

TIN MARSH by MICHAEL SWANWICK

Patang races through the blazing Venusian heat in a desperate flight for survival.

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It was hot coming down into the valley. The sun was high in the sky, a harsh white dazzle in the eternal clouds, strong enough to melt the lead out of the hills. They trudged down from the heights, carrying the drilling rig between them. A little trickle of metal, spill from a tanker bringing tin out of the mountains, glinted at the verge of the road.

A traveler coming the other way, ten feet tall and anonymous in a black muscle suit, waved at them as they passed, but, even though it had been weeks since they'd seen another human being, they didn't wave back. The traveler passed them and disappeared up the road. The heat had seared the ground here black and hard. They could leave the road, if they wanted, and make almost as good time.

Patang and MacArthur had been walking for hours. They expected to walk for hours more. But then the road twisted and down at the bottom of the long decline, in the shadow of a basalt cliff, was an inn. Mostly their work kept them away from roads and inns. For almost a month they'd been living in their suits, sleeping in harness.

They looked warily at each other, mirrored visor to mirrored visor. Heat glimmered from the engines of their muscle suits. Without a word, they agreed to stop.

The inn radioed a fee schedule at their approach. They let their suits' autonomic functions negotiate for them, and carefully set the drilling rig down alongside the building.

“Put out the tarp,” MacArthur said. “So it won't warp.”

He went inside.

Patang deployed the gold foil tarp, then followed him in.

MacArthur was already out of his suit and seated at a cast-iron table with two cups of water in front of him when Patang cycled through the airlock. For an instant she dared hope everything was going to be all right.

Then he looked up at her.

“Ten dollars a cup.” One cup was half empty. He drank the rest down in one long gulp, and closed a hairy paw around the second cup. His beard had grown

since she had last seen it, and she could smell him from across the room. Presumably he could smell her too. “The bastards get you coming and going.”

Patang climbed down out of her suit. She stretched out her arms as far as they would go, luxuriating in the room’s openness. All that space! It was twenty feet across and windowless. There was the one table, and six iron chairs to go with it. Half a dozen cots folded up against the walls. A line of shelves offered Company goods that neither of them could afford. There were also a pay toilet and a pay shower. There was a free medical unit, but if you tried to con it out of something recreational, the Company found out and fined you accordingly.

Patang’s skin prickled and itched from a month’s accumulation of dried sweat. “I’m going to scratch,” she said. “Don’t look.”

But of course MacArthur did, the pig.

Ignoring him, Patang slowly and sensuously scratched under her blouse and across her back. She took her time, digging in with her nails hard enough almost to make the skin bleed. It felt glorious.

MacArthur stared at her all the while, a starving wolf faced with a plump rabbit.

“You could have done that in your suit,” he said when she was done.

“It’s not the same.”

“You didn’t have to do that in front of—”

“*Hey!* How’s about a little conversation?” Patang said loudly. So it cost a few bucks. So what?

With a click, the innkeeper came on. “Wasn’t expecting any more visitors so close to the noon season,” it said in a folksy synthetic voice. “What are you two prospecting for?”

“Gold, tin, lead, just about anything that’ll gush up a test-hole.” Patang closed her eyes, pretending she was back on Lakshmi Planum in a bar in Port Ishtar, talking with a real, live human being. “We figured most people will be working tracts in the morning and late afternoon. This way our databases are up-to-date—we won’t be stepping on somebody’s month-old claim.”

“Very wise. The Company pays well for a strike.”

“I hate those fucking things.” MacArthur turned his back on the speaker and Patang both, noisily scraping his chair against the floor. She knew how badly he’d

like to hurt her.

She knew that it wasn't going to happen.

* * * *

The Company had three rules. The first was No Violence. The second was Protect Company Equipment. The third was Protect Yourself. All three were enforced by neural implant.

