

On a planet that doesn't spin, human life is forced to live at the mild equator, stuck between the harsh deserts and freezing glaciers in a permanent twilight. To expand their population, huge pipe systems are built to pump the extreme air across to the other side, creating small pockets of livable climate. But, when one of these pipes becomes blocked, the entire town begins to slowly freeze to death, trapped in a shrinking pocket of winter. They must seek out what's causing the block and destroy it before time runs out.

The Broken Pipe

by Jake Swartwout

Chapter 0

Discovering the Problem

Torn page from The Everon Investigator

Date: Fourbruary 16th, 2001

The End of Days

Scientists have just confirmed, Medotia has just spun its last turn. Sometime within the past month, our lovely world has slowed to the point of insignificance, permanently fixing the already burning side towards the sun. It is unlikely anything has enough power to safely accelerate it into rotating again. For reference, 10 generations ago, our ancestors would have experienced real days, where the sun would rise and set with mornings and nights. What a spectacular sight to behold.

Oneuary 5th, 2032

The scene taking place appeared to be calm and organized, but I know it isn't. Behind those screens, emails are flying rapidly, calculations are being exchanged almost like currency, and sweat is forming on every forehead in the room.

This was the pipe headquarters. An unexpected snowstorm had induced chaos into their heating plan, rapidly increasing the demand for warm air. They had the heat, but the pipes couldn't handle the rapid temperature increase, nor could the power grid adjust this quickly.

Thousands of cold demanding consumers and a grid that couldn't safely give them what they wanted: chaos.

Their system is easy to understand. Half the planet is hot, half the planet is cold, so technology comes in to split the difference. Giant pipes were built reaching far into either side of the equator, deep into the sweltering heat of the sun facing deserts, and

far into the dark and frozen terrain of the shadowed glaciers. Powerful fans pumped the air through the pipes in both directions, creating small liveable zones in otherwise unlivable conditions.

Eventually, the pipe system expanded to even the equator, as it was a cheap and infinite source of temperature control. It would be an incredible success for humanity, except that their current system was unable to handle the strain of that many users.

"Sir," one of the employees caught my attention. "The city of Peanwa is demanding extremely high levels of heating. Should we comply?"

I rubbed my temples. Little Peanwa was less of a city and more of an experiment. It's one of the farthest cities from the equator, meant to be a symbol of power and superiority to the rest of the world. There really wasn't much there other than houses and workers who wanted cheap real estate.

"Have you run the calculations? Can the system handle it?"

"Well, sir, we'd have to reroute some power from a nearby city, and even then we'd be almost reaching capacity. But, if their complaints are accurate, it seems well worth it."

"Hmm. Make it happen then. We certainly don't want to freeze our symbol of superiority, now do we?"

"No, sir. I'll get right to it."

He skittered off, patting people on the way and telling them the new instructions.

I settled back into my chair and picked up the phone.

"Randy"

"Yes, boss?"

"Send a team out to investigate the Peanwa pipe. They're demanding an unusually high level of power"

"Well, they are in the middle of a snowstorm, boss"

"When I said unusual, I meant unusual. Now get a team together before I drive out there myself"

"Right away, sir"

I sat back in the chair again, rubbing my eyes. There was still more to do.

After a long period, the phone rang with Randy on the other end.

"It's Randy, reporting back about the Peanwa pipe."

"Ah, yes, what's it's status"

"Well, we actually don't know. The path was blocked by ice and packed snow, so much that our team couldn't get through."

"How is that possible? The pipe should never leave the habitable zone."

"Well, that's the thing. There doesn't seem to be a habitable zone any more. Something about the snowstorm has caused a gap of snow between Peanwa and the rest of the equator."

"And how exactly did we let that happen?"

"There must be something blocking the pipe. And when the storm hit, the blocked pipe was unable to replace all the escaping warmth."

"Soo, what's that mean for Peanwa?"

"Well, it's not pretty."

"What then?"

"Well, they're blocked off from the rest of the world, trapped in the town. And, with the pipe blocked, there's no way to heat the city. They're trapped in there, slowly freezing to death."

"And is there anything we can do?"

"I'm afraid not. The part of the pipe with the block is completely surrounded by ice, inaccessible to even our best team."

"Can't we just go over? Abandon the whole scheme and actually think about the people for one second?"

"Well, the storm is still extremely strong over the town. There's no way we could get in safely, flying or otherwise."

"Good god. And how long do we have? How long until we lose them?"

"Well, they should have enough food reserves to last for about two months, if they ration it from the start, but there's no telling how the people will react. Remember, these aren't peak members of society. And even if they do, the cold will likely set in far before that. It'll remain for a little bit, but they'll have to start disassembling the town for fuel."

"So about a month then. That's barely anything."

I stood up and shouted at the crowd around me:

"Listen up everyone! We've got a town of people freezing to death as we speak! I need your best ideas, and your friends ideas, and their mother's ideas, and anything to get these people out alive. You'll all receive the full details shortly."

The crowd stared back in shock.

"Get to work!"

Peter had noticed the cold earlier than the others. He had seen the clouds and felt the cold air blow. He had closed all the windows, turned up the air heating, and kept the kids inside. When the snow finally did hit, he built a nice warm fire in the fireplace and curled into his favorite armchair with a blanket to read. Looking back, he should have saved the firewood for when they needed it most, but that's besides the point.

There's no way he could have predicted *that* cold. At least his house was warm when he could still appreciate it.

Sitting next to the fire, it was hard to notice that the rest of the house was slowly cooling. The snow was chilling the walls, and the vents were barely spitting out any heat to push it back.

The fire was so calming; the blanket was a nice weight on his side. Soon, his head began to droop, and, next the book, and, the book fell into his lap. His eyes slowly shut, and his breathing became heavy and...

...

...

It was a nice nap.

...

...

"AAAAHH!" Sally screamed from the kitchen.

Peter jolted awake and tried to remember where he was. It was burning hot, so he pulled off the blanket. The vents must have finally kicked in.

"Sally, what are you screaming about. No, you can't go outside, it's too cold."

But she didn't stop screaming. She was just a little girl, there wasn't much else you could expect. She had never experienced the house being on fire before.

It took Peter a moment to figure out why she was screaming. He was so focused on her, that he didn't take the time to look at the mantle covered in flames.

It became very clear when the candles sitting over the fireplace fell onto the carpet.

The noise made him jump with surprise, and spin around. His eyes widened. He had also never experienced the house being on fire before. This wasn't really a common occurrence. Most people just used the pipes for heating and cooling, but he liked the traditional fire. The sound and smells of it added to the atmosphere. This fire though, this fire added a little too much to the atmosphere. He was starting to choke on the smoke and fumes from the fire.

Finally, the fire alarms kicked in, whining their siren all around the house.

"Come on, kids! We need to get out of the house! Come on, everyone, let's go!"

The four pairs of feet sprinted towards the door.

"Yay! Outside!" Emma, the youngest, cheered

"Yeah, we're going outside, isn't that fun."

Peter unlocked the door and ushered them outside.

"Now you run over to Mr. Dana's house, tell him there's a fire and you need to stay there for a while"

"Aww, but I wanna play"

"We can play later, but right now you have to go to Mr. Dana's, okay?"

"Okay." The response was dejected, but the kids agreed.

They shuffled down the road, well, the road was completely covered by snow, but they stayed roughly in the center. They got to the house and were let in.

By then, Peter had already called the firehouse.

"I'm sorry, there's just no way we can get there, and even if we could, all of our water would freeze. Just throw some snow on it, that should put it out."

"But can't you come and help?"

"Sir, the car's can't travel the roads. So if you want your house to survive, I'd start shoveling snow."

The operator hung up on him, the ultimate sign of "I'm not doing anything". Peter threw down the phone and ran inside.

He ran into the garage and grabbed the snow shovel, then ran back towards the fireplace. In that time, the fire had spread and the room was painfully hot.

He pushed through the heat and got to the window furthest away from the fire. He had never tried to open the windows before, as the outside was always uncomfortably cold. He looked for some sort of latch or opening, but there didn't seem to be one. The builders hadn't wanted him opening the windows either.

"I really don't want to do this."

But, he had to. He grabbed the shovel with both hands, turned the handle towards the window, and shoved it through the three panes of glass, shattering all 3 and letting a whoosh of hot air escape the room. The pressure lowered rapidly and noticeably, then bounced back, pulling in a gust of cold air and swirling snow. The fires lowered slightly, first expanding with the output, then being crushed by the cold air coming back in.

"Ok, let's do this."

He used the handle to break out more of the window, working until he could fit the shovel's head through. From there, he moved scoop after scoop of cold snow inside and threw it onto the fire. It sizzled angrily, but went out pretty quickly.

Moving back and forth was tiring, his hands rapidly cooling and heading when they moved from snow to fire. A few times, he got too close and singed the hairs on his arms and felt like he had cooked his skin. But, plunging the hand into the icy snow quickly numbed the whole thing to a point where he could keep working.

He shoveled snow for ages, but the fire was shrinking back. It had begun to move onto the wall, but a few shovels thrown against it put it out.

By the end, Peter was tired and sweaty, burned on his knuckles and bruised on his palms. The walls were singed an ashy black and the fireplace was barely recognizable. There were shards of glass littering the floor, intermixed with snow and droplets of water.

He collapsed into the armchair that so recently housed his calm slumber. If only he could escape back to that time, watch the fire better and keep the kids safe. He let the shovel fall to the floor and rubbed his hands together, trying to revive the feeling in them before inspecting the injured skin.

The open window blew in a frigid breeze, with the fire no longer warming the room. The snow left on the ground absorbed any leftover heat, so even though he was warm from exertion, the air around left him shivering.

He heaved out of the chair, walking over to the open window. There was a bookshelf nearby, so he grabbed one of the larger books and jammed it between the shattered panes, blocking half of the hole. He got a second one and added it as well, almost fully covering the hole. The wind still got through, but it prevented the worst of it for now.

He grabbed the shovel again and used it on the snow, pushing it against the wall and then picking it up. It was carried over to the kitchen and left in the drain. The carpet was already ruined, but it didn't feel right to leave it like that.

Next, he had to get the kids. Moving slowly from exhaustion, he grabbed his snow gear from the closet and covered himself with its protection. He grabbed a bag and stuffed in the kids' things as well, because they hadn't had time to put anything on.

This time, he shut down the house, making sure everything was off. He left the heating on though, hoping that it would warm the house back up while they were gone.

The keys locked the door and his boots tramped an alternating path towards Dana's house. It was a short walk, so he got there pretty quick. The doorbell called for the owner, but the kids were the ones who came running for the door.

"Dad!"

They unlocked the door and let him in. He hugged them all for a long time, glad that they were safe through all of that.

"I ran super fast, Dad!" Emma boasted

"I bet you did" I started to take off my gear while they talked

"But I got to knock on the door!" Sam countered

"That's very impressive."

"Oh yeah, well I answered the phone!" Sally tried

"The phone? Sally, that's his phone, you shouldn't answer it."

"Yeah, but the lady was really nice. She wouldn't stop talking though. I wanted to tell her about my new pony but she wouldn't listen!"

Then Dana walked out to greet him.

"Hey Peter."

"Hey Dana. Thanks for taking the kid, I really appreciate it. I guess I just built the fire too big and it got out."

"That's too bad."

"Too bad? It's horrible! My living room is covered with ash, the window is broken, and it's all in the middle of a snowstorm."

Dana was leaning against the wall, but stood up and wrung his hands together.

"Is... is there something wrong? What did the kids do?"

"It's not the kids, they're always so well behaved."

"Then what? You can't be having worse luck than I am right now. Was it that phone call Sally was talking about?"

"Yeah. That's it."

"So? What was it?"

"They've noticed something wrong with the pipes. Haven't you felt it getting colder recently?"

"Well, yeah, the storm was coming. That happens all of the time."

"No, but colder indoors. There's apparently a blockage in the pipe, and the heat can't get through to us anymore."

"What? No. There's more than one pipe, right? I've seen the one they're building"

"The only pipes are within the city. This is the main pipe. Something about the snowstorm they said, it either caused some new problem or exaggerated what was already there."

"But what does that mean for us? They wouldn't put us here if we could die that easily."

"I thought that too. I've been calling around and apparently there's just the one pipe. And that one pipe is blocked."

Peter suddenly felt shaky, and stretched a hand out towards the wall. Sally was still clinging to his pant leg, so he shooed her off.

"Go grab a chair for your Dad, why don't you?"

"I'll get it!" Sam yelled, and ran off.

Sally gave chase to beat him to the task. They both grabbed the same chair and pulled it back together.

