

FIRETRAP

by

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From the look of the sky, this next week promised to be the busiest one I'd ever had. Once, when I was a little kid, I'd seen the Aurora Borealis back on Earth; but it was fireflies next to this. Up above, it was the usual night sky; long bands of ammonia and a lot of poison garbage in the upper atmosphere, condensed into thin, opaque lines, with the stars peeking down in between. But on this particular night, the sodium flares were so strong all over the planet that the ammonia bands were brighter than laser beams because of the reflected light. It was a pretty crazy feeling, standing there in the middle of that vast black basin, with the jagged mountains poking up all around me in a big circle, just like a wall to protect me from those giant white flares bursting up out of the ground all over the rest of this beat-up rock. I was probably standing on the only safe place for a thousand kilometers in any direction. That was because our guys had sealed up the ground here years ago. We'd pumped it so full of chlorine that you could dig a hole a thousand meters deep and not scoop out anything but table salt. That's why our basin was the safest place on the whole planet. Other camps, like Thirty and Forty Three, still had natural gas problems, because those camps were newer than ours was. Just like while I was standing there, looking out across the basin, you could imagine each time a sodium flare shot up, how much damage that could do to little prefab huts. And it only took a wink of an eye for the whole place to be leveled and burned so bad there weren't even ashes. The guys who were here when we first started used to tell how one camp called and said it needed some sealers out there fast, and when they got there, they couldn't even find where the camp had been. Just the same blasted metallic rock as the rest of the planet.

The whole time I'd been standing there, it was getting cold pretty fast. I didn't mind it until it got to be about ten or twenty below, which is when the chemicals in the natural gas would condense and not be dangerous anymore. That's when it was time for me to go to work. So I spit out my spinach--I always chew on freeze dried spinach, even though it upsets the guys at the

station--and walked back to where I parked my teeve. I got inside and sealed the compartment, then I turned on the atmo and sat back to wait for the light show to ease off.

Every night, when a sealer goes to work, he has to sit in his teeve and wait. Sometimes you could start right away; other times you'd wait up half the night, and even then sometimes you had to blow the whole thing off. I know there's a couple guys out there who just go, no matter how bad the flares are. But it's not like the station gives a crap. What's a teeve to them? They got a hundred of them sitting around, and can always get more when they want them. Personally I just don't like the thought of being burned up, so I waited; just like I'd waited a thousand times before.

Actually a thousand is about right. When I started I figured I'd only stick around until I had enough points to rotate out of the system, but then when I had them I figured sealing's no more a waste of your life than anything else. So I stuck around. Besides, it's nice to be by yourself, and not have to look at anyone's face all day. It's a peaceful job, and relaxing. It's only annoying when some idiotic dispatcher from the station puts his ugly face on your screen and tells you which direction to concentrate in...as if he really knows better than the guys who are out here doing it.

All sealers hate the guys at the stations. That's just a basic axiom of the trade; it's rule 1A. Hate the guys at the stations, hate the dispatchers, hate the camps, hate everyone whose life you're protecting by climbing down into gas fissures at the risk of life and limb. I don't know about the other guys, but I'd spend a good deal of this waiting time imagining ways to channel natural gas into the barracks back at Twenty Three, and then that sun would come up and the temperature gets above freezing, boom!--and neither hide nor hair of that place would be left. Just me and my teeve.

It took quite a few hours for all the action to die down. Like I said, it was an unusual amount of activity; more than I'd ever seen, at least in the vicinity of Twenty Three. Most of the flares, as usual, were out on our main channel. You see, the idea in sealing is to force all the natural gas to rupture as far away from your camp as possible, so you'd do that by blocking off

all the little branches and gradually limiting it to one big geyser out in the middle of the desert somewhere. Twenty Three had had all its little branches blocked off long ago, so me and the other guys basically just crimped off the remaining side channels bit by bit until we got them up to the main channel. At this time, there were two side channels left. Each one ran right along the outside of the rim of the plain, one on each side. The West Channel, as we called the bigger one, was about half a kilometer outside the mountains, and had six thousand flares left on it. The South Channel was fourteen kilometers out, and had maybe a hundred flares. One guy could clean that thing up in a month, but nobody ever bothered because it was so far out there. We all pretty much just hacked away at the West Channel, unless we ran into each other. Then one of us would head for the South Channel. Sealers like to work alone.

