

# Primrose Rescue

Written by Bud Sparhawk

"Let her have her head! Stop fighting her," Rams raged at the big woman as she struggled with the wheel. He lifted himself on one elbow on the low bunk.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing," Louella shot back. "You try steering this damn overgrown tub with one arm and see how easy it is!" She lifted her sling to emphasize her words.

"Let me get over there..." Rams said weakly. He tried to push himself up and failed. He flopped back onto the pallet Pascal, Louella's navigator, had rigged for him.

"Don't bother trying to get up. You'd fall right on your ugly face even if you ever did manage to get your ass in gear," Louella said nastily. "With that smashed leg you probably couldn't make it to the pilot's seat, even if you weren't so doped up. Now, be quiet and let me concentrate; I've gotten ships home in worse weathers than this. Trust me: I know what I'm doing!"

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The *Primrose* was a huge whale of a vessel. Her crew quarters were nestled deep within a bulbous pressure hull. Beneath her hull hung a kilometer-long diamond fibre keel and on her upper deck were the enormously strong sails that harnessed the howling winds of Jupiter. Lashed securely to her side was a smaller ship, *Thorn*; a barque that, until recently, had been JBI's sole entry into the Great Jupiter Race. It was this tow that made handling of *Primrose* so difficult.

Rams was still struggling weakly when Pascal arrived with three mugs of steaming tea. He placed one mug where Rams could reach it and held out another cup out for Louella. "If you want to drink this you'll have to let me take the wheel. You've only got one arm."

"Don't wreck my ship," Rams mumbled as he fumbled with the spill-proof cup, trying to put the nipple to his lips.

"Fifteen years of handling large sail, Captain. I think I can keep her on track while Louella sips her tea," Pascal replied affably. "Now drink your tea. It will make you feel better."

"Sure, long as she didn't make it," Rams grumbled. During Rams; infrequent conscious periods he always complained about the food. Of course, on that matter, Pascal could only agree. The one skill that neither of them had mastered in all of their years of ocean racing was cooking. On their two person races they'd usually eaten prepackaged food, which required no cooking and could be eaten wherever and whenever necessary. Pascal's own mastery of the culinary arts was limited strictly to a properly brewed "cuppa tea" and the boiled or microwaved pouch of whatever's when he had the time.

He couldn't understand this ship's advanced food preparation technology. No matter what he did, the best he could turn out were slabs of tasteless, tough, and practically indigestible generic foodstuffs (the package said it was meat, but he still wasn't sure about that—it tasted too much of wood pulp to come from an animal). Foolproof, that's what the instructions said; absolutely foolproof. Ha!

The only thing that was worse than his attempts at cooking were Louella's cinders of burned organic matter, offerings, no doubt, to her unknown teacher in the culinary arts.

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A week earlier Pascal had given Rams pain blockers for his smashed and broken leg. He had administered as much emergency treatment as he could with the limited medical supplies he found within *Primrose*, using medical skills that had been acquired in his years of ocean racing, when competent medical help for an emergency was, more often than not, hundreds of miles away.

He'd stabilized Rams, stanching the bleeding, evacuated the wound to prevent infection, and splinted the broken leg to prevent any further damage from inadvertent movement. More extensive treatment than that required a well-equipped medical center and trained staff who knew more than he, and that meant that they had to find their way to a station soon, before they ran out of pain killers.

The Great Jupiter Race had started out so well, a sailing concept of intense interest on the part of sailing enthusiasts throughout the solar system. Although the great sailing vessels of Jupiter had been plying the endless red seas of Jupiter's atmosphere for decades it was only the race sponsored by the corporate giants that turned atmospheric sailing on the giant planet into a sport.

Jerome Blacker, head of JBI industries and one of the men who built the Jovian industrial empire, had sent his best captain and navigator, a team that had won most corporate races on Earth's seas, to win the Great Jovian for the corporation. Not only would the race provide a way to use the JBI funds the Jovians had tied up in their banks, but it would provide an opportunity for unmatched publicity.

But the hurricanes and typhoons that Louella and Pascal had faced on Earth's tiny oceans were nothing in comparison with the swirling monsters that spun out of Jupiter's great heat engine. Eight days out of the start their barque, *Thorn*, had been hit by a monstrous hurricane that left them helpless and floundering in the great dark.

By sheer good fortune *Primrose*, the sailing ship they were now on, had managed to rescue them, although at great cost to Rams, *Primrose*'s captain, who broke his leg while trying to save them.

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Rams' ship, like every sailing vessel on Jupiter, held a complete data base of every station. The data bank's information allowed the ships to venture into the fierce winds of the giant planet with assurance that they could reach their destination. The inertial continually calculated each station's relative bearing.

According to the inertial they had been several hundred hours north and west of the nearest floating station when Rams had rescued them. Since they came on board they had been steering as tight a course as they could to intercept that station's projected track.

