

LEAP

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A DF Books NERD's Release

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First published in Analog, January 1993

Father Tim Shannon finished combing his thinning red hair, put down his steel pocket comb, and took a good long look at himself in the mirror. Although proud of his Irish ancestry, he was glad he wasn't green any more. The two sodas he'd sucked down had quelled the worst of the rebellion in his stomach. The Neoval and G-Right he'd washed down with the first one hadn't hurt much either, like a couple extra Hail Marys for good measure.

"Admit it, Tim," he told his reflection. "You weren't cut out for space travel." That left unspoken the question of what he *was* cut out for.

Not this, that was for sure. When Venus Development Consortium Chairman Aloysius X. O'Malley had asked for a priest from his family's neighborhood diocese to be sent for a short visit to the Venus stations at his expense, Tim had asked Bishop Pastorelli to send him, seeing it as a way to leave all his earthly troubles behind.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

He knew that the main reason Bishop Pastorelli had chosen him over the other applicants was that he hoped such a radical change in his circumstances might shake him out of the state he had fallen into. Tim himself had seen where that might be possible, but as with so many other things, he doubted it.

Tim's faith might have become as shaky as a church built atop a major active fault line, but free-fall had made him become increasingly positive that there was indeed a devil. No one else could have devised such a torment.

He'd gotten his first awful taste of that particular hell on the Soarliner that had carried him up from Earth to the orbiting cilty of Newtonia. The long trip from there to Adonis, the huge cylstation which was the Consortium's Venus operations base, had been spent in an at least bearable half-gee.

Adonis itself had been at Earth-normal, making the marriages, baptisms, and confessions he had done there no harder to take than the ones he had performed back in Boston. He could say the words and sound like he believed them without delivering what he had come to think of as a Technicolor confession.

The craft he was on now was a small sixteen seat combination shuttlebus and tug. The liquids dispenser and the bathroom were its only amenities. If you wanted gravity, all you had to do was think about how tiny it was compared to the abyssal nothingness around it, and the hostile planet below.

Endurance was the key. All he had to do was creep carefully back to his seat, keep from blowing his lunch for the rest of the trip to the smaller—but still Earth-normal—Anteros Research station, spend a couple days there playing priest, then he could start his return trip to Earth with its solid ground and dependable gravity.

He straightened his collar one last time. Wearing it constantly gave him the comfort of good camouflage. People always saw that first and rarely looked past it, basing their assumptions of who and what he was on what was around his neck, and not what was in his eyes.

He tried on a smile. It didn't look all that convincing, but he knew everyone out in the main compartment would just see it as the face of a man trying to be brave in the face of space-sickness. A Pilate's truth.

"You're a fraud," he told the face in the mirror, then got himself turned around in the cramped bathroom and reached for the handle of the door.

A split second before his fingers grazed the handle he remembered that he'd left his comb lying on the counter. It was a going-away present from his old friend Father Hiro Ryuku, and he didn't want to lose it. There was a Latin prayer for the resurrection of his hair graven along the top in elegant Uncials, a sort of priestly gag gift to a man who was already half-bald. As always with Hiro, there was a subtle subtext to the gift; a little parable about belief and hope.

Just as he began turning back to get it the small compartment filled with a sound so harsh and deafening that he started to fling up his hands toward his ears to shut it out. He staggered as the tug shuddered from end to end, and suddenly the floor was shoving against his feet. He felt his ears pop. The sensation of weight was gone as quickly as it came, the change peeling the magnetic clips on the soles of his shoes off the steel decking.

His momentum flung him back sideways, the counter clipping him hard on the side of one knee. He glimpsed the steel mirror over the counter coming at him out of the corner of one eye and tried to get his arms up to cushion the impact, but still his head cracked into the polished metal hard enough to set off red flash-flares in his skull.

He felt himself start to half bounce, half drift off the counter. One groping hand found the sink's spoutshroud under his thigh, and he grabbed it to hold him in place. His other hand locked onto the counter's edge, arresting his motion. Gasping for breath, he shook his head to clear it, wondering what the hell had happened. The compartment lights flickered, plunging him into several seconds of terrifying darkness, then steadied.

He jumped when a voice came out of nowhere and began yelling at him simultaneously in English and Japanese.

"Warning! Pressure breach in main compartment!" it blared in a sharply commanding tone. *"All passengers put on emergency pressure suits immediately! Warning—"*

Pressure breach? Tim thought, his confusion warping to panic. He looked around wildly, lurching back when a flash of orange jumped at him on his left, turning before his eyes into someone standing there in the bathroom staring at him, a child under its arm.

Then his misfiring brain made sense of what he was seeing. It was a bright orange emergency pressure suit, and it had come from an overhead compartment. The child was a half-sized suit tucked under one arm.

He swallowed hard, tasting blood from where he bitten his tongue. "Easy, Tim," he told himself, hardly able to hear himself over the dual computer voice and the ringing in his ears. "Stay calm. Remember the drills. Put the suit on and you'll be all right."

Biting his lip, he levered himself down off the counter and onto shaking legs. The mags on his shoes gripped the floor reassuringly. He took hold of the suit and pulled it free of its clamp. The suit's big clumpy magnetized boots thumped to the floor and stuck. The computer voice stopped mid-word.

In the ensuing silence he heard a new sound. He turned his head toward its source.

"*Oh Lord,*" he whispered, his eyes widening and his face paling as all the blood drained out of it. The bathroom door was bulged outward, literally humming with the strain on it. The sound he was hearing was that hum and the whistle of air escaping around it. He stared at it in numb horror, knowing that if the door let go he was going to be meeting his maker only seconds afterward.

He tore his gaze away and stared down at the suit in his hands. If he didn't get this thing on, and fast, he was going to die.

"Stay calm now," he whispered to himself, trying to banish the afterimage of that ready-to-blow door from his mind and remember at least one of the three or four emergency suit procedure demonstrations he had seen. They ran together in his mind like rivulets into a storm drain; muddy swirling, chaotic, inseparable. He thumped his forehead to jar something loose.

That seemed to help. "Legs first." The rest started to click into place.

His hands damp and trembling, he peeled the child's suit away, pulled the front of the oversized adult suit open, and slid first one foot and then the other inside. Even with his shoes on the gigantic boots were far too big for him. Next he shrugged his arms into the sleeves, his sweaty hands slipping into the gloves at the ends. After that he pulled the hard clear plastic bubble over his head and settled the stiff neck-ring onto his shoulders. The whistle of escaping air muted.

"Front closure." He panted, grasping the ring just below his navel and pulling it upward, sealing the baggy suit's front. All sealed now. What next?

"Size it." There was a covered box attached to one hip. He fumbled the cover back, then slapped the large red button underneath.

There was a weird crawling sensation as the suit shrank to fit him, the fibers contracting and stiffening. Bladders in the boots inflated, snugging around his feet. The collar tightened around the neck-ring, an electrically activated sealant making the seam airtight. Then there was a hiss and whisper as the small backpack life-support unit kicked in.

Tim sagged inside the suit, breathing a sigh of relief. He was safe now. He reached up to wipe away the sweat beading his face, his gloved fingers thumping against the hard bubble over his head.

"All right, now what?" he asked, his voice sounding strangely hollow inside the helmet.

But he already knew the answer to that. Having the suit on made it a bit easier. The stiff fabric made him feel like he had on a suit of armor.

He turned toward the door. He couldn't be sure, but it didn't seem to be bulging out as badly as before. If it was still whistling, he couldn't hear it through the bubble over his head.

He tried to think the situation through. Obviously something bad had happened. *Real* bad. It felt like the tug had hit something, but he couldn't imagine what. All he could know for sure was that if there had been some sort of accident, then the other passengers might be injured and need help. They were out there and he was in here. He started to open the door, but hesitated at the last second, gloved fingers hovering over the handle.