"Thank you" he replied, sitting down.

Dana sighed loudly to get his attention again.

"I think it'd be best if you guys stayed here, at least for a little bit. Without the pipe, the town will start losing heat. Keeping multiple bodies together will keep us warm"

Peter sighed back at him.

"I just... I don't know. This is all so quick. My house was just burning down, and now the entire city is freezing to death. Or, no, not death, they'll rescue us. They have to."

"They're a huge company, they'll find some way to save us. They've found ways to live out here, they've got to be able to save life out here."

"They've got to, they've got to, yes, they should, but Dana, can they?"

The two looked at each other in silence.

"I guess that's the question then. Can they save us in time?"

"I sure hope so."

Peter pushed himself up from the chair.

"Come on, I'll help you set up the guest bedroom for us. We'll send the kids to go get some of our stuff. If we want to survive, we're going to have to play this smart."

Chapter 1

The Crawler

*Billboard Hanging Near the Equator in North Co
Visible from Fivember 5th to the 20th, 2008
Pipe Conditioning Now Available to YOU!*

This miracle of technology brings the warmth of the deserts, the chill of the arctic, all directly to your home! With a simple neighborhood installation, soon you and all of your neighbors will be living in comfort with ambient air directly from across the globe. CALL TODAY for a FREE estimate!

Oneuary 7th

The studded iron shuddered under her weight, the thin metal sinking down into the insulation around it. These pipes weren't meant for people, but that's who they sent in anyway.

She paused, sinking back onto her legs and waving her hands around in the air. She was wearing protective gloves, but the intense heat of the metal very quickly penetrated the material. Her hands were calloused from many other crawlings, but this pipe was worse than normal. The heat blew in from behind and lingered here, warming the metal to an excruciating temperature.

She shook her hands around in the hot air some more, barely cooling them, but at least allowing the throbbing to subside. The heat started to reach her shins now, which meant it was time to start moving again.

It was tough work, being a crawler, but she knew no other life. Her father had been a crawler, and she wasn't good at much else. Well, she wasn't even really good at crawling, but she had a small body. Small body means fits into smaller pipes, means more useful. The pipe builders, North Co, did that a lot. Pick from their starving population whom they need, chew them up, and spit them back broken, bruised, and expected to be grateful.

This whole situation was a perfect example. A publicity stunt gone wrong, leaving the poorest citizens to suffer and die if they weren't able to rescue them in time. Those poor people.

From behind her came a faint echo of her name.

"Yeah?"

Another echo. Progress report.

"Nothing yet"

The echo told her to proceed.

The crawling continued, a short spool of thread unraveling as she crawled. This pipe didn't have any splits in it, but it was still a nice precaution to have. It made her feel more at ease, like a blanket that kids cling to for comfort. When she had her string, she was safe.

Another echo.

"What?"

The echo told her that they hadn't said anything.

The other echo again.

She turned her head to the side. It was coming from in front of her, towards the blockage.

Ah, probably just some animal causing the block. It must have wandered in from the desert side.

While the pipe was too hot for humans, there were some animals that liked the heat. When the temperature difference grew, they evolved to live in the extremes. The lack of predators made the new terrain a great place for prey animals. And eventually, they adapted to the heat. Now, scientists doubt that they live all the way at the poles, but it's known that they live pretty far in. It's tough, but they can survive.

Rose always loved the miracle of life.

That being said, she pulled a gun out of her pant pocket and made sure it was ready to fire.

"There's a noise coming from further down, I've got my gun and I'm going to proceed with caution."

An echo of confirmation.

She took a deep breath before starting again, hoping that it was something more pleasant. Like rocks. She would love to see some rocks right about now.

She crawled a little further, then checked her spool of thread. It was marked with bands and colors to symbolize the distances she had traveled. She had just passed the green stripe after the three black stripes, which meant that she was getting close. She had just passed into the frozen section of the pipe, and so would soon be nearing the block.

Well, assuming the block is somewhere in the middle of the ice block. They had tried having the people of Peanwa investigate the pipe, but there really wasn't much they could do. They couldn't see any obviously block from their end, so it was assumed to be towards the middle. But, they could also have no idea what is happening, and be completely off. She didn't trust their judgement. If they hadn't even been in a pipe, they couldn't possibly know what it was like. She knew the sound of an empty pipe. She knew the sound of a blockage. It took years of experience to learn the little tricks to save so much time. And that's why she was here. That's why they chose her.

A good time to use the trick. She rapped on the side of the pipe, and listened to the sound travel down. She counted the seconds that passed before she heard a loud echo rap back. Still a long way to go, maybe another 5 minutes of slow crawling.

She set off again, placing hand, shin, hand, shin, the twine unraveling at her side. The red marking now. Further than they had expected, but just as far as she had thought. They had used an sonic pings and fancy microphones that used statistics to calculate the most likely location of the blockage. She used one rap and intuition to figure out where it is. And look who turned out to be right.

She took another rest, crouching back onto her haunches to let her hands cool off. At the end of the tunnel, they were running the fans in reverse, trying to pull the heat out of the tunnel so it could be better worked on. But, the snowstorm was still raging, the electricity was still low, and the pipe was insulated to not release heat. She would be working in this heat for quite a long while.

Still crawling, still moving, still inching towards the blockage. It was certainly close now, the rap had told her that much. The gun in her right hand scratched the pipe as she dragged along with her, and it was slowly heating to the level of the metal.

It was getting hard to breathe, the thick protective suit restricting her motions and the air painful to breathe in. All of the air in the pipe came directly from deep in the desert, so it was painfully dry. Each breath in sucked the moisture out of Rose's mouth, out of her esophagus, and slightly out the deep recesses of her lungs. There was water hanging at her side, but it was difficult to get out in the tight space. She was so close though, and didn't want to stop. She could drink when she arrived at the block.

The echo behind her asked for a progress report. Rose groaned, but begrudgingly stopped to respond. She sat back again, then shuffled her body to be sideways in the pipe. Then, she turned her head towards the exit and responded:

"Going well, almost at the block" she called out dryly

She leaned into the pipe and relaxed slightly. She was tired. And it probably would be better to have more energy when she got there. Rose set down the gun to pull out her water.

The echo asked again for a progress report.

Rose groaned loudly. They didn't hear her dry whisper. She took a long drink of the water to fix her throat, then and she called back again, louder than before.

"It's going well, I'm almost at the block"

It wants a distance, so she read her rope and reported back.

Then the echo said something she didn't quite understand.

"What's that?"

The echo was loud this time, more clear, and... coming from the wrong direction. It was coming from towards the blockage. It was the blockage.

She whipped her head around and squinted through the shadows. It was too far down the tunnel to see, but there was a rustling of fur and the pounding of feet, getting louder as the blockage moved towards her.

Rose sprang into motion, sweeping the floor with her hand to find the gun in the dimly lit pipe. She finally found it, but couldn't get her finger through the whole to fire with the protective gloves on.

She cursed under her breath, taking the gloves off and glancing quickly up into the dark pipe ahead. She tried to grab the gun now, but the metal body had absorbed the pipe's heat and burned her hand.

She winced in pain, letting out a small groan of pain.

The rustling was nearly upon her as the sound was much louder. Rose gripped the gun as tightly as she could. A shape appeared from out of the shadows. She raised the gun towards the shape. The blockage was upon her. The gun fell to the bottom of the pipe, unfired.

Far down the pipe, my group of associates listened for a status report that would never come. No matter how many times we called down into the pipe, Rose never gave a response. The only echoes in the pipe were ours and the fans.

"What do we do now, boss?"

"We'll give her..." but I was cut off.

Rose's string twanged loudly as it was suddenly stretched taut. It hung there for a second or two, then pulled back, like it was snapped on the other end.

Randy cautiously went up to the opening and tugged the cord gently. It gave way without any resistance, letting him pull on it without much effort. It got caught and snagged on occasion, but eventually they had the majority of the cord piled up underneath the opening and the frayed end in my hands.

It wasn't a clean cut, so it definitely wasn't Rose tricking them. It seemed to be snapped from sheer force. But what could've caused that level of force? It was thin cord, sure, but it was still made to withstand years of crawling.

"Maybe she fell into a fissure? Seismic activity could have opened up a split in the ice and cracked the pipe along with it."

"She knows better than to attempt anything risky before telling us."

"Does she though? She was just a crawler, and not one who liked to take orders, from what I had heard"

I scowled at his distrust in our teams and their loyalty. That would be disloyalty to not just the team, but to the entire country. Not just disloyalty, but an active attack against the people of Peanwa.

"We train these crawlers to follow protocol." I shot back. "And we don't do this as some sort of sad joke, but to protect them. If something is obviously wrong, they'll call for backup let us know what's happening."

"Okay, okay. I'm just trying to figure out what happened, just as much as you. But sure, whatever happened, it wasn't her fault. That doesn't change the facts of the situation though. We still don't even know how far in it is. She hadn't encountered the block when... well, we'll just say when we stopped receiving information."

I shook my head in disappointment. How could we have let this happen. Every sign had promised that she would be safe. She had a gun, she had training, she had the experience. Yet, apparently all of this wasn't enough. Something must have gone wrong and there was no way to know. Now there was a missing crawler and his team was to blame.

Randy began to pace, darting his eyes back and forth in thought.

"Gah, I got nothin'. There isn't much that could've done that, and none of it could have gotten the best of her. We brought in our best for a reason."

"Your best?"

"Well, the best of those willing to come."

"And how many was that?"

"Sadly, not that many. Apparently, there's been some pretty bad rumors about what's blocking the pipe."

"And what's the worst of them?"

"Well, some of them are claiming that an old crawler is behind all of this. One went missing just a few weeks ago, and they think he's holed himself up in the pipe. They say he's blocking off the pipe because he's upset about how Peanwa treated him."

"Is that possible? Could he somehow survive in there?"

"Well, if he managed to find a way to block off one end of the pipe, he could conceivably live on the Peanwa side, letting in just enough warm air to keep it the right temperature. I don't know how he'd get food, but... it's just a possibility, and more than that, a rumor."

"We shouldn't believe rumors, but it's another option that we can be prepared for. Seeing what happened here, we need to be as prepared as possible."

I got out my phone and began searching for the next person we would have to call.

"What are we going to do now? Nobody is going to want to go in after this, but we need to know what the situation is"

"I've got some friends. It's going to be costly, but it's what we should have done from the start"

The kids grabbed as much stuff as they could, shoving toys and stuffed animals into their jackets and pockets.

Peter grabbed a box instead, gently taking the toys from them and placing them in the box.

"Now Sally, you can only bring two toys. You're going to have to put a few back"

"But I don't wanna"

"Well, if we don't pack the toys, we can pack snacks, wouldn't you like that?"

"Yeah! Yeah! Chips and ice-cream!"

"Okay, so go put these back then."

She ran off with the toys. Peter grabbed the box's edges and carried it over to the closet. He piled in jackets and hats and blankets, everything he thought might keep them warm. It was going to get really cold really soon, and he didn't want to walk between the houses when that time came.

He filled backpacks with food, shopping bags with clothes, and boxes with firewood. With the heating off, he could tell that they would be needing to keep a fire going most of the time.

He was in the middle of packing some cans of food into a cardboard box when the lights above began to dim and flicker on and off.

He waited for it to stop, but the flickering persisted, the dim lights going on and off over and over.

"Is everyone else getting the issue with the lights too?"

"Yeah, it's upstairs for me" Dana called back

Peter set down the can he was holding and went over to the window. The next house over's lights were flickering as well. He looked out the front door, and the one across the street was going off as well.

"Looks like the whole neighborhood's gone screwy"

"I guess we'll keep working then?"

"No wait, some people are walking outside, maybe I'll ask them"

Peter unlocked and pulled open the door, stepping into the small buffer area. He closed the one door and opened the next, just enough to stick his head out and call to the people.

"Hey! Do you know what's wrong with the lights?"

"The lights?"

"Yeah, our lights are turning on and off"

The group stopped and looked at the houses around them.

"Oh, he's right" one noticed

"I blame the broken pipe" the others responded

Peter stepped outside and closed the door behind him, knowing he would be talking for a while.

"It's not broken, it's just blocked"

"But I can only fix a broken pipe, I don't want to clean out its muck"

"But we don't have the tools to repair a pipe, so it just has to be dirty"

Peter interrupted their bickering:

"But what about the lights?"

