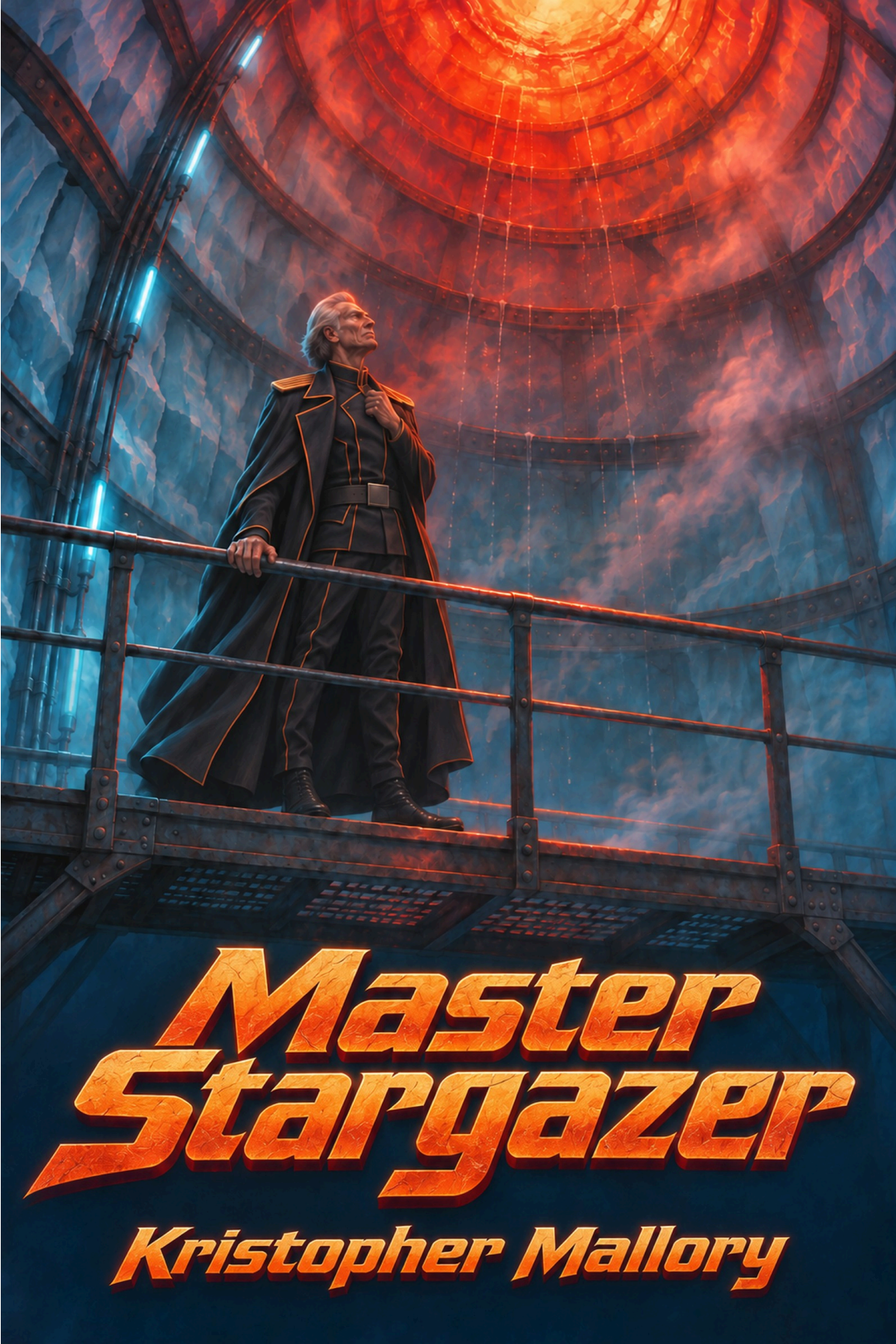

Master Stargazer
Kristopher Mallory

Master Stargazer

by

Kristopher Mallory

Master Stargazer

A short sci-fi story.

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www.StealthFiction.com

Master Stargazer

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Dedication:

Dedicated to Autumn, for always giving me feedback when I need it. Thanks.

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Master Stargazer

“Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains.
~ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*

Time and Place

Near the core of a spiral galaxy consisting of four hundred billion stars, a unique planet prepares for exodus…

Master Stargazer

Deep below the polar ice cap, the last great research station stands on high alert. Hundreds of the station's personnel fiercely do their part to manage the impending disaster. They had practiced countless times; every worker drilled repeatedly until they were able to perform their duties with a cold, robotic grace.

Now the time for drills is over; the culmination of the Stargazer's Thousand Cycle Plan is finally upon them. To the relief of all, the training held. There's no hesitation. Not a single worker deviates. Each member knows the consequence of failure is total destruction.

While the station's personnel fight to save the planet's population, the forty-second Master Stargazer stands over his garden, watching drops of water bead across leaves. He gently touches the seed pouch of his favorite flower, and the realization that the time has come hits him with unimaginable force. Fully aware that his heart is beating dangerously fast for a man of his age, he repeats the familiar mantra:

I must calm down if I'm to see this through.