From long experience with its prospectors, the Company had prioritized these rules, so that the first overruled the second, the second overruled the third, and the third could only be obeyed insofar as it didn't conflict with the first two. That was so a prospector couldn't decide—as had happened—that his survival depended on the death of his partner. Or, more subtly, that the other wasn't taking proper care of Company equipment, and should be eliminated.

It had taken time and experience, but the Company had finally come up with a foolproof set of algorithms. The outback was a functioning anarchy. Nobody could hurt anybody else there.

No matter how badly they needed to.

The 'plants had sounded like a good idea when Patang and MacArthur first went under contract. They'd signed up for a full sidereal day—two hundred fifty-five Earth days. Slightly longer than a Venusian year. Now, with fifty-nine days still to go, she was no longer certain that two people who hated each other as much as they did should be kept from each other's throats. Sooner or later, one of them would have to crack.

Every day she prayed that it would be MacArthur who finally yanked the escape cord, calling down upon himself the charges for a rescue ship to pull them out ahead of contract. MacArthur who went bust while she took her partial creds and skipped.

Every day he didn't. It was inhuman how much abuse he could absorb without giving in.

Only hatred could keep a man going like that.

* * * *

Patang drank her water down slowly, with little slurps and sighs and lip-smackings. Knowing MacArthur loathed that, but unable to keep herself from doing it anyway. She was almost done when he slammed his hands down on the tabletop, to either side of hers, and said, "Patang, there are some things I want to get

straight between us.”

“Please. Don’t.”

“Goddamnit, you know how I feel about that shit.”

“I don’t like it when you talk like that. Stop.”

MacArthur ground his teeth. “No. We are going to have this out right here and now. I want you to—*what was that?*”

Patang stared blankly at her partner. Then she felt it—an uneasy vertiginous queasiness, a sense of imbalance just at the edge of perception, as if all of Venus were with infinitesimal gentleness shifting underfoot.

Then the planet roared and the floor came up to smash her in the face.

* * * *

When Patang came to, everything was a jumble. The floor was canted. The shelves had collapsed, dumping silk shirts, lemon cookies, and bars of beauty soap everywhere. Their muscle suits had tumbled together, the metal arm of one caught between the legs of the other. The life support systems were still operational, thank God. The Company built them strong.

In the middle of it all, MacArthur stood motionless, grinning. A trickle of blood ran down his neck. He slowly rubbed the side of his face.

“MacArthur? Are you okay?”

A strange look was in his eyes. “By God,” he said softly. “By damn.”

“Innkeeper! What happened here?”

The device didn’t respond. “I busted it up,” MacArthur said. “It was easy.”

“What?”

MacArthur walked clumsily across the floor toward her, like a sailor on an uncertain deck. “There was a cliff slump.” He had a Ph.D. in extraterrestrial geology. He knew things like that. “A vein of soft basalt weakened and gave way. The inn caught a glancing blow. We’re lucky to be alive.”

He knelt beside her and made the OK sign with thumb and forefinger. Then he flicked the side of her nose with the forefinger.

“Ouch!” she said. Then, shocked, “Hey, you can’t ... !”

“Like hell I can’t.” He slapped her in the face. Hard. “Chip don’t seem to work anymore.”

Rage filled her. “You son of a bitch!” Patang drew back her arm to slug him.

Blankness.

* * * *

She came to seconds later. But it was like opening a book in the middle or stepping into an interactive an hour after it began. She had no idea what had happened or how it affected her.

MacArthur was strapping her into her muscle suit.

“Is everything okay?” she murmured. “Is something wrong?”

“I was going to kill you, Patang. But killing you isn’t enough. You have to suffer first.”

“What are you talking about?”

Then she remembered.

MacArthur had hit her. His chip had malfunctioned. There were no controls on him now. And he hated her. Bad enough to kill her? Oh, yes. Easily.

MacArthur snapped something off her helmet. Then he slapped the power button and the suit began to close around her. He chuckled and said, “I’ll meet you outside.”

* * * *

Patang cycled out the lock and then didn’t know what to do. She fearfully went a distance up the road, and then hovered anxiously. She didn’t exactly wait and she didn’t exactly go away. She had to know what MacArthur was up to.