The door bulging outward. Pressure in here ... vacuum out there?

He stared at the door, biting his lip. What would happen if he opened it? Wouldn't all the air in here rush out there?

Maybe taking him with it?

He let his hand drop, chilled by how close he had come to making a possibly—quite probably—fatal mistake. He was in a hostile environment, and he had to consider his every action carefully.

So what should he do? He frowned. Maybe this was the sort of thing they taught at the two off-Earth seminaries, but all he knew about this sort of situation would fit on the head of a pin with plenty of room left over for dancing angels.

Even though his knowledge of physics was pretty hazy, he tried to work it out. The air was leaking out around the doorframe. Sooner or later it would all be gone, and he could safely leave. How long would that take? He had no idea. But he did know a bit of first aid, and all the time he waited in here the people on the other side of that door might be dying for want of his help.

So what he had to do was figure out a way to let the air out faster. He looked around, searching for something that might help. Unfortunately this was a bathroom, not a toolshed.

A metal gleam caught his eye. There on the floor was the steel comb Father Ryu had given him.

* * * *

Father Tim squatted by the bottom of the door. “Patience is a virtue,” he reminded himself as he carefully wedged the steel comb into the widest part of the crack. “So just go slow and easy.” Talking out loud to himself felt crazy, but it was a comfort.

When he had one end of the comb wedged as far into the crack as it would go he pulled on the other end gently, using it like a tiny pry-bar. The gap widened slightly and he could feel both door and comb hum through his gloved hands.

The unpleasant thought that this would be pointless if there were some system putting air into the compartment as fast as he let it out came to him. He shrugged it off. All he could do was hope that there wasn't.

Just when he thought the muscles in his back and arms were going to give out, he realized that the comb was no longer humming like a tuning fork. Maybe that meant this had worked, and most of the air had escaped. He pulled the comb out and laid his palm flat against the door. The gloves made it hard to tell for sure, but there didn't seem to be any vibration.

His knees popped as he pushed himself up to a standing position. There was a patch pocket at his chest. He shoved the comb in it. Then he closed his hand around the handle, took a deep breath, and gave it a twist.

The door flew open as the residual air in the compartment rushed out, snatching the handle out of his grasp. The air pushed his body forward at a forty-five degree angle, but the boots held their grip on the decking, and he managed to catch the doorframe with his other hand.

He hauled himself back, gagging on a scream. The freefall and the tension had his stomach on edge. What he saw in the main compartment very nearly sent it tumbling over.

“*Jesus Christ Almighty*,” he whimpered, desperately swallowing back the sour bulge trying to climb up his throat.

The bathroom was at the back of the main compartment on one side, the airlock on the other. When he

had left the cabin there had been an aisle down the middle, four two-seat rows of seats on either side. Centered at the end of the aisle with a narrow bulkhead on either side was the high-backed pilot's chair, a horseshoe-shaped control console surrounding it. There was a long, narrow window at eye level, another curved panel of instruments and controls above that.

Fourteen of the sixteen seats had been occupied, most of them by Anteros Station residents who seemed to find free-fall quite comfortable. Some of them had joked and commiserated with him about their own baptisms into weightlessness to help him forget his discomfort.

The cabin lights were dead. A harsh, sulfurous glare filled the cabin now, glazing everything with a cold, unearthly light.

That light flooded up from where the central aisle had been.

Most of the floor was gone. All that remained was a wide ragged hole edged with twisted metal and torn cabling. It began just behind the pilot's seat and came toward him, stopping less than a foot from the bathroom door. Below that was nothing but endless awful nothing that finally gave way to the naked face of Venus. Worst of all, the hole was nearly as wide as the cabin. Not only was almost all the decking gone, so were the inner seats on both sides. The outer seats were wrenched partially inward, as if to give their occupants a good look at the damage.

Little more than a narrow, twisted rim of metal ran around the outside of the cabin and held the outer seats in place. Unidentifiable pieces of metal were embedded in the walls and ceiling of the cabin. Unused pressure suits hung everywhere, contorted torsos with their boots stuck to the nearest metal surface.

Tim clung to the doorframe, desperately swallowing back his rising gorge, his shocked gaze traveling from one horror to the next. The seat immediately in front of him on his left was empty, its straps floating loose. A woman was belted into the seat beyond, blind eyes wide and her mouth frozen open in an agonized scream. Clutched in her hooked fingers was a child's shoe.

"No," Tim panted, shaking his head from side to side. Her name was Jenny. She and her husband worked on Anteros. She had been sitting in the seat just behind Tim's, and he been chatting with her just before he excused himself to visit the bathroom.

In the aisle seat beside her had been her five-year-old son. A green-eyed, brown-haired, hyperactive imp nicknamed Sparky.

He tore his gaze away from her anguished face. Beyond her was the seat he had been in. The one he had left to go to the bathroom to drain off the two sodas which had saved his life.

Beyond that was the remaining seat on that side. A thin young black man was spiked to it by some sort of metal bar driven through his chest. Both hands were wrapped around the thing that had impaled him, and he stared down at it in blind surprise, his glasses hanging askew.

Tim's eyes lit on the pilot's chair hopefully. If anyone knew what to do, it was her. The back of the chair was torn, but the woman in it might still be in one piece. God, he hoped so.

The only way to find out was to go to the front of the cabin and check on her. To do that he had to somehow get around that awful hole where the floor had been. He looked the situation over, carefully keeping himself from looking down.

The ledge on the left side of the cabin seemed slightly wider than that on the right. Besides, the airlock blocked that way. So there was only one route to take.

All he had to do was make his feet move.

He swallowed hard, then peeled one foot off the floor and stepped over the threshold. Once that had a hold on what was left of the decking he brought the other one out, transferring his grip from the doorframe to the arms of the first seat in line.

That seat was empty. In an attempt to purge his brain of some of the fear clogging every single synapse, he tried to remember who had been in it.

An older man with a Vandyke beard and yarmulke. *Probably not Catholic*, he thought, trapping a semi-hysterical laugh. Still he freed one hand to cross himself, whispering a short prayer for the man's soul. The words of the prayer tasted of ashes in his mouth, but the act gave him something else to keep his mind off what he was doing and why.

Working his way around the chair was tricky business. He had to swing his legs wide around the seat. The ledge wasn't wide enough for his whole boot, his heels were left hanging over nothing. But their grip seemed to be solid, and the chair arms gave him something to hold on to. Once he had both feet around the seat he stretched out his hand toward the arm of the next in line. Holding tight to it, he sidestepped forward.

That brought him to the woman with the child's sneaker in her hand. Again he said a few words commending her soul and that of her son to heaven. Careful not to look down, he glanced over his shoulder at the seat across the cabin from her.

A man sat in that one. Grey-haired and wide-jawed, he had a military look about him. Even in death he sat rigidly at attention, face expressionless and eyes front. Looking past him at the Oriental woman in the seat in front of him, Tim once again came within a heartbeat of throwing up in his helmet.

There was a piece of flat metal embedded in the wall beside her. It had very nearly taken the woman's head completely off. Her head drifted partly free of the black stump of her neck like a grisly balloon, tethered only by a scrap of blackened flesh no bigger than her slim wrist. Her head was twisted so that she stared back at him, a quizzical expression on her face.

Tim closed his eyes and choked out words for both of them, speaking them like the mantra that stood between him and madness. That done, he worked his way around the dead mother, keeping his eyes averted from her face. Then he swung his body around his own empty seat, noting with numb detachment that the back of it was full of holes, knifelike metal splinters protruding from several of them.