As the research station commander, Master Stargazer's job is to ensure all aspects of the Thousand Cycle Plan remain on schedule, and yet, he's the only staff member not where he's supposed to be. His place is on the command deck, but grief had overtaken him, so he had slipped into his office to give a final farewell to his beloved flora. For years, those plants had reminded him life exists somewhere high above the ice cap. Even now, they remind him it needs to be preserved.

A portrait of Master Stargazer's family catches his attention, draining the little courage he has left. He slips into his chair, and silent tears fall freely from his old eyes. Seeing his family saddens him, but it's the terrible secret that pains him.

I wish I had not lied to you. There is no other way, but I should have told you the truth. Why does this duty fall on me?

Master Stargazer often wondered how his predecessors coped with the hopeless feelings that accompany the great burden. Not all of them had, he knew.

A shadow whispers from the doorway, “Sir?”

Master Stargazer turns toward the voice. “How long have you been standing there?”

The figure steps into the light, revealing the slender form of Beta, one of Master Stargazer’s assistants.

“I’m sorry I disturbed you, Master Stargazer, sir,” Beta says. “I only just arrived.” She points to the picture displayed on the view wall. “They are safe, sir. Their ship has made it to the outer ring with all the others.”

“Assistant Beta, I forbid unannounced intrusions. Nor should I have to suffer your presumptions. Why must a woman of your position have to be told this?”

“My apologies, sir. In my excitement, I failed to observe proper station protocol. I thought you should know the status of your family.”

Beta, the youngest of the three Stargazer assistants, often displayed an excitability that irritated the old Master Stargazer, especially when she made simple mistakes like bursting into his private quarters. Despite this, she had earned his respect. Not only had she been a valuable asset, but she was one of the few willing volunteers. Unlike the conscripts, she had joined the academy knowing she would die at her post.

As Beta stands at attention, waiting for her reprimand to continue, Master Stargazer notices for the first time how young she actually is, and his anger subsides.

Master Stargazer sighs. “Thank you, Beta. I’m happy to know they made it off the planet. What news of the other ships?”

“The final sequence of class-three’s left the atmosphere. Smaller non-kingdom vessels are still evacuating. They’re performing symbiotic grouping maneuvers, attaching themselves to the larger hulls.” Beta pauses. She looks away. “The official launch window is now closed, and unclassified ships no longer have the capability to make it off planet.”

“What percentage of the population made the evacuation?”

“Over ninety-seven percent. We did it, sir.”

“Wonderful, absolutely wonderful. Accompany Alpha and Gamma to the control room. Authenticate launch stage completion immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

Beta performs an about-face and marches away.

Master Stargazer takes one final look at the portrait of his family. His wife, two daughters, and his young grandchildren are on one of the massive starships, somewhere in the void of space, far from the doom about to befall their planet. This knowledge does little to comfort him.

I wish I could be with you.

No one else is capable of doing what needs to be done. Ensuring the continuation of life falls solely on him. Like his forefathers, he needs to overcome the challenges, or all will be lost.

Newfound resolve grants him the ability to act like the commander once more. He stands tall, pulls his uniform tight, and exits his quarters. He does his best to exude confidence for the benefit of every soul, both in the station and on the evacuation ships.

While walking to the command center, Master Stargazer often reflects on the past. To understand where you are, you must know where you come from, his father had once told him. For a Stargazer, all roads lead to the Thousand Cycle Plan. It rules every aspect of their life.

During the time of the four nations, over a thousand cycles ago, all men followed the word of the Creators. Only in interpretation did the four vary. The nations had found equilibrium between the slightly different rules based on the original doctrine of Star-worship that had spread some three thousand cycles prior.

Then the world changed when a young renegade refused the path of any nation; he had refused the concept of Star-worship.

The renegade suggested that all points of light in the sky were the same as the fiery Sacred Star that the nations all devoted themselves. He believed they should be studied, not worshipped. Most shunned and hated

him for his radical ideas. Yet he observed and learned from the points of light.

One evening, a bright flash changed everything. When the sky had darkened once more, the point of light seemed to have vanished. It had been nearly identical to their star.

News that Sacred Star could die would devastate the four nations, he knew, but it was his duty to warn them anyway.

The renegade begged his home nation's emperor to unite the four, as only the combined efforts of all would have any chance to stop the calamity.

As word spread, angry mobs formed in the streets calling for blood. With thousands laying siege to the palace gates, the emperor, whether he believed the renegade or not, labeled him a blasphemer and sentenced him to fire-death.

It's said that all Star-worshipers across the four nations cheered at the renegade's banishment to the steaming desert of Tal, where the heat of Sacred Star slowly burned him alive.

"Commander present!" a chisel-jawed worker shouted as Master Stargazer entered the control room. The score of deck crew snapped to attention.

"Hail," Master Stargazer said with a quick salute, which let the staff know to resume their duties. He walked across the command deck, stopping at each of the primary terminals to gauge the progress of Alpha, Beta, and Gamma; all three were nearly finished with the authentication process. As for the rest in the room, he realized, most of the people present were only observing, sullen expressions on each face.

