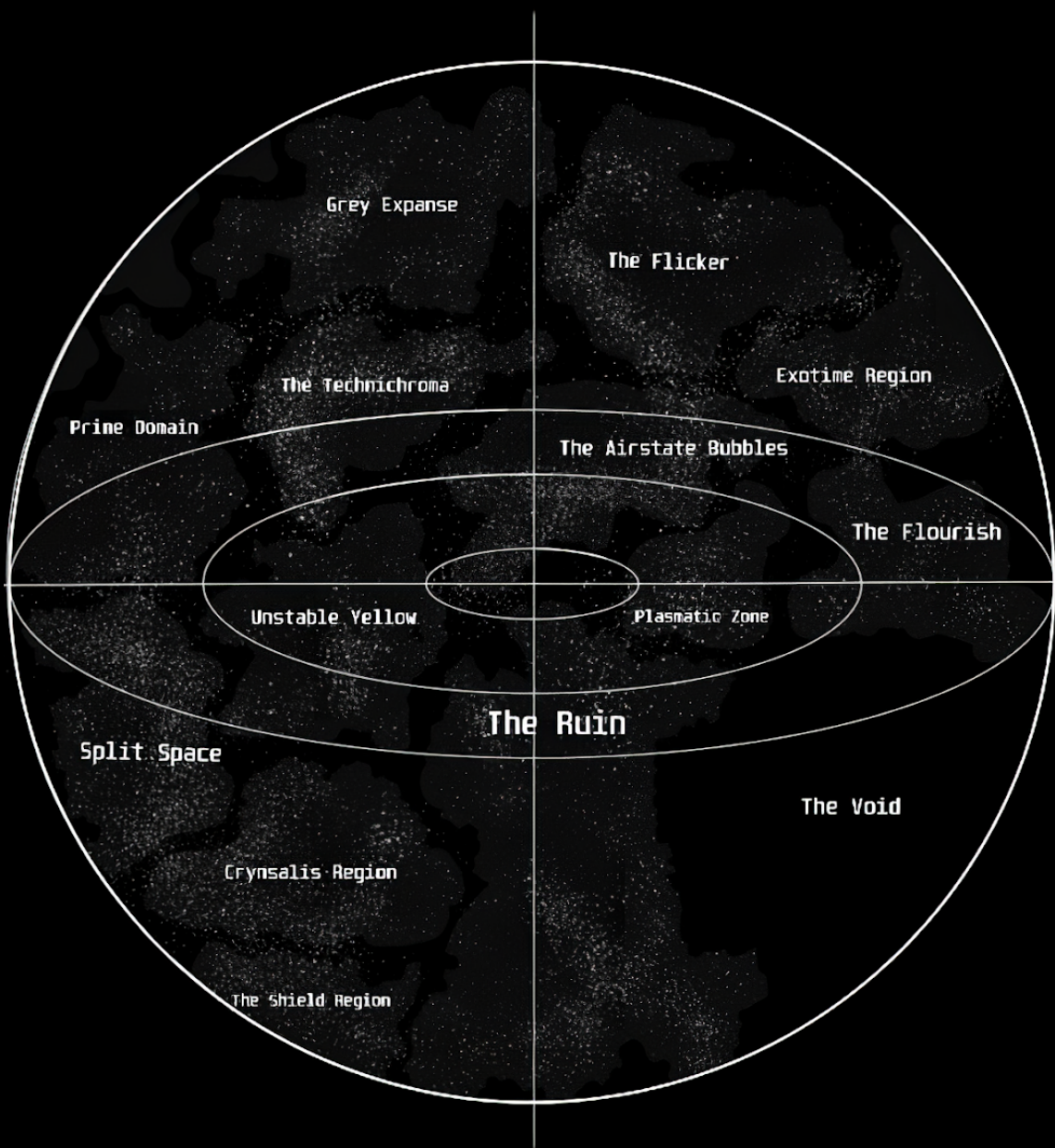


The Spaxium Mine



Mataeus Montez

(This is the demo version of this book. In order to read the full thing, you must purchase it)

The Spaxium Mine

Escaping Entropy Sec. Two
A Blood Lake Story

This book is the culmination of over 3 years of effort in scientific research and the from-scratch design of the universe, world, creatures, periodic table, laws of physics, storyboard, environment design, character design, and almost everything else. This is my largest project, although the size in page count doesn't necessarily reflect that.

Research, design, art, cover, printing, storyline and writing by Mataeus Montez

Dedicated to Draven Montez, the best brother I could have ever not wanted when I was 3. Glad my mind's been changed.

Also by
Mataeus Montez
(In favorite order)

Blood Lake
Serenade of the Shattered Cosmos
The Ornamentalists
Dream Journal
The Loophole
The Annual Massacre
Mountainside Story
Fake Ruins
What Happened to Jacob
The Mushroom Plateau

Escaping Entropy:
Serenade of the Shattered Cosmos
Nevers' End (extra)
The Ornamentalists (Short)
Classified (scrapped section, extra)
The Spaxium Mine
<Real (plot is now baked into The Spaxium Mine)

A word from the author:

It's a bit cliché, but for The Spaxium Mine to exist, I cannot give enough credit to the people who have supported me and my writing. From family to teachers, from friends, and even random ass people I see once and never talk to again, it seemed everybody wanted to see me grow up and succeed, and that felt pretty nice. I'm writing this as a thank-you note to everyone that listened to me rant about the crazy shit I was thinking of putting in books, especially my 8th-grade creative writing teacher Ms.Reh because she helped kickstart the Escaping Entropy series.

The existence of this book wouldn't have come without the inspiration for its creation. Back when I attended Wellington Middle School, I had a friend named Skyler who would take the bus with us. We lived diagonally across from each other's houses. We had even constructed a bridge over our back fences into our yards. Though we never used it, we were still really close friends. I used to go over to his house, and he would come over to mine, but when I did, he showed me a Minecraft mod pack called "Blightfall." It's a pack where humanity is dying out, and you need to colonize and explore an extremely distant and hostile planet for the future of humankind. You are Group One, and you need to make the place safe for colonization. This premise appealed to me in a manner so much that it showed up in my dreams and gave me a rough plan of the vibe I wanted The Spaxium Mine to have. In this dream, I woke up in a biodome much like Station A and the ones in the pack, filled with a small settlement of aliens operating in scientific buildings used for studying the outside world. The biodome was surrounded by towering alien plants, oranges, purples and blues, all muted. They had an ethereal quality to them, though they weren't glowing. It reminded me of how small we were. It was like being in the redwood forest for the first time, getting a sense of alienation from the world. A feeling that all you can do is exist without really existing inside of something that is so much bigger than yourself. The purpose of the biodome was to study the world but remain safe from its dangers. When it comes to ideas, they stick in my head for a long time. Then I heard "Iron Pyrite," a song composed by the

indie Norwegian electronic duo Lemaitre, and I immediately knew what I had to do.

