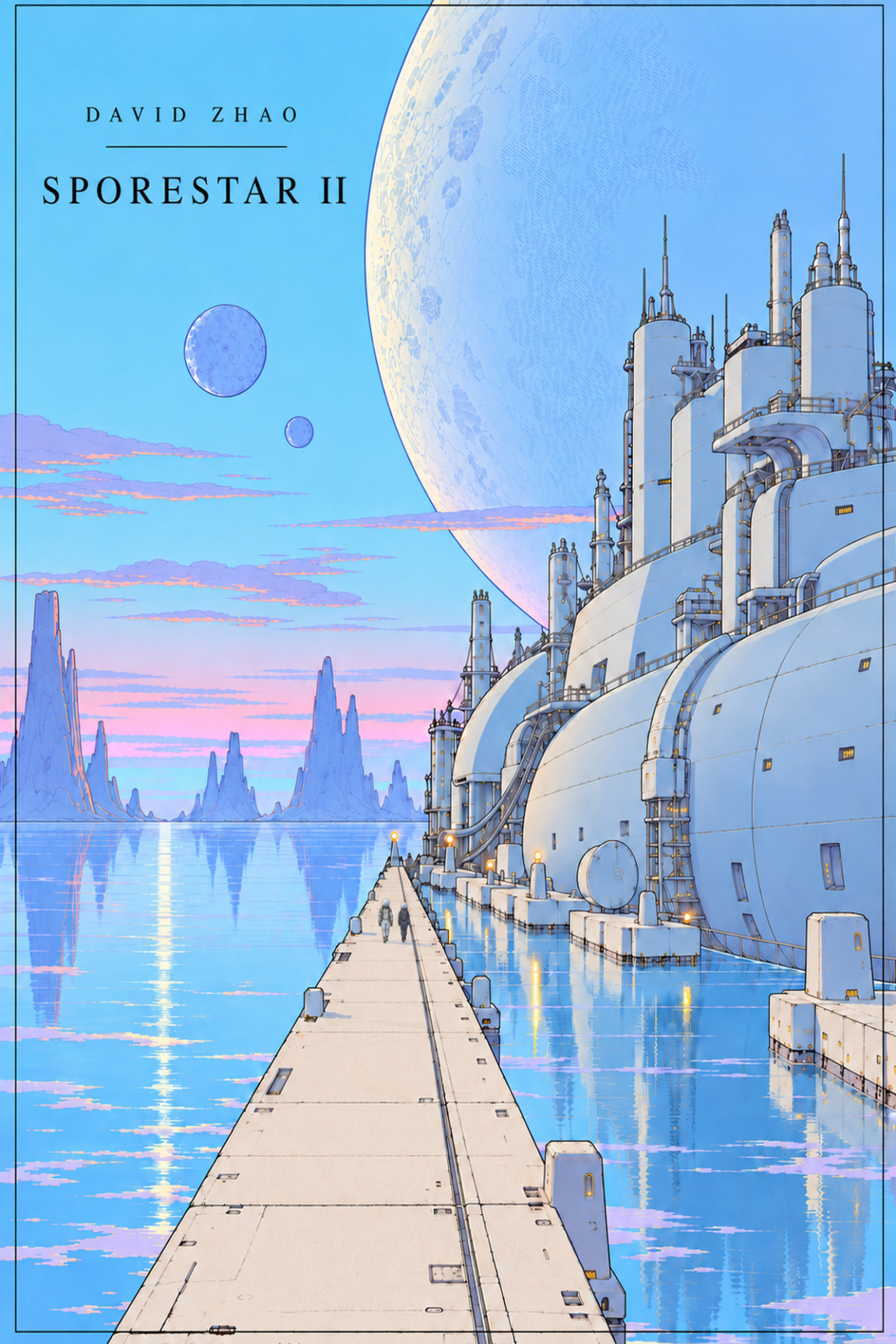


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SPORESTAR II



1

The ocean of Spore Star II resembled a stranded metal window, its stillness suffocating. Wisps of mercury and methane, slowly rising as vapor, adsorbed the irregular white noise seeping from the depths of the planet's ocean, forming a hazy, pale-violet halo that spread to the farthest edge of the horizon.

Scorpio would rise in 1.5 standard Earth hours.

I walked slowly along the naval base breakwater, an impossibly long breakwater whose distant end had contracted to the size of a needlepoint. I felt the clammy texture beneath my feet, the contours of my soles, those faint strands of memory recording a single direction. I knew where to go, had known from the first moment I arrived.

Even without a submarine guide.

Methane waves broke against the seawall, condensed frost clinging to the surface of my body, held apart from me by a shell 0.1 millimeters thick. I breathed, my chest rising and falling slightly, feeling the subtle connection with the world. Far to the planet's south, the electromagnetic storms raging there spawned violent cyclones, which gradually tired and dissolved on their long journey north.

I slowly raised my head, looking at the black curtain to my left, six azure satellites glowing in the distance, flickering in the atmospheric turbulence.

This was a nuclear submarine awaiting decommissioning, its black hull so vast as to be almost absurd, obscuring half the sky. A throb stirred in my chest, a warm current lingering around my cheeks. At the end of this path, the guide and I slowly sat down, without a word.

Compared with the purple-orange sky and its drifting, restless satellites, the sky here in the shadow seemed more like the familiar, beautiful night sky of home as I knew it—night sky—black, deep, **yet** offering a sense of safety. Along the edges of the mottled metal, metal and alien atmosphere clung to one another, tearing, biting, forming a colored iris—a shell of dry ice condensed at -69 degrees Celsius.

