Church Mouse

## [19]

“Mayday mayday live cave-in!” Ferguson yelled from the edge of shaft. The excavator plummeted thirty meters before coming to a stop.

“Should we engage the winch, bring him back up?” Wang asked from the command pod.

“Negative, I’m going in, make sure he’s safe to move” Ferguson replied.

“That hole might not be done falling.”

“Stop arguing and start lowering” Ferguson growled as he brought the rescue line over and clipped in. He realized his comm line was not long enough to reach the fall. “Get me a longer comm link. Ready. Ferguson out” he said just before detaching his comm line.

Wang started the smaller secondary winch and nervously watched Ferguson disappear. This was the first real emergency for him since joining the team on Ceru a few months earlier.

Jones left the command pod and took Ferguson’s place on the planking around the bore hole. He hooked an arm around one support rod for the main gantry and leaned over, peering gingerly down the shaft that pointed directly at the dormant end of the unknown ship. He would act as a visual comms relay until a new comm link could be sent down. He held up a fist when Ferguson reached the tractor.

The airbags lay deflated across the drive console, with Plotkin atop those. Ferguson signaled but no reply – Plotkin was not moving. He tried to open the door but it was jammed by fallen rock. He pointed his forearm-mounted ice pick at the window and fired at point blank range, shattering it. He reached in and touched the comm port on Plotkin’s suit. Pulse erratic, blood pressure falling. Just below the threshold of code red. Immediate evacuation.

‘Holy shit this sucks. What have we got for options – lift the tractor or move the body? Tractor’s pinned, won’t come clean smoothly. If I try to pull him out that won’t be smooth either. WTF? Think!’

He took a deep breath. ‘What would you want?’ Bodyboard, every time. He leaned back to look up at Jones and crossed his arms to signal emergency, then hands flat together to represent the board.

Jones, an emergency medical technician like Ferguson, was down the shaft with the body board ninety seconds later. Ferguson was already halfway in the cab putting braces on Plotkin. Jones tried to maneuver the board flat but it hit the walls of the shaft. Not enough space. ‘Shit, you can’t pull him out like a rag doll then put him on a tilted board, might as well tie a rope to his ankle for all the good it’d do’ he thought.

Jones pointed to the board and the intruding fallen rock, then shrugged hands up as a question.

Ferguson stopped and looked around. ‘Cut the roof spars’ he thought. He took out his mini torch and pointed. Jones nodded and started cutting. They had the roof off in a couple minutes. Jones put the body board on the remains of the tractor’s dashboard.

‘Hold!’ Ferguson said on the splints. They started lifting Plotkin gingerly. The half meter went smoothly then they saw his leg. It had been crushed by the sideboard and was now pinned.

Plotkin groaned.

They both froze and looked at each other. Hand signals fell short. Jones pulled out his slate. “Spine secure. Pull leg even if causes damage?”

Ferguson hated this. “Y” he wrote back.

They braced their feed and pulled in the direction of what looked like least resistance. The vibration from the snapping bone caused them both to stop breathing and listen. Plotkin’s suit visor started flashing red. Jones circled his hand indicating Go Go Go! They pulled harder and he broke free, the spinal brace still holding fast.

Jones lay Plotkin’s torso on the body board while Ferguson did the legs. He shuddered when placing the obviously broken one onto the board.

Jones rode up with Plotkin. Ferguson watched them recede for a moment, then looked back down at the wreck. Something was not right. Where was the rest of the material? The tractor should have been stopped by compressed debris after a few meters at most. How did it fall thirty? Sounder readings showed typical densities, no voids. Wait a sec, voids can hide from solo sounder readings, but not a trio of them. Did we do full triangulation soundings here? What if the thirty-meter column of rock fell into a bigger hole beneath me?

Ferguson’s heart skipped a beat as he pictured himself teetering in the roof of a giant cathedral shaped void, with only the wedged tractor preventing his fall.

‘How would I know?’ he wondered, as the tractor shifted with a sharp thunk. ‘Oh shit oh shit.’ He took out his rock hammer and furiously pounded a quarter meter long piton into the crumbly rock. As soon as he clipped his harness to the piton the tractor shifted again, opening a small void between itself and the wall of the shaft. Rocks and dust tumbled through and silently disappeared.

