

Where Gravity Sleeps

14 – Blink

“Who are you?”

“You called us Diamond Eyes. There is no translation for what we call ourselves.”

“How do you know our language?”

“We have absorbed one of you. Her name is Margaret Oldfield.”

“Is she dead then?” Jim asked and tightened inside.

“Her body was dead when we found it floating in space, but we absorbed the order that was her brain and many of her thoughts and her knowledge was salvaged. Now they are part of us all.”

Jim was stunned, but he continued. “What do you want us to understand?”

“How you came to be here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are here as an accidental result of our farming. We brought organic life to your planet a very long time ago by your measurement. We planted life here in many forms because we intended to return to feed soon. We didn’t know your kind had evolved or achieved sentience in the mean time. It has never happened before even in the lives and memories of our oldest, who live longer than stars. We regret harvesting your planet and we want you to understand that we did not know you were there. We are offering to help you survive.”

“You... intended to feed on us?”

“We require various carbon-life compounds for our survival they can only develop on planets. There aren’t enough live planets so we make more. What you call gravity is a great burden on us, so we harvest the entire planet to release the carbon-life compounds from the gravity.”

“Where did you come from?”

“We were here from before the flash. Before that we do not know.”

“Before the flash?”

“When all the galaxies finally fell together in a flash we moved farthest from it and survived. All other kinds vanished then and we were alone. We starved and floated frozen and were lost from each other. Many of us fell into stars and are lost forever. Some of us are still lost and we are looking for them. The rest are here because we were able to find the rest of our herd. We also have offspring. You call them children.”

Jim didn’t know what to make of it. “How did you find each other?”

“We can see each other... like you can see the stars.”

“You miss the lost members of your herd. But, you have hope you may yet find them?”

“We hope.” Said the multivoice very gently and lyrically.

“We are glad you meant us no harm, but we have been gravely harmed. You’ve destroyed almost all of our kind. We have no hope we will ever see any of those we lost ever again. How can we trust you?”

“When you learn about us you will understand that we do not lie.”

He paused for a moment, then continued. “We must have time to consider your offer and to learn more about you. Will you promise to do no harm to us or any of our ships and stations?”

“We promise to cause no more harm. We will try to protect you.”

“What will you protect us from?”

“The others that will come.” This was the first thing the multivoice said that was somewhat chaotic or disharmonious.

“What others?”

“Other kinds are coming to feed also. They do not make promises.”

“What are they? Are they like you?”

“No. Not like us. Not like you either. We will try to protect you. We know them and they are limited. But some would destroy you.”

“When are they coming?”

“Soon. We have already seen them.”

“Will you agree to come no closer to any of our ships and stations and to stay out of the belt of planetary debris between the fourth and fifth planets?”

“We agree, but then we cannot protect you.”

“We will consider your words and your offer. You may send an emissary to meet with us, if you will.”

“We will.” There was a sobering conviction in the multivoice. Perhaps they believed they would lose their emissary.

Just then one of the diamond eyes broke formation from one side of the disc and approached Hermes. It floated right up to the pilot’s viewport. Its pseudopod eye examined Hermes visually.

“I am Jim Richardson, captain of a ship called Bartlett. I met some of you when we were... where our planet was destroyed. And some of you saved me, my ship and its crew when we were attacked. I thank you. But, I am not the leader of my kind. I am proud to have spoken with you but now others will speak for us. We will allow your emissary to speak with our leaders... who are... um, as soon as we can assemble them.”

He felt such relief it distracted him and he didn’t know what to say next. He added “Peace.” Then he turned off his microphone and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Aboard Hermes everyone applauded and cheered at once. In the Bubbles and the Belt everyone was talking at the same time and few people were listening yet. The Diamond Eyes also had intense and voluminous communications as they broke their disc formation and began to form up quickly into their traveling congregation shapes. Ten minutes later they began the journey back to Earthspace.

The solitary remaining Diamond Eye emissary turned to watch them go and continued to watch them for minutes after they left. Then it looked around at all the ships in the armada. It moved closer to Hermes. It rolled over and a pattern resolved on its underside, like it was a projection screen. Only the people on Hermes could see its belly clearly. The pattern became digits. It appeared to be a frequency number and when Hermes tuned to that frequency he heard a voice, which he broadcast over the ship’s intercom so everyone inside could hear.