Only a few mottled traces of digits remained on the nameplate; the submarine's number was no longer legible. The sisters of the Steelglow Free Trade Union habitually named these killing machines in an ancient Earth language—those tongue-twisting consonants and trills like ritual incantations, like the invocations of witches on Walpurgis Night: summon, identify, then destroy.

For a long stretch of history, these Russian names had been more than names. They had once been a conclusion: death was written before every closing of a hatch. Freedom was written into them too—the kind of freedom that took destruction as its price and still pressed forward. From the moment the Spore people tore the Human Free Trade Alliance to ashes, three hundred billion lives or conscious entities erased, through the resurgence and renewed expansion of the following six hundred and fifty-four Earth years—these names had crossed one colonial world after another with the Steelglow fleet, leaving hard echoes in countless memories, like the iron clang of meshing gears.

Now, “..CT B...OBA” was only a blurred afterimage of letters, like garbled text corroded by seawater. The steel skeleton it designated lay quietly immersed in the harbor of the mercury ocean, like an enormous whale skeleton hauled up from the deep: its iron shell cracked, its paint flaking, its hatches loose as split lips.

“It's already close to death,” the submarine guide said. “Over the past fifteen Earth years, our submarine fleet has destroyed all the cities hiding in the oceans of Spore Star. City after city.”

“There are no Spore people there now.” A little electronic noise mingled with her voice, rustling from the language converter on the left side of her helmet.

I thought of us at that very moment, huddled deep inside our pressure suits, our minds curled inward. Ancient garments, as ancient as the submarine, as reliable, as battered.

“How did you and your submarine survive?” I asked. “Six months ago, the Council received the message ‘the ocean has been cleared.’ ” I paused briefly, feeling out her tone. “Was it you who sent that message, sister?”

“No, they died... three months ago, all of them...” She turned her head, and I watched the indistinct outline of her face. A pair of deep-green eyes looked at me through the thick, clouded goggles, their gaze quiet, melancholy. Though perhaps there was actually no melancholy in it.

People could always see their own reflections in the murky depths of the Steelglow sisters' eyes. “An accident, not an attack by the remaining Spore forces.” The electronic voice came intermittently. “The submarine's pressure vessel ruptured and leaked, the vessel sank quickly, was crushed, collapsed, and now lies quietly in the ocean depths some six thousand kilometers away.” She raised her hand and pointed toward the sea to our right. “In that direction, to the south.”

“So, Настя, you and your submarine are the fleet's only remaining survivors?” I asked.

The guide gave no answer, simply stood up, switched on the plasma cutter in her hand, and began melting the iris frost frozen over the submarine's entrance.

Amid the rising, incandescent sparks, I gradually made out the submarine's original color. In that pale-yellow arc of mirrored metal, we could even see our own reflected figures clearly, the arc flashing like starlight, intermittently obscuring my scrutiny of myself.

"Soon, you'll hear that breathing." **Настя** took three minutes to finish the preparations for opening the hatch with practiced ease, then gestured that it could be opened at any time. "Do you think it's necessary to investigate?" she said.

"Yes, it seems we must." The mist of a hurried exhalation obscured my vision. "The Council is very interested in the source of the echo; observers at the supply station one light-year away have also detected this strange sound source. In fact," I paused, "the human body can hear it directly. We must find out whether this is some kind of biochemical weapon the Spore people have secretly developed for use against humans."

I swallowed the rest of what I had been about to say. At least she seemed, as yet, to show no obvious effects. Steelglow people were always this composed, this calm. It was hard to believe that a thousand years ago, being a warrior had still been almost exclusively a male privilege, yet now that privilege and glory had vanished entirely, yielding wholly to these seemingly fragile sisters.

The ship's log was clear: three years ago, the first crew members began to hear anomalous sounds. Their source could not be traced, yet they penetrated deep into the skull and could not be removed.

"Once inside the submarine, everyone hears this sound... We checked all the equipment, but found nothing," the guide said. I recalled the contents of the log: a distance of one light-year was enough to cover an entire fleet.

Scorpio would rise in one standard Earth hour.

That submarine had to be entered. The Council's additional interest was clean: seize, price, possess.

Now, the whole of the galaxy's Fifth Interstellar Region was clearing out the remaining Spore forces, and no human, software entity, or even Bayesian thinking machine cared about the consequences. Those higher-order thinking machines remained silent.

I stood up and walked toward the hatch: this submarine had to be entered.

"Shall we go in now?" **Настя** calmly drew me back to reality.

"Yes, please lead the way," I said.

A pale-yellow gas surged from the opening gap, and I dimly made out the submarine's spiral entrance; we stepped onto the automatic transport lift, the outer edge of the passenger conveyance fitting closely against the threaded metal walls, moving slowly forward, descending gradually into the submarine. For a long time we said nothing more,

the planetary landscape disappearing behind me, intermittent electronic sounds in my ears gradually replacing the planet's white noise.

I knew absolutely nothing about this model of submarine.

Ahead of me, in the far, far depths of my field of vision, an orange-red glow emerged, while behind me the hatch slowly closed; at the instant it sealed, pale-yellow light and gas began seeping along the spiral guide grooves, gradually illuminating the silent passage and its immense depth.

(To be continued.)