"On a universal timetable," an attending historian says, "down to the last nanosecond, and we succeed in our mission. A great civilization is destroyed today, but our descendants will thrive in an even greater one. Words cannot describe…"

Master Stargazer tunes out the sound of the historian's voice. There's still much to be done. "Alpha, give me an update."

“Master Stargazer,” Alpha says while plugging away at a terminal, “the computer has accepted our credentials. Every ship is monitored, and if needed, can be directly controlled from your station.”

“Gamma, report.”

“Sensors show the southeastern sector of Sacred Star’s repulsion shield failed. One of the flares hit a populated zone—three hundred thousand dead. Other zones are begging for the evacuation ships to come back.”

A view wall replays images of Sacred Star’s fiery arm stroking the planet’s surface. Master Stargazer imagines the horrors those poor people must have suffered as the world melted around them.

They were warned. A thousand cycles they were warned this day would come, yet they still refused to abandon their faith in a star. What does it matter? Soon everyone on the surface will be lost—turned to ash and dust. May the Creators lead them to peace.

“I don’t care about the remaining surface population,” Master Stargazer says. “They chose to stay. Everything else is within parameters, I presume? Beta?”

“A message, sir,” Beta says. “The last ship is directly above the ice cap as you ordered. The poles are melting fast, but evacuation is still possible if we begin now. Orders?”

Master Stargazer raises his hand. The chatter in the room vanishes. “You have done excellent work,” he says. “History will remember you all as heroes. Non-essential personnel are released from service. Thank you for all you have done. Alpha, send the order to evacuate the station, then seal off the command center.”

The workers cheer and congratulate each other. Like everything else, the evacuation procedure is deeply ingrained. Within minutes, the station’s command deck is empty of all personnel except Master Stargazer and his three dedicated assistants.

“It was close,” Beta says, “but the staff evacuation ship is safely leaving orbit, sir.”

Master Stargazer approaches his control terminal. The panel powers up, revealing an array of dials, gauges, and sensors. He speaks a few words to the computer. The panel folds up, becoming flush against the wall, and a new board extends from the bulkhead. The sight of the replacement surface triggers a feeling of dread. He glides his fingers over the glossy black surface as he muses over the single illuminated button, which glows a brighter shade of red than that of the dying star.

Behind him, Master Stargazer hears the surprised murmurs of his team.

"That button," Gamma says, "what purpose does it serve?"

Master Stargazer cared little for Gamma's tone. He considers the man to be the most disrespectful, temperamental, and self-righteous person the Grand King had ever placed on his research team. Strangely, though, he also considers Gamma a friend because Gamma is the only person beside himself with the dedication and drive to make sure the Thousand Cycle Plan succeeds—perhaps even if he knew… Yes, the button would have to be discussed soon, but for now Master Stargazer ignores the question. "Beta, what's the current status of Star?"

"Nearing critical mass. The repulsers will not last much longer, maybe ten minutes, sir."

"Alpha, open communications with all ships."

"Communications open."

"Fleet, this is Master Stargazer speaking to you from the northern research station. We knew this day would come. Because of our unity, dedication, and perseverance, we're ready to leave this dying planet to begin a new life on a far-away world." Master Stargazer clears his throat, imagining the happiness and cheer the ship-bound populace must be feeling. "The colonists will be waiting for you. In a moment, my team will initiate D.S.L.D., and you will sleep soundly during the long journey. Thousands of cycles will pass, but to you, it will feel like mere seconds. I know some of you are frightened; find comfort in knowing every precaution has been taken to ensure the survival of life. Be strong. Be

proud. Be hopeful. Follow the Grand King's imperial flagship to glory… end transmission."

"Transmission cut, sir," Alpha says.

"Connect me to the captains."

"One-way channel open, sir."

"Captains, I'm now returning control to you. Finish preparations and have a safe journey."

"Communications channel closed," Alpha says.

Master Stargazer thinks of the forty-two framed images that line the main corridor of every kingdom ship. Each frame is dedicated to one of his predecessors, detailing the progress made during their reign as Master Stargazer.

The second Stargazer, banished to exile in the outer reaches for the sins of his renegade father, continued the research into the death of stars. He knew Sacred Star would die without intervention, and based on the size and luminescence, estimated that death would happen within the next millennium. Though he couldn't prove his theory to the zealots, he devoted his life to spreading the message of hope to anyone willing to listen; Sacred Star could be saved.

It was, however, a grim and violent age. Star-worshipers systematically executed dissenters, determined to silence all who claimed to know the truth of Sacred Star. In response, resistance groups formed, and the second Stargazer worked in secret, moving from place to place, while others fought back against Star-worshiper oppression.

Eventually, a Star-worshiper assassin infiltrated the resistance and poisoned the Stargazer. While dying, he begged his followers to teach his children and his children's children. They needed to continue working until the power to save Sacred Star was within their grasp.

And so it was.

For hundreds of cycles, secrets passed from one son or daughter to the next, each granted the title of Master Stargazer when the previous perished.

