

# **Source**

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## **Introduction/Dedications**

This story is dedicated to Chris A Jackson, James K Bowers, and all the members of the Herscher Project. Were it not for their inspiration, critiques, and constant support, this story would never have been possible. Thanks are also due to numerous friends and colleagues who, as usual, contributed their time and energy to help me with this work. To my parents as well, who at an early age instilled in me an appreciation for the environment and this planet we call Earth. Thanks are due to many people for many different reasons, so some explanation needs to be made as to how this story was inspired, who helped, and in what capacity.

Originally, all chapters in this volume were created as sequels to one original short story. Together, they represent the culmination of an idea that grew from a single project, commissioned by Mr. Bowers at the Herscher Project, to have writers create visions of a dystopian future. As a starting point, all interested parties were told to consult a short story by Mr. Jackson, known as “A Flash In The Pan”. Mr. Jackson, it should be noted, is an established fantasy writer with many titles to his credit, which include the “Zellohar”, “Deathmask”, “A Soul for Tsing”, “Weapon of Flesh”, “Scimitar Moon”, and the hilarious sci-fi spoof “Cheese Runners”. In this particular short story, Jackson explored the possibility of humanity’s future, discerning twelve different scenarios, arranged from worst to best. In one particular scenario, the human race continued to face the challenge of population threatening to outstrip its natural resources. After limitless expansion, it could no longer deny that it was reaching the limits of its growth, and would have to face severe decline. It was from this particular scenario that I decided to write my contribution which I had already named “Source”.

Since I first heard about the project, it was my hope to do a story based on the very real possibility that the human race will someday run out of drinking water. This possibility, should it ever come true, will not only mean environmental catastrophe, it will also have immense social and political consequences. One can imagine without much difficulty how terrible death tolls, international incidents, a global war, government crackdowns, and the rise of totalitarian regimes could result. It therefore seemed like a perfect idea to base a dystopian story on. In addition to that, I also feel it is an environmental issue deserving of attention.

Much like the problem of petroleum and global warming, discussion on this issue has typically been reserved to environmental and academic circles. It is only within the past few years that this issue has graduated from this arena and started to occupy an important position in political discourse. With the very real threat of diminishing supplies of crude oil, climbing energy prices and environmental changes that threaten human lives, it is little wonder why the people and politicians of the world would start to take notice. Unfortunately, this graduation has yet to produce any true results. On the one hand, the issue has been mired by the insistence of some that it is still a mere theory, rather than scientifically proven fact. On the other, it appears that entrenched economic interests are dead set against any initiatives that would discourage the consumption of their product. Nevertheless, in spite of these attempts to block legislation, clearly much progress has been made in terms of promoting general awareness. The mere fact that there is a debate should be considered as a good sign. However, as of yet, little discussion has been dedicated to the problem of diminishing water supplies around the world. It is unfortunate that such a problem would need to be considered imminent before it was considered worthy of our attention. It would also be unfortunate if this problem were left for too long, for as we are learning, global warming may not be helped in time to prevent a severe loss of life from happening in the next century.

In any case, Source was inspired by this combination of factors. Once I had finished with it, I had no doubt that I was pleased with the product. My colleagues were equally happy, but still found room for improvement. I took their suggestions very seriously, and in the end produced Source as it appears in its entirety. It contained many characters and moved quickly between perspectives and time periods in order to establish a sense of uncertainty and impending crisis. Shortly thereafter, the moderators at Elfwood Lysator read it over and were impressed enough to give it a Moderator's Choice award. Several comments followed, many of which suggested I correct the unfortunate cliffhanger ending by writing a sequel. Almost immediately I caved in to their suggestions, and began working on part II of the story, known as "Shortfall". Whereas the first story dealt with crisis, selfishness, and sacrifice, the second volume was almost exclusively concerned with death, loss, and terrible purpose. By the time it was finished, I believed I had more material to work with, enough to fill the pages of a full-length novel.

After completing the shorts named "Deliverance", "Galilee" and "Reclamation", I finally felt I had written the story through to its completion. All parts now appear in their entirety in this volume, not as separate short stories, but as a single, ongoing story. I sincerely hope that people enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. I also hope that its message, that the planet is our responsibility, and every action has consequences, will not go unnoticed. All too often, it appears that the responsibility for conveying important social messages is relegated to authors and intellectuals, and that they rarely manage to have an impact on anyone outside of intellectual circles. But I think it is clear at this juncture in our history that we can no longer speculate about our problems, and that everyone is capable of being informed. We can no longer stand to be silent, and we must deal with the problems facing our world responsibly, and immediately.

