

THICKER THAN WATER

by Ian Sales

*I come. What cares disturb thy rest?
Why hast thou brought me to the shrine?
Doth some fresh grief afflict thy breast?
Iphigenia in Tauris,
Euripides (trans. Robert Potter, 1781)*

For one brief moment, Major Gina Priest was elsewhere. There had been a voice, speaking her name as if from some oracular distance. She blinked blearily, and stared up into the darkness. A wave of dizziness passed through her. She blinked again, and yawned.

“What is it?” she asked.

A voice spoke from the intercom by the door: “Intruders.”

“Titans?”

“We think so.”

“How long?”

“Sat Twelve went off-line three hours ago.”

On hearing that, Gina was abruptly wide awake. “What the hell...?” She swung her legs off the bed, and rose to a sitting position. Again, dizziness swept through her. She ignored it — it was nothing unusual. “Damn it, Shepard,” she snapped. “Why didn’t you wake me when they hit the sat?”

“Lieutenant Messenger said not to.”

“I left standing orders.”

“The lieutenant’s the officer of the watch.”

“And I’m your commanding officer!”

A click from the intercom told her Shepard had closed the connection. Gina snarled. She stood, stumbled. Something rumbled beneath her bare feet. She reached out, and flicked the light-switch.

Messenger! What was the woman playing at? Her orders had been

clear. There was no excuse.

Considering with relish each punishment she would inflict, Gina pulled a fresh pair of fatigues from a closet, yanked them on, and fastened a belt about her middle. She splashed her face with water from the sink. It did not dampen her rage. She pulled on socks and boots.

She lurched awkwardly as she left her room, banging a shoulder against the door jamb. She swore. One more bruise to add to all the others. Up here, everyone was clumsy.

Her balance, but not her mood, improved as she made her way down the corridor. Messenger! Disobeying standing orders. Letting Gina sleep through an attack.

At the ladder, Gina reached out, grasped the cold metal with both hands, and put a booted foot to the first tread. She began to climb.

As she ascended, she felt a weight lifted from her. Her arms grew stronger, her feet on the ladder trod lighter. She had woken tired — it had been a long shift and she'd had little sleep — but her weariness drained from her with each metre she rose. Soon, she was pulling herself along by hand.

The top of the ladder debouched into the hub, a circular chamber five metres in diameter. To Gina's left, a glass dome looked out on darkness. Faint amber light leaked from one side, and the distant horizon sparkled. To the right, a hatch gave onto a long tube containing another ladder.

Pushing off with her feet, Gina dove into this tube. She flew down its oesophageal confines. A line of windows showed her hurtling towards the surface, where the shaft pierced a sheet of dirty ice. Something glittered on the ground, magenta and crystalline and unexpected. A great sea of it stretched hundreds of kilometres north and south. It was not ice. Another hatch blocked the tube at ground-level. It was shut. Gina hit it feet first, knees bending to soak up her momentum. She palmed the lock's control, and turned to gaze out the window as she waited impatiently for the hatch to grind aside.

Low on the horizon, a great marble of polished sandstone balanced precariously on an ice escarpment: Saturn. The gas giant's rings were plain

to see, stretching out like gauzy wings to either side. It was a sight Gina had seen many times before.

A huge curved shadow flickered across the ground and, looking up, Gina saw the spinning edge of Torus. Tethys: a giant rotating saucer above ground, a warren carved out of the ice below.

The hatch was now open. She dropped into it, and waited restlessly for it close. The inner hatch opened more rapidly.

Gina entered the labyrinth in the ice.

An unearthly chorus floated through the chill air. Gina, pulling herself along a circular tunnel, looked up and grimaced. Shepard. He was playing Saturn's radio emissions again. She hated that doleful barbaric wail. It spoke to her of loneliness, and she needed no reminders. Dismal notes attuned to woe, steeped in tears. A haunting and haunted symphony. Reaching the Tactical Response Centre's hatch, Gina grabbed a handhold, swung inside, and brought herself to an abrupt halt.

"Turn it off," she snapped.

The ululations issuing from the speakers cut off.

Gina's gaze fastened on Messenger, hovering by the tactical plot. The lieutenant was annoyed because Shepard had woken Gina.