He mumbled the words for the black man with the metal strut driven through his chest. Getting around him was a little bit easier, the ledge was slightly wider. Hand clamped on the back of the man's seat, he turned around to look at the pilot's chair, his toes hanging over the edge of the hole.

The back of it was only about a meter and a half away, but between him and it there was absolutely nothing. He reached toward it, his hand falling short the length of his forearm. Gritting his teeth he leaned closer, his gloved fingertips just barely hooked on the arm of the seat beside him.

Still he couldn't reach it.

He pulled himself back and looked around helplessly for some other way to reach her. There wasn't any.

Jaw clamped tight on the whimpers bubbling up from inside himself, he slid his left foot out as far as it would go, only half of it on the buckled remains of the floor. Then slowly, cautiously, he let go of the chair and slid his right foot next to his left.

That left him right in the dead center of nowhere, the passenger seat out of reach on his right, the pilot's chair out of reach on his left. He was able to keep his eyes off the raw nothingness below his toes, but not his mind. His ears began to ring and his head began to swim, dark sparks dancing before his eyes.

He felt himself falling. *It's just zero gee*, he told himself desperately, but logic could not convince his body.

A convulsion of panic sweeping through him, and he flung himself sideways at the pilot's chair in a frenzied spasm of terror, the force it took to peel the magnetized boots off the decking throwing off his aim. His arms windmilling uselessly, he saw Venus rising up to eat him out of the corner of his eye.

When his shoulder slammed into the metal stanchion supporting the chair he flung his arms around it like a drowning man grasping a rope. His legs kicked frantically as they fell slowly through the hole, pulling his body after.

But he had his arms locked around the stanchion in a death-grip. He ended up hanging there hugging the post for dear life, the rest of his body dangling outside the crippled ship. He stayed that way for almost a minute, wheezing for air with his eyes squeezed shut. His heart felt like it was about to hammer its way out of his chest.

At last his terror subsided enough to try pulling himself out of the hole. He swung his legs around until one of his boots found purchase, then began pushing himself around to the front of the chair. Inch by inch, moving like a man dragging himself up out of an open grave, he hauled his body up onto the floor in front of the chair.

Having solid ground under him again felt so good that he could have kissed it. Still panting, and his limbs trembling from the adrenaline rocketing through his bloodstream, he grabbed hold of the edge of the console and began pulling himself up to check on the pilot.

One look and his flickering hope that she was all right and could get them out of this mess was snuffed out like a votive candle doused with a bucket of icewater.

She stared sightlessly back at him, the whites of her brown eyes red from burst blood vessels. Knowing it was a waste of time, he reached out hesitantly and tried to find a pulse in her neck.

Her head lolled forward. A metal rod protruded through the curly black hair at the back of her skull like a stiff steel pigtail. There was a matching hole in the back of her chair.

"Merciful Jesus," Tim whispered as the full truth of his situation closed around over him like a set of steel doors. Everyone was dead except him, and with nobody piloting this thing, he was as good as dead himself.

* * * *

He had no way to tell how long he stood there like a zombie, staring at the dead pilot as his mind raced in circles trying to find some way to let him believe that this was nothing more than a bad dream, the unholy

mother of all nightmares.

But there was no waking up in a sweat-drenched bed to swear to never ever again have a midnight snack of cold pizza or sardines before turning in. This was *real*. This was too real.

He tore his gaze away from the dead woman's face and breathed deeply, trying to get a grip on himself. "Steady now," he told himself. Once more he tried to wipe away the sweat glazing his forehead, his gloved hand clunking into the plastic bubble. "You've got to *think*."

That was easier said than done. The only thing that came to mind was giving a final blessing to the pilot. He did so, reciting the words in a distracted mumble, his mind searching for his own salvation, not hers.

"Now what?" A question that just wouldn't go away. He had no idea. He needed help, and he needed it badly.

Get help.

He almost smiled. This thing had to have a radio or something, didn't it? There had to be someone somewhere who could tell him what to do. He got himself turned around to face the curving control console, his hopes veering toward panic again at the mind-boggling complexity of the layout. There were literally dozens of numeric and screen displays, and uncountable switches and indicators; many of them dead or flashing an unnerving red.

How the hell am I supposed to figure this mess out? Back home he always had to ask for help operating the simple PA system used to call Bingo games. He squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe the pilot could operate this mess, but he didn't have a snowball's chance in hell. Her face floated into his mind as if to show him how he would soon end up.

Tim's eyes sprang open and he wrenched his body around to look at her. This time instead of focusing on her face, he saw and stared at the earphone and pin-mike rig she was wearing.

So she could talk to air traffic control or whatever the hell it was they had out here.

"Excuse me," he said as he slipped the unit off her head. He held the earpiece up against his helmet. He might have heard a faint buzz, but he couldn't be sure. Was it broken? Or maybe it had become unplugged. He traced the wire back to a socket in the arm of her chair. It looked all right.

Then he remembered. Sound couldn't carry through vacuum. What was it the emergency suit demonstrator had said he should do if he wanted to talk to someone?

Touch helmets. But that wouldn't work. He cudgeled his abused brain. There was something else. Something—

Then he had it. There was a speaker and pickup built into the suit's neckring so it could be patched into communications systems in circumstances just like this. The cord was stored in a hard-shell compartment at the suit's waist.

Tim pawed frantically at the compartment's cover, getting the hinged cover open at last. He dug the thin wire out, unplugged the headset, and jammed his own cord into the socket.

There was a burst of static as the connection was made, and then he heard the most beautiful sound he

had ever heard in his whole life. A sound to make him want to cry Halleluja!

It was the sound of a human voice.

* * * *

“-ling Alpha Vector Two One Five, come in please. What is your situation? I repeat, what is your situation?” It was a woman's voice, husky, low and controlled, but with a sharp insistent edge to it.

“*Oh God help me!*” Tim wailed, “Please, you've got to help me!”

There was a moment's pause, then the woman's voice came back to him like a light in the darkness. “I read you. Is that you, Sherry?”

Father Tim fought to get a grip on himself. Hope, terror, relief; he felt like he was about to explode. He took a deep breath. “I—I'm Tim Shannon.” he stammered. “I—I'm the only one here. Everybody else is d-dead.”

Another moment's silence. Then the woman's voice came back, soothing and reassuring. “All right, Tim. Let's take this slow and easy. You're saying that Sherry—that's the pilot—is dead?”

“Yes ma'am.” He swallowed hard. “Everybody else, too. Everybody but me.” Each time he said it the idea seemed to get bigger in his head, as if saying it aloud made it more real. He could feel it trying to drive everything else out. And then there was the awareness of just how alone he was. More alone than you could ever be on Earth.

“Can you tell me what happened, Tim?”

“I don't*know*, ” he moaned, “I was in the bathroom. There was an explosion or something. The whole ship shook. I got into a pressure suit. After I got all the air to leak out of the bathroom I came back out here. That's when I found—found—”

“Easy, Tim,” she said gently. “Stay with me. You said that you had to let all the air leak out of the bathroom. Then there's no air in the main compartment?”

“No,” he said, taking a chilling glance back over the destruction. “There's no goddamned*floor!* It's all *gone* , and half the seats with it, and I'm all alone w—” His voice rose higher with every word, taking him toward where only screaming remained.

“Tim!” Her sharp, commanding tone stopped him mid-word. “You've got to stay calm. You're not alone. I'm here.”

“And I'm*here!* ” he hissed, his fear turning to anger at the unfairness of it all in an instant.

The woman chuckled. There was something about the sound of it that shocked Tim into a weird sort of calm. “Believe me, Tim,” she said, “I'm not much better off than you are.”

“I—I find that rather hard to believe,” he said with a nervous laugh.