## Part I: Source

### *Phobos Mining Camp*

The Martian soil. A cloud of frozen vapour passed in front of his eyes as a small gust of wind blew from the far horizon. The deep blues and indigos of the night sky shone in the scattered pools that cut through the red sand dunes. It was the magic hour, when the far sun was beginning to recede and sink into the earth. Terra hung in the distance, its orbitals twinkled like rings of silver lace and its lit-up side emitting pale shades of blue and green.

Delphus knelt down in front of the nearest pool. He scooped up the night sky and watched the stars slip between his fingers. Where it landed, a thousand sighs echoed in his ears. Distant Earth grew brighter, its oceans shining a brighter blue and rings of clouds forming in its skies. He felt a cool wave rush over him. Another gust of wind blew in, carrying the soft hints of a voice in it.

The sound was unmistakable, and it was beginning to grow in intensity. He turned to look in its direction and saw a dancing whirl of sand forming in front of him. The sand began to collect and take form, the voice becoming louder and identifiable as it did. The sand form became his second, and he had news.

“We’ve tapped the Virgin source, sir.”

“Is it good? Is it as good as we hoped?”

“It’s everywhere, sir. More than we can imagine. More than we could drink in our lifetimes, sir! Everything we could ever want, sir. It’s here! IT’S HERE!”

“Thank God.”

He knelt in the sand. The pools began to overflow and form into spouts. Water, crystals and starry eyes merged before him, washing over him and casting him adrift in the night. He was floating in a great sea of burning embers, ferried to somewhere far off.

The voice called again, this time it was much more distant.

“Boss?”

He ignored the voice. It was unwelcome. Why was it unwelcome? Did it not hear the news? The voice called again, so close that it was in his ear now.

“BOSS!”

His eyes snapped open. The ceiling of the cavern appeared before him. Closing his eyes tightly, he cursed his luck. He was awake, and back on Phobos. Somehow, he knew it was too good to be true. The operations centre and its bleeping consoles roused him to full wakefulness, as unwelcome to him as the voice that had been shouting in his ear. Looking over to his right, he saw the source of it, sitting there and staring at him impatiently.

“What’s the time?” he asked aloud.

“Fifteen minutes to the hour,” Milner replied, checking his chrono. “Which is exactly thirty minutes since the last time you asked.”

“Have I been out that long?”

“Just about. You were making funny noises. I thought I’d wake you.”

“I was dreaming,” he said mystically, the words emptying from his mouth like a gentle breeze.

“Really?” Milner asked, looking at him sideways. “What about?”

Delphus felt the vague recollection of something pleasant, of fields full of shimmering crystals, a sky full of stars. He remembered the feeling of having found something, feeling truly blessed to be where he was and beholding something great. But it was fast slipping away. What little he could hold on to was the memory of looking at himself in a small pool that he carried in his hands. Too soon, the pool had drained away, the reflection gone, his empty hands staring him starkly in the face. Was that what had happened, or was it the awakening that made him think of that? He couldn't tell.

He shook his head and avoided the question.

"Any word from the mining teams?"

"Not since their last scheduled report. Still no sign of any aquifers."

"Not even a trickle?"

"Nope," Milner shook his head, his eyes now back on the display console. With nothing better to do, he had taken to watching some vids being broadcast out of Demos. It looked like another lacrosse game, the loud percussions of drive-sticks making contact with the ball and sending it zipping along in the low gravity environment.

"How can you just sit there?" Delphus asked.

"What else can I do?" Milner replied. "Worrying about it isn't going to make a find that much more likely. Besides, the Ministry said it's here, so I'll assume that we'll find something eventually."