"Oh, it's probably all of the heaters we've got plugged in. We're trying to dig the road clear to get out"

"But shouldn't we wait until the storm stops?" Peter asked

"I wanna get out of here. It won't be long before the temperature drops even more. I don't wanna be here for that"

"And the snow'll freeze into ice" another chimed in

Peter nodded his head. It was good that they were working to rescue themselves. He had to admit, when death was this close, he had begun to lose his faith in North Co. They had shuttled all of them out here, broken a pipe, and the only rescue attempt they've seen was phone call that he missed. Real helpful they were right now.

He thanked the group, then headed back inside while they continued on towards the equator.

"I've got some news, not sure if it's good or bad"

Everyone came to hear what he had to say, the kids fighting among themselves for a good seat.

"They're working to shovel us out of here. Apparently there's a group of them working on it right now. The lights are flickering because they're using a lot of heaters. Melting the snow or something"

"Well, once we bring all of this over we can go help them out."

"I've done enough shoveling for today, but you guys can go. I'm sure the kids' energy could be very useful if put to work."

The two adults agreed, and got back to work packing. The kids had already gotten bored and run off, pulling toys out from the bottom of things and spilling stuff all over the already full tables.

They worked for another while, and eventually got the majority of the important things packed up. There was almost two tables covered in containers of all types, and a few large items.

"Come on kids, let's carry this stuff over"

They saddled down the kids with some of the lighter bags, picked up the heavier boxes, and headed out the door. It was a long cold trek, but they made it to the house.

They unloaded the boxes there, a took a little break. The bags the kids had brought were covered in snow, so on the way back, the kids were left to themselves at Dana's house.

They made many trips, lasting well into the night. Every once in a while the two would stop and rest, running out of breath quickly in the harsh cold air. Surprisingly, they were able to notice a difference in the air with the pipes shut off. The houses were able

to trap it and hold the composition at a somewhat steady rate, but the outside air had very quickly turned harsh and cold without the gradual leaking of new desert air.

After another trip back to Peter's house, they stopped to catch their breath again.

"Just a few more trips"

But it was many more. They worked well into the designated sleep time, but the sun was stuck just barely poking out of the horizon, just like always. It was an eternal sunset, but instead of bringing beauty to its people, it instead left them in cold wasteland. But, the light was enough to work with, especially after adjusting from several weeks of living there.

On their last trip back, the kids were asleep around the house. They had tried to stay up and had succeeded for quite a while, but eventually their bodies got the best of them and they had crashed in the middle of whatever they were arguing about at that moment.

Peter chuckled a little. He had never had them fall asleep themselves; it was always a battle to get them into bed. Looks like he had won the easiest one yet.

"Maybe we should join them in some rest. We've been working for quite a while."

"Yeah, it's been a long day for me. I could definitely use some rest."

Together, they grabbed the kids, Peter draping Sally and Emma over his shoulders. They headed down to the guest room where they had pulled in piles of blankets, pillows, and cushions around a bed.

He set Sally and Emma, the two youngest, into the bed, Sam was put onto a line of cushions, and Peter laid himself down onto a few blankets on the floor.

"Sleep tight everyone" Dana said as he turned the lights off. He pulled his head out of the room and shut the door.

Even under all of the blankets, Peter was freezing. He wasn't technically frozen, as that distinction would soon become important, but he was certainly uncomfortably cold. The cold had permeated his clothes and carried itself into the sheets with him. He moved around, shuffling his body in attempt to generate heat. It worked a little bit, and he could tell that he would be okay as the night went on. At least the kids would be warm. He couldn't stand the thought of them shivering at night, possibly getting sick from the cold.

In the morning, they all turned out to be alright. The large number of people in the room actually heated it quite a bit, so when they opened the door to leave, a rush of cold air swept in.

Peter automatically pulled back slightly into his jacket, trying to retain the warmth. It seemed like the temperature of the house was dropping. All of the trips opening and closing the door had likely leaked a large amount of their warmth, but this felt colder than last night.

When they went upstairs, Dana was already up and building a fire in the fireplace. There was a breakfast of vegetable omelettes and glasses of milk waiting at the table.

"Wow, this is pretty luxurious for the apocalypse"

"Yeah, well, we aren't going to be getting any new food for quite a while, so I thought I'd start with the things that will rot first."

"Ah, so we're getting rid of the luxury as quick as possible. Good plan, I was hoping to be stuck with canned beans for a month."

"You're stuck with canned beans either way, it's just whether you've got them for two weeks or a month."

Peter conceded, shoving omelete into his mouth rather than acknowledging defeat.

The kids didn't want to eat theirs, but it turned out to be a good thing.

"I still am rationing it." Dana said, sitting down and sliding the plate from in front of the kids over to himself. "I know kids are picky eaters, so we'll be careful of how much we make them."

"We've gotta feed them something, though. They can't just starve"

"They're not going to starve, but we're just going to take advantage of their hatred of eating. Lower the quantities, but still make sure they have enough to stay warm and active"

"I don't know, that just feels... wrong. But I guess we really don't know how long we're going to be in here."

They ate the rest of the omelettes in silence.

Chapter 2

The Robotic Surveyor

An Email

From: Amber Knoll, a representative to the North Co Pipe Management Sector

To: Steven Schmitt, the organizer of The Pipebot Project

7:00 AM, Oneuary 8th, 2032

URGENT: BIG favor needed

Hi Mr. Schmitt,

My name is Amber Knoll, and I'm the chosen representative to North Co's Pipe Management Sector. As I'm sure you've heard, the pipe to Peanwa is having some difficulties resulting in the dangerous cooling of the town beyond our control. We believe that there is some blockage causing the issue, but would like to investigate to be certain. We believe that your product would be perfect for this purpose, and are wondering if we could obtain one. I know it may be difficult, but I hope you recognize that this is an extremely important task.

*Thank you,
Amber*

Oneuary 13th

It took many days of arguing, plan approvals, restarting, and finally budget approvals, but I got what I wanted. A robotic pipe surveyor, still just in testing, but supposedly capable of traveling the pipes far better than any human could.

It was remotely operated, working through a long, and expensive, might I add, cable which trailed out of the back of it like a tail. The rest of the body was a sleek carbon fiber frame, shaped like a giant bullet, but patterned with a textured gray and orange patterns to make it seem more friendly. It might have worked, except for the 12 robotic legs sprouting out of every side of it, going both up into the air and onto the ground. 3 pairs of legs on the bottom, 3 pairs of legs on the top, their savior monster in the middle.

I had used a lot of connections to get this device out of the workshop early, and that wasn't even with a promise that it would work. I did set a few other rescue groups moving in the meantime, but we still needed to know what was in there before anything could be done to fix it.

We had tried asking another crawler to go in, but nobody volunteered. We tried paying crawlers to go in there, but they refused. We even tried threatening them, but nobody was willing to meet the same fate as Rose had.

This plan was going to work though, I could just feel it. The robot was in no danger of being killed, and if there was some creature in there, it would likely leave our bot alone. It was equipped with a distance sensor, so we would be able to match Rose's progress to our own, knowing exactly where she fell. And best of all, the bot streamed back live footage, so we would be able to see exactly what was happening, analyze the situation with a professional team, and then act upon it.

The bot was finally arriving today, and a large sum of money was being transferred in return. It was pulled out of a giant wooden box, packed full with packing peanuts and spare parts. The engineers there needed to repair and reassemble some pieces that had broken in transit. Otherwise, it was in good condition and would be working within the hour.

Even after all of the mechanics were fixed, the software itself took some time to boot up. It activated the cameras, controls, and analyzed the surroundings. Soon, the spider legs were wiggling and waving around in the air. The bottom legs pushed the robot up, then took experimental extensions and rotations to ensure everything was working properly. After those, it stood still and waited for instructions.

"Is it ready?" I asked the mechanic next to me

"It should be. It's processed a 3d layout of the room, tested all of the limbs, and now is ready to move."

"So how does it work then?"

"You'll see when we get there, but the gist is that this computer uses a wired connection to transfer our commands into the robot's actions. The wire will unroll as it goes along, coming out of the robot as to not get tangled in anything. From there, it interprets our command and decides if the action is feasible and how to carry it out. From there, it acts just as we tell it to. And to facilitate it all, the whole thing will be constantly videotaped and recorded so that we can later analyze the entire experience. Rose was surprised by something, and even if the same happens to this, we want to know what it is."

"I want to see it in action then. Let's get this bot into the pipe"

It took quite a long while of fiddling, straps, cranes, lifting, and a whole team of people being directed by a whole team of managers, but eventually they got the bot into the pipe. The pipe dipped visibly, the sheer weight of bot and miles of wires being quite intense. The team gathered around the computer to look at the screen, four screens broadcasting the different camera angles of the bot, and one holding the command program.

"What's the, uh, command, boss?" The mechanic sitting at the computer asked

He turned and looked at me, as did the rest of the team. It was intense pressure, so I just countered.

"I don't know the first thing about pipe safety. Shouldn't somebody have actually called in a crawler?"

The crowd turned to look at each other and murmured various accusations. Nobody actually did anything, so I took control once more.

"Move it forward then. It can't be that difficult. It's just a pipe, after all."

The operator turned back to the computer and typed some commands.

Move forward 1 step.

The computer processed, then completed. On the screens, the legs could be seen in the corners, moving in perfect synchronized steps.

Suddenly, the camera views swung violently, and the pipe shuddered heavily. A few of the workers screamed and spun around, searching for what caused the noise.

"The leg pierced the pipe!" Someone cried, pointing.

Barely through the bottom of the pipe was the robot's spider leg, covered in piping insulation and brutally scratched.

"What happened? What went wrong?" I cried at everyone around me "We need an answer! I need an answer!"

Like usual, they turned to each other and blamed every other party. Everyone had apparently done something wrong and each person was to blame.

I shook my head. This team was incapable of doing anything other than building apparently. I targeted the main controller again, hoping the direct contact would get a direct answer.

"You, what happened?"

"Uhh, well, um, the robot's leg, um, pierced through the, um, pipe"

"Well I can see that!" I roared, "why did it happen?"

"Um, well, it's probably pretty heavy."

"There's no probably about it! Did you already forget how long it took to get it into the pipe? So what caused it to break now?"

Finally, somebody behind me chimed in, hoping to stop my wrath against the controller.

"It likely tried to lift up too many legs at one time. Concentrating the entire weight onto a few legs was likely enough for it to puncture the thin piping."

"Finally! An answer. Get this woman a raise, she deserves it."

Around me, heads nodded in approval, probably just agreeing to get me to calm down.

"Okay, we need to get this robot back working again. Let's get this to happen"

Over the next hour, we did the same thing we did before, getting the crane, lifting the robot, and then something new. A team was brought in to repair the break in the pipe. They covered it with new sheet metal and sealant, and once that cured, they

slowly lowered the robot's leg back into place. The cranes were drawn back, ropes untied, and they were ready to go on their way again.

I had been observing the whole problem, but now that it was successful, I walked back over to the computer.

"Have you figured out how to fix the problem?"

"Well, I can't, uh, change the walking pattern without completely, uh, recreating the robot's code. But, I found a way to, uh, control the steps individually, so we can ensure one foot is always, um, always on the ground per side."

"Fantastic! Finally, some progress."

I turned around towards the main room.

"Alright team! We're ready to boot it up! Everyone prepare themselves!"

Up in the pipe, a worker called out "Powering up!" and then turned on the power.

We waited in agony, as this time it went through the boot up sequence inside of the pipe. The legs twitched up and down, back and forth, the cameras on the screen turning on and off as they refreshed themselves.

Finally, the motion stopped and the screen displayed the flashing cursor, waiting for a command.

"Well, do your special trick" I urged

The operator slowly typed, needing to get it correct or risk breaking through the pipe again.

Move forward .1 step

The robot picked up one of its legs

Move forward .1 step

The robot slid the leg forward

Move backward .1 step

The instructor turned here and explained himself.

"It wants to walk by picking up both legs, so I have to force it not to by attempting to move it backward. To do so, it begins with placing the leg back on the ground"

"But where do you go from here? Wouldn't anything just pick it back up?"

He chuckled lightly. "Heh, that's, uh, that's why you're paying me. Watch this:"

Lift back legs

Extend forward

And with that, the robot slid its body forward along the legs, pulling the now lifted legs along with it. The operator lowered the back legs and began the process again, slowly getting the robot to step by making tiny steps and turns and sliding and manually controlling the bot in the slowest way possible.

"Great work, but we need to improve this. Someone get to work on hacking the program to do this for us. There's far too much room for error in this situation."

A few people scuttered off to their own computers and began furiously clicking, trying to find the information needed to even begin to build this.

I watched the monitors closely. The robot's lights lit up the pipe extremely well, but were drawing an extreme amount of power. That was the second side of approving this project, getting funding for the needed cabling and power that would go into the machine. Being only a prototype, it was not yet optimized for power use and took an immense amount of power. The storm had since blown over so that the power was available, but it was still expensive. And even though we were saving an entire town, our budget was incredibly small.