"So?" demanded Gina acidly. "Tell me."

Tonelessly, Messenger said: "A pair of objects in Ithaca Chasma. We picked them up ten minutes ago."

"They're not shielded?"

"Yes, but we picked up a stray bounce on one of the passives scattered along the bottom of the Chasma."

Gina turned to Shepard. "Have you found out what happened to Sat Twelve yet?" she asked.

Shepard shrugged. "Hard packets, I expect. Timed to hit all at once. Could be rock, but mostly likely ice."

"The sat's dead, then?"

"Nothing but junk now," he confirmed.

Gina swore. The satellites' coverage of Tethys' surface was patchy at best. Another hole in their surveillance blanket would only make it easier for the Titans to breach Tethys' defences.

She pushed across to the tactical plot. Messenger backed warily out of the way. Gina ignored her. The lieutenant would pay — but later. After this threat had been neutralised.

In the plot's table-top display, Gina saw a pair of quickly-moving blips deep in Ithaca Chasma, a fault system two thousand kilometres long and one hundred kilometres wide. The bandits were about three kilometres below datum, jetting along and unaware they had been detected.

Pointing on the plot to a section of the chasm to the north-west, Gina said, "They'll emerge here: it's broken terrain. Here at the point nearest Odysseus."

Messenger nodded.

"Hit them the moment they show their heads."

Messenger went out in a sled to tow the Titans back to Torus. Shepard's worms had struck fast and with total effectiveness. The systems controlling the intruders' assault suits were now toast. Messenger, eager for glory, had volunteered to ride the sled. Gina agreed — before the lieutenant's irritating smirk drove her to violence. The last thing she needed now was split focus. Concentrate on the two Titans, the intruders:

How far behind them were the rest?

Gina imagined herself a Titan, tried to think like the enemy. She knew the other moon boasted an older settlement, bigger than Tethys. The databases said a population of five or six hundred, more than double that of Torus.

How much could she trust the databases? How accurate were their data? Titan had the advantage in numbers, but was their technology still four generations behind Tethys?

Gina wished she could plug that hole in the surveillance blanket.

She wished... She could wish for a lot of things. That the Titans had

not attacked. That Lieutenant Messenger obeyed orders. That her loneliness had not chosen this moment to bite so deep...

Still no sign of any Titan force behind the two scouts. Where were they? Gina snapped at Shepard until he'd reconfigured the sensors to extend their coverage. Still nothing.

Could the two intruders have come alone?

On a flatscreen, Gina watched Messenger supervise techs cracking the assault suits. They found a pair of blank faces: eyes glazed and mouths slack. Nirvana was the only way to travel in interplanetary space. Once out of the suits, the Titans' neuro-chemical states were stabilised and they were slowly raised to consciousness.

Gina reported to King.

"So, Gina," he said, as his face appeared on the flatscreen, "We expected this, did we not?"

King was an old man, older even than the Tethys settlement. He lived somewhere deep in the ice — and came to resemble it more with each passing year. Two slabs of ice for cheeks, mouth a lipless crevasse, knife-edge ridge for a nose, eyes like pluvial lakes. No one had seen him in person for nearly two decades. Now he ruled via flatscreens and security systems.

"They weren't always going to take 'no' for an answer," Gina confirmed.

"So now they invade."

"Well," said Gina, not as certain as she had been, "we've captured a pair of scouts. They took out Sat Twelve to hide their approach. No sign of any other forces yet."

"Is it repairable?"

"The sat?" She shook her head. "Not according to Shepard."

"I don't like this, Gina." King's anger was palpable. "Without a full sensor spread, we are vulnerable. We cannot afford to be. *We must protect the C₆₀.*"

Gina agreed. She served only to safeguard the fullerene sea stretching across the face of Tethys. Its origin was unknown, but plainly not natural. Its purpose was unknown. Since King had seized control forty years ago, it

was the settlement's mission to protect it.

"The consequences should we fail are unthinkable," King continued. "Something is loose in the System — else why did Earth firewall herself?"

"The C₆₀ is safe," Gina assured King.

He was either a prophet or a paranoid lunatic. Gina did not know which. She did not much care. Her orders were clear, and she obeyed them. Which prompted a thought:

"I want Messenger stripped of her rank," she said.