The lock opened, and MacArthur went around to the side of the tavern, where the drilling rig lay under its tarp. He bent down to separate the laser drill from the support struts, data boxes, and alignment devices. Then he delicately tugged the gold foil blanket back over the equipment.

He straightened, and turned toward Patang, the drill in his arms. He pointed it at her.

The words LASER HAZARD flashed on her visor.

She looked down and saw the rock at her feet blacken and smoke. “You know what would happen if I punched a hole in your shielding,” MacArthur said.

She did. All the air in her suit would explode outward, while the enormous atmospheric pressure simultaneously imploded the metal casing inward. The mechanical cooling systems would fail instantly. She would be suffocated, broiled, and crushed, all in an instant.

“Turn around. Or I’ll lase you a new asshole.”

She obeyed.

“Here are the rules. You get a half-hour head start. Then I come for you. If you turn north or south, I’ll drill you. Head west. Noonward.”

“Noonward?” She booted up the geodetics. There was nothing in that direction but a couple more wrinkle ridges and, beyond them, tesserae. The tesserae were marked orange on her maps. Orange for unpromising. Prospectors had passed through them before and found nothing. “Why there?”

“Because I told you to. Because we’re going to have a little fun. Because you have no choice. Understand?”

She nodded miserably.

“Go.”

* * * *

She walked, he followed. It was a nightmare that had somehow found its way into waking life. When Patang looked back, she could see MacArthur striding after her, small in the distance. But never small enough that she had any kind of chance to get away.

He saw her looking and stooped to pick up a boulder. He windmilled his arm and threw.

Even though MacArthur was halfway to the horizon, the boulder smashed to the ground a hundred yards ahead of her and to one side. It didn’t come close to striking her, of course. That wasn’t his intent.

The rock shattered when it hit. It was terrifying how strong that suit was. It filled her with rage to see MacArthur wielding all that power, and her completely

helpless. “You goddamned sadist!”

No answer.

He was nuts. There *had* to be a clause in the contract covering that. Well, then ... She set her suit on auto-walk, pulled up the indenture papers, and went looking for it. Options. Hold harmless clauses. Responsibilities of the Subcontractor—there were hundreds of those. Physical care of the Contractor’s equipment.

And there it was. There it was! *In the event of medical emergency, as ultimately upheld in a court of physicians* ... She scrolled up the submenu of qualifying conditions. The list of mental illnesses was long enough and inclusive enough that she was certain MacArthur belonged on it somewhere.

She’d lose all the equity she’d built up, of course. But, if she interpreted the contract correctly, she’d be entitled to a refund of her initial investment.

That, and her life, were good enough for her.

She slid an arm out of harness and reached up into a difficult-to-reach space behind her head. There was a safety there. She unlatched it. Then she called up a virtual keyboard, and typed out the SOS.

So simple. So easy.

DO YOU *REALLY* WANT TO SEND THIS MESSAGE? YES NO

She hit YES.

For an instant, nothing happened.

MESSAGE NOT SENT

“Shit!” She tried it again. MESSAGE NOT SENT A third time. MESSAGE NOT SENT A fourth. MESSAGE NOT SENT She ran a trouble-shooting program, and then sent the message again. MESSAGE NOT SENT

And again. And again. And again.

MESSAGE NOT SENT

MESSAGE NOT SENT

MESSAGE NOT SENT

Until the suspicion was so strong she *had* to check.

There was an inspection camera on the back of her suit's left hand. She held it up so she could examine the side of her helmet.

MacArthur had broken off the uplink antenna.

"You jerk!" She was really angry now. "You shithead! You cretin! You retard! You're nuts, you know that? Crazy. Totally whack."

No answer.