Master Stargazer finds himself staring at the glowing, red button. Unsure of the time, he asks, “Have all the captains transmitted their ready report yet?”

“Yes, sir,” Alpha says. “All kingdom ships are ready for Deep Sleep & Light Drive.”

“Beta, proceed with the D.S.L.D. sequence.”

“Yes, sir.”

A shiver ran down Master Stargazer’s spine as he suddenly felt a strong relation to the tenth Stargazer who had lived during the darkest of times.

Star-worshipers had destroyed all but a few Stargazer strongholds. Their victory seemed certain, and the Stargazers knew death was imminent.

Desperation forced the tenth Stargazer to be brilliant or let the cause die. He made his choice.

Under the guise of a mass surrender, he led a small reserve force in a coup d’état against the weakest of the four kingdoms. Hundreds of small drop-ships fell on the unprepared capital, and the Stargazers quickly took up offensive positions at dozens of strategic points.

The fighting was fast and fierce, and in the end, the Stargazer forces were decimated.

Though killed in the battle of Ren’Sala, tales of Tenth Stargazer’s bravery and sacrifice spread and slowly swayed the general population to support the Stargazers over the Star-worshipers. It was his unexpected and insane move that triggered the great four-kingdom unification. No Stargazer since had done anything quite as unexpected or dramatic.

A holographic display in the center of the control room powers on in a blinding flash. The perspective of the star system rotates and zooms past the planets to the correct orientation that shows the position of every kingdom ship. Most are already on the outskirts of the asteroid belt, waiting for the Light Drive to propel them toward the new planet, their new home.

One by one, the red dots representing the ships turn green as the passengers and crew aboard are put into stasis.

The last dot changes color.

May the Creators help me.

Suddenly an earsplitting alarm blares through the control room.

Gamma shouts, “Malfunction! Running system diagnostics now.”

“Progress update,” Beta says. “Deep Sleep system reporting one-hundred percent complete, but Light Drive won’t initiate. It’s as if they are—wait, the ships are moving, sir. Alpha, are you seeing this?”

Gamma’s eyes widen. “They’re heading straight for Sacred Star,” he shouts.

“Confirmed,” Alpha says. “Light Drive’s unresponsive, and the ships are traveling towards Star. What’s happening?”

“Turn the siren off,” Master Stargazer demands.

Alpha switches off the warning, then frantically types commands into his terminal, seemingly searching for a solution.

Master Stargazer watches their desperation. He feels the sting of guilt for putting them through this—especially Alpha, who had been his loyal supporter and dearest friend since they were children back in the Academy.

“The ships are slowing,” Beta says, relievedly. “They’re arranging in an unusual formation just beyond our planet’s orbit.”

“Globular pattern,” Alpha corrects. “The fleet’s formation is a perfect sphere around Star. We need to wake the captains.”

“I can’t, sir,” Beta says. “The whole system is unresponsive.”

“This diagnostic report can’t be right,” Gamma says, a grim look on his face.

“What is it?” Alpha turns toward Gamma. “What does it say?”

“It says we no longer have authorization to launch Light Drive.”

Beta furrows her brow. “Revoked credentials? Only the Grand King and Master Stargazer have that authority.”

All eyes turn towards Master Stargazer.

Master Stargazer whispers, “Assistants Alpha, Beta, Gamma…” He speaks as evenly as he can, trying to prevent his voice from shaking. “There are things I must explain before we can continue our mission.”

Gamma clenched his fists. “What is this outrage? We must launch now!”

“Please, Gamma, remain calm.”

“Sir, Gamma is correct. The repulsers are giving way, the ice caps are gone, our oceans are boiling, and most of the landmass is covered in magma. We have to get our people to a safe distance.”

“I know this will be hard to understand,” Master Stargazer says, “but you must know.” He takes a deep breath. The air feels like fire in his lungs. *Tell them the brutal truth.* “There’s no safe distance,” he says.

“We do not understand your meaning,” Alpha replies.

Gamma yells, “Damn you, Stargazer. Give us the codes.”

Master Stargazer pulls a blaster from his robe and aims it at his three assistants. “I regret having to do this.”

Alpha raises his hands. “Have you gone mad?”

“To be honest, Alpha, old friend, I’m not sure. If I’d done what I was supposed to, all three of you would be dead right now, and this conversation would not be happening.”

“Stargazer,” Gamma says, venom in his voice. “The Grand King won’t stand for this. Put down the weapon.”

“You know the Grand King holds no authority over me. Besides, he died thirty-three cycles ago, when the imperial flagship left for the colony.”

“Lies!” Gamma runs toward Master Stargazer, almost on him when the shot is fired.

“A warning, Gamma,” Master Stargazer says. “One more step and the next one will not miss. Now if I have your attention, listen closely. Beta, send all available power to the repulsers.”

Beta flinches. “Sir?”

“Life support, everything. Do it now.”

“The surface is completely engulfed in Sacred Star’s flares, sir,” she says. “Without internal shielding, we’ll burn.”

“I don’t care. Do it. I need time to explain.”

