

Filugori

we are frightened of being alone...

Thanks

To Sylvia, Owowonta, Adanta, Monica and Eze Ahanonu, my family.

And to all the writers whose stories have inspired my imagination.

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Humanity's Dirge

We are alone.
Hubris towers above man, waiting for him to falter.
We are alone.
Philosophers young and old still ponder.
We are alone.
Scientists claim to see something in the ether.
We are alone.
Explorers journey out, their mind's seeking shelter.
We are alone.
Planets of gold make us forget to remember.
We are alone.
Emptiness is a fear in long slumber.
We are alone.
And so we explore the cosmos in search of an answer...

In Search of Truth

7th Millennium

Human Ambition

7,020 AD | Location: Dharma V | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: Hugo Light

“Hugo! Look!”

The engine's roar prevented me from hearing her clearly, the open doors on the side of the landing craft didn't help either. I continued to survey the scene to my right. It was quite beautiful, if dead. Craggy red rocks jutted up here and there while small, multi-colored rivulets dug their way into the ground. A small dust storm had begun moving across the landscape, engulfing everything in its path. The sounds of its progress had just started to reach us when the lady yelled out once again. After a couple rounds of this, I turned around, frowning. Our eyes met and she signaled to her right, a slight grin on her face. I stared at her momentarily, pretty ones like her rarely made it out here; it got boring at times, staring at all the other women who'd been subject to one-too-many deadly encounters in the harsh Outer Sectors. She was petite with hazel eyes and auburn hair, a touch of gray seeping through at the roots. Her cheeks were a bit puffy, as were her eyelids, but I think that added to the allure. I couldn't quite place her origin. Natalia, maybe some Russia blood still coursed through her veins. But who knew now, few people still had family histories going back that far.

Shaking my head slightly, I followed her hand, gave a slight yelp and threw my fist into the air as my eyes began to water. There it was! We had finally discovered what we had spent all these years wandering aimlessly for. Out in the distance, across a sea that appeared to be made of silver, a splendorous pinnacle pierced the sky. And atop its peak, a mountain of gold. A slow grin spread across my face.

“Is that real?” I blurted out and looked back at Natalia.

“Real as we're going to get out here,” she replied coyly. I looked back at her and she grinned at me, again. Couldn't decide if she was annoying as shit or attractive as hell. That's for another time...

“Pilot, hey pilot!” I yelled and got up out of my seat, steadied myself on one of the overhead railings and put a hand on the pilot's shoulder. “PILOT! Hey, yeah. See that gold mountain, land near it. We're about to have a hell of a day!”

Men still strove for that most holy of materials, still killed for a chance to hold it, possess it. Some said that gold had become more than a sign of wealth and power. It had become ingrained in the very soul of humanity, driving us forward, providing the impetus to partake on the Herculean efforts to discover and colonize the galaxy. It was an elixir that we could not stop drinking, least we realize that there is no purpose to our sorry existence. So we continued-lusting, craving, hungering for that high, that indescribable euphoria of “Gold! We found GOLD!”.

The craft made an abrupt ninety-degree turn and blasted off toward the mountain. Natalia stared out the window the entire time and every once in awhile she'd lean forward with her elbows brushing her knees and her chin rest on her hands. There was a time long ago when I'd tried to make a pass at her; me being the captain and all should have worked wonders, but she'd rebuffed my advances almost before they began. We'd remained cordial since then, but every once in awhile that sly smile would creep across her face...

“Sir, I'm running low on fuel, think you can make it there by land? I can touch down nearby and unload the trucks,” the pilot said after a bit. We were probably only half-way toward the mountain.

I looked at him and he pointed toward the gauge and shrugged. “Sure, sure,” I said and surveyed the landscape. “Actually, can you get us over there? Looks like an ocean, maybe we can ride across it.”

The craft began to descend and after several minutes we were on the ground. People jumped out and began unstrapping the vehicles, part rover, part boat. We would make it across the sea just fine. Natalia walked by me, still grinning. I'm thinking she's quite mad. No way she can be that cute, single, and always smiling...

One of the trucks was ready to go and we immediately started up the engine. A couple men jumped on the sides and I gave the driver a thumbs up. It slowly approached the edge of the sea and stopped for a brief moment while the flotation devices appeared and a propeller sprung out the back-side. Old-school tech, piece of shit couldn't even hover properly. We'd never figured out anti-gravity, always sounded cool but it seems like physicist still haven't quite figured out exactly what gravity is. Someday. Anyways, the truck began to drift onto the liquid. Then immediately began to sink. A couple shrieks could be heard and I rushed over to grab onto a side along with several others. The driver tried desperately to reverse the trucks direction, but the sea appeared to be part-air, part-liquid.

“Get out! Everyone get out!” I began screaming as the truck continued its decent into the sea. Nearly everyone made it out of the truck, except the driver. He opened the door and swam out into the sea. He tried to paddle, but the liquid had such low density that he stayed afloat for about a second before disappearing into the silver sea.

“Shit! Someone have a rope? A rope!” but there was no saving him. We all staggered back as the truck sunk below the waves and disappeared from view. We put one more of the trucks on auto-pilot and set everything to full power, hoping that if we gave it enough momentum, it wouldn't suffer the same fate as the first truck. That idea utterly failed. A couple tries later and we finally decided to stop wasting valuable resources.

Shaking my head, I radioed the other search group. “Hey! We've found the gold, get some craft over here, we've run out of fuel”. The silver sea continued to shift and swirl. A half hour passed before the other crafts boomed in over the horizon and slowed to a stop over our position, kicking up dust. People began running towards the vessels and the scene felt straight out of an ancient Epic Hollywood film, at any moment the haze would peel back to reveal men on camels riding in—screaming with swords raised—from our flank. But alas, this was fleeting as the thrusters blew away the remaining particles and brought me back to my senses. I turned and rushed toward the last departing ship and jumped into the bay just as it gained air. We left the hatch open—strapped down there was no danger of falling out—and took in the dazzling scene that we were being treated to.

There had been tales of a planet with a silver sea and we originally thought that alone was worth the effort tracking down this elusive planet. But as we surveyed the surface, it became apparent that it had much, much more to offer. As I gazed across the passing terrain, I yearned to be down below, exploring this virgin world and unearthing her secrets. The silver leaked into a red ocean that mixed and churned with globes of blue and green. It seemed as

if someone took oil, dye and threw it into water then added a metallic sheen to everything. The blinding reflection at times prevent full appreciation of this wondrous creation. Floating amidst the churning waves were islands, the liquid here and there being more dense than soil. Each island was a different color and slightly transparent, like little jewels floating on the sea. Towering crystalline structures reached for the sky—some smoothed and beautified by the apparently acidic conditions, others translucent, reflecting the splendid array of colors that whirled about them. These fortresses on the sea, for all their stark beauty, were dead. Yet, at the center of all this majesty stood the most extraordinary sight of all, the mountain of gold—assured and confident—amongst the liquid rainbow sea. It was in this moment of bliss that the radio cut in, breaking the illusion that we finally could be tourist instead of glorified reconnaissance and miners on these forgotten worlds.

“We are approaching the target, everyone get ready!” I bellowed and looked around me as people drew their weapons and several clicks could be heard. A whirl and sizzle was followed by the sounds of harsh, raspy breathing. I looked over and shook my head, like always, at these ridiculous men in yellow. The Yellows, as we nicknamed them, were our ‘security’ and miners. One of the yellows looked at me through his visor, for some reason it was red, no doubt a blind man designed it. To my left another yellow check his ammo count, *Full!*, it read. Not sure why they even bothered checking, we’d never encountered anything even remotely dangerous that would require ranged weapons. One of the yellows stood up and grasped onto the railing, he then took out a pad and gave a quick run-down of the situation. Also, ridiculous. I put up with it because it seems to make these faux military soldiers happy.

“Target: gold. Objective: secure location until complete extraction. Duties: You, you and you,” he pointed to several people. “Will secure the perimeter until other landing crafts arrive. You two,” he pointed to two people at the back of the craft with massive devices that we used to mine the gold. “Will start digging and collecting. The rest of you, stay alert!”

The craft wobbled a bit as we neared the target and after a bit of maneuvering to find a solid landing spot, the pilot commenced his descent. Upon landing, we all rushed out, yelling and screaming. A man to my left looked to be convulsing from excitement. We waded in the gold, enjoying the feeling of it wrap around our feet. We molding it like clay and rubbing it all over our bodies. This was a rare one. We would barely need to process its ores. Jacques, my trusty tech, had been analyzing it for several minutes when I finally looked his way. He gave me two thumbs up. I grinned, it's that good. And as I grinned, I saw Natalie again, the smile still plastered on her face. I stared at her for awhile as she moved around the peak. She never stopped grinning. Still bat-shit crazy, I think. Or else she knew why we were really here, something only Jacques and I were supposed to know...

