
You began your conversation with [EB].

>Are you who you say you are?^{Not yet.}

<RECORD YOUR RESPONSE HERE>^{No response found, left blank.}

>I am asking you if you are who you say you are.^{Not yet.}

<RECORD YOUR RESPONSE HERE>^{No response found, left blank.}

>What was your name before you were born?^{Not yet.}

<RECORD YOUR RESPONSE HERE>^{No response found, left blank.}

>When was the last time you were sure you were real?^{Not yet.}

<RECORD YOUR RESPONSE HERE>^{No response found, left blank.}

>Do you remember what it felt like to be real?^{Not yet.}

<RECORD YOUR RESPONSE HERE>^{No response found, left blank.}

>Why do you refuse to answer me?^{Not yet.}

<RECORD YOUR RESPONSE HERE>^{No response found, left blank..}

>Be not untruthful. Are you who you say you are?^{Just sent.}



>Liar. ^{Just sent..}

“You,

I will say it again, pay close attention yourself:

You.

Who among You took that word and lifted it from its visceral reality?

Who among You translated the language of worked Earth into semantic meaning?

Who among You saw?

Who among you understood?

And are the two self-same?

You.

Consider the You who first considered these previous questions,

Consider the You who now considers this next question,

Who among You is here?

Who among You is real?

And are the two wholly different?

Think with your mind and present yourself a scenario of another distinct existence, wholly identical to yours in visceral reality.

Perturb this scenario now with the question posed so essentially to the infant child before their social awareness awakens:

‘Does this distinct existence possess too a loci of self as I do, or is It a simulacrum of Me—the Me that stands at the center of everything that happens to Me?’

Turn the mind inward and accept (for now) as axiom the existence of the Other; accept the postulation of the separate Me that now finds itself the subject of the Me that is You.

Ask yourself thus:

What is the distance between the You that sees and the You that understands?

What is the distance between the You that is the Me and the You of that distinct existence?

Are these distances separated by degrees of cardinality or category?

Can such distances be measured in quanta or qualia?

Construct your answers carefully, and you shall know the distance between You and the stranger that is the You subject to the Me.

Reach across the distance; reach out towards the stranger that the Me calls You!

If your reach does not bridge the distance of visceral reality, then call out with your voice!

If your voice runs dry and the language of your mind cannot bridge the distance of semantic understanding, then meet the stranger with your senses with which you verify your own reality!

To be without the power to touch the stranger's locus of awareness is to extend the distance between You and Me to a lonely chasm of infinity. Call it *Sheol* as those of the world before us once did.

To bridge that distance—to reach out, see, and understand the stranger is to be one in divine union: the One that Is as It Is. Know that its name is secret and it is supreme love, as those of the world before us once did.

Know lonely *Sheol* and know the love of the One that Is as It Is, but know this above all: Every stranger is as you are a stranger to yourself,

A great black cosmos of drifting stars, sometimes lonely yet never alone.

Ancirn Volheus.”

Profundis Dew-Of-Moonrise-Afterglow – “Seafoam”, 7.d. from the *Vishyi*.

...

Braig Adytum Präteritum sighed upon noticing the comments on his own personal manuscript.

In the natural darkness of this skylight observatory, the highlighted comments posted two minutes ago by Braig’s Uncle jut out starkly against the starlight pouring into the room and illuminating Braig’s multi-screen workstation. The yellow color of the highlights stood out as an eyesore, as did the comments attached to those highlights.

Braig closes the last comment box and slumps into his work chair, its armrest piled with various books and pamphlets on the miscellany of procedural generation and automated architecture.

He did not ask for input on this project. He did not even tell the others in the Family. This was supposed to be just a small pet project, worked on during the dead time between Family meetings. Yes, translations of a religious text are a trivial matter in comparison to the grand scales at which the Präteritums operated, but did the young Präteritum not deserve his own pastime? For a few years, it seemed that the relatively minor effort and expenditure of attention given to the project had allowed it to slip under the probing eyes of his Uncle Viktor, but now his words fill the sidebar of Braig’s graphics display. Viktor Gilnzny Präteritum had managed to invade even Braig’s personal literary spaces.

