

You began your conversation with [YM].

>Principate ship. Entire fleet's worth of fleets. For real.2 mins ago.

>I heard from Johanne. What can we do?2 mins ago

>Depends on what "we" means.2 mins ago.

>NANO's assets and its staff. We're still at least
partly operating 2 mins ago.

>Ok cool we can skip that part. You guys have info on the Grid right?2 mins ago.

>What kind of information are you talking about here?2 mins ago.

>Oh for fucks sake can you stop dancing around the question you know what I
mean.2 mins ago

>We have millions of hours of proprietary research and exploration
data. Be more specific.1 mins ago.

>Materials. Material analysis of what's inside the Grid.
Anything about mold?1 mins ago.

>How is the Grid malfunctioning related to what's happening now?1 mins
ago.

>The reason for the fleet of Principate ships not having already turned Pluto into a
giant crater is related to that mold. 40 seconds ago.

>Wait.35 seconds ago

>You're talking about the terraforming pillars right? The ones from the
Old Commonwealth? 21 seconds ago

>Holy shit you just straight up admitted it..16 seconds ago.

>You're right on the money.10 seconds ago.

>You are lucky we keep such diligent track of our
receipts.Just now.

Home-Beneath-Twinning-Stars, Unseen-Village-By-Silver-Riverside, and the Town-on-Sundown-Moonside—five of the closest Garden Worlds had responded to Meridien’s call for help, and those three were the ones to answer. Perhaps it was the years of sometimes violent antagonism between Garden Worlds and certain Principate fleets, or it was the unfortunate believability of Meridien’s account of what was transpiring, but the civil-militia of the three Garden Worlds had launched into motion at an alarmingly coordinated and rapid pace. A squadron of Principate highway-jacking ships from the three worlds had managed to stop one of three moon-sized carrier ships dead in its tracks; She goes wide-eyed at the news, having expected at best enough harassment from the squadron of ships to delay the transport for a few days. This would buy at least two or three days of time.

That’s two or three more days to figure out what went wrong the first go around.

It’s about the most optimistic way she can muster to see this turn of events; two or three more days to uncover exactly what that scourge from the stars really was. Meridien sits back in her ship’s chair and clicks open the filing cabinet below the control panel, revealing neatly-sorted folders filled with notes and theories surrounding the catastrophe of two millennia prior. Her fingers run habitually through each folder until they find the third folder from the back.

“Initial Phenomenon.”

Meridien lifts up the folder and flips through to the collected miscellany of documents, personal accounts, and journal notes. Her eyes scan through the text at a brisk pace, informed by the years of spending any time alone re-examining the evidence she has gathered: sudden structural malfunctions throughout the entirety of the Galactic Electorate, the arrival of a red-colored and foul-stenched mold, and the sudden disappearance of formerly terraformed Commonwealth planets. It’s playing out again now. Towers of malformed stone and broken staircases are emerging everywhere in the Solar System, and with it the same red mold that smells of rotting corpses. It might be contained to one star system for now, but it will continue to spread. The only thing presaging the scourge of stars—the Great Death—that has not transpired is the disappearance of former Commonwealth planets, but that’s to be expected. None of the planets lost in the Great Death ever returned.

It would be more concerning if those planets reappeared.

Nothing. Her eyes, tired from thousands of reiterated searches and coming up with nothing, begin to close as she lets out an involuntary yawn. This wasn’t going to do anything anyway. She is about to let herself drift off into an uneasy sleep when she feels the presence of **Order** appear beside her. Entelechy.

“You are working off of incomplete data, Meridien. There’s no epiphany to be found in those notes.” A gray-haired woman enrobed in starry black is peering over Meridien’s shoulders, dispassionately examining her notes.

“I might have learned something new, something that might jog my memory.” Meridien replies half-heartedly, waving away the woman beside her. “It’s not like you have anything to add to it.”

“You’ve set things back a few dozen hours. I hope for your sake that you will use that time efficiently.” The words come out cold as the woman’s bloodless, heatless body. **“Many of those people you’ve convinced will die for your time. Some already have. I suggest you try not to squander the time they have bought you.”**

“Help me then. Give a hint, a clue, anything! You were there. You saw what happened!”

“Even if I had bothered to assess the situation first, knowledge of it now would give you nothing of value.”

