



MARSHALSEA MINE

Felix had never gotten used to the sound of the chewers. Their constant grinding, crushing, milling bored into his head as if his brain was the rock itself. Earplugs didn't help, even if he could afford the commissary rates. Once, he'd traded a pair of dinners for a set of used ones—one meal for each plug. A little of his water allotment and some gentle scrubbing would make them as good as new. But when he tried them, hands almost shaking in anticipation of finally blocking out the little fuckers, he found the foam rubber had lost its elasticity in someone else's earhole. The little rolls couldn't expand enough and just fell out. He hadn't cried that night. His bunkmate, Sal, probably wouldn't mind, but you didn't show weakness if you could help it.

The kilometers of stone above didn't bother him, nor did the kilometers of ocean above that. But the noise. There must have been a chewer not far from where Felix lay. His cell was carved into the stone of Marshalsea Mine, itself burrowed six kilometers into the oceanic crust of the Southern Sea. The chewers were always digging, exploring based on semi-random patterns honeycombing the mine in search of...anything really. Their machinations reverberated through the stone to form a constant background static. He turned over, head pressed against his bundled

coolsuit. He thought about turning it on and wrapping it around his head—the rush of coolant was preferable to the chewers—but he didn't want to waste the charge.

Instead, he folded his one blanket in the dark, careful not to bang his head or hands on the stone walls, and tucked it around his ears. Its musty smell enveloped him and, while it didn't fully block out the chewers, it did cut down on Sal's snoring. Felix eventually closed his eyes and sweat himself to sleep, thinking of Amy and the earth between them.



In hindsight, he probably should have ducked down a side passage. Instead, he'd let his mind wander, eyes on the view through his VR link and thoughts on home. He could picture Amy as bright and glowing as the day she was born. Would she visit, when she was older? Lana's parents wouldn't let her for now—he'd made them promise.

The rumble of an approaching excavator crew—a vibration in the stone floor more than anything—grew more noticeable. It was too late to avoid them now. Hopefully they'd roll by without wasting time on him. Maybe part of him wanted them to notice.

Someone shouted something, voice lost in the *thrum* of machinery. A question? It was hard to tell through the layers of protective gear. Felix began to turn, experiencing a familiar disorientation when his view didn't move with him. His gaze was stuck on one of the chewer tunnels, one not too far from here.

An impact. He was on the ground. A quick pat-down revealed no serious injury, but he'd have to check his coolsuit for punctures. Felix switched his view to real-time and caught the fleeing taillights of an excavator. A figure hung off the side, waving at him. Chowder—one of Giraud, the Frenchman's minions. The picture was split, a crack running down the lens, and half his view was the bright, static cobalt of a forgotten sky.

Felix ripped his helmet off, the heat of the tunnel immediately baking the sweat on his skin into salt. The rock that had hit him lay on the ground a meter or so away. Just before the excavator rounded the corner, the ever-present breeze carried a shouted, “Mole!” to him. He blinked his eyes, trying to moisten them enough to see clearly. No luck.

He stood, picked up the rock, and hurled it down the tunnel. A scream built in his throat, but he tamped it down. It wouldn't help and might just antagonize them enough to come back. It wasn't likely they'd hear, but they already hated him enough.

Giraud was a cast-off, mid-level soldier in some Riviera milieu. If he was to be believed, he'd taken a fall and was waiting for a benefactor to pay him out. He also insisted the organization was falling apart without him. Meanwhile, he'd wheedled his way to the top of the biggest crew in Marshalsea. If he ever stopped partying, he probably could've bought his freedom several times over. But then Chowder and his ilk might not follow along.

They were all moles, when it really came down to it. But somewhere along the line the debt miners had decided Felix was spying on them. He controlled machines with cameras, machines that were supplied by Marshalsea. The suspicion he was, wittingly or otherwise, broadcasting everything he saw wasn't too far a leap. And it wasn't just him—he was wearing a dead-man's suit,

after all. The previous VR scout had been found under a pile of rubble. Giraud had showed him pictures, pointing out the stone gouges in the rubble that could have been carved by an excavator's teeth. That had been his first day. And so, the freshly patched suit had been cheap at the commissary, smelling like bowling shoe disinfectant. Just a little more debt added on.

Felix gathered himself. He'd fallen on his satchel, but a little flattening wouldn't hurt his lunch. A trio of other miners him passed on foot, headed down a tertiary passage. They gave him a wide berth, hushing their voices as they neared and glancing his way.

He tried to ignore them.

He had to get down to Sector 137B where a chewer had just completed a loop. Felix commanded the snake to return and allowed it to wrap itself around his torso, the plastic links squeezing gently, except for the very tail, which had always been janky. It wobbled against his hip like a nervous dancer's hand.

This hole was a bust anyway—nothing but silicates and a few mineral remnants that might indicate fossils. Marshalsea didn't care about those. 137B was going to be a bust too. If it wasn't for a broken chewer, he'd never waste his time in that picked-over section of the mine. The sooner he retrieved and fixed it, the sooner he'd drop another pill on the mine's roulette wheel. He got a cut of whatever he found—nothing as lucrative as the diggers doing the actual work, but if he found a big enough load it was theoretically possible he'd earn enough to get out of Marshalsea one day. He just had to make sure his suit didn't break and he didn't eat much.