The bastard was ignoring her. He probably had his suit on auto-follow. He was probably leaning back in his harness, reading a book or watching an old movie on his visor. MacArthur did that a lot. You'd ask him a question and he wouldn't answer because he wasn't there; he was sitting front row center in the theater of his cerebellum. He probably had a tracking algorithm in the navigation system to warn him if she turned to the north or south, or started to get too far ahead of him.

Let's test that hypothesis.

She'd used the tracking algorithm often enough that she knew its specs by heart. One step sideways in five would register immediately. One in six would not. All right, then ... Let's see if we can get this rig turned around slowly, subtly, toward the road. She took seven strides forward, and then half-step to the side.

LASER HAZARD

Patang hastily switched on auto-walk. So that settled that. He was watching her every step. A tracking algorithm would have written that off as a stumble. But then why didn't he speak? To make her suffer, obviously. He must be bubbling over with things to say. He must hate her almost as much as she did him.

"You son of a bitch! I'm going to *get* you, MacArthur! I'm going to turn the goddamned tables on you, and when I do—!"

It wasn't as if she were totally hopeless. She had explosives. Hell, her muscle suit could throw a rock with enough energy to smash a hole right through his suit. She could—

Blankness.

* * * *

She came to with the suit auto-walking down the far slope of the first wrinkle ridge. There was a buzzing in her ear. Somebody talking. Mac-Arthur, over the short-range radio. "What?" she asked blurrily. "Were you saying something,

MacArthur? I didn't quite catch that."

"You had a bad thought, didn't you?" MacArthur said gleefully. "Naughty girl! Papa spank."

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Arrows pointed to either side. She'd been walking straight Noonward, and he'd fired on her anyway.

"Damn it, that's not *fair!*"

"Fair! Was it fair, the things you said to me? Talking. All the time talking."

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"You did! Those things ... the things you said ... unforgivable!"

"I was only deviling you, MacArthur," she said placatingly. It was a word from her childhood; it meant teasing, the kind of teasing a sister inflicted on a brother. "I wouldn't do it if we weren't friends."

MacArthur made a noise he might have thought was laughter. "Believe me, Patang, you and I are not friends."

The deviling had been innocent enough at the start. She'd only done it to pass the time. At what point had it passed over the edge? She hadn't always hated MacArthur. Back in Port Ishtar, he'd seemed like a pleasant companion. She'd even thought he was cute.

It hurt to think about Port Ishtar, but she couldn't help herself. It was like trying not to think about Heaven when you were roasting in Hell.

Okay, so Port Ishtar wasn't perfect. You ate flavored algae and you slept on a shelf. During the day you wore silk, because it was cheap, and you went everywhere barefoot because shoes cost money. But there were fountains that sprayed water into the air. There was live music in the restaurants, string quartets playing to the big winners, prospectors who had made a strike and were leaking wealth on the way out. If you weren't too obvious about it, you could stand nearby and listen. Gravity was light, then, and everybody was young, and the future was going to be full of money.

That was then. She was a million years older now.

LASER HAZARD

“Hey!”

“Keep walking, bitch. Keep walking or die.”

* * * *

This couldn't be happening.

Hours passed, and more hours, until she completely lost track of the time. They walked. Up out of the valley. Over the mountain. Down into the next valley. Because of the heat, and because the rocks were generally weak, the mountains all had gentle slopes. It was like walking up and then down a very long hill.

The land was grey and the clouds above it murky orange. These were Venus' true colors. She could have grass-green rocks and a bright blue sky if she wished—her visor would do that—but the one time she'd tried those settings, she'd quickly switched back. The falseness of it was enough to break your heart.

Better to see the bitter land and grim sky for what they were.

West, they traveled. Noonward. It was like an endless and meaningless dream.

“Hey, *Poontang*.”

“You know how I feel about that kind of language,” she said wearily.

“How you feel. That's rich. How do you think I felt, some of the things you said?”

“We can make peace, MacArthur. It doesn't have to be like this.”

“Ever been married, *Poontang*?”

“You know I haven't.”

