

Ten seconds ago collided with now, nearly knocking Michaelson down. He slowed his pace, unable to continue. Looking around, he saw nothing to explain what just happened. He was several hours into a day-long geological survey, one that he had been looking forward to for weeks - a study of Basin Zanzibar and its impenetrable radio silence. He had planned to cover about thirty kilometers throughout the day, with stops every quarter hour to take readings. This was not in the plan. He paused, hands on his knees, unsure of what to do next.

*Didn't see that coming, he thought. When does a radio dead zone generate out-of-phase echoes? Whatever it is, keep moving or this route won't be done before dark.*

The echoes grew more intense with each subsequent step, slowing his progress further. Thoughts compressed, slowing as though moving through molasses. With a feedback loop. *There you go, put that in the report – my brain is reverberating in syrup. They'll bench me and give Taylor the good routes. But if this keeps up I won't be able to finish the route.*

"Where's Michaelson? He was due back an hour ago" Captain Anna Sorenson inquired. "Taylor have you heard anything?"

"No ma'am. Nothing on the radio. When was his last contact?"

“About two kilometers outside the perimeter of the basin” Ferguson replied.

“That was over four hours ago, why didn’t I hear about this sooner?” Sorenson demanded.

Michaelson looked up after taking another step, noting the darkening sky with confusion. He checked his watch – 3:15 in the afternoon, way too early for sunset. A knot of dread formed in his stomach – something is clearly not right. A phrase from an old teacher came to mind: When instruments disagree with reality, trust reality. *Damn, he thought, the sun can’t lie, it must really be this late. Time to go back.*

Ceru is a Mars-sized planet located in the next spiral arm of the Milky Way from Earth, travelling spinward. It orbits a star nearly the size of our sun and lies just outside the habitable zone, too cold for liquid water to exist on the surface. Despite the conditions Ceru is the first planet outside our solar system to be inhabited continuously, due to its abundant mineral wealth. Off-world mining is now commonplace, with hundreds of planets hosting operations of all sizes. Most lie on planets that are visually bleak, offering monochromatic landscapes and little else. Ceru bucks this trend with stark blue skies and blazing orange soil, surprising even the most jaded travelers. The peculiar shade of the sky reminded several early surveyors of the cerulean blue of Earth’s tropics, inspiring the planet’s name.

“There. He’s over there, about a half kilometer out” Taylor noted.

“What the hell is that, Tai Chi?” Ferguson asked, adjusting his scope.

“Huh, how can he move that slowly without losing his balance.”

They brought the rover to a stop at the edge of the timpani basin, its surface too fragile to support a vehicle. Taylor picked up a slate for communication in the silence of

the basin. That same silence blocks mining the rare-Earth elements found in abundance here, causing miners to dub it the Dead Zone.

“He’s going faster now.”

“Let’s hurry. I want to know what kept him out there in the DZ that long.”

“Base do you copy? This is Ferguson.”

“Base here, go ahead Ferguson.”

“We’ve got visual on Michaelson. He’s heading back. We are going into the basin to rendezvous with him.”

“Copy, mark the time, 18:15hrs.”

“Copy. Ferguson out.”

“Weird, mine says 18:14, it was just on base sync. Battery must be wearing out.”

The relentless pressure diminished as Michaelson returned. *Finally, it’s quiet again.* Taylor’s and Ferguson’s lights soon came into view. *Oh, they sent others. Apparently I need to be rescued from a walk in the park. How do I even start to explain this?*

[foo]