Anyways, as we relished in our magnificent find, we never thought that this would be it. This mountain of wonderful gold would be the last humanity would ever find. The massive worlds with gold to fill skyscrapers had long ago been stripped and their gold shipped back to Earth. People had started to search farther and in more dangerous or remote star systems. Everyone always hoped, or knew, that more gold was to be had. We only had to search harder, faster, smarter. But that illusion proved false. Last Miners, they would eventually call us. Forever exalted, we became the famed heroes who brought hope of another gold rush. But we were

soon shamed, the detested villains who delivered false hope of a new era. But that was far away and there was gold to be had.

Every so often a breeze wafted by. Spread out from dawn to dusk was a spectrum of reds, the sun blazing its trail across the sky. I walked toward the edge of the summit, looked down and felt a bit queasy. This would feed the gold stream for years. This was big and—above money—glorious. As we jumped up and down, the gold's warmth eloped and caressed some as they slept in its splendor. As I stared down at the base of the mountain, I noticed the sea gaining an acrimonious hue that was drifting our way, a dull black and gray swath that sliced through the serene rainbow ocean. A ship started to descend and finally landed. Several yellows stepped out, donned their respirators, took out their diggers, flipped the switches and began their work. Several of the others laid down their gear and a couple more waddled over to the nearest ship, climbed in and patted the side, then drifted off into the distance with a brief roar and puff of smoke. Looking around, I realized that we'd deployed at least a dozen or so more armed yellows. A couple had setup scanners and one was busy with his radio, whispering details about the location back to our ship above. I never understood why we always needed so many armed men, transports, and materials. It's not like we had ever encountered life...or ever would...

The Puzzle and Its Pieces

7,029 AD | Location: Outer Sectors | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: Hugo Light

The ship hung in low orbit around the twin planets. They were almost touching and several massive craters on their surfaces were a testament to past encounters. I loved journeys like this. Made me feel alive. "Deploy the ships, have everyone on standby," I bellowed and looked around. "Commence slow burn. And get the landing crafts ready!"

Here and there people continued at the same calm pace, such was the routine nature of this procedure. I thought it absurd. The amount of training we had been put through shouldn't go to waste. "What're you all, DRONES? Where is your hunger, your ravenous spirit for adventure?!" Someone once told me I was in my own world. Isolated, sheltered from the outside. Psychologist like to say it's a shield to keep me sane. I call it a positive attitude. People had long since ceased caring about that ephemeral fist pump, that momentous adrenaline rush. No, there was nothing to be had here, just training for the real thing, if even that. Sad lot. "Captain, give it up, there is no gold to be had; no one is going to get excited over a dry run," someone blurted. I continued to stare straight ahead then walked over to a mirror. Running a comb through my brilliant white hair, I starred at myself for a bit. My eyes always made me a bit uncomfortable, being all blue with no iris. Compared to me, most of my crew were young or middle aged, their hair still natural brown or black and their eyes of the same hue. People always asked why this was so, my appearance and demeanor. I would just laugh and change the subject, one mustn't dwell to long on the subject of natural white hair. Or more importantly, what it implies.

"Have you ever seen such a magnificent sight? All these people pass this awe inspiring scene without a second glance, it's like they..."

"Have lost the ability to take in the small things?" a young women blurted. I looked over and realized Natalia had snuck up on me again, a smile across her face. She was infuriating that way.

"You call this scene 'small'? No, they've forgotten how grand and mind-boggling our adventures are. Why do they live? What do they strive for? For gold you'll say. Fools, single-minded fools," I paused and looked around, the crew was still serene, still too fucking calm. "I have led them to the Outer Sector! They elicit the same reaction each time we find none of that deplorable substance—depression, as if all the wealth we've accumulated from past adventures has suddenly vanished. Memories never vanish."

"Gold is life. That's all we need to survive. You know that," Natalia responded. There was always something slightly snarky and know-it-all about her remarks.

"Indeed. Someday I'll show them wrong," I mumbled and walked off to sat in a chair near the bridge for several minutes until the ship was close enough to launch the landing crafts. One of the yellows came running over to me and signaled that one of the landing craft was ready.

We drifted down toward one of the two planets and I walked up and down the cargo hold of one, my jet black suite in stark contrast to the yellows' jumpsuits. Their clothing was adorned with trinkets, medals, and symbols, amplifying the simplicity of my iron pressed attire. I never

liked the faux military air about the yellows and their at times hyper aggressive nature. The air was thick with chemicals, we kept it pressurized to force out any foreign air that may try to leak its way through the double door once it was opened. Tools lay strewn about the vicinity, the whole place looked like a mess—nobody cared to clean it up after each expedition. A shame. The decision to paint the whole interior a stark white, my idea, was paying off; it exuded a professionalism and cleanliness that, despite the mess, satisfied my craving for order. We hit the wispy coat that surrounded the planets and I momentarily lost my balance. Straightening up, I smoothed my hair and stared out the viewport nearest me.

“There are no dignitaries here captain,” someone snickered. I looked about for the source of the disturbance, but none was to be found. They all gave him that same—eerily creepy—blank stare, as if they were about to commit mutiny at any moment. I surveyed the hold once more and then walked up the staircase on the side, cables attempting to slow my every step. The railing was all that saved my ass as everyone was thrown into the air. Moments later, the sound of action could be heard all around. I loved that sound.

“Get that door opened! Guns ready, shields on, we're going in Hot, HOt, HOT!” one of the yellows screamed and started running.

The doors lurched open and I momentarily swung their way. The yellows jumped outside, some floating and landing with a confident thud on their feet while others walked slowly, surveying the area. Dust kicked up and swirled around the landing zone, the whole scene something straight out of a comic strip. Ethereal and surreal, the particles cloaked the yellows' as they donned their old school respirators and set off, the doors closing behind them. I straightened my clothes and started up the second flight of stairs near the back of the hold toward the flight deck. Entering, I patted the commanding officer on the back and gave him a thumbs up. The landing craft started to ascend and several minutes later I was back on the ship.

I treated the crew to the same wide, confident grin that accompanied each expedition to a new world. I signaled to Natalia, who was on comm duty today. She grinned, a cute smile that balanced out her slightly puffy eyelids, and turned on one of the yellows' HUD. The screen flickered for a bit and then a clear image shone through, courtesy of a yellow's helmet. I walked over to a nearby chair and slumped down in it. The dust continued to swirl around the yellows, but everything looked fine and they began surveying the surrounding area. Several minutes went by and all that could be seen was a sea of red, barren rocks. During this time, the comm officer continued to rotate between different yellows' HUDs.

A yellow approached one of the massive craters that scarred these planets. The vastness was hard to comprehend; he couldn't see the other side even though the air had cleared and he could see to the horizon. He reached into his pocket and took out a small drone and flung it into the air. It hovered there for a bit, like a ugly hummingbird, then darted off to collect data. I didn't quite trust those things. They collected a lot of data and no one had given me a straight answer about where it went or what it was used for. But the yellows did that, imaging themselves the part-Marines, part-CIA of the 7th millennium. The screen changed to another yellow's HUD and my eyes flew wide open when an object glittered in the horizon. I sprung out of the chair and ran towards the comm station.

“Switch back to the previous HUD. Now, now, NOW!...Hey yellow! You read me? HEY! Go check that out!”

Moments later, he went to investigate. Approaching the object, the yellow kneeled down and wiped away some of the dirt. As he did so, the shape of a round disk took shape with a distinct number imprinted on its surface. 129. I looked around, but no one seemed to understand the significance. The man continued to wipe away dirt until a large, silver disk covered his view. He then took a step back to give us a full view.

“Kick it...I said KICK IT! Jesus,” I screamed as the yellow could be seen lifting his boot and repeatedly stomping on the object. The screen wobbled rhythmically but nothing happened. Eventually the yellow reached into his back pocket and out sprung a crowbar. Why he had that, I still can't recall. Anyways, kneeling down, he secured the bar in place then took a step back and checked the placement. He jumped and immediately reversed the boosters on his back to point skyward and landed on the crowbar with a loud crunch. It and the silver disk are flung high into the air. Just then, another yellow came into view.

“What are you doing? We have no idea what's on this planet. No one gave any orders to do anything but look. ”

“Hugo ordered me to! Calm the fuck down.”

They both walked over to the hole in the ground where the disk used to be. A small, black object that looked like a slightly worn rock came into view. It sat on a pedestal of gold and around it were various inscriptions. The pedestal had the same number as the disc, 129, along with another: 4,506. Looking around, I saw confusion creeping across faces on the bridge. No surprise, I had spent years researching about this. The remnants of StarsEnd: the chronicles of a woman who discovered how to collapse stars and turn them into portals to other parts of the universe. But the only copy, the original, had been either destroyed or, supposedly, scattered around the galaxy so no one would be tempted to use the technology. I continued to stare and my eyes grew progressively wider. I blurted something inaudible and Natalia looked my way, raising an eyebrow. It took me a couple seconds to reorganize my thoughts, but when I found the words, they came out clear and forceful.

“Get that thing on the ship. Now! NOW! NOW!”

I got up and surveyed the scene. Red sands whipped across the crusted plains and a loud roar could be heard in the distance. The sun blared overhead and there wasn't a cloud in sight. The Red Planet was indeed desolate and harsh, save a few mega cities where the land had been transformed into oases. Covering my eyes with one hand, I pulled out the radio and tuned into our channel. There was a hiss of static and a couple inaudible words came through.