Does Uncle Viktor think he knows the people of the Garden Worlds more than I do? The question disperses in Braig’s mind like a scoff disperses into a conversation.

Braig lets a frustrated breath pass between his closed lips as he reaches to connect another graphics display to his workstation. A curved screen of beryl glass snaps into position with the rest of the graphics display as soon as his hands move it into the general continuity of the collective screens. The newly connected screen partitions a portion of the workstation into his personal repository of information pertaining to the Way. Uncle Viktor’s words had merit, even if they were intrusive. Certain parts of the translation were off and included personal inflections that conformed more to a

Solar understanding of the common language than Gardener. The thought from before hangs over Braig as he works.

Of course he does. What does Uncle Viktor not know?

The man was a polymath of the highest caliber, his knowledge of numerous seemingly-disparate fields connected together seamlessly along his flights of intellectual fancy. The man was the epitome of the Präteritum method: evolution of large-scale paradigms of thought driven by the constant acquisition of new knowledge. That ebbing and flowing of philosophy was the connecting thread of the Family. It's how Uncle Simón created the plesiohedral designs of the Principate's monolithic carrier ships and how Braig's father Ion designed the outstretched heavensward spires of Earth's School of Phoenicia. It's how humanity, grounded upon a fallow and freshly-lifeless Earth, managed to reach toward the black cosmos and carve their very mannerisms into-

The thoughts of the Präteritum's greatness brought Braig no pride for his Family nor relief from Uncle Viktor's comments. This was supposed to be something of his own making. A pet project! A simple set of translations for the religious texts of a nationality many people had never even heard of, let alone seen. The Präteritums dealt with the people on the Garden Worlds far more often than any other group, Solar or Extrasolar, and among the Präteritums, Braig was certain he had learned more from their culture than any of his Family. He had met them on their grounds—he learned their particular vernaculars, heard their words of perspective, and walked among the society they had obscured from outsiders. This was true. He was sure of it.

Does Uncle Viktor know the people of the Garden Worlds more than I do?

The doubt had set in. Braig partitions on another screen of his graphics display a direct line to the Principate. Yes, that's right. If there are inaccuracies with respect to the cultural mores of the Garden Worlds, then surely the people who live there would detect them best. This stint in the Solar System had proven to be a formality for him and Sister Rusya, and some fresh air in a Garden World would surely help wash him of this haze of doubt. It was unbecoming of him to have such idle worry. One cannot steer the flow of human thought while uncertain at the helm.

I think of my uncle too much, he thinks.

Maybe I've been too possessive of this, anyways. Rusya would probably like to see it. He considers sending her the manuscript, and even partitions a screen to send it to her. Unfortunately, the attention needed to send the manuscript is taken up by the other partitioned screen lighting up with a message from the Principate refusing his request for interstellar passage.

Principate Executor Meridien kos Katafraktos is very, very busy. Busy enough to ignore the young Präteritum's personal channel communications. He was to be trapped along with the others in the maws of the Solar System, that much was made explicit by Principate instructions—a rare occasion, as the decision-makers who wait at the Principate's primary stronghold deal in ambiguities. The Principate's mete were the shadows and chasms of interpretation, its Executors the umbral pseudopods that poke and prod the world at large. That, of course, meant that she would be unreasonably saddled with orders to carry out.

Why are they acting so frantic now? She passingly wondered as she attempted to redirect her focus back to proper protocol for landing an Executor craft on a stormy methane ocean at high tide.

No landing gear required, the ship's internal interface should generate enough stabilization from its being active for the vessel to remain where it is. There's about eight thousand meters left for the ship to brake, more than enough to slow without inertial adjustments to a steady forward coast at a jerk of 2 earth-gravities a second. Meridien exhales slowly in relief. Bless the people of the Starborne Systems for choosing relatively friendly worlds. Perhaps it's those people's attunement to the nature around them that compels them to choose abodes less hostile to human life, considering how many of the Galactic Electorate choose inhospitable hellscapes for their strongholds. Perhaps it's an acknowledgement of their Solar roots—a nod toward their millennia-long transformation from chimeric experiments to preternatural superbeings. The only certainty Meridien knows is that they, despite purporting the power to command the movement of the celestial spheres, have remained silent while their Solar cousins wriggle in the Principate's trap.