Alpha’s eyes are wet with grief. “How can you stand here and let billions of people burn to death? Your family is up there. So is mine. Do not kill them, I beg you.”

Beta transfers all remaining power to the Solar Repulsion System, a network of repulser-satellites orbiting Sacred Star. Their creation was the first massive feat of global engineering done after the unification. If not for the repulsers, Sacred Star would have died cycles ago. Now that Sacred Star has entered the last stage of life and begun to fuse silicon to iron, the repulsers can no longer channel enough rogue energy to delay the inevitable. Minutes remain before they fail, and when they do, the repressed supernova will finally break through.

The computer voice activates:

“REPULSERS AT MAXIMUM LEVEL. SYSTEM FAILING. SUPERNOVA IMMINENT.”

“I gave them hope,” Master Stargazer says. “That is all I could do. I put them in stasis out of love so they would have no idea what’s going to happen. Now please hear my words, for they are truth, and the history of the Stargazers as you know it is a lie.”

Gamma laughs. “A lie? There’s no lie, only your delusion, old man. I should’ve seen it.”

“Gamma,” Alpha says, “stop instigating. We need to resolve this situation before it’s too late. Let him have his say.”

Ignoring Gamma’s insult, Master Stargazer nods at Alpha. He’s relieved to finally reveal the long-held secrets.

“From the beginning, we hoped to prevent the death of Star,” Master Stargazer says. “When the Dark Days ended, the twelfth Stargazer unified the world under the Grand King. Then the thirteenth Stargazer developed the Thousand Cycle Plan, but a solution seemed impossible. Eventually the

plan shifted focus from prevention to delay, and then to departure. Stargazers had to find a new home."

"Sir, we know all of this," Beta says. "The great alteration happened during the time of the seventeenth Stargazer. He realized the catastrophe could never be prevented. Sacred Star would die. Nothing could stop it."

Alpha continues with the next chapter of their history as if reading from a text halo, "Once the solar repulsion system was created, the real work started. During the time of the twentieth Stargazer, we perfected the technological power to probe deep space." He pauses to wipe the sweat and tears from his face.

"Stargazer, where are you going with this?" Gamma demands.

Master Stargazer turns towards Gamma and shakes his head in disappointment. "If you have nothing of value to add, remain silent." He flicks the blaster toward Alpha. "Correct. Every child learns this story. System-wide space travel rapidly advanced from then on to the time of the thirtieth Stargazer. Cryogenics, Half-limit ships, and other technologies matured. By the time of the thirty-third Stargazer, the planet reached maximum output. Every person contributed in one way or another to the Exudes project. Gamma, perhaps you can continue?"

"If you have a point, I hope you make it soon."

Master Stargazer stresses, "This is important."

"Fractal planet scanning changed everything," Gamma speaks quickly. "The thirty-ninth discovered a habitable system. The fortieth dispatched the Grand King and the colonials on the class-one ships. Class-two ships were built by your father, the forty-first. You took over as the forty-second on the eve of his death."

"Thank you, Gamma." Master Stargazer smiles sadly. "Yes, the thirty-ninth Stargazer's discoveries did change everything once again. There's no doubting that. We found a place where we could make our home. But as I said, what you know is a lie. Let me begin with my father. Do any of you know the details of his death?"

"Heart failure," Alpha says.

“No,” Master Stargazer replies. “Suicide. He shot himself with this blaster.”

“More lies,” Gamma says.

“Stargazers have self-terminated in the past,” Alpha says. “Why cover up his suicide?”

“There would’ve been an investigation otherwise. The question you should ask is: Why did he kill himself?”

The computer voice activates:

“REPULSERS AT MAXIMUM LEVEL. SYSTEM FAILING. SUPERNOVA IMMINENT.”

Beta narrows her eyes. “Why did he, sir?”

“Because everything since the time of the thirty-ninth Stargazer has been a total fabrication. Our technology allowed us to scan the entire galaxy. We looked for a new home. Sadly, we found nothing. The thirty-ninth Stargazer’s true discovery was that the galaxy, and possibly the whole universe, is completely void of biological life. Except for our own planet, nothing else is out there.”

The temperature rises with each passing second. Sweat pours from all four of them.

“What you are telling us cannot be,” Alpha says. “The Grand King will be waiting for his people when the fleet arrives.”

“We found a home,” Beta insists. “My parents are on a colonist ship, sir.”

“A lie. Every Stargazer for the last hundred cycles looked over the data. Our planet is unique. There’s no life anywhere else in the galaxy.”

Beta shakes her head in disbelief. “No.”

“I’m sorry. We’re truly alone. The cosmological joke is we were given just enough time…just enough time to advance to the point where we could save ourselves, only to discover there’s no place to go.”

“You have no proof,” Gamma says. “Stop this madness and give us the codes before it’s too late.”

“Gamma, you small-minded fool, the one great technological failure of our people is all the proof you need. We harnessed the power of an energy source that by all reasoning should not exist; we created ships that reach distant stars; we’re able to manipulate time-space itself, and yet with all these great advancements, we were unable to find a single living system outside our own. Life came from a natural phenomenon, or from the Creators, I can’t say, but the process hasn’t been reproduced, and every means of transplantation failed.”