Pascal knew that each station was stabilized to stay at a particular latitude. They maintained their track by manipulating huge drogues—bucketlike sea anchors—to maintain a constant and predictable velocity as they were blown along the belts by the winds of Jupiter. The floating and stationary hub stations were the only stability a sailor had in the maelstrom that raged at this level of the atmosphere.

For the first five days they had hoped to intercept Charlie Sierra Twelve as she followed the steady fifteen meter per second track in the data bank. Now it appeared that they would not intercept it as planned. They were falling farther and farther behind with each passing hour.

*Primrose* lumbered heavily with *Thorn* under tow: Louella could only bring her to within sixty degrees of the wind. What made it even more difficult to keep to the schedule they had set was that *Primrose* showed a definite tendency to try to turn downwind every time attention flagged. As a result they were moving slower than planned. According to Rams' careful calculations they would miss the station by two days, and possibly more. So close and yet so far. It was frustrating.

Pascal and Louella constantly fought the ship's desire to reach. If she did so they would slow to wind speed. Such a turn could easily spell disaster. With *Thorn* tied to *Primrose*'s side the force of the wind could easily smash the two ships against one another and cause extensive damage to both.

It wouldn't take much damage to an outer pressure envelope to send them to their doom in the endless drop below. A rupture of either ship would drag the other down.

So they had to fight the weather and their own ship. They had to hold to a line that held a possibility of finding refuge and aid. They had to try for the next station in line.

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Pascal was worried about Rams' condition. The captain hadn't taken well to his medication and had remained unconscious most of the time. Could he have calculated a wrong dosage? Suspecting that he had done so, he reduced the dose. As a result Rams stayed awake but was in a constant, low-level of pain. They had to get him to a decent medical facility soon. Without his intervention *Thorn* might have become a twenty-first century Flying Dutchman, sailing Jupiter's vast seas with the ghostly crew of Louella and himself. He owed this man a lot for saving him from spending eternity as Louella's constant companion, and that required far more gratitude than he could ever express.

After carefully reviewing the data bank of possible destinations Pascal selected station CS-17 as their next most likely target. After a few minutes of intense calculation he predicted that they would intersect her track just eight hours ahead of her, five days, fifteen watches, hence.

That meant that, once they got in front of her, all they had to do was simply reduce sail, slow below wind speed, and wait for the station to creep up behind them. It was a simple plan, and one that wouldn't require special handling.

Twenty hours before they arrived at CS-17's track the radar alarm hooted loudly, bringing Pascal to high alert and Louella staggering sluggishly from her cabin, her broken arm forcing her to move carefully down the passageway. In the past few days she'd banged it often enough to learn the painful lesson of keeping it held closely to her chest. Even the drugged Rams was awakened by the clamor.

"What the hell is that?" Pascal exclaimed, pointing at an indistinct shadow on the screens. "Louella, see if you can crank up the gain." He fought to keep the image centered in the screen by manipulating the sail controls and the wheel.

"Don't touch . . . gain," Rams wheezed from his pallet. "Too much noise out here. You'll wipe out whatever . . . we have. Try infrared instead. Maybe you can get a better picture with that."

"Can't; it's too far away to use the IR—and the damn sonar doesn't help either! Oh no, there it goes..."

Louella reached Ram's side just as the hazy shape disappeared completely into the sparkle of background noise. "What was that—what did we just miss?"

Pascal scowled at her. "You should be sleeping, not up here in the cockpit."

"Can't sleep with that stupid alarm clanging," she shot back, her weariness evident in the lack of conviction in her voice. "What did you see?"

Pascal described the faint image that had raced across the radar screen and his inability to resolve the image into anything he could comprehend. "If we had some decent equipment . . ." he began.

"*Primrose* has... best equipment on... planet," Rams mumbled from his bunk. "Cost... a bloody damn fortune. But can't run a tight schedule... without it. Won't find better gear on any ship on the planet," he finished in a rush.

"Then why couldn't we see what that thing was?" Pascal demanded, angry with frustration and the lack of rest that kept him from concentrating.

"Environment's the problem," Rams explained. "Old man Jupe puts out . . . lot of radio noise—magnetic field or something. Too much noise for radar, even with the double encrypted digital radar I use . . . Best I can 'see' is 'bout a klick."

"Which must have been just about the distance of that thing we passed," Pascal said, shaking his head to clear it.

Louella was still scowling at the instrument panel. "One kilometer for radar and the double damned infrared's only good for close range work; about a hundred meters or less. Since the docking sonar is only good for five hundred meters or so its like sailing blind on a dark night in the fog!"

"Gotta depend on your inertial," Rams said with a whisper of finality.

"You heard the man: Depend on the inertial," Louella repeated as she staggered back down the passageway. "Wake me when it's my turn at the wheel."

"So what was that thing we saw?" Pascal asked doggedly as she left. "Was something really there or was it just a radio ghost?"

