

Post-Self

Post-Self

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Also by Madison Scott-Clary

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ally

Post-Self

I. *Qoheleth*

II. *Toledot*

III. *Nevi'im*

Sawtooth

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Toledot

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Book I

Qoheleth

Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

— Ecclesiastes 3:15

RJ Brewster — 2112

The theater purred. It hummed to itself. It stretched and reclined. It relaxed. Unwound.

RJ and the room let out a slow, long-held breath together, feeling muscles and wires relax, nerves and current disentangle themselves, slowly, slowly.

“Alright, everyone. It’s midnight, time to start packing up,” Johansson was saying from down in the front row. “Ross, we’re short one. Can you start pulling together all of the mics? RJ will help you get them sorted.”

“Mm,” RJ offered through the sound system. Ey was busy putting the theater to bed, and couldn’t spare more than a meager few syllables to the rest of the cast and crew. “Get a headset, Ross, so I don’t have to talk through the speakers.”

Those speakers were signing off, going to bed one by one through RJ’s gentle ministrations. The physical back-up board set about the task of returning to neutral as RJ worked, all of the gain knobs orienting themselves, then all of the monitor knobs, the sliders, the whole system ticking through automated checklists as it cooled down. All minus the channel ey’d need to keep open to Ross.

“Hey boss, got a headset. Where do you want me to start?”

“Grab the leads, first,” RJ murmured. “Then Sarah and Catherine, they’ve got the nice mics. All of them should have a tiny number painted on the costume side that matches up with their box. The boxes are stacked in the pit, by the front wall, you should be able to get them out in one load, though be careful taking them back.”

“Got it, heading down to the pit now.”

RJ left the channel open just in case. The soft sounds of breathing and the occasional curse as Ross bumped his head on the pit cover were distracting while ey set about going through eir notes with the dozy theater. Best be available, though. The next night’s rehearsal was the last before they went live.

Ey knew the show better than most of the cast. Em and the theater. The two had to learn everyone’s lines, plus a few cues besides when they’d have to take care not to pick up any of the sound effects. Gunshots. Chairs scraping. A scuffle. The clap of heels on the matte black of the stage itself.

The theater’s job was to simply work with RJ and the lighting crew, responding to their knowledge of what was going on in the play, while RJ and Caitlin’s job, as sound and lights respectively, was to respond to the stage manager’s encyclopedic knowledge of the play, her view of the house.

All sound was under RJ’s jurisdiction. Cast and crew both: ey spent as much time managing communication between the hands, the manager, and emself and Caitlin as ey did maintaining the sound from the performers. Private jokes kept on the down-low.

They had to be ghosts in this. Even the theater.

Their jobs were ones that should be invisible to the audience, because it would only become visible if they fucked up. No one wanted to fuck up. Even the theater seemed to feel a sense of pride in doing its job and doing it well.

RJ soothed the room with gentle cooing and reluctantly started the process of pulling back. Ey closed the channel with Ross and put all of the headsets to bed last of all, before ey slipped back from the interface. Felt for that cool breeze of reality on the back of eir neck — or whatever passed for a neck so immersed — and backed out. Blinked as ey adjusted to seeing the cavernous hall with eir own eyes. Lifted eir fingers slipped from the contact points and leaned back from the headrest.

Ey shook eir head to clear it and stood, stretching, before ambling from the tech booth down the stairs towards the stage. Letting gravity carry eir lanky form down two steps at a time. Breeze against eir face. The treble note of dust and conditioned air only added to the newborn feeling of pulling back.

Ross was in the front row, standing still and staring at the floor, muttering agitated questions into the headset.

“Hey Ross, I’m here. The house is sleeping now.”

Ross jumped, then looked embarrassed as he tugged the headset off his head. “Sorry, was wondering where you’d gone. I just heard a beep.”

“Yep, signing off from above. Did you get all the mics gathered up?”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s what I was trying to tell you. I wasn’t sure what to do next.”

It only took a few minutes for RJ and Ross to get the last of the sound gear settled. Headsets from all of the hands socketed into numbered chargers on the wall. Everything would sleep tight until the next night on sound’s end.

Caitlin and Sarai, the stage manager, joined them with the rest of the crew. They sat on the edge of the pit cover, unwinding from the tenseness of rehearsal. The actors were slow to get out of their half-costume and clump together on the stage.

“Gather ’round, children”, a voice boomed from out in the darkened audience.

“Yes, Mister Johansson,” one of the actors singsonged back. Tired laughter.

“Good job, I think we’re there. Still, a bit more polish never hurts. No flubbed lines, and mostly relaxed, but Sarah, you gotta loosen up. It’s not Shakespeare, you can chill out. Crew, you guys got a little sluggish toward the end. I know it’s late, but so are our shows. Don’t work yourselves too hard, but keep on top of things, okay?”

RJ, Sarai, and Caitlin murmured their assent.

“Tomorrow night, back here at four.”

“Early,” RJ murmured. “How come?”

Johansson grinned. “There’s a school production that winds up around then and I want you all back here to make sure we still have a theater.”

There was a bit more grumbling, but RJ knew they’d be there on time. It wasn’t too much of a stretch. Those with second jobs would make it.

“Back to base, then. Get some rest tonight, and I’ll catch you all tomorrow. Remember, you can drink tonight, but tomorrow night, *Das ist streng verboten.*”

The troupe laughed and started to disperse, the tech leads lingering on the pit cover for a little while longer

as they reoriented themselves to the real world. A world bound by spatial constraints, limited by two eyes, two ears, two hands.

Eventually, RJ made eir way out onto the chill of the street, pulling on eir thin waterproof gloves to keep the contacts on the middle joints of eir fingers clean and dry.

Midnight on a weekday, and not much going on. People visiting the pubs to catch up with their friends after work. Black cabs, night buses.

The idea of a warm pub and one quick pint before heading home tugged at em, but the pull of home was much stronger than that of beer. There would be a pub of a different sort waiting for em.

Ey trudged instead up to Oxford Circus. Central line up to Benthall Green, walk the few blocks from there to eir flat. Stopped to pick up a take-away carton of curry and rice from one of the more trustworthy shops along the way.

Once home, ey slipped out of eir jacket and welcomed the warmth of eir little flat after the damp chill of London outside. Eir cat trotted up to em, twining around eir ankles. A little ginger thing of a few years that ey had rescued from a friend who was moving deeper into the city. She was the only one to share eir space with em after eir last flatmate had left for somewhere cheaper.

“Hey Prisca, let me put my shit down before I get you food.”

A meow, indignant, followed em to the kitchen.

Ey set eir take-away on the counter and scooped a cup of dry food into a fresh dish, setting it on the tile for the delicate cat. Indignant meows replaced by purring and crunching.

Ey thumbed eir phone to start music playing. Some of the stuff that reminded em of eir dad to go along with the curry that reminded em of eir mom. Quiet, but present.

Dinner was no more or less exciting than usual. RJ ate alone at the kitchen table with the carton spread out before em, baring orange curry and the soggy samosa that had come with it. Ey left eir gloves on just to be sure. No sense in having to clean eir contacts more than ey’d already need to after a long rehearsal.

Ey finished, scooped the last of the curry into a plastic container for the next day’s lunch, promising emself that ey’d cook an additional pot of rice before heading out in the afternoon so ey’d have more calories to keep emself running. Clean up as easy as tossing the container into the compost bin along with all of the others. Cooking much more than rice was for times other than crunch.

The rig in the corner of eir bedroom was exerting subtle gravities on RJ. As ey ran through the motions of the post-recital evening — eating, cleaning, storing leftovers, using the toilet — eir orbits grew smaller and smaller. Eir gloves were itching. Ey could feel phantom breezes brushing past phantom fur.

Phantom fur. Phantom ears. Phantom tail. Phantom realities teased around the edges of eir perception.

Ey finally allowed emself to sit down at eir rig, relaxing into the familiar curves of the chair. Even with the draw so close to em, ey took eir time. Ey picked up Priscilla and stroked her smoothly from ears to tail a few times until she started purring up a storm, informing her that, in fact, she was the prettiest kitty.

Peel your gloves off one finger at a time, ey thought. Relish the anticipation. Get caught up in it. Hell, let it linger.

Cat settled into eir lap and curled into a small crescent, ey set about cleaning the contacts on eir hands with lint-free paper and rubbing alcohol. Those done, ey wiped down the headset, removing the negligible residue of sweat and skin oils that had collected there. Clean enough as is. Ey had recently replaced the soft, padded

headrest where eir forehead would lay.

Eir gear at home was more elaborate than the stuff in the tech booth at work ey shared with Sarai and Caitlin. Ey had drained eir savings to acquire it. The rig, as well as the contacts on eir fingers, the interferites — nanoscale implants that took over eir optic and auditory nerves, and the electroparalytics to keep em from acting out in reality what took place online — the NFC connections implanted just under eir hairline and their ramifying tendrils, all of that painful work down eir spine that helped em more fully experience the connection.

All worth it.

Connections and gear cleaned, RJ finally felt complete enough to pop open the lid on eir rig. The screen, all but vestigial when ey was inside, still served its role during boot and login.

Ey quickly keyed in eir passphrase and then rested eir right hand on the curved pad, fingers finding familiar grooves that held eir hand in place. The connection from eir contacts the other half of eir two factors of authentication.

“Gonna head in, Prisca,” ey murmured to eir cat, stroking over her ears, fingering the soft, velveteen folds until the cat shook her head away. Purrs nonetheless ratcheted up a notch. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Ey set eir left hand into its cradle. Tilting eir head against the headrest, feeling the comforting touch of cool microfiber and the little twinge of recognition from the NFC controllers, ey nudged the button beneath eir thumb.

The rig went immersive. As RJ delved in, the soft hum of a cooling fan picked up to handle the waste heat of countless computations.

Ey could no longer hear it.

AwDae — 2112

RJ— no, AwDae, now, sat up in bed and slid to the edge of the mattress. Stretched languidly, let fur bristle from ear to tail, the latter bottle-brushing out. Ey shook emself to settle eir fur back down and yawned widely, slender pink tongue curling just shy of sharp incisors. All formalities, to be sure, or perhaps wordless mnemonics to finish the context-shift. The final step in a ritual.

All those phantom realities clicking into place.

Brushing eir fur down, the fennec stood and padded to the dresser in the corner of the room, pulling out a thin white cotton shirt with laces up the front and a simple navy sarong, which ey tied around eir waist. Countless hours examining some of the highest fashions out there on the 'net, and ey'd come to the conclusion that, in these times of excess, the understated said the most.

It also interfered with the fur least, worked well with a tail — a simple slit cut down the length of the sarong let that slip free — and it was cheap. There was no shortage of ways to spend money, and AwDae had better things to buy with what was left after London rent.

Better to perfect the form, to make it fit more precisely eir self-image. A handful of silver paltry exchange for building the you you are meant to be rather than the you you are.

Ey swiped eir paw from left to right atop the dresser, revealing a dimly glowing arsenal of personal belongings. It'd be a simple night out, so ey tucked a few vcards and a limited credit chip into a shoulder bag and hauled the strap over eir head, vulpine ears laying flat and out of the way.

From there, claws clacked against the glossy surface of the tport pad. Gauche as it was to pop in and out of existence where folks could see, ey kept eirs in a corner of the studio apartment rather than an alcove. The feeling of exposure and the jarring change of scenery was titillating, racy.

Ey stood straight on the pad and gestured a paw left to right, bringing up a list of recently used commands. Had ey left fingerprints online, there'd be a clear smudge over the entry: ey rarely did anything else on work nights.

tport: The Crown Pub

Tapped, and the obligatory *click* that went along with the change of scenery brought em to an alcove paneled in oak, lit by green-glass-shaded lights hanging pendulous from a cord directly above em.

Ey blinked to adjust to the comparatively dim light. The pub sim, largely following the circadian rhythm of the British isles, was just as dark as it was for RJ, back in London-as-it-was, but eir personal sim lived in a perpetual eleven AM springtime.

Ey turned and stepped away from the pad, narrowly avoiding a slender weasel stumbling towards the alcove.

“See ya, Debarre,” AwDae said, though it came out more like ‘*Shee-a, Debaw*’ coming from the fox’s narrow muzzle. Ey got a curt grunt from the weasel done up all in black.

The fox shrugged and headed into the pub proper, nose twitching. The scents of the room told em more of those present than simply scanning the crowd. One or two gawking entities with no scent property set — tourists — and the usual crowd of aromas. Friends, mostly. Acquaintances all.

Whiskers bristled at the distinct whiff of dandelions, a memory leftover from youth, and ey made a beeline towards one of the window tables, where the scent originated, skirting around bodies of diverse shape.

“*Shacha*.”

“Come on, fox, loosen your filters, won’t you?” Sasha laughed, scooting her chair back to stand up and lean in for a quick hug. AwDae slipped eir arms around the skunk’s waist in turn and gave a squeeze, tail aswish.

“Lame,” ey drawled, but dialed back the output filters on eir speech, letting something more closely resembling English pass. “How you been, skunk?”

“Oh, you know, same old, same old.” Sasha settled back into her chair and fiddled with a stack of vcards on the table, giving an outsized shrug. “Been kind of boring in here over the last few days, so it’s good to see you.”

The fox nodded, tugging eir shirt straight and moving over to the chair opposite the skunk, sliding into it easily and resting against the back.

“It’s late there, isn’t it?”

“Not too late. One something. Made good time home at least. Rehearsal ran late.”

Sasha grinned. “You know, every time you talk about rehearsal and such, I just think back to school. You hunched over the sound booth, you know? It’s hard for me to picture you as having grown up and taken that up as a job.”

AwDae adopted a look of mock-despair. “Isn’t it? I went to uni just for it and everything. But hey, London ain’t bad, I can’t complain any. Besides, not like you left it either.”

The skunk rolled her eyes and leaned forward onto her elbows, muzzle resting on obsidian paws. “Tell me about it. You’re missing out big time here in the ’burbs, dear. You could be teaching high school theater in any town along the central corridor, doing the same plays once every five years so no students repeat them. Truly a life of glamour.” Sasha laughed when AwDae buried eir face in eir paws and groaned. “Seriously though, you just remind me a lot of school. Maybe it’s ’cause of all of the ways you haven’t grown up.”

“Please, Sasha.” AwDae poked eir tongue out. “If you bring up dating...”

“Hey, sorry, just looking out for you, fox.”

“I’m plenty happy on my own, I can promise you that,” ey countered.

“No, I get that.” Sasha lowered her gaze. “Not all it’s turned out to be. Just got me thinking, is all.”

“Oh no, struck out again?”

She shrugged, nodded, shrugged once more, fiddled with a vcard. No eye contact.

AwDae reached out to take one of her paws in eir own, black fur on tan mismatched and complementary. Both had opted for mostly hand-like paws, but differences were evident on contact. Where Sasha’s fur was an even, silky black marked by white stripes that were a little too sharp, a little too exact, AwDae had labored to construct a version of emself as a fennec fox to exacting detail, down to the point where eir muzzle couldn’t even form the two letters that made up eir name offline.

Exactng, minus perhaps the two-legged-ness, the hands, the humanity around the eyes. Even then, ey had an av free of humanity stashed away somewhere.

Thoughts of honing versus forging blurred surroundings. AwDae had honed emself to a finer and finer point while everyone else forged ahead. Always a way to be a better tech. Always a chance to become more vulpine online. Always a way to become better at what one already was. To become more the AwDae AwDae felt ey was.

Still running sound. Still honing that skill.

Ey shook eir head to dislodge the rumination.

"I'm sorry, Sasha."

Sasha shrugged again, as though she might be able to drop the very idea of bad break-ups like an overloaded backpack. She gave the fox's paws a squeeze in her own. "Men are dicks. I'd take a fox like you over some dickhead guy any day."

AwDae smiled faintly, returned the squeeze. "Sasha, you know it wouldn't--"

"No, I know. I just wish there were more guys out there like you." When AwDae stiffened in eir seat and looked away towards the window, Sasha splayed her ears and added quickly, "Sorry dear. I keep putting my foot in it, don't I?"

"Sorry, no, you're fine." AwDae grinned apologetically. "I should get a thicker skin, maybe. Stand up for myself. I spend night after night hiding in here, and even then, can't seem to assert myself any. I appreciate you trying, though."

Sasha smiled cautiously and nodded. "You came out like fifteen years ago, AwDae. I should still be doing better."

AwDae's turn to shrug. "It's hard to ask for that, is all. Always has been."

"I think that's what I meant earlier, that you haven't changed, despite all the ways you have. You haven't done like all the rest and grown up, gotten married, all that crap. You're still doing what you loved to do in school. Don't get me wrong, I miss it too. *Actual* theater, not the school stuff. Seeing crazy shows with you on the weekends. Hell, doing crazy shows in uni. Doesn't pay the bills, though."

"You should come see us sometime. It'd be good to see you again, too."

"You know I want to." She grinned. It didn't last. "But yeah. You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck — in a few ways, even, though you're succeeding in others."

AwDae nodded, rumination hanging in a cloud around em. So many ways the world had moved on without em. After a moment, though, ey sat up straighter. "Oh, speaking of frozen."

"Debarre?"

The fox nodded.

"No news, yet. He's been trying to get in touch with the clinic or whatever that's taking care of Cicero, but the family's been getting in the way. They're fielding everything. They always sort of supported the relationship on the surface, you know, but never actually approved of it. Of them being together, I mean."

"What? Really?" The fox shook eir head, poking a claw at the table, before rubbing the spot with a paw pad. The sim was hardly immersive enough to waste cycles on letting claw dent tabletop. "That's unfortunate. Not all that surprising, I guess, given what Cice said about them. They at least confirmed that's what happened, though?"

“That’s what these are,” Sasha said, slipping the stack of vcards over to em. “There’s contact info for the family, and a few centers around there that work on implants, some hospitals. We’re thinking that those might be the types of places where he wound up. There’s also a card detailing his last connected times.”

AwDae twisted the stack of cards around in front of em, leafing through slowly and taking in a few of the details that slid across eir fingertips. “Mind if I make a copy?”

“Go ahead. It’s a deck Debarre and I have been working on. Not complete, but I’ll give you ACLs.”

“Mm. Debarre looked crushed. Is he doing alright?”

Sasha hesitated for a moment, caught in the middle of a gesture to grant copy rights on the cards. She shook her head, to which AwDae could only frown. She finished the gesture, and another set of vcards shuffled itself out from the original stack. Crisp black embossed on the creamy cotton-paper that AwDae preferred.

“I’ll take a look, too. I can’t do too much right now, I’ve got a—”

“I know, you’ve got a show coming up,” Sasha laughed. “Don’t worry about it, dear. Debarre’s working on it, I’m taking a look when I can, and I’m sure the weasel’s got others helping him out besides us. No reason not to, either. We all liked Cicero.”

The two sat in silence. AwDae slid Sasha’s deck back and fanned eirs in front of emself before shuffling them back into a stack and swiping above them, instructing eir rig to make a local copy of the deck.

Ey lifted eir snout away from the silence to scan the scents in the room once more. Now that it was starting to get on in the evening even in the Americas, the scentscape was changing. Some familiar scents, some unfamiliar, but most of them at least detailed, which told AwDae that the owners had put some thought into them. None, however, really jumped out at em.

More rumination. Rumination edging into drowsiness.

“Hey, Sasha, I gotta get going. I know I just got here, but I’m starting to crash hard.”

The skunk nodded, tail drooping. “No, it’s alright. It’s late there, and I know you’ve been in rehearsals for a while. Go get some sleep.”

Both stood up and exchanged another hug, AwDae reveling in that dandelion scent of eir friend. Memories of school, drowsy, dreamlike. Dandelions in the lawn. An impromptu picnic. Rubbing one of the flowers on the back of eir hand, leaving a yellow stain. Sasha explaining that the smell always reminded her of muffins.

“I’ll see you later, skunk, yeah?”

“Take care of yourself, okay? No working too hard, slaving over a hot rig...”

AwDae laughed and shook eir head. Gave the skunk one last squeeze before making eir way back through the crowd toward the alcove, already swiping eir command palette into view to head home.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Ioan Bălan awoke to an urgent message.

Ey didn't really like these, the sensorium messages. Much better to receive paper messages. Letters. Notes. Missives. Scrawled signatures and careful handwriting.

Ey mostly just liked paper, if ey was honest. Always accruing more paper, more pens. Paper messages, rich messages attached to paper that played on its surface, ones that messed with the reader's sensorium; ey sent them all. Eir friends found it perhaps a little disturbing. Antiques from a world more physical than this.

But to have one that just barged in on eir vision and endocrine system like this made em anxious. This one included a tiny jolt of adrenaline as an alert. Waking up to a zap of panic to have a partial sensory takeover felt rude.

At least ey didn't have to get out of bed to deal with it.

The opacity on the message was turned up high so that even in eir dark room with eir eyes closed (and heart still pounding), ey could see the fox. Bipedal, dressed sharply. It was sitting on a plain wooden chair situated in an empty room. The room had wood floors the same color as the chair. Something light: maple or pine. The walls were concrete where they weren't glass. Outside the glass was a sere shortgrass prairie, a cloudy day.

The combination of the fox's white fur, glistening and iridescent, combined with the room and landscape was all so painfully postmodern. Ey didn't think emself much of a pomophobe, but this was...intense, to say the least.

"Hi Mx. Bălan," the fox was saying. It seemed to speak in italics, though how, Ioan could not say. A sense. A sensation. *"I have a proposition for you."*

Ioan grunted. The message was simplex, thank goodness. One way. No interaction required.

"My name is Dear, Also, The Tree Was Felled — or just Dear — and I am a member of the Ode clade. I am an artist—" The word seemed to come with a tone of distaste. *"—and...performer. I am not just telling you this to, ah, toot my own horn, I believe the phrase is, but to underline the fact that I am woefully unprepared for the situation at hand."*

The fox smiled, looking tired, and continued. *"I need some help finding someone. Someone that does not want to be found. It is personally important, but also potentially damaging to the image of our entire clade."*

Ioan furrowed eir brow.

"This person has information, a name, that they have supposedly shared. We — the other members of my clade and myself — do not precisely know if they actually did, unfortunately, we just have word from some perisystem notification that someone said the Name." Ioan could hear the capital letter.

"I am sorry, I am getting sidetracked by details." The fox shook it's head, ears flopping from side to side. *"I try to*

be prepared for conversations and messages like this, but I am a little worked up. Excited, I guess. Can we meet?" It listed an address. *"Even if only to talk. Even if you are not interested, I would still like to meet you. You seem neat."*

The message ended.

Ioan lay in bed, thinking. It was still an hour before ey had to get up, and ey was loath to start the day before ey had to. Ey tried eir best to sleep for another ten minutes, at least, but eir mind kept slipping back to Dear's request.

Why me? ey asked the backs of eir closed eyelids. *Why hire a writer who fancies emself a historian as...what, a private investigator?*

Ey spent a few minutes researching the public basics on Dear. Pronouns (it/its), species (fennec fox), age (old — the Ode clade was an early adopter), some of its art. Really out there stuff. No further hints as to why it would need em in particular. Something on the markets piqued its interest, perhaps?

With still a half hour before eir alarm, Ioan stretched out of bed. The least ey could do was get a shower and some coffee. If there were any reason that the founders of the system had included full sensoria in the works it must have been for those.

Those done and clothes donned — ey knew ey could never out-natty the fox, so the usual faux-academia garb it was — ey penned Dear a short note with a time. If it was day in that sim, or even late afternoon, it should get the note before dinner or bed.

Besides, ey thought. Maybe it will get the fox to stop using sensorium messages.

No luck. Less than thirty seconds later, Ioan received a sensorium ping of acknowledgment, a shiver up eir spine for eir trouble.

Ey forked and sent the copy of emself, #c1494bf, out to the meeting. Meanwhile, ey'd get some food, perhaps work on eir current project.

RJ Brewster — 2112

RJ slid eir hands from the cradles and leaned back from the headrest, letting out a full-fledged yawn, pent up from the interferites preventing it. The sound and motion startled Priscilla from across the room. Ey levered emself up out of eir seat and trudged over toward the still-purring cat, stroking over her ears when she bunted her head up against eir hand.

Eir mind foundered in a slurry of work, of Cicero's disappearance, of school with Sasha, of honing and forging.

"I'm wiped, Prisca," ey informed the cat.

She purred louder.

Smiling, ey peeled eir shirt off over eir head and slipped out of eir jeans. Tomorrow's rehearsal would mean full dress for everyone and makeup for the actors. Ey'd have to make sure eir tux was clean. Should ey iron it? Maybe ey should iron it. Later.

For now, as it neared two, ey focused on making sure the door was locked and the lights were out before stumbling over to bed.

There seemed to be no shaking Sasha and all of her talk of high school—gone this last decade now—out of eir head. Even as ey climbed onto eir narrow mattress and burrowed beneath the covers against the chill of the night, ey was replaying memories from school. Scenes from the Americas. A worn out film, dim and scattershot.

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

Ey and Sasha had tried dating early on. After a few weeks of it not going anywhere, they had both admitted that they had felt pressured into having a relationship rather than actually wanting one. Good boys and girls fell in love with other good boys and girls, right? Went out to the movies. Kissed beneath the bleachers or something. Pretended they didn't have sex.

The relationship petered out, rather than ending in some climactic fashion. They had continued the trend of going to movies, and later to live performances. They had never lost touch, at least.

Sasha had gone on to have a string of other relationships, some earnest and some not, some more intense than others — a string that remained unbroken, if tonight's conversation was any clue — but RJ had stopped there.

The intensity of the social pressure to date throughout high school was equaled only by RJ's complete apathy toward the whole scene. Apathy or, often, antipathy. Ey'd felt the occasional twinge of romantic attraction, perhaps, but the expectation of sex that went along with the process so put em off that ey had instead buried emself in work.

Ey did well in some courses and not in others, as any kid might, but in the subjects ey enjoyed, ey dumped all of eir effort. Huge gusts of energy that drove em forward.

Ey had started early on in working the school's old sound board in the theater. Ey ran plays. Ey ran concerts. Ey ran assemblies and lectures and conferences, quickly earning the trust of the other tech crew, as well as the staff.

And then ey gained leadership. Prestige.

The various computer classes had captivated em as well, and for eir sixteenth birthday, eir parents had surprised em with the implants needed for full interfacing with a rig. Or, well, "surprised": eir father was an engineer and eir mother a fairly forward-thinking person, and they had promised em the procedure before university.

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

It was a straightforward procedure in an outpatient office, self-guided implants largely installing themselves. The worst had been the itching. It was bearable on eir hands and along eir spine, where the implants and exocortex breached the surface of eir skin, because at least ey could scratch, though ey had been cautioned not to. The NFC tags in eir forehead and the interferites embedded deeper — far, far deeper — led to an itch that no scratching would ever reach.

From there, sound and the rig had taken up all of eir energy, leaving little time to worry about any social stigma that went along with aversion to romance. Ey was simply the nerdy sound kid who knew more about computers than the teachers.

It hadn't always been fun, of course, but by then ey quickly learned that the more ey put into the task, the more ey got out of it. The more ey honed, the further ey went.

That ey had found furry in high school seemed almost a natural progression. Working and improving at the art of interfacing in a way that felt natural to em, it seemed, came just as natural to others on the 'net. Ey moved effortlessly through the Crown Pub and a few other choice spaces, slowly crafting the primary persona that ey used when interacting with others.

A fennec. AwDae, a corruption of eir chosen name. A corruption borne of the intricacies of a thoroughly vulpine muzzle. A persona honed to a fine point.

It was then that ey and Sasha had really started connecting, for it was her that introduced em to the community. They started hanging out more, talking more, building a network of friends together. Where dating hadn't worked out, friendship grew in both depth and breadth.

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

The forging of the virtual theater environment had culminated in a scholarship at a big name university out on the east coast. Immersive interactive theater technology, they called it. Forging into honing.

It meant leaving Sasha and a few other close friends behind along with eir family, but it also meant that ey would be at the forefront of a new tech. Something used in production. Films and live work both.

The field had been so new that eir own studies at the university helped fuel the change in theater tech work. Eir dissertation, what was meant to be a simple capstone project, was published and distributed, and theaters around the world were suddenly using immersive tech.

Ey had continued to work at the university for a while. It was one of the few places around with both a

theater and the hardware to back it up. Ey had considered continuing eir studies, but the draw of the theater was too heady, too alluring. Academia spelled a life of forging, work one of honing. Why deny one's base nature?

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

The call from London came less than a year after ey graduated. Would ey like to help start a tech-savvy theater group in town? The pay would be slow to start, but the troupe had a loose collection of apartments on the East End. Ey would have full run of the sound department. Yes? When could ey start?

Eir parents had needed convincing. They were pleased, to be sure, but London, so far away! Still in the Western Federation, but so far.

Ey made eir promises that ey'd come and visit every year, and packed eir bags.

Burying emself deeper into the covers and the mattress, leaving enough room for Priscilla to join em later, RJ's thoughts alighted finally on Cicero, on the lost.

Losing Cicero had been a shock. A disappearance, at first. Last seen two days ago. Three. And then it went on. Debarre hollering one night after getting in touch with Cice's family. Lost, lost, he was lost.

And getting lost was rare. Vanishingly so, with perhaps a hundred cases at the time. Still, among those who were counted among the lost, all were heavy interfacers. It was a risk, everyone had assumed, just as was travel. Call it occupational hazard. Something could always happen. Something could always go wrong.

To lose someone so close, though. That hit hard.

It was a sharp reminder of just how much ey relied on the integration tech, not only for work, but for the lion's share of eir social life. Ey enjoyed the company of the troupe just fine. Troupe pub trips were a weekly affair. But eir heart lay among eir friends on the 'net. Eir friends being on the 'net meant more interfacing, and more interfacing meant, it seemed, more risk.

Perhaps more for em than any of eir friends. Eir tech was truly immersive, after all. It was a dissolution of the body. Disembodied in the truest sense.

It was *becoming* the room. It was a new sensory experience. No limbs, no torso, no face or eyes or ears. Or maybe all ears: ey became the room, feeling the way sound echoed or didn't, knowing the limits of the speakers in a deeply physical way. Mics peppering the walls a new sensory input. The wires nerves. The speakers muscles to flex. Instincts, reactions, and actions responding to whole systems of stimuli.

Perhaps that was why ey felt so at risk. They all were, of course, but to dissolve one's concept of a body at work, and then come home to warp the very same concept into that of a fox — no, a finely wrought amalgam of fox and self — felt perilously close to being lost, sometimes.

Honing and forging, honing and forging. Risk and reward.

Ey slept.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Carter rubbed her face into her hands, ground her palms against her eyes until she saw stars, slicked her hair back in a vain attempt to wrangle fly-away hair. It had been in such a neat bun this morning.

She wasn't the last one left in the lab, but it had reached that point of the night where collaboration had stopped and everyone was butting their head against their own individual problems, toiling in silence. She folded her rig's screen down, socketing her tablet in next to it to charge.

It had also clearly reached the point of the night where she wouldn't be getting anything else done.

She felt out of her league. Everyone did, or said they did, here on her team, but that didn't stop the fact from wearing on her. It's not that there wasn't any support from on high. There was. It's not that there wasn't anyone else trying. There definitely was.

It's that no one seemed to take the lost all that seriously. It was like addiction, or plane crashes, or suicide. Something to look at, to study long enough to say "Ah, *this* is happening now," and then set aside. Conversation-piece science.

People admitted that the phenomenon was there, but only inasmuch as it didn't affect that many people. A simple number to point to. See how small?

It was as though the minds of the lost were just...elsewhere. Just dreaming. Implants showing them connected while no such connection existed.

There was no sense to it, though. No rhyme or reason to why such a thing would happen to the patient. Some of her team were pulling together all of the facts about the population that they could, from demographics to physical stature, searching for clues in the rig and the 'net itself, sim histories to go with personal ones. The neuroscientists were digging into what was going on within the brain, and what few scans they had from before someone had gotten lost. Their two pet lawyers — just law students on internship, both also versed in stats — were digging into the legal status of the lost as well as writing queries to procure patient medical histories.

And Carter was supposed to tie it together.

Or, that was her stated goal. The university medical center had only grudgingly provided space and funding for the project. An attempt to win some much-needed kudos, she suspected. Still, she was beginning to doubt just how much the UCL wanted her to succeed.

There had been an initial dataset dumped on her team, and a slow trickle as new cases came in, but it all felt so carefully curated. As manager, she had been met with hurdle after hurdle as soon as she started to venture beyond that. Colleagues assured her that all projects worked this way, but it was as though the advisory board had given her all the data that it was willing to give, and any more might...what? Put those kudos at risk?

Carter stood, stretched her back, winced. “Sorry, Sanders. I’m shattered. Catch you in the morning?”

“Mm,” he replied. The interruption seemed to remind him of his physicality. He rubbed at his eyes and stretched his arms out, alternating between clenching his long fingers into fists and flexing them out wide. “Sounds good, Ramirez. Catch you then.”

Carter gathered up her coat and her messenger bag, taking one last look around the lab, counting heads to see who would be staying later than her. Not too many. Sanders, one or two of his neuroscientists. Prakash and the new guy.

She swiped her way out of the wing and signed out at the front desk before making her way out into the night, bundling up in her coat.

At home, she scavenged a few pieces of salami stacked onto a couple of crackers, enough to keep her empty stomach from complaining through the night, and crumpled onto the couch in the shared living room. She left the lights off so that she wouldn’t bother her flatmates.

Or so she told herself. In truth, the darkness felt good. She could keep her eyes open and not be greeted with a tablet, a screen, a sim.

She sat long after finishing her snack, listening to her flatmates sleep, the sounds of the road outside, her own breathing. Sat, thinking in the dark of all the administrivia on tomorrow’s docket.

Eventually, finding herself at as much of a dead end as she had at work, Carter ambled off to her room, changed from her work clothes into a comfortable pair of lounge pants and a night shirt, and crawled into bed.

RJ Brewster — 2112

RJ allowed emself to sleep in until near eleven that morning. Last night of dress rehearsal, might as well be well-rested.

Many other members of the troupe held part time jobs during the day, and ey ran a small consulting business of eir own. The more industries that dove into immersive tech, the more eir expertise was worth. Even so, with all that ey did, ey made enough to not have to worry about holding down more than the one full-time gig.

As it was, on days when ey had nighttime rehearsals, ey felt no compunctions about sleeping in. Nothing to be up for, only the 'net to keep them occupied in the mornings, little enough need to get moving.

It was Priscilla who eventually succeeded in waking em, butting her head against eir cheek and purring obscenely, stomping on em through the blanket with kneading paws. The more insistent the cat became, the less able ey was to ignore her intrusions on eir admittedly banal dreams.

Fine. Trudge out of bed. Refill cat's water and food. Give the requisite morning pets to keep her happy. Scoop the litter box. Make self a pot of tea. Tea to shake the grogginess.

Ey sat at the tiny kitchen table, sipping from eir oversized mug and watching the late morning traffic from eir window. Mostly business traffic, with the occasional mother with child in tow. Black cabs. Scooters. Bikes.

By the time ey had finished eir first mug of tea, RJ had woken up enough to start on the prowl. As with the night before, ey made sure that everything was in order before touching eir rig. Ey'd taken care of the cat, but ey still needed to eat, emself. So, remembering eir promise, ey set about making a small pot of rice. Fifteen minutes to cook, plenty enough time to finish another mug of tea.

RJ left most of the rice cooling in the pot and took for emself a small bowl to go with the leftover curry. The process of swiping eir hand over the controls of the stove had reminded em of the deck that Sasha had shared last night. There was no reason to think that some random person in London would have much to offer in the case of another person ey had never met getting lost. No reason not to try, though. Maybe there was something, some small insight that ey had which, when pooled with those of others, might help in some way.

So many maybes. So many mights and perhapses.

Empty bowl in sink. Third and final cup of tea in the thick-walled mug. Good enough. Ey allowed emself to settle before eir rig at last.

As before, ey keyed in the password and rested eir hand onto the cradle for the two-factor. However, instead of delving in as ey had last night, ey unfolded the screen to full height and pulled the keyboard closer, swinging the hand rests to the side and the headrest up and out of the way. No need to go immersive, with work like this. Ey could just as easily work as a fox, of course, but it was so easy to lose track of time in there, and the night's

rehearsal mustn't be forgotten.

Besides, eir tea was here.

"Let's see," ey murmured, taking a sip of tea before setting the mug down

Ey called up Sasha's deck.

Cicero Lost Nov 2112

Priv eyes only

See Debarre for ACLs

Dr. Carter Ramirez

specialist in lost

so. London

Mr/Mrs. Jackson

parents, can't get much more

dad in govt, mother stays home

And on it went for nearly a dozen cards. Each had its own cover embossed with a few lines of type, each containing upwards of a terabyte of information culled from various sources, doubtless of varied quality.

RJ flipped through each, gleaning what ey could from a quick scan, before collapsing the deck once more and sitting back to think. Nothing in there seemed new. Nothing out of place. Ey had only received the deck last night, and yet nothing felt like it had been revealed, uncovered.

Ey knew of the lost, of course, and the name Ramirez was commonly tied with the few hundred or so cases that had cropped up over the last few months. The family...no, nothing to be gained there, at least not that had already been tried by Debarre. And again, there was the problem of being a random nobody in the UK: no one known, no one with power.

None of the rest of the cards carried any real significance to em.

If there was anything RJ was going to add to the conversation, it would be through eir connection to Cicero. Something ey knew, something the two had shared.

A small notification slid down from the top of eir monitor, covering the upper right corner of the screen.

D — D — R

Voting begins in 5 minutes on *referendum 238ac9b8*:

Summary: *Tariffs on importation of goods from the Sino-Russian Bloc...*

Cost: 1,000

Comment: 150,000

Bounty: 280,000

RJ reached to swipe the notification away. Ey had very little stake in the uncomfortable alliance between Western Fed and S-R Bloc. Could care less, honestly, about taxes on things that ey'd never buy. Then something clicked within em, and ey halted eir motion.

Cicero.

Ey hastily shuffled back through the *Cicero Lost* deck until coming up with the 'recent net activity' card and pulled up the contents. It took a few moments to remember how to sort tabular data — database classes in high school so long ago — but eventually, ey got the table sorted around the activity type. Ey scrolled rapidly through the list until ey got to the list of Direct Democracy Representative entries.

There was the connection.

The one thing that RJ and Cicero had was their arguments over politics. Not just politics, but the worthiness of the current political system in all of its facets. Arguments upon arguments upon arguments, fennec fox and tabby cat with their ceaseless bickering in the Crown Pub.

RJ was firmly on the left, but ey felt the representative democracy combined with the DDR was a pretty good system. Not great, sure. It was *fine*. It *worked*. To ask for more from a political system was to invite further troubles like those from the preceding century.

Cicero, however, seemed to waver between socialism and anarchy, depending on factors such as how much he had had to drink and how angry he was at the most recent vote.

I certainly can't see broad shifts going my way, he had slurred on more than one occasion. *Least I can vote. Vote on every damn thing that comes my way.*

Ey made sure syncing was turned on across all copies of the deck before snipping those rows out of the activity table into a card of their own:

DDR votes
todo: process by record
1 month, 835 votes (!)

The icon in the upper left of the screen showing the deck twirled gracefully to show the sync.

Cicero had voted precisely how he had talked. On the surface, he was no different than any other far-left socialist on the DDR.

Along with the ability to vote on issues directly came the ability to comment — for a price. DDR votes didn't cost money, but they did cost credit, up to 1,000 per. Credit gained by voting on cheaper issues, for each vote provided a bounty paid upon consideration, beginning with a few freebies in the tutorial.

What Cicero's records showed was that he was wealthy. *Fantastically* wealthy. RJ had a few million DDR credits banked away in case a high value issue that ey felt strongly about cropped so that ey could make a comment. Unlike voting, commenting could cost upwards of five million credits. And one could buy their way to influence by flooding issues with comments.

Cicero's wealth surpassed RJ's at least a hundred times over, if not more. Well into the billions of credits. For someone to be as active in commenting as ey knew the cat to be and still have that much in credits stored up showed a dedication to following politics that was just barely hinted at by those tispny rants. Cicero was well

connected, well read, and, most importantly, apparently a key political figure on the DDR comment sections to an extent that none of the Crown regulars had ever expected.

RJ sat back in silence for a few moments before muttering, “Well, shit. Prisca, you don’t suppose...” Rather than finishing the thought out loud, ey dashed off a summary in the notes attached to the card.

AwDae here. Looks like there’s a lot going on in DDR activity (where’d you get this, Debarre?). Cicero was into a lot, and I’m not trying to go all conspiracy nut on you all, but do you think that maybe he got in too deep or something? Not saying someone tried to do it to him or anything, just that maybe the more one uses the net, the more likely it is to happen to them? I mean seriously, look at all of his votes, and his stash of credits! I’ll keep poking at this after rehearsal.

The tea had gone cold long ago, but ey downed it all the same. Ey’d spent longer than planned plowing through the data the hard way and ey risked being late if ey didn’t start hustling.

It was nearing dusk by the time ey left, the tux newly brushed and ironed, the gloves newly washed, the RJ newly shaven.

On the way back to the tube station, ey stopped by a Thai counter and picked up some take-away noodles for the night. Ey made it halfway through the container before the rancid belch of station wind suggested ey pack it away before heading down to the platform.

Throughout the ride to Soho, RJ’s mind continued prowling through the data in Sasha and Debarre’s deck. Ey kept mulling over that surreal number of credits. Just how much social currency was bound up within the reputation market of the DDR credit system?

Cicero had built himself up into a proper political player.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

The morning's alarm startled Carter awake.

Disorientation — when had she fallen asleep? There seemed to be no line delineating squirming under the covers and the buzz of her phone and faint tingle along her implants.

And here she had thought that the end of grad school had meant the end of six-hour nights of sleep.

Blearily, she pawed at her phone to swipe the alarm off. It was tempting to go back to sleep — *after all*, she mused, *the lost weren't going anywhere* — but she managed to at least kick her feet out from under the covers and sit up. Frizzed hair hung down around her face, shielding her from the world for just a little bit longer.

It was her phone, as always, that brought her back to reality. It's mere presence, even silent, was enough to draw her forth.

Ramirez

New case, this time with scans from before the incident. Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it, do you :p

S

The brief, ungrammatical message from Sanders left her nonplussed until she pieced together that he was talking about one of the other subjects' histories, something about them being part of some subculture. Sanders didn't honestly believe that people who pretended to be animals on the 'net were somehow more predisposed to get lost than everyone else. And, to be honest, neither did she.

All the same, the thought stuck with her through her morning routine. Through the shower, the blank dissociation of standing in the kitchen. Through two cups of coffee, the first there in the kitchen and the second out of a travel mug on the tube as she headed out towards the UCL campus.

Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it.

She felt sluggish. Craved another cup of coffee even after she'd reached the bottom of the mug she had with her. Sluggish and slow, like thinking through mud. Too many late nights. Too many long days with too little to show for them.

The thought nagged at her, caught like some spinning shape against the threads of her mind in a way that the rattle and screech of the train couldn't displace. It tugged those threads free. Unraveled stitch by stitch, until it reached...what?

Until it reached the hem, and then the same thing over again.

“Holy...holy shit. Holy shit,” Carter said, startling the elderly lady next to her. She murmured an apology and fished her phone out, thumbing in a quick message to the team.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Ioan#c1494bf found emself twenty meters in front of a squat, flat house.

It was as modern on the outside as it had appeared on the inside: a concrete block, a thick wrap-around patio, bordered by dandelions and covered by cantilevered eaves, floor to ceiling glass for walls. Ey wouldn't be surprised if the far side of the buiding — ey couldn't see it very well, with the slope of the shortgrass prairie it huddled on — jutted out at some crazy angle.

Smiling ruefully, ey walked up toward the house. Ey had eir own aesthetic. Ey knew the trappings. Might as well own it.

A soft tone, a vibraphone struck with a soft mallet, sounded both inside and outside of the house as soon as ey'd passed the barrier between grass and patio. Ey stood on the concrete, waiting to be either admitted or greeted.

A shadow of a person — human — peeked out through the glass at em, gave a pleasant wave, and hollered through the glass, "Ioan! Hi. I'll grab Dear."

Before the person could do so, Dear came padding from around the side of the house, looking slightly more collected than it had during the message.

"Ioan," it said, smiling and offering a hand — paw? — in greeting. Ioan wasn't sure how ey knew when a fox was smiling, but it was definitely a smile. *"Thank you for coming on such short notice. Sorry for the urgent message, I just need to find someone to help out rather soon."*

Ioan#c1494bf took the offered hand/paw and bowed. "Of course, Dear." How strange it was to call someone a term of endearment as a name. "May we have a seat? I've just woken up and am still figuring out how to stand."

Dear grinned and nodded, gesturing cordially with its paw around the side of the building from whence it had come, leading the writer around and through a door in the glass.

The interior of the house was much as ey had seen, though as they moved through the space where that first message had been recorded (a gallery, Ioan noticed) and deeper into the house, things warmed up a little. The concrete walls were softened by hangings and the furniture unexpectedly plush. None of the firm-cushioned, straight-lined variety ey had expected.

Fox and writer settled for an L-shaped couch, facing each other across the bend.

After a moment's hesitation, Ioan began, "I must apologize, Dear. I'm not sure that you have quite the right person. I'm not really a detective, wouldn't know the first way of finding the one you spoke of."

Dear shook it's head. *"No, I'm pretty sure you are the right person. My search of the markets was quite specific, and you topped all the lists. I am not really looking for a detective, per se. There's enough of those in the Ode clade. They will suss*

out the whens and wheres.”

“Then what—”

“There are a few types of people in the world, Ioan,” the fox said, voice low and calm. Low enough and calm enough to take the sting out of the interruption. “There are forgers and honers. Most are familiar with those. Forgers build a thing and plow ahead, and honers settle on a thing and perfect it. Artists generally fall into these classes, and they map to two outcomes in particular: prolific and unfruitful artists, respectively.

“But you are not an artist. You write, yes, but that’s ancillary to what you do. A side effect. After all, there are some other types of people out there, too. Catalogers, feelers, experiencers.” Dear shrugged. “For its own reasons, the clade needs— I need someone to experience this along with us. Someone specifically out-clade. There’s a lot of history in this, a lot that we’ve forgotten before uploading, a lot that we’re trying to remember. Maybe even some that we’re trying to forget. I want you to help figure out the history of this, yes, but I also want you to experience it and tell a coherent story after.”

“An amanuensis,” Ioan said.

Dear brightened, its ears perking. “Precisely. And what a delightful word, too.”

Ioan smiled. “That’s good, then. Very much more my arena. I’ll keep this instance around and keep #tracker up to date.”

The fox nodded, then looked up, smiling as the person Ioan had first seen came in with three thick-walled, wide-brimmed mugs of coffee, setting two of them down on the corner of the table near Ioan and the fox. “Ioan, nice to meet you. Heard you were tired,” they said, walking off with their own mug.

Dear watched them go.

“Your partner?” Ioan asked. A moment of chitchat felt necessary. Ey lifted eir mug carefully. It smelled quite good.

The fox nodded, picked up its own mug, and leaned back into the cushions of the couch, slouching. “Mhm. Finally decided to explore relationships again,” it said. “They accuse me of treating it like an art project.”

Ioan grinned. “Well, are you a forger or a honer of relationships?”

Dear rolled its eyes, said, “Touché. I am trying to be a honer, with this one. I gave relationships a miss after...well, some stuff before uploading. For a long while, I forked to create lasting relationships rather than holding any myself. Gets lonely, though. It was like being turned down every time. At least from my— from this instance’s point of view.”

Ioan felt they were getting a little too deep for having just met, so ey steered the conversation along a tangent. “You fork quite often, then?”

“Yes. Dispersionista through and through. Or perhaps profligate tracker. Sometimes I do not have the option to let instances linger.” Something seemed to occur to it, and the fox sat up straighter again. “Speaking of, do you know much about the Ode clade?”

Ioan shook eir head, sipped eir coffee. It was good.

“It is an old clade. One of the oldest on the system. Our root instance, Michelle Hadje, uploaded basically as soon as she could, and quickly became one of the loudest voices on the system. She campaigned for more advanced sensoria to be included.”

“I’ve heard of Michelle.” Ioan nodded. “Usually in the context of the founders. You speak of her like she’s someone else, though.”

"Dispersionista habit. We are quite different from each other, by this point. If you get the chance to meet Michelle — and you may — you will see the differences."

"So what is Ode, then? Her old username?"

"No, an ode is a poem." Dear laughed.

"Oh! Oh, of course. So Michelle wrote this poem..."

"No, not actually. Michelle had a friend, a good friend, who wrote the poem." Dear was speaking more slowly now, sounding less rehearsed. *"When the friend died, Michelle memorized the poem. All of us up-tree instances do our best to keep it memorized as well. Really memorized, too, up in the forefront, up where we think about it, not stored in some exocortex."*

"Is that where your names come from?"

"Yes. Each of us is named after a line in the poem. I am Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, and my first long-lived fork is Which Offered Heat And Warmth Through Fire. My immediate down-tree fork is Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars."

Dear splayed its ears, grinning sheepishly, *"It is perhaps not a very good poem. Michelle was...well, she had some experience relating to the...ah, origins of the poem which I shall not get into here, but even she will admit that. The sentiments are nice, but this friend was not a poet. When they died, when they killed themselves, it really tore her up. We all still think of them often."*

Ioan nodded, once more steering the conversation away from more sensitive topics. "It must be quite long, then."

"One hundred lines divided into ten stanzas. There are only ever ten branches as direct ancestors of Michelle, and each branch only ever has ten long-lived up-tree instances. We may be Dispersionistas, but we are a small clade."

"And the poet? Who are they?"

Dear bristled, then mastered some complex set of emotions Ioan didn't understand. *"That is the Name that we don't share. The information that someone supposedly did share, I mean. Someone of the clade or close enough to it to know."*

Ioan's brow furrowed, startled by the fox's reaction, not to mention the concept of not sharing a name that was clearly important. "I see," ey said down to eir coffee, covering eir confusion. "So you'd like me to help in finding this person and act as amanuensis along the way?"

Nodding, Dear held out its paw once more. *"If you would be willing, that is. We would be glad to have you aboard."*

Ey was already sold, Ioan knew, but all the same, ey took a moment longer to consider the ramifications of the job. Ey couldn't come up with any reason not to.

Ey nodded, reached out, and shook the fox's paw.

Dear grinned, shook back.

"Excellent. I have shared just about all I have to share on the topic for now, though as we get updates, I will pass them on to you." Dear leaned back into the couch once more, lapped at its coffee. *"For now, stay. Finish your coffee, at least, though feel free to putter around for a while. Or just stay here. We have an apartment on the side of the house. I have already talked with my partner about it."*

Ioan nodded, "Thank you. I think I'll head home in a bit and sync up with myself, then start the research plan. Do you have any suggested avenues I should start down?"

“Of course.” Dear smiled. “As for research, dig a bit more into the Ode clade for now, probably. When I send you updates, maybe those will lead to different topics.” The smile turned into a sly grin. “I know you are not a big fan of sensorium messages, but as that is how the clade communicates — those of us who do, at least — I regret to say that you will be getting quite a bit more.”

Ioan gave eir best polite smile.

RJ Brewster — 2112

RJ arrived at the theater early, the last few meters of the walk having been spent hastily finishing the carton of Thai. Carton and chopsticks wound up in the compost as ey swiped eir way into the theater.

“Sorry, Johansson, I’m here.”

The hulking director laughed. “You’re here five minutes early, RJ. What on earth are you sorry about?”

“What? I– Oh.”

“Lot on your mind, kid?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I mean,” RJ frowned, squinted. Anything to get emself in the work mindset. “Yeah, sorry. Woke up early and spent a bunch of time researching. Guess my head’s still elsewhere, boss.”

“Well, alright,” Johansson rumbled. “So long as you get your head around work by the time we start. Hey. More crew.”

RJ hustled into the theater and made eir way down to the pit where the mics had been stored. Ey handed them out to the actors who would be wearing them, ticking off the cheat-sheet to align proper mic to correct actor.

Ey bounded back up the steps two at a time to the tech booth and set about waking the theater up. Caitlin was already delved in, so it would already be shaking its sleepy head. Ey just had to help it wake up the rest of the way.

RJ exchanged cheery greetings with the lights understudy as ey shrugged out of eir jacket, draping it over the back of the chair. Ey slipped eir hands carefully out of eir gloves. Contacts gleamed from eir digits, freshly polished and clean.

Ey settled into eir chair and delved in to greet the theater. It purred in recognition, brushed up against em, stretched and unlimbered. Thoughts of Cicero and Debarre, of Sasha and the lost left back with eir body, with eir hands resting lightly on the contacts in the cradles, forehead against the headrest.

The first half of rehearsal went by without trouble. Johansson had apparently highlighted a few areas of concern, so they began with those. From there, the cast has followed his lead, adjusting as needed per their dear leader’s suggestions. RJ and Caitlin kept a script running so that they could keep up with the director and stage manager.

When the clock hit eight thirty, Johansson called for a break and informed everyone that they would be running through top to bottom after. Last chance for a full run-through.

RJ gave the purring theater some reassuring warmth and backed out of the connection, reveling in the snap of eir fingers pulling away from that light magnetic grasp of the cradles. Ey wiped eir hands dry and flexed

fingers to keep limber.

Ey spent the break walking around the theater and stage in one big, looping arc, simply listening. Hearing from the theater's perspective so often, it was easy to get wrapped in the omniscience of it all. Good, too, to hear the way that the ambient sound moved through the room, reflected off of walls and ceiling, died among the baffles. It would all be different with people in the seats, to be sure, but the acoustics of the space were beautiful on their own.

Johansson whistled piercingly. Back to work, back to the stage. Back to the booth and back to the contented and satiny-soft embrace of the theater for RJ.

It was around the end of the first act that RJ started having problems.

When one was delved in, one could always focus hard enough to feel the way their head felt against the headrest, or sense the way that their hands rested within the cradles of the grips. Trickier, sure, when one was as immersive as eir tech required. Bodies weren't a thing in that liminal space. Ey was as much the room as the room was itself. No forehead, no hands. No headrest or grips

By the time ey had brought house sound down in time for the curtain, RJ could feel a numbness creeping. A stealing of sensation. A non-feeling flowing slowly over emself from the base of eir neck outwards, stretching out along eir scalp, down eir arms, the non-sensation not-tickling along eir ribs.

Ey had been willing, desperately, to chalk it up to nerves or exhaustion. It had been such a long week.

Thoughts of Cicero, doubtless cradled in some hospital creche: strictly disallowed but nonetheless teasing around the edges of consciousness.

Tired, yes. Exhausted. Yawns.

By the time ey couldn't feel the plastic of the headrest or the cradles beneath eir hands, no matter the desperation, ey began to panic.

Panic, yes. Just anxiety. Nerves.

All the same, it was final dress. Ey would be able to head home and catch up on sleep. Drink some tea. Hot chocolate. Pet the cat. Whatever ey needed.

Need, yes. Baser than want. Imperatives.

By the second curtain, something was desperately wrong.

Ey hadn't missed any cues yet, but ey couldn't seem to figure out how to work eir 'voice'. That thing that wasn't talking. That subvocalization used to communicate with Caitlin Sarai Johansson anyone. The immersion-mouth to chat to talk to radio for help a non-entity non-thing non-here, gone, leaving em feeling exponentially more cut off from the rest of the theater as time went on.

Numb, yes. Yet strangely embodied. Strangely tangible. Strangely localized. Oh god oh god please help please help. The play. Ey had work. Ey had the theater. Ey had the room and the lines and time and space to manage. Ey had a home and the Crown and a cat and Sasha and Debarre.

Had, yes.

It was the muzzle that was the kicker. The muzzle and the tail, which ey felt — any feeling a beacon in the storm of numbness which had long since enveloped em entire — with a piercing intensity. Felt, bordering on and then diving straight into pain.

Pull back, ey begged. Every bit of training begged. Every nerve begged, screamed. A bug, a glitch, an error. Pull back oh god please pull back.

Ey lifted eir hands — paws? — in a coarse, jerking motion which, along with the act of pulling eir head back from the contacts, led to em toppling over. There was no chair to catch em.

And that was when ey missed eir cue.

The curtain went down, the lights dimmed, and then, ringing clear, a thin giggle filled the auditorium. The lead laughing at a misstep. A quiet joke to share at the pub later. No harm. Sound was off, right? Curtains would eat the unamplified laugh.

“RJ,” Sarai whispered into the silence of the theater’s sim. “Stay on cue, bud.”

No answer, no apology, no acknowledgment that a note had been made. No signal.

“RJ?”

“What’s going on up there?” Johansson’s subvocalization rumbled through the director’s channel in the sim.

“Something’s wrong, boss, lemme back out and check up on RJ.”

“Hold places,” Johansson said aloud to the theater. The open channels from the actors’ mics carried a few quiet whispers in response. “Hold on, quiet please.”

Moving with a quickness which belied his bulk, Johansson jogged up to the tech booth and slipped in as quickly as possible to keep sound from leaking out. Sarai was trying to rouse RJ.

Like a projector bulb’s heat burning through celluloid film, the third curtain had signified a drastic change. Slow enough to be observed, faster than ey could hope to avoid. The few tenuous touches on reality that held RJ into eir seat in the tech booth scorched and peeled away, acrid smoke stinging eir eyes. And the numbness spiked.

RJ lay on a tile floor. Dirty. Yellow. Brown specks, dark enough to be black.

The tiles were completely regular, one foot on a side, obviously made of some synthetic material. Harder than linoleum, softer than stone. They were glued to a concrete foundation. No wasting time with grout, each tile butted up against the others to form a grid of thin, black lines showing where the dirt of hundreds of feet had been ground into the remaining seams. Thousands. Millions.

Ey couldn’t move, not yet, but ey could see that the world was bounded. There was a thin plastic strip of molding around the edge of a wall. Above that, regular rectangles of blue. A wall.

“Something’s not right, boss. Ey’s totally unresponsive on the line.”

“Pull him, pull him! Hit the panic!”

Caitlin, who had backed out moments before, and Sarai both leaped to RJ’s sides and pulled eir hands up from the cradles, rocking em back from the headrest to lean against the back of the chair. All according to training.

Eir body flopped lifelessly against the cheap plastic mesh.

Caitlin slapped the red button on the side of the rig, fingers coming away dusty. Below the desk, drives sparked to life and dumped the last thirty minutes of both sim and brain activity from the user.

“The hell?” Johansson growled, reaching in a thick pair of fingers to press against the side of the sound lead’s neck. “He’s got a pulse. Check his eyes, Sarai. Caitlin, call. Now.”

Shaking, Caitlin pulled her phone from her bag and struggled to unlock. She gave up, swiped to the emergency dialer, called out to emergency services.

“They’re rolled back, boss. Bloodshot, too.” Sarai tugged back the collar of RJ’s shirt, exposing eir exocortex’s simple color-coded readout, set at the base of eir neck. “Blue. What the hell...”

“Ey’s not jacked in, though,” Johansson said. A statement brooking no discussion. “Can’t be.”

“I think–” Sarai trailed off hoarsely, cleared her throat, tried again. “I mean, do you think ey’s lost?”

“Caitlin, what’s our status, girl?” Johansson didn’t wait for a response, throwing the door to the tech booth wide and shouting out toward the stage, “Cut! Manually shut off your mics and take a seat where you are. *Do not move*. Emergency services will be here soon, and will record what they can.”

Lockers.

The blue rectangles were lockers. The first hint was the vent, those five slots a few inches from the bottom of each narrow rectangle, but, as ey lifted eir muzzle from where it lay on the tile floor, ey could clearly see the locks halfway up each door.

Tall, narrow lockers. Blue. Yellow tile floors. Thin tile glued to cool concrete. The scent, the very feel of the place.

AwDae struggled against crashing waves of panic. Struggled to make all of this information fit in eir head. Struggled to make it all fit in with the fact that ey was currently vulpine. A fennec fox dressed in a suit, laying on the floor of the central corridor of eir old high school.

“What the hell?”

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

“Listen, Ramirez, I’m just not sure if you–”

“No, come on. Sanders, just hear me out.” Carter sighed and settled her weight against the edge of her desk. Took a slow breath to buy herself some time, organize her thoughts. “I’m just saying that we ought to look into social connections between the patients, too. That way, maybe we can see if there’s some factor that’s tying these occurrences together. With that under our belt, we may be able to formulate a better theory of what’s going on here, even neurologically.”

Sanders looked up to the ceiling, visibly counting to ten, then shrugged. “It’s just that you’re talking about contagion here, Carter, like this is some sort of flu or computer virus. Not only do we have very little data to go on, but there’s no indication that this is something passed from one person to another. We’ve had the rigs checked. Exos too. All of the data suggests random–”

“Sanders,” Carter said, voice stern. “I know how the project works. I know the data. There’s a lot of questions still left in the air. I’m not suggesting that getting lost is contagious. We dismissed the virus aspect ages ago. I’m merely suggesting that we might find shared factors within a social realm as well as the physiological. Surprised we haven’t, actually.”

Carter stood her ground. No sense paling under his glare. She was lead of the research team, she could tell Sanders to do whatever she wanted him to. Or, well, strongly suggest. Hell, there was no reason for her not to. She was plugged into all of the teams that he was not privy to. He may be lead of neurochem, but Carter was above basically everyone except the UCL itself and whatever grantors were sponsoring the project.

After a few tense seconds, he caved, shrugged, turned his back on Carter. He nodded towards his own team.

“Look, Sanders,” Carter said, following after. “You’re a fantastic doctor, and I respect that, I really do. I’m not trying to impugn that or anything, and I’m not pulling labor away from the neurochem team. I’m merely suggesting that we add a sociological aspect to our attack here.”

He held up his hands in surrender, then headed for the coffee station.

Carter rolled her eyes and let him go. She turned back to the remaining team. “We’ve got a hunch on the social front. Or, I do, but I think it’s worth following. There’s a couple of patients who are involved in the same subcultures, so maybe there’s distinct ties between them. Loose ties, sure, not everyone knows everyone else, but they *are* there.”

They nodded. Some looked unconvinced, but none hostile.

“Let’s time-box half a day to chase down these ties and see just where they lead. If they lead nowhere, fine. If we can find a way to tie them together, then we dig into all the ways that the web ramifies.” She smiled in

a way she hoped was disarming. “Worst case, half a day is spent tracing along the ’net, but best case, we find another avenue of research that lets us predict — and then maybe interrupt — future cases. Got it? Catch you at lunch.”

Carter sighed. Speeches. Hell of a start to the day. She collapsed into her desk chair, closing her eyes to collect her thoughts.

Rather than sequester herself in an office, she had taken a desk among the team. Four foot cube walls separating her from her neighbors. Made of glass, too; token walls rather than real ones. Not that there was much room for an office in the repurposed classroom. All the same, the deliberate attitude with which she had chosen to join everyone in equal conditions had endeared her to the more stubborn among the crew.

On the other hand, the lawyers-*cum*-statisticians were badly out of their element. Thankfully they had their implants and were able to spend most of their time in the office sim.

All the same, sometimes she wished for an office, if only for the door. A nice, thick, hardwood door. One with a solid core so that she could voice her ideas. Or scream.

Sometimes she just needed the ability to put things into words. No matter how often she tried to set things down in the notes on her phone, she always felt hampered by the small screen and her clumsy thumbs. Neither had she gone full immersive-on-the-go yet. Something about that glassy-eyed stare, the silly headband, the controllers gripped like walking weights, packed full of electronics, set her teeth on edge.

At least she had a private corner in sim.

She delved in rather than work on a tablet or screen. *One scream*, she promised herself. *Then I’ll organize shit.*

Once she left her private corner, Carter’s chosen workspace, her ‘desk’, was totally black. Not the complete blackness of unseeing, but the vaguely luminescent darkness of *Eigengrau*, as if wherever she looked, she saw the faint light of non-seeing. It was black enough to be easy on the eyes almost by definition. At least, as much as she had eyes in the sim.

Black without being unnerving.

Scattered throughout the space were decks. Decks upon decks.

Each was a point of light. A white rectangle with just enough depth to give the impression of being several cards stacked on top of each other but no more. Each was surrounded by a dim halo that dispelled the darkness. If she were to engage with a deck, it would fill her vision almost to the periphery with that fine velum paper. Almost, but not quite: the non-black provided a border and seemed to shine, in its own non-light way, through the paper. From there, she would be able to explore and expand that portion of the project at will.

The decks themselves were organized into groups, surrounded by bright lines of white string — literally string; Carter had chosen cotton string as her group delimiter. Decks within groups were linked by string, and many of these groups in turn were related to one another with more intangible threads.

She was a ghost. A non-being. A being of nots. A gesture from her non-hand would show the whole setup from the top. The mind, ever attracted to a two dimensional representation, sometimes appreciated this aspect. The mind, ever attracted to the *hereness* of space appreciated walking through the sim just as much.

Even with perspective in play, the scientists and lawyers working the project had tended to alternate between the aerial view and the interactive view, with the cards positioned at chest level throughout the sim.

Everyone’s view of the sim was different in its own way. Sanders, she knew, preferred an oak-paneled room

with dark green carpet, a facsimile of luxury with each of the grouping lines drawn out in finest silver. Others preferred pencil sketches, harsh angles, subdued colors on a dim background, or even more abstract, textual interfaces. So long as the concepts of decks and spatiality were maintained, it was up to the individual.

Cards had their ACLs, too. Some were visible only to the individual. Some were visible to everyone, but only on the surface, with details invisible to others. The vast majority were visible to everyone, completely open.

Carter began creating a publicly visible grouping, knowing that others were delving into the sim along with her, visible as diffuse shapes in her dark space. She wrote in air, titled the group in her stolid, blocky font of choice. “The Social Connection”.

From there, she began creating sub-groupings. For cases. For leads. On and on. For the “cases” group, she tapped a few of the case decks to make symbolic links, drawing lines of cotton twine which she dropped in.

Two were positioned at the top of the list:

Patient aca973d7

M — 2086-01-28

Lost: 2112-11-08

Patient 0224ebe8

X — 2084-05-09

Lost: 2112-12-07

Carter connected these two cards with fine thread. Hanging pendant from that, she switched to virtual keyboard and created a metadata label, more tag than card:

Possible acquaintances

The others, those shadowy figures, caught on to what she was doing, and got down to work, dragging sym-links of decks and expanding this new group of social connections.

Carter pulled back out of the sim when her personal timer went off fifteen minutes before the time-box was up.

She backed out and made her way from her workstation to the small counter at the front of the old classroom. She filled the electric kettle from the tap and set it on its base for tea, letting it heat up, then scooped a few heaping spoonfuls of coffee and chicory into the coffee maker. While she was in the sim, she had ensured that everyone else’s rig would have an alarm for the time-box, and it was only fair that she make everyone a cup of coffee before they pulled back.

The coffee had finished brewing and the mugs were all set out in a row in front of the pot and kettle, each waiting with handles out toward the room for ready hands. Carter poured herself some of the coffee, thick and bitter, and topped it off with a dash of sweetened creamer to dull the latter.

One by one, the ten techs pulled back from their workstations and ambled, glassy-eyed, to the counter where the coffee lay. Carter suppressed a smile: a horde of zombies in various states of disarray drawn to caffeine. It’d

be nice, but over the months they had spent on the project, the team had settled into a comfortable ritual of meetings over coffee. The habit remained unbroken.

“So,” she started, once everyone was gathered around and tead-and-coffeeed.

Silence. Sanders wouldn’t meet her gaze.

Finally, she caved and broke down her thoughts. “Time-box is over. I think we got a bunch of good stuff done in a few hours, some not even related to the task at hand. There’s definitely connections there. We’ve got a good number of them among the cases we have at our hands, but there’s precious little data on why those connections exist. We’ve got a few furries, a few ’net addicts — well, more than a few — and we’ve got a whole lot of DDR junkies. None of those point to anything that would lead people to getting lost.”

“Man, have you *seen* DDR zombies, though?” Everyone laughed.

Another voice piped up, “And the correlation on the neurochem side is extremely low. Might as well be non-existent.”

Sanders smirked down to his coffee mug before hiding the expression with a sip.

“No, there’s no doubt about that.” Carter sighed, shrugged. “So, again, time-box is over. What do you think? Is this line of thought worth pursuing? Plus-one, minus-one, zero. Sanders?”

“Minus-one.” The response was immediate.

Carter slipped her phone from her pocket and started a tally on the calculator. “Alright,” she continued. “Jacob?”

“Zero.”

Tallying as she went, Carter went around the room, The running tally took a few dings (neither of the lawyers were for the idea, she noticed), but remained net positive until the end of the line.

“We’re left at two, then.”

Sanders set his mug down with exaggerated care, but otherwise stayed silent.

“Hardly universal, so let’s triage. Can I get one from neuro, one from stats and history, and would one of the law team be willing to devote an hour a day to helping us out? Just to run stuff by as we come up with leads.”

If you come up with leads, was written on Sanders’ face. She ignored it.

Prakash Das from the neurochem team raised his hand, and Avery from statistics and history volunteered. One of the lawyers, Sandra, gave a noncommittal shrug and promised some of her time, saying, “We’re on shaky legal ground, I think, but we can probably keep it in check.”

“Alright. Let’s sync up, you three.” Carter smiled toward the rest of the group, “Not leaving you guys behind. One-on-ones and daily stand-ups will continue at the usual times. We’ll set another time-box of—” She checked her phone. “Three days, after which we’ll reconvene and vote again.”

Sanders strolled back toward his workstation, Ramirez’s eyes on his back.

AwDae — 2112

AwDae slowly picked emself up off of the floor, staggering to eir feet.

Ey was standing, swaying, in the middle of a long row of lockers. And then ey was sitting again. Not from weakness *per se*, but the shock of being in the tech booth and theater sim, and then suddenly being back in high school was taking its toll on eir wits.

Ey swiped eir paw from left to right in front of emself to bring up the usual menu.

Only, no menu came up. There was nothing in this sim, if sim it was. No global menu, no ACLs. No control.

Panic crested again, broke the surface.

AwDae felt behind emself, reaching for that sense of reality outside of the sim, that cool breeze of the tangible that should be at eir back. It *was* there. Ey could feel it. A cool breath of air on the back of eir neck, but muffled. Only, there was something keeping em from reaching for it, touching it. A thin barrier. A membrane. A sheet of keeping em trapped within the sim.

And then, with a jolt of pain driving like a spike down the back of eir neck and along eir spine, it was gone.

Throughout all of the practice runs, the endless training on the rig that had gone into eir education, that feeling had only come up a scant handful of times. It was the feeling of being forcibly disconnected from the rig through the manual expedient of removing the contacts from the cradles in which they rested. It was the shock of being brought to reality from out of a sim with no disconnection. It was the rush of eir exocortex dumping its core and the interferites struggling to hand back control with the last of their stored power. It was panic made tangible, halfway between electricity and the feeling of missing one's step on the last stair.

And with that, AwDae should've found emself back in the tech booth, trying to figure out what strange loop the theater had gotten itself into that would have frozen eir rig.

The lockers never wavered, though, and now ey found emself stuck in eir old high school with no contact to the world outside of whatever this place was.

Ey screamed.

Ey didn't know how long ey screamed, how many times. Ey didn't know how long ey cried or beat eir fists against the lockers. Ey didn't know where ey was.

Lost.

Lost like so many others.

Lost like Cicero.

Or perhaps Aeneas, Odysseus.

Sing to me the reasons, O Muse. Sing, Muse, the fatal wrath.

Eventually, ey cried emself out. Minutes, hours. Eventually, eir tail went numb and eir feet fell asleep.

Nothing for it. Ey wobbled to eir feet, kicked off now ill-fitting shoes, shoes not made for fox paws, and began to trudge.

Ey walked slowly down the halls, memories coming back in a wash. Realities blurred effortlessly. Realities of the embodied world. Realities of online life.

Nails on feetpaws clicking against the tile, following the math wing to the student center, a cavernous space that acted as a terminus for all of the different hallways, each hosting a different subject. They spread away from the cavernous room like limbs, a giant insect clutching at the earth.

Neither halls nor hub had ever seen a fox. They were supposed to be home to students. To students and teachers and staff. To humans. To anyone, not some lone half-beast.

Inside the student center, AwDae sat down and tried to reach towards reality once more.

Nothing.

Ey sagged, rolling onto eir side in eir increasingly frustrated attempts to pull away from the contacts, though that shock of pain suggested those in reality had long since pulled em away.

Frustration, anger, fear. Hopelessness. Terror. All simmered within em, working up to a boil as ey tried increasingly harder.

Finally, ey gave up and, hastily brushing at the tears staining eir cheeks, slipped out of eir tux jacket as well. Why keep it? Yet another unfoxly garment.

Ey swished eir tail to the side and lay flat on eir back on the cool terrazzo floor. Ey pulled eir suit jacket up over eir face and buried eir muzzle in the soft lining. With paws holding the cloth to eir face, ey deliberately let the tears come. Willed them too. Forced. Screamed and begged. Anything for release from the tension building up.

Time held no meaning. It was a few minutes or hours or days before ey peeled the coat from eir face and stood up once more. Exhausted, ey bent down to roll up the cuffs of eir slacks to keep them from bothering eir feet.

It was in the middle of the second cuff that ey realized the absurdity of the motion. In the theater sim, ey didn't have a body, and when ey 'woke' in eir normal sim, ey was dressed only in the clothes ey had on when ey went to bed. Usually nothing. Ey disrobed before disconnecting more out of habit than anything.

So why was ey still in eir tux? Did ey even have a tux in eir wardrobe?

AwDae puzzled over this for a moment before completing the cuff rolling. Something to look into later. For now, ey needed to find eir way out. Find eir way *back* out. Or, failing that, at least find one thing ey could finish. One, simple task to complete. Something to make em feel less powerless in the face of it all.

Exploring, then.

The sim was startlingly complete.

Perhaps. Ey had been in London a few years, and before that, on the coast at university. *Was it complete? Was it accurate?* Despair lay around the corner: the thought that the chances of em being able to compare the sim and reality vanishingly small.

In fact, the only thing that seemed to have changed was AwDae emself.

AwDae's curiosity won out. Ey made eir way back to the school's auditorium. It was exactly as ey had left it all those years ago. Trudging up the few steps toward the entrance, ey feared that it would be locked. Missing. Somehow erased from existence, such that it had never been there in the first place.

But the door swung easily beneath eir paw and eir nails clicked against the sound guard in the doorway, leading em into the dimly lit hall.

The house lights were at quarter, the stage lit only by utility lights from the back. All the same, it was enough for em to find eir way to the small sound booth. A counter with a light: off. A bank of sliders and knobs: all zeroed out.

AwDae brushed eir fingerpads along the lower lip of the soundboard. The screws were exactly where ey remembered.

Swishing eir tail out of the way, ey sat on the stool before it. Ey reached a paw up past the master sliders, just around to the back of the board, where ey found the power switch.

Click.

Nothing happened, so ey reached a little further back, finding the power strip for the booth itself, and toggled the switch on that. The board let out a satisfying pop of recognition as it came to life. The brief surge of power echoed throughout the room as speakers awoke. The theater uncoiled, purred to em, just as the one back in London had done...what? Three hours back? Five? A year?

Ey fumbled with the booth light, finding the ancient dial switch to wash away shadows with lazy red light. Light that illuminated a thin layer of dust covering the board and booth in a matte coating. Light that illuminated countless motes already disturbed. The only breaks in the coating were where eir fingers had brushed the dust away, leaving black slicks.

So familiar. So many dreams. Dreams of flawless performances of breathtaking beauty. Nightmares of feed-back and missing equipment.

Acting on a dream, ey slowly brought the master volume up to the spot ey still remembered from so long ago, turned the gain to mid on mic one, and brought the slider up slowly.

Blinked.

A soft hiss filled the hall. The channel was open.

That doesn't mean anything, AwDae thought. *There could be anything plugged into the snakehead in the pit. A line with a powered mic. A wireless receiver. Hell, a fault in the system.*

All the same, it was something. Something in this seemingly abandoned hulk of memory was turned on, something else besides emself was making noise.

Ey was about to head down to the pit to check on the snakehead, the terminus for all of the microphone cables or wireless receivers that stretched up to the board, when ey caught sight of a sheet of paper, folded in quarters, tucked between the side of the board and the wall of the booth.

AwDae plucked the paper free and unfolded it, held it under the red light of the booth lamp to get a closer look at it.

There, in tiny print, was a good chunk of the content of the vcard ey had created earlier that morning to add to Sasha and Debarre's deck. Cicero's DDR ledger, containing transactions that comprised votes made, bounties

collected, and comments posted.

A note, though. Doubly weird. The paper didn't act like a normal vcard. No menu, no ACLs ey could sense. And yet the closer ey looked at the paper, the more the data seemed to unfold, fractally nested and seemingly infinitely deep.

Ey blinked, and the moment passed. The note once more contained only tabulated transactions.

Frowning, AwDae refolded the note and stuck it into eir trousers' pocket. A small scrap of the outside world stuck in this elaborate fantasy.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

The first message was not long in coming, arriving about an hour after Ioan#c1494bf arrived back at home. At least it wasn't high priority; ey had the choice to accept then or experience later. Half duplex, though. An actual conversation rather than a recording.

Ey sighed, closed eir eyes, accepted. The things ey did for work.

"Hi Ioan," came Dear's voice. It was still seated on the couch. *"Long time no see, yes?"*

Ioan nodded, subvocalizing eir response. "Yeah, took you ages. Have something for me?"

"Maybe. We have received a file from someone down-tree. Or, well, hmm." It appeared to think for a moment before continuing, *"Someone down-tree from me found a file, and she thinks it might be a file from the clade, maybe one of the original ten."*

"Alright, send it over."

The file arrived promptly. Eir shoulders sagged. It began with -----BEGIN AES BLOCK----- followed by hundreds, perhaps thousands of apparently random letters, numbers, and punctuation.

"What's an AES block?"

"An old encryption algorithm." Dear looked a little embarrassed. *"And I mean old. We like old things. That's why she suggested it might be from one of us."*

"You don't sound convinced."

"I am not. You must understand that this is not something any of the clade wants known. It is just a name, yes, but it is important to us in a way that is hard to overstate." Dear sighed. *"Much of the clade is of the opinion that, if we could simply wipe the Name from our minds, we would. For a member of the clade to break that trust is nigh unthinkable. It is acting against our very nature."*

"You're right in that I probably can't understand the importance here. Still, I trust you on that. A friend, maybe? A mutual?"

The fox frowned. If anything, it sounded less convinced when it said, *"Perhaps."*

"An enemy?"

"A valid concern."

Ioan frowned. "I'm trying to square your use of the poet's work in your very names with your desire to forget the Name itself. That sounds like something someone could use against you."

"Names bear power."

"A memorial, then?" Ey hastened to add, "Sorry. It's probably not my place to understand. We can drop it for now."

“Yes. A memorial.” The fox’s shoulders slumped. “Let’s come back to it later. I do not want to get too distracted now. Still, we will have to speak more on this soon. It would be good for you to have a more complete picture.”

Ioan nodded. “So do you want me—”

“You do not need to worry about the file itself. That’s why I did not just forward it to you automatically.” Dear paused, then added, “Though I probably should have. Here I am talking about you having a more complete picture and not giving you everything.”

“It’s alright. I’m picking it up as we go along.”

It nodded. *“It is important, though. Amanuenses form an Umwelt, so this is part of yours, now. We will talk about it at the end. Something to keep in mind, I suppose. When we find the key, we will let you know and send over the contents.”*

“Okay, good. I gave AES a check, and you’re right, that’s ridiculously old. Can’t you just crack it?”

“We could. Some of us probably already have. I want the key, though. It’s probably a word or something, and may prove interesting in its own right.”

“Interesting?”

“Interesting in that the act of finding the key may turn up further clues.”

“Ah. Good point. I’ll do some digging on old cryptography, too, and see what all’s out there.”

“Good fucking luck. Cryptonerds were — are — very wordy. There’s going to be a boatload to sort through.”

Ey grinned, “I’ll fork and research, then.”

“Good plan. I am going to get back to the hunt, and hey, Ioan?” The fox’s smile was earnest. “Thanks. Even if I am just running ideas past you, it is good to put in words.”

“Of course, Dear.” Ioan waved. Ey always felt silly interacting with sensorium messages. Would #tracker think em crazy? “Thanks for the project.”

Dear bowed, signed off.

#tracker was, indeed, giving #c1494bf a bemused grin.

AwDae — 2112

The pit revealed little.

There were twenty boxes set on a table in front of the snakehead. Twenty receivers for twenty wireless mics. Twenty cables neatly velcroed together into a bundle, contracting from the receivers and dangling catenary from the dull grey plug-box. They were reduced to a four-by-five grid, arching up above the snakehead before plunging into it, XLR heads buried in XLR nests.

All of the boxes on the table were dull. Mute LEDs simple bumps on their surface. Dark. All but one: the first. The one with a piece of masking tape on its face, scrawled with a '1'. That box had a single red light on the front, indicating that it was powered on, and a single green light, indicating that the corresponding mic was transmitting.

"Great," AwDae murmured. "That leaves only half the school to search."

If it had been a wired mic, the search would have been over as soon as it began: the cable would've been plugged into the snakehead, and by following it until ey reached its end, there would be the mic.

And what?

There would be the mic, and ey would still be stuck in a nightmare. No, in some parody of a nightmare. All dressed up for the high school pops festival and, here, see? The auditorium is completely empty.

The fox barked a laugh at how many cliches littered the situation. Turning away from the receivers, ey rested eir weight against the edge of the table that bore them. Ey leaned a moment, then hiked eir backside up onto the familiar surface, relishing the squeak of stressed metal from eir sudden burden.

AwDae swung eir legs back and forth, hearing the table creak and groan in time with the slow movements. The sound was quiet, but in that dread silence, more than enough to fill the hall.

Ey stopped.

The auditorium was pleasantly wet: not damp or moist, but in terms of echo, it had just the right amount; or, at least, as much as a high school auditorium was able to muster. Had it been dry, the sound would've died away completely. The drier a room, the closer it got to an anechoic chamber. Zero echo. The painful lack thereof.

AwDae knew this hall, even years later, even in dreams. Ey knew the pockets of good and bad sound scattered throughout the seating. Ey knew the dead spots on stage where one's voice would fall flat. Ey knew how the stage was built rather like a horn, performers at the small end, so that their performances were projected out toward the audience. Ey knew how the stage was built like a drum, the orchestra pit a chamber of its own.

And yet, there was that slight echo of the squeaking of the table.

An idea. A crazy one, sure, but by this point, with despair nipping at eir heels, a crazy idea was better than none.

And, a bitter portion of em reasoned. If getting lost is permanent like they say, I've got nothing to lose.

Ey hopped off the table and began to pace.

The squeal of feedback in an audio system is an emergent behavior, and even those who have not heard it before know immediately that something is wrong as soon as the hum starts. That quiet hum in the background, building exponentially.

It doesn't take long before it can be understood as something originating in the system, rather than coming from speaker or performer. From there, it builds on itself, feeding back into the mic and growing louder until it quickly overwhelms all other sound. Rises, crescendos. Hearing and speaker damage equally likely if left unchecked.

Similar, in an upside-down sort of way, to the echo that AwDae had caused making the table squeak beneath eir weight. Sound was picked up by the microphone, transmitted through the sound board, then out into the room. Amplified, though, through the speakers.

If the microphone started to pick up sound from the speakers — and sound was sound, the mic cared not where it came from — that sound would loop through the board once more.

A feedback loop.

It would continue to build through further and further iterations, until the auditorium was filled with a roar of that one dread pitch the microphone had first locked onto.

Dread and dire. Cursed. An eternal struggle.

Obviously microphones were still in use. They hadn't been abandoned because of the loop; they just got smarter about finding ways around feedback.

One could angle speakers toward the audience, rather than the stage. Bodies were notoriously bad reflectors of sound. Part of what made the stage so acoustically dead, that.

One could turn down the monitor speakers facing the stage, but that would be cruel to one's performers.

One could turn down amplification, but that defeated the purpose.

The solution, then, was gain.

The adjustment was provided by a knob at the very top of the sound board governing the sensitivity of the mic. At the top, befitting its importance in the setup. The very beginning of the signal path.

Turn the gain all the way down, and the mic was a dumb lump of metal and plastic. Turn it all the way up, and the mic picked up everything from the movement of the air to the slight hiss of the live sound system, almost guaranteeing instant feedback.

AwDae cranked the gain almost to the point of feedback. If ey could make noise in various points throughout the auditorium, maybe it'd get picked up. The more feedback ey generated, the more sound the mic was picking up. The more sound it was picking up, the closer ey was to it.

Eir possible locations for the mic hadn't been reduced, it was still half the school, but eir chances of finding it sooner rather than later would go up. If the mic was not in the auditorium, ey could turn the main system up and start venturing further afield. Leave a door open, let the mic hear. Let em hear the theater ring like a bell in turn.

Riddles. Triply weird.

AwDae felt stupid. Insulted. Trapped for life and still solving riddles.

Hopelessness dimmed eir vision.

Qoheleth

Ey shook eir head, ears laid flat.

“At least it’s something.”

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Dear,

While I'm sure that your clade, with the resources and minds at its disposal, has already decrypted the AES message, I have only just managed the feat today. It was at least somewhat easier once I learned a bit more about the history of the whole affair.

You say that you all like old things, so perhaps you will be delighted to learn what was inside if you have not already. Here is the message in full:

Odists,

You know me. I will not tell you how, and I will not tell you why this secrecy is in place. Not yet. For now, though, you may refer to me as Qoheleth, or, at need, Hebel.

I am sorry for having said — or, rather, written — the Name, but not too sorry. I need to get your attention. There is something serious going on, and I need you focused on the matter.

Let's meet, yeah?

-----BEGIN RSA PRIVATE KEY-----

(There follows another block of gibberish similar to the first.)

-----END RSA PRIVATE KEY-----

Your move, by the way:

♦2 ♠8 ♠Q ♦8 ♣9 ♣Q ♥2 ♦A ♦4 ♣4 ♣3 ♣A ♠J ♣2 ♦7 ♦5 ♠7 ♥9 ♥5 ♠10 ♥7 AX ♥10 ♠3 ♥4 ♣8 ♠9
♣6 ♠4 ♥J ♥K ♣10 ♦J BX ♣5 ♣K ♣J ♥8 ♥3 ♦9 ♠2 ♠A ♥Q ♥A ♥6 ♦K ♠5 ♣7 ♦Q ♦10 ♠6 ♦6 ♦3 ♠K

There are several things of interest here. I'm sure you'll want to talk this all through, but as I will inevitably be writing this all down in the end, I figured I would also get my thoughts down on paper now, while they're fresh.

The passphrase for this encrypted message was *kemmer*. If the other Odists figured it out, I would be curious to see what they make of it, just as I'm curious as to your thoughts. Perhaps later. For now, there's a bit of story, here.

I did not originally find the passphrase, as the letter itself was decrypted through known weaknesses. None of the tools that I was able to find would (could?) give me the key, since all of the attacks were along direct avenues. Don't ask the details, I can hardly understand them.

Instead, I found the passphrase by accident while doing a search on some of the contents of the letter. Notably, I searched on *Qoheleth*, and then *Hebel* in relation to that name. There's lots of juicy stuff here. *Qoheleth* is more title than name, and is used in a book in both the Christian and the Jewish bibles. Given the author's reference to the Hebrew word, I've been restricting myself to searches surrounding the Tanakh. I should add that, while in the Tanakh, the book is called by the same name, while in the Christian bible, it is called *Ecclesiastes*, from the Greek.

Qoheleth can mean 'teacher', but also 'gatherer' or 'director of the assembled'. This last one, I suppose, fits in with their suggestion that the clade meet up. Perhaps all together? It is also referenced as *Ecclesiastes* in words such as ecclesiastical, 'relating to the church *qua* assembly'.

Hebel, in this case, appears to be an approximation of what is usually spelled *havél*, which translates to 'vapor', but is also interpreted as 'vanity' or, when taken metaphorically, 'meaningless'. For instance, the book begins:

havél havalím 'amár kohélet havél havalím hakól hável.

Which is, in some translations:

"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

Bleak, no?

The entire book is quite fascinating, and the tone seems to waver between this comfortable sort of nihilism (I hesitate to say hopelessness, as hope does not seem to be a factor in play here) and education, with *Qoheleth* using their past experiences and meditations to offer instruction on how to live a full life.

Back to the passphrase, though.

I have found several references to the term *kemmer*, with the primary source being an ancient speculative novel by the name *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. I forked and read this while investigating the Tanakh, and the book seems to surround the sociopolitical ramifications of a subspecies of humans which is androgynous most of the time, but which undergoes a biological process (*kemmer*) wherein they settle into one of two physiological sexes for the purposes of sex and procreation.

I was not able to deduce anything concrete out of this term, because I cannot tell where it is directed. While I do not presume to know the Name (nor do I wish to!), one possibility is that it refers to the author of the Ode. Another is that it refers to some aspect of the Ode clade itself. You are perhaps uniquely positioned to answer this, as I don't imagine the entirety of the Ode clade are agender foxes, given both what I know of Michelle Hadje and how you speak of your cocladists. A third possibility is that the term may apply to Qoheleth himself. A fourth is that it relates to the mystery at hand in some way. And, of course, it could be meaningless (hah) in terms of subtext, in this case and does not apply beyond being a neat word.

That said, I'm not a fan of the final interpretation, as upon further digging, I came across the line "the key word is kemmer, that's what yo' ass need" in an equally ancient song ("Air 'em out" by clipping. [sic]), which was too tight a coincidence to pass up. The annotated lyrics to that song, in turn, were packed with more references and discursion than this letter, many of which refer to old science fiction books and movies. This verse in particular features heavy references to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, including the phrase 'Ansible' — which shows up in other books as well — and, in turn, shows up in some of our technology: the communication system by which uploads are sent from Earth to the sim-system here at the L₅ point is called 'Ansible'. This struck me as particularly important. I found this song both in my searches on *kemmer* as well as on the Ansible, having taken to heart your suggestion that the clade likes 'old things'. The Ansible turned up a *third* time in the context of asymmetric cyphers, mentioned below.

Given this additional set of coincidences, I've compiled a list of further references in this song for research down the line.

At this point, I have only addressed the encryption passphrase and the salutation of the message! You must forgive me for the discursive nature of this letter. There are many layers at play, here, and I believe this is intentional on the part of the author. As you mentioned, amanuenses form a collection of semiotic processes relating to the task they are participating in. I've taken this to heart and am amassing documents surrounding the subtext as well as the text.

The second paragraph of the letter I would like to discuss with you in person, as I think that there is context here that may well be specific to your clade. I cannot imagine what might be so serious.

After that paragraph comes another block of text. Rather than being an encrypted message, however, it is a private key used for the RSA cryptosystem. It is an asymmetric cipher, which means that there is out there somewhere a corresponding public key. Strange that we are given a private key rather than a public one, as such keys unlock doors, rather than lock them. RSA can be used for many things, so that we were given the private key in this case makes me think that this will be used to either decrypt or otherwise access information down the line. Before you ask, yes, there is a passphrase involved with this. However, I have not yet figured out how to extract that from the noise yet. Cryptography is intriguing, but much of it is over my head, so I am relying on off-the-shelf solutions.

Finally, after the key block, we get a deck listing for a standard deck of playing cards. I am assuming, here, that the cards labeled AX and BX are jokers, though I have not seen them differentiated as such in the past. I am, frankly, at a loss when it comes to this section, so all I can offer are some thoughts on subtext.

“Your move, by the way” implies two things. First, it implies that there is some sort of ongoing game between Qoheleth and the clade. This strikes me as strange, and I cannot put my finger on why. It is not that you do not seem the type to play games, as you seem playful enough to me. Perhaps it’s that the letter begins with riddles about the true identity of Qoheleth, yet any ongoing game (and such a weird way to provide it!) would perforce give away that identity immediately. Perhaps it is simply this — all of this — that is the game?

The second implication is broader, and consequently more of a hunch on my part: this is a very casual thing to say to someone. For one, to have a *non sequitur* of a postscript on a letter that seems very focused on a single topic is a strange thing to do. It’s the type of thing you might do when sending a friendly letter to someone rather than a riddle of a message (I will admit, I’m considering what postscript I leave at the end of this letter now). The tone also differs from the remainder of the letter. It is familiar and friendly. The only thing that is even remotely close being “Let’s meet, yes?”, and even that feels more formal.

So, one question answered and several more raised. The largest, of course, remains: how deep does this all go?

I will continue my investigations and keep you in the loop on those. I hope to hear from you soon — I know I shall.

All my best,

Ioan Bălan

PS - In engaging with this project, my searches and purchases on the exchange are shaping my reputation quite strangely. #Tracker has received several queries for future projects surrounding both novel forms of encryption and a few requests for historical analyses on speculative fiction. Ey has turned down all of the former and seriously considered all of the latter — and ey wishes you to know that ey places the blame for this squarely on your shoulders.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

“Avery. What’s up?”

The ping had sounded in Carter’s ears like a soft bell, and the faint outline of a door had appeared at the periphery of her vision. Someone had requested a meeting. After a moment of dictating a note to herself for when she got back, she made her way through the door. One of the stats-and-history folks stood, waiting with arms crossed, in the private space.

“Running up against a bit of a snag, Dr. Ramirez,” they said. “This new patient, uh...0224ebe8?”

“What about them?”

“Well, I’m getting some doubled records. Weird things are duplicated. Sort of.”

“Duplicated? How?”

“Well, we’ve got some records from way back with a different gender marker on them and no pronouns.” They looked thoughtful. “I ran into a bit of that when I changed everything over, myself, but the process changed all of my past records, too.”

Carter frowned. “So e8 changed their marker and pronouns officially, but you’re seeing duplicate records under a different one?”

“Mhm. I was wondering, do we have any location data on them?”

“Not really, no. You’ve got all the same data I do. Most have been redacted.”

“I figured, yeah, but wanted to ask. I just know some friends back in America ran into similar, too. Some ancient conglomerate or something holding onto old records or not updating their systems, so I was wondering if e8 was over there.”

Carter shrugged. “I don’t really know. That sort of thing is scrubbed before we get the cases. I’m actually surprised the files weren’t normalized before we got them.”

Avery laughed. “We’re one of the big three, so of course it’s all extra difficult.” Carter must have looked nonplussed, as Avery continued, “Banking, government, and healthcare. Ask any one of the big three to adopt to social change, and you’ll get eighteen different reasons why it’s impossible to update their systems.”

“Fair enough. So they have two markers and no pronouns.”

“Well, ey has two markers, X and M, but only the one set of pronouns. None listed on the records with the M marker.”

“Is this going to be much of a problem?”

“Don’t think so,” Avery said thoughtfully. “The records are complete so long as we take both sets into account. You might want to run it by Sandra, though, is the thing. I don’t know if us knowing that this change

occurred is too much information for us to have. Legally, I mean.”

Carter knit her brow. “And there’s the snag.”

Avery nodded.

“Well, hopefully not.” Carter leaned against the wall and thought for a moment, then asked, “What can we do with this information, anyway? We’ve seen a pretty good spread across gender markers with our set of cases, do you think this’ll change anything?”

“I don’t know. The friends back in America who ran into this were all ones that made the change later in life. The younger you are when you change markers and such, the easier it is because the less of a record you have to change. It’s kind of like you’re burdened with a marker from birth, and the longer you go before changing it, the heavier the burden gets.”

“And they had a big one?”

“Not so big, all told, but it’s enough that all of eir records from when ey got eir implants are under a different marker.”

Carter nodded.

“From a history standpoint, that also means that eir marketing footprint takes something of a hard left at one point.”

“When th–” Carter backtracked. “When ey changed eir marker?”

It was Avery’s turn to nod.

“So we’ve got someone who’s advertised to with a masculine marker, then with a neutral marker–”

“And ey seemed to have given the whole romance thing a miss, too. Eir marketing footprint is mostly just rig gear and furry stuff. It’s like ey slipped through filters unnoticed, which, in itself, leaves a trail.”

“Well, if you can’t sell em sex, what’s left to sell?” Carter laughed.