Initially, *The Spaxium Mine* followed a large settlement of aliens on the surface world, exploiting land and mining rare resources (spaxium) in a corrupt corporate pursuit of wealth, where the ultimate value of spaxium was entirely artificial. The main character was supposed to be a cog in the system, disregarded and treated like a slave. But he escapes (much like in *Iron Pyrite*) with a large amount of the material to return to his homeland, where he discovers that what he was doing was ultimately for nothing. It wasn't meant to be a comment on anything, as I was still 12 years old, but I do see how it can be relevant to many modern-day issues. Corruption in corporations leads to profits generated from unethical sources, inflating value by bottlenecking the supply chain. And the corruption that comes from the human desire to have wealth. Like the main lyric in *Iron Pyrite*, I wanted this story to revolve around how "All that glitters ain't [isn't] gold."

A lot of my work on *The Spaxium Mine* was done in either my lunch breaks at high school, or in math class or study hall. School is the best place to be creative when bored. At the time of writing this, I kind of miss the days of having nothing to worry about. It's good to get good at something niche when in school.

Spaxium is meant to represent something irresistible, yet be of no value, where it puts people (in this case, the Komlughes) in jeopardy for literally no reason. Curiosity also kills the cat.

When I wrote the extra that's at the end of the book "*The Spaxwood Forest Preservation Pact*," I intended it to take place in an alternate universe of the *Spaxium Mine*. I had left a ton of loose ends untied with the ending (the one before the epilogue) and I remember being dissatisfied with it and knew that it needed proper closure, but the story sat with me for two more years before I could finally be satisfied. The closure I came up with not only ended up improving the story dramatically — to the point where I still can't read it without crying in pride — but revitalized my passion for the story. It had also unexpectedly opened up the possibility that *The Spaxwood Forest Preservation Pact* didn't need to have taken place in an alternate world.

The ending was possibly the most difficult thing to write and structure that I have ever written.

When you join an established Minecraft server, one where all the players are kitted in maxed-out netherite gear, you are to make a choice when they offer it to you. Do you accept and become like them? Or do you choose to stay poor and get up to that level of existence yourself through natural means? The goal of the game is not to beat it; the goal of the game is to experience it.

Patrons!

This book would not be possible without my patrons. You guys show that writing is actually a realistic thing for me to do with my life. Special thanks to my top supporters: Siren Canine, Zach Johnson, and My Geometry teacher from Frederick High School that I vowed to send her all my books for the rest of my life because she genuinely believed in me. Also obviously everybody that preordered this book to make way for my first ever bulk printing.

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Group One — an honor bestowed upon the passengers of Hylla: three beings who would usher in a new era, proving that nothing is unchartable. Group One was on a mission to explore a planet in the middle of the void. A planet rich in elements that had yet to be discovered. The void was so desolate that even after decades of planning, the mission was still widely considered impossible.

Over ninety other distinct cosmic regions with unique elements had been discovered at this point. Yukon was responsible for locating and mapping over a sixth of them. It only made sense that he would want to see his discovery through to its finality.

The mission was simple. Station A would act as their home base, a biodome stocked full of tools and provisions. Since the readings of the planet were from so far away, Julkan programmed software to log and compile recurring planetary readings in order to gradually construct a composite signal from the broken readings as they approached.

Julkan, who was another one of the travellers, had scripted and written almost all of the programs that the ship would run, while Kullbit was the lead ship designer. They had all been specialists in space travel and were nominated for their jobs in a landslide success. It made sense — they were the only ones running.

The ship took over three decades to design and proof, each room designed to be packed with not only the utmost functionality, but convenience. The Komlughs meticulously designed it for weeks. Everything that needed to be accessible was right in the open or in drawers with clearly labelled compartments; the design specified all items to be provided in the places the Komlughs felt they would best fit.

Even though the Hylla was designed for the Komlughs to travel in cryostasis the entire ride, it wasn't necessary. The Komlughs had set wake-up times so they could periodically check their location if they wanted to during their trip.

Julkan's programs proved to be a massive success, having been tested for months on end to chart the substance makeup, among other qualities. Given only the erratic readings from the planet, the program sifted through hundreds of billions of frames to identify similarities. Comparing the readings to known elements, the programs were able to sort just how much the planet defied expectation and calculated an estimate that the planet was composed of at least 19% elements

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unique to the void region. It was the highest concentration ever recorded among any planet in the universe; it was the best possible place to start.

Most of the universe's unique elements hadn't been physically observed, only theorized to exist based on universal laws and the behavior of its elements. Every region-specific element (RSE) had a quality that appeared nowhere else in the universe. These qualities cannot be predicted, only observed. If a domain of planets inside a region carried out laws of physics different from what could be explained with the matter within the central periodic table, it must be because of a regional element. These qualities can range from generating energy from nothing, to freezing time or even enabling localized RSE-based life forms.

Of the RSE's, gyrum was among the most notable. A yellow-gold semimetallate found within the Prime Domain that had nearly 200% conductive efficiency. Though it was rare enough to be valued similarly to a gemstone, the element functioned as a simple but expensive energy amplifier. Because of this, gyrum was primarily used for more important energy matters. Upon threading gyrum into a closed-loop coil, the energy inside can multiply exponentially until it either melts or is harnessed. Though it is unclear how or why this functions, it's theorized that the extreme energy difference across the material is drawn from either latent vacuum fields, entropy inversions, or is some kind of energy wormhole output. It's predicted that entire stars could be made from gyrum that would produce a constant stream of energy to its planets indefinitely. Gyrum has an extremely low melting point, meaning it is far less efficient than most other energy generators. The semimetallate's energy generation requires throttling to prevent it from melting. Because of this, gyrum is only able to generate a little less than half the energy of a pinwheel generator the same size.

Another notable RSE is shield — a material that is indestructible to high temperatures, radiation, impacts, and corrosion. The material is only workable under the operation of a consciousness and its intentions. Shield provides protection to much of the life in its region, forming shells of the RSE to protect them from attacks and work as indestructible weapons or tools. In the possession of conscious intention, shield becomes pliable and can easily be molded into any shape for a wide variety of desired purposes. The material has been

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used in military ops to produce indestructible aircraft, seacraft, and as thermal shields for planetfall or as protection from small debris in high-speed interstellar travel missions such as that of the Hylla.

Yukon's regions were well known, but one still hadn't made sense to all of Lughica. A region Yukon had coined 'The Ruin' that sat on the outskirts of the void. Archeology revealed that its history was fascinating, but nothing too special. It had been extremely powerful at a point, but had been through a civil war that resulted in the disappearance of the species. Fragments from the region's many gigastructures and terastructures suggested an almost cultish dedication to something they deemed 'the final truth.' It was something to die for, but other evidence suggested that it was far too dangerous to uncover. It didn't have any notable RSEs though, so it was largely ignored.