The mine was designed to keep its prisoners right where they were. Marshalsea's charter officially claimed its purpose was to give its charges an opportunity to repay their debts—debt the mine purchased on the open market. But Marshalsea encouraged lavish spending at the commissary and its trio of restaurants. Being seen at Mindy's Steaks was *status*. No one wanted to be caught eating cafeteria slurry. Felix only consumed nutrients there—you couldn't call it eating—out of desperation. And so, the miners paid ten-times the cost for a shitty soy burger and watered-down beer while their debt racked up.

Thirty meters further saw him to the main passage. It was about fifteen meters wide, well-worn from years of boots scuffing and machines trundling down its stone length. Dust was kept to a minimum here, for the sake of the machines rather than the inmates. Autonomous bots vacuumed up the fine powder and chips spit out by the chewers every minute of every day. Their analysis of the dust then gave Felix his map of scouting locations.

Felix's cut was smaller, but all he had to do was walk and drive the VR snakes. He was everywhere in the mine too—got a piece of anything he found. In practice, he was only keeping up with boarding fees and interest, even after twenty-two months.

Felix smacked the side of his helmet in an attempt to clear the picture, but it stayed resolutely blue. He'd have to get it repaired, or maybe even buy a new one. His chest tightened at the thought of what it would cost—not in money, but in time.

He commanded the snake to coil further up his body, so its sensor-laden head was peeking over his shoulder. A full, if somewhat grainy, video took the place of his current view. There was a second's delay or so, but it was better than seeing only half the world or cooking his face. Watching

everything through the eyes of the snake wouldn't help his reputation as a snitch, but it wasn't like the alternative would improve things.

Only a few people were in the passage. Most excavator teams were at their sites or resting, if they had funds saved up. The one and a half kilometer walk to Sector 137B would have been relaxing if not for the sweltering heat and the unending sense that he should be finding more for the mine. His cut might be small, but that just meant he needed to scout more to catch up. He forced himself to walk slowly to spite his own panic, knowing a few minutes wouldn't matter but unable to prevent his mind from screaming at itself.



Section 137B was deserted. It was an older tunnel, excavated several years before the fall that broke Lana and started Felix on this path. Marshalsea had scraped it clean, cannibalized the lights for other parts of the mine. No breeze from the air handlers reached this far. He walked by the infrared light of the VR snake, hand on a wall to steady himself.

A chewer, in the enigmatic way of its kind, had found itself lost in this general area. Felix hadn't seen any of the analyzing vacuums come this way, so it'd be dusty. An off-course chewer was a problem though—it meant it wasn't digging virgin stone, where the good stuff was. He had to bounce that roulette pill.

It took him half an hour to find the bore-hole. At each branch of the tunnel he left his mark—an L, for Lana—to direct him back to the main passage. He tried to mimic her swooping letter, but it was hard to get curves right on the hard walls. In all, he scribed seven Ls in the smoky igneous stone, the symbol almost luminescent.

With each successive passage the way became narrower, squeezing to follow the veins of precious metal that had once flowed through here like a river's tributary. The ceiling, too, slanted as he went, forcing him to hunch and occasionally knock his head. Eventually he came upon a passage slightly dustier than the rest. A pile of ground up stone spread beneath a hole about six centimeters wide.

Dust spilled from the opening, but weak enough for Felix to estimate the depth at perhaps a dozen meters, though it would depend on how many twists and turns the little bastard had taken. Felix held his breath and crouched so his helmeted face was near the bore-hole. Bandwidth was hamstrung by the depth of the stone and by the shittiness of his equipment. Dust coated his lower face, caking to mud almost instantly. Tiny pebbles pattered his mask, sounding almost musical. It made him think of windchimes and the last time he'd felt a real breeze.

When he was in position, he brought up the control interface and commanded the chewer to stop. The expulsion petered out after a few seconds. He took a breath, tasting the grit on his lips.

The chewer would take several minutes to extract itself, so Felix busied himself by testing the dust. This was usually for a vacuum bot, but he had a small mass spectrometer for quick field work. Not nearly as accurate as the large, centralized devices, it nevertheless helped him decide quickly where he should focus his energies. Felix scooped a sample, roughly shaking the spoon.

There wasn't a chance of a positive return in such a picked-over area, but he'd always wonder if he didn't check.

Felix was still peering into the hole, head angled so the functioning half of his camera had a clear view, when his spectrometer beeped. No sign of the chewer yet—it was either deeper than he'd thought or very low on battery. He cursed it. A delay while the device charged would set him a day behind schedule.

He might be able to keep his account flat or just barely in the red, if he gave up food for the next few days. Sal might share or cut a side-loan. Even his friend would likely charge some ridiculous fee, but it'd be better to spread his debt than accumulate it in one place. Besides, his roommate might need a favor down the line.