“Oh, plenty, I assure you. Just that, pushing nine billion, advertisers mostly rely on larger demographics. GQ folks and asexuals aren’t broad enough segments to bother wasting ads on. Granted this is only going by the transparency reports. There’s all sorts of weird guerrilla marketing going on these days.”

“Yeah, fair enough. Any similarities with our other furry?”

Avery shook their head. They swiped their hand to the side to bring up a snippet of desktop, dug through a few decks of vcards. “Being a furry seems to be the big thing they have in common. e8 is X, d7 is M. e8 is single and not looking, d7 is in a long-term relationship. d7 is almost a parody of a DDR junkie, e8 has almost no...well, hold on.”

Carter waited.

“Looks like ey was prodding around the DDR spaces a few hours before the event.” Avery had that far-away look to their eyes that one got while digging through data on cards. They shook their head to clear their vision, smiled to Carter. “Sorry, looks like I’ve got a bit of work ahead of me on that end. Any thoughts on the snag?”

“No, carry on as you were, I think. Sandra will keep an eye on it and let us know if we’re at risk of overstepping our bounds.”

Avery nodded and stepped back out of the meeting cubicle.

Back in the sim proper, Carter watched as the cards surrounding 0224ebe8 began to sift into two piles as the shadowy form that must be Avery worked. White cotton thread began to string itself around two groups,

followed by the tags '0224ebe8 (M)' in one and '0224ebe8 (X)' in the other.

After a few minutes, she walked back to her constellation of decks. On a hunch, she created a small grouping in her area and labeled it "DDR Activity Pre-Event". She began looping in relevant cards from both 0224ebe8 and aca973d7.

There was a soft *ding* within the sim, and a wave of shadowy heads looked up, Carter's included.

Directly above them in the middle of the 'ceiling' was the current time in faintly luminescent letters. As always, they would look different for each member; for Carter, traced out in fine cotton string was the '12:00' that indicated lunch.

Carter's vision began to dim. She backed out before the ominously cheery message instructing her to stretch her legs urged her to do so. University policy stated employees should work in a sim no longer than four hours in a row without fully backing out, so when she pulled back from her rig, she saw everyone else doing the same.

Most of the team gathered around the fridge and microwave by the coffee station to collect their lunches. She hadn't had the time or energy this morning. Lunch out it was.

At least she wouldn't be alone. There was a small coterie who made their way across the street from the campus building to the shops, hunting falafel or curry. She put on her best chummy face and tagged along with. The group chatted, inevitably but amiably, about work, comparing notes on the cases they were focusing on.

The group — three of them, with Carter — decided on a small Vietnamese place nearby. It would be a long lunch, with the wait and all, but she was promised that the food was amazing. Besides: Friday. Even the boss can enjoy a lunch every now and then.

Standing outside as they waited on a table, they made an obvious target for the tabloid sellers. They were wandering a little further than usual from the tube station entrance today, and the restaurant hadn't noticed them yet to shoo them off.

Carter rolled her eyes when Prakash bought a copy.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. I promise I read it for the laughs," he said.

Carter shrugged, "It's less about why you're reading it, and more who you're giving money..."

Prakash and Aiden stood in silence, eyes on Carter. They exchanged glances before Prakash broke in, "Hey boss, you doing okay?"

"Can I see that?" She didn't wait for an answer before she snatched the flimsy paper from his hands.

Soho Theatre Mourns Lost Tech

RJ Brewster was the pride of the Soho Theatre Troupe's tech department.

The brainy American who blessed them with boosted bass was admitted to the University College Hospital after apparently getting lost during a rehearsal on Wednesday. Ey was discovered during an intermission completely unresponsive. Medical crews declared em lost on the scene after analysing eir implants.

The genderqueer young man was described as "bright, but obsessed." Ey was a member of the furry cult and spent most of eir time on the 'net, which friends blame for em getting lost.

The STT promises that productions will go on as planned, with back-up techs running the sound system.

Brewster represents the 135th case of the lost marked in the world. Ey will be cared for by doctors at the UCH. Members of the University College London studying the lost were unavailable for comment.

Carter let the paper droop. Aiden retrieved it before it was closed completely, opening to the page where she had been reading.

“Oh, hey! Stuff about a lost person!” He read down further, then looked up at Carter. “Did you get an interview request from them?”

She shook her head. “Not a word. Not to me, at least. Maybe PR turned the interview down.”

Prakash read over Aiden’s shoulder. “Do you think we could go see em? We’re with UCL. Maybe we could—”

He fell silent at a look from Carter. She spoke carefully, voice carrying the weight of a prepared statement. “Ey’s in good hands. Trust the doctors on this. We’ll receive all relevant info from them. Any contact with a patient may introduce bias in the study.”

Aiden frowned, shutting the paper. “We shouldn’t have this.”

“No, we shouldn’t.”

He quickly balled up the tabloid and, finding no rubbish bins nearby, set it on the restaurant’s outside windowsill. Researchers were as jealous of their data as the lawyers were of patient privacy. Keeping the tabloid would only be a risk.

“But what about the theater troupe?” Prakash asked.

Carter caught herself in the act of shaking her head, turned instead toward the restaurant. She tilted her head back and let her eyes trace the sharp contrast between the gutters of the building and the steel-gray sky, seeing neither.

“We can’t,” she finally murmured. “Same risk of bias.”

A safe answer. A rote one. A required one. The legal aspect was plain, the ethics clear. If she wanted to learn anything from the doctors treating this RJ or the Troupe, she’d have to file a request, wait for the ethics board, wait again for the lawyers, and even then, even if she succeeded, she would only be able to write a questionnaire for them to fill out.

And yet here, a half hour tube ride away, was a social connection. The very thing she wanted most to understand.

She was distracted, thankfully, by the host inviting them in to eat.

AwDae — 2112

It took AwDae just under two hours to find the microphone.

The first hour was spent searching the auditorium top to bottom. Ey walked around clapping and humming, then quoting lines half-remembered from productions ey had worked with Sasha in the past. “So set its Sun in thee,” ey called in an affected accent. “What Day be dark to me.” Wistful Dickinson to fill an empty hall.

Ey would’ve whistled if it wasn’t for the structure of a canid muzzle.

Silence.

After an hour, venturing even into the overhead areas where sound was muffled, damped, ey gave up and took a break.

It’s probably fruitless to be this thorough in the auditorium, ey thought. The gain’s high enough that even a quiet clap should be enough.

Ey slouched in an auditorium seat and pulled out the slip of paper with Cicero’s transactions. Ey had found that if ey focused on the page just so, rows would sort themselves by columns, so ey spent a few minutes aimlessly zooming through the page of digits.

Ey scanned over the titles of the initiatives voted on. Very little there to latch onto. Or, rather, way too much. AwDae couldn’t hope to boil down the table into any single sentence, much less something useful. The cat had apparently voted on just about everything without taking any breaks.

Eventually, when neat rows of letters began to blur into one another, ey levered emself up from the seat. Paper refolded, ey slipped it back into a pocket before checking on the board once more. Everything remained set as it was.

AwDae had imagined ey would work in concentric circles away from the auditorium. That turned out not to be the best idea. The hall was nestled between two arms of the school which did not meet except via the auditorium itself. Eir route grew arduous: ey’d walk down one hallway, poke into classrooms, and make noise before moving on.

When ey reached the end of eir circle, though, ey had to jog around the auditorium through the student center to go down the other hallway and do the same.

Ey gave up on the concentric circle plan and started working from north to south, instead. Ey worked through the entirety of one hallway, clapping and hollering, without hearing anything. From there, on to the area of the student center near the auditorium.

It was there that ey heard the first, faint hum of feedback.

It threatened to skim beneath eir attention, sounding too much like an echo from eir own voice in the

cavernous common area. The door to the auditorium caught eir eye, and ey tried once more, getting another faint hum. It slowly died out as space and air dissipated tone.

It was only a few minutes from there to find the microphone itself. A lavalier mic, disguised as a button resting obsequiously atop the door handle leading into the principal's office. It was just to the northeast of the auditorium doors. Ey would've found it soon enough. It was surprising, in a way, that ey hadn't managed to trigger any feedback earlier.

The door was labeled 'Admin.'. Ominous.

There was a head office at the front of the school, but administration was where the principal and vice principals' offices were. One of those places that lingered in the mind of every student who passed through the doors of the school. Getting called to the front office was usually bad enough — a call from a parent? — but getting called to the admin office was more oh-shit than that.

Ears pinned back, AwDae picked up the microphone delicately through mounting feedback and quickly shut it off. The hum had grown loud enough that ey could hear faint clicks from the speakers. Magnets clicking, popping as the physical limitations of the ancient-and-not-so-great speakers reached their limit.

The sound stopped a scant few moments after, bouncing around the auditorium and the student center. Echoes.

Eir ears slowly uncringed. The school was silent once more.

Remembering the position where ey had found it, AwDae pocketed the mic and straightened up, wandered back over to the auditorium, turning the gain down on the board and lowering the house volume to a reasonable level. Ey even turned the mic back on and mumbled a quick "one-two" to ensure that none of the speakers had been damaged.

This is a sim. Not even mine, ey thought, the inside of eir ears flushed warm with embarrassment. *What does it matter if a speaker blew?*

Ey shrugged it off. Habits were habits. No reason to break them now.

Back to the admin office, then. AwDae couldn't help but feel as though ey was trapped within a game. One of those first-person puzzle solvers that seemed forever popular. One of eir favorite of the genres.

It was surprising the adroitness with which eir perspective had shifted. Sobbing: now behind em.

Perhaps the fact that ey seemed to be receiving what amounted to clues while in a complex abandoned building added to that. Perhaps it was the shift from RJ to AwDae. Perhaps something about emself. Countless hours in sim. Countless changes in scenery. Countless changes in form.

Shaking eir head, ey turned the knob on the admin office and peeked inside.

There were no traps, no jump-scares. Just the six-sided room with three doors on the walls this one. One for the principal, and two for the vice principals. Taking the game metaphor to heart, ey started poking around the office where ey could, flipping through a datebook on the secretary's desk (empty) and rummaging through the drawers (office supplies).

The waste baskets were empty.

Steeling emself for something...something what, shocking? The game mentality still holding tight, perhaps. Ey tried each of the doors in turn.

Surprising. It wasn't the principal's office that opened, but one of the vice principals. The name of the one

who had worked there when ey was a student escaped em, and no tags adorned the doors. The office was dark, but the lights responded to a touch on the pad. Ey set it to a comfortable level; warm without being cozy, bright enough to read without being intimidating.

Memories of being hauled into the room, all those years ago, with the lights all the way up, a gesture of power.

Rummaging through the desk revealed little of note.

Rather than a planner on the desk was a workstation. Simple. Ancient. It didn't respond to any of AwDae's interactions. How it would work, ey couldn't guess. A sim within a sim? Ey had perhaps hoped that a connection like that might lead...outside. Outside of this mess.

The only other items on the desk were a scratch pad and a pencil. The expected tools. The perpetual desk-toppers that never seemed to go out of style.

The pad contained a breakdown of costs, divided into departments, for the coming year. A simple three-column setup tallying subject, expense, and deductions from some number at the top. Budgets, perhaps. At the bottom of the page, was a final number, circled in dark, angry strokes. Apparently, the administrator hadn't liked the result.

AwDae flumped down in the chair at a jaunty angle, eir tail flopping down between armrest and chair back. Tired, so very tired.

Ey rubbed away the sandy grit of tears already shed. Ey was moving in this search with determination. As much as ey could muster. Anything to occupy eir mind, anything to keep em from collapsing into a depression borne of hopelessness and despair. It occurred to em that getting lost was the perfect prison: complete freedom, or nearly so (ey had already fantasized about jimmying open the other doors), with nothing to do. Nothing to dream, nowhere to go, nothing to know.

Ey didn't even know the time. No clocks adorned the walls.

Ey would go mad without a task. Could ey create anything? But why create in these empty halls? What would ey even begin to make that would matter the worth of a damn? Ey would never be able to share it. Ey would only be able to spiral endlessly inwards.

All AwDae wanted to do was curl up in the chair. It was comfortable enough. Perhaps ey could get some sleep in.

Instead, ey ground the heels of eir paws against eir face and leaned toward the desk. Numbers, digits, columns. Something familiar. Mindlessly working through the sums in eir head simply for lack of anything else to do.

"Weird," ey murmured sleepily.

The numbers didn't add up. Rather, everything added up within its own row. It was as though a row were missing.

Ey stretched out an arm, snatching up the scrap of note and holding it up to the light. No erasures, whiteouts, or scribbles. There was just not enough information.

Digits. Numbers. Ledger. Paper. Notes?

If ey was meant to be looking for clues, then...

Ey fished the previous 'clue' out of eir pocket. The ledger of Cicero's DDR interactions.

It wasn't nearly so simple as the single-column arithmetic on the scratch paper. Each referendum had three columns of digits: a cost, a bounty (if that referendum was referred back to the house), and any number of comments made on the issue. Often out of order on the sheet, as well, given Cicero's habit of voting on everything. Perhaps it was the first thing he did on waking.

Given the note's interactivity level of expanding on closer examination, ey tried to will a sum out of the columns to match the final row.

No luck. Ey wished for eir rig more than anything. It'd make the task almost trivial.

Ah well.

Ey snagged the half-used pencil and the rest of the scrap and worked it out. Each cost and comment would be a debit, and each bounty would be a credit. One could also buy DDR credits through a mechanism that basically acted as an additional withholding on one's taxes. There were two of those in there, possibly ensuring that Cicero would have enough DDR credit to make what AwDae assumed was some scathing political snipe on an upcoming high-stakes referendum.

Even so, it was clear that the section of numbers on the paper, a month's worth, perhaps, didn't add up. Once more, there was a missing interaction. Three missing interactions, rather: one vote's cost, one vote's comment, and one vote's bounty, at AwDae's best guess. Perhaps a few smaller votes to add up to those totals? It was recent, too. A few days before he had gotten lost.

Except one's DDR records were public. Not which way one voted, but that one had voted. Comments were public perforce. The information had to be public for the system to work.

Unless it had been tampered with, there was a combination of 1,252,000 credits unaccounted for in terms of transactions. One million debit to the comment, a quarter of a million credit for bounty, and two thousand to the vote cost.

AwDae tore the top sheet off the pad and, working faster this time, ran the numbers once more. Same result.

"Well, huh." Ey sat, frowning, for a little while longer before gathering eir notes. Ey folded them together with the original clue and stuffed them into eir pocket. Ey couldn't create a deck here, apparently, but ey could sure take items with emself.

If this all had something to do with what was going on outside, where ey was counted among the lost, that was all well and good, but how would ey get that information back out remained a mystery.

Too early to be thinking of such things. Ey wasn't going anywhere for the time being. Sleep was becoming an imperative.

Ey gave token consideration to where ey would be able to sleep before deciding on the auditorium. The fold-down seats were cushioned. Not very well, but better than the floor.

And the place had a sense of home about it, too. The thought was a barb tugging at eir heart, but there was nothing to be done. Not in this state. Not right now.

Sleep, then.

Sleep, and perhaps dreams.

Or perhaps not. Sleep to get away. Sleep for nullity. Sleep for nothingness.

Qoheleth — 2305

Transcript of Node: [bea0cf302fcd00863f0c67a91b1a75c0e4ba4863] with descriptive text by #d5b14aa.

The footage shows two persons. One of them has to be Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, who is an up-tree branch of the Ode clade, eighth stanza. No one else has ears that big, nobody else can somehow speak in italics. The other took some research, but I am confident that ey is an instance of Ioan Bălan, a historian and writer. Ey is a tracker, but only just, as eir habits tend toward few to no long-running instances. This instance is either #tracker or one tasked to this project.

The two persons are sitting outside of a cafe, from whom I obtained this footage. They are in conversation. Going to sit down and watch this.

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled: Thank you for your letter, Ioan. Lots of really good stuff in there, most of which I had missed simply out of nearsightedness.

Ioan Bălan: You've got me hooked on this project, I have to say. It's fascinating stuff.

Dear grins at this.

Dear We — that is, some other Odists down-tree from me — have come up with some further hints

about the message.

Ioan: Oh? Anything good?

Dear: I suppose it depends on your definition of good.

Ioan: [snark, good natured] Oh great. Excited already. [more earnest] The fascination continues. Well, let's have it.

Dear: So, one of us did an exhaustive search of some records and found an old archive server running somewhere.

Oh goodie. Better start gearing up.

Ioan: Wait, start at the top. What were they searching?

Dear: They were searching for the block of encrypted text — not what was in it; they cracked that long ago. They searched for the encrypted text itself, and they came across an archive server.

Ioan: Old node boxes? Wow, even I feel crusty using one of those, and I'm a historian.

Dear: [laughter] They found the archive server though, and there is a bunch of intriguing stuff on it. New, old, the whole thing. There is stuff from ages ago, shortly after we got here, and stuff from a few hours ago.

Ioan: You're kidding. Newly created stuff?

Dear: I know. It is ridiculous.

The fox's ears flop when it gets excited and shakes its head, never noticed that. It is kind of cute.

Ioan: Never met anyone who could actually get one working well enough to add new nodes. So the encrypted text was in a node on the server?

Dear: Yes. It is still there. [pause] Just sent the URI.

Ioan: I...well, I'll have to take it at your word that it's the same as the one you found earlier, I'm not going character by character.

Dear seems a little frustrated at this. About Ioan's slowness? I know I would not compare the files. It sounds exasperated.

Dear: Of course, Ioan. I promise it is the same, though. Needless to say, we found a crusty old archive with the block on it, and there are other public nodes on there as well. I am guessing a bunch of private ones, too.

Ioan: Anything good in those?

Dear: Nothing...penetrable. It is all fairly opaque. To me, at least.

Ioan grins at this.

Ioan: Thus us meeting?

Dear: [nodding] Yes. The only bit that I have any insight into is the deck listing, which I think might be another bit of old encryption–

Ioan groans aloud, at which Dear grins.

Dear: My sentiments exactly. It is another encryption scheme which relies on a deck of cards for a stream of random numbers. I have not dug into it in years because the decryption process is so slow, but there may be a node on that box containing the encrypted text.

Ioan: Want me to have a look, then? The techier stuff is going to go right over my head, you know that.

Dear: It is not all tech, promise. I just want you to give it a read and see what you pick up from it, you know? Put your amanuensis hat on and just spend some time experiencing.

Ioan: You think highly of me. No complaints, of course, but I feel I have to ask, why can't someone from your own clade fill this role?

Dear is quiet. Struggling for words? Our Dear? This must have hit it hard.

Dear: We...differ. The Odists, I mean.

Ioan: "Differ"? Within the clade?

Dear: Yes. A hallmark of Dispersionistas is that we treat each of our forks as fully-realized individuals. We may have a shared past, but from the point we fork onward, we grow ever further apart.

Ioan: I assume you mean more than just a matter of increasing conflicts.

Dear: Yes. Although we Odists limit our instances to the one hundred available names, we still consider ourselves Dispersionistas as we never merge back down-tree. But, that aside, we also want someone out-clade for this. *I want someone out-clade for this.*

Ioan seems taken aback.

Ioan: Do the other Odists not like that I've been brought on?

Dear: Of the ones who know, most are fine with it.

Now frustrated/confused.

Ioan: "The ones who know"?

Dear: You have, of course, noticed that you have not interacted with any of my cocladists. I have told some about hiring you, but not all.

Ioan: Alright, I suppose. If you're independent, then I guess it makes sense that I be your amanuensis rather than the clade's.

Dear: Yes. Perhaps more evidence that we are split on how to tackle this in the first place. Different camps, different strategies, infighting. Ioan, you have to understand that, when a clade gets old, it starts to get a little batty.

Calm down fox, I am working on it. Not so frantic.

Dear: Some clades try to get around this by keeping a certain core group of instances — talking mostly Dispersionistas, mind — in a setting that keeps them as sane as possible. Something that feels very ‘normal’. Or maybe some are researching forking from earlier points, from down-tree, rather than from where they are now.

It furrows its brow.

Dear: We do not. First of all, we started way too early on for that to be a thing. We trusted that change itself would keep us sane, that as instances diverged, especially with mutation algos in place, they would change enough to keep us from falling apart.

Ioan: And that didn’t work?

Long pause.

Dear: It kind of worked, I will put it that way. I feel fairly well rounded, as much as that means, and I am sure those across the clade from me do too, but it is complicated. You might not recognize my cocladists as Odists without knowing beforehand. It is like having a very close sib that was raised by a different family in a different sim.

Ioan: More different than you’d expect, then?

Dear: ‘Expect’...fits strangely for this. The problem is that they are still us, and we are still them. Clades are families of separate individuals in a lot of ways, but you must realize that, in the end, they are still one individual. We are more different than one individual should be. Does that make sense?

It does, Dear. That is why I am doing this.

Ioan: I guess so. [pause] So some of your clade would prefer I not be a part of this?

Dear: More than that. They feel that investigating the matter of the Name being written is too risky, too close to investigating the Name itself.

Ioan: I don’t know how I would respond to that.

Dear: That is my field, Ioan. Do not worry about it.

Ioan holds up eir hands, looks apologetic. The fox has tilted its ears back.

Ioan: Sorry, Dear. I hope I'm not overstepping at all.

Dear: [calmer] Do not worry about it. It is okay, I promise. It is just that we are really good at arguing, so I have been dealing with that quite a bit the last few days. That is why I hired you; I am relegated to an administration role so I am a bit on edge. Let's get back to the archive server, yes?

Ioan: Sure thing. Where did you say your cocladists had found it?

Dear: Just in a search. I do not quite know the details about how. Assuming just a text search of the perisystem. Not too sure on the terminology; I bought into being an artist pretty hard. All that knowledge is in exos.

Ioan: [laughter] No worries there, Dear. I'm trying to keep up with you is all. I was just wondering if they found anything else.

Dear: You mean like the other nodes on the server?

Ioan: I'll poke around at those, look for ties and such. I was more wondering if they'd found anything in their search that didn't meet the relevancy threshold for them. Stuff like back-links to the server, or anyone talking about this Qoheleth. Hebel. Whichever.

Silly name. Oh well. Dear looks taken aback.

Dear: I had not really thought to ask. I do not suppose they did, though. Do you think it is worth having them search around more? Lowering the, uh, relevancy threshold? [laughter]

Ioan: Yeah, I think so. Though now that I've got it too, I can do some of that digging myself. I want to see who likes the Tanakh so much as to name themselves that. And why 'kemmer'.

Dear: I...well, it is complicated and out of scope, but it relating to fluidity of gender is relevant to the clade as a whole. Very big for us, if only at a remove. I have opted out.

Ioan: So I noticed. It makes sense, though.

Dear: I am glad someone is thinking about this stuff. You are sounding more like a-

Ioan: Private investigator?

Dear: [laughter] I was going to say historian, sounding more like an historian every time we talk. But you never know, maybe you would make a good PI.

That was fast! I may have less time than I had thought. Dear is lovely, and it is totally right: on the other side of the clade, there are some who would not like this kind of digging. Too entrenched. Too Conservative.

Ioan: I can't tell whether or not I should be flattered.

Dear: It is a good thing. Just keep digging, and we will too. I will be about. Got a few more things to wrap up to finish the current gallery exhibition, but after that, I am just going to work on this — with you if you do not mind — and try and figure out what is even happening in the clade. Do keep in touch, yes? Ping me whenever.

Ioan: Will do. [pause] Wait, you're an instance artist, right?

Dear: Yes. Why do you ask?

Ioan: Why don't you fork to work on both at the same time?

Dear shrugs, grins, quits. Very lovely fox. Really quite lovely.

No time to dawdle watching Ioan try and figure out up-tree instances, though. Must be getting ready. Quit this instance, flush the server of extraneous crap to guide Ioan a little more effectively — yeesh, how old is some of this stuff? Need to re-encrypt a bunch of it anyway — and maybe get ready for some visitors.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Carter hadn't meant to dodge her subordinate's question. They truly did need to go in to eat.

The food was, as promised, excellent. Carter made a mental note to come here more often. A note filed into the appropriate box in mind, then set aside. She had to work through the implications of what had been spilled by the tabloid.

She couldn't visit this RJ any more than she could fly out of the restaurant's second story window and back to her lab.

It would be a useless gesture, of course. Her team didn't need access to the patient to do all of their work, because much of their vitals, properly anonymized, were provided as a real-time stream of data. It had been shown that physical contact was not registered at all by the lost; it would hardly matter if it was a researcher any more than a family member.

There would be people between her and RJ, as well. Not just doctors and nurses, but her own administration. She would have to go through any number of layers of bureaucracy just to get access to...to what? To variables that likely wouldn't help her investigation at all? Eye color? Hair length?

And of course, there was the law. Carter well understood the purpose of the Western Federation Personal and Health Information Protection Act. It was part of her research at a fundamental level. Anyone in medicine knew it, had the inevitable posters tacked to the walls.

Hell, she had voted on it, herself, in the DDR. It was something she felt strongly about regardless of her work. The tabloid had breached that, in a way. There was no culpability, of course, but there was a breach by publicly announcing the case.

And yet, there was nothing to stop her from going to a show in the next day or two.

Feeling very much the sleuth, she stuffed a small egg roll into her mouth. Savoring the taste. Savoring the idea, the plan.

Yes, she'd go to a show up in Soho.

With her resolution firmly planted, she found it difficult to make it through the rest of the day. Rather than wrangle the two competing strands of work groups into some cohesive whole, she spent much of her time distracted. Antsy.

Finding tickets was easy enough, though the price left her winded. She was thinking about all of the ways in which she could approach the cast. Or was it the crew? Would she even be able to get in contact with any of them? Supposing so, what would she even say? *Tell me about your sound tech?*

The rush was wearing off, as it always did.

Avery and Prakash were both settling into the routine of investigating what had gone on before the incidences of the lost. Those precious few minutes saved from the precious few cases where a core dump had been provided.

Avery was collating what data they had from each case on the social front before the event and searching for social connections between each of the cases, as much as the law would allow. Prakash, meanwhile, was digging through biochemical data that had been collected from each of the patients and searching for similarities for them. All stuff he had been doing before, of course, but now based specifically on the time before they had gotten lost, rather than during or after.

Carter had supposed that this would be innocuous enough, but Sanders had taken the opportunity of the boss dining out for lunch to chat with a few members of the workgroup. Not once, but twice while she was working, she had needed to field private messages from teammates. Both had concerns around the direction of the project, and questions about the wisdom of separating the already fractured group into smaller units.

In both cases, she reiterated that this would only be a temporary investigation. If it turned up any useful information, then they would have that conversation again in the near future. If it didn't, oh well. Everyone would cohere once more. There was comfort in the words, she hoped, but all the same, Carter wasn't sure of their efficacy.

She had had an idea. A hunch. One she thought worth investigating. That's what one did in science, right? Have ideas. Investigate. Be open to being proven wrong.

Sanders, however, had an *ideal*.

Or so Carter assumed. When assessing the team's standing on the issue, she had used the usual three point scale: for, neutral, against. What she hadn't asked was how many fucks each of them gave. There were, after all, two parts to making a decision. Which way you vote, and how much you cared about it.

Carter could easily estimate Sanders giving ten out of ten fucks against this current plan of exploration, while in fact, until this afternoon, she would have likely given five or six fucks.

That question hadn't been asked, though. She couldn't make up her mind whether she wished she had asked or was glad that she hadn't.

This afternoon, with the determination to learn more for the sake of the project (so she promised herself) and the sense that she was on the right path had significantly bumped the number of fucks she gave. And there was the hope of proving Sanders wrong, no small amount of competition within academia.

The play was some contemporary work.

The Short Trip, the ticket site informed her, chronicled an indecisive youth taking a trip away from family, purportedly to visit a bunch of friends for three days, the real goal of the trip being to visit his long-distance partner, but in the setting of a party, with guests, known and unknown, weaving their way through the scene — and, at times, through the audience.

This much she learned as she made her way south and west. Carter had to duck out of work earlier than usual to make it over to the theater on time. She had actually to travel past RJ in the UMC, borne along the

yowling Victoria line to Soho. Glad she left early, too. She needed to wait for three trains to pass before she was able to squeeze aboard.

The train vomited her out into Oxford Circus and left her spinning. Looking, looking for the right exit to the tube station, comparing directions on her phone. Each was helpfully lit up with a thin, translucent display overlaid above the older signage in painted tile. Both bore the unerring curves of Helvetica, perpetual winner of the font wars.

Neither meant anything to her.

Easy enough to find the theater by following the crowds. Her identity — and thus her ticket — was proved by a touch from her contacts, a grip around a simple bar in front of the theater. The bar flipped around to provide its other end to the next customer, the end she had touched getting a quick sanitizing so that everyone got a clean surface.

Carter was first surprised by just how much she enjoyed the play, then chagrined at her surprise. She had decided not to approach cast or crew beforehand, a decision that had proven surprisingly difficult. She worried that she would spend the entirety of the play thinking of what to say. She wound up engrossed in the performance all the same.

Lying to parents. Moving through the party. The awkwardness of meeting for the first time. The cast nailed it all. She'd had her own long-distance fling while an undergrad, and she knew the feeling well. *Meet at a public space where you know people*, mom had even cautioned. *Like a party. Just in case.*

It was well into the third act of three that she realized she hadn't given any thought to the sound of the play. A passing thought: this was probably a good thing. This was the sign of a job well done. An understudy, perhaps?

She applauded as heartily as the rest.

Still, her mission, such as it was, was right at the fore as soon as she stood. She was perhaps a little rude in her haste, making her way out into the lobby of the theater where some of cast and crew, as well as the director, were greeting the audience. Opening night, after all.

"Mr. Johansson. Mr. Johansson!"

The bulky man turned toward her with a pleasant, if bland, smile. A smile at war with the obvious worry lining his face. "Ma'am. I trust you enjoyed the show?"

"I did! Of course I did. I'd like to ask you something, though, if I might."

"Mm." The sound was assent, but only just. The rest of the audience was starting to stream out of the theater, his mind was elsewhere.

"I was...It's just, about RJ—"

The immediate focus of Johansson's attention was a heat lamp against her face. The intensity of it startled Carter out of speech.

"I mean, if it's not too forward to ask," she trailed off, a hint of a question.

"It is forward," he confirmed, eyes probing her. Too many reporters? "But I'd like to know how you know of em?"

"I'm a researcher at UCL, working on the lost."

Johansson took her elbow gently in his grip and led her off to the side, out of hearing of the rest of the audience and the curious cast. Gently, but brooking no disagreement.

“That doesn’t tell me how you know of em. Aren’t you– isn’t that privileged information?”

“The tabloids had a–”

The growl was immediate, hidden behind gritted teeth. “The paramedics told me I couldn’t contact anyone but the hospital, but the rag said you guys had declined contact.”

Carter straightened and shook her head. “We did not, nor would we have. Although, I must admit, the interview process would be far more formal than this. I only put the pieces together based on location and pronouns.”

“So what do you want from us?” Johansson’s shoulders sagged, the intensity lessened, permitting emotion. “We miss RJ. It’s been a real mess without em. Please, miss–”

“Ramirez. Dr. Carter Ramirez.” She hesitated for a moment before continuing. “We’re looking for...well, a few of us are looking for social connections between the lost, rather than just simple personality or neurological correlations. What can you tell us about RJ in that sense?”

Johansson looked up to his cast, then leaned a little closer to murmur, “O’Niell’s, once we’re done. Then we can talk. I have more to do here, so it may be a while. Please wait up, though.”

AwDae — 2112

Sleep did not come easily.

As padded as the auditorium seats were, they were not made for laying down on. They folded down, and while there were no armrests to get in the way of stretching out, the gaps between seats were awkward and painful. AwDae found that ey had to face toward the backs of the seats, lest eir tail get crimped against them. It left eir back exposed in a way that felt unsafe, no matter how empty the sim was.

At first, the faint dusty smell of the seat fabric inspired nostalgia, but it did not last. The memories were not comfortable, either.

Eventually, ey got up and began pacing blearily around the auditorium. There must be some way to rest that did not involve folding seats.

Ey could pull down one of the curtains and make a nest out of it. But, as ey did not know how to do so without ripping the fabric, ey was loath to do so. They carried some of that same smell, those same memories. A last resort, perhaps.

Exploring beyond the auditorium it was, then. The door out the back of the stage led to the hall containing music and drama classrooms. Ey started cataloging additional places where ey could hole up. The black fabric orchestra seats were promising, and they could be arranged however ey wanted, but ey hit pay dirt in the theater storeroom.

The back of the room was sectioned off into a wardrobe area, housing costumes and rack upon rack of identical tuxes and dresses for the choir singers. Nestled behind all of these rows of clothing was a sofa, old and sagging.

There was zero reason for the room to contain a sofa. Ey did not remember one being there the few times ey tagged along with Sasha. As inexplicable as it was, however, AwDae wouldn't have been surprised if such a thing had existed in the school when ey had attended.

Thanking whoever had created this sim, ey flopped down onto it. Musty smell intensified, lingered, settled. Ey was asleep within minutes.

Sleep, while restful, brought dreams of unnerving intensity. Dreams of twisting passages, of locker-lined corridors looping impossibly back on themselves, leading always into the same dim light of the student center. And in the middle, a menu, canted away at a steep angle, no different from what ey might get by swiping eir paw left to right in any sane and sensible sim.

Every time ey got close to try and read the menu, however, it would slide closed, leaving only its shadow behind. An unexpected rendering error.

AwDae jolted awake feeling as if ey had drastically overslept. Ey hadn't paid attention to when ey had gone to bed in the first place. One in the morning? Two? Rehearsal, and then hours of searching. Was it the same day? The same week?

All the same, ey felt late.

With the shock of transition, the need to explore the auditorium and hunt school for the mic, ey never did make it outside of the school. Could ey even do so? Ey felt silly for not trying, now.

Wake up, then. Ey stretched and started to plan a way out of the school. If nothing else, ey wanted to see how extensive the sim was.

It was customary in-sim to lock the doors that did not lead anywhere. Although the Crown Pub did have bathrooms and fire escapes, for instance — all for the sake of authenticity — the doors were locked tight. Beyond them would have been nothing at all. That was simply the extent of the sim. It was not inaccessible so much as nonexistent.

And yet there were much larger sims than the school itself, much more intricate. AwDae couldn't be sure of the boundaries without exploring.

Ey wondered what must have happened to eir body back in reality, even as ey walked toward the front doors. Ey didn't feel hungry, though ey felt ey should. Such things were translated in-sim as safety measures to keep addicts from starving themselves. After all, ey had still felt the need to sleep. Something had clearly been done with eir body.

That train of thought wound around the question of how exactly ey had gotten lost in a sim without being connected to it. Were other lost individuals in whatever sims they had been before, empty now of others? Did everyone experience getting lost the same?

Obviously, time had passed, and certainly the crew hadn't left em just sitting at eir rig after ey had finally lost touch. Even so, ey should've been pulled back to that reality when eir hands had been lifted from the cradles and head pulled away from the NFC headrest.

Had time passed, though? Had it? Had ey explored? Had ey slept?

And yet here ey was.

Where was eir body, then? Some hospital somewhere? Insensate and tied to life support?

And if ey was in a hospital, where did this sim exist? A sim this size couldn't simply live in eir gear. Especially not with all of the mechanics ey had encountered so far. Fully functioning sound booth and mic. Papers in the office. The sleeves of costumes hanging from the racks ey had brushed eir hand across on the way to the couch.

No answers to be had. All ey could rely on was what was in front of em.

Ey stopped at the bank of doors at the front of the building, staring at one of the panic bars. Would it be locked? Would it open at a touch? Should ey slam eir weight against it, or test gingerly?

Resigning emself to whatever happened when ey pushed it, ey rested eir paws against the smooth metal, claws clicking against the door itself, and gave a firm shove.

The door swung open and ey pinned eir ears back, squinting into the deafening sunlight beyond. Holding the door open with one paw, the other shaded eir eyes.

Ey saw the cul-de-sac for dropping kids off. Ey saw the street beyond, the set of townhouses that lined the road opposite the school. Ey saw grey. Ey saw fog. Despite the very sunny day, shadows cast sharply against

concrete, ey saw fog.

Fog of war? Render distance? Some visual indicator representing the furthest that the system was willing to draw? Or a boundary hemming em in?

Old tech. Tech unneeded for perhaps a century. Was it a limit of eir exo? Some languishing remnant? It had occasionally been used as an invisible boundary, ey knew. That it was there in the first place, closing off the street in either direction a hundred yards into the distance, confirmed that this was indeed a sim, not just some artifact of eir subconscious.

Did it, though? *Did* it confirm that? Did that truly follow? Was it a sign? What was its referent?

Ey stepped out onto the sidewalk by the flagpole and stared. Shoulders sagged. Tail drooped. There were no answers.

No answers.

Nothing for it but to keep looking.

Qoheleth — 2305

.1 Archive: [Hebel Qoheleth]

Node: [7cbc92e691678c4c17a04f5553cd1058ee122956]

[Encrypted]

Node: [32c5a64b66d0338be4373d796cf1eae5343f1077]

OCYNX GRIMN CYJPE PNNXS SCIQZ
KTWQW FBAVY FBOPA QERLB HWIJW
KPELO UCLAN OKHPM PCPWR NZNZQ
NMTIQ BKNHG UWFMG BPPZS CNRKX
TKEMU AFNOS VQUNW

Node: [36b1d8c1df07ce0f254b2332acd38c59bdf3bb00]

[Encrypted]

Node: [67e97446cdb3a4a3cfd5ebd75b1260f] Error

The node you have requested, [67e97446cdb3a4a3cfd5ebd75b1260f], does not appear to be an Archive node. You have provided a 32 byte identifier; the Archive system uses 40 byte identifiers.

If you believe you have received this message in error, please contact the Archive owner.

If you believe that you have the correct identifier, you may have attempted to access it on the wrong system. Please check the Gist system for a possible match.

Node: [80b42deb4c364cac5937cff9ca306625b69ae7c5]

[Encrypted]

Node: [bea0cf302fcd00863f0c67a91b1a75c0e4ba4863]

Security Footage

Location and time data provided in their own node.

Qoheleth

Limited sensory data provided by dual security cameras and microphones.

No sensorium data available.

Marked for deletion *sysime 181+331 0322*.

Note

Given the trouble of maintaining this shitty archive, I just transcribed it so I don't have to host the data.

Node: 172fb56e982d2d3f08957c5f7be0779bbf2f6aa6

Node: [172fb56e982d2d3f08957c5f7be0779bbf2f6aa6]

Transcript of Ioan Bălan and Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled speaking at a cafe.

Node: [f6981a0738b43275059c37a9c8b744e42eb91fb9]

[Encrypted]

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Johansson's hands dwarfed a pint of ale.

Once they had managed to find each other in the post-theater crush of the pub, they staked out a small two-top table crammed against one end of the bar itself. Johansson leaned to the side, away from the noise of too many voices.

He'd hardly touched the beer, but it seemed to take on an almost talismanic significance to him. Something to hold. Something to focus the thoughts. Carter drank her own cider slowly and waited, careful not to press her luck too hard. Johansson seemed slow to open up.

"Alright, so, RJ." His vocal cords unlimbered, a well-rehearsed baritone.

"Ey was your sound guy?" Carter backpedaled, eyes ducking to her glass. "Sound tech?"

There was a small smile tickling at the corner of Johansson's mouth, but he hid it a swallow of his thin ale, nodding. "Yep, lead sound tech. Best I've ever worked with, by a long shot. And don't worry. We still fuck up eir pronouns now and then. I know we did on the night ey...when ey...well, Wednesday."

Carter nodded. "And then you tried to pull em back out?"

"Nothing. It's like ey was still delved in even after eir contacts had been knocked out of place. We hit the panic button and called the docs. I guess some ambulance-chaser caught up with them, which is how you found out about us."

"Yeah. I'm not really in the habit of checking the tabloids myself, but I went out for lunch with a few coworkers and we got one pushed on us. The bit about you not being able to contact us got my attention, so I figured I'd make for the show tonight. Thought that might be my best bet."

"How'd you even manage that on opening night, anyway?"

"Oh, don't worry, it cost me plenty." Carter laughed. "Christ, this is so far out of the realm of what I'd do, too. I just feel like we're at an impasse."

"An impasse?"

"Yeah." Carter leaned back in her chair to gather her thoughts. "I've been on a few projects over the years. None were easy, but all the same, this one has a weird amount of interference. It feels like we're being made to trudge through mud. They won't give us access to the patients? Fine. That's PII. We just need the data that they collect from them, right? So why is that always so heavily redacted. Why aren't we getting that? It's never been a problem on any other project.

"All we're getting are little tidbits. A few hours of monitor scans, little clips of logs from before the event, and that's it. I don't mean to creep on you or anything, but with RJ, we've come across something we hadn't had

before. We found out ey was, well, you know..."

Johansson canted his head to the side. "An immersive tech? Genderqueer? Ace? A furry?"

"A furry, though those others are certainly interesting data points to keep in mind. We weren't totally sure ey was asexual, but it tallies."

"How did em being a furry help?"

"Ey's the second furry we've had come across our desks." Carter peered into her cider, then about the room. "In fact, it's caused a bit of a schism. Some of us are looking into possible...transmission vectors, while the rest are focused on cases individually. How could something like getting lost be transmitted from one person to another? It sounds like some awful drama; it's not a virus."

"I assume you're among those who doubt the transmission story?"

"Oh, no, I'm heading it up." She laughed. "But there are still convincing arguments to be made against it. Sanders, the leader of the opposition, such as it is, is dead-set against it. He thinks that we're wasting time chasing up this transmission tree. Valuable resources. We've got an agreement, though."

"What's that?"

"Well, we'll keep poking at this lead and if it dries up, we'll drop it."

Johansson hunched his shoulders, frowning. "Not much of a lead, I'll grant you that, but all the same, anything to get RJ back. Ey was more than just a tech. Sounds silly, but we all liked em. The tech crew, especially. We went through our share of fuck-ups tonight just getting by without em."

"Oh? I didn't notice any."

"You weren't on the headset. We had lights and sound arguing cues while stage desperately tried to keep them on track. It was a mess."

"All the same," Carter countered. "I thought it was delightful."

"Mm."

Silence.

It felt necessary. They both stared off into the pub. The room held the distinctly British dichotomy of being crowded and convivial, while also intensely conscious of personal space. The latter suffered as the night went on.

"You know," Johansson began, bringing Carter's attention back to the conversation.

"Hmm?"

"RJ wasn't one for relationships — doubt ey would be — but of all the people ey was close to, it was definitely those furies ey hung around. Come to think of it, I do remember em bringing up the lost with regards to them."

"Oh? Huh. It seemed like the two cases we have may be socially connected, but we don't have any proof."

"Yeah." Johansson shrugged. "Not much for relationships romantically, but certainly no shortage of friends. There was this one girl, Sasha, ey was close to."

Carter thumbed her phone on and swiped to a blank notes page.

"She was eir childhood sweetheart," Johansson laughed. "As much of a sweetheart as ey would confess, at least. She knew 'em both. RJ and eir friend who got lost."

Carter nodded, jotting down quick notes. "She's still out there, then? Not lost?"

"I assume so, I guess. You'd know better than I."

She shook her head, looking down at her phone as she scribbled the last of the note. “Mm, no. No female furries. A lot of ‘net addicts. I suppose there’s no small crossover, but we’re talking way deep. DDR junkies and layabouts.”

Johansson bristled, “RJ was no layabout.”

She held up her hands disarmingly, shook her head. “Mostly, is what I’m saying. They don’t have ties, or if they do, they don’t hold them long. These last few — the furries — they have lots of contacts from what we can tell. Strong ones. That’s where our two groups disagree most. I think that we’re seeing something novel, even if it doesn’t hold for the previous cases. ‘I’ being the leader of the group that thinks there’s the possibility of a transmission vector.”

“And the others?”

“They see it as chance. Too small an *n*. Too few cases to say one way or another. They say that there was bound to be both connected and unconnected folks among the lost. They’d say that it’s a matter of chance, since those who use the ‘net more would be more likely to wind up lost, regardless of social situation. Furries just use it more than most.”

“Both make sense, I guess,” Johansson hedged. “All the same, you know I have a vested interest in RJ, so I’m going to wind up seeing it from your point of view, since you’re working with em. Never mind that you invited me out here. What do you need from me?”

Carter frowned, thinking. “I guess I need to know more about em. I have eir redacted stats, a portion of the dump from eir workstation and the time leading up to it. I had been assuming we’re getting all of it, but perhaps that was too generous of me. It’s got PII redacted, but I don’t know if there’s anything else missing. What I need to know is what’s slipping through the cracks. I need to know about who RJ was. How ey interacted with the theater, I mean. And anything you can tell me about eir friends.”

“Should you...?”

“Should I have all of that information? I don’t know.” Carter sighed. “Is it against the law for you to tell me? No, not at all. I don’t know. Maybe. Is it unethical to further my own agenda with this project by consulting you? Probably yes. If I were on a bigger, more mature project, we’d probably be interviewing you anyway, though.”

Johansson frowned, nodded.

“But is it because I think that the more we know, the more likely we are to get RJ and the others back? I’d say yes.”

Johansson looked down into his beer. Then, with a decisive motion, drank most of it in a few smooth gulps, holding up the glass with the remainder, an obvious toast. “To RJ, then.”

Carter felt a little silly toasting to someone she’d never met, with a man she’d only just met, with a full glass of cider to his mostly empty ale. It all felt so dramatic, so theatrical, until she remembered who she was toasting with. She raised her glass and clinked its rim to Johansson’s.

“To RJ.”

AwDae — 2112

AwDae stood in the sunlight, blinking.

Ey felt weak. Not from hunger. Not from lack of sleep. Just worn out. Exhausted.

This was starting to feel like grinding. An endless drudge to level up. Busywork. Idle hands and tired eyes.

But then, you could quit a game. Here ey was, clues and riddles. And for what?

There was even a fog of war.

“So much bullshit,” ey laughed bitterly. No sense in keeping quiet.

Ey stripped down to eir underwear, hesitated, then stripped that off as well and shook eir fur out.

‘Comfort’ was the wrong word to use in regards a sim. It was a matter of sensory inputs that the system was set up to provide. The musty smell of the auditorium seats had been one thing, but ey was starting to get the impression that, given the way this sim was constructed, there would be rather more than less input. Eir tux was decidedly uncomfortable, not made for fox-people, and so eir fur was decidedly mussed.

Ey folded eir clothes and set them on the sidewalk in front of the school. The cool grass provided a welcome change from the indoor-outdoor carpet and tile inside, the roughness of the concrete out here.

“Alright. So. Problems.” Ey plucked viciously at a few close-mown blades of grass and held them pinched between eir pawpads. “Cicero is lost. He was voting on a bunch of stuff as usual, leading the comment boards. He voted on something and it made it to the floor, but it doesn’t show in the records.” Ey plucked blades of grass with eir free paw, enumerating the facts. “No vote cost, no bounty, no comment.”

Ey swished eir tail around to the side, hiked eir backside up enough to slip it beneath em, and rolled onto eir back. Blue sky. Cloudless. Too bright, even with the fog. Ey draped eir arm, fingers still clutching grass, over eir eyes. “And now I’m lost. I was working, and then I was here. Before working, I was digging into Cicero...”

Ey trailed off, spent a few moments thinking, then a few more just feeling the earth beneath em, the way the grass seemed to find a way through fur to tickle at em more directly.

“So had Sasha, though. And she was the one who got me the deck in the first place.” Ey ran through the actions ey had taken on the deck. It was surprisingly easy to pull up the chain of events. *Or perhaps not*, ey thought. *Given the note.*

Eir first write to the deck had been on the note about the voting records. Prior to that, there was only the sorting and sharing of records. Filtering. Reading.

Ey lifted eir paw once more and stared at the torn blades of grass. Tossed them aside. “Ah, hell. I’m talking to myself.”

Laughing, AwDae stood and gathered eir tux, heading back to the costume closet. Perhaps ey could find something that would fit em. Something to take into account that ey was more fox, less human.

Failing that, perhaps ey'd lay down again. Sleep, perchance to dream.

AwDae wound up in a simple, pleated skirt and a loose cotton shirt, gathered at the wrists.

The skirt fit well with a tail, certainly far better than eir trousers sagging beneath its base awkwardly. It was a robin's egg blue. Nice enough. Undecorated. Any detail would be lost on the audience anyway. Might as well save both cost and effort.

The shirt was made for someone with broader shoulders. RJ might have filled it out, but on the fox's slender frame, it was baggy and loose. Again, just a plain white, but ey could hardly complain. It didn't compress eir fur, unlike the tux shirt, with its pleats sewn down the front.

Ey gave consideration as to what to do with the tux. On the one paw — and here, thinking in paws already! So soon — it was just an artifact. Just bits. Everything was. Eir own body was. Had to be. Choosing clothes that were 'more comfortable' was only instructing the sim how best to treat eir body. Had to be. Clothes that were more comfortable were no different from clothes that weren't. It was just how the numbers added up. Just the math of simulated fashion. Had to be.

And yet, on the other, the tux was the only thing ey had...had what? Brought with from reality? It might just be a set of bits in eir exocortex, but it was *eir* set of bits and bytes.

Was it? Was there any point to the sense of ownership in so solipsistic a world?

Something to tie em back to the world outside this sim.

A solution in between, then. Ey dug until ey found a rucksack that had probably gone with some war-themed production. Drab, dusty, made of thick canvas. It would do well to carry anything that would help, including the notes ey had made.

Ey laid eir tux out on the ratty sofa and rolled it into a tight cylinder. An empty sim would care little if eir tux got wrinkled, yes? Ey stuffed it down at the base of the pack and folded the notes into a small pocket on the side.

Thus equipped, ey padded back to the auditorium. Ey made sure the room was put to sleep, and, on a whim, grabbed the one live microphone ey'd found earlier. Ensuring that it was off to conserve batteries, ey added it to the notes. A small token of where ey'd come from.

"Not going to do much without the receiver or board," ey murmured. "Do the batteries even matter? This is all so fucking silly."

Ey tamped down despair, buttoned down the flap above the pocket. So many questions.

Should ey lay in rations? Food? Water bottles, perhaps? Ey dismissed the thought as even sillier. Ey didn't feel hungry or thirsty, even after so long in the school, so why worry? Obviously eir body had been taken care of. There was nothing ey could do about it from within the sim. All that food and water would do is make the sim tell eir body that the pack was heavier.

From there, ey made eir way back toward the front doors, pushing them open against the pressure differential. The breeze outside ruffled fur and skirt as ey stepped into sun once more.

The grey mist turned out to be a render distance.

Had it been a barrier, AwDae could have walked up to the fog, but no further.

Had it been a barrier, ey was sure ey would have screamed.

As it was, ey was able to follow the same street ey would've taken on the walk back to the home ey grew up in and the fog simply receded before em. Ey could never approach it. There was nothing to investigate. It was just a bubble into which ey had been placed. A bubble that moved along with em.

The act of walking away from the school, wearing a backpack and heading towards home, was a dredge pulling up the silt of memories. School across the Atlantic in the '90s. Plays and productions ey still had memorized. Sasha. Dandelions in summer.

Even now, pacing the street as a fox, not much had changed. Ey had carried eir tablet and few books to and from school in a pack not dissimilar than the one ey was wearing. Even the skirt was not far off from a thrift-store find ey might have worn at the time.

Ey prowled through memories of Sasha, of dating, of becoming better friends than partners. Ey thought back to her staying the night, back to their shared anxiety, back to the movies, back to eir mom checking in on them at one in the morning just to make sure everything was okay (and, bless, to make sure clothes had stayed on).

Ey missed Sasha most of all, now. Together, the two of them would've been able to keep spirits up. Sasha would've been able to figure out the problem with Cicero's voting record faster than ey had, and ey would've been less alone, would've felt less hopeless.

AwDae trudged on toward home, reaching a paw up to pluck a handful of leaves from one of the trees as ey passed, feeling the reluctant snap as they pulled loose from the branch. For all the sim's complexity, school in spring was pretty far remote from London in the winter.

School. America. Hopelessness. Stasis.

"You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways."

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Ioan sat, startled, as Dear quit abruptly, leaving em sitting alone at the cafe table. There was a certain peculiarity to that fox's sense of humor, and while ey was slowly picking up on it, the occasional bafflement remained.

Ey took eir time finishing eir coffee, enjoying the view. A thoroughfare. Small crowds — some doubtless generated for effect. Enjoyed a moment's downtime before getting back into the puzzle at hand, then stood and straightened eir slacks.

Well, at least ey had more information to work with.

"Welcome back," #tracker said when ey arrived at home. "You have some mail."

Ey frowned, tugged the cream-colored envelope from the edge of the desk and turned it over in eir hands. Blank except eir signifier on the front, flap sealed on the back. Perhaps something about what ey'd been working on recently had piqued some interest on the reputation exchange. Another offer? And yet directly to this instance.

Making eir way out to the deck, ey popped the seal on the envelope, savoring the subtle tearing of the paper where the adhesive held fast. The paper was quite nice, the handwriting cramped and awkward, but legible in its green-tinged blue ink. Someone had put real effort into this.

Ioan

Dear has mentioned your aversion to sensorium messages, and I gather from your taste in clothing and our brief meeting that you have a certain aesthetic you enjoy. I hope that this scrap of note suits you well. The paper seemed up your alley, at least.

You'll have to forgive Dear. It really is stretched quite thin with its gallery show, and with the increased intraclade communication, it is feeling the pressure to keep forks to a minimum, as apparently there are no further names available. (It hasn't told the rest of the clade how many illicit forks it has. I suspect they all do.)

There is more to this that I think it is not sharing explicitly, but we've been together for a few years now, and I have my guesses. I think the intraclade attention is not precisely welcome. Having met some of its cocladists, I'm inclined to think that some more conservative types are being less than generous with their treatment of the subject at hand. Perhaps with their information as well.

All this to say that there is a reason for the fox acting the way it is. I will not apologize on Dear's behalf, it knows me better than that, but I hope an increase in transparency as to what all is going on in the family politic will help.

Visit soon.

Ioan smiled, re-folded the letter, and replaced it within its envelope. It joined the small pile ey kept.

Dear's partner had a good heart, and it was indeed a relief to learn that some of the fox's erratic behavior was attributable to stress. None of eir family had uploaded, and, by eir very nature, ey did not create eir own as the Odists had.

Ey did not envy it now.

The archive itself was a free-form database stored in the perisystem. It could hold essentially unlimited data in truly unlimited formats. Everything from text and structured data to full-sensorium recordings. Each blob of data was stored in a node, and nodes could be tagged and linked.

Unfashionable and difficult to work with, not to mention expensive to maintain, Ioan wasn't entirely clear why they had been added to the system. Exocortices had been around before the system itself. More personal, easier to interface with. Harder to share, granted.

Some remnant from its construction, perhaps?

Luckily, as an historian, ey had some experience working with them, even if that experience was decades old at this point. Ey pulled out a fresh sheet of foolscap and began to write, and by writing, interacted with the archive.

If archives were difficult to work with, this one doubly so. Nodes that weren't tagged, listed publicly, or linked to from other nodes were essentially inaccessible unless one had access to the index. Ey did not. That was something usually kept within an exocortex.

And here, few nodes were listed publicly, fewer still were linked to by others, and none were tagged. While traversing a well-pruned archive might still be akin to rifling through a card catalog to dig out books, this was no more than a file box stuffed full of loose papers.

Ioan's heart fell.

Of the nodes that were publicly listed, at least four were encrypted by something stronger than the original AES block. Ioan set those aside to knock against later. Another was a simple text blob with twenty-three blocks of five letters each. Further encryption? A different type? Ey could not guess which. Dear had mentioned one involving playing cards.

That left only three public nodes, one of which was an error. The other two...

Ioan's muscles went rigid. The first appeared to be a deleted blob of audiovisual data which referred to the second. A transcript of the conversation Ioan had had with Dear earlier that day.

They were being watched. Followed.

Ey read through the transcript once, then again, more thoroughly. There were a few notes made by this Qoheleth. They spoke of a familiarity that had only been hinted at with the previous letter. *Our Dear*. What did that mean?

Perhaps this individual was part of the clade itself?

Ioan frowned. The vehemence with which Dear — whom ey suspected was one of the more liberal of the Odists — had reacted when ey had asked about the author of the ode itself seemed to rule that out. If Dear, willing to bring on an amanuensis, was that protective, ey found it dubious that one of its cocladists was Qoheleth.

A friend, then? Mutual with the poet?

That was something ey would have to ask Dear about. Ey could speculate all ey wanted, but there was little ey could divine about that aspect.

The rest, then. Qoheleth seemed to be expecting that things were accelerating toward some sort of conclusion. *I may have less time than I had thought.*

And Ioan was being guided, somehow.

“How? Guide me how?” ey growled down at the paper. “It’s all fucking encrypted.”

#Tracker looked up, frowned.

Ioan#c1494bf shook eir head and apologized. Perhaps ey *should* take Dear up on the offer to stay with it and its partner.

RJ Brewster — 2112

AwDae was unsurprised to find home unlocked.

Although the front door had always been locked when growing up, the fact that this whole sim seemed oriented around riddles meant of course ey'd be able to gain entry places ey knew. Clues, right?

Ey checked the other doors in the complex to test the hypothesis. All locked.

There was no bracing for the surge of emotion and memory as AwDae stepped into the entryway of eir old home. Cool tile. Tattered rug. Coat hooks where they were supposed to be.

No coats. The sense of desertion was overwhelming. And yet.

And yet, ey felt as though eir mom could be just around the corner in the kitchen, prowling through the fridge, her boyfriend laid out flat on the couch, snoozing in front of the TV running old science fiction shows. And yet ey knew — knew on some fundamental level — that the house was empty.

Perhaps it was that it was all too silent. Silent as school had been.

AwDae shrugged out of the rucksack and set it down in the entryway. It was precisely the space where rucksacks went. It was precisely the space where ey had set eirs countless times growing up. Ey did as ey had always done and padded into the common area, toenails clicking against the tile of the entryway, and then the hardwood floor. Floors which had never seen fox paws.

The sensation, that uncanny mix of *home* and *wrong*, quickly grew to overwhelming. The fox sat down on the rug in front of the coffee table. Eir spot. Eir spot, where ey had sat to eat dinner countless times. Eir spot, where ey watched TV, those old sci-fi movies, with eir mom's boyfriend.

It was one thing for the house to be so painfully empty and another entirely to be here as AwDae and not RJ. Perhaps ey could have held each of those concepts in eir mind independently were ey to only experience one at a time. The two combined were too much. Ey felt eir breath as short, shallow gasps. Ey felt eir vision constricting. Ey felt eir heart race no matter how still ey sat. Ey felt all these things happening to em with an increasing sense of detachment. Ey found it hard to concentrate on what ey was even supposed to be.

Is my pulse elevated offline, wherever that is?

Ey let out a strangled laugh. Perhaps there existed in that space some doctor's befuddled stare at the sudden signs of anxiety showing in their patient.

The laugh turned to sob, stopped quickly.

AwDae leaned forward, stretching eir legs out behind em. Ey laid flat on eir floor, on eir oh-so-familiar rug, bafflingly present in eir bafflingly present home. Laid flat, then rolled over onto eir side. Eir tail lay limp against the short pile of the rug behind em.

How had this happened? What did I do? Why here? Why me? What did I do to deserve this?

Eir mind was awirl with words. With questions, and only questions. Ey didn't have answers. No answers inside, none before em, none in the house. Answers were a thing that did not– could not exist here. Answers a thing that happened to other people.

Ey did not have the mental bandwidth required to do anything other than watch questions swirl. Ey was at a loss for images in this end of days. Ey was an observer. Nothing more than a set of eyes with no will, no drive. No urge to move those eyes as ey watched all of the emotion that had been held at bay, held back with the sense of *doing something* over the last day and change. All that emotion surge.

Eir actions had been all wrong. Ey had accepted getting lost with resignation. Ey had leapt at the chance to solve the 'puzzle' of the microphone with something akin to excitement. Ey had found a new set of clothes with a casualness befitting a trip to the thrift store. All this when ey should have been experiencing terror. Doing all these things when ey should have been breaking down into sobs at the fact that ey had been struck with some sort of incurable...what? Incurable disease? Ey was lost.

AwDae noted with increasing dissociation that eir breath was coming in great, choking sobs. Eir perspective, that core of emself that spent life reviewing actions and reactions, watched with cool distance as eir body shook with gasps and tears streaked down over eir cheeks and muzzle, leaving tracks in the short fur. Whatever part of emself was in charge of releasing those pent up emotions had been divorced from the part of emself responsible for actually feeling them. *See? This is happening now.*

It's the emptiness, that part of em thought. This place was home, and the knowledge of being permanently removed from such a thing, from anything home-shaped or any sense of belonging, has led to this. There's no one here, and no one at school.

"No ranks of angels will answer to dreamers."

Words unbidden were calming. The heaving gasps for air began to slow, and ey wiped eir tears away in a smooth, slicking motion that flattened eir tall ears against eir head.

Struggling to bring those two parts of emself into alignment once more, AwDae levered emself up heavily. Ey leaned on one paw while the other straightened the fur of eir face, brushing the last aftershocks of that not-quite-sadness away in a careful, calculated gesture. Intentional. A setting-aside of emotion.

Perhaps eir initial reaction had been wrong on the emotional side, but correct on the intellectual. Ey would have to at least figure out why. There would be no sharing it, no telling others, no end game other than the knowledge of a task complete.

It was just the only thing left here in this null space that had any meaning.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Carter dreamed of shadows.

And through it all, there was the river: the muddy, sometimes stinking river. The Thames which only seemed to engender affection that one might call ‘grudging’. When she had first moved to London, it had been her guide. The Thames was always vaguely downhill, the slope her Y-axis. And on the X-axis, the bridges. Tower, London, Southwark, Millenium II, Blackfriars Rail, Blackfriars Memorial. Tick marks along a waterline.

And in her dream, she walked aimlessly along the south bank. The constant renovation of the area had led not to one great revival, but countless smaller ones. Buildings were torn down and raised back up, plots of land chopped into ever smaller portions. Those same buildings growing higher, never quite managing to match.

Strode past towers, squat pubs. Some old, some new. Mostly new.

Strode past people and crowds, buskers and food carts.

Strode beneath bridges, along railings, past tour boats gliding silently along the surface of the water.

And she passed shadows.

And the shadows were like the people of the crowds. A little taller perhaps, but still just like the people. It was as though someone had cut a person-shaped hole out of space, blurred the edges, vignetted, pinched the light.

And it wasn’t through prolonged observation, she was just suddenly aware of the fact that the shadows were all behaving in the same way. Always following one of the people. Same pace. Same gait. Somehow more sinister for that exactitude. Always following just one person, never changing, never looking around at anyone else.

And no one else seemed to see or notice these shadows except her.

And she started tailing one of the shadows. Quietly. Unobtrusively. Followed it following a young black woman pushing a pram. Another young child walking at her side. His hand curled loosely in the fabric of her pants. Constantly in touch.

And Carter struggled to keep up. The harder she tried to keep pace, the slower she seemed to go.

And she tried to call out.

And her voice came out only as a whisper.

And the shadow reached out it’s hand.

And the shadow’s fingers slid through the woman’s hair reaching for the base of her scalp.

And Carter screamed, inaudible.

The dream dogged Carter through her morning routine and into her commute. She kept thinking, if she'd just been able to keep quiet, maybe she could have seen what would've happened when that young mother was touched by the shadow. Some sort of metaphor for getting lost? Or was her sleeping mind just carrying too much work-burden into the night?

She was only able to dispel the lingering sense of too much meaning when she got into work and checked her email for news. No additional cases added to the research load. She realized she half expected a new one. Young, female, black, mother.

Just a dream, then.

After checking her mail on the rig's screen, Carter stood and stretched, making her way blearily to the coffee corner. She was one of the first in that morning. Just Avery and a few other early risers. Thankfully, Avery was the type to leave the coffee pot full rather than empty.

She doctored her coffee to her specifications and ambled back to her desk, setting the mug down on the smooth surface. She spent a few minutes scrolling aimlessly through her mail list. She didn't dive in just yet, despite the workload that she knew waited. The fog of the dream had been burned away, but there were still too many thoughts that needed organizing. Couldn't yet go through the process of setting up her workspace and ordering stacks of cards.

No, she corrected herself. She was wary of diving in.

She had things she needed to do in the sim. She had things that the sim would help her do quickly. She wanted to start a stack for this Sasha that Johansson had brought up. Wanted to find a way to start making and notating all of those connections.

Working in sim was part of her job, as it was for so many others. She had gone into this research project knowing that it was only in sims that people got lost. It had never bothered her before.

And yet here she was, waffling about whether or not she felt safe delving in to do her work.

She sighed, sipped her coffee, shook her head. Then set her hands in the cradles and rested her head against the headrest. Nothing for it.

Within her spare, black space, Carter prowled through the stacks she had started on this little side project. Invisible to others, she created a private stack within the string-delineated area, next to the pendant "Possible acquaintances" card. Private cards showed up with a subtle blue tinge to her, and would only appear on her view of the workspace.

On the first card in the stack, she transferred over the notes she had taken with Johansson. Then she started another card labeled "Sasha?" and added it to the stack.

The whole stack was looped up to RJ's card with a piece of cotton string. Others would be able to see that she had created the stack with the string trailing off to a faint outline of a deck, or a grayed out pack of cards, or however their view of the sim chose to represent the data.

Strictly speaking, she shouldn't be doing this. Such cards were intended to be for short notes to oneself about what one was working on, not for actual investigative work. This was something new. She wasn't supposed to have this information.

Carter stepped back to look at the whole cordoned off section of data. She frowned. Never mind the information, was she even supposed to be doing investigative work? She was supposed to be utilizing the data that the

hospitals and the university provided her with, not running out into the field and talking with acquaintances of the lost over pints after a show.

Sanders would have a fit if he knew what she was up to.

Even so, she wasn't quite sure it was only that which drove her to make the stack private. Some hunch. Some shadow lurking behind her.

She needed to be more subtle about this than she had been.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

The grin and sense of pride with which Dear had greeted em with did not last.

“Thanks again for the offer of space,” Ioan repeated. “I know I was driving #tracker nuts. I guess I talk to myself.”

Silence. Awkward.

“Of course.” Dear’s partner picked up when the fox did not reply. “You can stay as long as you’d like. It’s no trouble. You could probably scream bloody murder over there and we wouldn’t hear.”

“I’ll try not to, all the same.”

Dear’s partner grinned. Dear merely nodded.

“Hey fox, I’m going to get some writing done. Why don’t you show Ioan the gallery?”

“*Right, yes, of course!*” Dear straightened up, invigorated at having something to do. Something to declaim about. “*How much art history do you know?*”

Ioan stood to follow Dear as it padded from the living room back to the front of the house where the gallery was situated. “I studied photography and imaging quite a bit before uploading. Film, too.”

“*Let me guess: documentaries?*”

“Of course.”

“*You seem like the type, yes. An historian searches for stories in the past.*” True to eir guess, Dear was now smiling more easily. It gestured to a painting on the wall. “*All artists search. I search for stories, in this post-self age. What happens when you can no longer call yourself an individual, when you have split your sense of self among several instances? How do you react? Do you withdraw into yourself, become a hermit? Do you expand until you lose all sense of identity? Do you fragment? Do you go about it deliberately, or do you let nature and chance take their course?*”

The speech felt rehearsed, all those questions. A lecture? It hooked Ioan all the same. “I suppose that is what an instance artist is, then? Finding the stories inherent in forking.”

“*Yes. Forking is instantaneous, or might as well be, and yet in that instant, a story is told. There is a question implied to which the answer is ‘I must create a copy of myself’. Is it to accomplish a task, like you have done? Is it to sequester some emotion unable to be contained by one mind?*” Dear forked, another instance of it standing to the other side of Ioan. “*Perhaps it is to prove a point.*”

Ioan jumped at the sudden duplication. Both foxes grinned. The original Dear quit. “Who is the audience for this story, then?”

The fox laughed. “*Fuck if I know. The universe? That is not my job.*”

“I mean, you’ve got your exhibitions. Don’t you have an audience there?”

“Those who attend the exhibitions do get to watch and participate, yes. But are they truly the audience? If they are reacting to my work, and I am immediately reacting in turn, does that not make them part of the story, instead?”

Ioan shrugged. “I suppose so. It seems a bit like a distinction without a difference.”

Dear made a graceful setting-aside gesture, as though the statement was in some way irrelevant. *“All this to say that, for all of my fancy shenanigans, I still see the stories in the art around me. This painting — a replica from way back when — tells a story with the image it shows, yes, but also with its construction. The paint is applied with a palette knife in thick globs, see? It looks haphazard, but it is not. It is very carefully done. The story is the artist’s choice in tools, in technique, as well as in the subject of the painting.”*

The painting itself showed a riot of colors. Abstract, and yet hinting at some cyclonic force. Blue on green. Splotches of purple, of red. The paint shone under the lights.

Ioan and Dear stood in front of the painting a minute longer, each thinking their thoughts. The fox, with its paws clasped behind its back, looked to be trying to puzzle out the order in which the globs of paint had been applied to canvas.

Ioan found himself wondering what this cyclonic force was reaching towards. What it was destroying.

It was Ioan who broke the silence. “Why are you upset, Dear?”

The fox wilted. *“That obvious?”*

Ey nodded.

“Right. It is the clade.”

“A disagreement?”

“Of sorts. A silent one, or one on a very base level. I believe there is a story here. There is something going on that is worth researching and learning about and getting to the bottom of.”

“And others don’t?”

Dear shrugged. *“I am perhaps in a minority, on this subject. I think that there is a story, and there are a few others who see it my way. Most of my stanza does. But much of the clade is concerned only about the Name.”*

Stepping over to the next picture, Ioan formulated their response, but was preempted by the fox.

“It is not that I am not. I am, in my own way. But these puzzles...” It trailed off.

“Are they the story?” Ioan frowned, backtracked. “You think there’s a reason you’re being led down the path. The puzzles are part of the story, but they are, as you put it, the answer to the question that necessitated their creation.”

Ears perked, grin returned. *“Yes. Puzzles are puzzles and sometimes worth solving in their own right. I want to know why, though. Why say the Name, yes, but why build up tension like this?”*

The painting: a landscape, perhaps the prairie just outside. A cloud-dotted sky, nigh photorealistic. And in the middle, a black square.

Not just black paint, but a black that seemed to eat light. A black the hurt to look at. It made Ioan uncomfortable.

“I think I see why you approached me,” ey said. “You are interested in the story, and want someone who lives and breathes stories.”

That grin widened, and was joined by a swish of a tail. *“Precisely that. There is art to be had here. It is stressful and, if my suspicions are correct, it bears a message beyond just...what, a jape? A jab at the clade? There is a point to be*

made here.”

“The amount that you seem to differ from the rest of your clade is surprising. Are there no other artists?”

“*Oh, we’re all artists of a sort. Actors, mostly. A few sim designers. One of the other stanzas’ lines painted this,*” it said, nodding to that unnerving black square. “*But yes, we are all quite different. Perhaps you will see some day.*”

Ioan nodded.

Dear’s grin had faded to some expression more thoughtful. Thankfully, not as glum. When it spoke, its voice came from some place remote, from some emotion happening elsewhere, to someone else. “*Artists, yes, but increasingly few storytellers.*”

AwDae — 2112

“You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways.”

Sasha’s words, that night in The Crown Pub, pressed in against AwDae. Pushed thoughts out of the way. Blanketed eir mind.

Ey lingered around the house for a few hours, laying on the floor, poking around in various rooms. All as empty and static as school had been. Eventually, ey paced back outside and across the road to the countless acres of federation-managed open space that abutted the foothills. Ey walked a few of the trails and deer tracks, mind spinning helplessly through numb hopelessness.

There was no birdsong, and while ey occasionally heard the buzz and chirp of insects, ey never saw any.

Ey gave up and returned home. Ey wasn’t tired by the time the sun went down, but for lack of volition, bundled up all the same in what had been eir old bed and slept.

Having gone to bed so early, AwDae awoke before sunrise. Eir alarm clock, still familiar after so long away from this house, told them it was just past four in the morning. *I made it past the witching hour*, the fox thought, then laughed. Something about the idea of time in such a timeless space tickled and upset em all at once. Time! What a concept.

Despite the dark, ey decided on another attempt at exploration. Fog be damned.

Ey slipped out of the house and wandered around the neighborhood. Curling streets. Cul-de-sacs. Rows of townhouses. Familiar, all. Ey even made it back down to the school on the hill, searching for unexpected lights left on in the middle of night.

The results were negative, unless one counted streetlights in this empty world. All the houses’ and the school’s windows were dark.

Ey trudged back up the hill toward home and shut out the darkness. The kitchen light brought little warmth, so ey turned it back off and waited for sunrise.

With the fog limiting render distance, sunrise took the form of a slow brightening, almost imperceptible at first. The world around home lifted through greyscale into brilliant color, settling on a teeth-aching azure.

During eir teens, ey frequently messed up eir sleep schedule enough to see the sun rise. Some days, ey would go down to the school for a run around the track before heading back up to the house again, sweating and invigorated. Or at least tired in a different way.

This whole sim seemed designed to, as Sasha had put it, keep em frozen in the past. The act of watching the world brighten and...well, not come to life, but at least gain color tugged at memories of countless days. Of waiting for eir mom to wake and make coffee.

Coffee.

AwDae padded back to the kitchen, claws clicking on the hardwood beneath eir feet.

Prowling through the cabinets revealed startlingly little. The fridge was bare, as well. No food. No dishes, either. On testing, the faucet didn't produce any water.

"What the hell..."

It didn't make any sense. The whole world was rendered in such loving detail. Why not include things one would expect to be in a house? Lesser sims had running water. Perhaps it was due to the limitations of the sim being run from eir implants? Though ey still doubted that the implants would be able to run something so complex in the first place. Scent, taste, and texture were all available to em — notoriously expensive to implement — so why no food? Why no coffee?

"All I want is something real," AwDae growled. Fists parked on the counter in front of the sink, ey pressed firmly against the Formica. Tears stung eir eyes and, sagging, ey slowly sunk down to the cool hardwood floor. "That's all I want."

The sulk lasted a good half hour, with the fox crying off and on. It brought less catharsis than ey hoped. By the time ey levered emself back up onto eir feet, eir backside was numb and tail struck by pins and needles, somehow more real than it had ever felt before.

No coffee. No water. No catharsis.

Tail hanging limp beneath eir stolen skirt, ey slouched back upstairs to eir room and climbed back onto the bed, laying on eir front, muzzle facing away from the windows and the taunting of the morning. In toward the closet, toward stasis and familiarity.

Ey ticked off the list of people in eir life who would be thinking of em. Some hopeful connection.

Johansson was almost certainly stressing out, doubtless stressing the rest of the Troupe in turn. His response to unknown situations was to try and make them into known situations. Put all that nervous energy to work, get things into a state where he could understand them again. Even with another tech handling sound, even if that had gone well, the boss would be jumpy and on edge.

Caitlin and Sarai would be missing em on a more personal level. AwDae was friendly with the entire company, of course, but it was those two ey had gotten closest to. Sharing that back-channel communication, that private space of the theater sim. Sharing conversation that went beyond the Troupe, beyond theater. If anyone had able to reach eir friends outside of STT, it would be them.

And of eir friends, Sasha was always at the front of the fox's mind. She was the one person, excepting eir parents, who had been in eir life the longest. She was the one who understood em best, even surpassing eir family. Sasha had to be worried, even with em having been gone for so short a time. She had to be looking for em. The skunk was even listed as eir emergency contact.

Or perhaps, ey thought wryly. I simply want that to be the case.

Eir parents, always loving but always distant, would be concerned. Ey knew their tendency to freeze up when confronted with the unknown, though. Mom was the type who might sit by eir hospital bed and hold eir hand, as mothers do, but not necessarily the type of person to take action, to do any digging into 'what's and 'why's. Dad would simply be glued in place, unable to deal with any emotions surrounding the event.

Ey turned eir face to rub it against the pillow, leaving the pillowcase damp from tears. Then grumbled and sat up once again. Scrubbed at eir cheeks. Bristled eir whiskers. Reengaged with physicality.

Eyes settled on eir bookshelf. Ey pulled down the most weathered book ey could find. Some bit of sci-fi ey had read countless times.

The fox flopped back onto the bed and flipped open to a random page, then frowned. Ey blinked several times, squinted over to the window and back to the page, trying to focus.

The words swam across the page. Would not stay pinned in place. Would not form sentences, nor even phrases.

Ey flipped to the first page. The swimming effect slowed, coalesced into legibility.

The effect was unnerving. As ey read, words would slip slowly into order, into focus — though the world around em remained static and sharp — and with every flipped page, it would take a moment before ey could move on.

And this wasn't the book ey remembered.

Eir frown deepened. The story was there, familiar, but the text read more like a retelling. An admittedly quite detailed one, but a retelling all the same. An imperfect memory. It used words AwDae would've used, rather than those the author might have chosen.

Setting that book aside, ey pulled another down. The effect repeated itself. Stronger, this time. Ey had a hard time getting the words to settle on the pages, even starting from the beginning. Brow furrowed, ey tried with a few more books.

One ey hadn't read yet — tsundoku, perhaps, books one always means to read but never gets around to — was an unintelligible jumble of letters. No, not just letters, but marks that hinted at the idea of what it meant to be a letter. Mere shapes.

"Well, huh."

Still frowning, the fox sat on the edge of eir bed and picked up the original book, thumbing through pages and watching the effect distractedly. Words jumped out. Occasionally a phrase would form, but nothing exact. It was as though the book was deciding what to become from moment to moment based on where ey inserted their claw when flipping through it.

Ey hopped to eir feet, skittered back down the stairs to the pack ey had brought from the school, and fished out the scraps of notes. The scrap, the piece of paper with Cicero's DDR votes on it. No swirling, disjointed effect affected this text.

An hour's exploration later, ey had puzzled out what might be going on.

Of course AwDae's exocortex wouldn't have the complete text of the dozens of books on eir shelf. How could it? Ey had only ever read them as hard copies, never through any software mediated by the implants. Never on a screen of any kind. So of course ey wouldn't be able to read the books here in the sim, if that sim was confined to eir implants.

And ey was increasingly starting to doubt that the sim was bound to eir exo, or any of eir implants.

A midday walk through the open space netted em a hypothesis. A shaky one, but something more plausible than what information ey had been working with.

There likely was some information stored in eir implants. Some few dozen terabytes, maybe. Enough to store a good chunk of data, but not necessarily an entire sim. Certainly not one this big.

Maybe it was that the implants themselves didn't store the sim, or not all of it, but acted as a framework? Maybe AwDae's brain provided all of the information needed to show em a sim, and all the implants did was turn it into an experience. Maybe the implants were a mirror, reflecting memories, recollections, hints and dreams.

That would be why the text of the books was jumbled, and when it wasn't jumbled, it was wrong. It was just eir recollection of the book being mirrored back at em in a way that was tangible. Tangible as much as anything was in this place.

That would explain why ey had been able to smell the seats of the auditorium, too. It was a scent that must've been permanently ingrained in eir memories.

And yet, this was an imperfect sim, based as it was on memories. The school with its countless hours of memory invested in it, had plenty of detail, as did eir home. Yet AwDae was willing to bet that, were ey to go into another house on the block, ey wouldn't find anything. Or perhaps ey wouldn't be allowed in at all. All those locked doors on that first day's explorations. Ey would have no memory of the inside, so why would the minimal system of implants-mirroring-memories be willing to show em anything?

Strange ramifications, here. This meant that eir implants were still acting as implants, but rather than taking signals from eir rig, the 'net, and eir mind, they were only taking in information from eir mind. That meant that everything was still up and running as though ey was delved into the 'net.

Which was absurd, of course. There was no way for the interferites to run without power, without data coming from the NFC pads on eir forehead or the contacts on eir fingers. Ey had been pulled back. Ey had felt that rending, that spike of pain. There was no possible sequence of events that led to this conclusion.

Was there?

Perhaps getting lost was as simple as layer after layer of redundant fail-safes failing in turn, implants remaining on even after contact was lost with the rig.

AwDae sat on the fence bordering the open space, watching the color of the light duck down through golden and into salmon. Ey realized ey would need to be more deliberate in eir search. If ey was limited to places ey had memories of, ey would have to remember just which places those were.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Ioan sat back and rubbed eir eyes. Time had gone all funny with all this research.

As with so many of eir previous projects, ey had fallen into a state of free-running sleep and single-minded focus. Ey would work for a few hours, suddenly get impossibly tired, nap for what felt like fifteen minutes, and wake up three hours later. Then ey'd work for twenty hours straight, neglecting to eat.

Ey had researched it at one point and entertained the idea that it might be part of some larger sleep disorder, or an perhaps attention disorder, something grander. Ey had put it off as just one of eir many neuroses.

Less than healthy.

There were never any complaints about the quality or quantity of work ey got done while free-running. Ey didn't slip up or stumble. Didn't make any more mistakes than when ey stuck to a schedule. Made fewer, perhaps. And being methodical got one quite far as an historian and writer. Ey would write the same quality work at the beginning, middle, and end of eir waking periods.

What it did *not* do, however, was endear oneself to one's housemates. Ioan#tracker quickly grew frustrated with eir own forks, whether or not they used a cone of silence, so ey knew the feeling intimately. It was implicit that ey would, as a fork. It was always a problem when multiple Bălan instances stayed in the same house while on separate projects, each on a separate schedule, and ey was nothing if not a Bălan.

Here, at least, ey'd been lucky enough to be invited by eir...client? Patron? Had been invited by Dear to stay at its place.

So that's how ey found emself rubbing eir eyes in front of a simple, if painfully modern, desk in a studio apartment attached to eir...employer's? Friend's? Eir friend's equally modern house.

The studio apartment really was a studio, too: someone — perhaps the other Odist Dear had mentioned — had used it for painting. Rightfully so: the exterior wall was floor to ceiling glass looking out over that sere prairie. The landscape, Dear's partner had explained, was the work of Dear's cocladist, Serene; Sustained and Sustaining, 'born' when their down-tree instance, Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars had forked to explore her twinned interests of forming oneself and of forming one's surroundings in ever greater detail.

Ioan's head spun whenever ey thought about the clade, but the longer ey spent around Dear, the more ey found emself liking it. Ey was curious to get to meet another Odist.

If it weren't for the window-wall, opaquable, the apartment would have felt like a cell. Simple cot. Desk. The kitchenette the one concession to freedom. The walls were whitewashed concrete. The floor that same pale hardwood. The fixtures all brushed steel. No doors to the rest of the house, nor anywhere but outside. No restroom. One was expected to either turn off elimination or do so outside.

There's a cheap joke to be made there, ey had thought on first moving in. Dear lifting its leg against some tree. But I doubt its body ever had that functionality enabled.

Ioan shook eir head and rubbed at the rest of eir face. Ey was daydreaming — eveningdreaming? — and that made em wonder how long ey had been awake.

“Probably some horrid number of hours,” ey mumbled to the wall.

A sensorium ping; a gentle impinging of Dear upon eir senses. Half-sensed words: *“Does the wall reply often?”*

Ioan spun around. Dear was standing, prim and dapper as always, at the door through the glass, paws clasped before it.

“You scared the hell out of me!”

Dear’s serene smile widened into a grin. *“Sorry, Ioan. I’ll wait until after the wall responds, next time.”*

“Jackass.”

“Foxass,” Dear corrected, accenting the word with an exaggerated swish of its tail. *“Have some news. Walk with me?”*

Ioan nodded and stood. “Glad to. I’m hitting a wall, here.”

The fennec adopted a look of concern. *“Do not hit your friends, Ioan.”*

“Ha ha.” Ioan rolled eir eyes. “Something’s got you in a state today. Tonight. Whatever.”

“Tonight.” Dear’s smile softened and it beckoned out toward the prairie. *“Come, walk. Storm scheduled in an hour, let us catch all of the nice smells.”*

Sasha — 2112

Sasha clutched at the arms of her chair, fingernails digging into the foam of the armrests, promised herself she'd stay put.

Then stood up anyway.

That her relationship with RJ was as casual as it was was working against her. She knew ey was in the UK, in London, and that they worked at a theater, but for the most part, they talked about other things. Shared things, not work. Or, if work, theater in general. They talked about Cicero and Debarre. They talked about The Crown Pub. They talked about their past and their shared world, their syncosm. RJ rarely got too far into the present and the embodied world, eir exocosm.

So she had been at something of an impasse, then, with no way to figure out just what had happened to lead to eir disappearance. There were rumors abound in the Crown Pub that ey was lost, just like Cicero.

She would have to admit that she had been the source of more than a few of them, given the notification from the hospital she had received — that ey had put her down as an emergency contact was touching in a way she could not quite articulate — stating that ey had been admitted, but that, no, unless she were to arrive in person for biometrics, they would not be able to tell her what had happened.

No chance of that. Production season was the same in American schools as it was in Soho theaters across the Atlantic.

The thing that plagued her with doubts was the sheer improbability of such a thing. Ey had joined them on their own private investigation into Cicero. Had that been it? But here she was; and Debarre was, as far as she knew, still alright. Even then, how could it be that thinking about, talking about, working with data related to the lost would lead to one getting lost themselves? Wouldn't the researchers on the case be all the more susceptible?

Perhaps it was something about the data?

Still a dead end, she thought. *We have the same data ey had. There's four or five of us with ACLs on the deck.*

And perhaps ey wasn't lost at all. There had been the show, of course. And while RJ had never disappeared during performances before, ey had certainly been quieter during her timezone. But with the message from the hospital, the only potential there was that there had been some sort of accident at the theater.

She was embarrassed at how long it had taken her to think about simply searching eir name. She still knew that from school, after all. Doubtful that searching 'AwDae', nor even simply 'RJ', would turn up any medical reports.

So it was that Sasha wound up reading the same article that Carter had found a few days earlier. It confirmed all her worst suspicions.

She sent Debarre the link first, the subject line simply the emoticon :/. Distressed as she was, she deleted the auto-corrected emoji and replaced it with the plain-text emoticon, feeling, somehow, that that better represented her anxiety. She considered passing the article around further, but thought better of it. It pulled too hard at her heart. It had left her in tears when she first found it. Their relationship, brief as it was, had been one of the happiest of the lot she had been through. There was no ire in the way they had drifted from 'item' back to simply friends.

The one upshot to finding the article had been the name of the group that RJ worked for.

And thus Sasha: pacing back and forth in front of her desk, trying to work up the courage to hit send on the email she had drafted.

She had considered mailing the director of the troupe, Bernhard Johansson, but had decided against it, figuring that the man had far more on his plate running a play. Too much to bother responding to a request such as hers. Ditto this Sarai Coen, listed as stage manager. If the play was still running, both would be swamped.

She had settled instead on a Caitlin Wells, listed as working lights for the stage. Given all that RJ had told her about working as a tech, she would likely be both the closest to em and one of the least busy outside of work. If there were such a thing, that is. Sasha had been an actor, not a tech, and had no clue how busy those nights and days between performances were for the tech side.

She was just thankful that email addresses had been listed for the cast members. Not the crew, but given the pattern of *firstname.lastname@sttroupe.co.gb.wf*, she was hoping Caitlin's would follow suit.

Caitlin Wells,

I apologize for writing to you out of the blue, but I am a friend of RJ Brewster who works with the Soho Theatre Troupe, and I was wondering if you would be able to provide me with a bit more information about em. I am a friend from school and remember em working with theater there, and talked with em daily on a sim online.

I know this is a long shot. I hope this reaches you, and I hope that you are well, all things considered. If you get a chance to send me a note, I would greatly appreciate it. Both email and meeting in a sim would be fine.

Best.

Sasha

Sasha had deliberated over the two paragraphs for an hour and a half, deleting and correcting. How much should she ask for? Should she reveal where they interacted? How should she start the letter, and how should she finish it? Hell, how should she address herself? Her real name wasn't Sasha, though she thought of herself that way as often as not. She figured that, should they actually meet up in a sim somewhere, that would be the name that this Caitlin would get.

She ran quickly to her terminal and hit 'send' before she second-guessed herself any further, and then...

Oh, shit.

Now she realized her mistake. Realized that, if they *did* meet up in a sim, Caitlin would be meeting up with skunk-her, rather than something more like her in the offline world. Perhaps she had a human av stashed away somewhere. She could buy one off the shelf quickly. It was seven thirty in the British Isles, she might have time before Caitlin woke up.

No luck. A scant two minutes of Sasha fretting at her keyboard passed before a ping alerted her to a new message.

OMG OMG we were hoping one of RJ's friends would contact us. We only know so much. Your sim or mine? Meet you in five. C.

Far too little time to switch out an av for something a bit more...presentable? A bit more human?

Sasha groaned.

Nothing for it. She set her hands on the cradles and leaning into the headband of her workstation. Once in, she pulled up her in-sim mail and spoke quickly.

Caitlin,

Either is fine. Should warn you that I know RJ through furry, and may look weird. My address is @Sasha:of-all-stripes.fur#home in case you want to meet here, or we can meet publicly.

Sasha

The reply came in a matter of seconds, half a minute tops.

Sasha. Crown Pub? In case you want to tell others. That's what RJ always talked to me about. We know about furry. C.

The relief was palpable, if incomplete. It would certainly be strange to actually interact with one of the tourists that drifted through that sim. She tapped one of the pre-written replies — "Sure, see you there!" — on her client, hoping that this would portray the appropriate levels of urgency that Caitlin seemed to share, then dashed to her tport pad and swiped left, quickly selecting the top, most-visited option.

Caitlin was already there.

Sasha wasn't sure whether to be surprised or not that the woman had a custom avatar. She was evidently a fan of the past, with hair swept neatly to the side to reveal an undercut. She wore a long, sleeveless tunic emblazoned with the word *heh.*, running to mid thigh covering only leggings. Something from late the previous century.

Sasha felt strangely plain in her simple skunk av. Baggy shirt and fisherman's pants, fashionable enough by today's standards, did not stand up against London chic.

"Caitlin?" she said, voice raised.

The human waved energetically and ducked through the crowd. "Sasha, right? There a place we can talk? Anyone else you want to bring along?"

Sasha did a quick scan of the room, picking out Debarre sulking at the end of the bar. She jogged over and tapped him on the shoulder. "Someone who knows AwDae is here, want to join?"

The weasel perked at that, frowned, nodded. “Uh, sure. Do they know about Cice?”

“I don’t know, but they might. They only said they know about AwDae, and that ey had talked to them about this place.”

Debarre shrugged and slipped off of his stool, following after Sasha. “Better than nothing,” he grumbled, nodding to Caitlin on his way to one of the empty booths.

The three settled onto the overstuffed seats. There was a moment of silence before all three started talking at once, followed by another silence, then nervous laughter. Sasha gestured to Caitlin.

“RJ’s lost. It happened during a rehearsal.” She frowned, tapping a finger at the scarred table between them. “Should back up, though. How much do you know?”

“We read an article about em. Something from a tabloid. It just mentioned the Troupe, which is how I found you.”

Caitlin nodded, frowned, then offered her hand to Debarre. The weasel shook it cautiously. “Sorry, I should introduce myself. I’m Caitlin, the lights tech for STT. I was there when...when it happened.”

“Debarre,” Debarre said, gruff. “Boyfriend’s lost, too. AwDae...uh, RJ, Sasha, and I were trying to figure out what happened.”

Fumbling some cards out of her pocket and duplicating them, Sasha added, “We were exchanging a deck on Cicero, Debarre’s partner. You don’t have to do anything with them, but you might as well have a copy, too. And, hold on.” The skunk swiped, tapped through menus, created a new card titled ‘RJ lost’, duplicated it twice. She handed one each to Debarre and Caitlin. “One for RJ as well.”

Caitlin swiped up on the card, tapped the voice-record button, and began speaking. “Alright, so here’s what I know. RJ was working sound that night, last night of rehearsals, and started having trouble about halfway through. Ey went quiet on the mic, and then missed a cue or two before we noticed what was going on. We called a halt to the rehearsal and found em unresponsive at eir rig. We pulled em back and hit the panic button and...and nothing. Ey was gone. Even out of the rig, eir implants showed ey was still inside.

“The cops and paramedics had a protocol for the whole thing, I guess. Ey was taken off to the hospital. It all happened so fast. Johansson — that’s the director — met up with a woman from the university who said she was studying the lost and had a talk with her. She said she had gotten information on em, but wanted more, so they talked for a bit. Her name was—” Caitlin frowned and thought for a moment, then tapped the growing deck to add another card. “Carter Ramirez. Oh, you’ve already got one in here. Remembered it was Spanish or something. RJ mentioned your name, which is why I was so eager to meet up.”

Sasha sat up straighter. “My name?”

“Yeah. Ey talked about you quite a lot. Hell, ey mentioned Cicero.”

At this, Debarre looked so intently at Caitlin that she quailed under his gaze.

“Just that he was lost, I’m sorry. I don’t know much beyond that.”

The weasel’s shoulders slumped, and he nodded.

“There’s a lot of downtime, working tech. We all chat and...hey, why did you contact me, anyway?”

“I figured you’d be the least busy, other than maybe stage hands. Plus, RJ said lights techs were always cool.”

Caitlin laughed, brushing her hair back. The motion seemed automatic, as her av’s hair had hardly budged. “It’s true. Anyway, we talked. I don’t actually know what more to tell you beyond that. The rest of our relation-

ship was work. RJ was super focused on that, and didn't really chill with the rest of us when ey wasn't working. I mean, we liked em and ey liked us, but ey was rarely a hundred percent there, you know? Ey had a cat, I know that."

"Priscilla, yeah."

Caitlin shrugged. "Sure, I guess. Eir landlord is taking care of it. I was hoping you could tell me more, actually."

Sasha recounted much of her and RJ's history. All the way back to their relationship, back through school. School productions, school summers, sleepovers and movies and all the trappings of being a kid.

By the end, she was crying freely.

"I didn't know, I'm sorry. RJ never talked about relationships."

"I think I was eir only one." Sasha sniffled. "There weren't any others that I knew about, at least. Ey was kinda, uh...aromantic, I guess."

Caitlin nodded. "That tallies. Listen, I gotta get going, though. I ran at this without really thinking, and your email ping woke me up. I don't know if I can, but I should try sleeping more before the show tonight."

"No problem," Sasha and Debarre said in unison. They laughed, though whether at the shared words or the giddiness that went along with new information, Sasha couldn't tell.

"No problem," she repeated. "Thank you so much for meeting up with us. And thank you for confirmation on that researcher's name. I'll see if I can find this Dr. Ramirez. Keep in touch, alright? And add to the deck if you find anything."

Caitlin nodded. "Will do. See you later."

And with that, the woman signed off. Poor form to do so in the middle of a public sim like this, but everyone was jumpy. The skunk and the weasel shrugged it off.

"Guess now we have another lead," Debarre said.

"Yeah. And if she's a big name researcher, I bet she knows about Cicero, too."

At that, Debarre brightened, and for the first time in weeks, the two spent the rest of the night talking without tears.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Dear wasn't kidding about the smells. Ioan turned eir sensorium's sensitivity way up. Ey wondered if Dear's vulpine nose could smell things eirs could not.

Serene had worked wonders here. The smells, the textures, the raw beauty of the place, all well crafted. It was a fine line that she had walked, too. Too far in one direction and the landscape would have become nearly desolate, more foreboding than natural. Any further in the other, and it would've been softened too much, would've become too well-tended. Cartoonish.

As the two crunched their way through the short, stiff stalks of grass, winding their way around the larger tussocks, Ioan realized that ey was quite taken with the place.

A ridiculous house in the middle of nowhere, a glittering white fox and its partner, the prairie fading off into downs on one side and stretching out to infinity on the other. It had all seemed so contrived when ey had first visited. Too simple. Too one dimensional. Kind of tacky.

But it was all just *so well done*. So incredibly, skillfully executed. The artistry was in the details, and the details were fractal, continuing down through ever finer layers. The landscape's perfection was echoed in Dear's unique sensibilities and its comfortable relationship.

Ioan liked it here.

Ey was dawdling, past the comfortable stage of just enjoying the petrichor being washed in before the storm.

"Sorry, lost in thought."

"*It is alright*," Dear said. "*You looked like you needed it.*"

"Hmm? Getting lost in thought? Or getting out of the apartment?"