Numerous experiments were theorized to predict qualities based on a region's universal coordinates, but none have ever produced reliable answers — except for a few statistical outliers. The only method was to observe the element directly or collect samples for testing. Yukon managed to devise the only working long-distance quality gauge. These universal quality tests were able to measure properties such as density, conductivity, and reflectivity by measuring light waves and other signals from the region. Although these tests worked a majority of the time, due to the intense signal distortion, none of them worked on the void. But one thing was for certain. Of the RSEs inside the void region, one must be the rarest — not just amongst the region, but in the entire universe. Because each region was theorized as one-of-a-kind, it meant that the void was also one-of-a-kind, and there were no other regions as empty. What little could be found there could only be found there, and this meant that the materials there were extremely valuable to the ever-growing catalogue of elements and descriptions known as the periodic table; their rarity would provide immense profit.

The elements in the center of the periodic table were ubiquitous, scattered throughout the entire universe on its planets in roughly equal distribution. These central elements were apparently the building blocks of the previous universe, allowing the existence of the Komlughs to not conflict in any paradox after their abrupt relocation. The ancients were wise when they chose this dimension;

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their decision is looked back on with endless praise by all historians who learn of its intricacies. They were gods by definition, bringing light to a fallen world once again. But these legends have all been lost to time, so their authenticity is about as debatable as that of any religion.

Some regions hadn't been explored, of course, but Yukon's atomic prediction methods allowed scientists to map them anyway and assign qualities to the elements that could be found there. Each region had only three unique elements; this was known as the triplet rule. So far this conjecture had yet to be disproven.

After endless studying, the team had proven that one of the elements inside the void had a semimetallate structure. A "Semimetallate" element is an RSE that closely resembles metal, unlike semimetalloids or semimetals. These elements are usually high in density and share many of the same qualities as metals. This element, given its property of jumbling light waves into senseless static, was named after the lughic word for chaos and void — spax. Spaxium wasn't normal, though, even for being in a class of elements that aren't supposed to be normal. It seemed to be more unstable than the rest, making it the more valuable resource of the three. The intense interference caused by the spaxium rendered scans almost useless; its true nature would be a surprise. Of the three elements, Yukon hypothesized that the most common of them exhibited a non-structure, which was the reason the void appeared so empty. But because the element couldn't be observed using any of their technology, it hadn't been classified.

The mission's first order of business was to establish Station A. Julkan's program would calculate the landing zone for Station A from inside the Hylla. After dropping the base, the Komlughs needed to set it up as a viable place to live for future arrivals. They would set up generators and farms so they could live comfortably until receiving more supplies from Group Two. They had enough supplies to begin mining, but its purification and packaging would have to wait until the reinforcements arrived. Both missions were expected to take a millennium to reach their target, travelling 400 lightyears into the supervoid to land on Kippet. The void was supermassive, so 400 lightyears wasn't even a dent in the actual size of it.

Group two was scheduled to arrive after group one had fully set up Station A, which was packed with more than a decade's worth of

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supplies, so the 5-month gap was easily doable. Mingtshia was the name of the supply ship group two was using. Before Group One went into cryostasis, they were promised by RED that Mingtshia wouldn't arrive much later since their ships would be flying at similar trajectories.

Hylla was a self-flying craft designed for the void, built to last hundreds of years after the lives of its passengers. It had been equipped with the most advanced generators that could fit in a build of its size, mainly running on nuclear power as it far outdid Gyrum coils in efficiency. The Hylla's design had taken over four decades to finish — Kullbit had only taken over its development, rebuilding it from the ground up to see out its mission into the void. The ship's interior was fully modular, designed to close off any room if a sudden pressure drop was detected. Kullbit styled the orbiter to resemble a black crystal, painting its surface with purple caustics and placing it inside a claw-like apparatus that housed the thrusters and Station A, all of which were built within a large gyroscopic ring to maintain stability as it flew through space. The ring also served as a place for artificial gravity.

The ship was too large to land, so they needed to get it into a stable orbit before deploying Station A. As they woke up from their rest, this would be their duty. Their ship would provide instruction along the way.



Kullbit winced as its body's vitals crept up to normal; it felt weird to be alive after so long. The ship alerted Kullbit to get right to work. It couldn't recall waking up during the trip — but since Cryostasis was still such a new technology, memory loss wasn't out of the realm of possibility. Kullbit had gone under cryostasis before in training, but it seemed to be jarred more than usual. It had somewhat expected this, but the thought that something had gone wrong was hard to shake. The trip should have felt longer.

The Komlughs were technically completely dead the whole time, so it made sense that none of their senses worked, but Kullbit couldn't even comprehend how much time a millennium was.

Even the systems to revitalize the Komlughs seemed rushed, as if the planet had appeared suddenly. None of the Komlughs remembered having woken up during the trip.

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Every hour, the Hylla is supposed to send a progress report of its journey back to the observatories stationed around various planets at the edge of the void, a heartbeat signal, but the signals suddenly vanished. As soon as the Hylla entered the void, radio silence. Not even preceded by a distress call.

RED's mission control sends a signal to the Hylla, but of course, the ship doesn't answer back.



Once out of their cryostatic pods, the ship instructed the Komlughs to keep to their post-travel plans. Each followed through, moving into their spots.

"Planet in bounds. Yukon, you redirect the ship; I'll look out for Kippet," Kullbit administered, watching the blue location estimator lines flash as they analyzed the field of static on the screen, scanning each pop to average out Kippet's general position. It seemed almost frantic as if it didn't quite have the data it needed for a good picture in the time it had left to gather one.

"Alright," Yukon's voice cracked through Kullbit's intercom before clicking out. Kullbit looked toward the IR screen, watching as the planet came roughly to the center.

The planet glitched on the screen, Yukon clicking back in to announce its vexation. "It's tough to steer towards. These glitches appear to be similar to those detected at Prime Observatory. It's cool to actually see them up close."

"Well, I'll just tell you if we're heading for it. With all this static, I'll direct you toward orbit ring 3. We can't observe the planet directly, so we need to get far away just in case the gravity is stronger than we expected. The computer seems just to be spitting out random numbers at this point. There must be a lot of Spaxium here."