“This is red falcon, do you read? This is red falcon.”

“Red falcon, copy. We hear you loud and clear.”

“Come land near me, I've got something.”

“Copy, over and out.”

I knelt down and rubbed the scorched earth. A cold, hard surface rubbed against my fingers and I started running them around the edges. Latching the radio onto my belt, I clawed for a time at the ground around the object, eventually revealing a circle several feet in diameter. It seemed about right but the dust was darkening the scene, obscuring a clear view of the silvery plate. Whipping out a flashlight, I flicked it on and the beam shone through the haze. There was nothing overtly mysterious or mind-blowing about the plate. Neither special engravings, nor a treasure map awaited me. A shame, I'd hoped for more after all this searching. Rather, it has emblazoned on it a number: 8045. I slipped my notebook from my back pocket and he scribbled it down. A roar could be heard barreling down toward me and as I looked over my shoulder, a ship maneuvered through the nearby canyon and slowed to a halt some tens of meters from me. Those godless yellows jumped out, faux military gear and attitude aplenty.

“What do we have here?” one of them blurted as he turned on his torch. They loved asking the obvious and acting like every moment was part of a movie script. Could never tell if it was an inside joke on their part or just some comically misguided belief in their own awesomeness.

“Not sure. It's surprisingly cold given the environment, almost as if its being cooled internally. It has an ID number,” I stated and pointed towards the engraving. “Torch it.”

None of them really knew why we were on this mission, only that the ‘government’ had sent us to this forgotten world to erase the location of classified document stores. It'd taken some maneuvering on my part to win that job, but once it was done the yellows followed without question. I leaned in over the yellows and watched as they slowly melted away the number. The wind picked up from the east and surged through the narrow canyon, knocking us all over momentarily and sending the hovering ship into a nearby wall. I covered my ears as a deafening screech echoed through the canyon. The ship listed to one side and then another, finally smashing hard into a nearby rock wall. With hiss and fits the craft began to sink towards the ground, its engines giving out one by one. Once again, this faux military types showed their amateurism.

“Who the fuck landed that thing?” I screamed, indignant. The yellows started talking into their radios, their default response when they didn't know what the fuck was going on and wanted to act like the situation was under control. Ignoring them, I started walking towards the downed ship, muttering incessantly. Several crew members struggled out, one was bleeding from a punctured leg and arm. But they were expendable to a degree and I swept past, jumped inside the wreck, and navigated towards the storage containers at back. I looked around for a bit, they all looked the same and I explicitly told them not to label anything. Except the one I'd given a slight nick with a knife. Spotting that container, I crouched and flicking one of the lids open. Super-cooled air flowed out and filled the room in a white cloud. I swung my hands back and forth to clear the slow moving fog and reached into the container. I felt around for a bit, my hand being burnt once or twice by the liquid nitrogen. Then I felt the cold hardness and pulled out the black rock inside. I rotated it around several times, everything looked alright. Flinging open my pack, I shoved it inside and quickly exited the craft. The yellows were wandering about, unsure what to do.

“Destroy it!” I bellowed and began walking towards the steel circle to inspect the work done. A charred hole was all that remained and inside was another black rock, perfectly cut and glittering. I reached down and picked it up, letting the midday light bounce off its exquisite surface. 8045, it read. Same as the cover. That was reassuring; at least no one else had come for it. “Perfect, this exactly what the government wanted. Someone radio in another ship. Our work here is done.”

“Yes sir!” a yellow said and flicked on his radio.

Several minutes later, we were soaring through the air. I stood on the edge of the second crafts balcony and stared down at the receding landscape. Smoke billowed from the downed ship and for a brief moment, the angle between the ship, sun, and my eyes aligned, blinding me. Leaning back and blinking, I quickly looked towards the location and couldn't see any smoke. Must be too far away now, these sand storms ruin everything. I pressed a button and the hatch closed, it was a long ride back to the ship.s

Mastery of Space

3rd Millennium

In the Shadow of Fear

3,242 AD | Location: Unknown | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: Unknown

The pair looked out across the gorgeous vista, the golden plains below waiting to be harvested, the mountains in the distance yearning to be explored, the hidden structures, and stories aching to be discovered. The sky was auburn green; owing to the transition between ecosystems as the planet was terraformed. The suits were itchy, their bright white exterior blinding those foolish enough to stare at them. They reminded him of the astronaut suits they used to see from the late 20th century photos. But these lacked oxygen tanks and much of the other waste that was employed then. Leaves rustled in the distance, and one of them looked around, *is it time for the artificial wind to start blowing?* The other shook his head and signaled forward. Walking down the slope, they cut down anything that hampered their progress. But the golden fields were not barren, below them stretched miles of city, teeming with life. There was a slight haze as a result of constant construction.

Twin suns scorched the landscape, bathing the city in a surreal glow: everything had a slight radiance to it, as if partially lit from the inside. The towers themselves were beautiful, gleaming and reaching toward the sky. Several almost hit the top of the dome that protected this swath of land from the harsh elements outside. The breeze continued to blow and a rustle was heard to the man's left. They both looked at each other then scanned the scene around them; nothing seemed out of place and their sensors did not detect anything unusual. Shrugging their shoulders, they moved at a quicker pace down the mountain.

The worker looked around him, being atop such a tall structure with minimal supports didn't bother him, but he noticed some vegetation move in the distance. *Hmmm, so they're here.* He looked below him; workers hustled about the construction site, jumping between steel beams, welding parts together and lifting up more materials, it was a cobweb of activity. The city below sparkled and teemed, but it was unusual in that everything was coated in primary or secondary colors. And a pure white. It made for a sleek aesthetic, but it also felt wrong, out of place on this deadly planet. The people went about their lives, but the scene was oddly quite for such a populate city. The governor having installed noise absorption modules everywhere and on the walls of buildings to reduce what he claimed was 'harmful noise'.

The worker hated it here, the last terraformed city he had worked at was bustling with life, the smells of the bazaar wafted from below and the sound of a million voices had filled the air. It gave him energy and reminded him that he was alive. Alas, it was not so here, he sighed and started to climb down a nearby ladder.

Commander looked down upon the new world. Experiment 125-5-798. He'd long forgotten the meaning behind the codes. Someone told him it had to do with the coordinates where each experiment was begun. But that was absurd, as the whole enterprise was based on Earth. They only used the outer colonies to test the results. Occasionally things went horribly wrong, but then it was okay, you just glassed the planet, claimed that some weird radioactive waste had been found, and move on. However, occasionally you came across a planet in

too perfect a spot to just simply destroy. Even if the experiment went horribly awry, you just expanded the study. Or changed its goals. That was the case with Filugori.

Filugori had been discovered naught 50 years prior by a daring explorer, now deceased, who happened to be exploring this region and came across this beauty. A large portion of its atmosphere was already composed of oxygen, allowing it to be made habitable in record time. But they also needed to populate it, fast. They built several cities then lured people with hefty wages and beautiful resort-like living conditions inside glass covered dome cities. If the experiment went awry, they could just vacuum the entire dome, killing everything inside. This would terminate the experiment but still leave a vibrant planet on the edge of known space. It could still be colonized, repopulated, and experimented on. The plan was rock-solid and rather brilliant.

A communications officer came over and told Commander that everything was ready. He walked to the terminal and ordered the drop ships to commence landing. Commander looked back at Filugori. *But, he thought, there was always something unsettling about the planet, even before we started this program...*

The pair continued their trek, the city never seeming to get closer and the vegetation seemingly getting thicker as they moved farther down the mountain. Again they heard rustling to their side but ignored it. As they neared the first fence, one took out a small device and placed it on the fence. Zzzzt, a few sparks flew and the other went to cut the fence with a small laser. The sky turned dark and the pitter-patter of rain could be heard in the distance, rapidly approaching. The two suddenly looked at each other with horrified faces and rushed their movements. Breaking through the remainder of the fence, they rushed toward the nearest building, burst inside, and quickly closing the door behind them. A shriek could be heard in the distance and their blood froze. Running up the nearby stairs, they quickly moved the furniture in the rooms to block the stairs and one took out a few devices and turned them on, tossing them on the makeshift barricade. They knocked over a pair of tables and pushed them up against the entrance to a room, then jumped over them and ran to a pair a couches at the back. They ducked behind them and waited. The shriek grew louder.

As he descended, the worker noticed dark clouds building off in the distance. *They said rain tomorrow.* But he thought no more of it, he was on a deadline and rain was the least of his worries. As he walked along the steel beams, he noticed another worker staring at the clouds. He suddenly grabbed his head with both hands and sunk to his knees, whispering something. The worker started to walk over to him, but he quickly got up, looked around nervously, and then walked at a rapid pace toward the ladder nearby. *Okay...* The worker got on the ladder and started to climb down as well. As he reached the bottom, a bright blue cop car screeched through a stark white section of town. *I knew something was off. Just wish they would announce something.* The other workers were all rushing down their respective ladders, several looked quizzically at him and his slow pace, others had a crazed look about them. *What kind of drill is this? Did those fools set-off an alarm?* he thought as someone shoved past him and continued down a nearby ladder.

