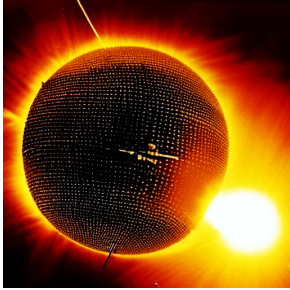


Miles Hall
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Mr. Kay
English 2



Sunset on the Cosmic Horizon

The themes are explained at the end of the story in italics. I highly recommend that you read them after you finish the story; however, wait until then, because one of them is a serious spoiler.

The sun burned low on the horizon, a bloody red against the dusty crimson of the Mercury dust fields. Arthur Tuarta held his cup of instant coffee, reveling in the otherworldly sunset through the thick glass panel. The satellites orbiting the sun had turned its shine from blinding to a dim glow over the past 19 years. Mankind had Helios chained and garroted, and his corpse was barely warm. “What a wonder,” he mused, “to be able to bend the stars themselves to our will!”

The harvest of the sun’s energy was necessary for the benefits it had brought, however. No longer did the Earth’s precious ice melt from the heat. No longer did coal and oil burn for want of electricity. The sun’s energy, seemingly endless, provided the fuel for a technological expansion, not unlike steam power (or indeed fire itself). The stars, which had once only seemed to be a natural phenomenon, were now shackled into an engine driving mankind’s crusade into space and the future.

The metallic ring of the alarm pulled him away from the sight: it was his shift in the computing room. He tossed his lukewarm coffee into the wastebin and bounded down the ivory

corridor. It was easy to lose track of time when the sun didn't move, Arthur mused: even after 6 months, the station on Mercury was a dramatic change from the comfort of Earth.



“My apologies for the lateness, sir!” Arthur addressed as he rocketed into the computing room, his yellow coat billowing around him in the low gravity. The floor had carpets that concealed magnets to hold the workers to the ground. The magnets worked, but the carpets were itchy and stank of coffee and oil spilled long ago. Googie decor filled the room, with a sloped ceiling and faux stars adorning the walls.

The metal doctor turned around, letting his frigid gaze come to rest on Arthur. He held eye contact for a long moment before speaking in a low, glacial tone. “There is no shortage of scientists eager to come to this planet, Tuarta. You are not here because you are the best choice but because we cannot afford to send you back to Earth. Your place in my solar operation is dictated solely by the exorbitant cost of space travel. Consider that next time you are late.”

Arthur's cheeks felt hot, but he knew better than to offer a response. He knew that the doctor and the base he commanded were in charge of the majority of the solar energy. The doctor's demand for excellence was a necessary trait, but Arthur still felt indignant at the public reprimand. Hiding his face, Arthur slunk to his cubicle.

The glow of the analog computer screen overwhelmed him. The vast amount of energy that solar power had provided in the past couple decades had been the cause for revolutionary technologies to arise- an unregulated flow of information that completely changed everyday life. The computing device in front of Arthur was one such wonder brought on by the solar age. Dutifully, he set to work with the knobs and dials, becoming another scientist among the hundreds sitting at the silver chrome desks.

The satellites around the sun collected energy from the sunlight and stored it on Mercury, leaving it up to the scientists here to arbitrate over where the energy was sent, not unlike an accountant puzzling over orders of coal or water in the old world. Requests appeared on the monitor as Arthur twisted the dial. Faxes from Earth, one after the other, begged him for sunlight. Some were farmers, pleading for some of their sunlight to make their crops grow. Others were families, asking for energy to power their houses, and still others were dying men longing for a last glimpse of sun. The things people needed their light for were beyond count, and it was Arthur's job to determine who would benefit the most from it. He felt like a crude Phaethon or Hyperion, beaming sunlight down to only the worthy mortals from his mighty chariot. It gave him a sense of purpose.

"Arthur Tuarta!" the doctor called, pulling him out of his fantasy of godhood with a jolt. "I finally have a way to get you out of my damn base!"

"Sir!" Arthur replied, snapping to attention. He was quite literally on the edge of his seat.

"A few hundred thousand satellites are out of alignment," the doctor explained, "like a cancer. When a satellite is off by a few degrees, the adjacent ones slowly adjust to its skew. We could have a hundred million or even a billion malfunctioning in 30 hours if someone doesn't go up to the master satellite and reorient them, and sunlight would escape through the satellite blockade, ruining our monopoly.

"And most importantly- it would be grounds for your transfer back to Earth, given that we need to dispatch a rocket regardless," the doctor finished. "Can you handle the mission?"

"Yes, sir." Arthur nodded, crestfallen. He understood that this was not an optional assignment, but he could not bear that his time on Mercury was drawing to a close. On this planet, he was close to the sun, able to exercise his will over billions of people back on Earth. As

pitiful as it was, Arthur only wanted a job in the solar power business for the sense of power it gave him; and he knew that he was not alone in that sentiment. He could not bear to go back to work on Earth after the luxury and purpose he had felt on Mercury.