I powered up my teeve and threw it into gear. All six wheels cut into the ground, and I was on my way to work.

We had a good road out to the West Channel. Ten minutes of whirring tires on the salt flats, then you'd be on the real terrain. Once you got over the crest of the first little ridge, the headlights of the other two guys would be out of sight and you could really just be by yourself and enjoy it. Sometimes, if you were in a good mood, just that ride over the little mountain range would be a lot of fun. Up and down, feeling the teeve's suspension suck up the bumps, slipping side to side on the loose stuff, going all out...but crashes could be dangerous. Only a week before, one guy piled up his teeve and disabled the thing. He wasn't hurt, but his atmo went out and he was frozen pretty stiff when they found him. Idiot was too proud to call for help. Now I drove past him, still sitting there all sparkly with ice crystals. I went slow through there every since he crashed, because I didn't know what made him wreck and didn't want it to find me too. I kind of wished someone would at least have the decency to shove him the rest of the way off the road.

Before too long I came off the mountains and had the whole rock-strewn desert all laid out in front of me. I turned off the road, thinking that on account of all the excess flare activity, I'd go a ways off the channel and hunt up some little side branches which would be less volatile. Twenty minutes out I turned on my spectrometer. I should probably explain that when you're

hunting for natural gas, you look for sodium on the spectrometer. Not because that's what the gas is mostly made of, because it isn't; but because that's what's easiest to see on the graph. Sodium isn't usually supposed to be a gas, not this cold anyway, but the elements and things it hooks up with aren't as easy to spot. This whole planet was messed up anyway. They spent a zillion dollars bombing it for years; one day with this kind of fusion, one day with that kind of fission, thinking that they were going to get the atmosphere to be like Earth's used to be. They ended up screwing the whole place. Now you could only breathe during the day, when the oxygen wasn't sitting on the ground in cubes, and whenever it rained you couldn't breathe at all for a month, and whenever natural gas leaked out, it exploded. Which is why they needed sealers. As if it would help. We all hoped the planet would suffocate every last human being on it.

I was saying how you go about locating one of these gas fissures. Once sodium shows up on your graph, it's a simple matter. You just drive straight into the wind, which there's always plenty of, and the spectrograph will get stronger and stronger. Suddenly it'll just disappear altogether, and then you stop. You know that you just drove right over it. Quite a few of them you'll see pretty clearly, and might even drive into it if you don't pay attention, but I was talking about little side branches. These fissures weren't often bigger than a man could squeeze down into.

Finally I found a nice clean sodium signal. I followed it upwind about fifty meters to a real pretty fissure, twenty meters long and a good half meter wide. That signal was real strong, so I knew that this fissure was blowing out an awful lot of gas. There sure would be some fireworks around there in the morning when things warmed up. But now, in the cold darkness, it was safe (as long as nobody lit a match, or started playing with a flint and steel). My helmet checked out all right, so I put it on and sealed my collar. We had pretty lame helmets in those days. They weren't heated, and didn't have any spectrometer in them. All they provided was oxygen and a transceiver (which is exactly what none of us wanted). But if you busted out the transceiver the dispatchers would whine and moan and give you a lot more hassle than it was

worth.

Anyone who's never sealed a sodium flare can't really appreciate how much fun it is. There's so many things that might happen that it keeps you occupied a hundred percent. There's nothing boring about it. You see some pretty fancy things down there sometimes, and the best days are the ones where you're fifty meters underground, maybe hanging free with nothing underneath you, then you remember that you left the atmo on in the teeve, and its batteries might run out any second and leave you stranded on the end of that rope. More than one guy disappeared in a flash that way.

I should probably say something about the process of sealing in case you haven't done it or don't know about it. You've got a belt with four timed concussion charges in it, and then a harness connected to the teeve's winch, and a little box where the rope connects to your harness with buttons on it to tell the winch to pull you up or lower you down. So what you do is go over to the fissure, while the winch is letting more and more rope out, and you snake down into it. The reason that you have to go inside is because of the shape of the fissure underground. The natural gas has tremendous pressure behind it, and if you close off the fissure just anywhere, say at the surface, that gas is going to bust right through like there's nothing there. So you crawl down, deeper and deeper, and pretty soon the fissure will open up to be really wide, like the size of the house. Here you can shine your light around and see some of the fancy stuff I was talking about. You know, stalagmites and those kind of things. At the bottom of this big open area, most fissures get skinny again, and where it gets skinny, the rock is usually pretty thin, as if there's another big place underneath. The reason it's like that is because of rock strata. It's the same everywhere on the planet. Where it's a strata of hard rock, the gas doesn't wear a lot of it away and it stays a skinny crack, but where the rock is softer, a lot of it erodes and you get the big open areas. Now it's those thin ledges of hard rock that are going to be the foundation of your plug. The gas is always blowing up really fast through that skinny part, but once you fill the big open area with debris, it can't blow up anywhere; so it uses the second open area that's below the skinny part as a buffer zone, and then you've got a good seal that I guarantee you is going to last.