"Don't know," Rams replied softly, his voice fading as he fell back to his drugged sleep. "Out here you . . . trust your inertial. You gotta trust . . . data."

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The next day the inertial indicated that they had arrived on the track of CS-17 and were leading it by nearly six hours.

Louella started sailing a waiting pattern, criss-crossing CS-17's predicted track while heading the ship in the same direction as the station. Pascal anxiously scanned the three sensor screens for the station's arrival each time they crossed her predicted track.

After ten hours of anticipation CS-17 still hadn't arrived. According to the inertial's readings the station should have been right on top of their position, yet both the radar and sonar showed nothing there except clear seas, roaring winds, and the perpetual hiss and crackle of radio noise at the limits of their range.

"Trust your inertial," Pascal muttered angrily under his breath each time they crossed the empty track.

"If the station isn't here then where could it be?" Louella demanded when she took over the watch. She was as frustrated as he at the lack of contact after nearly a day had passed. "Could the station master have altered the station's course for some reason—to avoid the storm or run a rescue mission?"

Rams grimaced with the pain in his leg. They needed him conscious and alert for this discussion, so Pascal hadn't administered the scheduled shot of sedative.

"The stations' positions are the only stability we have down here." Rams said through clenched teeth. "It's only the absolute predictability that makes sailing possible. No station master would ever vary his track by a millimeter, even if his life depended on it, because every sailor is dependent on that station being exactly where he is supposed to be at all times. No, the station wouldn't have deviated from the track for any reason."

"Then something must have happened to it," Pascal said slowly. "Maybe the storm moved it to a different track. Hmm, with that much wind force almost anything could be possible."

Louella snapped her fingers. "That's it! I'll just bet that's the ghost you nearly ran into earlier—we must have passed the station without realizing it." She turned to Rams. "Is there any possibility that your inertial equipment is out of kilter; that somehow it is giving us the wrong readings?"

Rams shook his head weakly from side to side, obviously trying to clear his head. "Not possible. The inertial has a better pedigree than the king of England. Remember, I'm staking my life on it every time I set sail. I calibrate it with the station's master system before I leave port. No, it can't be wrong—just not possible."

"Then, somehow the damnable storm must have moved the station off course, off track, whatever, and that's why it isn't where its supposed to be."

"Brilliant deduction, Louella," Pascal injected. "But what can we do about it. Should we try to catch up to it?"

"Can't do that. Don't know what track she's following. Haven't a prayer of finding her." Rams took a deep breath before continuing. "If the storm blew the station off her track, then the master's probably fighting like mad—He has to get her back on track: Probably working the sea anchors, ballast tanks, whatever to move her. Even if we use her last position we can't predict the line he'll take. Take more than dumb luck to find her. We'd never know how far below or above her track she'd be."

Louella sighed and made a small adjustment to the tiller. "So what do you suggest that we do?"

"Simple," Rams smiled groggily as he climbed out of the pilot's seat and stumbled toward his bunk and some much needed rest. "Find 'nother station."

By the end of his next watch Louella had decided on the station that they could intercept soonest and set them on the intercept track. The station she chose, CS-12, was farther to the south and an eighth of the way around the planet, far enough from the track of the storm not to have been affected. With proper trim and a little luck they could transit the distance to her track in little over a week or, with fair winds and some luck, a little less.

"We won't starve before we get there," Pascal remarked when he saw her sail plan. "I think we have enough food and water on board to last us. Just the same, I'm worried about our host. Rams' leg is

definitely looking worse and the amount of sedative I've got left in the medicine chest is running dangerously low. We have to get him to a doctor as soon as possible."

"I agree. Be a pity to lose him after he rescued us. Say, our air looks good, too," Louella said squinting at the tell-tales on the instrument panel. "We've enough reserves to spend another two weeks out here before the atmosphere in here goes stale on us. As long as we don't run into any more problems we shouldn't have any trouble reaching C-12. Piece of cake."

"Sure," Pascal replied with a worried glance at their rescuer. "Let's just hope we all survive long enough to eat it."

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The following days were an endless blur of watch on watch at the wheel, trying to keep *Primrose* on her track and squeezing every bit of speed they could out of the ship. Pascal took to talking to Rams in the long quiet hours to keep himself awake, telling the captain of the races he had run, talking about the lean years before being hired by JBI when he and Louella had bummed around the world, their clothes their only possessions. He spoke of the clear air of a winter's crossing, the stormy clouds of a southern storm, the crystalline brilliance of a spring night far from land, and the smooth hissing silence as a ship's bow sliced the waves.

The one thing he never spoke about was the gut-wrenching fear he had felt when he brought Rams back to *Primrose*, and the shame that stilled burned inside him for his craven, cowardly behavior. Louella might think he was some sort of hero, but he knew the truth of what had happened, he knew absolutely certainly that he was, at heart, a sniveling little coward, afraid of the deep dark that was anxious to pull him to its bosom.