Instead of digging with a crew, Sal was a loner. There were a few of them around, but they never seemed to last. The machinery a lone miner could afford was never up to par with what a crew could put together. The loners came and went, usually leaving via the infirmary from an accident or malnutrition. Sal trundled on, however. He was good at his job—had been a miner on the surface long ago before he discovered cards. He used to run a crew at Marshalsea before a supposed friend jumped his claim and shut Sal out. That man ended up buying his freedom, and Giraud took over as boss.

Felix had originally been terrified of the hulking man. Like Felix, he was an outcast—it was why they bunked together. The other crews had thought it funny to pair them together when Felix first arrived. Sal had gotten into several fights, racking up penalties faster than he could dig. The blame always landed squarely on his shoulders, but the more time Felix spent with Sal, the less he believed the stories of a crazed brute.

A beep woke Felix from his thoughts. A tiny green light blinked on the spectrometer: the results were in. Felix first checked the hole. If he angled his head and light *just so* he could make out the tip of the chewer, slowly extracting itself from the stone. It must really be low on power. A miniature wave of dust and chipped rock preceded it. Looking closer, he could see silver streaking its flanks. Great. It had probably found its way into a denser stone and torn the hell out of its housing. Felix probably wouldn't be liable for repairs, but it still meant it would have to be refurbished, and that'd take longer than a charge.

To distract himself from gloomy thoughts with different gloomy thoughts, Felix checked his mass spectrometer. The elements were correct, but the figures were wrong. Platinum didn't occur in these kinds of proportions. Neither did rhodium or iridium. Everything seemed to be breaking today. There shouldn't be a way for him to bust his VR rig, find a misbehaving chewer, and now damage his spectrometer. Maybe he'd fallen on it.

Felix shook the device, knowing it wouldn't do anything, but unable to help himself. He'd run diagnostics tonight and hope he didn't need it anytime soon. He was partway through his calculations when the chewer emerged, a small avalanche of silvery black dust heralding its arrival and its flanks streaked in more platinum than he'd ever seen.



He quickly scouted the chewer's tunnel, taking small samples with the snake's on-board scrapers. It confirmed the presence of several extremely valuable minerals. If anything, the spectrometer had estimated low. The chewer had stumbled upon an undiscovered vein about five meters beyond where the original dig stopped. In addition to the low battery, the chewer had a faulty gyroscope, probably what had set it off course to begin with. If it had acted as intended, it was likely this deposit would have remained undiscovered for quite some time. Maybe forever.

Paranoia washed over him as soon as he understood the magnitude of this discovery. What he held in his hands was so delicate. It could be taken in a moment by any passing crew, not that one was likely to show up. But if they did, if someone saw him come down a secluded tunnel and decided today was the day to fuck him over, then he was done. Marshalsea didn't care who brought them material. Whoever turned in the ore would be the one to reap the benefits.

Felix washed the chewer in coolant from his own suit. It hurt him to do so, knowing how much a recharge would cost, but he bit his lip and forced the valve open. He couldn't take the risk of turning in the chewer with platinum residue on it.

He also formatted the memories of his helmet and the snake. It was feasible that the blow from Chowder's stone jolted a circuit into contact with another, leading to a wipe. And maybe, if it was connected to the snake, it had fucked that software too. The story was farfetched, but any questions were more likely to point toward incompetence than a secret treasure hoard. He couldn't trust Marshalsea's techs—they were undoubtedly in the pay of competing miners. Or aspiring to be. It was better they thought him stupid than rich.

There was enough power in the chewer to bore a couple more meters into dead stone. That would give it the right kind of dusty sheen. A few minutes of hand sweeping cleared most of the stone dust from the ground. Felix couldn't afford to have a bot come this way and announce his findings. That done, he commanded the snake to wrap itself around his shoulders and headed home with an artificial trudge.



Dinner was 'budder' noodles. The idea was laughable. It wasn't like real butter was attainable for someone like him on the surface, let alone in Marshalsea. Let alone in Marshalsea's commissary. Felix speared another clump of sticky starch and shoveled it into his mouth, hoping the cook hadn't skimped on the vitamin additives. It didn't taste as metallic as usual, which was equally relieving and concerning. Some kind of vegetable oil. It tasted like movie popcorn.

Laughter erupted from down the hall, far louder than it should have been, given the distance. The Strip was a good fifty meters from the commissary and around a bend. Even Mindy's Steaks, Los Burritos, and The Broken Pick couldn't fit that kind of crowd. Marshalsea piped in the sound. The smells too—anything to tempt the commissary's poor denizens into spending their ore, rather than using it to pay down debt. It sounded like people were having fun. Looked like it too, if the video feed along the wall was to be believed. Giraud held court at the Pick, surrounded by cronies and empty bottles. His voice cut through the rest.

A splash of hot 'budder' woke Felix from his reverie. "The fuck you doin', downing your poor noodles in drool?" Sal lowered his fork, a flopping carbohydrate hanging from its blunt splines. There were only two, the leftmost who knew where. His pockmarked face, bruised from where bits of stone hit him through the mesh of his digger's screen, was annoyed. "You wanna go to the Pick, go. I get it, my company just isn't ribbiting enough for you."