This particular fissure was just like I described. The walls of the open area were all loose with the soft rock, which was kind of gravelly and cementlike, and looked like it would come down real easy once I laid some more slabs of the harder stuff across the skinny part. So I went around--it's easy to move around in the open areas, because you're hanging in the air and can push off from one side to the other, or go up and down--and I found some ledges of hard rock that were just begging to be cut off. You only need to blow the top one; if you do it near the base and do it the right way, it'll fall and cut off the others that you want. So I set one of my charges on short fuse and drilled it into the base of a good ledge.

You understand that you don't use incendiary charges, or dynamite or anything like that: it would be poor judgment in that atmosphere. You have to use concussion charges, which just explode with a lot of noise and force, but don't make any light or heat. Once in a long while one'll spark, and you can fry ten square kilometers. But that probably won't happen, so you don't worry about it.

I swung over to the other side of the cavern and drilled my second charge--on long fuse--into a shallow hole in the soft rock. If you stick it in an outcrop, only the outcrop will come down; but if you stick it in a hole, the whole wall blows.

Those two would probably do it. I pressed the up button to get out of there, and ten minutes later I was sitting in my teeve, helmet off, atmo on, and hot coffee pouring out of my thermos. I put my feet up, bit off a piece of spinach, and sat back to wait for the quake that would tell me my job was done.

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Suddenly I was blinded. Something right beside me flashed as bright as a nuclear fireball, with a burst of noise that startled me so that coffee went all over my suit. I said something, but I don't remember what. I was barely able to squint into that blazing luminance; but I already knew what it was. My screen had just come on, and the noise was that frightening burst of static that always preceded every transmission on this wretched piece of gravel in the middle of nowhere.

The guy on the screen was another sealer, sitting in his teevee.

Dumb little guy, with a scar across his pug face. His cheeks were so puffy that his eyes were like little slits. I'd seen him lots of times at the station, so I knew it was someone from our camp. But I didn't know him or anything.

"Tungsten, is that you?"

Tungsten? Was he talking to me? Then I remembered: Tungsten was what I wrote on the paper when I signed up. The guy had just said "Name?" so I looked around the room and the first thing I saw was an incandescent bulb.

I started to answer, but there was a frog in my throat. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd used my voice. But I managed a gravelly acknowledgement.

"Tungsten, we're at 229 on Old Big Branch. We need your charges." And the screen went black, with a crackle of static electricity and a white spot that stayed in the middle of the picture and gradually faded away.

What was he talking about? Some kind of a request for help? I didn't know what he was thinking. I didn't even remember what he said.

To be quite frank, I felt pretty aggravated by that. I'd been enjoying a peaceable night at work, and that pudgy little geek puts his face on my screen and makes me talk to him. I just hoped I never had to look at the jerk again.

Then came a jolt. For an instant I thought my screen was going to come on again, but then right away I realized that it was only my first charge going off. The second one was on a long fuse, so I had another ten minutes to wait before I had to worry about taking more spectrometer readings to check my seal. I closed my eyes and leaned back, sucking away on my spinach and clicking it with my tongue.

Then that raspy gunshot sound of the screen coming on again. My eyes were already closed, so I squeezed them tighter and clobbered the screen with my foot to let him know he wasn't welcome.

"Tungsten, I can see your lights and you're not moving. We need your charges right

now!"

I didn't need to open my eyes to find the switch for my running lights. A second later they were off.

"Did you plant more than two?"

I kicked the screen again. There's just no other way to deal with people like that.

"Morgan's down in the hole, and he already drilled our eight and he needs two more."

Eight charges?

You never use more than a couple charges when you seal a flare. Anything after that will just open up more than it closes. So when he said eight, that popped my eyes right open and I hunted my voice down again.

"What're you doing with eight?"