Kippet was in sight, but it didn't seem to reflect the locator scan quite as expected. The planet seemed completely different from what the team had observed a millennium ago, being more than twice as massive as their original estimate. A slight deviation was realistic, but the planet was located in the center of a 400-lightyear-wide void. Somehow in the span of just a millennium it accumulated enough mass to almost double in size — an anomaly. What was strange was how the locator scan acted up, detecting false geometric holes that

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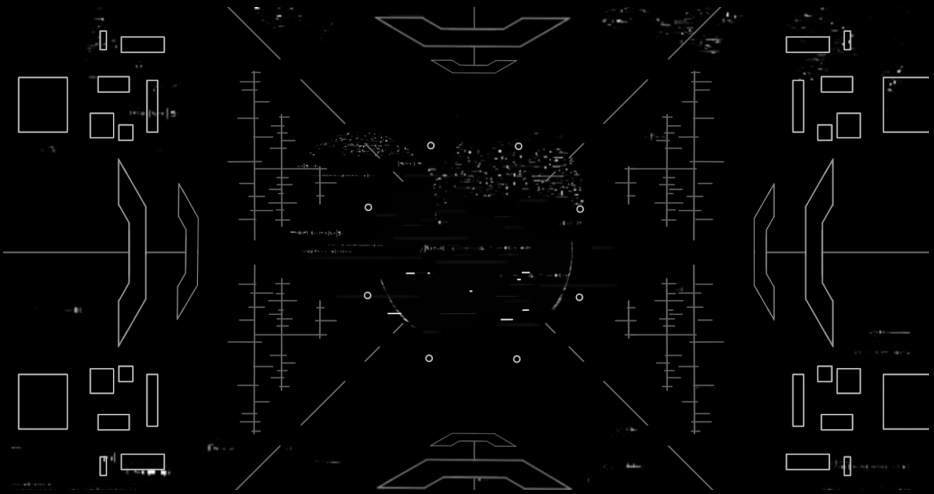
burrowed through the planet and emerged on the opposite side. They would only last for a few frames, disappearing as new ones arrived on screen.

“Crank up the beam intensity,” Kullbit spoke, clearly curious. It listened as a click played through the intercom, Kippet instantly becoming slightly more visible.

“It stopped,” Kullbit cracked.

“Good,” Yukon replied, fixating on his monitors once again.

“Hey!” Kullbit spoke up, “It seems we’re closer than we thought. Crank sideways to enter orbit. We’ll still have enough time to enter orbit 3, but you need to hurry.”



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Chapter 1: Emergency Escape

“The buttons won’t register,” Yukon cracked nervously. “Get someone over here!”

Kullbit clicked off, phoning line 23 where Julkan was. It was reconnecting systems that the Komlughs had turned off during travel.

“Julk, Yuke needs you now. Hylla isn’t entering orbit. Go help him get the connections working.”

Kullbit was stationed in the cockpit — too far to reach them in a reasonable time. Yukon and Julkan were stationed nearest each other toward the accelerators. If they looked out of the windows, they could see Station A. Julkan wasn’t great with hardware, but Yukon could probably walk it through what was wrong.

Kullbit stayed on the call with Julkan, listening as it rushed over to the admin control room. Kullbit had to remain in the cockpit so that it could tell everyone how close they were, but the nagging feeling that it could be doing something chewed at it almost painfully as the error sounds started to blast through the Hylla’s central intercom system.

An explosion shook the ship from the back, followed by the intercom announcing that all artificial gravity systems would be cranked to max to stabilize the ship for emergency mode. Kullbit unstrapped from the piloting seat, wriggling out of the straps to push toward the hallway.

“Julkan. You need to make sure that the button has permission to launch into orbit. You know the admin password. After that, press the button and push the throttle all the way up; it’s too late for any other option. If we enter the atmosphere, enable Hex immediately to prevent the ship from getting destroyed or burned up.”

“I unlocked the perms,” Julkan said, “The button won’t register still.”

“Is it even connected?” Kullbit yelled, flying through the main hall toward the back.

“Yes!” Julkan cracked back.

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The spaceship's intercom came on again, quieting the alarms as it spoke, "Warning, atmosphere incoming in [three thousand] meters. Emergency escape capsules have been unlocked. Head to them immediately. Bottom thrusters will be activated to ensure a safe landing. Good luck."

Kullbit hurried, not to the escape pods, but to help Julkan and Yukon. It could reach them if it went faster.

"Don't leave just yet," Kullbit shouted, frantically pushing off the walls of the halls to get to them.

"We won't," Julkan said, trying to act calm. It wasn't working.

"Activate the reverse thrusters now!"

"Alright, I'll try."

The ship rattled as something began to start up.

"Did you get it?"

"I—I think so," Julkan replied, the blaring of the alarm beginning to overpower its voice. "Insufficient power," It said, sounding hopeless.

"Connect all of the generators then!"

"A thousand meters left; it's only been ten seconds since three thousand. They can't generate enough to get us out, even if they were connected a minute ago. We have to abandon ship."

"We can still try!"

"Six hundred left."

"Alright, fine," Kullbit cracked, the determination in its voice snuffing out like a burning stick pressed into dirt. "Head to the escape pod; tell Yukon to come too."

The personal intercom clicked out, the blaring sound replacing both of the Komlughs voices. Kullbit had made it to the control room but headed past it to reach the escape pod, looking back as it floated down the hall to see both Komlughs emerge and follow. The door to the escape pod had been open. It didn't take long for everyone to fit inside.

Kullbit pulled the lever that locks the escape pod to the Hylla, feeling the room detach.

"Fuel sufficient for escape thrusters. Initiating generator connections," The ship announced

"Well then," Yukon uttered quietly, watching as the thrusters turned on from the window. The escape pod started to fall, pushing all of its passengers to the top. Yukon continued to watch Hylla as its

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massive thrusters came on, the escape pod falling away from its port. Hylla headed for orbit ring 3.

*

After a week of radio silence, RED found that the Hylla reported a planet nearby right before its heartbeat signals suddenly came to a halt. Logically assuming that the ship had crashed, RED launched a mission to look for the Hylla on the nearby planet.

*

The escape pod's thrusters fired on as it neared the surface, fighting against the planet's high gravity to steady its descent. The komlughs braced, their legs buckling under the jolt as they all crashed to the floor. Everything seemed intact until the pod's suit doors began to descend to reveal a set of three space suits and a shattered touchscreen. On closer inspection, they realized it was the remote to drop station A.

Each CO2 tank was capable of storing around thirty hours of air assuming good breathing technique, and there were enough to easily last a month. That wasn't enough time for Group Two to arrive. They needed a plan. The pod was well-packed, but Kippet was still largely unknown. Staying inside would only be safe temporarily; they needed to figure out a way to survive for longer.

Station A was still firmly attached to the bottom of Hylla, waiting to be released by a signal that could only be sent by the Komlughs or activated on board. Julkan had programmed a failsafe into the servers on board to release the base if the receivers picked up signals from the planet that indicated distress, but without the remote, there was no way to send anything.

Yukon and Kullbit were the only ones that were supposed to go down. And they were supposed to do it with Station A falling alongside them. But Hylla was in orbit. Not in orbit one or two, but three. Hylla was far out in space and could even be drifting away slowly.

"Nice job, Julkan," Yukon muttered.

"Hey, it isn't my fault no one knows how to fix the routing. It's too bad Kullbit couldn't get to us fast enough."

"Excuse me? *I* alerted you that we were off-course. If I hadn't been there to advise you that we needed to head to orbit three, we would have crashed."

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“So what do we do now?” Julkan asked into the silence of the room.



It was pretty out the window. The Hylla, a ship they had worked on for their entire careers, was now a lost artifact, reduced down to a blinking red speck. Silhouettes of jaggedy mountains pierced the sky. Once the Hylla dipped behind the horizon, the pitch-black nothingness swallowed them once again.

