

The snow and hail came down in torrents, pelting the thick canvas sheet covering the cargo compartment of the autowagon. Fionna pulled her parka tight in a fruitless attempt to shut out the sub zero temperatures soaking through the thick layers of insulation. Standard protocol if a bad storm is passing through the area was to delay the delivery to the research station, but this was one of the worst ones they'd had in decades, and she'd already been waylaid for over a week. She was worrying that by now the scientists would be running out of supplies, so company policy be damned, here she was, trekking nearly two hundred kilometers in total blindness.

Commented [1]: Fionna McLaren

The squalls of snow were so dense that she couldn't see a foot in front of the small tracked vehicle, let alone get a PPS signal. Had she not made this trip hundreds of times over the years, and penned comprehensive paper charts of the area, much to the mockery of her co-workers, she would not have been able to make this trip at all.

"That's twelve point eight clicks from the last marker... adjust nineteen degrees port... set speed 25 kph, for next nine point three clicks..."

Once she'd finished programming the autopilot for the next leg of the journey she turned her attention from the nav terminal to the antique CB radio she had installed when she first started cobbling together the crawler. She flipped a large switch which lit up the still working lights on the device. She then turned a chunky knob to line up the marker scored into it with a line on a piece of tape adhered to the dashboard of the small cockpit, and after adjusting

the squelch she keyed the transmit button and spoke into the microphone dangling from the ceiling by its cable.

“Fi to Home base, can you read me?”

After a few moments of silence she keyed the mic again.

“Fi to Home base, Home base, can you read me? Rodger, am I coming through?”

When only static greeted her she let out a huff and cranked the dial over to a second marking before trying to call the research station.

“Fionna McLaren to Westwatch Research Station, can you read me? Arlo are you there?”

Still nothing but silence and the occasional burst of static came through the airwaves.

“Damn storm must be worse than I thought, I should be able to get both of them from here...” she mumbled to no one in particular.

She cranked the heater a little higher, being mindful of the battery reserve in the crawler, and reached under the bench seat to grab a blanket. It was already thoroughly frozen through and through, but every little extra bit of cloth helped retain some of her quickly escaping body heat.

The following several hours dragged on as progress was slowed or set back entirely due to the intense weather. The high winds had caused an avalanche along the usual route that Fionna had to bypass. She chuckled at the thought that none of the other divers would have made it

this far, let alone been able to plot a new route like she could with the paper charts that they mocked her for.

The storm finally began letting up as she left the mountainous crags behind and made her way back onto the crater peppered flatlands. Now more than ever her charts were of great import, some of the small and medium craters had been completely obscured by the snow buildup, and careening off into one of them could do anything from damage the crawler, to permanently end her journey.

Slowly she made her way towards Perepelkin, careful to make sure her measurements were exact. If she was off by a degree or two back here it could send her careening off the carved slope and down into the base of the almost eighty kilometer wide crater. The rocky outcropping peeking out of the thick snow grew closer and closer as the crawler trundled toward the rim of the crater. Once at the crest of the slope Fionna made the final adjustments and set the autopilot one last time before, with a groan, the crawler shifted into a low gear and began its descent down the slope.

Everything was going smoothly, until two kilometers down the slope the treads lost traction and the crawler began to slide down the incline at an angle. Fionna, as quickly as her nearly frostbitten senses would let her, yanked the steering controls out of the locked position, disabling the autopilot. This stopped the crawler from lurching farther down the path under power, but it did nothing to break her from the sliding spin she had entered.

Fighting against the controls for what felt like minutes, she finally wrangled the crawler to a stop.

Sitting in the now still vehicle, Fiona let out a shaky breath, her helmet visor fogging up from the sudden wave of warm air. She sat there a few moments, both waiting for the visor to clear, and letting the crawler settle before trying to ascertain what direction she was now facing. Visibility outside of the crawler's cockpit was still basically zero, with the floodlights on high she could maybe make out scant glimpses of the ground a few feet away. Once she'd managed to get a compass bearing she carefully rotated the crawler so it was on the correct heading before slowly and carefully continuing down the natural ramp, this time without incident.