As I watched, the robot went through the motions of slowly moving itself forward. Every now and then I stared back at the pipe and watched the depression move in the direction of Peanwa. It was on its way.

From this position, the bot had quite a distance to travel. Rose had been able to enter the pipe through a small opening closer to the city, but there wasn't space to do that for the bot. And at this pace, he knew it was going to take quite a long time. The people of Peanwa would just have to hold out a little longer.

Once they finished breakfast and sat in silence for a short while, Dana proposed an idea.

"I was thinking we should go help them dig. We're stuck in here anyway, so we might as well put our time to good use."

Peter agreed. On a regular day, he would drop the kids off at school, and then head back to the equator and work for the day. But, school was canceled and the path was blocked, so he was free. The principal of the school had overrode the other authorities and declared that it was too dangerous for kids to go to school in the dropping temperatures. It was more likely that the teachers had refused to continue teaching when there was little hope they would survive, and they had been unable to open the school. The kids didn't mind though, and they were more than excited to go play in the snow with the rest of the town.

The whole group suited up, wearing thick and heavy jackets, multiple layers of clothes, gloves so thick they could barely move their hands, and fitting goggles that tinted the world and blocked the glaring snow. The kids, being shorter, looked like marshmallows, but at least they would be warm.

Peter spent some time going through the garage, grabbing shovels, pickaxes, and buckets so that everyone had something to dig with. He juggled them between hands, handing one out to every member. He handed Sally and Emma the buckets, as they wouldn't be able to do much digging. He trusted Sam with a small shovel, hoping

that he would be able to do some work. Given the option, Dana took the pickaxe, leaving the shovel for Peter.

And finally, it was time to head out. They crowded into the small buffer room, shut the door to the house, and nudged open the door to outside.

Instantly, the cold wind blew in and swirled small flakes of snow around them. It felt like only an instant before the harsh cold set in. Peter knew that it was just the sudden shock, but it still knocked him back. He could tell that the kids were extremely uncomfortable. They were expecting a regular fun snow adventure, not a frozen world. They didn't yet understand the reality of what was happening. Peter had attempted to explain it to them, but they just didn't understand. They thought it was just a game, and that the power would come back on soon. They only knew that they got out of school and got to have a sleepover at Mr. Dana's house.

Peter pushed the door further open and stepped outside. The snow was piled in the street, and their footprints from last night were still frozen in place.

"Come on kids" he called, leading the way through the path they had trampled the night before.

Dana followed in the rear, making sure all of the kids were still there. They trudged along glumly, dragging their buckets behind them. Luckily, walking helped to heat them up a little, and soon a small amount of their energy returned.

Down the road, around a corner, and up a little bit. The further they went, the worse the trails got. Snow was piled up deeper and deeper, eventually towering up over them, almost reaching a story up. It seemed like the residual heat from the pipe was able to keep much of the snow out from the center of the town, but the outsides were too close to the snow and were losing their heat much quicker. If this is what the equator side looked like, he didn't want to imagine far from both the center and the equator. They must be completely frozen into their houses.

They had been following a trail of footprints, using the pre-packed snow to make the traveling easier. The closer they got to the exit, the more footprints combined until they reached a well packed path. From there, traveling was much easier. There was an extreme concentration of heating here, from a combination of the people, them working, and the heaters melting the ice. It was still below freezing, but it was a nice difference from the subzero temperatures they were experiencing back at the house.

Peter had thought there would be some sort of giant wall at the edge of town, so he was greatly disappointed to not see anything. The snow ahead just continued to travel gradually up, but seemed to be pretty clear. The footprints had trampled down a small working area, and the untouched snow around it seemed almost like short walls keeping them in.

There were power cables that came slithering from out of the snowy depths and had numerous other tools plugged into them. There must have been a massive amount

of power being used for the heaters, and it made sense that the lights had begun to flicker last night. Probably the only thing keeping them from getting more cords was that they were already overloading the power supply.

Slightly off to one side of the trampled part, a small hole had been dug into the ground at an angle, running downwards and towards the equator. That must be the spot.

A man came walking out of it carrying a shovel of snow and ice, so Peter sped over and called out to him.

"Hi! Hello. I'm here to help dig us out. I've brought shovels, buckets, and a pickaxe, along with a bunch of less than willing helpers"

The man turned around and inspected the crew. He wasn't the leader, and there was no reason they would turn back help, but his expression still made Peter feel like he had somehow made a mistake coming here.

"Alright, well, it's good to have more help" he responded in a gruff voice. "You can go help Judy, she's carrying the ice away."

"Is there any spot I could dig at? I brought a pickaxe?"

"Unless you want to start your own tunnel, we don't need any more diggers. Go help Judy or get out of here."

"Thank you" Dana responded quickly, and ushered the kids over. This man was obviously a little angrier about the situation than the rest.

"Are you Judy?" They asked the woman who was working at the area the other man had pointed to.

"Yes, that's me. I was dreading having to move those ice chunks, so I sure am glad that you're here."

"Happy to help" Peter responded. "I'm just glad somebody appreciates our help. We're certainly not going to get out of here with that attitude"

"Oh, he's had it rough though. That's Gus, and he was caught out near the edge right as the storm hit. He was out with his wife, but she twisted her ankle on the way back, and, well, she unfortunately didn't make it back. And he wasn't able to carry her body back, so it's still stuck frozen into the road somewhere out near the edge of town."

"Oh god, that's awful." Dana responded instantly. "I wish we had known."

"Actually, Judy," Peter interrupted "I was wondering what is happening at the edges of town. There's no way people could live in this."

"Well, the furthest out mostly moved in with those they knew closer in. There are a few people still trying to survive in their houses, but they've got to be snowed in by now, and that snow frozen into ice. I'm betting that they won't last another two weeks, as gruesome as that sounds."

She looked around for the kids, realizing what she said a little too late.

Luckily, they were away eagerly dragging a particularly medium sized chunk of ice away towards a pile. They were struggling quite a bit, but did manage to get it there.

"Anyways," Judy continued "I think we're going to have to all move into the center of town eventually. There's no way we could survive in the edges as the heat dissipates."

"And we'll benefit from the concentrated body heat" Peter added. "I slept in a room of three kids, it gets surprisingly warm."

"It's just a question of when we do it." Judy sighed. "People are talking about it, but there's so much disagreement. Of course, the people with the inner houses think we're going to be rescued soon, but those on the outsides want to prepare for the worst case scenario. There's just no way to know."

"Well, North Co has to know when they get it fixed, won't they?"

"Not really. When they finally let a phone call through to an actual person with answers, they didn't even have any answers. Apparently, they sent in a crawler and she disappeared mysteriously."

"Disappeared? But it's a pipe."

"We don't know, and apparently they don't either."

"So what then? They can't just be leaving us in here to die"

"They'll figure it out. There's rumor that they're sending a bot in, but it's just a rumor."

Peter looked down at the ground, shocked by this news. They didn't even have a plan yet. The pipe had been blocked for who knows how long, and yet they still didn't even know what was blocking it.

"Maybe we should get to work" Dana came in, breaking the two others from their contemplation.

"You're right. If they aren't going to do anything, then we're going to have to save ourselves. Let's get to work."

Together, they got to work, moving the chunks of ice from a huge pile next to the cave to an equally large pile further away. It felt like monotonous work, but it would facilitate the mining of the tunnel further on.

The kids got tired and took many breaks, as they were easily tired or distracted by the things around them. But the adults worked through the day, carrying off the ice. As they worked, Gus continuously brought out piles of new ice that was being mined from deep into the blockade. Peter had tried looking down the length, but it was so long that he was unable to even see the ending.

"So Judy" Dana began, "Why don't we just go over the snow? It doesn't look like it would be that bad, and would be much quicker than trying to dig a hole through it"

Apparently, Dana had been the only one thinking. Peter hadn't even considered that. Luckily, Judy had an answer for them.

"Well, we've tried that with poor results. It's so cold that this snow has remained a fine powder. There's no way to walk across that without falling in. And after you fall in, you can't really keep going. That's not even to mention that the weight of the top snow is crushing the bottom snow into chunks of ice."

Peter looked down at the piece of ice he was carrying with shock.

"You're telling me that snow did this to other snow?"

"Yes, unfortunately. It's a great inconvenience, but at least it makes it easier to move."

"Has... has anyone tried?"

Judy looked at him confused, and he could see a twinge of concern behind that.

"That's a terrible idea! You wouldn't be able to make it further than a few steps before getting tired of climbing and freeze from the intense amount of snow you're in contact with. Besides, our tunnel is going fine, we've gotta be getting close. Especially given how little time we've been working on it, we're surprisingly far."

"But, maybe as a last resort, we could trample the path further and get out that way?"

Whether it was a good idea or not, Judy didn't want to accept defeat or change their current plan. She just denied it and quickened the speed at which she shoveled the snow.

"No, we'll get the tunnel finished and then we won't have to worry about it."

Peter gave Dana a look, hoping for approval, but he just shrugged back.

They went back to work, shoveling the snow. Shoveling the ice. Shoveling the snow and ice together. Shoveling more snow. It went on like this for almost an hour.

The kids were lying down on a patch of fluffy snow, and the adults were halfway between the piles when Sally pointed into the air and shouted.

"Look! I see a rocket!"

Everyone looked where she was pointing, fear filling their hearts. Luckily, she was mistaken, and it wasn't actually a rocket. Instead, there was an airplane flying overhead.

But, there was no reason for an airplane to fly here. Since everything is along the equator, the quickest path anywhere was above the equator. A plane would never fly above them.

Suddenly, the bottom of the plane turned black for an instant and then a shimmering white. The shimmer expanded, glittering in the sun for an instant before falling into the shadow with the rest of them. It expanded into millions of little dots, which themselves grew into white boxes attached to parachutes.

"It's raining presents!" Emma shouted

Everyone around was too shocked to respond. She was right, it was raining down gifts.

They hit the ground one by one, a few at first, and then speeding up as more reached them. When a box hit, it thumped hard into the snow, sinking deep into the powder until just a corner or edge of the box was visible.

"I want one!" Emma yelled as she sprinted to grab one that had landed near them.

She dragged it out of the snow, and everyone gathered around her to watch her rip it open.

Inside was several cans of soup, stacked loosely into the box. The rest of the space was filled with a blanket, some granola bars, and a box of matches with paper.

"It's just cans?" Emma asked, confused

"Not just cans, food!" Dana shouted. "They're sending us supplies!"

The medium weight boxes were falling to the ground now, a few of them hitting near the mine. Dana hopped his way through the snow in a series of long steps, grabbed one of the boxes, and hopped his way back. He tore into it, and was happy with the results.

"This one's got coal, kindling, some granola bars, and a propane torch. They packaged everything in paper for more kindling!"

It seemed like each box could be individual, but were also meant to go together to create a complete survival set. The next box was Peter's, and he called out the contents.

"Mine has some thick snow gloves, a med kit, more granola bars, and more matches."

The team rushed around, grabbing boxes from around the site and bringing them into the middle. Even Gus took a break, but only when the woman mining stopped giving him more material and came out to join.

Judy was almost in tears.

"North Co did come to save us!"

The pile they had grown with just the four of them was quite impressive. It was piled high with food, like soup and granola bars; things to make fires to keep warm, like coal, wood, paper, twigs, matches, and Dana's blowtorch; lots of clothes, blankets, and other protective gear; some tech, like two cell phones, a set of walkie talkies, piles of batteries, and flashlights; and several med kits, each with some of the basics, but also varying slightly between them.

"This is fantastic, absolutely amazing" Dana remarked, "This shipment alone will extend our survival at least another week, and that's not even taking into account if we find more or they come back and drop more."

"Finally" said Peter, "The first good news I've heard all week. C'mon. Let's take a break and warm ourselves by a nice fire and eat something. After that, we'll get back to work and get us out of here in no time."

ooo

Oneuary 15th

The bot had finally made it to something of interest. It had taken two days, with the initial construction, leg puncture, pipe sealing, slow walking, and general fiddling to get it to work. But, someone had finally managed to hack into the bot and change its walking mechanics to be non-manual, and from there it was able to make actually good progress.

Currently operating the robot was my favorite problem solver from the previous day. Out of everyone, only she had been able to think quick and figure out their problems. So, he promoted her. If there was anyone he wanted leading the team, it was her.

To the side, there was a team of watchers sitting at the monitors, all of them analyzing everything there and making sure there wasn't anything to be missed. So far, it had just been a regular pipe, but finally, one of them called out.

