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*“I remember the first time I stepped foot on the deck of Earth’s Solar Gun. The gleaming lights of the spaceport below falling into the deep blue of the Earth, the flat horizon from the ground slowing bending to a curve, and the azure sky giving way to the twinkling dark—The world became small, so small as to fit within my view, and yet, there was a distinct feeling as if the world had become painfully large.*

*The world below was a single dazzling marble, but the space beyond it had gotten no less vast. On the turquoise steps of the Gun, O that great edifice of human ingenuity, the sight of that endless expanse compelled tears to swell within my eyes. My fellow trans-planetary passengers smiled and patted my back with nostalgia hanging on their words. They ascribe my tears to the awe at the unity of the world, and speak wishes to feel that feeling for the first time once again. I spoke not of the loss I felt within my breast beholding humanity’s cradle in that black sea of stars. So much we had done, so much we had lost, and yet, the world above us laid unexplored and out of reach.*

*Will I ever touch the diamond-encrusted surface of 55 Cancri E, drifting outside of stellar influence?*

*Will I ever stand upon the clouds of Kepler 47 C and witness the syzygy of its twin stars?*

*Will I ever brave the astronomical energies of Sagittarius A and ride the immense gravitational tides of its supermassive black hole?*

*Will I ever set foot upon some unknown planet, and find life where life as we know it could not have existed?*

*I do not know these things. I likely will never know. And yet, years from that first moment of sorrow at the world we have missed, I still search for the answer. Perhaps the stars still wait for us. Perhaps those distant illuminated worlds drift in the ocean of space, eagerly awaiting the day that some living being shall witness its beauty and splendor for the first time.*

*Perhaps not.”*

Gauss Paiologos, from *On Space Travel*, page 137.

Braig Adytum Präteritum held the hand-bound physical copy of *On Space Travel* to his chest like a cushion of comfort as he slouched in his work chair. The text may be considered sophistry now by the people couched within the luxury of the Solar System, but young Braig has kept his old and well-lived booklet of the treatise close on his person for as long as he had first received it from old Adytum Präteritum. The ponderance offered by the author had become an affirmation within the periphery of the Präteritums:

“The stars do not wait for us.”

A simple, elegant, and driving affirmation to the necessity of exploration—of new destinations physical or artistic. Such an affirmation Braig utters now, steadying his thoughts in response to the message displayed on his screen.

*Request rejected!*

For centuries, the Präteritums and the Principate had maintained a steadfast and cooperative relationship. It was the Präteritums who helped architecture the monolithic spaces of the Principate’s Dreadnought-class ships, and it was the Principate who ferried the Präteritums across the galaxy in their search for new evolutions of design and aesthetic. As the continuity of that cooperation between the two, Braig Adytum now experiences the joy of being spontaneously denied travel service for no apparent reason by the Principate. Splendid.

*Rejected!*

Here he was, dragged on family business to the bed of excess that was the Solar System, forced to entertain himself with side projects away from his main charge, and even having to deal with the insufferable inhabitants of the Sol itself, and now the Principate denies even his leave? *Truly, the end of the world!*

Braig Adytum slumps further into his chair as he turns off his work screen entirely. Gazing instead toward the night sky peering through his skylight, he breathes the crisp Earth air, and springs into movement with *On Space Travel* tucked under between his arm and torso. Lack of movement within life combined with a lack of movement in space was severely detrimental to the creative process, after all. With a learned determination for fresh air driving his steps, Braig briskly passes the threshold of the observatory’s office and past the spiral steps down its height.

Through faint illuminations of lamplight he emerges from the base of his observatory in the still-standing Alpine mountains to a moonlit starry night. Braig's eyes trace across the night sky, pinpointing the locations of various scenic locales across the milky river of stars in the sky—the one that was now being obscured by the ugly silhouette of a massive, misshapen tower jutting out of the mountainous earth as if it were the finger of a hand vainly reaching toward heaven.

Braig's brow furrowed deep as he sighed the sigh of a man who could not escape from his work.

