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 nepotism 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 exploratory 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. The air inside the suit was apparently filtered, a coincidence of chemical reactions on a moon wide scale had caused Sarpedon to have an almost breathable atmosphere. This overjoyed the financers who could then requisition them filter suits instead of the more expensive close loop ones. The filtration system in his suit hummed quietly.

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.

The sled stoped just inside the clearing and they began the alborous task of setting up the station. Pietrov entered a activation code and Malacki, as captain, keyed in his authorization. Lights lit up on the side of th huge metal rectangle and they felt vibrations as below them, the station drilled itself securely into the rock, not nessesisarily ideal in an area of high tectonic activity, but with economies of scale, no one was going to specially design them a station just so they wouldn’t be bumped around.

Malacki excited at the prospect of setting up the station soon became bored as the process stretched on. Sections of the modular building were either automatically extending, or had to be arranged by hand. Either way, each piece fit snugly into the next, truly a feat of engineering.

Jackson wandered around observing the spires. That was when Malacki noticed Pietrov was no longer with them. He turned around to see the man sitting on the ground on the edge of the plateau, staring at the chasm they had just crossed.

Malacki sat beside him, hoping to reestablish some king of rapport between them, they would after all, be working closely together for the next two months.

However, the other man barely even noticed his presence. He sat hands grabbing his legs, staring…just staring.

The station had fully deployed and Jackson could feel the filtration systems and dynamo vibrate as they worked to create a breathable atmosphere . he turned around and saw Malacki trying to talk to Pietrov and realized that because of their radio system, he had been listening to everything Malacki had said.

“I can’t get over how deep it was.” Pietrov finally replied. All joking and sarcasm had left his voice. His eyes tried to look at Malacki but got locked on the chasm instead.

“Do you remember the first time you went into space? When you looked out the viewport and saw that huge expanse and recognized how truly insignificant you were? This was like that. As the bridge was collapsing I looked down and felt like that again. But instead of wonder, it felt cold. ” The last word ripped from his mouth in a rasp.

Malacki didn’t know how to respond. Something had obviously resonated deeply with Pietrov but his experience with the fissure had only been one of fear and embarrassment. He simply could not relate. Perhaps if he took a closer look…He felt Jackson tap his shoulder and saw the man shake his head.

Jackson had seen reactions like these in the war, but usually only after some horrible atrocity, while the flesh was still burning like wax and screams echoed in… that was over now though. And thank god it was. No side had benefited from that war, except for maybe space exploration in general. We just couldn’t stand each other. Sarge would have known what to say, but Jackson, despite his training, had never commanded men. He could only shrug also in response. He couldn’t really hold it against Pietrov, to be honest there was something unnerving about the mile deep space., perhaps not deserving of this response, but unnerving nevertheless.

Malacki was the first one into the newly constructed station. The interior lights were not on yetm but he could look around with his suit torch. It had finished just in time; they could tell Agenor was being eclipsed by Asterion but couldn’t remember how many solar days each Sarpenonian one was, shorter to be sure though.

Malacki looked around the small station. There was a center table, all metal with small spindly chairs, also metal, presumably these had folded up from the floor. A dim light was flickering on over the table, illuminating his surroundings better. Behind him Pietrov and Jackson had filed in through the airlock, the massive metal door slamming shut behind them.

On their left and right were humming metal walls, presumably hiding access to the life support systems. Underneath his feet he saw an access trapdoor to the crawlspace and the nuclear pile emergency controls. Off to one side were sleeping quarters for the three of them, really only three metal boards on top of one another. Finally, in front of them, across the table was the data center that controlled the mapping equipment overhead.

Malacki remembered this procedure, which was good, since it seemed like neither Jackson nor Pietrov were going to help him. He flipped on the central computer and waited a moment for it to boot up. Behind his chair he heard the sound of tearing plastic telling him that Jackson had found the food stocks.

He took off his helmet and breathed his first breath outside his suit on Sarpedon. The filtered air was thin and he could hear the processors working at full. Apparently Sarpedon was at the limit of what they could filet, any more toxic and they would have to close loop everything.

Malacki keyed in his authorization and the maintenance told him a link was being estabilished. He wrote a typical report detailing what had happened, leaving out his fall and Pietrov’s current state. Because of the great distances between Sarpedon and the nearest TCC hub, the communication was really only one way. In fact the team that would pick them up was probably already in transit. It would take a couple of days to communicate with the team and exactly the time of their deployment for the extraction team to arrive. Even though he would receive no reply, protocol said to send messages all the while anyways.

Malacki let the computer churn as he got up. Jackson was out of this suit completely and wolfing down freeze dried something. Peitrov was also out of his suit, which lay on the floor in the sleeping quarters. There were inflatable matresses somewhere and Pietrov was asleep.