Again a long pause. Tim knew that she was in the position of someone trying to talk another person down off a high, precarious ledge, and that he was damned close to its edge.

Seeking a way to calm himself, he tried to imagine what she looked like. In her mid-forties, maybe. Strong and patient, with a face to match, lean and cut with laugh and character lines. Clear hazel eyes. Brown hair cut short in a no-nonsense style—

His heart clenched inside his chest. He was imagining her as looking like Beverly. Just like—

“All right, Tim,” she said, derailing his thoughts from the dead end they were heading toward. “I think we better put that particular pot on the back burner for now. The same for what happened. First things first. I don't suppose you know how to pilot a spacecraft.”

“I can't even drive a car,” he admitted bleakly.

“Then I guess you don't have any bad habits for us to overcome,” she said, somehow managing to sound pleased at his incompetence. Tim smiled wanly. If she could be so calm that she could even make jokes, then maybe everything was going to be all right after all. “Is Sherry still in the pilot's chair?”

He nodded. “Uh huh.”

“OK. The first thing you're going to have to do is get her out so you can sit down. Can you do that?”

“I—I think so.”

“That's the spirit. Give it a try.”

“All right.” He leaned close to look at the harness holding the woman's body in the seat. Straps came down over each shoulder, both ending at a complex looking buckle which also held the wide waist strap.

“Just give the handle on the buckle a half-turn,” the woman said just as Tim reached toward it.

“Thanks, uh—”

“Lilith. But call me Lil. All my friends do.”

The latch turned easily. The buckles sprang apart. “Lilith, huh. Lil is probably best for me. I'm a Catholic priest, and your namesake isn't one of the Church's favorite people.”

Lil snorted. “The church smeared her name, Padre. In some circles she's considered the first feminist hero. Her only sin was refusing to be Adam's slave, and telling God there was no point in having free will if you didn't use it.”

Free will was something that Tim had been having his own troubles with, so he let her comment pass unchallenged. At this point he'd gladly accept help from someone named Beelzebub. He pulled the last belt out of the way. “She's free of the harness now. What should I do with her?”

“Can you strap her to one of the other seats?”

He glanced back at the gaping hole he would have to pass to reach the nearest empty seat, his gut clenching anxiously. “I don't think so.”

“Then you're just going to have to let her go.”

“But she might fall out!” There was something horrifying about the idea of letting that hole eat anyone else. It would be like shoving someone through the gates of Hell. He stared about him, looking for some other alternative. Then he saw the headset. “I’ve got some wire.” He picked it up. “I think there’s enough to tie her to the back of the chair.”

“Good thinking, Tim,” Lil said approvingly. “Do it. But hurry.”

Tim wondered what the hurry was, but didn’t ask. He braced his feet, took hold of the dead woman under the armpits and lifted. There was a moment’s resistance, then her body came up out of the chair.

And kept coming.

“Dammit, no!” he gasped as he felt her begin to pull on him. He held on tight, then suddenly felt one of his boots begin to peel off the decking. He let her go before she could pull him off his feet completely.

“Problem?” Lil asked quietly.

“I—she—” The body thumped into the overhead, rebounded, and started back toward him. “Wait a minute—” He caught hold of the front of her coverall, trying to guide her still-moving body back behind the chair. She almost pulled out of his grasp when he tried to stop her motion, but he managed to hold on. Once he had the body plastered against the back of the chair he whipped the wire around and knotted it hurriedly.

“I did it,” he said with a sigh of relief.

“That’s great, Tim. Now sit down and strap yourself in.”

He did as she said, fumbling the belts in place and locking the buckle. The moment it latched he felt safer and more secure. A little voice in the back of his head reminded him that it hadn’t helped the chair’s former occupant, but he ignored it.

“I’m all strapped in.”

“Excellent. Now on the near end of the right arm of the chair there’s a covered panel. Do you see it?”

He looked down. “Yeah.”

“Slide the cover back. There’s a row of buttons inside. Push the blue one.”

Tim pushed the cover back and peered at what was under it. “Uh, they’re all dark, Lil.”

“Hell,” she said without any particular emphasis. “OK, push the one on the left farthest from you, then the second from you on the right.”

“All right.” He did as she said. If anything happened, he couldn’t tell.

“So much for plan A,” she said quietly. “That was a telemetry boost and autopilot reset. Neither worked. So what I want you to do now is look at the control board at about one o’clock on your right. There’s a square screen in the middle about twice the size of your hand. Is it lit?”

“It sure is!” Already he had a mental picture of Lil as someone who would not give up easily. She would

keep having him try things, and sooner or later something had to work.

“Good. At the far end of that panel you uncovered is a slide switch. Push it down, then all the way to the right. When you do that you'll see an overhead schematic of the ship's engines. Tell me how many green lights you see, and where they are.”

“Push the switch down, and to the right,” he muttered, repeating her instructions as he carried them out. “All I see are red lights. Five of them.”

“Damn. Try the middle position.”

He did as she said, his apprehension increasing at what appeared on the small screen. “Four reds, no greens. That's bad, isn't it?”

“It could be better,” she answered shortly. “Try the last position.”

Again there was nothing but reds. He told her so in a small voice.

Lil was silent for several seconds. “All right, Tim,” she said, for the first time her calm sounding forced and artificial. “You're doing just fine. Look on the lower lefthand side of the console. There are two big digital readouts, one on top of the other. Can you read what they say?”

Tim turned his head to look. “The top one reads 4733. The bottom one reads 1397.”

“All right, that confirms what I'm reading on telemetry. Now we've got a couple more things to try, Tim. But first I have to go off-circuit for a minute or two. You just sit tight. I'll be back before you know it. OK?”

The thought of being alone again brought the panic crackling back through him again. But he managed to keep his voice even as he said, “I'll be here, Lil.”

“You better be. I'm counting on you.” There was a soft click and she was gone.

* * * *

Tim sat there alone with the endless silence ringing in his ears, smelling the acrid tang of his own sweat. Funny how he hadn't noticed it until now.

He had a sneaking feeling that Lil was hiding something from him. That the situation was even worse than it looked from where he was sitting—which was plenty bad enough, thank you very much. How much worse? There was no way to know until she told him, and he wasn't exactly inclined to ask.

He flexed his hands inside the gloves. They felt damp, clammy. The impulse to do something with them sent him reaching toward his coat pocket for his rosary. His gloved hand slid across the smooth fabric of the pressure suit. He stared down in momentary confusion, then realized that the rosary might as well be back in his room in Boston for all that he could reach it now.

A mordant smile crept out onto his face. Talk about old habits dying hard—or being near to dying bringing back old habits. It had been quite a while since he'd had any real faith in prayer. For almost four years now he had fervently prayed for strength and guidance, only to sink deeper and deeper into a morass of confusion and doubt. The last two had been the worst.

“Yeah, you're Beatific as hell, Tim,” he muttered to himself. The Reorganizations of 2003 and 2021 had led to the formation of the Priestly Trinity; three separate Over-orders. There were the Shepherds; both male and female priests, allowed to marry—even in same-sex relationships—and have children. Then there were the Fishers; consecrated unions where both members were considered priests, the marriage dedicated to missionary work, spreading and upholding the faith. Then there were the Beatifics who cleft to the old strict traditional rules; male priests and female nuns who had taken vows to be ascetic and celibate.

Tim had taken the vows of a Beatific at age twenty, and over fifteen years of dedicated service had passed before his belief had begun to corrode. Even then he might have made it through this two year rough patch, if he had not met Beverly.

He saw her in his mind then. The way he had first seen her, the trim, self-assured figure with an arm full of books who had made him stop in his tracks and stare with something like recognition, not the way he had seen her last, in a satin-lined box with her face so pale, so white...

