at the holos of the rendezvous...

The congregations of Diamond Eyes moved about a kilometer apart from each other. They had slowed dramatically in the last half hour of their journey and now they came almost to a halt in front of an armada of about 100 ships, mostly station craft and some deep space cruisers. The congregations began to split up with the outer layer of diamond eyes moving away from the cores. This process of disassembly continued for half an hour until all that remained was a cloud of diamond eyes.

Just then, Hermes flew directly between the cloud and the armada.

The flagship of the armada contacted Hermes with a general broadcast. "Hermes, what the hell are you doing? Get out of there now!"

Ishmael replied, "I'm carrying Captain Jim Richardson of the Bartlett. He intends to negotiate peacefully with the Diamond Eyes to avoid any conflict."

There was no reply. Ishmael positioned Hermes and shut down his main thrusters.

Finally the flagship replied, "Hermes, proceed, and good luck."

Hermes had learned the simple microwave language with ease and was now ready to translate for Jim. People throughout the Belt and the bubbles watched the live broadcast from the com ships monitoring the rendezvous. Many people in the Belt were watching the events delayed because of their distance.

Everyone watched as the diamond eyes formed a huge disk, their bodies touching each other lightly so that there was almost no visible space behind them. About 100 meters in front the gray ones took position with their attendants.

Jim broke the silence. His message was broadcast in english words to the human viewers and in their microwave equivalents to the diamond eyes.

"No break. No burn. No throw. We talk. We learn." He said.

The diamond eye disk rippled with colors and then it displayed an image that took everyone by surprise. The image was of a woman dressed in a medical uniform with her hand extended, palm up. Her lips did not move. Surprisingly, the microwave frequencies, that everyone expected to have carried the minimal language pioneered by the Bartlett, instead carried an

unmistakably female voice. It sounded like many voices speaking the same words and all using very close variations of exactly the same voice. It was the multivoice of the diamond eyes.

The entire crew of the Bartlett froze when they heard that it was composed of many voices, all of which were Dr. Margaret Oldfield's! Dumbfounded they stood and listened to the live broadcast, which at this point was reaching almost every living human who could still think.

"We understand you. We want you to understand." The multivoice said slowly and clearly. Then there was a long pause while the image showed the woman holding out her hand and in it was a source of light, like she was holding a glowing jewel. She held it forward and waited.

Caramine Ogalla lay motionless in her life support system. Her mind usually wandered when she was conscious. At this moment she was awake and listened to the live broadcast. Her body was in terrible pain but she could not actually feel it because of drugs she was receiving constantly. It felt instead like a weight was on her whole body and she could not move. Machines now replaced the functions that her body had lost. Now she listened to see if humanity would survive. She was so close to being dead herself that she was almost uniquely unbiased about the outcome. She was ashamed when she caught herself wishing these creatures would put her out of her miserable state. *No, I'd rather see Barthes fry.* She thought.

Jim was stunned. He'd known Dr. Oldfield for many years. They had worked together before and she followed him to the Bartlett when he earned his commission. He sat down and collected his thoughts. Somehow they have got her voice. Maybe she somehow contacted them? *I have to know who we're dealing with here,* he thought. Then he spoke. "What do you want us to understand?"

"Everything," said the Multivoice.