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It is common knowledge among the Executors of the Principate that the Principate was born from failure and desperation—failure to reconcile the ills of Man and desperation in the face of calamity. Access privy to Executor privileges show records of growing discontent rising in a populace declining in birth and death. A populace, now confronted with not looming finality but a lonely eternity, looked back upon their lives and found them wanting. And so, in search of luxury and pleasure, the most decadent among Man turned his gaze outward to distant stars yet teeming with life; upon those stars did they find new treasures to covet.

More than seven thousand years ago, the fledgling sophist school of Nihilo pillaged the end of the world with their elevated minds and brought from its brink a taste of infinity. With one taste of that heretofore unseen eternity, the wielders of Man's gradated power began their chase, sparing no expense and paying no price too great. They built their gateway to infinity on a pyramid of corpses; fellow humans ruined in surreptitious experiments of thought, suffering's gaze averted for the promise of eternity, and centuries of toil wasted to a great funneling of resources, every sin was but another wretched step toward the edge of reality.

The hand of Man's rulers reached across the sea of stars with their sin-stained fingers:

There was the Commonwealth of Planets, a farce of a state engineered to funnel like-minded sycophants into positions of power, that the rulers of eld might hold onto their dynasties to the end of time.

There were the Shadow-Casters, accursed traitors to the honorable Hunter line, bloodied murderers of inexpedient fellows and powerful opponents alike.

There were the Dream-Divers, ruthless expeditioners into the structure of human thought, ripping into unwitting minds human with their dull blades and otherwise to explicate that grazing infinity once touched ages ago.

Now a shadow of itself, there still stood the School of Nihilo, turned from philosophy to outright cultship, a wicked brand of control upon intellectualism itself.

Yet the most egregious sins of them all would be at the hands of the Paradise fleet, *oh, wicked Paradise*. Goaded by a weakened and divided populace seeking opportunities away from a bleak Commonwealth, Man was compelled to sail the void between stars on a fleet of hidden vessels millions strong. With technology taken from ages of single-minded development, the fleet of Paradise sailed to a million worlds. Opposition silenced and native worlds' thrown into disarray by the assassinations of the Shadow-Casters, the unseen fleet arrived on countless thinking worlds, the Fleet's jagged ships eclipsing countless stars. In the shade of Paradise, Dream-Divers reveled in the vile chaos, obliterating cultures, history, friendships, and *love itself* under cover of night. The cultists of Nihilo would pronounce victory for Man, and promise to an unassuming mass lands swept by gold and splendor.

*"A home upon a hill and a boundless halcyon for each and every Man."*

Many of Paradise would rejoice for victory, for Man's advancement in a hostile and uncaring world. Those who caught glimpses of the calamities from their spaceside decks averted their gaze out of learned apathy or restrained their conscience in fear lest they be taken in the night like so many had been before. Those who gave their all in defiance of that inscrutable wall of cruelty found even their martyrdom unable to reach across the starry void monopolized by their oppressors. Paradise, carried on whispers of eternity, built atop a mountain of corpses, would visit across countless worlds, their names extricated from collected memory.

And as if to spit upon the legacies of those murdered worlds, the fleet of Paradise would defile the very planets themselves. From on high they cast down great pillars of stone inscribed with arcane runes plundered from obliterated minds, and watched in glee as a world once suited for the survival of creatures wholly unlike humans was stripped of its identity: its gravity, its atmosphere, its ecosystems, all of it replaced by the conditions befitting the planet's new colonizers. The settlers of Paradise stepped from the bleak walls of their fleet ships, and wept. Some wept for the painted beauty of those transformed worlds, others for the price they had unwittingly paid for their supposed prosperity.

Willing or not. The price was paid: Paradise, goaded by promises of prosperity, paid for in unconscionable and unimaginable defilement. A homogeneity of existence pervaded all of humanity, its inhabitants trapped within the mire of tedium that was system Sol. Yet, as the worst of Man celebrated their ephemeral and vile victory over the vast cosmos, that longing for infinity—the very one that yet drove the dynasty of Nihilo—remained restless and unsated. More than two thousand years, and they had nothing to show from their work. They were no

closer to their promised infinity. Their machine of power, which ground dreams and lives to nothing, had given them nothing.