“Tim? Are you still there?”

Father Tim tried to shake off the feeling of hopeless sadness that had gripped him. So sweetly alive and then so utterly dead. “Yeah,” he said thickly, “I'm still here.” She'd dropped a book that first day. Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth* .

“Break's over. We've got one more thing to try before we have to go to our fall-back position. OK?”

“Sure.” He'd picked it up for her. Introduced himself. With that innocent act he had begun his fall into a deep dark crack between two worlds.

“Are you all right?”

He took a deep breath, trying to sweep away the dusty cobwebs of memory. He had to concentrate. Life might not have been much worth living lately, but he wasn't ready to die. “I'm fine. What do you want me to do?”

“Open the covered panel on the left arm of the chair. At the top there's a key-switch. Push it down and turn it to the right.”

“I'm sliding back the cover. I see the switch. There, it's turned.”

“That put the ship's controls into fly-by-wire mode. Let me see...” A long pause. “No dice. All right, turn it all the way to the left.”

He fumbled the key around the other way. “Done.”

“Good. All the ship's computers seem to be down. Now you've put the controls on full manual. We're going to give them a try on the off chance that there's an engine or two still working.”

“Those red lights I saw on that small screen were the engines?” *Red means dead* . Like everyone here. Like me.

“You got it. Now there's a larger screen over that engine screen. It should show two interlocking circles. There's a red box in the middle of one, a set of cross-hairs centered on it. There should be a winking

green light in the middle of the other circle. If that display changes I want you to let me know immediately.”

He nodded. “All right. There's also a flashing pink light off to one side of it, a line coming from it hitting one bar of the cross-hairs.”

“I know. Ignore it. Now I'm sure you've noticed the joysticks on either arm of the chair. Take hold of the right one and move it forward.”

“Watch out, student driver,” Tim joked weakly as he closed his hand around the stick. Biting his lip in anticipation, he pushed it forward. “I don't think anything's happening,” he reported in a hushed voice.

“I'm afraid you're right. Without the computer to mediate fuel flow, that should have set you back in your seat hard as hell. Your telemetry's all hashed, but I can read that much.” She hesitated a second. “Let's go for broke. Try all the other positions.”

“Broke, huh?” He began moving the stick in his right hand. “Right. Down. Left.”

“Nothing. Try the other stick. Forward first.”

“Forward. Right. Left. Down.”

Several long seconds passed before Lil spoke. When she did her voice was outwardly calm, but there was no way to miss the underlying tension. “Well, old buddy, we've got a problem.”

That had become horribly obvious. “The ship is completely out of control, isn't it?” he said in a small voice.

“Yes, Tim, it is.”

“I'm gonna crash on Venus.” The unearthly light filling the cabin seemed to brighten, as if in anticipation. He could almost feel it under him, patiently waiting to claim him.

“No,” she said quietly, “The pressure release threw the ship off its original course. Either Sherry or the autopilot tried to compensate, but not very successfully. If the tug maintains the course it's on now, in about twenty minutes it's going to crash right into the middle of Anteros Station.”

Tim sat there stunned. “You're—you're—” He swallowed hard, even though his mouth had gone dry as dust. Over a hundred people lived and worked on that station. There was one baptism, one marriage, and nine confessions to be heard after he arrived. Thinking of the people he was supposed to minister to put an all too human face on the destruction his arrival would now trigger.

He found his voice again. It was a rusty croak. “Can't you—can't the station be moved out of the way?”

“Not in time,” she answered gently. “The orbit-holding thrusters are completely computer controlled. It would take at least three more hours to rig up any sort of manual controls. Our tug could push it out of the way in time, but unfortunately you're in it.”

“So—so that's what you meant about not being much better off than I am,” he said thickly. How could she have remained so calm if she had known this all along? No wonder she hadn't told him, she'd been afraid he'd crack like an egg under a hammer.

She'd been right to do so. The thought of dying was bad enough, but the thought of killing so many was more than he could handle. He felt the fragile calm he'd maintained so far coming unglued. He felt like cursing, like crying, like tearing his hair and screaming, like all his doubts and failings of faith had brought him to this awful pass; God punishing him by making him the killer of over a hundred innocent people.

"That's part of it, Tim." He heard her take a deep breath, her words ringing ominously in his ears. How could there possibly be more bad news to come? He waited for her to say what she had to say, slumped in the seat and staring at his useless hands.

"Are you listening, Tim?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm not going to lie to you. At this moment there is nothing either of us can do to save you. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. But there still may be something you can do to keep from killing everyone on the station."

Maybe it was shock catching up with him. Maybe he had already started to die inside. Suddenly he felt nothing. Less than nothing. The white noise of mindless apathy.

"Is that so?" he said in a dull, robotic voice. She was good, but it wouldn't matter. Beverly had been good, and she'd ended up smashed like a bug on the bumper of a bus.

"Yes it is, Tim. We'll try it the easy way first, though your telemetry makes me doubt it's going to work. If it doesn't, then I'm going to have to ask you to do something very hard."

Twenty minutes. Less than that now. Nothing had worked so far. Nothing would. God had decided to use him to kill those people and there was nothing he could do to stop it. There was free will in action—

—there was him unable to decide whether to commit himself to his vocation, or to renounce it so he could commit himself to the woman he had come to love. There was him stringing her on while he played the role of priest for almost eighteen months, giving himself to neither. There was him sitting in a dark room in the rectory knowing she had to be wondering why he hadn't met her as planned, knowing he had pushed her patience too far and she was going to demand an answer that he didn't have, and there was him answering the phone and learning that she had been struck and killed by a bus while walking home alone from the restaurant where he was supposed to have met her for dinner—

"Tim?"

"Uh huh." God would have forgiven him for choosing to leave the Beatific Order so that he could be with her. She would have forgiven him for choosing to hold to his vows. Oh, the sins of omission sent the deepest, most uncleansable stains into the fabric of the soul...

"Will you try?"

He shrugged inside the suit. What was the use in even trying? Red means dead. Life was a joke and death was the punch-line.

"Please, Tim."

There was a bottom to despair. He found it easily enough, having been there plenty of times before. It was a place to stand. Or crouch. Perhaps even kneel.

“I know this is hard.”

No, going through the motions is the easiest thing in the world. I should know.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked in a voice emptied of all emotion.

She spoke quickly, as if sensing that she had to get him in motion. “On the far left of the console, just above those numbers you read earlier, are two keys under a clear cover. Turn them to the right, please.”

“What are they supposed to do?” he asked as he looked for them. Not *what do* they do, or *what will* they do.

“They’re the emergency fuel and oxygen dumps. The tanks are outside, above the main compartment. The released pressure should alter your vector enough to clear Anteros.”

He twisted around to reach them, knowing nothing was going to happen, but willing to humor her. “They’re uncovered. I’m turning the one on the right. Now the one on the left. So much for that, right?”

Several seconds passed before she answered. “Nothing happened with them, but I think something else has.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve given up.”

He said nothing, staring out the long, narrow viewport between the upper and lower consoles. In it he could see the ghostly reflection of his own pale face trapped inside a plastic bubble like some cave-bred albino catfish stuffed into a goldfish bowl. Trapped and out of place. Seeing no way out.

“Haven’t you?”

He looked down, spreading his empty hands. “Maybe I have, Lil.” Not an admission, just a statement of fact. “Maybe God is punishing me, and I’ve just decided to accept my fate. Maybe there is no God, and this is where you end up following something that doesn’t exist.”

“I thought you were a priest.”

“I was, once. I still wear the collar, but that doesn’t mean anything. A fallen priest can fake faith the way a dutiful wife fakes orgasm. It’s not hard. People see what they want to see, anyway.”