"I think..."

It got my attention, and I turned my head towards them. Other parts of the team squinted at their monitor and tried to see what it was. The operator stopped giving the walk command, and soon the swinging on the monitors came to a rest.

Another watcher stood up and pointed at their monitor excitedly.

"I see it too! Move forward a few more steps!"

The operator hesitantly typed in the command and the robot shuffled forward and stopped.

"Yes, it's getting closer, do another."

The original watcher agreed, "Yes, I see it too"

I was very interested in what it was. There hadn't been anything of interest for the entire night, nor the two hours I had been sitting here working while they watched it. The bot had passed Rose's position a little while ago, as they had passed her gun left on the bottom of the pipe, but they didn't expect the block to be here. So then, what could they be seeing? I rolled my chair behind them to join.

The bot crawled forward another step, the monitor appearing to zoom in on the point they were pointing at.

"Is that light coming through?" I asked

They jumped, not realizing I had joined them oh-so-secretly.

They squinted, as though that would help on a monitor, and shrugged.

"Do a few more steps this time" The watcher asked

"No, only do one" I ordered. "We don't know what it is yet, let's be cautious about this."

The operator shrugged at the watcher, and typed in the short command.

The bot stepped once, the screens shifted forward, and the blur of light got a little brighter.

The operator looked at me expectantly, and just a little smug, so I just waved my hand at her and made another order.

"Forward again, just one step"

Again, the screens slid, the blur got to be a little less of a blur, and everyone craned their necks to try to get a better view.

"Any ideas?" I asked

They glanced between each other, always afraid of being wrong, but one did answer, "You're probably right, it looks like it's just sunlight coming through."

"Move it forward once more"

Screens shift, blob changed, but this time it actually gained a small amount of form. The blurred edges sharpened slightly and a pixelated hole replaced the light blur.

Some of the watchers stood up, but I was unphased, ordering another step forward.

This time, the pixelated hole morphed into a fairly regular hole, and the detail became clear.

"Okay, it seems to be just a hole, so two steps this time"

Finally, the hole was close enough to be in better detail. Everyone knocked heads as they all tried to look at the same monitor together. There was a muffle of sorrys, then actual analysis.

The hole was jagged, the multiple layers of piping and insulation covering the bottom of the rounded pipe. The layers were bent from both sides towards the sides of the pipe, almost like a cabinet opening inwards to reveal a sunlit outside. The way it was bent left the path along the pipe open, but a little snug.

"But if the metal is bent to the side, then what's blocking the pipe?" Someone asked, clearly confused. They should have been a little more than confused, such as scared, concerned, nervous, or upset, but there really wasn't any way for them to know what was ahead.

"Can the bot fit between those two?" I demanded to know

"I believe so. Just to be safe though, we can pull both legs closer in, hopefully reducing the overall height."

"Just be careful. We can't afford to lose the bot now. And Top-Cameras, see if you can see anything when we go under."

The bot settled itself down onto its haunches slightly, then proceeded to crawl forward slowly, the operator making extra sure that there was good clearance between them and the metal.

The Top-Camera crew watched extra intently, moving their heads to see more as though it was an actual window they were looking through.

The bot made it through fine, and it lifted itself back up to normal walking position.

"See anything?"

"Less than we were expecting, actually. These pipes generally get buried slowly as new snow falls on them and the snow below is crushed and moves away with glacial movement. But, it seems like this pipe has been exposed on the surface."

"Exposed on the surface?" I was shocked. I pushed myself back to my makeshift desk and picked up the phone there.

"Hello, yes, apparently there's a break in the pipe that's been exposed to the surface. I want you to send anything that can get there to investigate... yes... the coordinates?" I looked up at the group "the coordinates?"

The operator looked at the screen and called out the distance it was into the pipe. I repeated it back on the phone.

"Actual coordinates?" I asked back.

Everyone scattered, but luckily the operator had my back.

"The pipe runs directly perpendicular to the equator, we didn't make any turns, and we know the distance into the pipe. Give me a few moments and I'll calculate it."

I was impressed. I kept being pleasantly surprised by her. She had adapted to the pressure quickly, and always seemed to be able to solve my problems. It was nice to finally get someone who could handle this situation.

"No, you keep the robot moving. There's still a block somewhere down the pipe, but this could end up being incredibly useful later if we use it right."

She nodded in agreement, then scribbled down the distance for everyone else to use for calculations. Then, the bot was in motion again.

And right as I got the information across and a team on the way, the watchers cried out again.

"I see something dark ahead!"

"No duh, it's all dark ahead! Use your words!"

"It's, uh, well, I can't really see it yet."

I threw my hands in the air in exasperation.

"Just tell the operator to slow down, she's a whole lot smarter than you, I bet she could handle it."

I knew that I had gone a little too far, but I had been sitting here for far too long with these people, and it was starting to get to me.

Each step closer made the dark thing seem more important. The robot's lights illuminated some structure built in the middle of the pipe. Closer inspection showed it to be a sort of nest, constructed of various pieces of trash jammed together to plug the pipe. There was a small opening near the bottom, and through it appeared to be a smaller tunnel also made of trash.

"Can the bot fit through that?"

"It doesn't look like it. That hole's way too small, the bot would have to be a lot smaller to make it safely."

Someone tapped me on the shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

"Not now, we've finally found the block. Operator, get the location of this as well."

We were looking closely at the screen now, trying to figure out what to do next.

"Could we ram it? Would that be enough to break it?"

"I'm not sure if it has enough power to do that, but we could certainly try. The bot's shell is built to withstand a fall, so hopefully we can use it to ram some trash."

"Sir!" They tapped on my shoulder again, with the panic in their voice obvious.

I turned to yell at them, but a screen along the way caught my eye. In it, a shaggy creature was bounding along the pipe from behind the bot.

My mind turned blank, this was our chance to clear out the pipe, and now the blockage was about to destroy their expensive robot, which they were supposed to return.

Luckily, the operator was up to speed like always, and typed a command. Suddenly, the bot sprang forward and rammed into the barricade. The animal was approaching quickly, but there was no way out, so they might as well open the pipe up while they were there.

They rammed the wall again, this time the trash caved in and the robot's front briefly poked through the wall.

Then, the screens went black.

"What happened?" I roared, "What did it do to the bot!"

"It bit the cord!" One of the back-camera watchers replied, "just one bite and the power was completely lost!"

I slammed my fist into the table, everything bouncing up slightly, and those around me pulling away.

"We were so close! How could this could have happened? Did we even bring down the barrier?"

The watchers all murmured that they hadn't seen it.

"Fine, we'll check the tapes."

I got up and paced, working off my nervous energy. The group around me dispersed to their own personal computers, pulling up the camera histories. Many eyes

squeezed shut, mouses clicking and dragging to the right position, searching frame by frame to see what happened.

"I got something!" one shouted. I turned from my pacing to see what it was

A moment later, another added "I see it too!"

"See what?"

"The bot made it through the wall!"

I looked at the monitor, at the three frames flashing back and forth of the view through the wall.

Between the bits of rubble, we could see a dark room further down the pipe.

The light reached through now, and it lit up the space. At the end, there appeared to be a solid wall of trash, no tunnel through.

The final frame was half obscured by trash, which had fallen in front of the camera. The rest of it showed the same room. It was padded with old clothes, towels, blankets and such as a small nest, while the trash block was more of discarded plastic and metal.

There was almost one more frame, but it only covered a few of the top lines of pixels before cutting out, completely useless.

I cursed the beast. We had successfully broken the blockage, but it had made two layers, meaning that we would have to send something else in to actually finish up the job.

"Has anyone gotten a good picture of it?"

Someone called me over, and actually played a video. From out of the shadows appeared a shape, a ragged 6 legged beast, covered in thick grayish fur. On its rounded head was short snout, which was currently open and showing a set of horrific looking teeth. The video showed this blockage smoothly running along the pipe, rapidly reaching the bot.

"Well no wonder Rose got... well, no wonder, this beast looks horrific"

The video then showed it swooping its head downwards, grabbing a mouthful of their expensive wire, and cutting straight through it with a firm bite. Or at least they assumed the blockage bit the wire, since that was when the video cut out.

"Anyone able to identify that animal?"

Someone piped up with an answer:

"It's an Okawan moosk. Where I live, we have a bunch of them running wild across the ice. They're sorta like dogs, but moosks are quite a bit more dangerous."

"And why is it in the pipe?"

"It probably got cold. It probably followed the warmth of the break, liking the water from melted snow and the heat it provided."

I stood up, rubbing my eyes to relax them after staring so intently at screens for so long. So, we had a moosk infestation. We had an opening in the pipe. And we had a wall of trash that was slowly killing an entire city.

"Looks like we have an animal to kill."

Over the course of a few days, the team had made good progress on the tunnel. They had found the median of the road and had begun following it, hoping that it would lead them on a straight line perpendicular path towards the equator. Each time they passed another post they made a big huzzah, as it meant they were one step closer. It also kept their spirits up, as digging for this long was mentally tortuous and physically exhausting.

After the first day, Peter had decided that they should leave the kids behind. It was nice to have them there, but they were causing more nuisance than it helped having them there, even though one of the adults had to stay behind and watch them. Today, Peter was digging while Dana was back watching the kids.

At the site, various others had come and joined, many had left, some were constantly there. Gus stopped showing up after he strained his back one day. Whoever had been in the tunnel the first day had also not returned, as today there was a woman named Lizzy working to chip away at the ice.

Judy was still here though, so her and Peter together shoveled the ice blocks together. Judy would walk a full bucket along the long tunnel, then Peter would walk it away from the opening and towards the ever growing pile. It had grown quite large, and sometimes he would have to climb up it to throw a bucket onto the top, rather than having it expand outward too much. He would often trip and fall trying to cover the icy terrain, just a further testament to why they shouldn't try to hike overtop.

He was hiking down the now small mountain when Judy came running out of the tunnel. What was she doing?

"Peter!" She shouted through breathes, "The tunnel's collapsed!"

He was shocked, but should have known. They were digging through packed snow, it was only time before it crumbled. But why would Judy be screaming, it was just a tunnel, they could dig it out more.

That's when he remembered. Even though he hadn't seen her all day, Lizzy had been in the tunnel digging. She had been the one who was breaking down the snow, breaking down the walls that held the snow above her from falling.

"Lizzy!" He shouted, and broke into a sprint to follow Judy down the tunnel. He grabbed a shovel before plunging into the shadowed length, ducking down, the shovel bouncing along the ground behind him.

He was impressed by how long the tunnel had gotten, but they still got to the collapse somewhat quickly.

It was a gruesome scene, not because of what they saw, but because there was no sign of life at all. The tunnel just abruptly ended, a slanting pile of icy snow closing off what could have once been a tunnel to just a wall of snow.

"We've got to dig her out!" Judy cried, then desperately started shoveling snow away.

"How far in is she" I asked, joining her, "How far do we have to go?"

"We had gotten so far! I know it had to be further than this, but it must have caused the entire ceiling to fall. Oh, poor, poor Lizzy."

The two of them shoveled desperately, trying to redo the hours of progress in mere minutes. But, the hard stable part of the ceiling had fallen, so now each shovel thrown just let more snow fall into its place.

Peter stopped shoveling. He was at a loss. It would take more effort to get Lizzy out than they could provide in time. Judy slowed her work too, coming to the same realization as he had.

"There's got to be a better way" he said.

They exchanged glances, looked desolately at the snow in front of them, and back at each other.

"I got noth..."

"ICE!" Judy shouted, "We'll melt a layer of snow and refreeze it into an ice roof!"

I gave it a look to say 'let's try it' and followed her again outside of the tunnel.

The cords had just been left on the ground, the heaters having been found to not be useful. We looked around for something to melt the snow with, but everyone had taken back everything they might be able to use to heat themselves.

"There!" Peter pointed

Connected to one of the cords was a curling iron, the one heating element that couldn't possibly keep a room warm, and really couldn't do much else in the apocalypse.

"You grab it, I'll connect up the cords" he told Judy, gathering up the cords that were lying around the area.

He connected them into a rope and Judy carried them down into the tunnel. He watched her disappear into the dark as he connected up more and more cords.

Luckily, they had enough to make it all the way to the end of the tunnel, with there being about three cords of spare length. That would be used up as they moved further down the tunnel to where Judy was.

Once it was complete, he headed down into the tunnel to help out. It didn't seem like Judy had made any progress, but he could tell that the ceiling was shiny, and

reflected the light of the small floor lamp. There was a small gap at the top of the snow pile, where Judy was waving the curling iron back and forth.

