

BEGET THE GODS, BEGET LIFE.

By Datorien Anderson.

A colder gust of air had hit my skin and the darkness from beforehand was replaced with the display monitors of the ship. Maintenance must have finally cleaned the vents. A myriad of buttons was available to use—full analog, digital—was for when the ship's power was above seventy-five percent in capacity. Analog was the main usage; it was far more effective and wasn't prone to software glitches.

I sat up once I heard the soft beeping noise. The words INCOMING SIGNAL REQUEST was promptly displayed. Confusion played across my face since I wasn't expecting the Penthus's Comms Operator to establish a transmission yet based on the ships currently cycle. I accepted the request and watched as it displayed:

TETHER ESTABLISHED. CONNECTED TO THE LETHE |

The Lethe?! As far as I knew the Lethe's crew didn't get to their ship intime. I tilted myself forward as I wondered how to approach this. It'd been a long while since the journey in the expanse had started and the Lethe should have hailed us long before I became one of the communications operators.

"Who are you?" I spoke.

The phrase was mimicked in the display. The cursor flickered at the end of the sentence, and I could barely take the suspense. Ah! I remembered: the whole reason for why we're staying in the stars. It's been long enough that we don't need to know why, but answers are usually given when the question arises. Why aren't we on Earth? It wasn't that the Earth was barren of life, and neither was the planet becoming inhospitable, that was the consensus back then for why we would need to find other places. It was because: rapture, Ragnarök, Dagor Dagorath—it had happened.

The old news reports of it happening when we were shown made me hear my heartbeat ever so much. The spaceships themselves weren't a final effort to flee: they were the product of human achievement and a few had already been sent out. All with different and sometimes similar core purposes. The Penthus was devised to cradle asteroids and the miners aboard would harvest what resources they could like swarms of bees around a flowerbed rife with pollen. The Dysnomia, the ship I'm on, was more of a survey ship. It orbited planets as the souls aboard was gathering information. This information—is what I would send to the Penthus—and they'd unclutched from an asteroid and go to another or a different ship entirely would send out a mining vessel. The Lethe was still being built, then finished and was just waiting on her crew to arrive.

The Lethe was just starting to assemble her crew when they surfaced. The God: angels and demons of man. When the news reports of divinity and neighbors forsake old ties for the new ones that could be established. The grace and favor they could have been granted? The videos would sometimes show graphs denoting an uptick in cults and the number of people attending churches were high. Ultimately, there was other ships that left—some that never made it off the Earth, but the Lethe was unknown—the last reports was that it was still grounded. It was called: The Great Tragedy, or the ironic divine comedy. Two humorous—once a civilization event all within' the same hundred years. The hope that people had

at first was that it was the devil in disguise and the good would finally arrive but nothing: it was true, it was God.

It was crazy, it had been unthinkable—could we escape the divine? Would we be able to leave the grasp of divinity that claimed us—and just as soon, destroyed us. I still can't understand why—it felt so strange, to reject such as if were where in denial. Sometimes I wonder if we're just delaying the inevitable but... it's been over a hundred years. The last communication from Earth happened seventy years ago. Yet there were so many who outed neighbors and were okay with descent upon us. The news reports first were disbelieving and then—when people believed the worst of humanity happened. The last video footage was of the angels coming down from above.

So, when the older people would flinch or seem sick when something vaguely religious had popped up in song or video. It became understandable: one of my peers growing up had expressed interest in it. I saw the light disappear from their eyes—the quick downshift of a smile and suddenly they wept hugging their child. Here? We no longer pray. It's said that praying allows us to become prey. We no longer utter praises or the thanks of the divine. They were so indiscriminate with their slaughter. The last known message from Earth had stated:

WE HAVE DISSOLVED OUR FUNCTION TO LIVE. WE HAVE NOW SCATTERED INTO POCKETS.
TRUSTING IS HARD BECAUSE THEY BECOME US—DO NOT PRAY—DO NOT THANK THEM.
THE RELIGIOUS WHO DO HAVE, DAMNED US TO DIE.

Every now and then. I read that. I'm still so shocked into stupor when someone sneezes in a movie and they reply: "Bless You." When someone does something so idiotic the idiom: "Oh, bless your heart." Feels me with unease. It made sense when the world went to—oblivion—that people just obeyed the will of God because—well, I don't know enough or care to know why. They knew they were of the objective good because the darkness that followed—the demons? They were worse. The angels were callous and indifferent, but the demons enjoyed us. From what films, books and music told me: there should have been warmth.

"Hi!" A message pops up, "I'm Danny, are you an alien?"