“I have. Married and divorced.” She knew that already. There was very little they didn't know about each other by now. “Thing is, when a marriage breaks up, there's always one person comes to grips with it first. Goes through all the heartache and pain, feels the misery, mourns the death of the relationship—and then moves on. The one who's been cheated on, usually. So the day comes when she walks out of the house and the poor schmuck is just standing there, saying, ‘Wait. Can't we work this thing out?’ He hasn't accepted that it's over.”

“So?”

“So that’s your problem, Poontang. You just haven’t accepted that it’s over yet.”

“What? Our partnership, you mean?”

“No. Your life.”

* * * *

A day passed, maybe more. She slept. She awoke, still walking, with MacArthur’s hateful mutter in her ear. There was no way to turn the radio off. It was Company policy. There were layers upon layers of systems and subsystems built into the walkers, all designed to protect Company investment. Sometimes his snoring would wake her up out of a sound sleep. She knew the ugly little grunting noises he made when he jerked off. There were times she’d been so angry that she’d mimicked those sounds right back at him. She regretted that now.

“I had dreams,” MacArthur said. “I had ambitions.”

“I know you did. I did too.”

“Why the hell did you have to come into my life? Why *me* and not somebody else?”

“I liked you. I thought you were funny.”

“Well, the joke’s on you now.”

Back in Port Ishtar, MacArthur had been a lanky, clean-cut kind of guy. He was tall, and in motion you were always aware of his knees and elbows, always sure he was going to knock something over, though he never did. He had an odd, geeky kind of grace. When she’d diffidently asked him if he wanted to go partners, he’d picked her up and whirled her around in the air and kissed her right on the lips before setting her down again and saying, “Yes.” She’d felt dizzy and happy then, and certain she’d made the right choice.

But MacArthur had been weak. The suit had broken him. All those months simmering in his own emotions, perfectly isolated and yet never alone ... He didn’t even *look* like the same person anymore. You looked at his face and all you saw were anger and those anguished eyes.

LEAVING HIGHLANDS

ENTERING TESSERAE

Patang remembered how magical the tesserae landscape had seemed in the

beginning. “Complex ridged terrain” MacArthur called it, high ridges and deep groves crisscrossing each other in such profusion that the land appeared blocky from orbit, like a jumble of tiles. Crossing such terrain, you had to be constantly alert. Cliffs rose up unexpectedly, butte-high. You turned a twist in a zigzagging valley and the walls fell away and down, down, down. There was nothing remotely like it on Earth. The first time through, she’d shivered in wonder and awe.

Now she thought: Maybe I can use this. These canyons ran in and out of each other. Duck down one and run like hell. Find another and duck down it. Keep on repeating until he’d lost her.

“You honestly think you can lose me, Patang?”

She shrieked involuntarily.

“I can read your mind, Patang. I know you through and through.”

It was true, and it was wrong. People weren’t meant to know each other like this. It was the forced togetherness, the fact you were never for a moment alone with your own thoughts. After a while you’d heard every story your partner had to tell and shared every confidence there was to share. After a while every little thing got on your nerves.

“How about if I admit I was wrong?” she said pleadingly. “I was wrong. I admit it.”

“We were both wrong. So what?”

“I’m willing to cooperate, MacArthur. Look. I’ve stopped so you can catch up and not have to worry about me getting away from you. Doesn’t *that* convince you we’re on the same side?”

LASER HAZARD

“Oh, feel free to run as fast and as far as you want, Patang. I’m confident I’ll catch up with you in the end.”

All right, then, she thought desperately. If that’s the way you want it, asshole. Tag! You’re it.

She ducked into the shadows of a canyon and ran.

* * * *

The canyon twisted and, briefly, she was out of sight. MacArthur couldn’t talk to her, couldn’t hear her. Couldn’t tell which way she went. The silence felt

wonderful. It was the first privacy she'd had since she didn't know when. She only wished she could spare the attention to enjoy it more. But she had to think, and think hard. One canyon wall had slumped downward just ahead, creating a slope her walker could easily handle. Or she could keep on ahead, up the canyon.