"Okay, I think we can dig a little more"

They hesitantly pulled the snow out from underneath, and it seemed as though the ice would hold. It was an incredibly thin layer, so they would have to be careful to not break it, but for now, the ceiling was staying in place.

Peter used the shovel to pull the snow out from the tunnel, dumping it temporarily where Judy had been setting it. The pile built up quick, but that was a good sign of progress. And while he worked, Judy worked to gently melt the snow, then use the snow to refreeze it into a hard layer. As she moved, she improved the method, and soon, she was melting it, adding in other layers of snow, and melting those together as well. The ceiling was now a somewhat thick sheet of ice, just thick enough so that Peter and her moved forward at the same rate.

They worked for a time, calling out occasionally to see if they were getting any closer. To see if Lizzy was even still alive. But they didn't hear anything. Either they were too far or she was becoming too weak to respond.

The day was getting on, so they didn't know if Lizzy was going to make it. She had a thick jacket and would have been hot from working, but that snow was brutally cold, and they weren't even sure if she could breathe.

Judy then began to notice something strange. The iron was taking longer to heat the snow. She checked the connection and tried again in another location. There, it didn't do anything at all, the snow not even melting slightly.

"The heat's cut off?" Judy asked

"I'll go check the cords, I guess" Peter offered, and left, pulling up the cables along the way and making sure each connection was sound.

But even when he got out of the tunnel, the wires were still connected. Perhaps somebody unplugged the main cord?

He followed the cords back even further, trekking through the tall snow along the cable. Everything seemed to be in good condition, yet, as he got further into town, something felt wrong. It wasn't the cords that were in bad condition, but the town itself.

It was almost midday, and usually the lights brightened to feel like a day and wake the people up. But, now, the lights were all off, and it was as dark as their nighttime cycles.

Peter looked around, confused. What had caused the power to go out?

Then he realized it. The daytime cycle was supposed to be at bright lights right now. With the entire town freezing to death, they were likely all using electricity to heat their houses. Along with the lights trying to turn on, they were using an intense amount of power that the planners had likely never accounted for. The extreme usage must have caused the wire to blow somewhere, cutting the entire town off from power.

This was terrible news. They were relying on the power for so many things. People were using it to keep warm, have lights to be able to see, and communicate with the outside world. Now, all they had was whatever the batteries could handle.

He ran back to the tunnel, as quick as he could. They would need to revise their approach to digging. He quickly told Judy what he had seen around town, and she groaned loudly.

"How are we going to get to Lizzy now?"

But they went back to work. It was futile now though, the snow falling back in as fast as they could dig it out. They tried packing it together, but it was far too cold and the snow wouldn't bind together. It was hopeless.

They didn't even know how close they were to reaching Lizzy. It felt like they had gotten so far, yet they still weren't able to even find Lizzy. They were still following the rail, so there was no way they could have gotten off course.

Eventually, the two of them gave up. It had been almost two hours of digging, and now they had stopped making any progress. It was Peter who first stopped digging, standing up and sighing. Judy continued, but soon joined him in standing. They stared at the block together, not being sure of what to do.

Peter sighed, turning around and sitting on the pile of snow. They sat next to each other, and Judy put her arm around Peter. The two let small tears fall, each burning their faces as the drops froze in the cold air.

"We lost her." Peter whispered.

"We did. We just let her go."

They hugged, knowing that there really wasn't anything more they could do to help her.

Chapter 3

The Exterminator

Letter Included in the Rescue Boxes Dropped onto Peanwa

Attention People of Peanwa!

There is a blockage in the pipe that provides heat to your town, as you have been previously told through a phone call. We have a very competent team working to solve this problem as quickly as possible, but we are yet unsure of how long it will be before we clear the blockage and restore the heat. Until then, we hope that these care boxes help you feel more comfortable. Each box contains a variety of items to assist in improving your experience, but every box also has its own focus, so collecting and grouping multiple boxes is highly recommended. We hope these boxes are of assistance to you. More information will be provided as it becomes known.

Oneuary 23rd

The helicopter dangled a ladder down from it's side, the swinging steps scraping the snow on occasion as the pilot attempted to keep it steady.

The snow was far too unstable to land on, so they would have to climb down the ladder while the helicopter hovered safely above. It swung back and forth, and eventually got close enough to the opening for action.

It was time for the Exterminator. Her name was Paula, and she was a hardened fighter, protector, and crawler. She'd previously served for the North Co military for quite some time, but before that had been a crawler. It was the perfect combination of grit and skill. Well, also one of the only willing combination. After word got out that there was a wild moosk in the pipes, interest had skyrocketed, but interest in participating had dropped to a small group. They had dispelled the rumors of a rogue crawler, but somehow the reality of the situation was almost worse. Now there was a wild creature who had already killed one person and maimed a robot, meaning it knows how to kill. Perhaps fighting in the war had made her lose a few brain cells, because this was certainly not safe.

She made her way down the ladder, swinging wildly in the winds caused by the beating blades of the helicopter. At the bottom, she hung on, moving her body weight to swing the ladder to the pipe opening. It wasn't too difficult, as the hot air had melted almost a funnel down to the opening. She jumped off the ladder from a high perch, sliding down the smoothed ice and stopping abruptly as her feet clanged against the pipe's hard metal exterior.

Above, the pilot saw her signal and pulled away, swinging around and heading back for the equator. In only moments it was gone, and she was left to herself and the

pipe. That pilot wasn't coming back. She was either making it through to Peanwa or dying in the process.

"Report, I've landed successfully at the opening" she radioed in, "I'm going to enter now."

The device crackled back at her, "Good work so far, and best of luck to you in there. The people of Peanwa are counting on it."

"Roger" she responded, and then tossed the radio into the surrounding ice. It wouldn't work in the pipe, so there was no more use for it.

When she leaned over the pipe, she could feel the stream of warm air coming from it. It was still being cooled from the other end, but the pipe was huge and the air around her extremely cold. Her suit was meant to protect from heat, not cold, so the warmth was appreciated. Not necessary, but appreciated.

She pushed away from the ice to standing, then jumped into the pipe. It wasn't very impressive, as the pipe only came up to her waist.

She finished the final preparations before starting. Loading the gun, which had been wrapped with a leather handhold and trigger; starting the light that was attached to her forehead; and taking her final drinks of water and breathes of somewhat comfortable air.

Finally, she ducked down into it, squeezing into the shape she had crawled as so many times before. It was a tighter fit than it had been with Rose, but that didn't matter to her. As long as she could get through, she could kill the blockage.

Kill the blockage. That was the goal. Kill it before it killed her.

Back at headquarters, everyone was getting updated on her progress. She was the one that was saving the day, saving them from embarrassment. Yet, she was the one risking her own life.

From somewhere behind, a ping sounded. It likely echoed off of her and back towards the sender. At least they knew her position. Even if they couldn't see where she was, or if she was alive, they had a rough idea of how far she had made it.

The pings weren't a bad idea actually. After waiting to make sure their ping had faded, she tapped the side of the pipe to produce her own sound. It echoed back eventually, and gave her an approximate distance to go. It matched with where the nest should be, so either the blockage is on the surface or in it's nest. Either way, somebody would be surprised, and Paula hoped it wouldn't be her.

She began the long crawl, working her way towards the end at a steady pace. Every minute or so, she would pause to reassess, knowing that knowledge and preparation were how she could best protect herself. The beast moved fast, so she would have to be able to move quicker, never letting her guard down or risk being caught in a bad situation.

It was a slow crawl, each step painfully hot and each breathe drying. She had forgotten what it was like to crawl, and she certainly wasn't used to the extreme temperature. It threw everything off, including her sense of time, so eventually she set a stopwatch on her wrist to remind her to take breaks. Every beep of the watch would suddenly bring her back to reality, encouraging a restoration of both mind and body.

It took many rounds of beeping to get her to the nest. By the end, she was using the first to know when to rest, the next to force herself to move once more. The heat was really getting to her, her body having nowhere near the capacity for temperature regulation that a crawler should have had. It was taking an intense toll on everything, especially her spirit. It was brutal to be knocked down so far, especially when the situation seemed so minor.

But there it was, there was the nest.

It looked different than she had seen in the videos, as the moosk had probably repaired the damage caused by the robot. The robot itself had been dismantled, as Paula saw some pieces of it in the wall. Apparently sending in the robot had only helped the blockage, giving it more parts to build with.

But, the watch beeped once more, so she was to take another break. It probably was best to stop before investigating further. If the moosk was in there, then she would want to be as ready as possible.

She had just barely started to drink when the alarm went off again. It felt as though they were getting shorter and shorter, but it was much more likely that she was getting slower. The tunnel had been long and painful, and everything was beginning to go numb. She took another loop to rest up all the way. Now, she was ready enough to make a move.

She reached out to grab the edge of a piece of plastic that was lodged in the wall. She gave it a testing shake, but it barely moved. The moosk had lodged everything so tightly against the pipe that it probably wouldn't budge. Instead, she investigated the opening at the bottom.

It was a small opening, seeming too small for even the moosk to fit through, but it must have been just right. She tried to poke her head through, but her shoulders got caught and were obviously too large to fit.

Another break. During this one, she looked back to watch for the blockage. If she was going to go into its nest, it would be best if it wasn't around.

Back to the tunnel, it was still too small. Fortunately, since it was an opening, the surrounding wall wasn't as tightly packed. It took some pulling, but she was able to get parts out of it. The hole slowly expanded, with her taking constant breaks, checking for the blockage's return, testing if she would fit, and then piling more of the trashed wall behind her in the tunnel.

The wall was extremely thick, as she had to crawl in to her elbows to even have her head go through the other side.

Thankfully, it was currently unoccupied. She might be able to break through before the moosk even came back.

Eventually, the hole was expanded far enough in that she needed to take off her backpack to fit better. She just set it down next to the opening.

Back into the hole, prying away any piece that felt loose, almost like a grim game of jenga. It was harder to pull pieces out that were further down the pipe, so she had to widen the opening to allow for any progress to be made.

She laughed when taking her next break. She had thought the pipe was small before, but now she was trying to squeeze through a tiny opening in a wall in the pipe, and felt like it was taking forever to disassemble the wall.

Eventually though, she got it to a point where the opening was large enough to fit through. It was tight, the jagged pieces getting caught on her clothes and squeezing her shoulders in a frightening manner. At one point, she got stuck and was unable to move any further. Moving backwards caused something to dig into her ribs, but her shoulders were pressed firmly against the pieces ahead. She grimaced in pain as she forced the object to dig deeper, then turned her shoulders and almost sprang forward into the new gap.

She pushed against the wall, squirming desperately to get through. It was unlikely she would be able to get back through without more work, but that was fine, she didn't want to go back anyways. The real issue was still further ahead.

Finally at her goal, she turned off the timer. She would need her wits constantly about her here, there were no breaks.

Inside the room was a horrific stench. It had smelled like this outside too, as it was a confined pipe, but the block had constricted the worst of it to just here. The problem was obvious: a pile of rotting meats and carcasses to one side. It appeared to be a mix of other wild animals, but Paula was pretty sure that she recognized a piece of the crawler uniform in the pile as well.

Poor Rose, she thought. She could have been the one to save them. Instead, all she had some rotten luck and their first of many attempts to save Peanwa. But, that's how rescue missions went. She certainly had plenty of experience with plans not working out. In the military, they did their best to prepare for every situation, but it was impossible to beat the enemy at every aspect.

Speaking of the enemy, there was an echoing thump from the other side of the wall. The blockage had returned. There wasn't any more exploring she could do, unless she wanted to risk the moosk's wrath.

Paula wondered how good its sense of smell was. It wouldn't matter to her, as she had a gun, but it would decide how quickly the moosk met its fate. Perhaps it walked slowly either way, she had never dealt with a wild moosk in a city's pipe before.

Pretty much nobody had quite known what to expect. It seemed that most people tried to stay away from animals that could kill them in a single bite. They had told her that it might take a few shots to kill it; there has been quite a bit of experience in that regard.

The pipe creaked behind her, the thin metal deforming underneath the weight of the blockage. It was moving closer,

She gauged the size of the whole she had passed through, wondering if it would be better to confront the beast when she first saw it, or when it was trying to squeeze through the whole. But, she had enlarged it, so the moosk could likely fit through easily, not slowing down at all.

Could she get through in time though? It was still quite a small hole, but it was the better option. She hadn't checked her body would fit through it the other direction, and that was already a tight fit.

But, if she did kill the blockage while it was in the hole, that would cut off all of her air. It was already horrible enough with her body taking up most of the pipe, but that would be a sheer wall. And listening to the pipe creak and groan, she assumed that the moosk's body would be far too heavy to drag out of the way. She had a tank of oxygen, but it was in her backpack, on the other side of the barrier. That was it then, she had to go back through.