The question caused a smile to show and shook all that doom and gloom away. What should I say back? If they are able to use the primary source of communication, that must be a good thing—but I'll err on the side of caution. I don't think I'll show my face. So, I'll deny all requests for anything further than text-based conversation with the Lethe.

"Sort of." I said quickly. "I'm... Echo. Call me Echo for now. I'll refer to you as Ace. Alright?"

"Okay! I like that name. Hi Echo."

"Hello Ace. Where is the Lethe currently?"

I decided to follow some protocol and start asking for information to right up a report. I marked it: First Contact with Lethe (2XXX). Ace told me that the Lethe is still on Earth. The answer caused my stomach to do flips, it didn't sound like it was damaged from what they said it looked like—but they said they had never seen such pristine and new technology. They seemed so excited like a—well that's fine if that's the case as long as the information is solid and seems airtight. Of what age the source came from didn't matter to me—I always found children could be a bit more truthful anyways.

“What of her crew?”

“I haven’t seen anyone here. There was a... very dried and shriveled body that I had to push away from this chair though.”

Damn. That was just as what was expected. At least now, it’s confirmed. The Lethe never left Earth. There are other ships out there, but we’d hope that the Lethe just had an issue with their communication system for years or was in suspended hyperspace. The genetic diversity was needed since we do exchanges with the Penthus in denizens but at least now we have a reason to keep some of the other vessels in relatively close space.

“The speed is going to annoy me, but it could be worse, we could use Brainfuck as a means of texting—it’s a very odd, minimal but the data will—Nevermind.”

I had been ecstatic to speak with someone from Earth. It was a hope of all of ours. At the very least we—the now, denizens of space, hoped that not all life was inane as the workings and teaching on Earth. I retained the communication on and off for weeks—Ace didn’t really tell too much at first—so that took a lot to get through. They feared that with sufficient knowledge that I wouldn’t speak to them anymore; I could never do that. Or at least, of my own free will.

A good bit into those weeks, Ace started asking more questions. I was more than happy to oblige. They were mundane, helpful or funny. I’d then directed Ace to do some system diagnostics and showed him how it worked. I’d describe and then initiate some commands remote but with heavy latency. As if it were compiling for anywhere from: several seconds to at least thirty minutes. It all was dependent on signal strength. The Lethe was finished with repairs and still very operation.

I was in the middle of re-directing traffic and sending out a request for a comm buoy maintenance. Then there was the matter of people calling me as if I were an old IT helpdesk for mundane issues. It wasn’t what I was trained for, but usually, I’d still helped them out of a jam with the work in that department. They owe me many favors. I’m not worried about cashing them in, it’s more a joking thing.

A hail from the Penthus was incoming. Right on time. I pressed the correct commands to establish a link and tether. A video stream popped up.

“Echo!” Ping said—he is one of the Penthus’s communication’s operators.

“Ping! How’s asteroid life?”

“Stable. Oh—Hey Captain Muck.”

The words Captain Muck caused me freeze up momentarily. I looked behind me to find no one. I sighed and flipped Ping the bird—he laughed good naturedly, and we started to talk shop. There was a lot of messages to route to the ships’ forum and mail center—newsletters and other general announcements. We initiated a data-stream for the synchronous transfer of information. Which—as always, caused a spike into the ships power functions. It was why this was a scheduled occurrence—since the respective ships had to be a precise location to send a signal—it would relay to each other until the signal tether was strong enough.

There was a somber silence between us—as we waited for the data transfer to completely finish—
“Aaaand, done.”

“You want a pat on the shoulder?”

“That would be nice—oh! Okay, I was searching in the databank archives and found this dance: I’ll show you.” Ping got up from his seat, his form barely fitting onto the screen until he backed up some more. Once there was enough of him on the screen, he breathed in and put on a super concentrated look on his face.

He danced in a way that was like a mime trying to create a box but was more fluid than doing the robot. All his movements were focused on his hands, arms, and elbows—but still he moved to the rhythm of the music.

“You look—”

“Dumb? Yeah, I know.” Ping stops his movement and sits down. Turning the music down, “What did you want me for?”

“I got in contact with the Lethe.” I quickly said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I got communications established with the ship known as Lethe.” I said slower and a little more descript.

“Holy shit. That means there are people there. That’s good news.” Ping looked ecstatic, genuinely happy to hear the news of the possibility of new humans with us. “But—I have some news of the Penthus, some people have—I don’t know, cracked? There’s enough dirt to prevent Earth-sickness but some... I don’t know. I heard rumors of suspected religious items. Which—I mean, it’d be uncomfortable but as long as they don’t invoke anything... The trauma is real.”

