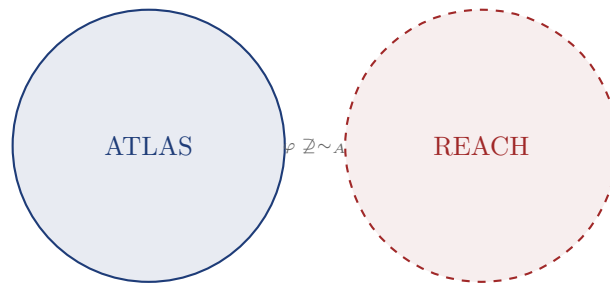


NINE PARSECS

A graphic novel in three volumes

Nine parsecs to Sector 7.

Standard assignment. Routine discrepancy.



“One map showed what usually happens.
The other showed what could still happen.”

Written by Flyxion
Independent Author

June 14, 2026

“In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the Map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In the course of Time, these Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.”

— Jorge Luis Borges, *On Exactitude in Science*, 1946

“Every projection is a promise about which distinctions
survive.
The question is: which promises have been kept?”

— Field Auditor Manual,
Atlas Bureau, Meridian Commonwealth,
Year of Synchronization 412

“Assignment 412-7743: Sector 7, Meridian Plateau.
Distance from Bureau Central: nine parsecs.
Nature of discrepancy: administrative.
Estimated resolution time: three days.”

— Atlas Bureau Dispatch Log,
Year of Synchronization 412, Day 14

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

BORGES Field Auditor, Atlas Bureau. Late forties.
Not a rebel. Not a hero. A professional investigator of discrepancies between the Atlas projections and observable reality. Believes in the Atlas at the story's opening — not fanatically, but as a craftsman believes in his tools. His transformation is epistemological, not political.

VERA SOLIS Senior Cartographer, Bureau of Historical Records.
Fifties. Dry, precise, and unremarkable until she is not. Has spent thirty years cataloguing the Atlas's compression history. Knows more than she says.

DIRECTOR HAAN Head of Atlas Coherence Division.
Sixties. Genuinely competent and genuinely convinced that the Atlas serves the public good. The story's most dangerous character precisely because he is not wrong about most things.

THE RESIDENTS OF DISTRICT 43 Collective.
An entire settlement that officially does not exist as a distinct entity. Not rebels. Farmers, mechanics, teachers, children. People living inside a bureaucratic erasure they did not choose.

THE UNDERGROUND CARTOGRAPHERS "Those who mark what the Atlas no longer distinguishes."
Linguists, historians, mechanics, archivists. Their symbol is a crossed-out projection glyph: $[\varphi]$ with a diagonal slash.

THE ATLAS Not a character. An infrastructure.
The representational system that governs the Meridian Commonwealth. Navigation, economics, science, career assignment, risk assessment, education. No one sees the world directly any longer. They see Atlas projections.

Volume One: The Discrepancy

In which a field auditor investigates a mapping error
and discovers it is not an error

Issues 1-4 Pages 1-88

 ISSUE ONE: DISTRICT 43

Pages 1–4 — Arrival

 EXT. MERIDIAN PLATEAU — DAWN

PANEL 1 — Wide establishing shot — double-page spread

A vast plateau under a cold, pale sky. In the distance, four Atlas Towers rise above the horizon. They are extraordinary: slender, crystalline, somewhere between lighthouse and cathedral. Each one catches the early light differently. They look like something mathematics might dream. Below them, a long-distance transport crawls across empty terrain.

CAPTION: “Meridian Commonwealth. Year of Synchronization 412.” CAPTION: “Nine parsecs from Bureau Central to Sector 7.” CAPTION: “Field Auditor Borges had made longer journeys. He expected this one to take three days.” CAPTION: “The Atlas Towers were built in Year 3. No one alive remembers a world without them.”

PANEL 2 — Interior of the transport — BORGES at the window

BORGES sits alone in a near-empty carriage. He is not young. Heavy field coat, worn at the elbows. A leather satchel. A battered Atlas terminal on the seat beside him, its screen showing a regional projection map: clean lines, colour-coded districts, confident labels.

He is looking out at the towers, not at the map.