King scowled. "We cannot afford to lose her."

"She disobeyed standing orders. I won't let her get away with it."

"No." King was already bored. His eyelids began to lower, he turned to one side. With a vague gesture, he signed off. The flatscreen faded to black.

Savage howls and sprightly song filled the TRC. Saturn's chorus was back. Gina gestured angrily at Shepard. He killed the signal.

"Where's Messenger?" she demanded. The lieutenant should have been back half an hour ago.

Shepard did not look round from his flatscreens. "With one of the prisoners."

Gina clenched a fist. Messenger had no authority to visit the prisoners.

"In the stockade?"

"No," replied Shepard absently. "Took him to an empty storeroom. Level five, North."

She stared at him, suspicious, her anger abruptly gone. Had Shepard been spying on the lieutenant? His flatscreens were tied into Torus' security systems, but...

And why had Messenger taken one of the Titans from his cell?

Gina left the TRC. Past the lock leading to the aboveground carousel gaped a hole in the tunnel's floor. Like all Torus' tunnels, its lighting remained dark until triggered by motion. For one brief moment, Gina hovered on the lip of that dark well. That first step... It always gave her

pause. She wondered at her lack of trust — she could not “fall”, after all. Nor was she scared of the dark.

She took the plunge, dived into the shaft leading to the lower levels. A bolus of light followed her as she descended. Approaching level five, she heard a chorus of a different kind:

A human scream.

For a second, Gina did not know how to respond. Momentum carried her downwards, and she had no conscious control over her flight. She floundered, and swore. She managed to get a foot to the shaft wall and brought her descent to a halt. She arrowed upwards, back to the hatch to level five. Her first thought was for Messenger. Had that scream been the lieutenant’s? What had the Titan done to her? Why had she taken him to a storeroom?

Gina flowed into the tunnel, and pushed off the hatch’s lip with as much force as she could. Some thirty metres ahead of her, a pair of curved rectangles of light bracketed a cube of sparkling air. The brighter of the parentheses was the open entrance to the storeroom.

Another wail sounded, fading away to wet sob.

Gina pushed herself towards the open door —

A fine mist of red drifted about the chamber. Globules orbited a man strapped to a board secured to floor and ceiling. His face was pale, sheened with sweat and painted with blood, sunken and bruised where one zygomatic bone had been crushed by a blow. The eye was buried beneath swollen flesh. Three of the fingers on his right hand were bloody stumps.

Beside him, face and chest blotched with red splatter, hung Messenger. In one hand she held a pair of powered pincers. She fastened their jaws about the man’s right thumb.

Gina could not think, could not make sense of the scene before her. Her oesophageal sphincter spasmed and shot stomach acid up into her mouth. It burned.

“No!” she rasped.

Messenger clenched her hand. The pincers closed. The man howled. His severed thumb, trailing blood, drifted away.

Gina launched herself across the storeroom. She hit Messenger in the midriff with elbows and shoulder. Together, they impacted the wall. The pincers cartwheeled away. Messenger bellowed in pain. Gina bounced off, and drifted slowly backwards. Her shoulder touched the board to which the prisoner was strapped. She recoiled and spun awkwardly away.

“What the hell do you think you were doing?” Gina demanded. She didn’t care what King said: Messenger’s career was *over*.

The lieutenant glared sullenly. “Interrogating the prisoner,” she replied. She hung spider-like against the wall, long arms outstretched, long legs bent at the knee and splayed.

“You were *torturing* him!”

“He wouldn’t tell me what I wanted to know.”

“Look at him! Look what you’ve done to him!” Gina needed anchorage. Only the board to which the bandit was secured was within reach.

Now, he let out wet gasps, beyond meaning, beyond sense. Gina put out a hand, sent herself towards Messenger.

“We don’t *torture* prisoners!”

“You know we’ll execute him,” Messenger said dismissively.

“That’s irrelevant!” Gina glanced across at the Titan. Blood looped up from his mouth to quest blindly above and about his head. Tentacles of red reached out from the stumps of his fingers. “I won’t have my officers torturing prisoners. It’s immoral! It demeans us.” She threw out a hand, reaching for a grand gesture. “We’re on our own, Messenger. Earth is gone, pulled in on herself. We’re all that’s left — us and Titan and Hyperion and Iapetus and whoever else might still be alive around Jupiter or the rest of the Outer Planets. We can’t afford to throw away who we are, *what* we are.”