Holding the gun out in front of her, Paula flattened out to fit into the small hole. The sharp edges scratched her back all the same as before, but nothing had caught, yet.

Her head was completely through now, and both arms were sticking out as well, trying to find things to grab on to as a handhold. The pipe was continuing to creak, the noises louder than before. It was getting closer.

She turned her head up and squinted into the dark. It was tough to be sure, but it she could have sworn that she saw motion.

"Oh no" she whispered to herself. It was moving quicker than she had thought it would.

Her motions were quickened, wiggling more desperately to get through. It was never good to be caught when the enemy arrived.

It backfired though, something in the back catching on her pants when her body was only out to her stomach.

She tried to see what it was, but it was too tight to see what it was caught on

Swiveling her head around, she looked down the pipe again. Yes, that certainly was the blockage. It seemed like it hadn't seen her yet, but it wasn't walking slowly

either. There was something hanging from its mouth, possibly more trash for the wall, or possibly another victim.

She pulled at her leg desperately, hoping that the fabric would tear. It was far too thick though, not even giving slightly. It must be caught on a pocket or loop, but she wasn't sure. It wasn't giving way though.

Checking on the beast again, it seemed to be investigating her now. It had noticed something was wrong, and was approaching curiously.

She thrashed her body violently around, trying everything to get it unstuck. It seemed like the issue was far too deep though, as even sliding back into the tunnel a little didn't release her.

Then the blockage started running. It saw her as an intruder in its home. And not just any intruder, but a delicious and weak intruder.

It moved quickly, the six legs working together to glide it through the pipe with ease. The fur shook slightly as it rocked side to side, creating a rhythm to her demise.

She gave up struggling, and instead turned to face the beast. She lifted the gun up, putting her finger through the trigger and preparing to fire. The gun was strange, as they had specially built it for the pipe. Not only with a larger grip to accommodate the gloves, but they had also supplied bullets that did well in the hot and low oxygen environment.

She shot at the blockage.

The bullet hit one of its legs, but the beast just lifted it off the ground and continued running, the other five making up for the loss. Blood continued to drip, but that didn't stop it.

She readied the gun again and fired once more, this time hitting the beast in its front.

It still didn't stop, but it definitely did slow, this shot hitting something important. She didn't know where its heart was, so she couldn't aim for that, but severe internal bleeding would have to do for now.

It was extremely close now, almost on her, while she readied the gun once more.

But the beast beat her to it, almost like a leap, it shot forward suddenly, covering the last distance in barely no time.

Paula was not prepared for the beast, the gun held near her chest as she had been readying it. It grabbed on to her extended elbow and pulled with extreme force, the teeth digging into the flesh, scraping the bone, and almost tearing her arm off.

Even now though, her pants didn't rip, instead pulling the wall behind her out into the pipe. It crumbled, but she didn't really notice, as the blockage had thrown her over itself into the other end of the tunnel.

It was so tempting to try and crawl away, but she was here to do a job, even if that job killed her. And, she wouldn't be able to escape anyway, so she might as well die feeling like a hero.

The gun had fallen out of her grip in the air, so she squirmed over to grab it while the blockage spun around. It was slightly out of reach, but her arm was in no condition to pull herself over, resulting in her making a strange thrashing motion to hop in the right direction.

The blockage pounced again, but this time Paula was quicker. The gun was in its mouth, the jaws slamming shut, but soon there was a hole going through the back of its mouth and through its head.

The beast collapsed onto her good arm, crushing it between pointed teeth. There was no muscles to crush it off, but the sheer weight of the head still hurt when they pushed the sharp teeth through the jacket sleeve.

Winching quite a bit, she hunched, tucked her mauled arm out of the way, then used her shoulder to push against the nose at the end of the snout and lift its mouth open. She pulled her arm off of the bottom teeth and then withdrew it from the slimy cavern, allowing the head to fall closed on itself.

It was done. She had killed the beast! After it had bit her the first time, she hadn't thought there'd be any chance of her winning, yet here she was. The beast dead and her crouching victoriously over it.

She called back down the tunnel, unsure if anyone could hear her, but wanting to try anyway.

"It's dead! The beast is dead!"

The sound needed to travel, and after that time came two pings in quick succession. They understood, they could start formulating a plan to... no, their original plan was for her to remove the blockage.

She tried to lift either of her arms, the pain immense and horrific. There was no way she could break down a barrier, especially not one that was as solid as this one. Well, she already had her fill of being a hero, it was someone else's turn.

She didn't want it to sound like she was giving up though, so yelled back a version of the truth that put her in a good light.

"This barrier is really strong! You should take it down with better tools!"

Three pings in response. What would three pings mean? Maybe they didn't understand.

"Need...Better...Tools!"

Two pings this time. Couldn't they just yell back? They were able to hear her, so why not? Was the business side of piping somehow too good for some old fashioned yelling? It didn't matter though, they knew what she wanted them to know.

The better question to ask was about her getting back. She couldn't crawl in the traditional style, as both of her arms were far too injured.

Luckily, she was already on the side of the blockage that was closer to the entrance, but unfortunately, her bag was still on it's other side.

She didn't think she could make it across the blockage's body twice, or even carry the bag through regular pipe for that matter. She would have to leave it.

So, already facing towards the beast, she used her legs to push against the bottom of the pipe, scooting along a small amount.

She groaned inwardly. This was going to be so much worse than the way here.

And it was. Without her arms, the shuffles move at a horrendously slow pace. Every time she got to a bump in the pipe, she had to wiggle around while pushing in order to get past. And her arms weren't doing very well either. Each motion made them ache more, adding on to the already miserable throbbing.

Eventually, there were three pings, wondering what was happening. Oh yeah, she had never bothered to tell them what had happened.

"Injured! Send help!"

Two pings. Good. They knew she was hurt.

Another two pings. A little confusing, but probably meant that they were planning to send someone in to help her.

But, they weren't here yet. So that meant even more time scooting along the tunnel by herself, arms aching and blood dripping. She wasn't even able to take breaks, as she had left her bag of supplies back with the moosk. No oxygen, no water, no breaks.

She sat and scooted for quite a long time, her legs becoming sore from the strange motion and her butt becoming numb from sliding over so many bumps. But she still wasn't there. Her throat was becoming dry and raspy, and she didn't know how much longer she could go for before collapse.

"hello? which direction are you paula?" came a quiet questioning from behind.

Paula stopped scooting and turned towards the noise.

"i'm here" she tried to shout back, but it came out so dry and sore that she could barely hear it herself.

They must not have heard her, as more questions followed.

"hello? paula? i'm a medic, i'm here to help you"

The sound changed in volume in a way that made one think the medic was turning their head from side to side, trying both directions of the pipe and unsure of where to go.

Paula thought about trying to shout once more, then just lifted her legs and banged her heel into the pipe forcefully.

"hello?" the sound came towards her

She banged her heel again, two thumps, copying the simple code of the pings.

"Is that you Paula?"

She hit the pipe twice in response; the voice was getting louder.

"Okay, I'm on my way"

And that was followed by a rapid shuffling sound, them crawling along the pipe dragging whatever supplies they needed.

Finally, Paula could relax. Somebody else could take over.

She fell backwards onto her back and passed out, her body incapable of taking any more.

Peter was huddled around the fire with the kids. It was far too cold to be out doing anything now, and even inside was starting to become unbearably cold. It seemed as though the fire's warmth was sucked away as soon as it came about, doing little to warm their cold bodies.

Judy came and joined them by the fire. This was her house, as she had invited them all to join her near the center of town. There had been no further word on the situation, and the tunnel had collapsed, so it seemed like everyone should huddle near the center for warmth. They had each carried as many supplies as they could, trying to pack mostly kindling and food, as more layers could hardly protect an already chilled core.

Judy stared into the fire for a short while, holding out her gloved hands to warm them slightly. She stuck her face out too, getting so close to the fire that it would normally be dangerous, but now, only warming it back to above 0.

Finally, she described what the phone call had said.

"It was a wild moosk blocking the pipe. They're sending in an exterminator, but they don't know if she'll survive. It's already killed one."

"We'll have to hope for the best then. Wish her luck."

"Yeah, luck." Judy replied.

They sat there in silence for a bit.

"I should go tell Dana" she said, getting up.

"And I should keep bringing things in." he replied

Dana was out carrying sleds full of supplies from his house to here. They had used their one bag of supplies quicker than expected and still had the stockpile of boxes at his house, so why not bring them over. Judy and him were bringing boxes over, while Peter brought them inside and watched the kids. They had all been taking a break when the phone suddenly rang, the ID being a rep from North Co.

Peter had been able to take many breaks, trying to do the boxes in batches to keep the cold air from getting in much more than it already was. At this point, it was hard to tell what was cold or colder, so they had to rely on intuition to know when they were losing heat.

His break was over though, and it was time to get back to work. There was another small pile of things at the door for him to bring inside. He patted Sam on the shoulder and stood up. He was already dressed in complete winter gear, so there wasn't anything more to put on. He opened the door to the buffer room and entered.

Once the house door was securely closed, he could open up to outside. Most small changes didn't affect him, but this full blast of icy air froze his face and caused his eyes to sting.

Shivering and stiff now, he did his best to move the pile of boxes into the buffer room. There was little friction because of the powdered snow between the cardboard and his gloves, so he had to squeeze them extra tightly.

Soon though, he had moved the pile inside, along with a few of the non-boxed items that Judy and Dana had added partway through. They were bringing in supplies from Dana's now, mostly furniture that they could burn later if need be and food supplies. It was a life or death situation, so there really wasn't reason to be possessive.

He checked to be sure that there wasn't another set coming, then closed the door. He turned around and opened the inner door, enjoying the merely cool air that warmed his face.

Something was weird though. He looked down, and Sally was standing right in front of him.

"What is it, hun?"

She cupped her hands around her mouth and spoke in a whispery voice "There are people in the house!"

People in the house? She wouldn't talk about Dana or Judy that way, or at least he didn't think so, so then who could it be?

He walked slowly in the direction she was pointing, stopping by the fire to grab a nice table leg from the pile of wood.

He heard noises coming from around the corner, like there was someone going through their food.

He whispered down to Sally "Thanks for telling me, would you go sit by the fire with your brother and sister now?"

She nodded and went over to the fire and sat down, all of the kids craning their bodies to watch what was going to happen.

He crept around the corner, hoping to assess the situation before acting.

There were two people standing in the kitchen, going through their food, grabbing what they wanted, and throwing it out the open window. The window must have been

left unlocked, or perhaps unlocked by one of the kids, because there was no sign of force or damage.

They didn't appear to be armed, so he had the upper hand.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Their heads snapped up, a mix of fear and hatred in their eyes.

One of the two dropped what they were holding and ran towards the window. The other looked down, saw that he was holding cans, and threw them at Peter.

Peter ducked out of the way, but one of the cans still hit him in the leg. It stung, but he would be fine. It just gave them enough time for the second one to follow the first in jumping out the window.

Peter ran up to the window, watching the group of four run away from the house, scattering in different directions. There was no way he could catch them.

He looked down, and there was still a pile of food outside the window. With the bruised shin it took a little longer than the thieves, but he managed to get out of the window as well. He picked up the stuff strewn across the ground and set them on the counter right inside the window.

Sally peeked around the corner, wanting to see what he was doing. The other kids followed when she didn't get yelled at.

They had gotten quite a few things out of the house, probably working since the moment he went outside. This was a planned attack, which was frightening. Not only were they completely unaware of being watched, but people were beginning to lose their morals.

It seemed like the cold was getting to the town too. Only that their way of coping was to resort to violence, banding together into gangs. He wondered if this was their first attack and they were just extra vulnerable, or if this band had been stealing from others around the neighborhood. It seemed as though they had a strategy, so perhaps they had done this before.

He struggled to climb back into the window, falling onto the boxes and cans of food he had just brought in and tossing a spray of powdered snow onto everything.

The kids ducked back around the corner, afraid of getting caught watching.

Peter dusted himself off and took stock of the surroundings. They had taken quite a bit, but didn't seem to get away with much. After stacking everything back where it went, there was a noticeable dip in supplies, but they could probably manage it.

It was a shame that they had to resort to violence like this. If they had only asked for assistance, they would have upset, but willing to join supplies and work together. There was no need to resort to savagery between civil parties.

But, he probably gives them too much credit. He knew that this town was full of people who had nothing to lose. People who needed to get away from the equator, needed the cheap housing,

Author's Note: Uhm, I skipped this part and forgot to come back and finish it. Sorry. Just imagine that he had a tough past and is still trying to work to get away.