Distraught, Beta says, “If half of what you say is truth, sir, then it’s the Creators will our existence to end. How can they let us come so far for nothing?”

“My father wondered the same thing,” Master Stargazer says. “That’s the real reason he killed himself.”

“Then what of the colonists?” Gamma asks, “What of the Grand King? Where were they sent?”

“You may recall the twenty-ninth Stargazer invented an atomizer capable of breaking down all organic matter. No practical use could be found. Another lie. The fortieth Stargazer installed them on the class-one ships. They were quite useful.”

Beta gasps. “Why?”

“You need to understand.” Master Stargazer pauses, suddenly feeling as if he’s standing in a furnace. He looks down at his sweat-drenched uniform, then rips open the collar, knowing it isn’t going to help. Each breath is labored and stings his lungs. “With nowhere for the Grand King and colonists to go…the fortieth Stargazer felt it would be a cruelty to allow the ship to end up in the vast emptiness between galaxies. He activated the atomizers once the crews entered stasis because-”

“Liar! The Grand King lives!” Gamma rushes forward.

Startled, Master Stargazer tries to speak, but the rising heat has dulled his senses. His words, once so carefully chosen, able to sway or inspire billions, have failed him when he had needed them most. Instead of a debate, he raises the weapon and aims at Gamma’s chest. Just then, Alpha

and Beta attack as well, each running toward him from different sides, attempting to flank. If he fires now, he'll win, but pulling the trigger on his friends isn't as easy as he hoped. The split-second hesitation costs him his advantage.

"Get the blaster," Beta shouts. "Get it!"

Fools!

Master Stargazer sidesteps Gamma and turns toward Beta. He fires. The shot strikes her in the head, and a red cloud floats in the air as her body is flung backward. Sweat pouring from his brow causes him to momentarily lose focus, and he's unable to hone in on his next target, Alpha.

A sudden flash of pain erupts in Master Stargazer's back as Gamma tackles him from behind. Before he can right himself, Alpha lands a heavy blow to his temple. The world dissolves into a white mesh of confusion and hatred. As Alpha continues to strike, Gamma gets a hand on the blaster. It's almost pulled free, but Master Stargazer manages to fire off two more shots.

Blood sprays Master Stargazer's face, and through the red splatter he sees the terror in Alpha's eyes, as life pours from the two gaping holes in his friend's chest. Alpha's body collapses just as the alert system blares a new dreaded message.

"SOLAR REPULSION SYSTEM FAILURE. SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. SHOCK WAVE IMMINENT. FOUR MINUTES TO PLANETARY IMPACT."

"Die!" Gamma screams.

Master Stargazer struggles to keep hold of the weapon, but Gamma, half his age, is much stronger. Master Stargazer fires again, and a searing pain erupts through his body.

Master Stargazer clutches his free hand to the wound. All the fight in him seems to vanish. Defeated, he lets the blaster fall to the ground as he stares at Gamma from a growing pool of blood on the control room floor.

Gamma, terror in his eyes, pushes himself up and grabs the Blaster. His face is a bloody mess from the red gash that extends past his left ear.

“If only I fired that shot an inch to the left.” Master Stargazer laughs, but it quickly becomes a grunt of pain.

Not in the mood for jokes, Gamma places the barrel of the blaster to Master Stargazer’s head. “Give me the codes, damn you.”

Blood pools around Master Stargazer in the shape of a leaf. He applies more pressure to the wound. It’s no use. *How had this gone so wrong? So, so simple, but I was too weak.* “For cycles I had this planned, Gamma… three shots and three dead friends.”

“Give me the codes,” Gamma demands, pressing the blaster to Master Stargazer’s forehead. “We don’t have time!”

“I failed. I’m sorry.”

“SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. THREE MINUTES TO PLANETARY IMPACT.”

“Give me the codes now!”

“Gamma, everything I told you is true.”

“I won’t accept defeat—even if I did believe what you say. I’ll get them out of the blast radius. I’ll send the command to wake them up. Stargazer, any chance is better than no chance at all.”

“Torturous and futile…only one way.”

“Sacred Star is dead, and the planet is about to be destroyed. I’ll leave them in stasis then. Let me get them away from the blast. The Creators will save them. STARGAZER, THE CODES! PLEASE!”

“Dead…starless abyss between galaxies…the expanse.” Master Stargazer feels cold in the scorching room as his life bleeds out. “Fate worse than death…worse than anything.” He coughed. More blood. “You wish that?”

Gamma says nothing.

“No way to save them…every solution…every solution led to failure.”

“SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. TWO MINUTES TO PLANETARY IMPACT.”

Gamma drops the blaster and collapses next to Master Stargazer. “Then this is how it ends. You should have told us sooner.”

“Our people would have… suffered…despaired…I couldn’t.”

“All is lost,” Gamma says. “All is lost.”