The Komlughs crowded to the window in the darkness, staring into the black. A few dim lights glimmered behind them, reflecting off the metal window frame. They didn't illuminate much more than the pitch-black sky. The sky was so dark that it was impossible to see anything.

“We have to go out,” Yukon said. “We can't just survive here until Group 2 arrives.”

“You're right. There's probably something out there we can use. Let's get our suits on; there isn't much to do in here,” Kullbit said, turning from the window to go toward the space suits recessed in the wall. They were lit by the soft lights positioned in the corners of the chambers. The power source had been minimal, just enough to run the heat and the suit rack. Kullbit reached in, unhooking its suit from the wall. The other Komlughs reached in to do the same.

Once suited, Kullbit pulled open the inner airlock door. The Komlughs moved into the room, waiting for Kullbit to raise it back up so that they could lower the second door. After a while, loud clicking came from below the door's slot. The door had gotten stuck, presumably because it had disconnected from the track and had caught underneath the ridge of the opening. Kullbit sighed, reaching down to try and pull the door back up, feeling around for any lip it could use to pry the door out.

“Help me get this stupid thing up,” Kullbit cracked, looking around. The other Komlughs bent down to help it out, but the door had already gone too far into the crack to reach. It was supposed to lock in place and then unlock when powered, but the power had been damaged.

“It's locked,” Yukon said, “without power, it won't unlock. If we can find a repair kit, we can fix the main systems. The backup remote might still work.”

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"It's broken," Julkan added, flipping open a panel to check its components. "I already tried that. Could I get a light?"

Yukon pointed the light on his wrist to the panel.

"Oh," Julkan muttered, "It seems unrepairable, but I'd need to get a closer look when we get back. Let's get going," It said, prompting Yukon to reach down to the floor to open the second door.

Yukon knelt to the floor, Kullbit's light aiding him as he strained to align the door into its track. As Yukon pulled up, the seal on the door gave way, Using the reinforcements on the door as a grip, the Komlughs slid the door up the track with a hideous screech. The endless blackness greeted them instantly, their lights tunnelling through the mist, carving beams through the vapor that had flash-frozen in the air.

Light from their chests bled onto the ground, revealing dull expanse for what was probably the first time. Everything was a shade of gray, accented by a darker black from small crevices and scattered crystalline shards. Tiny pitch-black stones protruded from the ground like knives. The Komlughs suits would puncture if they rubbed against them too hard, so a careful step was essential. The gravity not only weighed down the suits, it weighed down their confidence. It was a wonder it was this strong, especially for a void planet. Somehow, entropy had completely spared this place.

It was a surprise how the place even existed: a planet composed of almost all the matter from a void larger than a galaxy in any direction.

The planet wasn't dead, either. Sure, it was cold enough to freeze air solid, and there was not a star to see, but everything else was there. The calming sounds of wind passing over rocks, to the trickle of liquid flowing through something that resembled a forest — it even sounded like there was some grass rustling in the distance.

The suit intercom clicked on. "Testing one-two," Yukon cracked, prompting the others to join the channel.

"Okay, I think we're all here now. This place is pretty."

"Woah, look up. It seems this planet has life on it," Kullbit announced, pointing its light up to look forward at what appeared to be a field. "Watch your step — the ground isn't too friendly where we landed."

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Kullbit glanced at the screen on its left arm, which displayed the map of Kippet that had been compiled a few days before arrival. The map was created using data collected from a long-range scanner, which also helped determine the actual spaxium concentration. The planet had originally been suspected to be a scanner glitch, too anomalous to be real. A planet nearly the size of Pom, located in a void spanning more space than the observable universe by eye.

It couldn't be real, but there they were, standing on it after sleeping for a thousand years. It would take a lifetime for any distress signal to reach civilization again.

The Komlughs had not planned the trip well. A 5-month gap between any help? It wasn't good. And the mission could have gone worse. The Komlughs had been overestimated.

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Chapter 2: Life on Kippit

“There’s a small vein of exposed spaxium over there. It seems to be relatively pure... which is... strange. We need to be careful getting over there though since the rocks are sharp enough to puncture our suits. If we can collect it, it should be a pretty good sample to study,” Kullbit spoke into the space suit, its muffled cracks coming through to the other Komlughs. There almost seemed to be some static playing through the suits, but none of them really heard it; it just existed.

Yukon, looking directly down at its feet to try and avoid stepping on the stones, was the next to speak. “How are we going to study it? We have scanners, but we don’t have any of the observation tech that Group Two is bringing. We can only collect it for the most part.”

“Oh right,” Kullbit replied. “I guess we could take it anyway and bring it back to the pod to study it.” The chunk looked oddly perfect — its sides carved into sharp planes that mirrored the exact shape they had predicted.

“If you dig for it, you have to be careful about your suit; there are a lot of sharp rocks over there. You may need to clear some of them out with another rock. We came here for mining, but I guess they didn’t think about the suits’ durability that much. There also might be something over in that field. It sounds like there’s a forest a little bit further, but I think we should work on trying to get this spaxium.”

“Hey, look over there!” Kullbit cracked. Yukon turned to Kullbit, who was pointing into the distance, its light shining harshly over a box.

“It fell out of the Hylla. It must have fallen from the storage room, and there’s probably something we could use from it. I’m going to check it out.”

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)



A low rumble rose from within the trees. Julkan and Yukon's flashlights whipped toward the forest. They scoured them heavily for anything that could match the perception each of them had in mind. They stared into the blackness, their lights darting around, thin beams unable to locate a source for the sound. The wind had died down since they had been in the escape pod. Everything was so still. Silence. No wind. Nothing but the sounds of the Komlughs breathing through the intercom and the quiet whirring of the mechanisms in their backpacks. The silence sounded forceful, a false security that hung in the air, just in the shadows their beams couldn't extend to. Suddenly the Komlugh's lights surged, flaring so brightly that the forest in front of them became clearly visible.

Something tall stood in front of the forest, almost the same height as the grotesque trees behind it. Their lights had only illuminated it for less than a second. It looked just like the grotesque

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

trees behind it — if not for the extensive array of huge colorless eyes staring back.

The tree pushed the grass out of the way as it charged, and the lights all burned out in unison, plunging them into the quiet blackness of the world again.

“Shit!” Yukon yelled; he had turned around and booked it.

“Kullbit, run!” Julkan yelled, the intercom breaking off comms for its own announcement.

“Power ins-s-s-sufficient. B-b-backup power source ini-ni-ni-nitiating,”

“What happened?” Kullbit asked, abandoning its path to the box to try to locate the other two Komlughs. Kullbit was the only one who hadn’t seen the figure.