Delphus grunted and pushed himself to his feet. Even in the low gravity environment, he could feel his joints straining under the effort of standing up. The intense cold and monotony were beginning to wear on more than just his patience. He needed to get mobile again, to get the blood moving and his mind off the interminable seconds that fell between. Milner, on the other hand, had let his extremities turn numb a long time ago and huddled himself into his seat, hoping to keep his internal organs warm at least. The report was now three hours overdue, and each passing hour made things that much more strained. In the grand scheme of things, they had wasted for more time on this mission, a mere drop in the bucket for their team's long history of service. But everyone knew what hinged on this latest find; their jobs, their futures, and perhaps the future of the Mining Corps. They needed a find, and a good one at that. He knew worrying about it now wouldn't hasten the mining team or change the outcome of their excavation. But, as he'd realized some hours ago, there was nothing better to do...

The loud hum heard through the protection of his helmet finally stopped. Oleg ordered the ear caps removed so he could let some outside noise in. The din of the drill slowly cooling down was there, in the background, beneath the voices cackling through his intercom. The driver had reported a breakthrough. The long depths of stone had finally given way, but the signs were not altogether good. Getting out of his seat inside the tunnel crawler, he worked his way forward into the drilled shaft in the direction of the drill unit. He passed a few surveyors on the way, there reports already filing into his headset. Flipping down his helmet's visor and setting it to surveyor mode, he noted the wall patterns that the surveyor was pointing out.

"Sandstone sir, thick and dry. There's evidence here of leaching, but it looks like its been dry for some time."

"Not a great indication," Oleg said, flipping his visor back up. "Still, that doesn't mean there isn't a source up ahead. I'm going to have a look."

"Be careful, sir," the surveyor called to his back. Oleg dismissed his concern with a wave of the hand. He had been a shaft foreman long enough to know how to step right and

where not to venture. Years of working inside tunnels with sonic boosters also had given him a sixth sense for knowing when a cave-in was about to happen. All his instincts were in the green today. Although they were under the gun and the job was a high-profile one, everything was going smoothly and safely. He only hoped the other teams were fairing equally well. Though given how many, the law of averages stated that at least one or two teams were having troubles, if they weren't already dead and buried.

The Ministry had certainly spared no expense in this particular operation, even pulling teams in from as far away as Triton and Pluto. When that proved insufficient, they even contracted out to private mining concerns, and Oleg was thankful he didn't have any of them close at hand. Private miners were good at guarding the bottom line, but safety wasn't always foremost on their minds. Ministry types, on the other hand, might take longer, but the endless amount of red tape ensured that nothing got done if it meant endangering people unnecessarily. At least that was how he saw it. And he would be damned if any private boys had found their cache before he did.

Making his way to the drill unit, he turned himself sideways to squeeze past a wall of smooth rock on one side and the drill chassis on the other. His suit registered amplified thermal readings as he brushed the rock, the stone still hot from its run-in with the diamond-headed bit. The driver greeted him once he reached the front, touching his helmet in mock salute.

"How's the pressure today?" Oleg asked.

"More than I can take," the driller joked. "Lucky for me I just drives her."

"Right."

The tip still glowed red hot from the pressure and friction. Oleg gave it a pat as he walked by it, throwing his suits alarms into overdrive. Mentally, he told them to relax; he did not intend to be making prolong contact with it. It was simple tradition, one always showed respect for the gear that did the hard stuff and chose not to break down in the process. One also thanked them for when they turned up the desired caches the rest of them just happened to be drilling for.

With that in mind, Oleg stepped past the drill to the precipice to look over the edge into the newly opened cavern. Overall, it was not too impressive a sight. The far wall of the cavern could not have been more than a fifty metres away, best guess. The fact that drill's own headlights were able to pick out the different colour pigments in the sandstone were a good indication. His visor's own estimate confirmed this.

Snapping on his head light, he peered down the edge past the far wall to see how deep the cavern could be. He could only hope it made up for its lack of width in depth. He was surprised to see that when he came to the limit of his helmet's reach, he was still wasn't able to see the floor. Leaning over just as much as he dared, he caught sight of a few more metres, but still no floor. Oleg took a deep breath and did something he always told his miners never to do, he stepped out onto the ledge to get a better look. Craning to see down and not compromise his already precarious footing, he finally saw what appeared to be bottom. Unfortunately, the cavern didn't end there. At the bottom, in a sloping, slide-like fashion, the cavern turned into a tunnel and extended deeper into the rock, beyond his line of sight.

"Driver!" he yelled back. "Hey Ed!"

"What is it boss?" he asked from his side a second later.