“Fuck off.” The words spit out like a stray bullet, missing its target and meekly bouncing off the walls of her ship’s cockpit. The venom in her voice earns no response from its target. At the very least, it vents her frustration enough to take her thoughts off of her unwanted visitor. Discarding any potential new leads in the initial phenomena, Meridien instead looks to the present, attempting to connect the dots of the Principate fleet’s next move.

One supercarrier has arrived for over a week, stationed over Pluto orbit like a wall preventing escape. Another supercarrier sits stranded in place by the collective work of the Garden Worlds coming to Meridien’s aid. One final supercarrier remains unaccounted for, with no evidence as to its appearance down any of the pipeline of contacts she has in the Principate. She had originally assumed it was merely in transit, meant to be used as a staggered deployment of reinforcements while the fleet awaited the backup of the Targid storm. However, the ship had been missing for far too long from real space; it was now a missing variable.

With so many parts already in play, another missing variable balloons the space of possible outcomes for Meridien to sort through even further.

“See? Much more expedient to focus on the scope of the present.” The entelechy remarks. “Shut up. I’m thinking.” How do you track a ship that hasn’t surfaced in real space? Was it possible? Meridien searches her mind for a connection to contact or a favor to call on, and

manages to find a possible lead: The Präteritum family, known for their role in architecturing the Principate's interstellar highways ever since their creation. Three of the elder architects were nigh-impossible to track, thanks to their furtive and surreptitious ventures, but the younger members of the family, still finding their footing in the world of design, were far easier to reach. In fact, one of them was foolish enough to come to the Solar System without a backdoor exit out of here.

Meridien snatches the young Präteritum's request for leave before another can process the request, immediately denying him the chance to flee the oncoming calamity. He would help Meridien find the one-in-a-billion trajectory to maneuver out of this thicket of death, or the two of them would go down trying.

Braig Adytum Präteritum frowns as he measures the tilt of the mold-infested tower that erupted next to his accommodations. 3.5 arcseconds off of vertical; this was unprecedented. The Grid does not use mathematical precision in its implicit architecture. The procedural generation defines its coordinates using spatial understanding, not mathematical calculation. For all intents and purposes, no tower should have such a massive deviation from a perfectly vertical angle relative to the ground.

Perhaps the biological prescriptivists were correct in their assumption that the Grid, dreamt up from flesh and tissue, could decay in an abstract sense?

He considers venturing through the tower's weathered stone doors and collecting data on the internal structure, but the blooms of mold in the crevices dissuade him from ingress. If there is a chance of abstract decay, the mold itself could be its emissary, and Braig certainly did want to personally experience what a top-down form of physical decay would feel like.

Probably like melting inside out, body first and mind last. Braig shuddered at the thought. Perhaps it would be smart to contact Viktor after all.

His terminal rings. Someone has followed up on the denial of his egress. He pulls the antiquated pager he uses as a portable terminal out of his pants pocket, anxiously hoping that the previous denial was a simple mixup.

SYS>>Hello. I am an Executor following up on a previous inquest. I believe you had your exit accommodations denied?

Oh, serendipitous fortunes. He was saved!

>>Yes. Your system seemed to have made an error. Do you know how much trouble you've given me?

>>Reverse it immediately, and expect scathing complaints to the coordinators.

SYS>>Unfortunately, that's not possible at the moment.

He groans with indignation.

>>What do you mean that's not possible?

>>Just put me on an itinerary out of this star system!

SYS>>The only available terminus on Pluto is currently down. No further itineraries are planned.

The indignation turns to a stone that sinks to the pit of his stomach.

>>What?

>>Why is it down?

SYS>>The terminus has been disabled indefinitely. We will not be communicating further.

The dialog closes. The pit in his stomach churns with fear. Such outright denial must indicate that the Principate had become openly hostile in relations with the family. Even worse, it was in this backwater of design—a living fossil from the pre-Commonwealth era, where their buildings started rotting and growing mold!

He was boxed in, with no way to ask for help from the rest of the family. All of them had left months ago, leaving him as the only Präteritum left in the Solar System. His attempts to reopen communications with the executor are met with no response. He cannot even open the dialog again. The reality of his situation sets in as he scrambles to find any active itineraries out of the star system, searching through everything related to interstellar travel until he comes across a live news broadcast showing a

massive Principate supercarrier perched in the Plutonian sky, swallowing the night like the cover of a coffin. The object had not moved nor deployed vessels for over a week, despite an apparently nonfunctional interstellar terminus.