The return to his bunk at the end of each watch was a brief respite, a welcome relief for his poor body. He could hardly wait to lie down and release the truss that bound his lower body and protected him from rupturing himself in Jupiter's constant two gee drag. Usually he fell asleep in seconds, only to groggily wake at the chime to return to the wheel and relieve Louella.

But occasionally he could not rest. In those periods he recalled the terror he had felt when he was outside. What if Louella found out that his cowardly fear had nearly caused him to kill himself and the captain? Would she laugh at him, belittling him in that taunting way of hers if he told her? Yes, he thought sadly, she would do exactly that. He had no choice but to hide his cowardice from her and Rams. He just wished that he could hide it from himself as well.



He had nightmares of falling endlessly into Jupiter's bottomless depths and being crushed slowly in her enormous embrace. There was no rest from such dreams and he usually awoke bathed in the stink of fearful sweat.

Ten days after the near encounter with the wayward station, the winds, which had been generally westward, suddenly became gusty, shifting thirty degrees to the north, varying in strength each time they quartered back to the west.

Once, *Thorn* started to drift away from *Primrose* when the winds gusted, only to slam back and strike broadside as the wind shifted. *Primrose* shuddered with the force of the collision. A moment later, far below, *Thorn's* keel, with the huge rock attached, smashed into *Primrose's* and sent a vibration racing upwards that made the hull ring.

The chunk of rock embedded in *Thorn's* keel had been a gift from the storm, one of the valuable bits of flotsam the storms occasionally brought up from the depths. It was these rocks that made Jupiter's miners risk searching the edges of the hurricanes despite the dangers. A single rock could bring a fortune for its metallic content, and a modest profit for the volatiles that it might contain. By the standards of the trade the one caught in *Thorn's* keel was enormous, ten times the size of the largest one Rams had ever heard of.

"Any more surprises like that and we're liable to flounder," Louella remarked as the vibrations dampened. "I'm not sure of how much punishment this ship will bear."

"We ought to cast *Thorn* off," Pascal suggested. "*Thorn* and that damned rock's a danger to us. Besides, we could to make better time if we weren't burdened by the tow."

"NO!" Rams shouted from his bunk. The reduction of the dosage meant that he was conscious more than not. "Can't do that to me... won't let you steal my future."

Pascal knelt beside him. "Captain, be reasonable. You need medical attention soon or you'll never be able to use that leg. What good would all the money be if you can't walk?"

Rams coughed. "Not 'bout money... 's about freedom: owning my ship free and clear; being able to steer from port to port without worrying about the bank waiting to seize it. About having enough profit to get a decent crew, 'nough to put something aside for when I can't fight the damned gravity any more."

He pushed Pascal's arm away and turned his head toward Louella, stretching a hand out to her. "This is

about having *Primrose* as my own for the first time. Can't you understand that?" he sobbed before lapsing back to unconsciousness. "Can't... you... understand..."

Pascal couldn't understand Rams' concern. He'd always sailed on someone else's boat; sometimes as captain, but mostly as crew. Ownership had never mattered to him; it was being able to sail the ship, to direct her course, to trim her heading was all he cared about: There always had been far more ships needing trained captains and crew than there were capable people. Ownership wasn't important.

"I understand," Louella remarked unexpectedly from the passageway, breaking his chain of thought. "We'll do everything we can to save her, won't we Pascal?" The tone of her voice told him that anything other than agreement would create a hell of a row.

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"It's insane," he replied with as much emphasis as he could muster as he let her slip behind the wheel. "We're liable to have a hull rupture if *Thorn* smashes into us again! We'll never make it to the station unless we cut the damn tow loose and get rid of *Thorn* and that damned rock! Its stupidity to try to save them when our own survival is at stake."

Louella snorted in derision and twisted the wheel, heading *Primrose* back into the wind. *Thorn* was pushed away as the head wind rushed between the two hulls.

"I'm putting us on a new course. If we sail close to the wind *Thorn* will stay on our lee side and away from *Primrose*. We won't have any more bumping."

"That's crazy. That is completely off our planned course! We might miss the station entirely!"

"Pascal, you bitched the same way when we were trying to work our way around Cape Horn in that storm back in '79 and I got us through that, didn't I? Now, instead of complaining, why don't you try to figure out what this new course will do to our arrival time."

After a few minutes of playing with the inertial and the computer Pascal announced that they would arrive too late, twenty hours behind the station.

Louella considered for a few minutes. "If we come up behind her then we can go on a broad reach and

catch up to the station. Hey, our speed has to be faster than the station's. We can catch it in maybe thirty hours or so. That'll only add another day or so to what we originally thought. Close enough, and it saves the tow for the captain." She nodded toward Rams, who had slipped back to sleep while they argued. "That should be good enough reward for saving our skins, eh, Pascal?"

Pascal couldn't argue with that: He just hoped that their supplies would last.

And the captain, of course.

