They came in too low over Sarpedon, its towering ice spires and cracks screaming before them as the lander ploughed its way through the thin but ice crystal laden atmosphere. Perhaps it was a miscalculation in the lander’s computer, but Pietrov, the technician furiously denied any wrong doing. Jackson, a grizzly of a man, their supposed specialist for the mission, commented that the weather patterns were not well known on the planet. A down draft near one of the massive ice plates that covered the planet might have forced them into a suboptimal landing trajectory.

Malacki, the supposed leader of this exploratory group listened to both of the two men and said nothing. Not because he didn’t know which one to trust, but because nothing like this had ever happened before.

He knew fully well it was patronage that earned him this position over these two veterans. His cousin was on the board of directors for the Trans-Steller Cartography Corporation and although Malacki wanted no special privilege, it would seem that friendly cousin decided to tip his hand anyway.

He stuck his head out of the land and quickly regretted it. Even suited up (the atmosphere was not quite breathable, 5 minutes and you’d be done, regardless of the cold) the chill hit him like a sack of bricks. He hastily closed the hatch.

“You’ll be wanting these”, Jackson motioned to a nondescript panel on the wall. Inside were suit add-ons, an exo-skeleton like attachment that was supposed to provide extra insulation and durability. Jackson had apparently given his manager a bit of trouble when the poor pencil pusher had tried to send their group down there without them. Jackson, without orders was already suiting up.

“It doesn’t matter what we go out in. ” Pietrov complained. “We’re almost 10 miles from where we were supposed to land. There’s no stable ground to deploy the station!” Previous explatory teams had substantial trouble with the mobile equipment lab, its design was top-notch, but its actual fabrication had been contracted out to the lowest bidder and due to some unforeseen error, it vibrated badly. So badly in fact, that teams on desert planets and the like had complained of sunken stations after only a half a day of operation. There was even a rumor, nothing substantial, that they had lost a team like that, buried alive suffocated under the ground.

Ignoring that last thought Malacki tried to bring some semblance of order to the group. “Its clear that we’ve had a bit of a set back, but blaming each other won’t help at this point. We have the turbo-sled for exactly this purpose.”

“The turbo-sled blows. You can’t even get 4 mph out of the thing” Pietrov complained again as he swiveled in his pilot chair.”

“Doesn’t matter ,” Jackson growled as he hurled the exo-suit at Pietrov, connecting with a dull thwack. “If you think we’re going any fast than that anyway in this climate, you’ve got another thing coming.” He said as he lifted open the hatch and disappeared into the outside.

“Need anything from the land?” Malacki offered as the two struggled into their exo-suits. “Everything is in the station. That’s the point.” Pietrov answered face obscured by the suit.

Actually Malacki did know that, something similar had happened on his other mission, but he certainly had not been in charge of that one. He had the honor of working under captain Underman, one of the original founders of TCC. Underman had been a space explorer before everything had become privatized and all fame left the profession. If it was just as simple as hauling the station a bit before setting up shop. “Piece of cake!” Malacki said to no one, realizing that Pietrov had already left the lander.

Scrambling out, trying to ignore the cold, he saw Jackson purposefully unbolting the station while Pietrov struggled with detaching the shielding around the turbo-sled. The three worked in silence amid the blinding snow until with a grinding of metal and a ice reverberating thud, the station dropped onto the ground, starting another round of complaints from Pietrov.

“What are you doing> We need to have dropped it onto the turbo-sled. How are we going to move it now?” He asked as the second to last bolt vanished into the snow. “Shit” Pietrov muttered as he dropped to his knees, looking for the piece.

“Forget it” Malacki said, “You’ll never find it and we don’t need it.”

“Are you going to dick around until we freeze? Unhook that damn sled and lets get going!”

Malacki scowled under his helmet but said nothing. The last bolt unriveted and the sled tilted into the snow. “How much power does it have?” Malacki suddenly asked as Jackson muscled the two out of his way and pushed the inert sled over to the station module.