“I don’t believe in god myself,” Lil said thoughtfully. “I guess what I do believe in is people.”

A grimace that might have been a stillborn smile crossed Tim’s face. “That’s asking for a life of disappointment.”

“Maybe so. I’ve been let down plenty of times, just like everybody else. But even the most devout people don’t expect all their prayers to be answered, do they? The thing is, if what you believe in proves

itself often enough, and when you need it most, then you can keep on believing. Let me tell you something, Tim. I spent quite a few very scary minutes talking into a dead mike trying to raise someone on that tug, the whole time knowing that it was headed straight for Anteros. I believed that if one person survived whatever happened, then there was a chance to avert disaster. One person *did* survive.”

“Right. Me. A faithless priest.”

“You said everyone left in the shuttle was dead. Did you say any words for them?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“In other words you did what you could for them. Even if it didn't make any difference, you did all you could. That's what I want you to do now.”

Tim sighed. “Sure. Why not?” He let out a hollow, mocking laugh. “It's not like I've got anything else to do for the next few minutes.”

“That's the spirit.” Her tone turned brisk, businesslike. “Let's see, you're in an emergency suit, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“OK. Directly in front of you at the lower edge of the console is a black handle with a red-striped bar above it. Push the bar and pull on the handle.”

He did as she said. “A long black thing came out.” He hoped it was supposed to, but it was hard to see how he could frig the ship up any worse than it already was.

“It was supposed to. There's a patch pocket on your left thigh. Put it in. Now on your far right at about knee-level there's a compartment with yellow and black striping around it built into the bottom of the console. Turn the handle and open it up.”

Tim jammed the black thing into his pocket and Velcroed the flap shut. He leaned forward as much as the harness would allow, finding the compartment and opening it. The door dropped down, a light coming on inside.

“I've got it open.”

“Good. There's several square chips clipped to the door. Some are yellow, some red. Take a yellow one. It fits into a socket in the commcord compartment in your suit. It's a command frequency remote. When you plug it in you won't need the cord any more to talk to me.”

Tim did as she said. “I'm plugging it in ... pulling the cord. Can you still hear me?”

“Like the voice of an angel. There are a bunch of yellow strap-like things inside the compartment. Take two of the big ones that look like knee-pads and buckle them around your knees, then slip two of the smaller ones on so they're over the palms of your hands.”

He sorted them out and began putting them on. Legs first, soft cups going over his kneecaps and simple buckles at the sides. The first one went on and fastened easily, in spite of his bulky gloves. “What are they?”

“Maggrips. Magnetic fiber material that sticks to metal surfaces. I’m turning you into the human fly.”

“Why?” He snugged the second buckle and began pulling on the elastic hand-straps.

“So you can go out onto the top of the ship and open the manual dump valves.”

The numb caul of apathy that had swallowed Tim up shredded into a hundred quivering pieces as her words sank in. He froze, the second hand-strap half on. “You—you want me to *what*?”

“There’s an emergency hatch right over your head, Tim. I want you to go out it and onto the hull, then go back to the filltile and pull the manual dump levers.” She made it sound like the easiest thing in the world. He craned his neck to look directly over his head. Sure enough, there was a circular hatch there. And beyond it—

—*nothing*.

“I ... can’t...” he whispered in a choked voice. Just the thought of it made his blood run cold, made his stomach start rolling queasily.

“You have to. If you don’t, there’s a very good chance that every single person on Anteros will die.” Her tone was perfectly flat; a statement of cold, unarguable fact.

Tim tried to hide his face in his hands, only ending up with his gloves against the plastic bubble. There was no place to hide, and in the silence he could almost hear the relentless ticking of the clock.

Why me, oh Lord? he asked himself, gazing dully around at the useless controls. Is it because I failed you? Is it because I ran and tried to hide? Is it because you wanted to put me out where I would have no place to hide from your scrutiny, from your judgment? He looked up toward the hatch again, toward heaven, his eyes tripping over something they had missed up until now.

It was a mirror, set so that the pilot could look back at the passengers. Just like on a bus.

He’d forgotten all about it. Right after first settling into his seat and belting himself in, he’d looked forward and seen the pilot’s smooth brown face in the mirror. She had looked so relaxed, so self-assured. She had smiled and winked at him, and in that moment some of his anxiety about riding in this tiny ship across thousands of kilometers of pure nothing had subsided.

Now he was in her place, and when he looked back all he saw were the dead. The woman with the death-grip on the child’s shoe drew his gaze with the dark, irresistible magnetism of deepest tragedy. He found himself imagining her final seconds of life. That sudden, horrible sound, the whole floor ripping open like a mortal wound, the lifeblood of air snatched away in an instant, trying to take her son with it; the scream that was still frozen on her face as she made a doomed, desperate effort to hold him, her final seconds of horror and denial and a mother’s sharpest pain.

Father Tim closed his eyes to shut the sight out, only to see that scene replayed on Anteros a hundred times over as the tug struck it like a deadly missile fired from the chuckling depths of Hell.

He bowed his head, screams of the dying ringing in his ears. “Tell me what you want me to do,” he whispered.

* * * *

Two minutes later he was standing on the arms of the pilot's chair and preparing to open the hatch. Since there was vacuum on both sides of it, all he had to do was turn the lockbar and push it open. Like all you had to do to walk on water was take that first step...

He kept telling himself that there was nothing outside that hatch that wasn't already in there with him, but still opening it was going to be hard, so hard.

"All right, Tim," Lil said encouragingly. "One hand on the brace bar and push the hatch open with the other. Easy as pie."

"Uh huh." He gripped the bar tight and then quickly, before he could change his mind, jammed the lockbar to the side and pushed. The hatch swung up easily, giving way so quickly that if he hadn't been hanging on so tight he might have ended up flying out like some hapless jack-in-the-box. "It's open."

"Fine. Now pull yourself up so your upper body is sticking out through the hatchway."

Freefall made it easy enough to lever himself up—at least in the physical sense. When his head and shoulders were through the opening he hung onto the brace-bar with one hand, slapping the other against the craft's outer skin. The maggrip on his palm stuck fast. He concentrated on looking down into the hole he was in rather than up at the daunting foreverness gathered around him and waiting to claim him.

"OK, Lil," he said rasped, "Now what?"

"There's a panel on the side of the hatch facing aft—toward the back—yellow and black striping around it. When you open it, you'll see bright red tether belts inside. Put one of them on."

Keeping one hand on the brace-bar below, he opened the compartment, then pulled out one of the belts. A fine silver wire came from it. *That* was supposed to hold him? "Got one. There's a little green light of some sort on the buckle."

"That means the tether system is functioning. It runs off its own powerpack in case of emergency."

"I guess we've got one of them here," he said with an uneasy laugh. "Maybe two. How am I supposed to put this damn thing on and still hang on to the bar?"

"You'll need both hands to put on the belt. Brace your knees against the inside lip of the hatch. The mags will hold you secure. The belt's wire and buckle go to the front."

He brought his knees up and jammed them against the edge of the hatch, feeling the pads glue themselves to the metal. Letting go of the brace-bar was hard, but he did it.

"How do you know exactly where everything is, and how it works?" he asked as he began fumbling the belt around his waist. His hands were slippery with sweat inside his gloves. He had to keep talking to keep his mind off what he was supposed to do next. If he really let himself think about it he'd haul himself back inside, close the hatch after him, and count the minutes until he became a destroyer of innocents.

"I've handled her a few times myself. I'm station manager at Anteros, and have to know every piece of equipment inside and out."

"If you pull this off, lady, I'd say you earned yourself a big raise." He heard her laugh, almost smiling himself. "I've got the belt on now."