“Hello? Are you there Jim?”

“Yes, this is Jim” Jim said aloud and his voice was sent to the Diamond eye over the same frequency it had used to reach them.

“Can I talk with you until your leader comes?” It asked and now Jim realized that it sounded afraid. It had a woman’s voice, like a whisper from the multivoice. But it sounded very alone and somehow youthful.

“Yes, but wait just a moment.” Jim clicked off the microphone again and then asked Rose to contact the leader of the armada and ask where they should lead the Diamond Eye emissary. He switched his microphone back on and said, “So, what shall we call you?”

“I am the emissary.”

“Yes, but do you have a name?”

“My frequency is my name.”

“Well, I can’t very well call you 33171992. So, are you a girl or a boy?”

“I am the seventeenth gender.”

“Ah... the seven... tenth... gender, you say. Ah. I see. So, wait. Are you saying it takes seventeen of you to... make offspring?”

“We have ninety seven genders and two of each are needed to mate successfully and form a new one of us.”

“How long does it take?”

“Several of your days. How many genders does your kind have?”

“We just have two. Men and Women. I’m a man; Margaret Oldfield was a woman.”

“Only two? How long does it take you to mate?”

“Well, it kind of depends, but maybe half an hour?”

“Or less.” Jennifer added under her breath.

Just then Rose received a reply and was instructed to lead the Diamond Eye to a point in space another hour away from the Bubbles. A team of representatives from the Bubbles were going to meet them there to talk with the Diamond Eye. Ishmael flew Hermes toward the new destination and the Diamond Eye followed along.

“Your kind... reproduces so... quickly.”

“Well, it starts quickly but it takes three quarters of a year to actually make a baby and then it takes years until they can take care of themselves.”

“Oh, I see. Can I watch you mate?”

“No.”

“Will your leaders destroy me because they are angry about... what happened to your planet?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. But there are a lot of angry people, you know? Do you know what anger is?”

“I understand some of what Margaret Oldfield knew about it. She was very angry at someone for killing her.”

“Yea, and your kind killed many billions of our kind. So we’re even angrier, see?”

“I am afraid, Jim.”

“Yea, well, I think it’s a good sign that they’re letting you fly with me. Do you see the other ships following us?”

“Yes.”

“If they wanted to destroy you, I think they would have already.”

“Really? How?”

“Well, ah. I don’t really know. Uh, what kills you?”

“Stars.”

“Well, I don’t think they’ll be throwing a star at you any time soon.”

“Oh, that’s good. Do you mate often?”

“Uh, so, what else can you do besides paint numbers on your tummy?”

“I’ve never mated before.”

“Yea. Hey, pardon me for saying so, but you seem kind of, well, young.”

“I’m the youngest.”

“How old is that?”

“About 174 of your years.”

“Why did they send you then?”

“I chose to come. Every one of us did. But, I don’t know why I was the one selected. There must be a good reason because our oldest are very wise.”

“Did they tell you what we should call you?”

“No.”

“Since there’s only one of me, what does it matter?”

“Well, maybe it’s just a human need, but we like to have a name to call each other. Don’t you have names for each other?”

“Just our frequencies.”

“Hmmm. That’s probably not going to work very well for us... humans, I mean.”

“You could pick a name for me.”

“What, like Bob or Fran?”

“I like Boborfran. You can call me Boborfran.”

“How about one or the other?”

“I like Boborfran better.”

Cosmo sat at his desk. Like everyone else he had heard the Diamond Eyes refute his claim and confirm the report by the crew of the Bartlett. For the first time ever in his life he had been caught publically in an outright lie.

There was a knock at his door. He looked up. He flipped a switch and his door became partially transparent, enough so he could see out. But nobody could see in. Outside one of his officers stood looking around nervously. Cosmo opened the door.

“Sir, we’ve got to get out of here while we still can.”

“Go? Where?” He looked blankly at the officer.