He shrugged off the hard memories. The past was the least of his issues, given that they might not even have a future. He finished setting all of the stuff back, not quite focusing on what was happening though. When everything was back, he continued to just stand there, not quite sure of what to do.

In a little bit though, Judy and Dana came walking back inside. The kids jumped up and ran to greet them, spilling embellished stories about what had happened while they were gone. At least Peter didn't have to.

He snapped himself out of the daze and joined the kids, confirming that what they said was true.

"Why that's horrible" Judy exclaimed "I didn't think we were at that point yet"

Dana only shrugged as though he had expected it to happen.

"Well," Judy tried, "I guess we'll cover up the windows? There really isn't anywhere we could move the food to, so we'll just have to hide it."

"You think they'll come back?" Peter asked "They got in through an unlocked window, I'm not sure if they'll use force next time"

"Even if they won't, we'll cover the windows to protect against anyone else. It'll add another layer of insulation anyways."

And so, they spent the next hour cutting a thin wooden board into rectangles that they nailed into the windows. Each window was double checked to make sure it was locked before nailing the sheet in place. It would have been so much better to use the wood for a fire, but this was apparently what they needed to keep their supplies safe. Hopefully using it now would prevent the loss of so much more in the future.

When they finished, the house was so much darker than it had been before. There was already very little light in the shadowed ice side, but covering the windows just set them to a whole different level of darkness. They tried checking the lights again, but the power was still out, as they probably couldn't reach the power lines just as much as they couldn't reach the pipe. So, they were left sitting around the fire, which lit only the one room and left the rest shrouded in darkness.

They had other flashlights, but their supply of batteries was limited. So, one was set in the corner of the room to light up an area the fire missed. One more was left off near the fire, there for moving around the house.

Peter, now standing, stooped over and grabbed it. He flicked it on and shined it at the ceiling.

"I'm going to go make some food, I'm hungry."

They just nodded at him, too downbeat to formulate a full response.

Peter trodded into the other room, the flashlight casting shadows through the stacks.

He stood next to the stack of soup cans, looking for one that he was in the mood for. He eventually decided on a can of tomato soup. It was poured into a pot and that was carried over to the fireplace.

He set the pot down next to the fire, there not being any other method to cook it. He grabbed some more wood for the fire, placing it over top of the flames. Every now and then he'd hold the pot over the top of the fire, stirring it slowly and feeling the sides to check if it was done or not.

The kids were watching him, so he grabbed some bowls from nearby and poured them each a small amount of soup. He just ate from the pot, as they didn't have running water to wash anything.

Together, they ate their soup in silence, staring at the fire.

"They took my chicken soup" He said finally

"I'm sorry to hear that" Dana responded

"I think I'll split the food into two tomorrow, just to be safe"

Everyone nodded, but nobody said anything.

"Just to be safe."

ooo

Oneuary 24th

Paula woke to freezing air once more. It disoriented her, the last thing she remembered was being suffocated by the heat in the pipe.

"Ah, you're finally awake" said the medic, turning around to check on her. He leaned over her, performing various checks to ensure her brain wasn't injured.

"Can I keep my arms, Doc?"

He just looked away, not answering her question. This shook her a little, suddenly holding her arms out to make sure they were still there.

They were. He just couldn't take a joke apparently.

"Hey Doc, you gave me a real scare there. There was some pretty messed up stuff in there, it'd be nice if you treated me a little better than this."

The medic glared out of the side of his eyes, but didn't turn to face her.

"Whaat? What did I do?"

Suddenly, he was in her face, finger wagging, eyes glaring.

"You didn't do your job! You let Peanwa down. You let us down."

He started to turn away again, but it came back again.

"And you know what? Some of us actually care about others! Some of us actually have friends who are *dying* because you failed at your job." He was shaking his head

now. "And to think I had to drag out the body of someone like you. Treat you like some hero."

She was more than a little surprised. She almost died fighting that awful beast, and had even won! Where was his gratitude for that? Where had he been when they wanted volunteers to go into the pipe. She was ready to fire back.

"Now just a minute. I'm the exterminator, and last time I checked, that beast has been exterminated! And as you should be more than aware, both of my arms were injured beyond use, causing me to pass out and nearly die in that pipe!"

He mumbled something away from her.

"Excuse me?"

"I said: maybe that would have been better! Then I wouldn't be stuck out here wasting my time on some nobody."

Was this medic hoping she would have died? Was that truly the better alternative in this case?

And what did he mean by stuck? Where even were they?

She scoffed at him to act like he hadn't just bested her, and looked around.

"Where even are we, anyways?"

"They threw me out here with you, at the pipe opening in the middle of nowhere."

And indeed, they were at the winter opening once more. The ice surrounding, the torn pipe, her radio. She was lying on the icy slope, her body wrapping around the opening. The medic was standing in the pipe, turned towards his box of supplies on the other side of the opening.

All of that scooting and she hadn't even passed the first opening.

"Anyways, I have valuable information about the inner wall. If I had died, there'd be no way for them to know what to expect."

"We'd manage."

At this point, Paula was almost hoping he would crawl in there and die. That'd show him what it was really like.

"Throw me my radio, I need to report back."

He did actually throw it at her, the thing smacking her in the chest while her good hand waved wildy to catch it.

She shook her head, then held it up to her mouth.

"This is Paula reporting back"

They responded pretty quickly given the fact that she had been unconscious for however long.

"Good to hear you pulled through, what's the report?"

She sneered at the medic, mouthing the words 'good to hear' and turned her attention back to the radio.

"The blockage is dead. Shot three times, once through its right leg, one through its front side, and once through the inside of its mouth and through its skull."

"Fantastic news. And the wall?"

"It's made of trash packed so tightly together that I was barely able to disassemble it. I formed a person sized hole in the front wall using a hole already in it. But by the time the beast was dead, my arms were injured and incapable of removing any more."

"Roger that. We'll make sure our team is equipped. And where is the beast now?"

"Uhhh" she shook her head, thinking. "Well I guess it would have to still be next to the wall. I was stuck there when it caught me."

"Alright, we'll prepare for that as well then. Thank you for your service, we'll be waiting for you at the opening."

"Wait! Aren't you coming to get me?"

"There's no way to land a helicopter on the snow. You'll have to crawl back through the pipe."

"But..." But they were right. And she couldn't grab onto anything they hung down, as her arms were still in poor condition. "Roger that. See you guys at the other end." And she let the radio fall to the ice. It sat there staring back at her, almost laughing at her situation.

She groaned and pushed herself up into a sitting position. It was going to be a long trip back, that was certain. Especially with this horrible medic.

"Am I good to crawl then, Doc? At least tell me you did your job right."

"It's not my job to surpass the rules of biology. You still need time to heal. But, your right arm only has some cuts which I bandaged up. It should be good to use, well, for anyone with normal strength, so you might not apply."

It seemed like her head was constantly shaking around this guy. That one was totally unwarranted.

Since her arm was supposedly healed, she gave it a few testing twists, stretching it out in front, to the side, up, and sweeping circles. The muscles hurt to stretch, but otherwise, the suit had done a good job protecting her.

"I'm going to get moving then, follow me when you work up the courage." Paula said, finally getting in the last word.

She hopped off the pipe into a standing position, then crouched into the pipe and began crawling away before the medic could think of a retort. He didn't need to think of anything witty though.

"Wrong way! That's the direction I found you in."

Darn. She didn't think about that, but fainting had completely disoriented her.

She turned around in the pipe and crawled past the medics legs, trying to ignore his sneering smile.

"Some hero" he muttered, but she just ignored him. There was a long crawl ahead of her.

Chapter 4

The Demolition Team

Oneuary 26th

For the third time, the helicopter dropped off a crew at the opening. They jumped off the ladder one by one, sliding down the ice towards the opening and quickly moving out of the way of the others.

They were equipped with battery packs, drills, saws, and all other sorts of tools. Anything that might be helpful in disassembling a strange wall of trash. One of the workers even had a small collection of bottles, filled with various chemicals that might be used to dissolve things in the wall.

There was three of them, each with a specific purpose and mission.

One would open a new opening further down the pipe, allowing for easier access to the blockage. They needed an easier way in, the distance they had to crawl was quite extreme.

One would work to close the current opening, stopping the air from escaping there. Only one opening was needed, the other would just release far too much heat out.

The third would begin disassembling the wall, taking tools from the other two as needed. They would switch off when the others finished their jobs, climbing out of the new opening if it was too tight to pass.

From the moment that the first one landed, they went to work. They began the long crawl towards the wall, unblocking the pipe being their first priority.

The next followed after, as they would need to melt quite a large amount of ice and snow above the pipe before the opening could be used.

And the third tucked himself into the pipe on their back and began to pull at the metal flaps there, attempting to close the opening. Even as a trained professional, sealing oneself permanently into a confined space was still horrifying. Once the opening was closed and covered with a special sealant, they too were on their way crawling down the pipe.

After squeezing around the dead Blockage, the first reached the wall. There was a small area between body and wall, so that was where they began creating the new opening. They made precise jagged cuts to make fitting it back together and sealing it later easier. There was also a hole in the bottom of the pipe that they had punched through, hoping that it would act to drain the water from melting the thick layers of ice above. A small amount of water was already pooling in the pipe. A small puddle was forming near the wall and forcing the rest to running away from it and back down the pipe. The team at the end was prepared for that though.

As they continued working, the water pooled even deeper, the cuts above now dripping onto them as well.

"I'm ready to open the top, move back towards the equator" the second one called. It was highly likely that snow would collapse through the new opening, rapidly cooling the other side and blocking them off from the heated side of the pipe.

The deconstructor, who had been watching from a distance away, now scooted further, getting to a safe distance before shouting back an a-okay. The opener wedged themselves next to the Moosk, then pulled at the pipe's top.

The metal creaked and popped as it was bent, and piles of snow dropped in as the opening grew wider and wider.

As expected, the temperature dropped quite severely. The powdered snow mixed itself into the air and absorbed much of the residual warmth. It didn't even melt either, having been in such a deep freeze, only that which hit the metal floor actually melted, and even then it made only a mediocre layer of slush. The Moosk blocked much of the heat from getting through, but air was getting hot enough to not matter.

Back at headquarters, they had turned the hot air back on to this pipe. They knew that very soon they would be supplying heat to try to heat up Peanwa, so it would be best if the pipe was already hot. This meant that it was uncomfortably hot in there, but it helped to melt the snow rather quick.

After some waiting, the first worker once again grabbed the flaps of the opening. Again, the pipe popped and creaked, but now both sides of the top were open, making a nice, smooth, square opening.

With more snow falling in and the slush melting, the pipe flooded with water, wetting their clothes and equipment. They had to stay crouched there for quite a long while, their only option being to wait for the snow to melt. Eventually though, the snow ceased to fall into the pipe and the pile shrank bit by bit into a cold pile of slush that they could crawl over.

While waiting, they had pulled the Moosk's body back a ways, giving them slightly more space to work with. They crawled over one, and the deconstructor crawled over the other. They could now get to work on the block. They readied a power saw, hoping to cut through some spots and loosen the pieces.

The other two crawled into the slush, then stood up, being fully upright for the first time in quite a while. They took some time to stretch, then pulled out radios to report back their progress.

"Opened up a new opening directly before the blockage" one said.

"Successfully closed the previous opening" the other one reported. They nodded at each other, readying themselves for the next part of the mission. The blockage would be producing quite a large amount of rubble, and they would need to carry it out.

Already, there was a pile growing, as the densely packed wall was deconstructed. Along with that, they needed to remove the Blockage's body, allowing for easier passage.

One stooped again, moving forward slightly to pull the pile closer to the opening. The other reached in to grab the parts, then chucked them onto the snow. It was quite high up, so it took time to throw each part individually. They soared through the air and landed somewhere in the powder surrounding their icy hole.

Headquarters had sent a helicopter to recover the Moosk's body, and it was nearing the location. They passed the first opening, where the dark metal could be seen surrounded by a ring of ice. Then the second opening, surprising close, which appeared to have caved in.

Their hearts sped up. This was too deep of a hole to have been caused by snow compacting. They had radioed out that they had opened up the pipe, how had it collapsed again, and so quick? Would they be alright?

Then something caught the pilot's eye. Motion, of a gray shard flying up out of another hole. It landed among a ring of other trash and pieces, marking the location of the new opening. They relaxed, and flew over to the actual opening.

And that's where I stopped writing, unfortunately. There are remaining plot points, but no writing left. It's up to you whether they saved them in time or not!