Which way should she go?

Upslope.

She set the walker on auto-run.

Meanwhile, she studied the maps. The free satellite downloads were very good. They weren't good enough. They showed features down to three meters across, but she needed to know the land yard-by-yard. That crack-like little rille—did it split two kilometers ahead, or was there a second rille that didn't quite meet it? She couldn't tell. She'd've gladly paid for the premium service now, the caviar of info-feed detailed enough to track footprints across a dusty stretch of terrain. But with her uplink disabled, she couldn't.

Patang ducked into a rille so narrow her muscle suit's programming would have let her jump it, if she wished. It forked, and she took the right-hand branch. When the walls started closing in on them, she climbed up and out. Then she ran, looking for another rille.

Hours passed.

After a time, all that kept her going was fear. She drew her legs up into the torso of her suit and set it to auto-run. Up this canyon. Over this ridge. Twisting, turning. Scanning the land ahead, looking for options. Two directions she might go. Flip a mental coin. Choose one. Repeat the process. The radio was line-of-sight so MacArthur couldn't use it to track her. Keep moving.

Keep moving.

Keep moving...

* * * *

Was it hours that passed, or days? Patang didn't know. It might have been weeks. In times of crisis, the suit was programmed to keep her alert by artificial stimulation of her brain. It was like an electrical version of amphetamines. But, as with amphetamines, you tended to lose track of things. Things like your sense of time.

So she had no idea how long it took her to realize that it was all no use.

The problem was that the suit was so damned *heavy!* If she ran fast enough to keep her distance from MacArthur, it left a trace in the regolith obvious enough to be followed at top speed. But if she slowed down enough to place her walker's feet on bare stone when she could, and leave subtle and easy-to-miss footprints when she couldn't, he came right up behind her. And try though she might, she couldn't get far enough ahead of him to dare slow down enough to leave a trace he couldn't follow.

There was no way she could escape him.

The feeling of futility that came over her then was drab and familiar, like a shabby old coat grown colorless with age that you don't have the money to replace. Sometime, long ago, she'd crossed that line where hope ceased. She had never actually admitted to herself that she no longer believed they'd ever make that big strike—just one day woken up knowing that she was simply waiting out her contract, stubbornly trying to endure long enough to serve out her term and return to Earth no poorer than she had set out.

Which was when her deviling had turned nasty, wasn't it? It was when she had started touching herself and telling MacArthur exactly what she was doing. When she'd started describing in detail all the things she'd never do to *him*.

It was a way of getting through one more day. It was a way of faking up enough emotion to care. It was a stupid, stupid thing to do.

And this was her punishment.

But she couldn't give up. She was going to have to ... She didn't finish that thought. If she was going to do this unnamed thing, she had to sort through the ground rules first.

The three rules were: No Violence. Protect Company Equipment. Protect Yourself. They were ranked hierarchically.

Okay, Patang thought. In order to prevent violence, I'm going to have to destroy Company property.

She waited to see if she'd pass out.

Nothing happened.

Good.

She'd come to a long ridge, steep-sided and barren and set her suit to auto-climb. As she climbed, she scanned the slope ahead, empty and rock-strewn under a permanently dazzling cover of sulfuric acid clouds. Halfway up, MacArthur

emerged from the zigzagging valley below and waved jauntily.

Patang ignored him. That pile of boulders up ahead was too large. Those to the right were too small. There was a patch of loose regolith that looked promising but ... no. In the end, she veered leftward, toward a shallow ledge that sheltered rocks that looked loose enough to be dislodged but not massive enough to do any serious damage to MacArthur's suit. All she wanted was to sweep him off his feet. He could survive a slide downslope easily enough. But could he hold onto the laser drill while doing so?

Patang didn't think so.

Okay, then. She took her suit off automatics and climbed clumsily, carefully, toward her destination. She kept her helmet up, pointed toward the top of the ridge, to avoid tipping MacArthur off to her intentions.