“Good. Now your suit's bootmags are more than strong enough to let you walk on the hull. But since you're not used to EVA, you'll probably feel safer crawling on your hands and knees. The magpads will make it easy, and even if you do somehow manage to push yourself off the hull, the tether will catch you.” Her voice dropped lower.

“The cabin makes up only about half the tug's length. The stile is at the aft end of the cabin. The thing is, we haven't got much time. According to the simulations you have to trip those dump-levers within the next six minutes to be sure this will work.”

The mere mention of standing up on the hull had made Tim's head swim and his gut squirm. He swallowed hard. “I think—I think I better crawl before I walk.”

“That's just fine, Tim. You don't have that far to go. But you better get started.”

He took a deep breath, telling himself he could do this—that he *had* to do it. “Here goes.”

He put both palms flat against the hull, the maggrips adhering tight. Then he gingerly brought one knee out and set it against the ship's metal skin. Both the magpad at his knee and the magnetized toe of his boot took hold. Fighting a creeping vertigo and keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the flat scuffed white surface between his hands, he slowly withdrew his other leg.

“I—I'm out. I'll head back now.”

“You're doing just fine, Tim,” Lil said, sounding like she meant it. “I know how scary this must be for you.”

He slid one hand forward a few inches. One knee forward. Then the other hand. The other knee. “Oh?” he said in a shaky voice. “Can you hear the pee running down my leg over the radio?”

She chuckled. “I think you're sloshing me.”

He inched forward another half a foot. What would that be in meters? Who the hell cared? “Want to hear something funny?” He spoke quietly, as if the sound of his voice might somehow dislodge him.

“That would be a nice for a change.”

“I might just be committing a mortal sin here.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Suicide. I may not be a rocket scientist, but even I know what's going to happen if I purge those tanks. They're at the top of the ship. Venus is under it. I'll be willfully heading myself right down toward it.”

Lil was silent for a moment. “Do you really believe that what you're doing is wrong?”

He considered her question before answering. “No, not really. Swerving your car to avoid a child and flattening yourself on a concrete abutment isn't suicide. That's all I'm doing here. Swerving.”

“You're doing more than that, Tim. You're showing courage. You're showing faith.”

Tim chuckled to himself as he crept another few inches toward the back of the ship. “Are you trying to repair my faith, Lil? Help me make peace with God before I bite the big one?”

“Why are you still alive, Tim?” she asked quietly.

He snorted. “I drank too much soda to settle my stomach and had to take a leak. A bathroom door that should have been blown off its hinges somehow managed to hold.”

“Those are circumstances, not reasons. I think you're alive so that you can do what you're doing right this very minute.”

Tim chewed on that as he continued crawling toward the rear of the cabin. Inch by inch he had gotten a third of the way back. He had come abreast of two long cylinders, one on either side of him, **FUEL** written on them in letters the size of his hand. Two smaller cylinders were inside and parallel to them, **OXY** on them. The big ones would probably be shoulder high if he were brave enough to stand, the nearer ones slightly higher than his bent shoulders. Having them on either side of him like a double set of safety rails made him feel a lot more secure. He crawled faster, knees and toes clumping against the hull. The stile had to be somewhere ahead of him, but he was afraid to look up.

“You're saying—God put me here for this?” he puffed.

“I'm saying you're in the right place at the right time. Someone who had faith in God might see His hand in that.”

Tim nodded to himself. “I suppose they might. What about you? What do you see?”

“I see my own faith confirmed.”

“I thought you said you were an atheist.” The strangeness of his situation didn't escape Tim. Here he was, crawling on his hands and knees like a penitent on a runaway spacecraft, with a planet named for a pagan goddess under him, debating theology with an atheist who would die if he failed. Too bad he wasn't going to live long enough to be able to look back and laugh.

“I am. My faith is in *you*, Tim.” Her voice carried utter conviction.

“I don't deserve it.” God, the Church, his brother priests, Bishop Pastorelli, Beverly; he had let them all down. Weak in flesh and poor in spirit, his only remaining faith in futility.

“Some say that about God's love, don't they? I don't believe in saints and sanctity, but I do believe in heroes and heroism. I see you doing what needs to be done, putting all your doubts and terrors aside so you can save the lives of others.”

“So now we're talking salvation. Next you'll be pushing redemption. Are you sure you're not really a Jesuit ath—*ow!*”

“What's wrong?” Lil's voice suddenly crackling with tension.

Tim let out a shaky laugh. “I'm fine. I got so wrapped up in our talk I crawled right into the side of the stile!” There it was before him, an open metal framework with several big pipes inside, a flat boxy thing at the top.

“Thank God.”

“That's my line. So what do I do now, Lil?”

“Trip the manual dump levers at the top.”

“At the top,” he echoed unhappily. That meant he was going to have to stand up after all. His eyes stung from the sweat in them. Once more just thinking about standing up made his gut clench and his heart hammer crazily against his ribs. But he had come too far to wimp out now.

He licked his dry lips. “All right. Here goes.”

There were wide u-shaped handholds welded to the framework. He reached out to grab the lowest one with first one hand and then the other, the whole time grimly keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the metal in front of them, absolutely certain that if he let himself see where he really was he'd freeze as solid as a pillar of salt with fear.

He knee-walked closer, then cautiously gave up the kneepads' hold to get into a squatting position. The boots' magnetic soles bit into the plating with a reassuring solidity. “*Talk to me*,” he croaked as he groped blindly for the next handhold.

“I love it out here in space. It's so beautiful here. I haven't been back to Earth in twenty years.”

“No? I wish I was there right now.” He'd found the next rung. He took hold of it, wishing his hands weren't so sweaty.

“Why did you come out here, Tim?”

“That's a long story. Let's just say I was trying to run away.” A crippled laugh stumbled out his mouth as he pulled himself up to a standing position. “Look where it got me. I'm standing up now. I see the two levers with **EMERGENCY DUMP** written over them.”

“That's great. Do you see how they are latched?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Undo both latches first.”

“All right.” Holding tight with one hand he fumbled the safety latches off both levers. “Done.”

“Okay. I want you to dump the fuel first, it's under less pressure. When you turn that lever something like a geyser is going to blow out of the top. There's going to be acceleration, so hang on tight to your handhold. Are you ready?”

“Ready as I'm ever going to be.” He hooked his arm through the handhold, fingers wrapped tightly around the metal rung's side, then laid his other hand on the handle marked **FUEL** .

“God give me strength,” he whispered half under his breath, closing his eyes and giving the handle a sharp twist.

He couldn't really hear anything, but vibration thrummed through the metal into his hands and feet. A

feeling of falling washed over him, lifting his stomach toward the back of his throat. He gritted his teeth together and held on for dear life.

Lil's voice came to him, excitement sharpening her tone. "Your vector is beginning to change. Trip the oxygen dump now."

It took every iota of courage and strength in him to peel his hand off one lever and grip the other. He gave it a twist, sending a second plume into the endless night.

The feeling of falling got worse, becoming nearly overwhelming. The whole framework shook with the force being transmitted through it.

"*Changing*," a distant voice said.

Tim clung to the stile, his head bowed and his eyes clamped shut. He felt something begin to rise up out of some lost place deep deep inside himself, and his lips began to move in prayer. The most heartfelt prayer of his whole life.

Not a prayer for his own safety or salvation, but a prayer that this worked, a prayer for Anteros Station's deliverance.

* * * *

"*Tim! Can you hear me?*"

Tim shook his head to clear it. "Yes, I hear you." The sensation of falling was gone. Everything was quiet and still, almost ... peaceful. He raised his head and opened his eyes.