He tested the piton with his full weight. It held. “Subterranean chamber below excavator” he spoke into his suit recorder. He shone a light into the gap but saw only blackness. “No visible feedback. Attempting range finding laser.”

Two hundred meters.

‘Oh my god. The floor is two hundred meters below. I feel like a church mouse in the rafters of Notre Dame. I think I need another piton.’

The tractor fell.

## [20]

The tractor plummeted into the void, the thin air muting its fall to near silence. Ferguson fell a meter until his safety lanyard caught. The piton held, leaving him swinging gently with his torso still in the shaft and his feet dangling in the void.

“Oh thank God. Now to –“

The sound of screaming metal pierced the air, penetrating his suit with sufficient volume that he reached up to put his fingers in his ears, only to have them blocked by his helmet. Nobody has been in space long enough yet to lose those kind of habits.

“What the frak was that?” he said aloud.

The cable supporting the tractor snapped taut, straining under the load. The cable was intended for such loads, but the temporary support structure on the surface was not. The gantry twisted and lurched, driving one support leg through the planking. Once through it kept going, the timpani basin’s loose material providing little resistance. The gantry – previously a three-legged teepee structure – now listed heavily to one side. The shift jolted the tractor into motion.

“Oh shit the cable’s coming right for me!”

Ferguson pushed off the side of the shaft at the last second, with the cable slamming into the wall where he had been. Rocks crumbled into the void and fell out of sight.

“Fuck that was close.”

He watched for a few seconds to see if it was coming back. It drifted back to the middle of the shaft with big, slow oscillations, seeming to have spent its energy on the slam into the wall. It did not appear to be returning.

“Time for that 2nd piton,” he said to himself. Just then a comm line dropped within reach. He plugged it into his suit.

“Ferguson, what is your status, copy?” Wang called down. Ferguson took a second to react, his survival instincts having caused him to momentarily forget there are others above.

“Stable, unhurt. But I’ll need a lift out.”

“Negative for the moment. Gantry’s blocking the hole, and it does not look like it’ll hold long. Got anywhere you can hide if that thing comes down?”

‘Omigod. Holy shit.’ Ferguson muttered. He realized it was possible to be even more scared.

“Say again” Wang prompted.

“Unknown. If I can hide. I was planning how to go up not down. How long do I have?”

“Few minutes. Half hour. I don’t know. I do know we can’t get anything on the basin heavy enough to lift that thing out in time.”

“I need more rope. Pitons. Full kit.”

“Copy, down in 1. Out.”

Ferguson unplugged the comm line and hammered in his last two pitons while he was waiting for the rope and gear, listening for every creak and groan that might signal the gantry’s impending doom.

The gear arrived in a small bundle attached to a rope that was being lowered by hand through a small gap between the gantry and the shaft wall. He took the rope and secured it to his wall anchor, then rappelled a meter down, putting his head at the same level as the roof of the subterranean chamber. He pounded pitons furiously upward into the rock, inching farther away from the terminus of the bore shaft with each one. After five minutes he had managed to get about ten meters away from the edge. There he set a new anchor system and waited.

He did not have to wait long. The vibrations came first, then the screech of steel across rock. The rumble lasted a few seconds then turned to silence as the combined mass of the tractor, cable and gantry fell into the cavern. His headlamp illuminated enough of the tractor to watch it fall. At about two hundred meters down he held his breath to listen for the impact. Nothing. It was gone. Moments later the gantry and the last of the rock debris also disappeared from view, having fallen into a chasm that is blocked by a large shelf.

“Whoa, it keeps going,” he said, realizing that his prior depth reading was for the surface of the shelf. He counted a few more seconds then felt the impact, his safety harness vibrating slightly in response.

“Damn, this is insane. Basin rock can’t support a cave this big, what is going on down here?” A sense of awe tinged with fear washed over him. He switched his suit camera on to record everything he could on his way out. Once back at the edge of the hole he pointed his helmet straight down. Blackness. The range-finding laser had better luck. Nine hundred meters. ‘What the-‘

Just then a rescue basket lowered, along with a new comm wire – he plugged in.

“Status?” Wang asked quickly, unable to hide his anxiousness.

“I’m still here. Ready for that lift out,” he said as he climbed into the basket.

[for update to 2nd in command: “You want the good news or the bad news first? Bad news is Plotkin has a busted leg and we lost a tractor. The good news is that the route is cleared to less than hundred meters from the ship.”