The anger that had burned brightly on seeing the tortured prisoner had gone. Gina blinked, and glanced across at the Titan. She could feel no remorse, no shame, no sorrow. He would die soon. That had been a certainty from the moment of his capture. Tethys could not afford to keep prisoners.

Turning back to Messenger, Gina — sadly, weakly — added, “We don’t torture people. It produces flawed intelligence.”

“You’re too soft,” Messenger sneered. “You’re not one of us, anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The lieutenant laughed: “Ask King.”

In her room in Torus’ carousel, Gina’s head spun. “Not one of us”? True, she had always felt distant from Torus’ other inhabitants. But that she’d put down to her inability to form relationships. She’d never known her mother. And her father, dead now these ten years, had been a cold and distant man. King had not helped. From the day of her father’s death, he had looked out for her. The favouritism rankled. And she imagined it riled everyone else.

She sent a message to King, demanding an audience. Minutes later, her intercom squawked, and the voice of Torus’ leader said:

“Yes, Gina?”

“Messenger said...” Gina did not know how to start. “Messenger... She said I’m not one of you — one of *us*.”

“So?”

“Am I?” She gazed across the room at the intercom by the door. Someone somewhere was listening to Saturn’s radio emissions. She could hear it, a faint and distant chorus of whoops and drones.

“Is it important?”

“To me, yes.”

“The truth will not affect you in your duties, Gina –”

She leapt on this admission: “So she *was* telling the truth?”

King was silent a moment. Gina listened to the speaker’s faint hiss, felt a wave of dizziness pass through her. Somewhere a rumble briefly growled. Something in the moment gave Gina heightened focus, a vertiginous clarity. She waited for King’s words with a growing feeling of their importance.

“You were certain to find out,” King said. “Someday. But yes, Messenger is correct: you are not from Torus. You are a Titan.”

Gina’s memory flashed on the bloody prisoner in his cell. The curtain of red mist across the air, the cuts and contusions decorating his face, the

bloody stumps of his fingers...

“You were born on Titan,” King continued. “Captain Priest captured you in a raid thirty years ago. You were no more than a baby, and he chose to raise you as his own daughter.”

“*Why?*”

“Why raid Titan for children? We did not. It was a punitive raid; we were at war. If Priest were still alive, you could ask him why he took you.”

“I’m a *Titan*.” Was that wonder... or horror? Gina could not interpret her own feelings.

“So I said.” King’s patience was audibly wearing thin.

“But you’ve always trusted me!”

It was ironic, she thought, that such a cold-hearted man should display the most humanity of those with whom she had dealt today. Perhaps his age gave him a more urgent understanding of what they had to lose.

But no:

“Nurture is stronger than nature, Gina,” he said. “You were born on Titan, but you’ve always been Tethys.”

Gina found herself in the stockade. She hovered at the hatch to the tunnel leading to the cells. She did not remember the journey from the carousel to here. Stretching out a leg, she pushed gently against the wall and floated along to the first occupied cell. It held the other Titan, the one Messenger had not tortured. He lay curled in a foetal ball in one corner of the cell. Something must have told him Gina was at the gate, for he unfurled, slowly, uncertainly.

“Tell me about Titan,” demanded Gina.

The prisoner gave a puzzled smile.

“I don’t care if an army is following you,” said Gina. “Tell me what Titan is *like*.” She put both hands to the gate and gripped the bars. “I was taken from Titan when I was a child.”

“You were? When?” The Titan pushed himself across to the gate, and peered at Gina. “When were you taken?”

“Thirty years ago.”

He frowned. “How?”

“On a raid.” Gina gestured dismissively. “Tell me what it’s like on Titan.”

He remained silent a moment, staring intently at Gina. What he saw in her, Gina did not know. But it was enough. He looked away and, voice flat and emotionless but soon turning warm and wistful, he said:

“Our settlement is larger than yours. We live in a hollowed-out butte on the shore of an ethane sea. From the windows, you can look down onto it. It’s mostly frozen, big waxy floes of pink ice everywhere, strange bergs shaped like molten plastic, but glittering in the sub-zero temperatures. Sometimes it rains, a blood-red rain that fills the sky. We can’t see Saturn, the clouds hide it. All the time, it’s dim like twilight, a foggy orange twilight.”