Undeterred, Pietrov slipped his way into the driver’s seat and started powering on the sled. “Looks like plain batteries, so probably a couple of days if we take it slow.” Pietrov said, configuring the sled. Jackson stopped trying to push the station module and looked over his shoulder. “Are you kidding me? I specifically asked for a nuclear pile!”

“A nuclear pile for a turbo-sled? I’d be surprised if they even allow that! The station will have one, although we’ll need to deploy it to come out of hibernation.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know” Jackson growled above the wind, “Help me lift this onto the sled!”

Pietrov made no sign of moving as Jackson and Malacki positioned themselves at the corners of the metal cube.

“There’s no way we can lift that.” Pietrov said pointing at the station, but he lowered the sides on the flat sled anyway.

“Yes we can, even with you two wimps.” The massive man lowered his body, wrapping his gloved hands around the massive cube. “Just need…to move it a goddamn inch”

Malacki struggled to help the man as he slowly raised the station almost single handedly. Pietrov said nothing but helped by backing the now operational turbo-sled under the massive station. In less than ten minutes and with considerable effort on all three crew member’s parts, the station was now correctly centered and loaded on the sled., leaving barely enough room for the driver.

“There’s not enough room for us” Malacki noted. Jackson ignored the comment and peered over Pietrov. “You have the coordinates? ”

“Locked in. The lander will provide positional data, even buried under snow.” Pietrov said, looking back at the snow half buried lander.

“Lets go then” Malacki said and amidst the suffocating snow, the group set out, the turbo sled lumbering behind them.

For what seemed like forever, the group labored in silence, or rather none of them spoke, the wails of the thin Sarpedonian atmosphere ever present. Completely blinded by snow, the group could only rely on Pietrov’s occasional subtle course corrections to assure they were not heading in circles, or worse, the wrong direction altogether.

In side his suit, Malaki listened to the plastic squeak of the joints with every stride and wrinkled his nose at the inevitable stench that arose from inhabiting the same suit for weeks at end.

Starved of conversation, he fiddled with his HUD in his suit. The read out was sparse, telling him useless biometrics and a few pieces of information like temperature (-50 degrees Fairenheight, even the journey to the stars hadn’t managed to get the Americans to abandon their nonsensical scale.) This continued for at least another hour.

Very suddenly and altogether unexpectedly, the storm lessened, giving them view of their surroundings.

They were on a wide white plateau, whose sides could only be recognized by a slight change in white, on the horizon. “We landed on the wrong plateau” Pietrov explained, “At our current speed, it will take us eight more hours to arrive at the proper spot.”

“we better not spend longer than that. “ Jackson replied.

“From what I saw of the mission briefings, we don’t want to be exposed come nightfall.” Pietrov turned around, “This is day time?”

“Yes,” Jackson replied, “Sarpedon orbits a gas giant, not unlike Sol’s Jupiter”.

“Asterion,” Malacki interjected, “and the solar body is Agenor, why we can see what we’re doing and why its only -50, instead of whatever it is on the other side right now.”

“Actually I did read up on this planet before I came” Pietrov said stubbornly, “scientists believe the relatively mild climate is due to Sarpedon’s proximity to… Asterion. The gravity well and eccentric orbit…”

“Yes, it flexes the planet creating warming. Not unlike Jupiter’s Europa. We read the briefings.” Jackson said, silencing them, “or at least I did,” he muttered under his breath.

“Well then, you’ll remember that our crash site was supposed to be a rock outcropping. Now that I’m here, how is that possible?” Pietrov pointed out.

“You didn’t read the report all the way did you!” Malacki exclaimed. “That was all in there.”

“”Humor me. I was busy.” Pietrov said dismissively. “The planet is supposed to have large tectonic movement due to the powerful gravity differential between perihelion and epihelion.” Jackson said, clearly quoting the document.

“Those terms are actually misapplied, as Sarpedon doesn’t’ orbit Agenor, it’s a moon.” Malacki said. “In fact, I noticed several discrepancies between…”

The ground beneath them shook violently. Trudging through the snow was hard enough, completely unprepared, Malacki’s visor showed only white as he face planted the ground. He heard Jackson curse as he grabbed the turbo sled to stabilize himself. “There’s that tectonic activity you read about, ”Pietrov said, safe in the seat of the turbo sled.