As if rehearsed the Lethe was waiting for a connection with the Dysnomia. I hummed and established the connection. I knew that Ping wouldn’t mind the distraction, he was often as curious as I was about old Earth history and wondered how it was now.

“Ping meet Ace.”

“Like ASCII?” Ping laughed.

“Yeah, hey, I’m proud of that one.” I retorted back, acting like I was offended and sinking a bit deeper into my chair as I leaned back.

“Seems appropriate, I’ll allow it.”

“I didn’t know you were my boss, Ping.”

“Well then, hello Earthling.” Ping said.

We both snickered at our banter—I started to fine tune the connection between the three of us until it was as strong as it could get. There was a slight delay—that got longer—until it sorted itself out and was nearly in real-time. It was easier getting Ace’s connection to stabilize since the location was on Earth. It was easier to track unlike an asteroid—that could knock out of range fairly quick given the right—or bad circumstances.

“Ace—I’d love to hear more about the garden world. The olden’ home of humanity.” Ping said, his voice was a slight bit dramatic—but there was a great deal of sincerity in his voice. I quickly turned up the voice volume so we could hear Ace better. Sometimes—they spoke lowly and quiet.

“The Earth is many things, there are many tribes—many buildings of old are replaced with temples and shrines. All of them, all for the same god—and all so different even when in direct voice; they all share the same vices: violence, bigotry and warring minds. The Earth is still beautiful and flourishes with bountiful harvests and waterways of fish and clean, drinkable water.” Ace started, Ping had lifted an eyebrow up at Ace’s way of talking but said nothing as he continued, “Populi like thy, are scattered and amok—in the presence of God—we shrug and affront many priests, clerics and dominie. Our living is by harsh rules, and we tread carefully but on—Oblivion—as you call Lethe. We are free.”

As far as Ace was able to tell us. The Lethe was now being inhabited by a group of humans: it was a beacon of atheism among the priesthoods—and slavers of grace. They gave themselves no type of faction identifier. If their careful, a full thriving population could be supported and flourish there. Ace didn’t let anyone from the group know that he was in contact with us. Just that he found something really cool—it was his secret hideout. In truth, the door to the communications room was unlocked but there was another passage that only someone small could squeeze through.

In the lands of Earth, what they ate was dictated by what laws governed the territory that they were in. Ace told us: if a religious leader took them in and said they couldn’t eat pork. There’d be not a single pig or boar to be found in the region—or it was considered holy. If it was killed and eaten, those who did: no matter who or how old they were—were to be punished with methodical starvation until they truly repented. There was many laws: some written, some spoken and some were never told to them. As punishment for looking at the divine, one of their group’s women, had her eyes plucked. I feared for what Earth had become.

Often, I wondered what should we do? Could we do anything? All I—or Ping could do was help, the ship needed trained people to be able to fly them. Ping and I sat in an uncomfortable and disheartening silence. Even if we could have done something—being able to get inside of—and use some of the Lethe’s systems helped plenty. The most either of us could do was alleviate how it ended for them. But—we, our groups already in the stars were just running and dreaming of living on Earth again—I often wondered, if we would continue running?

I showed him how and Ace had uploaded pictures for us, there was an old phone that was able to be used and the console did have a converting connector. The only issue was guiding Ace to upload the raw image for us to grab—and convert to a viewable picture. That was what made me realize why people needed to be trained to use the communications system. In the intervals when it was just Ping and I, and Ace was needed by his group. The pictures he sent were fascinating: the buildings were overgrown with vines. One picture was a bird nest atop of a ruined streetlight, in some places the water reached to the rooftops and people had boats to go through, every once in a while Ace would send a picture that was a bit blurry with an odd light, that didn’t make sense and say: “it’s something divine.”, the more horrid of

the pictures was humans being unnecessarily cruel to others—a true hellscape. One that made me feel safe surrounded by nothing but space.

Ace told us he'd wait for the right time, sneak and take some pictures and tell us, "There was some religious sects that allowed some technology—nothing too big, and others had completely shunned the idea of electronics. Calling it the reason why we were judged so harshly and it's good that we are living as we do under the grace and guidance of God. Some people still can't get along though—even if it was a direct command." At least, that was how much as I able to paraphrase from Aces' odd manner of speaking.

"Ace. Have you ever lied to us about anything?" I questioned him. The screen was blank for a moment until he spoke.

"Oh. I would never tell a lie: if the priests' watchers find out— they'll cut out your tongue... and put them in a bowl. A pound of lies, they'd say for all of us to see them on display. As a child, one of the rhymes started with: a pound of lies and perverts' eyes." The teenager said, "But, I've found that they could never tell omission, and often the truth when spoken aloud, sounds as strange and absurd as stories old."