The dots connect: the malfunctioning grid, the supercarrier, the denial of egress. This was a quarantine camp. Exits had been blocked off, barricaded by deadly force. No one who once entered could now leave. The Principate has deemed this place a mass grave, for him and all the others trapped on these planets. They would sit within that supercarrier, shooting down any and all escape attempts while the mold and malfunctions drowned cities in chaos and rot. Perhaps they'll wait for the buildings to begin collapsing into one another, burying the plague beneath kilometers and kilometers of brick and stone.

Perhaps they'll even call one of those sentient star-storms over and flood this star system with radiation, permanently sterilizing any organic life on its surface.

Braig's imagination runs wild with scenarios of destruction, *Apokalipsis*. He imagines himself huddled in some stowaway ship, blind to the world as it bumbled through Plutonian airspace, desperately attempting to evade the detection of the Principate grave wardens, only to be shot down moments before it can hitch a ride on the Interstellar Highways. He conjures up images of towers surging into the sky, finally cracking at the foundations, and crumbling onto the terrified onlookers as they are crushed under thousands of tons of rubble. Such mortifying allure existed within the aesthetics of *Apokalipsis*, so much that it nearly took Viktor Präteritum's life when it had been his obsession.

The thought of Uncle Viktor snaps Braig out of the spiraling doom and back to reality, with the fetid tower in front of him and the pager in his hand. With a frustrated shout, he forcefully closes the pager and shoves it back into his pants pocket, anxiously pacing about the entrance of the tower. This was *not* how he was going to go out. He had plans! Plans that included at least a tour around the great majesties of the galaxy and a firsthand perspective of the whole thing, which, of course, he could not possibly get to if he were dead!

Thus, having determined that his future could not terminate so unceremoniously in this backwater (that he himself had not even wished to visit), Braig's mind instead begins to turn to the scheme of problems and solutions.

If the Principate is resorting to containment because they have given up trying to solve this rot issue, then all I have to do is present another solution that'll make them extract me out of here!

Acting quickly to flare out the reach of his idea-generating mind, Braig takes out his copy of *On Space Travel* and begins to brainstorm in the margins of the foreword. He was no stranger to ontology and the epidemiology of form; he had spent a half-decade studying the semiosis of Targid storms and how ideas propagate through entire nebulae. A simple top-down form of abstract decay was nothing special. Braig had seen the people of the Garden World expertly contain a similar top-down epidemic of form when a terraforming engine had catastrophically malfunctioned, nearly triggering a cascade of atmospheric changes that would have obliterated a planet's worth of plant life had they not acted quickly.

I've studied how the experts handle it. All I have to do is apply what I've learned. Braig reassures himself, regaining some of his self-confidence. The Präteritum family has collected millennia of data on this star system and the Grid. He merely needed to scrape the relevant bits out of the system and formulate a proper understanding. Having formulated the narrative of his escape, he switches scheme, delving into the dialectics of inquiry.

What is "Outer Heaven"?

The thought gnaws at Meridien's mind like a gadfly. The term had popped up while rifling through the historical documents related to the School of Nihilo. Of all the remnants of the Commonwealth to remain after the Entelechy's redaction of the Solar System's history, the persistence of Nihilo's obsession with the infinite and the utopia was one that seemed to resist all attempts to excise it. Every year, a whistleblower exposes officials within planetary governments for involvement in the cult's endless attempts to recreate endlessness. In fact, less than a decade ago, a cult experiment had resulted in the deaths of thousands and the poisoning of the Earth's oceans. Every time a cult member is outed, the local authorities' inquiries would uncover countless manifestos and correspondences obsessively attempting to bring infinity into reality.

"Though we now live our aimless, endless lives, the infinite still eludes us, ever more patently than before. "

Meridien had long attributed this obsession to the malaise of endless living, a symptom of the decadent exploitation that had sustained these powerful figures' unearned immortality.

Endless life and endless plenty were not enough for such individuals. They had robbed the stars to make manifest imminent heaven, and yet paradise had become a prison. Thus was the idea born that the end of scarcity and the onset of eternity had not been enough.