The conversation with Gamma fades from Master Stargazer’s mind. The voice he hears becomes lighter than a soft breeze. Each time he allows his eyes to close, he imagines being with his family. Not deep beneath a dead world about to be obliterated by Star’s shockwave, but in the vast green fields of the Stargazer’s estate. He jokes and plays with the grandchildren. His wife and daughter tend to the garden. His son calls from the porch, informing them that lunch is ready. As he brushes dirt from his hands, he notices his favorite flower has grown a seed pouch.

The button!

Master Stargazer’s eyes fly open. “Gamma,” he croaks, “Gamma, the button. I need to press it…only hope,” He says, his voice barely a whisper.

“There’s no hope here. Have you not caused enough pain? Be silent and die.”

“This far, and no farther? Why?”

“I said be quiet!”

“One chance. Listen. Please.”

Gamma glares at the bodies on the floor but says nothing.

“We tricked millions of colonists into death.” Master Stargazer musters every last bit of strength. “Repulsers, scanners, ships, and thousands of advanced technologies at the right time. The last Star-worshipers claimed the Creators guided us. We reached the highest technological limits, and still we could not save ourselves. What did Stargazers do after that?”

“You kept going. Pretended. Lied!”

“Out of compassion, Gamma. Atomizers killed millions…had to maintain the story. Had to…compassion.” He coughs and nearly passes out, but keeps talking with his eyes closed. “Could’ve gone into the dark abyss, stuck in stasis for all of time. Horrifying. Atomizers…best choice.”

Gamma nods. “I would rather die than end up in the darkness, I’ll grant you, but that changes nothing.”

“SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. ONE MINUTE TO PLANETARY IMPACT.”

Master Stargazer notices the puddle of his own blood boiling from the intense heat. “Ships, deep sleep, lies…murders. The right thing to do, yes? Only thing to do?”

“Yes,” Gamma nods, “If I had known, I would’ve acted as the Stargazers did.”

“And of all things to kill with…not explosives, or poison gas, or…or-”

“Compassion; they died asleep, they died with hope, but the outcome is still the same.”

“More than that.” Master Stargazer coughed blood. “More than that… died uniquely…the button.”

Even though the shockwave is about to destroy the fleet, Gamma stands up, as if a strange feeling had overtaken him, as if he was somehow compelled to do as Master Stargazer asked. “It doesn’t matter,” Gamma says, as he lifts the old man to his feet and slowly helps him across the room.

Once in front of the panel, Gamma reaches to press the button. Master Stargazer stops him. “No, Gamma. This burden is mine.”

“SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. SUPERNOVA. 30 SECONDS TO PLANETARY IMPACT.”

With a final prayer to the Creators, Master Stargazer gently presses down, and somewhere in a sphere around a dead star, eight billion people are vaporized.

Master Stargazer and Gamma, the only two sentient beings left in existence, sink to the floor, exhausted. They watch the computer simulation of the coming shockwave.

Gamma says, “The body of Sacred Star would have destroyed them just the same. What difference did it make?”

Master Stargazer shrugs. “Part of the plan.”

“The Thousand Cycle Plan was meant to atomize our race?”

“No. Not our plan, Creator’s plan. Faith…a funny thing,” he says absently. “Never much use for it…until now.” He manages a small laugh. “What do atomizers do, Gamma?”

“Break down matter into…” Gamma’s eyes widen. “Microscopic specks of organics.”

“Exactly. We might not be the last.”

Gamma rubs his chin. “Planet-bound organisms would never have worked,” he says quickly. “Not at those temperatures. In space, the parameters are different.”

“Right technology…right time…enough life.”

“Atomize it all near a Supernova and the building blocks can be blown clear across the galaxy.”

“Like spores…like spores.”

Gamma squeezes the old man’s hand. “New life,” he says, his tone astonished.

“If it works…” Master Stargazer’s voice fades, and his head lowers to his chest. “If it works…” He dies in the arms of his friend, and with faith in his heart.

“It will, Master Stargazer. It has to.”

Gamma’s final, hopeful words are spoken as the Supernova destroys the planet and spreads the Stargazer’s seeds outward and in all directions.

The End.



Acknowledgments

Special thanks goes to Wade Zulauf and Jason Adams for editing this story. This story went through several (dozen) revisions and if not for the editing work of these two great friends, the final draft would have never have been completed.

I also would like to thanks to all the readers who took the time.

Interview with the Author

Q. What inspired this story?
A. It is heavily influenced by a lot of the short science fiction stories of the nineteen fifties, particularly those written by Isaac Asimov.

Q. What is your favorite sci-fi book?
A. Too many to count! Currently I'm enjoying The Hyperion Cantos by Dan Simmons. I also love the foundation series.

Q. What's on the horizon?
A. Well, Sci-fi wise…I am working on a story titled, 'Dying Embers' and I'm currently looking for a home for another short titled, 'Arc Racer'.

About the Author



Born near Baltimore, Maryland, Kris has been writing short fiction since he was a kid. First sharing his ramblings on Stealth Fiction and then on Reddit, where most of his stories were posted to r/nosleep. His stories have been featured on The NoSleep Podcast, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, Tales to Terrify, and Horror on the Rocks. The recording of The Scarecrow Corpse, read by Markiplier, has been heard hundreds of thousands of times. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife. And occasionally, he turns into a strawberry.