Dear shrugged and smiled.

"Sorry all the same. I'm here now. Will try not to do that again." Ioan grinned sheepishly. "What did you find out? You seemed almost punchy."

"*I was, definitely. Still am.*" The fox grinned. "*We seem to have found out who our...ah, who our target is.*"

Ioan mulled over the word 'target', searching for a better one. Ey couldn't think of any, so ey nodded. "What do we know?"

"*We know a name, and from there we can find a bit of history, which you may be able to help in filling in.*"

"Names are good. Something other than Qoheleth?"

"*Other than that, yes, but almost certainly connected, probably the same person. I think they're the same, at least. Not much more than the name, though. No location, no sightings in ages. Some aging — or agéd — resources. A name and some history.*"

Ioan gave an impatient gesture with eir hand. "Well, what's the hold-up?"

Dear's grin widened. *"The hold-up is that I want you to feel some of the excitement that I felt on hearing this from down-tree. I want you excited and invested."*

"I've been working twenty hour days on this, I'm pretty fucking invested."

The grin turned into a laugh. *"I know you have. My partner is worried about you."*

Ioan felt heat rise to eir cheeks. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be a bother being up so much."

"No, no. We cannot hear you or anything. They are just worried because we do not hear you, or hear from you. We both like you."

The historian nodded, chastened.

"Do not worry about it, Ioan. It really is fine." Dear patted eir shoulder. *"The name, though. The name is the important thing right now."*

"And the name is?" Ioan's mind raced. Could Dear even say the name? Was it the poet, miraculously talking through years to the system? That would be exciting.

"Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen, of the Ode clade."

Ioan froze.

Dear stopped a few paces ahead and turned, looking intently at em while its tail lashed excitedly behind it.

"They...what?"

"Good." Dear laughed. *"I am glad that I am not the only one who had to pick their jaw up off the ground."*

Ioan stuffed eir hands in eir pockets. Brought them back out to press against eir forehead. Crossed eir arms. Returned eir hands to eir pockets. Suddenly anxious. "I thought you said that Qoheleth couldn't be from within the clade."

"And so I believed. For him to share the Name is...a breach. Apostasy of a sort that I thought precluded the very prospect."

Ioan did not push further, instead relishing the surprise. "It's a real the-call's-coming-from-inside-the-house moment."

Dear tilted its head, ears perked.

"Never mind. Old trivia." Ioan shook eir head and rocked back on eir heels. "How, though? How'd you get the name?"

"A hunch I had, actually, though someone else dug it up."

"What was the hunch?"

"Signifier."

Ioan rifled through eir mental notes on the project. "Signifier...from the first encrypted note? Signifier is the password something something?"

Dear nodded. *"Hardly anyone uses it anymore, but signifier used to be what we called the names of long-lived branches. It's still used here and there among older clades."*

"Right, yeah. Ioan Bălan is my name, Ioan#c1494bf is my signifier."

"Yes. It fell out of use quickly. Too clumsy a word. I use it now and then, when I can get away with it."

"Makes sense, yeah. So they're..."

"He is an Odist, yes. Way, way down-tree. One of the first instances." Dear's smile faltered, *"We were not very good at record keeping back then. We are not really now, to be honest, but the System is better. We...we did not know that he was*

still alive.”

“Didn’t know? I thought you all talked to each other. You must, in order to keep the names straight. Wait, ‘he’?”

“Remember, all of our names are chosen from our stanza. I talk with the other nine within my stanza every now and then — some more than others — and we filled out the stanza not long ago.” The fox’s expression grew glassy. *“Life Breeds Life...that is the second stanza, first line. They are a conservative bunch. I only know one or two, but I assume that others are out there. And yes, ‘he’. Michelle was a woman, but those early days were heady.”*

Ioan nodded, “So the first stanza were the first forked, meaning he was the eleventh fork?”

“The first line from each stanza were the first forked, back when it cost to fork. Like, cost real reputation. Anyway, the first fork of the second stanza — second fork overall — must have just been a little more conservative than the rest of us. Or liberal. It is difficult to discern.”

“I...hmm. May I ask something potentially personal?”

Dear nodded.

“The Odists that don’t want me digging into this too much, the ones you didn’t really talk to, are they from that side of the clade?”

The fox’s ears perked, *“To the last, yes. Why?”*

“How will, er...”

“Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen. Just Life is fine, too, though if he has chosen Qoheleth, we must call him Qoheleth.”

“How will Qoheleth react to the search? To me?”

Dear shrugged and turned its back on Ioan.

The historian stood, quiet and still, and watched as the fox took a few steps deeper into the prairie, crossed its arms and stood straight, staring up into the bruised sky. *“To the second bit, I do not know that it matters. He is one of us. And even those of us who did not want any outsiders brought on board are only frowning, looking down their noses at the thought, not gathering up arms.”*

“And to the first bit?” Ioan pressed. “What do you think he will think of the search?”

“What do I think? Or what do I feel?”

Ioan scuffed eir foot against the grass. The temperature was dropping out on the prairie. It would be an inconvenience to have to slosh back to the house if it rained.

“Both.”

“I think that he would probably get a kick out of it. I know that I am. Several of the others are, and the ones who are not just do not care that much or are perhaps more angry than curious.” Dear turned back around. Its arms were held tight against its front, guarding. Whether from cold or emotion, Ioan couldn’t tell. *“As for what I feel, I feel that it is his game. He is the one running it. But even if it is a game, it is not play. There is no real fun in it, just...snark. Anger. Pride, maybe. It is a game he has worked at perfecting, and he wants us to see that.”*

Ioan marveled at the change in Dear, though with this raise in stakes, ey felt some of the same.

The fox’s smile was weak as it added, *“He has designs. Designs and reasons.”*

Ioan and Dear trudged back to the low block of concrete, a bunker against the storm, as a chill wind swept away the petrichor and brought with it the rain.

AwDae — 2112

No menu.

No menu and no HUD.

Without eir HUD, there was no way that AwDae would be able to teleport. Ey would need to swipe up a destination entry and tap or speak the command for sending emself off. Hell, even if ey was able to get at the menu, ey wouldn't have the coordinates for any of the particular places ey had come up with to visit.

If locations within a dream even had coordinates, that was. Of all eir explorations, ey had begun to doubt that this was a sim. No sim, no coordinates. No coordinates, no teleport.

Ey would have to walk and just hope that it would not be tiring. No calories burned when taking simulated steps in a simulated environment. All the same, the prospect felt exhausting.

Eir first location on the list had been the university, that sprawling campus where ey had studied (and, later, pioneered) the integration tech ey used daily at work. It seemed meaningful enough: that place most closely associated with the beginnings of eir susceptibility.

Without teleport, however, that was out of the question. It was halfway across the continent.

Something more manageable, then.

The clinic where ey has had eir implants installed was halfway across town. It would take an hour or two to traverse, ey supposed. A guess. Ey had never walked it before.

Ey had time, though, it seemed. All the time in the world.

With little else to do, ey once again slept early and woke early in turn. If it was to take a good chunk of the day, at least ey could do so while it was light out.

Shouldering the appropriated pack, ey set out from home as soon as it was bright enough to do so. A short walk down to the school, then further down the hill toward Broadway, which would get em most of the way there. After that, two blocks east, and ey would find emself at the squat, white building of the clinic.

From there, it would be easy. There had been about a dozen appointments in the building, so ey knew it well enough that it would likely be in reasonable shape. Assuming the doors were unlocked, at least.

The first skip happened halfway down the hill from the school.

AwDae reached the corner of the fence surrounding the track and football practice field, remembered eir brief jogging phase, and how ey always turned north through the neighborhoods before reaching Broadway, which was always so noisy. And then, without warning, ey was gliding down the street in a sitting position.

Ey yelped, startled, and flailed eir arms out for support, left elbow catching painfully on something solid a foot to the side of em.

The skip took perhaps a second all told. A second of blurred darkness, of shadow and motion. A second of panic and confusion before the rest of the car formed around em. Ey was sitting in the passenger seat of the family sedan, coasting down the road toward Broadway at what ey supposed must be the speed limit.

The car, like the books in eir room, took a while to swim into focus. Even then, parts of it shifted indecisively, unable to come to rest in some solid, known state. Ey had only tried to drive it once before giving up on the prospect, so the dashboard in front of the steering wheel was particularly vague. Hints of dials. Gestures at needles. Smudges of marks on the levers on the steering column. The back of the car lurched in and out of focus sickeningly.

Ey realized ey was holding eir breath and let it out in a shaky whine.

The car continued down the street toward Broadway. Turned smoothly without stopping at the light. Accelerated seamlessly, without haste, without care for its occupant's stress. The soft hum of the motor and the road noise beneath the wheels was as indistinct as all of the visuals. Indistinct and disconcerting.

After a few short blocks, AwDae had a hypothesis. Of course the sim — correction: eir memories — did not include walking along Broadway. Ey had never done so, had only driven. Or been driven, as ey had never gotten a license emself. All eir memories could dredge up were those of the car, of moving smoothly along the road.

No teleportation, then. Just fast-travel.

Eir one experience with hallucinogens had prepared them for the blurring, smearing effect of the world around em. The fog did not diminish, but it played tricks with the buildings lining the road to either side. There was the house with the psychic's sign out front, relatively clear. But the rest of the buildings were shifting, unsettled. When focusing on them, AwDae saw them as flat facades. No depth. Textures on a low-poly wireframe. It was a nightmare of that hidden time of intrasaccadic perception, that moment of suppressed visual input when one shifts one's gaze. That moment laid bare, elongated.

Ey moaned and closed eir eyes. The sights were wrong. The sound was wrong. Even the feeling of acceleration and deceleration, the swing around turns, was off, as though the entire universe was poorly rendered and em right along with it.

It was poorly rendered. Eir stomach turned at the wrongness of it all.

The next skip hit as a memory of walking through the parking lot of the supermarket at Broadway and Timberline asserted dominance over the memory of driving along the thoroughfare. So suddenly was ey on eir feet and walking parallel to Broadway, so surprising the shift, that ey stumbled and fell to eir hands and knees.

AwDae retched. Nothing came up. Not even the sting of bile.

Ey lost track of time, sitting in the empty parking lot. Half an hour? An hour? Trying to master the urge to return home and disappear beneath the covers. Anything to avoid that horrible, half-remembered drive.

And yet, ey had to do *something*. If there was even a chance of em being able to get out of this dream, this non-place, ey would have to keep moving. Keep moving and hunting and looking and thinking.

With a groan, ey stood and walked toward the road once more.

The skip came as expected, and ey gritted eir teeth as the world whirled past. Perhaps ey would be able to make it to the east coast, but if that meant eight hours of this — home to the airport, the plane, a different airport, transit to the dorms — well...hopefully there was a work-around.

The rest of the journey to the clinic passed without further skipping. There were a few shaky moments

passing through the pedestrian mall, where ey'd spent countless hours walking, but apparently ey had spent enough time traveling along the road along whatever metric required. Eir 'car' continued down the empty street, blithely changing lanes to pass vehicles that weren't there, turn signal and steering wheel moving on their own.

And then it parked.

The low-slung building of the clinic was just as AwDae remembered it.

The idiom got a laugh out of the fox. Perhaps that was literally true. It could be no other way than how ey remembered it. The building was as it must be.

Preempting another skip, ey scrambled to open the door of the car and hop out on eir own before it was done for em. With a satisfying thunk, the passenger door of the dusty blue sedan swung shut behind em.

Promising, ey thought. Perhaps I just have to be more deliberate about it. I'll get in the car later, follow the drive back home, and maybe it'll park in the driveway as easy as that.

Eir claws clacked against the pavement leading to the smoky glass doors. It wasn't overly warm out, but the cool air that breathed out of the clinic was refreshing nevertheless. Something static. Something still. Something known.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Dr Carter Ramirez,

We would like to thank you, first of all, for all of your continued efforts in working on these cases of the lost. Your services are invaluable and are providing the families and friends of the lost with hope, not to mention the world at large. We have come to rely on this technology in our daily lives in all spheres of work and pleasure.

As you know, research here at UCL is funded through a series of organizations and foundations working together. These relationships are both an expression of trust and a political statement, and both of those expressions work in both directions. We welcome conversations, questions, and comments about research from the sponsors, mediated through the appropriate channels.

A recent suggestion regarding your project was that more effort be placed on researching the neurological aspects of these cases, focusing primarily on the treatment and prevention of such events in the future.

As such, we are requesting that you add one more neuroscientist intern to the team. Unfortunately, due to budgetary constraints, your team must remain the same size as it is currently. At your earliest convenience, could you please respond with the name of a member of your group not on the neuroscience side who will, if possible, be offered a transfer to another project? Admin will take care of the rest.

Please continue the excellent work. If you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to send a note.

Ari Liebler

Research Coordinator

Carter slid her chair slowly back from her rig and walked numbly to the coffee station. She wasn't tired. She *wasn't* tired. She was a bit too awake, if anything. She just needed something to do while mulling over the email from admin. Such a politely-worded request to change the course of her project and fire one of her team.

Pouring herself half a cup of chicory coffee, she looked out over the room, at the heads bowed over tablets or nestled into the headrests of rigs. How could she possibly be expected to choose who would get the axe?

Carter slipped back to her desk and delved in, stepping out of the workspace and into a side room, one of the small areas off to the side of the main space where virtual meetings could be held, where others' avs would show up in full focus rather than just shadowy shapes.

Shadowy shapes. The dream still dogged her.

“Meeting, when you get a chance,” she murmured into a message pane, then sent it off to Sanders.

She received a ping of acknowledgement and settled back to wait.

It was only a few minutes — hardly enough time for her to organize her thoughts — before the head of neurochem stepped into the room and settled into the chair across from her. “What’s up, Ramirez?”

“Here,” Carter said, swiping the email she had received onto a vcard and handed it over to Sanders. “Give that a read.”

“Rough stuff,” he said. “Who do you think will be the unlucky one?”

Carter sighed. “I’m not sure. I can’t think of anyone I would want to lose. Anyone we could afford to lose, even.”

Sanders nodded and tossed the card back to Carter, who recycled it.

“Look,” Carter continued after an awkward pause. “I know you weren’t a fan of the social link I mentioned before...”

“Did I suggest this?” Sanders laughed, holding up his hands. “No, of course not. I’d not presume to go behind your back like that. You knew my reservations, but I’d rather talk about it with you and the team than pull something like that.”

Carter nodded. The sincerity was clear. She relaxed back against the seat. “I got it, yeah. I’m sorry. It just came so suddenly and seemed connected, is all. Maybe I’m getting too good at seeing connections that aren’t there.”

Sanders politely said nothing, looking down at his hands.

“Well, hey. Thanks for that. It’s reassuring. I’ll let you get back to your stuff, and will call the team in for a huddle about this after lunch.”

“Sounds good,” Sanders said, pushing himself up out of his seat and walking back into the sim.

Carter watched as he turned from a solid avatar back into a shadow, thinking. If she was going to pursue this line any further, she’d likely have to do much of the work herself.

Something, she realized, she was already prepared to do.

The team was visibly unhappy at the news. They had been working together over the months that they had on the project and by now felt themselves a well-oiled machine. Rightfully so.

“This is going to throw a huge fucking wrench into things,” Avery grumbled. “We lose one of our own, then have to get someone new up to speed. It’s going to take ages.”

“I know.” Carter sighed. “I’d push back if I thought it’d get me anywhere, but they say it’s a matter of those who sign the checks, so I think I’m S-O-L on that front.”

A tense silence greeted her. No one was looking at each other, just staring at shoes, ceiling, walls.

“Listen, I think we have some time. Absolutely no pressure, but if anyone wants to volunteer, cool. Otherwise, I’ll put some thought into this and make a decision. I’ll have to, I mean. I don’t want to. Either way, I’ll go to bat for you in trying to get a transfer rather than just the sack.”

Another sullen silence. Carter shrugged helplessly, and with an apologetic look, walked back to her rig. She had little more consolation to offer.

Once delved in, Carter frowned. A small, pulsing envelope icon in her peripheral vision let her know she had another email. *If it's more bad news, I'm going to scream.*

The address wasn't from someone at UCL. Or the UMC, for that matter. It was a free address, something personal rather than professional. It had made it past the filters, though, so perhaps it was legitimate, despite its shady provenance. Perhaps not bad news, but Carter remained wary.

Dr. Ramirez,

I'm writing to ask for your help in the search for two of my friends who are lost.

I know there's probably not much you can do to help, and you might not even be able to talk to me, but my friends and I are scared, and want to know what's going on. And if we can help, we'll do all we can.

Their names are RJ Brewster and Collin Jackson.

If you can, email me back. I understand if you can't.

Sasha.

Carter frowned harder. Not bad news, then, but neither was it good.

This Sasha, RJ's friend, was right. She technically wasn't supposed to respond, at least not with anything more than a form letter stating such. Carter wasn't even supposed to know that RJ existed, who *ey* was, much less that she knew who *Sasha* was from Johansson.

She began digging through administrivia to look through the form letter. At the same time, a part of her sequestered itself and began to plan.

She would have to do most of the work on this herself, yes — perhaps all of it — but maybe she could do a little more outside research. She had done so with Johansson, why not with Sasha? She wouldn't be able to rely on it, couldn't publish it, but there was no harm in more information, was there? Even if she had to strike out on her own?

Before she lost her resolve, she filled out the form letter and scheduled it to reply at five, near the end of her day. Then she paced around the workspace, organizing and cleaning decks, too distracted to dig into numbers as she sorted through the plan in her mind.

She left that evening at five after five, earlier than usual. She had been prepared to beg off with feeling ill, but found she didn't need to: most of the team were also packing up and leaving. No one looked happy. One of their jobs was on the line, of course they would be unhappy. Everyone avoided eye contact on the way out.

Determined now, Carter left quickly and, standing in the station for her train, fumbled out her phone and started typing.

Sasha,

I know you just got a reply from my work address, but I'm replying here as well. While UCL and the team I work with aren't able to provide any assistance or information with regards to the cases, I might be able to help a little on my own, and I'm sure you'll be able to help me. We don't have much information on RJ or Collin, and I'm desperate for more.

Maybe we can figure out a way for that information to get to the team later, but for now, we can talk here.

-Carter

She hesitated, thumb hovering over the 'send' button. This was reckless, she knew, but the more she thought about the interactions of the lost, the more she was convinced that there was something to the connection. Especially here. Here, where she knew now that patient 0224e8 was RJ, and that aca973d7 was likely this Collin Sasha had mentioned.

And the more sure she was, the worse the letter from admin stung.

She gritted her teeth and hit 'send'.

Qoheleth — 2305

It has been long enough that I am thinking of myself as Qoheleth now. All that slow washing-away of given names to replace with chosen ones. Something worth being methodical with. I have even begun introducing myself as Qoheleth whenever I go out, just to try it on for size.

That I have never actually done so is of little concern. It is ancillary to the problem at hand. Something I can tackle later, or at least tackle in thought. I can daydream about the name change. Just plan and plan and plan, like I have planned everything else.

I like the sound of it. I like the way it feels in my mouth when I say it out loud. I like the connotations of ‘teacher’ and ‘gatherer’ and ‘director of the assembled’. I want to feel the way that it feels to be someone different, and I have found at least a part of that in this name, the name that *I* chose for *myself*. Not some line of a poem I wish we would all forget. *Could* all forget. I may not have yet taught or gathered yet, but I am working constantly to earn the moniker.

And ‘Hebel’. Hebel was another name I picked up. Vain, futile, mere breath.

Qoheleth’s words, in the book written so very, very long ago, were all about hebel. “This, too, is meaningless,” Qoheleth had written after that long walk through life. Try pleasure. Try work. Try prayer. This, too, is meaningless.

That is not how I envision the name, though.

I think of the two names as signifiers rather than simple names. I think of the two moods that they bring. And I think most often of the two *sources* of names. Not the book, not the time at which it was written. My two sources. Now.

Qoheleth was the name I gave myself out of hope. It is a name of goals and aspirations. It embodies the things that I want to do. It takes all of my plans and me, maker of plans, and binds them up neatly into a word. Ties a pretty bow to the top. A single word. A name and also a rejection of *the* Name.

Hebel was the name I gave myself out of despair. It is a name of self deprecation and a way of reminding myself that, lofty as my goals may be, they are all vanity. Mere breath. Meaningless in the end.

Together, the names remind me that I am doing this for a reason. All of these resources, all of *my* resources, those found objects and hand-me-downs accrued over the years, are being built up and strung together into a cohesive goal. A net. Less trap than source of safety. Something to catch. Something to rescue.

They, the resources, are all nothing. The reasons are all nothing. Vapor. Mere breath.

The whole plan is nothing except for the truth underlying it. Not to fear God, but to...to something. To *do* something. To *be* something. To get the whole clade to see. My clade.

Qoheleth

No, my *old* clade. I am not of the Ode any longer.

I am Hebel Qoheleth now.

Hebel Qoheleth.

The old name is dead. I have followed it to the letter: I chose death as I must. As we all must.

I am Hebel Qoheleth.

AwDae — 2112

If AwDae had been expecting to find some fresh clue, some exciting conclusion to eir adventure at the clinic, ey was disappointed. The office was an office, nothing more. Cold. Hollow. Impersonal, despite countless touches cleverly engineered to add personality.

If ey had expected perhaps some comfort from familiar surroundings, ey was also disappointed. Walking into the clinic, memories fell upon em like ticks from branches. Latching on, leaching substance. Consult, surgery, treatments, training, follow-up, training, training, training. Getting to know the doctor and his team. Getting to know the trainers. Learning to loathe them. Learning to love what they had to offer.

There was nothing there.

There were the couches in the lobby, of course. There had to be. That is what belonged in lobbies. There was the desk where ey checked in, the receptionist's chair behind it. Such desks belonged, and thus followed chairs. There was the hallway. There were the locked and unlocked doors — ey now suspected that the locked doors hid rooms that ey had never seen, eir memory refusing to consider things never remembered.

There was the dimly lit surgery suite.

There was the row of paired mirror rigs. Instructor, student.

There was the whole affair laid out before em, and no solutions. No explanations.

Ey paced the halls. Sat on the lobby's couches. Sat at the rigs, dumb and silent. Lay on the operating table, face down as ey remembered. Laughed at the way eir snout poked so perfectly through the slot meant for an oxygen mask. Rifled through notes, their swimming text a mocking jeer.

Ey threw eir weight against a locked door, far more solid than it had any right to be. No rocking in the frame evident. It may as well have been a wall.

Tears stung at eir eyes. School, home, this place. Everything was dreamlike, unsettled, waffling between mind-numbing and nightmarish.

Not dreamlike, no, but a dream. If, as ey now suspected, all of this was simply taking place in a combination of eir mind and eir implants, why would there be these tantalizing clues dangled in front of em? Why would eir mind think to invent a mode of transit that simply skipped em along in jagged, stomach-churning jumps?

Tears flowed freely now, and ey hunched down against the unknown, unknowable door, first crouching, then sitting with the skirt pooled around eir waist as tears stained the fur of eir cheeks.

Nightmares.

Dreams.

Ey needed something to anchor emself to. Ey needed something to hold onto that was not dependent on

clues and tidbits of information that were...were what? Stored in eir implants? In some core in eir exocortex, dumped when ey was pulled back?

Ey needed to make sense of something in this pale semblance of a world. Make understanding. Make knowing. Make lucidity.

Dreams and lucidity. What mattered a lucid dream if there was nothing to wake up from?

And yet was it not lucid? Did ey not have some semblance of control over this place? Ey had been trusting that it was some sort of locked down sim. One in which ey had no ACLs. Some sort of semi-scripted film from which ey could not deviate.

But if it was a dream, if it was all within eir head and implants, was it not completely eirs? Did ACLs matter in a dream?

The fog of war. The importance of the sound board. The very setting of eir school and childhood home. All of these were from within. The ancient strategy games ey had played growing up. The thing that had captured eir imagination in school. The places all stained with memory. Places which ey still dreamed of, even with home now in London. All things and places and memories where ey had spent uncounted hours honing and honing and honing.

Were these limits of the technological system operating in tandem with eir nervous system? Or were they simply limitations of a panicked mind?

Both?

Neither?

A test, then: something within said limits to begin with. Ey knew eir home. Ey knew eir room. Ey knew the feeling of the duvet beneath em. Ey knew the feeling of sitting on that bed, reading far past eir bedtime. Flashlight and book, listening for footsteps, feigning sleep at the slightest noise.

Ey *knew* it.

Ey closed eir eyes on the dim hall of the clinic.

Ey dreamed it, dreamed of home.

Ey felt it, breathed in the rich scent of the memory of it.

Ey knew every detail of it.

Ey dreamed it.

Ey felt it.

Ey reached out and, in one paw, clutched.

And eir fist was full of duvet.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Eating was not a necessity in the System. While it was easy to go for months or years without eating, it was something that remained a habit for many who chose to upload. Remnants of biology. Ioan suspected that there was no small amount of hedonism involved in killing one's body to decamp to a world beyond scarcity. Eating became a purely sensory affair, one focused on taste and scent and company.

All the same, dinner was a muted affair. Dear's partner cooked that evening. Ioan sat with the two around the table and tried not to feel like a third wheel.

Dear and Ioan made it back to the house just as the first cold sprinkles had started to fall. Once they'd reached the patio, they stood a moment and watched, just out of reach of the rain. The weather went from cloudy, through sprinkles and drizzles, to stormy. Ioan focused primarily on the sound. The way ey was able to pick out the individual sounds of droplets striking dry grass during the sprinkles. The static of the drizzles. The rush and roar of the storm itself.

Ey could not guess what Dear was thinking. It stood, watching the rain and shivering. It looked contemplative, pensive. Somewhere north of sad, south of simply thoughtful. Ioan sifted for the word, gave up, and guided the fox back into its house.

Ioan felt some energy return with the mix of curry and lentils and rice. Calories an empty term, that is nonetheless what it felt like: like eating a hearty meal, regaining strength. Perhaps it was just the act of being present. Of existing. Engaging with one's sensorium. Mindfulness. Perhaps that was why so many within the system still engaged with food after all.

Dear picked up somewhat with the food. Not as much as Ioan had. Nor, it seemed, as much as its partner had hoped, judging by their own apparent anxiety. Dinner was good, necessary, but plagued with silences. Even after, as the three sat talking, their conversation was full of nothings.

It wasn't until they poured wine and moved to the couch that Dear began to open up.

"I script a lot of my conversations. Perhaps most," it said, staring into its 'glass', wide-rimmed to make way for a fox muzzle to lap. Ioan felt strange drinking wine from something more akin to a bowl

Ioan looked up. "Mm?"

"I was just thinking." It shrugged, swirling its wine. It took a few laps. *"Earlier, when I was sharing that bit about the Name with you, I had that all scripted. It was all pulled together in my head. The whole thing. I would make a few jokes. Lead you on. Tell you the name, and then we would bask in the wonder and truth of it."*

Ioan nodded, silent.

"Just like I spent dinner scripting this conversation."

Dear's partner gave its shin a playful kick. The fox grinned.

"It is thoroughly ingrained. I am pretty sure most people do it, it is just—" It frowned, sighed. *"I had the whole thing scripted and planned, and then you asked questions — as you are meant to, of course — and my script collapsed."*

"I 'went off script', you mean?"

"Yes."

"Sorry about that, I—"

"Oh goodness, no!" Dear laughed, shaking its head, *"I am trying to apologize here. Do not steal my thunder. I just meant to say that you asked good questions and got me thinking, and I was not expecting that."*

"It likes to proclaim," teased Dear's partner.

"It is not not true." Dear smirked. *"But anyway, I am sorry I got all quiet, I did not mean to put a damper on things."*

"You didn't, I—"

"I did, though. Dinner was like some depressing silent movie."

"Don't sulk, fox," its partner said. "Dinner was fine. And let poor Ioan finish."

Ioan grinned, letting the banter play out before continuing. "All I meant to say was that I worried that I'd offended with my questions."

"Not at all." The fennec furrowed its brow. *"I mean, not really. I felt offended, is what I mean to say. When you asked how Life would react to you being a part of this investigation, it stung. An unfair reaction, I admit. Just one from the gut. I was offended because that made me realize that I'd invited you along on this as some sort of tool. Something I could wave about and say, 'See, look what I have!' A tool or a trophy. Offense borne of shame."*

Ioan looked down into eir wine, taken aback.

"Doubly unfair of me, and for that I apologize." Dear raised its glass in a salute. *"So you asked a very good question because it made me question my own role in this hunt. It made me think of what others would think. Me bringing along an amanuensis and historian. It made me think of why I am doing so. Something I had not considered as well as I thought."*

"And I think the reason for me doing so goes further than even I had planned. I think I have you along as a means of keeping me grounded. A means of keeping the clade from just doing what the clade has always done yet again, of—"

The fox abruptly stopped talking and set its glass down on the table. Its ears were standing erect and its fur bristled down along the back of its neck. Hackles raised. It looked frantic.

Ioan looked to Dear's partner for explanation. They sent a very faint sensorium ping in response.

Sensorium message. That was it.

The message lasted less than a minute before the fox leapt off the couch and dashed off to another room, forking almost as an afterthought along the way.

The fork turned quickly and padded back to the couch. It didn't seem to be able to sit, and instead kept pacing in front of Ioan and its partner.

After a few tense laps of wine, it said, *"Qoheleth just sent me a message."*

"What?" Ioan rushed to place eir glass on the table with Dear's. "You mean Life?"

"He asked me to call him Qoheleth, but yes. He sent me a message. May I pass it on?"

Dear didn't wait.

The message began with a sickening flash. Highest priority. It came with a rush of adrenaline and a sensation of falling. Sudden and intense fear replaced with an incongruously jovial voice. An old voice, almost Santa Claus-

y.

The contrast made Ioan's teeth ache.

"Hi Dear, this is Qoheleth. Not Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen, but Qoheleth. I am glad to see that you have kept at it and gotten so close. I am not sending this to deter you, but to cheer you on. I am going to send you a bit more information — just you, mind! — but I want you to get the rest of the clade in on this. I want to see if you can get them working with the same delightful fervor you and Ioan have.

"So anyway, here's the bone I am gonna toss. You should be looking at the node ending in 343f1077. That will get you right to my door. May need the gist node ending in e39fcd49 to help, too. You already have the key, I think. I expect most, if not all of you, though, you understand? You are lovely, Dear, and I cannot wait to see you and your friend, but I would like to host as much of the clade as I can.

"I am quite excited for this, and I am totally looking forward to see you all, yes?"

There was a moment's silence, a sense of lingering, and then, "Oh, and thank you, Dear. You have made this a treat. You are the closest one to the thing I am after, and I am glad this tickled you as much as has me. I think you and I both know why, too.

"Anyway, see you soon, fox. Cheers."

The relative calm that fell over Ioan signified that the message had ended.

"Holy shit." Ey slouched back into the couch, eyes wide.

"Right? Hold on, do not go anywhere. Going to reduce conflicts while I make the calls." The fork of Dear quit without fanfare.

Ioan shook eir head and said again, quieter, "Holy shit." Ey reached for eir glass of wine.

"Bone I'm going to toss," hmm?" Dear's partner mused. "He makes it sound like a game."

Ioan nodded and watched them spin their wine glass between their palms by the stem, watched the wine creep up the sides from centripetal force.

"It showed you, too, then?" ey asked.

They laughed, "Of course. I know I've not been hitting the books or the streets like you two have, but I'm still in this. I was the one who pointed it to you."

Ey nodded, feeling eir cheeks flush. "Of course, sorry. Do you know what he meant by "closest one to the thing I'm after"?"

"Maybe. I only really have an inkling, though, and I'd rather let Dear explain."

Ioan nodded again, "That's fair."

There was an uneasy silence for a few minutes. The two sat on the couch, sipping their wine and mulling over the message.

For eir part, Ioan was considering the strange sense of the familiarity with which Qoheleth had addressed Dear — "see you soon, fox" — as well as *why* the fact that this seemed incongruous to em. It was difficult to think of Qoheleth as a member of the same clade as Dear after so long of striving to believe the opposite. Hard to think of him as someone with whom Dear shared a root identity after so long of thinking of this person as someone entirely different.

Silences have their own rhythms, Ioan knew, so ey waited until there came a point at which ey could ask, "About all this, do you know much more about the whole Name business?"

Dear's partner looked up. "Who, Qoheleth's?"

"No, I mean the whole name of the poet."

"Ah." They shrugged. "Not particularly. I just know it's something the clade has an almost religious fixation on. Most of them, at least."

"Do you know it?"

They laughed. "Oh, gosh no. I mean...well, do you know why Dear's a fox?"

"Why's that?"

"Because it likes foxes."

Ioan felt as if ey'd stumbled. Dear's partner laughed.

"Seriously, that's true. But also, it was an experiment. I don't know the Name because I'm not allowed to know the Name, that much is obvious from the clade's reaction to this whole business. But I also don't know the Name because I'm pretty sure Dear doesn't even know it. Not anymore."

"How do you mean? I thought all of the Ode clade knew the Name, kept it secret and close to their hearts or something."

"Many do, I've been told. And I think that Dear does this too, in its own way. That way means doing its best to forget it and to move on."

"To get to the acceptance stage of grief?"

Dear's partner nodded. "So it did its best to forget."

"Is that something that one needs to work on, then?"

"Have you forgotten anything recently?"

"I, well—" Ioan stopped and thought for a moment. It was a difficult question to comprehend, much less answer. How could ey know whether or not ey had forgotten something by going back through eir thoughts?

All the same, ey prowled through eir memories. Even just those from the time ey had been spending with Dear. They were jumbled, sure, and lots of impressions, but no, nothing was forgotten that ey could think of. With focus, ey could recall the entire afternoon on the prairie with startling precision.

"I'll spare you the details by passing on some thoughts from Dear," they said. "We aren't gifted with eidetic memories when we upload, but neither can we truly forget anything we experience after that point. It's as though each memory is labeled with a priority level from zero to ten, and when it hits zero, it's forgotten. Except the actual scale only goes down to naught-point-oh-oh-oh-oh-one or something. We can kick it way to the back of our minds, down the priority list, but we can't forget it. The system won't let us."

Ioan nodded. "So Dear tried to forget, tried to kick that memory all the way to the back of its mind. What does that have to do with being a fox, though?"

"Know much about exocortices?"

"Sure, I've got a few up and running for storing long term stuff. Hell, I've got one for this project. Isn't that kind of like forgetting?"

"Almost, but you can never forget that they exist, can never forget the passphrase."

Ioan frowned, directing it to eir wine rather than Dear's partner.

"But exos also need part of your sensorium to match, right? That way you can't just tell someone your passphrase and let them in."

Ioan frowned. Ey had a hunch of where this was headed.

“So Dear put the Name into an exo all by itself, and then tried to change its sensorium enough that it couldn’t get back in.”

“I see,” Ioan said, sipping at eir wine again. Dry. It left em parched. “It’s a fox because it likes foxes, but that wasn’t the goal. The goal was to no longer quite be the same Dear that put the Name into the exo.”

Dear’s partner nodded.

“How did it do that? By forking?”

Another nod. “Forking and mutating, forking and mutating. You can change your form easily enough, but it’s much harder to change your sensorium. I don’t even know how many times or tweaks it took. That’s how it got into instance artistry.”

“Damn. That’s intense.”

Dear’s partner grinned. “It’s an intense fox.”

“True enough.”

“It’ll be back soon enough. Let me throw a question back at you. What are your thoughts on the last thing Qoheleth said? “I think you and I both know why”?”

Ioan settled back into the couch with the remainder of eir wine and thought for a moment. “I’m wondering if he was talking about what Dear did to forget the Name. On one hand, it sounds like a sort of congratulations. Like, “I’m glad you’re able to move on,” but after all that talk of the clade and all of what Dear said earlier, I’m not sure if that’s the whole story.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, has Dear mentioned to you the more conservative side of the Ode clade?”

Its partner winced. “Plenty.”

“It said that Qoheleth is from that conservative side. I wonder if that’s not working out well for them.”

“Conservatism?”

“Yeah. Retaining all of those things from the original Michelle Haje, yet following a dispersionista path more in letter than in spirit. Dear called them batty.”

“It’s called them that to me, too.”

“I’m just wondering if it’s right,” Ioan said, finishing eir wine. “Maybe they are batty. And getting worse.”

Sasha — 2112

Sasha wanted to be pleased with the rapidity with which everything was happening. It hadn't even been a week, and here was one of the lead researchers of the lost mailing from a private address.

She desperately wanted to be pleased. Wanted to believe that things were moving forward. Wanted more than anything to smell the lingering scent of fox and cat in the Crown Pub, just to know that ey was there.

And yet, she wasn't. It was all wrong. Everything about this was wrong. There was no way to forget that, despite the forward momentum, she was still doing all of this for what was widely acknowledged to be a lost cause.

She began typing.

Dr. Ramirez,

Wow, I'm glad you got back to me! I was not expecting that. I'm a little confused as to why, but I guess no sense in questioning it.

Do you have information on RJ and Collin? I'll gladly give what I can. They both were good people. RJ and I went to school together, and the three of us spent a lot of time together in sim. They would spend hours talking politics (mostly Collin yelling).

The last thing I got from RJ was this:

AwDae here. Looks like there's a lot going on in DDR activity (where'd you get this, Debarre?). Cicero (Collin) was into a lot, and I'm not trying to go all conspiracy nut on you all, but do you think that maybe he got in too deep or something? Not saying someone tried to do it too him or anything, just that maybe the more one uses the net, the more likely it is to happen to them? I mean seriously, look at all of his votes, and his stash of credits! I'll keep poking at this after rehearsal.

Do you have any idea what that might be about? I know I said Cicero was super into politics, but do you think RJ was onto something here?

I've copied Cicero's partner, Debarre (don't know real name, sorry!) and Caitlin Fowler from where RJ works.

Sasha

The response was only an hour in coming. As with Caitlin, it was short and to the point.

Sasha, all - @129822922:d.no.onehere.board#default

A throwaway user? The wrongness intensified.

All the same, Sasha logged in and swiped her way over to the address Carter had provided.

As with most throwaway rooms, it was a cube measuring about five meters on a side, a faint grid lining the floor, and as with most throwaway avatars, Carter was visible only as a gesture at humanity. The lines of a face hinting at expressions, features. Average height. Gray skin. Androgynous hair.

“Sasha. Uh...you’re a skunk.”

She frowned.

“Right, sorry. I’m sorry for meeting you like this.”

Sasha shook her head. “It’s okay, I guess. Can you tell me why?”

“Will you accept “because of a dream” as an answer?”

Her frown deepened.

“I suppose not.” Carter hugged her arms around her middle, a gesture that looked distinctly out of place from the gray avatar. “You mention, uh...AwDae investigating DDR activity, as well as Collin’s own involvement but—well, should we wait for others to show up?”

“I don’t know if any of them are coming.” She felt the tightness of panic in her chest intensify. “I don’t know where Debarre is. Probably work, it’s midday for us. And I imagine Caitlin’s show is on.”

The figure before her sighed. “Right.”

Sasha pulled up her deck. “I can take notes, perhaps,” she allowed. “I don’t suppose you’ll want ACLs with a throwaway.”

“No, probably not. Notes will have to do.” Carter seemed to compose herself, and then continued as she was saying before. “You mentioned the relation to DDR, and we already suspected that Collin and RJ were friends. This is something we’ve been looking into with my group. The possibility of a social vector, I mean. It’s gone poorly.”

“Poorly how?”

“Well, there was unexpected resistance within the team, and then shortly after taking this tack, the hammer came down from above saying we had to fire someone — someone studying this aspect — and shift our investigation to the neurological side.”

Sasha blinked. “Are you suggesting you’re being told to not look at social aspects?”

Despite the mere sketch of facial features, the av’s smile still carried the weariness heard in the tone of its voice. “In a way, yes. I had a dream about shadows following everyone and I guess I could say I’m a bit spooked. Too many coincidences in too short a time.”

“I’d chalk it all up to paranoia if I weren’t feeling so anxious, myself.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“I, well.” She brushed her paws down over the fur on her forearms, stalling to hunt for a response. Any response. “I don’t know. Things are moving so quickly. I don’t know how to explain. I met up with Caitlin and she told me a lot, and then I emailed you, and your two responses didn’t do anything to assuage my fears.”

Carter nodded, didn’t respond.

“But I don’t know that anything you might have said beyond “we fixed it, AwDae’s awake” could have done anything but. Even your “we’re working on it” form letter was anxiety-inducing in its own way. I know you’re working on it. I imagine a lot of people are.” She hesitated, then added, “But that doesn’t really help to hear.”

“No, I imagine not.”

“And to then get another email saying that you wanted to talk things through outside of work just added to my fears. Like, what could that possibly mean?”

“I’m sorry,” the figure said dully. “I really can’t help in the context of work.”

“I know. I read up a bit on WFPHIPA.”

“Yeah.”

The panic was slowly transmuting into anger. Sasha didn’t like it, but was powerless to stop the shift. “And now here you are, in all gray, talking about, what, conspiracy theories? Dreams?”

“I’m sorry, Sasha. I really don’t feel any better about this than you. I’m not usually the paranoid type, but I think Sanders...well, I suspect that one of my colleagues has motives that go beyond just his focus on neuro-chemistry. I think they go beyond just the university.”

Further information tempered anger. “How do you mean?”

“Well, I said the hammer came down. It did so in the form of grantors threatening to pull funding from the project.” Carter shrugged. “And I believe that the research coordinator — that is, the university itself — was just passing along that message. I think the stress is coming from higher up.”

“Wait, grantors?”

“Yes. The project is hosted by the UCL, but is being funded from external sources. Grants, that sort of thing.”

“Who’s writing the grants?”

Carter held up her hands. “No clue. That’s the thing. Why would the grantors throw their weight around, saying that we should follow specific lines of research? That’s not their job.”

“Have you even published data that would suggest anything but a—” Sasha dug for the term. “Neurological cause?”

The figure stiffened. “What?”

“I just mean AwDae got lost only a few days ago, and you said that ey was the reason you started looking at the social aspect, right?”

Carter began pacing. “Right, yeah. And we haven’t published anything along either front in that time, social or biological. I can’t say this is helping my paranoia any.”

“Do you think this coworker—”

“Sanders?”

“Do you think Sanders is, I mean...” Sasha said, struggling to keep her voice in check. It seemed to want to simultaneously rise in panic and also sneer at the very suggestion. “Some sort of shady government plant?”

“I gotta go,” Carter said. “Don’t use the DDR for a while.”

Then, without ceremony, she teleported away.

There were three small warning chimes, and Sasha found herself back in her home sim. The throwaway had been recycled.

“Fuck.”

AwDae — 2112

The relief of finding emself sitting in eir own bed, ey supposed, should have been immediate and intense.

Instead, seeing eir room around em once more rather than the clinic, all AwDae could do was close eir eyes and shift down in bed until ey was able to draw the covers up over emself, a mirroring of this morning. The weight of the blanket atop em, the feeling of being surrounded, covered, supported by the mattress seemed to be more important than...than what, relief? Joy?

Ey did not feel despair, did not feel hopelessness.

AwDae was not sure what this emotion was. It was a non-emotion. It was a sense of swelling, of being too full. Of having words and images and colors flooding through em and yet wholly out of reach.

When ey had awoken this morning, ey had supposed that ey would head down from home to the clinic and magically find some sort of success. Or, if not success, at least another clue. Another step along the way. A fraction of success. Some piece-of-eight that, when added up, would save em.

This was not a puzzle, though, was it? This was not a set of steps that could be followed to some logical conclusion. There was no end to the road, because there was no road.

Dreams, after all, have no plot.

Ey curled beneath the duvet. Resting in the fetal position in eir childhood bed beneath eir childhood blankets, ey could not even pretend that ey was dreaming. Had ey been asleep, this would have been one of those confusing dreams of too much meaning. Not nightmare, not blessed peace. Just neurons firing at random, conjuring images up from dust, from nothing. Mere breath.

If history played out as it promised to, there would be no waking. Ey was in a world of dream, eir every thought mirrored back against the inner surface of eir cortices, both cerebral and exo.

The data ey had received on the note, still nestled snugly within eir pack, was not some hidden clue. It never had been. It had been an artifact of a dreaming mind leveraging the data that had been stored in eir exocortex. Some part of em, already in the mindset of rummaging through data that afternoon before the rehearsal, was primed to dream of clues, of mysteries to solve.

Find this note.

Find this mic.

Find this solution and perhaps you will achieve your goal.

But what goal was that? Was it to solve the riddle of Cicero's loss? Was it to become unlost, to be found?

Or was it to become unstuck? Was it to find something new? Some way to move on? Move forward? Move, period?

"You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways."

The laugh that came to em was choked. More sob than anything.

Well, hard to get more stuck than this.

Ey drew the covers up over eir head. Perhaps ey wished to blot out the dream with darkness and silence, but this darkness was dream. The barrier: dream. The silence: dream.

Ey slept, then. Not the restless, confused sleep of the night before, but a dreamless sleep of an hour. An hour? A day? What mattered time? It was the sleep of a mind demanding that very blessed nothingness. Was that something ey could request, as ey had requested to dream eir way back home?

It was not a long nap, of course. Or perhaps it was. Perhaps ey could will it to be as long as ey wanted. Perhaps ey were bound to a rhythm, but the scale did not matter. Perhaps ey could bend time.

Either way, when ey awoke, the corners of eir eyes gunked up with dried tears, the funk of the morning had largely passed. The numbness still lingered around the edges, vignetting curiosity, but it was not so all-consuming as it had been.

AwDae sat up in bed, folding eir legs beneath em to keep eir tail from cramping. Ey teased a thread loose from the edge of the duvet, tugged. A habit from youth made easier with vulpine claws.

Habits in dreams. Dreams that were more than dreams. Dreams one knew about and nevertheless was pinned beneath: nightmare demons sitting upon one's chest, upon one's mind. Upon one's exo, perhaps.

"If I dream, if I dream," ey murmured, words coming unbidden to eir lips. "If I dream, am I no longer myself?"

The vignette of numbness throbbed, narrowed, then faded once again. The words seemed to carry import beyond their plaintive query. Ey could not stop emself from speaking.

Dawdling.

Ey stretched eir way out of bed and padded to the door of eir room, closed.

"Wait," ey commanded emself. Hand on doorknob. A count to three. A promise to emself. *I will open this door and will find the open space across the road instead of the hallway.*

Could one dream within a dream? Do so with such a detail that ey would not notice the transition? Had ey dreamed the trip to the clinic? Had ey perhaps slept through the return?

"I do not know. I do not know."

A supplication. A mantra against hopelessness.

Ey turned the knob and stepped out into the shortgrass prairie of the open space. The packed dirt of the trail welcomed eir paws. The scent of dust and rattle-dry stalks of grass washed over em. Warm, yellow light hemmed em in through the fog of war.

"Wait," ey said once more. Kept eir hands at eir sides. Loose. Relaxed. No menu to reach for, no gesture required.

A promise to emself. *I still have will.*

The fog receded upon eir request, thinned, disappeared. Mere breath. The prairie of the open space stretched out before them. A valley, and then a ridge of hills to the east. The mountains behind eir back.

Not a sim. No limitations other than those eir dreaming mind had set upon them. Ey had spent so long in sims, lived eir life out in worlds bounded by the edges of invisible properties that, upon getting lost, ey had imagined the same must be true inside. More so, eir unconscious reasoned, for was ey not constrained by the

processing power of eir exocortex?

But it was not a sim. It was a dream, eir dream, eir exo a mirror, and in the end, ey held control.

No commands, then. No promises. Ey knew that, were ey to take a step forward, eir foot would come down on the dinged hardwood floor of eir London flat. Priscilla would meow her hellos and twine around eir ankles.

Ey did not rush. Ey stood still. The breeze fingered eir fur and teased along the hem of eir skirt as a breeze must. There were the turbines on the far ridge, three blades turning laconically as turbines must. There was the highway across the valley, the gas station squatting low alongside it as gas stations must.

No commands in dreams. No promises required. Ey would take that step and all would be as it must.

And then ey took the step.

And then Prisca meowed her hello and twined around eir ankles.

And then AwDae fell to eir knees and let the cat step up onto eir thighs, and ey lifted her in eir arms and buried eir snout in her warm, purring side, and cried.

Cried because this was not London. Cried because this was not eir cat. Cried because ey could dream anything ey wanted and it would never be anything beyond a dream.

This was a memory. This was something dredged up from eir own mind. Prisca, eir very own Prisca, was purring against eir face because that is what Prisca must do. She was squirming out of eir grasp because ey knew that, had ey held her like that in the waking world — and ey had — that that is what cats do.

It was eir dream. Eir own, eirs alone. All the lost must perforce be dreaming their own dreams. Ey dreamed of homes and clues and boundaries, of cats that squirmed, of emself as a fox — and that one ey would keep — and could not begin to guess at other's dreams.

Could ey will Prisca to stop? To hold still and be eir pillow to cry into? Ey did not know. Eir mind resisted the question. Resisted, because ey did not want that to be the case. Did not want to will eir precious cat to be anything other than she was. To ask that question was to admit the idea that ey could dream anything other than that which ey must.

Ey let the cat down so that she could stalk self-righteously to her favorite spot and groom the tears out of her fur.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Carter could not explain why she had created the throw-away account to talk with Sasha. Nor could she fully explain that panic that had washed over her, strong enough for her to flee, to log out and wipe both account and sim.

All she could explain was that Sasha's simple questioning had thrown her estimate of what might be going on both within the dynamic of the team as well as within the 'net as a whole into utter turmoil. The woman...skunk...skunk-woman had been correct: while there were occasional reports on their findings published to a scant few reviewers and advisors within the UCL itself, there had been none since RJ had gotten lost. No papers published in any journal, public or private. The phenomenon of the lost was new, and so was the study of them.

So how was it that the grantors were throwing their weight around in terms of the directions her team was taking? How would they know to do so? An informant? A mole?

After logging off, she picked up a sandwich at a nearby M&S, but could not bring herself to eat more than a few bites of it. When she lay down, sleep would not come easily, and when it did, all it brooked her was the same stress-dream of shadows.

How does one encompass all of this in one mind? How does one take in the knowledge of being spied upon, of having decisions made — made by the unseen and unknowable — that impact one's life on such a base level and some how make that work? Make it fit? How does one do these things, and still go back to a workaday life?

Work felt impossible. Everyone around her was a suspect. Everyone around her was suspicious in their own way. Everyone around her was someone who was in secret communication with others, and, without any knowledge of those communications, what guarantee did she have that she was safe?

And was she not communicating with others? She was the one who had contacted Sasha. She was the one who had contacted Johansson. Was she not worthy of suspicion?

The worst was the lack of answers. She could ask all the questions she wanted, and there were no answers to be had.

Finding it impossible to get down to the business of actually working, she paced between rig and coffee station. If, perhaps, there was some way that she could think harder, think better, then perhaps she might be able to fit all of this within her newly updated worldview.

All the coffee did was up her heart rate. It did not wake her any, did not make her more efficient. It simply kicked her anxiety up another level.

All her rig had to offer was the work at hand.

She delved in all the same. If nothing else, she could use the dark. She could use the cool *Eigengrau* of her workspace, the order of information neatly delineated by thin cotton twine. Perhaps numbers would sooth her anxious mind.

A soft ping. A notification. A small bell still loud enough to jolt her out of her reverie, or non-reverie, or whatever this caffeine-tinted haze was. *Avery would like a meeting.*

Carter found it hard to sit still in the small room. It was all she could do to keep from pacing agitatedly, and she focused instead on keeping her steps more within the realm of slow and contemplative. *Is this out of the ordinary? Is me walking back and forth out of the norm enough to report to some higher authority? Is Avery on my side?*

"Dr. Ramirez, sorry for bothering you."

"No problem, Avery. What's up?"

They shrugged. "That's just the thing, I'm not really sure. I started digging into what we were talking about, about how e8 was looking into DDR records before eir disappearance, and on a hunch, I decided to look at all of our other candidate cases. Turns out most of them, even the ones who weren't heavy politics junkies, had a massive uptick in the amount of engagement they showed prior to getting lost."

Carter frowned. "Wait, so not just e8? All of them?"

"Well, sort of. Of those who are just the junkies, it's hard to pull apart just how much of their interactions were actually off baseline for them, you know? A set that large, a slight increase might not be that out of the norm. Still, it is there."

"Do you have a starting point for these increases?"

"Nothing in particular. In absolute terms, no." Avery's smile was wry. "Perhaps obviously. After the initial rush of cases, everyone got lost at different times. Relatively, though, maybe. It looks like everyone who had this uptick had it within seventy-two hours of getting lost."

"How confident are you in that?"

“Are you asking how strong the correlation is?”

“Sure.” She hesitated. “Though I’m also curious about your confidence in this line of reasoning.”

They looked up to the ceiling. “Well, in terms of the line of reasoning, I’d say that it’s strong enough that it’s got me actually interested in looking deeper into it. Not that I wasn’t interested in these cases before, but this is really intriguing. I like the sort of...well, mystery aspect of it.”

“Yeah, it does have that going for it, doesn’t it?”

“And it always did before, too.” Avery dropped their gaze once more and shrugged. “Just that now, I feel like I was handed a big bone in terms of what could actually be going on. It’s not an answer, but of all the correlations we’ve been looking at until now, this is one of the bigger ones.”

“That strong of a correlation, then?”

“Well, look.” They summoned a snatch of workspace, pulled a vcard from one of their decks, and tugged on the corners to expand it to presentation size. A table filled the page, but after a few commands from Avery, it shrunk, slid up to the corner, and in its place, a graph appeared, showing a series of correlation points and a trend line. “It’s fairly strong if we leave everyone in, but if we filter...out...there. If we filter out the junkies, you can see how high it spikes.”

Leaning in closer to the page, Carter scowled at the graph, then up at the minimized table, and back to the graph. “That’s higher than anything else we’ve gotten, right?”

Avery nodded, tapped in a few more commands on a keyboard Carter could not see. They frowned at some mistakes they made along the way, but then the graph was overlaid against other correlations they had been investigating previously. “Just over one standard deviation, yes, though...wait.”

Carter had started to nod along with Avery, then frowned at her subordinate’s growing confusion. “What?”

“Do you see that?”

She looked back to the graph. “See wh—wait, what?!”

“Do you *see* that?” Avery said, louder. It was as though they themselves needed the convincing, that they needed to have this witnessed right along with them.

And it was worth witnessing. As both of them watched, wide-eyed, the graph shifted. The strength of the correlation started to dip. Not smoothly, but in fits and starts. Avery’s hand darted up and, with a fingertip, they dragged the table out to fill more of the card’s surface. There, along with the graph, the numbers of the correlation were beginning to change. Row by row, the ‘interactions DDR by hour 72 lim’ values were dropping. They were still high, yes, but perhaps more reasonable. The correlation was still there, but weaker.

“What—”

“Do you have this data backed up anywhere?” Carter was shouting. Didn’t know how to keep from shouting.

“I— maybe. Sec.” A few hasty commands, and the data was dumped to another card, the column name changed to a keysmash. The numbers stopped dropping on that card, even as they continued on the first. They handed the card to Carter. “But what—”

“Pull me back and hit my panic button. Quick!”

Avery stared, open-mouthed.

“Go!”

There was the pleasant animation of a user logging out and Avery disappeared.

Carter braced herself, but even so, the jolt of pain running in a sparkling thread down along her spine was stronger than she remembered, and she came up gasping, hands shaking from where Avery held them just above her contacts. With their knee, they hit the panic button on the rig, and the flip-up screen began ticking off cores dumped and suggesting that an official report be filed.

Still shaking, she looked around the office. Everyone was delved in except her, Avery, and Prakash, standing startled by the mini-fridge.

“Everything alright?” he asked, brow furrowed.

Carter waved her hand dismissively, trying to look calm. She doubted that she did. “Was in a meeting. Crashed or something.”

Perhaps picking up on the anxiety of the last minute, perhaps experiencing their own terror, Avery nodded. “We were in a meeting, uh...trying something. She started...” they trailed off and shrugged.

Prakash nodded. “Need to file a report? Anything like that?”

Carter stood, wobbled, and regained her balance. “I will after some water. Getting yanked hurts worse than I remember.”

“I haven’t done it since training.”

Avery shrugged. “I don’t think many have. It’s not all that common.”

Rinsing her mug free of coffee residue — additional caffeine at the moment being contraindicated — Carter attempted a laugh. “Right, yeah. I’ve had sims crash before, but not myself.”

The laugh didn’t seem to soothe either of her coworkers.

“Well, either way, I’m kinda shaken up. I think...uh,” she trailed off, looking at her phone. “Maybe a walk. Yeah, I think maybe a walk.”

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Interview with: Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled

On the formation of the Clade

Ioan Bălan

Systime 181+338 1644

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled: What, specifically, do you want to know about the clade?

Ioan Bălan: Other than “start at the beginning, and when you get to the end, stop?”

Dear: [laughter] Yes. I could do that, I suppose, but it would not make for a very good story.

Ioan: Right. I suppose start at the beginning, specifically with your decision to upload.

Dear: You understand that there will be portions of that story that I cannot tell you, yes?

Ioan: Of course.

Dear: [thoughtful silence] Okay. Did you ever come across...well, no. When did you upload?

Ioan: 2238. June or something.

Dear: [sighs] No. Okay, well, in your research, did you ever come across mentions of “the lost”?

Ioan: Yes. Lots of turmoil around then. Early 2100s, right?

Dear: [nodding] Yes. Though it’s strange, now that I think about it. The turmoil at the time felt very small and personal. While there was all this grand-scale stuff going on around us, we were dealing with friends and acquaintances disappearing. There were so few cases at first that it was just this thing the news would publish as a sort of curiosity. “Look! Isn’t this strange? The scientists are working so hard!” [laughter] It wasn’t until after that the turmoil you’re talking about began.

Ioan: Okay. Did you upload during?

Dear: Oh goodness, no. Uploading had been something scientists and such had been poking at, but that no one had yet to accomplish. Or, well, perhaps someone had accomplished. Some had claimed to, at least. The consensus at the time is that, while it was likely possible, there would be little chance of having systems large enough to house more than two or three individuals. It was not an...ah, not a linear increase in complexity, I think. Add another mind, and the complexity more than doubles. [pause] It was the lost who started it, in a way. The things we learned from them when they came back—

Ioan: How many— sorry for the interruption. How many came back? Of those you knew?

Dear: Oh, all of them came back! Just that some of them didn’t last long, after.

Ioan: Including the...uh, the owner of the Name?

Dear: [pause, tense] Yes. In a way.

Ioan: Okay. Back to the uploading side, then. The lost taught you...

Dear: [visibly relaxing] Right, yes. When they came back, many of them — many of us, for I was briefly among their number — talked about what we had learned while...ah, in there. The things that we talked about and described are what sent the wonks down new avenues of research, and that eventually led to the first uploading tech. From there, there was the usual “too expensive” hand-wringing, but it all marches on, you know? [laughs] It got cheaper, the tech got better, the L₅ station and Ansible were set up. Population was getting out of hand again, they said, and some wag decided to pitch uploading as a solution.

Ioan: I remember that, yeah. The posters were all over the place.

Dear: Yes. Notably, as the cost came down, it was pitched as something for the poorer classes to take advantage of. It bore more than a little whiff of eugenics.

Ioan: And were you...I mean—

Dear: [laughter] Poor? Not particularly, actually. It appealed to me for...different reasons. I would prefer not to get into those at the moment.

Ioan: Alright.

Dear: Yes. Well. [pause] Okay, right, I uploaded in the 2130s, shortly after the L₅ station was set up. It had become sufficiently cheap that it was something I could afford—

Ioan: Cheap? How much?

Dear: It was...well, still a considerable portion of my savings.

Ioan: I see.

Dear: Why do you ask?

Ioan: We were — our families were, I mean — paid for us to upload.

Dear: Oh? Fancy that! [laughter] Anyway. It had become something that I could afford, and I leapt on the chance. It had been around long enough that it still felt relatively established, but was still a far cry from what it was now. This was probably early systime 10+, I mean. Folks knew what they were doing, but much of the society — what we think of society — here had not gelled into what it is today.

Ioan: You mention that it cost to fork, yes.

Dear: Yes. The reputation markets were already set up by then, but since this was before the System’s proper expansion and some tech that came later — I could not begin to understand it — it was gently discouraged by the market.

Ioan: It hadn’t reached this...post-scarcity, you mean?

Dear: Right. There was still a scarcity of resources and we were still sufficiently...ah, still sufficiently human, perhaps, socially human, that this was used as a lever, a measure of one’s class.

Ioan: We still have the markets, though.

Dear: [laughter] Not like we did then.

Ioan: Alright. Don’t suppose you would be able to do what you do today back then.

Dear: Not at all, no. It does still cost some minuscule portion of credit for one to fork now, but I digress. We began as Michelle and did the things that Michelle did, forking infrequently. This was still a few years before the distinctions between strategies started up. Most everyone was a tasker back then by virtue of the markets.

Ioan: It’s hard to picture you as a tasker.

Dear: [laughter] Right, yes. As everything started to get cheaper, though, those distinctions began to emerge. By then, Michelle had a few long-lived instances, tagged as you are, Mx. #c1494bf.

Ioan: [laughter] Thank you. This was before the Ode?

Dear: The Ode itself existed. That came before we uploaded.

Ioan: Before the Ode clade, though?

Dear: Right, yes. Michelle and her forks existed, but the very idea of clades was new at the time. At one point, though, she and a few other founders began to describe their trees as such. The larger trees grew — for those who maintained long-running forks, that is — the more unwieldy tags became, and folks decided on names. Some folks settled on simple standards. Another of the founders, the Jonas clade, for instance, uses syllabic prefixes. Ar Jonas, Ko Jonas, and so on. Leading vowels the first forks, then leading consonants, then the vowels following the consonants, *et cetera ad infinitum*.

Ioan: And you chose the Ode.

Dear: Michelle did, yes. She had picked up a contrarian streak during the whole lost saga.

Ioan: Did she play a large role in that?

Dear: [taken aback] Did her name not come up in your research?

Ioan: Not on the lost, no. Just on the founders.

Dear: [frowning] Well, alright. Yes, she played a role, but time softens rough edges, I suppose. Either way, the things she did gave her enough reputation to fork, and she chose the Ode to name her instances while remaining Michelle, herself. She started with the first lines of each stanza, then let them create and name their own forks from there.

Ioan: Thus the limited dispersionista style.

Dear: [nodding] Right. Each stanza became a small family of taskers, in a way. We, the Odists, create our own forks as needed, but do not let them live long. Or are not supposed to, at least.

Ioan: “Aren’t supposed to”?

Dear: Oh, I am sure a few of us have created long-running forks while everyone else has turned their head.

Ioan: Have you?

Dear: [smiling, shrugging, mu-gesture] By virtue of our set-up, though, such forks are not members of the clade. Those forks are not named as such, and likely not in communication with any other cocladists aside from their immediate down-tree instance.

Ioan: Is the Ode available somewhere for me to read?

Dear: Of course. I will give you a copy. That is hardly secret.

Ioan: And the clade, how long has it been since you have all been together.

Dear: This will be the first time there have been more than half of us together in one spot.

Ioan: Ever?

Dear: [nodding] Ever. Some dispersionistas are families. I mentioned the Jonas clade before; Jonas Prime has set up regular intraclade communication. Some are just clades, defined by ancestry with no further connections.

Ioan: Are you in touch with any of your cocladists?

Dear: I am assuming you mean “in normal times”? Right. One or two. Serene and I get along quite well, and I talk with Praiseworthy — That Which Lives Is Forever Praiseworthy, the first line of my stanza — with some

frequency. Michelle and I have talked a few times. She comes to my exhibitions.

Ioan: Ever talked to, um...

Dear: Qoheleth?

Ioan: Yes. I was going to say “Life Breeds Life” but forgot the line.

Dear: Names are important, Ioan. If he has decided on Qoheleth, then Qoheleth it is.

Ioan: Right, sorry. I was in the mindset of the lines. Have you talked with him?

Dear: Before this? No. Not knowingly.

Ioan: And how do you feel about seeing the whole clade together?

Dear: I would be surprised if we manage to net all of them. [laughter] But I suppose I feel excited. Not necessarily because I have never met many of them so much as because it feels like we as a clade have a goal in front of us. Seeing them is secondary to them — to us — actually doing something. Accomplishing something.

Ioan: And what do you hope to get out of it? This gathering?

Dear: [smiling] A story. Others want answers, and I suppose I do too, but I mostly want a story. I want *the* story. I want to be the audience and a character. I want to dive into the story and bathe in it. I want a story.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

London in winter was not a snowy affair. No traces of white lacing the ground, no flakes in the air. Just sporadic sleet and steel-gray skies, breath clouding her vision while fingertips went numb around her mug of water.

She dumped the rest of the water in the already soggy grass and looped her pinkie through the handle, fingers curling into her palm to hunt for warmth. Another few steps and she gave up, setting the mug on a window-ledge so that she could walk with her hands in her pockets.

It wouldn't be missed. Mugs were less important than being out of there.

The pain of being drawn back so forcefully had disappeared immediately upon coming to outside the sim, but the memory lingered. Her mind would not let it go. If she thought about other things, she knew, it would disappear. Just a memory. A bad dream.

She did not think about other things. Could not think about other things. All she could think about was her implants and the system. All she could think about was the vain hope that the data on the card had made it into the core dump she knew had been left in her exocortex's storage immediately upon the crash. She had no idea how she'd get it out — the tech side of the implants was hardly her specialty — but she knew it was possible.

So she paced along the sidewalk, head down, remembering pain. She knew she was walking a street, but did not know which. She just needed away from the room, away from the neat row of rigs. Rigs she no longer trusted. Away from people she no longer trusted. She needed away, and hoped that the bracingly cold air would help in some way.

Her phone pinged. On silent, the ping came in the form of a brief tingle along her implants through the wireless. A gentle impinging on the senses. It pinged again. Then pinged several more times in short order.

It made her sick. A rush of anxiety to go with the reminder of the subtle tech ramifying through her flesh.

Avery:

Ramirez, something's happened

Avery:

ACL change in the system. Been locked out. Everyone's coming up

Avery:

What do we do?

Avery:

Shit, security's here???

Avery:

!!! Police

Sanders:

Police here. Need you. Come back ASAP

Prakash:

Police here looking for you. Stop where you are. Do not come back.

Her breath came in short, ragged gasps. She hardly needed Prakash's orders to stop. She was frozen to the sidewalk. She could hardly take another step if she wanted to.

Prakash:

I'm coming to you. Told them I went to look for you. Stay there.

What? Carter's mind seemed to be floating down a river, bumping across rocks and swirling in eddies. She could not focus for the water in her eyes. Literal, as well as figurative. She could not tell if she was crying, or if the air was simply stinging. *Security? Police? Prakash coming here?*

And then: *How does he know where I am?*

Sure enough, there, jogging around the corner was his lithe form, unjacketed with puffs of breath showing in the still air.

"Ramirez," he said. His breathing was calm despite the jog. "As I'm sure you've heard, the police and security are at the lab, looking for you."

Carter merely stared at him.

"Ramirez? Doctor Ramirez. Hey!" He snapped his fingers in front of her face. "Things are going to happen very quickly now. I need you to stay away from UCL and stay away from home. I've got some, ah...friends who will be in contact with you soon. Not Western Fed, if you take my meaning."

She blinked, nodded dumbly. Another rock for her mind to bump over in that swift-flowing stream: *Prakash? Sino-Russian Bloc?*

"If you run, you'll only look guilty. You need to stay away from UCL, but—" He pointed down the street. "If you were to head to the medical center, then it's only an ethics violation, not running from the police, okay? Brewster is there."

"What—" Her voice cracked, and she had to swallow a few times to get it to work properly. "What happened?"

"You found something they didn't like. You saw something you weren't supposed to, and I think I know what. Sanders tipped them off, then told the police you might be a danger to yourself or something. I don't know. He's a plant, they think on their feet. I didn't stick around. Hold still." The last was delivered as Carter started to shrink away from his hand reaching toward her. He held it up in a disarming gesture, a bulky-looking phone held within. "Avery texted me why you had them pull you back. This is just a back up drive, promise."

She stood still. There didn't seem to be any alternative.

Prakash pressed the box against the top of her exo, just at the base of her neck, masking the motion as a hug. There was no sensation from her implants, but when he leaned away, he nodded to her. "We're good. Thank you, Ramirez."

“Why?”

“This will be good for both of us.” His smile was wry. “We get some intel to use against the WF, and you will doubtless get your lost back.”

Carter gaped. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Just—” Prakash frowned at something over her shoulder. “Fuck. Get going. Walk, don’t run. Don’t look back. Take the tube. You’ll be followed, but being around more people will only help.”

And with that, he patted her arm, moved around her, and walked away.

Despite any attempts to appear calm, she had to clench her hands within her pockets to keep them from shaking.

She was lucky with the tube, and managed to step immediately onto a car without having to wait. She supposed that if she were being followed, the platform would be the perfect place for someone to catch up with her. The short ride was spent wondering what they might do to her. Cuff her then and there? Pretend to be a friendly acquaintance and draw her to the side? Just talk?

Not something she wanted to find out first hand.

She had calmed enough by the time she reached the UMC that she was no longer shaking and could walk quickly and, hopefully, unsuspectingly up from the tube to street level. The steps disgorged her across the road from the UMC itself, and she was able to duck quickly into the building, using the light traffic as an excuse to jog.

With the connection between the University College and the Medical Center, she was able to swipe her way in without fuss, and once in, to quick-walk over to the wing where she knew they worked on implants. It was no clinic, but it did have some areas dedicated to care and maintenance.

She needed a rig. She didn’t *want* a rig, but she needed to delve in and at least let Sasha and her friends know what was happening, that she might be seeing RJ soon. Needed to let someone else know what she knew.

This is stupid, this is stupid, she repeated to herself. A mantra. Or perhaps a prayer for someone to stop her.

No one did. She was doctor Carter Ramirez, after all, right? Why would a research doctor from the very university that ran the medical center need to be stopped? Of course she was welcome, the staff rigs are just down the hall, help yourself.

All she could hope for now was that that, if the lost were related to information they knew but had not shared, that they were being prevented from sharing, perhaps she would be safe if she were to be visible about it. Had already been visible about it, with that stunt back in the lab. If she were too visible a subject and the lost were the result of some intentional action, her — or any of her team — getting lost would be suspicious. She hoped.

Fuck, this is so stupid.

Even so, she sat in front of a workstation facing the door and, seeing nothing suspicious — no one at all, really — set her hands in the cradles and her head against the NFC terminal.

No time to make a throwaway, she thought, quickly bringing up a menu in her home sim. There was a flashing notification attached to the black sphere representing a core dump. *And I’m already fucked anyway, but hopefully there’s something I can do.*

The mail was quick and to the point. She had the address for Sasha and, with a quick browse of her mail archive, the ones for Caitlin and this Debarre, too.

All

Things went sideways with the project, we may be fucked. Govt plant (Sanders, if you remember, Sasha) and SRB spy on the team. Police showed up today and everything, just barely got out.

I found some data, though. Don't know what to do with it, but I've attached the core that might have it saved. It has to do with DDR activity as suspected, notably some vote that happened a while back, deleted from EVERYONE'S records. Something crazy happening high enough up that they're trying to make everyone forget and disappear those who won't.

Home sim is @cramirez:eo3.london.gb.wf#default, will stick around a few, but after that, going to see RJ. Will probably be the last you hear from me, as am being followed.

cr

No time to think. She hit send.

I'll give it five minutes, then I probably need to get out. Had to swipe into the room, but I doubt that'll deter anyone for long.

She jumped when Sasha stepped from the tport pad less than thirty seconds later. "Jesus, that was fast."

"Caught me before work. What the hell is happening?" The skunk's voice was shrill with panic. "Police? Is AwDae okay?"

Carter held up her hands defensively, then jumped again as a...weasel? Another furry of some sort, long and brown and dressed all in black, dashed quickly from the pad.

"This is Debarre." Sasha spoke quickly. "Debarre, Dr. Ramirez. She's at the hospital with RJ."

Debarre looked frantic, pacing erratically. "What the fuck is happening?"

"I don't know!" Carter forced herself to calm and lower her voice. "I don't know. Something really fucked is going on. I'm at the UMC, the hospital where RJ is. I haven't seen em yet. I only have a few minutes. Did Caitlin get the message?"

Sasha shrugged helplessly. Something was happening with her avatar. The resolution starting to degrade, polygons and voxels starting to show where once the fur had been smooth and well-rendered "I don't know, I—" She shook her head. "Didn't...h-hear..."

Both Carter and Debarre watched as the form that was Sasha fell to its knees, glitching wildly, voice filled with static. And then, with a damning silence, disappeared. Lost. Lost to the sim, lost to the world.

There was a descending chime, a diminished triad, and a message floating above the black sphere of a core where Sasha had disappeared: "User forcibly pulled back. Core dumped. Please report any further complications to your provider."

Debarre let out a shout and, without a warning, signed out.

Carter hastily followed suit.

Fuck.

AwDae — 2112

“If I dream, am I no longer myself?”

AwDae did not pace the streets of London. Did not open the drapes to see if the streets were full of people or desolate and empty. Did not listen for the sounds of the city.

Ey did not step from eir flat. Did not, in fact, leave the spot where ey knelt on the floor for more than an hour, for days and days. Did not do anything except stroke Priscilla when she came and walked by eir knees.

“I still have wants and needs,” ey murmured to the cat, who only slow-blinked at em. “If I dream, is that not so?”

The words were automatic. Ey opened eir muzzle and they came forth in a steady cadence.

A memory: RJ and Sasha sitting on the edge of the stage during a break in rehearsals. The play: words of Dickinson. A five minute break. RJ’s tablet not showing the usual stage diagram with mic placement and notes, but a white screen. Sasha laughing as RJ began writing, eyes closed. Automatic writing. Drivel and nonsense. Something to giggle over with best friends.

Eyes closed. Ey could feel the soundscape of the room around em change, and knew that ey must now be kneeling on the stage in school.

“Wait.” Ey shook eir head, tall ears bowing. Ey opened eir eyes and was back in eir flat.

What lives we lead we lead in memory, ey thought, then smiled. *My mind should be reeling. I should be feeling overwhelmed and overflowing.*

Ah well.

Ey stood once more, rubbing at eir knees and wincing at the pins and needles rushing over eir paws. Could ey will the discomfort away? Perhaps. Could ey even feel discomfort? Could ey dream it?

Perhaps.

Not now.

Ey padded to the kitchen and opened the cupboard in which the tea must be stored, and, yes, pulled out a tea bag, setting it in eir favorite mug. Ey held the kettle beneath the faucet from whence the water should come and, yes, filled the kettle halfway full and set it on the counter once more.

A memory: RJ and Avon. Avon, who had let RJ crash on his couch when ey had first reached London. RJ and Avon at a small cafe. Avon promising an authentic cream tea and then immediately launching into a tirade against authenticity. RJ laughing. Avon watching, hawk-eyed, to see whether RJ would spread eir clotted cream on the scone first, or instead reach for the jam. Avon nodding approvingly at the choice.

The water quickly came to a boil. After pouring it into the mug, AwDae hiked emself up onto the counter by the edge of the sink and let eir tail dangle into it. It would get wet, but that is just what happens with sinks.

“You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways.”

“I am stuck, yes,” ey informed Priscilla. “I am stuck with will and with memory and with time. As much time

as I need.”

The cat purred. AwDae laughed and lifted eir mug. Too hot to drink, but comforting to hold. Ey felt the comfort in memory.

A memory: RJ waking a few days? Weeks? RJ waking some time ago, years and years ago, and groggily making a pot of tea. RJ sipping one mug of tea while watching the traffic. RJ sipping a second mug of tea while making rice. RJ starting a third mug of tea before sitting down at eir rig and getting lost in research. RJ digging and digging and digging through cards, through tables, through numbers and words and data. RJ frowning at a mass of voting records. RJ downing a cold mug of tea.

The tea was cool enough to drink, now, and so AwDae did.

And when ey had half-finished the tea, the fox slid from eir perch on the counter and padded over to eir rig. Frowned. Why bother with such a thing? Instead, in its place should be a small, white room extending past the boundaries of eir flat. And there was.

And when ey would step into that room, ey would cease to be a fox, but instead become fully immersed in memory, manipulating it with the same ease with which ey manipulated the acoustic space of the theater. And ey did.

And when ey might think about what memories ey had, ey would find there, whole and uncorrupted, all of the information ey had been prowling through on Cicero’s disappearance. No riddles to solve, no tricks, no mics, no paper. Ey would be able to expand across that sense that passed for sight in a fully immersive sim the entirety of the data. And ey could.

AwDae dreamt. Dreamt of work. Dreamt the table of Cicero’s DDR votes, dreamt that it rotated in beautiful precision along any axis ey wished. Dreamt of the other cards in the deck, of recorded conversations and notes and last-connected times. Ey dreamt eir way through all of the data packed into the deck of vcards Sasha had given em so very, very long ago.

Ey kept dreaming.

Ey dreamt of the Crown Pub. Dreamt of emself sitting at a booth with Sasha. Dreamt of talking about Cicero with her. Dreamt of how ey had poked eir claw against the surface of the table in the sim, then rubbed at it with a pad, despite the fact that sim would not allow the table to be dented.

Axiom: when any sufficiently large group of furies convene in one place, they will spontaneously generate a bar to hang out at. A bar, a cafe, a park, a plaza.

Thus: in eir dream of so many furies, the table was there, perfect. The table, the booth, the whole pub. Not the noise, not the people, but ey dreamt, in that fully immersive perception-of-everything way, of the entire pub. Of the entire sim. Dreamt of the precise construction of it down to the parametric equations that defined the curves of the vinyl stool cushions. Dreamt of the area behind the bar, unreachable by patrons but behind which puttered the staff AIs’ avs.

It was all there. The entire thing. The entire sim, all the way out to its boundary fence and the subtle magic of the fake street beyond. All cached in eir exo, in eir memory.

Ey dreamt of eir home sim. The simple bed. The simple dresser. The logic behind the commands that let em select items and clothing to equip to emself. The tport pad.

All there.

And ey dreamt of Sasha. Ey dreamt of everything about her. The subtle scent of dandelions and the too-straight stripes that traveled over her muzzle, head, and then down her back. The equations that drove her tail. Her very voice.

“You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways,” she said.

She was all there. All of her avatar. What ey remembered of their final conversation could be played out from start to finish between skunk and fox in perfect detail. Detail that could not be anything other than perfect. Detail that had to be perfect because eir exo had cached the skunk’s av, just as it had cached eir flat and the Crown Pub.

But she was not all there.

She was not there at all. Her avatar was a hollow shell that AwDae could make parrot her lines. It was a puppet. It was a sensory representation without context. A sign without an object, signifier without the signified.

AwDae was in a hall of mirrors that allowed no one else but emself. She was not there and she could not be there because AwDae was lost, and when one is lost, one is alone in ways more fundamental than could be dreamt of in any solipsist’s philosophy.

What lives we lead we lead in memory, and the end of memory lies beneath the roots.

Ey could not forget, for memory ends at the teeth of death and is wholly inaccessible to the living, because the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing.

And ey could not cry thus immersed.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

It took a moment for Carter to collect herself again after pulling back. She allowed herself thirty seconds of simply sitting in the chair before the public terminal, face in shaking hands, before she stood up. Even then, she had to force her breathing down to levels that might be considered normal.

And normal this was not.

She pulled out her phone and, perhaps in a vain attempt to appear calm, tapped away on it while walking out of the room. She had toured the facility often enough that she had an idea of where the lost would be kept, even if she didn't know for sure that she would be able to find them there, much less access them.

Johansson, Caitlin,

At UMC, things got complicated. May be out of contact after this. Please stay safe. Stay away from DDR. Stay away from RJ.

cr

She had already begun to put her phone back in her pocket before the faint ping along her implants notified her of a new message.

??? We're here too??? Room 2309

Shit.

Carter quickened her pace, doing her best to maintain the appearance that she belonged here. She, Dr. Carter Ramirez, researcher on the lost, was meant to be here. Meant to be in the hospital, in the wing where the lost were kept. She belonged here, it was okay.

And the ruse, if ruse it were, worked well enough to get her up to the second floor and onto the hall where RJ was being kept. A slow hall. A quiet hall, where none of the patients could talk or move. An empty hall. A nurse's station with a lone nurse sitting behind a monitor.

Empty, except for two chairs in front of one of the rooms.

The only occupied chairs along the entire hall were occupied with suits. Suits stuffed to the brim with frowning men. Men frowning at her.

Well, shit.

There would be no backing up without increased culpability. She had been preempted. And why not? Dr. Carter Ramirez, researcher in the lost, was meant to be here, right?

All she could do, all she could think to do, was nod to them politely and head to the nurse's station. "Good, uh...good afternoon."

They looked up from the paperwork and frowned. "Afternoon. May I help you?"

"Yes, sorry. Dr. Carter Ramirez, UCL. I'm here to view a patient, RJ Brewster? Should be in 2309."

The nurse's frown deepened. "You're expected. The gentlemen down the hall are here to speak with you. That's 2309 they're sitting in front of. Go ahead."

Well...shit.

No way around it. Carter thanked the nurse and, moving with as much calm as she could muster, started down the hall. Both of the suits stood, buttoned their jackets, and waited at attention, watching Carter come to them. A show of power.

A show summarily interrupted by Johansson.

The director barrelled out of the room and nearly collided with the suits. His thick hands set on each of their shoulders, and, even from two rooms down, his rumble was clear. "Gentlemen, can I speak with you? I have some concerns about the patient."

Nonplussed, the suits turned toward Johansson. "Sir, we are not--"

"Won't take a moment, please. Just need a bit of privacy. Dr. Ramirez, head on in. I'm sure we can all talk in a moment."

Unsure if it was confusion or Johansson's convincing act that drew her forward, she simply nodded and continued into the room. Caitlin, she assumed, sat on a chair next to the bed. And in the bed itself must have been RJ. Short, slight, dusty blonde hair swept back out of eir face by a simple hairband, eyes taped shut, nasal intubation tube taped to eir cheek. Still. Completely still.

"Dr. Ramirez?" Caitlin said.

"Yes, uh...Caitlin, is it? And this is RJ?"

The tech nodded. "Yeah. Who were those guys? They seemed pretty keen on seeing you."

Carter shook her head. "Not sure. Government or something. They followed me here from work. I'm surprised I haven't been dragged off in cuffs yet, honestly."

"Boss is good at wrapping people up. Getting them invested in what he has to say, I guess." She smiled, shrugged. She looked exhausted. "Still, I don't imagine you have a whole lot of time. What can you tell me?"

"Tell? Shit." So dreamlike had the last few minutes been that the reminder that she was supposed to have some urgency to her movements snapped Carter to attention. "Our team discovered something about a DDR vote, and I guess we weren't supposed to. Don't use the DDR. Don't vote on anything! Don't delve in if you can help it."

The sudden intensity seemed to startle Caitlin. She sat up straighter in her chair. "Wait, what? Why?"

"Anyone connected to the lost, anyone connected to me is at risk of getting lost, too."

"You mean...intentionally? Not an accident?" The tech frowned. "Why are you here, then?"

Carter ground her palms against her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know. Running from those guys, I guess. Trying to not look guilty, or at least look less guilty." She considered expanding on what Prakash had said, on Prakash himself, then decided against it. If he was indeed helping her, that would be throwing him under the bus. Guilty of what, though, she didn't know. "I figured if I came here, it would only be an ethics violation

or something. Pretty vain hope.”

“Maybe.” Caitlin sounded unconvinced. “I guess it’s nice to meet you. I heard about you from the boss and Sasha.”

“Sasha! Shit. Sasha’s lost now, too. That’s why I’m saying don’t delve in! Got an idea, though. I need a...oh good, there’s one already here! I need the mirror rig.”

She was shouting. Didn’t know how to do anything but. If she was worried about attracting attention, though, she needn’t have: similar hollering echoed down the hallway.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Mustering the Odists took surprising effort.

Qoheleth had said that he would welcome them at any time. Dear had taken this to heart and Ioan had no reason to suspect that there would be any delays in gathering everyone together. Despite the shady nature of the acts leading up to this — the puzzles and mazes of clues, the spying, the digging — everything seemed so simple on the surface. The last clue found, the final puzzle solved. Visit Qoheleth and finish the act.

And Ioan had thought that this would be easy.

Some of Dear's cocladists did not want to go. They argued that it would be a danger to concentrate the clade in one place like this. That they could not express what that danger might be did not help their case. They would not go, they said, even with a forked instance.

These took much persuasion. In the end, many agreed only if the entirety of the clade was there.

One *did* want to go but refused to fork to do so. Or, it turned out, to fork at all. This, above all else, set Dear off: the fox did not take confusion of this sort well, but for the root of that confusion to go so counter to its very existence led to a tantrum, and then a sulk. Ioan could hardly fault it. The more time went on, the less ey was willing to put up with the politicking and glad-handing.

In the end, the clade was at the whims of that single individual's schedule.

Some of the more liberal members wanted to bring others, as did Dear by bringing Ioan, and this set off another round of debate. Further delays. They decided that they would only bring informed participants who had already played a role in the project.

With little else to do, Ioan read and waited. Ey read up on the history of the Ode clade. Ey read the Ode itself, hunting for hidden meanings. Ey read up on this form of public key encryption. Dear forked to teach em the encryption algorithm that used the deck of playing cards, and so ey read about manual encryption, and then the history of playing cards. Ey read and reread Ecclesiastes and all ey could about it. Ey even read about various mental vagaries and attempted to map them to Michelle Hadje, Qoheleth, Dear, and various members of the Clade which Dear talked (or, as time went on, ranted) about.

This last was mostly for fun, but ey was also beginning to strategize eir report. More than a report, ey wanted to write something that would stand on its own. A book, perhaps, or at least an article. An essay and formal report for Dear, and a smoothed, anonymized version for wider publication. If the clade would let em, at least. Ey wanted the result to be readable, rather than simply an account of events. Something that would help explain the whys and hows of an older clade in turmoil. Something to express the rising panic ey felt about aging in a timeless place, about memory and the importance of forgetting.

Qoheleth

An historical document.

A story.

And finally, the day had come. It had been nearly two weeks after deciphering Qoheleth's last message, but it had finally come. There had been no further communications from the wayward Odist. He seemed patient enough to wait.

AwDae — 2112

I am at a loss for images in this end of days.

No images. No images. Not real ones. Nothing real in this empty space. Ey could see, but why? Why see eir flat? Why see Prisca? Why see anything?

So ey did not. Ey dreamt emself blind. More than blind. Eir dreaming mind ensured that there was no such thing as sight. That it had never existed. Did not exist for emself. Had never existed for anyone.

Ey was like the theater. Ey was vast, incomprehensible spaces. Ey was the lack of the concept of space. Ey was words. Ey was information. Ey was sound, and the only sound was eir voice.

“The only time I know my true name is when I dream.”

Except was that eir voice? Did ey hear? Did ey speak? Was it em making these noises? Was it em hearing them? Ey dreamed emself out of sight, could ey still dream emself speaking?

“Why ask questions, here at the end of all things?” Ey laughed. “Why ask questions when the answers will not help?”

Ey dreamed emself asleep, then. Asleep and dreaming. The world moved around em in soft colors and meaningless images. Words strung themselves together, tangled, frayed, came apart once more. Ey dreamed.

Ey dreamed.

Who knew how long? Who knows? What means knowing in dreams?

When ey woke — when ey dreamed emself awake — AwDae answered eir own question: “To know one’s true name is to know god. To know god is to answer unasked questions.”

And as ey thought upon eir true name, eir mind wandered across what remained in eir exo. Wandered across the deck on Cicero. Wandered across those cards for centuries at a time, millennia, and did not ask.

And there it was.

The vote was not there, and yet the answer was. There was the shadow of intention, of the need for an entire vote to disappear from the collected direct democracy that was the DDR. There was the reason for those who had interacted with the vote, who had voted, who had spent the credits needed to comment on it in the political theater. Commented where others could read, where representatives from the territories would see.

What mattered the vote? What mattered the comments? What mattered the content, the cost? What mattered the golden fleece, or any MacGuffin? It could have been a flashlight with an amber filter in a suitcase just as easily as it could have been a declaration of war against the Sino-Russian Bloc. Chekhov’s vote.

It did not matter. All that mattered is that those who had seen it — had seen the vote, who had interacted with it, who had interacted with it at however many levels of remove — were *personae non gratae* from that point

on. Easier for them to not be. Easier to admit the mystery of the lost into the collective consciousness than to let such come to light. What cared the world of billions for the hundreds of lost? What cared the powers that be for the resistance of however many dozens that were now lost?

Ey rambled beyond the deck, beyond eir flat, beyond Prisca. Ey wandered across the interior of eir skull until ey stepped up onto the stoop of eir exo.

Do I know god after the end of all things? Do I know god when I do not remember myself? Do I know god when I dream?

Ey dreamed that border. Dreamed that border between endocortex and exocortex, and then dreamed eir way across it. Dreamed of the difference between endomemory and exomemory. Dreamed that exomemory into lines. Into rows and columns and formations. Review, friends — troops long past review.

Ey dreamed that memory into data, into words and images and sounds and smells and sensations. Dreamed more than just the memory. Scraped the insides of that exo and dreamed everything. Dreamed it into formation.

And reviewed. Ey walked, a fox, with baton in paw, skirt and blouse dreamed into uniform, laughing joyously. Ey walked along the formations and inspected. Neatly ordered. Neatly organized. Standing proud.

Ey reviewed and marveled at the preciseness with which eir mind obeyed itself. Madness be damned: if ey could control nothing else in this non-world, ey could control emself.

Ey very carefully did not ask.

And there it was: the answer.

There, standing tall, as proud as any other memory, was a subroutine. And when AwDae gazed into its porcelain face, ey understood. And when that porcelain face gazed back, it smiled beatifically.

There it was: the very subroutine, the very bug exploited, the very program triggered at the order of some higher power. The very entity which had painted the inside of eir exo with silver and glass that left em trapped within. There was the virus in all its glory. Its subtle curves meant to fit the space of an exo's logic perfectly. Its ability to recognize actions. Its ability to cut off the outside world. Its ability to ride shotgun along regular software updates. *Security*, it promised. *Added security along the barrier between waking and dreaming.*

It smiled, and AwDae laughed.

"The only time I know my true name is when I dream," ey spoke through tears. "And may then my name die with me."

Madness grew to a cruel point, pierced bubble of dream, and then dissolved fox.

Ey dreamed.

Qoheleth — 2305

Qoheleth is a patient man.

I have time. Enough time, at least. I know that I am gone. My memory, split as it is across an archive and nearly thirty exos, is a millstone around my neck. It drags me down. It drowns me even in plentiful air. I can feel the way it crams up against every recess of my skull, demanding to be let out. The Name, the Ode, every act since uploading and so many that Michelle took — that *I* took — before that. It drags me down. It nips at my heels. It fogs my vision.

There are no metaphors that clearly show just how horrifying the inability to forget can be, and so I find myself reaching for every analogy that I can find.

I am a lost cause, but much of the clade still has their faculties about them. I think so, at least. I hope so. So long as they act within the decade, we will be here. Any longer, and we will risk further degradation, further madness.

It has been two weeks since I messaged Dear — lovely Dear — and although it had tried to contact me several times, and pinged countless more, I never responded. I did my part. I called them, got them fighting, got them interested, and I think I got them invested.

That is all I need, is for them to be invested.

Now, hopefully they will come.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

The designated meeting point was the prairie in front of Dear's house. Ioan was confused as to why they didn't just meet in Qoheleth's sim, until ey realized that many members of the clade had not met in years or decades, or, in the case of up-tree instances, ever.

For a family reunion, it was quite stiff. Formal and tense. *Probably not the best of circumstances*, Ioan thought. Ey focused on eir job as amanuensis.

Ey was surprised at the variety of the cladists. It made sense, of course, for a dispersionista clade, but it was the direction in which the differences headed which intrigued em. The most notable difference was the species presentation ratio. Many of the cladists were still human, mostly short women with dark hair.

"Fewer foxes than I had imagined," Ioan observed.

"*Hmm? There is me and Serene, yes.*" Dear dragged Ioan over to meet her. Serene was quite similar to Dear, though with natural coloration rather than the iridescent white fur that Dear maintained. Dear gave her a tight hug and introduced her to Ioan as the one who had designed the landscape of its property. Ioan liked her at once.

Dear also introduced Ioan to That Which Lives Is Forever Praiseworthy, its immediate down-tree instance, also eminently likeable.

"Why only you two? Why are you the only foxes?"

Dear shrugged. Serene looked away. Praiseworthy gave Ioan a sharp look, and ey dropped the subject.

Of those that bore forms other than fox and human, Ioan could not tell. Ey supposed that ey would do some research after the fact to try and place name to species and species to line in the Ode. Perhaps there was a pattern, and perhaps not.

"*You must understand that while uploading was attractive early on to those with an interest in exploring the different shapes a body could take,*" Dear had explained. "*Few were able to accomplish that on initial upload. Many furrries uploaded, few wound up looking like their avatars in the sims of the past. You wind up looking like how your brain pictures itself on some level more fundamental than merely preference.*"

Ey nodded. "I look much how I did before, yes, though I've made a few changes."

"*Changes require forking, though, yes? And if forking is expensive...*" The fox trailed off, shrugged.

Ey supposed it was due to the individual preferences that each long-lived fork had gained in its time away from the root of the clade once forking became cheaper. The remaining Odists who had not changed — or who had changed very little — even after the cost had come down were the ones who Ioan suspected Dear referred to as "conservatives".

And yet they were only similar. No two were identical. Each had picked up some of their own distinguishing characteristics, whether through intentional mutation or through accident and acquired experience. It was an interesting artifact of the dissolution strategy: fork, fork often and be deliberate about it, but do not let the self dissolve completely.

Michelle herself was notably absent, though Dear assured the historian that she was still very much alive. *“She said that, if anyone should remain behind, it was her, as she had started this whole damn thing.”*

“And how do you feel about that choice?”

Dear shrugged, unsmiling. *“Her choice is her own. I would have preferred that she be here, but then I would have preferred everyone be as invested in this as I am, and we know that not to be the case.”*

There were a few tag-alongs aside from Ioan, as well. Folks immediately identified as out-clade. A few friends. A few partners, singular and plural. Some who ey suspected were like emself: historians and helpers, here to witness and record. The ‘catalogers, feelers, and experiencers’ Dear had mentioned. One of the conservatives (at Ioan’s guess, at least) had even brought a reputation analyst along with her, a slight Asian gentleman who introduced himself as Qián Guōwēi.

It was an interesting move, bringing along someone whose job was that of market analysis to perhaps the strangest family reunion in history. This Guōwēi did not speak much to anyone at all, and few spoke to him in return. It seemed to be some unspoken agreement that the reputation expert remain aloof, somehow above those whose reputations were at stake.

And then it was time. Dear announced that the party would be leaving in five minutes.

AwDae — 2112

“Time is a finger pointed at itself,” AwDae informed Priscilla. This Priscilla. Not the real one, no. The one ey created. The one ey dreamed. “That it might give the world orders. The world is an audience before a stage where it watches the slow hours progress.”

The cat purred to em.

It was wrong to instruct a cat to be anything other than a cat, so, despite the dreamscape’s submission to eir whims, Prisca remained Prisca. There was no influencing felinity.

Similarly, it was wrong to puppet one’s friends, and so AwDae had remained in silence, in solitude. No puppet of Sasha telling em that ey was stuck. No need: if there were any doubt to the fact, it was dashed upon meeting the bug which had trapped em here. That porcelain-faced daemon who need not guard the entrance for the entrance had been destroyed.

No, not destroyed; its very existence had been negated. It had never been. There was no going back because there was no going, and there was no back. This was the world as it had always been. This is the world as it will always be. And yet...

“You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways.”

Was ey stuck? Perhaps, yes. If so, then so be it. Ey would sleep. Ey would dream.

And ey would make. Ey would create. Ey would forge, not hone. Ey would build the world ey would live in, if this was the world ey was to die in. Ey would have it be precisely as ey would want. *And why not?* ey told emself. *In this end of days, I must reach for new beginnings.*

So ey created.