Commander knew what was coming, he knew what had to be done and that he had sent those people to die. *Filugori...* He turned around and looked at the screen next to him, several messages from that pesky organization, saying they had warned him what would happen. *But I didn't even colonize this place. It was around before I was born.* He looked back at the planet and noticed that dreadful storm cloud brewing near one of the cities. *Here we go...*

Few things scared this pair; they had been through the depths of the Azori Asteriods, the hell of the Ni Black Hole, and the soul-shattering Tigi cloud, to name a few. But this, this was different. In all those cases, they were in the relative safety of their ship, with the knowledge that should they perish, people would be informed. This, well, they would be MIA forever. Their ship could not transmit, for reasons unknown, and the city they were going to, well, something looked off about it, and maybe this was why.

The building they occupied was a vibrant red; everything from the tables to the sinks to the ceiling was painted in the same primary color. It unsettled them and one continued to flick the safety on his gun on and off. Suddenly the door hit the wall opposite of the entrance and dripping could be heard. The two looked at each other and quickly armed their weapons. Nothing happened for a time and one started to lower his gun, his shoulders slumping slightly. *Seems we might have over reacted.* He mouthed to the other with a grin and started to get up. Just then, they heard a noise behind them. Each felt his heart stop and time started to dilate. Neither had the courage to turn around and check. Dripping was heard and a unadvised shriek could be heard that started to grow louder by the second. A tear rolled down one's eye. *So, after all we've done, this is how it ends...*

The worker swore he heard a scream, one that was inflicted with such fear and horror that he thought it a figment of his imagination. People continued to rush toward their transportation units, many looked horrified when they discovered that they had been disconnected from the network and, hence, had become inoperable. The worker looked for a terminal and found one. Going to the news section, he found that there was only one article. *"IT FEEDS OFF OF FEAR! DON'T BE AFRAID! BE HAPPY!"* it read.

The worker looked around and a feeling of dread came over him. *The pay was too good, I should have asked why.* He rushed toward his vehicle and pushed the button, but it would not start. The cloud had reached the city by that time and the sky started to grow dark, the pitter-patter of rain could be heard in the distance, but it was unnaturally subdued. And then he remembered the noise devices and his blood curdled. *That's sick, just sick.* And then he heard the drip behind him. This, by itself, wasn't a problem, hoses leaked, shit happened and clouds were brewing up ahead. No, there was a more pressing problem: the intense, mind-shattering bloodlust. His mind raced. *Just stay calm, stay calm and it'll just wander past. Remember the article, remember the article, remember...* A yelp was heard naught a couple meters away. A tear rolled down the worker's eye. *Oh God.*

Commander knew. Commander had ordered it all. But it would remain only him that knew.

The cloud spread over the entire city, engulfing it. It would soon be painted red, the interiors, the exteriors, all of it. And Commander didn't like the colour red. It gave him an uneasy feeling, especially when it wasn't primary, *those shades of crimson irritate me so and they dry all wrong*. So Commander told his nav to set coordinates for Lili II. This experiment had run its course. *This new...thing*, the Commander thought as he rubbed his temples, *I wish I could tame it*. A chill went down his spine and he looked at one of the readouts on a panel nearby, it monitored life within a given region of this world. The city, the one engulfed in a cloud, read zero. He'd never seen an experiment proceed this way: rapidly, ruthless, complete. He looked out the viewport at Filugori once more and shook his head. *Something isn't right. I sure hope they know what they're doing...*

Collapsing Stars

3,830 AD | Location: Earth | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: Aime Red

The book fell to the ground and I hurried to pick it up, *Collapsed Stars* it read. As I reached down, my eyes were temporarily blinded and I took a step back. Looking to my right, the sun shone through the tall glass windows overlooking the city below. The hallway stretched forever into the distance and at paces streams of light pierced the darkness. The floor was a solemn black and along the walls to the left were vines made of gold. Diamonds ran along the vines, simulating dripping water, and they sparkled in the afternoon sun. The sight always gave me chills, a homage to a glamorous past we never had. However, since finding gold throughout the galaxy, we could not only re-imagine the past but give ourselves the glory we have always sought. Gazing out the window, an endless sea of buildings stretched out before me, some a glistening gold, others a royal green. Everything had been given a coating that made them reflect an enormous amount of light, causing the entire city to be blinding during the day and to sparkle from the cars and lights at night. Far in the distance, barely in view, I could see a building rise above the others, a spire reaching toward the clouds. Rising from its base and terminating at the peak, a ribbon of gold wound its way around the building. Small points of light moved up and down the ribbon and just as I turned to pick up the book, a ship slipped into view and descended onto a beautiful, blue, leaf-like pad protruding from the tower—our docks looked so lovely. Snatching the book from the ground, I continued down the hall and entered my quarters.

We had been at it for several years now, attempting to discover a technique to travel across the stars without the restrictions imposed by hyperspace travel. All sorts of ideas had been proposed, some had the idea we could crunch space, others proposed bending time while the more eccentric just thought we could create another hyperspace within hyperspace. Some of the proposals, like the later, had been tried...and failed. Others appeared to work, only for us to realize that they had altered the ships systems and had given the wrong coordinates upon returning to Earth. For the past twenty-odd years, they had hit one road block or another. Since joining, I had become intrigued by the idea of 'crunching' space and went to the library a couple days back seeking guidance. While there, I came across a middle-aged man, whence begun an interesting conversation of sorts...

"So, you're looking to warp space?" he said looking at me with icy-blue eyes.

"Yes, that is my goal at present," I remarked. "But I cannot seem to find anything that would give me a clue how to do so. The hypothesis of some older physicists do not add up and I am reluctant to pursue the ones engineered by the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics."

"Tried once, to look into this... 'theory' as they call it," he said and began walking toward the staircase, beckoning me to follow. "And came across an interesting book. Haha, but I'm no math whiz and this book's full of it and many fascinating ideas..."

He continued to ramble on and I rushed after him, excited at the prospect of finally having a lead, some clue that would finally break this years-long deadlock. The administrators

were getting nervous, we'd not produced a new theory or suggestion in awhile and like the skunkworks projects of old, we had been sucking up unfathomable amounts of money with our experiments. This new government was rich and stable, it has been around for hundreds of years and only rebellion in nearby star systems and some of the outer colonies had caused any kind of stir. But no matter how much gold they amassed, we were running into different...limits.

After descending several flights of stairs we came to a pair of locked doors. The man pulled out his card and swiped it. With a hiss the doors slide open and he quickly returned the card to his pocket before I could register the name written on it.

“Sir, may I inquire as to your name?”

“Light,” and he proceeded to walk through the door without saying another word. He continued past several rows of books and drives. Over the past hundred years humans started printing information in books again, as a copy of our knowledge that couldn't be wiped by random magnetic fluxuations or more exotic phenomena. Before the rebuilding, Earth had suffered an earlier than expected magnetic field reversal followed by a period of solar flares that left our satellites and many record-keeping complexes down—some for good. We lost a lot of knowledge during that period and people suspected that it was a government plot to hamper the rebels by starving them of crucial public knowledge. Most unfortunately, there are some esoteric equations and techniques for hyperspace travel and other modern technologies that would take millennium to re-discover as few today attempted or wanted to understand how they were derived.

“Here it is,” Light pointed towards the book and smiled. Peering past his outstretched arm, I tilted my head and read the title. “*Collapsing Stars*?! You brought me all the way here for that! We cover collapsed stars in elementary physics, do I look like an Outer?”

“You studied collapsed stars, not collapsing stars,” he glared at me. “Don't get smug with me...”

He inserted his card into a slot underneath the book, plucked it from the shelf and tossed it over to me. It was jet black and all the writing was in gold. I turned it over and looked at the cover. It featured a sphere with several holes stretching inwards, some nearly made it across to the other side. At the bottom of each hole could be seen points of various sizes and colors. Turning the book over again, a smile began to develop on my face. Across the back of the book was a small inscription: *Control space and you will be its master*. I looked towards the man.

“So, this is how we will cross the stars?”

“I'm not sure about that, but you might find it an interesting read. Now, we must leave, my time is running out and I don't have much money at the moment,” he noted and started to walk towards the doors. I hurried after him.

On my bed I touched the edges of the book until I found my bookmark, flipped open to the page, and started to once again devour the text. It had been several weeks and I had barely gone to work, my mind occupied by the thought of finally cracking the problem. I had been scribbling down ideas and uploading them to my small, black harddrive—one of those

ones with little memory but were built like a rock to survive the ages. It was also modular, very convenient. The book suggested that when a star collapsed, it would often create an indentation in space that would essentially move it closer to points in space much farther away. Think of tunneling through a sphere and ending up on the other side. It was much quicker than traveling along the edges. The only problem was, few stars actually made it all the way across and punctured space on the other side. Imagine making a donut whose middle didn't quite make a hole. Working through the equations, I had come to a realization. All that would be needed is one last push, that little extra piece of mass to propel the star through to the other side...

