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**7**

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NOW MAJOR MOTION PICTURE **MICKEY 17**



**SOLARIS**

## 1

THIS IS GONNA be my stupidest death ever.

It's just past 26:00, and I'm sprawled on my back on a rough stone floor, in a darkness so black that I may as well be blind. My ocular wastes a long five seconds hunting for stray visible-spectrum photons before finally giving up and flipping over to infrared. There's still not much to see, but at least I can make out the roof of the chamber above me, glowing now in a pale, spectral gray, and the black ring of the ice-crusting opening that must have brought me here.

Question: What the hell happened?

The last few minutes of my memory are fragmentary—mostly unconnected images and snippets of sound. I remember Berto dropping me off at the head of the crevasse. I remember climbing down along a broken jumble of ice blocks. I remember walking. I remember looking up, seeing a boulder jutting out of the ice about thirty meters up the south wall. It looked a little like a monkey's head. I remember smiling, and then...

...and then there was nothing under my left foot, and I was falling.

Son of a bitch. I wasn't looking where I was going. I was staring up at that stupid monkey-head rock, thinking about how I'd describe it to Nasha when I got back to the dome, and I stepped into a hole.

Stupidest. Death. Ever.

A shiver runs the length of my body. The cold was bad enough up top, when I was moving. Down here, though, pressed against the bedrock, it's soaking into me, eating through the skin suit and the two layers of thermals, seeping down through hair and skin and muscle and all the way into my bones. I shiver again, and a sudden jolt of pain runs from my left wrist up to my shoulder. I look down. There's a bulge where there shouldn't be one, pressing against the fabric just at the point where my glove meets the sleeve of my outer thermal. I start to pull off the glove, thinking that maybe the cold will help keep the swelling down, but another jolt of pain stops that experiment almost before it's started. Even just trying to make a fist, the pain ramps up from bad to blinding as soon as my fingers start to curl.

Must have banged it on something during the fall. Broken? Maybe. Sprained? Definitely.

Pain means I'm still alive, right?

I sit up slowly, shake my head clear, and blink to a comm window. I'm too far out to pick up any of the colony repeaters, but Berto must still be close, because I'm getting just a hint of a signal. Not enough for voice or video, but I can probably manage text. My eye flickers to the keyboard icon, which expands to fill a quarter of my field of view.

<Mickey7>: Berto. You getting this?

<RedHawk>: Affirmative. Still alive,  
huh?

<Mickey7>: So far. I'm stuck, though.

<RedHawk>: No kidding. I saw what happened. You walked right into a hole.

<Mickey7>: Yeah, I figured that out.

<RedHawk>: Not a little hole, Mickey. A big one. What the hell, buddy?

<Mickey7>: I was looking at a rock.

<RedHawk>: ...

<Mickey7>: It looked like a monkey.

<RedHawk>: Stupidest death ever.

<Mickey7>: Yeah, well, only if I die, right? Speaking of which, any chance you're coming for me?

<RedHawk>: Uh...

<RedHawk>: No.

<Mickey7>: Seriously?

<RedHawk>: Seriously.

<Mickey7>: ...

<Mickey7>: Why not?

<RedHawk>: Well, mostly because I'm hovering two hundred meters over the spot where you went down right now, and I'm still barely reading you. You're deep underground, my friend, and we are definitely in creeper territory. It would take a hell of an effort and a great deal of personal risk to get you back out—and I can't justify that kind of risk for an Expendable, you know?

<Mickey7>: Oh. Right.

<Mickey7>: Not for a friend either, huh?

<RedHawk>: Come on, Mickey. That's a cheap shot. It's not like you're really dying or anything. I'll file a loss report on you when I get back to the dome. This is line of duty. There's no way Marshall won't approve your regen. You'll be out of the tank and back in your bed tomorrow.

<Mickey7>: Oh, that's great. I mean, I'm sure that'll be convenient for you. But in the meantime, I have to die in a hole.

<RedHawk>: Yeah, that sucks.

<Mickey7>: That sucks? Really? That's all you've got?

<RedHawk>: I'm sorry, Mickey, but what do you want? I feel bad that you're about to die down there, but seriously, this is your job, right?

<Mickey7>: I'm not even current, you know. I haven't uploaded in over a month.

<RedHawk>: That... is not my fault. Don't worry, though. I'll fill you in on what you've been up to. Got any private stuff you've done since your last upload that you think you might need to know?

<Mickey7>: Um...

<Mickey7>: No, I guess not.

<RedHawk>: Perfect. Then we're all set.

<Mickey7>: ...

<RedHawk>: All good, Mickey?

<Mickey7>: Yeah. All good. Thanks a lot, Berto.

I blink away from the window, lean back against the rock wall, and close my eyes. I can't believe that chickenshit bastard's not coming for me.

Oh, who am I kidding? I can totally believe it.

So, what next? Sit here and wait to die? I have no idea how far I tumbled down that borehole or drop shaft or whatever it was before I hit ground in this... whatever this is. It might have been twenty meters. From the way Berto was talking, it might have been more like a hundred. The opening I dropped through is right there, no more than three meters up. Even if I could reach it, though, there's no way I'm climbing with this wrist.