The far wall of eir London flat was gone now, opening out onto the open space behind eir childhood home. The comfort of one home leading directly out onto the comfort of the next. The smooth hardwood floor, worn almost to softness by decades of use, transitioned smoothly to shortgrass prairie. Ey could sit at eir desk chair — remolded to accommodate a fox’s tail — and watch the turbines turn laconically in the breeze.

When ey slept, and ey did, ey would bring about sunset. Had the day been clear, clouds would move in. Not many, but enough to pick up a riot of colors as the light dipped from white down through yellow, orange, salmon, red, purple... And then the sun would be down and ey would sit on the threshold of the two worlds, of the two times and two universes, and enjoy the scents and sounds that night brought em. Dream senses. Heightened senses as a fox might have.

And then ey would bring back into being the wall between the worlds and sleep. Ey would find eir room the perfect temperature. It would be cold enough that ey would need blankets, but not so cold as to be uncomfort-

able. And Prisca would come curl up next to em. And ey would pet her while she dozed. And ey would sleep without dreaming.

Ey would wake again however longer later and walk the world. Who knew how long ey slept. Who cared? What meaning had time? Had ey been lost for days? For years? Ey did not count. Did not keep track in some tally carved in stone, for ey was not trapped. Ey lived for hundreds of days in there, for dozens, or mere hours. Ey was completely free. *We are the motes in the stage lights*, ey promised emself. *Beholden to the heat of the lamps*.

Ey would wake and walk the world. Ey would walk the valley in that prairie. Ey would fall to all fours and dig eir fingers into the soil. Ey would poke eir snout into the tickling stalks of grass and breathe the scent of life. Dear the wheat and rye under the stars.

And the sun would rise.

Ey would dream emself into a new shape. Ey would dream emself beyond this amalgam of human and fox, and there would be no rising from all fours. Ey would be a fox, then, and eir name was unspeakable by those who walked on two legs. A fennec out of place and time. Displaced to here, in the middle of North America, displaced to now, this meaningless moment. Ey would be a fox and scamper between the tussocks. Ey would come across a stream and drink of cool water. Ey would lift eir gaze to find an old-growth forest of oak and maple. Old-growth! Imagine. Ey would scamper between the trunks and through the humus and moss, for those were things that must be in a forest.

And then ey would break through the forest and come upon a pebble-strewn beach. A beach! Here! In the middle of the continent. What wonders dreams held.

And then ey would rise to two feet once more. Ey would be AwDae once more. Short, lithe, a memory stronger in so many ways than that of RJ. Who was RJ? A vehicle for AwDae? AwDae, a slim two-legged fox clad in a cornflower blue skirt trimmed with embroidered dandelions. And why not? Why not be clothed in something comfortable and soothing?

And ey would walk the beach in the summer heat, teasing the tide line with eir steps. The water, cool, would lap against eir feet playfully, leaving the fur damp and clinging to eir skin. What was missing, hmm? Ah yes, gulls. There, above em, gulls dreamed along with a breeze tinged with the salt-tang of the sea. Cry, gulls, cry.

And perhaps the sun would grow too hot, for was that not what the sun did on beaches? But look! There in the distance, pebbles faded to sand and, towering above that sand, shady palms. Ey would sit and look out over the ocean, and there, dreaming above the waters, a squall line crossed.

And maybe ey would go home. Maybe not. There were no obligations. What mattered time, after all? "If I walk backward, time moves forward," ey reasoned aloud. "If I walk forward, time rushes on. If I stand still, the world moves around me, and the only constant is change."

And perhaps the world was moving around em. What cared ey? Had ey been able to influence that world, to enact any sort of change, perhaps ey would have. Had ey been able to share this knowledge of viruses and routines, of stolen votes and stolen lives, perhaps ey would have.

But ey could not. All ey could do was dream.

Dream spires of color rising from the sea in graceful arcs. Dream the rattle of dry grass. Dream the scent of new rain. Dream the sand beneath eir feet. Dream the names of all things. Dream a slow descent into fractal madness.

Qoheleth — 2305

Aha! Dear sent a sensorium message. A view of a crowd and it announcing that they would be leaving in five minutes. Surprising turnout, even. I had expected most of the clade, but here, it looks like I will be expecting the entire clade plus a few here and there — I can see Ioan next to Dear, there — in just a few minutes.

A bit strange to not see Michelle herself there. Not only that, but to have not heard from her, either. On consideration, I am not too surprised that she will not be showing up — not happy, granted, but not surprised — but I am a bit miffed that I have yet to hear from her. Perhaps she struggles still.

Will make a note to contact her down the line. While I suspect she may be perhaps the most broken of all of us, that is not to say that she is safe from this building problem as well, nor that she is necessarily safe simply by virtue of being the root instance. We know madness, do we not?

I am going to shut down all the exits from this room so that there will be less incentive to wander away. Not that I have a whole lot left, mind. I had probably better increase the size, too, in order to fit everyone comfortably. How much room does each Odist need? How much space does one two-hundred twenty year old mind, copied 100 times over, occupy?

Prefer too large over too small, perhaps. There is a joke to be made about ego here, and yet this meeting is too important for me to make it.

This is going to be fun.

Ioan Bălan — 2305

The room was a utilitarian grey, closer to black than to white. Ey did not know why, but it seemed to be a default color. The illumination was a central light source somewhere above the exact center of the room, vague and misted. Soft. Inexact. It was enough to give definition to the room's corners and boundaries, those walls of matte...stone? A faint grid proved it too regular to be mere stone. Not a whole lot else. Even faces felt somewhat featureless in that light.

A small pedestal was set a few meters from one of the walls, only a half a meter high.

A platform? A dais? What kind of meeting would this be?

The Odists arrived in clumps of ten or twenty at a time over the span of thirty seconds. A low murmur started up almost immediately. If this meeting had to be called, then perhaps every detail was of the highest importance.

It seemed that the style of the place was familiar to the clade. The grey, the grid, the light.

A man appeared on the platform.

Qoheleth.

Ioan wasn't sure how ey knew. It was a primal knowledge, an immediate judgement than *must* be correct, something more than what was implied by him being there, in that place at that time. Qoheleth.

He was about Dear's height, a touch heavier, and had affected a greying beard and receding hairline. His clothes were a simple cream tunic and trousers of...was that leather? Coarse linen blurred by distance and softened by age? Atop it all, a ruddy brown robe.

His very form shouted his identity. The shift in form, the shift in gender, the clothing. It was theatrical. His presence spoke of knowledge of the stage. And he certainly seemed to have adopted the part of a biblical notable.

The murmuring doubled, trebled, subsided.

Qoheleth smiled, fatherly, and called out to the group, "Welcome, Odists. Good to see most of you again, and I am sure it will be pleasant to meet the rest of you later."

Silence. Confused. A silence part curious, part angry.

"I am Hebel Qoheleth, though some of you remember me as Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen, of the Ode clade. For my own reasons, I have chosen to rescind my membership within the Ode clade—" He held up his hands to quell scattered protests from within the crowd. "I have chosen to rescind my membership within the clade because something is starting to go wrong."

Ioan split eir attention between Qoheleth and Dear. The fox's brow was furrowed and intent. In the rest of the crowd, expressions varied, but not by much.

Many of the other out-clade individuals were doing the same, confirming Ioan's hunch that they were other amanuenses. There to experience and observe. The reputation analyst, Guōwēi, had positioned himself up near the platform itself and was scribbling notes.

The conservatives in particular looked stoic.

Qoheleth continued, "Something is going wrong in many of the old clades, with many of the old uploads. The founders should probably all hear this. Everyone should, but, even though I am not a part of you anymore, I still feel the responsibility to tell you all first."

"Why the puzzles?" a voice shouted.

The older ex-Odist look proud. Grinning. He was having *fun*. "I had to get you interested and invested to get all of you here. I had to make you all think that there was more going on than just an old man convening a meeting."

Grumbles from the clade.

"It worked, did it not? Would you have showed up if I had simply asked?" A note of a jeer. He smirked, then went on. "So, on to why I called you all here, hmm? Let us get to the good stuff. Or the bad stuff, really.

"There is a problem cropping up in the older uploads and their clades. A bug, of sorts. It is a small one now, but it will get plenty worse over time.

"Actually, it may not be a problem with the uploads at all, but a problem with the *System*. We are stuck. We are frozen in a few ways, but not the right ones, if there is such a thing. We are eternal, and that which is eternal should be unchanging. Anything that changes should end. You know this. The creator of the Ode knew this. The problem is forgetting and aging. We cannot forget. We never age. We are stuck. We never grow."

Dear was nodding.

"Perhaps some of you sense the wrongness in this, but I am worried that it is too few of you. I called you here to teach you why this is a problem." Qoheleth ignored the indignant sounds from the audience and kept going. He seemed to be in a rhythm. Following a script, of sorts. Further stagecraft. "It feels good to be forever young, to be forever ourselves, does it not? We last and last and last, and there is no sign of us stopping. But even if the physical and biological aspects of aging have been obviated by the system, by being digital, the need to age and change is still there. It is a need backed by sanity and diversity rather and biology.

"Sanity drives the need because we cannot forget. *For memory ends at the teeth of death*, yes? I see you there. And you, *The end of memory lies beneath the roots*, yes? Perhaps some of you have figured out ways to intentionally forget, but forgetting needs to be an organic process. It needs to be something that happens to us, not just something that we choose to do. All we can do is ignore, now, but even so, that drives us further from sanity. It is at most a limitation of the System applied to our sensoria, our minds."

Gaining confidence, Qoheleth was speaking louder, more fluently. "Diversity, because we need to change more than just our shapes and those memories originating after the fork.

"All of us here, all of the Ode clade gathered today, are still essentially Michelle Hadje. I do not see her here, and that is fine. Her choice. But we are all still her. All hundred of us, all of our short-lived instances, all of our secret long-lived instances we didn't name after the Ode."

Dear briefly splayed its ears, managed its embarrassed reaction, then straightened up again. Ioan saw several others do the same, all from the more liberal bent. Ey smiled.

“It is not enough that we make nations out of individuals, we need to change beyond our root ancestors if we are to survive. We need to breed, to produce more individuals, to create the synthesis of two or more minds. We cannot keep relying on those who can afford to upload from offline for change. We need to forget at the very least.” He pounded his fist against his palm with these last syllables. “Or perhaps we need to learn how to die again.”

The silence was intense and intent. Ioan made a note to emself, *Impressive. He has them hooked. All the way. Almost all of them except the conservatives.*

“That is why I posted the Name. That is why I gathered you here today. I am telling you, we need to fix this, and I have—”

Ioan missed the cue, if there was one, but with eir eyes locked on the stage, ey did not miss the action.

At the mention of the Name (and perhaps that was the only cue that was needed), Guōwēi hoisted himself up on the stage, withdrew a syringe from his pocket, and slammed it into Qoheleth’s back.

Then he quit.

Qoheleth had time to let out a soft “hah”. It sounded bemused, a mild surprise. And then began to artifact and jitter on the platform.

The death lasted perhaps five seconds, the old man’s internals struggled against the intrusion of the virus, before he crashed. Crashed and disappeared from sight much as the assassin had. The small, black sphere of a core dump dropped to the floor with a thud.

It would doubtless be corrupted. They always were.

By the time Ioan managed to look back to the room, the conservatives had all left or quit.

Uproar was too strong a word for what happened among the remainder of the crowd. There were a few scattered shouts, mostly of surprise, but the rest was concerned murmuring. For its part, Dear stamped a foot and began to pace in the small space it had, tail lashing behind it. “*When Memory is full,*” it was muttering. “*Put on the perfect Lid —*”

“What just happened?” Ioan whispered to the fox when it came close.

“*One of the conservatives took a bet.*”

Ioan did not press further.

Qoheleth — 2305

I have them! I finally, really, truly have them!

I do not know that I have them all hooked, not completely, but I did it. I set my mind in motion by will alone. I count those who are not hooked. Mostly first and second lines, mostly like me. How did they go so wrong, though? I am a first-line instance. Michelle's second fork, even, and I did not turn out so bad. Did I?

Well, I turned out pretty messed up, but only because I suffered the same fate that they all will. Perhaps were already! Only I suffered it a little bit earlier. I started going bonkers from the sheer amount of stuff in my head. I started living too long, living my Methuselah life while still having my Michelle mind. Nothing was getting out of my head. Nothing *could* get out of my head. An impossible poison.

Oh, and I have such grand plans!

Grand plans of organizing a petition among all the founders and old clades, with the Ode clade leading and me leading them in turn. A petition to the system engineers to hire some damn developers again and stop treating this like abandonware. Abandonware that gives them, what, a dumping ground for the poor and a small brain trust? Get some devs in there and give us the ability forget and the ability to die. Hell, maybe even the ability to reproduce, to breed. The word is even in my name — my old name — for chrissake.

As I continue through my spiel, I can tell I am hooking the liberals. The later stanzas, most of all. Dear's sold completely, I can see it on its face. Can see it on Dear's other fox sib, on Praiseworthy. Dear's whole stanza.

The conservatives are harder to read. The whole lot look blank and stern. Stoic. They just stand there, with their historians and their analyst — the flash of his stylus as he scribbles notes in shorthand keeps distracting me. I power through, though, because it was working.

It is working because I am Qoheleth. I am the teacher. I am leading the assemblage. I am instructing them in the dangers they face, telling them what is going on in forceful, no-nonsense terms.

It is working because I am Qoheleth. I am the gatherer, the assembler. It is working because I am the one who brought them together and gave them what they need to understand this. It is working because I am the leader.

It is working.

And then I fuck up. I know it as soon as I do it, too. I say something about the Name. I get too proud and start going into my whys. I should not have done that. It'd lose me the conservatives. They, more than others, guarded that dumb Name more jealously than all the rest.

I try to keep going to cover up my mistake, but there is that damn analyst, pulling himself up onto my stage. My stage. It takes only a moment before I figure out what is going to happen. Takes less than a moment. I know

Qoheleth

immediately, but by then it is too late.

The damn analyst's hand slaps into my back, and there is a sudden, searing pain. A hot wire being drawn through my spine. The only noise I can manage is a sort of strangled laugh at my own foolishness.

My insides start to crumble.

Maybe I was Hebel after all. Vain, futile. Mere breath.

Havél havalím 'amár kohélet havél havalím hakól hável.

Fuck. I was so close.

I am glitching. Can see bits of myself spreading out.

So close.

Tunnel vision.

Blackness.

So close.

Dr. Carter Ramirez — 2112

Caitlin helped Carter wheel the mirror rig into place.

Rather than the usual cradles and headrest, both sets of contacts came in the form of gloves and a headband. She remembered her first experiences, of laying back in a recliner with the uncomfortably itchy accessories, of the panic and sensation of falling that first time, of the world reorienting itself and the gray hands and skin of her default avatar swimming into focus. The instructor's kind voice as he helped her move her arms and legs for the first time.

The mirror rig let the instructor and the student share a space, yes, but also share a body. It gave the instructor access to the panic button that would knock both instructor and student back out of the sim.

It was that experience of watching Sasha get lost that had kicked Carter's mind into gear. If it acted like a crash and an incomplete withdrawal, mightn't she use the mirror rig to help pull RJ back? A slight hope, yes, and she might not even have time: judging by the sounds of the argument outside the door, Caitlin's voice now joining the fray.

But she had to try.

She slipped the headband over RJ's head and the gloves over her hands, and then dragged two chairs closer together so that she could lay on them. No recliner, and the interferites would make her voluntary muscles relax, so sitting up was out of the question. It would have to do.

She pulled on her own set of accessories, the scratchy, inexpensive fabric familiar even after all these years. She lay down and delved in.

Blackness. A black that hurt the eyes. A black so bright that it drew forth tears.

And then, a slow softening. A raising up from the impossible black to something merely pitch, and then from there through *Eigengrau* to grey.

This was not how it was supposed to go. The mirror rig was not connected to the 'net by default, it was a self-contained sim holding a simple demo room. A room with malleable ACLs that could be manipulated by student and instructor both. A room for learning.

This was not a room. This was not a space. This was not being.

Carter tried to cry out, to move, but no muscle would respond to her commands.

And yet, the instructor could control the student, right? It took several attempts and what felt like hours, days, but she was eventually able to will a menu into existence. Thankfully the ACLs for that were tied to the contacts rather than to an account, for there, at the bottom of the menu, was a 'shared controls' option.

She was dizzy and the words kept blurring in and out of focus, but she was eventually able to select ‘Mirror all’, and with a teeth-rattling *pop*, the world came into focus.

Not the room, the whole world. RJ/Carter sat on a low bench at the edge of a small pond. The bench sat at the edge of a trail in the midst of a narrow ridge of dry, knee-high grass. Cottonwoods dotted the rim of the pond, peanut shaped with a short bridge crossing the narrowest section. Behind em/her: a shortgrass prairie, stretching to a valley. Wind turbines.

RJ/Carter was murmuring, was speaking aloud. “May one day death itself not die? Should we rejoice in the end of endings? What is the correct thing to hope for? I do not know, I do not know.”

The Carter half of this shared mind struggled, screamed, beat upon a strange membrane that kept her from truly interacting.

“To pray for the end of endings is to pray for the end of memory,” the murmur continued.

RJ/Carter could feel the way the fabric of the tunic hung off their shared shoulders, feel the way it billowed, beneath their shared thin coat of fur, feel the gentle sway of their shared tail behind the bench.

It was familiar/alien.

The voice was eir own/not her own.

The feeling of a muzzle natural/unnerving.

“RJ.” The murmur, that stream of words arriving from nowhere, was interrupted by the two simple letters.

The fennec stiffened, paused. Something new/something strange. A feeling of terror/a feeling of terror.

“Should...should we forget,” the litany continued. Their voice was clouded by tears, panic. “Should we forget the lives we lead?”

“RJ.”

Panic rising/hope rising.

“RJ, listen to me. Should we forget the names of the dead?”

A struggle for autonomy/a struggle for control.

Carter pressed on. “RJ listen to me. My name is Dr Carter Ramirez and I should we forget the wheat, the rye, the tree?”

Tears welled, coursed down cheeks. The fox stood, paced anxiously, tore at grass, threw stones into the still water.

“My name is Dr Carter Ramirez. The only time I know my true name is when I dream.”

Ey beat back at the words with eir own/she struggled to maintain some semblance of calm, to bring her voice low and soothing.

“My name is Dr Carter Ramirez and yours is RJ Brewster, or...uh, AwDae. You are at the Univ– the only time I dream is when I need an answer– the University Medical Center in London. You have– Do I know god when I dream?”

Ey felt a veil being lifted, being torn, being tugged at/she pressed against that veil between them, searching for soft spots, for weak spots, for ways in. Their breathing came in coarse gasps.

“RJ, b-breathe. Keep breathing,” RJ/Carter stammered. The veil began to tear. “We’re connected using a mirror rig. D-do you remember learning to use your implants with one?”

Paws tore at grass, though no longer with panic but with anger/frustration. This was unconscionable/taking too long.

Ey did not have time for this/she didn't have time for this.

The veil tore.

"RJ, I'm going to stop mirroring. Please do not. Please leave me RJ we don't have much time and please leave me alone RJ, Caitlin and Johansson are here."

And with a final rending, the veil disappeared completely and Carter swiped from mirroring to coexisting, and in that grey, default shape sat on the ground by the weeping fox. "RJ...AwDae. I shouldn't be here. At the UMC, I mean. We don't have too much time. The police are outside and arguing with Johansson. Can you feel for the exit?"

AwDae's fingers dug into the earth, clutched at the roots of the grass. Ey hesitated there, perhaps considering trying to tear up the whole tussock, before sitting up once again, cheekfur stained with streaks of tears. Ey would not look at Carter, and instead looked out toward the mountains.

There was a moment of vertigo as the mountains fell away, the pond rose, and the scene shifted from the curated wilderness into that of a simple flat. Water became hardwood flooring before Carter got wet. Bench became bed. Trees became walls. The sound of the stalks of grass rustling phase-shifted into a quiet purr.

Carter was kneeling on a rumpled bed next to a sobbing fox while a long-haired cat traipsed across her lap to go stand on AwDae's. The fox lifted a paw to stroke through the cat's fur.

"Since then — tis centuries — and yet Feels shorter than the Day," ey said between gasps. "I first surmised the Horses Heads Were towards Eternity —"

"AwDae?"

"Or perhaps," ey continued, seeming to gain strength from the words. "Distance — is not the Realm of Fox nor by Relay of Bird Abated..."

"AwDae, can you hear me?"

"Emily Dickinson." Eir laugh was choked. "I am at a loss for images in this end of days: I have sight but cannot see. I build my castle out of words; I cannot stop myself from speaking. And could never come close to the beauty of Dickinson. How long have I been here? Has it indeed been centuries?"

Carter shook her head.

The cat bunted her head against the fox's paw, and ey scratched claws gently between her ears. "This is Priscilla."

"AwDae, we need—"

"I know. I can feel the exit." Ey sighed. "I am not sure I want to go."

Carter hesitated, then leaned in closer to hug an arm around the slender fox's shoulders. "I don't know that you'll have a choice, RJ. I don't think Johansson and Caitlin are going to hold off the police for long."

"If they pull us back, will I come with?"

"I don't know."

AwDae sagged against her. "I know I should come with. But in case I do not, here is what happened."

Carter tamped down her impatience and let the fox speak. Let em speak about the experience of getting lost. Let em speak about dreaming and the mirroring of exo- and endocortices. Let em speak about Cicero and the

vote in the DDR, the trap that had been triggered by some outside authority. Let em confirm all her suspicions and then some.

That impatience melted away. There was no way that Johansson and Caitlin were somehow holding off the police for this long. Too much time had gone by.

Had it?

Had *any* time gone by?

Carter could feel the maddening influence of this non-place, so detailed in appearance. She could feel the way the dream buffeted her, drew smudging lines away from her mind. Pulled at words, wrapped her in blankets of language. unforgotten. Something innate made real. Memory froze, and forgetting was forgotten. And yet, when she focused, she could still feel that cool breeze of the exit behind her. She focused on that.

“Thank you, AwDae,” she said when ey finally fell silent. “This confirms much of what we learned in the lab and in talking with Sasha.”

The fox sat bolt upright. “Sasha? You were talking with her?”

“She contacted me, yes. I wasn’t supposed to, but I talked with her and Johansson both.”

Ey subsided. “I am glad to hear she is alright, then.”

Carter frowned. “She isn’t, though. She got lost about an hour ago. Or something, I can’t tell time in this place. I delved in to pass on information before the police caught up with me, and Debarre and I watched her get lost. That’s what led me to try the mirror rig. You should–”

As she spoke, the fennec’s frown grew deeper and deeper, and then, apparently having heard enough, ey dissolved from view. Not disappeared; dissolved with the pleasant disconnection animation.

Ey had pulled back.

Carter reached for that cool breeze on the back of her neck and pulled back as well. The quiet purring of the cat was replaced with screaming.

No, not screaming, shouting. Surprise, not fear or pain. Caitlin and Johansson shouting.

Carter lifted her head from the chair she had appropriated as a pillow and tried to tug off the gloves of the mirror-rig and found her hands bound with a zip-tie. Police frowned down to her. They couldn’t prevent her from looking, though.

Caitlin was holding RJ’s hand, and Johansson was shouting for a doctor.

RJ’s eyes were open. Confused and anxious, but cogent and bright.

Before she could rejoice, before anyone could stop her, even herself, she delved back in. Delved back in to the sim, then swiped ’net access on. She signed on, dropped into her home sim, and swiped up an audio broadcast to Sasha, Debarre, Avery, Prakash, Johansson, her MP...everyone she could think of, and began talking. Those that were not listening live would receive a recording.

“My name is Dr Carter Ramirez, researcher at University College London studying the lost. We have succeeded in waking up one patient, RJ Brewster, and have discovered the mechanism by which individuals get lost. The police and Western Fed agents are here to prevent me from saying this, I think, so if I disconnect, that is why. Do not use the DDR. This is the source of the mechanism as described by Mx. Brewster.”

She kept speaking until she had exhausted the knowledge of what she had learned over the last week. The pressure from on high. Sanders’ carefully-constructed ruse. The data shifting. The rising panic. The only thing

she left out was Prakash's involvement, the Sino-Russian Bloc's interest in the case.

And then she pulled back once more, sat up, and tugged off the gloves with her teeth. She shrugged to the police and, on seeing RJ sitting up, smiled over to em.

Ey did not smile back. "We have to get Sasha."

Ioan Bălan — 2305

After the assassination, with no one to lead and no reason to remain, the rest of the Odists and their friends left. Dear's pacing wound down. It eventually stopped, shoulders sagging.

"Come, we should return." Then it turned and addressed some others near by, mostly from the same stanza, by the historian's guess. *"Any of you are welcome, too."*

It was Ioan, Dear, Serene, and Praiseworthy — the first line of the stanza and down-tree instance from Dear — who wound up back at the house. They entered the sim twenty meters from the front door, where Ioan had originally arrived so long ago. Those few days ago. They trudged slowly up to the house.

Dear's partner greeted them at the door, silent. Perhaps Dear had sent ahead a message, for they greeted the group and then stayed out of the way. They disappeared and returned shortly with mugs of coffee.

The four witnesses slumped into the couch. A universal sigh. Dear and Serene leaning against each other, and Dear's partner claimed on a stolen dining-room chair nearby.

"So," they said, finally. "What happened?"

"One of the conservatives played her hand. She chose protecting the clade in the short term over learning more. She brought along an assassin, and as soon as Qoheleth revealed his reasoning for revealing the Name, the assassin acted and then quit. My guess is that Qoheleth had not forked and will not be heard from again, and that the assassin, was a fork of someone unsuspecting. Someone who will 'mysteriously' experience problems merging back. No culpability for its #tasker or #tracker instance."

Its partner frowned. "Ah."

Silence fell on the group again.

Ioan waited for one of those ebbs in the rhythm of the silence before clearing his throat. "Perhaps it's too soon, but may I ask after everyone's well being? Their thoughts on the matter?"

Serene simply shook her head.

Praiseworthy shrugged, looking what Ioan thought might be glum, though her gestures and expressions took additional work to decode. Ioan had learned to understand Dear's expressions and movements, but she was another animal, of some form different from Dear and Serene. Black fur, white stripes retreating up along her snout and over her head. Thick tail that looked delightfully soft. Many of the clade matched her more closely than they did Dear. "I am not surprised, really. Not happy, but not surprised."

Ioan turned to Dear. "You alright?"

It was a moment in responding before it nodded. *"I am with Praiseworthy. I am not surprised, but not happy. Rather pissed, actually,"* it said, smiling sardonically. *"That was short-sighted of them, though, because I have a hunch*

that Qoheleth was right."

"Right'?"

"About the need to age, to die. About forgetting."

"Does this have anything to do with you trying to forget The Name?"

Dear shot a glance at its partner, laughed. *"You two get along, I see. Yes, it does. I think I did it, too, unless there is some association I missed. I cannot remember it for the life of me."*

"You will have to tell me how you did that, Dear." Serene laughed.

"Later, yes. I think Qoheleth was right, though. We need forgetting. We need breeding and change and death."

"So how do you feel about the assassination?" Ioan asked.

"I would prefer that not be the only means of death, of course. Perhaps the primary way should be through...ah, suicide is not the best word, but it is what I mean. Through choice, just like Qoheleth's old name."

Life breeds life, but death must now be chosen.

Ioan nodded.

"It is as I said. Batty. They are all batty." It stared at its paws, one of them brushing through Serene's forearm fur. "It is like some sort of Methuselah syndrome, or reverse Alzheimer's. Instead of being doomed to forget, we are doomed to remember. Doomed to remember everything. We cannot forget, and it all gets to be too much for one mind."

"What about exos?"

"Exocortices are a fix, but an incomplete one. Do you know why we have them?"

Ioan and Dear's partner shook their heads, while both Serene and Praiseworthy frowned.

"The origin of the system came from the lost, from the turmoils of the early twenty-second century, though one could perhaps trace roots further back into the twenty-first. Prior to the system, the 'net on Earth required engaging with through another thing called exocortices. Implants along the spine, with tendrils trailing along nerves."

Serene and Praiseworthy both reached up to rub at the backs of their necks.

"And the lost, those unlucky few, wound up trapped in a dream, mirrored between cerebral cortex and exocortex. They — we — were trapped along with all the knowledge that had been cached in those early exos."

"You mean they kept the name to refer to something similar?"

Dear shrugged. *"I suppose. All that we experienced in that dream also wound up cached in those implants, and it was that cache that helped the engineers on the early system to construct the shared dream that is the system today."*

Ioan ground eir palms against eir slacks. This information, this dump of the past, was doing nothing to quell the anxiety of the previous hour. "Right, okay. How are they only an incomplete fix to forgetting?"

"You are still stuck with the knowledge that they exist and their inventory, yes? That is why I cannot forget that the Name exists. I cannot forget my origins or that there is an exo containing them. One which I cannot forget. Not unless I go through the whole shitty process again — sorry, Serene, it was not pleasant, my dear. I could forget that bit of knowledge, but then what? I will have the knowledge that I have an exo that I cannot access pointing to something of dire importance. Can you imagine that feeling of lingering dread being a constant factor in life?"

Ioan shifted, leaning forward to rest eir elbows on eir knees, eir chin in eir hand. Ey sipped eir coffee as ey thought.

Serene slouched against Dear's side, poking its thigh. "I understand what you are saying, Dear, but I do not want to die. I do not want you to die, either."

Dear's partner, frowned. "Neither do I, fox."

The fennec laughed and shook its head, ears flopping about. *"Trust me, I do not either. I do not think many do. I just think we need death, or something like it, as part of the system. Death. Fear of death. Needs and reasons to survive in the face of an inevitable end."*

"Something like it?" asked Praiseworthy.

"We need a way for an individual to end. We need a way to release those memories. We also need a way to create new individuals, so perhaps they should be related. Qoheleth called it breeding. Indelicate, perhaps. It could just as easily be a way of ending one individual and having them live on as another."

The others nodded. Silence once more.

Finally, Dear gave a lopsided smile. *"Perhaps that is my next project."*

Sasha — 2112

Pain woke Sasha. Pain and a rumbling, jittery sensation within her body.

The pain coursed through her limbs, seeming to originate from a wellspring at the base of her neck. She remembered a quickly building sense of vertigo, of the whole of her perception growing fuzzy around the edges, and then...nothing.

And then this.

She levered her eyes open slowly, carefully, and was greeted by an extreme close-up view of a dandelion. A dandelion. More dandelions. Cartoonishly fat bumblebees — for what bumbler is not cartoonish? — coursed among them in lazy Lissajous curves. They all avoided her with the polite patience of bees of all ilk.

“The fuck.” The half-formed phrase tumbled out from between what felt like half-formed lips.

She carefully picked herself up off the ground, off the field of endless dandelions. The pain coursing through her body was quickly explained as she turned around. It appeared that she had fallen from a tall barstool. There stood before her a row of them lined neatly before a bar. *The bar*. The one so familiar from countless nights and weekends loitering in the Crown Pub.

The bar stood alone in the field. No backing wall full of racks of bottles. No walls at all: beyond the bar was more endless field. No floor: the stools sprouted as easily from soil and grass as did the dandelions.

Dandelions.

That warm smell of fresh-baked muffins hung thick in the air. The warm air. The warm sun. The warm sky. The warm earth.

She rubbed at the back of her neck to ease the pain, then quickly pulled her hand away as though burnt.

Hand.

Paw.

Hand.

Paw.

Her body could not seem to make up its mind. Just as the fall seemed to explain the jolts of pain, the quaking in her body seemed to come from the way her form wobbled between states. Waves of skunk-fur/waves of human skin washed across her, gentle stripes moving through the base of human skin/through the base of skunk fur.

She screamed.

She screamed and the scream wobbled through different registers with an unnerving electric intensity that set her teeth on edge and made her fur bristle/made her skin crawl.

The scream did not echo.

What vasty nothing must produce such anechoic bliss! The silence hurt her ears, deafened her.

The scream cut short, she stumbled, ran, stumbled again, and kept running. Did not know where she ran. Did not care where she ran. Picked a direction and sprinted. Hoarse breathing echoed within her ears, for where else would it echo?

Hazardous glances back marked her distance by the shrinking of the lone bar, standing awkwardly amid flowers.

And I ran. Words coursed absurdly through her head. Coursed and squirmed, slick to the touch. *I ran so far away.* Words and music. Notes falling upon her from on high. Words welling up from somewhere deep within her gut.

She looked back, saw the bar dwindle, and when she turned around once more, skidded to a halt. For there was the bar again. Obstinate proving its presence through albedo and shadow and solidity. Looked behind her again and saw only empty field.

Screamed again.

Deafened again, fell silent.

Reached behind her for that cool draft against her neck, tried to pull back.

There was no draft.

There was no pulling back.

That pain, then: not the shock of falling from the stool, but the shock of sudden disconnection.

Fell to her knees and scrambled toward the bar on all fours, huddling against it and staring wide-eyed at the endless plain of dandelions. Heard her breath echo against the wood of the bar. Turned to face it and screamed deliberately, letting the subtle echo of acknowledgement, the presence of something solid, wash over her. Relished it. Screamed obscenities. Cursed the world. Cursed the powers that sent her to this place. Lost. Lost. Lost.

She could not control her thoughts. The world came at her too fast. An intrasaccadic smear of a world. A gesture at reality.

It was days/years/minutes until she was able to calm herself once more. The sun set/never set. The air temperature swung wildly to cold at night/was an unchanging warm that would not permit the passage of time.

Her mind wandered far.

Days passed.

Or not.

She plucked at a dandelion at some point, breathed in the fresh-baked scent of it. Let it fall to the ground.

She levered herself up onto the stool once more and cheerfully ordered herself a drink from no one. She clawed/scratched at the bar's stained and varnished surface, sobbing. Tears left tracks in fur/slid from her cheeks to the bar top.

And always her form shifted and danced. Her tail would sway into being and then it would never have been there. Her skin would sting and prickle from slamming her hand down against the bar and then that skin would be replaced by velvety pads.

She came to at some point/calmed down enough to think/let her breath slow enough that she was no longer sobbing.

Days passed.

Perhaps.

If this is a dream and I know it, do I not have control? Can I not make my reality for me?

She breathed in to the count of four, held for the count of two, and then breathed herself out on a breath. There, beside her on the next stool, sat her human form/sat her skunk form. Her mind was split. Shared between the two. Neither could move without the other moving. Unison did not describe the perfection of the match.

But at least she was no longer out of focus.

Was this what the lost were going through? She brushed her hand/paw through her hair/over her ears. *Or perhaps it is merely a furry thing, primed as we are to have an internal representation so different from our external? Perhaps it is a me thing? Perhaps all are unique.*

"Oh AwDae," she moaned. "Oh fox. How long have you been suffering?"

Days passed.

The sun rose and set with a frightening hum/utter tranquility.

She stood/she stood.

Poetry coursed through her, half remembered/perfectly memorized lines from productions long past. Lines from school, from work. "Since then — 'tis centuries — and yet feels shorter than the day I first surmised the horse's heads were toward eternity —"

It had been centuries for her, and yet each felt shorter than the crash to the ground from out of the perilous heights of the embodied world. Time feels so vast that were it not For an Eternity...

Time, which beat against the skies. Time, which hemmed her in. Time, which forced words from her mouth/from her muzzle in breathless haste/unwavering slowness. *I fear me this Circumference Engross my Finity — To His exclusion who prepare By Process of Size For the Stupendous Vision Of his diameters —*

"Oh fox."

She cried again/cried again. Sat on the ground again/sat on the ground again. Plucked a dandelion/plucked a dandelion. Again/again. Always twice over.

"Sasha!" She spoke aloud.

"The fuck." Half question this time.

"Sasha, it's Debarre," she said. Then: "What the fuck?"

"I'm so sorry. I came as fast as I could. Everything's a fucking mess."

"How long has it been?" she asked herself.

"About sixteen hours."

"Hours?" Hours? What meaning held time? She had lived her whole life — several such — on this tiny world.

"Yeah. I had to dump a chunk of my savings into a ticket to get here."

She clawed at the ground in something between frustration and terror that a friend's voice was coming from her mouth/from her muzzle. "And...how are you..."

"A mirror rig." The joyous tone of the words clashed against the tears still flowing freely. "We figured it out. Carter figured it out, I mean. She and AwDae busted everything open. Figured out how to rescue the lost,

figured out how everyone *gets* lost in the first place.”

She stopped digging at the earth. “AwDae is back?”

“Yes! And the clinic where Cicero is is trying to get him out as well!”

She had to turn toward the bar again to let the shouting echo. The silence was giving her a headache.

Or not. A neck-ache. Something was tearing at the back of the neck/through the fur of her scruff. An ache. A jolt of pain. A ripping. A tearing.

“I’m going to stop mirroring now. This is horrifying,” she said to the wood of the bar. She did not know who said the last, Debarre or herself. Was there a difference?

And then, a hand on her shoulder. One of her shoulders. The sensation made her hair/fur stand on end. She turned around, and there was Debarre. Or so she guessed. The grey, default avatar. The figure frowned as he looked between the two of her. Looked at Michelle/looked at Sasha.

“I...what? Sasha?”

She gritted her teeth/bared her teeth. “I do not know either. What to we do now? How do we get out of this...place?”

The shape that promised it was Debarre shrugged. “Can you back out?”

She reached. Felt the draft. Smiled beatifically. She passed the field of dandelions. Passed the setting sun, or perhaps he passed her.

And breathed in the cool air of an implant clinic.

There, beside her, also sitting up from the recliner and pulling off his headband, was, she supposed, Debarre. Short. Soft. Thinning hair. Ecstatic grin.

“Sasha?” The grin picked up an ironic twist. “Or Michelle, I guess. You okay?”

Ioan Bălan — 2305

Earlier that day, after Serene and Praiseworthy had left, Ioan had thanked Dear earnestly for the opportunity and experience and prepared to leave. Dear had cried and made Ioan promise to come back — “*your wall will miss you*” — to which Ioan readily agreed. They shook hands, hesitated, shrugged in unison, and then hugged. The contact felt important. Necessary.

Ey would soon, but for now, ey needed some distance from the experience to sit and think and remember and write.

No, not remember — ey couldn’t forget. To mix the thoughts around. To understand. To perform as an amanuensis.

Ey moved out to eir favorite Adirondack chair on the deck with pen and paper. Fine, cream-colored paper. Soft, without being fuzzy. A subtle inlay of thicker rows of pulp, leaving faint horizontal lines visible across the page without necessarily leaving it bumpy or ridged. Fine paper and a nice pen.

Ey spent a minute thinking back on Dear and Qoheleth, spent another savoring the heft of the pen and the texture of the paper, and then began to write.

Or tried to. The words would not come.

It was perhaps too fresh to begin properly. Too near to the surface. Not yet emulsified into the story both ey and Dear craved. The ending had essentially been reached, but the story was still just an outline.

Ey set the paper aside and stood from the chair to lean against the balcony railing of the deck, looking out onto the manicured lawn of the yard, the ring of perpetually blooming lilacs that served as a fence.

Looked, but did not see, for ey was focused inwards. Focused on story and memory. And then ey was focused on composing a short sensorium message to Dear, requesting a half-duplex meeting.

Unsurprisingly, the response was nearly instantaneous. “*Ioan. I did not expect to hear from you so soon.*”

“Right. I know that I promised I needed some space from the story but I was wondering if—”

“*Yes, of course!*” The fox was grinning wide, ears at full attention. “*Sorry, continue.*”

Ioan laughed. “Well, I think you answered it already, but I was wondering if I could send a fork to work in the room you offered. It was a wonderful place to write, and that would give me easy access to you for clarifications and whatnot.”

“*As I had guessed. The answer is still yes, then. Shall we expect you for dinner while you stay with us? Please say yes.*”

“Of course, Dear. I’ll gather a few things and then head over momentarily.”

The fox appeared to bounce on its feet as it clapped its paws before itself. “*Wonderful. We will see you soon.*”

The few things Ioan needed to gather turned out to be a duplicate of eir nice pen and the few notes ey had

made already. It would be easy enough to acquire anything else that ey needed once ey was there, and just as easy to come back to visit this house.

A pen, a few notes, and a new name.

Ey explained eir goals to Ioan#Tracker. Ey frowned, but agreed, requesting a merger beforehand.

#c1494bf was startled by a pang of jealousy. The experience had felt so hard-won, more so than most of eir experiences. To leave #Tracker burdened with it while ey went off to have further experiences felt like an intrusion. To create a long-lived fork was a new thing, though, and ey supposed there would be many discussions on it to come.

Ey forked into #0224ebe8, a signifier that felt somehow familiar, and then #c1494bf quit, letting #Tracker handle the merge. Eir frown deepened, and the two agreed that they would talk about it in the future.

The new fork bowed, then headed to that delightfully modern house on the prairie.

Dear and its partner were already waiting on the path leading up to the door. The fox looked like it had calmed down somewhat, that grin tempered into a smile. Its partner looked pleased as well. “Ioan, good to see you so soon.”

Ey bowed to the two, then reached out to shake each of their hands. “Apologies, but you can call me Codrin Bălan.”

Any sense of calmness that Dear had managed to acquire was quickly lost. The grin returned, its tail whipped about behind it, and, in perhaps the strangest display of excitement that Codrin had ever seen, it forked several times over, copies of the fox — of the fox, of what Codrin supposed must be non-anthropomorphized fennecs, of Michelle — briefly littering the path before quitting.

Codrin laughed.

“A change of name is cause for celebration! Come! Come inside and tell us about it.”

Once inside Dear’s gallery, ey began, “This little...what, adventure? This adventure has been lousy with names. Your whole clade has a unique approach to them.”

Dear nodded. *“Names are important. They put a label on things, sure, but much more than that. Names give voice to identity. A chosen name doubly so.”*

“I was ‘Ioan’ before I uploaded. I suppose a great many trackers keep their names. Despite the masculinity implied by it and my own fluidity, I was rather attached to it. I liked being ‘Ioan’. It was my identity.”

“And ‘Codrin’?”

Ey regarded the painting of the black square. It no longer felt quite so unnerving. “From ‘codru’. Forest. The idea of clades inspired me.”

“Does it come with a change of identity, then?”

“Perhaps.”

Dear turned to face em, regarded em pleasantly. *“I promised you at the beginning of this that I would discuss your Umwelt with you.”*

Codrin nodded.

“It is an idea from the field of semiotics. It originally applied to the biological side of it. It was the idea that different species living in the same environment would, by necessity, create meaning for themselves in different ways. It was then generalized to the idea that individuals within the same environment would still create meaning in different ways. You and

I looking at a painting will experience different feelings and thoughts.”

It prodded at Codrin’s arm, then at its own. *“Of course, we only have a gesture at biology in the system, but it is still the case that it is the sum of our parts — our experiences — that shape how we create meaning.”*

“I see. Then yes, I had a set of experiences that led to a change of how I create meaning.”

The fox’s ears bobbed as it nodded. *“So it is no surprise that you might feel a shift in your identity. The Ioan that finished the experience was no longer the same Ioan that started it. Ey was a Codrin now.”*

“Precisely. It was strange,” ey mused. “When #Tracker— when Ioan asked that I merge, I felt a bit of jealousy, and I wasn’t quite sure why. Despite all of the other projects that I’ve approached with a fork leading to no such feelings, something about this one made it feel like a stranger was asking me to give up something intimate.”

Dear laughed. *“The very thing that keeps me from being anything other than a dispersionista. Jealousy is a sign of needs not met, and one of my needs — one of the clade’s needs — is that of ownership over memory. I would be quite furious if Praiseworthy asked me to merge with her.”*

Ey grinned and nodded.

“Perhaps you have a bit of dispersionista in you, then.”

“I suppose I must. You Odists seem to have infected me with the need to own memory.” Ey sighed. “I don’t know if it will stick, and perhaps once I’m done, I will head back and merge with Ioan. I don’t know.”

“You are welcome to stay here while you figure that out, and as long after as you would like.”

“You’re sure? You and your partner won’t mind?”

It shook its head. *“Of course not. I am sure we all have our own privacy needs that will require discussion, but we like you, Codrin. Trauma, if trauma this is, forges bonds. I think we are both open to strengthening this one.”*

There was a comfortable silence, then, as the two digested the conversation.

It was Codrin who spoke up next. “What do you make of it?”

“Of what? Of the goings on?”

“No, of the painting,” ey said, nodding toward the canvas. The prairie and the ultrablack square.

“Haven’t a fucking clue.”

Sasha — 2113

“To get lost is to go mad,” Sasha spoke to the small crowd that had gathered in the Crown Pub. Read, actually, for she had written the speech to give — as Michelle Hadje rather than Sasha — at a gathering not too dissimilar from this one earlier in the day. A digital ceremony to follow the analog. “It is perhaps indelicate to say, but it is true. To get lost is to go mad.

“I think that this applies to more than just the sense that it has come to mean here and now. I think that if you go for a walk in a strange city and get lost, there is some aspect of that which is similar to madness. You walk the strange streets and see the strange people and strange buildings, and eventually, it all seems to blur together and your thoughts wander. They wander beyond the limits of your body and your mind. They soar above the city and try to make sense of these unknown, shifting shapes. They try to draw sensible paths from the turns you took. I turned left there, did I not? Or did I?”

The sombre group of diverse species was mostly looking at her. Animals of all shapes, anthropomorphism of all levels. Even some humans, for there was Carter, looking much as she had at that first ceremony.

And some looked down. AwDae looked at her, keen-eyed. Debarre looked down, shaking with sobs.

“And to get lost in today’s sense feels much the same. Your mind flies to strange places and dreams with all the logic of dreams. Only in there, when your mind dreams, so too does reality. If, that is, the word ‘reality’ has any meaning in this case.

“And you go mad. You go mad and you try to control the dreams. You try to control them and you fail, because in the end, lucid as you may be, it is the dream which has you, and not the other way around. You do what you can, but you go mad. Your mind is flooded with words. They fly at you like poetry, spill from your mouth or your hands in unceasing torrents. It changes how you speak, how you act, how you create and move within the world.

“And there along with you is all that was stored in your exocortex. All of that data, useful and useless, is in there with you. You can keep it for your very own, browse it at will, build it up into castles as tall as you like.

“We are gathered tonight to remember Cicero. We are gathered because to get lost is to go mad, and now, even a year later, that madness clings to the lost like some horrid stench, hangs from us like bloated ticks. Perhaps it will fade over time, and perhaps not, but for Cicero, as with so many others, the lingering madness grew to be too much, overcame him like a wave, and the undertow took him from us.”

Debarre moaned, tried to stifle his grief with his paws.

Sasha’s own voice creaked as she went on. “But, even as the madness worked its awful magics on him, he gave back what he could. In his time in there, in that horrible forever, he prowled through the data left in

his exo. Many of us did, each in our own way, but he had the advantage of being one of the first. He had the advantage of having the much needed information that drew attention to those responsible for the terror we all lived through, some of us directly and many, many more of you indirectly.

“I feel that madness still. Many of the lost do, perhaps all.” She saw AwDae nod at this. “We owe it to Cicero and his memory to repair as best we can. To use what he gave us to help build ourselves up better than before. To, in his name, live fuller lives having known him. We owe it to him to remember him as that oh-so-intense cat with a penchant for politics. We owe it to him to remember the whole of him in all ways.

“And we owe it to ourselves tonight to remember the best of him. Let us delight in each other, rejoice together.”

She raised a glass. “To Cicero.”

The crowd echoed, intent, shaky but one hundred percent present in the moment. “To Cicero”

The rest of the evening was quiet, subdued. Sasha and AwDae sat with Debarre, each to one side. They supported the weasel as he cried. Cried over his twice lost partner, cried over the cruel vagaries of family which had kept him from attending the day’s first funeral. They supported him with silence and listening.

And when he had cried himself out and was willing to admit something other than mourning into the night, then they rejoiced together.

And if Sasha and AwDae were in some way distant, in some way not wholly there, Debarre either ignored it or forgave them their madness.

Epilogue

RJ Brewster — 2114

Sasha,

I am, in a way, leaving you with a burden. I know this, and I apologize for doing so. I do not ask for nor deserve forgiveness. The only thing I can ask for is that you remember me.

The world within was a nightmare. I am sure that you know some of what I mean. It was a nightmare and I would not wish it on anyone, and yet now, to be without it is to be incomplete. I was changed in there. We were all changed in there. You do not deny that you were not, after all. Cicero certainly was not. None of the lost came away unscathed, even if we awoke hale and hardy.

We lost Cicero, and then we *truly* lost him. The nothing that he experienced in there, the void which contained all his power transmuted into weakness, the way his anger coiled about and turned back around on himself did him in in the end.

And I will not deny that the same has crossed my mind. There was a scent of the void in there, and it was alluring. I have been tempted to follow in his footsteps and seek that void out in some coarser, purer form. I decided against it. Truly decided: I made a conscious decision to stick around.

I did it for STT at first, but integrating with the theater was too stark a reminder. Then I did it for you and Priscilla, but then she passed. Then I did it for you and...well, here is where I do not deserve forgiveness. I welcome your anger, should it come, as that is perhaps what I deserve. It is not that you are not in some way worth sticking around for, as you certainly are. You have always been my champion and friend.

It is just that the call is too strong.

I have volunteered for an early procedure. A way back. Or, rather, a way to a new place. A way to be embedded within a system, rather than simply within a hall of mirrors. I cannot say where, other than it is not in the Western Fed. All I can tell you is that the world should expect big things when it comes to what we have learned from the lost.

I will not say that there is no chance that we may some day meet again. My body will die, I'm told, but should my mind and my sense of self miraculously survive, then I will be on my own once more. This time, however, it will be my choice.

There will be those who come after. Perhaps you will come after. Perhaps you will yearn for that return to the eternal dream where memory does not die. And maybe those who come after will do so for other reasons, but they will come.

Should I survive and then others come after, perhaps I will meet them. But it is best to assume that I will not. Maybe it is best to think of it as a sort of suicide, in the end. Here I am, going off to find a better place, and doing

so through death. A place that is inaccessible to you or anyone, except perhaps some anonymous scientist in a lab, typing at a terminal.

If I see you again, I will greet you with open arms. If I do not, know that I loved you to the last, in my own way.

I have little else to offer but the imperfect words that plagued me while I was lost.

I am at a loss for images in this end of days:

I have sight but cannot see.

I build castles out of words;

I cannot stop myself from speaking.

I still have will and goals to attain,

I still have wants and needs.

And if I dream, is that not so?

If I dream, am I no longer myself?

If I dream, am I still buried beneath words?

And I still dream even while awake.

Life breeds life, but death must now be chosen
for memory ends at the teeth of death.

The living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing.

Hold my name beneath your tongue and know:
when you die, thus dies the name.

To deny the end is to deny all beginnings,
and to deny beginnings is to become immortal,
and to become immortal is to repeat the past,
which cannot itself, in the end, be denied.

Oh, but to whom do I speak these words?

To whom do I plead my case?

From whence do I call out?

What right have I?

No ranks of angels will answer to dreamers,

No unknowable spaces echo my words.

Before whom do I kneel, contrite?

Behind whom do I await my judgment?

Beside whom do I face death?

And why wait I for an answer?

Among those who create are those who forge:

Moving ceaselessly from creation to creation.
And those who remain are those who hone,
Perfecting singular arts to a cruel point.
To forge is to end, and to own beginnings.
To hone is to trade ends for perpetual perfection.
In this end of days, I must begin anew.
In this end of days, I seek an end.
In this end of days, I reach for new beginnings
that I may find the middle path.

Time is a finger pointing at itself
that it might give the world orders.
The world is an audience before a stage
where it watches the slow hours progress.
And we are the motes in the stage-lights,
Beholden to the heat of the lamps.
If I walk backward, time moves forward.
If I walk forward, time rushes on.
If I stand still, the world moves around me,
and the only constant is change.

Memory is a mirror of hammered silver:
a weapon against the waking world.
Dreams are the plate-glass atop memory:
a clarifying agent that reflects the sun.
The waking world fogs the view,
and time makes prey of remembering.
I remember sands beneath my feet.
I remember the rattle of dry grass.
I remember the names of all things,
and forget them only when I wake.

If I am to bathe in dreams,
then I must be willing to submerge myself.
If I am to submerge myself in memory,
then I must be true to myself.
If I am to always be true to myself,
then I must in all ways be earnest.
I must keep no veil between me and my words.
I must set no stones between me and my actions.

I must show no hesitation when speaking my name,
for that is my only possession.

The only time I know my true name is when I dream.
The only time I dream is when need an answer.
Why ask questions, here at the end of all things?
Why ask questions when the answers will not help?
To know one's true name is to know god.
To know god is to answer unasked questions.
Do I know god after the end waking?
Do I know god when I do not remember myself?
Do I know god when I dream?
May then my name die with me.

That which lives is forever praiseworthy,
for they, knowing not, provide life in death.
Dear the wheat and rye under the stars:
serene; sustained and sustaining.
Dear, also, the tree that was felled
which offers heat and warmth in fire.
What praise we give we give by consuming,
what gifts we give we give in death,
what lives we lead we lead in memory,
and the end of memory lies beneath the roots.

May one day death itself not die?
Should we rejoice in the end of endings?
What is the correct thing to hope for?
I do not know, I do not know.
To pray for the end of endings
is to pray for the end of memory.
Should we forget the lives we lead?
Should we forget the names of the dead?
Should we forget the wheat, the rye, the tree?
Perhaps this, too, is meaningless.

May this be the end of death. Failing that, may the memory of me die and be food for the growth of those
who come after.

Yours always,
AwDae

Book II

Toledot

Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

Jacob said, "Swear to me first."

So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

— Genesis 25:32-33

Part I

Departure

While the reasons for the Launch project are complex and will be discussed in depth in a later portion of this history, it is important to establish a set of facts before continuing. This is no “take care that you first place him in his time”, some fictional bit of history to be placed at the chapter headings of some long-rambling fictional account. These facts are important because they provide much needed context for the project that led to our little diaspora.

First and foremost among these facts, almost to the point where one might consider all other facts as following logically from it, surrounding it, existing only to support it, is that Launch Day takes place exactly two hundred years after Secession Day.

On the surface of it, especially for those who have had some connection with the event itself, this may seem backwards. After all, so much happened around Launch. So much had to happen around Launch, yes? Sending off two multi-ton blocks of computronium and raw materials, solar sails and Dreamer Modules, out into unknown space takes rather a lot of work.

But in all ways, that falls out of the simple fact that Launch Day occurred on the bicentennial Secession Day.

From *An Expanded History of Our World* By
The Bălan clade

Ioan Bălan — 2325

The first thing that Ioan did when ey arrived before that low-slung house, there among countless acres of rolling buffalo grass, was laugh.

The prairie was as ey remembered. Grass still tickled at eir lower calves even through the socks and slacks; clouds threatened rain as they always did; wind tugged at eir hair in all the very same ways it first had however many years ago now—was it really twenty? And yet the house! Banners were hung about in deepest black, streamers running from pole to pole in a welcoming path, guiding visitors. The house itself was lit about with flames of all sizes: tea-lights scattered among the dandelions, elaborate candelabras set upon tables, braziers set upon tripods, wall sconces set beneath the cantilevered roof. A glow painting the grass beside the house suggested a bonfire out back.

And there, the largest banner of them all, draped from that roof, shouted in stately capitals: “HAPPY DEATH DAY”.

Still shaking eir head, ey walked up along the streamer-lined path up toward the house. When the threshold was crossed, a chime sounded from within.

Ioan need not have looked hard for Dear; the fox was already sprinting around the corner of the house. Foxes, ey realized, for as it ran, it forked off copies of itself of all sorts: that iridescent fennec ey remembered, yes, but also scampering foxes no larger than a double-handful, a few grinning copies of the Michelle Hadje of its past, and even a shoulder-high lumbering beast with eyes that crackled with a light of their own.

Dear—the real Dear—was easy to pick out, for it was dressed in mourners’ garb. A black suit, almost-but-not-quite masculine, with its eyes hidden by a gauzy black, almost-but-not-quite feminine veil.

One by one, the various forks quit, and Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled skidded to an unceremonious stop in front of em.

“Ioan! Mx. Ioan Bălan! It has been too long! I have missed you.” The fox held out a paw.

Ioan bypassed this and went straight for the hug. “Dear, this is patently ridiculous.”

The laughter against eir ear was giddy as the hug was returned. *“I hold no patent on the ridiculous. It is precisely as ridiculous as it needs to be. Come! Come around back. You are early, and that is perfectly fine, but folks will want to say hi.”*

Following after the fox and laughing at the way the occasional non-anthropomorphized fennec would blip into being, scamper into the grass with a (frankly rather horrifying) screech, and then disappear, Ioan tried to chat with Dear.

The fox was short on speech after the greeting, eventually hushing em. *"We'll all talk together."*

"Ioan! Goodness!"

Ey smiled. "Codrin, you're looking well."

What similarities the two had borne early on had since started to blur. Codrin had started out, as a matter of absent-mindedness, an identical copy of Ioan. While Dear could fork out all the unexpected shapes it wanted, Ioan had never mastered the art. Time changes much, however, and eir up-tree fork had deviated in style from Ioan's stolid adherence to form. Codrin's hair had long-since grown past Ioan's tousled look, and the curls ey hated so much adopted as an integral part of em. Eir face, too, had changed, adopting a femininity that suited eir features. The warm-colored sarong and tunic ey had last seen em in, however, had been replaced with clothes as funereal as Dear's.

Matching, Ioan realized. They were a triad now, Codrin, Dear, and Dear's partner, and ey supposed there was no reason that the three of them shouldn't match on their so-called death day.

There were hugs all around, and Ioan hid eir secret smile at the uncanny act of embracing one's own fork, however far they had diverged.

"How are you three? Excited?"

"Nervous is more like it." Dear's partner laughed. "At least, I am. I can't speak for Codrin, but Dear hasn't shut up about this for months."

The fox looked quite proud of itself. *"Guilty."*

Ioan looked to Codrin, who shrugged. "I play the moderate, as always. I'm nervous and excited in equal parts. The nervousness comes from the irreversibility, and the excitement from the inevitability."

"Ey has a way with words, as always. I have been unable to be nervous, even about the irreversibility."

"A new project, then?" Ioan guessed.

It smiled wryly. *"You know me well. Yes, I cannot seem to think of anything else. Fewer things in life than we imagine are truly irreversible. Time is the one that everyone thinks of, and whenever they name some other process in life that seems irreversible, it really boils down to the ways in which it is bound by time. Breathing? Digestion? Aging? Death? All time-bound aspects that only bear the semblance of irreversibility."*

"And yet we have short-circuited so much of that here. We have found ways to take time and set aside some of the constraints that it puts on those processes. Breathing, digestion, and aging are all optional, and death, as we must know, is something that must be chosen. Even then, a true death remains elusive. Perhaps we quit and merge down tree, but is that death? Perhaps all of our instances quit, but even this lacks some of the savor that a true death contains."

"You're declaiming again."

Dear stuck its tongue out at its partner, a gesture that bordered on cute on that vulpine face.

Its partner laughed. "It took you a surprisingly short time."

"It has already been established that I am excited. Permit me this." After a pause, it continued. *"Now, however, we have been permitted the wonder and curiosity that drives so many images of the afterlife. Now, we get as close as ever to knowing that an afterlife exists, and ghosts will speak to us from beyond the heavens."*

"For a time," Codrin said.

"For a time, and even that carries with it the irreversibility of time."

The ideas touched on some subconscious musing that Ioan had carried with emself ever since the choice to

remain had been made, and the group settled into a silence broken only by the crackling of logs on the bonfire. Ey didn't know what the others were thinking, there in the flickering light, but for em, the weight of that decision settled at last on em, and eir thoughts scattered before the implications.

Ey had made eir own irreversible choice, and while ey knew that ey could technically reverse it up until that final point of no return later this evening, ey knew that ey would not.

"Ioan?"

Ey realized that the triad were staring at them. Ey shook eir head to dispel the rumination. "Sorry. Yes?"

"Where is May Then My Name?" Dear's partner asked.

"Here."

Four heads turned to watch the skunk, similar to Dear in so many ways but for species, pad around the corner. She smiled apologetically and bowed. "Sorry I am late."

Dear brightened and bounced up to the skunk, part of its own clade, and once she stood straight again, hugged her. "*My dear, a pleasure as always.*"

Ioan waited for Dear to release May Then My Name Die With Me before getting eir own hug. After, she looped her arm through eirs, letting em play the escort and settling into a familiar pattern of constant touch.

"Glad you could make it," Dear's partner said.

"I would not miss it for the world. Besides, I am one of the honored guests, right?"

Codrin smiled. "We've only invited honored guests."

"Of course! And here come more."

For the next hour, the chime of arrival was near constant as guest after guest arrived. Much of the Ode Clade showed, though Ioan noted that some of the more conservative members were absent, grudges remaining even to this day. Michelle Hadje herself, the root instance, was notably absent, and a tug of still-unprocessed emotions pulled at the insides of eir chest.

Ioan had only met her once before, shortly before this whole plan had been set in motion. She was unfailingly kind, though if madness rode the whole of her clade, it seemed to affect her deeper than the rest. She was often taken by long silences, sometimes in the middle of sentences. During these, she lost coherence, her form rippling and changing, waves of skunk rolling down her form, followed by equally tumultuous waves of her human self. These spells would last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, and even after they were quelled and the conversation resumed, afterimages of mephit muzzle and ears would ghost suddenly into place and just as quickly disappear.

After that visit, Ioan had asked Dear about them. Its features darkened and it had averted its gaze. "*We all have our ways of dealing with loss. She could seek change if she wanted, but...it is complicated.*"

It was rare for the fox to leave a thought unfinished, but Ioan could not think of a way to ask it to continue.

While every guest was noteworthy in their own way, a few names stood out to em. Dear's sibling instance, Serene; Sustained And Sustaining, arrived, a deranged grin on her face as she ran directly at Dear and tackled it, the two foxes wrestling briefly on the ground before standing up and dusting themselves off again, both laughing.

"I cannot believe you are going to destroy this place, you asshole. I spent weeks on the grass alone!"

Dear grinned lopsidedly. "*It is not yours anymore, however, and I am a sucker for grand gestures.*"

“Some gesture!”

“Asshole, remember?”

Serene had arrived with her and Dear’s down-tree instance, That Which Lives Is Forever Praiseworthy. The entire clade, all one hundred of them, had each taken a line from a poem for their names, the shortest of which was What Right Have I, and the longest The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream, a jumble of syllables often shortened to just True Name. Both were present.

Ioan was surprised by a guest who arrived late in the evening when the champagne and wine were already flowing. Simien Fang, the head of an institute that both Dear and Ioan had worked for at times in the past, made his appearance in classic understated style. He was dressed in all black, but only when viewed head on. He had apparently made an agreement with Dear to allow the occupants of the sim’s vision to be modified such that when viewed out of the corner of the eye, his outfit flashed in a whirlwind of phosphene colors. Not only that, but his normally calm features distorted into a devilish grin, no matter the expression seen directly.

The party rolled on inevitably. Good conversation, good wine, good food, good company.

And riding along with it, a sense of impending change, of anxiety and excitement in unequal measure.

A sudden peal of thunder, louder than any Ioan had ever heard, brought silence in its wake.

“It is time! It is time! Please gather around the fire!” Excitement filled Dear’s voice, though Ioan thought ey could now detect a hint of nervousness that had not been there before. *“There is no time for speeches, there is no time for goodbyes! It is time!”*

The fox forked off several copies, all wide-eyed and feral-grinned, who helped to herd the hundred-and-change guests into a loose ring around the bonfire with shoves and snapping teeth before quitting.

Ioan and May Then My Name took up places about a third of the way around the fire from Dear and its partners, the better to see without flames in the way.

The triad stepped forward, and the circle closed behind them. Each forked in turn, the forks bowed, and disappeared.

The weight of inevitability began to crest as midnight reared its head.

The three within the circle began to sing.

Should old acquaintance be forgot
and never brought to mind?

Something about their posture forbid everyone else from joining in just yet. Their voices were raw, earnest all the same, carrying above the roar and crackle of the fire.

Should old acquaintance be forgot
and auld lang syne?

Ioan realized that ey was crying, that May Then My Name was crying, that many in the circle were crying, and when Dear raised its arms to the sky, all the gathered attendees around the fire began to sing as one.

For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne.

We'll take a cup of kindness yet,
For auld lang-

Before the final note of the song could be sung, Dear gave a jaunty salute, bowed with a flourish, and quit along with its partner and Codrin Bălan.

With a deafening silence, the landscape around them immediately crumbled into voxels, those voxels joined together by powers of two, and with a soft chime, a descending minor triad, all the members of the party were shunted off to wherever they called home.

Ioan stumbled and fell to eir knees on the parquet of eir entryway, May Then My Name standing, defiant against the change in scenery, in air and light and gravity, beside em.

"What an asshole," she laughed.

Ioan and the skunk let the intoxication of the night cling to them a while longer while they sat on the balcony of Ioan's house, overlooking that perpetually lilac-scented yard, and talked. They talked of the party, of the modern house on the prairie, of Dear and the contradiction of formal intensity and playfulness that it seemed to embody, and then they talked of nothing at all as they sat in silence.

It did not seem time yet to snap sobriety into being.

It had taken Ioan several weeks to get used to the skunk's affectionate nature. When she first moved in as the intensity of the project began to ramp up, it had taken em by surprise. Even the act of her moving in was unexpected and new. Ey had needed to have a series of awkward conversations discussing boundaries and intentions.

Now, it had become comfortable and familiar. May Then My Name was as she should be and Ioan had grown to enjoy that.

As she slouched against eir side on that bench swing and ey settled eir arm around her, ey asked, "What's the story behind your fork? Or your stanza?"

"Mm?"

"Well, Dear said that it and Serene were forked when their down-tree instance wanted to explore an interest in instances and sims. Is there something like that which led to...to whatever your down-tree instance forking?" Ey supposed that, were ey sober, ey might have better luck dredging up the lines from the stanza. Something about true names and God.

May Then My Name shrugged, shoulder shifting against Ioan's side. "In the early days, I—Michelle, that is—did not have much direction to her forking. Forks were created at need essentially to handle the increased workload. The first ten were created all at once in a burst of activity so that she could take a break."

"Were the early days busy?"

"Very busy. We were one of the founders you know, and there were a lot of details that needed to be seen to before this place became what it is today."

Ioan nodded. "Dear said that Michelle had campaigned to include sensoria in the System."

"Yes, though that is something of an elision that has become shorthand for experiences rather than thoughts." Her voice was clear, though it still held the careful articulation of one who has realized that they are not sober. "We were not beings of pure thought, there were still experiences, but there was no guarantee

that they would be shared. It was chaotic, as you might imagine from a set of unique individuals trying to dream the same dream.

“This was back in the early days, you understand, before the System had become a dumping ground for the world’s excess population.” She smiled, far off. “We were all starry-eyed dreamers, you know, and so were the engineers phys-side. Hard problems remain hard, however, and it kept getting deprioritized. Michelle and the rest of the founders provided arguments for the means by which we have consensual sensoria, as well as additional sensorium tools such as the messages.”

Ioan relished the long-faded impulse to bristle at this. The Ode clade was notorious for their fondness for sensorium messages, those sensations and images that barged in on one’s own senses. Ey still found them unnerving. Ey said, “Just how much of the early System did your clade influence?”

May Then My Name’s laugh was quiet and muffled beside em. “I am sure we have lost track. The first lines of each stanza quickly picked up interests of their own—even then they were rarely in communication—and each picked up a project of their own, and whenever a new project would come along, they would have to generate enough reputation to fork again. Everything was much more expensive back then, and we would sometimes have to pool our resources.”

“What was your stanza’s project?”

She waved a paw vaguely. “We lost the idea that the whole stanza would be working on similar projects after a while, so they are not as tightly connected any more. Early forks were much more likely to share similar interests, if only because the individuation had not set in as strongly. The first line of mine, though, *The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream—True Name*, you met her briefly tonight—was heavy in the politics of the early System and its relations to phys-side.”

Ioan blinked, startled. “I had no idea. I’m guessing that’s back when it was a bigger deal?”

“Very much so, yes.”

“I thought there wasn’t much political interaction after Secession, though.”

She shrugged noncommittally, then rested her head back on Ioan’s shoulder. The alcohol of the night still dogged em.

“And the reason for your fork?”

“To feel.”

“To feel?”

“To feel. True Name kept spinning off instances to work on such concrete things, I think she forgot how to feel. Emotions became distant out of habit. Touch became a distraction. I was to become her anchor. We would merge every few months after that, though it has been a long time since we last did so. She says that we will merge once this project is finished.”

“You haven’t diverged too far?” Ioan asked.

“She would like us not to,” the skunk murmured. “That is why I am acting as coordinator. It is a familiar role.”

Ioan nodded. “Close enough to politics, I suppose.”

Another moment of silence. Ey permitted some of the drunkenness from the evening to drift away, allowing thoughts to come more clearly. May Then My Name relaxed further against eir side, and ey suspected she was

not far away from sleep. Tomorrow, eir work would begin to pick up in earnest, so ey was tempted to let her sleep, but a question nagged at em.

“May?”

“I like it when you call me that,” she mumbled.

“It’s a good name.” Ioan smiled. “I had a question, though. How much do you remember from back then?”

She sat bolt upright, wrenching at eir shoulder. “What did you say? Sorry.”

Ey reclaimed eir arm, rubbing at the shoulder. “It’s okay. How much do you remember from the early days of the System? Around the time you uploaded, I mean.”

“You, my dear, are a fucking genius.” She was on her feet within a second, pacing back and forth in front of the bench swing. She paused mid-pace to lean down and bump her nose against Ioan’s forehead; her form of a kiss. “Fucking genius.”

Given that she appeared to have sobered up, Ioan allowed emself to do the same. “What do you mean?” ey asked.

“I want to modify the project scope. Can I tell you a secret?” She was speaking quickly now.

“Yes, of course.”

“I want to modify the project and add in an early history of the System, of Secession. Do you think you would be up for adding that in?”

Ioan frowned. “If can I fork for it, I suppose.”

May Then My Name laughed. “You are talking to an Odist, of course you can fucking fork.”

“Alright, alright. What’s your secret, then?”

“I want to write an early history of the System to parallel the current. They are eerily similar, you know, but it has been two hundred years. We are well past history, and doubtless there are histories already written. I remember the secession, I remember uploading, I remember getting lost, I remember everything. Yes, I remember. Of course I do. All the great and terrible things that we did. We could write a history, but that is all already there. There are paper trails and journals and everything phys-side already knows about us, but—”

Ioan’s eyes went wide as ey picked up on her idea. “You want to turn it into a story.”

She clapped and bounced excitedly on her feet. “Yes! Yes, a mythology. I know I have mentioned them before, and we had talked about incorporating that aspect with Dear and Codrin. The history is important, and perhaps you can write that too, but now is not the time for *only* history. Now is the time for—”

“Stories.”

In a decidedly Dear-like move, the skunk forked several times over, crowding the balcony before the bench swing with copies of herself, all of which had the same expression of glee. They quit quickly, and May Then My Name leaned forward to give Ioan a handful more of those nose-dot kisses. “You get it!”

“I worked with Dear, you nut. Of course I get stories.” Ey laughed, reaching up to grab her around the waist and haul her back onto the swing beside em.

How different she was than Dear. Individuation is born in the decades and centuries, though. Ey would never have thought to be so physical with the fox, but as she laughed and slumped back against eir side, ey realized ey had long since fallen into the habit of physicality, of touch. Of, ey realized, feeling, just as she’d said.

Douglas Hadje — 2325

When Douglas Hadje pressed his hands against the sides of the L₅ System, he always imagined that he could sense his aunt along with however many ‘great’s preceded that title, sense all of those years separating him from her, and he pressed his hands against the outside of the System every chance he could get. If he was sure that he was alone—and he often was—he would press his forehead to the glassy, diamondoid cylinder and wish, hope, dream that he could say even one word to her. His people, humanity, now nearly two centuries distant from the founding of the System, forever felt on the verge of true speciation, of mutual incomprehensibility, from those within. Did they still think the same? Did they still feel the same? Their hopes were doubtless different, but were their dreams?

But always his hands were separated from the structure by that thin layer of skinsuit, and always his helmet was in the way of the carbon shell, and always he was at least one reality away from them.

He would spend his five minutes there, connected and not by touch, thinking of this or that, thinking of nothing at all, and then he would climb away from the cylinder down the ladder, down the dozen or so meters to the ceiling of his home, climb through the airlock, and perhaps go lay down.

Others knew of this. They had to. All movement outside the habitat portion of the station was tightly controlled. Everything was on video, recorded directly from his eyes through his exo. All audio was recorded.

But he never spoke, and he always closed his eyes. For some unknown reason, he was permitted this small dalliance.

The System sat stationary at the Earth-Moon L₅ point, a stable orbit with relation to the earth and moon such that it only very rarely required any correction to its position. Once a day, as the point rotated beyond Earth from the point of view of the sun and more briefly by the moon, it fell into darkness, but other than that, it was bathed in sunlight unmoderated by atmosphere. It rotated at a stately pace in relation to the moon and Earth such that its vast solar collector was always pointed toward the sun.

The station itself comprised three main parts. At the core of the station was the diamondoid cylinder, fifty meters in diameter and five hundred meters in length. The solar collector was attached to the sunward end of the cylinder, spreading out in a series of one hundred sixty thousand replaceable panels, one meter square each, held in a lattice of carbon fiber struts. Surrounding the cylinder was a torus, two hundred meters in diameter and as long as core cylinder itself, such that it was forever hidden from the sun by the solar collectors. Seventy-seven acres, of living space, working space, factories, and arable land, all lit by bundles of doped fiber optic cables which collected and distributed the light from space and cast it down from the ceiling. The entire contraption

rotated nearly three times per minute, fast enough that they had an approximation of Earth's gravity.

That is where Douglas lived along with about twenty others.

To fund such a project, the torus had originally operated as a tourist destination. Many of the living spaces consisted of repurposed hotel rooms. It had long since ceased to serve in that capacity as humanity's curiosity for space dwindled and spaceflight from Earth once again began to rise in price.

To build such a project, the area had been cleared of much of the Trojan asteroids that had collected there, either used for raw materials or slung out into space into eccentric orbits that would keep them from impacting Earth or winding up once again captured in the same Lagrange point. Even still, one of the many jobs was to monitor the area for newly captured rocks and divert or collect them as needed. The material could be used for new solar panels, or perhaps the two five-thousand kilometer long launch arms sprouting on opposing sides of the torus, the Hall Effect Engines that kept the rotation of the station constant as the arms had been extruded from its surface, or of course the two new cylindrical launch vehicles at the tips of those arms that had, over the last two decades, been constructed as half-scale duplicates of the core.

Little of this mattered to Douglas.

He was, he was forever told, a people person. He was an administrator, a boss, a manager. It was his job to direct and guide and herd people into doing what was required for this twenty-year project. He was forever told that he had the empathy and skills to lead, though he forever doubted it.

He simply cared about this with a fervor that was dimmed only by the idea that, somewhere within the mirror-box that was the System cylinder, his distant ancestor dwelt.

Douglas was the launch director. He was the *director*. He was high enough on the food chain that he had ungated access to the textual communication line that connected the phys-side world to the sys-side world. He was the director, and he knew that, if he wished, all he need do was pull up the program, type up a letter, run it past security, click 'send', and Michelle, his generations-gone aunt, would somehow receive it.

And yet he never did.

He didn't know why. He asked himself again and again what it was that kept him from reaching out to her. Was it that speciation? Was it the confounding societal differences? Was it that unfathomable distance between the physical and the dream? He did not know, he did not know.

Instead, he worked. He oversaw the construction of the Launch Vehicle Systems, those two smaller cylinders that would be, in a few days, released from either end of the launch arms at incredible tangential velocity. He worked with the sys-side launch coordinator to ensure that everything was working appropriately, that the micro-Ansible connection between the main System and the launch vessels was appropriately transferring entire identities.

Who this coordinator was, this confusingly-named May Then My Name Die With Me, he had no idea.

He needn't even message Michelle directly. He had May Then My Name Die With Me, perhaps she would know her. He could ask her. She could mediate.

And still, he never did.

Director Hadje,

The launch is tomorrow and communications are looking good. A status report will follow, but before I get to that, I would like to open a dialog with you surrounding topics beyond the launch itself. Please ensure that this is both acceptable by the hierarchy of superiors that doubtless read our communications and yourself, as they are of a somewhat more personal nature. As my role of launch coordinator slowly dwindles, I have been asked by both my clade and a historian sys-side to collect information through extant lines of communication, a sort of oral history of the events leading up to, surrounding, and immediately after the launch.

Thank you,

May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

2325-01-20—systime 201+20 1303

Status Report

- **Micro-Ansible transmission:**

- *Outbound functionality:* five-by-five (go)
- *Inbound functionality:* five-by-five (go)

- **Transmission status:**

- *Personalities transferred:* 2,593,190,433 / 100% (go)
- *Individuals by clade transferred:* 1,123,384,222 / 100% (go)
- *Personalities remaining to be transferred:* 0 / 0% (go)
- *Individuals by clade remaining to be transferred:* 0 / 0% (go)
- *Personalities transferred leaving no immediate forks (pct):* 3.8%
- *Individuals by clade transferred leaving no immediate forks (pct):* 0.00000018%
- *Social makeup of transfers:* 84% dispersionista / 10% tracker / 6% tasker
- *Social makeup of L₅ System:* 23% dispersionista / 38% tracker / 39% tasker
- *Transfers irrevocably lost:* 8 (go)

- **System status:**

- Castor:
 - * *Stability:* 100% (go)
 - * *Clock offset:* 0ns (go)
 - * *Clock skew:* 0ns/ns (go)
 - * *Clock jitter:* 0ns/ns/ns (go)
 - * *Entanglement:* 100% (go)
 - * *Fork reliability:* 17 nines (go)
 - * *Merge reliability:* 23 nines (go)

– Pollux:

- * *Stability*: 100% (go)
- * *Clock offset*: 0ns (go)
- * *Clock skew*: 0ns/ns (go)
- * *Clock jitter*: 0ns/ns/ns (go)
- * *Entanglement*: 100% (go)
- * *Fork reliability*: 18 nines (go)
- * *Merge reliability*: 21 nines (go)

• **Disposition**: go for launch

Notes: the level of transfers irrevocably lost is disappointing but cannot be helped. Still, it is far below the loss from the Earth-L₅ Ansible, which, as a matter of course, implies the loss of a clade rather than a personality. One clade was lost irrevocably, but, at the risk of sounding crass, they knew they were signing up for this, and it is always a risk for taskers. That one loss represents 0.005% of the total transfer loss, and is vanishingly small in the grand scheme of things, though I am sure it is of no consolation to their friends. Congratulations, as always, for another step closer to launch.

Attachment: history questionnaire #1

As mentioned, I am working with a historian—or rather, three forks of the same historian—to compile a history of the launch. Due to a certain incorrigible tricksiness, this will take the form of a mythology; something romantic to be passed down through the years. To this end, data collection is ramping up in the form of countless interviews. I have, of course, all the status reports a girl could ever want for the basic facts, all of the trials and tribulations over the last two decades, but that is only a small portion of a mythology. Should you and your superiors agree, I would like to begin the process of collecting testimonies from those phys-side.

Concrete questions

- How long have you been working as phys-side launch director?
- What is involved with your role as phys-side launch director?
- How long have you been working with the System phys-side?
- What led you to pursue a career working with the System?
- What led you to remain phys-side rather than uploading, yourself? Will you upload in the future? Why or why not?
- What led you to pursue your position as launch director rather than remaining in your previous position?
- Please provide a biography of yourself to whatever level of detail you feel comfortable.
- Please provide a physical description of yourself to whatever level of detail you feel comfortable.
- Do you have any hobbies?

On the System

- How do you feel about what you know of the founding of the System?
- If you were suddenly removed from your position as director, what would you choose to do as a career in its stead?
- If you were suddenly removed from your location in the extra-System station and returned to Earth, how would you feel and what would you expect?
- If the System shut down and all personalities irrevocably lost, how would you feel?

Gestalt

- If you were told that, one year from now, you would die painlessly, what would you do? Would this change if you knew that your death would be painful? Would this change, in either case, if your death was seven days from now?
- If everyone but you disappeared, what would you do?
- How do you feel about being alone for extended periods of time?
- Do you remember your dreams?

On history

- How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?
- When you become intoxicated—whether via substance use or some natural process, such as sleep deprivation—which of the following applies to you?
 1. Ape drunk: he leaps and sings and hollers and danceth for the heavens.
 2. Lion drunk: he flings the pots about the house, calls his hostess whore, breaks the glass windows with his dagger, and is apt to quarrel with any man that speaks to him.
 3. Swine drunk: heavy, lumpish, and sleepy, and cries for a little more drink and a few more clothes.
 4. Sheep drunk: wise in his own conceit when he cannot bring forth a right word.
 5. Maudlin drunk: when a fellow will weep for kindness in the midst of his ale and kiss you, saying, “By God, Captain, I love thee; go thy ways, thou dost not think so often of me as I do of thee. If I would, if it pleased God, I could not love thee so well as I do.”—and then puts his finger in his eye and cries.
 6. Martin drunk: when a man is drunk and drinks himself sober ere he stir.
 7. Goat drunk: when in his drunkenness, he hath no mind but on lechery.
 8. Fox drunk: when he is crafty drunk as many of the Dutchmen be.
- While walking along in the desert, you look down and see a tortoise making its way toward you. You reach down and flip it over onto its back. The tortoise lies there, its belly baking in the hot sun, waving its legs back and forth, trying to right itself, but it cannot do so without your help. You are not helping. Why not?
- Two by two, two by two, and twice more. We always think in binaries, in black and white. We remember history two by two. We consider the present two by two. We think of the future twice over, and twice again. I have looked back on history and seen ceaseless progress or steps backward. I look back a hundred years and see illness and failure, and I look at today and see _____?

- Oh, but to whom do I speak these words?
To whom do I plead my case?
From whence do I call out?
What right have I?
No ranks of angels will answer to dreamers,
No unknowable spaces echo my words.
Before whom do I kneel, contrite?
Behind whom do I await my judgment?
Beside whom do I face death?
And why wait I for an answer?

Please take your time, and remember that the launch takes precedence over your answers.

In friendship,

May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode Clade

May Then My Name Die With Me,

Thank you for the updated status report. I am looking forward to the launch, and will provide you the best textual description that I am able as it happens from phys-side. I will attempt to provide real-time updates, though the exigencies of the situation will take precedence. Congratulations on making it this far, and thank you for all of your help. Status report follows.

While we were largely baffled by the nature of your questions, the launch commission and myself have accepted the task of aiding you and your companion in your history/mythology project. Answers(?) will follow in a separate message.

Thank you,

Douglas Hadje, MSf, PhD

Launch director

2325-01-20—systime 201+20 1515

Digital signatures:

- Douglas Hadje
- Launch commission:
 - de
 - Jonathan Finnes
 - Thomas Nash
 - Woo Hye-won
 - Hasnaa

Status Report

- **Station-side status:**
 - *Systems check*: Complete (go)
 - *Staff*: 100% (go)
 - *Gravity compensation*: 100% (go)
 - *Tiedowns*: 100% (go)
 - *Expected rotational impact*: Nominal (go)
 - *Rotational compensation engines*: Nominal (go)
 - *Power storage*: 98% (go)
 - *Power consumption*: 86% (go)
 - *Panel efficiency*: 5 nines (go)
- **Launch arm status:**
 - Castor:
 - * *Launch strut integrity*: 100% (go)

- * *Launch arm integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Launch arm path*: Clear (go)
- * *Launch arm cameras*: 100% (go)
- * *Launch vehicle path*: Clear to 1.8AU, 5 nines confidence (go)
- * *Capacitor charge*: 6 nines, on track to 100% (go)
- * *Speed*: 100% (go)
- * *Expected acceleration*: Nominal (go)
- * *Expected jerk*: Nominal (go)

– Pollux:

- * *Launch strut integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Launch arm integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Launch arm path*: Clear (go)
- * *Launch arm cameras*: 100% (go)
- * *Launch vehicle path*: Clear to 1.2AU, 5 nines confidence (go)
- * *Capacitor charge*: 6 nines, on track to 100% (go)
- * *Speed*: 100% (go)
- * *Expected acceleration*: Nominal (go)
- * *Expected jerk*: Nominal (go)

• **Launch vehicle status:**

– Castor:

- * *System surface integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *System interior integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Sabot integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Sabot ejection system*: Tests pass (go)
- * *RTG power rate*: Steady (go)
- * *RTG temperature*: Nominal (go)
- * *RTG pre-launch heat sink*: Nominal (go)
- * *RTG post-launch heat-sink*: Tests pass (go)
- * *RTG post-launch heat-sink deployment mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- * *Solar sail integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Solar sail deployment mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- * *Solar panel integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Solar panel deployment/retraction mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- * *Attitude jet functionality*: 100% (go)
- * *Raw material capacity*: 100% (go)
- * *Raw material manipulator functionality*: 100% (go)
- * *Raw material manufactory functionality*: 100% (go)
- * *Dreamer Module functionality*: 100% (go)

– Pollux:

- * *System surface integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *System interior integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Sabot integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Sabot ejection system*: Tests pass (go)
- * *RTG power rate*: Steady (go)
- * *RTG temperature*: Nominal (go)
- * *RTG pre-launch heat sink*: Nominal (go)
- * *RTG post-launch heat-sink*: Tests pass (go)
- * *RTG post-launch heat-sink deployment mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- * *Solar sail integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Solar sail deployment mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- * *Solar panel integrity*: 100% (go)
- * *Solar panel deployment/retraction mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- * *Attitude jet functionality*: 100% (go)
- * *Raw material capacity*: 100% (go)
- * *Raw material manipulator functionality*: 100% (go)
- * *Raw material manufactory functionality*: 100% (go)
- * *Dreamer Module functionality*: 100% (go)

- **Disposition:** go for launch

Notes: We are 1% away from desired power consumption reduction on the station. While this is within tolerances, we are expecting that, with the shutdown of the glass furnace at 2330, we will hit our mark of 15% station-wide power reduction. Congratulations!

Message stream

Phys-side: The launch vehicles in their sabots are settled into their creches and the doors are shut. Everyone's excited, but I'm pleased at the calm efficiency of the control tower I'm in (Pollux). We are 1deg offset spinward from the launch arm, so we should be able to see the launch well enough, but the arm appears to disappear into nothingness "below" us after about 100m, so the show won't be great past then. We'll all be watching the cameras. Even those won't be very exciting, given the speed the LVs will be going. Models suggest that we might feel a jerk and fluctuation in gravity, that will be quickly compensated by the engines.

Phys-side: Given your apparent interest in the subjective aspects of the launch, I have to say that I wish there was a big red button I could hit to trigger the launch. Wouldn't that be satisfying? I picture it like one of the keyboards, where there's some sort of spring in there, and a satisfying click as the button snaps down that last bit and makes some physical electric contact. Everything's done on a timer, however, and the chances of any manual intervention being required are essentially zero. Everyone in the tower here is in place to take in data and give reports. I didn't receive permission to pass those on directly, however, so you're left with them being filtered through yours truly.

Phys-side: One minute.

Phys-side: Thirty seconds.

Phys-side: Ten seconds. Godspeed.

Sys-side: Godspeed, you dumb bastards.

Phys-side: 3

Phys-side: 1

Phys-side: Launch looks good.

Phys-side: Watching the struts flex and jolt with the release of mass is quite beautiful.

Phys-side: They weren't kidding about the jerk. Two of them, actually, as the engines fired a half second after the jerk reached the torus. We've got two injuries down here—bumps and bruises. Reports from the torus indicate that damage was minimal. Some sloshing from the hydroponics, but that's easy to clean up. One of the furnaces will need some care. Worst bit of damage, however, is that the solar array suffered a cascading failure: one panel broke loose and tumbled end-over-end across a few hundred others. Power's still nominal, though. We'll get it fixed.

Phys-side: Did you feel anything up there?

Sys-side: Har har. No, nothing up here. I, like you, wish that we had, though. If there had been some sudden jolt or a flicker of the lights, I think that perhaps this launch would have felt more real. I suspect that my cocladist, Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, would have simulated an earthquake at the exact moment of launch, destroying its home in the process, but alas, it was one of those hopeless romantics who transferred entirely to the LVs without leaving a fork. I will have Ioan (my pet historian) ask it if it did so from the LVs. I would not be surprised.

Phys-side: Your clade sounds fascinating. I don't understand a single bit of it.

Sys-side: I will tell you a story one day.

Sys-side: How do you feel with 20 years of work gone in an instant?

Phys-side: I'm still processing that. Numb? Giddy? Can I be both at the same time?

Sys-side: I see no reason why not. Why numb? Why giddy?

Phys-side: Numb because there was nothing to see. Not even a flash. The LVs were here, and then they were gone. I'll never see them again. Giddy because it worked. Telemetry is good, speed is nominal, entanglement is nominal, radio communication is nominal, though the rate at which message times are increasing is surprising, though I knew that this would happen. How neat is that?

Sys-side: Very neat. I feel much the same. I feel numb for the reason I mentioned above. They were here, and then they were gone, and there was no feedback from the action. We are still talking despite this. This is where the numb and the giddy cross, as, in some ways, it feels as though they never left (modulo the fact that Dear would almost certainly rather talk via sensorium messages rather than text), but Codrin (Dear's pet historian) is much suited to words. Giddy, though, because this remains exciting for all of us, both here and on the LVs. Already they diverge, already they are no longer the ones who left here, already they are no longer us.

Phys-side: That's not something I can picture, but I'll trust you on that.

Sys-side: Different worlds, different problems. I must see to Ioan and to writing. Douglas, congratulations once more, and I will stay in contact regarding the LVs and my research.

Phys-side: Thank you for all your hard work, May Then My Name Die With Me.

Sys-side: You may call me May Then My Name, now that the hard work is over.

Phys-side: Thanks! Be well.

Sys-side: You too.

Michelle Hadje/Sasha — 2306

Come to me.

Come alone.

That was all that the message had said.

Michelle had long considered this moment, and just as long considered what she might say. She was of two minds. She was of two minds.

The part of her that desired knowledge, that craved a reason in all things, that part of her felt compelled to give an explanation. It felt the need to rationalize and understand and comprehend, and it craved the knowledge that others also understood.

That part was Sasha.

That had felt inverted to her, at first. Was not Michelle the rational one? She was the one who had maintained her ties to her body. She was the one who remembered all of the *things*, all of the *actions* of her past. She was the one who wanted to fork and keep all of those memories.

But instead it was Sasha who felt incomplete, unwhole, when her reasons were unspoken. Eventually her gestalt came to the awareness that this was because Sasha was the one who felt, just as Michelle was the one who remembered, and thus she was also the part that desired compassion above all things. She wanted to explain herself so that others would not be left hurt. She was the one who decided, in the end, not to fork, to fix, to repair. Those memories that mattered—really, truly mattered—all of her instances already shared.

Michelle did not want to tell anyone.

She was of two minds/she was of two minds.

So she edited and rewrote and pared her message down. Thousands of words. Hundreds of words. Ninety-nine words. Ten words. Two commands. A duality like her.

Come to me.

There had been a date, a time, an address. *Come to me*, she thought/she thought. *Come to us*.

Come hear. Come learn. Come understand. Or don't, but come all the same, that we might hear, learn, understand.

She was of two minds/she was of two minds.

Come alone.

She had met their friends and lovers and hidden, forbidden selves. She had met their scribes and their amanuenses and their biographer-historians.

Come alone, she thought/she thought. I only want you. I only want us. I only want me.

And she knew they would. She knew they would. She knew they would come and they would do so without hesitation, for a request from the root instance was a thing that had never happened before, and it bore more weight than any possible life event or schedule could ever hope to. She knew they would come because she would be there/she would be there.

She was of two minds.

And so on the allotted day and at the allotted time and in the allotted place, they came. They appeared one by one in that field of grass, that field of dandelions. They came and they stood and they waited. Some of them chatted amiably. Some of them were crying, and she knew which was which because she also felt amiable/she also was crying.

They came to her/they came to her.

They came alone.

One hundred and one of her stood in that meadow. Qoheleth was gone, but there were two of her/there were two of her, and the number was still as it should be.

No, not as it should be. Not as it ought to be. There ought to be only one hundred of her there without Qoheleth, but she was of two minds/she was of two minds.

She smiled to them/she smiled to them, and that was enough to bring them to silence. Those who had felt their amicability frowned now, picking up on the sudden anxiety of the meadow, of that green grass yellowed by dandelions.

“I am of two minds,” she said/she said. Waves of Sasha/waves of Michelle rippled across her form, two identities washed through her mind, and she quelled the urge to vomit. “We are of two minds. We do not want to do this, and there is nothing more in life that we desire than to do this. There is too much in me. There is too much of me.”

There were more crying eyes in the crowd now, and she was crying/she was crying.

Her voice wavered, but she asked all the same. “Please fork. Please fork and merge down-tree.”

In less than five seconds, the number of copies of her had doubled, and some inner part of her/some inner part of her smiled, sensing now that doubling that she felt as a core part of her being expressed in all those versions of herself that had grown these last nearly two centuries.

“Since then—’tis Centuries—and yet Feels shorter than the Day—” she thought/she murmured, words borne of a thought/of a memory. A few of the clade who could hear her weak voice joined. “I first surmised the Horses’ Heads Were toward Eternity —”

Many were sitting now, some were pulling at tufts of grass, stalks of dandelions, anything to ground themselves.

“I just want...we just want to experience...a little more,” she choked out. “Can you give us that?”

The reasons for the forks became clear, now, and over the next hour—for some had diverged so far that a great amount of effort was required to reclaim memories—they began to merge their outermost instances down-tree, down-tree, down toward the root. Many looked shell-shocked as years and decades and centuries of

memories poured into them, and then were passed on down. Many looked as mad as she felt.

She held up her hand when the mergers had completed down to the doubled-versions of the nine first lines and one second line (for Qoheleth had been a first, Michelle remembered/Sasha remembered) standing before her.

“We have a task for each of you who will remain. One last task.” And she walked down the line/she walked down the line, leaning close to whisper into each of their ears, whether they were skunk or human or something new and different, what she wanted them to accomplish, whether it be vague or specific.

“Now,” she said.

Of the twenty before her, ten merged into her, one by one.

“Oh,” she said/she said. “Oh.”

She was laughing/she was crying/she was furious/she was in love/she was knowledgeable/she was a being of emotions/she was an ascetic/she was opulent.

She was.

She was of two minds.

She was of ten minds.

She was of ninety-nine minds.

She was of a thousand times a thousand minds as more memories than any one individual was ever meant to have poured into her and through her and consumed her. She cherished them one by one by one by one by one...

“Oh,” she said, feeling more singular than she had in two hundred years.

And then she quit.

Yared Zerezghi — 2125

Although Yared Zerezghi was treated with the deference that was afforded to those who had attained such feats as he had, he was also regarded with the wary eyes due to anyone who might be considered hero and villain both.

At least, he realized, until he had made it to the airport. No one wanted to be there. No one wanted to sit through that liminal process. Everyone wanted to be where they were going, not sitting in uncomfortable chairs surrounded by people they were studiously trying to ignore.

The last flight to Yakutsk was dull, but it was that singular type of dullness that allows anxiety to build and grow. He stared out the windows at first, watching the cities and towns that built up around the transit hubs, and then, when all was replaced with desert or windswept grass or bare mountains or burnt husks of forests, he would stare instead at the pages of his book. He could not get the symbols on the pages to line up into words and sentences, but it was better than looking out at the world he was leaving.

The book remained unread when he finally landed in Yakutsk and, as he was about to pack it into the small plastic bag that was his only luggage, he thought better of it and shrugged, handing it to the passenger next to him.

“Want a book?”

She frowned. “Are you...just giving me your book?”

He turned it so that she could see the cover. It was something on politics. Pop drivel, mostly. “I guess I am, yeah.”

“Why?”

“I won’t need it.”