A chill went through him as his eyes were filled with the stars. They were so clear, so bright, and there were *so many* of them! His mouth opened, as if to breathe them in.

He stared in unfolding awe. Instead of emptiness, this was fullness; instead of darkness, this was layer upon layer of endless light. Without even realizing what he was doing, he let go of the metal stile and stepped back, his head turning and his mind whirling as he took in the awesome arch of eternity.

"It worked, Tim. The tug is going to miss the station. You'll pass under it in about three minutes."

He nodded, then remembered she couldn't see him. Even before she had told him that he'd somehow known his prayer had been answered. "I'm glad. Lil?"

"Yes, Tim?"

He could see the curved edge of Venus now, glowing like a burning pearl. Feeling tears of rapture in his eyes, he struggled to find words. "It's ... it's so beautiful," he said in a hushed tone, knowing he was damning it with faint praise. He had never really been a Bible-quoter, but words from Psalms came to him then: *The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork*. This was a declaration in a voice even one as deaf as he could hear.

"Yes it is. But I think I know something you're going to think is even more beautiful."

"What's that, Lil?" This was beauty enough. He felt filled; fulfilled. How could he have been afraid of this? His prayer had been answered, and in its wake he had regained even more than his old lost faith; he

had found the peace of God, the peace that passeth all understanding.

“Me, of course. Look off to your right.”

He got himself turned around, never thinking twice whether the big clumpy boots would hold him. There in the distance against the diamond dusted dark was a blaze of bluish white. He stared at it, frowning. “That’s you? But I thought you were on the station.”

“I know you did. Actually I was just starting back from one of the atmosphere-dipping platforms when this mess started. I’m in a little two-seat satellite truck, and I’ve had this baby at full burn on an intercept course almost the whole time since. If we hadn’t managed to alter the tug’s trajectory I would’ve hit it broadside with about one minute to spare. Anteros would’ve still gotten pretty banged up with debris, but the 25 percent casualty rate the computers predicted was one hell of a lot better than the 98 percent rate we could expect from the tug’s impact.”

It was almost a minute before Tim could speak. “You never let on,” he said quietly. “You were ready to sacrifice yourself, and you never said one word about it.” He had gained considerable respect for this calm, competent woman in the short while he had known her. That respect took a quantum leap forward at this revelation. No wonder she believed in heroes, she was one.

“Hey, your plate was already full. Besides, when I found out that you were alive I saw that I just might not have to play human cannonball. But none of that’s important now. The thing is, I started braking just after you climbed out that hatch, and since then I’ve been trying to match speeds with you.”

Tim had turned his head to look toward the front of the tug. There in the distance was a tiara of lights that had to be Anteros. He scowled thoughtfully. “I don’t know much about this stuff, but doesn’t that mean you gave up your chance to ram the tug?”

“That’s the way it works.”

He shook his head in bafflement. “Why?”

“I knew it wouldn’t be necessary. The computers said that if you dumped the fuel in time you’d miss the station, and I knew you’d pull it off.”

Tim could hardly believe how fast he was approaching the station. It was nearly overhead now. The marker lights flashed once, twice, then glowed steadily again. He smiled and raised his arm to wave. In moments it was safely behind him.

“How could you know I wouldn’t fail?”

“I had faith in you, Tim.”

He dropped his arm, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, and feeling both laughter and tears inside, beneath the stillness that filled him. “I’m glad you didn’t have to kill yourself.” He turned back in her direction. Now he could see some sort of mass centered in the blue glow. “It still seems like a pretty big risk to take.”

“Maybe so, but I think it was worth it. By beginning to brake then I’ve been able to slow down just enough to pick you up.”

Tim heard her words, but they were so unexpected that at first they didn't make any sense. *Pick him up?*

“You—you gambled everything on a chance to save me?”

“That's no more than you did, old buddy. Now this isn't going to be exactly easy, I'm still going to be moving at least thirty klicks per hour relative to you, and I can get only so close. You're going to have to jump for it, and you're going to have to hold on tight when you hit. But what the hell, you're Father Tim, the human fly.”

The idea that he wasn't going to die after all was so strange that he had a hard time believing it. “I thought you said there was nothing you could do to save me.” It wasn't that he wanted to argue the possibility, he just wanted to understand it.

“No, I said there was nothing I could do right then. This was a possibility then, but only that. I never make promises I can't be sure of keeping. Look, if saving your own butt isn't reason enough to do this, that black module I had you pull is the tug's flight recorder. I'd sure as hell like to know what caused the blowout.”

Tim laughed out loud. “You keep every base covered, don't you Lil?” He patted his thigh. The module was still there.

“You bet your ass, dad. That's why I'm boss. Now are you going to take that tether off and climb up on the stile? If you do, I can have us back on Anteros in about two hours. You can be back on Adonis in a couple days, and on your way back to Earth before the week is out.”

Tim began taking off the tether belt. Smiling to himself, he said, “No.”

There were several seconds of silence. Long enough for him to get the belt off and wrap it around one of the handholds.

“What do you mean, *no*? Are you determined to be the first man on Venus? Don't bother, you'd be a fried friar, dead the minute you hit the atmosphere.”

He looked toward her ship. He could see the vehicle clearly now. It was an absurd looking aggregation of struts and tanks and grapples, a clear plastic bubble set in the middle. Inside the bubble was a tiny figure in a blue suit. Thrusters flickered and pulsed as she fought the ship toward rendezvous.

He put his hands atop the tower and climbed up, ending up atop it on his knees. A fitting position for this place.

“I'm not going back to Earth. I want a job, Lil. I can be a counselor. I can teach. Hell, I can scrub toilets and wash dishes. I don't care what you have me do, but I want to stay here.”

He expected her to argue. Instead she asked, “What made you decide this?”

Tim straightened up, looking around at the stars all around him, and the face of Venus below. His fear was gone, not even an echo remained. Instead he felt uplifted, elevated. He was in a place high enough to see clearly, and all the scales had fallen from his eyes. Off in the distance was a blue pinprick that might have been Earth.

Here was awe and majesty enough to keep God alive in him for as long as he lived. Here was the Creator's face revealed in all its glory.

"Maybe God did put me here so I could divert this thing," he said, as much to himself as to Lil. "Maybe His plan was even greater than that. Maybe He brought me here, closer to Him, because this is the place where he wanted me all along."

"The right person in the right place at the right time," Lil said softly, an underlying strain in her voice as she fought the ungainly craft toward him. "Your resume is pretty impressive, Tim. What the hell. You're hired."

"We'll talk wages and bennies later, Boss—" Tim said with a laugh as he stood up atop the stile. She was almost on top of him now. "—though I am going to want Sundays off."

"That figures. OK, I'm going to start counting. When I say *three* I want you to jump as hard as you can. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely." He glanced down at the crippled ship under his feet, thinking of all those who had died in it. He closed his eyes and said a prayer for their souls. This time the words had resonance and meaning. In one way they were already in Heaven.

"*One!*"

He opened his eyes again. One of the spindly manipulators at the front of the craft was lost directly overhead. Was he really fulfilling God's plan in doing this? Or was it just that he was being given another chance to start a new life, and this time he was taking it?

"*Two!*" He tensed his legs and spread his arms like someone about to fly. The craft was almost fully over him now, three or four meters of absolute nothingness between him and it. Maybe he hadn't been able to choose before because they hadn't been the right choices. God's plan revealed. Free will, and knowing the choice to take when it came. In the end it didn't really matter. Either way it demanded the same thing. Something Lil had taken when she believed in him. An ability he had lost, but which God had returned to him in full plenitude. All it took was-

"*Three!*"

—a leap of faith.

Father Tim Shannon laughed as he joyously launched himself into the void, taking the leap.