"For the record. Why do you speak like that?"

"When the only thing you hear is gospels and chants; the tilt of the tongue will follow just as the apostles speak." He paused, "I tried not to speak as I do; more like you, Echo and like Ping. This is one of those things that aren't simply meant to be."

"Can you tell us one of them?"

"ONE TRUTH—UNDENIABLE IS OUR FAITH.
JUDGED ARE THE ONES WHO FLEE,
WE STAY AND NURTURE THE SOIL,
UNTRIDDEN, UNTETHERED FROM MATERIAL LUST,
WE HARNESS WHAT'S GIVEN, I THANK THEE.
LET'S REPENT TILL OUR DEATH AND EMBRACE,
THE WARMTH OF THE ONE HOLY SPIRIT."

We were silent after Ace finished. It felt odd to listen, and it made me feel uncomfortable. It sounded like the ravings of a mad man. While it was what was asked, the silence that proceeded spoke volumes to how we felt about it. Ace was very open about life on earth, and we were just now getting more into the now— the reason why human lives fell apart— or at least, the reason that the priesthood that he lived in believed.

"God is us, incarnate. Our fervor is his strength." Ace explained, I kind of wished I never told him how to enable voice.

"It's scary how some obsessed with an idea—even if it's true, can really fuck it up for us all, huh." Ping voiced out loud, "In this world—in the presence of holy, we are still resentful of the idea. Because the idea—it's truth, it is harming us."

A figure darted across the room behind Ping, the only sound heard was their magnetic boots. Ping looked shocked that someone was in the room with him as we listened to Ace speak. He was so engrossed in the store that he hadn't known there was another person in the room with him.

"Shit." Ping relayed, "Shit. Shit. That was that senile old man. I'll be back later, I gotta give him some warm milk. Toodles, Echo. Ace."

The transmission that Ping was sending out was turned off. I sighed in my hands. We both knew who that was— it was old man Jeckles, he was suffering from Alzheimers and genuinely believed often, he was on a movie set back on Earth. The last time he had heard something he shouldn't have, he scrawled his walls in red, repeating words and phrases he had heard. Ping told him that Jeckles was given a rather strong sedative and then woke up feeling better later.

Ace had left not soon after Ping did. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep at the console, the room was a little too cold to gain any deep sleep. So when I opened my eyes due to a flashing light. I sat up and checked the time. It'd only been a couple of hours and it didn't feel as if I slept at all.

The link-connection light blinked multiple times. Erratic—there wasn't any sort of rhythm to it. It was the Penthus—Ping? I opened the communications link and Ping looked relieved for a moment. There was no sound coming through yet. He stood up and enabled the hard lock onto the door.

"—Echo?! Can you h-hear me—" His voiced barely registered though to the link.

"Yeah. I hear ya, what's going on?" As the audio equalized, I heard faint noises coming through from his headset.

"Jeckles—He started—" There was a slight delay before the real-time synchronization was established, "—regressed way back to when he was a child on Earth, he kept chanting words and then... they're here. Echo. THEY are here." Ping was struggling to speak—he was barely keeping it together. His nervous ticks were all front and center. He kept glancing behind him, looking around and clasping his fingers together. In a minute of silence he finally came together with a heavy sigh. His right arm grasped him arm and he looked downcast.

"It was—it was a massacre. Wanton murder. A good amount of us have left on preserver ships. I choose to stay behind—be the guy to help others leave. I already have one ready just in case the worst happens."

"Damn Ping—hey, at least your safe. I'll be your lifeline until you are able to leave."

"What if I can't?"

"I'll keep you company until it comes."

It—meaning uncertain death. I had to focus on my breathing so I wouldn't get into a panicked fritz either. Okay, time to think this through. I grabbed the display; bringing up the quick-comm codes and started entering the information on a side-panel that was sent straight to the head security officer.

`ALERT: PENTHUS-20XXCB | CODE-SER311 LBD-TBD | COORD-X19-29N-70U'

Two minutes passed before a messaged was sent back to me, it read:

‘READY—CLEARED AND EN ROUTE. DEBRIEFED TO CAPT.’

“Okay. Ping—a rescue detachment has been sent. We’re not leaving each other alone in this cold of space. By now, the captain has likely already sent a high priority transmission to the other ships. How are things are your end?”