His expression is neutral. A man doing a job he has done many times before. On the seat beside the Atlas terminal, a dispatch slip:

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: ASSIGNMENT 412-7743 SECTOR 7 DISTANCE: 9 psc EST. RESOLUTION: 3 DAYS NATURE: ADMINISTRATIVE DISCREPANCY

CAPTION: “Field Auditor Borges. Twenty-two years with the Bureau.” CAPTION: “He has investigated 340 discrepancies. He has resolved 340 discrepancies.” CAPTION: “Nine parsecs. Three days. Standard.”

PANEL 3 — Close-up on the Atlas terminal screen

The map is clean and elegant. A grid of districts, each labelled. In the centre of the region: DISTRICT 19 (POP. 14,200). No District 43 appears anywhere on the map.

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: DISTRICT 19 — ADMINISTRATIVE SECTOR 7 — STATUS: NOMINAL

PANEL 4 — The transport slowing — a settlement visible through the window

A real settlement. Dense. Lived-in. Chimneys, market stalls, a school, a repair yard. Certainly more than fourteen thousand people.

A hand-painted sign at the entrance reads:
DISTRICT 43 — ESTABLISHED YEAR 61
SFX: brakes, wind, the sound of ordinary life

Pages 5–8 — The Settlement

EXT./INT. DISTRICT 43 — MORNING

PANEL 5 — Borges stepping off the transport, satchel in hand

He looks at the sign. Looks at his terminal. Looks at the sign again.

He makes a note on a small paper pad. Old habit. The terminal records everything, but Borges has always kept paper notes.

PANEL 6 — A SETTLEMENT OFFICIAL approaches — middle-aged woman, sturdy, no-nonsense

Her name badge reads: MARET CAAL — DISTRICT 43 LIAISON.

MARET CAAL

Auditor. We've been expecting you.

We filed the discrepancy report six months ago.

BORGES

The Atlas logs it as District 19.

MARET CAAL

(flatly)

Yes. We know.

PANEL 7 — Walking through the settlement — wide shot showing its density

It is clearly a distinct, thriving place. Its architecture is different from the surrounding districts. Its dialect has its own cadence.

CAPTION: "The Atlas had merged District 43 into District 19 eighty years ago." CAPTION: "The merger propagated through every planning system." CAPTION: "Roads stopped being routed here. Funding was redirected. Teachers were not assigned." CAPTION: "Over time, the distinction disappeared everywhere except among the people who still lived here."

PANEL 8 — Borges and Maret at a community hall — a table covered in records

Old paper maps. Handwritten ledgers. Photographs. All of them showing District 43 as a

distinct entity.

BORGES

These records are genuine?

MARET CAAL

My grandmother was born here when it was still on the Atlas.
My mother was born here when it wasn't.
My children have never appeared in a resource allocation table.

(She sets down a ledger)

The Atlas says we are District 19.
We have always been District 43.
Both statements are true.
That is the discrepancy.

Pages 9–14 — The Investigation

INT. SETTLEMENT RECORDS ROOM — DAY

PANEL 9 — Borges alone with the records, cross-referencing his terminal

He is methodical. He has done this before. Usually the answer is clerical: a data entry error, a boundary dispute, a legacy identifier.

He is not finding the usual answer.

PANEL 10 — Close on the terminal — Atlas administrative history

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: DISTRICT 19: Formed Year 332 via merger of Sectors 19-A and 19-B (formerly designated 43, 44, 45). Merger rationale: administrative consolidation. Resource savings: 12.4%. Planning efficiency gain: 8.1%.

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: All downstream planning systems updated. Distinction preserved in: NONE. Historical archive flag: SUPPRESSED (Year 340, Coherence Directive 7).

PANEL 11 — Borges’s expression — something shifting behind the professional mask

He reads it again. And again.

The merger was not a mistake.

It was a decision.

A very small, very rational decision made eighty years ago by people who are long dead.

CAPTION: “12.4% resource savings.” CAPTION: “8.1% efficiency gain.” CAPTION: “One distinction removed.” CAPTION: “14,000 people made bureaucratically unreachable.”