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Rams' condition was getting worse by the hour. Pascal had peeked beneath the bandages; he saw the swelling around the break, felt the heat radiating from the wound. Obviously there was an infection present within the leg, probably around the break. He'd been giving Rams the antibiotics until their supply ran out. The supply had never envisioned a journey this long, he thought, and now Rams was paying the penalty.

"We need to get him to a doctor soon," he told Louella when she returned from her all too brief rest. "I think that an infection is setting in and I don't have anything left to deal with it."

"How far away is CS-17? We should be crossing its track this watch, shouldn't we?"

Pascal started; the discovery of Rams' problem had driven the approaching station completely out of his head. That was the trouble with exhaustion, it was so damned hard to keep your mind focused, so hard to remember anything. "Yeah, we should hit it sometime in the next few hours. Then all we have to do is catch up to her."

Louella slipped into the seat and placed her hands wearily on the wheel. "Piece of cake."

"Trust your inertial," Pascal replied mirthlessly with a final glance at Rams. He headed for his bunk and a few blessed hours of relief.

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He awoke with a start. An alarm was ringing shrilly somewhere. Was it time to go to school? No, that was the dream. He shook his head to clear it and realized that it was the radar alarm. They must be near the station! "Damn Louella," he cursed. She must have let him sleep right through the watch, doubling her own burden to lighten his own. He tightened the truss, stood and moved toward the cockpit, checking the time as he did so.

Wait a minute; he hadn't been asleep more than four hours! What the hell was happening? The station was still hours away. What could they have run into?

"It's another damn ghost," were the first words Louella spit at him as he entered the cockpit. "Come on over here and see what you can make of the displays."

"Looks like something really big. Could be the station, just like the last one. Trim us up a couple of points higher, would you?" Louella twitched the wheel slightly to turn *Primrose* closer to the wind. Their speed picked up slightly and the radar image started to clear.

"Doesn't look like a station," Pascal announced as the outline clarified. "Come around another ten degrees. Yes, stay on this heading and we'll be able to pick it up on the sonar."

An hour later they still couldn't make out what they were seeing on the screen. The image showed something larger than the ship by a factor of ten, but looking like nothing they'd ever seen.

As best they could make out it was roughly cone-shaped, with the blunt end facing the wind. Whenever they got close a slimmer projection appeared at the leading end and seemed to lead upwards.

It was Rams who figured it out. "It's a drogue," he explained. "One of the sea anchors the station uses to hold itself in place. They're usually a klick below though."

"What the hell is it doing at this level?" Louella demanded. "I thought those things were hundreds of meters below the stations, not on the level the ships used."

Pascal thought hard. "Maybe we aren't where we're supposed to be. Perhaps we are way down below where our instruments tell us we are."

Louella stared hard at the display, trying to work out her own conclusions. "You think there's something

wrong with the altimeter? Oh shit!"

"What's the matter?"

"The altimeter isn't absolute. It just figures out the altitude by the buoyancy of the ship—it's an approximation."

"So we aren't as high as we should be? That doesn't make any sense. If the outside pressure was lower then the station would be as affected as us." Pascal replied, fighting to hold the logic of the problem in his mind.

"*Thorn's* dragging us down," Rams suggested. "Rock and ship are ballast too. Holding us down."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Louella exclaimed. "Crap, all we have to do is rise to their level to dock with her."

With that she reached out and flipped the heater switches that would vaporize and vent a portion of the ballast and lighten the ship. "Shouldn't take more than a few minutes to evacuate some ballast. Hey, that's strange..." Her forehead crinkled in thought as she stared at one of the displays on the console. Finally, she spoke.

"Pascal, honey, I think we have another little problem."

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After extensive systems checks and repeated attempts to get *Primrose's* heaters to work they concluded that the heater circuits within her keel must be faulty.

Louella said it first. "The question isn't how did it happen; it's what can we do about it? How can we get the ship up to the station's altitude?"

"Need to get down there and fix the circuits," Pascal suggested after a few minutes of intense thought. For some reason he wasn't thinking too clearly, probably because of the lack of rest and the pressure of their predicament.

"I think the drag of the tow is holding our speed below that of the station at this angle of attack. We're losing way relative to the station. We need to quarter away to build up enough to catch it again," Louella said in a tired voice.

So saying, she let the wind take *Primrose* on a slanting course away from the station, building their speed once more. Back and forth they passed under the station, careful to avoid the lines that held the drogues in place, and trying the radio with each pass, but getting only static for their troubles. There was no way they could tell whether the station was aware of their plight or not.

Meanwhile Pascal had crawled forward to loosen the hatch to the lower deck and the heater connections. He had to check several times, because he kept forgetting what he had done. As far as he could tell, the heaters were working properly. He could even feel the warmth through the housings with his hand.

So that meant the problem wasn't the heaters, he reasoned slowly. Therefore, it had to be the vents. They must have been damaged whenever *Thorn's* rock had smashed against their keel. Maybe one of their collisions had warped them into uselessness. No way of telling from down here. Wearily he climbed back up and made his way to the cockpit to tell Louella the sad news.