"Not eight. Ten. Eight and two, ten. We need your two. He's already drilled the rest. Now bring them, 229." And he turned himself off again. Rude little geek.

229 was an open flare that was inactive because we'd sealed its branch off right by the main channel. Old Big Branch was fair sized, and could hold a lot of gas; but the main thing was that it ran under the mountains and right up under Twenty Three.

I didn't know what Pudgy and Morgan were up to but I thought I should find out. I looked toward the mountains, and there was a little speck of light on the summit. That was Pudgy's teeve, just driving back down the other side to rejoin Morgan. He had come all that way just so he could look down on me.

The little slime didn't even trust me.

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I'd been on the road for a good six or seven minutes when I heard my second charge blow a couple kilometers behind me. Then it occurred to me that I hadn't dropped a beacon, so how was I supposed to go back and check my seal? Damn. This whole thing was a real pain in the duffer. Stupid little--what was his name? Pudgy? Who cares.

I was just about on the summit now. I passed that guy who had crashed and frozen to

death. At least he didn't have to put up with being bothered and annoyed. As I drove past, I made sure to give him plenty of room. He had a good thing going there, and I didn't want to spoil it for him.

When you drive back over the summit, the whole basin that Twenty Three is built in comes into view all at once. The camp's a couple kilometers across, and they keep almost all the lights burning the whole night (the one good thing about that planet was that there was always plenty of geothermal energy). Consequently you get a pretty fancy view. If the flares were going, the view would have been better, but it was still the middle of the night so even the ammonia bands overhead were dark. All you could see was the camp, all spread out like some giant fairy or something had dropped a lot of phosphorescent dust, or sneezed out glowing fairy snot, or whatever fairies do. So it made a decently fancy picture.

Halfway between me and the camp were a couple other tiny specks. These were Pudgy and Morgan's teeves, and one of them blinked at me. They obviously saw me coming and wanted to make sure I saw them too.

What could they possibly be doing inside the mountains? These guys had totally screwed up my night. No matter what, I wouldn't be able to get back out there and check my seal. There was no point in going to look for it without charges, and if I gave the two I had left to these imbeciles, I'd have to go all the way back to the station for more and by then it'd be warming up, and you wouldn't catch me outside the mountains for Joe.

Pudgy blinked his lights again; twice this time. He was getting impatient, so I eased up on the throttle a bit to slow down. He was ruining my night, so I did what I could to ruin his. I thought about jettisoning one of my charges, but then he'd jump up and down and scream in my face and that's the last thing I wanted to put up with.

I finally got there and took my own sweet time parking my teeve right next to Pudgy's. Or it might have been Morgan's; you couldn't tell from the outside. Within a nanosecond Pudgy was pounding on my window. "Come on, Tungsten, we're out of time!"

I tore off another piece of spinach, spit out the one I had and bit into the new one, then

sucked on it to get the juices going. Then I opened my door.

"Morgan's got three minutes left on his fuses."

That was well below safety margins. So I asked "What're you guys doing?"

"What do you think? We're going to do the camp."

I stopped chewing. Pudgy had his helmet on, and his clothes had fresh salt on them, so he'd been down there too.

All of a sudden he reached for my belt and tried to yank it off, but I shoved him away. He kept a hungry eye on my two charges though.

I walked over to their fissure and looked down. Old Big Branch had always been wide open, and fissure 229 was no different. I could have driven my teeve into it; in fact, a whole convoy of trucks could have gone down there.

"Where's Morgan now?" I asked.

"About a hundred meters down."

A hundred? And he had three minutes left?

"He says that without the last two charges, the eight he's planted will just cave the whole roof and not leave any way to open up the other end... He says to start the fuses now, and to make them as short as possible."

Pudgy was communicating with Morgan. He had his helmet on and I didn't, so I couldn't hear Morgan. Maybe Pudgy was lying. Maybe I didn't give a rip.

"I'll get my helmet," I said, and walked back over to my teeve. I opened the door and switched on the spectrometer, then I grabbed my helmet and pulled it on. The spectrometer showed the clearest sodium signal I'd ever seen.

But Old Big Branch had always been inactive. It had always been sealed at the main channel, on the other side of the mountains.

"Morgan?" I called.

"Tungsten? Get down here! Now!" Morgan had this weird, quivery voice, like someone was strangling him.

"Morgan, are you clearing this branch through to Twenty Three?"