More stories: StealthFiction.com

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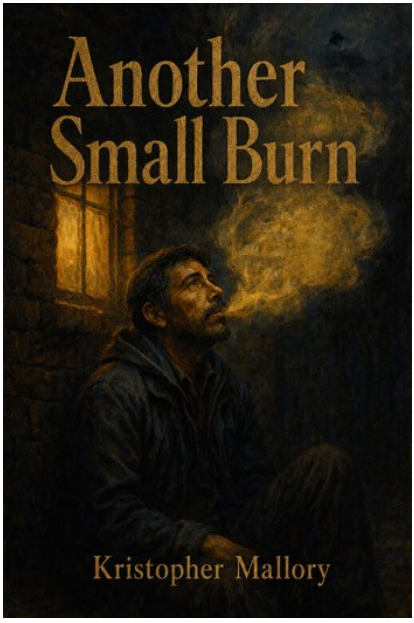
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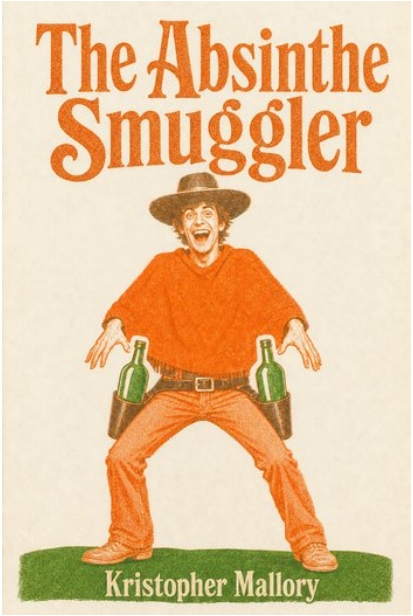
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Carlos can burn any memory into magic, the way everyone can now; the hard part is choosing which ones he can live without.

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Praise for Another Small Burn:

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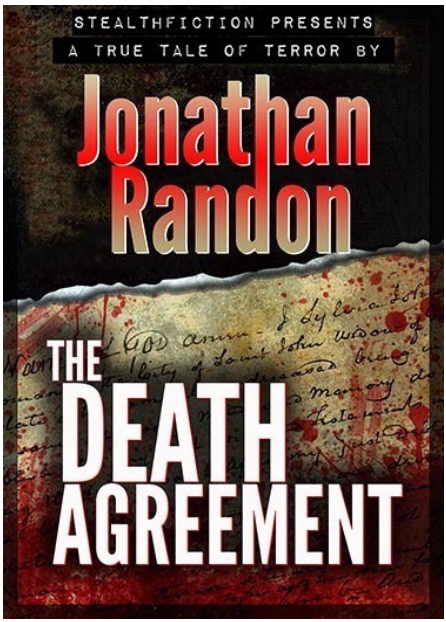
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Christmas Eve, a blizzard, and Hank agrees to sit with old Mr. Everett, twenty-two-time winner of the town's decoration contest, who insists he is not going crazy.

~~~~~

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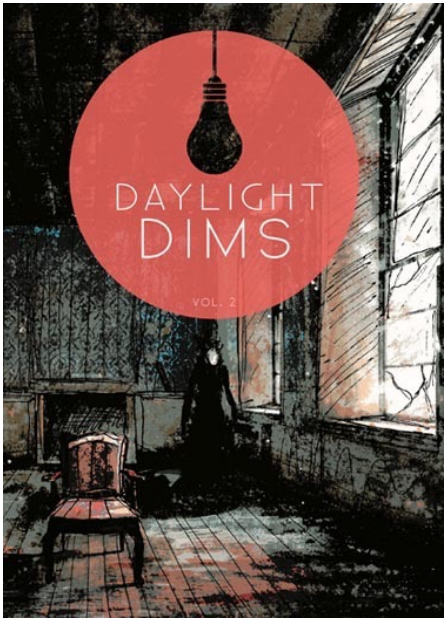
We made a pact. He lived up to his end by dying. I tried to live up to my end by following The Death Agreement.

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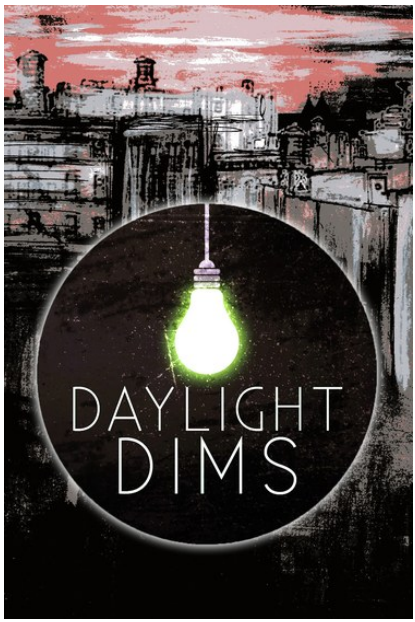
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