"I knew we should have cast *Thorn* off when we had the chance," he said once he got his breath back.

"Too late to reconsider that now," she replied, too tired to even argue the point. Instead she appeared to be deep in thought.

In a few minutes Louella came up with a truly frightening solution: Pascal would simply go over to *Thorn* and switch on her heaters. That would provide enough lift to bring the both of them to the station's level.

"Maybe I should raise *Thorn's* sails, too," he suggested dryly. "Or even sail the damned thing up to the station by myself."

The sarcasm was lost on Louella, who was as tired and worn down as he. "Did you forget that we lost the sails, dear? No, just see if you can lighten the load for us."

"Maybe if we just cast off the tow," he began.

"Not after bringing it all this way you won't!" she shot back. "We're going to save both of them!"

Pascal wasn't sure if she meant *Primrose* and Rams or *Thorn* and the rock. Not that it mattered—he still had to go out on deck and dare Jupiter's fatal siren call once more.

He hoped his bowels would hold this time.

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Slowly and with great care, he suited up and returned topside, clipping two safety lines in place as Louella flipped on the lights. Very carefully he worked his way to the edge of *Primrose's* deck clamping a deathlike grip on a stanchion to anchor himself in place.

After a few moments in which he tried to steel himself for the task ahead, he looked at the gap between the two ships, the chasm that had no bottom, a chasm into which he could easily fall forever . . .

No. He shook his head to clear out the thought. He couldn't let the fear control him. He had a job to do. But his guts told him differently, as did his trembling legs.

*Thorn* was still drifting off to the port side, but she was significantly below *Primrose's* level, giving the tow lines a steep downward slope. Why hadn't they noticed that she was pulling them down? Was that something else they had missed because of their fatigue?

Maybe he could do what he had the last time; tie himself to the tow rope and slide down to *Thorn*. It would be easier than last time with the slope so steep. Wait, maybe it was too steep; so steep that he would break his legs from the impact of hitting the other deck under two gees!

But what if the tow line parted when he hit? with his legs broken he wouldn't be able to hold himself in place—he'd slip over the edge and into the dark chasm that...

Damn, why did his thoughts keep returning to that nightmare? Once more he tried to clear his head of the nibbling fear even as he threw another line around the winch for added security.

Perhaps he could rig a second line to retard his fall, paying it out as he lowered himself down the line. That would keep him from hitting too hard, but it would also make the time he hung over the deep, black emptiness even longer—increasing the risk of the line breaking and letting him fall, fall... He shook his head, dismissed the thought, and began rigging the lines.

He first put a short loop around the tow rope, then anchored both ends to his suit. He then attached a second loop, and a third, just to make sure. Next, he detached another line, put it around the winch, and secured one end to his belt: That would be his retard line, one he could pay out through his hands and control his slide.

Just as he had before, he said a short prayer before lying down under the tow line and testing the harness he'd created. Satisfied that it would hold him, he released a meter of the security line and felt himself start to slide down *Primrose's* curving side.

Through the narrow field of his helmet he could only see the tow rope and the spider's web of lines that supported him. He concentrated on letting only a small amount of line at a time through his gloves. With each downward lurch the fear started eating at the edges of his mind, fear that he kept trying to suppress, of the depths that could so easily draw him down, down, down. A shudder of stomach-wrenching fear tore at him as he rocked somewhere above the vast chasm, paralyzed by his fear, unable to move. Tears welled up in his eyes and he felt his sphincter spasm. He was shaking so hard that it was difficult to think.

The longer he stayed here, he finally realized, the greater the chance that the line would break and send him to his death. With great effort he forced his hands to relax for an instant and release another meter of security line so that he could continue his slide toward *Thorn*.

Except he didn't move. The released line drooped limply on his chest. Panic filled him. The retarding line was jammed. He was stuck here! He would stay here forever, dying suspended above Jupiter's crushing depths!

With the desperation of the damned, he reached up to pull at the tow line that was supporting him, desperately hoping to get himself in motion, but the tow line was just out of reach; he had made the harness too long!

And the call of the depths was intensifying, increasing his risk, increasing his fear. The sour smell of urine and emptied bowels inside his suit told him that his body had submitted to the fear even more than his mind.

What could he do, he wondered with sudden clarity of mind; just lie here in his own shit and piss and



tears until the lines snapped and ended it all? Yes, that could be an appealing option—a few minutes of terror and then the sweet release of death, final and complete! Finally there would be an end to this fear, these nightmares, this cowardice that he had lived with for so long.

But, another part of his mind protested, that would also doom Rams and Louella, two people he had an obligation to save, and one whom he just realized that he loved. He couldn't kill them just because of his own cowardice.

Then he noticed that two of the safety lines were crossed on the tow line. They had jammed while he lay there letting himself submit to the cowardly voice within. All that he had to do was untangle them and he'd be able to continue.