Malacki embarrassed, quickly got to his feet and looked around. Everything looked the same, although in a couple of steps upon resuming walking, their eyes caught sight of a massive rent in the ice ground only a foot wide. They crossed easily but Malacki was unnerved by how quickly it had sprung up under foot The turbo sled’s massive treads spanned the gap easily and the group continued on.

The storm was now completely gone, and Malacki could sometimes glance up and see bits of Asterion among the whatever chemicaled clouds. He had read the entire report, but to Pietrov’s credit, the document had been immensely dry and full of guesswork and supposition. TCC hadn’t even sent an unmanned probe before them. All observations had been made at a distance, the signature of a low budget operation. Probably paid for by some university.

They were now heading down the edge of the plateau, spread before them was a massive chasm, lying perpendicular to their path. Their planned landing location was barely visible in the form of a rocky outcropping atop the next plateau.

“Shit” Malacki said, staring at the massive hole. “How the hell are we going to cross that?”

“We’re a fucking cartography company, you didn’t think the lander mapped this area as we came in? There’s a narrow spot at exactly two o’clock,” he listed coordinates, “we should be able to cross there.” “Should?” Malacki questioned.

“You didn’t even check the plan captain.” Pietrov said sarcastically, “now you’re interested?” Malacki shut up. He was supposed to be in charge. He was supposed to be the captain. What the hell had gone so wrong?

After about an hour of dismal walking, the storm returned. Malacki was almost glad. There was something depressing about having walked four hours but constantly reminded that they were going to have to cross that chasm.

The blinding white was conforting in a way, he trusted Pietrov to the navigating, so really, all he needed to do was walk, dream like in his own thoughts while Jackson and Pietrov and the sled followed. He he was in the front like a modern Columbus really. Perhaps this planet would be associated with him somehow. It would be interesting to figure out which university funded…

There was no ground where he had just stepped. His heavily booted foot broke through a thin layer of ice and snow into the void below. He caught Jackson yelling something to him as Jackson sprinted forward. Pietrov cursed and futilely tumbled out of the sled.

He was falling, if just for a moment.

His torso wedged in the crack. He had fallen up to his chest into the ice but he could feel himself slipping further downwards. He vagueally remembered Jackson hauling him backward by the armpits, the sut squeeking against the uncovered ice.

Another tremor rocked the ground below them, a deep rumble that vibrated his bones through the suit. He shook his head, realizing that Jackson was asking him a question.

“Are you ok? Can you feel your feet? Did you twist anything in the fall?”

“No,no” Malacki replied slowly. “Ii was quite odd. I put my foot down and there simply wasn’t anything there.”

“This is far too soon for the main chasm on my charts. This must be a smaller one.” Pietrov said, now on foot beside them. He walked past Malacki and peered down the drop.

“Ha, its not even that large. You could have stepped over it. My gods, look how deep it is though. I can’t even see the end.” Pietrov stared into the chasm. The dull grey light that filtered through the clouds illuminated enough to make out jagged sides on the way down, cut at point like a diamond, faces all the way down. It was a thousand little mirrors leading to the abyss, all blue and translucent, a frozen ovean of ice, all the way down to the blackness, all the way down…

Jackson clapped his hand on Pietrov’s shoulder and took a quick glance down. “Like hiking glaciers on Antarctica back on Earth. Nasty way to go.”He turned away and dropped a hand down to Malacki who was still confused for some reason, probably shock. Novice.

Malacki snapped out of his daze and caught Jackson’s hand. “Thanks” He said as he got to his feet.

“Pietrov, I don’t want to repeat that. Can you tell me where those are?” Pietrov looked around after a moment.

“Um…no. All the intel I have is from sub-orbital and arial shots as we came in. We would need to set up the station to get detailed enough geological data. Even then, its not really rock; its ice. I know how to operate the system but not enough into how it works.” Pietrov admitted, getting back into the turbosled.