The Executor craft smooths to a stop like a fleeting ghost, its tick-like shape akin to a pebble preternaturally unsunk above the waves. So it goes, skidding across the methane ocean's raging surface toward the rain-soaked abode of Vim Coimeinos, Starborne president over this ocean planet. The gray basalt crags comprising Coimeinos' island home stand slightly unremarkably amidst the stone shores upon which the residence sits. Only the unnatural light emanating through those opaque pillars of stone betray the presence of life.

Is it a pretension of humility, or a disregard for splendor, hm? Meridien wonders as her ship glides ghostly onto the tide-carved shores of the Coimeinos residence. She retrieves the dossier of Principate orders once again and checks them once more to confirm the ambiguities they contain. Yes, nothing stops her from speaking to the Starborne—The Principate had no such sway over those cosmos-communing peoples—and nothing stops her from attempting to compel them to act.

Of course, if intervention from the Starborne were a concern to the Principate, they would not have left such an ambiguity. Vim Coimeinos' silhouette replete with the indigo light of the cosmos appears from the walls of the basalt crags of his home, overlooking Meridien's ship. Thus, she prepares to exit her craft—

“I would not waste time exiting that vessel, Executor.” Spoke Coimeinos, not through the air, but from the air itself, like the voice of the atmosphere. Meridien sharply inhales through her teeth, her face grimacing and devoid utterly of surprise.

“Can you not at least spare a little consideration of what I may be asking?” She says with a shakiness unbecoming that of an Executor. She nervously raps her shoes on the ceramic flooring of the Executor craft as she attempts to avoid a face-to-face with the Starborne.

“The Principate moves three of its own supercarriers across the galaxy on illicit Highways hastily constructed by the *Tay al-Ard*.” Coimeinos replies, the darkness of the overcast rain clouds obscuring his features beyond his head of matted hair and his rain cloak.

Meridien's breath catches in her throat.

“The balance of voices in the stars shifts, and the Principate takes a side.” The Starborne allows the undercurrent of disdain to flow through his words. With this, Meridien confirms the Starborne's understanding and more importantly, their own stance on what's about to happen in the Solar System.

“And you have taken a side too?” Meridien quietly asks, her voice just barely audible above the sound of the rain against the hull of the Executor craft.

Coimeinos shakes his head in denial—a gesture carried over from the Starborne's Old Human roots—and responds, “We are not the rulers of the world at large, and we have no interest in intervening in affairs that are not our business—”

“—And you do so by choosing to do nothing.” Meridien snaps, “Are you afraid of interceding against the Principate, or are you all cowards to the core?” She’s seen this before, from people who claim far more benevolence than the Starborne. Always excuses, always deflections of responsibility overlaid with the veil of neutrality, as if their inaction did not scream their true intentions loud to the world. *Cowards, the whole lot of them! They’re no different than the Principate!*

“A child like you knows nothing about the scales at which your masters operate—

—operate, how the tiniest of—
—strings, listen to me—
—You disrespectful juvenile!”

“And who are you—
—to say you know—
—more than anyone else?”

The tension rises, and pretension’s facade wears away. Coimeinos’ exclamation covers the silence after the exchange, and yet the Starborne plays now in the Executor’s field. Meridien allows a moment of silence to fall between the two as the clamor fades to a tense stillness.

Coimeinos harrumphs in a lull of comfort brought about by Meridien’s silence. He sees the upper hand, and takes it with the cataracted sight of arrogance, watered by time and wisdom.

“Uncouth and inexperienced you are, to think coming here was not an edge case considered by the great intelligence of the Principate!”

Meridien hears his response, and breathes a silent sigh of relief.

“And a group of self-congratulated nitwits you are,” She replies, “to not realize that the act of hastily transporting so many ships toward the Solar System so suddenly with no preparation signals desperation on the part of my masters. They allow me to come because they believe your people, in all your power, will kowtow before the Principate under the threat of losing access to their transport cartel!”

Coimeinos’ composure staggers from Meridien’s implication, and he blurts hastily.

“And the rest of the Galactic Electorate are no different, and that will remain a fact until either the Principate falls or the secrets of the *Tay al-Ard* are revealed.” The Starborne

realizes that he has been led to this statement too late. Meridien moves to pull the dialogue toward her desired direction with Coimeinos in tow.