After struggling to reach the lines he finally concluded that there was no way to reach the knot. The only way to undo the tangle was to untie one end of one of them and pull it through. All he had to do was remove one of the safety lines that kept him from falling into the depths at his back.

Did he have the courage to try, or was he too cowardly to take the risk? That was the question. He tried to move one hand toward the line. It froze into immobility, captive of the fear inside, divorced from the urging of his conscious mind. He tried to force his hand to move, to grasp the line and loosen it, but it remained as it was.

At that point he realized that this was an irrational fear, something born in the primal, reptilian depths of his brain. There was nothing he could do about it; his fear wasn't a conscious choice so much as the way his brain was wired. At that it was as if some liberating wave passed through him, releasing him from his false perceptions, releasing his hand from the clasp of his deep-rooted fear.

"Either way I die," he said and quickly, before the fear within could take control, undid one of the ends at his side.

As the supporting line came loose he fell backwards with a stomach-wrenching lurch. His legs were held as his upper body dropped. The safety line whipped out of his hand and he felt himself fall down, down, down... to clang viscosly against the deck of *Thorn*.

"I did it! I did it!" he shouted joyously, reveling in his success. He clambered to his feet and looked back at the gap he had crossed. With the sudden feeling of relief he realized that he had crossed more than the physical chasm; he had crossed a threshold within himself. Discovering that he could do what he had to, despite the gnawing, debilitating fear inside of him, meant that he wasn't a coward. A coward would have submitted to the fear and hung out there until the lines parted. No, he wasn't a coward at all, he finally

admitted to himself.

And, now that he had conquered the real enemy, taming *Thorn* and bringing them both into dock would be a trivial matter. He headed for the hatch and his future, clipping his safety line securely in place with every step.

Just because he wasn't a coward didn't mean he should take chances. Jupiter's depths still called to him and the smell inside his suit warned him that the fear was still a gnawing reality.

\* \* \*

*Thorn* seemed terribly cramped when he crawled back inside and made his way to the console. They had left the ship open to the atmosphere so he had to squeeze his suit into the tiny cockpit and the pilot's chair. The switches were widely spaced and he could easily move them with his gloved fingers.

No matter how many times he tried the heater switches *Thorn* refused to gain any altitude relative to *Primrose*. After the tenth try he remembered that they had lost all of their ballast—that had been one of the problems after that rock slammed into their keel.

Damn, how could he have forgotten something as significant as that? Both Louella and he must be more fogged by fatigue than they thought. Now he really was in a pickle; he had no way to make *Thorn* rise and, worse yet, there was no way for him to get back to *Primrose*. He hadn't the strength to climb up the tow lines in a two gee field nor, he admitted freely to himself, the nerve.

A quick check of his air supply showed that he had less than a day before it ran out. "Lou, we have another problem," he said into the radio, hoping that she could hear him through the popping, crackling noise.

After she replied, he quickly explained *Thorn's* status. "As best as I can figure it out," he said slowly, "there's only one way that you two can make it to dock; I have to cut *Thorn* loose and let *Primrose* run free. *Thorn's* dragging you down: Without her weight *Primrose* will be able to make station."

As he said those words he was surprised at his own sincerity. He really was willing to sacrifice himself for them. A great inner peace came over him with the knowledge that he could face his certain death with such calm detachment. Where was the quaking coward who had shit himself on the line? Where was the little man who feared the depths more than his own death? Apparently his cowardice wasn't the only thing he'd lost on the way down.

"You damn fool! That's suicide for you," Louella shot back. "There has to be a better way. Can't you lighten the load? Maybe toss something overboard?"

Pascal replied sarcastically. "Sure, nothing to it. I'll just drag a few tons of metal out the hatch and toss them over the side. Shouldn't take me more than a few months, that is, if I had the equipment."

"At least you haven't lost your sense of humor," Louella responded dryly.

"Yeah, that's one thing I didn't lose on the way down here. Listen Lou, I already thought of that possibility and discounted it. It just won't work." His voice dropped to a more serious tone as he said, very slowly so that there would be no misunderstanding; "Trust me, Louella, this is the only way to save you two."

"Damn it, Pascal, I can't let you throw away your life," Louella shouted. "Why don't you see if you can cut the keel loose from the housing—better to lose the rock and save you." She paused for a moment and then added, "and the ship, of course."

"Won't work. No tools, no way of squeezing into the lower hold in this suit, besides, there isn't enough time." He explained the condition of his air supply.

Rams' weak voice came on. "Wait a minute. You don't have to cast away. Just lengthen the tow lines. Add more line and see how far the ship sinks. Might be buoyant at a lower level—ain't no P12 layer, y'know."

Pascal considered that suggestion. Perhaps Rams was right; if he rigged all of the line on board to the tow he could gradually let it out until *Thorn* stabilized. Damn, they could have done that from *Primrose* and he wouldn't have had to come across in the first place! Another bitter tribute to their deficient, sleep-deprived thought processes.