Neither Morgan nor Pudgy answered me. I could tell that it was because my question was so stupid and the answer was so obvious. These guys were going to flood the whole basin with gas. And I knew what would happen when the sun came up.

Pudgy grabbed me and connected my harness to the winch on his teeve, then started shoving me toward the fissure. Just before I dropped off the edge, Pudgy grabbed ahold of my belt and reached for the triggers on my charges. Before I could do anything, he had twisted the fuses all the way to the short side, and was about to start them! I grabbed his wrists, but he was a lot stronger than me. We wrestled, but he started those fuses just as easily as if I hadn't been there. Then he pushed my down button and shoved me off the edge.

Well, now I was in a real situation. I hit my up button, but Pudgy must have been controlling the winch from his teeve, because I still kept going down. I looked past my feet and couldn't see anything; I was just dangling in mid air, surrounded by total blackness, with that hot gas blowing up all around me. Morgan had set this whole cavern to blow, it could have gone off at any second for all I knew. The two charges on my belt could have detonated too.

"Morgan?" I called, "Morgan, where are you?"

"Just keep coming straight down, Tungsten, I see you."

"Morgan, you can't do the camp."

I heard a little snicker with a hint of questioning in it, as if Morgan couldn't conceive that I might be serious.

"You better club him Morgan," said Pudgy over the radio, "and take his charges."

"What?" Morgan laughed. "Tungsten's a sealer, he knows what we're doing."

"I'm not joking, Morgan," cut in Pudgy, sounding really ugly and excited now.

"Tungsten's one of those 'Oh, you can't kill innocent people' freaks."

I couldn't see Morgan in the blackness below me, but I could imagine the smile melting off of his great square face. I could imagine him reaching down, pulling a steel safety rod out of his backup harness, and gripping it like a baseball bat, all the time watching me glide down into

range.

"Morgan?" I said. "He's kidding you, pal, I'm with you guys."

But Morgan didn't answer.

"Eighty meters, Morgan," came Pudgy's voice. "Can you see him yet?"

"Yeah."

Twenty meters until my head got bashed in, and probably less than two minutes until this whole cavern would all come down on top of me. And just a couple hours until the sun would come up and fry Twenty Three, wiping out three hundred people. I desperately looked all around, but couldn't see Morgan or anything else.

I had to try something fast. I had no weapons, I couldn't think, there was no way to defend myself. I had to act interested, and not waste any time.

"Where do you want me to drill my charges?" I asked, with enough faltering in my voice to betray my ruse.

"Ninety meters, Morgan," was Pudgy's answer, "and a minute fifty left."

"A minute fifty," I cut in, "we'll make it out of here yet, huh Morgan old pal?"

Still no response. There were only seconds left, and I realized I was panicking. Panic itself, I think, is not nearly so terrifying as the realization that you've lost control of yourself.

My feet touched bottom and the winch stopped. A flashlight flicked on and burned into my eyes. I threw up my hands instinctively to ward off Morgan's blow...but it never came. I held my breath for one full second, and then I looked.

Morgan was standing in front of me, studying me with fierce suspicion. The steel rod I had imagined was indeed in his right hand. He adjusted his grip on it, and lowered the flashlight.

"Drill them right behind you."

I turned around, slowly; as if he was a cop who had just warned me not to make any sudden moves.

Now the situation became clear. When they had pumped the ground full of chlorine to

stabilize it, billions of tons of salt were formed. Somehow, during this process, some kind of sludgy looking solution had flowed down into this branch and solidified, closing it off good. Morgan had already drilled eight charges across the face of this salt wall, but he hadn't planned it well. He'd saved the two highest stressed points for last, and then had run out of charges. That's why I was here.

One whole wall of our huge cavern was made of this salty stuff. It looked like it had come out of some huge toothpaste tube and just frozen like that. Once this wall was blown open again, the natural gas would have a free path all the way to Twenty Three. But if the last two charges weren't planted in the right spot, the whole branch would be sealed and these guys would be out of luck. I couldn't let Morgan drill my charges, and I cursed myself for getting into this.

"I thought this branch was inactive," I said, "but when I checked my spectro, it showed more gas than I've seen in months."

Morgan smiled proudly. This diabolical plan to wipe out Twenty Three was his baby, and he obviously appreciated compliments. "It was," he explained, "until this morning. The gas pressure's so high, it broke through the seal at the main channel."