"Get back to the crawler, fetch me the portable light and tell the Lilly to come with me. We got some exploring to do."

"No sign of water?"

“Not yet, just do that please.”

A moment or two later and he was joined by Lilly, his second and their team’s seismologist. Behind her, Ed carried the portable light fixture, it fitted to his shoulder like some kind of archaic missile launcher.

“Well, Lil’, seems our sonic readings were incorrect. The cavern is actually a long tunnel extending a lot deeper.”

“Ah,” Lilly said, nodding inside her helmet. “Tunnels can play havoc with sonar readings, it’s no wonder it looked fuzzy before.”

“But didn’t the Ministry say that this was a sure find? Didn’t they say it the presence of liquid H<sup>2</sup>O that was throwing off our readings?”

“The Ministry says a lot of things boss. Especially when they’re desperate to be right.”

“So what do we do now?” It was Ed asking this from their rear, already looking uncomfortable under the weight of the light. As the one bearing the burden, he was clearly not happy standing around and wanted some orders.

“Well, we came here to find a source and if the only way to do that is to spelunk a little, then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll never get the drill down there as it is, too steep. Tell the others to report back to the crawler and take a break, we’ll go on ahead. And have one of them bring us the tow cables and climbing gear. Looks like we’ll get to do some recreational climbing after all.”

Lilly cringed. She and some of the others had been lured on this outing with the promise that when they were finished, they would be getting some paid time off to flit around Mars. She and a few others had already talked about seeing Olympus Mons, maybe doing some rock climbing when they had the time. Somehow, the foreman had overheard them and it now a bunt of a bad joke. If this was all the climbing Oleg was promising them... well, suffice it to say, that stunk to high hell. But then again, no one was counting on the promises that had been made anyway on this mission.

“Crew reports they’re settled and waiting,” Lilly said after conveying Oleg’s orders and receiving their replies. “Shall we contact Phobos too?”

“No need, we’ll call them when we’ve got something more tangible to report.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ed. “Let ‘em wait it out, I’m sure they’re plenty comfortable sitting up there, not like us down here.”

“What could be taking them so long?” Delphus asked abruptly. “Our best estimates said they should have hit something by now. It can’t take this long to find a source.”

“Boss, relax,” Milner muttered.

“How can you stay so calm?!” Delphus shouted back at him. “Especially now! We are under the gun and if we screw up, you know what the Ministry will do to us!”

“Yes, I know all that. But losing your cool won’t make things better.”

“What do you suggest I do then?”

“Maybe you could start working on your résumé.”

Delphus stared at him for a few seconds. Not knowing how else to react, he softened and allowed himself a small chuckle. Milner laughed too, betraying some of the tension he’d kept well hidden until now. He nodded as well, as if trying to drive the point home.

Yes, it was funny, if for no other reason than because it was true. But the moment passed and they went right back into silence. A moment later, and Delphus was pacing again, wearing a new stripe into the metal flooring.

Rising from his seat, Milner walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Sir,” he said, “there are bound to be some unforeseen delays. We can’t expect the crews to maintain their rigorous schedule under all of the conditions we’ve imposed on them. It’s not humanly possible.”

“Tell that to the Ministry,” Delphus said without meeting his gaze. “If those miners think I’m pressuring them they should try talking to the folks back home. We haven’t been paid in weeks, and my wife keeps telling me about all the bills that keep piling up. Sorry, I just can’t be stoic right about now.”

“I understand, sir. But we still need to stay calm here. Besides, we really may want to assess our options here. It might not hurt to start thinking about...”

Milner’s words were interrupted by the crackling coming from the main comm channel. Looking at each other, the two men then dashed to the comm panel to hit the receiver button. Delphus was there first. Milner almost tripped over himself. As the report came through, he stood back up and tried to recover what dignity he had lost in that hurried little shuffle. So much for calm, he thought. The report was both blaringly loud and full of static. Nevertheless, they were able to get the gist of it.

“Mining base, this is foreman Oleg from mining team Omega, reporting from base thirteen. This is our survey report for potential source find...”

Both men crossed their fingers and waited for the good news.

“Nothing,” the voice said with undeniable finality. “The source is dry. There’s nothing, sir, and from the looks of it, there hasn’t been for centuries.”