A look of understanding bloomed on her face and her expression shifted from confusion to a cautious smile. “No, I suppose you won’t. Well, thank you. I’ll give it to the library if I don’t wind up reading it.”

Yared nodded and gave a gesture of thanks. It was only after the conversation was over that he felt a hotness in his cheeks. He had been lucky that the woman spoke English so well. She was very white, and while that might not mean anything, he was flying into the Sino-Russian Bloc, and she could just as well not have been a native speaker.

The act of landing, of deplaning and customs, was as dull and rote as he expected it to be, and yet some protective action of his mind had buried that overwhelming anxiety under a blanket of numbness, which had soon spread to encompass all of his feelings and emotions.

The stop through customs was met with another wide-eyed expression.

“You are the first that I have met,” the agent said.

“Oh?”

“The first of the ones heading to the System.”

Yared nodded.

“I think that I will see many more the longer I work here.” The agent stamped his passport with an expert twist of the wrist, adding a smear to the ink which added a layer of authenticity. It would be all but impossible to mimic that smear. She handed his passport back with a sly smile and a tap to her temple, “I do not think I will go. I am terrified enough of my own head.”

Yared could only smile back and move on through the line.

He was met at baggage claim by a slight man who took him by the hand and led him out into the heat of the afternoon. He was shunted into the air-conditioned back of a black car—so many memories of weeks and months ago beneath that blanket of numbness—which took him to an unassuming office complex.

Unassuming from the outside, at least. Inside, he was met with white tile and calm, efficient staff who swished on the floor with white, paper booties.

He was directed to a waiting room where he was instructed to disrobe and push his arms through the sleeves of a paper gown. He was even provided with his own booties.

“You have fasted?”

“Yes?”

“Forty-eight hours?”

“More like seventy-two.”

The nurse looked up from her tablet and gave him a kind smile. “Are you nervous?”

“I...don’t know.” He looked down at his hands. They were perfectly still for the first time in three days. “I was. I don’t know what I am now.”

She nodded and swiped something on the tablet before clipping it to a bandoleer of various medical goodies strapped across her front. “If you would like medication for your anxiety now, I can provide. Your procedure is in ten minutes, however—you understand the rush—so if you can wait that long, you will shortly not feel a thing.”

Her English had the same clipped, stilted accent of the man who had driven him to the medical center, of the customs agent, of all of the flight agents. He wondered briefly if it was some S-R Bloc accent, or if the overwhelming numbness had distorted all he heard.

“Please, Mr. Zerezghi. If you would lay down here. I will place an IV, and we will get you to the surgery immediately. You understand, yes? We are on a schedule, yes?”

He nodded and did as he was told. The numbness, he realized, had extended to the physical as well, as he didn’t notice the needle in the back of his hand until the nurse clipped a line to it.

The surgery was...well, Yared was something not quite awake, not quite asleep for most of it, but what he did remember was that it was in all ways unpleasant. The noises that drifted in and out of his awareness, the last remaining scent, the last remaining taste, both of some nickel-plated sourness that he could not place. The last remaining sight of just light, just light.

And then a stretching. A stretching up of his arms while his feet remained anchored, there on that bed. He stretched up tall, kilometers up, light years. So tall that he began to thin out, tapering in the middle until he thought that he would snap...

Whether there was any discontinuity or not, he did not know. He was simply...there. Simply standing in a cube of grey walls, grey ceiling, grey floor. It was lit by lights that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, and the lack of a shadow was disturbing in a way that he could not place.

A soft, feminine voice spoke to him, then. Or did not come to him. He did not hear it through his ears, but it was there, nonetheless, through something more and less than hearing. "Yared. Can you speak?"

He opened his mouth and exhaled in a gasp. His throat worked at least, though everything was...different. So different.

Remembering—somehow—how to move, he tilted his head forward to look down at himself. Naked, but sharp and clear. He lifted his hands to look at them, seeing the same dark skin, the same well-trimmed fingernails.

But no contacts. None of those silvery pads on his fingers. He rubbed his thumb over the spots where they had once been, then reached his other hand up to touch at the back of his neck where the long-familiar exocortex implant was missing. Smooth, soft skin, with only what hair and blemishes he remembered from this afternoon, from so long ago.

He took another breath, and let it out in a long *aaah*, then another and said, "Yes, I think so."

"Fantastic," came the voice once more.

"Is that...are you True Name?"

A soft chuckle, and then, "Yes, it is me. Or a portion of me, at least. You are still in the upload clinic's system, which cannot easily fit two."

"So, not in the System yet."

"No, but the transfer is nearly complete. You will not remember this encounter, I am afraid, but you will have new ones." The voice sounded as though it was smiling. "So very many new ones. I am just happy to see you move and hear you speak, as it means that the same will be true sys-side."

Yared frowned. "I will...not remember?"

"This instance is in a temporary location for the purpose of testing, so eventually, you will either quit or be halted, yes."

"But then I'll be in the System?"

There was a pause, and then a laugh. "You already are. The upload has completed, and I—the real True Name—am speaking with you."

"But I will die here?"

"Not die, no. You will quit. You are already living on."

The words made him tremble. They were so final, which jarred against a tone of comfort, of reassurance. "I don't know if I'm ready for that."

The voice still sounded like it was smiling. "There is little I can do to reassure you, so, tough shit. You are already on the other side."

And with that, Yared Zerezghi ceased to be.

“Yared. Can you speak?”

He blinked open his eyes, confronted with a shape of black and white, then shouted and fell backwards.

The shape that stood before him, laughed and leaned down to offer a hand. “I will take that as a yes. I am True Name. Do you remember me?”

He stared up at the shape, something half human and half animal, a tapering snout and white-striped black fur. Feminine form. Soft tail. Friendly eyes.

“True...Name? The Only...The Only Time...”

“The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream, yes.” It— she was smiling, though Yared was not sure how he knew that. She wiggled the fingers of her offered hand—paw? Paw—and said, “Come on, let us get you up.”

Yared still did not accept the offer, looking around himself instead. He sat atop a small hill in a grass field, dotted liberally with dandelions. The sky was cloudless and blue above him. The sun stood on high.

He shook his head, marveling at the sudden change from cold clinic and unpleasant sensations to so prosaic a landscape, then took the paw at last, letting himself be helped to his feet.

“There you go,” True Name said. “How do you feel?”

“Um.”

“Naked, perhaps?”

He looked down at himself and started back from the animal. “Uh...yes. How do I...”

“Picture yourself clothed how you wish. Your favorite outfit, perhaps. Picture that, and then want it. Want to be clothed.”

Squinting his eyes shut, Yared did his best to think his clothes into being. He heard a laugh from True Name.

“Relax. Breathe in, and then when you breathe out, think of that outfit and say to yourself, ‘gosh, I wish that I was wearing that right now!’, and then smile.”

“Smile?”

“That part is not necessary, but I find that it helps with the newly arrived.”

Breathe in.

Breathe out. “I would like to be wearing that nice thawb I got to try on.”

Smile.

And then he was. He felt the fabric hanging comfortably from his shoulders. It was not sudden or slow, he did not feel the transition, he just was simply wearing the garment as if he always had been.

“There, see? It will become second nature, and you will not need to smile or speak out loud.”

Yared nodded. Breathed in, breathed out, and then the fabric had two gold brocade stripes heading down from the shoulders to the hem.

“Excellent!” The skunk—as he now remembered her to be—clapped her paws. “I figured you would be a fast learner after so long.”

“Where are we?”

“We are in a private sim. Usually, new arrivals show up in a gridded gray box, and then a guide will arrive and show them basically what I showed you, but you are something of a celebrity, at least among the circles

that I run in, and so I pulled some strings with the Council of Eight.”

He nodded absentmindedly, reached down, and plucked at a dandelion. It felt real enough. Finally, he said, “You are not exactly how I pictured you. I’ve seen pictures of Michelle.”

“What were you picturing?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned. “I guess I never really internalized the whole ‘skunk’ thing.”

True Name smiled and shrugged. “I look like this. Rather like my av back in the ‘net. I can look—” There was suddenly a short woman standing beside the skunk. The resemblance was clearly there in the shape of the profile and the way she moved, but for the fact that she looked like the photos Yared had seen. The human spoke. “—like this, but that is not my preferred mode.”

And then she was gone, with just the skunk standing before him.

“What was that?”

“I forked. I created a new instance of myself from that moment. I just let it slip back into that other form I remember.”

“You can do that?”

She laughed. “I can, though it does cost some reputation if the fork lasts longer than five minutes.”

“And then it just...went away?”

“She quit, yes.”

“And I can do this, too?”

Before she could respond, Yared breathed in, and then two of him breathed out. He let out a shout of laughter.

True Name looked startled, then clapped her paws once more. “Well done! Usually it takes new arrivals a few days to get to that point. Now, one of you—you have not experienced too much that is different from each other, so it doesn’t matter which—one of you think, ‘okay, I am ready to quit’.”

“And what will happen then?”

“Then? Nothing. That instance will stop. If you quit—” she pointed at the newer of the two Yareds “—then you—” and then at the first “—will have the option of merging the fork’s memories back in.”

“Will I feel anything? Is it like dying?”

“No, Yared. It is fine. The experiences simply stop.” She smiled wryly, adding, “We still have not answered the question of an afterlife, but we are told from outside that System capacity increases when an instance frees up space.”

He frowned, but gestured to the newer fork, who backed away a step and crouched. “If you promise it’s not like dying. I can’t...I can’t have gotten this far just to die.”

“I have never died, so I cannot promise, but when I just forked and then merged, the memories that I received did not include anything that felt like death. They just stop.”

Yared’s fork—he realized he knew it as Yared Zerezghi#323a998a, though not how—slowly straightened up, closed his eyes, and breathed out.

Then disappeared.

There was a sudden, demanding pressure on Yared, as though a memory of something important was *right there*, and all he needed to do was remember it.

So he did. He remembered the suddenness of the beginning of existence. He remembered the sight of himself. He remembered the different angle that he had seen True Name from, so incongruous with where he was standing now. The conversation, the shock of being informed that he should quit, the fear, the determination. And then the memories just ended.

“See? There is nothing after.”

He tilted his head, trying to remember anything past that point, but there was nothing else to grasp. “Not really, but I suppose I’ll get used to it.”

“You do not need to fork if you do not want to. And you will learn how to control the merger over time, and only remember certain parts. You will learn. But come, secession and launch are only a few minutes away. Think to yourself, ‘I want to be at Josephine’s#aaca9bb9.’ You will also get used to remembering those letters and num—”

Yared’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim, steamy light of a restaurant. It was chilly outside, but delightfully warm inside, where silver and red stools lined a bar and the sizzle of eggs could be heard from a griddle. There were a few dozen people inside, including a gaggle of other skunks and women that looked eerily like True Name and Michelle.

True Name appeared beside him, laughing. “That was fast. I know that I should not be surprised at the quickness with which you are picking this up, but I am.”

The skunk padded over to a corner booth where seven others waited. Three well-dressed individuals, a dirty pile of rags that may have contained a human, a nondescript face that he couldn’t seem to focus on, another animal of some sort that reminded Yared of a ferret he had seen once, and a perpetually smiling man with artfully tousled hair.

Both of them slid into the booth, and as they did so, the noise of the restaurant dimmed almost to inaudibility.

“Uh, hi.”

“Mr. Zerezghi, a pleasure!” The tousled man reached out his hand and Yared shook it on instinct. “Jonas. Happy to meet face to face at last.”

Yared straightened up. “Jonas? Really? Nice to meet you as well. Is this...are you the Council of eight?”

True Name nodded. “That is us, yep. Michelle could not be here tonight, so I am here in her stead.”

“You meet at a diner?”

“We meet all over,” Jonas said. “There is no headquarters, *per se*. We just find interesting places and meet there.”

“Wherever’s most boring.” The nondescript person shrugged.

A mug of coffee was placed before him and Yared lifted it automatically for a sip. He wasn’t sure why this surprised him, but he figured he had a lot to learn.

“You’re the last one,” rasped the pile of rags. “The last arrival before secession. You didn’t want to be the first one after? It’s your big deal, right?”

“No. I don’t know why. I suppose just in case something goes wrong with the launch.”

“Nothing will go wrong. There is a backup facility, anyway,” the ferret-shaped one said. “Debarre, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

The rest of the council introduced themselves.

“So, how long until secession takes effect?” True Name asked.

One of the well-dressed women tilted her head, then smiled. “Ten seconds.”

Yared set his coffee down quickly as the table began a countdown. He looked around and then realized everyone was counting down. Shouting the numbers. Grinning and laughing and clapping.

By the time they hit four, Yared was counting along with them.

“Three!” he shouted.

This is what it was all for, he thought. Sitting in a diner, drinking terrible coffee, and meeting friends.

“Two!”

I dreamed for so long, and I get here minutes before it all happens at once. This is what it was for.

“One!”

It was all for these smiling faces and complete and total freedom.

Everyone began cheering at once. The windows lit up with a fireworks display. True Name stopped clapping in order to hug him around the shoulders, and after a moment’s hesitation, he returned the gesture.

“This is why you wanted to be the last one, is it not?” she murmured in his ear just loud enough for him to hear. “You greedy son of a bitch. You just wanted to be the last one to join the party.”

He laughed. “You know, I think you may be right.”

Part II

Progression

The reason that this association between Secession and Launch is as important as it is is multifaceted. Yes, there was a similarity between the acts, of dividing, of leaving; much of the first part of this history will be spent dissecting those. Yes, there was political maneuvering both phys- and sys-side in order to accomplish them both; you will read about that. Yes, there was discussion about the wisdom of actions such as these; this you will read about as well.

The facet upon which this first chapter focuses is, however, one of correspondences. Both involved separation of one group from another. Both involved the construction and modification of a political system — or perhaps non-system — in order to accommodate the goals involved.

In our immortal lives, however, one cannot deny that both Secession and Launch shared the same engineers. The same names, the same clades, the same individuals worked to bring about Secession as they did Launch. Get used to the names of the Ode clade and the Jonas clade. You will see them a lot.

From *An Expanded History of Our World* by
The Bălan clade

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

After their ‘deaths’, such as they were, Dear cackled madly and ran about the still roaring bonfire, prancing and leaping, forking dozens of copies as it went. Its sim had been set up in the Launch Systems, both Castor and Pollux, precisely as it had in the L₅ System, down to all of the decorations and flames. As soon as they had transferred themselves over to those Systems—something which they had been told would take several minutes across the micro-Ansibles connecting the three systems, but which was as subjectively instantaneous as any normal transit—they were alone. The crowd was gone, the singing was gone, and any chance of reversibility had gone with them. There was no way that Codrin or Dear or Dear’s partner could ever go back. The transit was one-way. *“There is no going and there is no back,”* Dear had been saying for months now.

“It is done! It is done!” the fox hollered. *“It is done and those poor saps did not even get to finish their song! Oh, to see their faces! Crumbling sim, friends forever cut off!”*

Dear’s partner also laughed, hopping to their feet and chasing after the fox in a drunken dash, leaving Codrin to sit and smile and watch and think.

There was no more Codrin in the L₅ System. Ey was only here. Ey couldn’t remember being there, for were the sims not the same? And if ey had never been there, had ey ever really existed there? Ey was only memories, and perhaps that is all ey had ever been. Navel gazing and existential crises mixed with the (admittedly drunken) glee of having actually *done* something. No longer just the passive amanuensis, but now the active participant.

Or, well, nearly so, for it was Dear who talked em into this, as it was so good at doing.

When Dear and its partner finally collapsed into a laughing heap amid the dandelions and shortgrass, Codrin stood, raised eir hands to the fire-dimmed sky, and addressed fox and human and flames. *“Hwæt! We great three have made it! We have made it to safety and sanctuary!”*

Dear rolled up and immediately focused on Codrin with a singular intensity that ey had seen countless times before and yet never gotten used to.

“We three, the heroes, the shield-bearers of Elf Hive had long since sought the beast. It lived in the caves, they said. It dwelt in the fields and disguised itself as tall grass, ready to ensnare the traveler. It was as large as a mountain and crouched beside the valley, unseen, traversed, summited, and still it claimed lives in its hunger. Who knows the truth, now, but us three? None who met its gaze had ever lived to tell the tale, and none now will ever hear, for we are the only ones who have seen it face to face and lived, and yet we escaped only by jumping from the world up to the heavens.

“We sought it by night until we realized that it was not there—”

“We sought it!” Dear shouted, hoisting a tankard that had appeared in its paw.

“We sought it by day, supposing that that is where it must be hiding–”

“Sought but did not find!”

“We looked to the morning, supposing that it might dwell between the two, but morning is the time of creation! The beast of destruction cannot live there. And so we sought in the evening gloaming and there we found the slaving teeth–”

“The jaws that bite, the claws that catch.” Dear’s partner chimed in, lifting their own tankard.

“And we braved them. We braved, but though we tried, we could not best them. There was no fight to be had–”

“No swords could cut it!”

“No spears could pierce it!”

“–and all we could do was hold off its attack to run away until true darkness fell and we could finally rest. The next morning we would take off running, and hope to gain some distance, but always the beast was there, ready and waiting–”

“Ready to pounce!”

*“So we grew weary, for nothing we did could not be undone by the beast. It *did* dwell in the grass! It *did* live in caves! It was the mountain! It was all these things and more.”*

“So much more, yes.”

“So, the best that we could do,” Codrin said with an air of finality. *“Was to leave behind the earth, the realm of the physical, to leap up and up–”*

“Up and up!”

“Up and up!”

“–and ascend directly to the heavens to live as gods!”

The three of them all lifted their newly created tankards high, spilling spruce beer and laughing as they shouted, *“Hail! Hail!”* before drinking deep.

“You, my dear, are quite drunk,” Dear’s parter said, grinning.

Codrin giggled. *“That I am!”*

“But that was delightful! Much better than signing a waiver that we might be lost and then waiting for the appointed time.” Dear paused, tilted its head, and adopted a sly grin that surely meant trouble. *“But I do not think that that is actually what happened, for when God hath ordained a creature to die in a particular place, He causeth that creature’s wants to direct it to that place.”*

Codrin sat down on the ground as the other two had and awaited Dear’s version of the events.

“I knew that because from the moment that God opened up the heavens and reached down to touch me on my crown and opened my third eye–” It forked into a version of itself which had such a feature. *“–that I was to seek far and wide for those who saw the world as I did and guide them into a fullness of being that no one had ever seen before right up until that ordained moment of my death.*

“In short, I began a cult.”

Its partner laughed. *“You might well have, given the chance.”*

“Shush, you. I began it in all good intentions. I had seen the truth as revealed to me by God itself—for is not God made

in the image of me?—and certainly the best that I could do to help my fellow man was to lead them to the truth. The truth is beautiful and cruel. We are not meant to own a thing! We are meant only to suffer, and by suffering, be purified, and by being purified, ascend from this mortal plane through the cosmic vibrations to something akin to ecstasy!

“Power, as the tired saying goes, corrupts, and I bore power. Eventually, I attained absolute power, at least among my followers. I was their prophet, was I not? We were not meant to own a thing, yes, but as the ephemeral physical items passed through our lives, I sampled the greatest among them. The truth may be cruel and we are meant to suffer, but is not even the highest pleasure a form of suffering of its own? Orgasm is called the little death, is it not?”

Both of the fox’s partners laughed.

“And so I took what I wanted and did it all in the name of suffering and poverty. I believed it as hard as the rest of my followers, though. There was no cynicism, back then, down in the physical plane, where all is tainted by evil. I was a prophet and the prophecy applied to me, as well.

“There was no hope of a grand death, I knew that. I knew that I would die in the agony of flames—” It gestured at the bonfire still roaring. “—and I knew when, so I was expecting the hammering on my door and the shattering of its hinges. I was expecting my team of tame Judases to come crashing into my meditation chamber. My followers! Some of the greatest and best among them! They all came for me, and I let them in full knowledge haul me to my feet by my very scruff—grab me there and I go limp as a kitten!”

Both of the audience members grinned at this. Both knew it to be true.

“I let them drag me to my pyre, my last great possession, my last great suffering, and I wept with joy at the beautiful, terrifying, and irreversible agony of that final moment. Even my screams contained ecstasy!

“The cosmic vibrations welled up within my heart and my mind and my soul and my body and when there was nothing left of me but ash, I found myself here, surrounded by love and peace and all that I could possibly desire!”

With that, it bowed dramatically and sat back down amid the applause.

When both Codrin and Dear had stared at their partner for a long few seconds, they finally held up their hands and surrendered to the pressure. “Fine, fine, but I’m not the storyteller that you two are, so you’ll have to forgive my tale.”

“Pish and also tosh, my love. I look forward to it.”

“You are also very drunk, fox.”

“But of course!”

They clambered to their feet and stretched their arms upward, then nodded. “Alright. My appearance here began shortly after Dear’s. Its gift of prophecy was accurate more often than not, and, at first, it was humbler than any single one of us could possibly hope to be.

“That, you see, was the secret to its power. It was not simply that it would think of others any time a choice was presented between itself and them, though that was surely true, but that it seemed to exist without ego. Completely without. It would forget to eat. It would forget to drink. It would even, though I am happy to count this as a rarity, forget to breathe. Why would it? In its mind, the self was non-existent, and by that point, breathing had come under its own control, such was its mastery of self, and if it was always focused on the betterment of others, it could neglect itself. I wouldn’t be surprised if its heart would forget to beat some day.

“This is the source of the passion in its followers. When one sees that total reduction of the self in the service of others, that does not inspire greed in nearly as many people that you might suspect. Instead, they are unable

to help themselves before that one. It's almost impossible to resist the paradoxical allure of one such as that, and perhaps some more primal need draws one to try and equal that nadir."

For as much as they had downplayed their ability, Codrin was pleasantly surprised at the fluidity of their telling, and ey sat as rapt as Dear.

"I had a gift of prophecy, myself, though I had not understood it until joining this cult – and yes, it was a cult. It was during a nine-day fast and I had been meditating for at least thirty six hours straight, and in that, I received word from God in the form of a vision: our dear leader's death, it cackling in the flames, and I saw the reason why.

"It was after that that I started to notice it, the slow regrowth of its ego. It started with little things, at first, a morsel of that required food more than the rest of us received, or an extra smile of particular friendship between it and one of the others.

"I kept this to myself, at first, but eventually it began to grate on me more than I cared to admit. The strange thing about anger, though, is that it has the roots in the self, and so I felt that it was keeping me anchored where I made no further progress on my journey to utter selflessness.

"So I did what any other acolyte would do and began to talk with the others in secret. I was not the only one, it turned out, though I was the only one who had seen the inevitable conclusion. When I mentioned this to my co-conspirators, though, they immediately grew wide-eyed and listened to what I had to say. I didn't put the pieces together at the moment, but soon enough I began to feel the subtle nudges toward assuming the role of prophet.

"I don't know who began the mob. Was it Aya? I think it was Aya. I think it was her who began the chant and then began the roar. It was her who battered down Dear's door and dragged it, strangely limp, strangely smiling, out to the bonfire, and it was her who threw it on, for it had become a slight creature long ago."

"It was! Aya, that bitch."

"And then, of course, it was her who grabbed my hand and thrust it up into the air, proclaiming me as the next prophet. It was unanimous. I was to be the one in charge.

"And you can surely guess my fate. You can surely see that it had come much sooner too, as all of those little luxuries that Dear had accumulated were now mine, and I succumbed as I knew I must to temptation.

"Weird though. They skipped the fire and went straight to beheading!" They finished with a bow and sat down grinning at the hearty applause. Both Dear and Codrin leaned in to give them a kiss on the cheek.

There was silence for a while as the three of them sat and drank their ale and looked at the fire or looked at each other or looked at nothing. Perhaps they left to walk the prairie. Perhaps they huddled by the fire in shared warmth. Who knows? It did not matter in that moment. They were home, and they were together.

I was only later, when Dear and Codrin had curled together in bed—Dear's partner having fallen asleep on the couch—that the fox肘ed Codrin in the side, and ey could hear the grin in its voice. *"Beowulf? You are such a nerd."*

Codrin laughed and buried eir face in the fox's scruff. "Did you doubt that I knew of Beowulf?"

"Oh! I did not doubt, but the fact that you pulled that out to start a story time makes me giddy. How long had you been planning on doing that?"

"It wasn't planned. It just struck me in the spur of the moment."

"I knew there was a reason I loved you."

Codrin poked a finger against the fox's stomach, getting a yip in return. "Did you doubt that, too?"

"It is always nice to have confirmation."

"Happy to oblige."

There was silence for a bit. Codrin began to nod off.

"Codrin?"

"Mm?"

"When you write back to Ioan and May Then My Name, will you send those stories instead of what our actual reasons were?"

"Don't they already know those?"

"The surface ones, yes. Not the emotional ones, though. Not the ones from the heart. Not the drive to get out, get away."

Codrin nodded, silent.

"If you can do me a favor, Codrin, can you send only the ones from tonight?"

"You don't want them to know the real ones?"

"No."

The finality of the word brooked no argument, and Codrin left it at that. "I'll get them sent over in the morning."

"Thank you." Even the fox sounded on the edge of sleep. *"I think May Then My Name will enjoy that too. She is probably already poisoning Ioan with talk of myths and legends, if I know her."*

"Ey'll rise to the occasion, I'm sure. That's as much up eir alley as history is."

"You two do make good storytellers."

"Well, your clade does seem to attract quite a few stories."

Dear laughed and wriggled itself closer against Codrin leaving space for its partner when they would inevitably crawl back to a real bed.

"Do you think that Codrin on Pollux did the same?" Dear mumbled.

Ey was awake only enough to say, "I hope so."

Michelle Hadje — 2124

Michelle Hadje mastered the urge to vomit.

She knew that she could change this. Change all of these things from so many dreams that pressed in against her. She knew that she could will them away, or perhaps spring for a fork that would simply...not have them. She had enough reputation by now to fork a dozen times over. Some perks came with being on the council, after all.

But she hadn't, and she was not quite sure why.

At one point, she had entertained the idea that it was out of a need to keep some part of herself tied to the her of eight years ago, the panicked and wild-eyed woman who had scrimped and saved all that she could to get a one-way ticket into the System. Perhaps she needed to keep some tenuous connection to the Michelle left so changed by getting lost that year on year become madness on madness.

But that wasn't quite it. Perhaps, instead, she felt as though she wasn't worth it. She hadn't been able to save her friends, not in the end, and it was only by dint of luck that she managed to survive the years after that terrible day her mind was wrapped in on itself, squeezed, stretched, knotted, and all her thoughts and all her dreams were mirrored back upon her. Perhaps she *deserved* these bouts of lingering disconnection, depression, dissociation, derealization, depersonalization.

That wasn't it either, though. She may sometimes feel the weight of responsibility, but thoughts as gloomy as that came only when she was feeling particularly peaky.

Lately, her best guess as to why she kept this madness draped around her was the slew of memories of RJ that hit her at unexpected intervals. She could feel em, sometimes, as a ghost, perhaps, or a wish, a dream, but then that feeling would disappear and she'd be left with despair and the urge to vomit and the flickering of herself.

Michelle.

Sasha.

Michelle.

Sasha.

That last hypothesis encompassed much of the previous two, and would explain why the looming tenth anniversary of the founding of the System seemed to make it all the worse. Ten years since the founding, eleven years since RJ disappeared, giving emself up to the act of creation.

Ah well. She had lingered long enough outside the coffee shop, so she swallowed down her rising gorge and

mastered a few waves of shifting form, skunk fur and human flesh fighting for dominance. The human form won today: round of face rather than mephitis snout; curly, black hair rather than thick black fur. It would do. She would be Michelle for the meeting.

The Council of Eight, for all its high status and demand, met in incognito in unassuming, downtempo sims rather than some conference room or grand palace. The eight of them would trickle into the sim over the course of a few hours, set up camp on a hilltop or in a cafe, enjoy the ambiance, and then set up a cone of silence to discuss business. They had been noticed once or twice, but never hounded and certainly not attacked.

Debarre and user11824 were there already, slouching before their coffees in comfortable silence. Both looked up and waved to her when she entered, so she requested a mocha and joined them around the table.

“Hey Sa-er, Michelle. Hows tricks?” Debarre asked.

“Tricksy, as usual.” She smiled wanly. “How about you two?”

user11824 shrugged. His features were nondescript to the point where Michelle doubted that he even needed to work at being incognito. Eyes simply slid over him without pausing. “Bored. Boring. Bored.”

“How are you bored? There’s always too much to do.” Laughter came from behind her, followed by a friendly touch to the shoulder. Jonas, on the other hand, was perilously handsome, well past the point of standing out, and friendly with a casual ease that left all feeling envious.

“Yeah. Boring shit.”

Jonas slid into the seat next to Michelle, coffee in hand. There were a few minutes amiable chatter as the other four octarchs trickled in: two well-dressed women, one well-dressed man, and one slouching form of indeterminate gender (and occasionally species) that looked more like a discarded pile of rags than anything.

Michelle blinked, and a cone of silence spread around the table. The proprietor raised an eyebrow, but made no other move to acknowledge it.

“So,” she began, rubbing her hands over her face. “I know we just had a meeting, so I am sorry for stealing you all again, but I have a thing to ask of you all. A question, for sure, but it may morph into a favor, depending on the answer.”

“Boring one?” user11824 asked.

Michelle forced a tired chuckle and wobbled one of her hands over the table. “Maybe. Probably. Most things are boring to you.”

He rolled his eyes. More chuckles around the table.

Swallowing down another wave of Sasha washing across her body, she continued. “I would like to create ten forks to delegate responsibility. Would that be okay?”

Jonas frowned. “That’d be pretty expensive.”

“Would it be worth the expenditure?” the pile of rags rasped.

Michelle quelled the instinct to shrug again, nodding instead. “I think it would be. Just temporarily. At least for the next year or so. I will shift my role to a more managerial one, acting as consensus builder for my clade. I would not gain any more say in votes.”

“Would you take on additional responsibility, too?”

“I can. I am always happy to do my share of the work, and if that share increases ten-fold while I shift to a consensus point, I will be okay with that.”

Debarre gave a lopsided smile. “If it’s simply about more hands on the ground, I see no problem with it. It’s your reputation to spend, and...” He hesitated, smile fading to a more serious expression, continuing, “And if it helps you out, then it’s probably for the best. I’m sorry Michelle, but you look like hell.”

She forced herself to keep tears out of her voice. “I feel like hell, if I am honest. I will ensure none of the forks have...all this.”

Nods around the table. A woman from the well-dressed trio spoke up. “I’m comfortable answering your question with a ‘yes’.”

They went around the table, and none of the others challenged the first vote. Michelle slouched in relief, letting her control slacken and her form blur for a few moments.

“Does that answer mean that you have a favor to ask?”

She nodded to Debarre. “A two-part favor. I would like some help delegating to my forks, if we even have ten things that need doing, and then I would like a week off.”

Jonas laughed. “You’re allowed a vacation, Michelle. Go for it. I’m sure we can all find something for your new clade. The Hadje Clade?”

“The Ode Clade.”

Debarre stiffened in his seat, frowned. Michelle did her best to maintain her tired mien, keeping her gaze on Jonas.

“No clue what that means, but hey, Michelle-slash-Sasha of the Ode Clade it is.”

“Do we applaud? Is this exciting?” user11824 asked. He looked honestly befuddled, and Michelle admitted that she could use a life so bound by boredom that excitement could go unnoticed.

“It’s exciting for me. I get to sleep in.”

Laughter around the table.

The pile of rags shifted, rasping its words. “Are we comfortable with this as a general rule? Perhaps we would all benefit from a fork here and there to help us out.”

“Can we come up with a mechanism for tracking hands on the ground, as you so eloquently put it?”

Michelle nodded eagerly to the sharp dressed man. “Please. It is not my intention to take more work just so we can do more things my way.”

“And we’ll have to be careful not to overextend our reach. There being only the eight of us kind of limits our capabilities by necessity.”

“We can be open about it, set limits for ourselves. Maybe no more than ten per council member.”

“It might be handy to fork further for personal reasons down the line,” Michelle said, carefully avoiding Debarre’s gaze. “I can think of a hundred things I would like to do.”

The weasel’s frown deepened.

“Sounds fair enough. I figure we’ve all got personal lives outside this,” one of the women said.

“Yeah, boring ones.”

“You’re such a drag. Take up fishing or something. Then you can be bored with purpose.”

“I’ve got a stack and a half of trashy novels to plow through.”

“There’s some changes I’ve been meaning to make. Maybe I can even figure out how to make it like a real demolition process, too. Putting a sledgehammer through drywall? Exquisite. Simply exquisite.”

The chatter continued around the table. Michelle focused on her mocha, studiously avoiding Debarre's searching gaze.

The cone of silence was dropped, and council members left at their own pace until only Michelle, Jonas, and Debarre left.

"So, what's the deal with the clade name? And why are you two being so weird around each other?" Jonas asked.

There was a moment's silence, then Debarre murmured, "You tell him."

"A friend of mine—of ours—wrote this poem, an ode, and I was thinking that I would name the instances after lines from it. A hundred lines, ten stanzas. That gives me ten first lines to start with, and I can go from there."

Jonas shrugged. "Well, fair enough, if strange. You didn't answer why you two got all weird, though."

"Complicated stuff. Both Michelle and—"

"We were both among the lost," she interrupted, shooting Debarre a warning glance.

Jonas held his hands up to forestall further conversation. "This is between you two. You can share what you want when you've got it sorted out."

Debarre nodded sullenly. Michelle looked down at her hands.

"While we're on complicated subjects, I have an admission to make." Jonas looked sheepish. "I have a small clade of my own on the side. All for personal stuff, of course, nothing tied to the Council."

Debarre tilted his head, then laughed. It was an earnest laugh, full-throated, and Michelle realized that Jonas had said precisely the right thing to cut through the tension.

"Do you have some equally stupid clade name?" Michelle said, grinning.

"Oh, just the Jonas Clade. I'm going to keep forking as long as I have reputation, I figure, so we've been naming ourselves with syllables. There's plenty enough of those. I'll stay Jonas Prime, but there's already a Ku, Ar, and Re Jonas."

"Fucking nerd."

Jonas batted his eyes at Debarre. "Thank you. I try."

After a bit more chatter, Debarre made his goodbyes and left the sim.

Michelle and Jonas tacitly agreed to go for a walk down the street. The sim was of a comfortable, small town plaza, so it was a pleasant enough walk. They made their way to a central fountain and, while Jonas sat on the rim and watched, Michelle dumped hunk after hunk of reputation to create her ten forks. They alternated between looking like Michelle and looking like Sasha. Each introduced herself in turn.

"I Am At A Loss For Images In This End Of Days of the Ode Clade."

"Life Breeds Life But Death Must Now Be Chosen."

"Oh, But To Whom Do I Speak These Words."

And on down the list of first lines. Eventually, a crowd of eleven stood near the fountain, in front of a bemused Jonas.

"So, what next?"

"What is next is that I get assignments from the Council and then take a fucking vacation. I plan on sleeping for at least three days straight."

Jonas laughed. "I wholeheartedly endorse this course of action. One of you want to take on an assignment today?"

After a short conversation, one of the skunks stepped forward. "Sure. What kind of assignment?"

"Which one are you again?"

"The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream."

Jonas winced. "Got something shorter I can call you? Even if only in informal settings?"

She laughed. "Oh, sure. Let us go with 'True Name'."

"Much better! Alright, your assignment is to work with me on the individual rights conversation."

"Is that heating up?"

"Yeah, there's some real grade-A stupidity going on out there." Jonas paused to wave to the rest of the Ode Clade, which left the sim *en masse*. "Lots of this and that about how software can't be an individual blah blah blah. One particularly vile shithead suggested that if we wanted to be treated as individuals, we would need to contribute to society as equals with those still in the embodied world. He suggested we could split the System and dump individuals into flight computers and software rigs and other expert systems to run those so that they wouldn't have to keep designing them."

True Name frowned. "What a dick. Is that kind of opinion common out there? I am still coming off the mountain of work that was the reputation market."

"Not so common now, but those voices are getting louder by the week."

"Damn."

"Damn indeed. Thankfully, those aren't the only voices. The DDR still has a good number of folks who remember the lost and just how fucked up it was for whole-ass people to be dumped into nothingness, and that sounds awfully similar to becoming a glorified flight sim."

"But that is on the DDR. Do we get votes? Do we even have access?"

"We do not, no. All we can do is read the forums. What we do have is the ability to communicate."

"Influence, you mean."

Jonas smiled, nodded. "Influence."

"I did pretty well in debate class."

"Good, we'll have need of that. And you can write, too. Your proposals are a thing of beauty."

"Oh? A joy for ever? Their loveliness increases?"

Jonas looked blank.

True Name laughed. "Never mind. Let us go change some minds."

Yared Zerezghi — 2124

When one is uploaded, the only thing that is left behind is the body, and that in pieces. It is an uncomfortable, perhaps gruesome fact of the process, but unavoidable. The intellect, the emotions, and all that makes a person an individual are sent to that building (or compound, we don't know what it looks like) in the Sino-Russian Bloc and then they become a part of the System. We do not see what they see, and cannot, but we do talk to them. They are quite the talkative bunch, and they describe all sorts of wonders. The System is much like our sims but far, far more real. Realer than we could ever imagine. It is, I'm told, quite literally a dream world.

All of this—the chatter from the System, the continuity of lives from here to there, the vibrancy of the place—points to a collection of real, actual people. They may not have the bodies, but they are no less real, living, feeling, laughing, crying, joyful beings, and they deserve the recognition of their reality, their individuality.

I hear many arguments against their individual rights:

“Because we cannot interbreed with them, they are a different species, and thus are not guaranteed the same rights.”

This is a crass and ridiculous idea. Of course we cannot interbreed, The chances of us interbreeding with a moth are more likely, as at least a moth has a body! However, if we see that their lives in the System are continuous progressions from the lives they lived here and they had inalienable rights here, then there must also be continuity of rights. Whether or not we can interbreed is nothing but a distraction.

“They should have to pay for the power requirements for running their system.”

This argument carries weight when it is viewed from a strictly logical point of view. Running the System *does* cost money, and even if they have little need for money in there as they go about their day-to-day lives, perhaps they can find a way to help subsidize that ability. I can think of a dozen ways off the top of my head even while writing this.

However, for the argument to be used as a reason that they must not have individual rights—those of freedom, happiness, and access to necessities—borders on the incomprehensible. When an individual is out of a job outside of the System, we do not simply strip away their rights on the spot! We must have the correct conversation, here, and this is just muddying the waters

“If they are essentially expert systems running on a computer, they should be treated as such and used to run expert systems out here.”

This is it, here. This is the worst of almost all of the myriad arguments that I’ve heard. This is the pillar of cynicism that everyone’s inner sociopath leans against. This is the bit of us that says: if I cannot see it, it isn’t worth the scantest thought. This is the bit that says: every individual must serve a tangible use in the world in order to exist. This is the bit that says: they deserve this because I am also a cog in this horrendous machine.

Humanity is, as ever, a race of cynics-at-heart, yet this approaches such a low as to turn the stomach. You would afford dogs and cats greater rights than those who we know for a fact can think and talk and feel and know. We know this because they *are* us.

Without compromising their identity, I can say that I have received a letter from two representatives of the Council of Eight, the leadership within the System, and on this we agree. They are alive, and because they are alive, they deserve the rights guaranteed those who are alive. They are individual, and so those rights must be individual. They can feel happiness, they know what it means to be free, and they are completely dependent on this one necessity, and so those rights afforded us must be granted them.

One of these representatives with whom I have been speaking is one of the lost. I know that the collective conscious moves quickly, and it’s a lot to ask it to keep in mind a single incident from nigh on twelve years ago, but they are important. They were among the lost, those unlucky few trapped within their own minds and exorcised by the whims of tyranny, and when they were returned to our shared existence from their solipsistic one, they were among the voices campaigning for

change from the very political systems who failed them and many others. As one of the lost, their experiences were integral to the creation of the System, and have been a part of it from the inside for almost a decade.

Their memories are real.

Their life is real.

Vote for the granting of rights. Vote yes on *referendum 10b30188*.

Yared Zerezghi (NEAC)

Yared submitted the post to the DDR forums and swiped his way out of the whole damn trash fire, feeling for that cool air on the back of his neck, backing out of his rig fast enough that he teetered on his chair.

Every time he had to write something about this, every time he had to force himself to reiterate the arguments of others, it made him angry. Irrationally so.

He slung his bag over his shoulder, donned his cap, and stomped out of his apartment. He needed away from computers after something like that.

Sunlight assailed him on the street. The view was as bright as ever, the weather as oppressively hot as always. He swayed for a moment as he struggled to acclimate, and once he was able, continued to stomp his way down the street to the coffee shop on the corner.

He could let his anger cool, but it felt too good to nurse it just a little while longer.

His usual low stool was free, so he claimed that and sat to watch as the coffee was roasted, ground, boiled, strained, poured. Despite the urge to stoke that fury further, the meditative aspect of watching the coffee being prepared, the smell of it and the small cakes of himbasha, calmed him quickly.

He was partway through his second cup and nibbling on his second slice of the sweet cardamom bread when another man sat down next to him. This would not normally be cause for concern, except for the fact that the man was wearing a suit. A *black* suit. This was not just incongruous, it was alarming in a place where the sun shone so hot.

Yared looked around, then spotted the black car parked down the cross street. Obviously that must have a cushy, air-conditioned interior, which would at least make the choice of clothing tolerable.

He nodded to the man, who nodded back, ordered three coffees, and waited.

Yared finished his cup and reached out his hand to grip the contacts to pay for his coffee, but the man gently pressed his arm down.

“Please, allow me to purchase your coffee and food. Do you like the himbasha here?”

Frowning, he nodded. “It’s quite good. May I ask why you’re paying for me?”

“My passenger would like to meet with you,” the man said, nodding over toward the car. “The coffees are for the three of us.”

“With me?”

“Yes, Mr. Zerezghi.”

Yared reached once more for the contacts to pay, hoping he could simply walk away from the situation, which was quickly moving from alarming to frightening, but his arm was once more gently pushed away. In-

stead, the man reached forward and let his implants connect with the contacts, the touch completing the payment.

“I think I should leave, sir.”

“Please, stay. It is cool in the car, and we only wish to talk.”

“About what?”

The coffee was poured into paper cups and the himbasha was slid into a paper packet.

“Please, Mr. Zerezghi, this way.”

Yared remained seated. “You haven’t answered my question, sir. About what?”

By way of answer, the man smiled, not unkindly, and said, “My passenger has read your post from this morning and was most impressed. Please, you may stand outside the car if that would make you feel better.”

Still frowning, Yared stood, nodded to the woman who had prepared the coffee and let the man in black lead him to the car.

The man set the tray of coffees on the roof of the car, removed one and set a slice of himbasha on it, before opening the back door and handing the tray and other slices to the person inside.

So incongruous was the context that Yared did not recognize him at first. The man was dressed much as he was, in loose white pants and a white shirt, but the clothing was much finer, with an elaborately embroidered neckline on the shirt, and spotless pants where his own were dusty and overdue for a wash.

Still, the face was unmistakable. “Councilor Demma?” he asked, voice small.

“Mr. Zerezghi! The very one. Please! Come in and sit with me, and we can drink our coffees. They smell delightful.”

Yared stood at the door a moment longer, feeling the cool air against his face. His mind had gone blank. Any thought of the coffee, of the message earlier, was gone, and all he could think was, *What in the world does Yosef Demma want with me?*

A gentle hand on his shoulder from the driver urged Yared into the back of the car where he took a seat opposite Councilor Demma, who handed him his coffee and offered him the bag of himbasha, which he declined.

“I suppose you’ve already eaten plenty, hmm? It does smell delicious. I rather like it when they put orange in it as well as the spices.” He broke off a corner of the bread and set the rest aside. “I will get straight to business, Mr. Zerezghi, as I know that this is rather unexpected for you. We have been keeping tabs of your posts on the topic of individual rights on the DDR forums. Your voice is one of the loudest, most consistent, and most eloquent out of the whole system, and we would like to work with you on those.”

Yared coughed on a swallow of coffee. “You have been...watching me?”

Councilor Demma laughed and waved his hand, chewing on his sweet bread. After swallowing, he said, “Do not worry, Yared. The NEAC Council is a political body, the DDR is a political entity, so of course we monitor the forums. We are monitoring everybody, not monitoring you specifically. Except, of course, inasmuch as you are a part of that everybody.”

“But you came for me, sir.”

“That we did. Your posts have attracted our attention. They are quite well written, very well researched, and the information you have by virtue of your relationship with your two companions is invaluable. We—that is, the interests in the council that I represent on this topic—feel that you would be a useful aid in reaching our

goals.”

“And what goals are those?”

Councilor Demma smiled in a way that did not exactly instill confidence. “Individual rights and autonomy of the System.”

Yared blinked, frowned, and took the few seconds offered by a sip of his coffee to work up the courage to ask, “Autonomy?”

“We are like you, Yared. We desire that the uploaded individuals maintain individual rights. Our dreams are perhaps a little bigger, is all. You fight for their rights, but we fight for their independence.”

“How can they be independent. Aren’t they a part of the S-R Bloc? Those who upload have to get a visa, even if only for a few hours, before they join the System.”

“Yes, but it is dual citizenship!” the councilor said, stabbing his finger toward Yared. “They remain citizens of the Western Fed or of the Northeast African Coalition or wherever they are from. They essentially only have a visa for the S-R Bloc. If they are our citizens, they must still have the rights we grant them. That is your argument, yes?”

Yared nodded numbly.

“We, like you, wish to protect those rights, but we want to grant them even more. We want to grant them their independence.”

The import of Councilor Demma’s request struck him like a blow to the stomach. “You...you want to help them secede?”

The man across from him smiled and finished his coffee, setting it aside before taking another bite of the himbasha. “This is quite good, Mr. Zerezghi. I will have to remember this place.”

Yared frowned at the non sequitur.

“This is not something that they have in the System. They do not have delicious coffee and delicious desserts. Neither do they have hamburgers or Sichuan noodles. They have none of the same stuff as us, as crude or as plain or as beautiful as it may be. They don’t have the same stuff that makes our societies what they are. They have their own society-stuff. They have their own world and their own customs.

“Have you heard about the way that they can make copies of themselves and become two individuals? It is fascinating to me. They call those collections of individuals clades, because they can form a branching tree of personalities. Wonderful! Can you imagine the culture that must spring up around that? Are clades families? Do they fight like siblings? Culture has sprung up around our coffee, our himbasha, our *stuff*, and it certainly does not involve these clades of theirs.”

The councilor was intensely charismatic. The argument made sense, too, and a part of him was ready to dive in head-first if it would accomplish his goals. The rest of him prevailed, though, and he asked, “But where do I come into this?”

“Excellent question.” That disconcerting smile again. “All we would like you to do is continue on your campaign for individual rights now. However, we would like to suggest some small changes to your arguments, just little nudges here and there. They will not start right away, but soon, we would like you to shift the language you use. We have confidence that individual rights will be granted, but we want the way primed for what comes after.”

“Confidence?”

The councilor tapped his temple. “We keep an eye on the forums, remember? We keep our finger on the pulse of the DDR. I also have the interests that I represent, and I have confidence in them.”

“You just want me to campaign as I usually do, but subtly suggest that the System should secede?”

“Ideas grow organically, Mr. Zerezghi, but they all start from a seed. You are ideally placed to be that seed, both for the DDR and for the Council of Eight.”

Yared sat up straighter. “Oh, so not just the DDR, but also the System?”

Councilor Demma nodded, still smiling. “There is nothing you need to do yet, but let us meet up for coffee again, yes? Perhaps here, again, in two days time? I would love to make these chats over coffee a regular part of our schedules.”

“Can I take those two days to think on it?”

That smile faltered only briefly but was quickly replaced. “Of course, Yared, I understand that this is a large request to make of you. All the same, I do hope that you will agree to join us. Much is resting on this venture.”

At some unseen signal, the car door was opened from the outside. The meeting, it seemed, was at an end, and he was back on the street, back in the brightness and heat, watching the car disappear around a corner.

Douglas Hadje — 2325

May Then My Name,

As promised, I'm returning to the questions you asked. The launch went well, we had our party, and now my plate is mostly clear. I have a bit of work to do with the launch arms, but responsibility has shifted over to the flight coordinator.

I suspect that you are still interested in the subjective view of things. It's a little weird, not having so much to do all the time. I tried to sleep in this morning, but wasn't able to. Who knows, maybe I'll relax over time, or find something else to fill my days. Take up knitting. Something.

Anyway, to your questions. These were all very strange and cryptic, but in the spirit of building your mythology, I'll try to answer them in earnest. If you need clarifications, I'll be here.

How long have you been working as phys-side launch director?

From the very beginning. I was a senior System manager before that, and submitted my resume to the launch commission on a whim. It was a bit of a shock when they picked me, if I'm honest. I suspect it was the name. It'd look good to people such as yourself.

What is involved with your role as phys-side launch director?

As mentioned, very little now. Previously, though, I was the one who had to keep everything in his head. Those directly under me would supervise things such as the micro-Ansibles or launch timing or the HE engines, and I just pulled all that together and kept everyone moving at about the same pace so that nothing was rushed and no one was left behind. In short, I was a manager.

How long have you been working with the System phys-side?

As long as I've been working. My first job back in 2294 was as an Ansible tech in a clinic.

What led you to pursue a career working with the System?

I've always had a fascination with the System and just how different it was from life on Earth. I had considered uploading as soon as I hit the majority but something kept me out here, I guess. I think it was just that the whole idea was so beautifully audacious that I just wanted to keep it up and running smoothly.

What led you to remain phys-side rather than uploading, yourself? Will you upload in the future?
Why or why not?

I think I answered the first part up above, but I will add to it that there is some aspect of fear that kept me from doing so. Or, maybe not fear, but intimidation, if that makes sense? I felt like I would be outclassed there. I would be able to rub elbows with people from 210 years ago! It makes me feel small.

Will I upload? I think so. I think when everything is finished out here and I can comfortably leave my position and say that I did a good job, I'll head back planet-side, go on a week-long bender, and then go to an upload clinic when I'm still hung over. I've done a lot out here. I've given decades of my life to the System, and I think it would be a fine place to retire.

There is one other thing, and I hesitate to mention it because I'm not sure if it would be uncouth, but doubtless you recognize my name. My great-great-something aunt was Michelle Hadje, who was formative to the creation of the System itself, was one of the earliest uploads, one of what I think are called the 'founders'. I want to meet her.

I know that I could just message her. I want to just message her! Something keeps me from doing so, though. I feel weird about it, or intimidated, rather in the same way that I feel intimidated about uploading. She's family, but so distant as to be a total stranger; she's more than two hundred years old; she's been essentially silent from phys-side for most of that time as far as I can tell, so I don't even know if she's still alive. Some day I'll work up the courage to talk to her, but I'm not sure if that will be before or after I upload.

What led you to pursue your position as launch director rather than remaining in your previous position?

Like I said, I just submitted my resume on a whim, and before that, I was just managing station-side Ansible stuff. The next step up the ladder shouldn't have been launch director, but, like I said, here we are. The launch program totally captivated me. I was part of a messaging campaign to get it approved, and took part in as many debates as I could from out here. I desperately wanted it to happen, though I knew there was little chance of me actually getting to work on it. I was surprised and elated to get the chance.

Please provide a biography of yourself to whatever level of detail you feel comfortable.

I was born Douglas Fredrick Hadje-Simon on April 9th, 2278 in Saskatoon to the last in a long line of Uranium miners. I got my implants along with the rest of my class at age five, and quickly took to the 'net. I spent as much time as I could in there, as did (and still do) most folks. I don't know when you uploaded, but most of Earth is not a pleasant place anymore, so the net is where one goes for literally anything but living in a shithole on a giant rock that is also a shithole, if you'll forgive the language.

Like I said, I took a job working on Ansible stuff as soon as I could. I'll admit that this was a selfish act. I was hoping that I would eventually wind up station-side to get away from the mess down there. I don't regret it. I don't miss my family. I don't miss my friends. I don't miss home. This is home now, as much as anything. I will do my best to either upload or die up here rather than go back. I'll work myself to the bone if I have to.

I moved up through the ranks quickly enough and, first chance I got, I headed up with a few other techs on a ship headed to some mining site on the Moon. I spent probably five minutes on the Moon before the other

techs and I headed out to the station. I started out as a senior station-side Ansible tech and made my way up to lead before making it to launch director. You know the rest.

Please provide a physical description of yourself to whatever level of detail you feel comfortable.

I'm nothing special, I think? Average height (I've heard that shifts over time? I'm 190cm), average weight, brown eyes, brown hair from my dad, curls from my mom. I have no idea whether I'm attractive or ugly, and honestly haven't thought about it until this question. I don't even know what to write here, I guess. My body's just a tool and vehicle to get me from place to place.

Do you have any hobbies?

I still tool around on the 'net (though since there's more than a second's latency to Earth one way, it's mostly entertainment sims rather than chat), and for the mandatory exercise, I like running well enough. We're not allowed to cook up here, but I remember being fond of that back planet-side.

This is super embarrassing, and just between you and me. I'd prefer you not tell anyone about this, and please, please don't tell Ms. Hadje. One of my hobbies is picking up any EVA task I can get just so I can go touch the System itself. Hardly anyone's seen it, but it's beautiful. It's coated in an inch or two of manufactured diamond, and the inside is a glittery mix of gold on black that seems to go on forever.

On these EVAs, I'll go touch the System and imagine that I can feel family in there.

I don't know if it counts as a hobby, but it's important to me, and it isn't work.

How do you feel about what you know of the founding of the System?

I don't know what I feel. You have to understand that it's been existence for more than four times as long as I've been alive. I know some of the big highlights, I suppose. It was invented some time in the 2110s, and seceded in 2125. It used to be super expensive to get to, then in the 2170s when things started getting really bad, several governments started offering incentives to upload. It turned into a weird combination of a brain drain and a dumping ground for the poor. There were a few periods where one government or another would outlaw uploading, but it would never last. It was this huge allure to us, like some sort of perfect utopia. Some folks hated it. Some still do. There were even sabotage attempts on the launch.

I don't know, though. It's almost getting to mythical status out here, so maybe your work is coming at the right time.

If you were suddenly removed from your position as director, what would you choose to do as a career in its stead?

You sent me this before launch, and it means less now, so I'll answer how I would have felt at the time. I think I would have gone crazy and thrown myself out the airlock. I'm really not kidding about how much this means to me.

If you were suddenly removed from your location in the extrasystem L₅ station and returned to Earth, how would you feel and what would you expect?

See above. I'd rather die than leave the station.

If the System shut down and all personalities irrevocably lost, how would you feel?

See above.

If you were told that, one year from now, you would die painlessly, what would you do? Would this change if you knew that your death would be painful? Would this change, in either case, if your death was seven days from now?

Obviously, if it's possible, I would just upload in all of these cases. If it was not possible for whatever reason, I'm not sure. I think I'd spend as much time as possible working with the System as closely as possible. If I had the choice to die, painlessly or in agony, while touching it, I think that I'd be happy. Or maybe not happy, but it would feel like a worthwhile death.

Maybe I'd finally screw up the courage to talk to Michelle.

If everyone but you disappeared, what would you do?

Um...I don't know! Much of the uploading rig here is automated, though I know there are some buttons that need pressing and knobs that need twiddling. I'd probably spend every waking moment trying to automate it the rest of the way so that I could upload. If you mean the System too, well, see above.

How do you feel about being alone for extended periods of time?

This is a very rare occurrence. Earth is crowded. The shuttles are crowded. The station is less crowded, but it's also a place where one lives with a bunch of coworkers, so I'm usually not all that alone. The closest I get to being alone is sleeping or during EVAs. I spend most of that time dreaming, and I don't mind that at all.

Do you remember your dreams?

My dreams when I'm asleep? Rarely. They're usually confused images of long hallways or being super crowded in a small space. Waking dreams are much more pleasant.

How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?

I have to say, I started talking with de, one of the launch commission members, and we agreed that your questions grew exponentially weird starting about here. I originally thought I'd answer each in some snarky way, but the more I thought about them, the more I realized what you're going for. In that vein, I'll try to answer each as best I can.

There are a good number of people who think that God/god(s) forgot about Earth. There have always been doom-sayers and end-of-the-world-ites, but they have seen a huge uptick in my life alone. I think this last century has been defined by coming to terms with how fucked up everything is. And it's not that we don't blame ourselves. Many of us do! But many of those same people tack it on God, too. "God is disappointed with us and that's why everything's terrible" or whatever.

Me? I'm not so sure. I was raised thinking much of that, but I also feel like I left those feelings in the shuttle station back planet-side. I don't think about God much anymore. Maybe that's part of the problem: when we forget about God, we get complacent and then get into trouble, and suddenly he's much more relevant again. Who knows. Life up here is easy. I work, I get tired, I rest, I eat well, I get to do the thing I love most of all. Did I forget God back on Earth? Did I leave him there when I came here? Is there room for God in space? Do you have God in the System, and is that God the same one we talk about phys-side?

Maybe I can't answer the question without asking a bunch more because God and I forgot each other.

When you become intoxicated—whether via substance use or some natural process, such as sleep deprivation—which of the following applies to you?

I laughed at this one. Where did you find this? I dug but couldn't find the source. I know that the previous one is a Psalm of some sort.

There are very few chances to get intoxicated here on the station. I had a glass of champagne after launch, and it was the first drink I had had in at least a decade, if not longer. You spend that long away from alcohol, and you lose essentially all of your tolerance, so I'm ashamed to say that, while I did feel drunk, I basically stumbled off to bed and slept.

However, you talk about other intoxications. I am no stranger to insomnia, and you're right that there is a sort of intoxication to that. I tend to get goofy and laugh a lot at the stupidest things when I've not slept for a day or two. I will laugh and laugh at the smallest thing, and then the laughter will fade and I'll sigh and say, "I'm so tired." And then I'll do the whole thing all over again. I think that might be kind of like Ape Drunk?

One thing this reminded me of, though, was of when I had just turned twenty and got incredibly sick. I had a very high fever, and when it was at its worst, I felt as though I was being offered a chance to peek behind a curtain, or at least see the shadows moving around backstage beneath the hem of it. I felt that I was granted a glimpse of some thinner reality that sat just behind our own. I was writhing in my bed, unable to hold still, with my back arching and my tongue sticking out, and yet there was this sense of the numinous and a short wave of ecstasy, and I felt pleasantly drunk. I don't know what "when a man is drunk and drinks himself sober ere he stir" means. Does it apply to functional alcoholism? Even if it does, it feels like that moment. When I was in fever, I burned all the brighter before I got better, and in that moment, I saw the most clearly.

While walking along in the desert, you look down and see a tortoise making its way toward you. You reach down and flip it over onto its back. The tortoise lies there, its belly baking in the hot sun, waving its legs back and forth, trying to right itself, but it cannot do so without your help. You are not helping. Why not?

I don't know. I don't know why I flipped it, and I don't know why I'm not helping it, but I see myself there, watching it flail around, and I'm sobbing. I'm sobbing because for some reason, I'm not flipping it over and I wish against everything that I could give it relief. I feel guilt and shame in equal measure, and I watch myself beat my fists against my thighs, trying to force myself to do the thing, do the thing, just *do the thing*.

This is a truly nightmarish question, May Then My Name.

Two by two, two by two, and twice more. We always think in binaries, in black and white. We remember history two by two. We consider the present two by two. We think of the future twice over, and twice again. I have looked back on history and seen ceaseless progress or steps backward. I look back a hundred years and see illness and failure, and I look at today and see _____?

I recognize this! We read it in class. I know that the next words are “twice that and more”, but I don’t think that’s quite what you’re getting at.

I look back a hundred years and see illness and failure, and I look at today and see twice that and more *below*, but up above, as it were, I see only the clean purity of space and the steady brightness of stars. If I literally look up, beyond the walls and hull, there is the System, and while I probably hold overly optimistic ideas of what goes on inside, I don’t think you have illness and failure to nearly the same extent as we do phys-side. I doubt it’s a utopia, but I would be hard pressed to imagine it as any worse than outside.

Oh, but to whom do I speak these words?

To whom do I plead my case?

I am writing this to you, but if I have to plead my case to anyone, it’s to myself. I have to make my case to myself that I am worth enough to upload, that I can bring *something* to the System, that I would be welcomed there. I’m a very harsh judge, though, and it’s taking a lot of work to convince myself of that.

From whence do I call out?

Close. So close. I call out to myself from within myself. I call out to the System through a few inches of diamondoid coating and the fabric of my EVA suit.

What right have I?

No ranks of angels will answer to dreamers,

No unknowable spaces echo my words.

This is the crux of the problem, isn’t it? I am convinced, on some level, that I don’t have the right to want this thing. Immortality is for the gods, and that’s what you seem like to me. You seem like gods, and here I am, the mortal sweeping the floor of your altar. The candles are out, the celebrants are gone, no ranks of angles will answer to a dreamer like me, and as always, sound does not travel in space.

Before whom do I kneel, contrite?

That part of me that says, “No, you are not a god.” And when I beg his pardon, he laughs and says, “No amount of contrition will get you into a place separated from you by an impossibly large gap. Only death will get you there, and you are not worth that.”

Behind whom do I await my judgment?

I wait behind that part of me which desperately hopes that you think kindly of me, that you accept me. You, May Then My Name, as well as Michelle Hadje and the whole of the System. If that part of me is allowed in, then maybe I will be seen as worthy, too.

Beside whom do I face death?

There is no one beside me. I have few attachments here, and what professional contacts I do have with whom I've fostered a friendship have no plans to upload. It's just me before the System, waiting for death and hoping it's enough.

And why wait I for an answer?

Please answer, May Then My Name. I wait because I have to know that there is something beyond this. I went into this questionnaire with an open mind, and now I'm having a hard time continuing because I just want to curl up in my bed and cry because these last questions have stripped me of any pretense that I had about my desires and what's keeping me from them. I don't recognize where you got them from, but they have me truly unsettled. They sound almost like your name, and if you are a part of these questions, then please answer.

Ioan Bălan — 2325

There was a rhythm to research, Ioan had found. The ideas and information did not always flow smoothly; sometimes, ey would go days without breaking through the current blockage, or perhaps ey would rush forward in leaps and bounds, the periods of sleep and waking growing longer and longer until ey was out of sync with the world around em.

But despite these peaks and troughs, there was a rhythm. Ey would find a pace at which the project would bloom, fits and starts or a smooth progression, and would slowly be able to predict the ways in which it would move.

There had been work before the launch, but the way in which it shifted after Dear's Death Day had knocked Ioan into enough of a different mindset that this felt like a new project. Ey supposed that, in part, it had to do with the sudden cessation of sensorium messages from Dear. That the fox was now restricted to text only must've been a shock to its system, and when eir thoughts would drift away from the task at hand of collating histories, ey would picture it sitting at a desk scribbling away, frustration on its features and agitation in its tail.

Then again, ey thought. It still has plenty of company to pester up there.

"Woolgathering?"

Ey snapped back to attention and smiled sheepishly at May Then My Name where she had parked herself on the other side of the room. "Yeah, I guess. I get in the zone and then an idea gets away from me and I forget to keep working."

She nodded. "Well, come here, then. Let us plan instead of read or write or whatever it is you are doing over there."

"Woolgathering, apparently," ey mumbled, but gathered up a notebook and a pen to go plop down next to the skunk all the same.

When May had moved in with Ioan the year before the launch, she had quickly requested several changes to the house. A desk for her to work at as well as a private room—a cube with all grey walls—in which to do whatever it was that she did when composing her mythos. She had also requested a few items that would work with her physiology. A stool for the desk that would let her tail drape down and curl around her feet, that sort of thing

She had declined, however, another room or bed, which had initially staggered em.

"Are you going back home to sleep?" ey had asked. "I thought you were moving in here."

She had laughed and poked em in the stomach with a finger. “You have a bed, Ioan, yes? It fits two, yes? If not, just make it fit two.”

Ey had formed few attachments over the years, and certainly none which included sleeping in the same bed as someone. Eir confusion must have shown on eir face, as May had rolled her eyes and laughed.

“I do not mean anything untoward by it,” she had said.

Ey had struggled to speak with a mouth suddenly dry. “If you say so. I just haven’t slept in the same bed with someone...uh, ever, I guess.”

Her eyes had widened and she tilted her head. “Really? Never?”

Ey had shook eir head.

“Well, I would still prefer to share your bed with you, it is just the way I work. I do not sleep well alone. But if you feel uncomfortable, I will be fine with another bed like yours.”

So now ey slept beside a skunk.

She had also requested a few beanbags that she could curl on, more comfortable than a couch for one with an outsized tail. Each of these was larger than Ioan had felt was strictly necessary, and it had required that ey expand the bounds of the rooms to fit them, but ey had quickly gotten used to them, as ey could stretch out on them just as well as May. They were a little too amorphous to sleep on, but still plenty comfortable.

Ey sunk into a slouch on one next to the skunk, feeling the way it molded around em. Ey knew well enough by now to lift up the arm on the side where the skunk was curled, and she predictably scootched up by eir side to rest her head against eir chest at the shoulder, arm around eir middle. Ey let eir arm drop again, curling it around her shoulders.

“Alright, planning,” ey said, reaching eir free right arm down beside the beanbag for the lap desk which had proved so useful for times such as these. “What should we plan?”

“How about your forks?”

“Right, yes. Do you think I should have one for both Castor and Pollux? And I’ll probably need one for history, judging by what you’ve told me already.”

She nodded, the fur of an ear-tip tickling at eir neck. “Start with one each. You can always cut down from there if it is unnecessary, or use them only as needed. If that first message from Codrin on Castor is anything to go by, better safe than sorry. Monsters and cults! It is all very like Dear. I bet it put Codrin up to it, what with me doing the myth bits.”

“Ey’s been infected by Dear’s weirdness.”

“It is an Odist thing. You will catch it, too, from me.” She laughed.

“I don’t doubt I will. I’m thinking the triad on Pollux fell asleep instead. They’re already diverging.” Ey started a diagram on the page. “So that’s three. Would it be four Ioans Bălan total, then, with me to collate the information?”

“Probably for the best, yes.”

“This down-tree instance to collate, two for the LVs, one for early System history—”

“I will fork for that as well.”

“More Mays?” Ioan laughed.

She poked the tip of her tongue out of her muzzle. “Are you complaining?”

“No, no, I’m sure it’ll be fine. That’s three forks. A fourth as needed for interviews for those who stayed behind.” Ey tapped eir pen against eir lower lip. “How often should we merge?”

“I would suggest once a day to start with, perhaps an hour before you—your #Tracker instance—plan on stopping work for the day. You can use that hour to do your collating. You are less used to frivolous forking than the Odists, and much as I might enjoy multiple loans to canoodle with, I would prefer that you not get overwhelmed.”

Ey laughed and shook eir head, jotting down notes on the paper as ey talked. “You’re probably right. Besides, I’d have to make the house even bigger to have enough bedrooms.”

She tightened her arm around eir middle and shrugged. “Or the bed, but there will be only one of you. I may keep a fork or two around working on other tasks, but they can shift schedules if you would prefer not to have multiple mes crowding in on you at night.”

Ioan brushed the fingers on eir left hand through the soft fur on the skunk’s arm. “I’d prefer that, if that’s okay. I’m only just getting used to sleeping next to one you.”

Tilting her muzzle up, she dotted her nose against the underside of eir chin. “For which I am grateful! I struggle to be around people without being close to them. Thank you for indulging me.”

“Of course,” ey mumbled, feeling the skunk’s snout lingering beneath eir chin. “It’s just new to me. Unexpected.”

“Why?”

Ioan frowned and set the lap desk and notes aside, opting instead to brush eir fingers along her arm. This conversation had slid off course, and ey knew that it was hopeless to get it back. Once May began to talk about feelings, all was lost. It was evening, anyhow, and a good time to set work aside.

“I suppose it just never occurred to me,” ey said. “Forming attachments that would lead to something like...whatever this is has never really been a need of mine, so it just never happened.”

The skunk nodded against eir chest, and ey could sense a frown on her muzzle. “That is so counter to the way I function that I cannot even picture it. I am a being of attachments. I think we all are, just to greater or lesser extent.”

“I guess. I’m not a total recluse. I like interacting with others.”

“Just not beyond a certain point.”

Ey hesitated, then said, “It’d probably be more accurate to say that it’s never happened before. I enjoy it now, it just didn’t even really cross my mind until recently.”

“When you had someone addicted to close attachments move in with you?”

“A bit before, perhaps, probably when working on *On the Perils of Memory*, what with all that went into that Qoheleth business, though I couldn’t put my finger on it at the time. That’s where Codrin came from, after all.”

May slipped her arm from beneath eir hand so that she could lace her fingers with eirs. “That makes sense. Do you understand it better now?”

“A bit, though I suspect I have a long ways to go yet,” ey said, squeezing her fingers between eir own. “Why are we talking about this, by the way?”

She laughed. “We are part of this story, too.”

“Does that mean we’re going to figure in your mythology, too?”

“Oh, of course! The archivist of tales and eir lover, the painter of myths!”

Ioan laughed. “Lover? Really?”

“It makes for good reading,” she said, poking her nose up at eir chin again. “Though I would not turn it down.”

Ioan tensed. Ey could feel eir cheeks burning. “Uh...there’s another conversation I’ve never had to have before.”

“We will have it another time,” the skunk murmured. “Your heart is racing and making my pillow uncomfortable.”

Ey forced a laugh. “What is it with you Odists? Are you all this good at turning everything on its head? Dear and Codrin, and now—”

“You and me?” May giggled.

“I was going to say, “And now you’re pushing me in weird directions.” I wasn’t expecting Codrin to find emself in a triad, if I’m honest.”

“You, my dear, lack a certain self-awareness for someone who spends all eir time up in eir head.”

“Thanks, I think.” Ioan shifted to the side enough to look down at the skunk. “How do you mean, though?”

She laughed and licked em on eir chin. It was an odd sensation. “It is not surprising at all, knowing Dear. For as inventive and high-minded it is, it has a pattern of conforming itself to a situation such that those around it *want* to get close to it, and it does so in such a way that they think they want to be close of their own volition. It tailors its charisma to fit.”

“Are you saying it’s manipulative?”

“Oh, no. Not really, at least. I do not think it knows that it is doing that. It also lacks that self-awareness. It is more like...” She trailed off, searching for the words. “It is like it knows what feels good but not why, so it has developed mechanisms to ensure that those good things happen more frequently.”

“More like a self-reinforcing behavior, I guess?”

She nodded.

“I suppose that makes sense, then.” A silence fell during which Ioan thought about what self-reinforcing social behaviors ey had. “I like to work. It’s a really fulfilling feeling. So I work. I try hard to do a good job, and when I do, it leads to more work. I developed a way to keep myself interested.”

“A coping mechanism for the terminally immortal.”

Ioan laughed. “‘Terminally immortal’? How does that even work?”

“I do not know. You are the word nerd, here.”

“The archivist of tales, you mean.”

She laughed. “Of course. And eir pet mythologist.”

“Oh, now it’s ‘pet’?”

“I am still trying on labels. I am the one who has to write that sort of stuff, after all.”

Ey lay back against the beanbag and May made herself comfortable against em once more.

More woolgathering. That’s what the evening called for, more than work. More woolgathering for the both of them.

Lovers? Ey let a tape run forward in eir mind. Ey watched the friendship ey had formed with May progress

into some form of romantic relationship. How would it start? Would it start with em making a formal decision to let that happen? Or would it happen by accident? Would ey some day wake up and realize, *Holy shit, I think we're dating. Are we dating? I think we are.*

And ey set a different tape to playing. A tape wherein ey set firmer boundaries, prohibited the friendship from progressing further than it already had. Or, worse—strange to already be placing value judgements!—a world in which ey pushed the skunk away, backed off from the physical affection, from the talk that bordered on flirty, from even the hypocorism ‘May’. If ey let that tape play beyond that point, ey knew ey would find all of the ways in which that would hurt May and how, knowing her, seeing her express that pain would hurt em in turn.

How do they do this? ey thought. *How do the Odists just worm their way into your life and make themselves comfortable, letting you think it was your idea? That's what she'd said, and now I'm in exactly the same position as Codrin twenty years ago.*

“It is not intentional, Ioan, I promise. Not wholly.”

Ey jolted, blinking rapidly as her words registered. “Wait, what? What isn’t?”

“Getting close. Wearing down your inhibitions. What we were talking about before.”

“You reading my mind?”

She shook her head and ey could hear the smile in her voice. “You mumble when you think really hard.”

“Shit, right. Sorry. I trust you on that. I’m not upset or anything, I like, uh...this, and don’t have any plans from rolling that back. You mentioned a pattern, though, and got me thinking about it.”

“This is what I like about you, Ioan. What the whole clade likes about you, if history is anything to go by. You spend enough time up in your head that you start thinking about what you are thinking about and putting words to what you are feeling. You get surprised, and then you think about your surprise and break it down to make meaning of it. What you lack in self-awareness you make up in easy self-analysis.”

“Feels like overanalysis, sometimes.”

“Mm, probably is, and sometimes I wish you would come back down out of your head to be present. But it is the same as we are prone to overdoing whatever it is that we are specialists in. Dear goes hard on instance art, I go hard on feeling.”

“What are you feeling about...” Ey forced himself to push away encroaching work-thoughts. Ey had been about to say *about this whole venture*, but instead went with, “About this?”

“Now?” She squeezed eir fingers in her own before disentangling them to tap at eir nose. “I am feeling comfortable with you, and I am feeling happy about that. I am feeling like asking you to cook something because I am starving or asking you if you’d like to go to bed because I am tired or asking you to get back to work so that I can do the same.”

“That’s a lot of feelings at once,” ey said, grinning.

“Like I said, we overdo it.”

“Well,” ey said, focusing enough to fork off two more Ioans, which ey tagged #Castor and #Pollux.

“I’ll finish up work,” #Castor said.

“And I’ll cook dinner,” #Pollux said.

“And we can head to bed after we eat.”

May's laugh was bright as she clapped her paws. "Well played." She slid off the beanbag and stood. She forked another May to go help #Pollux cook before stretching and offering a paw to Ioan to help em stand.

"What?" Ey took the paw and let her help lever em out of the beanbag. She kept the grip on eir hand after. "Bed now? Instead of eating?"

"Excuse me. We are adults in this house, Mx. Ioan Bălan, and adults eat at the fucking table and not on a pouf."

Yared Zerezghi — 2124

The discussion of speciation continues, I see.

And you know what? You all begin to convince me of this fact. If you have been following the System feeds, you will have doubtless seen the ways in which the System differs from life phys-side in levels so completely fundamental that they strain the imagination. We (by virtue of the fact that you are even reading this) have all used the 'net. To greater or lesser extents, we have all felt the ways in which it is different than 'real life'. I myself have often found the ways in which tactility differs here from out in the world: there is touch, yes, and there is something akin to the sensation of hot and cold (thermoception, the dictionary tells me), and it obviously could not function without a fairly accurate simulacrum of proprioception. If you don't know where you end and the rest of the sim begins, it is nigh useless as a shared space.

But touch? Touch is subtly different in so many ways. I remarked on this to a friend who is far, far more into the tech side than I am, and he immediately mentioned that he had felt similar. The reason, he explained, is that no matter how hard the implants try, they can only approximate the sensation of touch. Hearing? Fine. We have decoded the phenomenon of sound well enough that we are able to toss that sense in there just fine. Smell? Well, that's a bit more difficult, as I've read that there is some funny quantum aspects to that sensation. In the end, however, it is just a matter of simulating chemical interactions well enough.

Touch is so inexact, though. For each person it is different, and for each location on the body, the reaction is different. If you touch me on the shoulder, I might turn around to look at you. If you stick your finger in my ear (please don't) I will likely react much more violently. However, if I stick my finger in my ear, it elicits no such reaction, and can even feel pleasant.

Those in the System talk of such varied experiences, but when I brought this up over the chat-line with some friends that I've made over there (I've been asked to withhold their names), they seemed more confused than anything, and had me try in several ways to describe this difference in touch, the way I sometimes fail to sense a touch, or the way I sometimes feel a strong, sudden pressure (for who has not accidentally stubbed a toe?) with about the same level of intensity of brushing my fingers over a surface.

They said that there is no such issue within there. The dreaming brain is far more capable of coming up with the sensation of touch than the limited version we find in our implants.

An example: One of these friends is a furry, which means that her form (what we might think of as an avatar) comes with all the accoutrements that that entails. She has fur, whiskers, and a tail. Those may come with some expanded sensations via implants, but in there, in the dream, her body knows how they work. She can wag her tail (if that's a thing that her species does, I don't know the specifics), can feel the ways in which the teeth of a comb move through her fur, can lick her chops, and has even told me that she enjoys having her ears petted. None of these, she told me, were things that she found possible via the 'net.

This is a complete and total fundamental difference between us phys-side and those who live sys-side.

And what a small one, too! Consider the larger ones:

- *Forking*: Those who upload can create copies of themselves. Complete and total copies that live and experience completely separate lives. Not only that, but when a fork wants (if a fork wants!) it can merge back with the original copy or persona or whatever you want to call it, and then that persona has the memories of *both* copies. This beggars the imagination: we simply have no way to *actually* understand this, bound as we are by those pesky laws of physics.
- *Reputation markets*: Well, I say we're bound by the laws of physics, but on a subtler level, they are as well. The System only has so much capacity (though it is growing every few months), so in order to limit this potentially boundless expansion, there needs to be some factor which places limits on them, whether it's strictly for keeping bad actors at bay or simply to conserve space for new arrivals.

But of what use is money to them? They don't *need* to eat. They don't *need* to pay for travel. There is nothing for them to buy except this capacity to create, which means there is no money changing hands. Instead, they have decided on a currency of reputation. The more you do and interact and contribute, whether it is from being on the Council of Eight or simply having a really good conversation with a friend, you accrue reputation, and it is through this mechanism that one pays for expansion. Create more? Interact more? Gain the *ability* to create more, the *ability* to interact more.

- *Creative potential*: This is what happens when you combine the first point with the second. Say you are a mathematician. It can be frustrating to work on a complex problem one step at a time, and managing a team comes with its own problems. What if you had more brain power to throw at the problem, and that brain power had *exactly the same knowledge* going into it? Obviously, there are plenty more situations that require collaboration with other unique individuals, but this alone makes it worthwhile. Already, there have been great contributions to the fields of math, theoretical physics, literature, and sociology/psychology. Hell, some of these are already being used to earn money which is being put to use in the day-to-day

demands of the System. For them, though, this is the basis of an economy that cherishes such pursuits. Already, we are seeing more individuals in those fields uploading than any other.

When I think about all of these facts, I have to admit, I think that you may be right on the question of speciation. It is not just that we cannot interbreed with them, for that is a question of biology, and one party lacks that aspect. It is not just that they are not of human stock, for that is demonstrably not the case. But it does come down to a complete and fundamental change in the very fabric of being.

The term “post-human” has been thrown around plenty, of course. It mostly fits, too, but I would argue that it also implies some remnant of humanity other than those within the System have (the creation of new, unique post-humans springs to mind). They are something *more*. They are something *different*. They are exohumans, perhaps. Post-biological. The language fails.

They are uploads, and we are not.

I stand by my firm argument against so many tired and played ones that I have seen. They are beings. A new species, perhaps, but we afford rights to *beings*. We afford rights to *individuals*. That they can fork presents new problems, but what has ever stood between humanity and a solution but staunch conservatism?

Vote for the granting of rights. Vote yes on *referendum 10b30188*

Yared Zerezghi (NEAC)

As soon as he received confirmation that his post was visible on the DDR forums, Yared backed out from his rig and headed for the door, stretching a crick out of his spine as he went.

This had become routine. The action of posting a particularly frustrating essay to the forums had often been followed by going out for coffee, but now, as soon as he posted, he knew that Councilor Demma would arrive for a debriefing. This had turned into coffee together every two days. Yared would always go to the shop at the end of his street and wait for Demma’s tireless driver to show up, buy three coffees and three pieces of himbasha, and lead him to the car. Sometimes, they drove out past the edge of the city to the fields of low-moisture corn and beans. Sometimes, they drove into the city center by Government House and circled the perimeter.

Or, as today, they simply sat in Demma’s car, sipping on coffees and nibbling sweet bread while they talked. “Mr. Zerezghi,” the well-dressed driver said, enough acknowledgement for the day.

The owner of the coffee shop had already made their order as soon as Yared showed his face, so they collected their tray of drinks and food and walked through the late morning heat to the black car that stood idly by.

As always, it took Yared a moment to acclimatize to the blast of conditioned air that greeted him when he slipped into the car, so Yosef Demma sipped his coffee and waited until Yared could speak once more.

“Mr. Zerezghi, a pleasure to see you as always. How are you? Have you had a good day?”

“Yes, Councilor,” Yared said, sipping at his coffee to stave off the chill of the air. “I trust that you have as well?”

“Quite good, quite good.”

The formalities, those were also rote by now.

“We have read your post. It is quite the well written essay.”

Yared nodded. “Thank you, sir.”

The councilor leaned back against his seat, switching his coffee for a slice of the himbasha. “You know, originally, my constituents and I were nervous about the idea of letting you craft your own posts. Many thought it unwise to let you choose your own words, thinking it best that we write your arguments for you and have you simply post them. I disagreed, as I think that something of your style would be lost in the process. You rely on a lot of imagery and word choices that are good at swaying readers, and I think this isn’t necessarily a thing that my speech writers would be able to accomplish. You have recently changed their minds.”

“I’m happy to hear that. I like to think I’m a good writer.”

“You are, you are,” Demma nodded. “But it is always good to see that working to your advantage. To our advantage.”

Yared suppressed a smile.

“We are also pleased to see the way in which you incorporated our suggestion.”

“I’m glad to hear. I was worried, I’ll admit. It’s not that I don’t agree with the speciation argument, I just had originally worried that it was distracting from the topic at hand.”

“Of course, Yared. You have your own reasons to argue for individual rights, and we do want to respect those. You must understand, however, that we have the benefit of a team of analysts on our side, and they have determined that, from the Direct Democracy angle, this is the most efficient way forward specifically for the secession movement.”

Leaning back into his seat and holding his empty coffee cup in his hands to leach the last bits of warmth from it, Yared sighed. “Of course. And as I mentioned, I’m not necessarily against the arguments you suggested.”

The note had come late the night before, delivered via courier, along with an apology that he had been given so little time to work it into his next post. *Begin to agree with speciation*, it had read, and a tang of distaste tickled at his senses. *Not quickly, just hint that you’re being swayed. Say you’re starting to be convinced, but that this only strengthens your arguments.*

Demma reached out a hand for Yared’s cup, as he always did, and crumpled it together with his to dispose of in a waste basket hidden in the back of one of the seats of the car. “Mr. Zerezghi,” he said, bowing slightly in his seat. “Thank you once more. I won’t take up any more of your time. You should have your next suggestion in the next day or two.”

Yared returned the bow and, as if that were the command he was waiting for, the driver opened the door to let him out into the growing heat of the day. He swayed once more at the shock of the temperature difference.

“Yared,” the driver said, nodding, then slid back into the driver’s seat of the car.

Once he could walk again without stumbling, he made his way back to his room and out of the sun. It was air conditioned, yes, but the unit in the wall had seen better days. *Much* better days.

A sudden wave of exhaustion crashed over him, but all the same, he settled back into the chair before his rig and delved in once more.

A message was already waiting for him at his desk, so, in the sim, he sat down before it, smiling inwardly at the oddly duplicated action.

Jonas Prime: Yared! Beautifully done. Ping when you’re back around.

He swiped a keyboard into view and instructed his desk to do just that.

Jonas: Welcome back. How goes?

Yared Zerezhgi: Well enough. Hot as ever. Thanks, by the way. Think the post will help?

Inwardly, he fretted, worrying that his counterparts in the System had picked up on the slow change in direction over the last few posts.

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream: Probably! I am pleased that you enjoyed my description of brushing and petting.

Yared: I felt it got the point across quite nicely.

True Name: That it did.

Jonas: We've been tracking the speciation argument, as far as we can see, and it's an interesting idea. I go back and forth on it. Sometimes, it feels like a distinction without a difference, and sometimes, phys-side ideas just leave me completely baffled. I've forgotten how strange the System sounded when I was outside of it.

True Name: Yes. It is a good talking point, but also a line that you should walk carefully. I worry that it will lead the discussion back to the "sub-human" arguments that pop up here and there.

His heart dropped. So they had picked up on the change.

Yared: I'm worried about that as well. Still, when I've argued on the forums in the past, I've found that building a strong argument and then slipping a little bit of empathy for the other side nudges them to do the same.

A lie, but hopefully a helpful one.

True Name: I had not thought of that, but I was never big into the DDR. Calling it both "Direct Democracy" and a "Representative" made it sound disingenuous.

Jonas: I mean, it makes sense. If they start feeling our empathy in the equation, maybe they'll start feeling empathy towards us.

Yared: That's the hope! Some of these people though...

Jonas: Numbskulls.

True Name: Dipshits.

Yared: Both accurate.

True Name: Just do not generate too much empathy in them. I do not want them latching onto anything to use against you.

True Name: Against us, in the end.

Yared: Of course! I'll keep monitoring the forums and chatter, and it looks like some governments are waking up to it.

True Name: Whoopee.

Jonas: I'll have you know that she just rolled her eyes at me.

True Name: Jerk.

Yared: Haha. Still, I think it'll help. It means that this is going to be taken into consideration and not just turn into a DDR-only referendum. If we get them discussing it, then we have a smaller target to influence. DDR votes carry less weight when gov'ts weigh in. They read the forums as much as any DDR junkie, so the arguments can sometimes carry more weight.

True Name: As much as it pains me to admit, you have a point.

Jonas: When you get a chance, you and I can go into it more in depth, Yared.

Yared: Have some thoughts?

Jonas: I was a politician phys-side, so, yeah.

True Name: WHAT

True Name: You are kidding.

Jonas: I'll have you know that she just punched me in the shoulder.

True Name: And I will do it again. Fucking gross.

Jonas: I'll have you know that she did, indeed, do it again.

Yared laughed. He was pleased to see them in good spirits.

Yared: Don't beat him up too bad, True Name. He probably does have some good info, even if it is a few years old.

True Name: ...

True Name: I GUESS

True Name — 2124

The next meeting spot for the Council of Eight was in a rooftop bar. However, given that that rooftop bar was in the midst of a block of apartment buildings and vertical malls that had built with shared walls, such that there was a cubic half-mile of stair-climbing, elevator rides—down as well as up—and trestles that bridged buildings of lower height than higher ones, it was more adventure getting to the venue than the meeting itself promised.

Still, The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream climbed.

The apartment buildings ranged from serviceable to gutted, and more than one time, she had to step carefully through a path covered in rubble. She could not decipher whether this was due to abandoned renovations, some unknown battle, or the simple degradations of time.

The malls offered different dichotomies. Some of them were sparkling new with speakers that whispered to her in Mandarin and lights that shouted in her face, while others played placid muzak through halls lit only by emergency lights, darkened storefronts yawning onto scuffed and over-waxed parquet floors.

She wondered who it was that had owned this sim, what collective it was that had decided to mash all the best and worst multiple clashing centuries worth of Kowloon Walled City and the North American Central Corridor.

And then, the rooftop bar. Despite no vehicle entrance to the complex, this was situated on the top level of what appeared to be a car park straight out of a mid-western American airport, complete with one or two of those vehicles that seemed perpetually parked, ones that had lingered for months or years, accruing a parking debt of thousands, tens of thousands of dollars.

The bar itself was a pop-up affair, with walls and ceiling of corrugated plastic held together with rivets and tape, a bar-top that was a few two-by-eights set across a trestle, fronted with further corrugated plastic to keep the patrons from kicking fridges or sinks out of alignment.

The drinks: early 2100s hipster bullshit, all intensely sweet or riddled with smoke-scented fizzy water or long strips of seaweed or clams within the ice cubes, steadily making the drink more and more savory over time.

True Name found it all confusing and jarring.

She liked it immediately.

Debarre was already at one of the tables—similarly cobbled together—sipping something that seemed to be all foam. He waved to her as she entered, and she waved back, heading to the bar to pick up one of those seaweed concoctions before joining him.

“That looks fucking gross, Sasha.”

She laughed and shrugged. “I am True Name, but yes, it really does. If we are going to meet in a place that gives me a headache to walk through, it is probably best that I get something with...protein? Is that how this works?”

“Uh, sorry. Yeah. True Name.” The weasel splayed his ears and averted his eyes. “Can we talk about that sometime?”

“Yes, but probably as Michelle, if that is okay.”

“Why?”

“She is...closer to it than I am.”

Debarre gripped his glass more tightly and twisted sideways to swing his leg over the bench and straddle it. “Yeah, I don’t get it. Before everyone else gets here, can you at least give me a sentence or two?”

“When she forked, when I...became me, she decided not to fork that part of her that suffers, if that is the right word.” True Name frowned. “Already we are drifting further apart. The species remains, the appearance and the speech patterns remain, the *mind* remains, but not that part of her that is so split. I am me, I am templated off of Sasha, because being both Michelle and Sasha at the same time was no longer tolerable.”

He shrugged, still staring down into his drink. “I can’t speak to that, I guess. But why Aw—”

True Name slammed her glass down on the table a bit harder than intended, some of the drink spilling over her paw. “Do not say that fucking name.”

The weasel jumped at the sudden intensity, and when he recovered, he finally met her gaze. His expression softened from fear and anger to a tired bleakness. That moment drew out for a long few seconds of quiet and seething sadness. He reached for a napkin from the dispenser at the end of the table and handed it to her. “Here.”

She hesitated, mastered a surge of unnamed emotion, and accepted the napkin to wipe the sticky drink from her paw and then, on realizing that she was crying, the tears from her face. “Sorry, I am just...”

“We’ll talk.” He reached over and gave her dry paw a squeeze in his own. “Michelle and I will. There’s something I’m missing here is all, and I want to figure out why more than what.”

True Name hid her muzzle in her drink and pretended to take a sip until she was sure she wouldn’t slur her words when she spoke. “Thank you. She is open to messages still, I will let you two work it out. For now, I need to focus on the meeting. Jonas and Zeke are here.”

Looking over his shoulder, Debarre nodded and turned to sit on the bench to face her again, leaving room for the other two. Jonas settled next to True Name so that they could give their speech together when the time came, and Zeke, that shifting bundle of rags and grime slid onto the bench beside Debarre.

“Good afternoon,” the almost-face within the bundle rasped.

Jonas grinned. “It’s morning, isn’t it?”

A pseudopod that may have been a hand waved the comment away. “Time has lost all meaning. I seem to have forgotten how to sleep, these days.”

“You need a vacation like Michelle.”

There was a low rattle from the rags, and True Name imagined that must be Zeke’s laughter. “Don’t tempt me. I don’t have the funds to fork, so you’d be down to seven.”

“Why *did* you make it so expensive?” Jonas elbowed True Name in the side.

She held up her paws defensively and laughed. “I did not. The price is tied to System capacity.”

"The laws of physics were a mistake and reputation is a lie."

"It is the best limiting factor that we have that is not a complete fabrication, at the moment."

"I rather miss coins."

"My dad used to collect coins, you know."

And so on, until the table was full and the cone of silence fell.

"Sasha? Uh...True Name. Jonas?" one of the well-dressed triad asked.

"Right," Jonas said, setting his drink down. "The bill. Things are progressing slowly, as they always do, but it sounds like they might start picking up steam shortly. Our main contact on the DDR side, one Yared Zerezghi based out of the Northeast African Coalition, says that some of the governments are starting to take interest in the bill, which could work to our advantage. Having it just be a direct vote would mean that we would have far, far more representatives to convince, since that'd mean essentially everyone on the DDR. The more governments in play, the more the role of the DDR shrinks."

"How does that even begin to help? Aren't they super stodgy?" Debarre asked.

"They can be," Jonas hedged. "But if we can form contacts with each of them, we can argue our case directly. Yared might be the one to give us a good in for the NEAC, and I still have some Western Fed contacts."

"Anyone for the S-R Bloc or anywhere in SEAPAC? Middle east? India?"

The trio of suits raised their hands. "S-R Bloc. We don't know any of the oligarchs directly, but we had some big money interests of our own."

"Israel," Zeke said, then laughed at the awkward silence that followed. The trio frowned. "Sorry, nothing to be done there."

"And SEAPAC?"

user11824 shrugged. "I was a nobody, but I was a Maori nobody."

"You had enough to upload. That has to count for something, doesn't it?"

He shrugged again.

"We will take all the help we can get," True Name said. "Even from nobodies."

"Alright, I'll poke mom."

Zeke nodded to True Name. "What's your take on the situation?"

She stirred her drink to buy herself some time to think. "I think it is leaning our way. One of the big arguments remains speciation, but Yared's spinning that into a pro-rights argument instead of a neutral- or anti-rights one. His voice is getting louder, too. It sounds like he is getting a lot more upvotes on his posts than before."

"That's good."

True Name nodded. "I think so. He is not the biggest voice on the issue yet, but it sounds like he is probably in the top three."

"You said he's NEAC, right?"

"Yeah, Addis Ababa," Jonas said. "Not exactly the seat of power, but I guess not everything has to be Cairo. Sounds like we have a good mix, at least. No one from South America?"

Everyone shook their heads.

“I suppose that’s alright. They’re a big enough voice in Western Fed, but they’re still in the shadow government side of things. They don’t even have the shadow minister of System affairs.”

“Who does?”

“Lithuania.”

One of the suits laughed, and Debarre looked blank.

“Politics,” Jonas said, grinning lopsidedly.

“If you say so.”

After a moment’s silence, Zeke rasped, “So what are our next steps?”

“Let’s all talk to our respective interests—Zeke too—and we’ll meet again soon. True Name and I will keep working with Yared and guide as best we can from our side. Speaking of, though, any thoughts on the speciation topic?”

Six sets of eyes flitted between Debarre and True Name, between weasel and skunk, then the whole council laughed.

“I don’t give a shit,” user11824 said. “But if your Yared guy can twist that argument against the opposition, then that’s just one more tool, isn’t it?”

“We aren’t seeing that,” the man in the suit spoke up. “Two thirds of our power structure still think child restrictions are a good enough idea that those laws have bled into Russia. I’m pretty sure they see speciation as a positive. What better way to help in population control?”

One of his companions shrugged, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they started putting limitations on uploading by gender, but that is a separate topic.”

“Zeke?”

The pile of rags shifted in a shrug.

“Debarre? True Name? Anything you can leverage?”

The weasel laughed. “I mean, if you want to point to us as an example to push that along, and Yared’s tack seems to be working, go for it.”

“Alright. It’s something you can suggest to your respective interests if you think it’ll help. We’ll reevaluate next meeting. Anything else on the agenda?”

Everyone shook their heads, then lifted their glasses to a toast. The cone of silence dropped.

“Well, then, you are all free to stick around or go if you want,” True Name said. “I am going to stay and get well and truly plastered.”

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

Interview with Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled#Pollux

On the reasons for vesting entirely in the launch

Codrin Bălan#Pollux

Systime: 201+25 1014

Codrin Bălan#Pollux: Before we get into the heavy stuff, how are you feeling?

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled#Pollux: [laughter] You are going to have to be more specific, my dear. Do you mean my general disposition?

Codrin: Yes. I just want to see how you're feeling before all these discussions, then afterwards, I'll ask the same thing and we can see how the topic influences you.

Dear: Clever, clever. Well, I am feeling fine. It has been a good day, and it was a good night last night. For the record, I hosted a get-together of those interested in instance-art, so it was bound to tickle my fancy.

Codrin: Good. Have you noticed any difference in that realm of late?

Dear: No.

Codrin: Alr-

Dear: I take that back. Sorry for interrupting. I take that back. I have noticed that about the same number of people showed up to the gathering as used to on the old System.

Codrin: How do you mean?

Dear: Well, only a portion of us transferred, yes? I would have thought that this would have lowered the attendance at such events. I have also noticed, in looking around, that the majority of our fellow travellers are dispersionistas.

Codrin: I know that May Then My Name has some stats on that. It might be interesting to see.

Dear: [nodding] That would be interesting, yes. You had a goal for this interview, though, so shall we get to that?