The system became bloated, and in years became unsustainable. In the vast conquest of the Paradise fleet, a Galaxy divided and isolated became connected by the yoke of empire, and soon, a chorus of powerful voices rose against the dull mutterings of the Nihilo dynasty. Countless stars yet undimmed forged unbreakable souls, shouting their voice into the apathetic wall of Paradise:

*“Rob us of the sky, and we shall tread upon the ground,  
Blind us from the stars, and we shall heed their song,  
Deprive us of our words, and we shall speak with our actions.*

*But you defile our love,  
Erase our legacy,  
And deny us our place in this world,*

*So we shall fight,  
‘Till the stars sigh their last,  
‘Till the last ember of our life burns away!’”*

Such was the cry of a million creeds, united against the tyranny of Man’s rulers. Those words, translated to the common language by a faction of humans long since having disavowed the Commonwealth, were shouted in defiance in a chorus of countless civilizations, among them humans of all walks having long since disavowed themselves from the seat of Sol’s empire. Across an age, a spark of resistance ignited to a shining star of defiance.

And yet, before the galaxy could play host to a war of unseen proportions, the cries of those standing against Paradise would resonate with those straining voices within its crushing confines: Conscientious objectors no longer able to abide by the wrongs at home and abroad, militias and legions defecting in preparation for the inevitable power vacuum, guild leaders seeking to free themselves from the state to pursue their craft, researchers and intellectuals having fostered deep networks of resistance for over a thousand years, and those countless downtrodden, simply seeking retribution against a world that had failed them. Three hundred years past the first conquest of Paradise, the Commonwealth boasted over a million subjugated worlds. By the turn of its first millennia, the number had been whittled by endless sacrifice and loss to barely ten thousand.

Rebellion and defections were common within the Commonwealth. A planet lost in a decade, a whole system lost in a century, and for almost two millennia, the Nihilo dynasty pushed on, growing ever more untenably as more and more of its most powerful drowned themselves in their own lies, having lost sight of even the endless end that had justified their means. However, 4019 years after the calamity that rebirthed Man in flames, the hysteresis of that vile dynasty's karma would finally end, as the Paradise that spanned thousands of star systems collapsed.

The Night of Falling Stars, it was called. The golden order of Man's rulers crumbled in a great cascade—viceroys surrendering to mysteriously bolstered resistance forces, entire fleets blockaded and stranded on inhospitable worlds, colossal nonhumans striding across worlds once thought inaccessible, broadcasts of impassioned calls to revolutions carried across a hundred thousand light years in but an instant, and the near-miraculous evaporation of Nihilo's seat of power in a flash of indigo **Light**—and brought an end to over two thousand years of suffering as a mostly-uncoordinated alliance of revolutionaries swept the galaxy faster than ever seen.

The Nihilo Dynasty was toppled. Some planets reported less than double-digit fatalities in the ensuing fall. Many civilians saw this as nothing short of divine providence, smiting the unjust tyrants of Sol to usher in a new era of peace. The loose alliance of revolutionaries birth a new forum of collaboration: The Galactic Electorate, a seat of initially 78 major unions of lives in the sea of stars. In a moment of grace, Sol was spared of the wrath of a million worlds, merely quarantined and stripped of its military, left to be forgotten, but never forgiven. How such grace was afforded to Sol is unknown, but many have pointed to the simultaneous rise of the Interstellar Highways as proof that human guilds had bought the deferral of the galaxy's rancor with the price of constructing the Highways. Nevertheless, the scars of Nihilo's sins began to fade, the World at Large moving forward into new problems and growing pains.

*They were not so incorrect*, thought Meridien, lost in her thoughts as she awaited the completion of her landing protocol. Certainly did the people of the Garden Worlds see through the veil of secrecy and identify the facilitators of the Night of Falling Stars. Indeed, the revolutionaries, the generals, the guild leaders, and the philosophers of the former Commonwealth had been collaborating with the external resistances for centuries of secrecy. Their enemies vanquished, they turned their resources to assist the Electorate, enabling greater connectivity among its constituents with the ill-gotten gains of Sol's conquest while upholding the tenuous peace. "*Never again*," they proclaimed, pledging to stand against tyranny eternal as long as their organization remained.

And yet, they would come to be called “Principate” by their charges.