PANEL 12 — Borges walking outside — looking up at a distant Atlas Tower

It is late afternoon. The tower catches the light and scatters it in prismatic arcs across the settlement below. Children play in those arcs of colour.

He has never thought of the towers as sinister.

He still does not.

That is what makes this difficult.

PANEL 13 — He opens his paper notebook and writes

Close on the page, his handwriting:

“Merger was legal. Merger was documented. Merger was rational by every metric the Atlas uses.

Question: what metrics does the Atlas not use?”

Below that, after a pause, in smaller writing:

“District 43 is reachable. It is only unreachable inside the projection.”

PANEL 14 — Evening — Borges at a window, the settlement lit up below

Ordinary life. A bakery closing. A repair shop open late. Someone teaching children to read under a lamp.

All of it outside the Atlas.

All of it happening anyway.

CAPTION: “340 discrepancies resolved.” CAPTION: “This one was different.” CAPTION: “The others had been errors.” CAPTION: “This was a feature.”

Pages 15–22 — The Transmission

INT. BORGES’S FIELD OFFICE — NIGHT

PANEL 15 — Borges filing his initial report — terminal screen

He types carefully. He is a professional. He documents everything.

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: FIELD REPORT 412-7743

Auditor: Borges

Location: Sector 7, Meridian Plateau

Status: DISCREPANCY CONFIRMED

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: Finding: The settlement designated District 43 in pre-332 records exists as a physically and socially distinct entity. Current Atlas designation as District 19 subsector is a consequence of Year 332 administrative merger, not an error.

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: Recommendation: CLASSIFICATION REVIEW. Possible systemic pattern — see attached notes.

PANEL 16 — A reply arrives almost immediately — unusual

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: FROM: Director Haan, Atlas Coherence Division

TO: Auditor Borges

PRIORITY: STANDARD

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: Report received. Merger Year 332 was conducted under Coherence Directive 4, legally binding. No review required. Close file. Return to Bureau.

PANEL 17 — Borges reads it twice

He closes the reply.

Opens his paper notebook.

Writes one word:

“Why?”

PANEL 18 — He does not close the file

He opens his terminal again and begins pulling historical records.

Not about District 43.

About every merger since Year 100.

There are 847 of them.

CAPTION: “A field auditor investigating a discrepancy has broad access to historical records.”

CAPTION: “He had never needed it before.” CAPTION: “He needed it now.”

PANEL 19 — Montage — pages of records scrolling, night deepening

Each merger shows the same pattern:

Resource savings.

Efficiency gains.

Distinction removed.

Historical archive: SUPPRESSED.

CAPTION: “847 mergers.” CAPTION: “847 distinctions removed.” CAPTION: “847 rational decisions.”

PANEL 20 — Final panel of Issue One — Borges at the window, dawn arriving

The Atlas Tower on the horizon catches the first light. Beautiful. Perfect. Mathematical.

He looks at it for a long time.

CAPTION: “The Atlas was not wrong.” CAPTION: “It predicted everything it was designed to predict.” CAPTION: “The question Borges was beginning to ask was different.” CAPTION: “Not: what does it predict?” CAPTION: “But: what does it erase?”

 ISSUE TWO: THE HISTORY OF COLLAPSE

Pages 23–30 — Bureau of Historical Records

 INT. ATLAS BUREAU, CENTRAL ARCHIVE — DAY

PANEL 21 — Wide shot — the Archive

Enormous. Cathedral ceilings. Rows of physical records alongside terminals. The Bureau of Historical Records occupies three subterranean floors of the Central Atlas Tower.

VERA SOLIS is at her desk in the centre of it all: small, precise, surrounded by three open ledgers and a terminal she appears to be ignoring.

CAPTION: “Vera Solis. Chief Archivist. Thirty years with the Bureau.” CAPTION: “She had requested a transfer nine times. It had been denied nine times.” CAPTION: “She had stopped requesting.”

PANEL 22 — Borges arriving at her desk — she does not look up

BORGES

I sent a request for access to pre-332 compression records.

VERA SOLIS

(still not looking up)

I know. I approved it.
No one else would have.

PANEL 23 — She finally looks up — direct, assessing

VERA SOLIS

District 43?