In my line of work, you spend a lot of time pondering different ways to die—when you're not actually experiencing them, that is. I've never frozen to death before. I've definitely thought about it, though. It's been hard not to since we made landfall on this godforsaken ball of ice. It should be pretty easy, relatively speaking. You get chilly, fall asleep, and then don't wake up, right? I'm starting to drift, thinking that at least maybe this won't be such a bad way to go, when my ocular pings. I blink to answer.

<Black Hornet>: Hey babe.

<Mickey7>: Hey Nasha. What can I do for you?

<Black Hornet>: Just sit tight. I'm in the air, ETA two minutes.

<Mickey7>: Berto pinged you?

<Black Hornet>: Yeah. He doesn't think you're retrievable.

<Mickey7>: But?

<Black Hornet>: He's just not properly motivated.

You know, hope is a funny thing. Thirty seconds ago I was one hundred percent sure I was about to die, and I wasn't really afraid. Now, though, my heart is pounding in my ears and I find myself running down a checklist of everything that could go wrong if Nasha actually manages to get her lifter on the ground up there and makes a rescue attempt. Is the floor of the crevasse even wide enough for her to set down? If it is, will she be able to locate me? If she does, will she have enough cable to reach me?

If she does, what are the chances that all that activity brings the creepers down on her?

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

I can't let her do it.

<Mickey7>: Nasha?

<Black Hornet>: Yeah?

<Mickey7>: Berto's right. I'm not retrievable.

<Black Hornet>: ...

<Mickey7>: Nasha?

<Black Hornet>: You sure about this, babe?

I close my eyes again, and breathe in, breathe out. It's just a trip to the tank, right?

<Mickey7>: Yeah, I'm sure. I'm buried deep here, and I'm pretty badly banged up. Honestly, even if you managed to get me back, they'd probably wind up scrapping me anyway.

<Black Hornet>: ...

<Black Hornet>: Okay, Mickey. This is your call.

<Black Hornet>: You know I would have come for you, right?

<Mickey7>: Yeah, Nasha. I know.

She goes silent, and I sit there watching her signal strength rising and falling. She's orbiting the drop site. She's trying to triangulate my signal, trying to pin down my location.

I need to end this.

<Mickey7>: Go home, Nasha. I'm checking out now.

<Black Hornet>: Oh.

<Black Hornet>: Okay.

<Black Hornet>: How're you gonna do it?

<Mickey7>: Do what?

<Black Hornet>: Shut down, Mickey. I don't want you going out like Five did. You got a weapon?

<Mickey7>: Nope. Lost my burner on the way down. Honestly, I don't

think I'd want to use one of those things on myself anyway. I guess it would be quick, but

<Black Hornet>: Yeah, that's probably a good call. How about a knife? Or an ice ax?

<Mickey7>: No, and no. And what exactly are you expecting me to do with an ice ax?

<Black Hornet>: I don't know. They're sharp, right? Maybe you could chop yourself in the head or something.

<Mickey7>: Look, Nasha, I know you're trying to be helpful, but—

<Black Hornet>: You could just pop the seals on your rebreather. Not sure if the low O2 or the high CO would get you first, but either way it shouldn't take more than a few minutes.

<Mickey7>: Yeah. I know I haven't tried it, but somehow I don't think slow suffocation is my thing.

<Black Hornet>: So what're you gonna do?

<Mickey7>: Freeze to death, I guess.

<Black Hornet>: Yeah, that works.

Peaceful, right?

<Mickey7>: I hope so.

Her signal dwindles almost to nothing, then hovers just above zero. She must be hanging just at the edge of transmission range.

<Black Hornet>: Hey. You're backed up, right?

<Mickey7>: Not for the last six weeks.

<Black Hornet>: Why haven't you been uploading?

I really don't want to get into that particular question right now.

<Mickey7>: Just lazy, I guess.

<Black Hornet>: ...

<Black Hornet>: I'm sorry about this, babe. I really am.

<Black Hornet>: Want me to stay on the line with you?

<Mickey7>: No. This might take a while, and if you go down out there, you don't get to come back, remember? You should get back to the dome.

<Black Hornet>: You sure?

<Mickey7>: Yeah, I'm sure.

<Black Hornet>: Love you, babe. When I see you tomorrow, I'll let you know that you went down like a pro tonight.

<Mickey7>: Thanks, Nasha. Love you too.

<Black Hornet>: Goodbye, Mickey.

I blink the window closed, and watch as Nasha's comm signal dwindles the rest of the way down to zero.

Berto's already long out of range. I look up. The opening is staring down at me like the devil's anus, and, backed up or not, I'm suddenly not cool with dying. I give my head another shake, and climb to my feet.

HERE'S A THOUGHT experiment for you: Imagine you found out that when you go to sleep at night, you don't just go to sleep. You die. You die, and someone else wakes up in your place the next morning. He's got all your memories. He's got all your hopes and dreams and fears and wishes. He thinks he's you, and all your friends and loved ones do too. He's not you, though, and you're not the guy who went to sleep the night before. You've only existed since this morning, and you will cease to exist when you close your eyes tonight. Ask yourself—would it make any practical difference in your life? Is there any way that you could even tell?