To Gina, it sounded... surreal, unreal. Oranges, reds, pinks... Not black, white, grey. A landscape of *colour*.

The Titan continued: “Our settlement is dying. We lost biomass in a blow-in last year and we’ve never recovered.” His voice hoarsened as he spoke. “We also lost part of our manufactory. That’s why we came. We asked — so many times! — but you wouldn’t give us any of the fullerenes. So we came to steal some. We need them to seed our superconductor cultures.” His gaze flicked to Gina, became accusatory. “Why won’t you let us have some of the carbon?”

“It’s an artefact,” she said.

He did not understand.

“There’s something in the System protecting artefacts. That’s why Earth firewalled herself. It’s what happened at Io.” She shrugged. “You mess with the artefacts, you suffer the consequences.”

From his expression, it was not the answer the Titan had expected. He turned about, and pushed himself away from the gate.

“What’s your name?” Gina called after him, curious now that this bandit had become a person to her.

He glanced back. “Pyle,” he said.

Later that day, Gina brought an intercom down to the stockade, and

played Saturn's radio emissions for Pyle. To its unearthly laments and swelling sighs, they talked.

"I've figured out who you are," Pyle told Gina. "Memnon's daughter. We all thought you were dead."

"Memnon?"

"He's on our Council. An important man. He had a daughter, but she disappeared during a raid thirty years ago."

Eagerly, Gina gripped the bars. "Yes! That must be me. You thought I was dead?"

"Nestra was in mourning for weeks —"

"Nestra?"

"Memnon's wife. Your mother."

"I have a mother," breathed Gina in wonder.

Pyle nodded and grinned. "You have a brother too."

Gina blinked. "I do?"

It was too much. She drifted away from the cell's gate, gesturing for Pyle to leave her alone. She had a family — strangers, but her own flesh and blood. A father, a mother, a brother.

She looked back at the cell, at the young man clinging to the bars of the gate. Pyle gave a tentative, worried smile, and she was struck forcibly by its openness and lack of guile. She could not see this man executed, she could not watch him be expelled naked onto the surface of Tethys.

Gina pulled the gate to the cell open. Pyle lay curled up in one corner, bobbing lightly. He straightened and rolled to face her, a quizzical expression on his face. She watched his gaze fasten on the bundle which floated beside her.

"Yes," she said, giving the bundle a shove.

It sailed across the cell like Saturn across the sky. Pyle dived for it, and clutched it to his middle. Gina laughed to see his face.

"It's only a rescue suit," she said. "But it's enough to get you out to the sled."

“You’re letting me go?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m coming with you.” She did not want war between the two moons, but King would never open relations. And... a family, she would have a family.

Pyle had the bundle unrolled, revealing a coverall of silvery-grey cloth with built-in gloves and boots. He unzipped its front and began to wriggle into it.

“Where are we going?” he asked, struggling to get his hand into a glove.

“Titan.”

He stopped, looked up from his hands, and stared at Gina. “Titan? A sled won’t take us there. It doesn’t have the specific impulse. Or the fuel.”

“It’ll get us into orbit. The satellite you junked to hide your approach, I checked it out with the telescope. Its engine is undamaged and it’s nuclear-powered. We’ll use it to boost the sled.”

“You’re mad,” Pyle responded cheerily.

“Hurry. It’s the middle of the night-cycle, but that doesn’t mean we can take our time.” She spoke because she needed to do something. Pyle was squirming into the rescue suit as fast as he could.

He zipped up the suit’s front. He gazed at her, and she saw his face began to glow with hope...

And it made her happy. It was a shock, but for the first time in her life that she could remember, she felt truly happy. She had done something *right*. Not just “correctly” or “precisely as ordered”. She smiled; and found she could not stop.

“I want to meet my father and my mother,” she said. Her cheeks ached. “And my brother.”

“Oh.” Pyle looked up. He grinned. “In that case.”

“Yes?”

“In that case,” he repeated, still smiling. “In that case, I have some good news for you.” He pushed himself across the cell and landed at a crouch on the wall beside Gina. “You don’t have to go to Titan to meet him.”