"Riveting."

"I know what the fuck I said. Eat your noodles. I paid for 'em, skinny motherfucker."

Felix inserted a forkful into a mouth that could hardly taste. He was too excited. His foot jabbed up and down. It had already earned a kick from Sal. His roommate knew something was up but was savvy enough to keep his mouth shut. There were about a dozen miners in the commissary—a cavernous room meant to hold six or seven times that many. The rest of the prisoners were either working (a few try-hards no one liked) or at one of the restaurants on the Strip, pretending the watered-down beer did more than hydrate.

"Sorry," Felix spluttered around his mouthful, "It's good, I promise."

Sal gave him a skeptical look, but let it slide. "What's gotten into you, Cat-Man? You've been acting weird all night. You're not gonna snap on me, are you? I don't want to bunk with a crazy person."

Felix barked a laugh and immediately tried to cover it with a cough. *Probably what a crazy person would do.* Sal didn't look convinced. "You really want to know?" A giggle burst through his lips.

"I don't know. You found solace in our savior the Lord?"

Felix laughed again. He took a couple deep breaths, glancing around the room in an attempted surreptitious manner. No one was watching. He and Sal were pariahs. Any interest in them that wasn't meant to make their lives miserable wouldn't be socially acceptable. Sal impaled another noodle. It crumbled into a sticky mess. "You really want to know?"

Sal stood. "You want to play games, how about you jerk off tonight? Just keep it quiet, all right?"

"Okay, okay. Sit down. You'll be glad you did."

He plopped into his chair, concern written on his face. It wasn't usually a good thing when someone else was happy at Marshalsea. Happiness was a zero-sum game, something to be won at the expense of others. In the culture of the mine, it meant Felix was either cracking up after all, or he had leverage.

The next part would be delicate. Felix didn't have the means to extract his find alone. When Marshalsea had assigned him as the VR wrangler it more or less doomed him to permanent residence. He mostly relied on the goodwill of others, a commodity that was rarer than real butter. Stagnation wasn't a strategy, and so Felix plied his trade in the hope he would get a fair share, knowing that would never happen.

Sal, however, might be different. It was a dangerous thought, but one Felix desperately wanted to believe. The man had been betrayed himself. That might mean he would be honorable and not leave behind a friend, or it might mean he would do anything it took to get back on top.

He had digging equipment—not great, but good enough. While Felix liked to think they'd have an equal partnership, he needed Sal a lot more than the other way around.

Leaning in, Felix shifted to a conspiratorial whisper, hoping it would look to prying eyes like gossip and that the piped in crowd noise would cover his words. “I found something.”

“What do you mean, you found something?” Sal asked, far louder than Felix was comfortable with.

Felix glared and crossed his arms.

“Fine,” he continued. “I’ll play spy with the mole.”

“You know I hate that. It’s not even true. You’d think if I was a mole the turnkey would give me better food than ‘budder’ noodles.”

“Are you going to tell me what you found, or just complain?”

“I found it.” Felix’s smile broke from its cage momentarily before he tamped it back in. “The big one, Sal.”

His friend’s eyes widened. “Holy fuck. You’re shitting me.”

Felix shook his head. “Pure luck.” He walked Sal through the events leading up to his discovery, still not disclosing the actual coordinates of his find. He trusted Sal, but he wasn’t stupid. Felix wanted to look him in the eyes as he promised.

When he was done, Sal was quiet for a while, chewing his lower lip, dinner forgotten. “Why are you telling me this?” Some mixture of annoyance and hope hung on his face. “If what you’re saying is true, this could get you out. It might even be enough for a parting bonus. One big enough to set you up surface-side.”

“It might be enough for both of us.”

Sal raised an eyebrow. “Don’t mess with me, Cat-man. You wouldn’t do that, would you? Knowing what you know?”

“That’s why I’m telling you. You’re my friend. I’d rather partner up than spend the next few weeks waiting for someone to cave in the back of my skull with a rock, just so they can jump the claim and eat at Mindy’s for the next ten years. Besides, you’re a miner. Even with a find this size, I’m not sure my cut would do it. I need you to split your share with me. We do it right down the middle.”

“Who says I don’t take it and run? What do you need from me?”

“Just your word.”

Sal took a bite and leaned back, chewing his noodles like thoughts. Eventually, he seemed to come to some conclusion. “But we can get at least one steak, yeah?”

Felix laughed. “There will be plenty once we get out of Marshalsea.”



They began their labor the next day. The biggest challenge in the beginning was setting up in secret. Widening the corridor enough for Sal’s equipment was a feat in and of itself. Explosions from mining charges might give them away, even this far from the populated sections of the mine,

so they excavated manually until the digger fit. Little more than an exoskeleton, the digger covered its user in steel plates, and an alloy mesh mostly protected their face.

Once the tunnel was big enough, they blocked it so all that remained was a foot passage circuitous enough to dampen any noise. They'd unblock the tunnel when it came time to leave.

In one sense, they were lucky to be pariahs. No one cared much what they did unless it was in the service of entertaining aggression. If no one saw them actively working together, neither would be more of a target than they already were. They never left for the site or returned together.