Replace 'go to sleep' with 'get crushed, or vaporized, or set on fire' and you've pretty much got my life. Trouble in the reactor core? I'm on it. Need to test a sketchy new vaccine? I'm your guy. Need to know if the bathtub absinthe you cooked up is poisonous? I'll get a glass, you bastards. If I die, you can always make another me.

The upside of all that dying is that I really am a shitty kind of immortal. I don't just remember what Mickey1 did. I remember being him. Well, all but the last few minutes of being him, anyway. He—I—died after a hull breach during transit. Mickey2 woke up a few hours later, sure as shit that he was thirty-one years old and had been born back on Midgard. And who knows? Maybe he was. Maybe that was the original Mickey Barnes looking out through his eyes. How could you tell? And maybe if I lie

down on the floor of this cavern, close my eyes, and pop my seals, I'll wake up tomorrow morning as Mickey8.

Somehow, though, I doubt it.

Nasha and Berto might not be able to tell the difference, but deep down on some level below reason, I'm pretty sure I'd know I was dead.

THERE'S PRETTY MUCH nothing in the way of visible-range photons down here, but my ocular is picking up just enough in the shortwave infrared to get a look around. As it turns out, there are a half-dozen tunnels leading out of this chamber. All of them slope downward.

That shouldn't be.

None of this should be, actually.

The tunnels look like lava tubes, but according to the orbital survey, there isn't supposed to be any volcanism within a thousand kilometers of here. That's one of the reasons we picked this place for our first base camp, even though it's far enough off the equator that the crappy climate of this stupid planet is even crappier than it has to be. I walk slowly around the perimeter of the chamber. All the tunnels look the same, circular tubes about three meters in diameter, glowing faintly in a way that tells my conscious mind that there's a positive temperature gradient at work, and at the same time lets my subconscious know that they all probably lead directly to hell. I count six paces from each to the next.

That doesn't seem right either.

No time to worry about it, though. I pick a tunnel and start walking.

After a half-hour or so, I start to wonder if maybe I should have tried to tell Nasha that I wasn't going to

just sit there and freeze to death after all. It would be good if she knew not to let Berto file a loss report until and unless I actually die. The Union is pretty loose about a lot of stuff, morality-wise, but some really bad things happened in the early days of bio-printed bodies and personality downloads, and at this point on most colonies you're better off being a serial killer or a child stealer than a multiple.

I pop open a comm window, but of course I'm getting no signal here at all. Too much bedrock between me and the surface. Probably for the best. I'm pretty sure the only reason Nasha didn't force the issue on a rescue attempt is that I gave her the impression that I was broken anyway. If she knew I was up and walking around with nothing worse than a headache and a sprained wrist, she might swing back and try to come for me, whether I wanted it or not.

I can't have that. Nasha's the only clearly good thing I can point to from the past nine years of my life, and if she went down because of me, I couldn't live with myself.

I couldn't, but I'd have to, wouldn't I? I can't die—not and make it stick, anyway.

In any case, I'm not sure she could find me even if she wanted to at this point. It's like an ant farm down here, with cross-tunnels every dozen meters or so. I've tried to pick the ones that looked more up than down, but I don't think I'm having a lot of success, and I have no idea what direction I'm headed.

On the plus side, though, I'm not shivering anymore. I thought at first that I was going hypothermic, but the infrared glow from the walls has been brightening steadily, and I'm pretty sure now that it's getting warmer the deeper I go. I'm actually starting to sweat a little.

Which is okay for now, I guess—but it's gonna suck if I actually do manage to find my way back to the surface. It was negative ten C when I broke through the crust covering the mouth of that drop shaft. Temperatures at night have been dipping to negative thirty or more, and the wind never stops. If I do find a way out, it might be a good idea to hang around inside until the sun comes back up.

I'M DAYDREAMING ABOUT Nasha the first time I hear the skittering. It's like a bunch of little rocks tumbling down a granite face, except that it starts and stops, starts and stops. I hurry on, and I don't look back. It's obvious to me by now that these tunnels are not a natural formation. I don't know what kind of burrowing animal digs three-meter-wide tunnels through solid rock, but whatever it is, I'm pretty sure I don't want to meet one.

As I press on, the noises come more often, and closer. I find myself walking faster and faster, until I'm almost running. I've just passed a cross-tunnel when I realize that I can't tell if the noises I'm hearing are coming from behind me or in front of me. I pull up short, and turn half around.

And there it is, almost close enough to touch.

It looks generally like a creeper, which I guess makes sense: segmented body, one pair of legs to a segment; hard, sharp claws for feet. The mandibles are different, though. Creepers have one pair on their front segments. This guy has two: a slightly longer pair held parallel to the ground, and a shorter pair held perpendicular to those. Just like a creeper, it has a short, dextrous pair of feeding legs inside the mandibles, and a round, toothy maw.