Gina abruptly sobered. Filled with foreboding, she asked, “Why’s

that?”

“He came with me,” Pyle replied.

Gina felt dizziness sweep through her, though she was not in the carousel. She gripped the bars of the gate beside her. “He’s the other one?”

Pyle nodded.

“Wait here.” She put out a hand. “Please. Don’t move until I return. I’ll go and fetch... fetch...” She frowned: she did not know her brother’s name.

“Orris,” supplied Pyle. “His name is Orris.”

Messenger had released Orris from the board, and he now hung, coiled into a tight ball, in the centre of the storeroom. Splashes of red decorated the walls, but no fresh blood sent tendrils out from the Titan.

“Orris,” said Gina, after unlocking and pulling open the door.

Seconds passed. Gina thought she saw movement, and waited patiently. Slowly, Orris lifted his head, and turned to look towards her. His swollen eye was on the side he presented to her, so he rotated himself to bring his uninjured eye to bear. His face remained expressionless.

Gina had picked up another rescue suit on her trip from Pyle to here. She took it across to Orris. “Put this on,” she said. “I’m getting you out of here.”

He looked up at her, face too battered to show emotion.

“We’re escaping,” she explained. “We don’t have much time. But the three of us — you, me and Pyle — we’re going to Titan.”

“Why?” Orris asked, his voice faint and hoarse.

“Because, because...” She gestured hopelessly. “Because I won’t have my officers torturing prisoners, and King will say nothing. Because —” She paused — “Because you’re my brother.”

Orris closed his good eye. He seemed to be thinking; remembering, perhaps. “The raid?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“We thought you were dead.”

“You believe me?”

He smiled, and it made his facial injuries seem all the more worse. “There’s a family resemblance. I can see it now. You take after Mother.”

She stiff-armed the rescue suit at him. “Take it, Orris. Put it on. Pyle is waiting for us.”

She had to help him dress. He was missing three fingers and a thumb on one hand. Messenger had made no effort to treat the wound, and they bled as soon as Orris shoved his arm in the suit’s sleeve. Gina saw him wince with the pain.

“When we’re en route, we’ll sort out your hand,” she promised him. There was a basic medical kit aboard all the sleds.

If she had felt trepidation watching Pyle dress, then she was even more fearful as Orris tried to pull on his rescue suit. let out several loud grunts of pain and, once, only just managed to bite back a scream. Gina put out both hands — scared, worried, trying to imagine the pain he must be feeling.

“Wait here,” she told him. “I’ll go fetch Pyle.”

Major Gina Priest was a respected officer on Tethys, with a natural gift for strategy and tactics. But this escape... There was no plan to it. She had not thought it through. Leaving Pyle in his cell dressed in a rescue suit. If anyone saw him wearing it...

Fortunately, no one had. The lower levels were rarely visited during the night-cycle. There was little down there, and they were cold.

The two of them returned to Orris’ cell. Pyle let out a low moan when he saw the state of his fellow Titan’s face. “What have they done to you?” he cried. Rounding on Gina, he opened his mouth –

Orris put a hand to his shoulder. “It wasn’t her,” he said in his hoarse voice.

Pyle closed his mouth, but his eyes when he looked at Gina had changed. She could see the difference. They were narrower, suspicious, unsure if forgiveness was due.

Down here on the lower levels of Torus, detectors for the security systems were scarce. They were also easily circumvented. Gina led the two Titans to a little-used shaft in a northern sector of the labyrinth. Two snips

with a pair of cutters, and the fibre-optic lines carrying data for the security systems went dark. The only person likely to spot an incursion in this part of Torus was King. And he could not do so now.

Up the shaft they made their way, Gina leading... and only beckoning the Titans to join her when she was sure the tunnel leading from the shaft on each level was empty. They reached a hatch capping the shaft. It was manually operated.

Pyle grabbed the central locking wheel. "Orris," he said. "Help."

Orris shook his head. His arms were held tight to his chest, gloved hands clenched just beneath his chin. He did not look well, pale and beaded with sweat. Gina put out a hand to encourage him, to comfort him. She turned to assist Pyle.