Codrin: Yes, might as well. I am curious, first, why you decided to travel on the launch. Was there anything in particular that drew you to the idea?

Dear: Other than the fact that I am a hopeless romantic? [laughter] There were a few. I am a hopeless romantic, yes, and—I will not actually be able to see them—I want to see the stars. I want to be one of the lucky few, or few billion, who get to travel between them. Another is that, when one is functionally immortal, boredom is a very real problem. I do not like being bored, and after something like two hundred years sys-side, I was getting perilously close.

Codrin: So it's a sense of adventure?

Dear: I suppose, though that brings to mind something more active than this is, to me. I hear adventure and I think sneaking behind enemy lines or guns at dawn. It is a desire for the new and interesting. Not just that there be new and interesting things going on around me, but that those new and interesting things change me in some deep way. I like stasis even less than boredom, and uploads are at risk of falling into patterns familiar enough to be considered stasis.

Codrin: Is there an aspect of being the first to do something involved?

Dear: Perhaps. I am not against being something other than the first, but I do like it when I am.

Codrin: Did you have other reasons for transferring?

Dear: A few, though they are less easily put to words. If you remember the Qoheleth business, there is some of that involved. I have been unable to forget what he said, and beyond the very literal sense that it was couched in. If we are doomed to forever remember everything, then the only way—or perhaps one of the only ways—to relegate something completely to memory is through inaccessibility. If I— if all instances of Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled were to quit, then there would be no more objective instance of myself for others to remember.

Codrin: I would prefer that you not.

Dear: [laughter] I have no plans on it. If exploring this strange mystery were a project, then I would not be served by not being around to complete it. The launch gives me a chance to do that very thing.

Codrin: Perhaps you could say that you would go from being someone who is remembered to someone who is missed? Does that sound like a fair assessment?

Dear: [excited] Yes. Yes! That is it precisely. If we are doomed to forever remember everything, then the closest we can get to being forgotten is to turn memory into longing.

Codrin: You mentioned a few more reasons. Do you have others?

Dear: Even less easily put to words. I like the idea of relativity. The faster we go, the more our perception of time will drift. I like the idea of the ever-increasing transmission times. Already, we are losing seconds and minutes to distance. I am interested to see what will happen to the population of a System that will no longer be receiving new uploads. Will we relax the taboos on finding ways to merge separate personalities into children? That would mean that we would be even closer to a new species, as the tired rationalizations go. Would the taboo of incest remain, and we will continue to frown on generating new minds from in-clade personalities? There are many questions to ask during this journey.

Codrin: And we will have time to do so.

Dear: [laughter] Yes, we will.

Codrin: Can you speak to your decision to invest your instance solely into the launches? You left no immediate forks back on the L₅ System, correct?

Dear: [tense, sober] Correct, I left no forks behind. I have two main reasons for doing so, one more personal than the other.

Codrin: Perhaps we can stick to the less personal one for now.

Dear: I will tell you both, as long as I am able to add one condition.

Codrin: Of course. I'll honor that as best I'm able, and if I'm not able to, we can skip that reason.

Dear: Thank you, my dear. You may transfer this interview in its entirety, but you and Ioan may not use the second reason in your histories. May Then My Name Die With Me may use it in her mythology, as long as it is not associated with my name or clade.

Codrin: Certainly. I can honor that. Would you like me to get confirmation from Ioan?

Dear: [laughter] You are not so different from em yet. I trust that if you agree that ey will as well. Though Ioan, when you read this, please imagine a sly smirk or quippy saying or well-placed 'fuck' when I see your face fall at the request that your history be incomplete.

Codrin: [laughter] Even I'm feeling disappointed now.

Dear: You historians, tsk. Anyhow, the first, less personal reason is this: I mentioned that it would be interesting to explore what it means to be missed as an analog to forgetting. I want someone to miss me.

Codrin: Do you worry that you won't be missed, on some level?

Dear: [long pause] I am not comfortable answering that question.

Codrin: I understand. Let me ask this instead—

Dear: I have changed my mind, but Codrin, I love you dearly, but fuck you for making me cry.

Codrin: I'm sorry, Dear. Do you want to stop?

Dear: No, no. That is my choice usage of 'fuck' for the interview. [laughter, short break in interview] Okay. Early on in the System, some wag, when pressed to build a library, uploaded every single book they could get their hands on, legally or otherwise, into the perisystem architecture, going all the way back to the Epic of Gilgamesh. When I was forked and still trying to figure out ways to play with instances, I went on a tear of reading biographical works, going through dozens of books at a time, hunting for little moments that could be used, somehow, in an exhibition.

Dear: I came across a book of essays from goodness knows how long ago, and I was so taken aback by one part in particular that I snipped it out and stored it in an exo. Ah, let me find the correct part [pause] Okay. "Should you happen to be possessed of a certain verbal acuity coupled with a relentless, hair-trigger humor and surface cheer spackling over a chronic melancholia and loneliness—a

grotesquely caricatured version of your deepest self, which you trot out at the slightest provocation to endearing and glib comic effect, thus rendering you the kind of fellow who is beloved by all yet loved by none, all of it to distract, however fleetingly, from the cold and dead-faced truth that with each passing year you face the unavoidable certainty of a solitary future in which you will perish one day”.

Dear: I worry sometimes that, as a public personality, first as Michelle Hadje, then as an Odist, and now as an artist with an ebullient personality and the aforementioned “verbal acuity coupled with a relentless, hair-trigger humor and surface cheer” *et cetera, et cetera*, that I... [pause] Okay. [pause] Okay. I sometimes worry that I, as those things, fall into the category of “beloved by all yet loved by none”.

Codrin: I love you, Dear.

Dear: [waving paw, tears] This was not supposed to be the personal part of the interview. Codrin, Ioan, please just say that I want someone to miss me, that I want to haunt the L₅ System as some quiet ghost who communicates in words from light-years away and memories that you will never forget. I want to haunt you because that is one thing I cannot do without merging into oblivion. I want to be missed.

Codrin: Perhaps here is a good place to stop.

Dear: The second reason is short.

Codrin: Okay.

Dear: And this is for the myth only.

Codrin: Right.

Dear: I want to die.

Codrin: Dear, I—

Dear: I am sorry, my dear. I should have prefaced that. I want to die eventually. I do not want to quit, I do not want to be killed. But you must understand, by the whims of gravity, both Castor and Pollux will eventually be captured by a sun or a black hole or whatever the fuck is out there, and they will be destroyed. And even if not, the power source will die, or the factories will not be able to manufacture replacements or some other technobabble bullshit. There is no suicide in me, nor any desire to be murdered, but I want to experience— Ah, Codrin, I am sorry. I love you. I am so sorry. I will stop.

Codrin: Let’s go inside, please.

Transcript ends, no closing remarks

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

The sim in which Dear's house squatted low, that short-grass prairie filled with buffalo grass and dotted with yucca and hardy dandelions, ran to the horizons in ceaseless waves, and often, when eir mind was too tangled up in itself to get anything done, Codrin would hunt those horizons.

When ey had first moved in years ago, ey had asked Dear what else was on the prairie, and it had laughed. "I do not know."

"Did Serene not leave you a map?"

It shook its head again and had repeated. *"I do not know. She does not know. It is just a prairie that never ends. You can walk as far as you want and there will always be more prairie before you. There are no mountains on the horizon, there are no rivers or creeks, and while there are a few rock outcroppings, they are largely uninspiring."*

"So, just an empty prairie?"

"You say 'just', but Serene assures me that it is more complicated than that. The prairie is generated out to the horizon, and as long as you walk, it will continue to be generated out to the horizon. Only the places that we have seen are locked down, as it were, and remain after we have left."

"That sounds like it would just continue generating prairie."

It had shrugged at that. *"All I have seen is prairie, and I have walked for days out there. Serene is no less a trickster than I, however, and I would not be surprised if there is something out there, perhaps triggered by a mood or a word."*

And so when eir mind was too tangled up in itself to get anything done, Codrin would walk and walk and walk, always with the idea at the back of eir mind that perhaps ey would stumble across a creek or a cave that ey could bring Dear out to see.

The endless prairie also provided an outlet to seek solitude.

Moving in with Dear and its partner had been decided on a whim, originally as a way to complete the project ey had undertaken, and then when their relationship began to encompass em as well, ey had found emself suddenly surrounded by those other than emself.

This had had its ups and downs. Ey did not realize that a not insubstantial portion of what ey had previously labeled boredom or listlessness had been loneliness. That feeling of becoming a part of something that required emotional investment and paid back emotional dividends had fulfilled em in a way that ey had not expected. Ey had talked about this with Ioan a year or so after ey had noticed it, and eir down-tree instance had agreed far more readily than ey had expected, saying that the Ode clade project had led to something of a sea change within em, and then reminded Codrin that ey had merged before moving in with Dear and had both perspectives

within em now, solitary and social.

However, it had meant that that part of em which was built up of things solitary now required conscious intervention to satisfy. Ioan had needed to seek out the social, and now Codrin needed to seek out the solitary.

Ey needed to be away from Dear.

It wasn't that the fox was hurting em. It was a delightful partner, kind and considerate, and it knew how to apologize when it had made a misstep. It wasn't even particularly loud, as its partner had long ago kicked it out of the house for working on anything that would be noisy.

It was just a lot.

The first time that Codrin had stepped away from the house when Dear was being a lot, the fox had gone into a small sulk, sending Codrin a curt apology via sensorium message and not responding when Codrin said that ey'd be back in a bit. They had soothed ruffled fur over dinner. Now, when Codrin stepped out to take a break from a very intense fennec, ey would leave with a reassurance and still take comfort in the loneliness of the prairie.

Dear had been a lot today. Codrin had suggested that they do an interview together after Ioan had sent both launches—Castor and Pollux—a note asking that Codrin include the trio's reasons for leaving as well as those ey would be interviewing.

"We already told em that our fireside stories would be the only reasons we would send."

"Well, yes," Codrin said. "But from the sound of it, the Pollux launch didn't do fireside stories."

"Then why not send that request only to Pollux?"

"There was more to the message than that, Dear. Maybe ey just wrote the same thing for both launches and sent it in one go."

The fox had stared down into its wide mug of coffee, a series of emotions crossing its face, before nodding. *"Yes, of course. I apologize, Codrin. I have been thinking about those stories since launch night, and the more I do, the less I want the actual reasons to wind up in some history book."*

Codrin had laughed, sipping eir own coffee. "I understand the impulse, believe me. I'm not even sure *I* know your reasons."

"That is by design, Codrin."

Ey could not place why that had bugged em so at the moment, but as it continued to snowball in eir mind over the next hour, picking up emotions as it went until it was an outsized lump tumbling around within em, ey had walked over to where the fox was blocking out stage diagrams of some sort, kissed it between the ears, and said that ey would be back soon.

During eir previous expeditions, ey had begun placing cairns at regularly spaced intervals with rocks pointing directions where ey had split off this way or that, so as ey walked from cairn to cairn, looking for new ways to explore, ey thought about the conversation.

"That was such a dramatic thing to say," ey said, sorting through eir reasoning aloud. "If it simply didn't want to talk about it, it would equivocate or tell me to fuck off. So why be so obviously sly about it?"

The rocks did not reply. Ey set down another marker stone atop the cairn and walked off into the grass perpendicular from eir trail.

"If it had told me to fuck off, I would've just written that in a note back to Ioan, and we would've had our

private laugh about it. If it had equivocated, it knows that I probably would have kicked it way down the priority list and likely not bugged it again. Was it something about the stories themselves?”

The grass did not answer, only rustled and tugged at the hem of eir sarong.

“It prides itself on being deliberate, and it *knows* that I know that, so why did it say that in particular? Am I supposed to ask it? Am I supposed to feel curious or chagrined or envious?”

The wind only murmured to em.

Ey walked out into the grass and focused on letting the litany of questions go, counting eir steps up to one hundred, where ey paused to build a new cairn out of flat clods of dirt and stones dug up from between the tussocks of grass. The sensation of the dirt gritting against eir palms, of the way it got trapped beneath eir fingernails, anchored em to a moment in time, rather than spinning off into abstract thought.

“I won’t push it. Not yet,” ey murmured to the pile when it had reached above the thin stalks of grass. “But that does sound like an invitation, doesn’t it? *That is by design*. Like an invitation to play, or tease the reasons out of it.”

Ey frowned and pushed emself up to standing again. “Or maybe not.”

As ey continued to walk out into the prairie, a small portion of eir mind kept an eye out for a break in the scenery, anything other than that endless, rolling sea of grass.

The rest of eir mind, though, continued to prowl through conversations that ey had had with Dear over the last few years as the prospect of the launch became more and more real. The fox had often talked about irreversibility, about how some things that one thought of as irreversible weren’t. It had talked about having a drive to leave, and how there were some decisions that came from the head and some that came from the heart, but never what drove that drive, those decisions.

“Does it feel guilt? Or regret or something?”

Ey held onto that thought as ey walked another hundred paces to where ey would plant the next cairn. Soon enough, however many decades or centuries in the future, the prairie would be dotted with regularly spaced piles of rocks and dirt for miles spreading out from the house, and they would become as much a regular part of the landscape as the prairie itself, rather than this new thing that Codrin had introduced.

As ey worked, digging up rocks and roots, ey tried to think of what all Dear might have to feel guilty about or regret over. Ey knew that that experience with Qoheleth had come with some regret. It had mentioned more than once while Codrin worked on the story that had come out of that experience that it wished it had pushed harder to learn more before trying to pull the whole clade together.

But it had stopped talking about regrets once the project had been completed. It had been happy with that, and it had giggled and clapped its paws at the spike in reputation it had gained the newly-formed Bălan clade.

“*See what a corrupting influence I have had on you?*” it had said.

“I’m a ways off from having a clade listing like you, Dear.” Ey had pulled up the reputation listing for Dear, and then for the entirety of the Ode clade, and they had both marveled at the numbers.

“*Well, okay, yes. But still! The Bălan clade! How delightful!*”

Was it something to do with the clade? The Odists had been around long enough—what had Dear said? After Secession? 2130 something? Still almost two centuries—that there was certainly enmity between the various factions, perhaps there was some regret there.

Ey sat before the cairn so that it came up to eye level, and watched the long, slow sunset begin.

Perhaps it was regret or guilt, perhaps not. The fox had attacked the idea of leaving, of truly leaving the L₅ System and leaving no fork behind, with a ferocity that even Dear's partner admitted was somewhat unusual, as though it had *needed* to leave, to escape something.

And then its story, building an ascetic cult until it had been killed by its followers. Did some of that ring true to the fox? Did it feel that it had a cult following? Did it feel as though there were some risk of being destroyed by the thing that it had built up? Did it feel like an ascetic who had taken too many liberties?

"I'm overthinking this," ey mumbled.

All the same, ey frustration had burned itself out, and all that remained was exhaustion and worry. Ey would forever worry about Dear, seeing how brightly the fox flared, that some of the madness that it had said plagued the Odists, whether from age or from something before uploading, surely dwelt within it as well.

As the sky purpled, Codrin sighed and stood up once more, stretching and beginning the long walk home. Ey could just arrive there, but the walk felt necessary to process so many strangely-shaped thoughts.

Dear and its partner were waiting to greet em when ey returned home, each with a kiss in turn. The sun had slid fully below the endlessly distant horizon, and while ey had spent full nights out in the prairie twice during these excursions, those had been preceded by arguments (both of which had been fallout from ey newness to the concept of relationships), and since this one had not, the two had started to get concerned.

"Dinner's ready whenever you are."

Ey perked up and nodded, "Very ready. Sorry for staying out so long."

Dear shook its head. *"I was worried, but I always worry. Did you sort out whatever needed sorting out?"*

"Mm, halfway, perhaps?" Ey nodded toward the table, where the settings had been placed. Ey smelled the tang of sauerkraut, the smokiness of paprika. "Shall we?"

"Thank fuck. If you had insisted on keeping us out here to talk our ears off, I would have filed a petition to have you censured."

"Dear," its partner said. "Don't be a shit."

Codrin laughed. "No, no. It's okay. I'm doing fine. Dear's alright."

"Mx. Codrin Bălan!" the fox growled, stamping its foot. *"I have just been called a shit, do not take this moment from me."*

"Alright, you little shit. Have your moment at the table."

It looked proud, bowing extravagantly and leading them into the dining room, where they dined on székely gulyás and spätzel and chatted amiably about only the small things.

Dear, having clearly waited until the food had disappeared, finally spoke in a tone that told Codrin that it had been scripting the line since ey had returned home. *"Now, will you tell us why you went for your walkabout? Was it just for alone-time, or did it have to do with where our conversation ended this morning? I have thought myself in circles about that, but want to hear your take before I burden you with mine."*

"Alright." Codrin stalled for time by pouring emself some wine, trying to decide where to begin. "I can accept that you have your reasons for leaving the System behind. I think all three of us do. I would like to know why, but at your own pace. I had a thought out there, though. When did you say Michelle uploaded?"

The fox very carefully set its wine glass down. Codrin noticed that its paw had begun to shake. “*Did you go looking?*” it asked.

Ey blinked, startled at the change of its demeanor. “No. You said the 2130s, I just did a quick saerch at the time to confirm and I had no reason to doubt you. Should I have?”

“No, of course not.”

Its partner had a strange look on their face, somewhere between anxiety and dread.

“Isn’t that what you said?”

“Yes, it was. *It was. That was after the Secession, but early enough to be plausibly within the realm of ‘founders’ as I had said.*” It cleared its throat, composed itself. “*You may add this to your histories, but I would like the chance to read over what you write before you commit it.*”

Codrin shrugged, nodded. “If it’s a story about you, I don’t see a reason why not.”

“*Thank you, dear. But no, I uploaded in 2117. I—Michelle—was one of the Council of Eight.*”

Ey coughed on eir next sip of wine. “What? You were? Uh...holy shit.” Ey looked to its partner. “You knew this? I don’t mean that in an accusatory way, sorry. I’m just a little shocked. More than a little.”

“Yes. I left it up to Dear to tell you. It’s always been tight-lipped about that.”

“*It is there for anyone to look up, but most who look it up do not seem to care very much, or find it simply a curiosity.*” It hesitated, then added, “*It is also particularly difficult to look up for reasons that I will not go into now, but that is why you found the date that you did.*”

“So you were there for Secession? For the L₅ launch?”

“*Not this instance, but yes. Did you read up on the lost for your publication?*” It shook its head. “You must have, yes, I remember. Do you remember Debarre?”

Codrin nodded dumbly.

“*We pooled our money and uploaded together. He was also on the Council.*” Dear sighed and rotated its wine glass anxiously on the tabletop. “*Michelle soon became unable to participate in the council—you saw her before she...before she quit—so she forked the first ten lines, dumping much of her reputation into the process, and talked the council into letting them sit in her place.*”

“So it became the Council of Eighteen? Er...Seventeen? I’m realizing how little I know about the Council.”

“No, no. Not at first, at least. *The deal she struck with the other members of the Council was that her responsibility would be split evenly among the ten. At first, The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream was the only one to sit council, then as her responsibilities to the secession process began to grow, more of Michelle’s ongoing projects were given to further first lines.*”

“You said not at first. Did she—the Odists—wound up with more than an equal share of responsibility?”

Dear nodded. “*It was slow and subtle, and, initially, unintentional. She was—*”

“‘Initially’?”

It sighed. “*This is the part that keeps me tight-lipped.*”

Codrin nodded for it to continue.

“*She was the origin of a lot of projects, you must understand. She helped Ezekiel, one of the other council members, implement the idea of forking. She and Debarre helped implement the reputation market to limit that, given the technical limitations of the early System.*”

“And Secession?”

“Her and Jonas, yes.”

“Secession was initially the idea of one of the phys-side campaigners,” its partner said. “Initially they were campaigning for individual rights, and that debate intensified when news of forking reached the outside world.”

“Yes. There were some truly ugly suggestions from phys-side. Mostly on the DDR. Did that still exist when you uploaded?”

Codrin shook eir head. “At least, I don’t know the acronym.”

“It stood for Direct Democracy Representative. It was a silly idea to allow for members of the public to have direct debates and to vote on referenda.” Dear’s expression soured. “A terrible idea, I should say. It is what lead to the lost debacle, and we learned nothing from it. It was still heavily used during Secession, and the debates surrounding individual rights on the DDR were heated. Some wanted to treat it—the System, that is—as essentially an employer, having those who uploaded be treated as employees who must work to earn their place. This, I think, stemmed from the fact that many who uploaded were middle or upper middle class. The wealthy remained, preferring to keep their wealth, and the lower classes could not afford it.

“Some who uploaded agreed, at least after a fashion. They suspected that they would be brains-in-a-jar who would be able to devote themselves entirely to their science or art. Those phys-side wished to use uploads to drive factories or fly planes or what have you. Menial labor. Capitalism is ever the opportunist, and we were seen as tools, as was any employee.”

“That sounds disgusting.” Ey thought a moment, then shook eir head. “Or impossible.”

“Capitalism was never one to let impossibility stand in its way,” Dear’s partner laughed.

“Yes, well, there were at least still those phys-side who wished to help. Dreamers to the last.” It smiled fondly, lifting its glass to swirl the wine within. “Many of them uploaded. You have doubtless talked to a few without knowing. I don’t know if Yared—he was our biggest champion—decided on joining the Launch. Perhaps he did. If he did not, I will nudge Ioan to him if May Then My Name does not do so first. If he did, you may yet meet him.”

“Dear,” Codrin began, softening eir tone. “You don’t have to answer this, but do you have regrets about this period in your life?”

This time, the exaggerated care when setting down its glass was missing, as it nearly slammed it on the table. “I will not answer that.”

“Dear,” its partner murmured.

It was nearly a minute before it mastered its anger. “No, I will not answer. Not now, at least.”

“Sorry, Dear.”

“It is not on you, my dear. I am...ashamed. Many of the first lines...well, no. I will not elaborate now.” It grinned wickedly at Codrin. “You will doubtless tease it out of me, bit by bit, you tenacious fuck.”

Ey relaxed, nodding. "You know me well."

"I do, at that."

They sat in silence, drinking their wine.

"I am ashamed." Dear said, voice far off, distant. *"Yes. I am ashamed."*

Codrin let the rest of the evening drift into quiet. Dear remained thoughtful, even as the three of them decided on bed, but it didn't seem time for prodding. It was simply time for being. For enjoying each other's company.

The questions would wait. It was time to just be.

Douglas Hadje — 2325

May Then My Name,

Thank you for writing back. I was not expecting to get so emotional from your questions. They struck a nerve, and I'm still not sure why. I sent my answers and then went to lay down and do exactly as I said: curl up and cry.

Then I sobered up, such as it were, and immediately regretted it. I feel like I was too emotional, too caught up in the moment. Too personal, maybe? You and I have had a very professional relationship, and I *am* grateful for that, because we did just launch two interstellar probes full of a few billion souls. I feel like my answers were maybe too familiar.

Your reply put much of that anxiety to rest, for which I am also grateful. I will answer your next batch of questions momentarily, but I want to address some points from your letter leading up to those, first.

Of course I will write back! I have no intention of stopping. Ioan and I will continue to bombard you with questions until either you tell us to stop or we come out with our history and mythography—and even then, do not count on it. Also, please feel free to ask us your own questions. Not only will we enjoy answering them, but they will continue to help us build our picture of you which will help us put your answers in context.

Oh, don't worry! I will have plenty of questions for you. If I'm going to upload in the future, I'd also like to know more about how things are sys-side. I mostly only contact you (and I guess Ioan through you? Hi Ioan!) so it all sounds very surreal.

I do remember the name Michelle Hadje. She was one the founders as you mention, but more, she was the source of (or at least involved with) many of the ideas that drive the System to this day. She helped with consensual sensoria, for instance, as well as the reputation market that we use in lieu of currency in order to regulate forking in the early days. Unfortunately, Michelle herself does not remain in the System as of a bit under twenty years ago, so I will not be able to put you in touch with her, and should you choose to upload in the future, you will not be able to meet her face to face. I am sorry for your loss.

Thank you so much for letting me know. I'm saddened by this, but strangely calm as well. That I will never get to meet her comes with grief, but that I now at least know something of her (even if it's of her end), a portion of my curiosity has been sated.

I say a portion, though; did you ever meet her? You say she was formative for a lot of the System's tech; does everyone know that about her? Is she famous? If you did know her, what was she like? You say that Ioan's a historian, perhaps ey knows?

I know her end, but I remain hungry for any information that you can give on her life.

You mention having little to do. Do you know when you might upload? Failing that, might you ask the Launch commission if you can add real-time communication with us to your list of duties? It would be convenient to have someone on the station to talk to so that we are not limited by the transmission time planet-side.

I asked, and they said yes. Though again, they were largely baffled by the request. They have suggested that I keep communication as the last priority on my list of duties, which, sure. I'll send a message when I'm able to talk, if you're amenable. Will they wake you if you're asleep? (Do you sleep? I realize I don't even know.)

You say that you consider your body a 'tool and vehicle to get you from place to place'. I would like you to know that, upon reading that I ran to show Ioan your response and laugh in eir face for being almost exactly like you in this respect.

I am not sure whether to thank you or be offended, but since Ioan sounds very interesting, I'll go with the former. Everything is so much bigger than I am, I sometimes wonder why I ought to worry about my body at all. Perhaps this is an artifact of an unpleasant upbringing and a long series of very intellectual jobs, and perhaps it's just foreshadowing me uploading.

Ioan, if you're reading this, maybe you can explain this to May Then My Name, if you haven't already.

Before I get to answering questions, here are a list of mine not already included above:

- What does your day-to-day life look like?
- What did you do before uploading?
- Where were you before uploading? If it's not insensitive to ask, do you have an accent while speaking? I've noticed a few habits you have when writing, so it got me thinking English might not be your first language.
- I sort of asked in my previous email, but I worry that I overstepped my bounds by asking when you uploaded. Is that a sensitive topic?
- Where does your name come from? Does it come from that snippet you sent to me?
- On that note, do forks generally keep the same name (you mentioned three copies of Ioan, for instance), or is it common to change names for different forks?

- In the status reports you sent for the launches, you mention dispersionistas, trackers, and taskers, and in the final one, you mention that investing fully in the launch was a danger for taskers. By this, and from some surface-level research, I infer that these describe habits of forking. I'd like to hear your take on it, though. What habit do you have? Is this something people even talk about? Argue or fight about? Is it insensitive for me to ask? If so, apologies!

These questions are for Ioan, if ey's up for answering them:

- What does being a historian on the System look like? I keep imagining that you live in a sort of repository of all knowledge anyway and can just look up whatever you want. Is that true?
 - What are some things that you enjoy researching/writing about?
 - Is there a university up there where people study? What other occupations are there?
 - Were you a historian before you uploaded?
 - I asked May Then My Name above; if you're comfortable answering, what habit of forking do you have?
-

And now, for the answers to your questions.

If you are willing, tell me more about your childhood (where you were born, what your parents were like, what your schooling was like, etc).

As mentioned before, Earth was a shithole, so while I'm happy to talk about it, don't expect me to be kind or friendly about it.

I was born in Saskatoon which, as a city, had gone through the usual cycles of boom and bust. In 2278, it was heading down from a boom cycle when the second great uraninite vein had been depleted. It was one of those times where everyone starts to realize that there's not going to be another that they can just drill their way towards, and by then, even the tailings had been refined as much as they could conceivably be.

When a city goes downhill like that, there really isn't any drastic change. It's all little things. The mine stops hiring. The trickle of new employees slows to a stop. When people move out in search of work, their houses sit empty with 'For Lease' signs for weeks, then months, then years. Your friends at school start moving away. Your class size dwindles. Stores and restaurants close.

It's not until something big happens that makes you lift your head, look around, and realize, "Holy shit, this place is terrible." In my case, it was when one of the two Ansible clinics closed. I had long been a dreamer, but to have one of the outlets for that dream disappear was my "Holy shit" moment. My parents had been talking about the city dying, about having to drop breakfast as an option in their restaurant except on Saturdays, cut staff, all that stuff, but it had never really clicked for me what that actually meant.

Saskatoon was such a brown place, too. Dust storms, summer droughts, wildfire smoke turning blue skies tan six months out of the year. You grow up with that, you'd expect to be used to it, but like I said, we spent as much time in-sim as possible for lack of anything else to do, so we knew what it could be like but wasn't. No reason to play out in the streets when there are AQI advisories. No reason to go shopping when you can't afford to buy anything, and all the toys you could possibly want are online.

I think that the Simon side of the family came with a hereditary pessimism that dogs our heels, so I suppose there may be a lot of that at work. My parents were pessimistic, so I was raised in that environment. Were others happy there? Maybe. Maybe they had taken it with them when the mine shut down. Maybe there were other places in the world with greater concentrations of happy people.

If so, I never saw them, unless they were online.

What is your earliest memory?

I had to give this one some thought. I was going to say that it would have to be prepping for implants. I got them the week before my first year of school started, and I remember there were two appointments leading up to the procedure. The first was more a meeting than anything. "Will he get the standard set?" "Yes." "Any health problems?" "No." "Great, we'll do a pre-op in a week."

But I don't think that was quite it. Before then, I remember my dad playing with me where we would sit on the floor, legs spread out, and roll a racquetball ball back and forth between us. He laughed like a loon whenever the ball would go wide and I would have to get up and go run after it, but, on thinking back, he always made sure

that those were in the minority, and that once I started to get frustrated, he'd stop and go back to just talking about animals or food or whatever.

Tell me more about Earth. We can get the facts from broadcasts and information requests, but I want to see it through your eyes and feel it through your hands.

There's only so many times I can call it a shithole, I guess.

South of the 50th parallel or so, most everyone lives belowground and works above ground. We went on a few trips out east to visit the Hadjes and I always got a kick out of it for the first few days, running through tunnels ahead of the family, looking up at the balconies, all that sort of thing. Eventually, though, I'd grow tired of life in a linear strip, with nothing further away than a few hundred yards to focus on.

Lets see, what else.

There's two main governmental powers, loosely dividing the planet into the Northwest and Southeast hemispheres, plus a couple dozen smaller jurisdictions that will come and go every decade or so. We talked about various wars, uprisings, troubles, etc in the past, but there weren't really any when I was down there other than the occasional saber rattle. The two blocks were basically trade divisions centering on the Atlantic and Pacific. Overland trade is pretty rare and mostly automated, but still runs the risk of breakdowns, etc. Easier to do things by sea, I guess.

The ultimate cynicism of capitalism remains, though we were taught that it ebbs and flows. When I was down there, it was on its way out of a trough, where social services were being cut back, wage gaps increasing, etc etc. Rich folks lived at the poles, poor near the equator. Rich folks ate meat, poor folks ate tofu and tempeh. That sort of thing.

The 'net was also starting to undergo a boom of advertising as I was leaving (as mentioned, the station still has some connectivity, but it's rarely worth interacting via sims due to the lag), perhaps to make up for the lack of offline ad venues. I remember coming home and diving in and daydreaming through half an hour of trailers and interactives and the like, then just getting into trouble wherever I could.

I wish I could tell you more, but I either blocked out the rest or didn't pay attention in class.

If you could go back anywhere in history and change any one thing, what would it be?

Shit. Um...I guess in light of your last letter, I'd stop whatever made Michelle leave or quit or die or whatever happened to her? I don't think I'd want to have uploaded sooner. I'm proud of what I did for the launch. Doesn't change the fact that I'd love to have met her.

Is that weird? I'm starting to feel like it's weird.

If you could go back in time and tell yourself any one thing, what would it be?

Of all the things that I have groused about already, I don't actually have any one thing that needs changing. I don't wish I'd uploaded sooner. I don't wish I'd left sooner. I don't have any regrets about the way I got here. Maybe go back and kick my ass and tell myself to talk to Michelle sooner? It's starting to sound like an unhealthy fixation at this point, and I'm kind of wondering if it is, to some extent.

You are given three wishes, with three restrictions: they must have plausible deniability (that is, be explained by luck, natural causes, etc.; no changing people's memories!); they must provide a benefit, rather than a detriment; they must not involve singular personal benefit for you or any one individual. What are they?

Throwing me the hard ones, huh? This is probably the one I spent the longest on.

I'm going to assume by plausible deniability, that rules out changing anything about the past.

First, I'd wish there to be some technological breakthrough that would make it easier to communicate with the System. Text is fine and good for those who live up in their heads, but I think that one thing that keeps a lot of people away from uploading is the mystery of what's up there. They hear that life is better, but hearing is not seeing. They hear that they'd be functionally immortal, but hearing is not proof. If we had a way of seeing what day-to-day life was like in the society, we'd feel less of a taboo of making our way there.

Second, I'd wish that whenever a nuke or bioweapon was launched, there'd be some plausible failure in it. A firing mechanism doesn't work. A worker comes to work hungover and snips the wrong wire during a fix. That sort of thing. I said saber rattling, and that mostly comes down to a slow, quiet arms race, and even if the chances of anything *actually* happening are very low, I have an intense paranoia of that kind of widespread death and destruction.

Third, I'd wish for some sort of astronomical event that would kick interest in space down there back into gear. It's weird, because I realize that this is contrary to the first wish, since folks zooming out into space is kind of the opposite of folks uploading. Still, everyone's got their heads down. There's some threshold level of hardship that makes folks turn to survival rather than out to the stars, and I think it's higher than one would expect. A rogue asteroid? Some crazy discovery on the moon? Hell, aliens? Anything grander than keeping a job or a house or just plain staying cool.

Do you have any romantic attachments? I am assuming no by your previous message. Have you in the past? Will you in the future?

This next batch of questions was irksome. They're incredibly personal, and while I vowed to try to keep an open mind and be approachable about any subject you'd ask about, I'm frustrated with how much I didn't want to answer some of these. Oh well, no growth without pain, right?

No, I've never had any real attachments. I dated a few times back in school, but it was always one of those things that I did because it felt expected, rather than one I wanted to.

It's not for lack of desire, as I think that having someone meaningful in my life would be comforting and fulfilling, but it always came second-place to work or hobbies, so I'd spend those dates thinking about a project I was working on or dreaming about the stars or the System. Relationships are frowned upon on the station. Allowed, but closely monitored, with mandatory counseling, etc. That's too much time away from the other things in my life.

Will I have one in the future? If I remain phys-side, probably not, if I'm honest. The drive will still be there, but knowing myself, I'll work myself to death before I find the time for one. If I head sys-side, maybe I'll explore it. If that gives me the chance to deal with projects on the side, whether through greater free time or forking or whatever, then I don't see why that would stop me.

I'm not so lonely as to be hurting for one.

If yes, what do you look for in a partner?

I don't know, really. Similar interests, for sure. I'd like someone who is interested in the System as the wonder that it is, and I'm sure that those people exist even sys-side. I'd like someone who is comfortable with my general desire to focus on those interests. Not that they'd be second-seat, of course, just that I'm not going to be able to shut up about those things even at the best of times. If they share those interests, we can get all excited together.

I don't know that I have any real tastes in women (more my type than men, though I've known a few I could see myself spending that much time with). It's not some grand statement on, like, the inherent validity of all types of women, just that as mentioned, I spend most of my time up in my head, so that's lower on the priority list. I don't know. They ought to have a head, probably.

If no, explain why not.

N/A

When was the last time someone said 'I love you'? How did that feel?

Mom, the day I launched. It came with an implicit "...and I hate you for leaving me behind." I don't like talking about it, but I still hate her for that in turn. I don't do well with guilt.

What are your opinions on sex?

It seems fine? I don't know. I don't have much (or any) experience with it. Again, it's low enough on the priority list that I just forget that it's even a thing most of the time. I imagine it feels good, of course, and I can see how it'd deepen an emotional connection. Those are good things, so it's probably a good thing, too, but I can also see it being used as an emotional weapon because of that intimacy. It seems fine.

Have you had sex before?

No. It's been offered, but in such a strange manner that the woman I was with at the time used my missing those cues as reason for leaving me. My social awareness is minimal, though, so I don't really know what she expected. I was left mostly baffled after the whole relationship. It was my last before leaving for the station, and I haven't tried dating since for previously mentioned reasons.

Will you have sex (again) before you upload?

No, see above.

Do you masturbate?

I don't know how it works sys-side, but this is generally an insensitive thing to ask someone phys-side. I'll say yes and leave it at that.

Assuming you have one, where is your favorite place to be touched? Least favorite?

When I was dating, the type of physical contact I enjoyed most was having my hair played with. I assumed most others did as well, so I would often offer an equal exchange, brushing my girlfriends hair for them and letting them play with mine in turn. My favorite spot was probably at the back of my neck, which I suspect is due to some ancient inhibition against letting people touch dangerous spots on the body, so if you are intimate enough with someone to let them do that, they must be a safe person to be around.

No idea about least favorite. I guess I just don't have that much experience with being touched.

What is your favorite texture?

Fur, I think? Grandpa Hadje on the east coast had a cat, and one of my fondest memories from those trips was when she'd fall asleep on my lap or on my chest with me petting her. One of the girls I dated long-distance (I know that this makes it sound like I dated around a lot, but I only had three relationships: two local, and that long-distance one in the middle) had a feline av, and I was always happy when we would just relax in sim together and she'd let me pet her.

What is the greatest pain you have ever felt, physically, mentally, or emotionally?

I was knocked off the edge of the torus by someone (I mentioned sabotage attempts before, right?), and the tether caught me around the middle and swung me up against the side of the station pretty hard. I broke an arm and a collar bone in the process. That hurt like hell, but you mentioned mental pain too, and the same applied there. Seeing the stars reeling beneath me, seeing the station leave me behind, and seeing the core of the System racing away led to a fear that made my chest and stomach hurt so hard that I retched in my suit. I'm just thankful that the guy was tackled before he could cut my tether. He was sent back planet-side to be charged.

If you could change any one thing about your body, what would it be?

I'd like to be less demanding, if I'm honest. Bodies are a lot of work to upkeep. Is that the case in the System? I've heard that a lot of bodily functions are optional, but not whether opting out of them was pleasant or not. My arm still hurts sometimes when I change gravities, and that reminds me of the fear of falling away from the torus, and if I could stop my arm from doing that, that would be nice.

You asked me to react to the following lines without looking them up.

Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity —

This took a few readings before I was really able to understand it. It sounds like the middle of some longer work. I'm not totally sure what to make of it. Is it about immortality? I can see what it would be like to have to face down eternity, and assuming that by virtue of the horses heads pointing toward it, that one is inexorably carried into it yet never actually reaching it, you've got a sort of void you are constantly gazing into. It's terrifying and a little exhilarating.

I was of three minds
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

This one felt impenetrable until I realized that it might be about forking. Is it a contemporary thing? I can see that being the three minds portion, and I can see the tree as a metaphor of the same root personality, but blackbirds haven't existed in any of the places I've lived for decades, so if there's specific symbolism behind that, I'm missing it.

Birds = flight and freedom, maybe? Black = death? Or maybe eternity? Three minds, each of which is bound up with those things? The freedom of eternity? I can see why this would appeal to one sys-side.

She has but does not possess,
acts but doesn't expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever.

I've never heard it this way, but this is from the Tao Te Ching. Of those who are not focused on doom-saying, Taoism is popular planet-side, particularly among the 'net crowd, as a lot of people use it as a way to focus on letting go of the terrible things.

This is particularly interesting in the way that the System and the LVs are designed to last forever. "When her work is done, she forgets it" makes me think that those who helped build or worked on the System wind up forgetting about it when it *becomes* their life. "Has but does not possess/acts but does not expect" took more thought, but I can see it applying to the act of uploading, maybe. All those things you had, you never really possessed, as you leave them behind. Uploading itself is terrifying, in a way, as you can never go back and no version of you keeps living on phys-side. Maybe the only way you can get over that fear is to let go of expecting the procedure to succeed/fail. You need to leave behind your expectations, too.

Flown to space by what callous earth destroyed,
I chase the long-flying radio waves,
and sift to find again your breathing voice
Far away from grief and a potter's grave.

Does this have to do with the launch? It certainly feels like! It feels like how even now my mind is chasing those radio waves that are coming from the LVs, now so far out of reach for any one of us that we can barely comprehend. But still, we keep on searching for those voices that come back to us ever slower. Did someone on

the LVs leave you behind? Someone you love? Family? One of your forks? Basically, someone whose voice you keep on searching for. Or maybe they were one of the eight irretrievably lost personalities?

“Far away from grief and a potter’s grave” makes a lot of sense to me as someone who left Earth behind. I don’t know what it was like when you uploaded, but I can see it as a way to dream of some place better.

Time is a finger pointing at itself
that it might give the world orders.
The world is an audience before a stage
where it watches the slow hours progress.
And we are the motes in the stage-lights,
Beholden to the heat of the lamps.

You never answered me about your name. This is another one of those snippets from the work you sent earlier, isn’t it? It has the same feel as your name, so I can’t help but wonder if that is related to you in some way.

There is something feverish about these words that I don’t quite understand. I don’t know what they mean, can’t even begin to give you an interpretation, other than it makes it sound like that feeling of insignificance that comes with looking at the stars and being buffeted about by forces we can’t understand.

I’m trying to hold back on replying to you in the same emotionally inundated state that I ended my last letter, so I’ll just say that this left me feeling things that I can’t even name. Loneliness? Insignificance? I don’t know, even those don’t feel right. Can you send me the whole work? I’ll block out some time to cry over it or something.

Thank you as always, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Douglas Hadje, MSf, PhD

Launch director

Digital signatures:

- Douglas Hadje
- Launch commission:
 - de
 - Jonathan Finnes
 - Thomas Nash
 - Woo Hye-won
 - Hasnaa

Ioan Bălan — 2325

May Then My Name Die With Me sat across from Ioan at their dining table, looking somewhat diminished.

“Are you comfortable with this?” Ioan asked.

“This feels unusually formal.”

“Yes, well, I’d like to be able to see your expressions.” Ey grinned. “Also, it’s easier to write when I don’t have a skunk hanging onto my arm.”

She rolled her eyes, sighing dramatically. “I suppose. Ask away then, O archivist.”

“I’m not—”

“I know, I know. Not an archivist. Grant me this whimsy.”

“Alright.” Ey tested the nib of eir pen on the corner of the page and then began to jot in eir comfortable shorthand. “Uncomfortable question first. When did you upload?”

May frowned down to the table, drawing lazy Lissajous curves on its surface. “I would have gone for the shit-sandwich approach. Do you promise to ask lighter questions after?”

Ioan laughed, nodded.

“Alright. Michelle uploaded in 2117. I know that Dear mentioned to you that she uploaded in the 2130s after Secession. This is a small lie it told to downplay our role in helping the System become what it is today. Michelle uploaded, burned through what energy she had on early projects, and then forked to let her clade take her place,

opting for an early retirement, herself.”

“Do you mean her work on sensoria?”

“That, and several other projects.”

“Such as?”

“You will doubtless learn, Ioan, but not from me. It is not my story to tell.”

Ey lifted eir pen from the page. “Can you tell me why? I can leave it out of the notes if you’d like.”

“You may include this. I have distanced myself from much of that time out of shame. You know as well as I do that I cannot forget it, but I can at least think about it as little as possible.” She smiled, abashed, then the smile grew sly. “I will not tell you who to ask about it, either. I have confidence that you will find out on your own, and I am curious to see how quickly.”

Ey laughed. “Alright, if you won’t talk about that, that’s okay. It’s enough that you mention it; I’ll keep my eye out.”

She reached out and took eir off-hand in her own, brushing thumbpad over eir knuckles. “Thank you, dear. Do you have a more pleasant question for me to answer?”

“Of course. Why did you stay behind.”

At this, the skunk brightened considerably. “This is what I was expecting. I have a response prepared and everything.”

“Dear always mentioned that it scripted its conversations, as well. Is that an Odist thing?”

“Perhaps! I do not doubt it, from that fox. It is always so dramatic.” She retrieved her paw to fold it with the other before her. “Right. I remained behind because it tickled me to do so. Could I have invested in the Launch? Of course. However, it occurred to me early on, soon after you and I agreed to work on this project together, that acting as a fulcrum between the two LVs would not just keep my instance from infecting the responses that I received, but would allow me to play them against each other.

“Besides,” she added, stabbing her pinky toward em, “there is no Ioan on the Launches, and I am busy wrapping you around my little finger.”

Ey laughed. “Well, keep up the good work, then.”

“I could just as easily turn this question around on you, Mx. Ioan Bălan. Why did you not invest yourself in the Launch? We do not yet know Codrin’s reasons, but why remain, yourself?”

“I’m not sure, honestly. I think what you say about not influencing the responses that we get fits me, too. I don’t want Ioan’s thoughts, I want those of the LVs unfiltered through my transmissions.”

“But Codrin—”

“Has diverged significantly in the last two decades. I have no concerns about contamination. Ey is not me any longer.”

She nodded approvingly. “Good. There may be hope for you yet.”

“Wrapping me around your little finger, indeed.” Ey finished eir current line of scratchy notes. “You say that it tickled you to remain behind. Can you talk more about that?”

“Of course. Many of the clade—many of the liberal side, at least—enjoy using our functional immortality as a plaything. If we are to live forever, then, it is worthwhile to find as many things to keep it interesting as we can along the way. It is interesting to me that I have acted in a very intentional way such that I will not get to

experience our three societies begin to diverge that directly. There is no going back to change that, because there is no going and there is no back. It is already fun to see the differences between Castor and Pollux through the eyes of both Codrins, and to realize that the L₅ System contains neither, and then realize in a flash of insight that there is no May Then My Name Die With Me to witness directly. Do you experience the same?”

“Maybe a little bit,” Ioan hedged. “But if what you tell me is true, I’m not nearly old enough yet to be so concerned in finding fun in the little nooks and crannies of experience.”

“You are no fun,” she whined. “But I see your point. You also do not have the decades of split mind from before the beginning of the clade. You do not have the strange avenues of thought that preceded our creation. The Ioan of the 2230s or whenever it was that you uploaded had a baseline sanity that Michelle lacked.”

“You don’t seem insane.”

She forked a version of herself atop the table lacking all human attributes that hissed at Ioan with foaming mouth. Ey startled back, and she laughed as the creature quit. “Do I not?”

Ey shook eir head. “Weird, perhaps, but your thoughts and actions are consistent with each other. You’re an internally consistent individual.”

“Yes, well, Michelle was not. She was a being of irreconcilable contradictions, and we are lucky that she did not pass that on to us when we came into existence.”

“If she hadn’t quit as she did, do you think that she would’ve remained on the System, invested entirely in the launches, or split between the two?”

May’s features fell and she averted her eyes. “She could not do but what she did. You were not there at the end.”

“Feel free to not answer, but can you tell me about that?”

“I will only say that she was ready, that, whether or not she had been planning that day from the very beginning, that was precisely the time that she was meant to die.”

“‘Die’? Not quit?”

“In her mind, I think that it was death, yes. She quoted her—our—favorite line of poetry at us, and the death thoughts proceeded apace. We are no longer branches of a unified whole, but trees of our own.” There was a long pause before she added, “I think that had been true perhaps from shortly after Secession, and that she was already dead, in her own way. Reality just caught up with her.”

Ey nodded. Something in the skunk’s expression told em that the topic was closed, that while she might answer another question, she would resent it. Instead, ey let a moment of quiet fall between them, a silent acknowledgement of that ending.

“You have another question. I can see it on your face.”

“Perceptive, as always. Whenever you talk with Douglas, your cousin however many times removed, you always evade his questions about your name, and have yet to tell him about your origins, though I know that that would mean a lot to him. Why?”

Her laugh was musical and expression almost giddy. “We already talked about having fun, my dear.”

“Well, yes, but that was fun involving yourself. What’s the origin of this fun involving someone else?”

“I have fun with you, you know that.”

Ioan smirked, but waited for her to continue.

“Alright, have it your way. First of all, I am not Michelle, though I am of her. All the same, I am doing my best to build up the suspense with him. I know that it would mean a lot for him if I were to simply drop the bomb on him now—though I realize, having said that, that that is perhaps a poor choice of words, given his admitted fear. But how much more an impact it will have if I build it up like this! I cannot wait to see what emotions play across his face.”

“‘See’? You intend to wait until he uploads?”

“And why should I not? I know that he will.”

“He always talks about it as a potential thing, though.”

She grinned and shook her head. “He will. He has already made up his mind, he just does not realize it yet.”

“How will you tell him, then?”

“I will continue to drop hints for another few months, and when he does—I think he will do it within the year—I will bring him home. There, we will talk, and you will observe as, over the course of a few minutes, I reveal the truth.”

Ioan straightened up. “Me?”

“Of course. Can you think of a better myth? Can you think of a better story in history than of the man who brought the launches to fruition learning that he is talking to an instance of the very woman who helped bring Secession to fruition, the one who he has desired above all things to meet, who he thinks dead?”

“A little grandiose, don’t you think?”

She stuck her tongue out at em, a strangely cute gesture on her features. “Is that not a requirement of myths? A myth that is not grandiose is just a story.”

“You Odists do seem prone to grand gestures.”

May preened.

Ioan set down eir pen and folded eir hands on the table. “Tell me a story, then.”

“One for the history? One for you?”

Ey shrugged.

She thought for a moment, once more drawing designs on the table with a claw.

“Alright,” she said, standing up. “Come with me, my dear.”

Ioan stood to follow her as she padded from the common room to the balcony, then down the steps from there to the yard, a rectangle of grass hemmed in by a moat of mulch, a fence of lilac bushes making up the border. They were technically the end of eir sim, though between the leaves and trunks of the bushes, one would occasionally catch a glimpse of another yard, another house, a street beyond.

“Look,” she said.

Ey looked at the yard, at the lilacs, even the patio and the sky.

“What do you see?”

“My yard. What am I supposed to see?”

“Look at the grass. What do you see?”

Ey focused on the green carpet of grass, then frowned as ey began to notice the two or three yellow flowers spotting the yard just barely visible. They sat only a few millimeters below the tops of the trimmed grass. “What are those?”

The skunk grinned at em toothily.

“May, what did you do?”

“I talked you into a small addition. That is what I did.”

Ey knit eir brow. “Talked me into...how do you mean?”

“Do not worry, Ioan, you are the only one who has ACLs over your property. I do not. I just made a few suggestions, mostly when you were asleep—or at least very sleepy—or head-in-the-clouds at work.”

“You’re saying I made these?” ey asked, stepping out into the grass and bending down to inspect the flower, yellow, a myriad of petals, grand-toothed leaves radiating from the base.

“I am saying that *we* made these.” She bent down beside em and plucked the flower from near the ground, lifting it with a dream-clouded smile. “I am saying that you trust me—*really* trust me—and that life in the System is more subtle than I think you know. You trust me. You let me into your life as a coworker, then cohabitant and cosleeper. You let me into your dreams, my dear, and your dreams influence this place as much as, if not more than, your waking mind.”

That waking mind was now whirling with the ramifications of what she was saying. “I did this on your suggestion?”

She shook her head. “If you would like to think of it that way, yes, but I would prefer to say that we did this.”

“Is this your story?”

“No. Sit down by me.”

They knelt before this brand new plant in the yard, both looking at the yellow flower May turned this way and that in her paw.

“This is a dandelion. It—”

A memory clicked into place for Ioan and ey laughed. “Oh! Of course! I’ve been here too long, haven’t I? Here in the System, here in the house with its perfect yard. Almost ninety years now, I think. They were all over back phys-side, though.”

May nodded and beckoned for em to continue.

“We didn’t have a yard where I grew up. Just an apartment block facing the street, a strip of weeds between the building and sidewalk, and then between the sidewalk and road. At one time, I think that strip had contained grass and trees, but now it just contained a narrow path full of thistles and dandelions.

“I only ever saw lawns in movies or on the ’net. The world wasn’t as bad back then as Douglas makes it sound now, but still, we weren’t wealthy, and it was hard enough to ensure a steady supply of clean water for the residents, never mind grass like this. We were certainly not wealthy enough for that.” Ey laughed. “Well, we were dirt poor, actually. Most of the weeds were green, leafy things with fuzzy green flowers that would turn into bundles of seeds, or spiky thistles with purple bulbs of flowers, but there were a few dandelions scattered about.”

“No lilacs?”

“More stuff from media. I remember wishing I could grow some indoors because I thought they were small enough to be houseplants until I was corrected. I have no idea if these are accurate, but I remember loving the smell.”

“They are spot on, Ioan.”

Ey smiled.

“So you uploaded and made your sim like this?”

“Yeah. Sort of. It was inspired by some sim I frequented on the 'net, something a friend built. I found something close to it on the market, and when I had reputation enough, I dug the sim and grabbed that template, then spent a year rebuilding it as best I could remember. No dandelions.”

She laughed, bumping her shoulder against eirs. “Of course. They are a weed, yes. Or often thought of as one. The leaves make a good salad, though, and I was told that you could dry, roast, and grind the roots to make a coffee substitute.”

Ioan made a face. “I’d rather coffee.”

“I have no idea if the substitute was any good, but I like coffee, too.” She held the flower up to her snout and smelled long at it. “Me, though, I like the flowers. They are too complicated for their own good in this stage, are they not? Sure, they close up and then become the puffballs that spread them further and further, but here, they are almost platters of yellow.”

Ey grinned as she held the flower in both paws like a tray carrying food.

“But that is not what I like about them. I am telling you, now that you are awake, the things that I whispered to you to bring about this story. The things I suggested, as you put it. What I love is their scent.” She held it up for em to sniff. “They smell like muffins. How can anything that smells like muffins be bad? ”

Ey breathed deep of that scent. There was, indeed, the note of some baked sweet bread, but that was layered atop a vegetal scent. It was not unpleasant, but not precisely like a muffin. Ey decided not to share this opinion with May.

Instead, ey asked, “Is that your story, May?”

“Of course not. You told the story yourself. Young Ioan with eir indoor lilacs.” She laughed, peeking up at em slyly. “Or perhaps we told the story. You asked, so I suggested, as you say, and you told the story.”

Ioan frowned, then rolled eir eyes. “That’s not what I asked, and you know it.”

“Tough shit. It is our story now,” she said. “Now, give me your hand.”

Ey held eir hand out for her, then let her turn it over in her paws. Before ey could object, she flipped the flower over, pressed it firmly to eir skin, and rubbed it in a vigorous circle.

“There.” She held eir hand up so that ey could see, looking proud.

On the back of eir hand, the skin shone a golden yellow in the circle where she had rubbed the flower.

Ey shoved her over onto the grass, laughing. “You nut.”

She lay there among the grass, giggling helplessly. Among the grass where a brand new dandelion poked through the green in front of her snout. One that had not been there before.

Yared Zerezghi—2124

Mention how the System almost feels like its own nation, mention L₅ but only in passing, the note read. Expect agreement from a new faction. Act pleasantly surprised.

As he had found himself doing increasingly often, Yared stepped out of his apartment to walk the town and draft his new post in his head. They used to flow so easily, when each one did not feel like some school assignment.

He walked out past the coffee shop, waving to the woman behind the counter, and shaking his head to an offer of coffee. He was already wired enough.

He kept on walking, instead, out and down the street past apartments, the store where he bought his food, apartments, the restaurant that he ate at once every other week, and yet more apartments. Out and out until he ran into that patch of scrub that somehow never got developed, then right and into where the scrub turned into scattered bushes, and then trees. There had been a fence, once, but all that remained were the posts.

He'd never bothered walking up here until he'd accepted the unnerving assignment to convince everyone to secede. Explicitly, to convince the DDR and various governments to allow it, but implicitly, he felt, to convince those he talked to on the System, as well. Convince True Name and Jonas to suggest it from the other side.

It had been unnerving at first, at least.

Why would he, a nobody who dumped all his free time into the 'net, into the DDR, be expected to make any change? He knew that, once a referendum was picked up by more than a couple of the various legislatures, it was hopeless to expect the DDR had any real impact. It became the joke that he was sure so many thought it was.

He had picked up the topic of the System's individual rights as his next pet topic, for even though he had felt little interest in the System or its labyrinthine technologies at the time, when the previous bill he had hyperfixated on had failed on the floor, and after a night of far too much tej, he needed to set his mind on *something*.

He didn't know why he did this, why he felt the need to dive into politics. He was a no one in Addis Ababa, a city which paled in importance in the NEAC, a governing body that paled in comparison to the others in the world.

He had a data analysis job he could do from home reasonably well, and he didn't slack off while at work (though he did leave DDR alerts on in his field of view). He made enough of a living to stay in his apartment in an alright part of town. He was comfortable. He had no plans to upload.

Or hadn't previously. The more he learned, the more enticing it seemed.

It certainly seemed like an easier life than this, accepting messages from shadowy government agencies to try and influence what was supposed to be a direct means of being represented in the legislatures of the world. It was one thing to try to do so from one's own perspective, but to accept such influence, even if he was only paid in coffee and cake...

It had surprised him that he had even picked up the task at first. Secession seemed like such a strange thing to ask for. What did the NEAC—or any government, really—gain by having the System secede? What was the System doing that threatened them so much? There was the brain-drain that some feared, but this seemed to rely on some more basic instinct or need to have that which is different separated from that which was familiar.

He didn't know why he had picked up the task, but it was working, even on him. *Especially* on him. The idea of secession from a government's point of view was one that fit neatly into his worldview without him needing to change anything, and that was strange in and of itself.

The System probably should secede. At that point, uploading became a simple matter of emigration, one to a country that was guaranteed to grant you residency. Not only that, but, though the cost might be high and the move permanent, it offered a ready-made haven for refugees, whether from the increasingly hot climate or the countless little spats along disputed borders. Uploading was an option for those who had nowhere else to go, and one that offered them more freedom than any other country on earth.

And this new idea that had started showing up, first in his conversations with True Name and Jonas, and then on the DDR in general, of tacking the System onto one of the launches for the L₅ station construction. The timing—True Name and Jonas, then the DDR—made him wonder if the Council of Eight had its fingers in other pies, too.

He wasn't sure how to feel about this. What an opportunity that had presented itself! All those arguments about the resources the System used would be all but put to rest. The station would house it, the station's solar power source would power it, and the Station Hotel's revenue would fund it. It would be another part of the tourists' experience. There were already plans for a new transmission system that would be easy enough to build for uploads to make it from Earth to the System without having to fly to the station first.

It was all starting to feel like such a good idea, and some part of him felt embarrassed that Councilor Demma's bald-faced political machinations were working just as well on him as they promised to on the masses that filled the DDR forums.

He realized he'd been so lost in thought that the wooded grove had already spat him out the other side, back into heat and back into traffic.

"Well, shit," he mumbled, and began the long trek back to his apartment, polishing the draft of his post in his head.

I won't lie, I'm pleased to see this discussion take a turn to the positive. There are some great minds thinking and talking here. Here on the DDR forums, out on the 'net, and now out in the subcommittees that will feed into the legislatures of the world.

What heartens me more than that, however, is to see some names that I had previously seen arguing *against* independent rights now campaigning *for* them (or, at the very least, neutral in tone). This is how the DDR is meant to work: it's a forum for us, the rank and file of the nations of the world, to be able to participate in the legislative process that will bind us in more ways than of old. No

more relying solely on representatives. No more collecting signatures for yet another petition that will fall on deaf ears. No more letter writing campaigns that doubtless fed countless shredders and trash folders.

To those arguing for independent rights, keep working hard, as there is still much to be done, but to those who are arguing against this referendum, I would like to address a few of those points that seem to keep cropping up:

The System has no meaningful way for us to control its goings on, and thus could be a good place for disaffected citizens to coordinate with phys-side agents on acts of terrorism.

This is one of those arguments that is difficult to refute because, on the surface, it is indeed a potential reason that one might upload.

That said, enough thought about how international terrorism works is enough to put this to bed as yet more FUD. First of all, it is the responsibility of each country to monitor their own citizens to within the limits of their national policies (and, let us not kid ourselves, well beyond). If a disaffected citizen is willing to engage in a terrorist act on their home soil, then it is the responsibility for the government to deal with that individual.

I will grant that this leaves the upload to contend with. There is no easy way to detect whether or not the System has punished them, and there's certainly no way for them to be extradited, should they be discovered.

Do not doubt your respective governments' abilities to track these actions, however. It is something of an open secret that they are always a decade ahead of us mere mortals when it comes to encryption, and thus cracking of those encryption methods used ten years prior. They'll be able to track communications from the System easily enough, just as they track any other form of text-based communication.

(And to my NEAC government handler who reads all of my posts, finger hovering above the big, red 'arrest' button: hello! I hope that you are well.)

Without clear news sources coming out of the System, there is no way for us to tell that the Council of Eight is effective at governing those sys-side.

Disregarding the Council of Eight's mandate to "guide but not govern", I'm curious, now! What would a "clear news source" would look like?

When one thinks about news sources here, one thinks of a stream of information about concrete events: what hurricane hit which part of North America; what stock jumped to what price; what the cricket scores are. These are all *things*. They all have to do with *stuff* or *places* or *money*.

Think of one thing that has made news recently that does not have to do with any of those things. I will preempt many of your examples:

- Legislation—that is, new laws to govern stuff, places, or money.

- Scientific advances—that is, new ways to work with stuff, places, or money (and before you suggest theoretical sciences, consider that those are future ways to work with stuff. Psychological breakthroughs? Better ways to keep us happy so that we can produce and consume more stuff).
- International relations—that is, which group people in which places have which stuff that which other group of people want.
- Technological breakthroughs—stuff.
- Exploration—places.
- Travel, entertainment, comedy—commodified experiences.

Here are some things that you might find in this theoretical news source that also appears in ours:

- Opinions
- Interpersonal relations
- Religion, maybe?

When one is unbound by the constraints of stuff, places, or money, one finds that there is little news that is worth treating as news.

Doubtless they have news out there. I don't mean to imply otherwise. Of what worth would it be to us to know of a cult surrounding, say, some upload who has found a neat thing to do with forking? Of what use is the knowledge of what is the new, hottest sim? Which of us really, truly cares about their petty squabbles?

I would say that I do, but let's be honest, I can't even begin to understand those, but I can certainly respect their rights to have them.

Now, tell me what effective governance looks like in such a system. Resources are controlled through the reputation market. As far as I can tell, there is no murder, there are no wars, fights can be over in a blink if one of the parties just leaves, and the worst offense someone can commit is stalking, and even then, one can be bounced from a sim.

We come yet again to the idea of speciation. We are fundamentally different. Or, to use a metaphor from the first point, this is an entire *society*, human or otherwise, that is fundamentally different, as one might see with the vast gulf between customs in different areas of the world.

The L₅ station has no obligation to host the System.

Correct, and yet they volunteered. This is a non-argument for a non-problem.

They are an international cooperative effort with business interests involved. The System is neither of those, true, but it is also not *not* those, either. A nation to cooperate? It is not a nation, but I believe I've argued the point that, given fundamental differences, it might as well be. A business? It is not a business, but it does have employees and businesses associated with it, and it produces some delightful results in terms of the new ideas that constantly flow through the communications channels.

Friends, I struggle to see the merit of many of these arguments, and of the ones that do hold water, there are sensible compromises available. These people are *people*, and it has long been established that people deserve rights. They are a *culture*, and it has long been established that cultures deserve protection.

Vote for the granting of rights. Vote yes on *referendum 10b30188*

Yared Zerezghi (NEAC)

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

Codrin and Dear walked, hand in paw, from cairn to cairn out through the prairie, tracing lines of exploration that Codrin had built over the years.

Ey had been surprised, at first, that Dear had agreed to this walk. The offer had been made on a whim: *I'm going to walk the prairie, do you want to come?*

And it had agreed, forking off an instance to continue its work in quiet while the down-tree fork tramped out into the fields. There was no storm today, hardly even any clouds, just a few patches of lazy shadow that drifted across the rolling landscape as their corresponding cumulus slid between sun and grass. It made for a pleasantly warm spring day with enough of a breeze to keep it from becoming outright muggy, and quiet enough that the occasional clattering of a startled grasshopper sounded clear.

Historian and fox walked, hand in paw, from cairn to cairn, saying little, but saying it kindly.

"Codrin," Dear asked as they passed another pile of rocks. *"Did you bring me out here to talk about the interview?"*

"That was on my list of things to talk about, but I also just wanted to spend time with you."

It squeezed eir hand in its paw and smiled. *"Thank you, my dear. It does mean a lot. Still, do tell me your thoughts on the interview."*

Codrin bent down to pluck a thin stem of grass as they walked, fiddling with it between nervous fingers, tapping the tip against eir chin. "I don't know. It was surprisingly painful for me. I think it was painful for us both, in our own ways. Still..."

"It still scared you?" Dear hazarded.

"I think so, yeah. I can understand the anxiety that one might not be missed after one leaves a place. Even in the face of knowledge that that's not true—Ioan will miss you, May Then My Name will miss you, just about everyone who showed up at the death day party will, too—it's hard to really internalize that others will still be thinking of you when you aren't there."

The fox frowned, but nodded to Codrin all the same.

"It was just hard to hear you say, 'I want to die' so plainly."

It squeezed eir hand in its paw again, but remained silent.

"Especially after Michelle..."

Dear stopped suddenly, there by a cairn, leaving Codrin to keep walking until its paw tugged em to a stop in turn.

"Michelle made a difficult decision, but the right one," it said. *"I remember that pain, the inability to be just one thing, to*

be an entire person. I remember how those waves of instability always made her—made me—so nauseous and being touched felt disgusting. It was lonely-making for someone who needed—deserved—love and affection. She made the right decision to choose her own end and make it meaningful, own it.”

“And the decision to not fix the split-mindedness?”

It dropped its gaze to the ground. *“I do not know if that was the right decision.”*

Codrin turned to face the fox, taking its other paw in eir free hand. “Do you know why she made it, at least?”

“Yes. I think so. At least, I know why she made the decision two centuries ago. She felt that she was honoring the Name, that to get rid of that part of her that left her in that state after getting lost was to disrespect the referent of that name and all that they went through. She thought that, after seeing how her first forks were locked into singular aspects, she would lose that.”

Dear looked off into the prairie, so Codrin took the opportunity to lean forward and kiss it’s cheek. “It was difficult seeing her and then learning of her death, and given the associations that you have with her, I couldn’t help but think that there might be some of that in you when you said you wanted to die.”

“I know, and I apologize for that. It did not adequately express what that means to me, but was too sharp a phrase to turn down. I will be more careful with how I phrase these topics in the future.”

“Thank you, Dear. I’ve been giving it some thought, and I think I understand what you’re going for. I think we even talked about it after Qoheleth’s meeting. You wanted to find a way to...end, I think you put it.”

Dear grinned. It looked tired. *“That we did, yes. I will say that this is not the same idea, though it does come from the same roots. I was thinking then that there ought to be some way for one personality to lead to another, to be free of those memories, yet for someone new to live on. The core of that is still there, but I suppose what I want is to come by an earnest death. A real death. Natural causes, such as it were. I don’t want to know when or how, but knowing that there is a limit to our immortality has become a comfort to me.”*

Codrin disentangled eir hands from the fox’s paws, opting instead to hug it around the middle. Dear reciprocated by looping its arms around eir shoulders.

“That’s what I suspected you meant, yeah. I just didn’t pick up on it at the time is all.”

“Yes. Sorry, Codrin.”

“It’s okay, promise.”

They stood for a while, there in the prairie, silent, thinking, until by some unspoken signal, they turned toward the side of the cairn that hadn’t been explored and began walking.

“What is next on your list?”

“Hm? In terms of interviews and such?”

“Yes. Do you know where you will start looking?”

“I was thinking I’d start asking around our friends and see who invested totally up here and who didn’t, then perhaps put out the question to a wider audience. That ought to get me a good amount of responses.”

“It is a bit of a shotgun approach, is it not?”

Codrin laughed, shrugged, and knelt down to begin building the next pile of stones. “You got any better ideas, fox?”

It knelt beside them, digging up stones of its own and handing them to em. *“Of course I do. Do ask our friends, as I think they will have much to say, but also, while poking around, I saw that several of the founders have made the launch.*

I am not surprised that this is the case."

"Oh? That makes sense, I suppose." Ey plopped a root-tangled rock on top of the growing pile, laughing. "Something exciting after all those years, back to being at the heart of something important."

Dear splayed its ears. *"It is hard to let go of that desire, yes. A few of them are quite mad now, however."*

"Mad how?"

"All of the council, all of those who uploaded so early, were reasonable in their own ways, but some more logical than others. I sure as hell was not." It sat back on its heels and watched Codrin finish the cairn. *"After things with the council began to disintegrate and the meaning of being a founder grew all the more poignant with the explosive population growth, many got frustrated and left to get up to their own things. Many of us...lost track of each other after that, but I have seen many of their names here and there, and I know that several are on the launches as well as the System. They might have some interesting insights to give you."*

"Interesting good? Interesting bad?" Ey laughed. "You can't call them mad and then just leave 'interesting' hanging in there."

"Of course I can." It stood again, dusting off its legs. *"But I love you, so I will not. As far as I can tell, many initially picked up artistic endeavors of some sort or another, and almost to a one, they became interested in history and preservation. I am sure that you have read several of their works. For those who experienced such, much of the strain on their personalities began to show about twenty years ago."*

"Twenty years ago, huh? Around the time of *On the Perils of Memory*? Or the launch?"

The fox only grinned.

"Well, I'll put them on the list, then. I'm curious to hear what a mad founder has to say about travelling however many kilometers a second through space. Anyone else?"

"I am sure there are more Odists on here who would be willing to talk. Some of them might even be interesting." It admired the waist-high cairn, smiling. *"If you want actually interesting perspectives, however, you cannot go wrong hunting down artists, though. They will always have something to say."*

True Name — 2124

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream met with Jonas at a sim of her choosing. They had tacitly agreed that they would switch sims every time they met, if possible, and alternate who chose which. It followed the general outline of how the council met, but, being just the two of them and learning where they would meet only minutes prior meant even less of a chance of being found out.

Found out from what or by whom, True Name had not yet divined. Perhaps it was just a good habit.

She felt constantly aware of who was around her. Not in the sense that she was being watched, though she certainly entertained that idea. It wasn't that she and Jonas might be discovered as members of the council and accosted. Nor was it that they were doing anything untoward. They were just getting together to do their jobs and do them to their full abilities.

Perhaps it had something to do with lingering anxiety left over from Michelle. Perhaps it was due to the tenuousness of her position on the council—not that they doubted her as a fork of Michelle, but she did sense some hesitancy surrounding allowing forked instances to sit while the root instance did not.

Maybe I have drifted too far, she often found herself thinking. Maybe I am no longer Michelle enough to see things in the same way.

So, she remained vigilant, regardless of whether or not she knew why, and kept as much as she could above-board with the council. Always at the forefront of her mind, she held her goal of ensuring the continuity of existence and continuity of growth of the System. That's what this all boiled down to, right?

Today, they met at a place of her choosing, and she had chosen the closest thing that she could find to the Crown Pub of old: a well-aged, British-style pub, complete with a few high-topped tables and the types of small beer that she had never quite grown to love, yet drank all the same.

Jonas blinked into the sim outside, so she was first alerted to his presence by a quiet ding from the bell above the door. She watched him step inside and look around with an appraising glance before spotting her and joining her at the two-top.

"Nice place. How's the beer?"

"Flat. Weak." She took a sip and shrugged. "Perfect for the setting, as far as I can tell."

"Better than clams frozen in ice cubes?"

She laughed. "Much. Want to get a drink and find a booth?"

"Sure. You find the booth, I'll get the drink, then we can talk."

The booth in the corner is where the sim diverged from the one she had known so well back on the net. Where

those at the Crown had been high-walled, wood dividers reaching up to the ceiling even after the cushioned backs ended, these were low-backed and reminded her more of the types of padded benches one might find on the bus or train.

Ah well, they cannot all be perfect.

She waited until Jonas sat and she ribbed him good-naturedly about his choice of a fruity vodka drink before setting up the cone of silence.

“So,” he said, offering her the neon-pink cherry out of his drink.

“So.” She bit the cherry off the stem and chewed thoughtfully, the fruit sweet enough to make her sinuses burn. “Have you read Yared’s recent post?”

He nodded.

“Thoughts?”

“It’s written well enough. He’s good at picking three points and tackling them. He’s been focusing more on questions of government.”

“And have you read between the lines?”

His face split into a grin. “I believe so.”

“And?”

“No, no. I want to hear you say the words first.”

She laughed and tossed the cherry stem at him. “Alright. Do you think that he is suggesting that we somehow become our own country?”

“I most definitely do.” He sipped at his drink and leaned back against the back of the booth. “Secession isn’t something that I’d considered with any seriousness before. Then again, it didn’t really feel like it’d be necessary until all of this talk about rights, and even then, it didn’t even feel worth considering from a feasibility standpoint until the L₅ team offered to bring the System with.”

“Agreed, yes. I am happy to see that our friend has some subtlety.”

“It wasn’t *that* subtle.”

“Well, no, but he at least refrained from mentioning secession or making any direct suggestions as to our independence from the S-R Bloc or dual citizenship. That must count for something.”

“Of course. Though it does have me wondering. Do you think he’s acting on his own volition?”

True Name tilted her head. “Are you suggesting that he is a front for some larger player?”

Jonas shrugged, finishing off his drink in one smooth swallow before setting the glass back down on the table. “Nothing so grand. I’m just wondering if he’s being influenced by someone.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The way the topics of his posts are drifting. It’s not that one doesn’t follow another, so much as there seems to be a trajectory in mind, with each getting closer to a specific goal.”

She frowned. “Are you saying you have seen this coming?”

“No, no,” he laughed, holding up his hands. “Just that, taking this new info into account, when I look back at the recent posts, I’m seeing a small pattern.”

She drank in silence as she digested this. Yared seemed like an honest and earnest supporter, though certainly from the standpoint of a DDR junkie. He also seemed like a nobody. A nobody who was a reasonably good

writer and loud on the 'net.

That combination probably made him a fairly attractive target to influence.

"Had you known this was coming," she began, lifting Jonas out of his own reverie. "What would you have thought? What would you have done?"

He raised his empty glass to her. "An astute question! I'll make a politician out of you yet."

She kicked his shin beneath the table, and he laughed.

"You're a bit late to be whining about that. You've been on the council longer than I have." Twirling his glass between his fingers, he said slowly, pacing his words with his thoughts. "What would I have thought? I would've thought much as I mentioned before. I would've considered it unnecessary, then infeasible. What would I have done, though? I think I would have used him in turn. Gently steering him away from the idea while trying to find out who was behind this shift, if anyone, and try to dig up dirt on them."

"I see. He does seem rather pliant. He would be a useful tool for us to wield, too."

"First the astute questions, now the cynicism! You're well on-ow!" He laughed, reaching beneath the table to rub at his shin. "It's a good idea, though. No matter what we decide, we can always push him a little this way or that to help us out. I still want to figure out who's behind him, though."

"I do too, since you brought it up. Do you have any hunches on who it might be?"

"He's NEAC, right? Probably one of his own council-members. No one too high up, but someone high enough that they can read the situation better. Likely someone from the ruling coalition, but not the head of the council. Probably a more senior position, too. The grandfatherly type, or at least avuncular."

True Name laughed. "Really?"

"Really. They're always the sly types you need to watch out for. Nothing they say is not a coldly calculated maneuver to get you to agree with them." He shook his head. "Even their wives—and they're almost always men—are probably married to them only because they told them that they loved them in *just* the right tone of voice to get them to say yes."

"Manipulative shitheads."

Jonas laughed. "Very. Probably Demma, or maybe Bahrey. Both fit the bill. They'll have all the plausible deniability in the world, too. Some underling did the actual work, while they sit back and get whatever it is that they want."

"So, tell me, O great political teacher, how do we find out which without asking?"

"Bring up something about the bill and pretend to be disheartened by it or like we don't understand it, ask him who would be the one to address it, now that it's reached their ears."

"Right. I was thinking we would ask him what government types are thinking about the launch, if anyone has been pushing against it or for it, who seems neutral, and then ask for names under the guise of doing research, see who he names first."

"There you go," Jonas said. "You'll run the risk of maybe getting more names than you were hoping for, but chances are, the first one that'll come to his mind is whoever's driving him."

True Name smiled, sipping the last of her warm, flat beer. She was pleased at just how much trust she was building with Jonas. Ask the questions you already know the answers to, look like you're thinking, then suggest something that's almost but not quite right.

She was nothing if not an actor.

“This secession angle, though. Do you think that would be worth pushing towards?” she asked.

“I’d like to steer a little closer to it, first, just to see what that’d look like. It’ll require the launch amendment to pass, as I don’t think System hardware can remain on Earth without someone getting upset at whoever’s land it sits on. Once that’s sorted out, though, and we have a better idea of what an independent System will look like, I say we push hard.”

True Name nodded. “It sounds like there is no reason not to. If the System is to remain beholden to existing government influences, it will always be at risk of reinterpretation of those laws. We are uniquely positioned to be almost entirely impossible to invade as a sovereign kingdom, and we have enough support that there is low risk that we will be simply turned off. Too many people want to join. Too many still see utility for us. Too many dreamers.”

“Listen to you, my dear!” Jonas laughed. “You sound like a dreamer, yourself.”

“Perhaps.” She grinned. “But also someone willing to devote myself—several of me—to getting what I want.”

“Speaking of, what are the rest of you doing?”

“End Of Days says is working on remaining sensoria stuff, talking with the S-R trio to round out the proposal for sensorium messages. Praiseworthy is reading up on propaganda. Life Breeds Life is keeping an eye on how tasks are divided. Most everyone else is out and about, keeping a feel for the place, or making things.”

“You and your names. What sorts of things are you making?”

“Writing. Performances. Friends.”

“Hobbies?”

She nodded, tapping absentmindedly at the rim of her glass with a claw. “Minus the friends part, yes. I was a theatre teacher, phys-side. Need to have fun somehow.” She could feel the conversation drifting into small-talk territory, and she wasn’t yet ready to lose Jonas’s attention. “You have your forks already, do you not? What are they working on?”

Jonas sat up, then slid out of the booth. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

True Name set her empty glass aside and slid out to follow him.

The next sim they traveled to was an apartment. Something high up, somewhere over a city she didn’t recognize. It was well furnished and quite spacious, but could hardly be called upscale.

As soon as they arrived, two other members of the Jonas clade appeared from a door that appeared to lead to an office. There was no doubt about their identity as Jonases: they were identical.

“Skillfully done,” she said, laughing. “Who was I speaking to today? Not Jonas Prime, I imagine.”

The one who had brought her here laughed, shaking his head. “No, I’m Ar Jonas. What tipped you off?”

“If I had several identical copies of myself with the same common name, all forked from the same root instance, I would not send the root instance out to a meeting not at a place of my choosing.”

One of the other Jonases nodded appreciatively. “Well spotted.”

Ar Jonas disappeared from beside her and, with a blink, reappeared. “Merged with Prime,” he explained. “I’ll leave you two to talk.”

He and the other Jonas left to go pick up where the work had been left off in the office, leaving Jonas Prime to guide her to the sofa.

“How often do you show up at council as Prime?” she asked, once they were seated.

“Used to be every time,” he said. “Then one day, I nearly missed it as I was in the middle of a...discussion, so I sent Ar. I was nervous that someone would see through it, but no one did. I tried to keep going myself for a while, but after there were no repercussions, I gave up on it, and alternate between the other six.”

“Six?”

“Of course. Ar, Ku, and Re, as I mentioned, and now Ir, who forked from Ar and looks nothing like me, so he’s got more latitude.”

“And the other two?”

“Why would I tell you everything?” He laughed. “They’re my instances, doing the things that I do, which should be enough.”

“As they must. You have already told me more than you probably should have.”

“I trust you’ll keep quiet about it.”

True Name grinned, putting her finger to her snout in the universal hush sign. “It is a neat enough trick. I think that the Ode clade already differs too much to send one of them in my place, so perhaps not for me.”

“It’s up to you, yeah.” Jonas sat back against the couch, one arm draped casually along the back. “I honestly was surprised when no one noticed my reputation drop, but then I figured out that most people just look at the clade’s reputation, rather than the instances. I have a feeling that’ll change eventually, but for now, no one seems to pay all that much attention.”

The skunk frowned, browsed the markets—something that felt more akin to remembering what the stats were, rather than looking anything up—and saw that, while she had less reputation than Michelle had before she forked, the clade had a good bit more, likely from what each of them were doing to build reputation. Jonas naming his clade after himself was a fairly savvy move, in the end. ‘Ode’ having no direct ties to Michelle it seems like something unrelated.

Ah well. I am still happy to have done it, she thought. And perhaps we will find our own way to build reputation that does not involve a constant game of make believe.

“Thank you again for your trust, Jonas,” she said, standing. Neither the booth nor the couch had been all that kind on her tail. “I am going to go do some digging in the recent news from the NEAC and wait for our dear Yared to get in touch with us again.”

He nodded up to her. “Alright. I’ll be in touch, I’m sure.”

“And, Jonas?” A grin twisted the corner of her mouth. “Do not call me a fucking politician. I have an image to maintain.”

He laughed and waved her away.

Douglas Hadje — 2325

Douglas doffed his suit and packed into its carry bag, which had previously held his clothes.

Why did I do that?

He finished straightening his jumpsuit and began the slow walk back to his apartment. He ignored the colored strips on the wall that would guide him back the quick way, and instead walked anti-spinward, the long way around. This would take him through the manufacturing sector, but that was alright. It would be loud and there would be the quietly efficient drones carrying out all their little tasks, but it would give him more time to walk, more time to think.

Why the hell did I do that?

He wound his way through a few of the factories, from the glass furnace to the thick cylinder that housed the strut-works, a complex of sturdy supports and extrusion machinery that had grown the launch arm out of this side of the station. He brushed his hand along the smooth wall of the cylinder, before continuing to wind his way through the manufacturing wing.

The reasons eluded him. He didn't know why he did that. Why he kept doing that. Why would he run himself through this exercise time and again? Why would he grab his suit, dream up some small errand that warranted an EVA, and go out to touch the side of the System?

Why would he keep doing that to himself.

She was dead. Dead, or close enough to it. *Nowhere on the System*. That's what May Then My Name had said. This woman he had essentially no ties to other than a family name, this woman he'd never met, one who owed him nothing and to whom he only owed dreams.

She was dead and there was nothing he could do about it. No funeral, no memorial that he could reach. He wanted so badly to mourn this woman he'd never met and felt as though there were no possible way to do so without something to do. Something to say. Some cold stone to stand before or unfeeling metal plaque where grieving fingers could trace the letters of her name.

She was dead, and that shouldn't even matter to him.

That was the worst part, he'd decided: that his grief felt unwarranted. There was no connection between them other than the name, they'd never talked, and she likely didn't even know that her family had continued on after her through her brother, so what did he do to earn the right to mourn her? Doubtless she left loved ones behind on the System, too, people she'd known for more than two hundred years, lovers, enemies, colleagues and friends who respected her. *They* had the right to mourn.

He was just that weird guy who would take EVA walks from the narrow gap of the station to the System, press his hands and forehead to the glassy exterior, and dream that he was dreaming along with the billions who lived inside. No one inside knew of him other than the sys-side launch team, and no one actually knew him personally aside from May Then My Name and perhaps Ioan.

The manufacturing sector ran out beneath his feet, and he stepped from there to the spotless, black control center for the machinery. It had hardly been used since the development and construction of the strut-works. It had only really existed for the pleasure of the tourists who had made the station possible in the first place, for the walls of the control center were glass, letting tourists gawk at all of the machinery that went into running a station.

No tourists anymore. No gawking. The glass walls offered little to those who worked on the station other than a place to lounge and zone out, watching robots scurry to and fro.

He swiped his way out of the sector and passed from there to what had previously been a strip mall running most of the length of the ship. Shops had long ago been decommissioned and transitioned into various offices. This had been divvied up into threes, with one third being dedicated to running the station itself, one third to running the System, and one third to science and research, for those who were still able to make the long, expensive trip out to the moon and from the moon to the station, where they might do their concrete astrophysics or space-bound astronomy.

The mall opened up onto a promenade and park. The grass and gardens there remained meticulously well kept, doing their part along with the atmospheric regulation system to keep the air inside clean.

Gardens faded into low trees and greenhouses where most of the food for the station was grown. Potatoes, yams, soybeans, apples, millet, and the precious rotating crop of grains that blessed the station with the occasional bit of bread.

All was tended by automated systems, along with the help of a few botanist-nutritionists.

He walked through the sectors of the station and thought. He walked along the promenade tailward, then further anti-spinward to the greenhouses, and back sunward again. He walked and he thought, slowly going through the mental list of things he'd always wanted to say to Michelle and erasing them, line by line. Why keep them around, now? Why bother?

Having walked back to the sunward hub, he finished the trip to his room in the hotel. His room where he would remain precisely as alone as he had been before.

His implants buzzed as he walked into his room, and a glance at the corner of his HUD showed a message-received icon. He'd turned off his HUD for the non-errand and the walk through the station, but now that he saw it, saw that it originated sys-side, he tossed his suit bag onto the bed and dashed over to his rig.

May Then My Name Die With Me: Douglas! Ioan and I are available today. If you have some time, we would like to talk with you.

This, at least, was something pleasant to distract himself from his unearned grief.

Douglas Hadje: I'm available for the next few hours before I should probably go to bed. Let me know when you're around.

The reply was almost immediate.

Ioan Bălan: Douglas, nice to meet you! May is forking, she'll be here in a moment.

May Then My Name: I am here! Glad you could make it. How are you out there? Enjoying the cold vacuum of space?

He frowned, quelling the suspicion that they had known of his EVA.

Douglas: The station is a perfectly comfortable 20C at all times. If ever it gets cold, I'm probably in trouble.

May Then My Name: Boring.

Ioan: Don't listen to her. Are you doing well?

Douglas: As well as I can. I'm still trying to figure out what to do with my time. I've gone on a few not-super-necessary EVAs to just look at the stars or the System or whatever. I really should take up knitting. Oh! And nice to meet you as well.

Douglas: How are you two?

Ioan: Fine, here. Very busy. We're conducting interviews all across the System, as well as coordinating with those who are doing the same on the LVs.

May Then My Name: Ioan is doing the interviews and coordination, I am eating all of his food and leaving the dishes out.

Ioan: She's been working, too. She's probably got the larger project ahead of her than I do.

Douglas: You sound like you're having fun, so I'll take that as a good sign. What did you want to talk about?

May Then My Name: Your questions. I thought that it would be more comfortable to do so as a conversation rather than over mail. Certainly more organic.

Douglas: Alright, where do you want to start?

May Then My Name: Perhaps it would be easiest for Ioan and I to answer a whole bunch of your questions at once. They are mostly biographical, and I think that a few paragraphs from each of us will cover most of them.

May Then My Name: We have flipped a coin, and it was decided that I will go first.

May Then My Name: I uploaded back in the early 2100s, back when the System was small and full of dreamers, weirdos, and people like you and Ioan who spend all of their time thinking. Before that, I was a teacher, though towards the end of my phys-side tenure and for some time after, I became involved in politics. I grew up in the central corridor of North America, in the Western Federation. As with everyone, I do not think that I have an accent, though after some trouble with my implants before I uploaded, I found that some speech and thought patterns had changed, and

since then, language and I have had a complicated relationship. We could have worked to change it, my cocladists and I, but why bother?

May Then My Name: You ask about dissolution strategies (tasker, tracker, dispersionista): you are correct that they apply to the ways in which an individual forks. They are not hard and fast categories, but rather a set of patterns that we have noticed over the years and applied names and numbers to. Taskers will fork only very rarely, and then for a specific task, merging back into the root instance immediately afterward. Trackers fork more frequently, and may maintain forks over a longer period of time. The reasons for forking may vary—Ioan is a tracker, ey will explain more—but the forks almost always follow a single line of thought or relationship or what have you to its logical end before merging back. Dispersionistas are those who fork for fun, spinning off new personalities and maybe merging them back, maybe not. My clade, the Ode clade, falls somewhere between tracker and dispersionista: we fork frequently for many temporary purposes, but maintain a relatively small permanent clade of around 100 instances.

May Then My Name: Is that clear? I can answer questions about this until the cows upload.

Douglas: I think so. It made sense when you called them ‘dissolution strategies’, which makes me think of dissolving into a solution.

May Then My Name: Basically. We all enjoy dissolution (or not) in different ways. Those are lazy categories to bucketize vague trends. They are similar in some ways to political divisions: one may identify with a political label, even if one’s actual political inclinations may be more complicated than that label implies.

Ioan: And all dispersionistas are all bleeding heart liberals or weirdo artists.

May Then My Name: To a one, yes.

Ioan: I fall more into the tracker camp. I pick up projects such as this one or researching a book or something, and let a fork work on those. I—my #Tracker instance, as it’s called—or my forks may create extra instances for smaller tasks along the way, but it gets to be too much for me to deal with after a certain point, and the slow divergence of personalities feels uncomfortable. I have three forks out there now, one for collating data from each LV, and one for conducting interviews here while I write. That number goes up and down as needed.

Douglas: Makes sense to me.

May Then My Name: Do you have a sense of how you will approach this when you upload?

Douglas: Good question. I’m only just now learning about it, so it’s hard for me to say for sure, but I think I’m with Ioan on this. It sounds like it’d get confusing after a while.

Ioan: Oh, it does. When there are ten different Mays running around, I’d be hard pressed to tell them apart.

May Then My Name: I need to keep you on your toes somehow.

Ioan: Or step on them.

Douglas: Is that a common thing? That many May Then My Names?

Douglas: Would it be too personal of me to just call you May, by the way?

May Then My Name: 'May' is a pet name reserved for those with whom I am closest. I ask that you please stick with May Then My Name.

Douglas: Alright. Apologies if I overstepped.

May Then My Name: Accepted! Thank you for asking. But yes, it is common that I will spin off a bunch of instances for this or that. I have a tendency to fork when I get excited. That is not terribly relevant, though.

Ioan: You asked about what it's like being a historian on the System. It's not quite the information haven that I think you're imagining. All of that vast wealth of data is technically there, but it exists in the perisystem architecture, and finding one's way around there can be something of a pain. Our role becomes one of researcher and librarian as much as historian. Besides, the goal of a historian isn't always to dig up long lost artifacts or writing or whatever, but rather to make sense of what is there. Take all that info and make a story out of it.

Ioan: Do keep in mind that I'm not strictly a historian. I'm mostly a writer, and my role can vary from historical research to something more akin to anthropology like this current situation, to something almost like a journalist, where I watch something happen and build a coherent story out of it.

May Then My Name: That is how ey came to work with our clade and thus the Launch project. Ey had done some observing with one of my cocladists, and it recommended em to us for this task.

Ioan: As for my biography, before I lose the thread, I uploaded in the 2230s after growing up in south-central Europe. I uploaded after a short stint in university where, yes, I studied history. My parents died, and I am not built for a life with death in it, so I headed sys-side to allow my siblings to attend school.

May Then My Name: Oh, Ioan. That is the first I have heard of this.

Ioan: It's been almost a century, I've come to terms with it. We can talk about it another time, though, if you're interested.

Ioan: You ask about universities here. There are quite a few organizations that fill that role, most of which are hyper-focused on specific fields. I worked with a history and anthropology institute for a while, and actually missed one of May's cocladists while working with an institute for art and design.

Douglas frowned at his terminal. That was the third time Ioan had referred to May Then My Name as that pet name 'May', but he couldn't think of a polite way to ask what that meant about how close they were.

Douglas: That makes sense. I imagine there has to be some structure in place. I know that you can't upload before you turn 18, but I imagine a lot of people still want to learn things that interest them after.

Ioan: Very much so. We have to make our own fun.

May Then My Name: ‘Fun’, ey says.

May Then My Name: Douglas, Ioan could have fun organizing eir pen collection.

Ioan: Can and do.

Ioan: You’ll have to forgive the silliness, Douglas. It’s been a long day for us.

Douglas: It’s okay. I’m glad that there’s still fun to be had sys-side.

May Then My Name: Oh, plenty!

May Then My Name: Now, you also asked after Michelle.

His stomach sank. He considered what to type back, but decided instead on waiting for May Then My Name to continue, lest he get too emotional again.

May Then My Name: First of all, you asked if I ever met her. I had the chance to meet her a handful of times. I would not call her famous, *per se*, but many do remember her as one of the founders. She was

May Then My Name: Well.

May Then My Name: I want to say that she was old. I am only a little bit younger than she was, in the grand scheme of things, but some of her experiences prior to uploading left a mark on her, and time was not kind to her in that regard. Though aging is not really something that we need to worry about, sys-side, she seemed to have aged every one of those two centuries.

Douglas: What did she look like, at that age?

May Then My Name: You misunderstand, or I misspeak. She looked much as she did when she uploaded, but that pre-upload trauma meant that she felt all two hundred of those years. If you go through an event that makes 80% of your days bad days, then that means that you wind up with 58400 bad days through the years. That will wear on one.

Douglas: I don’t know what to say.

Douglas: I’m sorry to hear that about her.

Douglas: Is that a common experience sys-side?

May Then My Name: Not that common, no, and hers was unique.

May Then My Name: Every now and then, one of us will get tired of functional immortality and decide to just quit their instance—that is what she did—and disappear off the System. I do not begrudge her that.

Ioan: I’m sorry for your loss, Douglas.

He had to blink away tears in order to reply, and then did so quickly, hitting send before his courage failed him.

Douglas: I'm really torn up about this. I don't even know why. I never met her, know basically nothing about her, and have apparently been thinking about someone as though they were alive, when in reality, they've been dead for two decades. How can I possibly miss her? But I do! I miss her and feel like I'm in mourning, and then I feel guilty over the fact that I'm grieving this person who never knew me.

Douglas: I'm sorry.

Douglas: That just all came at once, sorry.

Douglas: I'm sorry.

May Then My Name: Douglas, let me tell you a story.

May Then My Name: One of the times I had the chance to meet Michelle, I visited her sim with her. She had not built herself a house or anything, like most do, but instead built for herself an endless green field of rolling hills. Except, that, rather than letting that field be perfect, it was absolutely covered with dandelions. Weeds, basically. It was not that it was some weeded lot, but that it was a field of very obviously well-kept grass, dotted every few feet with these clusters of perfectly imperfect flowers, little suns peeking up out of their spray of leaves.

May Then My Name: From what you say of Earth, a field of well-kept grass would be incredibly rare, and so I imagine that you understand what it would mean for something so pristine to become filled with these flowers that everyone considered a nuisance.

May Then My Name: But Michelle was obsessed with them. She loved their smell, and loved how bright they stood out against the grass. There it was, this amazing field of the richest grass that invited one to roll in it, and it was dotted with these intensely yellow flowers.

May Then My Name: Her sim was intentional in its imperfections. It was a dialectic. It was a koan, a contradiction in which sat a kernel of universal truth, understood only when one realized that both sides of that contradiction could be true at the same time.

May Then My Name: I did not know why she invited me over to her sim to meet with me, rather than meet up at some cafe or park or office, but when I arrived, I saw that she seemed to be having a bad day, as so many of hers were. When she had a bad day, it was visible in her very body. She would flicker between two different forms, like one might flicker between two different avatars on the 'net. I am still not sure how that worked, as it was generally a violation of the norms, but no one ever called her on it, no System process ever made her stop.

May Then My Name: I asked her about the field as we sat down on the side of a low hill, and she picked one of those dandelions. It was perfect. They have hollow stems, and the walls ooze a sticky, white latex when the stem is broken, and even that was perfect in the sim. She picked the flower and smelled it, then handed it to me. "When I was in school," she told me. "My friends and I would go sit in the grass above the football field and talk, and at least once a year when we did that, I would pick a dandelion and tell them that I always thought they smelled like muffins. They would always laugh."

May Then My Name: And then she got real quiet and we sat there for what must have been an hour before she spoke again, “How silly, that that is the one thing that I remember most clearly. Sitting in the grass, smelling flowers with my friends.”

May Then My Name: Scent, I have been told, bears the strongest ties to memory, and this defined her in some undefinable way. We got to our business after that, but I remember smelling that flower and thinking, “Well, what do you know, it does smell like muffins.”

May Then My Name: I do not know if Michelle would have liked you or if you would have liked her. I do not know if you would have felt any connection for each other, or felt like family. What I do know is that she was every bit the person you imagine her to be. Fully realized and with every bit of story that you must have imagined for her over the years. She was real. She was complex. She thought about her friends, two hundred years gone, and how they laughed.

