

ALLEN STEELE

SHEPHERD MOON

SHORTLY AFTER THE MONTHLY shuttle from Titan touched down at Herschel Station, she climbed into her hardsuit and took the elevator up to the surface. She had made up her mind a couple of weeks earlier-- in fact, she had been rehearsing the scene in her imagination for many months now, long before she had consciously reached her decision -- yet there was a moment when the outer hatch opened in which she almost backed down.

She loved him. In spite of everything he had put her through, she still loved him. But if she didn't do it now, it would be another eight months before she got this chance again, and if she waited until then, she would surely go insane. It was now or never.

Nonetheless, she loved him. . . .

She involuntarily took a deep breath, and that was all it took: the taste of cold, recycled air, scented with old sweat and the vague machine odor of recirculation pumps. She hadn't smelled fresh air in almost five years, and short visits to the station's hydroponics bay couldn't match the recollection of an early-morning pine forest in upstate New York just before the summer sun burned off the fog, and even that memory was quickly fading. She had just passed her sixty-eighth birthday: Not quite an old lady yet, but certainly not getting any younger, and she didn't want to turn sixty-nine on Mimas.

The ground resembled the cobblestones of an ancient street in Italy, except it was dirty, gray ice, scored by myriad craters. Ice, dirt, craters; no hills, no atmosphere, no forests.

No life.

She was beginning to consider herself dead. Her husband . . . whether he was still alive was debatable.

Guide ropes formed aisles that branched away in all directions. The shuttle stood on the landing pad about a half-kilometer away, two silver barrels squatting on spindly landing gear. She was tempted to head straight for it, but she immediately rejected the notion. She had been married to him for twenty-six years now, he deserved more than a note left on their cubicle's datascreen. So she grasped the ropes and, using them to anchor her against the moon's negligible gravity, hauled herself step by step down the center aisle.

She didn't want to look at the sky. As much as it was his obsession, it was her damnation. She was afraid that if she allowed herself to look upward, she would be lured into the trap that had snared him. So she refused to raise her eyes from the gritty, frozen ground beneath her boots as she pulled herself hand over hand along the cables out to the place where her husband had set up his easel.

She didn't want to go. Her breath panted loudly within her helmet as she struggled against the ropes, each exhalation briefly clouding the faceplate of her helmet. She still loved him. Another step taken; another choice made. She didn't want to go. Her feet felt like dead weights with every step she took. She still loved him, and she didn't want to go. . . .

And suddenly, before she was aware of the distance she had overcome, she was with her husband.

He sat on a metal stool in front of his tripod-mounted easel, his palette strapped to his lap, his back turned to her. The stool and the easel had been bolted to the surface, and more straps around his waist kept him from floating

away. Perhaps, she briefly wondered -- not for the first time -- it might have been merciful if he had forgotten to tie himself down just once, so that a random movement such as the restless shifting of a leg might have pitched him off the moon's surface, outward and away. . . .

It would have made all this unnecessary.

He didn't look up from his work. He didn't even know she was here. She took another deep breath, reconsidered one last time what she was about to say and do, and then touched the stud on the left wrist of her suit which opened the comlink.

"Milos," she said.

There was no overt reaction on his part, nor had she expected any. He remained crouched over his palette, his helmet's faceplate turned toward the electronic canvas mounted on the easel. Yet his right hand froze above the canvas, his forefinger hovering a centimeter above the wide black screen.

"Umm . . . Genevieve? Yes, dear?"

His voice was a distracted blur. He was cordial, yet she knew how much he hated to be disturbed. It had always been like this. When they had lived on Earth, in the fondly remembered years shortly after their marriage, he had locked himself in his studio for days on end, regardless of whether it had been in Rome or San Antonio or Brussels, and when they had followed his new obsession out into space it had been the same, whether he was on the orbital colonies or on the Moon or on Mars. He could be polite, so long as he wasn't bothered for more than a minute. . . .

"I want to talk to you," she said.

His forefinger wavered above the canvas. "Uhh . . . can it wait?" His left hand touched the palette as he selected another color. "I'm rather involved at the moment."

He had learned to paint this way on the Moon, when he had done his Tycho series. Conventional media were useless in hard vacuum; out here, oils, acrylics, and watercolors either froze or instantly evaporated as soon as they were exposed. But the canvas was linked to the fingertips of his right hand, which in turn was controlled by the palette on his lap. He could thereby fingerpaint his sketches while on the surface; later, when he was in the shirtsleeve environment of Herschel Station's underground habitat, he could printout his sketches and paint over them, using whatever medium he desired.

Other artists had attempted the same thing, and some of them had become competent at the form, but Milos had invented the technique.

Bonestell, Pesek, Steinbach, Miller, Eggleton, Hardy, Bauch . . . he had been compared to all the past masters, and had surpassed them all. The new Da Vinci, the critics proclaimed after he had finished the Tycho series. The Rembrandt of the cosmos, they said after he produced his Olympus Mons 'paintings. After he had rendered his Jovian murals, they had given up on easy comparisons and had begun to use the only term that was still relevant.

Genius.

He was the one and only true master.

"I'm going to leave you," she said.

"Oh. Okay." He gently touched the screen and his finger traced a long red streak down the center of the canvas, he didn't speak again until the finger finished

the line. One mistake, even the slightest hesitation of his hand, and the painting was ruined. He would not work any other way, despite the canvas's erase-and-save capabilities. "Then I'll see you at dinner?"

He didn't understand.

"No, Milos. Not at dinner." She hesitated. "I'm leaving you for good." She paused. "Today. Within the hour. I'm catching the shuttle to Titan. A ship is going back to Earth tomorrow and I intend to be on it."

There. It was said.