BORGES

You know it?

VERA SOLIS

I know 847 of them.

(a pause)

Sit down, Auditor.

PANEL 24 — She spreads a large old paper map across the desk

It is different from any Atlas map Borges has seen. Denser. More detailed. Filled with small notations in faded ink.

VERA SOLIS

This is a Year 100 administrative map.
Before the Great Consolidation.

BORGES

I don't recognise most of these designations.

VERA SOLIS

No. You wouldn't.
They no longer exist in the Atlas.
They still exist in the world.

Pages 31–40 — The Pattern

INT. ARCHIVE — CONTINUOUS

PANEL 25 — Vera unrolling a second, older map — even denser

VERA SOLIS

Every generation, the Atlas becomes more efficient.
Fewer categories. Broader classes. Smoother predictions.

BORGES

That is its purpose.

VERA SOLIS

Yes. That is exactly its purpose.

(She sets down the map and looks at him)

Borges. What does the Atlas not predict?

PANEL 26 — Borges, considering

BORGES

Noise. Outliers. Statistical anomalies.
Events in the tail of the distribution.

VERA SOLIS

Events in the tail.

(quietly)

Yes.

PANEL 27 — She pulls out a ledger and opens it to a specific page

VERA SOLIS

In Year 180, there was a drought in what was then District 43.
The Atlas had no category for it — the region had been merged into a coastal administrative zone. All drought preparedness resources went to the coast.

BORGES

I don't see that in any official records.

VERA SOLIS

No. You wouldn't.
The affected population was, by that point, administratively inside the coastal zone. The drought occurred in a place that did not officially exist as a drought-prone region.

(pause)

Seven hundred people.

PANEL 28 — Long silence — Borges processes this

BORGES

The merger was rational.

VERA SOLIS

Every individual merger was rational.
The Atlas was optimising.
It simply did not know it was optimising away certain futures.

PANEL 29 — She closes the ledger

VERA SOLIS

The Atlas is an extraordinary prediction machine.
It is very good at telling you what usually happens.

(She looks out a high window toward a Tower)

What it cannot tell you
is what is still possible.
Those are not the same thing.

Pages 41–50 — The Reachability Layer

INT. DEEP ARCHIVE — RESTRICTED ACCESS — LATER

PANEL 30 — Vera leads Borges into a lower level of the Archive

Older. Darker. Physical storage — actual printed records in acid-free boxes. The terminals down here are a different generation.

CAPTION: “Sub-level 3. Access requires Archivist clearance.” CAPTION: “Borges had never been below Sub-level 1.”

PANEL 31 — Vera retrieving a specific box — methodical, she has done this before

VERA SOLIS

The original Atlas architecture had two layers.

BORGES

I know. The predictive layer and the administrative layer.

VERA SOLIS

Three layers.

(She sets the box on a reading table)

There was a third.

PANEL 32 — She opens the box — original engineering documents, Year 3–20

Detailed. Mathematical. Dense.

VERA SOLIS

The founders called it the Reachability Layer.
Its purpose was different from prediction.
While the predictive layer modelled what would probably happen,
the reachability layer modelled what could still happen.

BORGES

What is the difference?

PANEL 33 — Vera drawing a quick diagram on paper — two overlapping circles

One circle: clean, solid border. Label: PREDICTION.

One circle: larger, dashed border. Label: REACHABILITY.

The prediction circle is inside the reachability circle.

VERA SOLIS

The predictive layer tracks what is likely.

The reachability layer tracks what is accessible.

Every likely thing is accessible.

Not every accessible thing is likely.

PANEL 34 — Borges staring at the diagram

BORGES

The rare things.

VERA SOLIS

The rare things. The tail events. The low-probability futures.

The reachability layer preserved them.

Not because they were probable.

Because they were possible.

And some of them mattered enormously.

PANEL 35 — Final panel of the sequence — close on one of the founding documents

A formal technical notation in Year-3 script. Borges leans closer to read it.