Malacki joined Jackson “What you got there?”

“Chicken cubes, want one?” The big man replied. “You got to get used to them at some point. We got vacuum dried enough to last a year.” That was one thing TCC never skimped on, apocfully beucase Underman hated NASA’s food accomidations on their missions.

Malacki accepted the offer more for the comraderie and less because he liked the disgusting food stock. The two ate in silence for a while. Malacki tried to think of something to strike up converstation but his brain was tired form the day’s events.

It was then that noticed the pale light filtering in through the windows above the table.

“That’s new.” He murmered as Jackson joined Pietrov in unconsciousness. He could just make out Asterion overhead, reflecting light in to their station, pale blue light, making long shadows. He paced over to the computer and saw it was finished sending the message. Malacki turned on the mapping software and left the machine again. He then slipped out of his suit, which by this point had become dank with sweat. He hung it up properly in the UV cleaning nok and shambled over the bunks to discover that he had the floor. “Bastards,” he thought as he lay down on the inflatable matress. Soon he was asleep.

The pale blue light slithered in in the dead of night. At some point the light over the light over the table had decided to conserve energy, leading the three in illuminated stillness. The sharp mechanical corners of the station silluehetted with the ethereal blue light unsettled Malacki as we awoke with a start.

He didn’t need to use the restroom, something else had awakened him. He felt the hairs go up on the back of his neck. A shadow moved. It was Pietrov in his suit. His eyes were wide as he grabbed Malacki and forcable turned him toward the skylight.

“Look at the light!” he said, pointing toward the small windows. Light patterns played across the wrought metal of the opposing wall. It was beautiful andfrightening for some reason. They skated across the walls until whatever had caused it disappeared, leaving them in pale darkness.

“I am going to go. I have to see what that was.” Pietrov said, “I knew it… I saw shapes moving down there. ” he suddenly exclaimed, throwing against his matress and sprinted towards the door.

“Wait!” Malacki called, “you’re not making any sense!” and he jumped to his feet and made to run to grab the man. However, his feet landed on something smooth and his legs went out from under him and his head smashed into something metal and the world went black.

Jackson awaoke to a commotion going on next to him and he instantly lept out of bed and almost fell over the prone form of Malacki. “What the fuck?” He started as he saw the blood by Malacki’s head. He heard the thunk of the airlock as Pietrov left. He ignored it for now.

He raced to remember the procedures for evaluating a head wound, drilled into his skull by Sarge in basic training. The wound was not fatal, mearly a nasty surface wound, minor concussion at worst.

Malacki stirred and started to rise. Jackson tried to say something about taking it easy or not moving his head, but Malacki was insistent. “Suit up quick, we’ve got to stop Pietrov, something’s wrong with him.”

Jackson nodded and the suits flew on. As soon as Jackson had on his and as he was making his way towards the airlock, he was contacting Pietrov on the suit comm.

“Pietrov, what the hell is going on? Where are you going?” but somehow, Jackson had an idea that it had something to do with the blasted fissure but even so, Pietrov’s response surprised him.

“The things, I saw something move under, in the darkness. It was an echo against the walls. God damn man, I saw something move!”

“Are you talking about the chasm we crossed?” Jackson said, trying to stall the other man until he could reach him. “Of course you saw something move, there’s tetonic activity all the time here, ice falls Pietrov, what are you running for?” Jackson said, as they waited impaciently for the airlock to decompress.

The door swung open on silent hinges revealing a shadow lit plane of skeletal spires wreathed in shadows that jumped and flickered. Something was causing light to shimmer neavby.

“NO, I’m sure. I saw it on the bridge and I knew it when I saw the lights. Gods, you got to see this, its so beautiful.”

They trudged through the snow following Pietrov’s footprints to find him on the edge of the chasm, bent over, peering down into the depths.

Something was flashing pulsating down there, like a reflection on the water, an aroura of pale blue light, bouncing off wind polished ice faces, reflecting over and over in the deep. They were half way down the slope when they got the transmission.

“I…I can see them. They’re calling me. I…I’ve never seen anything like this, so many patterns, I wish I could see it closer…”

At that moment, there was an earth shattering rumble beneath their feet, and the slpe they were on buckled under them. Their flight became a fall and the hit the ground. All around them icre walls were collapsing into the darkness. Their bridge, tormented by their earlier passing cracked in half and fragmented as it gave way to the urges of gravity.

“Shit, Pietrov, get away from there!” Malacki screamed as the ground shook again violently.

“I guess you’re right. I should…” Pietrov’s voice said as he rose, but his body never turned to run and his head was still tilted, still staring. The ground around his feet gave way, cracks formed and he gave them no heed.

“NO!” Jackson yelled, frantically sprinting in the cumbersome suit towards Pietrov.