I remembered watching the flares early that evening, and wondered how I had missed making that connection.

"Minute and a quarter," said Pudgy, and Morgan's face soured visibly.

"Drill 'em," he commanded, and his fist squeezed the steel rod.

I couldn't stall, or Morgan would have suspected. Instead I began to pretend to work at setting the charges, which Pudgy had already done, but Morgan didn't know that. It gave me a chance to talk.

"Morgan, how long have you been planning this?"

He smiled again, pleased at the opportunity to show off his baby some more. "Years," he shrugged. "Damn campers. Seeing them fry is really going to make my week."

"The campers are a pain in the duffer," I added. How could I get up? Pudgy was

controlling my winch.

"Coming out here, sealing and burning every night for six years, and never a 'thank you' or 'we appreciate what you do for us, Mr. Morgan sir.'"

"Yeah," I agreed. I had to distract Pudgy. Had to get him away from that winch. But he could hear everything we said, and he knew what I was up to.

"Forty five seconds," came Pudgy's voice. "Are they drilled?"

"Forty five!" repeated Morgan in shock. "Get out of the way, Tungsten!"

Morgan came at me with his steel rod, meaning business. He was going to drill those charges himself, even if it killed me.

Five seconds before a charge goes off, the chemical ignitor glows red, and acts the dual purpose of warning light. One of mine went. "I've got a red light!" I shouted.

Morgan's eyes were wild with fear and shock. He staggered back and smacked his up button three times, and right away went gliding up. I hit my own button, but it wouldn't work. Pudgy was still on the winch.

I was about to blow up. I slipped the belt off and tossed it up to Morgan. He swung his arms wildly, as if fending off a snake, and the belt wrapped securely around his neck. His flailings only tangled him up, and I dropped to the deck for cover.

If you've ever placed your ear against the barrel of a twenty-inch hydrogen artillery gun when it fired, you have a fair idea of the noise my two charges made when they blasted little bits of Morgan all over that cavern. I took a fair amount of shrapnel and was pretty badly cut up, but other than that and a concussion, I made it through all right.

"Morgan! Morgan!" Pudgy was screaming, because he knew that if those charges had been placed right, the ground he was standing on was likely to give way at any second. I gambled that he'd leave the winch and run to my teeve to escape, and I must have been right because a second later I was sailing skyward at emergency speed with my finger clamped on the up button.

I didn't know how many seconds were left, but it couldn't be more than a few...

I watched below me as I ascended with the hot gases. One by one, eight red lights came on. I looked up: the faint blue spot of night sky was getting closer, but not fast enough.

My heart didn't beat once for those five seconds. I was sixty meters above that line of red lights when suddenly they all went out.

Sound travels at three hundred and forty two meters per second in that atmosphere, so one fifth of a second after the lights disappeared, I got hit with what may as well have been a freight train and the entrance overhead collapsed. As for whatever happened after that, I really can't tell you.

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The next thing I knew it was broad daylight. That was about all I could tell, because my face was all swollen up. Whether that was from burns or cuts, I don't know.

I was in a lot of pain, especially if I tried to move. It took me a while to figure out my situation, because I couldn't see too well and I was much too weak to risk the pain of feeling around.

The deal was that I was still in my harness, and was jammed underneath the winch on the front of Pudgy's teeve. The winch was humming, because it was still trying to pull, but had no slack left. I dragged my left hand over my sore body and fumbled around for the clip on the front of my harness. My fingers were pretty beat up, and I'd say it was a good ten minutes of half-conscious fiddling before I was disconnected.

A little later I'd managed to get into a sitting posture. I was laying in a frozen puddle of blood and salt mud, and my suit was caked all over with dried blood. There were great huge bruises on every bone in my body, and all the ribs on the right side of my back (as I later learned) were broken.

From where I was I could see the tracks of my teeve. I was right; Pudgy had tried to escape in it. But he didn't get too far. When that cavern blew, it filled in solid for a kilometer in each direction--the result of the charges not being placed in a complete pattern. So there was a great pit where the ground had caved in, and my teeve's tracks disappeared into it.

It was almost nightfall when I got back to the station in Pudgy's teeve. I couldn't control it very well, and when I made it into the garage, I just kept going and bumped into the back wall. The teeve stalled. A minute later, one of the dispatchers opened my door and stood there gawking like I was a freak or something.

"Holy cow, Tungsten, are you all right?"

As if it was any of his business.