“Anywhere but here. C’mon, sir, lets go. I’ve got a ship we can use.” He put his hand to his chin as the thought crossed his mind that Cosmo had cracked. “Sir?” he gestured out the door.

Cosmo followed him out. They hadn't gotten more than a hundred yards before they were confronted by constables from New Eden. Captain Barthes, we'd like to talk with you about..."

There was a sudden flurry of laser fire and Cosmo was injured. His officer was killed. Before Cosmo could respond someone kicked his weapon out of his hand and he was subdued. Then his hands and feet were bound with plastic strips.

They pulled him through the nearly weightless corridor with a cord. His body bounced lightly off the walls, floor and ceiling. He was powerless even to control the direction of his body. It so enraged him that he began screaming, "LET ME GO! LET ME GO! LET ME GO!"

They just continued to pull him along. One of the constables knew Cosmo. He turned to him. "What were you thinking?" He said and shook his head. Then he turned away as they continued. They arrived at the Luna Linda jail. The guard let them in, staring at Cosmo the whole time. "Make them let me go!" Cosmo sobbed to the guard, who just looked down. They threw Cosmo into a cell while he screamed obscenities at them. Once the door was closed they remotely released his hand and foot restraints. His scream made only a tiny, compressed sound through the door.

Cosmo screamed and wept and shouted until he was exhausted. He slept for hours and when he woke he found food and a note saying his lawyer would come by to talk with him within 48 hours. He ate like an animal and threw the foods he didn't like against the walls, where they mostly stayed in the light gravity of the station interior.

Cosmo was in quite poor physical condition and his depression was black and deep. He burst out in tears or shouted disjoint phrases randomly. Within hours his condition worsened and he was shouting at imaginary enemies around him.

Ian, Helen and Athena endured the flight to Rose World. It was hard on them and especially on Athena who was disturbed by every course adjustment. Navigating in the belt sometimes involved frequent changes in course so the Macbeth family got little sleep. They were quickly given their own cabin when it became obvious that if they didn't get one nobody else would get any sleep either. By the time they got to Rose World all they wanted was a place to sleep that wouldn't move randomly.

When they exited the elevators and were greeted they were so exhausted they were practically sleeping where they stood. Tired as they were, it would be so easy to fall asleep in the ultralight gravity. Helen did, during the introduction. She drifted sideways slowly and a minute later she bounced lightly off the ground and began floating slowly upward. Athena watched her with wide eyes. Ian noticed Athena's interest and then he saw Helen floating horizontally at waist level. Too tired to be confused he simply reached out and held onto her arm gently, as if this happened all the time. He let her sleep.

She awoke when he tried to move her. “C’mon honey, they’ve got an apartment for us.” She was facing sideways at knee level. It was especially disorienting without gravity.

In what seemed to flow like a dream they floated to a new building and went inside. They were led to a door. They went inside and found something to eat. Then they all slept in a bedbag, like they had used on ships. There wasn’t enough gravity yet in Rose World to sleep in a normal bed.

They awoke the next day to the cool morning and the incredibly clean air of life in Rose World. They settled in quickly and by the end of the day they had a stock of food and supplies. They were given almost everything they asked for. They felt light in every way.

“What kind of requests will you look for, Ian?”

“I don’t know. I’ll see if they need a programmer. And you?”

“I’m sure it takes some physics to build this place. I’m going see what Spintech needs.”

They each thumbed through pages on their consoles for a while, looking at requests. “Hmm. This looks interesting...” Ian said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, this guy named Hermes seems to be looking for someone to help him produce an advanced artificial mind. Out here? I gotta contact him...” Ian entered a message and offered to help Hermes.

Hermes received Ian’s offer and was genuinely surprised and pleased, in his own fashion. He began a dialogue with Ian, and then shortly he began filing in a public shelf of the Beltweb, technical information Ian would need if he was going to help Hermes. In all the discourse, Hermes didn’t yet reveal that he himself was an artificial mind. For the time being, he let Ian believe he was the owner of an artificial mind. Betty Wishford followed all their communications, but she did not understand the technology of her own mind nearly as well as Hermes did.