Having a secret helped when they were both off-shift in the commissary or recreation wing. They'd suffer the slings and arrows of their fellow miners, insulted for the shabbiness of their coolsuits and plainness of their meals. If anything, they tried to stay apart more than usual, giving the impression of some cellmate spat. They took meals together but ate in silence, each looking into their bowls, thinking of how they'd dig deeper in the morning.

The partnership between Felix and Sal worked better than either expected. As a VR scout, it wasn't unusual for Felix to spend a lot of time with the chewers and snakes. Almost no one else bothered to go into the storerooms, except for the weekly inventory by the mine's turnkeys, and they were easy enough to fool. Felix cobbled together a mostly-functional chewer from the bins of disused machines kept around for spare parts. It couldn't turn left, but that was okay once he linked the guidance system to his own control unit. His job was to map the bounds of the deposit and its composition. It took longer than usual, but that was fine—Sal's digging equipment was limited, excavating at a tenth of the speed the bigger teams worked.

Every day, Felix found himself at the dig site. He tried to vary his schedule—he was, after all, supposed to be everywhere in Marshalsea. So, he set the guidance protocols of the chewer for twelve to twenty-four hour increments, testing the boreholes as they were created. Sal even taught him how to use the mining charges, though Felix never got the hang of the digger. After spending as much time as he dared, he then went about his day as usual, following up the most promising leads elsewhere like he was hungry for the next big stake.

Slow as tectonic shift, he built a map of their find. It was even larger than expected. The wayward chewer had broken into just the tip of a rich deposit of platinum and secondary minerals, bright silver flashing through igneous stone like a fish. This was their road out. This was their road to salvation.

As he scouted, Sal dug, first excavating a storeroom for the ore. Turning in a load of platinum each day would raise eyebrows—leaderboards graced the walls of the recreation wing, telling everyone who in the mine was wealthiest. It was the bedrock of social order, and Felix and Sal wanted to stay comfortably in the bottom quarter.

They disguised the footpath as a natural fissure in the side of the tunnel. Some rubble piled up at the opening would dissuade casual passerby and block the vacuum bots. Every day Sal chipped away at the vein, and every day the pile of silvery ore grew like a ladder leading to the surface.



It came crashing down two and a half months later. Felix was just arriving at the site following his daily walkabout. The deposit had been steadily tapering over the past three weeks. This wasn't entirely surprising—it had already gone further than expected. As long as his estimates weren't wrong by a couple orders of magnitude, they should already have excavated plenty to get out. Now it was just a matter of whether or not they left with a nest egg.

Felix rounded another corner, coming within a hundred meters or so of the dig site. No sound came from the mine ahead—unusual, but not an immediate cause for concern. Out of fear of their fellow miners guessing what they were up to, Sal was still using his old digger equipment. It had probably broken down again.

There were voices though. Not good. Felix couldn't make out what they were saying, but the tone was heated and he recognized an accent. Giraud. Giraud and his thugs. Felix crept forward, removing his VR helmet. He stashed it gently against the side of the tunnel. Hot air blasted his face and dried out his eyeballs, but he'd never fixed it and couldn't afford to have his view obstructed. He'd just had to hope no one threw a rock at him.

They were arguing in the dig site's annex. Sal, dressed only in his coolsuit, stood with arms crossed. The digger's paint-peeled frame stood against a nearby wall, battery hatch open and empty. One of the power cells lay on the ground, a red indicator light blinking, and another rested on a charging port nearby. Chowder, the squirrely little fucker, was examining the machine while effectively blocking it, should Sal try to make a break for it. His back was turned.

If Felix could get to the digger maybe they'd have a chance.

Giraud sat on a boulder, one leg crossed on his other knee and looking as relaxed as a man could be. His coolsuit, the newest model, was immaculate. The three other members of his entourage, Owen, Rollo, and Traiton, were arrayed throughout the room. Sal kept turning, trying to track each of them, but they were too spread out.

"I'm not going to say it again. Take your groupies and get out of my site."

Giraud laughed. "That's pretty good, Sal." His French accent was thick, but not so much Felix couldn't understand. "You are a funny guy. Site and sight. I get it. Five years ago I might not have." He hopped off the rock and took a step toward the bigger man. "But here's where your joke breaks down. You see, this is our dig now. *My* dig. Tu piges? I appreciate all the work you have done, but Rollo here spent a long time following you. Don't worry, I'll compensate you fairly. How's a week at Mindy's sound, eh? A steak would do you good. I'll even treat you to real cow. Isn't that magnanime?"

Sal took a step forward of his own and swung his right fist in a wide arc that could probably crush stone. Giraud ducked, and fast as a grasshopper snapped a hook of his own into Sal's kidney.

A grunt escaped Sal's chest. He tried another swing, but Giraud hopped behind him and kicked out one of Sal's knees. The big man fell and looked up. "You poor fuck. You got left behind too, so now you're going to do the same for me."