Simple Times

13th Millennium

FirstNova Incident

13,088 AD | Location: ? | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: The 13th Millennium, 23rd edition

The wars has been going on for about seventy years. We, humanity, were losing. This newfound threat evolved more quickly than us and seemed to have no qualms about killing entire worlds. We initially knew not where they came from. Some whiz finally located their home galaxy, Canis Major Dwarf, based on the direction all their ships *wouldn't* hyperspace towards. However, no one has made it to Canis and returned. Some have ventured to Andromeda and other nearby satellites of the Milky Way, but they always returned for fear of straying too far from a JumpNode or having it collapse and remain isolated, dying a slow death. And the miracle of Hugo Light and his crew was unlikely to be repeated.

We still called Earth home. Around 2,000 A.D. it was a complete wasteland and humanity temporarily moved itself to Mars and then went about transforming Earth into a golden paradise. We did not have time to wait for Nature to work her magic, so we modified existing species to grow faster, constructed new ecosystems, dug monumental canals, grew new forest and raised entire mountain ranges. Operation Sunk Cost, as it was known, never had a budget. But it had a clear set of goals: reconstruct Earth, make her a shining jewel in the cosmos, and test our ability to shape entire planets to our liking in short order. The results were spectacular and fit humanity's newfound confidence: we had just discovered hyperspace and begun colonizing nearby star systems.

A millennium went by and we were satisfied. But we soon came to a realization: hyperspace was too slow. So began Operation SkipSpace. It started out benign enough. Physicist, engineers, and astronomers searched for methods to shrink space and allow us to effectively skip around the heavens. Years passed with no luck. Our expansion never abated during this time and humanity was fracturing. It took too long to hyperspace between nearby star systems, let alone the myriad of spiral arms we had come to occupy. Pressure mounted and as a temporary fix, Earth constructed several massive fleets and sent them to the outer colonies...under the auspices of protection against a threat yet unknown. A brilliant engineer then developed hyperPods, a nifty little device that could zip through hyperspace at speeds that would destroy normal craft and carry valuable information back to Earth, allowing coordination of humanity's vast territory. But still, the search was on for a faster method of travel.

Around 4,500 A.D., it is said, a military frigate, ID Y-149, came across a collapsing star. The star went nova as the frigate approached to investigate and it went offline. A rescue team soon arrived. Two sleepless months later, they discovered no trace of the craft. Y-149 was listed MIA, its crew honorably discharged, and its final mission details classified. The incident, the first of its kind, was summarily forgotten and written off as a freak accident by official press and the media.

Five years later a ship appeared out of hyperspace near Earth, within the KillZone. The response was swift and deadly, the craft was immediately destroyed and its parts scooped up by a passing trash ship. Days later a hearing was called to investigate the incident; some were

shaken that a ship could enter the KillZone without being detected via radars in hyperspace. All attempts to find its route's origin were met with frustration and finally it was determined that the ship's black box would be recovered. After a week of review and analysis of the charred remains of the ship's record, nothing conclusive could be drawn: the data was too corrupt to confidently interpret what the computers were saying. Furthermore, what the computer was saying didn't jive with reality.

``From: coordinates 500.500.707 to coordinates 0.0.0 [Earth]. Time: two hours. Structural integrity: 100%. Collisions detected: 20."`

It made no sense. This ship had made a 1 megaparsec hyperspace jump in two hours. That wasn't physically possible and if it was the ship would have been destroyed multiple times along the way. The case was immediately closed, the box sequestered on Earth, and the incident forgotten.

However, there were some who didn't quite believe this version of events...

Ruined Plans

7th Millennium

The Trial for Life

7,045 AD | Location: Earth | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: Hugo Light

“You realize what the charge is for this crime?”

“This trial isn't fair,” I said and wiggled a little. They had bound me tight, as if I was some gun-totting space pirate. The straps were eating into my skin and my normally pressed black suit had been replaced with loose, gray garments. They'd shaved off my hair and I still hadn't gotten used to the chill of the air currents wafting over my bald head. They had died the remaining wisps of hair black and inserted white contacts into my eyes, to let the world know I was imprisoned. It was slightly ridiculous for such measures to be taken. I had nowhere to run: everyone on Earth knew my name and story. They could not shame me further: the media had thoroughly discredited my entire life story during the past couple of months. Before officially arresting me, I was under house arrest and only left to get groceries. Fucking ridiculous.

But the sheer scale of Earth's mega cities, and the number of people therein, allowed me to temporarily escape notice for brief periods. But I had contacts and many friends. They feared I would gain access to a ship, a number of smugglers and others believed my stories of worlds around dying stars and mysterious races in other galaxies. The possibility of me bolting seemed inevitable. I looked up at the interrogator and tried to focus, but my mind began to wander...

Several days back I was sitting in my balcony overlooking the city. Cars zoomed along the magnetic tracks and the woosh of elevators could be heard. Buildings towered all around me, rising and falling like mountain ranges. Massive wires connected everything and formed an intricate meshwork much like a spider web. Lights of all different colors illuminated the inside of several wires and if one peered long enough, little dots could be seen traveling along through the light. I found it beautiful and calming.

Every once in awhile, a large bang filled the sky and a ship would rocket through the clouds and into the void beyond. A slow murmur filled the air and its pitch would rise and fall as the landing craft descended from the heavens onto a nearby pad. I got up, walked toward the edge of the balcony, and peered into the abyss below. I never could get used to the terrifying drop from the upper levels, where light shone and dreams were made, to the lower levels, where the shadows lurked and men went to die.

I'd been down there, quite often in fact. During my childhood, my father had brought me to the lower levels. I hated the place. I saw men get killed, murdered, and maimed in the most horrible ways imaginable. It had...affected me. As an adolescent, I never enjoyed real fights and always looked for a way out, for a resolution, an escape. My father had wanted me to be an explorer, like him. When he left to go on missions or jobs, I would sometimes go and visit the depths, to explore places no one had laid eyes on in centuries or to find solace in a bar beyond the eyes of the government. But I never truly grew to like the place. I looked up again at the sparkling city and shook my head. My time in that world was done. I'd moved on and seen things no one else could even imagine. Yet still...

Out in the distance loomed a magnificent black skyscraper. A massive golden ribbon looped

around from the base to the top. Elevators ascended and descended along the ribbon and several ships floated into view and glided down onto one of the transparent, emerald landing spaces protruding from the building. This scene never got tiring and I was endlessly amazed that humans built this, the mindbogglingly complicated system of interconnecting structures. No one understood, they all thought me a bit peculiar for harboring such an interest. Afterall, it was solely the work of soulless computers. I turned around and sat in the chair once again. Several minutes later, someone rapped on my door and before I could get up, several men clad in yellow jumped me. One more reason to hate those bastards. There was a click to my left and next I remember was cold water being splashed on my face. They waited till I had regained consciousness fully and then told me a trial would be held in a week's time.

The interrogator stood up and walked toward the witness stand. He paused for a moment, coalescing his thoughts and decided his next course of action. The day had finally come when gold no longer mattered. It happened faster than was planned. Humanity, faced with that precarious drop in vigor and purpose that would come with the dying of the last gold mines, had decided to lust after another thing. What they turned to was, at first, inarguably better. Life. Yes, that most holy of crusades was launched, that most forgotten of desires amidst our material paradise. Life. No person had yet encountered it, in the several millennium that we had traveled the known universe; no person had yet reported life. Sure, there had been the occasional crackpot who attempted to cement his name in history by discovering that illusionary non-Sol life form, but they always came back empty handed and disillusioned. However, there was never a desire, after the first gold world was found, to start an extensive search for life.

But, the gold disappeared, ran dry. I had tried to reverse the slow slide, finding a small gem world here, some gold there. However, it was done and there was no going back. Oddly enough, it wasn't that we consumed all the gold or that it suddenly vanished, but to be unable to mine more gold was essentially to make it useless. In some perverse way, that confounded economist and thinkers, the more gold was found, the more its value increased on the market. It was akin to a stream, the more water in the stream, the more value can be derived from its many uses, but once this stream runs dry or turns into a lake at the bottom of a valley, its value diminishes to naught.

“You lie and claim to both have encountered life...and visited another galaxy.”

“No and yes,” I responded, with a bit more ice than intended.

“What?”

“I am not lying. Only me and three others survived that horror. Life's out there, it's just not what you are expecting...”

“You have no proof! The ship's logs are bullshit, they show you making jumps at speeds not possible given...”

“Your current technology?” I interrupted the blubbing idiot. “Yes, that's entirely true. But we found things, out in that wasteland of a galaxy. You probably think that the aliens you seek are big, hairy monsters. That our new friend, enemy, or whatever you want it to be will be easily found and pacified.”