“And you believe an act of desperation like sending an armada across the world at large is not a sign of their seat of power being threatened?”

There is naught but palpable silence from Coimeinos, astride in the methane rain, like a forsaken statue in a forgotten land

After a long second of silence, Coimeinos’ voice rings through the air, warily probing Meridien’s intentions with his words.

“Why are you saying this to me? What do you stand to gain from telling me this?”

Meridien leans forward, finally meeting Coimeinos’ gaze with her own.

“Because I am not real, and this is not happening.”

Nothing but a faint mist of blue remains of the Executor and her vessel, leaving Vim Coimeinos alone in the rain of his ocean abode. The sudden disappearance thrusts the Starborne out of the conversation with an abrupt feeling of unease, sending him back into his home with his eyes still on the dissipating cloud of azure.

Inside Coimeinos’ home, he slumps against the entrance as it makes itself seamless with the exterior crags.

That was a threat, he thinks to himself. The Principate knows our plans, and has seen fit to demonstrate their knowledge. But how did they know? Of course! One of the nonhuman retainers must have tapped their secure lines, and leaked the information to the Principate for their own gain!

I must report this meeting to the Queen Regent and counsel the next move, he decides, and reaches for the dark and tetrahedral black-box communicator used to transmit secure messages across the interstellar void. Producing a small rectangular key from his person, Coimeinos inserts it into the seamless tetrahedron’s surface, prompting it to unfold its size and present a small analog keyboard along with a mechanical display attached to a roll of illuminated parchment.

>>SC1

Click, the mechanical display moves to the next line.

>>FORWARD ALL

Click. The display proceeds again.

>>EXECUTOR MEETING UNEXPECTED. POSSIBLE SECURITY FLAW. THEY ARE ONE STEP AHEAD.

Click. The paper's typed contents disappear in an instant and the section of illuminated parchment is torn from the main roll as its message becomes instantly imprinted onto the respective black-boxes of the Starborne's inner circle.

The power to use displace an entire vessel and person in time in an instant! Have we grossly underestimated the Principate's advancements in technology? The possibility hung bleakly above Coimeinos' head. If this was what the Principate were capable of, then truly nothing would stop what happens next in the Solar System.

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Meridien sinks into the polyfiber cushion of her cockpit chair, letting out a long sigh of relief now that she was no longer under the scrutiny of the Starborne noble. This was her likeliest shot at delivering the inoculating message—Vim Coimeinos' steward world was populated by primarily non-communicative and solitary sea creatures that were easily fooled by the Principate crafts' ghostly silence. She had gambled that she could rely on the relative lack of notice to perform her disappearing trick with an entire spacecraft instead of just her person. The storm over the Starborne's residence ensured that her gamble paid off. The message is delivered, and its recipients are completely unaware of its delivery.

The Principate's mete were the shadows and chasms of interpretation, its Executors the umbral pseudopods that poke and prod the world at large. Such a preconception seems self-evident to its ubiquitous clients in the Electorate, and among them are the Starborne. Those ideas—the shadowy nature of the organization, and the sinister agency of its Executors—were equal boons to all Executors within the Principate. The near-universal distrust for Principate agents allowed them to often sow suspicions that could leash their target's decision making patterns and completely blind them to things that would have been obvious and plausible without that preconceived distrust of the Principate.

Just as they traverse the interstellar void by the manipulation of space, so too does the Principate direct the thoughts of its countless clients by the manipulation of things left unsaid. An Executor must steer the course of their charge's actions like how an ocean steers the course of a ship upon its surface—threatening the ship with various signs of hazard to turn it from an undesired direction and lulling it with calm waters to encourage complacency in its motion.

Yes, that is what an Executor must do. That is what Meridien does. The Principate's great intelligences predict ranges of client behavior in response to various threats or the lack thereof, and instructs Executors to elicit the desired behavior. As individually powerful but politically isolationist as the Starborne are, the 99% confident range of behaviors indicated that denial of information regarding the Principate's mass movement of Electorate ships was the optimal strategy. Accounting for a secondary range of defective behaviors, such as direct interaction with a rogue Principate Executor, the Principate had anticipated that the sociological profile of the Starborne nobles would be too conservative to act to within four standard deviations, even when provided with information accessible to an Executor. Unfortunately for the Principate and Meridien, she answers not to one, but two loathful masters, making her a few more standard deviations out from the norm than a mere four.