"Of course," Giraud laughed. "Why wouldn't I? Tramater stole your find the first time, and I took over. I'm going to steal your second find. This haul is big enough for me to buy my debt and still leave a prize for these fine fellows." He gestured at his grinning troupe. "Chowder's taking over for me. Isn't that right?"

“Sure is.” Chowder lifted himself from the exoskeleton and swaggered forward. His voice was thick, like he was chewing fudge. “You’re a good man to know. Maybe one day I’ll get to steal your third find.”

Felix crept forward on hands and knees, the black walls seeming to absorb the dim light cast by Sal’s lantern and heat of the floor burning through his suit. As long as no one looked deeply into the shadows, and as long as he didn’t make any noise, he might make it to the digger. He took comfort in the darkness.

“Lost for words?” Giraud asked. “Why won’t you talk to Chowder?”

“That’s a stupid fuckin’ name.”

Felix heard a *smack* and turned to see Sal on his back, split lip, blood pouring out his nose and Chowder’s booted foot coming to rest on the floor. The blood clotted almost instantly into a muddy smear across the bottom half of Sal’s face. Felix winced and continued. His hand knocked into something hard with a slight *thunk*. He froze.

“Who the hell asked you? Maybe I think Sal’s a stupid name.” Rollo and Traiton grinned. Owen was excavating his ear with a curious vigor.

Felix eased out the breath he’d been holding. What had he bumped into? He patted the ground in front of him. A box, a gear crate. The lid was open. Felix reached inside. *Perfect*. This was much better than an exoskeleton he didn’t know how to operate.

“All right,” Giraud said, stepping between the two men. “We won’t understand what he’s saying if his teeth are broken.” Sal levered himself onto a knee, looking like he was ready to launch at any moment. Giraud crouched to meet him. “You will not win. Give me your data for this site. Composition, extent, where you’ve stashed the material. We found one hidey-hole, and I know you have more. There’s a juicy steak in it for you if you make my life easy.”

“Nobody move.” Felix stepped from the shadows, face lined and pale where it wasn’t covered in onyx dust, a cylindrical object clutched in his right hand. “This charge is armed. Two-second delay. I push the button, we die.”

A wide, incongruous smile spread over Giraud’s face. Chowder looked like he was about to shit himself. “Mole,” Giraud exclaimed like he was greeting an old friend. “I was wondering if you’d show up. Sal was just telling us where you keep the stash.”

“Not anymore,” Felix said. He turned toward Sal. “Hey buddy.”

“Hey Cat-man.”

“You. Assholes, move to that wall.” Felix gestured with his free hand, the mining charge in his other. He hoped no one saw how his arm trembled.

“No need for this,” Giraud said. Unlike his companions, he hadn’t moved. “We can work together. I know we haven’t always gotten along, but you never *tried* to be my friend. And Marshalsea. It pits us against each other, eh? Why don’t we beat it together? Frères.”

Felix laughed. “Bullshit. I heard how you were talking to Sal.”

“Yes, but that was Sal. You’re a smart guy. And you are holding a bomb. I know I got to deal with you.” He took a step forward.

Felix stepped back and raised the mining charge even higher. “Against the wall! I’m not fucking around.”

“Do you even know how to work that thing? You're a mole, not a miner.” He took another step.

Amy's face appeared in his mind's eye. The sound of a clicking button was the loudest thing in the chamber, drowning out even the chewer burrowing through nearby stone. A happy chirp from the arming mechanism followed.

Giraud's eyes widened and, for the first time since Felix met the gang leader, the man's confident facade slipped. “Arrêtez!” He dropped to the ground, covering his head.

Felix clicked the button again, another beep indicating successful disarming. “Sal taught me. You think I just sat back and watched him dig?”

Giraud scuttled backward, soiling his pristine coolsuit. *Osti de câlise de tabarnak! Tu es foutu, Mole.* Chowder helped Giraud to his feet against the rear wall of the chamber. In the darkness, their eyes were bright and frightened, like they were trapped inside a room with a dangerous animal.

“What's that mean?”

“You are crazy, asshole.”

“Could be. This doesn't work, I might as well click the button. I'm not letting go of my one chance out. At the rate I earn I'll never leave on my own. And no crew will have me because they all think I'm spying for Marshalsea—which I don't, by the way. You stupid fuck, think I'd still be so poor if I was working for the mine? This is on you, Giraud. The time for us to work together is long past.”

Sal stood, placed a hand on Felix's shoulder. “Good going, Cat-man. Want me to take that now?”

“No. They know I'm willing to use it. Giraud sees. Our digging days are over. We got most of it, anyway. If you boys behave there's more to this vein—I know we can't hold it from you, especially if you get some of your other friends involved, so you're welcome to it. Maybe you can buy a steak or two.” He tuned to Sal. “There's nowhere to put them, so I'll hold them here. You go rent a loader and get back quick. We're leaving.”



Felix pinned them for two hours, charge held above his head while Sal rented a loader from the Marshalsea fleet. He held them for another three as Sal unblocked the exit passage and emptied the smallest storeroom, just inside the dig site, of ore.

The loader would cost them, but that was okay. Once they had a makeshift cell, Felix herded Giraud and his gang inside. Sal blocked the entrance with a boulder, leaving a hole for ventilation. He even tossed some prepackaged rations inside. They'd be working for several hours still.