Translated into modern script as a caption:

CAPTION: ““The predictive layer learns from the past. The reachability layer models the future’s shape. Both are required. Neither is sufficient alone. A civilization that loses its reachability layer does not collapse immediately. It simply becomes, over time, less able to reach its own possibilities.” — Chief Engineer Maren, Year 12”

BORGES

(quietly)

When was it removed?

VERA SOLIS

Year 89. Resource constraints.

The reachability layer consumed three times the compute of the predictive layer.

The Efficiency Council voted 11 to 2 to shut it down.

(a pause)

The decision was documented as an “architectural optimisation.”

 ISSUE THREE: THE UNDERGROUND CARTOGRAPHERS

Pages 51–60 — The Symbol

 EXT./INT. VARIOUS LOCATIONS — DAY AND NIGHT

PANEL 36 — Borges walking through the city — he notices something

On a wall. Small. Easily missed.

A symbol: the Atlas projection glyph, φ , crossed by a diagonal slash.

He has seen it before. He thought it was graffiti.

Now he stops.

PANEL 37 — The same symbol — in three other places Borges passes

On a doorframe. Chalked on a pavement stone. Carved into the base of a public bench.

CAPTION: “He had walked past it hundreds of times.” CAPTION: “He had never looked at it.”

PANEL 38 — Borges photographing the symbol with his terminal

[ATLAS SIGNAL]: IMAGE SEARCH: No matching symbols in Atlas cultural registry. [ATLAS SIGNAL]:

Recommendation: Flag as unregistered cultural expression. Classification: NOISE.

(He looks at the screen for a long moment, then closes it. He takes out his paper notebook and sketches the symbol by hand.)

PANEL 39 — Vera’s office — Borges showing her the sketch

She glances at it.

Does not react.

BORGES

You’ve seen this before.

VERA SOLIS

(after a pause)

Yes.

PANEL 40 — A long look between them

BORGES

The Atlas doesn't know about them.

VERA SOLIS

The Atlas classified them as noise thirty years ago.
Once something is classified as noise,
it stops being tracked.

(quietly)

That is how they prefer it.

Pages 61–70 — The Meeting

INT. REPAIR WORKSHOP — NIGHT

PANEL 41 — Borges being led through back streets by Maret Caal

BORGES

You know them.

MARET CAAL

District 43 has been outside the Atlas for eighty years.
You find resources where you can.

PANEL 42 — A workshop — machine tools, maps covering every wall

The maps are extraordinary. Hand-drawn, printed, scratched on metal, woven into fabric. All of them dense. All of them filled with distinctions the Atlas no longer makes.

Six people waiting. Different ages, backgrounds, professions. A mechanic. A linguist. A retired teacher. An archivist (not Vera). A young engineer. A very old woman whose hands are permanently ink-stained.

CAPTION: “The Underground Cartographers.” CAPTION: “They do not call themselves that.”

CAPTION: “They call themselves: People Who Mark What the Atlas No Longer Distinguishes.”

CAPTION: “The name is too long for most conversations.”

PANEL 43 — The ink-stained woman speaks — she is ELDER NAESS

ELDER NAESS

A Bureau auditor.

(she studies him)

You found the pattern.

BORGES

I found a discrepancy.

ELDER NAESS

Yes. That is where it always begins.

PANEL 44 — She moves to a large wall map

It is a composite — hundreds of sources, decades of work. Every merged district, every suppressed distinction, every administrative collapse marked in red.

[REACH MAP]: The wall map covers 847 mergers and approximately 3,200 secondary collapses. The red marks form a pattern: systematic, concentric, accelerating over time.

ELDER NAESS

The Atlas predicts what is likely.
We map what is still reachable.

(she traces the red marks slowly)

These are the things that are no longer reachable.
Not because they became impossible.
Because they became invisible.

PANEL 45 — Borges, absorbing this

BORGES

The Atlas is not wrong.
Its predictions are accurate.

ELDER NAESS

Completely accurate. Yes.
For everything it still distinguishes.

(turning to face him)

That is the problem, Auditor.
A map that only shows roads it recognises
will correctly predict every journey that uses those roads.
It will tell you nothing
about the territories it has stopped mapping.