May Then My Name: You may not have had the chance to meet her, to talk to her, but you very much knew her, in your own way.

It was a long time before Douglas was able to respond, and both Ioan and May Then My Name kept quiet. He didn't feel like they were expecting him to reply or that he was keeping them waiting while he let all that pent-up emotion out at once. They were simply holding space for him.

Douglas: Thank you for that. I don't know if we would've felt like family, either, but I am incredibly happy that I got the chance to hear you talk about her.

May Then My Name: You do not need to justify your grief, Douglas. You are allowed to feel it. Give yourself permission. You have my permission, as well.

Ioan: How about we call it here for now? There will be plenty of time for questions coming up, and I'm sure we'll all have our lists to bring to the next time we can chat.

Ioan: Take care of yourself, Douglas. May's right. You're allowed to mourn. It's the healthy thing to do.

Ioan: Besides, May made herself cry and I don't think she's going to be good for much more tonight.

May Then My Name: Ioan I swear to god.

May Then My Name: I am going to eat crackers in your bed and put sand in your shoes.

Douglas laughed in spite of himself.

Douglas: Thank you both, then. I really mean it. Ping me whenever, and I'll get to it as soon as I can.

After they said their goodbyes and he put his terminal to sleep, he turned out the lights, stripped out of his clothes, and climbed into bed. He was prepared to let emotions overtake him, but where that knot of feelings had formed within him was now only calm. He wasn't through it, he suspected, but at least he was able to untangle some of that grief tonight.

He embraced that calm, rolled onto his side, and slept.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

The first interview of note that Codrin Bălan conducted was with an author who had chosen to invest completely in the launches, leaving no forks behind.

At first, Codrin wondered why it was that this author had chosen to be a part of the interview process, why it was that Dear had recommended him. He seemed, on the surface to be entirely uninteresting. He was an author. That was that.

His name was Martin Rankin, and while Codrin had not read any of his works prior to the suggestion, ey had certainly heard the name in the various literary circles that ey trawled on occasion. A man prone to grand literary gestures, one who leaned heavily on the twisting of endless sentences, ceaseless streams of fragments, prose that bordered on florid even by Codrin's relatively flowery standards. Ey knew that ey was prone to many of the same pitfalls, but this man took it to an extreme that ey found unreasonable.

To prepare for the interview, ey'd read two of Rankin's books. They were not without their merit, as might any such book be that garnered so much attention, but they still took plenty of work to get through. He wrote most often about contemporary life within the System in all its deliriously boring intricacies.

That said, much of his work was bound up in a sense of magical realism that was, ey had to admit, enticing. This was something that Codrin had never managed to capture emself, and so ey set aside some time to study the ways in which Rankin used surrealism to enhance the story at hand without distracting.

Martin Rankin was exactly as ey had expected. There was nothing about the man that did not shout Martin Rankin. He wore his identity on his face, on his chest, in the way his hands moved across the table as they talked, there at the cafe, there sitting out on the street, there sipping their drinks.

"So, you are the illustrious Codrin Bălan." His voice was imperious, veering dangerously close to pompous, looking over the rim of the glass appraisingly at em as he sipped grappa.

Something about the man grated. Ey wasn't quite sure what it was at first, whether it was the self-assured way he spoke, or the self-aggrandizing expression he wore on his face. It was nigh intolerable.

All the same, ey tried eir best to keep up eir smile as ey spoke. "And you're Martin Rankin. It's a pleasure to finally get the chance to meet you in the flesh. Thank y—"

"What a curious choice of phrase, in the flesh." His tone was droll, bored. "Have you stopped to think of all of the little idioms we bring with us from 'phys-side'? Even that term! Phys-side. It spells out very plainly that we do not exist in that form any longer. We exist in *opposition* to it. 'Sys-side' contains no such sense of our abstract existence."

Ey nodded, smiling ingratiatingly. The man was clearly used to having the chance to expound on his own ideas, and anything that anyone else had to say was of secondary importance—if it was important at all. Ey decided to lean into that. “What a beautiful way to put that. Do you think that the same applies to the dichotomy between L₅ System and launch?”

The simpering tone appeared to appeal to Rankin’s sensibilities, as he smiled down to Codrin with all the patronizing disdain of *bless your heart*. “I do believe so. What can we say but ‘launch-side’ and ‘sys-side’? Do those truly say anything about our existence here? We are hurtling out into space at some terrifying speed, driven by the momentum imparted by the spin of the station and the deliciously thin membranes of those solar sails. Ah! What a journey on which we have decided to embark! We lucky few. Those back on the System know nothing of our experiences out here, even if they have also decided to join. There is no way to accurately transmit that experience through text alone.”

Hiding a grimace behind a sip of eir own drink, Codrin jotted down the author’s words. The first thing that Rankin had done upon meeting up with em had been to make a similarly patronizing comment about the anachronistic nature of pen and paper. Ey had supposed at first that ey’d met a fellow admirer of fine pens, fine paper, and the joy of beautiful inks.

Alas.

“I’ve heard from my partner that—”

“Ah, yes! The illustrious Dear! How is he?”

“It. It’s doing quite well.”

“Right, right. *It* always did have such a strange way of moving through the world.”

“If we could—” Ey cut emself off and recomposed eir plastic smile. “I’ve heard that you are working on a project that capitalizes on this. Can you expand on that?”

“Of course! Of course. I will always help a fellow writer.” He set his glass aside and made a grand sweep of his arm. “You look around you, and you see so many going about their lives as they might have otherwise. Even I am guilty of the dalliance of getting up, drinking coffee, perhaps sitting and reading a while. We lucky few—” Codrin knew that some two and a half billion personalities were on the launches, but ey declined to comment. “—can draw so much inspiration from a project on so grand a scale. My project is one that utilizes the base nature of a personality embedded in a System that cares not for consistency between its two constituent parts.

“Before I disappeared from the L₅ System, I wrote an outline for a new book describing the universal feelings of exploration that are bound up in this endeavor, and now I am working writing the book which follows that outline. My counterpart on the Pollux launch is doing the same—he had better be!—and we are sending the results of our labors back to the System to an editor who is a most trusted companion, and he is compiling them into a single book which will serve to showcase the similarities and differences that one mind can hold when it has lost a unifying sense of self!”

Codrin wrote quickly, not just to keep up, but also to keep eir eyes on the page and away from the by now nearly dancelike gestures that Rankin was using. Ey wondered just how much of it was a conscious decision to be witnessed (and thus perhaps a deeply ingrained need to be seen and not forgotten), and how much of it was some innate characteristic of this certain, special type of asshole.

“Does that make sense, my dear Codrin?”

“Oh, yes. Yes it does, Mr. Rankin.”

He sat back in his seat with a self-satisfied smirk. “I think that you’ll like the end product. I’ve read some of your own works, by the way. You pick some quite interesting projects about our post-human life, though I must admit that your style is quite dry.”

“Such is the life of a historian, I suppose.”

Rankin laughed. “Of course, of course, I forget myself. You’ll have to send me your notes for this current project, and I’ll see if I can pull them together into something coherent and readable.”

Ey bit eir tongue and nodded. “Of course, I’ll see about doing so when I’m done. Back to your work, however; do you have any predictions on how the works will differ?”

“The *work*, Codrin. It’s a very singular work. Both me and my counterpart are writing the exact same work, and the only difference is the circumstances.” He waved off any reply before continuing. “Though imagine that our two takes began quite similar, and then started to diverge further as time continues, such as a fork might diverge from its down-tree instance. How interesting! A work that, in some core mechanism, follows the exact same path as our daily existence.”

“And you have an editor who is merging these two threads? Are they planning on doing something special with the presentation of it?”

“Yes. Yes! Of course, what is a book but an experience? A book should be delightfully difficult to read, if it is to be enjoyed to the fullest. You are engaging with a topic, you must—*must*—put in the same amount of effort that the author has! We have plans to arrange the two texts side-by-side, locked together at the points specified in the outline, as well as any similarities that the texts share. Imagine, I, Rankin#Castor, writing, “And so, in my heart of hearts, I knew the truth among the stars” while Rankin#Pollux writes, “And so, in my heart of hearts, I know the truth among the wheeling of the stars.” From there, we can have the texts line up on the page, and perhaps even highlight the similarities. My editor promises that he won’t send me any of the result until it’s complete and ready for manuscript sign off, lest #Pollux’s writing influence my own.”

Once ey had finished jotting in eir shorthand, Codrin asked, “Do you have any idea on how the work will be received?”

“Ah yes, the problem of reception.” Rankin smiled sourly. “Our works have inherent worth, and yet we must, at some point, rely on readers for their validation. I hope that it will be received quite well, though I know that it will go over the heads of many. Such can’t be helped, though, for even in this world of leisure and ease, many still claim that they don’t have time to read. Time! We have all the time in the universe, if we try hard enough, and yet here we are, spinning our wheels on whether or not there’s time enough to read a book! What rubbish.”

“Do you often fork to read books?”

Rankin frowned, at which Codrin took secret pleasure. “No. There are some aspects of life which must be experienced singularly and without the dreary experience of reclaiming memories from a dying mind.”

“Dying?”

“What is the act of quitting but that of death?”

Codrin withheld eir thoughts on the matter, asking instead, “Perhaps there’s a story there, too. Read a book, quit, and then write about the experience of having only the memory of reading that book. It seems to fall in line with the scope of your current project.”

Rankin's expression grew colder. "An interesting problem for you to tackle, my dear Codrin. I look forward to your monograph on the subject."

That secret pleasure grew warmer. Ey suspected that Rankin would have enjoyed such a project, had the idea come from within, rather than from someone else. "I'll have to give it a go, sometime, though I suspect my dry writing will fall short of yours."

A little bit of sucking up warmed him again, and Codrin once again marveled at what an art conducting interviews was.

"Writing is something that comes from much practice. I can do little but encourage you to practice, practice, and practice some more." He laughed, jabbing a finger at em. "After all, we have all the time in the world, do we not?"

Ey gave a hint of a bow, a moment of silence to show eir appreciation, and then continued. "Do you have any projects planned after this book? Perhaps something to work on alongside it?"

"Of course! It's important not to fall into the trap of working on a single project, otherwise you'll feel obliged to refine and refine and refine! Keep it varied. I'm also working on a novel exploring income inequalities within the System. Or Systems, perhaps. This will hopefully be released concurrent with my main work. This is being done by a separate fork, and we merge weekly on the project. It takes no small amount of focus to keep either one of us from getting sidetracked, but it's important that we continue our work at a good pace. We may have all the time in the world, but it's easy enough to be forgotten in our current market if we don't keep coming out with more and more works, eh?"

"There is that, yes. At least there's not a livelihood resting on it."

"Oh but there is! I'm sure that if my words aren't read, that I'll disappear into nothingness!"

Ah, Codrin thought. *There it is*. "Does this drive influence your writing?"

"Oh, here and there," Rankin said, wagging a hand. "Sometimes I'll cut corners to ensure that I'm always writing something, or I'll split off enough forks to work in shifts, ensuring that I'm writing at all hours of the day, such as it is. One will work a shift, merge with the next to keep the momentum going, and go to bed."

"That must be a very productive experience."

"It is! It very much is. You should try it, my dear Codrin."

"I most certainly will," ey lied. Ey was no stranger to modified sleep schedules and just how unpleasant that could be. "Do you have any last words of wisdom that you'd like to impart for the eventual readers of this project?"

"I would tell them this: you are always dreaming, but you should always dream bigger. What but big dreams was it that led to these launches? What but big dreams was it that led to the System as a whole? Dream big! Dream your own dreams. Bring them to fruition, and bigger and brighter things will benefit us all."

Codrin finished eir transcribing with a flourish and bowed to Rankin. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Rankin. Is there anything else?"

"Only to thank you for your time. Make sure you get me your notes, and I'll make sure that you and Dear each get a copy of the upcoming book once it's done. Do tell him hi for me."

"It, but yes, I will say hi."

"Right, right. Do tell *it* hi." Rankin quit before, Codrin suspected, he could roll his eyes.

Ey bit eir tongue until ey was back home at the house on the prairie. Ey stomped out into the grass to eir very first cairn, set eir paper and pens down carefully in the grass, and shouted to the cloud-dotted sky. *“What an enormous sack of shit, sǎ-mi fut una.”*

Then ey picked up eir supplies and walked back to the house.

Eir partners greeted em at the door, both looking winded and still laughing.

“You heard, I take it?”

“Tell us how you really feel, my dear.”

Codrin rolled eir eyes. “Not a fan. Let me set my shit down and get a glass of wine or something.”

Dear gasped, paw to muzzle. *“A curse! Codrin! I am shocked.”*

“I’ll get the wine,” its partner said, still laughing.

They gathered on the couch where Codrin could lounge against Dear with eir feet up in its partner’s lap.

“So, how was it, really? Was he really that bad?” Dear asked.

“You didn’t tell me that he was so...so...”

“Pompous? That his head was so far up his ass that he could smell his breath?”

Codrin laughed and poked the fox in the side. “Yeah, those things. I’m guessing you don’t think too highly of him, either?”

“Not particularly, no,” Dear said, brushing fingers through Codrin’s hair. *“I was more wondering if a writer—a writer in particular, I mean—might have some ideas that you could glean for this project of ours.”*

“I suppose.” Ey kept silent for a moment, simply enjoying the physical contact. “Though, come to think of it, his current project sounds interesting enough.”

“The dual text thing?” Dear’s partner asked.

“Yeah. Did he tell you about that?”

“Mmhm. It sounds interesting, at least on the surface. We’ll have to see how the execution works out, though. It could be stupendously boring.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“It is not a bad idea for a project such as he is wont to do,” Dear murmured, sounding distant. *“I would not have turned down the opportunity to do such myself, if the types of projects that I do fit that framework.”*

“The thing is, I don’t think it’ll work for ours.” Codrin shrugged against Dear’s thigh. “I don’t think spoiling Codrin#Pollux is something we really need to worry about, and I’m sure Ioan will keep sending us interesting stuff.”

“Probably best to not, actually,” Dear’s partner said.

“Right. Come to think of it, even Rankin said that he started with an outline to keep the two instances organized. We could probably do with more organization between the three of us.”

“Or the three of our groups, at least. Perhaps Pollux and Ioan taken together will provide us with a good idea of where we should be working next.”

“Do you want to send Ioan a note to start coordinating?”

“I just did.”

There was a sensorium ping, a view of the office where Ioan had begun work so many years ago.

“I should’ve known.”

“I am more predictable than you give me credit for, my dear.”

After a moment’s silence, ey grumbled, “He even kept calling you ‘he’. Drove me nuts.”

Dear made a strange face, then threw its head back and cackled. *“He has honed his insensitivity into quite the art. What a delight! So, while he was being a pompous ass, did he actually have anything to add to the conversation besides that one idea?”*

Codrin shook eir head.

“He always was a one-trick pony.”

“He also kept talking about idioms that applied mostly to phys-side and how they stick around here, on that note. But still, being a one-trick pony is a worry I struggle with.”

“That you struggle with it, that all of us mere mortals struggle with it, is what keeps us separate from them.”

“‘Them’?” Dear’s partner laughed. “You make them sound way more organized than they really are.”

“They do not need to be. They are all the same.”

Michelle Hadje/Sasha — 2124

It took Debarre a matter of seconds to answer Michelle's request for a meeting. His arrival in her sim, the weasel blinking into existence next to her on that endless field of grass and dandelions, startled her enough to cause her to stumble.

"Shit, you okay, Michelle?"

She laughed, picking herself back up, feeling as unsteady as ever. "Yeah, I just was not expecting you right away. I thought that you would set up a time later."

"I was free." Debarre leaned forward and helped brush some grass off of her side. "Is now not a good time?"

"No, no. Now is fine. Thank you for meeting up in the first place."

"Of course."

Michelle led them off at a leisurely pace into the fields, into the warm day and soft hum of bees. Debarre walked along in silence beside her, apparently enjoying the day with his whiskers bristled out and eyes half-shut against the sun.

She'd always intended to build herself a house, but the field always felt so complete without it.

"True Name mentioned that you wanted to talk."

"Yeah," he said, looking down at his feet as they poked their way through the dandelions. "But I'm not quite sure where to start."

"I am guessing that it is about the names." She mastered a brief wave of anxiety, a brief wave of skunk features across human ones, a brief wave of Sasha among Michelle. "I am afraid that I do not have a fantastic explanation for it."

Debarre shrugged this off. "I don't need a great explanation. I don't need anything, I guess. I just want to know what's going on, Sasha."

And with that, with a susurrations of fur against clothes, she was Sasha. What thoughts before that had kept her as Michelle, as her human self, had been uprooted for the day and replaced with those that anchored her to a time, a context, a name. Debarre, of all the others that she'd met, seemed to understand this best, and he took this in stride.

"If I am honest, I do not know myself. At least, not truly. It is something that came to me in the moment." She paused to pluck a dandelion, twirling it between fingerpads, laughing. "I am still a little unnerved by it, myself. I remember thinking to myself, 'I need a fucking vacation, but I should fork so that I do not leave the others in a lurch', and then there it was, the idea, already fully formed and ready to go."

“To use Aw– to use eir poem for the names?”

She canted her ears back. “I miss em. I have been thinking about em for years.”

“A decade.”

The skunk nodded.

“I think about em a lot, too, Sasha. We were all pretty torn up about it, even if ey’s the one that helped build this place. I remember bawling my eyes out when you read the poem.” He laughed, rubbing a paw over his face. “Hell, when you said all that in the coffee shop, I was having a hard time dealing with a whole shitload of emotions and you were so upset at the bar.”

“The bar?”

“Oh, uh, sorry. True Name was upset at the bar. I started to ask her about all this, and I almost said eir name and–”

“AwDae’s?” she asked, tilting her head.

Debarre flinched back from her, stopping mid-step.

“Debarre?”

He frowned at her, straightening up. “When I tried to say ‘AwDae’ earlier, True Name lost her shit. Like, I was afraid she was going to lunge across the table and deck me. You didn’t know?”

Sasha shook her head. “None of my forks have merged back down to me yet. I– we decided that I would take some time off before reengaging. I have no memory of what happened.”

“It was kinda terrifying.” The weasel laughed. “She slammed her glass down and said something like ‘do not fucking say that name’. I can respect wanting to keep things close to the heart, but I thought I was about to get in a fistfight.”

“I am trying to picture either of us in a fistfight, much less with each other, and failing,” she said, grinning. “I would very much appreciate this being kept between us, yes. Ey was not...the politics of em leaving for the S-R Bloc are complex. I have no plans to deck you if you say eir name when it is just the two of us.”

“I appreciate that. Why’d True Name seem to think otherwise, though?”

Tossing away the dandelion, she shrugged helplessly. “I do not know. At the point when she came into existence, she ceased being me. We were perhaps the same for only the briefest of seconds, but we have long since diverged.”

“That far, though? It’s only been a week or two, right?”

“I suppose so. I will have to check in with her. With the rest of the clade, too, and see if anything else strange is going on. I have not been keeping tabs on all of them.”

Debarre nodded. “They seem like they’re doing fine.”

“They are not taking over the council, then?”

He laughed. “Not at all, no. Just True Name taking your spot in dealing with the politics stuff. I actually haven’t seen many of the others.”

Sasha nodded.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, just enjoying the sun. The vacation had treated her well so far, and she already felt less torn in two without the stress of the council weighing on her. Debarre also had a calming influence on her, as though having one person associated primarily with only one context was enough to pin

her in place, rather than having her constantly ping-ponging between two.

Skunk and weasel both sat down in the grass, laughing at having apparently come to the same decision independent of each other.

Debarre plucked a blade of grass and threw it at her. "You reminded me; another thing that True Name said is that when you forked off your ten instances, you left behind the part of you that is split between Michelle and Sasha. She called it 'the part that suffers'."

Hiding a wince by plucking a handful of dandelions one by one, Sasha nodded. "I do not think that having ten versions of me who are just as fucked up as I am would have made anything easier."

During the pause that followed, she began weaving those flowers into a chain.

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Suffering."

Sasha set the half-complete flower-crown on her lap and began to pick another handful of flowers. Anything to keep from looking at Debarre. "I do not know if that is the right word. It was not a deliberate choice to fork each instance only when I was in a more singular state, but I am not displeased that this was the case. That way, they can do what they need to do without...without..."

Debarre did not press her. She worked through her tears, tying the last of the dandelions in place to form the chain into a loop so that she could rest it atop her head, petals tickling at her ears. When she dropped her paws again, the weasel took them in his own.

I can feel em, she thought. I can almost feel em, there in the sunlight, in the flowers.

"What keeps you from doing the same, yourself? Maybe you could fork when you're feeling excellent and leave behind whatever's causing the split."

She didn't answer, just sat with her paws in her friend's, her head bowed, her tears leaving tracks in fur.

"Sasha?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you regret coming here?"

All she could do was shake her head before emotion completely overwhelmed her. She slouched to the side and, with Debarre's help, lay down amid the grass and dandelions, resting her head on his thigh. His silence was patient and his paw on her shoulder kind as she let that wave of emotion wash over her, through her, and when it was past, he shared in the calm that remained after.

"I'm sorry, Sasha."

"No. It is alright." She rolled onto her back, picking up the fallen flower-crown and reaching it up to drape it over the weasel's head. "The System may act as a magnifying glass on some of what I was going through before uploading, but much of what I feel now I was going through before, just less visibly."

"Alright." He straightened the loop of golden flowers atop his head, ruffled a paw over her ears, and then leaned back, propping himself up with his paws in the grass.

"Nothing keeps me from fixing myself," she murmured up to the clouds. "I do not know why I do not just do so."

"Can I be honest?"

“Of course.”

“I worry it’s survivor’s guilt.”

She took a deep breath and quelled another wave of emotion, choosing instead to nod. “That is a distinct possibility. I do feel guilty that I made it and AwDae did not, that ey felt compelled to disappear across the border and give eir life for this—” She waved her paw up at the sky. “—that ey did all that and never even got to see it.”

There was a rustling and shifting beneath her head, and when she turned to look, the flower-crown was draped over her snout. They both laughed.

“We both lost someone,” Debarre said, voice thick. “I feel guilty that I made it and Cicero didn’t, sometimes. Hell, for a while, I was furious that AwDae lived longer than Cice did.”

“I am sorry.” Sasha started to wind the chain of flowers around her wrist, but it fell apart, so she dropped it into the grass instead. “I never knew.”

“How do you imagine that conversation would’ve gone? “Hey AwDae, fuck you for outliving my boyfriend?”” He laughed. “Shit like this isn’t rational, Sash.”

“I guess not. I am still glad that you are around, though.”

He sighed. “Of course I am. I never would’ve made it without you. I’m glad you’re here. You and Michelle. Hell, your whole damn clade.”

She gave the comment the space that it deserved, closing her eyes to feel the sun warm her fur. *You and Michelle*. Now there was a thought.

“Only, I wonder.” His voice sounded distant, as though he were speaking to the sky rather than her. “I wonder if your forks have changed in ways other than just not being split. I wonder if they’re really even you anymore.”

Ioan Bălan — 2325

“I uploaded as soon as I could. I think it was the forties?”

“Which forties?”

Renee laughed. “Right, the 2140s, sorry. I can’t believe it’s been that long.”

Ioan smiled and jotted down the date. “Thanks. What led you to upload?”

“Jesus, I don’t know that I even remember anymore.” She got a far-away look in her eyes, then brightened up. “Cancer! I think, at least. I got something, and it just felt like it’d be easier to come up here than stay down there.”

“That makes sense. Not much of that to worry about here.”

“Sometimes I think it must’ve been early onset Alzheimer’s.” She laughed. “I just get a little spacey, is all.”

“It’s easy enough to do. I get stuck thinking about this or that and can’t think of anything else, sometimes,”
ey said.

“Oh! Yes, that’s it precisely. I get stuck writing stuff in my head, and then I forget what it was that I was doing.”

“You write music?”

She nodded. “Composer, conductor, violinist. Have you heard any of my stuff?”

“I listened to some while I was preparing for our meeting.” Ioan smiled sheepishly. “I’ll admit that much of it was over my head, but I can certainly see the skill behind it, and you play beautifully.”

“Thank you for saying so,” she said, giving a hint of a bow. “For saying all that, I mean. I sometimes enjoy writing stuff that’s hard to grasp. It makes for an experience of its own. Bafflement, confusion, lack of understanding, those are all feelings, and music is supposed to toy with feelings.”

“That’s something I can appreciate, as well.”

“I’m sure you can, with your work with the Odists.” Renee grinned at Eir confusion. “I read up on you as well. They sound like a wild bunch.”

“I’ll say.” Ey laughed. “You were a musician before uploading, too, correct?”

“Oh, yes! One of those lucky few who got to do what she loved for a living. I think that’s why I uploaded, in the end. Getting a terminal diagnosis didn’t really make me depressed in and of itself. What got to me was the thought that that would mean I wouldn’t be able to play or write anymore. I’ve seen people go through treatment, and none of them are in any shape to play an instrument.”

“What kind of cancer? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Thyroid, I think. Yes, that was it. I noticed it when it started to get uncomfortable to hold the violin.” She made a sour face, then added, “I’m sure I sound obsessed.”

Ey waved the comment away. “I’m here to listen. Please, obsess all you like.”

Renee smiled gratefully. “There really was nothing in my life, otherwise. Writing, playing, conducting. Concert after concert after concert. No friends, no family, no other hobbies, no other addictions. What would I even do with myself without the few things in my life I loved? Really, truly loved, too. I loved my parents, but it was more of a theoretical love. I told myself I loved my husband, but when he left—I was too distracted, he said—I was actually sort of relieved.”

“That’s a plenty good reason to upload, I’d say. 2140s, hmm.” Ey hunted through eir memory, back to interviews with Douglas. “That was before governments were paying people to upload. Was it expensive for you to upload?”

“Paid...?” She frowned and shook her head. “God, no. What a weird idea.”

“It got bad, phys-side. Some governments started subsidizing uploads to keep populations down and people happy.”

“Weird, weird. No, it was not expensive, but I did have to pay. Couple thousand francs CFA, I think?”

“I don’t have a reference point for that amount. I was compensated—well, my family was—to upload, coming to about two years tuition at the university. In terms of what the average person made where you lived, was that a lot?”

She shrugged. “Not sure about an average person. It was about six months’ saving for me, and musicians didn’t make a ton of money.”

“There wasn’t much money in history, either,” ey said. “Now, the reason I sought you out was two-fold. First of all, one of the things you’re known for is that you found a way to send your compositions phys-side pretty early on, correct?”

“Yes. Yes! I had nearly forgotten that they pinned that on me.” She laughed, leaning back in her chair. “I didn’t really figure it out, so much as use something a publisher pointed out to me as a curiosity. It’s nigh impossible to send images and sound back through phys-side. I guess they came through all garbled, with little bits in focus and the rest a total mess, like remembering a dream. I have no clue as to the details.”

“As I’ve heard, too. Text appears to work okay, as something more concrete.”

“Right, just drop it in the perisystem blah blah and phys-side can pick it up. Anyway, music can be described, and that publisher said that there had been several different tools for writing sheet music as just plain old text. Want to play the note A? Write down A. B? Write down B. A rest? R. *Et cetera et cetera ad nauseum*. It was nothing

new, but I guess no one had thought to try something like that before. I read up on one of them and made a few changes to the whole shebang, and now we can send that back and forth. Books? Sure. Math? Sure. Even film and stage scripts! Why not music?”

Ioan laughed. “Of course. That makes sense. Did your music change after you uploaded?”

“I wrote a lot more string works,” she said, grinning. “After all, I could fork and play as many parts as I wanted. Or could afford, at least. It still cost a bit to fork back then. I also made a few instruments up here that I could only describe in order to let phys-side know how to make. Concerts were much easier to have, because schedules are easier to coordinate when you’re not restricted to just one version of yourself. Music started to drift between sys-side and phys-side—stylistically, I mean. I got some iffy reviews of stuff offline that went over pretty well here.”

“What happened to music phys-side that didn’t here?”

“They swung back towards some older styles. Second-wave minimalism was at its height when I was leaving, and I loved the stuff. All those long notes, chords that held forever or used rhythm to add variety. Phasing.” She chopped her hands unevenly in the air before herself, emphasizing the latter in a way that Ioan didn’t understand at all. “Outside the System, though, it swung back toward more romantic stuff. It was all very Mahler, very Antoniewicz, very Liu. The problem with living forever, though, is that you can keep refining your craft in whatever ways you want. I stuck with minimalism, for the most part. People keep uploading, though, and they bring their ideas with them, so I’ve tried to diversify my works a little bit, but I write what sounds good to me.”

“Is there a steady stream of composers joining? Enough to shift styles sys-side?”

“Less so, lately. If people are being paid to upload, though, it’s not too surprising. That makes it sound like things are a mess out there, and when things are a mess, people study less music and try to get out early, often before they’ve got the experience and knowledge that set in later in life. Would explain the wave of folk music I’ve seen in the last decades.”

“Makes me want to take a survey of ages when folks upload through the years.” Ey scribbled a note to emself on the corner of eir paper. “Another time, though. The second reason that I wanted to interview is that you didn’t opt to join the launch. Why was that?”

She covered her face with her hands and laughed, sounding muffled. “Oh no, that’s embarrassing. I meant to, I really did. I just forgot.”

That evening, back at eir house, after ey had merged eir work-forks, after ey had sat down to dinner with May, ey finally let the memories, those countless little moments, wash over em.

“What?” the skunk asked, head tilted.

“Hmm?”

“You were frowning. What happened? Getting tired of my cooking?”

“No, it’s good. Just thinking about something Codrin#Castor talked about today.” Ey stabbed at a spear of asparagus. “Ey interviewed some asshole author who was working on a book on both launches, but intentionally not communicating to see how they would diverge.”

“Sounds fun enough,” May said. “But, if I am thinking of the same author, it will be quite boring.”

Ioan laughed, finished chewing on the asparagus. “Codrin suggested that we specifically not do that, though, that it might be better to coordinate between the two launches a little better. Figure out who to interview and

in what order, while the transmission time isn't too bad."

May shrugged. "I am up for it, if all three of our groups agree."

"After I explained it to Codrin#Pollux, ey seemed on board. I think it might be a good idea."

"Did either of them have any suggestions for where to look next?"

"Nothing in particular," Ioan said around a bite of fish. "Sorry. I figure stuff like why one invested in one or the other is a project that could go on forever, based on the numbers. Sure, there are only two hundred or so clades that totally invested in the launches, but the numbers are much higher on our end."

"You are thinking about Secession, are you not? Looking for founders to interview?" May grinned. "Clever."

"Am I that transparent?"

"Yes, absolutely."

Ey laughed. "Well, how much of the Council of Eight remains?"

"Most. I will direct one of the Codrins to find some of them."

"But not me?"

"No. Remember I am curious to see who you find first." They ate in silence for a bit, before May spoke up. "Do you remember what I said about Michelle?"

"That she was instrumental to Secession, yeah. I was thinking of hunting down some Odists."

"A good bet, that." She paused, looked down at her plate and said, more quietly, "Will you ask the first lines?"

"That was my plan. I figure they were the first forked."

"Yes."

"Is something wrong?"

"I am worried that you will be unhappy with what you hear."

Ioan shrugged. "It's history, isn't it? Nothing to be done about it."

She nodded, setting her fork down on her plate, though some of the food remained. "Yes, but I am worried that you will be unhappy with me."

Part III

Acceleration

Let us first consider a few of the subtler correspondences between the Secession and the Launch:

- Both have ramifications that stretch backwards and forwards through time for decades surrounding them.
- Both were intended, beyond the surface and altruistic reasons, to ensure the continuity and stability of the System.
- Both the Ode and Jonas clades were instrumental to engineering them.
- Both involved political manipulation both phys-side and sys-side.
- Both involved historical manipulation to ensure that accounts align.

And now we may consider the facts that fall out of the sum of the correspondences:

- The history of the System, stretching all the way back to before its foundation, is one of technology, yes, but beyond that, is one of politics.
- Despite the assumption that such is not possible in the System and the promises that such is not the case, there are governing factions that guide the progression of the System through times via its interactions with phys-side politics.
- Per that fact, those controlling factions sys-side controlled — and continue to control — politics phys-side to a degree heretofore unimaginable.
- The System as a society, however loose knit, is directional: it advances not just in its use of technology, but in the way that all societies, that all civilizations strive to do so, which is toward greater security.
- The unknowable size of the System and the unimaginable population within in all its variety and beauty retain the human characteristics of emotion and intellect, and are thus subject to the very same propaganda that has steered societies and civilizations for thousands of years.

From *An Expanded History of Our World* by
The Bălan Clade

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

The first direction from the L₅ System—or Lagrange, as many were starting to call it—came in the form of a message from May Then My Name Die With Me. “Find Ezekiel,” it read. “Talk with him. Be patient, be kind.”

When ey showed it to Dear, the fox’s ears stood erect, and it led Codrin out of the house to stand on the patio and watch the storm from the safety of the overhang.

“Please be careful, my dear.”

“Do I have something to worry about? Should I be prepared for violence or something?”

It shook its head. *“I do not think so, no. Ezekiel was a member of the Council of Eight. One of the founders. He was close to much that happened in the early history of the System.”*

“What did he do?” Codrin shook eir head. “I mean, what is it that he’s known for?”

“Forking.”

Ey let out the air in their lungs in one, low *huh*. It felt as though ey had been kicked in the stomach, and ey struggled to regain eir breath as stars swum before eir eyes. *“Forking? You’ve got to be kidding me, Dear.”*

The fox laughed. *“I am not.”*

“I thought that that was a core aspect of the System from the beginning.”

“It was an accident at first. Someone split in two—not Michelle, before you ask—and the System automatically corrected and deleted both forks. The population was quite low at that point, and Zeke knew the victim. As part of his grief, he began to formulate the sys-side algorithms and drafted the petition to phys-side for allowing legitimate forking of personalities.”

“And Michelle helped?”

“She coordinated between Ezekiel, phys-side, and another council-member on the logistics and how it was associated with the reputation markets, yes.”

After a moment of staring out into the rain-clouded prairie, Codrin said, “I’m constantly surprised at just how much of a frontier it was back then, and just how many pies your clade seems to have had its fingers in.”

Dear smiled tiredly.

“So, why did you bring me out here?”

“It is nice to talk about serious things with the sound of rain in the background.”

“Really?”

“Of course not, my dear.” It gestured back through the window, where its partner sat, reading. *“They do not enjoy hearing me talk of that time in our lives.”*

Codrin frowned. “I think I know the answer, but should I interview them?”

“Please do not, Codrin. I do not want to bring up painful conversations of the past, nor do I wish to you to learn all that they know from a single source.”

“I understand. Ioan mentioned that May Then My Name has been cagey around her past as well— No.” Ey held up a hand to forestall a comment from Dear. “You don’t need to defend her, or yourself, for that matter. I won’t push you for more history. I would, however, like to hear your reasoning for these decisions.”

“For withholding information?”

“For withholding it yourself. It seems as though you want us—you as in the Ode clade, us as in the Bălan clade—to discover things on our own. Why?”

Dear stuck a paw out, palm up, beneath a downspout and the steady stream of water that flowed from it, letting the water soak into its fur. *“There are parts of our past that I am ashamed of. Many of my cocladists are, as well. You could interview any one of us about the entirety of our story, even me, and we would tell you, but we would also resent you for that.”*

Codrin waited Dear out.

“We would resent you, and the temptation to lie would be too great. It is better that you gather this information piecemeal to gain a more accurate picture of what it is that happened leading up to both Secession and Launch. May Then My Name is right. You should seek out the founders. You should seek out someone other than an Odist. You should seek out one who did not simply agree with us that far back.”

“Alright, I can accept that.”

It leaned in to bump its nose against eir cheek. *“Thank you, my dear. Be kind to Ezekiel, as May Then My Name suggests. Be patient with him. Be careful for his sake. Be prepared for a difficult conversation.”*

“Difficult how?”

“He is not who he used to be. Time has not been kind to him, to his sanity. He is no longer the shrewd and funny politician he was back then. Since about the time of the launch proposal, he has returned to being called Ezekiel and donned the mantle of his namesake.”

“What’s that?”

Dear shook its paw dry. *“A prophet.”*

Codrin was not sure what a prophet looked like, but the conversation with Dear dogged em all the way until ey was able to find Ezekiel and get him to agree to an interview.

What at first looked like a bundle of rags set in the middle of a rocky, arid plain, slowly raised an arm up toward the sky. It was a shaky movement, exhausted, as though the movement caused it great pain. Surrounding the bundle was a scattering of what looked to be clay pots, each of which was lidded with a wooden stopper, and in the air was a foul scent.

“Ezekiel?”

A low rasp came from the pile of rags. “Codrin Bălan. I have been waiting for you.”

Unable to think of anything else to do, ey sat down next to the bundle of rags. Hidden within it may have been a face, but ey wasn’t sure. “Waiting for me?”

“Yes. A voice from within spoke to me and I knew it to be that of the Lord, and I fell down upon my face, and it entered into me and set me back on my feet, and held out a scroll. He said to me, “Mortal, eat what is offered you. Eat this scroll.” So I opened my mouth, and He gave me this scroll to eat, as he said to me, “Mortal, feed

your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll that I give to you.” And I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey to me.”“

A long pause followed, during which Codrin did not speak, but silently wished for the scent of honey, rather than the scent of something burning.

“And so I knew that you were to come and to take my story.”

Ey nodded. “I’ve come to interview you, yes. A few members of the Ode clade suggested that I seek you out.”

A dry rattle sounded from within the dusty rags, and it took em a moment to understand that this was laughter. “Yes. Yes, of course they did. Speak, Codrin Bălan. Ask me your questions.”

“I have a few. Some about the launch, and some about Secession.”

“Ask me first about Launch.”

“Did you leave a fork behind on the L₅ System?”

“No,” he said. A finger rose tiredly from the upraised hand. “The word of the Lord came to me: O mortal, turn your face towards man’s iniquity in the heavens and prophesy to them and say: O cruel men of machinations, you have broken your treaties with the Earth which God has set before you, and though it be the doing of the many who are one, leave now the world of your birth that it be washed clean of your sin. You may have hoped for life as gods of the false idols, but the heavens are no longer yours for such arrogance.”

Codrin remembered the admonition to be kind and patient, to be careful, and so ey sat in silence, as seemed appropriate.

“Those who sought to build their temple continue here, yes, and continue there, but judgement will yet come to them. I have seen the fire encased in flame and the sun’s eagerness to send us on our way, and that is my reason for leaving them behind, and I am to lay here for three hundred and ninety years, arm outstretched to the System, and live off the cakes of wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet, and emmer, until perhaps we cross the threshold of the firmament.

“We diverge, Codrin Bălan. We of Castor and Pollux. The prophets diverge and so too the prophecy. How can two divergent prophecies be true? And yet they must, for the voice of the Lord has given us the scroll as sweet as honey, and our minds must be as one, though they be as split as the broken one.”

When the speech appeared to have concluded, Codrin bowed eir head. “That answers many of my questions, Ezekiel. You speak of the many who are one. Do you mean the idea of clades?”

“Yes. Some are the many who are one. Jonah, who is many that are one. Michelle, who is few that are one.”

Ey once more remained quiet, mind churning over what seemed to be the root of the Ode clade. Michelle? Breaking the treaties with the earth which God set before her? Michelle, who left the world of her birth? And who was this Jonah?

“There were eight of us,” Ezekiel said, and something about its voice sounded clearer, more present than it had before. “A council set to guide but not govern. We were to be the interface between our world and the Earth. The three from the East, the prophet, the nameless one, the politician, the broken one and her friend.”

Ezekiel must be the prophet, and surely Michelle was the broken one. Ey didn’t know the rest of the references, so ey filed the information away until later to look up. Ey felt the need to be completely present for the prophet.

“Guide towards Secession?”

“Not at first. At first, we were to be one people in two forms: those who had life entire on the earth that God set before them, and those who lived beyond death. Those who lived on Earth saw the idolatry in the System and with the help of True Name and Jonah, built up a religion of separation, that we be two people in two forms.”

“True Name?”

The prophet turned a weary head towards Codrin. There was definitely a face there, ey saw, though it was dirty and blended seamlessly into the tattered rags that surrounded it. “One piece of the broken one.”

Ey closed eir eyes and rifled through the Ode that ey kept near to hand in an exocortex. There were two instances of the phrase; ‘The only time I know my true name is when I dream’, and ‘To know one’s true name is to know god’. Both of them made sense as a possibility, as the first was the first line of that stanza and would have been one of the earliest forks, but the second named god, which fit well with Ezekiel’s role as prophet.

After a moment’s thought, ey asked eir question, choosing eir words carefully. “The True Name who dreamed, or the True Name who knew god?”

Another raspy cackle came from the bundle of rags. “You need not mince your words with me, Codrin Bălan. I am the mystic, you are the poet. The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream, a broken vessel for a broken soul.”

Ey smiled cautiously, feeling a heat in eir cheeks. “Is True Name on the launch?”

“Yes.”

“Are they on the System as well?”

“Yes.”

“Should I interview them for this?”

Ezekiel once more turned his gaze toward the sky, supposing that that is where the abandoned planet must lie. “No. The Lord has put cords upon you, so that you cannot turn from your path. Your twin and your root shall seek her out, but you must seek out one borne of her, and you must seek out more of the eight who were to guide but not govern, and you must seek out Jonah, and you must see to your loved ones.”

Codrin nodded, taking down the list of names—if names they were. *Ioan and Codrin#Castor would get to talk to True Name, apparently. I’ll get one of her up-tree instances, more of the Council of Eight, and this Jonah. Loved ones...Dear, perhaps?*

“What should I ask them?”

“Ask them what you asked me. Each shall give you a different answer, and when they are brought together, you may see the past and write your poem, poet.” His arm began to waver, and then dropped once more to his side. “I am tired, Codrin Bălan, and I must eat and drink.”

Ey nodded and stood, folding eir notes and capping eir pen. *Much as Dear said, ey thought. Combine the sources for a more clear picture.* Ey said, “Thank you, Ezekiel. I hope that you enjoy your meal.”

A final rattling laugh, and the arm fumbled to the side where a flat cake had been cooking atop a pile of what looked like smoldering dung. Once more, his voice lost the edge of prophecy and became more cogent. “It’s vile stuff, but I’ll try.”

Yared Zerezghi — 2124

Yared Zerezghi: I'm going to come clean right up front: I shouldn't be telling you this.

Jonas Prime: Okay hold up.

Jonas: Before you actually tell us, I want to know why.

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream: As do I.

True Name: I am sure you have your reasons, but if you need us to talk you out of it, we can do that, too.

Yared: Uh. Well, I wasn't *specifically* told not to tell you, but I was left under the impression that I shouldn't be talking to you about this sort of stuff. Still, I've done my reading, and the line to the System is about as secure as it gets, and after all this time, I trust you well enough that you won't do anything crazy with the information, and that it'll probably help you in the end, as you work through all this sys-side.

Jonas: What, that you've been working with a government official who is making you steer the DDR towards considering secession?

Yared: ...

Yared: What the hell?

Yared: Yes, but how the hell did you know that?

True Name: Jonas has been waiting to drop that on you for some time now. He is currently laughing his ass off. You will have to forgive him.

True Name: I mean, I am also laughing my ass off.

Yared: I'm just more shocked than anything.

Jonas: I promise it's not out of cruelty, we just made a lucky guess, and I've been wanting it confirmed. Your tone at the start said it all.

Yared: I guess I'm relieved.

Yared: But also a little scared that everyone else has figured it out, too.

Jonas: I wouldn't count on it. Maybe some have, but few enough that they'll likely be laughed down as crackpot conspiracy theorists. Very few people pay as much attention to you as we do.

True Name: Thank you for confirming this with us, though. It will help us work together more consistently between sys- and phys-side.

Yared: That was my thought, as well.

Jonas: Was that all you were going to tell us?

Yared: Most of it. I was just going to ask your help for the next step, afterwards. I'm *definitely* not supposed to be doing that.

Jonas: Well, alright. How does this all work, anyway?

Yared: I meet up with my handler, of sorts, on a regular basis, and we talk through the current sentiments, and then someone on his team will slip me a note specifying how I should steer my next post. Sometimes I'll write two or three posts on the subject, just so they can keep an eye on the response, then I'll get the next note.

Jonas: And this handler, are his initials YD?

Yared: Okay, now you hold up.

Yared: I *need* to know how you guys figured that one out.

Jonas: Politician, remember?

True Name: We noticed the contents of your posts starting to shift, then started considering possible sources that might be guiding you. That led us to council members, and from there, we were able to sift through who is on the council and come up with a short list of names. Yosef Demma just happened to be at the top.

Yared: You still have me worried that others have this all figured out. Jonas, convince me not to worry. You're the politician, I'm the scared DDR junkie trying not to get stoned to death. Or worse, have my DDR account suspended.

Jonas: Alright, I'll try. I promise, no stoning. The number one advantage that we have is an entire team of instances working with you and on essentially no other projects. That means we have the resources to send a few of them chasing after this hunch that someone was steering you, do some textual analysis, find the patterns, then do some digging into NEAC politics, looking for people with both the resources, the motive, and the personality to pull it off.

Jonas: Remember, most of this team were phys-side politicians, too, so we have that head-start. The worst you have to worry about is the WF or S-R Bloc doing the same with their own people after they find out. We haven't seen evidence of that yet.

Yared: Multiple phys-side politicians?

True Name: Multiple Jonases.

Yared: Oh! There are multiple forks working on this?

Jonas: Of course.

Jonas: That's what I mean when I said few people pay as much attention to you as we do.

Jonas: Does that soothe your fears?

Yared: I think so, yeah. Do you agree with Jonas on this, True Name?

True Name: Having spent a considerable time with him and some of his forks, I trust him on this, yes.

True Name: Now, can you tell us as much as you are comfortable about councilor Demma, your relationship with him, and what you suspect are his goals?

Yared: Well, we meet for coffee regularly, like I said, and usually drink it in his car while his driver takes us around town. He seems like a nice, older gentleman, and pretty trustworthy. I suspect that's a bad sign in a politician.

Jonas: No comment.

Yared: Well, either way, he's nice enough to me, and I guess that's probably how he got me working for him. I think his motives basically boil down to the fact that the System has diverged considerably from the culture of any of the political entities left phys-side, both by virtue of who winds up there, and the obvious reasons of not sharing any of our concerns around trade goods.

True Name: He is not wrong, but I do not think that is motive enough.

Yared: I don't either. I suspect that he's not keen on something about the System where it is, whether that's its location in the S-R Bloc or that it remains a multinational entity where uploads retain their citizenship back phys-side. Maybe he just wants to make it a separate nation in order to allow it to be a place to send refugees, asylum seekers, and so on. Or maybe he wants to restrict emigration.

True Name: Those are all good potential reasons, yes. Do you have any hints as to which may be the most likely?

Yared: Not particularly. He's mentioned them all in passing.

True Name: Alright. Keep us up to date, then.

Jonas: What was your most recent message from Demma and his people?

Yared: That's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually.

Jonas: The thing that you're not supposed to do. Right.

Yared: Right. The message was: "Gently broach the subject of secession. Keep it only to one sentence, and only as an offhand remark. Make it sound like it was sys-side's idea."

Jonas: Wow, that's not exactly subtle.

True Name: Seems like a shitty thing to do.

True Name: But that is coming from someone sys-side, so perhaps he sees it differently. My assessment is that he might not actually be wrong on this. If he pins it on us but does it gently enough, it can be seen as a situation where both parties are happy to agree on something. It will have to be

done carefully, however. If it is suggested too strongly or too early, we risk the possibility of backlash for seeming too eager for secession, as though we are rebelling. If it is not suggested strongly enough, some might see it as secession being forced on us. Jonas? Thoughts?

Jonas: I think you're spot on for the DDR. Yared, has any mention of secession come up in the forums yet?

Yared: Only two or three times, but given that this topic is starting to be taken up on the governmental level, that amounts to almost none. That said, I'm seeing quite a few people taking to the launch idea, which they're now equating to something equivalent to secession—they're calling it separation from Earth or resource independence, stuff like that—as well as more talk about international rights, given that sys-side individuals technically retain their citizenship, which makes the System something like international waters.

Jonas: Clever. That might be far enough to drop some very subtle hints. I'm not sure about the word 'secession' yet, given some of its past connotations. You've suggested that we have the nature of statehood, but you might try pushing harder on referring to us as a nation, a national entity, a nation-state, and so on. Maybe even use the word 'statehood' directly.

True Name: Do you have anything written yet?

Yared: Sure, one moment.

Yared: We continue to circle around this discussion of individual rights as though we are debating the individuality of those sys-side. It's important to understand, though, that this is a distraction from the actual point. Many have mentioned that those who have uploaded, whether or not they are individuals, are no longer analogous to humans (there's that speciation argument again!) and one wag even put it, "Who cares if they're individuals? They can't even vote!"

Yared: This is quite true, my dear wag. They can't vote. They have no say in our political affairs out here, just as we have no say in theirs. How could we? I mean, sure, I bet some of them read DDR posts and wonder *what the hell is going on out there?* But consider what their politics must look like to us. What would *we* vote on? Whether or not they must post signage that their sims allow non-euclidean space? Is it okay for you to try and impersonate someone when you can become like them to exacting detail (except for, surprise, their individual personality)?

Yared: I think we're still split pretty evenly on speciation. Even I am. One day, I'll think, "Sure, they may be fundamentally different from us, but they still *think* like us. They still reason like humans. Except for the biological differences, they still are." Other days, though, I'll wake up and think, "We have no common frame of reference with these people. They're just too different."

Yared: This actually came up in a few conversations with my friends sys-side. It sounds like they share some of that ambivalence toward speciation. They can't interface with phys-side as we can, and we can't interface with sys-side as they can, so how could they even be considered the same species as us? And yet here they are, taking place in a political debate as filigreed and baroque as any other, and doing so with the same rational minds that we have, even if only at one remove.

“At this point,” one of them said as we laughed over another fruitless debate. “I’m not even sure we should be discussing individual rights with governments that have no way of knowing how we work. We might as well just secede and end the discussion there.”

Yared: But who knows if speciation will even wind up playing into it, in the end. I’ve noticed that, even though we remain split on the topic, tempers have cooled on both sides. I’m surprised—pleasantly so!—to see this agreement building even in Cairo; I know that many of my compatriots there bore apathy or even antipathy towards the System after previous dealings between the NEAC and the S-R Bloc. We’re no longer at each others throats about whether or not they’re so fundamentally different from us that it requires some strange new way to think of them as individuals.

Yared: And honestly, that’s my hope. I think that way whether or not they’re humans, whether or not they have their own customs and social structure, whether or not they’re even a separate country. Even those who are falling on the side of speciation are starting to refer to them in terms of individuals. “Them.” “How many of them.” “Who in there even thinks X?” All of these are ways that we refer to individuals, and, you who are still arguing this belabored point that they should have no choice on what is done with their personalities once their bodies are gone, you are now

thinking of them as what they are: individuals.

Yared: That, my friends, feels like progress to me. We are starting to come to an understanding of what the System is, whether it's a home for the disaffected and dying, an international forum where individuals can truly live together, or a country in its own right, is home to thousands of individuals, each with their individual lives, individual reasons, individual feelings. They're people. The System is their home. We cannot take that from them without violating their individual rights.

Jonas: Well written as always, Yared.

True Name: Agreed. You have a way of agreeing with people just enough to make them feel like you might actually be on their side, and that perhaps they ought to work toward the same goal.

Yared: Thank you both. What do you think about the secession angle?

True Name: It is a little blunt. It feels forced, the way it is just stuck in there. Perhaps you might soften it from "We might as well just secede", to something more like "We would have better luck running our own government", something like that. I agree with Jonas that there is fear bound up in the word 'secede', and the phrase "better luck" implies a humorous remark.

Jonas: Yeah. You want us to be soft, kind, approachable, that sort of thing, especially if you're going to use your current tactic of "agree with them enough to get them to fight for you". We want to seem like good people who deserve our individual rights, that to not grant them would be, at best, a real

shame, and at worst, an affront to their own ideas of freedom.

True Name: This is especially true, given that very few phys-side are acting as our voices. They are arguing on second- and third-hand accounts, such as your own. To them, uploads are this mysterious entity that they might struggle to actually comprehend. You will have to, perhaps ironically, humanize us for them. We have to seem like we can still joke around, still hurt, and still feel the full range of human emotion.

Jonas: You've seen True Name and I joking around, after all.

Yared: Yeah. So what do you think about: "At this point," one of them said as we laughed over another fruitless debate, "I'm not even sure we should be discussing individual rights with governments that have no way of knowing how we work. We'd have better luck running our own government. We can herd our cats, they can herd theirs."

True Name: I like that. I am enough like a cat to be difficult to herd.

Jonas: Confirmed. Getting her to do anything she doesn't want to do is fucking impossible.

True Name: I prefer to think of myself as 'staunchly independent', thank you very much.

Yared: Haha

Yared: Actually, how about I include some banter into the post?

Yared: "At this point," one of them said, as we laughed over another fruitless debate. "I'm not even sure we should be discussing individual rights with governments that have no way of knowing how we work. We'd have better luck running our own government."

Yared: To which the other replied, "We can herd our cats, they can herd theirs," thus spawning a good five minutes of cat-herding jokes, wherein we unilaterally decided that cats were, to put it politely, staunchly independent. I think that applies to them as much as it does to us.

Jonas: I like it! It'll need a bit of cleaning up to make it flow a little better in context, but I trust that that's something you can do on your own.

Yared: Of course.

True Name: I am sorry to make such a cat out of you in this situation, Yared. You are being herded by two different camps, us and your councilor friend. Our goals align for now, for which I am grateful, but I understand that having both parties tell you not to tell the other about them is uncomfortable.

True Name: On that note, it is probably best not to tell Demma about this conversation.

Jonas: Seconded.

Yared: Thirded. I don't know that he'd have my head on a platter if he knew that this conversation had taken place, but I don't know that he wouldn't, either.

Jonas: We don't want that, we like you too much.

True Name: I was going to say that you are too useful to us, but I will grudgingly agree that we do rather like you.

Yared: I'm pleased to hear that!

Yared: I'll get this polished and posted. What's next on your side?

True Name: Jonas will likely be snooping around for news and schmoozing where appropriate. I will be focusing on how to present this in the most empathetic, understandable way possible to the Council and other interested parties. I need to sell it to the System.

Yared: Does that mean you're for secession, then?

Jonas: If the L₅ launch goes through, yes. If not, then it becomes more complicated, and we likely *would* have to move to international waters.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

It was difficult for Codrin Bălan to reengage with the project at hand after what seemed to be an ever-mounting pile of oddities.

It was not simply that ey had been finding piece after piece of new-to-em information about those that ey loved—though it was also that—nor was it that eir entire clade seemed to be entangled far deeper in something going further back than expected—though it was that as well—but that, by virtue of the twin launches and the L₅ System remaining back around Earth, ey was limited to reading much of this over plain text. Text that had flowed over sheets of paper in a comfortable font, bound itself up in books, and begged to be pored over, stood itself before em and said, “Read me, understand me.” It all added one layer of remove that, despite eir attraction to the written word and fine paper and comfortable fonts and nice books, left em feeling caught up in some dreamlike state of almost-understanding.

As an example, there was this seemingly universal agreement among the Odists that no one of them should be the one to tell the entirety of the tale, and each for their own reasons. There seemed to be shame bound up in all of them, in some way, but beyond that, both instances of Dear had diverged to the point where the foxes were starting to come up with their own explanations for not providing that info to their respective Codrins Bălan.

Why was it, for instance, that Codrin#Pollux had decided to simply interview Dear, where ey had not? And what was ey, Codrin#Castor, to do with the information that Dear had shared with eir cocladist? Hell, was cocladist even the right word, at this point? That seemed to imply a down-tree instance that one could still access.

I want to die, the fox had said. How had Codrin#Pollux even begun to deal with that bit of information? When ey read those words, in eir comfortable font on eir fine paper in eir nice books, ey had cried. Ey had cried much as it sounded like Codrin#Pollux had.

Ey had cried and closed the book and paced eir way out into the prairie outside the house, where ey had cried some more. Ey had not walked any new paths that day, simply walked to the outermost cairn that ey could find, sat down next to it, and watered the thirsty grass with a grief ey could not name.

And that ey could not name it only added to that unnerving sense of remove. It wasn't just sadness or grief. It wasn't the type of feeling that one might experience at the actual loss of a loved one. It wasn't the type of feeling that one experienced on learning that a loved one bore within its heart thoughts of suicide. Neither of those were true. Ey knew that, had ey been the one to conduct the interview, ey would have had much the same reaction as the other Codrin had (ey suspected, for all ey had was the transcript, incomplete as it was).

But instead, ey had a cottony shield of time and distance that meant that ey could process it at eir own pace. Ey could go sit out in the prairie and cry and then come to an understanding of Dear's desire that ey couldn't have any hope of doing, were the fox sitting before em.

With this distance, both from the interview and from Dear itself, ey could remember its words: *"I just think we need death, or something like it, as part of the System. Death. Fear of death. Needs and reasons to survive in the face of an inevitable end. We need a way for an individual to end. We need a way to release those memories."* Ey could remember those words and understand the sudden too-full feeling of discomfort that had come with them. Immortality came with its own costs, and it was not simply that one might grow bored, but that one might go mad.

But ey hadn't interviewed Dear, had ey? Codrin#Pollux had. Codrin#Pollux had that trauma in a way that ey did not.

And Ioan! The wondrous hints that eir down-tree fork had been receiving! That their dream worlds worked in far subtler ways than imagined. That May Then My Name had told em, "I am worried that you will be unhappy with me."

So much bound up in that statement. By virtue of having lived with Dear and its partner for more than two decades, by having fallen into a steadily less-eccentric orbit around the fox, accepted mounting feelings of love, and having found emself in a relationship with an Odist, ey could read perhaps more clearly than Ioan the signs that ey was well on the path to doing the same. The Odists loved hard and they loved deep and they loved fast, and it was hard not to become intoxicated beneath all that love. *She seems to have wormed her way into my life and made herself comfortable, all while making it feel like it was my idea*, Ioan had written in a clade-eyes-only message. *She says that it's her role to feel, though, and I believe her in this.*

Ah, but Ioan, it is much more complex than that. With an Odist, it is always much more complex.

And that, of course, was not even the main implication of the message. "I am worried that you will be unhappy", even without the "with me" at the end suggested more of that guilt, shame, or distaste for the past that ey had picked up from Dear. From *both* Dears.

Eir Dear: *I am...ashamed. Many of the first lines...well, no. I will not elaborate now.*

The Dear on Pollux: *You could interview any one of us about the entirety of our story, even me, and we would tell you, but we would also resent you for that.*

Eir Dear had said, *"You will doubtless tease it out of me, bit by bit, you tenacious fuck."* But given what both May Then My Name and Dear#Pollux had said, ey no longer wished to try.

And so here ey was, sitting in a dark field, looking up at the stars. Very dark. Well and truly dark, beyond almost anything Ioan had experienced phys-side, or even after uploading. There was a purity to that blackness, just as there was a purity to the red-filtered flashlight that Tycho Brahe (not his real name; he had requested the pseudonym) used to guide them both to the top of a—yes, pure—grassy hill.

"I come out here on nights when I am depressed," the old astronomer had grumbled. "And that has been most nights, of late."

"It's a beautiful place."

"Isn't it? It reminds me of a trip to the west coast that I took long, long before I uploaded. This grassy hill in the middle of a wide ring of firs. You can't see it, but the grass is not actually grass, but a sort of moss. When it's freshly dried out after a rain, it's delightfully soft, isn't it?"

Codrin nodded, then, realizing that ey could barely see Tycho next to em, murmured, “Almost cushy.”

They sat on that hill in silence, leaning back on their hands and watching the stars overhead.

It had taken a few moments for Codrin to get eir bearings when they had first started watching. The stars overhead were stationary, but in a way that ey was not used to. There was the barest hint at a bare hint of movement, a dream of parallax, and the constellations didn’t feel right. One star, brighter than the rest, was visible low over the horizon. There was no moon. It was quite unnerving in some indescribable way.

“What is this?”

“It is a view from outside the LV.”

Codrin frowned up at the sky. “I didn’t think that pictures could make it into the System. Systems.”

Tycho sighed quietly. “They can’t. This is just a projection. A description based on what I know the stars to look like combined with information based on where they are relative to the fisheye lens on the side of the Dreamer Module.”

“And so you project that combination into a sim?”

“Yes. It’s here for anyone to see, but I have been too tired to tell many people.” A long pause, and then, “Yes, too tired.”

There was a quiet lie in that admission, but Codrin let it slip by. “Can you tell me some more about what I’m seeing?”

“Of course, Mx. Bălan,” Tycho said, audibly brightening.

He pointed first to the brightest star, low on the horizon. “There, see? That is the sun. The launch arms let us go at such a point that we are traveling along the ecliptic in order to use some of the existing orbital velocity we were already on. We have a disadvantage from Pollux, as we were released counter to that orbit.”

He pointed at another star, one that almost seemed to be creeping slowly across the field of view, the source of that parallax sliding. “That is Jupiter, there. You can see it moving only by virtue of the fact that we used it as a slingshot several days into the journey. We are millions of kilometers away from it by now, but it’s still one of the things that we are closest to. That’s how you know that we’re on Castor. Pollux will be using Saturn as a slingshot planet, a fortuitous trade-off given the orbital advantage I mentioned. There was a touch of maneuvering after launch to get the trajectories to work out.”

He pointed over to the fir trees opposite where the star that was the sun shone. “Beyond those trees—really, the reason that they exist—is the solar sail, which blocks the lens. It was only recently deployed, you know. We could have deployed it on our way to Jupiter, but, as you know, we have all the time in the world, and there was no sense in risking it during the gravity assist.”

He pointed at something else, and it took Codrin a moment to discern in the dark that he was pointing at himself. “And here I am, some nobody, some shithead who loved everything about this idea, but who can only view it in a very approximate way, like this.”

“You don’t seem particularly happy about your situation.”

Tycho’s laugh was bitter. “Of course I’m not happy. I mean...I *am* happy, but that happiness is tempered by the whims of reality more than I had expected.”

“What would your dream experience be?” Codrin asked, enjoying a secret smile at the phrase couched within the ultimate dream experience that was the System.

“To see it all,” he said, and ey noticed that the bitter edge was slowly leaving his voice. “I have all the perisystem processing that I can ask for to give me a simulacrum like this. You must know that this naked-eye astronomy is all but useless in the grand scheme of things, other than to give us a sense of where we came from and where we might be going in a way that allows us to tell ourselves a coherent story. The rest of astronomy is all math.”

“I suppose that’s why this place feels so much more romantic to me,” Codrin mused. “I’m a storyteller, not an astronomer. Still, I imagine that that need for stories runs deep, and I can see the allure to possibly being able to actually look out a window at stars whizzing by.”

“Yes.” Tycho sighed, then lay down on his back, with his arms crossed behind his head. “Yes, to see it all.”

There were a few minutes of silence as astronomer and historian looked out into the night sky, there in the simulated pacific northwest, there on the simulated moss surrounded by the simulated trees while simulated stars shone still above them.

They don’t twinkle, Codrin thought to emself. *That’s what it is. They don’t twinkle, and the last time I saw them was from Earth, and all those who uploaded and made sims with star-filled nights, never left that aspect out.*

Ey mentioned this to Tycho, who laughed good-naturedly. “Of course. You’re right. If they twinkled, it might feel more natural, but there is no reason for it, here. This place is a dream. My dream. The stars are there, and they don’t twinkle.”

“You said this view is constructed with data from the Dreamer Module,” Codrin said, gently directing the conversation to topics that might please the astronomer more.

“Yeah. The module is mostly a big disk on the ass-end of each of the LVs. Most of that is various instruments that feed data to me and other astronomers here, as well as back to the core System and scientists on Earth. This particular lens is on a long strut that points out from that disk in such a way as to let as little of the solar sail obstruct its views as possible. There are other telescopes with much narrower fields of view in there. It can introduce a bit of vertigo, but would you like to see?”

“Sure.”

“Alright, close your eyes.”

Ey did so, and when Tycho instructed em to open them again, the sudden change in the sky was, indeed, a little dizzy-making. The entire field of stars had changed, and where there had been warped but familiar constellations, there was now a deeper blackness, brighter stars, and far more of them. Far, far more. “What is this?”

“A different view. A more powerful telescope looking at a patch of sky that we’ve never had a chance to see from this angle. One compounded from hours of exposure. I have no idea how exact it is, though, as it’s all interpreted through the perisystem infrastructure, but it’s still doing a slow sweep of the sky at a high enough magnification that the star field is completely different from what we’re used to.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that that would’ve had such an impact on me,” ey murmured. “I felt like I was falling for a moment.”

Tycho sighed. “I did, too, the first time, and even now I’m not sure why. I think it’s the mix of contexts. Here we are, looking out to space from the westernmost edge of the Western Fed, and yet all of the stars are different. They progress in such strange ways as the telescope searches on its automatic pattern.”

“It’s uncanny.”

“A good word, yeah. It’s like looking out on an alien sky, but even that misses the strangeness of so many stars. An alien sky, but as seen from the context of Earth. Firs, moss, a light breeze, dampness soaking into your trousers, and an alien sky. Did you have the chance to visit the L₅ station before you uploaded?”

“Goodness, no.” Ey laughed. “We were too poor for that.”

Tycho laughed along with em. “As was I. I do wonder, though, if I would have felt the same way I do now if I’d just had the chance to see the stars in such a new context before doing so here.”

Codrin nodded, and a few more minutes of silence enveloped them as they took in that alien sky.

“You asked about the Dreamer Module, though.” Tycho’s voice had regained some of its strength. “And you’re the one who works with stories. I’m sure you had your own questions, but there’s a story there, that you might find interesting.”

“Of course. I’d love to hear.”

“I worked with a team of scientists, a few of whom were station-side and the rest of whom were planet-side. All lovely folks, of course. They tried to come up with some pithy acronym for the module, but some bit of news called them ‘hopeless dreamers’, and the name stuck from there.

“We basically nailed down the instrumentation that would go into the module, then built up its structure from there. Only some of it is telescopes, you understand. There are also various packages for measuring the cosmic microwave background radiation, ones for measuring ambient temperature variations, all the normal stuff. There’s also a secondary generator in there, I suppose to ensure that neither the module nor the station impact each other.

“Anyhow, that’s not the story part. The story part is that we got halfway done with the planning of the module and were just starting to spin up all the work to build the components, and we suddenly ran into a bunch of pushback. A lot of it was the usual grumbling about costs, even though most of it was to be manufactured at the station. Some of it was tied in with the voices that wanted to keep the launch from happening in the first place. If ever there was such a thing as an anti-dreamer, it was them. They felt that to make a dream a reality was somehow wrong. I never understood their arguments.

“The last bit of friction, and the most interesting bit, I suppose, came from sys-side. Their arguments were plainly insincere, though I never could figure out their true concerns. They said that the added complexity to the LVs put the integrity of the Systems within at risk beyond some imagined tolerance. It didn’t bear up to even the slightest scrutiny, but they seemed to have loud voices.”

Codrin frowned. “Most everyone I talked to was as ambivalent about the launch as they were about most phys-side projects, though I fully acknowledge that we run in different circles. There was an initial flush of excitement as it was announced, and most everyone I’ve talked to here said they’d made up their minds to go along on the launches even then, two decades back. It calmed down after as many forgot, but then ramped up before launch.”

“Yeah, I felt much of the same in my circle, though you must understand that we were working on the launches for all of those two decades, so our excitement was bound to how well the project was going. We were spending so much time talking with phys-side, hearing all their gossip about the sentiment out there, and both sides were surprised when we started to have serious conversations about the sentiment sys-side when those

arguments started to get louder.

“At first, it was just the occasional opinion column in the feeds, but the actual news started to pick up on it soon after, and then there were a few debates. I don’t think it ever got to the point where the module was at risk, but people are still talking about whether it was a good idea, I hear.”

“And you said you don’t know what their real arguments are?”

“Correct.”

“What about who was having those arguments?”

“That’s the thing, there were relatively few voices from those who had uploaded recently. Most of those who started the arguments were from the first few decades of the System’s creation. I suspect that at least part of their concern is that they still feel somewhat upset at having to pay to join, some of them dearly so, but even that doesn’t feel like the whole reason. It was just all these super old uploads, both individuals and clades, who seemed less than thrilled at the prospect. Founder types, you understand.”

Eir frown grew. “Do you remember any names?”

“The Jonas clade was pretty vocally against it. I think they even had compunctions about the launch, for that matter. There were some of the Odists, though I never took much interest in who. Their names are always so impenetrable. Let’s see...there was Àsgeir Hrafnson, who has always seemed like he’s against everything. Such a sour man...”

Tycho continued to list off a few names, and Codrin continued to nod dutifully, but eir mind was elsewhere. The Odists’ opinion on the launch seemed to range from, at best, utterly ecstatic, as Dear’s had been, to, at worst, simply uninterested, to go by what Dear and May Then My Name had said.

Was this another lie from Dear, or had the fox simply not gone looking for names in the debate?

“Obviously, the launch went forward anyway, and both LVs contain Dreamer Modules, so they weren’t successful,” the astronomer was saying. “They didn’t seem interested in paring down the scope to the modules, nor even adding any risk mitigation factors beyond the extra RTG and a set of explosive bolts that could jettison the module if necessary. I think that’s what made me the most suspicious of their initial arguments. If there was risk, why not try to mitigate it further?”

“I’m not sure,” Codrin said, mouth dry. “Perhaps it was more of an image thing? As in, adding the module might damage how others viewed the launch.”

“Perhaps.” Ey heard Tycho shrug against the moss-grass before he continued. “Anyway, that’s the story. I don’t know if it’ll be of any use to you in your project.”

“It might. It already answered most of my other questions, too. The last one I have is that you invested entirely in the LVs. Why?”

The astronomer was silent for a long time. “As upset as I get that I’m not actually able to see all the stars, even I am not immune to the romance of the idea. Imagine sitting at home, knowing that you could have flung yourself off into space, out among the dangers and excitement, and choosing instead that boring safety? The only benefit would be the combined knowledge of Castor and Pollux arriving at the station at the same time we’ll get it on either one of our LVs, but, well.”

Tycho gestured up to the shifting night sky, leaving his words at that.

Eventually, even Codrin lay back in the grass. Lay there with Tycho Brahe in all his sadness and happiness and wisdom and romanticism. Lay there and looked up at the stars ey knew not for how long.

Douglas Hadje — 2325

May Then My Name Die With Me: I am surprised to see you online, Douglas!

Douglas Hadje: Remember how I said my workload as launch director would be starting to decrease after launch?

Douglas: Well, now I'm only working a few days at a time, and most of that is writing up documentation and collating reports for the launch commission. Soon, even that will disappear, and I suspect I'll be out of a job unless I decide to take on another position.

May Then My Name: Do you think that you will?

Douglas: I don't know. Maybe? Probably. Once I'm out of a job, my reason to be here is kind of gone, and I imagine whatever goodwill I've built up will start to run out and they won't let me stay on the station. It's mostly self-sufficient, but resources are limited and I'm sure there's someone who would like to take my spot.

Ioan Bălan: And you mentioned not wanting to go back planet-side.

Douglas: God no, not if I can help it.

May Then My Name: Either way, I am happy to see you about. Did you have any particular topics you wanted to discuss today? If not, I am sure that Ioan has some.

Douglas: Nothing in particular. I've got a few minor questions outstanding, I think, but I'm starting to get the sense that you'll only answer those when you're ready.

May Then My Name: That is a very good sense that you have.

Ioan: May's obstinate, ignore her.

Ioan: She also kicks pretty hard, but then, I deserved that.

May Then My Name: You did.

Ioan: Alright, well, the topic I was thinking of asking you about is that of the political side of the launch. One of the instances on one of the launches conducted an interview that suggested that there was actually quite a lot of political machinations behind the scenes.

Douglas: Oh! Yes! I'm surprised you didn't get much news of that in there.

May Then My Name: I am sure that we could look it up, but you are in a unique position to tell us more directly, and after it has been all mixed around in your head.

Douglas: True. Well, where do you want to start?

Ioan: How about you start most recently, actually, and then work your way backwards.

Douglas: Alright.

Douglas: There was one last spate of protesting right before the launch. I saw some of the videos from planet-side, and a lot of it was just talking-heads discussing the fact that some had tried to shut down portions of the net, and even tried to take down one of the Ansible stations. Most of it was the same stuff we saw during the planning phase. I guess it kind of broke down into three complaints:

Douglas: 1. Expenses—this one was diminished toward the end, as there's not really a whole lot of expense required in popping some explosive bolts to set the launches flying, and all the material used out here was from scavenged Trojan asteroids. The protests that we saw around this were mostly griping about how much had already been spent. "Think of how much could have gone to deacidifying projects, etc etc"

Douglas: 2. Brain/workforce drain—This is a perennial topic with the System. All those smart minds out there focusing on pie-in-the-sky dreams instead of 'real problems' back there on Earth. What they imagine someone with a masters in spaceflight or astronomy or whatever can do back on Earth to better an overheated dustball is beyond me.

Douglas: 3. Earth vs space sentiments—This one is probably the most common, and also the hardest to explain. Even I don't totally understand it. I think I mentioned before that, the harder things get, the less time and energy you have to focus on those pie-in-the-sky ideas. You're too busy scraping by or focus on growing soybeans or trying not to burn up or whatever, you don't have much time to do anything but dream about space and watch movies in your hour before bed or however your day looks.

Douglas: You have to remember that my opinion of the place is colored by the fact that I lived where I did with the family that I did while the city was in a state of decline, so.

Douglas: Anyway, a lot of these people seemed to be just plain angry that there were people doing things that were not for helping improve the general condition of life. There's still six or seven billion people down there, when you mesh birth rates with death and upload rates, and a good chunk of those people have no wish to upload, so they're stuck in a life that's uncomfortable enough to make them angry at those who have what feels like (and might as well be) unlimited potential, as they imagine the System to be.

Douglas: Does that make sense?

Ioan: I think so. You've got people who are unhappy, and part of that unhappiness is the fact that others are happy.

Douglas: More than that. They're unhappy, and part of that is that those others are not helping to make life better for them. It's usually not even making life better for humanity, but for them specifically, for the world as they specifically view it.

Ioan: Was there any sentiment that they were being abandoned by those who left on the launches?

Douglas: Yes and no. You have to understand that most people still struggle to think of the uploads as human. Thus calling them 'uploads', even, rather than 'uploaded personalities' or whatever. It's not just shorthand, it's a way of separating them into some other idea. They aren't people, anymore, they're programs, in their minds.

May Then My Name: There has always been this argument of speciation, and the instinct to make us the other continues apace, I see.

Douglas: I'll take your word for it. It's difficult to persuade the average person that those in the System are still human, or if not human, then at least still people. They're not the types to listen to all the arguments for why we know that you're still you after you upload. They duck-type you into being programs.

May Then My Name: 'Duck-type'?

Ioan: Looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, must be a duck.

Douglas: Is that what it means? It's just come to mean a false-equivalency of any kind. Few enough ducks, anymore.

Ioan: I only learned it from an assignment talking with some perisystem specialists.

Douglas: I guess it doesn't surprise me that you have those inside as well as outside. Sometimes, I get these little jolts about how little I actually know about the System, compared to how much I know about the launch.

May Then My Name: It does not help that many of us—not just me—are obtuse on purpose.

Douglas: You said there was some grumbling sys-side, as well, right?

Ioan: Yes, though I don't totally understand it. Some of it sounds like that like, "Why bother? We've got a good life here, and there's no reason to be putting that in any kind of danger just to throw copies of us out at the stars." The bits that I mentioned earlier, however, have more to do with the Dreamer Modules than the launch itself, though.

Douglas: Oh? There was a little bit of chatter about those here, but I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to it.

Ioan: That's okay. I'll dig, myself.

May Then My Name: We were working backwards from present. Was there much in the way of disruptions in the middle of the launch construction process?

Douglas: Not as much, no. There was a lull in overall protests. A lot of the grumbling about the Dreamer Module came during this time. There were one or two other sabotage attempts. Do you want to hear about those?

May Then My Name: We will, yes, but there is time. For now, we are curious about the macro-scale political landscape before, during, and after launch.

Douglas: Alright. That'll give me some time to remember more about what happened with them.

Douglas: Large scale, hmm.

Douglas: Well, most of the government side goes way over my head. In the WF, there was always a bit of waffling, even on the majority coalition side, but whenever sentiment in a member party of the majority drifted away from the launch, they never seemed to last all that long in power.

Douglas: I talked about protests and sentiments before, but for the most part, folks were either on board, didn't care, or didn't know about the launch. It was just another satellite in their eyes, or some deep space probe.

Douglas: Early on was when it was talked about most. There wasn't a whole lot of questions asked about whether or not the launch would happen, weirdly. I remember it just kind of popping up in the news as a foregone conclusion. "The launch was happening, how's everyone feeling about that?"

Douglas: I think some were pretty unhappy with that, at first. Like, where did this decision even come from? Obviously, the System is its own authority and can do whatever it wants, but someone has to manage the phys-side work, so who, phys-side, actually had those conversations? There were a few gestures at investigation, but they fizzled out. Mostly, people were just confused. Some people get upset when they're confused, but for the rest, it just left them shaking their heads. It was the politicians who were dealing with it after that initial shock.

Douglas: Building the launches wasn't too expensive, honestly, because almost all of that was done in an automated fashion here on the station. That said, retrofitting the station for the launch struts, building the launch arms, expanding the production sector...all that took time, energy, and money. I'm surprised it went as smoothly as it did, despite all the grumbling.

Ioan: So it just popped up on the scene, then interest waned, then ramped up before the launch, then dropped? Like an 'M' shape?

Douglas: I suppose so, yeah. After the launch happened, there was nothing that could be done, so everyone lost interest or lost steam in their protests.

May Then My Name: We had a conversation a while back about our own point of no return. It was actually a year and change before the launch itself. By then, individuals were already transferring, and even if something went wrong, the cheapest solution would have been to launch anyway, and just take the hit on final velocity.

Ioan: Really?

Ioan: It makes sense, I suppose. What would you have done? Un-built the struts/arms and LVs?

Douglas: Basically. That would require dealing with yet more conservation-of-momentum issues, which would've required more money to build *that* infrastructure, etc etc.

Douglas: None of which really seemed to matter to the protestors.

May Then My Name: You said that parties whose sentiments veered away from supporting the launch often wound up leaving the leading coalition. What was the general sentiment of the leading coalition in the WF? Elsewhere on Earth?

Douglas: Oh, good question. I guess most of them wound up being the types that pushed for higher taxes while playing to humanity. They're all named something different, I guess. It was the liberal democrats for most of the time in the WF. The demsocs felt that the money that was going to the launch was better served on Earth. The libertarians were here and there on the issue. Sometimes they felt like it would be a net win for humanity, sometimes they felt like the burden of the launch was too much. The conservatives spent most of the last twenty years as the shadow government. Their arguments were mostly what I said before. It was money that was going to a thing that wasn't them or their financial interests.

May Then My Name: The way you talk, I assume that you are a liberal democrat?

Douglas: We don't get a vote up here.

Douglas: I'm with whatever party allows the System to continue and helped the launch move forward.

May Then My Name: A single issue voter, then?

Douglas: I guess so!

Ioan: Well, we appreciate that, given where we live.

Douglas: Haha, well, good.

Douglas: Any other questions? I don't have any in particular, and would like to go grab dinner.

Ioan: Not from me.

May Then My Name: When will you be uploading, Douglas?

Douglas: I don't know. Some day, I promise.

May Then My Name: When you do, I hope that you will tell us, so that we can meet you face to face.

Douglas: Of course! After all this time, I'd be disappointed if we didn't.

May Then My Name: We will have many stories to tell you.

Douglas: I look forward to them all. Goodnight, you two.

Douglas: Or morning.

Ioan: Afternoon, actually. Enjoy your dinner!

True Name — 2124

It was Jonas's time to pick the location for their meeting, but as he had scheduled it for a few hours from the time of the message, The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream decided to spend a bit of time exploring fanciful cocktails at the Kowloon Walled City/central corridor mega mall/parking lot rooftop bar.

Her first drink was a total wash. Someone had decided to explore the utility of sulfurous odors in drinks by combining the smoke of a newly lit match, a slice of preserved egg, and some smokey mezcal, sweetened by a few squirts of over-ripe apricot puree.

There was, True Name discovered, essentially no place for sulfur in a cocktail. It was a drink that was *almost* good, so long as one did Not breathe in the scent. The first heady whiff that she got had burnt her nostrils and she only managed a few sips after that.

Her next drink was some bracingly strong lime-and-bitters-and-liquor deal with a float of foam made of egg whites and pork fat. There was a dusting of star anise and cinnamon on top. Her final assessment: pleasantly disgusting. The lime, egg whites, and spices all worked quite well together, she imagined, but the added porky fat clashed with it in such a savory way that she suspected it would have gone better with some brown spirit.

Still, she drank it all.

Her final drink was a weak, British style ale that, she was informed, used a mixture of herbs rather than hops as the bittering agent. Spruce and henbane, the first of which left her with an almost-unpleasant subdermal itching and the latter of which left her vision tinted red and her intoxication higher than it might have been otherwise.

Terrible. Delightful

She let that intoxication linger as she prowled through one of the mall sections of the solid block of building. She paced along balconies, fingering wilting leaves of variegated plants, scratching a claw through the grime of countless hands accumulated on faux-wood banisters. She peered through grates at shelves still speckled with abandoned gadgets and folded jeans. She sat in the food court, still smelling of rancid grease and sanitizer. She breathed in the stale, over-conditioned air, and wondered for the thousandth time just who had thought to create such a sim, and what sort of twisted nostalgia had led them to do so.

It was as she stood in front of a quiescent fountain that it occurred to her that this place—the mall, the dingy city, the parking structure and its shoddily crafted drinks—was all a monument to the imperfections of mankind's countless attempts to provide for itself in so many imperfect ways.

They were here. They were immortal. They *could* build perfection. They could live their lives in eternal bliss,

and yet they still got their kicks out of the temporary and the imperfect. They were, despite the arguments, still human in so many delightfully crazed ways. The cracks still shone through, even when presented with the opportunity of perfection. They were the futurological congress of yore, where even the idea of queuing had been romanticized and pushed into the realm of the transgressive. Even these poor fools who had the limitless expanses of the mind before them knew that, in some ways, it was their origins that made them complete.

And it was intoxicating.

It was intoxicating in such a way as to leave the skunk feeling somehow more complete than she had expected. There was no speciation. She was complete in all her humanity, as were all who uploaded. By her very imperfections, she was complete.

What, then was the difference?

She picked at a coin that had cemented itself to the rim of the fountain in a layer of slimy algae, winced at the unpleasant sensation, and then flicked it into the murky-green water that still stained the basin of the fountain.

There was a part of her mind that was tempted to consider those who lived sys-side as somehow more perfect beings than those who remained phys-side. But no, that was not quite correct. They were different, yes, but they were not some greater form of perfection—or perhaps not entirely.

Were there perhaps some core difference in ideals? Obviously, given the cost of uploading, there was a natural barrier, but even among the upper-middle and higher classes, there were some who simply chose not to upload. What was the difference? Was it aspirational? Were those who uploaded on some different wavelength from those who stayed behind? There were certainly many who found the whole process abhorrent on a physical level, yes. Of those who found it distasteful on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual levels, what did the prospect of continuing to live phys-side provide that living sys-side did not?

She could not decide, but there was the logical fallout of that situation, that the two should be treated on a fundamentally different level, when it came to politics.

There was a slight twinge of a sensory alarm, and she knew that it was time for the meeting with Jonas.

He had chosen a war-gaming room for the meeting. There in the middle of the room was a backlit map of Earth at least five meters long, and scattered across its surface were dozens of chess pieces—knights, pawns, queens—which had been pushed this way and that by long sticks that still rested along the edges of the table.

A smile quirked at the corner of her mouth. *How very like him.*

Jonas was sitting at the other end of the table, eating small hors d'oeuvres from a paper plate. Cocktail weenies spiked with toothpicks and finger sandwiches.

As soon as he noticed True Name standing at the edge of the light that lit the table, he grinned and gestured with his plate toward the hot-and-cold buffet lining one of the walls.

Oh well, why not, she thought, willing away the drunkenness and instead loading up a plate with bruschetta and pita crisps with hummus.

"You're looking well today," Jonas said, once he had finished his mouthful. "Have an exciting jaunt?"

She laughed. "Why? Were you watching me?"

He shrugged.

"Well, it was exciting as could be expected. I got a lot of thinking done. A lot of planning. Which one of you are you, by the way?"

"Jonas Prime, today."

True Name nodded a greeting and focused on her hummus for a few minutes.

Once it was clear that she had reached a pause, Jonas spoke up. "Tell me about your thoughts and plans. I'm curious what it is that required alcohol to understand."

"I was thinking about the difference in politics phys-side and sys-side."

He sat up straighter, nodding for her to continue.

"I think that it is a matter of aspirations. We who have uploaded have different goals in life than those who remain behind. Perhaps it is worth approaching them in different ways."

"That's true." He looked thoughtful. "We've already been doing that, to an extent."

"Yes, but out of instinct. Perhaps it is time to do so intentionally. If the goal of politics is to steer groups of individuals, then perhaps it is time to figure out the different ways in which to steer them. The motivations of those on the System are highly independent, surrounding whatever brings them the most freedom to accomplish what it is that they want. Them in particular, rather than large groups, though smaller groups may have goals that are aligned as well."

Jonas frowned down to his remaining weenies, then set the plate aside. "And phys-side?"

"Larger groups. They may feel that they have individual goals, but, whether or not it is in the fore of their thoughts, they know that the best way to accomplish them is to band together with those who share similar enough goals."

"An astute observation."

True Name let the non-compliment slide over her, continuing. "If we are to steer the council, then we must approach it with an eye to the goals shared by dreamers, and if we are to steer affairs phys-side, then we must approach it with an eye toward something broader, offering sugar-coated compromises that feel like wins."

Jonas's frown deepened. "You're a bit further along in this than maybe I gave you credit for."

The skunk leaned forward, resting her chin on folded hands. She refused to rise to the bait offered, choosing instead a thoughtful expression. "Your forks. Do they work on a similar dialectic?"

He nodded.

"Then perhaps it would be smart for me to do similar. I do like your idea of continuing to be seen as a single

individual to the council. I am not sure that I am willing to cycle through my forks for that, however, so perhaps I will continue to act as the point of contact that the other council members see, and simply consult with my forks via regular merging.”

“It’s not a bad idea, no, and with a small clade, some of whom already look like you, you can probably get away with it easily enough. I have to make sure only one of me is out and about where people might see me at a time.” He grinned, adding with a wink, “At least, while working. Ar is out drinking.”

The skunk laughed. “Of course. Hopefully he has better luck with drinks than I did.”

There was a lull in the conversation as True Name crunched her way through the bruschetta on her plate.

After she finished, she spoke up again. “The only problem that I see is that I will need to save up reputation, and then hide the expenditures as best I can. Do you have experience on that?”

Jonas visibly brightened. “Oh! There’s no need to do that. You can push some reputation into your name by having the members of your clade vote you up. Make something silly. Take up poetry. Release it out into the world whether it’s good or not, then have your cocladists build it up higher.”

“Cocladists, huh? Is that the term we are going with?”

He shrugged.

“Well, alright. I will put on some monologues I remember from phys-side.”

“Alright. Let me know when you do, and I’ll upvote them, too. It’s not like there’s no reason to, we talk often enough as council-members and the market doesn’t care who upvotes.”

True Name laughed. After a moment’s concentration, two additional versions of her appeared behind her chair, waved to Jonas, and stepped out of the sim. “I had just enough for two, and I figure two ought to be enough for now.”

“Do they have equally silly names?”

Once more, she resisted the urge to bridle at his comment. Instead she smiled sweetly. “Why Ask Questions, Here At The End Of All Things and Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help.” After a pause, she added, “Why Ask Questions and Answers Will Not Help.”

Jonas man froze, the last of his cocktail sausages halfway between plate and mouth. That mouth now slowly formed into a devious grin. “You continue to surprise and amaze.”

After they had both finished their plates of appetizers and enjoyed a moment of silence, they each began pushing around a few chess pieces off the map.

“We have Yared in NEAC,” True Name said, pushing a pawn over to Addis Ababa. “And you said you know some in the Western Fed, yes?”

Jonas nodded, pushing two queens, two pawns, and a bishop over the chessboard. The bishop in the British aisles: “A judge. He’s easily bribed. We can’t do it ourselves, of course, but we can find those who will. He’ll be useful for influencing some legislation whenever cases regarding uploads come up.”

One of the queens wound up in Germany, the other on the east coast of North America: “Two representatives. Both were good friends. Both too sly for their own good. I’m surprised they haven’t gotten flushed out, yet, but we can keep using them until they do. I think they’ll be useful in pushing for the legislation—both the core bill, and the launch amendment.”

“How about the secession amendment?” True Name asked.

“Probably, assuming there is one.”

“I think there will be.”

Jonas gave her a strange look, but instead of replying, pushed one pawn to the toe of Italy’s boot and the other to the northern end of the central corridor: “Two other friends. DDR junkies, mostly, but very loud ones. This one–” he said, tapping at the one on the central corridor. “–is reactionary and easy to influence, if you feed him the right information, and this one–” He tapped the one on Italy. “–is one of those calm-voice-of-reason types. He would be harder to influence, but it sounds like he’s already mostly in agreement with our dear Yared.”

True Name noticed the lack of names for each of the figures, but said nothing. *It is probably for the best. Leaves me some plausible deniability, and keeps me from interacting with his pawns.*

“Now, how about sys-side?”

Jonas shrugged. “The council, of course, plus the owners of some higher-profile sims, and a few perisystem architects.”

“Alright. I suppose that on my end I do not have anyone other than the council,” she lied. “And all of my various selves, of course.”

“Right, you have Debarre in your pocket, and Zeke likes you plenty.”

He kept throwing her all these little comments that seemed to tempt her to respond emotionally. Was he testing her? Was he watching to see just how much power he had over her?

Not the best tactic for someone who taught theatre to teenagers.

“I think we have the council mostly locked down when it comes to the idea of independence,” she said, setting down her stick.

“And your clade?”

“I have plans for them. Nothing that will get me in trouble with the council, I think.”

“Will you tell me some of those plans?”

She smiled. “Why not? We are working together, after all. They can use our background in theatre to work the propaganda angle.”

It was only a portion of the truth, but she also suspected that Jonas knew this. He accepted it easily enough.

“I’ll send Ir to coordinate with you, so that we don’t step on each other’s toes. That’s what he’s been working on.”

“Did you not say he looked nothing like you? You certainly have the face for a propagandist.”

Jonas laughed. “He arguably looks better. Just different. On that note, will you have your, uh...human self do the propagandizing?”

She waved the question away. “I will work it out. For now, do you have any more news on Yared and his handler?”

“Not too much more. Demma has been heard to mention the System as a country, but so far hasn’t mentioned the word secession. Yared’s latest post is along similar lines as his last. Fluffy, if you’ll forgive the metaphor. The little bit of us teasing each other went over well, and there were a few comments elsewhere on the ‘net that others caught talking about the fact that at least those in the System still seemed to have fun in it.”

“Any other comments about secession that you have seen?”

He shook his head. “Same little blips from some of the crazier people. More of them, perhaps, but it hasn’t

bubbled up too far. There's a bit more chatter about the legal status of the System independent of other nations, but the S-word hasn't come up yet. You heard any here sys-side?"

"Not except between us," she lied again.

Jonas need not know all of her plans, nor that the propaganda work had already begun. Nor, for that matter, that she was still in contact with Dr. Carter Ramirez, phys-side, who still had reputation of her own, her own knight in the British Isles. After all, if he was going to continue to maintain some of his leverage of the situation, should she not do the same?

"Alright, well." Jonas frisbeed his plate into a trash can by the buffet tables. "I guess we're in a holding pattern on that front until the news breaks elsewhere. Until then, keep kissing babies and shaking hands. Or shaking babies and kissing hands. Or whatever it is that not-a-politicians do."

Before she could respond, he winked to her and blipped out of existence, likely back to his home sim.

True Name remained a while in the sim, falling back into the habit of planning and rumination, memorizing the pieces and their locations that Jonas had pushed onto the board, and thinking about all of the lies she had told today.

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

As happened about once every six weeks or so, that boundless energy within Dear became too much for the fox to control, and it would go tearing through the house, working on several projects, forking here to clean, there to make a mess, now to request affection and then to holler about how badly it wanted to be alone.

The first time that this happened, Codrin had been quite startled, opting to lock emself in the office that ey still kept out around the back of the house. One of the many instances of Dear quickly fell into a sulk, and sent em carefully spaced out sensorium messages to make sure that ey hadn't left.

Eventually, Dear's partner had knocked on the door to eir glass-walled office, and Codrin let them in, where they leaned back against the edge of eir desk.

"Do you know of any wild restaurants?" they had asked.

"Wild?"

"Yeah. You know, crazy experiences, or maybe they're really busy or raucous. Some sort of theme. Anything like that."

Codrin had searched through eir memory, then shrugged. "Does a back-alley food court work?"

They laughed. "How in the world do 'back-alley' and 'food court' work together?"

"I have no idea. You walk down this street, and there's just this awning sticking out over a narrow alley. Smells like hell, but when you get through it, there's this courtyard, and all of the walls are various stalls of different food. Most of it's dumplings and buns and stuff like that, but I found it because there's a place there that serves, of all things, really good tacos."

"Sounds about right. Come on."

They had walked back around the patio and into the main house and Dear's partner surveyed the scene of various foxes in various states of activity or various moods, then walked up to one scribbling on a notepad at its desk, grabbed a fistful of fur and loose skin at the nape of its neck in their hand, lifted the fox to its feet, and shook it gently. All of the forks that had been littering the house quit in an instant.

"*Oh, is it dinner time?*" It had looked bedraggled, limp, unsteady, and a glint of some intensity that Codrin had never seen before hid in its eyes.

"Yeah. Come on. Codrin knows a place."

There had never been a full explanation of what it was that happened, but as they dined on plates of dumplings, steamed buns, noodles, and tacos, the fox's hackles began to lay flat, and the erratic twitching of its tail slowed to a more familiar calm. It had spent most of the dinner peering around curiously and talking

their ears off.

“Sometimes I overflow,” is all the fox had said when pressed.

Even after nearly twenty years, though, Codrin had yet to gain the knack of telling the original instance of Dear when that many were running around, and so when the fox began to ‘overflow’ once more, ey sought out its partner in their own workshop and waited until they reached a stopping point before saying, “I think it’s time for dinner.”

As usual, they were able to hunt down the root instance and shake it back to reality. Whenever the fox was grabbed by the scruff, it went limp, and the shake was usually something of a rag doll affair. At first, Codrin had worried that its partner was hurting it, but as ey was welcomed into their relationship, ey learned that the fox counted it as a pleasure.

Today, they found themselves at what Dear promised them was a pitch-perfect simulacrum of a late 2000s diner. While ey could not speak to the accuracy, nor even the quality, something about the sheen of lingering sanitizer on the counters that left streaks, the smell of truly terrible coffee, and the sizzle of grease all added up to a cohesive whole.

Codrin ordered a large plate of fries, Dear a vanilla milkshake, and its partner a slice of pie. They shared all three, and Codrin learned the delight of dipping fries into milkshakes.

“Thank you, my loves, as always,” Dear said, once it calmed down. *“I am honestly surprised that it took this long after Launch for the mania to hit.”*

“Maybe you were less focused on one thing?” Codrin said around a mouthful of melting shake.

“Perhaps. I do not have a single project to dump my attention into, so that singular energy does not build up in quite the same way.”

“The news from Castor and Ioan isn’t enough to keep you focused?”

“Not particularly, no.” It grinned and poked a fry at Codrin. *“You are the historian, my dear. That is your job, not mine.”*

Ey rolled eir eyes.