I could tell the interrogator was boiling, a barely contained teapot about the blow and that he thought me a liar. A liar who would so brashly cause mass hysteria and concern. What I was saying could do that, if it was found to be true. He calmly took out a light and started to fill the room with that most horrid of smells; a couple coughs could be heard reverberating about the cavernous hall. Stretching back and curving upward as it reached the last row, the number of people attending this trial was astonishing. Everyone was dressed for the occasion—reds, yellow and greens filled the hall. The trial felt like a circus. After a couple of minutes pacing in front of the witness stand, the interrogator stopped and glanced at me.

“So you're guilty?”

“No,” I hissed, eyes narrowing.

“Sorry, that was not a question. You are guilty.”

“This trial is a fraud!” I shouted. “You seek to destroy me, my reputation, my life. I've already lost everything in that fucking dead galaxy. Everything! My wife's dead, my crew, my ship. And those goddamn fuck with your mind. You don't understand. I'm warning you!”

“Do not accuse...”

“The jury wants to convict me! Look at them, they've barely even paid attention during the trial. Its ridiculous. And the judge. He said capital punishment! This crime doesn't reach that level, where in the books is that? It isn't,” I continued to rant. I'd lost it a little. That happened now, especially when the memories of those things came flooding back. The terror was too great.

“Your appeal tugs at my heart, but I could care less about your conspiracies. What I do care about is whether you are lying,” he said leaning forward. “Or just hiding something?”

“Hiding? Yes, I'm trying to do that...and warn all of humanity to do the same! You don't understand,” I realized how absurd I sounded, how childish. No one would believe me.

Humanity had come to a cross roads, do we begin anew, refreshed in our goals, understanding, and decision making. Or do we continue to harbor our addictive past, plagued with wars, death, and madness. The fact that we had not encountered life disturbed some, filled them with dread. People hated being alone. Some proposed that we start the Grand Colonization, seeding the galaxy with many more colonies, enough to build a vast network that would fill the void. If what I said was true, there were many who stood to lose. And perhaps many more who would gain. Does a total war bring more revenue than colonies?

The interrogator had been silent for about twenty seconds. Much too long for my liking, or for the others in the chamber if the shuffling of papers and movement were any indication. “You're scared...aren't you?” I blurted out. “Deep down, that fear exists that we may be all there is, that the universe is in fact...empty. Well, it's not.”

The interrogator looked about—slightly distressed—and dropped the light on the ground, smothering it with his heel. Chatter filled the hall and several people shouted out incomprehensible phrases. Several of the exit staircases began to clog with people. The interrogator's brow creased, he was trying to find a proper response, something to check my wild outcries. This was supposed to be a staged trial, to show the masses that I was a man full of lies. But that seemed to be backfiring. I smiled on the inside.

“Your honor, I would like to request a recess,” the interrogator finally said. The blood left me. There was no way they'd allow this to drag on...

“Granted.”

I turned to the judge, astonished. Several yellows walked toward me, undid the straps, and one gave a hard shove between my shoulder blades. As I fell to the ground and chuckles could be heard reverberating throughout the chamber.

“And you're...ack, let go of me, I said let GO!” I screamed and stumbled away, temporarily, from the yellows surrounding me. Lord I hate them. “You're thinking to yourselves, if this man found life...” and right then someone smacked me over the head and the world went black.

The Violent Ones

7,041 AD | Location: Unknown | Galaxy: Unknown | Log: Hugo Light

Flash, crackle, bang. Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat. The flare skidded down the long, narrow tunnel that appeared to stretch downward forever. Another corridor ran to our right, if you want to call the passages in this labyrinth of a make-shift cave that. Behind us, a sliver of light, flickering on and off, spilled in from the opening from whence we came. We all gave each other the look-n-nod, donned our breathing masks, and proceeded to attach the hooks and ropes. Minutes late, one by one, we rappelled down into the abyss below. I landed first and immediately dropped to my knees, overwhelmed. There wasn't a foul stench, an unbearable sight, or a deafening noise. No, something felt so wrong about this place that I couldn't handle it. Donning my mask, I looked around as the rest dropped down near me and flicked on their lights. A purple mist hugged the ground and a small rivulet of water passed by us, its trickle amplified by the still, quiet air.

“Hey, capitan!” Jacques yelled, causing me to jump several feet in the air. Jacques was our resident technician; he was average at what he did but made up for it with humor and an unwavering tenacity.

“What?” I blurted.

“Come look at this,” he hollered once more as I rushed over.

“What!? There's nothing...” my voice trailed off as I pointed my flash-light down the corridor to our right. For as far as our lights could cast, there was gold. But this wasn't raw, dirty gold. By the looks of it, it wasn't even natural. No, this had been placed here.

“But...but there aren't any mines here. This can't be...” I quickly turned around and ran in the opposite direction, through a small underpass and into the opposing corridor. Nothing. Nothing but rock and dirt could be seen. Turning around, I ducked and exited the passage and ran toward the others.

“Hey Hugo, should we call...” Kit mumbled as he took out his receiver and started to dial. Kit came from a well-to-do family and his timid nature only amplified the sense that he'd been entitled and sheltered.

“We need to leave this place...” I said. Things weren't adding up. I started to back away from the cave toward my rope. I gave it a tug, strung it through the rungs at my waist, and began to ascend.

“Wait, but...” Jacques stuttered as he also began his ascent.

“Now!” I yelled and turned around to give him a hand signal-thumb extended, wiggling. Immediately he began scaling the wall ever more rapidly and I could see Kit down below slowly putting away his equipment. “Hurry the fuck up Kit,” I bellowed as I reached the top of the tunnel. Drawing my pistol and flashlight, I searched for the exit, but our lamp had flickered out. Lighting another flare, I turned around and helped Jacques over the edge and looked over to make sure Kit was doing fine.

“Hugo, what the fuck!? Why...” Jacques began, but I quickly cut him off.

“Jacques, did you see it? The gold, all that fucking gold. That isn't ours!”

“Calm down, Jesus. We can take it, we need all...”

“IT'S NOT OURS. Don't you understand? Didn't you feel it down there? Why was there another tunnel, empty? The purple haze? The goddamn water!? Water! There can't be water here. Where are we?”

“Ummmm...”

“I don't fucking know, but this part of the planet has no water. There's no aquifer nearby! Something's wrong, very wrong. We need to leave.”

“You're just paranoid Hugo; we could make a killing if we brought that back with us...”

“Shut up, just the fuck up. You think we're getting back home? Fucking retard. Go help Kit.”

I continued looking around for the exit and couldn't find anything. Then, a split second flicker alerted me to the location and I ran over, threw another flare through the hole and stamped out the old one. Red light flooded the entrance and I looked behind to see Jacques and Kit sprinting toward me, their eyes wide.

“Hugo, go! We saw someone down there! Holy fuck, you were right. What the hell is this place?”

I jumped up and out, drawing my pistol along the way. I peered into the darkness around us. Above me the moons shone bright, as always, and I could barely make-out our vehicle in the distance. Kit, then Jacques, climbed out of the hole. As soon as they were clear, I tossed a grenade inside and we ran. The darkness was pierced with a ray of light momentarily followed by an obnoxiously loud roar and then all was silent and Night's cloth once again enveloped us. We made for the car and clamored inside. I revved the engine and gunned it back to the ship.

“So, you found gold?” We were greeted with the same snarky comments by everyone who listened. No one believed us. No one wanted to. Even as their captain, my words on this particular matter held no special status. We couldn't find gold here; it was a dead place. But we stayed. We had to, there was no way back. We were stuck here, on this dying planet outside the galaxy. But hope remained that they would one day send a ship to retrieve us. But that hope was dying fast. No one would find that wormhole, or whatever the fuck it was, yet alone figure out how to use it. The engineers had been working on how to fix our ship, the ETA always being weeks or months off.

“So, what do you think? We might be able to go back with more people and at least ID the stuff, right?”

The star that held this system together was dying as well, long past it's prime. It's red light barely reached us and what little did was normally blocked by the many moons orbiting this hell-hole. Night. It terrified most, but we'd gotten used to it. On most planets, the night signified death, the awakening of mutant animals that lived on our terraformed worlds. But nothing lived on this scorched rock, so we were safe...

We threw our packs onto the car and jumped inside; it creaked a little and took a couple tries to get it going. "We're heading back. We're going to settle this," I yelled over the roar of the engine. I'd gone a bit crazy, obsessed with the idea that there might in fact be raw gold on this planet. If I brought some back, the crew's morale would be sky high.

"Why don't we bring others along...I'm scared of that place. We saw someone else down there as we were leaving! Remember!?" Kit said, clutching his pistol.

"You were seeing things, there ain't anybody but us on this planet," I responded and pushed my feet to the floor. Kicking up a storm of dust, the car lurched forward.

We arrived at the place, the earth around it still bearing the burn marks from my ill-advised grenade toss.

"Brilliant, and how do you propose we get back in?" Jacques said and began climbing out of the car.

"Get out the shovels."

"Really?" Kit piped in, he hated manual labor. I stared at him just long enough for the silence to become uncomfortable.

"Does my face read 'I'm fucking kidding' right now? Yes, get the goddamn shovels."