Slantwise across the slope, that's right. Now straight up. She glanced back and saw that she'd pulled MacArthur into her wake. He was directly beneath her. Good. All systems go.

She was up to the ledge now.

Stop. Turn around. Look down on MacArthur, surprisingly close.

If there was one thing Patang knew, after all these months, it was how easy it was to start a landslide. Lean back and brace yourself here, and start kicking. And over the rocks go and over the rocks go and—

LASER HAZARD

“Ohhhh, Patang, you are so obvious. You climb diagonally up a slope that any ordinary person would tackle straight on. You change direction halfway up. What were you planning to do, start an avalanche? What did you think that would accomplish?”

“I thought I could get the laser away from you.”

“And what good would that do? I'd still have the suit. I'd still have rocks. I'd still have you at my mercy. You hadn't really thought this one through, had you?”

“No,” she admitted.

“You tried to outwit me, but you didn't have the ingenuity. Isn't that right?”

“Yes.”

“You were just hoping. But there isn’t any hope, is there?”

“No.”

He flipped one hand dismissively. “Well, keep on going. We’re not done yet.”

* * * *

Weeping, Patang topped the ridge and started downward, into a valley shaped like a deep bowl. Glassy scarps on all sides caught whatever infrared bounced off the floor and threw it back into the valley. The temperature readings on her visor leaped. It was at least fifty degrees hotter out there than anyplace she had ever been. Hot enough that prolonged exposure would incapacitate her suit? Maybe. But there was MacArthur behind her, and the only way forward was a shallow trough leading straight down. She had no alternative.

Midway down the slope, the trough deepened. Rock walls rose up to plunge Patang into shadow. Her suit’s external temperature went down, though not as much as she would’ve liked. Then the way grew less steep and then it flattened out. The trough ended as a bright doorway between jagged rocks.

She stepped out into the open and looked across the valley.

The ground *dazzled*.

She walked out into it. She felt weightless. Her feet floated up beneath her and her hands rose of their own accord into the air. The muscle suit’s arms rose too, like a ballerina’s.

A network of cracks crazed the floor of the valley, each one blazing bright as the sun. Liquid metal was just oozing up out of the ground. She’d never seen anything like it.

Patang stomped on a puddle of metal, shattering it into droplets of sunlight and setting off warning alarms in her suit. For an instant she swayed with sleepiness. But she shook it off. She snapped a stick-probe from her tool rack and jabbed it into the stuff. It measured the metal’s temperature and its resistance to pressure, ran a few baby calculations, and spat out a result.

Tin.

She looked up again. There were intersecting lines of molten tin everywhere. The pattern reminded her of her childhood on the Eastern Shore, of standing at the edge of a marsh, binoculars in hand, hoping for a harrier, with the silver gleam of sun on water almost painful to the eye. This looked just like a marsh, only with tin instead of water.

A tin marsh.

For an instant, wonder flickered to life within her. How could such a thing be? What complex set of geological conditions was responsible? All she could figure was that the noontide heat was involved. As it slowly sank into the rock, the tin below expanded and pushed its way up through the cracks. Or maybe it was the rocks that expanded, squeezing out the liquid tin. In either case the effect would be very small for any given volume. She couldn't imagine how much tin there must be down there for it to be forced to the surface like this. More than she'd ever dreamed they'd find.

"We're *rich!*" she whooped. She couldn't help it. All those months, all that misery, and here it was. The payoff they'd set out to discover, the one that she'd long ago given up all hope of finding.

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

"No! Wait! Stop!" she cried. "You don't need to do this anymore. We found it! It's here!"

Turning, she saw McArthur's big suit lumber out of shadow. It was brute strength personified, all body and no head. "What are you talking about?" he said angrily. But Patang dared think he sounded almost sane. She dared hope she could reason with him.

"It's the big one, Mac!" She hadn't called him Mac in ages. "We've got the goddamned motherlode here. All you have to do is radio in the claim. It's all over, Mac! This time tomorrow, you're going to be holding a press conference about it."