Kullbit stood still, listening to the static in its suit getting louder and louder. It was the only thing it could hear through the intercom. As Kullbit listened, it heard a quiet gallop through the hiss. The gallop grew closer, growing louder fast. Kullbit almost fell backwards in fear, but it managed to turn away and run, listening as the galloping continued to get closer. It pushed harder, using all six limbs to force its body over the unknown surface beneath it. Kullbit wouldn’t have seen less with its eyes closed. The silence of the world pounded on them like hammers as static in their suits continued to rise in volume, getting harder to ignore with every step toward where they thought the escape pod had landed. None of the Komlughs could hear each other in the pounding silence; their only plan was to keep racing into the blackness, every step an unknown.

Julkan popped into the intercom, the signal so weak it could barely supply a shattered message.

“Over here!” It screamed, the gravelly connection snapping into harsh attacking pops, cutting out the second before it could finish. None of the others could tell where the signal had come from, but Julkan started to bang on the escape pod to provide the Komlughs with a destination. The static tried to overcome the banging desperately, a final attempt to deafen the Komlughs from any crutch. They followed the battery, carelessly leaping through the sharp rocks toward their goal.

As Kullbit rushed toward it, colorful hallucinations danced over the blackness as if it had rubbed its eyes too hard, yet they remained

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

wide open, grasping for any sign of reality. The static had mutated into a loud crackly buzz, viciously presenting its fulminating display of sound that completely drowned out the patter of both entities' trampling steps. Whatever was chasing Kullbit was an indeterminable distance behind it. Kullbit ran blindly into the blackness, its mindful steps retiring to make way for its sheer speed. Julkan beat against the exterior louder, desperately calling out for the Komlughs to make it back. Once Kullbit was near, it grasped the push-to-talk of the intercom, suppressing its heaving breaths to speak.

"I'm almost there!" it yelled, unsure if the signal had gone through well enough to be understood.

"Reading clearly!" Julkan replied, "Get in, the door's open," Kullbit squeezed past Julkan and into the escape pod, poking its head back out so it could listen for Yukon.

"Yuke!" Julkan yelled through the intercom, noticing that the wind had picked up again. The static was abnormally loud. Kullbit retreated into the escape pod, sitting down to catch its breath as it held the sides of its helmet to soothe the deafening static.

Yukon cracked through the intercom, popping in and out of connection.

"Don't close it-" It said, a loud sound scratched through, followed by the sounds of Yukon gasping for air. He was louder than the wind.

"YUKON! Do you copy?!" Julkan yelled, waiting for a response as it held its head out of the escape pod, unable to see anything. Yukon screamed, a deafening sound like metal being crushed against itself, a low growl warping it through everyone's intercom.

"System emergency: [Yukon Gymsul] is in critical condition, suffering major blunt force trauma. Medical assistance is required immediately," The intercom spoke clearly; the static began to die down, yet the intercom wasn't finished. "System emergency: [Kullbit Clemmer] has a punctured suit and is far below regulation temperature. Return to safety immediately to patch as soon as possible."

Kullbit looked down at its left arm, noticing that through all the madness, the suit had been slashed. It was so cold that it hurt, and it would get worse if the door wasn't closed. But Yukon was still out there.

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

Kullbit's arm turned rigid, its skin crystallizing over in frost as its blood froze in its veins. Kullbit winced, trying to cut off the blood flow by tightening the loop around its arm. The door was still open, and the sounds of Julkan repeatedly banging on the outside of the escape pod echoed in Kullbit's head. Julkan didn't want to accept that Yukon was gone yet.

Kullbit couldn't patch the hole, but it could almost hold it closed. It couldn't feel its arm at all, but the pain of the intense cold bled all the way up its chest and into its neck, so it tightened the loop more. Kullbit felt as if it would sever its arm if it tightened the loop any more. It silently pleaded for Yukon to still be alive.

A minute later, Julkan gave up yelling, the door slamming shut as it tumbled in.



The moment the door closed, the static on the intercom vanished, leaving the room in complete silence. Gradually, their suit displays flickered back on. The Komlughs inspected them for any anomalies.

"Our generators were fried somehow," Julkan cracked, looking over the power generation graph to see a spike followed by its sudden plummet to zero.

"What fried them must have been whatever that thing was," Kullbit replied, shaking in pain as it tried to catch its breath. It held its arm tightly against its chest, gritting its teeth as the cold pressed into its freezing skin like knives.

"We need heat, and I need water," Julkan stammered,

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

"We have to disassemble the suits to get the Gyrum out. We need this room to be at a safe temperature to take our helmets off," Kullbit cracked,

"I can't see a thing, turn on your light," Julkan said. Kullbit hesitated as it lifted its arm back up to turn on the light. It fizzled, so it tried again, failing. "Light's dead."

"I'll take my heater out; it's already warm enough in my suit and you clearly need it more than me. Here, I'll let you get it," Julkan cracked, turning its back to Kullbit.

"I'll have to do this in the dark... One-armed," Kullbit explored around the back of the suit for the zipper, its thick gloves preventing it from feeling any of what it was searching for. Kullbit found a bump, cognizing it to be the zipper's body. The bridge had bent upward so far that the pull had fallen off. Kullbit tried to get a hold of the object, but despite its effort, it could not budge the slider.

"I can't get it," Kullbit strained; it tried to open the pack, wincing as its arm moved even the slightest amount. It looked for a way to take the pack apart without breaking anything, but It was too dark.

"I need light," It said, continuing to fumble with the pack. The cold worsened, so it grew more desperate. It was sealed so tightly that the only way to get it open was to destroy it.

Kullbit reached over to the seat, wriggling the metal footrest loose and snapping it off. Kullbit plunged the sharp end into the backpack, it reached in, trying to pry it open with one arm. It felt around for the generator, ripping it out once it had a proper grip on it. The lights in Julkan's suit dimmed as its backup power source came into effect. Kullbit held the generator in its arm, inspecting it to see if it had burnt out.

"It's completely fine," Kullbit stated, "It's heating up right now." The loop still had enough power in it to dupe, but it needed to be protected. If both the Komlughs got out their generators, they could supply each other with the power required to generate enough heat to warm the entire room.

"Take mine out too," Kullbit cracked weakly, handing the footrest to Julkan. Julkan did the same, ripping out the generator and passing it to Kullbit. Kullbit inspected it to see if it was burnt out.

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

"The generators are completely fine." It routed the snapped wires together, watching them begin to spark. The sparks were hot, but the noble gas in the air extinguished them almost instantly.

"Are the suits still salvageable after what we did to them?"

"Should be; the backpack doesn't connect to anything inside the suit besides Carbon Dioxide and power. The only thing we severed was the power, which we can likely solder back in place. We still have a chance, although it's pretty slim."

"You know, I honestly don't even want to try anymore," Julkan cracked quietly, feeling Kullbit's arm to see how frozen it actually was. "We've lost too much."

"Oh, come on, you know you're just saying that."

"Maybe I am. But we were just meant to get the ship into a stable orbit and set up a base for Group Two. We weren't the important ones."