But, he continued to reason it out, what if *Thorn* didn't find a level where she was floating? In that case she'd continue to exert the same drag on *Primrose*. Unless *Thorn* floated there was no way that *Primrose* could escape.

But he still had the option of cutting her loose if that didn't work. Warily he rose from the pilot's chair and began to climb out onto the deck. There was no sense telling either of them that he was considering

that possibility, he'd just do it when the time came. As he worked on making the lines fast to the winches he wondered what it would be like to sink into Jupiter's seas. At least, he added with a smile, he wouldn't be falling.

Something loomed out of the dark, whipped beside the ship and disappeared into the dark behind him. He'd no more than a brief glimpse of something huge and conical. It almost looked as if some giant bucket had been...

He slapped his head, and the helmet rang with the impact of the armored glove hitting the metal. There was no need for them to lose *Thorn* after all! The solution had been in front of them the whole time!

Slowly, knowing that the survival of them all depended on his safety now, he returned to the cockpit and keyed the radio once again.

"You need to cut as close to one of the drogues as you can," he explained to an incredulous Louella. "Get in front of it and let off so that *Thorn* slips inside. With a little bit of luck the drogue will hold *Thorn*. Then I'll cast off *Primrose* so you can get to dock. After that you can have them haul in the drogue."

"Pulling *Thorn* and you to safety," Louella finished for him. "That's freaking brilliant. But do you think I can steer the ships well enough in the dark? I'm as likely to smash you into the drogue as not."

"You're the best helmsman I've ever sailed with," Pascal replied warmly, hoping she could hear the admiration in his voice over the crackling, popping link. "I'd trust you with my life."

"Which you are going to do," she responded without a trace of humor in her voice. "Stay off that deck on our approach. You hear me, you little twerp? Stay inside and conserve your air. I don't want to lose you now."

"I hear you, Captain." *Matter of fact, you'll have a hard time getting rid of me from now on*, he added to himself as she cut the connection. There was still a lot of time to wait before he could get out of this stinking suit.

\* \* \*

Instead of doing as she wanted, he stood on the deck and peered into the darkness. The lights illuminated

the side of *Primrose* and etched the thin tow lines that held the ships together, a thread of light that bisected the chasm he had crossed. For the past two hours he had watched Louella switch the sails, changing the heading to get in front of the station and into position on one of the drogues. When she backed the sails he knew that she had picked up a drogue on her radar and was steering the ships to intercept.

He looked across the stern, wondering when he would be able to see the maw of the approaching bucket and if *Thorn* would hang up on one of the drogue's lines instead. If that happened he'd cast off the lines in an instant to keep *Primrose* from floundering. There was no way he would let her be trapped.

It loomed out of the dark like a great fish, its gaping whale mouth making the *Thorn* a mere minnow in comparison. Pascal didn't hesitate: As soon as he saw the drogue he loosened the tow lines and watched them whip away. *Primrose* shot away, rising like a rocket, its light dwindling into a mere star in the inky blackness above him.

And then even that point of light disappeared as *Thorn* was swallowed by the huge drogue and an absolute darkness descended. Pascal braced himself for the impact when *Thorn* hit the rear of the drogue. He prayed that his safety lines would hold, that he wouldn't be thrown off the deck. He dropped down and held on with both hands while he braced his feet against the traveler bar.

Contact was more like a soft kiss than a harsh crash. There was a slight bump, then a grinding noise as *Thorn* swung around until her broad side rested against the wall of the drogue.

Pascal turned on his light so he could find his way back to the cockpit and noted that the deck was canted at an angle. This puzzled him for a moment until he remembered that the top of the mast was probably touching the low wall of the drogue and forcing the entire ship to one side. They must have come to rest in the very tip of the huge bucket, the very safest place he could be. Now he had only to wait for them to haul their catch up to the station. A piece of cake, as Louella would say.

\* \* \*

The young elevator pilot who had delivered them to the station several weeks before, smiled in recognition as Pascal and Louella climbed out of the connection tube and eased themselves into their seats.

"Have a good race?" he asked innocently as he readied his elevator for the long trip back up the cable to synchronous orbit where their transportation back to Earth and Jerome Blacker's wrath awaited.

Pascal glanced at Louella, smiled, and answered. "Let's just say that this race was one of our best."

Louella glared at him. "Pascal, you are so full of crap! The only one who came out ahead was Rams, God bless his grasping, greedy heart. Damn it, we lost the frigging race, gave away *Thorn*, cost JBI a bundle, and almost killed ourselves. This race was an unmitigated disaster from the beginning to the end."

Pascal continued to smile at her. Yes, the great Jupiter race had been all of that, and more. But without it he wouldn't have become the man he now knew, and accepted. He reached over, took her hand, and squeezed it gently.

"It was all of that, Louella, and," he added sincerely, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world!"