Together, legs braced against the shaft wall, one arm interlocked in one of the other's, the pair found sufficient leverage to turn the stiff wheel. Once they had cracked the initial resistance, it spun freely. Pyle pulled it down, and snaked out of the way as it swung ponderously past him. Orris was first through the gap.

The hatch led into a square chamber cut from the ice and not insulated. The air was so cold, it was barely breathable. Each small gasp sent a spear of agony shooting through Gina's chest. In an ecstasy of fumbling, Gina pulled a maintenance suit from a locker and struggled into it. Pyle tried to help, but for all the spacesuit's simplicity, some of its technology was beyond him. She sealed the helmet, and warm air stung her cheeks and nose. The debilitating stitch was still there, still had her bent over in pain. But it would fade.

She glanced up through her eyelashes, and saw Orris and Pyle wearing their suit's soft helmets. Both bore grimaces on their faces, and Orris was visibly shaking.

"This way. Quick." Gina led the way along a tunnel carved through the ice, swimming along as if undersea. Saturn's light filtered through the ice, giving everything an orange hue. This, she thought, must be what Titan is like. Its oranges and pinks. Colouring everything.

An airlock filled the end of the corridor. This too was mechanically

operated. Gina opened the inner hatch, ushered the two Titans within, and entered herself. While Pyle closed the hatch, she set about opening the valves which would vent the airlock's atmosphere outside. When the mechanical dial read a pressure of zero bars, she unlocked the outer hatch and led her escapees onto the surface of Tethys.

Before them stretched a carpet of crystalline magenta. On an island of ice some five hundred metres away, a flying saucer had come to settle and sat spinning soundlessly: the settlement's carousel.

Gina heard a click — her voice-activated radio had just engaged. She turned away from Torus. Her home. Or it had been for thirty years. She saw Orris kneeling beside the purple crystals.

"Is this...?" he whispered.

"The fullerene sea? Yes," answered Gina. Stretching north and south as far as the eye could see, over the moon's horizon. A glittering carpet of magenta, unexpected and lurid against the dirty ice.

Orris began to scoop up a handful of the crystals, dragging a gloved hand towards him and scraping up fullerenes.

"No!" she shouted. She pushed herself across to her brother, and grabbed his shoulder. "Leave it!"

He shook her off. She floated away, floundering for a handhold.

"We need it!" he told her. "Titan will die!"

"You can't take it! It's an artefact."

Orris scoffed. "No one believes that!" He shook his maimed hand at her. "Look what you did to me! I *deserve* this. *I deserve the fullerenes*. Titan needs them to survive." He hunched over, protecting his handful with his body.

"Let him have them," Pyle said. "We *do* need them."

"No." Gina had managed to grab an outcrop of ice and pull herself down. "You can seed your cultures with superconductors from Sat Twelve. Or from the sled. You don't need raw fullerenes. And they're too dangerous to steal. We protect them *for a reason*."

It was plain reason was lost to Orris. He turned away from her, still bent over his spoils. He would not relinquish them. To delay further only

increased the risk of discovery. She let it go.

“Over here,” she told them. “The sled is over here.”

Coupled to the wreck of Satellite Twelve, the sled boosted out of Tethys orbit. They had enough oxygen, food and water to last the trip to Titan. The satellite’s nuclear pile provided more than enough power. They would also use its bulk to shield them from Saturn’s radiation. They had no drugs, and so were forced to spend the journey awake. Gina was looking forward to it. She had much to learn — about Titan, about life on Titan, about the family from which she had been stolen thirty years before.

As Tethys slowly shrank behind them, Gina peered out of the sled’s porthole. On a whim, she tuned the sled’s radio to Saturn’s frequency-hopping radio emissions. They no longer seemed sad, but... hopeful... reverent. She smiled, and watched pocked, icy Tethys dwindle and shrink. She felt no connection to Torus — she had lived in a human vacuum there. She turned her gaze on Saturn, that great globe of polished sandstone which dominated the skies of its many moons. She frowned as she saw something odd –

Across the face of Saturn stretched a line of turbulence, a vapour trail in the gas giant’s vast clouds. It visibly extended as she watched. To be visible from 300,000 kilometres away, it must be huge. Enormous. And travelling very, very fast.

It had not been there before.

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