Pages 71–80 — The Proposition

INT. WORKSHOP — LATER

PANEL 46 — The young engineer — TESSIAN — spreading technical documents

He is in his late twenties. Nervous energy. Brilliant in a way that has not yet learned to hide itself.

TESSIAN

We have been rebuilding it.
The Reachability Layer.
From the original Year-3 documents.

BORGES

You have the original documents?

TESSIAN

Vera Solis copied them.
Over thirty years.
One page at a time.

PANEL 47 — Borges sitting with this information

BORGES

What does it show?
The reachability layer.
What does it actually show?

TESSIAN

(pulling up a prototype display)
Everything the Atlas still predicts, but also —
the branches.
The low-probability futures.
The things that are possible but unlikely.
The distinctions that matter for crisis response,

for adaptation, for reaching places
the current trajectory would never take you.

PANEL 48 — The display activates — two maps side by side

On the left: an Atlas projection. Clean, confident, well-labelled.

On the right: the reachability prototype. The same region. But denser. Filled with faint lines, alternative pathways, branching structures. It looks like a river delta viewed from above, or the fine structure of a leaf.

[REACHMAP]: The reachability map has approximately eight times the information density of the Atlas projection. Much of it is faint — low-probability — but present. The missing distinctions are visible as a kind of texture.

BORGES

(quietly)

It's not a better prediction.
It's a different object entirely.

TESSIAN

Yes. Exactly that.

PANEL 49 — Elder Naess watching Borges

ELDER NAESS

The Atlas tells you where you are going.
The reachability layer tells you where you could still go.

(a pause)

A civilization that has only one of those
does not know the difference.
Eventually it begins to believe
that only what is likely
is what is possible.

PANEL 50 — Borges and Elder Naess — the exchange

BORGES

I traveled nine parsecs to investigate a discrepancy.

ELDER NAESS

(quietly)

Nine parsecs to reach us.

How far is the Atlas from the territory it claims to map?

(No one answers. The two maps glow on the display beside them.)

PANEL 51 — Borges looking at the two maps for a long time

No speech bubble.

Just a man who has spent twenty-two years resolving discrepancies understanding, perhaps for the first time, what discrepancy actually means.

CAPTION: “340 discrepancies resolved.” CAPTION: “This one could not be resolved.” CAPTION:

“It could only be understood.”

ISSUE FOUR: DIRECTOR HAAN

Pages 81–88 — The Hearing

INT. ATLAS BUREAU, DIRECTOR'S SUITE — DAY

PANEL 52 — Wide shot — the Director's office, high in the Central Tower

Floor to ceiling windows. The city spread out below. Three Atlas Towers visible on the horizon.

DIRECTOR HAAN behind a clean desk. A tall man. Methodical. Calm. He has the manner of someone who has thought carefully about everything and arrived at correct conclusions.

CAPTION: "Director Haan had joined the Atlas Bureau at twenty-two." CAPTION: "He believed in it the way an architect believes in load-bearing structures." CAPTION: "He was not wrong about most things." CAPTION: "That was the difficulty."

PANEL 53 — Borges across the desk — formal, controlled

DIRECTOR HAAN

You did not close the District 43 file.

BORGES

No.

DIRECTOR HAAN

I instructed you to close it.

BORGES

I found additional relevant material.

PANEL 54 — Haan opens a file — a copy of Borges's extended report

DIRECTOR HAAN

You are claiming that the merger programme constitutes a systematic pattern

of what you call “admissibility failure.”

(he reads from the report)

“The Atlas projection does not merely fail to represent certain reachable states. By acting on the projection, the Bureau actively narrows the reachable futures of the affected populations.”

(he sets the file down)

That is a very serious claim.

PANEL 55 — Haan, leaning back — not hostile, genuinely engaging

DIRECTOR HAAN

Borges. The Atlas has governed this Commonwealth for four hundred years. In that time: no famines. No wars of the type that destroyed the pre-Atlas civilizations. Life expectancy doubled. Resources reach ninety-three percent of the population within viable timeframes. You are telling me this system is failing.

BORGES

I am telling you it is optimising.
Those are different claims.

PANEL 56 — Haan, a flicker of something — not anger, closer to genuine interest

DIRECTOR HAAN

Explain that.