For a moment MacArthur stood silent and irresolute. Then he said, "Maybe so. But I have to kill you first."

"You turn up without me, the Company's gonna have questions. They're gonna interrogate their suit. They're gonna run a mind-probe. No, MacArthur, you can't have both. You've got to choose: money or me."

LASER HAZARD

"*Run*, you bitch!" MacArthur howled. "Run like you've got a chance to live!"

She didn't move. "Think of it, MacArthur. A nice cold bath. They chill down

the water with slabs of ice, and for a little extra they'll leave the ice in. You can hear it clink."

"Shut up."

"And ice cream!" she said fervently. "A thousand different flavors of ice cream. They've got it warehoused: sherbet, gelato, water ice ... Oh, they know what a prospector likes, all right. Beer in big, frosty mugs. Vodka so cold it's almost a slurry."

"Shut the fuck *up!*"

"You've been straight with me. You gave me a half-hour head start, just like you promised, right? Not everybody would've done that. Now I'm gonna be straight with you. I'm going to lock my suit down." She powered off the arms and legs. It would take a good minute to get them online again. "So you don't have to worry about me getting away. I'm going to just stand here, motionless and helpless, while you think about it, all right?" Then, desperation forcing her all the way into honesty, "I was wrong, MacArthur. I mean it this time. I shouldn't have done those things. Accept my apology. You can rise above it. You're a rich man now."

MacArthur roared with rage.

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

"Walk, damn you!" he screamed. "*Walk!*"

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

LASER HAZARD

He wasn't coming any closer. And though he kept on firing, over and over, the bolts of lased light never hit her. It was baffling. She'd given up, she wasn't running, it wasn't even possible for her to run. So why didn't he just kill her? What was stopping him?

Revelation flooded Patang then, like sudden sunlight after a long winter. So simple! So obvious! She couldn't help laughing. "You *can't* shoot me!" she cried.

“The suit won’t *let* you!”

It was what the tech guys called “fossil software.” Before the Company acquired the ability to insert their programs into human beings, they’d programmed their tools so they couldn’t be used for sabotage. People, being inventive buggers, had found ways around that programming often enough to render it obsolete. But nobody had ever bothered to dig it out of the deep levels of the machinery’s code. What would be the point?

She whooped and screamed. Her suit staggered in a jittery little dance of joy. “You can’t kill me, MacArthur! You can’t! You can’t and you know it! I can just walk right past you, and all the way to the next station, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

MacArthur began to cry.

* * * *

The hopper came roaring down out of the white dazzle of the sky to burn a landing practically at their feet. They clambered wearily forward and let the pilot bolt their muscle suits to the hopper’s strutwork. There wasn’t cabin space for them and they didn’t need it.

The pilot reclaimed his seat. After his first attempts at conversation had fallen flat, he’d said no more. He had hauled out prospectors before. He knew that small talk was useless.

With a crush of acceleration their suits could only partially cushion, the hopper took off. Only three hours to Port Ishtar. The hopper twisted and Patang could see Venus rushing dizzily by below her. She blanked out her visor so she didn’t have to look at it.

Patang tested her suit. The multiplier motors had been powered down. She was immobile.

“Hey, Patang.”

“Yeah?”

“You think I’m going to go to jail? For all the shit I did to you?”

“No, MacArthur. Rich people don’t go to jail. They get therapy.”

“That’s good,” he said. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“*De nada*,” she said without thinking. The jets rumbled under her back,

making the suit vibrate. Two, three hours from now, they'd come down in Port Ishtar, stake their claims, collect their money, and never see each other again.

On impulse, she said, "Hey, MacArthur!"

"What?"

And for an instant she came *that close* to playing the Game one last time. Deviling him, just to hear his teeth grind. But...

"Nothing. Just—enjoy being rich, okay? I hope you have a good life."

"Yeah." MacArthur took a deep breath, and then let it go, as if he were releasing something painful, and said, "Yeah ... you too."

And they soared.

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