“Great” Malacki said, carefully striding over the hole he had fallen into and looking around nervously for signs of more. A rope fell to the ground in front of him, read against the blankness.

He picked up the end to see Jackson had already attached it to himself through a suit loop and was attaching the other end to the turbosled. “We won’t be loosing anyone like that this trip.” He said assuredly.

“What if the sled goes down?” Pietrov asked as Jackson signaled Malacki to continue walking. As they started out again, he turned around and Pietrov just made out a grin through his visor. “that’s why we’re going first.” He said.

They had now descended almost all the wasy down the slope. They had one mile until the original landing site, about a half mile to the gap and then simply up the other side. Right at the edge was some sort of volcanic or hopefully tectonic up-thrust where the rock jutted above the mile think ice.

Pietrov consulted his instruments. The lander signal was getting a tad fainter but that could have been a million of things most likely interference from the ice storm. Their way across the gap should be coming up shortly.

The storm had cleared again. The smooth canyon snaked to the north and south, separating the two plateaus. In the center of it was the chasm.

Pietrov could instantly see that it was going to be a problem. He was not sure about the crossing, it was just a bridge of compacted ice, perhaps one of those ice spires that had fallen into the gap. There was no reason, no assurance that the bridge was sturdy enough to handle the sled. It could just break right through the ice and… he didn’t want to think about that.

They were now running parallel the chasm. Malacki was staring at the ground, supposedly to forestall another unexpected adventure. Jackson stared forward, his helmet back bobbing up and down as the man trudged through the snow.

Pietrov looked down at the red wire attached to his sled. Jackson had attached it via a carabineer to the railing of the sled. However, the carabineer could slide back and forth on the railing so it did slightly, hitting against the stop on the end. Pietrov forced down an irrational urge to smash the slip off the sled.

Instead he looked at the chasm beside him. The massive rent in the snow was right beside them barely four feet away. Easily as long as two turbosleds, Pietrov shuttered at the forces that would have had to conspire to create it.

Its blue white walls glistened as gaps in the clouds ahead allowed Agenor’s light in. It was frightening really, that mile deep rent. Nothing could ever exist like it on earth, but here on this strange and hostile moon, torn by gravity as it orbited, it was possible, right in front of him.

Its sides looked sharp, occasionally, pieces of ice would tumble into its depths, dull tinks of ice against ice down into the dark. Mabye it wasn’t a mile deep, it certainly was possible that it was deeper, icy depths down to the core, tectonic movements moving stone and ice as massive bodies strained for equilibrium on a scale cyclopean and unimaginable.

A chill worked at Pietrov unlike any he had experienced earth side, which even went through his suit…wiith all this tectonic activity what was to stop one of those from opening right beneath him as it had Malacki? But undoubtably there was something beautiful about the chasm, something deep and visceral, suffused with a cold otherness that commanded respect, almost like there was something…

“Pietrov!” he heard Malacki yell at him. “Look, is this the spot or not? You just going to sit there, blindeyed like a lump?”

Pietrov jumped back to reality. “Err, yeah, I guess so, let me check the coords.”

“I guess so” Jackson imitated, “truly a cartographer’s cartographer, a man of logic and eloquence, this Pietrov Garetski.”

“Shut it!” Pietrov said as he jumped down from the turbosled.

He took out a weather proofed datapad and peered at the cords. “This is the place alright. I don’t know if we can tell how think the ice is though.”

“No tricky tech solution? Alright, I’ll go first. Pietrov, don’t move that sled anywhere near the bridge until I say so. Malacki, take off that rope. I don’t want you dragged in if I fall.” Jackson looked warely at the layer of snow that spanned the chasm, it was obviously thin near the edges, carved away by wind and snow. Probably a piece of ice spire that fell from further up the plateau and rolled down the slope.