"Well, I don't really care anymore. We're the ones that will set up the future for those who come after us. We are the ones that will go down in history for being the first, even if nothing else goes successfully," Kullbit said, smiling in the pitch black.

"None of that matters now."

"Of course not. The only thing that matters now is that we keep pushing. We have so much opportunity for greatness. We can't just rely on Group Two to come along and save us. We trained for this for over 15 years."

"You're one to talk," Julkan said, sighing as it let Kullbit's arm fall back to its side.

"What was that thing anyway? You made it sound like it was alive. I didn't see anything."

"I don't know," Julkan responded, leaning back against the wall. "It started chasing us. It got Yukon; you heard that scratch on the intercom? I don't know what it did to him, but it got him somehow. I think-"

"I don't want to think of it," Kullbit interrupted. "We have things to take care of."

The lights in the suit gradually came back, illuminating their faces. Julkan's face was pale from shock, and Kullbit's was dark from the cold. They inspected themselves for other small rips that needed to be patched, but Kullbit was the only one with a rip in its suit.

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

"You feel it? The room is already warming up," Kullbit turned to Julkan, "We can do this."

The wind returned, but it wasn't as strong as when they had landed. The Escape pod was only about the size of one of the cleaning supply closets on the Hylla, but for two gyrum coils the size of a human hand, warming it up would take a considerable amount of time.

"Remember that box?" Kullbit cracked, wincing as it regained feeling in its shoulder. The pain from the cold could actually hurt now that its nerves were functioning again.

"What about it?" Julkan inquired

"That box was full of electrical components. Mostly gyrum wire and other basic electrical stuff."

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

Chapter 3: Incurable Spaxsepsis

"We still need to go get that box," Julkan said, sighing.

"We have to wait. My arm is hurting even more than when it froze," Kullbit cracked, squirming as it tensed up and winced from the pain. "I- I don't think it's just the cold doing it. My suit feels too tight. I need it off."

"Captain, The room is 200 kelvin; you'll freeze very fast. You're hallucinating."

"Well, the room's just going to get warmer, isn't it? I can just unzip the arm to get a look at it. I don't know if I can handle it being in the suit anymore. It's swelling... A lot."

"*sigh*, Okay," Julkan said, carefully reaching for the opening to start unzipping its arm. "Sit still; this will probably hurt. I'm just going to unzip you." The tear in its suit spread as Kullbit's arm swelled, its skin pale and blotched with black specks where crystallized blood had begun to pierce through like needles. Not only did Kullbit have frostbite, but its skin was tearing from the swelling.

"Julkan, it hurts so much," It whined, clutching its arm.

"Your arm is ripping itself apart... I don't think we can keep it." A long silence followed.

"Well... That makes sense," Kullbit cracked, stunned, but Julkan could sense its heart drop.

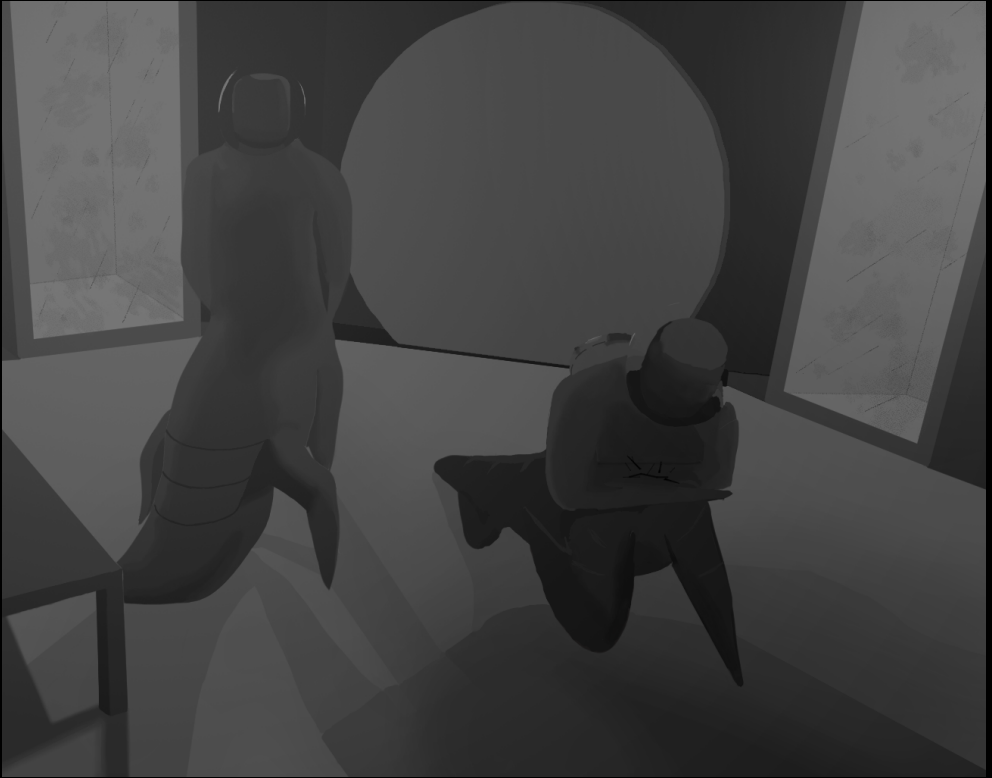
They both sat in silence for a while before Julkan finally spoke up.

"We have to do it before it gets warm enough to turn back to normal. Your nerves are not coming back; they were frozen solid. Your whole arm was. You can't recover from that."

"Okay. Well, what are we going to do?"

"Tighten that loop around your arm real tight," Julkan cracked, looking to the door of the escape pod. "I think I can help."

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)



Julkan pushed the door to the escape pod open, the wind catching it off guard and nearly knocking it to the floor. It had sounded quieter from inside. Kullbit trembled, pushing its arm out through the opening; the cold was sharper in its skin than before, sinking in through its ripped skin and re-solidifying its blood. It started to shake in anticipation, waiting for Julkan to slam the door shut.

“Do it already!” Kullbit yelled, needle-like pain shooting up its shoulder.

“A few more seconds!” Julkan yelled back, trying to be louder than the wind outside. Kullbit began to groan, wondering if the door had enough force to snap through its bone.

“Three... Two... One...” Julkan counted down, the wind outside whipping lashes deep into Kullbit’s frozen arm. It had almost completely solidified. The door creaked as it slammed down, and as it cracked upon Kullbit’s arm, for a moment the roaring wind fell silent. A scream pierced the intercoms, the sudden jolt disrupting the nerves that were still intact. It collapsed, the pain taking all of its strength to suppress.

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

"Damn it, not hard enough. We need to try again," Julkan muttered. Kullbit's shoulder was beginning to go numb from the cold as it glared at Julkan in the darkness. It stood up slowly, shaking on its weak legs as it extended its arm back out of the escape pod. Julkan propped the door open more than it had before. The blackness stared them down, reminding them of their vulnerability. Julkan fumbled with the light controls in its suit, sweeping a beam through the dark to make sure they were still alone, fumbling with the controls a little before pointing its beam out of the door. The wind was so loud that it masked the sounds of static that were beginning to intensify. As Julkan scanned, it caught sight of something white resting in the grass close to the escape pod. Julkan paused, focusing the light beam on the object. It was Yukon.