We began to dig. Kit was having a hard time of it and Jacques constantly grumbled. Slowly but surely the ground gave way. The red flare flickered back and forth in the night wind, giving the scene an eerie look. In the distance I could hear what sounded like howls, but when I stopped digging to hear, they faded to nothing. I looked over at Jacques several times; his face was expressionless and beads of sweat had begun to roll down his face. Suddenly I heard a yelp and turned around.

"Jesus! Where the fuck did Kit go?" I turned toward Jacques, but he'd already rushed past me toward the hole.

"Calm down, he just fell into the cave. Let's go," Jacques said as he secured his pack and jumped down into the hole. Grumbling under my breath, I followed.

The place was as we'd left it, dark and slightly humid. Lighting a flare, I tossed it in front of us and began to walk toward the edge. Peering over, nothing could be seen through the darkness and I lit another flare and tossed it down. It flickered for a bit and a slight breeze could be felt as it went out. Kit stood a bit back, his gun drawn as he looked nervously about with his flashlight scanning the walls in jerky arches. Jacques walked over to the edge as well and took out a small orb. Twisting it, he threw it over the edge into the darkness below. Nothing happened for a couple of seconds, then a light brighter than any I'd seen in ages pierced the darkness.

"What the...why do you have that?" I demanded and looked over to see Jacques smile as he began to drive his stake into the ground.

"Think just because you're the *captain* you get all the goodies?"

I reached into my pack and pulled out the ropes and other equipment and began preparing for the descent. Kit didn't look to be having any of this and sat down near the edge. A couple minutes later the ropes were secured and we began to rappel down. Kit stayed where he was and watched.

“Guys, I don't think we should...”

We ignored him and began rappelling down and hit the ground a minute later. Jacques and I pulled out our guns and I signaled for him to go right—where the gold pile was last time. Walking towards the cave, we peered inside and saw...nothing. Not a trace of the mountain of wealth that laid there before. Jacques turned to look at me and the blood immediately left his face.

“What? It's not that big a deal, we might have just been imagining...”

“Shut up and look behind you,” Jacques whispered and pointed over my shoulder. I slowly turned around and suppressed a yelp. Two white orbs hovered in the darkness opposite us, the blinding light from the orb appearing to cease at the entrance to the other cave. I looked back at Jacques then at the orbs, they'd shifted slightly to the right and I saw them disappear and re-appear momentarily. I began to perspire and it took all the concentration I had to reach in my back pocket, pull out a grenade and silently release the pin. *One...two...three...*, the seconds ticked by and my heart began to stop. *Four!* The grenade rocketed towards the otherworldly orbs.

“Grenade!” I yelled and jumped toward Jacques, knocking him to the ground just as the cave exploded. The breath went out of him and I dragged him up after several seconds. He was mumbling something incoherent. I fought through the dust, found our ropes, and guided his hands onto his.

“Up, up, up!” I screamed and slapped Jacques on the face as hard as possible. He looked at me then snapped out of his dazed and began to climb. I followed suit. Half-a-minute later we reached the top and as we were about to climb over, something big flew over the edge and hit the wall opposite us. A screech was heard and a loud thud below extinguished the orb's light.

“What the fuck was that?” I looked over at Jacques. He just stared at me, his eyes wide and his face white. Fearing for Kit, I quickly crawled over the edge. He stood near the back of the cave opening, his gun drawn. He looked completely gone and as I rushed toward him, he pointed his gun at my heart.

“Code? Give me the fucking passcode!”

I stopped, confused for a second. No one had asked for a passcode since we visited the Outer Sectors. I fumbled through my mind and quickly dug it up.

“Figs...”

“That isn't the whole thing!” Kit screeched and I could hear the pistol's trigger compress.

“in a winkle. You fuck-tard, I wasn't finished,” I yelled and Kit immediately lowered his weapon. I pointed towards the edge. “What was that?”

“You playing some game on us you sick fuck,” Jacques said and tried to crack a smile as he walked towards Kit. Kit was still expressionless and he occasionally gripped his gun tight

and lifted it in front of him. I eventually disarmed him. Then suddenly, Kit was back with us and he jumped into the air.

“We need to leave! Something attacked me. I don't know...fuck, what the hell was that? I couldn't really see...it had eyes. There was no life in them, like two flashlights floating in the darkness...”

Looking at Jacques we both gave a silent ‘oh-my-fucking-god’ and immediately ran towards the hole and crawled out. Turning around I reached down and helped Kit up and out then began running towards the car. Upon reaching it, I flung open the door and shoved my finger into the ignition. The engine failed to start. Not a sound was heard. Groaning, I got out, quickly popped the hood, and jumped back at what I saw. The engine had been removed, a clean cut with pipes and wires the only indication of its previous existence. Jacques and Kit came over and saw the carnage. They looked at one another then back at the car.

“What the fuck? How does this happen,” Kit blurted, his voice cracking a bit. “Give me back my gun. Hugo. Give me back my gun!”

“What did I do to deserve this shit?” Jacques said and drew his pistol once more.

“I bet someone from the ship is getting a kick out of playing games with us,” I smiled, trying to remain calm. There was no fucking way my crew did this. “Guess we're walking back. Grab your stuff.”

I slammed the hood shut. We got our back-up packs from the back and threw them over our shoulders. As we followed the car's tracks back to base, I heard a howl in the night.

“Hey guys, stop for a second,” I said and stood still. There was nothing.

“Give it up Hugo, we're just imagining things. The night does that to people,” Jacques said and continued walking.

“Yeah...” I said and peered into the darkness behind us. I swear that the air shifted, but it was only for a moment. “...you're probably right.”

In the Valley of Death

7,042 AD | Location: Unknown | Galaxy: Unknown | Log: Hugo Light

I looked down at my hands and jumped back several feet. There were no streams nearby, no source of water I could wash away the blood...and the memories. Strewn about, a piece here, a bit there, were bodies. Or what remained of them. The blood still flowed from some, their life force slowly leaking from them. To my right lay a rather beautiful women, her sparkling auburn hair splotched red and her form-fitting uniform torn to shreds. Her head was raised by the log she'd fallen beside and I realized her eyes were looking straight at me, a smile on her face. Her eyes were beautiful, a hazel like no other. My heart frozen before I realized there was no life there, that smile a grim aftermath of her death. Natalie...she, of all people, should have survived this. She *knew* about them.

This opening in the field had seemed like a good idea. We'd piled up bags and other material to defend ourselves against...something. No one had seen the damn thing(s?), yet alone heard them. We'd only felt a bloodlust, one stronger than anything we could imagine. We'd found them near the gold, little surprise there. At first we just ran and hoped that they would eventually give up, but it seems tenacity and hunger are their prime traits. I continued to walk in the direction of the last vehicle I could remember worked. As I went to open the door, I heard a moan behind me and jumped several feet in the air.

“Hugo, Hugo, help me...,” I looked over my shoulder and saw a man lying on the ground, his hand severed. With a start I realized it was Jacques and rushed over.

“What happened!” I cried and tore off a part of my shirt and wrapped it around the bleeding stump.

“Haha, did the beast knock you that hard?” Jacques quipped and I grinned that his trademark humour was still intact.

“Maybe...seems like we're the only ones left,” he nodded and I helped him to his feet and into the car. I pressed my finger on the scanner and pressed the ignition, nothing happened. We looked at each other and smiled. “Surprised? I don't think cars are our thing.”

We jumped out and I popped open the hood to see the familiar sight of the engine cut clean out. To this day, we've never figure out why they always did that. Doesn't matter. I walked over to the trunk and pulled out the food packs that were always kept there and threw one to Jacques. He caught it and pulled a small pad from his pocket and pointed to my left and began walking in that direction. Without a word I followed, we needed to get back to the ship and find a way to repair it. It, and StarsEnd, were our only ticket out of this hell-hole. This empty galaxy of horrors.

The brush was getting thicker and night was fast approaching. We'd assumed the craft was much closer and not carried enough with us to last more than a couple days. For some fucking reason this planet had plants. With all that was happening, we'd kind of went along with it. But it now seemed quite absurd. We'd never-never-encountered forest in the Universe that weren't made by man. Unfortunately, most of the plant life here was poisonous or made your

stomach churn. Before leaving I'd bandaged up Jacques's arm and put some ointment that should drive off infection, but you never knew on these alien planets what would get you. It was odd, and in retrospect quite arrogant, of humans to assume we were all that existed in this universe. There was always the assumption that yes we would encounter life, just not *intelligent* life.

“Yo, Hugo, want to setup camp soon, we can't wander like this through the night. We'll take turns on watch,” Jacques said as he dropped his pack on the ground near him.

I nodded and pulled the tent out of my pack and started driving stakes into the ground in a nearby clearing. The night always fell more rapidly and deeply than anticipated, for all the stars in this galaxy seemed to be dying. Looking up I could spot maybe twenty real twinkles, the rest was a red haze. I quickly threw the tarp over the haphazard shelter and signaled for Jacques to enter. Drawing my pistol, I sat against a nearby tree and stared off into the darkness. My mind began to wander...