“Fucked—but I’m trying, I’ve already routed some people to a life pod. I guess we’re both getting into some shit doing the right thing-- huh? I could have left. I didn’t need to stay but what type of person would I be if I didn’t do anything? I would be no better than the madmen of Earth. You know—I thought about it when I ran after Jeckles. I could have prevented all of this by killing him. But what are we without our morals—my morals have damned us. This is my fault. I thought he calmed down and went to sleep but he didn’t—I fell asleep next to him. He just—he wouldn’t stop saying I’m the herald—I’m the priest. An... and before I knew it... he... just started. And then...”

“Hey. If it’s your fault—it’s mines too. But these are restricted areas we are in—ultimately security fucked up for not taking him seriously. I’d have stayed behind too.”

—TETHER ESTABLISHED. Huh, wait. I didn’t do that.

—LETHE CONNECTION GRANTED. Okay, neither did I do that.

What the fuck was going on? Before I could voice my concerns. A video link with the Lethe was authorized and the display turned on. It was blank—no one was showing in the screen—the room was bright, and everything was still clean: there was no dust, deep scratch or flickering lights. A stark contrast from the backgrounds of our screens. There was a voice that started speaking, random things, all pertaining to Earth.

“I wonder what keeps a god tethered to its core?” — “He was ripped apart by a crowd—devoured whole, anew with what was wished to be. Judgement. Pain: Rapture.”—Gnashing, tittering. It was like hearing a distant whisper that was right behind me. I turned around to see not a single person. The door behind me was shit—but not hard-locked like how Pings was. “You wished the devil—but he listens to me. All the babes born; baptized in ash, blood, or fire.”

Ping looked pale and sick— “Ace, Echo?! Cut the fucking joke—this isn’t the time.”

“I ain’t doing a single damn thing. I authorized nothing! Try to end the connection to the Lethe, I’ll try too.” I quickly belted out just as fast, the uncomfortableness that I felt before hand grew so much that I felt sick.

The strange and disturbing phrases wouldn’t let go. While Ping attempted to cut the connection from his end, I had tried to at least—remotely turn the volume down and issue a command to shut the entire system down. Maybe an overflow in code could cause the system to get a memory leak and crash the entire thing? Was that even doable in such a short amount of time? I tried to implement a haphazard virus to trigger that but realized that someone would have to actually open it to enable it to work—but if I did it remotely?

“Ping. I’m going to try something.” I say, entering a command to remotely shut the system down.

“Ah—Doom an entire group of people in oblivion, to save yourselves?” A voice—one that was much clearer. It sounded feminine and masculine all at once. The words had caused me to erase all that I had wrote. It was true—the Lethe could still help another large group of humans escape the Earth. But could I truly ruin whatever hope can be attained on that cursed planet? I thought about it hard. There was always a choice and that was one that I couldn’t do.

I felt so tired at this very moment. Attempting to articulate a response to that required more thought. But—I wasn’t the only one hearing that? The speech pattern wasn’t at all like Ace. I was afraid to say anything for fear of what could have been my mental state—even a simple freeze on the display that never happened made my heart skip a bit. I stared at the deep gray surface of that station, the spot that I vacant was littered with stickers: old Earth shows, new media created on the ships and some music venues.

Ping sighed and stood up, “Echo... I know, I can’t either. Whoever that is? Fuck you—I’m... I’m going to help as many people as I can, there are people still trapped and I’m one of the ones with the master key. If the SER-Detail can’t get to me—or I die, well... it’s been real Echo. Ping out.”

CONNECTION WITH PENTHUS TERMINATED |

The reality of it all made me feel so dejected. The connection with Lethe was shockingly still up and extremely stable. The numbers displayed virtually no latency. There was a chance that the divine was attacking the Penthus and all I could do is wait for my own doom. We were ruined on Earth—and now, it’s all the same in space.

“You... you caused all of this, didn’t you? Where’s Ace—no, Danny.”

‘Lethians.’ This word resounded in my head and then the voice was heard again, “The humans all in the ship—asleep dreaming, even the small one: Danny. He dreams.”

“Are you going to hurt them?” My voice was quiet and soft, a stark contrast from the one that felt like it demanded obedience and authority.

“The ones already suffering here—in the holds of my flock, the ones who love me so wildly. They will hurt. I’m delivering unto them what they’ve want and believed so dearly—The Lethians are not mine to take no more. Now go! Godless creatures—one day, you shall inherit this Earth when I’m done—You are no longer children of God, your souls belong to no one but you.”

An alarm blared as the ship’s lights went out. A whirring sound vibrating from the ducts as the lights turned back on. The backup power system likely turned on. I halted some communication and only allowed the important ones to patch through. I wondered—was this it? Was this the end?

CONNECTION ESTABLISHED WITH PENTHUS |

“Ping?”