Thankfully for Fiona the Westwatch Biotech Research Facility was built into a dome centered in the crater, so even with the crawler knocked off course it was only a matter of driving straight towards the center and strafing around the crystalline glass structure until she came upon the airlock. Once on the relatively level ground of the base of the crater the remaining trip to the Research facility only took around an hour and a half, and much to her surprise, she was only about three minutes to right of the airlock upon finally reaching the dome.

She attempted to call the inhabitants of the facility again several times to no avail before just getting out and braving the frigid temperatures to open the airlock herself. Even down here deep in the depth of the crater the wind

was adding a not inconsequential chill to the already staggering -95°C temperature outside. She pulled the blanket tight around herself like a cloak and got to work on opening the outer airlock. It was a process she was not unfamiliar with, they had the exact same system back at headquarters, and sometimes when Alec the maintenance guy would let the systems go for too long without servicing them she'd have to get out manually unstick things.

This cold was quickly robbing Fionna of her faculties though, every second she was in the wind she could feel more and more of her body grow sluggish and slow to respond. She'd only managed to get one of the four dog arms opened before she had to retreat back into the cab of the crawler and crank the heater to high. After a few minutes of defrosting she snapped it back to low to try and conserve as much power as possible, since she's obviously be here for a while, and once she felt she'd thawed out enough to give it another go, she rolled out of the cab and made a run for the next handwheel.

What would normally be a two minute process ended up taking over an hour and brought the crawler down to a dangerously low thirteen percent battery, but finally Fionna had cleared the dog arm and slid open the airlock door. Running back to the crawler she slowly eased it into the docking space and hooked it up to the charging station in the floor before making her way back to the large door and pulling back closed to allow the space to fill with oxygen. As soon as the last of the locks was set the automatic fill routine began and once there was enough air

in the large room to carry sound she could hear the hiss of the tanks emptying their continents through the vents.

After several minutes the red hazard lights changed over to green, indicating that Fionna could remove her helmet and that the internal atmosphere had reached ideal conditions. As she released the clasps on her suit and twisted off her helmet she took a deep breath of the station's air, happy to finally be out of the stifling recycled air of the suit, only to be assaulted by an overwhelming rusty, metallic scent that caused her to gag. She quickly covered her nose and mouth with a grease covered rag from the floor of the crawler, it was a smell she was quite familiar with, but it was concerning how potent and permeating it was.

Worried that something bad had happened, Fionna started making her way deeper into the facility. She'd been taken to the infirmary once a few years ago to have popped stitches replaced, so she simply tried to remember the path they'd taken back then. Much to her chagrin the heavy smell of blood was omnipresent, every time she pulled down her oil stained mask to test the air it was seemingly, confusingly, the same concentration as it had been in the airlock. It got no fainter or stronger as she wandered through the bare halls of the Westwatch facility, it was as if the air itself was soaked in blood. The thought gave her pause, and almost made her sick to her stomach, but what if someone *had* fallen into one of the fans in the vast mazes of life support systems? Surely they would have been found rather quickly given this overwhelming stench.

Fionna fought the growing urge to break into a sprint back to the crawler and leave. The horribly metallic smell was starting to seep through the saccharin smell of the spent motor oil soaked rag, and her nerves were on a razor edge, but she continued on towards the infirmary. If anyone was still around they would either be there or in the security office, and since no one was answering her calls over the radio, that was stop number two.

Once she'd finally made it to the medical office she was somewhat relieved to find that there was nothing of note there. Thankfully the infirmary had the overwhelming smell of antiseptic, and the bloody scent that permeated every outside hallway had not made its way into this area yet. Fionna took the chance to grab some surgical masks and alcohol bottles hoping that would counteract the smell better than a rag as she made her way through the other parts of the facility.

As she made her way back through the chilly hallways the new alcohol drenched masks did the job of hiding the acrid scent. Fionna was still