Linda looked at me and smiled. I never got tired of that look nor her infectious laugh. There were people who'd get on your nerves if they talked for hours on end, but I looked forward to such occasions with her. Her jet black hair and bright red lips, a style she enjoyed, didn't always complement her rather pale skin. Though, she had green lipstick on today. Not sure where she procured it. She reminded me of the vampires people used to obsess over. But she had so much life in her that it rarely crossed my mind. We'd been journeying between stars in this deranged galaxy for a year now and some of the crew was doubting we'd ever find anything. It was crucial we did, our ability to recycle the food, air, and other resources was fast running out and without proper navigation, we had no way of knowing the exact time to a nearby system. However, we had no idea if anything life sustaining existed out here. Slight problem.

“What's bothering you Hugo, is it my sexy new look?”

I snapped out of my thoughts and leaned over to give Linda a long, deep kiss before rolling her over on the bed beside me and bringing her in close. “Far from it, just thinking.”

“About the crew right? Take your mind off it, there is nothing you can do now.”

“But do you see their eyes? They've become like when we were in the Outer Sectors and we couldn't find any gold. They crave materials, not adventure. But only that can keep you going in the end.”

“No Hugo, not everyone is like you. Lights are an adventurous bunch, but don't mistake your inner fire for something common to others. Hell, I don't even like adventure...” I looked over at her, raising an eyebrow. Keep in mind, this was the person who did a flyby on a black hole, used to race through asteroid belts, and hyperspace in random direction searching for something to entertain her.

“Haha, come on, have you become that humourless? But you have to agree. These stars are all dead and the sky's becoming more black each passing day. There is no adventure here, only entropy and a slow death.”

I picked Linda up out of the bed and onto a nearby table and ran my hand up her thigh. “You

mean life, right," I smiled.

"Haha, not today," she said, pushing my hand away and walking towards the bathroom. This galaxy was killing everyone, even the most optimistic were having doubts and no matter how we tried to pass the time, that dreadful thought always came back. What if the things we'd escaped from were real? What if we died here, in this cold, far-off galaxy? And who would find us if we did? The sound of the shower cut through my thoughts and I looked up, a grin passing across my face.

"Hey Hugo, where are you? I have something much more entertaining than those thoughts of yours in mind..." Linda purred. So not everyone had changed...

I woke with a start and aimed the pistol in front on me, safety off, finger on the trigger. But nothing was there and I took a couple deep breaths to slow my racing heart. I heard rustling in the distance. A shakes of the head brought me back. I quickly went to the tent and shook Jacques awake.

"What, what," he looked around, a bit groggy.

"Sshhhh, someone's here," I whispered and pulled his gun out for him. We exited the tent and slowly made our way to the underbrush nearby. The rustling grew louder and finally a man came stumbling through. His face was mangled and he walked with a limp. The heavy pack he was carrying probably didn't help. Jacques was about to holler when I put a hand on his shoulder.

"What the fuck are you doing!," I whispered and pointed to the man's uniform. It wasn't ours.

"Well that's new. Since when did they send rescue squads to other galaxies," Jacques looked at me as a slow horror began to grip his face. "Unless..."

"I was thinking the exact same thing."

"Fuck, what should we do?"

"Tail him."

The Gates of Hell

13th Millennium

Our Fathers' Sins

4th Millennium

Destroying Stars

4,500 AD | Location: Unknown | Galaxy: Milky Way | Log: Capitan

Our ship approached the star, its surface rippling. It was beautiful, in its own way. The surface grew and contracted rhythmically, a study in contrast, blue bumped up against red, purple butted heads with green. Little flares could be seen from time to time, licking the cosmos and then receding back. I looked at my chief mate, Jole, and bellowed over the din of the ship, "You ready?"

"Hell yeah I'm ready, let's do this!"

"Wait for the orders."

We continued to pace around the ship nervously. It had been awhile since we had been on a mission like this, destroying stars. It'd been attempted several times before. However, to the disappointment of many, each star destroying mission had failed without so much as causing the stars in question to bulge. But we had learned and the calculations had been corrected. If this dwarf was overloaded just right, we could initiate a space-collapse and create a 'node', as the physicists were apt to call it. Node or not, this was a slightly ludicrous endeavor.

"Command has arrived, we're clear."

"Fire."

A small beam of light left the ship and streamed toward the star. Then another beam was released. And another. Like those annoying blinkers that ships use when flying over cities, thin beams of light tore through the heavens and pierced the star. It began to change; blue began to dominate red and purple absorbed green. Soon, it was a bright blue ball, growing and contracting more rapidly as the beams continued to penetrate its surface. Then, it began shrinking and shrinking, to impossibly small sizes. And then it happened. It disappeared.

"What the fuck!?" Jole yelled and looked at me, suddenly nervous. This wasn't supposed to happen.

As I reached over to turn on the intercom, I was blinded by a burning light. Sweet Jesus, there was light like I had never known. Reeling back, I suddenly, we remembered, *10 parsecs*. Lunging around, I found the console and forced my eyes as close as possible. Through a blurry haze, I saw what I already knew. "4 parsecs to nearest celestial object". I didn't have time to express horror as we were engulfed by the oncoming shockwave...

Outside the Heavens

~4,500 AD | Location: Unknown | Galaxy: Unknown Galaxy | Log: Captain

I awoke with a jump and looked around me. Bodies were shrewn about and a disgusting smoke filled the cabin. Trying to get up, a sharp pain immediately drove me back to the ground. To my right I could see Jole attempting to get up, a piece a metal had pierced his arm and he was bleeding. I could see his lips moving, but barely a word was audible. Reaching into my left jacket, I pulled out an adrenaline stick and drive it into the side of my neck. Blacking out, I came to wide awake and immediately covered my ears—people were screaming and every conceivable alarm had gone off at once. Jumping up, I darted towards the console and checked that the MassGens had been turned off, they were an enormous drain on a ships power. However, on my way there, I caught sight of the ship's status report and my eyes opened wide. Everything registered green! That wasn't possible, we'd just been hit by nova...

“Sir! Captain, are you alright!?” I turned around to see Jole running toward me, his teeth clenched tightly together. “Not sure what happened, but it doesn't appears like any major damage occurred.”

“I know. Look at the console,” I pointed towards the screen. “Appears we...” I looked around at the scene before me. “...the ship suffered no harm.”

We continued to press dials and buttons, making sure everything was stable. It was quite remarkable, really, how well everything was holding up. We continued to run through various tests, passing all, and I was about to send Jole to the med station when a female communications officer screamed. Startled, I ran over then realized nothing was wrong with her, but she sat with her hand on her mouth and finger pointed at the screen. Looking up I also yelled, but in an entirely different tone.

“Honey, that cannot be right, check the equipment...” I commanded and stared at the screen once more. “That is not right at all,” I mumbled as I walked toward the viewport at the front of the cabin. Peering through, nothing could be seen but blackness and an occasional twinkle, the exact opposite of what I'd ever encountered. It was a darkness so encompassing, so inky in its unwavering solidity that it gave me a chill. It was the type of dark you encountered in mental torture boxes. A shiver went down my spine.

I sprinted over to the comm station and I looked over the communication officer's shoulder at the screen—nothing had changed. Jole staggered over and also gave a yelp; looking over my should I could tell he tried to do a fist-pump but failed, the metal still firmly lodged in his right arm. His eyes were wide open and a smile that hinted at bottomless fear started to creep across his face.

“So, we're...”

“...outside the galaxy? Appears so...”

End of Preview

We've only just begun...

Appendix

Characters

Description of the different characters, their backgrounds (age, planet, etc.) and any critical information about them regarding the story.

3rd Millennium

Canis Light

Age:

One who thought of JumpNodes but abandoned the idea. Helped Aime find the actual transcripts.

Aime Red

-Age: 30

-Had the original idea for the JumpNodes while reading *Collapsing Stars*.

-She doesn't abbr. anything, more eloquent and long-winded.

4th Millennium

Captian

Age: 29

Capitan of the crew that leaves

Kind of cocky. Eventually humbled by the discovery of what is aboard his vessel.

Jole

Member of the crew that traveled outside the galaxy

7th Millennium

Hugo Light

Born on Earth, son of a wealthy trader

White hair, blue eyes, pale skinned

Curt with his speech, uses a lot of abbr. and slightly improper grammar.

Jacque

Resident technician; he was average at what he did but made up for it with humor and an unwavering tenacity.

Born

Kit

Came from a well-to-do family and his timid nature only amplified the sense that he'd been entitled and sheltered.

Linda

Girl friend of Hugo that journeyed with him to Filugori and was killed in the unknown galaxy.

Will Light

Hugo's father.

Natalia

A crew member who knew the truth about Hugo's adventures in the Outer Sector.

13th Millennium

PeregrineFalcon

Bi's ship

Bi Sky

Born on Damascus II.

Ri Klo

Comm for Bi.

Ni Ji

Second mate for Bi.

Ig 1 (aka Emydee)

Annoying as hell robot.

Eji Sky

Wife of Bi, she is taken and tortured before rescue.

Mon Rona

Gates of Hell, change his name. Siska leader and one of the main antagonists.

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