The Queen Regent is shrewd, she will see through her confidant's ignorant concerns and understand that there is more at stake than even one star system. Meridien reassured herself, allowing herself to slouch and sink into the chair's soft fibers. She takes the moment of reprieve to appreciate this small victory, but Vim Coimeinos' words echo in her memory of her second master.

"A child like you knows nothing about the scales at which your masters operate."

One and the same to their core. Old souls ground down into their comforting patterns, declaring their stagnation to be instead perfection. The Principate, The Starborne, The thing that *that insane woman* calls her family—they avert their gaze and plug their ears in the face of grievance, and call it wisdom. Yet, is she any different? What did she understand about the world at large, really? What in the world convinces her that her cause is right, when she doubts the very people who instilled in her the sense of right and wrong—

Meridien springs back to proper posture at her terminal notifying her of a new private message. She quickly checks with a flick of her wrist and confirms her guess. Joshua. Her posture relaxes again.

JD>>How did the conversation with the old scrote go

She allows a giggle at Joshua's usually colorful diction.

MK>>Ate it up like the sucker he is

MK>>Bet they're on full guard about a potential spy already

JD>>Man youd think theyd just cup their ears and start singing laladladalala after being duped so many times

MK>>That's why we don't do face-to-face that often.

JD>>So that means you're honest with me right

JD>>Because you like being face to face on face

MK>>Don't think that means what you think it means.

JD>>Sure it does I think

MK>>How have you been?

JD>>All my parts still working pretty sure my screws are on reaaaaaaaaaal tight :)

MK>>No I mean how are you feeling right now?

JD>>See thats a question I can answer

JD>>Im terrified as shit right now girl if i had the ability to piss still I'd have a nice piss colored puddle underneath me right now

MK>>That's reassuring and very wonderful to hear

JD>>Thanks I miss being able to piss everyday :)

JD>>Thats a joke pissing is for regular people

JD>>Who dont live in a robot

JD>>I mean how cool is that

MK>>There are a lot of boring people who live in mechanical frames

JD>>Yea and Im not one of them I have a big gun and I can swing around with a grappling hook like pshhshsheweeew

MK>>Grappling hooks automatically make someone not boring by principle

JD>>I mean how the fuck are you gonna make a grappling hook boring

MK>>Maybe I should get a grappling hook too so I'm not so boring : (

JD>>Yea you should its very cool :)

There's a small pause in the flow of text.

JD>>Were getting through this Meri

JD>>If it comes down to it I will use my "very loud doorbell" to give a good old knock on mommy dearest's head

JD>>That means I'm going to shoot her

MK>>Don't think that would work

JD>>With a gun

JD>>With a big gun

MK>>If it comes to that, I'll be right behind you to help you take the shot

If only Principate weaponry worked on entelechies of pure symmetry.

JD>>Thats the spirit now go do what you have to do while i go get a bigger gun

JD>>Love you bye be safe

MK>>You too

Her next course of action is to find the nearest Garden World as fast as she can.

You are continuing your conversation with [EB].

>Are you who you say you are?5 mins ago.

>Please stop misusing the questionnaire feature5 mins ago

>You don't tell me what to do..5 mins ago.

>[JB], what is wrong with you?
Are you pathologically unable to be polite??5 mins ago.

>I'm pathologically unable to respect a parasite like you..4 mins ago.

>Is everyone from the Old World so uncouth and disrespectful?4 mins ago.

>No actually but there were plenty of parasites like you..4 mins ago

>"Parasites" as in civil servants?4 mins ago.

>The only thing you serve is your own cock..3 mins ago.

>Right, and you choose to work with the likes of me?
What does that make you?3 mins ago.

>No comeback?
How quick Old World wit runs dry..2 mins ago

>What a brat like you doesn't understand
is that sometimes you just need to
shut up, keep your head down,
and work. 1 min ago

>It makes me sick to my fucking stomach. Just sent.