Malacki simply collapsed and stared knowing they were too late. One final jarring motion split the ice and with athunderous rumble, Pietrov and a substantial amount of ice and snow vanished into the abyss.

Jackson beat the ground in frustruation as Malacki watched a man die.

Malacki heard Jackson cursing to himself, and heard the survivalist ask himself the same question over and over: “why?”.

Malacki’s communicator came to life.

“Malacki” the voice said, and Malacki realized with horror that it was Pietrov. He was still falling.

“Its beautiful down here. The ice is like crystal, like diamonds and it reflects the light. They are down here also. They are also beautiful, beautiful but cold… so cold. You should come down here also.” The voice said softly. Then there was silence.

Malacki collapsed to the ground and realized that he had walked to the edge, but didn’t care. Jackson looked up with renewed horror, running towards him but for some reason Malacki couldn’t make him out very well, like he was a mile away, underwater. A smooth sublime blue like liquid ice.

He stared at the lights, now dimming, subtley shimmering beneath and inside the ice. There were something strange and alluring about them, but they were fading rapidly, the water parttern succoming to the dark plae blue light form above. The illumination, whatever caused it was gone. Darkness was all that lay below him now and darkness it would remain, a fitting testament to Pietrov and his eternal cold embrace.

Jackson threw him away from the edge. “Fuck, no you too! Stay away from the edge! Stay away from the edge by god!” Jackson said realizing he was yelling and perhaps more to himself than Malacki.

He shook the other man until he seemed to snap out of whatever had possessed him. Jackson threw his arm around Malacki and half directed, half dragged him up the slope back to the station.

They could not help Pietrov, he was gone, like so many others Jackson had known. It didn’t matter, they had a report to file.

Back in the station, Malacki unenergetically filled out the casuality report before launching into uneasy sleep. Jackson read over the report. It was clear from Malacki’s writing and body language that Pietrov’s death affected him greatly. Jackson could not understand why someone so technologically proficient and logic in other aspects would do something like this. It made no sense. But he was no stranger to madness. It had come for him once, holed up in a broken office building in Mogadishu, as the bombs and artillery exploded around him and the thunder of cannons and the crack of rifles had eaten away at him until he was certain he could not go on. But he had survived then, and he would survive now, he assured himself. He checked to make sure that the mapping equipment was still running, since without it, everything they had fought for would have been without purpose.

The next few days passed without much consequence. They didn’t go outside at all. They had no reason to and here shone the failing of TCC. Their engineering team (and accounting team) were brillian, things packed so densely aand so light it would amaze, but there was nothing to do.

Hours dragged on and after so long everything became tedious and farmilliar. Neither of them particularly wanted to go outside the station, and this became a sort of mental block. In the next week, the only ventured out once, just to make sure that the turbo sled didn’t become buried, just in case they needed to use it for some reason.

Malacki saw that Jackson passed the time working out, excerizing until the other man must have been sore, ad then ate, and then slept. That was basically all the other man did. LAthough it was clear that both men appreciated the fact that they were not alone, they didn’t really talk about anything.

For Malack, it was a time of anxiousness as he replayed the scene over and over in his head while trying to stave off the boredom.

The mapping was going well, geographically, they had mapped an astounding amount of the planet, or moon rather, almost 10% of it was mapped down to features of 50 feet or greater, a number chosen by who ever had funded the expediation to begin with.

His mind fixated on the chasms on the maps. Some of them swept around the whole planet like an eggshell. Just like an egg being cracked. Squeezed until it cracked. When he realized what he was doing, he shut off the computer in disgust.

Pietrov is dead.

He tried to fiddle with inconsequential things in the station, he had always wanted to be a technition like Pietrov but didn’t have the schooling. Perhaps this was an opportunity to learn some about the technology.

The computer was standard issue for TCC but it had an absurd number of cores, most of which were constantly running the mapping in programming. All the furniture folded or lowered or move in the wall some way and Malacki was once again amazed with the engineers who had designed the station.

He tried to learn about the communication protocol that they used to talk back to the TCC hub or the extraction ship, since Pietrov was the one who was supposed to handle that. Pietrov fell, looking at the lights. The lights were real.

He even went down the hatch to the nuclear pile, cancerbe damned. Obviously there wasn’t much to fiddle with down there. The engineers had made sure that the mappers were really, really sure that they knew what they were dong if they wanted to manually change something about its operation.

Malacki learned that the nuclear pile operated off essentially a heat gradient due to the decay of the isotopes inside the ominous pill shaped metaloceramic shielding. There was no actual nuclear reaction perse going on, just steady decay. At this point, Malacki was rereading the safety manual for the device. There was an ejection feature, that was interesting. If you didn’t want it to decay anymore, you could eject it. Pietrov saw something in the ice, down deep. Malacki had seen it also.