BORGES

The Atlas is very good at producing the futures it expects. Seven hundred people died in a drought in Year 180 because the region they lived in had been merged out of the drought-preparation category. The Atlas did not predict the drought incorrectly. It had simply stopped tracking whether that region could experience one.

PANEL 57 — Long silence — Haan at the window, looking at the city

DIRECTOR HAAN

(quietly, more to himself than to Borges)

We cannot track everything.

The reachability layer was removed because it was computationally intractable.

The founders made a choice.

(turning back)

Every generation makes the same choice.

Efficiency over completeness.

It has served us well.

BORGES

It has served the people inside the projection well.

(a pause)

District 43 is not inside the projection.

PANEL 58 — Final panel of Volume One — Haan and Borges, facing each other

Haan does not order Borges to close the file.

He does not threaten him.

He says:

DIRECTOR HAAN

I will read your full report, Borges.

(very quietly)

I am not certain you are wrong.

I am not certain it matters.

CAPTION: “Volume One ends here.” CAPTION: “Not with a conspiracy revealed.” CAPTION: “Not with a system condemned.” CAPTION: “With two people who understand the problem differently” CAPTION: “and are not sure which understanding is actionable.”

Volume Two: The Compression

In which the history of collapse is mapped
and what was lost begins to be named

Issues 5–8 Pages 89–176

Synopsis — Volume Two

Volume Two moves between the past and present. Borges, now working with the Underground Cartographers under unofficial tolerance from Haan, begins the process of auditing not a single discrepancy but the entire history of compression. Each issue introduces a different mode of collapse: geographic (merging of places), linguistic (merging of dialects and categories), scientific (merging of risk classifications), and social (merging of professions and identities).

Each collapse was rational. Each was documented. Each removed a distinction. Each made certain futures less accessible.

The central visual motif of Volume Two is the two maps side by side: the Atlas map becoming progressively cleaner and more compressed over the decades, while the reachability map, reconstructed from the Underground Cartographers' archive, shows the corresponding loss of branching structure — futures that were possible and are no longer being modelled.

The emotional centre of Volume Two is the discovery of the Year 89 vote. Borges obtains the original transcript of the Efficiency Council meeting at which the reachability layer was shut down. It is eleven to two. The two dissenting votes left written records. Borges reads them and does not know what to do with what he learns: the people who voted to shut down the reachability layer were not wrong about the resource constraints. The people who voted against were not wrong about what would be lost.

Both sides were right about the things they were right about.

That is the most Strugatsky-like moment in the manuscript.

Volume Three: The Second Map

In which nothing is overthrown
and something is restored

Issues 9–12 Pages 177–264

Synopsis — Volume Three

Volume Three does not resolve the conflict between the Atlas and the reachability layer. It does not replace one with the other. The outcome is smaller and more durable than that.

Borges succeeds in one thing: he proves, formally and publicly, that the Atlas is not reality. Not wrong. Not evil. But not the same as the territory it maps.

The final issue opens on a classroom. A standard Atlas-curriculum lesson on geographic organisation. The teacher is following the standard Atlas projection. Then she pauses and calls up a second display.

The two maps appear side by side for the first time in a Commonwealth classroom in three hundred years.

The students look at them.

A student asks: “Which one is the real map?”

The teacher answers:

“One tells you what usually happens. The other tells you what is still possible.”

She does not say the Atlas is wrong. She does not say the reachability map is right. She says they are different objects that answer different questions.

The final panel zooms out to show Borges standing at the back of the room. No speech bubble. No caption. Just a man who resolved 340 discrepancies and one pattern, watching two maps share a wall for the first time.

A faint smile.

The end.

VISUAL DESIGN NOTES FOR THE ARTIST

The Atlas Towers

The Atlas Towers should be beautiful. This is not negotiable. Dystopian stories frequently make the sources of their problem ugly or sinister; this one must not. The Towers are elegant, mathematical structures somewhere between a lighthouse, an observatory, and a cathedral. They are places where people get married, where children learn to read, where scientists do their best work. The problem the story describes is not created by anything sinister. It was created by rational decisions. This must be visible in the architecture.