Arthur's rocket roared as he shot away from the tiny red planet. Mercury had a thin atmosphere, so breaking off into space was as gentle as a ride down one of the highways back on Earth. The canyons and mountains that had once seemed to dominate the landscape shrunk the farther he traveled, and soon, the horizon slipped away and Mercury became another dot in the massive black expanse.

The pod was pale blue inside, with only a single room that housed the controls, food, and passenger. Suddenly, the fax machine on the control panel clicked as a report came in. Arthur begrudgingly turned his eyes to the mission statement coming in from Earth and away from the glory of the cosmos. The paper smelled of the electric coils and ink it was pressed with- the stench of bureaucracy. It read:

[July 17, 1958] TUARTA-ARTHUR is en route to MASTER-SATELLITE-IV. Mission statement: Communicate to satellites 9S154309-28040059 and order completion of ADJACENT-REORIENTATION-INITIATIVE. After mission report to STATION-EARTH-E9311944. Confirm mission statement and proceed.

Arthur printed his signature at the bottom and punched the codes into the Remington 10K on the control panel. Arthur was glad that the pod, though old and slightly claustrophobic, still had a measure of comfort, and he soon found himself relaxing back into his faux leather seat. Though the pod moved blindingly fast, the stars and planets so far away outside seemed

stationary. Space granted a gentle weightlessness that lulled Arthur into sleep, making the 8 hour journey to the station pass in an instant.



Arthur was awoken only by the shock the deceleration placed on him. The satellites above him formed a tight weave of aluminum and silicon- a web built to trap the sunlight and beam it back down to Mercury. Though a tight net of shadow from the outside, the interior was ablaze. Below his feet, the sun burned- so vast and glorious was the endless ocean of light that he could not help but gasp. With fervor and might did the cosmic fires still burn! Up close, where the satellites did not obscure so much of the sun's radiance, the air in the pod around him was lit with the astral rays. Despite the protection the pod offered, Arthur could feel the heat sinking into his bones like those hot summer days long forgotten.

The pod came to a consistent orbit a few miles off of the trajectory of the master satellite. It hung there, simultaneously moving blindingly fast and not moving at all. Arthur punched the code into the card paper and inserted it into the reader, listening to the beep of the radio communicating with the satellite. All the while, he was strangely transfixed by the pulsing heat of the sun- what a majestic creature! For humanity to have mastered her, brought her to her knees; what power and glory to man!

The dashboard suddenly lit up with red. Alarm bells rang somewhere in the pod as the fax machine furiously clicked. Arthur whipped his eyes away from the window and back to the controls of the pod.

[July 17, 1958] UNFORSEEN SOLAR FLARE IMMINENT, 147 SECONDS. EXIT SOLAR ORBIT IMMEDIATELY AND MOVE AT LEAST ... 3.78° NORTH ... TO AVOID CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE.

The light outside the pod pulsed more violently. Arthur stared in terror and awe at the storm of radiation and heat brewing on the sun's surface layer, realizing the truth of his situation. Satellites didn't just roll off course for no reason- the solar flare's tremors must have been the cause of trouble with the satellites' alignment. Regardless of the cause, however, his life was in danger.

Arthur engaged the pod's single pitiful thruster, turning all of the gauges to their maximum. He was pressed against the floor of the pod in the sudden burst of speed, rocketing away from the master satellite and the source of the solar flare. Unfortunately, it was not certain to be enough- even 3.78 degrees of the sun's circumference was almost 30,000 miles. Arthur counted down the seconds until the invisible wave of death would reach him.

The solar flare was no different than a dam breaking or a power plant melting down in the old world. This danger was the price that came with using such a powerful natural phenomenon as a tool- undoubtedly, thought Arthur, would Earth suffer blackouts, starvation and despair in the weeks and months it took to repair the satellites. He closed his eyes, letting the sun's radiation and heat rip open the pod and char him and the satellites to ash.

"This is the price I pay for believing that we could control the stars," Arthur cried to the endless flame, "my reprisal for humanity's hubris."

Three notable symbols are the sun, the control of the sunlight, and Arthur's death. The sun is a natural resource, and is representative of the unmasterable natural elements of our world. In this story, mankind has controlled sunlight and uses it to solve natural problems, representing the good that can come from controlling natural resources. There is also a hint of corporate control, which is likewise representative of corporations exploiting our control over

natural resources for their own benefit. Finally, Arthur's death is representative of human greed and our tendency to get too comfortable with the power we control. A similar piece of media is the recent movie "Nope" (though the movie was in no way used as inspiration for my story): the natural forces around us are powerful and deadly, and we tend to forget that they do not respect us as their masters without a steady hand holding their leash. Arthur's death is also reminiscent of Icarus. Arthur compared himself to gods on the Greek pantheon earlier in the story (Hyperion, Phaethon), and his end being similar to that of Icarus' is ironic and demonstrates his hubris (and, in turn, humanity's).