While Malacki and Pietrov watched, he stepped cautiously onto the bridge. “The surface is smooth, we lucked out big time. If it were uneven, the sled…” One foot extended after another. If it didn’t hold he knew what would happen. It had occurred before while ice hiking in northern Canada. The ice would start to crack, every further step making ti worse. It would be at this point that most people would panic. However, that did not occur. All the way across, he motioned to Malacki to follow.

Malacki followed nervously, careful to stay near the middle of the fallen ice spire. However, like before, nothing happened. Now was the hard part, though Jackson. To his shock, Pietrov arrogantly started the turbosled, its large treads digging into the top layer of snow. The sled fit with only feet on either side.

“See, no problem…” Pietrov’s grin faded from view as another rumble met their feet. A section of the chasm wall near them gave way and Jackson saw Pietrov’s eyes follow it down into the chasm depths. The sled stopped and Pietrov stared in horror downward suddenly.

“Shit” Jackson had time to say, as the first cracks audiably appeared in the spire. “Get the fuck off of there!” He yelled.The turbosled was only half across. Jackson waited no lnger, he saw the panic. Pietrov was all talk. Faced with an actual situation he was a deer in the headlights.

“Abandon the sled, get Pietrov off! We can rope him across!” Malacki said, forgetting that Jackson and the sled were the only things tied together at the moment. Jackson tried to ignore that thought as he sprinted to the sled. He could feel the tiny gives as sections of the spire beneath his feet sheered and jammed against one another in a mad race to kill him.

Pietrov was still staring at the chasm, so Jackson pushed him aside, noticing as he did so that Pietrov never broke eye contact with something down below. Jackson ignored the man and floored the accelerator.

A normal car would have skidded out, but the treads on the sled went too slow and the weight on them too high for that to happen. The sled launched forward as a side section of the spire groaned and cracked under the weight of its load. It was not as climactic as a scene from the movies, the spire never really fully collapsed, but a large section in the middle bucked, split and fell, leaving a man height sized passage.

Jackson made it to the other dise in time for the adrenaline rush to really kick in. He twitched his head to the side to see a flushed Pietrov still staring behind him at whatever it was he was looking before.

Malacki watched the scene with a growing sense of horror, perhaps realizing that if the spire fell, he would die of expose or dehydration alone in the frozen wastes of Sarpedon. He didn’t quite like the look in Pietrov’s eyes. And thought for a moment that the man might have been making fun of the way Malacki had been shocked earlier from his fall.

After Pietrov didn’t snap out of it, even after Jackson had successfully brought the sled to safety, Malacki got unnerved. Something about those ice chasms wad terrifying and fascinating. He approached the sled and buffeted Pietrov on the side of the head, purposefully blocking his view of the rift. Pietrov stopped his hand forcefully and, completely not anticipating the move, flunk Malacki to the ground.

Malacki was obviously furious and embarrassed Jackson noticed, but he knew Pietrov was not himself. He could tell the poor man was physically shaking inside his suit.

“Pietrov!” he yelled over the comm as he hauled the man forcibly out of the sled and threw him to the ground also. The impact or the yell got his attention and Jackson Pietrov’s eyes focused finally on Jackson.

“…didn’t have to do that. ”Pietrov said weakly. Malacki by this time had gotten to his feet and was purposefully not looking at Pietrov. “Leave the fucker alone. We’ve only got to get up this hill.”

When Jackson didn’t make to move Malacki reluctantly turned around. “What’s wrong?”

“Only Pietrov knows the location to lock the sled. The site was very carefully picked. Especially after all this to get over here, it would be stupid to screw it all up in haste.” Jackson said directing Pietrov to the turbosled.

The man seemed dazed but started the sled rolling and in only a couple of minutes they had crested the slope and were on the plateau.

The scene before them was of black rock sticking up amidst snow drifts, every now and then a particularly strong gust would expose one of the man height black spires only to be covered up almost immediately. Gravel crunched underneath their feet and treads as they crested the plateau.

“This is where we need to set up.” Pietrov said ad they moved forward. The spires parted for whate seemed just enough roon for the station.

“Well this is bleak.” Malacki said. No one responded but cleared the way for the lumbering sled.