“You can't leave us here,” Giraud called, panic lacing his voice. “You don't want that on your head.” Felix turned to follow Sal, already working on the next load of ore. They'd tell Marshalsea where the gang was on their way out. A rescue dispatch would cost Giraud, but he could afford it. “Wait! The turnkey told me about you. Told me about your wife.”

Felix paused.

The Frenchman's expression had shifted, a little craftier, a little surer. "Yes, I know all about Lana. I even know about Amy. The turnkey talks." Giraud's face peering from a gap in the stone was moon-white, floating before him. Teeth flashed in the darkness.

"You don't know anything."

"I know about the cliff, and how she nearly drowned before you pulled her out of the water. How she survived for a time but didn't really live either. I know sweet Amy will be a beautiful girl one day. It's all in your file."

"I don't need to listen to this."

"How much are you getting from Sal?"

"I—" Felix took a breath. "None of your business."

"I have friends," he continued, undeterred. "Above. Friends who I have made rich. Some owe me favors. Money too. I may not be as rich as them, but few are."

Felix's jaw clenched. "So, why are you here?"

Giraud's laugh was almost musical as it bounced around the cave. "My funds are—how do you say—inaccessible. At the moment." His face loomed.

"I don't need your money. I have enough now to buy my way out."

"But what comes after this? After Marshalsea? Your Lana will still be gone. What if something happens to you?"

The room. A bedroom in a now-empty house, furniture hocked long ago and an endless parade of boarders that nevertheless trickled like this vein of platinum as the paint peeled, the roof leaked and then...

A room converted to a hospital. Rented monitor, discount IV packs, empties neatly folded for recycling in an old orange crate still smelling faintly of citrus. Felix kept few heirlooms, but the ones holding only sentimental value remained in this room. They kept Lana company.

She'd never woken up. But the hope that she might open her eyes had kept him alive even as he cannibalized the rest of his life. He didn't know if he wanted Amy to remember or to forget. He saw her sitting in his place by the long-gone bedside.

Felix's eyes burned. He wiped them with the back of his hand, taking comfort in the grit that told him where he was. "You can fuck right off."

Another flash of teeth. "You don't want that. I can keep you safe. Brain trauma doesn't have to come from a cliff jump. Did you have fun that day, before she tripped? Or was she sad? Anything can happen to a person. A vehicle can strike you crossing the street. You could be mugged. It's a dangerous world filled with desperate people, mon amie. What if something tragic happens to you? Would you hang your weight from Amy's delicate neck?"

The air in the cave was too thin to breathe. "Are you threatening me?"

The apparition laughed. "Bien sûr que non! I am offering you security. Lead me from here, and you and your daughter will want for nothing. I can get you a job, a life. Would Le Côte d'Azur not be a beautiful place for Amy to grow up? Think of the sun, and the wonderful food." His voice was soft, drawing Felix nearer still.

"And if I don't?"

“Who's to say? I will leave here, one day. Sooner, now that I know you're leaving platinum behind. You may not be a mole, but do you want to live like one, waiting to be rooted out like vermin? Besides, who would hire an ex-debtor? Who will rent you an apartment? You won't be free when you turn in your gear. What comes next?”

Giraud's face was the world. His eyes blazed, hungry. His words wrapped around Felix's lizard brain and sank their teeth deep. He'd never leave Marshalsea. The man's reach wasn't infinite, but there was no way to know just how far it spread. *Who will hire an ex-debtor? Who will rent you an apartment?* Felix had clicked enough job application fields to know the truth in those words. There was a reason most of the debtors who managed to leave came back for a second tour at Marshalsea. The mine, Giraud, would stay in him forever.

A crunch of gravel woke Felix from the spell. He jumped. Sal was behind him, not much more than a shadow in the darkness. He held a large stone in his right hand. “You good, Cat-man? We got a lot of work to do.”

Felix's gaze flickered between the man he hoped was a friend and the rock. It was big enough to crush bone. With Sal's strength behind it, nothing of Felix's head would remain but pulp. He raised the stone. “Wha-”

“It's okay,” Sal said. “I brought you something.”

“Piss off, Sal. We're having a conversation,” Giraud said. The softness in his voice was gone, replaced with a reedy anger. Fear. Or desperation. It wasn't the voice of a man in control.

Sal ignored him. He presented Felix with the stone. It was an ordinary rock, about thirty centimeters wide. Just one of millions like it. Felix took it, using both hands where Sal only needed one. Its edges were ragged, scared and brittle. The Earth made this. It cared nothing for how it was used.

Giraud was saying something. Or asking something. His voice shifted from one key to the next. Sal patted Felix on the shoulder. “I'll be loading up when you're ready.”

Felix turned back to the imprisoned men. Giraud had gone quiet, waiting to see what he would do. He shifted his grip on the rock. It would fit almost perfectly in the ventilation gap.



When they finally finished, Felix and Sal rested, faces caked in mud and coolsuits nearly expended.