There was a long pause on their end. Delphus pulled himself away from the console. He looked like someone who had just been told his dog had been run over. He just stood there shaking his head. Meanwhile, the mining captain needed a reply.

“We’re finished here, sir. Permission to return to the surface?”

Delphus reluctantly pushed the transmitter button.

“Permission granted, Captain.”

The intercom crackled and died. A long silence followed in the control room. Milner waited anxiously for his boss to say something. Given the news, he wasn’t sure if he could think of anything positive to say. Again, he said what he could.

“Maybe some of the other miners did better.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Delphus came back.

“There’s got to be some sources left in this system.”

“Huh!”

That was all he could say to that. Delphus shook his head a little longer, then finally said what was already obvious: “The Ministry is going to eat us alive. This is the third time we’ve had to tell them we couldn’t deliver.”

Nodding, Milner said: “Maybe we should start putting together our report.”

“Right, can’t keep them waiting,” Delphus said sarcastically. “In the meantime, tell the engineers to start closing down the facility. Might as well get a head start on it all.”

“You really think they’ll shut us down here?” Milner asked.

“There’s no reason to stay here any longer. This place is dry as a bone.”

Sheila drummed her fingernails against the top of her desk as she stared out her window into space. Unfortunately, this provided little stimulation, as the view had become boring many months back. There was nothing but an endless ocean of stars out there, and beneath them, a limited view of a planet that had died a long time ago. At first, she had welcomed her promotion and the release it provided from her former office environment. Her new position at the Ministry of Supply meant privacy when she wanted it, a personal assistant, and a new office with a window. It also gave her some space to reflect on the recent upsets that had happened in her life.

Tim was gone; their relationship had dried up long ago. Somehow, her home domicile felt just a little too empty without someone else to be there. At least she still had David, a co-worker from her old position, to keep her company. That was another perk of her promotion; she got to choose whom she wanted for the position of her personal assistant. He was the natural choice and could always make her laugh. Nevertheless, that did not change the basic nature of the work they performed at the Ministry. Things gravitated between long periods of tedium and quick flashes of panic. For much of the year, there was little to do except process minor reports. The rest of the time, they were being pressured to produce major ones.

Clearly, this day fell into the former category. David was out trying to get his hands on one such report. Her bloody superiors insisted they send it by courier, rather than trust in the extremely efficient Terran-Orbital Network, or T-Net for short. This errand took him away and left her with only two options to pass the time: play a solo game of low-gravity ball, or stare out her window. Bouncing a ball against the wall in the low-gravity environment could only occupy her interest for so long. Just how long could watching a ball drift slowly through the air stay interesting? Sheila had it timed to about twenty-one minutes. That only left the unpleasing view of Earth, with all its vast poisoned oceans and dried up landmasses. One could only imagine what it looked like eons ago when it still supported so many lives.

In time, David returned to her office with a metal tube in hand. He was almost breathless when he blew quickly through her door. Dropping it on her desk, he motioned at her to open it.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Huh! Yeah!” he puffed, trying to regain his breath. “They said it was very important, look at it!”

Hesitantly, Sheila picked up the tube and eyed it carefully. It was from the Central Ministry, and even had the Seal of the Executive on it. This was important news! It was little wonder why they had chosen to send it by courier instead of over the open T-Net.

Using her personal key, which was something every manager was entrusted with, Sheila quickly unlocked the tube. Sheila untwisted the vacuum seal and popped the end off. It gave off a loud cracking noise as the unpressurized contents were exposed to atmosphere. Turning it up on one end, Sheila was rewarded with a small piece of crystal paper. The razor thin sheet landed on her desk, and slowly, reacting with the oxygen atmosphere, some phosphorescent letters began to light up on the sheet. The message was short and very direct:

*Emergency Meeting. Central Ministry. 0800 HOURS, April 15<sup>th</sup>. U-V Classified.*

“My God!” Sheila said.

“Whooh! Yeah,” David said.

“David!” Sheila said as she looked up suddenly. In her haste, she forgot to tell him to leave the room. Sensing her thoughts, he drew back sheepishly.

“Oooohh, sorry,” he said.

“Well, I guess the damage is done,” she replied. “I suppose I’ll have to kill you now.”

“That’ll be better than you taking me with you!” David came back.

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