And yet, they would turn their near-monopoly on interstellar travel against the people they had once protected from retribution.

And yet they would stand helpless against the scourge that the galaxy would face two thousand years later and allow the people of Sol to forget their sins.

The rage, it rises. Rises like stars reddened and swollen in struggle against their fate.

“Little lady, we were speaking of ages-gone?”  
A forthright yet gentle voice rang from her ship's communications.

Meridien springs from her chair in surprise as she is launched out of the mire of her thoughts. She hurries to answer the person at landing control.

“Sorry. The mention of the Night of Falling Stars brought up bad memories.”

She blurted, knowing full well that she would not have been born until centuries after the Night.

She hears a harrumph of offense from the other side as the operator of landing control calls her bluff.

“We good folk are deserving of at least a better lie, no?”

The response elicits an exhale of mirth from Meridien.

“I apologize. I *am* a liar by trade, you know.”

“Little inwit that we do not fear your face then!”

“Rest assured, I can be even worse if need be.”

Through the banter, Meridien leans forward, allowing herself to peer with her chin resting upon her folded arms the splendor of the Garden World approaching below. Both the Principate of the modern day and the Garden Worlds hearkened to the philosophy of the pre-Nihilo Children of Flowers, an old dream of a social structure in harmony with the advancement of life's fulfillment. Nevertheless, their architecture shows the divergence in

interpretations: The Principate's installations and ships are cold, monolithic things; great edifices of ancient guilt, memorializing the apathy of an order long dead in the hopes that Sol's crimes will be never repeated. The Garden Worlds, however, displays with its caressing shape like a yet-unbloomed rose bud the characteristic optimism of the people who choose to live upon them. One could tell their opposition in purpose and outlook simply from one glance of their abodes. Thus does Meridien, a mote in the face of the Principate's great monoliths, see herself being received yet again by a people they had betrayed.

Landing procedures followed accordingly, her vessel pulls silently into the neatly-engineered garage space reserved for undersized vehicles.

“Welcome back to Home-Beneath-Twinning-Stars, Meridien.”

Meridien rises to exit her vessel as she concludes her conversation with landing control.

“This is your home. No need to extend an invitation.”

Before the person on the other side can offer a response, she ends the communication and prepares to disembark. The seamless chamber of her ship's interior recesses in the back, opening to a ramp lowering onto the ground, where Meridien sees people clad in vivid colors rushing to greet her. Hesitation resolves as she cannot help but oblige their welcome and descends to meet her liaisons.

Among the half-dozen who had arrived at the landing garage were two youths bearing purple cloaks emblazoned with the symbol of their binary stars, with but two or three accolades to their name pinned to their jackets (Oh, the insatiable curiosity of some people!) In the back sat a gold-cloaked porter, keeping his distance from the Principate Executor. A duo beside them stand vigilant with the black cloaks of the Civil-Warrior, their gun-lances jutting from their back like banners of war.

Flanked by the Civil-Warriors is Meridien's liaison, the white-cloaked Emissary known by his storied name as Peace-Of-The-Pale-Worm. The man twists a lock of his well-groomed dreads in his fingers as he beams at Meridien's arrival.

“Insight matches outlook, Meridien. Relax those weary shoulders and let us deflate your stress.”

The mention of her shoulders' tension elicits a shrug and a correction of posture from Meridien.



“Thank you for the helpful pointer. Inwit’s agenbite for my rush and lack of decorum. Not that you would care, worm whisperer.”

The Emissary sharply exhales in mirth from the exaltation of his name, his face one of acknowledgement.

“Your hurriedness speaks for the urgency of your task. Tell us now and we will not abide by the waste of our time, yours and my compatriots.”

One of the youths chimes in,

“Inwit speaks to leave this conversation to those privy?”

Meridien dismisses the notion with a shrug.

“I’ll say this to anyone who will hear it and respond in earnest.”

The Emissary frowns, drawn by Meridien’s disregard of privacy for what was said to be an important discussion.

“Is this not a matter of confidential information?”

Meridien steels herself. Deceive the reactionary and inspire the proactive, that was the mode of her plan. She imagines the Night of Falling Stars, when the organization that was not yet the Principate had bent the very cosmos themselves to save every life that could be saved.