Milos didn't say anything for a couple of minutes. For a time he simply stared at the canvas, then he slowly turned around until he was looking at her. She couldn't see his face behind the silvered faceplate of his helmet; all she could see was her own distorted reflection.

"You won't reconsider?" he asked.

She was surprised that he didn't ask the reason why. On the other hand, he was not an insensitive man, for all his other faults; he must have picked up on her dissatisfaction, perhaps even before she realized it herself.

"No," she replied. "I've already made the arrangements. When I get back, I'll live in our apartment in Brussels . . . at least for a while. You can reach me there."

His narrow shoulders moved slightly; he was nodding his head within his helmet. "I see." A pause. "Will you be filing for a divorce?"

A good question. "I don't know yet," she said truthfully. "I don't think so . . . at least, not if I think you're coming home soon." She shrugged, feeling her shoulders chafe against the inside of the suit. "Call it a separation."

"A separation. Yes." She heard him sigh through the comlink. "It may be some time. I have much to do here before I can. . . "

"Oh, goddammit, Milos, before you can do what?" She pointed at the half-finished canvas. "Complete this painting? Then what? Start another one, and another one after you've finished that? You've painted the same bloody thing sixteen times already!"

She hadn't intended to lose her temper. This was not how she had imagined the confrontation, in all the many sleepless nights when she had lain in bed, listening to the dull murmur of the ceiling conduits as she gazed into the darkness. But here it was; she was shrieking at her husband like an angry charwoman, and despite herself she felt a surge of pleasure.

"When was the last time you made love to me?" she demanded. "For Christ's sake, when was the last time you even looked me in the eye? I never see you, never touch you . . . you're always out here, painting this damn planet again and I can't take it anymore!"

She took a long ragged breath, hearing her heart banging in her ears. "I want out, Milos," she said, forcing herself to lower her voice. "I want out, and I want out now. And that's all."

But that wasn't all. She had said everything she needed to say, and then some things she hadn't expected to say. She could have walked away. Yet she wanted -- she needed -- to hear his response.

He was silent for a few moments. "Very well," he said quietly. "If this is what you need to do . . . if you need to leave me, go your own way . . . then please

do so. I've never stopped you before and I don't intend to do so now. If this is what you wish."

She let out her breath. "That's what I wish, Milos."

"All right, Genevieve." He paused again. "I'll send a message to our bank and have them transfer some money from our account to your own. You'll be comfortable until I get back."

She nodded her head. "Thank you." Hesitation. "When will you . . . ?"

"I don't know. It will be at least another year. Perhaps longer. You'll have plenty of time to chase all those young Belgian studs, eh?"

She smiled, but she couldn't muster the strength to laugh. "You're my only lover, Milos," she said, hearing her voice crack. "I'm too old to go sleeping with art students anymore."

"Just as well. They might give you a disease. Artists are like that, you know."

The joke fell flat; neither of them laughed. They gazed at each other for a time, their faces invisible to each other behind glass masks. When she found her voice again, it was only as a whisper.

"Why?" she asked.

For a moment he didn't reply. "We are imperfect creatures, you and I," he said at last. "We are born, we live out our short and fragile lives, we grow old and then we die. In a few years, no one will remember if we ever lived at all."

He lifted a gloved hand to the sky above his easel. "But this, my love...this is perfection. It is eternal, it is always changing, and it is perfect. Even if I were to paint it two dozen times, a hundred times, even a thousand, I shall never get it right."

For the first time since she had exited the base, Genevieve lifted her eyes from the ground. Before her, just past the short horizon of the shepherd moon, Saturn was an immense wall across the sky. Mimas was the sixth inmost satellite of the planet's miniature solar system; from this vantage point, less than two hundred thousand kilometers from its swirling cloudtips, Saturn blotted out the stars, larger than anything human eyes had ever seen. Its rings rose vertically as a straight, silver arch, bisecting the vast world, their shadows falling across the red and orange cloud bands which moved in grand, constant fluctuation, never appearing quite the same way twice.

"But I can only keep trying," Milos said, "because it's the only thing I can do."

Saturn was a thing of vast and frightening beauty. There was no way she could compete with it for her husband's attention, and she was tired of sharing.

"Goodbye, Milos," she said. "Good luck."

"Goodbye, Genevieve," he said softly. "Thank you."

There was nothing more to be said.

He turned his back on her, returning his attention to his canvas. She switched off the comlink, but stood there for a couple of minutes, silently watching him. For a time, he stared at the mighty world beyond the rocky shore, visible yet unreachable. Then he shifted on his stool, touched the palette with his left hand, and slowly raised his right hand to the canvas.

She bent down, picked up a chunk of ice, and stood erect. If she hurled it at

the canvas, the painting would be destroyed. Indeed, the canvas itself would be ruined, its internal electronics disrupted beyond repair; he would not be able to replace it. There would be no point for him to remain on Mimas any longer. He would be forced to go home with her, and they would be together in Brussels. . .

And he would hate her for the rest of his life.

She let the ice chunk fall from her hand, watched as it floated slowly to the ground. Milos never noticed, his finger moved across the canvas, adding a long daub of magenta to Satum's face. Yet, as she watched, his finger hesitated for a moment, obeying a tremble of his nerves.

A random, uncorrectable splotch appeared on the canvas.

He lifted his finger away from the easel and stared at it. For a few moments he did nothing. . . . then he touched a stud on the palette and the painting disappeared. Gone forever.

She held her breath and waited.

He sat still, looking at Saturn. After a short time, his finger rose to the blank canvas and, once again, he began to patiently trace the outline of the planer's hemisphere.

"I love you," she whispered. She then turned around and began following the guide ropes back to the base.