Felix's eyes kept returning to the mine entrance. The wall imprisoning Giraud and his gang was down there, just on the inside of that opening. He thought of the air running thin. About what that would do to their minds. He'd seen the effects of oxygen deprivation firsthand and couldn't inflict that on a person, no matter how evil. But he also couldn't risk ensnaring Amy and himself in Giraud's net for the rest of their lives. The wall remained, blending into the rubble of the tunnel. Someone walking by would never guess people were behind it.

Sal had needed to rent two more loader carts from the Marshalsea fleet. Each time he left, Felix worried he'd be trailed by another gang, wondered what the loner was doing with heavy

equipment. Felix never strayed more than a couple of meters from the mining charge. Twice he came as close as touching the stone before backing away.

But no one followed Sal, and only dust remained in the storerooms that, hours before, had been packed full of silvery rubble. This was it. They were going to do it. Sal reached into a utility pocket and extracted a small bottle.

“What's that?”

“Picked up some liquid celebration at the commissary. Surface-side, whenever I won something big I celebrated with a drink. Won less toward the end, but still drank. I think it's time we revived the tradition.” He unscrewed the cap of the small vodka bottle and took a swig, grimacing when the alcohol washed out his split lip. “Not my brand, but it'll do.” He passed it over.

It burned as it tore down Felix's dusty throat, but he smiled anyway. “Thanks, Sal.”

“Right back atcha, Cat-man.” They sat in silence for a time, the peace broken only by the chewers' labors. “Sorry about your wife. Didn't know.”

“Not your fault. I never brought it up.”

“Amy's a pretty name. Bet she's smart like her dad.”

Felix laughed. “Hope she's smarter.”

No sound came from the men behind the wall. He'd told Sal about Giraud's offer during a water break. The big man had held him as he wept. Felix hadn't expected so much kindness from Sal, though perhaps he should have.

He tore his eyes from the tunnel. They bounced right back. “I don't think I can do it.”

“Fuck 'em.” Sal took another sip. “Asshole told you he's going to fuck up your life. He already had a hand in ruining mine. I say we leave 'em to rot.”

Felix drained the bottle and stood. “Not like this. Warm up the loader.” Felix grabbed the mining charge. The entrance to the excavation site was on the other side of the chamber, no more than a dozen meters away. A few meters further were Giraud and his men.

Even after all their work Felix and Sal wouldn't have enough ore saved up to make them rich on the outside—Marshalsea would make certain of that. That was okay though. He thought of Amy, who had been staying with Lana's parents these past two years. He'd never expected to see her again, certainly not before she was an adult. Her first words were long gone. What had they been? At least he'd be there for a lot of the rest.

He couldn't allow himself to live under Giraud's thumb, whether it was in fear or gratitude. You didn't make deals with men like him. They only took, even when they seemed to give. He didn't know what came next. Acid built in his stomach at the thought of the upcoming struggle, but it was one he wouldn't shy from.

Felix halted, turned the device over in his hands. He entered a command into its little control panel. Mining accidents happened all the time. The turnkeys had the resources to investigate but probably wouldn't bother. No company equipment would be reported missing, and a search would only hamper productivity in the rest of the mine.

Marshalsea would leave its scars on Felix, but at least he could choose the design.

The charge was only half a kilo but very powerful. It was meant to be inserted into a carefully-calculated bore-hole and detonated in sequence with any number of its kin. He and Sal

had used several to clear out the big storage chambers. He didn't know what would happen when it was detonated in the open. An uncontrolled collapse in the immediate area, hopefully. Darkness yawned ahead of him, a darkness leading to more wealth than he would ever see in his lifetime, or his daughter's.

He couldn't stop someone else from getting it. If, one day, an intrepid miner ventured into these tunnels, they'd find riches and death. Giraud's bones would be cast aside as momentary curiosities, and then his spiritual successor would extract the last molecule of platinum, rhodium, and any other fucking thing. They'd spend weeks with the chewers, exploring well past the vein's end, hoping beyond hope that lightning would strike twice. They might not be wrong. Marshalsea would take it all though, not caring how much of the iron came from blood.

Felix clicked the button, wincing at its chirp. Thirty seconds. He hurled the mining charge into the tunnel mouth, not waiting to hear it strike ground, but turning back to Sal. His friend had indeed warmed up the loader and was just now booting up his digger. They'd convoy back to headquarters, Sal on escort. Wouldn't the turnkeys be surprised to see the outcasts, the loner and the mole, appear with the largest find in ten years?

“All set?” Sal asked.

He saw Amy's face once more. It had been worth it. She'd never know what her father had done—he'd bear that burden alone. “All set.”

“Then let's get out of here.”

Felix forced a smile, patted Sal on the shoulder. He opened the door to the loader's cab. A great crash shook the floor, ringing his ears and blowing a hurricane of dust into his face. The explosion's glow reflecting off the cave walls looked like sunlight.

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Artwork by Alben Tan. After earning a degree in architecture, he decided to pursue his passion for digital painting. He began painting in 2012 and works as a game artist under Tropa Entertainment. He lives in Davao, Philippines. You can find his work at www.instagram.com/alben.tan/