Finally, Malakci ran out of things to read about and that when the nightmares started. It didn’t help that those lights showed up again casting their teasing colors across the wall as the two tried to sleep, enticing in their brilliance. However, after the first night of that, Jackson blacked the skylights out with odds and ends. The other man had first switched to martial arts routines, and then simply to mediation and Malacki sometimes couldn’t tell whether the man was sleeping or awake.

15.7% of Sarpedon was mapped. Tectonic activity seemed to increase, rocking the station frequently, rocking all 100 tons or whatever like a toy. Malacki cross validated with the seismograph , increased tectonic activity . The ice floats on light, no magma here Pietrov assured him. The light gets trapped beneath the ice and that’s what causes the tectonic movement. It made a lot of sense.

Sometimes he could remember things that Pietrov perhaps hadn’t actually said about the fissures. Serpents, boring their way through the ice, through flesh. They shine to attract mates, they live off the thermal energy caused by the gravitational tides. They were beautiful. They hadn’t actually made it across the bridge. They were all down there together, one big happy team. Actually everyone was down there, even the people they knew from Earth. There was no Earth. There couldn’t be, since they had already mapped 17.3% of Sarpedon.

They really didn’t need to map any more than the specific 20% around them. Apparently, this location was important because the university wanted to study the glaciological accumulation caused and affected by the gravitational tides. What that meant was that the university wanted to study the ice serpents.

Agenor was the sun, but Sarpedon was only a moon, even for its size. The intergalactic committee on the categorization of stellar bodies obviously discriminated against planets with ice serpents. He should write them a letter.

Jackson woke up in a sweat to see that Malacki had left. The blocks he ahd put on the windows were missing and that strange pattern oozed into the room.

“Fuck, Fuck, not again! No, not again” Jackson pleaded to no one as he dashed to put of his suit.

“Its ok Jackson. Me and Pietrov can look out for one another.”

“Malacki, Pietrov is fucking dead” Jackson yelled into the comm, almost screaming the last word.

“Are you sure?” Malacki asked distantly.

“Yes! Are you screwing me? We both saw him fall! Where the hell are you?” But Jackson knew where he was.

“I’m not so sure he’s dead. I think he smashed into a ledge about 200 feet down. I think he’s been sitting there laughing at us for the last two weeks. He gets to see all the cool things down there. But it is cold. Very cold he says.”

“You’re fucking loosing it!” Jackson said as he sprinted from the station, lit by only Asterion’s reflected gaze, a shadow, an echo of Asterion. “No, damn Malacki, lets talk. I should have talked with you. What are you interested in?”

“It’s the station Jackson. Its our suits. The engineers screwed up. It’s the air filtration systems. We’ve been taking in toxic levels of Sarpedonian atmosphere.”

“What!” Jackson yelled. “How do you know this? ” he asked accusingly as he tumbled down the hill again toward the accursed chasm and its twinkling lights.

There was a pause but Jackson’s blood froze when he saw that Malacki’s foot prints led to the edge, disappeared off the edge.

“The ice told me Jackson. The serpents told me.” Malacki wasn’t there. Jackson blinked. He surely hadn’t seen the other man jump, but the footsteps clearly lead right up to the edge…

Then he saw the ice serpents.

He was back in the station sitting at his chair.

Malacki had jumped, that much was clear. He felt himself screaming but he was not sure why. The floor rumbled and twisted beneath him. His heart beat in his head, he could hear its beat. But it wasn’t all these things that sent him to the other side. He was fine until Malacki started talking to him again a day later.

The collection was perfect and according to procedure. The team on Sarpedon had mapped the required surfaces and quite a bit more. The university would be pleased. The loss of the two crew members was unfortunate but not horrendous. It was only when the mapping failed that the accounts truly hurt. That was why they sent three people after all.

The state of the third crew member was also regrettable. Jackson Smith? Obviously a false name. He would be entitled to mental care for years, but still cheaper than a failed mission.

The only strange part of the whole thing, the TCC officer noted as he looked over the report, had been when the extraction team had come to collect “Jackson” and the station. The extraction team had reported that the handle on the air lock had been broken off from the inside. The place had been a mess and they had eventually found “Jackson” in the crawl space, half burned by radiation from the nuclear pile which had been half ejected, screaming that the radiation was the only thing that could block the light, whatever that meant. There was an added note at the end by the pilot of the team noting that the cracks looked a lot like snakes, which didn’t make much sense and was an uncharacteristically unprofessional annotation.

Regardless of the setbacks the team had faced, they had accomplished their mission. The university was indeed pleased with the mapping, especially the fissures. In what seemed like a true lucky break, they had decided that the moon was worth additional study.

The twenty man team that was about to leave would be profitable, very profitable.