Surprise struck Julkan as it looked upon his body. He had been only meters from making it back safely. The static cracked, suddenly louder than before. Startled, Julkan grabbed the door handle, quickly bringing it down upon Kullbit's arm, which crumbled into chunks, blocks of ice falling to the ground outside the escape pod as they both retreated away from the door. Kullbit held its shoulder lightly, unwilling to touch what was no longer there.

"You let all the damn heat out again," Kullbit muttered, its voice growing shaky.

"I thought you'd be in more pain," Julkan cracked, ignoring Kullbit.

"Didn't even feel it," it joked, its breath hitching.

"Whatever that thing was—" Julkan cracked, its voice dry. "If I didn't close that door, I think that tree would have got me."

"Was it out there? Did you see it?"

"I don't know," Julkan quavered, "That static was too damn loud. I just had to close the door."

"Once my arm heats back up, I don't think it's going to be pretty," Kullbit pondered, cringing at the thought.

"I can stop it from bleeding, but sealing it might have to wait." The Komlughs waited in the room, listening to the wind outside as it whipped and whistled, throwing small debris against the metallic surface of the escape pod. Julkan reached under the escape pod's seat, dragging out the med kit and a bottle filled with ice. The light from its suit was the only thing illuminating the room; outside the windows,

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

nothing but the Hylla's dim red flash could be seen. Nothing else even existed. The Hylla's light was the last breath of a dying alarm. Even though they worked, their suits seemed to have been damaged. The light had burned out, a result that only occurred if the connection had melted beyond repair. Yet they still worked. It worked, and that's all that mattered. Julkan used its slightly dimmed beam to locate the med kit, pulling out a tourniquet and some bandages to cover the end. The suit could seal around Kullbit's arm if it fumbled with the straps enough and pulled it to a close, but it needed to be capped if it was to be protected. Generating heat was far too much of a problem for the Komlughs to leave to the tiny gyrum coils and suit heaters. That box would be vital to the Komlugh's survival. Hopefully, they could find some more food out there as well.

"Captain," Julkan cracked as it shone its light over Kullbit's mangled stub. "I have to go get that box. Could you reinstall my generator so I can go back out?"

"Sure, but the connection will be bad. Tell me if you get an alert." It grabbed the generator from the floor, pulling Julkan with it and turning it towards the light so it could see better. Kullbit slotted the mechanism into place.

"It's working. While I'm out there, could you warm up something for me? I haven't eaten in millennia," Julkan said, smiling faintly.

"Don't die," Kullbit said, dryly, "or else you'll be the idiot."

Kullbit winced as Julkan opened the door again, holding its arm away from the cold air and toward the gyrum coils sitting in the middle of the room.

"Wait!" Kullbit cracked through the intercom. "I think that thing attacked us because we had lights. Try to stay in the dark. You remember the path. I'll watch your position from the satellite view on my map. The Hylla is just coming back around the planet's horizon, so there should be a signal. The ship is plotting safe spots to set up base since it knows we can't drop base ourselves."

"The transmitter's broken. I'm surprised the receiver still works. I hope it finds a spot nearby to drop base."

"Sounds good. I'll try to stay connected on the intercom for as long as I can." Julkan stepped out of the door into the still air; the wind was gone, as if flicked off by a switch.

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

Kullbit watched the map. The quality was terrible, most likely due to the atmosphere, but it could still see Julkan as it exited the escape pod. Although it was just a small blob within the intense static, it was still a point that Kullbit could recognize. The static moved like waves, as if the landscape was shifting and wrinkling over on itself. Shadows moved in the static — and Kullbit could almost catch small three-dimensional forms bubbling through. Kullbit pressed its lips together, dismissing them with a shake of its head. It was just the wind moving the grass. The Hylla had only one reference point, so obtaining a good map of its topography would be impossible. The intercom cracked, most likely due to interference, and then Kullbit began searching for anything around Julkan to see if it was okay. Julkan had paused; the ruffling sounds from the space suit had ceased. Kullbit remained silent, intently watching the map.

The inside of the spacesuit provided no light. Julkan looked up into the sky, watching as the Hylla's dim lights provided nothing but the comfort that light even still existed. A groan came over from where Yukon's body had been; Julkan remained in place.

"You're good; what are you waiting for?" Kullbit cracked, listening to Julkan's breathing as it slowly sped up.

"Yukon," Julkan stammered, turning toward where Yukon had been, trying to make out anything in the blackness.

"There's a small error on the map; it seems to be about 5 meters away," Kullbit cracked, listening as Julkan exhaled.

"It's the thing," Julkan whispered, its breath too tight against itself to announce its words properly.

"Keep quiet and try to move past it. If it looks like it's noticed you, don't make any sudden movements or try to cry out." Julkan continued to move forward, feeling out in front of it to make sure that every step it made was safe.

"Small rock patch to your right. You have to either go through it or proceed directly next to the tree. I don't want you getting cut up, and I don't think you should take your chances."

"I'll go toward the creature," Julkan said, shaking. It took another step, watching the silhouette with an unbreaking gaze as the gentle breeze caused the plants to sway. The Hylla wouldn't provide light for long, so Julkan needed to hurry.

The Spaxium Mine (Demo)

"I'll tell you if I notice anything. If you make it past the creature, the box isn't that far away."

Julkan continued toward the tree, steering away from where it thought the rock patch had been. The ground was hard to navigate over due to the sharp rocks.

"I really wish they made the boots to these things better," Julkan complained, switching the subject when its boot became uncomfortable.

"Yeah, but they were made for indoor wear. You know, like inside of the base."

"That is true, but how did they not expect us to walk around outside a little bit? They could have at least given it better puncture protection or another layer."

"Keep going," Kullbit said, the room becoming warm enough that it was comfortable. Its arm had been damaged so much that the pain was strange, almost as if it wasn't pain, just a constant reminder that something was wrong pulsing through its torso.

Julkan made it to the base of the entity; its movement had slowed down so much Kullbit couldn't even tell that it was moving from looking at the map. Julkan touched the base of the tree, halting as it waited for something to happen.

"I'm gonna see if I can fix the remote to drop station A," Kullbit announced, unaware of Julkan's situation. Julkan heard what seemed like troubled breathing coming from beneath the creature. It was Yukon's breathing. He had been dead a moment ago, his vitals all none. How was he alive? The tree didn't move at Julkan's tap, and after a while, it continued. Julkan knew it was a trap; it knew Yukon wasn't really alive. Something connected to the intercom. Through the bad connection, a groan cut through—Yukon's voice.

Kullbit froze, The static had grown heavier. "Julkan..." Silence.

"Do not engage."

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