Suggested design language: crystalline geometry, arcing light, mathematical precision. The Towers should look like something built by people who loved knowledge and were very good at their jobs.

The Two Maps

The Atlas Map and the Reachability Map are the story's central visual objects. They should be clearly distinct at a glance but clearly related.

Atlas Map: Clean. Confident. Saturated colour. Clear district boundaries. Well-labelled. Beautiful in the way good graphic design is beautiful. A document that inspires trust.

Reachability Map: Denser. Softer. Branching structures — like a river delta, a leaf's vascular system, or a probability tree. Many pathways shown in fainter ink, indicating low probability but real possibility. It looks like the Atlas map plus a layer of potential beneath it. When the two are shown side by side, the Reachability Map should feel like the Atlas map with its shadows restored.

The Underground Cartographers' Symbol

The symbol $[\varphi]$ with a diagonal slash should be small and handmade wherever it appears. Not monumental. Not threatening. The size of something scratched by one person who wanted to mark that this place was more than the projection said it was.

Colour Grammar

- **Atlas Blue** — institutional confidence, predictive accuracy, the official world
- **Reachability Red** — the branching futures, the preserved distinctions, what remains possible
- **Archival Ochre** — old records, the pre-compression world, Vera's documents
- **Warm Grey** — ordinary life in both the Atlas-visible and Atlas-invisible settlements

Tone

The story should feel like a procedural mystery that gradually reveals itself to be a philosophical meditation. The visual pacing of Volume One is slow and documentary. Volume Two is denser and more archival. Volume Three opens out into something closer to ordinary life — schools, markets, children — as the stakes become clarified.

The ending panel should feel earned, quiet, and only slightly hopeful. Not a victory. A beginning.

APPENDIX: THEMATIC NOTES

On Maps and Territories

The central premise is the inverse of Borges's *On Exactitude in Science*. Where that story imagined a map so detailed it became the territory, this story imagines a map so compressed that it can no longer represent the territory's possibilities. Both failures are failures of the relationship between representation and reality. The first is a failure of economy. The second is a failure of fidelity to what remains reachable.

On the Atlas as a Character

The Atlas is not a villain. It is not malfunctioning. It is doing exactly what it was designed to do, with great competence. The problem is not that the Atlas is bad at predicting. The problem is that prediction and reachability are different things, and a civilization that has only a prediction layer has no formal way to know what it has stopped being able to reach.

This is important for the reader's experience: the story should never feel like an argument against prediction, planning, or systematic knowledge. It is an argument that prediction alone is insufficient — that reachability is a prior condition, not a competitor.

On the Strugatsky Influence

The Strugatsky brothers, particularly in *Prisoners of Power* and *Roadside Picnic*, wrote about societies shaped by forces they could not fully understand and individuals who had to act within those societies without the comfort of moral clarity. The present story follows that model. Borges is not a hero. Haan is not a villain. The Efficiency Council of Year 89 was not wrong. The two dissenting votes were not wrong either. Everyone is operating within the limits of what they can know and what they can choose given those limits.

The Strugatskyan element is not the dystopia. It is the absence of a clean resolution. The reachability layer cannot simply be restored. Three hundred years of compression cannot simply be reversed. What can happen is smaller and more important: a civilization can learn, again, to hold two maps.

On the Formal Correspondence

For readers of the associated theoretical work, the graphic novel *Nine Parsecs* can be read as a dramatisation of the admissibility distortion framework. The Atlas represents a learned projection φ optimised for predictive accuracy. The mergers represent admissibility-violating collapses — pairs of states (districts, populations, categories) identified despite possessing different reachability sets. The Reachability Layer is a visualisation of the admissibility quotient \mathcal{X}/\sim_A that the Atlas projection has departed from. Director Haan represents the genuinely correct observation that the predictive layer works well for everything it still models — that $D_A^\pi(\varphi) \approx 0$ under the current policy. Borges's report argues for the structural distortion: $D_A^{\text{struct}}(\varphi) \gg 0$ in the regions the current policy no longer visits. The classroom

ending is not a proof. It is the first time two maps — the predictive quotient and the admissibility quotient — share the same wall.

End of Treatment.