With a deep breath of calm. She wills the imprint of the Soul of Symmetry to **move the fabric of reality to bring its crystalline self into her hand**. All present could observe it clear as day: a halo of distorted phase in the normally bound Color of reality, colored a somber **Blue**. Find the words, she speaks plainly, praying that the shock of her performance will disarm the skepticism of what she will say next:

“Two thousand years ago, a scourge in the stars—the Great Death—came to Sol and ravaged life across its planets. The calamity only ended with the intervention of an entity able to manipulate the concept of **Order**, who did so by resetting the whole of Sol back six thousand years to humanity’s re-population of planet Earth.”

The six others present immediately rose to respond—some to contest the absurdity of the claim, or perhaps to express shock at Meridien’s sudden dispersion of reality’s Color. Nevertheless, she continues.

“I witnessed what should have been Sol’s end and billions dead, and instead of becoming a casualty, I was made to witness a test by this powerful entity to see if the people of Sol deserved to continue living. The entity gifted me the abilities you just saw to see if I could change my people’s fate. Sol is not the only civilization that has been subjected to this test. None of the previous civilizations have succeeded in changing their fates.”

The Emissary's face, bewildered yet betraying belief, darkens in grim realization at the fate of a people ignorant of their own doom. Meridien takes another breath, and concludes her revelation:

“The recent events in Sol and the World at Large have called this entity of **Order** prematurely to Sol. I believe the Principate is privy to information outside of its purview thanks to another entity who is responsible for the **disappearance** of the Nihilo dynasty’s capital, and has allowed a large number of anti-human factions within the Electorate to mobilize an invasion force against Sol due to this information. If the timing of the **Order** entity’s arrival is any indication, Sol faces a campaign of extermination it will not survive.”

The porter in the back stammers out a response,

“I- I had heard that the Targid Star-Winds of war had been seen moving across the night sky  
toward the Cygnus Arm.”

Meridien’s eyes belie determination beyond the ages.

“Sol is my home, no matter how flawed or fractured. We deserve a place in this world.”

Everyone falls silent at the words. The cry of a million creeds, invoked for the people whom it had once defied. The Emissary breaks the silence, his voice carried on the wind of his gentle Garden World.

“Never again.”

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You began your conversation with [JD].

>Are you who you say you are?<sup>3 mins ago.</sup>

>absolutely not im a goddamned enigma<sup>5 mins ago</sup>

>I'd have to say the same.<sup>3 mins ago.</sup>

>you love to see it hey this is jo barkles right<sup>3 mins ago.</sup>

>how do you know who i am.<sup>3 mins ago.</sup>

>my girlfriend is a goddamn time traveler is how<sup>3 mins ago.</sup>

>That's absurd. You're a troll.<sup>2 mins ago</sup>

>uhhhh how about another piece of proof you once walked through a forbidden door and acquired power at the edge of reality?<sup>4 mins ago.</sup>

>I believe you. Tell me what you're here for.<sup>1 mins ago.</sup>

>yay you didnt freak out okay lady i know youre trying to fix Sol and everything given how the government just exploded in flames there but there mayyyyy be a principate ship holding a bajillion soldiers ready to<sup>1 mins ago.</sup>

>oops sent too early<sup>50 seconds ago</sup>

>ready to rain hell on everyone you love so maybe put aside the realpolitik for a moment and come to pluto<sup>47 seconds ago</sup>

>Tell me your name and how to recognize you. <sup>42 seconds ago.</sup>

>names joshua im a cool robot with blue glowy lights and a big gun : ) <sup>35 seconds ago</sup>

>I'll be there in ten minutes. Here's a direct contact to Yimsel from NANO. Tell her what you told me.<sup>20 seconds ago.</sup>

>love ya barkles youre gonna save lives<sup>15 seconds ago.</sup>

>by the way this is kinda outta nowhere but i  
appreciate you trying your best to fix things up with your  
uh group there7 seconds ago.

>thanks for caring about my people at least a little  
but could you please get better friends2 seconds ago

>Our people.Just sent.

>remind me that you said that i have to treat you to some Tit's after this  
blows over.Just sent.

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