“Still, I really must find one soon. I am aware that it is not pleasant for you two when this happens, but it is also unpleasant for me when I do not have direction.”

Dear’s partner shrugged. “We just need to get one of those loose clamps for holding bags shut or hair back in a bun so we can just put it on your scruff when you start getting out of hand.”

“Do you promise? I promise that I will do everything in my power to deserve it,” it said, grinning wickedly.

“Dear, I swear to God.”

“If you threaten me with a good time, you will win precisely the prize that you deserve.”

Codrin laughed. “You’re right. We deserve peace and quiet, sometimes.”

Ey received a fry to the face from the fox, which ey dunked into the shake. “What is this place, anyway?”

“It is the restaurant that-” It hesitated for a beat, during which the noise around them dimmed as a cone of silence fell. *“It is the restaurant at which the clade celebrated Secession Day.”*

Codrin stifled a yawn from the ear-popping sensation that always came with the silence. “You weren’t there?”

“I had not yet been forked, no, but Praiseworthy was there. I remember it through the words and sensorium of another.”

“What was it like back then?” ey asked.

“Mx. Codrin Bălan, are you working?”

“Not particularly,” ey said. “I really am just curious.”

“Well, you will still need to be more specific. ‘Back then’ covers a large swath of time.”

“How about a year to either side?” its partner suggested.

“That still encompasses a good amount of history. I will tell you some of them, but you will have to—”

“Find the rest on my own, yes.”

The fox gave a hint of a bow. “Thank you in indulging me in this, Codrin. I cannot be the one to share everything.”

“So what was it like before Secession Day?”

“I do not think that the hoi polloi thought about it all that much. They were concerned about the prospect of others deciding that they did not have rights, to be sure, but it was all very abstract. Even from the point of view of the Council, we could not quite understand what a lack of rights would look like.

“I think that is why secession seemed to come so naturally to us. It took far more effort for those phys-side to comprehend what secession would look like than it did for us. From our point of view, we were separate from the rest of the world, such as it was, in a way that already seemed to preclude citizenship to any other political entity.”

“And you—Michelle, that is—were still on the council at that point?”

“That is a complicated question.” It poked at the last bit of shake with its spoon. “We shall say yes. Elements of the clade were still on the council at that point. This sim is where we celebrated Secession. One of the Odists, Debarre, Ezekiel, user11824, the Russians, Jonas—”

“Jonas?”

Dear tilted its head inquisitively.

“Ezekiel talked about a Jonah. Is that someone else?”

“Oh, yes. Same person. Jonah is a name that fits Ezekiel’s current mode of thinking better, I suppose. We were all there, along with our phys-side accomplice in the campaign for secession and the L₅ launch, Yared.

“The mood was very celebratory. The council sat in that booth—” it said, nodding toward the corner booth. “—and counted down with everyone. It was all very exciting. Everyone was giddy and laughing, and there were fireworks outside.”

“How crowded was it at that time? I imagine there were far fewer people in the System than there are now, if you had to pay to upload.”

“Of course, yes. Still, there were a few common public sims that individuals and instances would frequent. This was one of them. There were a dozen or so others here in the diner along with the rest of the Odists, and several hundred along the street, either on it or in restaurants along it. All were cheering, as far as I could tell.”

“I imagine there was some of that during Launch day, too,” Dear’s partner said. “Beyond our party, that is.”

“Perhaps. I do hope so.”

“So, after all of the celebrations died down, was there any real change?”

Dear shrugged. “Some residual excitement, I suppose. There were some little things that lingered, however, and stuck around. Secession Day, of course, but that is also the date that we started using systime in earnest. The actual number chosen as year zero, day zero for systime is a bit more than a year before Secession, and was tied to the creation of the reputation market, such that there was always a time to which it could be synchronized. Before Secession, we still commonly used the calendar they were—and presumably still are—using phys-side, but after, almost everyone switched to using systime. It

made logical sense, yes, what with sims not being tied to any particular schedule bound by Earth's rotation or procession around the Sun, but also it felt like a sign that we were becoming our own nation, our own people."

The table grew quiet after this explanation, as the last bite of pie was eaten and the last fry dipped in the last bit of shake.

"Feel free to tell me to stuff it, but what was your stanza's role in the whole affair?" Codrin asked.

"You do not need to stuff it, my dear. Each first line had a role to play, after a fashion, and that often informed what the rest of the stanza focuses on, as we are formed from that instance as a template."

Ey nodded, waiting for the fox to continue.

"Actually, my dear, can you guess? I am one who plays with instances, who finds ways to make others mad and happy and fall in love and get in fights, who guides and shapes sentiments, all by just being myself, and I am one who has turned that into an art."

"I know I've met Praiseworthy, but I don't know much about her. I know Serene built the house and prairie. I think you mentioned that you two were forked when Praiseworthy's up-tree instance wanted to explore the ramifications of both instances and sims."

As it waited for Codrin to piece together what ey could, the fox scraped the bottom of the shake glass for the last spoonful of ice cream and fed it to its partner. A small affection that made em smile.

"Can you give me a bit of a hint about Serene?"

"You get one hint, and it will be small. What emotions come to you when you walk the prairie?"

Codrin sat up straight. "A politician? Was Praiseworthy a politician? All this talk of shaping sentiments and expectations. Or, wait. No, that's not it."

Dear urged em on with a little twirl of its spoon, looking pleased at the response.

"A speech writer? Did she come up with the speeches that whichever one of you was on the Council at the time used?"

"You are thinking too narrowly, my dear. The Council had little need for speeches for itself, and, as a body created to guide but not to govern, there were few enough speeches given outside of the council. After all, where would it give them?"

"Too narrow, hmm..." Ey frowned. "Was she...did she come up with propaganda?"

Dear laughed, reached a finger into the shake glass to swipe up a little bit of sticky vanilla shake, and dabbed it on Codrin's nose. "Well reasoned. Praiseworthy was the propagandist among the first lines."

Codrin rubbed eir nose to get the melted ice cream off before it congealed further. "What exactly goes into being a propagandist, when the role of the Council was to guide but not to govern?"

Without falling, the fox's happy expression somehow became a fraction less earnest, just that much less directed.

Before it could respond, ey held up a hand. "It's okay, Dear. One of the Bălans will figure it out."

"Thank you, Codrin."

Ey reached out to pat at the back of the fox's paw. "I hardly want you to resent me, if that's the result of me pressing you on this."

"You are a ways off from making me resent you, my dear."

Codrin nodded, watching Dear's gaze slip away, scanning the street outside the diner, quiet in the late evening. Ey could not quite figure out the emotion on display. Its ears were tilted back, but it did not look

angry, nor particularly sad. Pensive, perhaps?

“Dear?” its partner asked.

“No, you are a ways off from me resenting you, but you are perilously close to me lying to you.”

Ioan Bălan — 2325

Ioan and May walked hand-in-paw along the rim of a lake. It had settled neatly into a bowl formed by three peaks, and around it wound a deer-trail, which was only wide enough to permit them to walk side by side half the time. For the rest of the hike, Ioan walked in front, guiding May, pointing out roots, and eventually helping her clamber up onto a rock out-cropping at the point where the lake drained into the lands below through a chattering creek.

There they sat to eat their lunches and talk.

“I had no idea that you enjoyed hiking.”

“Oh, goodness no. I hate it.” Ey laughed. “But it’s the only way to get to this rock.”

They sat in silence for a while, the sun warming their backs as it slid down toward the peaks that ey supposed must be west.

“Why did you bring me out here, Ioan?”

Ey lazily scanned the far shore of the lake, picking out the places where the deer trail dipped shyly down to the edge of the water before darting back up into the trees.

“I needed to focus on something further away than a piece of paper,” ey said at last. “Further than the lilacs in the yard.”

“And the interviews you have done have not helped?”

Ey shrugged.

“Cabin fever, perhaps?”

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Ioan, I am not the one who is supposed to be asking questions,” she chided.

“Right, sorry. It’s a little bit cabin fever, I guess. I’ve spent an awful lot of time cooped up in the house and just sending forks out to run the interviews. It’s one thing to remember being outside, but another still to have to make that memory align with not having left the house in days.”

The skunk nodded, picking a pebble from near her paw and tossing it into the lake. “I understand. It think that I am perhaps more comfortable inside than you are, but I am still happy that you brought me here.”

“Glad you like it. It’s an abandoned sim that I visited decades back and still had the coordinates to. It reminded me of how my grandfather described his time in Slovenia.” Ey crumpled the wrapper to eir sandwich and returned it to the backpack that ey’d brought with em. “It’s just good to get out and change contexts, I guess.”

May nodded.

“It’s just...” Ey frowned, hunting for the words. “It’s just that we have limitless time and limitless space and all the creativity we could hope to use, and still I sometimes feel trapped, as though I’m stuck in this tiny, constrained space where I can barely move and can’t hope to stretch out. Does that make sense?”

“It is not a feeling I share, but I can see how one might,” May said, carefully shifting the backpack from between them to the other side of her so that she could lean against em. “It is the feeling one gets when one asks “is that all there is?” and the answer comes back “yes, of course”.”

“Yeah,” ey murmured. As May rested her head against eir shoulder, ey turned eir head to place a kiss between her ears. Ey did not remember when ey had first started doing that, but it had long since become habit. Every time ey remembered that it had been an act that was out of character for em until May moved in, some part of em raced around in circles to try and find out what had changed and why.

It’s just...May. That’s just how she is, ey kept reminding emself. There is no explaining an Odist.

“It’s been happening more and more since the idea of the launches first started to take off. It happened before, too, but I think coming to the understanding that this *isn’t* all there is, that there’s also stuff outside the System and far away from the Sun...well, it just kind of rubbed my face in it. “You’re stuck here, Ioan Bălan,” it says. “You’re not going to be on the launch, and even if you were, that wouldn’t be you. There’d be no merging of experiences”.”

May laughed. “I find freedom in that. Not only will I not have to do any of that work, but I will also get to be one of the shithheads that stays behind.”

“And that’s a bonus?”

“Of course it is, my dear. When was the last time you had the luxury of staying behind? Of that being a one-way decision?”

Ey frowned.

“Do not think too hard, Ioan. I can tell you now that it was before you uploaded,” she said, as though speaking from a dream. “That was the last time that you could have made the choice to stay behind. It is some of Dear’s beloved irreversibility. You cannot un-upload. You cannot upload part of the way. There is no going and there is no back, remember? Now, though, you are here. If you are busy working and a friend is throwing a party, why, just fork! You do not need to worry about whether or not you need stay behind or join them. You can do both.”

“But with the launch, you had the decision to stay behind.”

“Yes, it was a new experience. New in these last two centuries.”

“You’re so weird,” ey said, then laughed as she elbowed em in the side.

“We are both weird.” She poked at eir thigh with a claw. “That includes you, my dear. We both stayed behind, and we both sent along cocladists so far diverged from us that they might as well have become new individuals.”

“Mm, true. I’m happy for them, at least.”

“As am I. Their communications are not quite as happy as I suspect they wish, but I am still happy for them.”

Ioan knit eir brow. “There is that, yeah. Do you remember Ezekiel?”

“Of course,” May said, sitting up and swinging her legs up onto the rock so that she could sit cross-legged, facing em. “He was brilliant. Intensely, incredibly brilliant. I am sure that he still is, but that brilliance is now coiled all around itself in the way that happens with prophets throughout the ages.”

Ey turned to face May in turn. “Who do you think that weighed more on, though? Dear or Codrin?”

The skunk dipped her muzzle. “That is difficult to say. They are each sensitive in their own ways. Dear, I imagine, is feeling a lot of old fears confirmed, and old memories come to roost. I worry that, some day, that fox will spin itself into a whirlwind and dissipate into the atmosphere.”

“I’m sure it’d enjoy that.”

“It would make it a whole production. Invite everyone on the LV.”

Ioan laughed.

“And Codrin?” she said.

“I expect ey’s struggling, in eir own way. Were I confronted with something like that, I’d be able to keep it together throughout the interview, but afterwards, I’d have to spend a lot of time just decompressing.”

“Why is that?”

“You spend all your time up here—” Ey tapped at eir temple. “—and being confronted by the ways in which that can go wrong to someone who was, as you say, brilliant, can really mess with you. I bet ey holed emself up in that office for a while and paced a ring into the floor.”

If ey had been expecting a laugh or a smile from the skunk, ey was disappointed. She simply nodded and looked off into the water again. “There is nothing wrong with that, Ioan. We have known that disconnect. We have known the feeling of a mind coiled in on itself. That is frightening to all of us. It *should* be frightening.”

Suspecting that May would appreciate it and not knowing what to say to that, ey simply reached out and took one of her paws in eir hands.

Ey didn’t know how long they sat there like that. Ey didn’t remember what ey was thinking, or where ey looked. All ey remembered was the satiny feeling of May’s pawpads against eir skin, and the sound of a quiet lake.

May broke the silence first. “Ioan, my tail is falling asleep. Can we go back?”

Ey nodded, levering emself up onto eir knees, then onto eir feet so that ey could help the skunk stand.

She laughed and winced once she stood, rubbing at the base of her tail. “All pins and needles.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine how that must feel in a tail.”

“And I cannot imagine how to describe it. Help me down, and we can walk back.”

“Walk? You don’t want to just leave?”

“If you are going to drag me out on a hike, then so help me God, take me on the hike, Ioan.”

They walked back along the deer trail, back the way they came. The water was now to their left, and where their eyes had been drawn to it before, they were now drawn to the pine forest that rimmed the lake. Trees reached straight for the sky from their brown bed of needles.

And as they walked, faster than before, May talked. “I worry about them. Both launches, both families. I worry about me and you. The interview with Ezekiel, yes, but both of them, both Castor and Pollux, are starting to circle around the center of it all.”

“The center?”

“All three of us—Dear#Castor, Dear#Pollux, and I—have warned all three of you Bălans that there is a lot behind this.” She was panting now as she walked, faster and faster. She had taken the lead, and was drawing em along behind her as she spoke. “We couch it in humor and jokey language as though they are riddles for you to

solve, but Ioan, I worry that all it will do in the end is sow distrust between our two clades.”

Ioan worked to keep up with May as she nearly jogged around the last bend in the path. “We can stop, May. If you don’t think it’ll lead to anything good, then we can just stop. We can look elsewhere. We can go back to interviewing musicians and astronomers and shitty authors. There are still stories to tell, and I’m sure that they will lead to just as many myths.”

She shook her head. Or at least Ioan thought she did. It was hard to tell, with the two of them jouncing along down the path.

“May, please, at least slow down! You’re going to pull me over.”

Rather than slowing down, the skunk skidded to a stop, leading Ioan to nearly collide with her. As it was, ey had to stumble to the side to keep from bowling her over.

“May?”

“I am sorry.”

Ey frowned at the stricken expression on her face, the tear-tracks in cheekfur. “Do you want us to stop? Stop talking to Odists? If you want to help guide us to better places to look, we can take a break from it.”

She was already shaking her head. “You are not going to be able to avoid it, Ioan. I am worried, and I will not stop being worried, but you will not be able to avoid the inevitable end of this line of thought. You did not know it, but you were not even able to avoid the beginning of it.”

“There’s no way to stay behind, you mean.”

She laughed, and the laugh was shaky with tears. “You are a brat. But yes. There is no way to stay behind.”

“You’re just worried?”

“I am just worried. You are at serious risk of learning the truth, and that has me worried.”

“Alright.” Ey drew May in for a hug. “I don’t understand you Odists. I never have. You seem to have all these dramatic events spiraling around you.”

She giggled as she rested her head against eir shoulder. “We do, yes, and you love it.”

“It keeps life interesting, no denying. I just worry about you in turn.”

“That feels nice to hear, my dear.”

“Good,” ey said.

“Now, take me home and talk about something—anything—else for the rest of the night.”

Yared Zerezghi — 2124

For the first time since their arrangement had begun, Yared was greeted at his own door, rather than at the coffee shop down on the corner.

He had yet to start his day, instead reveling in the cool quiet of the morning, before the sun levered itself up over the roof of his building to shine through his window and before the thrum of the air conditioning took over. The cool, the quiet, his pillow, his sheets, and the blessed nullity of not yet being awake enough to think, to worry.

At least the knock on his door was polite.

He hurried to throw on his clothes and kick his bed into something resembling a made state, toss last night's take-out container in the trash, and rub the last of the sleep from his eyes before answering the door.

"Mr. Zerezghi." Councilor Demma's driver nodded cordially. "The councilor would like to speak with you at your earliest convenience."

At your earliest convenience seemed to imply right now, so Yared nodded and kicked on his sandals to follow the suit out of the hallway and into the street. The pavement and buildings had yet to start to bake, but he could tell that it would be another day of hiding inside, or skittering from one air-conditioned place to another.

If I make it through this, he thought.

Demma's car was parked down the block and on the other side of the street, and Yared was pleased to see a carrier with three paper coffee cups in it sitting on the roof. If nothing else, he'd be able to wake up a little, and that would provide him some semblance of normalcy to this strange shift in protocol.

"Yared, wonderful to see you. I trust you are alright?" Demma said, once he was seated in the car, coffee in hand. It felt far too chilly.

"I'm well, councilor. I wasn't expecting to talk until later today."

The politician waved the statement away and nodded toward the driver, who slid the car smoothly out into the street and drove towards, Yared assumed, the city center.

"I must apologize for waking you early. Please, enjoy your coffee for a moment. I am happy to enjoy the scenery for a while."

Something about that statement, or perhaps Demma's tone of voice, made it sound more like a command than a suggestion, so Yared did just that, sipping on his coffee as it cooled, as his mind raced. *Did I do something wrong? Am I being taken to prison? No, almost certainly not, if Councilor Demma is here. Why am I being made to wait? Am I supposed to feel uncomfortable, or does he actually just want me awake?*

After Yared finished his coffee and set his cup aside, Demma smiled.

“Mr. Zerezghi, I would like to thank you for all of your work on the project at hand. I believe that we have both seen the ways in which it is shaping the discussion on our small part of the 'net, yes? There are other forces at work, to be sure, but your voice is loud, and our little faction is adding in resources behind the scenes, as you have no doubt noticed.”

Yared nodded, waiting for the hammer to fall.

“I would, however, like to know the identity of who your contacts are, sys-side.”

He tilted his head. “What? Why?”

Demma sighed and set aside his own coffee. “I have a suspicion that I know who one of them is, and I would like confirmation of that. I would appreciate if you would tell me, so that I do not need to tip my hand and send you hunting him down. You understand.”

“I suppose.” Yared bit his lip and considered the possible consequences of sharing the names of his contacts, deciding that if he shared just one, that perhaps that would be enough without compromising the identity of both. “You say ‘he’. The man that I’m in discussions with is named Jonas. Is that the one you’re thinking of?”

The councilor groaned and slouched back into the cushy microfiber seat. “Yes. I was afraid of that.”

“How so?”

“He is a very slippery man, Yared. While I suppose that it’s nice that his goals align with ours on the issue of rights and secession—I can read between the lines as well as he can, I know who he’s tapped phys-side—that is not always guaranteed to be the case.” He finished his own coffee and accepted Yared’s cup when offered to dispose of in the trash. “Slippery and manipulative. I worry that you are at risk of being played by him, of becoming his puppet.”

Aren’t I already yours? he thought. Instead, he said, “He seems friendly enough, but I guess I can see how that might be used to guide me. He hasn’t asked for any favors or anything, at least.”

“And have you told him about our little agreement?” When Yared quailed under Demma’s gaze, the councilor shook his head. “I cannot say I’m pleased, Mr. Zerezghi, but I’m also not particularly surprised.”

Yared wiped his palms against his thighs, shaking his head. “He guessed, councilor. He asked, and even knew it was you. I’m sorry, sir, I don’t think there’s anything I could have done to stop him from doing that.”

“Oh, did he now?” Demma’s laugh was earnest. “I’m not particularly surprised at that, either, and I suppose it does let you off the hook somewhat, doesn’t it?”

All he could think to do was nod.

“Well, if Jonas Anderson has figured out what we’re up to, that does change things somewhat. I know that our latest suggestion was that you mention independence for the first time. I’d like to modify that somewhat, if you haven’t already written your post.”

“Not yet. I was going to do it this morning before our usual meeting.”

“Yes, well, do hold off for a little longer. I would like you to change it so that you quote Jonas in mentioning independence. Do keep his name out of your posts, of course. It’s probably best that he remain your ‘friend’ and not ‘one of the slickest politicians in the Western Federation’ when people read what you have to say.” Demma smiled kindly, adding, “And if I may ask you a favor, please don’t consult him about this post before you send it. You’re welcome to keep talking with him and whoever his companion is, we won’t restrict your access to

that. Perhaps they're even another copy of him. I just want to hear what his reaction is when you put the word 'independence' in his mouth."

"Of course, sir."

Nodding, the councilor said, "Thank you, Yared. I'm glad to see that we are more on the same page, now. Stay wary of Jonas Anderson, maintain your friendship, and keep me up to date about the things that he says that don't make it into your posts. As long as our goals align, we should be able to work together through you."

"You won't talk to him?" Yared asked.

"That's far too risky for my current position. It's plausibly deniable that you were already talking to him before we reached our agreement, should that agreement be made public. It's true enough, isn't it? If I were to talk to him, though..." He trailed off with a shrug and a half-smile.

"I understand."

"I'm glad that you do." Demma flicked his eyes up to the driver's rear-view mirror, and the car slid to a halt in a parking spot. "Mr. Zerezghi, a pleasure as always. We will be keeping an eye out for your post later today."

Yared sat up, looking out through the window at the outskirts of the financial district. It would easily be an hour's walk back to his apartment, and about as long of a bus-ride. He didn't even have his phone.

The councilor was already holding his hand out to shake, so there seemed to be no argument that this is where he should leave. He shook the hand, climbed out of the car, and watched it slide off into traffic once more.

Trudging to the nearest bus stop, he thought, *I suppose as long as this is the only punishment that I get, I shouldn't be too concerned.*

At least the bus was air conditioned, and it gave him time to draft his post in his head.

I cannot express just how pleased I am to say that I have no arguments to dispute, this time!

It's tempting to slack off in one's campaigning when things start to swing one's way, but even I know that complacency will provide a wedge for dissenters to gain a foothold, so, despite the heat, I'm back with another of my posts. You'll all have to live with me so long as this issue is on the table, and doubtless, you'll have to keep living with me once I pick up my next little fixation. Both friends and foes will understand, even if their opinions of that fact differ.

Today, then, instead of refuting arguments, I'd just like to express some of my gratitude and provide an overview of what is going on and why it is that I'm so pleased.

First, I'm happy to see that the argument about speciation has all but stopped as an argument about independence. Oh, sure, it continues elsewhere on the 'net, but it's been all but dropped from the comments about this referendum. It remains fascinating to many of us, of course. The more I talk with my friends sys-side, the more I find myself split on the idea, and even they seem to have their own opinions on it. One of them said, "Who even cares? We're still ourselves," to which the other responded, "Right, but just think about how much of a wrench that it will throw into evolution."

Second, I'm happy to see the amendment to move the System to the L₅ station has been tacked onto the bill. It's mostly a formality, at this point. Those who work with the System phys-side have already signed a deal with the launch coordinators, and the amendment is simply to recognize that

this is the case from a governmental point of view. It may make talking to my friends somewhat more difficult, due to the transmission delay, but I'm sure we'll survive. When I joked to them that, in space, no one can hear their ceaseless banter, they agreed that it was probably for the best, and said that they were looking forward to moving to cooler climes.

Last, of course, I'm pleased to see the interest that the world's governments are taking in the issue. Sure, that means that our role here on the DDR is diminished, but *it is not gone*. We have as much a say in the legislation as any one of them does. This is where my caution about not slacking will pay off. We have the S-R Bloc on our side, and the various African coalitions are drifting that way as well. The Western Fed seems to be cautiously on board. But we are still waiting on hearing from the middle eastern countries, Japan, and SEAPAC, which means that we will need to stay vigilant. While I suspect that Japan will side with individual rights, and the middle east will remain largely apathetic, I have no idea which way SEAPAC will swing, so our vote must still be counted among them as a voice in favor of the referendum.

Now, instead of arguing any further points, I'd like to provide you with something lighter. I know that many enjoy the little snippets of conversation that I have with my friends sys-side, so I'm going to share a bit more of that with you. It's fun, yes, but I hope that it will continue to build empathy with them and their existence, even if I am not any good at writing anything beyond polemics on the 'net. As always, I will be protecting their identities, so I will go with John and Tara for their names.

When John joked about moving to the coldness of space, I, naturally, complained about the heat.

"How hot is it there?" he asked.

I said, "Right now? About 43C."

Tara said, "Yeowch. That is far too warm." (This is not actually what she said. She has quite a mouth on her, but I will soften that for the sake of propriety.)

John said, "You're covered almost entirely in black fur. You'd be warm in Antarctica."

She responded, "Well, yes, I am *here*. If I were actually in Antarctica, however, I would not be covered by fur that is a part of my body. A fur coat might be nice, however."

I asked, "How does that work, anyway? Do you feel like a human except in a different shape?"

Her response was a while in coming. "Yes and no. I look different, to be sure. Anyone who has seen a furry can probably imagine what that means. My av on the 'net allowed me some sensation of that, in that I was provided with a vague sense of touch on my tail, and the sensation of my ears had been moved higher up on my head to approximate the location where the ears of [my species] are located. Having a muzzle worked well enough. Here, though, the proprioception is complete in a way that an avatar could not hope to be. It made the avatar feel more like a set of clothes and a mask than it did an actual form. Here, it is my form. It made my avatar feel almost cartoonish, with the standard fur patterns a bit too exact and the claws on my fingers nearly identical. Here it can be—must be—as detailed as I would like. My claws wear at different rates, fur colors mingle

organically. That is a sign of aposematism, did you know that? It is a warning to those who would attack to stay away. I could even smell like my species, should I choose, though I have not.”

John said, “Confirmed. She smells like flowers.”

I asked, “Why did you choose that form?”

She said, “Because I wanted to and I could. It is what I am used to from my time before uploading. I think that I originally chose it for that concept of aposematism. I had probably gone through a bad breakup and was looking for something that said, “Stay away, I am independent.” I had terrible luck with relationships.”

John said, “She’s more independent than is good for her, sometimes.”

As this was the point in the conversation that I figured I might include it in a post, I guided it toward the topic at hand, saying, “Is that why you’re so interested in individual rights?”

Tara said, “Yes, in a way. You have to understand, though, that many of the arguments against them that you have shared sound mind-boggling at best, impossible at worst.”

John said, “We’re more independent than I think a lot of people phys-side give us credit for. You keep talking of us as though we’re almost a separate country, and honestly, you’re not wrong. We’ve been questioning what the reasoning is for retaining dual citizenship other than for governments that essentially have no power over us to claim the rights to whatever it is we send out. We’re ungovernable by conventional standards, and I wouldn’t be surprised if someone does file a referendum for us to drop the pretense and become our own country in the next few months.”

I asked, “If you did, would you participate alongside the other world governments?”

John said, “Maybe on some things, but we wouldn’t be able to relate to much in the way of legislation.”

Tara said, “If we do, John will have to be the representative. He is the politician.”

John replied, “You keep saying you’re not a politician like that does anything to convince people that you are anything but, my dear.”

I let them banter for a bit. The only other salient point was brought up by John, who said, “If a vote for independence does show up, make sure you vote for it. It’ll make all of our lives so, so much easier.”

So, that was our conversation. I hope that this helps you understand a bit more what the lives of those who live sys-side are like. They joke around. They have strong opinions. They can look like anthropomorphic animals if they want. Who cares if they’re human? Who cares if their bodies have died? They’re just as real as any of us, and they deserve all of the same rights.

Vote for the granting of rights. Vote yes on *referendum 10b30188*.

Yared Zerezghi (NEAC)

He read over his post a few times to make sure it looked alright, then hit post and immediately backed out from his rig. He knew that he'd come back to messages from Jonas and True Name. He couldn't guess at what their tone would be, but he knew that he wasn't ready to deal with them.

He just knew that he needed something spicy to eat and at least two glasses of wine.

True Name — 2124

It had initially taken some getting used to, meeting with one's up- or cross-tree instances. Michelle, in her role in helping tie the cost of forking to the reputation markets, had certainly done it a number of times before, but, as the cost of a new fork was only applied five minutes after it had been created, all of her forks to date had been short-lived in order to conserve her reputation for some imagined future date.

The date had come and gone, now, so True Name—and likely all of the other Odists—had had to learn how to interact with the other copies of Michelle Hadje/Sasha that had sprung so quickly into being and immediately began to diverge.

The fact that those who matched Michelle and those who matched Sasha were evenly distributed had helped at first. There had been some oddness in talking to a Michelle-alike, given the countless memories of the constant shifting between the two forms, but that had had a different flavor to it than talking to another Sasha-alike. Seeing a form and a face that so clearly mirrored her own was not exactly unnerving so much as uncanny.

As the days and weeks went by, however, the forks diverged further and further, and different cares painted different faces, different habits were formed and dropped, and it became less like talking to an alternate version of oneself and more like talking to a twin, a sibling.

So it was when *The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream* met with *That Which Lives Is Forever Praiseworthy*.

Her initial impression is that the other skunk had shifted her wardrobe to look more professional, choosing a loose-fitting pantsuit in muted blue that had been in style before Michelle had uploaded. This also included a pair of pince nez glasses perched atop her muzzle which, when True Name inquired, Praiseworthy explained were non-prescription, and “something I am just trying for the moment. They are quite annoying, but still fetching.”

Beyond that, however, Praiseworthy had decided to divest herself of many of the personality traits that had made Sasha Sasha. Gone were those aspects of childishness that Michelle had long held onto, and gone was the exhaustion that had lingered for years after getting lost.

I have changed, too, at that, True Name thought. *I have become the politician, working with Jonas. Praiseworthy has become something else.*

The two skunks shook paws, and then Praiseworthy drew True Name into a hug. It was surprising. Something about it felt both natural and performative, as though this was just a thing that one did when one had a role to play.

“True Name,” Praiseworthy said. Her smile was warm and earnest, and she spoke with willing paws, palms up. “It is nice to see you again.”

She laughed. “I suppose so. You have changed quite a bit in so short a time.”

The other skunk bowed, laughing. “As have you, my dear! And that is why you have come here, is it not?”

“I guess it is, yes. The more I work with Jonas, and the more I talk with the Council and phys-side—the more politicking that I do—the more I feel the ways in which my attitude and expressions are lacking.”

Praiseworthy nodded. “Yes, you do still have some of the stiffness about you, and there are some sharp edges that could do with softening.”

“Softening?”

“Yes. It is mostly a matter of appearance and affect, though. You should not blunt your wit or intellect, just your tone and features.”

True Name frowned. “I am not sure what you mean by blunting or softening, though.”

Praiseworthy took her gently by the elbow and started walking through the grass. They had decided to meet on a portion of Michelle’s dandelion-ridden sim, far away from their root instance, but in a place that was still familiar to both.

“Take your walk, for instance. Even now, as we are just out for a stroll, you walk with purpose. Your shoulders move too much. Remember, if you keep them pointed straight ahead and shift the rolling motion to your hips, it will lead to others seeing more feminine aspects in you.”

She tried to keep her shoulders still as they walked, immediately feeling a slight strain in her hips.

Praiseworthy laughed. “You do not need to keep them level to the ground, just perpendicular to the direction you are walking in. But here, no need to practice too hard. Fork, holding in your mind a pelvis just a hair wider than your own, but keeping your hips the same width. It will mean slimming down a little.”

“I can do that?”

“Of course. Zeke dreamed some algorithmic magic behind the scenes. You can fork yourself into most anything that can be consensually held in the mind.”

True Name nodded warily, holding this new image of herself in her mind.

“Perfect,” Praiseworthy said, moving to take this new fork by the elbow and nodding to the original instance of the skunk. “Now you quit. No need to incur a charge. Michelle, no need to accept further memories from us for the day.”

The skunks tilted their heads in unison.

“Michelle will be getting a pile of memories, if she wants, as I will have you fork a few more times yet. I have been letting her know when she can ignore further merges, as I have done this quite often. I believe they are working on a way to attach a priority to merges, or even a suggestion not to accept the memories.”

The first True Name nodded, then disappeared.

True Name felt down her flanks, taking a few more steps and finding it far easier to walk casually and still keep her shoulders pointed forward. She nodded approvingly. “Excellent. What other suggestions do you have?”

“For your role, you will need to carefully balance cute, attractive, and competent. If you go too far towards cute, then it will be difficult for you to be taken seriously. The same if you go too far attractive because you will be just a pretty face. If you go too far competent, you will be seen as dour and unpleasant.”

Praiseworthy stopped her and turned her gently to look at her face.

“Now, first, your eyes will need to be just a hair larger, your ears slightly rounder, your cheeks fuller, and you will need fewer but longer whiskers. Can you hold those in your mind?”

She closed her eyes, picturing what she knew of herself in her mind, and forked.

“Goodness.”

She opened her eyes again to look at the fork, immediately laughing and shaking her head.

“Am I cute?” the new skunk asked.

“Adorable, but that is not quite the direction we want to go. You look closer to a teddy bear.”

She rolled her eyes, then quit.

“Let us try one at a time. You will need to work fairly quickly to avoid the hit in reputation. Fork once, and then that fork will continue to look as you do now, while you work progressively on each of those steps.” When True Name did so, Praiseworthy nodded. “First, rounder ears.”

The new fork perked up when her down-tree instance forked and quit, the new instance having slightly rounder ears. She nodded, smiling.

“Excellent. Now the whiskers. Great. Cheeks? And...eyes. Fantastic.” Praiseworthy smiled after all the forking had been completed, then nodded to the first of the new instances, who quit.

The option for a rush of memories was provided to True Name, who, on a whim, accepted it, now remembering what it had looked like from the outside as her face had grown...well, cuter. It had worked well.

The two skunks worked through a short laundry list of changes. True Name grew a few centimeters taller, her shoulders became the slightest bit flatter without getting broader, her back straighter.

One last time, she forked to get a good look at herself to compare with what she remembered from before the process.

She was, indeed, cuter, but this was tempered by a more conventionally attractive body type, staying shy of being both adorable and overtly attractive. This somehow combined into a look that was more professional. It made her look, she realized, like a public figure.

“Oh, this is delightful.”

Praiseworthy beamed. “I am glad that you enjoy.”

They worked next on how to better her affect. Smile more earnestly, laugh more easily, transition from those expressions to stern or confident or pitying. There were a few more forks as they worked on ways to soften True Name’s voice, pitching it just a little lower, rounding some of the vowels, practicing elocution. With each fork, she found that the lessons stuck more firmly. Perhaps what was in her mind before became more cemented in place.

Finally, Praiseworthy had True Name practice forking into a Michelle-form for situations where a skunk would be out of place, and then they worked on perfecting that version of her, as well. It was surprising, at first, that she could even make so great a change with one fork, but then, she remembered precisely what it had felt like to be Michelle, just as she remembered what it felt like to be Sasha.

Nearly two hours later, when the practice and modifications had wrapped up, the two skunks sat at the top of a low raise in the landscape, and True Name discussed the other reason that she had sought out Praiseworthy.

“I need help in spreading ideas. I know that you have settled back into acting and directing, but I do not have the time or energy to guide emotions and reactions to news while still working on this political angle.” She plucked a few blades of grass, rolling them into little balls between fingerpads. “I know that propaganda is not the same thing as theater, but would you be willing—”

“Yes!” Praiseworthy laughed. “Of course I would be willing to help. There is more than a little propagandizing in trying to get actors to do their fucking jobs, even when the actors are yourself. What precisely do you need? Speeches? Words whispered here and there? Posters?”

True Name laughed and shook her head. “Not quite the answer that I was expecting, but yes. Speeches and letters specifically. Some geared toward phys-side, some toward the Council, and probably a few towards other

groups sys-side. I would not turn down a few words whispered here and there, though that will take some strategizing. There will be an instance of Jonas who will be working with you in shaping sentiment, as well.”

“I will look forward to it, then.”

They sat for a while in the sun, each looking out into the fields. At one point, Praiseworthy took off her glasses and set them on the bridge of True Name’s muzzle, shook her head, and slid them into a jacket pocket.

It was good to be around oneself, True Name realized. There was none of the pressure involved with interacting with others, none of the careful maneuvering required when talking with Jonas. They could just sit there, side by side, and understand that there was nothing between them that the other did not also, at least to some extent, understand.

“Have you talked to many others in the clade?” Praiseworthy asked.

She shook her head. “Here and there. I have a meeting scheduled with Life Breeds Life, but that is about it. You?”

“You were the last I had yet to speak with. It is interesting to see how we have each decided to focus on different areas. You dove hard into the political angle. I tried to get back to theatre, but enough of that desire remained in me that your propaganda job sounds fun. Life Breeds Life is quite strange. He has been focusing—”

“He?”

Praiseworthy shrugged. “I guess. He has been focusing on historical stuff. Documenting this and that, digging into old things. I have no idea where that came from. Loss For Images is writing these days. May One Day is fiddling with reputation markets—or at least as much as Debarre will let her—and last I heard, Hammered Silver has just been either relaxing here with Michelle or sim-hopping.”

“How is she, anyway?”

“Michelle?” Praiseworthy frowned, ears tilting back. “Much the same. I think the last of her energy went into us, and she is...I do not know. Empty? She spends a lot of time sleeping, a lot of time sitting and thinking. She came to a play, but left partway through. She is still of two minds.”

“And she still has not explained why she never fixed it?”

The skunk shook her head.

“Any guesses?”

“Nothing solid.”

True Name nodded and turned her gaze back to the rolling plain. So much grass. So many dandelions. “There is a time and a place for dwelling in memory,” she said. “But Michelle does nothing else. It is no wonder she is stuck. When...when ey died, I think she began to as well. When she she dumped the last of herself into the Ode, she sealed the deal.”

Praiseworthy said nothing.

“She is dead, I think. There is no more life in her. There is nothing to be done but let her enjoy that death as long as she would like. I do not expect that she will come back.”

The other skunk drew her knees to her chest and folded her arms across them. Uncomfortable on the tail, but the pensive mood seemed to demand it. “I think you may be right in that. Let her do what makes herself happy while her shade remains.”

“I wonder if she knows it, yet,” True Name said, then let silence fall again. The two sat together, watching as afternoon slid carefully into evening.

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

Codrin was, as ey supposed everyone must be, primed to hunt for patterns.

The Odists, as much as they tried to resist it, were as beholden to living within a pattern as any other group of individuals. Perhaps more so than other clades, but certainly well within the realm of societies, or even families. It wasn't just that they were all weird—though they were—nor that many of them fit the mold of either the human or skunk versions of Michelle Hadje—though that was certainly true. It was a matter of bearing, of how they carried themselves, of how they expressed themselves. Not all were as excitable as Dear nor as affectionate as May Then My Name, but all of the ones that ey had met had the same walk, the same smile, the same sensation of quiet when they were quiet and the same way of speaking when they spoke.

The differences, then, were in the details. Where Qoheleth had opted for the biblical look, May Then My Name had decided on a comfortable softness that befitted her similarly comfortable, soft nature. And where Dear had wholly owned a look that somehow managed to be both painfully well-dressed and playful, the woman before em exuded all of the casual cool of one who was relaxing on a summer Saturday. It was a weekend look, and ey could not find any other way to describe it.

Ey was surprised when ey had been contacted by her, rather than the other way around.

Hey, there is this neat bar I know. Come check it out, and we can chat there.

— Why Ask Questions, Here At The End Of All Things of the Ode Clade

It came as a letter. An actual, honest-to-goodness letter, slipped under eir door (which is how the sim decided to interpret it), written in a rounded hand on yellow legal pad paper.

Ey spent nearly five minutes just staring at the letter, turning it over in eir hands, inspecting the writing, the ink (shitty ballpoint, ey had noted with distaste), the creases. Ey could make neither heads nor tails of it. It was incredibly Odist while at the same time being totally unique.

When ey showed it to Dear, the fox rolled its eyes and handed it back.

"She is a shithead."

"A shithead?" Ey laughed. "How so?"

"She just is. That whole stanza is made up of assholes."

"Isn't May Then My Name in that stanza?"

It only grinned.

"Well, should I be careful or anything?"

“No, no. You will like her, I promise.”

Codrin refolded the note and tucked it into a pocket in eir tunic. “You sound less than fond of her.”

The fox shook its head. *“Not at all. I like her quite a bit, but I like her because she is good at making others like her.”*

“Aren’t you all, though?” Dear’s partner called from the couch. “Look at what May Then My Name is doing to poor Ioan.”

“Yes, but she is particularly good at it, and that is why she is a shithead. She is more like some strange inversion of May Then My Name. It is a matter of intent.” It grinned at Codrin and took eir hand in its paw to give the back of it an affectionate lick. *“You do not need to be careful, though. She is harmless to any one individual, and any harm that she might cause to a group will be welcomed with open arms and all of the love in the world.”*

“Sounds charismatic.”

“That is not quite the right word, but it will suffice.” It laughed, pushing Codrin’s hand away again. *“Go on, then. Enjoy. If it is the bar that I am thinking of, you will doubtless have a good time.”*

“And will I get more of this story that keeps coming up?”

Dear turned back to its desk where it had been working. *“Oh yes.”*

And so here ey was, sitting across a trestle table from woman dressed from a weekend, up on the roof of a car park, drinking a very spicy, very clammy Caesar while she laughed about how terrible her cocktail was.

“Is it really that bad?” ey asked.

“Here! Here, have a sip. It is atrocious.”

Ey took the glass and sniffed it warily. It smelled of citrus. Ey took a sip, tried to swallow, but began coughing violently instead. “What...what the hell is in that?”

“Neutral spirits, at least ninety percent, lime zest, and enough seltzer to make it not burn on the way down.”

“Not burn?” Codrin said around an ice cube. The spice of eir Caesar didn’t hold a candle to the alcoholic heat of the drink.

“That is what they said.”

“Then they failed miserably.”

She laughed, earnest and joyful. “That is precisely what they excel at, here. How is your drink?”

“Very heavy on the clam. I think there are some frozen into the ice cubes.”

She reached out for the drink, and ey shrugged, sliding it over to her. She took a sip, made a sour face, then dipped her fingers into the glass to fish out one of the shellfish ice cubes to crunch on. The sour face turned to one of disgust.

The move was so innocent, so playful, that eir first reaction was to laugh rather than get upset at someone’s fingers in eir drink. Ey liked her at once, then grudgingly admitted to emself that, yes, she was kind of a shithead for just how effortlessly she had made em laugh, not three minutes into meeting her.

Once ey had eir drink again, ey asked, “So, why did you invite me here?”

“You are doing your thing with Dear, are you not? Your...” She spun her finger in the air as she pulled up the word she was looking for. “History? Your myth? It is so fascinating! There is so much story to be had after two hundred years. Creation, Secession, Launch; so much happened around those and between them, and sure, there are timelines and dry textbooks and whatever, but this! You are one of the first ones who is actually pulling a story out of it.”

Ey grinned. “That’s the hope, yeah. I was originally going to just make it about Launch, but there are more parallels between Secession and the launch than I’d expected.”

“There are, yes. And you know, I wonder if we will start thinking of the launch in the same way as Secession. You can almost hear the capital-S in Secession, and now I hear it in Launch.”

“Perhaps. Maybe we’ll just do it from here and the L₅ System or Castor will do something else.”

“Mmhm.” She grinned at em. “I have already heard from Castor via the System that we are starting to diverge in pretty major ways.”

“I’ve heard similar through Ioan, yeah. I’m happy to share what I have, though. You’re the first other Odist that I’ve talked with about this aside from Dear and May Then My Name.”

“May! Oh gosh, what a delight. Has she already tricked Ioan into falling in love with her?”

Codrin laughed. “Tricked?”

“Do not get me wrong, I do not think that she is disingenuous about it or that her intentions are anything but pure, but I have yet to meet a single person who has not fallen at least a little in love with May after spending any considerable length of time with her.”

Ey nodded, stirring eir drink with the too-large stalk of celery. “That’s fair. And for what it’s worth, yeah, I think she has. I don’t think ey’s ready to admit it yet, but yeah. Your whole clade is like that, you know?”

Why Ask Questions adopted a look of indignation. “Are you accusing me of being manipulative? Codrin Bălan, I would never! All I did was figure out that you really like nice paper, nice pens, and hand-written notes, find the best way to subvert that, invite you out to a bar that would clearly pique your interest, and beguile you into talking about your down-tree instance falling in love over terrible drinks.”

“What?” Ey laughed. “Did you really do that?”

The offended look slipped into a proud one that bordered perilously close to smug. “Of course. But I also did want to meet you. I really am a fan of this project, and I wanted to be a part of it, if you will have me.”

“Well, alright. I’m happy to hear that other Odists are interested in it. I’ve been asking a few rote questions and then letting a conversation develop from there. Is that alright?”

“Of course!”

“First up, I have yet to check, but did you invest entirely in the launches, or is there still a fork of you back on the System?”

“Oh, I left a fork back there. I am not nearly so brave as you and your family. And before you ask, that is who I have been communicating with to relay messages between the two LVs.”

“Are your...well, let me back up. What are your roles? Jobs, interests, whatever.”

She laughed, shrugging. “I do not really have one at the moment. I helped a little with the launch, and rather a lot with Secession. My job was basically to work with crowds. I love talking one on one like this, but I always feel guilty actually manipulating individuals—and not just the basic research I mentioned earlier. Crowds are another story. I can get a whole restaurant singing a song together whether or not they are drunk.”

“Dear did mention that you worked at scale, yeah.”

“The fox also probably called me a shithead.”

Codrin, caught in the middle of a sip of eir drink, coughed.

“Of course it did! What an asshole. I love it for that.”

“To be fair, it also told me I’d like you immediately, and I do, so at least there’s that.”

Why Ask Questions preened, saying, “Why, thank you. I am flattered. To get back to your question, though, yes, my goal was working crowds. I helped heavily with the campaign for Secession sys-side. My cocladist, Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help, was tasked with managing much of the phys-side campaigning.”

“And you did similar during the launch?”

“Yes. May worked the technical side, I worked the campaign side. There was little work to be done sys-side, though. Most everyone was on board immediately.”

Codrin nodded, “I don’t remember much in the way of arguments against the launch.”

“I like an easy job every now and then.”

“Was Secession that much more difficult?”

She leaned back from the table, twirling her drink thoughtfully. “I suppose, yes. It is not that there was not support for it, sys-side, but before we had seceded, the political situation was far more complicated. The System needed to agree to secede just as much as the governments outside needed to agree to allow us.”

“This was back when the Council of Eight was a thing, right?”

“Mmhm. It was their—our—last big work. We did a good job at getting everything set up so that it would just run, then we stepped back. The goal was always to guide rather than to govern, as I am sure you have heard.”

Codrin nodded. “Ezekiel put it almost the same way.”

“He is here?”

The sudden intensity of her gaze, the drop of her smile, the sharpness of her voice made Codrin sit up straighter. “Yeah. I interviewed him a few weeks back. Why?”

“I am just surprised that he agreed to come along on the launch at all.”

“He invested entirely, actually.”

“Oh did he?” She smiled tightly, sipping at her drink and wincing. “Well, how about that.”

“Why did you not expect him to be on the launch?”

“You met him. He is not the person that he used to be. None of us are, I suppose, but he has lost some core aspect of his being. He lost what made him Zeke when he became Ezekiel.”

“It was a pretty surreal experience,” ey admitted. “Was he also a part of the plan for Secession?”

“Not really, no. That was mostly our clade and the Jonas clade.”

“Was the Council of Eight really a council of eight clades?”

She laughed, then held up her finger to her lips. “Do not tell anyone. It was specifically not to be that, but the workload around Secession grew out of proportion for the two of us who were focusing on it, so we forked in the background to get all that we needed done. It was all above board within the Council, but no one else knew.”

Codrin nodded and, remembering some of the caginess that Dear had shown, asked, “Do you want me to keep that part out of the history?”

“Oh, goodness no. Please keep it in! I may not be manipulative, but I am careful. I will not tell you anything that I do not want to wind up in your project.”

“Dear said that if I pressed any one Odist too hard, they’d resent it and start lying.”

"I suspect that it is right in that, too," she said. "But I will not let our conversation get to that point. I will just make you move on to the next question."

Ey nodded, considering eir next question. "So, how much did the clade work together back then?"

"It differed from person to person. Praiseworthy—Dear's down-tree instance—was keen on working with all of us, while some others essentially talked to no one. I did not talk to many of them at first, given that I was...well, it was not so much that I was not supposed to exist, that I was not supposed to be playing a role. At first, I looked almost exactly like my down-tree instance so that we might be mistaken for each other. I decided that I was done being a skunk some years after, though."

"Are you still in touch with your down-tree instance?"

She nodded eagerly. "Oh yes, True Name and I talk quite often."

"And she was the one who was organizing the campaign?"

"She and Jonas, yes. We played our silly little game of politics, and then after Secession, we had no reason to go so hard at it, so we simply became friends."

"While I'm on the subject, did you talk much with Michelle?"

"Next!" Why Ask Questions said gleefully, waving her glass at em.

"What? Oh! Right, okay." Ey let the thread drop and prowled through eir mental list of questions. "Alright. I talked a little to Dear about what the mood was like before and after Secession. I have my own experiences from before and after the launch, but I'm curious what yours were. Was the launch exciting to you? Just another day's work?"

"True Name was to organize Launch as she did with Secession, so I suppose it was a bit of both. We were all excited to have a fun project on our hands, and it was a lot of work, even if my role was easy. When the launch actually happened, we had our own little party separate from the fête that you and yours put on." She raised her glass. "The drinks were far better."

Ey laughed.

"It has calmed down since then, as I mentioned. There is little to do, and what remains of our stanza launch-side has started to drift apart once again. We are all friends, but we are coworkers first and foremost, and when we do not have to be at work, we will not be."

"You hang out with other friends, then?"

"Hang out, drink, go for long walks on the beach, watch plays—did you know that Time Is A Finger Pointed At Itself has put on some really interesting ones? Michelle was a theatre nerd before she uploaded. She put much of that on hold after the whole getting lost kerfuffle and all of the politics that went into the first years after uploading, but still that desire sticks with us."

"Stepping back a second, you said that True Name was to organize the launch. What did you mean by that?"

"I would like to say 'next', but I will answer this question, and then perhaps we can just enjoy the day for a little while. Does that sound alright, Mx. Bălan?"

Ey frowned, but nodded all the same.

"One of the last things that Michelle did with each of the stanzas was to give us all a task. Ours was not actually so specific as 'See about launching mini versions of the System into space', so much as 'Do something big, help us divest'."

“What did she mean by ‘divest’?”

After a moment’s silence, Why Ask Questions leaned forward, set her drink down next to Codrin’s, then picked eirs up instead. “Come on. Can you believe that, in all of the years that I have been coming here, I have never actually seen the bottom level of the parking garage? I bet that it is full of rats and unexplainable puddles on concrete, reflecting harsh lights. I bet it is all sorts of murder. Bring your drink.”

She winked at em, and with that, the interview was over.

Ioan Bălan — 2325

Ioan Bălan: What excited you about the prospect of uploading?

Fu Jinzai: I actually wasn't that excited about the prospect. It was something that I just kind of did because it felt like it'd be easier than sticking around. The kids weren't seeing me anyway, and I could at least get them some cash for when they were older. It sounded nice enough up here, but there were still nice things back there, you know? I didn't think about it too much.

Ioan: What do you miss most about phys-side?

Jinzai: The mountains.

Ioan: Have you done much exploring in the mountains around here?

Jinzai: Oh, sure. They're fine. Some of the ones that I've gotten around to visiting are really nice. They've got a lot of variety and all. There are some that are more like the Alps and some that are more like the Himalayas and some that are kind of like the ones back home, but it's not that I miss, like, the idea of mountains. I miss the little bits of the mountains that made them mine. I miss all the little caves that you could find, or when trees that had fallen over and their root-balls had been pulled up and you could sit under them if you weren't afraid of bugs or anything [laughter]. I miss the little shacks that people had built years and years and years ago, and, like, you have no idea what they were there for, right? Maybe this one is next to a pond, so it's for fishing, but then that one is just kind of in the middle of a forest, and it's too big to be an outhouse and too small to be a cabin, so maybe it's a, a [snapping fingers] hunting blind? Is that the word?

Ioan: Where you sit and wait for animals to go by while hunting?

Jinzai: Yes! A hunting blind. And then I miss—and this is really silly—I miss logging. It's horrible, right? [laughter] I know that it's horrible. Some people put in logging trails on their mountains, but they don't put those big swaths of woody trash that the loggers leave behind. I kind of miss that, you know? I miss looking out to the next mountain over and seeing this big rectangular patch of brown. I miss hearing chainsaws running miles away across the valley, but it sounds like, I don't know, like a dream, because it's echoing around the hills.

Ioan: It sounds a little like the mountains you've found here are too perfect, perhaps. Is that sort of what you're saying?

Jinzai: Yeah, I think so. It's too perfect. I don't mind perfection, of course, it's a damn sight better than living a terrible life, but—oh man, I'm gonna sound like my grandpa when I say this—it lacks that kind of toughness that makes you build character. Not, like, the character that he meant, in the trash sense of, like, being a big tough guy, but like, I think if you could grow up here around all this perfection, you wouldn't have much character. You'd be pretty boring. [laughter] I guess I'm glad that you can't upload until you're 18, so you at least have a chance to have some comparison to perfect mountains with the shitty ones phys-side.

Ioan: What's the first thing that you did after uploading?

Jinzai: Oh man, this is gross, so I'm sorry ahead of time. I ate myself sick. [laughter] I found some of those big sims that are all food and whatever, and I figured, "Hey, I don't have a body, right? I can do whatever!" So I started hopping from sim to sim just absolutely stuffing myself until I felt like I was going to pop, but I started getting super uncomfortable, so I came home and got super sick. [laughter] Sorry, yeah, that's pretty gross. I didn't realize that you could fiddle with your sensa...sensi...

Ioan: Sensorium?

Jinzai: Yeah, sensorium. I didn't know that you could fiddle with it so that you could just keep eating or whatever, but unless you're conscious of it, your mind makes it so that you just kind of work like you do back home. Didn't know that, so I ate until I just about burst. [laughter]

Ioan: What's your biggest regret about uploading.

Jinzai: [long pause] I mean, I said that I wasn't really seeing my kids much back then, and I guess that was true enough. I got to see them two or three times a year when I got rotated between crops and had a few weeks of leave. But like...man. I love them. I love them so much. I love them and I miss them every day, just like I loved them and missed them every day back phys-side. I regret...ah, hell. [long pause] I regret that even though they didn't really know me all that well, that they'll never get to know me at all, now, and all I'll have are these memories and— [long pause] and the only way I'll ever get to see them again is if they upload and, like, as a dad, I'm not sure that I really want them to. I know it's perfect and all, or at least can be, but I'm not sure I want them to feel like they need to upload to get away from a shit life, and I definitely don't want them to feel like they need to upload just to see me again.

Ioan didn't know quite what it was about the latest messages from the launches that was nagging at em so much. It wasn't that either of the Codrins were sending back anything that was particularly surprising. Sure, the Odists had been a big part of Secession, but ey knew that, hadn't ey? They dealt with propaganda and speeches and politics, so they must have been, right? That's what was needed for something like seceding from the rest of the governments on earth, right?

It wasn't the more personal notes that ey'd gotten, expressing how life was going out on the LVs, all of the ways in which it was exactly the same, except for some key difference in sentiment. Those on the LVs felt like they were going on a journey, and those who remained at the L₅ System felt like they weren't, so there was an entirely different feeling between two societies that were otherwise identical.

Three societies, for it was obvious that Castor and Pollux were diverging rapidly without strict contact with each other or the System.

And it wasn't that, either. Ey had known from the very start that the systems on the LVs would diverge from each other as soon as they were launched. Nothing about that was weighing on em, and it was turning out to be precisely as interesting as ey had expected that it would be.

And yet, still...

Ioan Bălan: What was the first thing that you did after uploading?

Magnús Einarsson: Sleep. I don't know why, but for some reason, right after uploading, I felt like all I could do was sleep.

Ioan: Did you have trouble sleeping before you uploaded?

Magnús: Not particularly, no. At least, I don't think so. I just found a room that I thought would be good and then slept for probably two days straight. That went on for a while, too, I would get up and eat or whatever, try and read a book, and then get so tired that I'd have to sleep again, so I'd sleep another twenty hours.

Ioan: Do you still sleep a lot?

Magnús: Not nearly so much, no, but still more than I did before uploading.

Ioan: And you uploaded about thirty years ago?

Magnús: 2292. March 3rd.

Ioan: Alright, thank you.

Magnús: Why do you ask?

Ioan: I'm specifically looking for people who uploaded in the last 150 years, after they started— I mean, after they stopped charging to let people upload.

Magnús: They used to charge?

Ioan: Yes. Was your family compensated for you to upload?

Magnús: [laughter] Quite well, yes. It was this big argument between my wife and I. I didn't particularly want to upload, but she said that she'd be able to keep the kids in a better school up North with the funds, and then she'd follow once she was sure that they were in a good spot and that she could say goodbye to them properly and all. We'd heard all about it, and it obviously didn't sound bad at all. It was just...I don't know. It was like being asked to move away forever, even if I knew that she would follow, and that maybe my kids would too, after they had a good life.

Ioan: Do you regret uploading at—

Magnús: She never did.

Ioan: I'm sorry?

Magnús: She never followed. She got the kids in their nice school and remarried. I haven't heard from her in twenty-five years.

Ioan: I'm sorry to hear that. It must've been hard to hear that from her.

Magnús: Oh, I didn't hear it from her. I heard it from one of my kids. Anita. They wrote to me and said that mama had moved in with another man and that school was alright and that was that.

Ioan: I'm sorry. Do you still talk with your children, at least?

Magnús: I talk with Anita sometimes. They say they might upload in a few years. They say married life isn't what they expected, and now they're in much the same position I was. They have a kid. They're less strapped for cash with their husband's job, but they're still not going to get anywhere. It sounds like they have a much better relationship with their husband, though, so maybe it won't just be the same old cycle again.

Ioan: How do you feel about that as an option for them?

Magnús: I don't know. Disappointed? Disappointed but not surprised? If they do wind up coming here, then I am going to do my best to make up for lost time.

Ioan: What sorts of things will you show them when they upload? What are some things that you like best up here?

Magnús: There's the things that I like best, and then the things that I think we'll like best together. The things that I like best are the really relaxing things. I like swimming and then going and laying on the grass. I like reading. I like just sim-hopping and people watching. The things that I think we'll like best together are probably some of the game sims that people have set up. They really liked a lot of the spy sims back on the 'net, like the ones where you hide behind walls and sneak through a base and play capture the flag or whatever. I always found them stressful when I did them on my own, but doing one with them, one where we had to escape from a search party, is one of my best memories with them. They have some good ones here that I think they'd like.

Eir current best guess at what kept their anxiety level always at least a little bit above baseline was the obvious similarities between Secession and Launch. It wasn't just that the Odists were involved in both, because both felt like something that the Odists would be interested in.

Rather, it was the fact that the very same individuals had wormed their way into the very same roles with two projects of very similar structure. Again, on the surface, not too surprising, but the result of that was that the two events started to look almost the same, which in turn made Ioan think that Secession had been almost a practice run for Launch.

Obviously it wasn't. At least not precisely. Secession was a necessary thing based on the politics of the time phys-side, while Launch was something that was borne out of a desire to explore.

Wasn't it?

It just felt an awful lot like those who had helped the most with Secession used their work as a template for executing the launch.

Ioan Bălan: What was the most disappointing thing that happened or that you saw after uploading?

Rosemary Seeley: I think just how lonely it was at first.

Ioan: Can you expand on that?

Rosemary: I mean, when you first upload, you're kinda dumped into a set of common areas until you figure out where you're going to stay or whatever. You can meet up with family members if you have them—I didn't—or you can meet up with those of a similar culture or religion—I'm from the middle of the blandest town on the planet and don't hold to any religion—or maybe you can meet up with others based around a similar interest. Thing is, I'm really interested in just cooking and chatting and reading.

Ioan: Were you able to find any groups for cooking or reading?

Rosemary: Not at first, which I think is what made it feel so isolating. People talk about System Freeze, and I can guarantee you it's real. [laughter]

Ioan: How would you describe System Freeze?

Rosemary: Well, I mean, I was poor as dirt back on Earth. I was a pretty good cook who liked to read mystery novels when she wasn't working. If you're poor as dirt, you're only going to get so good at cooking, though, and you're only going to be reading a certain kind of mystery novel. It's not like I went through a ton of schooling to be reading anything high-minded, and what can I say, I'm a sucker for pulp. So I upload and wind up staying in a communal sim somewhere and every time I go out to look for people who like cooking, it's all these people who are *super* into it and have all this weird experience, so all I can do is take classes, and I feel like a real hick. Then I go out and look for reading clubs or people who like mystery novels, and all I can find are these groups that read what I liked ironically so that they can dunk on it with friends.

Ioan: I'm sorry to hear that. It sounds really alienating.

Rosemary: It was, yeah.

Ioan: You said it was lonely at first. What was it that helped it be less lonely for you?

Rosemary: Oh, you're going to laugh at this. It's really embarrassing.

Ioan: You don't need to share if it's uncomfortable, of course.

Rosemary: No, no. It's funny now. Just embarrassing. I started lying. I said that I was an author of a series of books that were mysteries that were also cookbooks. I said I was this schlock author who

wrote terrible novels with mediocre recipes and just kept pumping them out as fast as I could under a bunch of different pseudonyms and that I got really tired of writing them and how bad they were, so I uploaded. I started just going to a few of those ironic book clubs and a few of the cooking classes and started talking about these horrible books that I'd written. Weird thing is? People started saying that they remembered them! I guess it is a real genre that people write, so any time someone said they remembered a book I'd laugh and look all embarrassed and say something like, "Oh nooo, that one was so bad! Paid the bills, though." [laughter] Eventually, I kind of dropped the bit, but by then, I'd gotten a few friends who were interested in just cooking normal things for each other, and a few others who actually liked the pulpy mysteries, and that's how I broke through it.

Ioan: [laughter] That's really clever.

Rosemary: The one time I've been proud of lying, yeah.

Ioan: What would you suggest that others experiencing System Freeze do?

Rosemary: Don't wait for it to solve itself, and don't wear yourself out searching. You can just make whatever interest group you want, and if one exists, just be willing to get folded into it. You won't even have to lie. [laughter] But that's just the start. If you don't actually want to keep up with the interest group long-term, that's fine, your only real goal is to start meeting people, then things start to thaw.

And so here ey was, hunting down those who had uploaded specifically for the money that it would leave their families and friends back phys-side. Their stories were, ey figured, just as valid as anyone's. They were just as valid as eir own, for had ey not done the same? Here ey was, interviewing those like emself.

These were the people who had moved to the System out of some sense of not just a better life for themselves, but one for those they had left behind. Ioan had had few enough ties back to eir family phys-side after uploading—only enough to ensure that the payments had gone through and that eir kid brother was alright—and then none since then. If any of eir family had uploaded since then, none had gotten in touch and ey'd been too much of a coward to go looking for Rare□.

Eir hope in undertaking this exercise had been to learn a bit more about the time between Secession and Launch, about what had lead to the demographics of a System that had decided to hurl large portions of itself out into space. Was it something perhaps borne of the sentiment of the population that had grown in the intervening years? Was it something that had always been there?

When ey had come up with the list of questions, ey had intended to divine why those who had uploaded had found the System attractive. Was that, perhaps, what had driven the desire for the launch?

And yet now, it seemed like that was, at most, a secondary effect.

So much was going on that had gone on before and so many of the same actors were involved that, although these interviews had been interesting in and of themselves, it seemed doubtful that such had had any notable affect.

Ioan: How do you feel about the launch project?

Jinzai: [shrugging] It feels largely irrelevant to me. I'm here to help my kids, and if they upload some day, I want to be here for them.

Ioan: Did you send a fork to go along with the launches?

Jinzai: No, I never really felt comfortable with forking. Just me here on the station.

Ioan: How do you feel about the launch?

Magnús: I don't care. It doesn't matter, does it? It's just this wild-eyed idea that feels like it doesn't have much relevance. I don't remember having any interest in [said in a singsong voice] exploring the galaxy when I was on Earth, and I don't have any now, so why bother? I don't think anyone else did, down there, either.

Ioan: Did you send a fork along with the launches?

Magnús: Never forked before. Never got the hang of it.

Ioan: How do you feel about the launch?

Rosemary: It felt silly, you know? Like this big, grand idea that some folks get, and it was just kind of one of those things that folks do just to say they can, like going to Mars, or creating their own wild sim.

Ioan: Did you send a fork along with the launches?

Rosemary: Yeah. I figured, "Why not? No harm in going so long as I can stay here, right?"

And so ey went home, back to work on the project, back to receive more updates from the Codrins and the LVs. Back to sit in front of an empty page, considering what it meant that they felt caught up in some storm, some vortex that ey could not see except that the occasional landmark would pass through their field of view, once every two hundred years. Back to sit with May and at least feel comfortable with someone, even if that someone was starting to feel, for some reason ey could not fully understand, as though they were part of that very vortex.

True Name — 2124

The next time the Council of Eight met was nearly two weeks after True Name's discussion with Praiseworthy, thanks to a small, artificial delay suggested by the other skunk in order to see how well she could manage buttering up those who needed buttering up, meet with Ir Jonas, and let True Name get used to her new form, her new expressiveness.

When Jonas Prime first saw her after that meeting, he had sat up straighter from where he had been lounging on his apartment's couch, pointed his finger at her, and all but shouted, "Perfect! I don't know what you did or how, but it's fucking perfect."

She had laughed, given a bow, and stood up straighter once more. "Glad you approve. I figured if I am going to continue not being a politician, I really ought to look the part."

"I'm surprised you didn't work it in bit by bit, but it'll go over well."

It did, thankfully. When she met with a few of the council members—Debarre and Zeke, thankfully—in order to request the delay on the meeting, they had both complimented her on her looks. She explained it away as wanting try looking 'a little less dumpy', a calculated phrase which had gotten a laugh out of Zeke.

But now, the time had come to actually have the council meeting, which was taking place on a set of benches set alongside the edge of a well manicured pond. The S-R Bloc trio showed up in high-collared coats, hats, and sun-glasses.

"This is utterly ridiculous," Jonas said. "I feel like we're about to start meeting sleeper agents from foreign powers to discuss what intel we've picked up in the last month."

One of the Russians, in a rare sign of outward emotion, grinned broadly. "I thought you of all people would enjoy, Jonas."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I love it, but it's not exactly subtle."

"We'll just say that we're in the middle of a spy reenactment."

Debarre laughed. "Well, I'm for it. All we're missing is the ducks and a bag of breadcrumbs to feed them."

"This can be arranged," another of the S-R Bloc trio said.

"Another time, perhaps. We can play out the full scene."

"Maybe we can walk and talk for once." True Name gestured down the trail, palm up and hand relaxed as Praiseworthy had instructed—you do not want to seem stiff, but rather like you are suggesting that you would like to get on with something that was already their idea in the first place.

It worked well, as the whole council turned on cue and began to walk slowly down the trail. Jonas caught her eye and gave her a wink while the cone of silence settled into place and the meeting began.

“What news on the markets?”

“Nothing particularly new there. We’re still tuning the cost of sims, but the model for forking seems to be working well. We got the chance to test it during a recent hardware upgrade.”

“How about sensorium messages?”

“Proposal was accepted, and there’s an alpha in place. Want to try?”

“Sure, why n- Holy shit! Please don’t do that again.”

And on and on.

They had made it about halfway around the pond before the discussion turned to True Name and Jonas.

“Glad to hear the launch is a go. I’m curious to see if there will be any interruptions in service meanwhile.”

Jonas shook his head, “Should be smooth sailing. Worst case, we shut down for a few hours or days, and then come back online, in which case we won’t even notice a thing in here.”

“And the bill sounds like it’s going well, too,” Debarre said. “I’m actually surprised that it isn’t a foregone conclusion, too. From what I’ve been hearing, there’s essentially total agreement on the DDR, and most of the governments seem on-board now, too.”

It was True Name’s turn to nod, and she slid through the sentence smoothly, letting the topic flow into the conversation as gently as Ir Jonas and Praiseworthy had suggested. She just needed to trust that the work had been done, trust in her own abilities. “Yes, it has almost unanimously been accepted, and all we are really waiting on right now is for them to decide whether or not we can be trusted to govern ourselves.”

The reaction was precisely what she had hoped: almost nothing at all. There were some nodding of heads, and user11824 just shrugged, as he ususally did.

Excellent, it is already in their minds, she thought. Just need to keep going.

Aloud, she said, “We got lucky with our DDR junkie friend, actually. It looks like he has been tapped to help draft the secession amendment that will be added to the bill, though I do not predict any trouble with that passing, either.”

Zeke rumbled with a laugh. “They’re actually calling it ‘secession’ now? How delightful.”

True Name grinned, watching Jonas laugh along with the bundle of rags. *I must find a way to thank Praiseworthy. That could not have gone better.*

“Hey, if it gets us what we need, then they can call it what they want,” Jonas said. “We can govern ourselves, they can govern themselves, and then all these rights arguments become a moot point. The only sticking point seems to be some portions of the S-R Bloc holding onto the idea of dual citizenship.”

The trio nodded in unison. “We will be working on that.”

“Hell,” True Name mused. “We could probably even make a spectacle out of it. If it is to become something important to the entirety of the System, might as well make it a holiday.”

“We can even get out the fireworks!” Debarre laughed, the weasel bouncing ahead a few steps to turn and walk backwards in front of the rest of the group. “No need to worry about wildfires or anything.”

True Name laughed. “When was the last time you even saw fireworks?”

“Oh, I’ve never seen them. You were lucky, you had a big fuck-off lake you could launch them off of. It was just farms and orchards around us, so they were illegal.”

The skunk smiled inwardly. That the topic of secession had been accepted at face value and slid so easily into joking and chatter was the best she could have hoped for. Even Jonas looked happy.

After to-do items had been handed out and the meeting wound down, Jonas waved to the group and disappeared from the sim. That left True Name five minutes to walk and talk with the others before she would meet up with him, so she spent a few just walking alongside Debarre, talking about the fireworks that she had watched with their mutual friend during high school, the author of the ode from which she drew her name.

Then she waved her goodbyes as well, and stepped from the spy-park sim to a cafe, the very same one that Michelle/Sasha had visited before she had forked that first time.

“Mocha, right?” Jonas said, handing her a drink and leading her out to a rickety table on the sidewalk, already ensconced in another silent bubble.

“Thank you, yes. Perhaps champagne would be better.”

He laughed and fell into the chair opposite her, a motion that somehow managed to ride the border between ungainly and endearing. “We’ll get stinking drunk when the bill passes, don’t worry. We’ll get all of you and all of me together and bust out the champagne, cocaine, and condoms.”

“Do not even start,” she said, laughing. “I do not sleep with slimy politicians.”

“You know, you’re going to have to drop that act at some point. You have a speech writer, a styling team, a propagandist—”

“They are all the same instance.”

“—and a team of analysts working on both the sys-side and phys-side angles. You, my dear, are one hundred percent a politician now.”

“Alright, fine. Just do not tell anyone, okay?”

“Lips are sealed.”

She sipped at her mocha and leaned back in the chair, looking out onto the street, people both real and imaginary milling along the sidewalks. “I was thinking today that we may actually be the only politicians on the council.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, Debarre is a friend. A smart one, but I think he mostly got the position by virtue of being associated with me and the lost. The S-R Bloc three are spooks who won’t even tell us their names. Zeke is a true-believer; good at what he does but without the faintest thought for how it goes over. user11824 is the opposite. He wears his anonymity like a brand, but does not actually do much.”

“And then there’s us,” Jonas said, nodding. “The ex-WF rep and whatever the hell you are.”

“I am just me,” True Name mused. “I do not know what that is, precisely, but I am just me. I am no longer Michelle, not by a long shot. I maintain none of that constant state of distraction, none her meekness, and very little of her surplus of empathy. I have lost who she was to become myself.”

Jonas nodded. “For the better, I’d say.”

“Do you think she was not a good council member?”

“Oh, she was fine. Good ideas. Smart. What she lacked was direction, which you make up in spades.”

“I am happy to hear that. Truly.” True Name raised her paper coffee cup in a toast to him. “There are some within the clade who have done the opposite, I am told. Praiseworthy has talked to them all, which is very her. Memory Is A Mirror Of Hammered Silver has hardly left Michelle’s sim in weeks. She wound up with all of the empathy that I set aside. I have my fair share, but only that. I have moved past that surfeit as a point of pride.”

Jonas shrugged. “At least someone’s keeping Michelle company.”

True Name said nothing, simply returning to watching the movement of the shoppers.

“What’s next on your list, fuzzy?”

“If you call me ‘fuzzy’ again, I will dump this coffee over your head and rub it into your perfect fucking hair.”

He laughed.

“What is next? Probably keeping in touch with Yared and helping him draft the amendment. I am sure that most of it will be councilor Demma’s work, but that he has been given at least partial responsibility means that we will—must—have a hand in it as well.”

Ioan Bălan — 2325

Ioan's next interview subject was waiting for em at the agreed-upon library in the agreed-upon sim.

The location was grand, as though it had been tailored perfectly to eir tastes: a cube sixty meters on a side, lit brightly by lights so that within shone a smaller cube made entirely of shelves. Shelves containing book after book after book. Spiral staircases wound up each corner, disgorging patrons onto the various levels so that they could meander along balconies and dive into corridors of books. Books, magazines, pamphlets. Scrolls, parchments, leaflets, snippets, chicken-scratch in diaries, words upon words upon words.

And there, on the bottom floor beneath all of the books, a cafe and bar, serving everything from tea and coffee to beer, whiskey, and doubtless some ridiculously fancy cocktails.

"Mx. Ioan Bălan?" The young woman was waiting for em just inside the door to the cube.

Ey held out a hand. "Yes. You must be Sadijah?"

She beamed and bowed to em. "Yes, yes! It is nice to meet you. You'll have to forgive me for not shaking your hand, I don't like being touched. Follow me, though, I've staked out a booth where we can talk."

They wound their way through a small crowd, an array of low couches and tables, and between the coffee and alcohol bars to a high-walled booth in the corner of the seating area.

"Would you like anything to drink before we begin?"

Ioan shrugged, "A tea, perhaps. Too late in the day for coffee, too early for alcohol."

Sadijah nodded. Within a minute, a server brought them two steaming cups of a milky tea—chai, it turned out, and quite good, at that.

Once they'd gotten the obligatory how-are-yous and good-teas and nice-libraries out of the way, Ioan retrieved eir notebook and a pen.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. Your name came recommended to me by several people. I'm glad to get the chance to talk with an actual historian."

Her laugh was clear and bright. "No, thank you, Mx. Bălan. I've been looking forward to the chance to meet you for quite some time now."

Ey paused partway through unscrewing the cap of eir pen. "You have?"

"Oh, yes! I've been following your work since *On the Perils of Memory*, the Ode clade project. You somehow manage to distill quite a bit down into a document that is clear and easy to read." She paused, then added, "Documents, I should say. I was lucky enough to get a chance to read the detailed history as well as the investigative journalism piece."

“Really? I had no idea that it had made it out of the clade,” ey said, posting the cap on the back of the pen. “I’m pleased to hear that you think so highly of me.”

She nodded, grinning widely. “That’s why I arranged for us to meet, today. I have lots to talk about, of course, but I wanted to meet you, as well.”

Ioan hid an uncomfortable laugh behind a sip of tea. “I’m flattered. You arranged this?”

“Yes! I made friends with a few of yours and encouraged them to suggest that we meet.”

“That is quite a strange thing to do.” Ey decided to roll with it, scratching out shorthand on eir paper. “Why did you think to do that?”

“Oh, because I’m horrible at actually asking for what I really want, and it’s easier for me to ensure that things happen my way instead.”

“That’s very...well, honest. Thank you for letting me know, at least. What was the reason you wanted to meet me for, then? Beyond just, as you put it, wanting to meet me.”

Sadiah sat up straighter in the booth, setting her nearly untouched tea to the side. “Before I answer that, I need to know how much you know, so that I know where to start. Is that okay?”

Ey nodded. The whole encounter was so outside eir experience that ey could think of nothing better to do.

“Stop me when I get to something that you haven’t heard or realized yet. Two hundred years ago, the System seceded from the rest of the institutions on Earth. This happened in conjunction with one of the launches for the L₅ station. Secession was organized by the Council of Eight, one of whom was Michelle Hadje, the progenitor of the Ode clade—this is why I was so interested in your work, I’ll note. The Ode clade is made up of, nominally, one hundred individual instances, though they occasionally spin off long-running instances and pretend they haven’t. The first ten of these instances were created shortly before Secession in order to help handle the workload as Michelle grew tired of her position. With me, so far?”

“Yes, that sounds correct,” ey said. Ey figured it was not worth correcting her on the reality of Michelle, of what ey’d seen and heard from May and Dear.

“Okay.” Sadiah continued her speech smoothly, sitting almost completely still, as though reciting something from memory. “The Odists were integral to both Secession and Launch, and may have orchestrated both, each in their own way. I see you frowning, which I’ll take to mean that I’m getting close to the limits of where our knowledge agrees.”

“I suppose, yes. Some of the discussions I’ve had—my clade has had, I mean—with Odists have brought much of this to light over the past few days.”

“Excellent. Please stop me when I reach the place when our knowledge diverges. The Ode clade, through managing Secession and Launch, has influenced the politics of the System, such as they are, as well as those on Earth, which—”

“Okay. This is new to me, and you’re also speaking a little too fast for me to keep up. If you are able to, can you slow down?”

She laughed breathlessly, finally letting her shoulders sag and her chin droop. “Alright, I’ll try. Thank you for reminding me, I get excitable, sometimes.”

I could tell, ey thought.

“So which part about influencing politics had you not heard before?”

“The bit about influencing politics phys-side.” Ey shook eir head, “Which I’m a little confused about. I suppose I can see how that might work, given the communication between sys- and phys-side during both of those occurrences, but—”

“I’ll note that we’re nearing the extent of my knowledge as well. Sorry, I interrupted.” Despite the acknowledgement, she continued, unfazed. “All I can say is that I’ve noticed patterns. I think you have, too, as mentioned when you frowned, but I am starting to piece together patterns that go beyond that. Yes, they helped with Secession, yes they helped with Launch—more than helped, organized—but that, I think, includes subtle manipulation of politics planet-side in order to ensure that both happened precisely as they wanted.”

“Where are you seeing that?”

She cocked her head to the side and waved an arm expansively above the two of them. “It’s all there, Mx. Bălan. The news that we received from phys-side shows some of the same patterns that we also see sys-side. The hesitant gestures toward a project, which are suddenly rapidly and smoothly moving forward. You must understand, projects like this do not move smoothly on their own, nor do they change the speed at which they move without some outside influence. That is why we speak of momentum and inertia when it comes to projects as well as forces, yes?”

Ey realized that ey hadn’t been writing anything, so ey focused momentarily on jotting some of this information while Sadiyah wasn’t speaking. Finally, ey said, “How do you picture this influence working?”

“I don’t know.”

“I can see how the right words in the right ears might help smooth things along, at least. Do you think that might be enough to lead to these changes you’re talking about?”

“I don’t know,” she repeated, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Say that the Odists have managed to have a hand in both Secession and Launch,” ey continued. Ey did not smile. “What does that get them? What is their motivation?”

“I don’t know.” She was smiling in earnest now.

“And,” ey said, realizing that eir frustration was showing, but was unable to stop it. “What impact does that have on us? Or on Earth?”

“Mx. Bălan,” she said, laughing. “I don’t know. I don’t know! Isn’t that exciting in and of itself? I don’t know, and that means that we have something interesting to work on. There are patterns here, as you acknowledge, and they may go deeper, or they may not, but that gives us a direction to look, doesn’t it? It gives us direction to our questions, doesn’t it? You’ve been asking why people have been staying or leaving. Your cocladists have been asking the same on the launches, I imagine. Those are good questions for boring histories. This is a tenuous question for exciting histories!”

She was waving her arms around now, and the volume of her voice had steadily increased. Ioan was happy for the cone of silence that came with the booth.

“Sadiyah, I must ask you to both slow down and lower your voice again,” ey said, as calm as ey could manage. “I’m having a hard time keeping up and the shouting is making me anxious.”

Startled, she let her shoulders slouch and chin dip once more. “Sorry, Mx. Bălan. Thank you for reminding me again. I don’t like touch, you don’t like loud noises. *Quid pro quo.*”

Ey didn’t think that’s quite what that meant. That, or if she did mean it as an actual this-for-that exchange,

she was on far more levels of manipulation than ey was comfortable with. This arranged meeting was closer to the Odists' manipulation as she'd described than perhaps even she realized.

"Humor me in at least a few of the questions. Why are you here on the System? If you are also on the LVs, why remain here as well?"

"If the patterns are also showing up planet-side, why on Earth would I leave?" she said, laughing. "Pardon the expression."

"Okay." Ey let the answer flow onto the page in eir shorthand. "And why did you upload in the first place?"

Sadiah sat back suddenly as though slapped, blinking rapidly and tapping at the table anxiously. "I...I don't know."

"You don't?"

"I really don't," she said. She was talking slow and quiet now. Her expression was as scared as her voice was. "I don't know, I don't know."

"Do you remember when, at least?"

"2295, but I don't know why."

"Alright. I feel like I've touched a nerve, for which I apologize. What do you miss most about living phys-side, and what excited you most about moving sys-side?"

At this, the historian—if that's what she was—relaxed. "I was fundamentally unhappy with the limitation of time and just how much research I could do at once, so I came to where I could fork."

Ey nodded and jotted down the answer. "And, last one, what's the first thing that you did after uploading?"

"I don't...I don't know." She looked to be on the verge of tears.

Ioan held up eir hands disarmingly. "Let's end the interview here, I think. I've clearly set you on edge, and you've given me a lot to think about. Is it alright if I get to work on processing this?"

She nodded meekly. The shift in her attitude was so jarring that eir anxiety only spiked higher. This went beyond touching a nerve; it was as though her whole script collapsed and, with it, her sense of self.

"If I have any further questions, I'll be in touch," ey said, sliding out of eir seat in the booth, capping eir pen in the same motion. After a moment's pause, ey added, "And I'd like to ask that you respect my boundaries and not try to engineer another meeting between us, okay? I think that would just stress the both of us out."

Another nod, and then Sadiah either left the sim or quit. Ioan couldn't tell which, because ey was already heading for the exit of the building.

Back at eir house, ey kicked off eir shoes, set eir half completed notes on eir desk, and immediately walked into the bedroom to lay down.

May, ever attuned to eir mood, immediately forked and followed em to the room. "Ioan?"

Ey paused, halfway onto the bed.

"May I join you?"

Ey thought about all of the things Sadiah had said, all of the things ey'd learned about the Odists these last few however many weeks, both on eir own and through eir communications with the Codrins. Ey thought about all of the ways in which, whether or not they were true, this spoke to a level of manipulation that ey'd not suspected before. Ey thought, also, about how truly caught up in it ey was.

And then ey nodded anyway, finished crawling into bed, and let May play with eir hair as ey rested eir head on her lap.

Ey felt helpless to do anything but.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

The initial message from Codrin#Pollux via Ioan had been confusing and had, at first, seemed garbled. The way in which this Ezekiel spoke told of one who struggled with his connection to reality.

All of eir work on the Qoheleth matter had set em in a mind of caution whenever ey saw such struggles. Eir immediate question was always to find out when the individual had uploaded. The complete and total inability to forget anything in the System architecture, that thing which had been the driving factor behind Qoheleth's backwards, inside-out approach to a warning, loomed large whenever ey spoke with someone who had been embedded here for so long.

Then again, that note had also contained an equally unhinged explanation from someone who had uploaded less than forty years ago, so perhaps it was more tied to personality than it was to memory.

While it might not be one and instead be the other, there was always the chance that both might be true, and whenever ey was confronted with the possibility of winding up in such a state emself after centuries, ey would spend hours, days, weeks watching eir every action carefully, interrogating every thought, every word for hints of that disconnect.

It was in that mindset that ey sent a carefully crafted sensorium message to this The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade.

"True Name," ey said, speaking to the observing half of emself who would send the message. "My name is Codrin Bălan, and doubtless you remember my down-tree instance from working with my partner and your cocladist, Dear, some years back. Perhaps you also know of my current project of cataloging the experiences of those who have invested in the Launch to be combined into a history and mythology.

"As I work through the list of possible interviewees compiled by clade, I have had several suggestions from out-clade. In particular, my counterpart on Pollux interviewed an...ex-coworker of yours named Ezekiel. He suggested some avenues for exploration in this project for myself, Codrin#Pollux, and Ioan back on the L₅ System, including a suggestion that I interview you."

Ey cleared eir throat and sat up straighter, feeling suddenly anxious. "If you'd agree to such, I'd like to meet at the place of your choosing to ask you some questions about your feelings on the launch and, if possible, Secession as well. Please feel free to get in touch with me by whatever means you'd like. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you."

Ey sent the message off and let the speaking instance quit.

"My dear, when you are nervous, you hedge."

The voice of the fox startled em into awareness. “I what?”

“You *hedge everything you say*,” Dear said, padding the rest of the way into the room to rest its paw on eir shoulder. “*If you would agree, place of your choosing, feel free, whatever means you would like.*”

“I suppose I do.” Ey sighed, resting eir hand atop Dear’s paw.

“*It is not a bad thing. Not necessarily, at least. However, it can show a lack of confidence in your words, and—you will forgive me for having overheard—with True Name, you will need all of the confidence you can muster.*”

“Did you—”

The fox’s grip on eir shoulder tightened. “*You may ask me your questions when you return. For now, please focus on how you will ensure that you will maintain a confident bearing.*”

Ey nodded, lifting eir head to let Dear bump its nose affectionately to eir forehead. “Thanks, Dear. Maybe I should chug a glass of wine or someth— Oh, there’s the reply. I should head out soon.”

“*Send a fork, then, and walk with me in the prairie meanwhile, or read with me on the couch, or do literally anything to keep us from focusing on this.*”

“‘Us’?”

It gave a lopsided smile, shrugged, and padded back into the common area.

Codrin forked off an instance, then followed the fox.

The sim that True Name had specified was a comfortable apartment several stories up some skyscraper in a city of considerable size. Ey arrived in an entryway that looked out over a simple living room, sofa against one wall and media station against the other, hallways splitting off in either direction from there.

And, in the center of the room, stood a smiling skunk. She looked friendly without being ebullient, professional without being prim, confident without being smug. Her shoulders were straight, expression welcoming, and bearing...willing? Was that the right word? She looked as though the only possible thought she had was to help solve every one of Codrin’s problems, and ey saw emself fall for it immediately, as though watching from above.

“Mx. Bălan?”

Ey smiled. “You must be True Name. Thank you so much for having me over and being willing to talk.”

“Of course,” she laughed, and it was gentle, earnest, endearing. “Please! Let us sit down somewhere. Last thing I want is to leaving you standing around in the entryway.”

Ey followed as she padded off down one of the hallways to a room set up much like an office. There was a desk, topped with a calendar and a few pads of paper, each covered in notes of a handwriting that was almost-but-not-quite Dear’s. It was organized without being uncomfortably neat.

“Now comes the awkward question,” she said. “Do I sit across the desk from you, or do I drag my chair around so we can just be more casual? I have never done an interview quite like this before.”

“Uh, well,” ey stammered. The comment had been delivered so effortlessly that ey felt the need to do whatever it was to accommodate her best. It was then that Dear’s nudge toward confidence nudged em, and ey stood up straighter, smiling. “How about across the desk? That’ll let me write and gives you access to anything you need.”

Giving a hint of a bow, the skunk stepped around the corner of the desk to pull out a stool of the type ey had grown used to, living with a partner in possession of a tail. Ey took the seat opposite and set a dot-pad on eir

side of the desk, pulling out eir pen.

“Oh!” True Name looked genuinely surprised. “What a delightful pen! Is it something that you had back before you uploaded, or have you picked up in your time here?”

“Oh, goodness no.” Ey laughed. “Nice pens were well out of fashion when I uploaded. I remember reading all about them, though, and so when I got here, I was finally able to indulge myself.”

She nodded. “It really is wonderful that all those things we dreamt about phys-side can just be had here, is it not? You may shed a bit of reputation hunting down something very obscure or gain some by making it yourself, *et voilà*, you have precisely the item of your dreams. Anyway, I am rambling. What would you like to talk about?”

Ey felt primed to look for deeper meanings, but was also aware of how prone ey was to ruminating and long silences, so ey simply made a mental note later to dig into that statement about phys- versus sys-side items.

“I have a lot of questions,” ey said. “Which seems to be a theme when it comes to interviewing Odists. I don’t want to take up too much of your time, though, so I suppose I’d like to start with some about the launches.”

“Of course, I would be happy to answer those. Do not worry about my time, though. I will make it with a fork, if only to ensure that you get what you need.”

“Thank you, that’s very generous of you.” Ey tested the nib of eir pen on the corner of the paper. “I’m pretty sure that I know the answer to this, but just to start with, did you invest entirely in the launch or is there an instance of True Name back on the System?”

“Oh, I left an instance behind as well, which I am sure you have guessed. With all the work that we have done on the launch—the Odists and other like-minded individuals—it felt as though it would be a shame to not do so. I understand that you invested entirely here, but Ioan remained behind; I know that this is your interview, but I am also curious as to your reasons on that.”

Codrin hesitated, then shrugged. “It was Ioan’s idea, actually. Ey suggested that ey remain behind so that, as the one compiling the information, ey didn’t wind up adding eir own interpretations before sending the data back, given how far we’ve diverged. It was Dear’s idea, at first, to invest entirely. I’m happy with having done so.”

True Name nodded, smiling, and gestured for em to continue.

“Thanks for confirming my suspicions.” Ey quelled the desire to add an *I suppose* before continuing, “My next topic is getting a sense of how you feel about the launch. I understand that you helped with much of the early stages of planning, and I’m wondering, do you consider it a success? How do you feel about the speed and ease with which it came together?”

“I very much consider it a success. Many sys-side were on board with it, and those who were not simply did not care. Those phys-side were quite eager to work with us with only a very small minority who were not.

“As for your second question, I think that that was largely due to this being the first time in nearly two centuries that our two groups have worked together on one goal in any meaningful way. Scientists sys-side consulted with those phys-side on the design of the launch struts and arms. Many sys-side focused on providing a set of goals to be accomplished by the launch, and many phys-side focused on the design of the System replicas, solar sails, and the Dreamer Module.”

Codrin nodded as ey jotted down her answer. Ey considered asking her about the sys-side friction regarding

the Dreamer Module that Brahe had mentioned, but decided to hold off on bringing up something that might prove contentious just yet.

Instead, ey asked, “You mention that this is the first time in nearly two centuries that the two sides have worked together on something. Can you give me an overview of the types of collaboration that you were a part of or witnessed during Launch?”

She laughed easily. “Is it not strange how we are already speaking of it in a similar way to Secession? I can hear the capital-L in your voice when you speak and you leave the definite article unspoken. But yes, I can tell you about that.

“You doubtless know that quite a few elements of the Ode clade worked on the launch project. My own up-tree instance, May Then My Name Die With Me, was the sys-side launch director. My role, however, was to act as the political liaison between the two entities. There were meetings to be had, tempers to be soothed, knotty problems of jurisdiction to be considered. Did you know that there were discussions as to whether the new LV Systems would be considered as seceding from the L₅ System? It was all very thorny. We eventually decided that the LVs would be considered a joint project with fifty-percent responsibility of sys- and phys-side and their Systems independent colonies. I found it quite silly, but here we are.”

Ey chuckled at the suggestion. “I suppose it is a little silly, but then, much of the political side is over my head. Tangentially, and maybe this is a question better asked by Ioan and May Then My Name, I was informed that the launch director phys-side is actually a distant relative of Michelle Hadje’s. You must have been aware of that, given your role, but I’m curious as to your thoughts on having him involved.”

“It was a nice bit of serendipity, a Hadje working on Launch just as one worked on Secession.”

“I have heard mixed responses on this from the clade, but do you consider yourself a Hadje still?”

True Name sighed, looking genuinely saddened. “No, not any longer. Sometime between Secession and her death, I had diverged too far from Michelle. The last time I merged back with her, it was quite difficult to rectify those conflicts, I imagine.”

“I understand. I apologize for interjecting, though. Do you have further thoughts on Douglas Hadje working phys-side?”

“It was, as I said, serendipitous. When I saw that he had submitted his resume for the position, I was surprised. I do believe he was well qualified for the position, but I ensured that I had a chance to sit in on the hiring committee meetings.” Her smile returned, this time a touch mischievous, and she winked to em. “I may or may not have had some conversations with others on the committee to argue his case. It tickled me to have that option crop up during the process.”

Ey raised an eyebrow as ey wrote. “Yes? Well, I suppose that is as good a reason to hire someone as any other, if he was qualified and a good fit.”

She laughed. “Of course. If he had been a total numbskull, I would not have spoken up for him. Probably distanced myself from him, at that.”

“I hesitate to call it ‘pulling strings’, but did similar opportunities arise during Secession?”

“I do not think so. We still had our phys-side contacts that were alive at the time at that point. We, here, meaning the Council of Eight. During the campaign for Secession, we each interacted with those contacts, and many who were interested in helping us achieve that goal eventually got in touch with us. They were surprised when we suggested the idea of secession, but as soon as we explained the reasons why, they quickly got on board.”

“What were your reasons? At the time, I mean.”

The skunk shrugged gracefully. “We are just too different. By virtue of the ways in which the System works, we were not able to understand each other well enough to interact as members of our prior countries. I was a member of the Western Federation, and when I first uploaded, I technically still was, but of what use was I to the Western Fed in an uploaded state other than as a mind who could only interact with the outside world via text?”

“Did they want you to remain such?”

“Of course. Many of them did, at least. With an increasing number of their most curious and intelligent minds uploading, the government was concerned of a brain-drain, such as it were. If we were still citizens, they could claim that our output was created under their jurisdiction. That is why it was a campaign and not just a foregone conclusion.”

Codrin nodded as ey wrote, and some part of em realized just how smoothly the conversation had gone. There were few times ey could name where confidence had failed em, and it had instead felt much like any

other conversation between friends.

“What was your role in the decision to undertake the launch project?” ey asked.

She blinked, sat up straighter, and smiled wide. “Oh goodness, did you not know? It was mine from the start. Before she left, Michelle met with the clade and gave each of the stanzas a suggestion. They were quite vague, as she was struggling, there at the end. She said, “Do something big. Do something worthy of us.” And so I gave it some thought and remembered that it had been so long since the two entities had worked together on a project, and we are already in space, so the idea of Launch came naturally to me.”

Ey stopped writing in the middle of a sentence, startled. “Wait. You originated the idea?”

“It was a communal effort from start to end, Codrin, you must understand. I think that many were considering very similar ideas, but I was the first to bring it to the attention to both entities out loud.”

Codrin, mastering eir surprise, finished writing eir note. “Well, I suppose I have you to thank for this project as well, then.”

Her laugh was musical and genuine. “I am happy to hear that, Mx. Bălan.”

“I think that was all the questions that I had prepared,” ey said. “Though I was wondering, my cocladist on Pollux mentioned that Michelle’s last words were “Do something big, help us divest“. Was that just something lost in translation?”

True Name opened her paws in a gesture that was half shrug, half non-acknowledgement. “Which you decide to accept is up to you to incorporate in your work.”

Ey was still reeling from the revelation, not to mention the lingering admonition not to push any one Odist too much, so ey decided to leave it there. “It’ll give me plenty to put into my report. Do you have anything you’d like to ask me?”

“Only a suggestion. You have doubtless heard of Jonas, yes? Good. Well, I might also suggest that you find an instance of the Jonas clade to talk with. Given the direction of your questions, he will likely have much that will interest you.”

Douglas Hadje — 2325

Douglas found it strange that, over the next several days, the conversations that he had with May Then My Name and Ioan had amounted to little more than chitchat.

It wasn't that it was unpleasant. May Then My Name had a delightfully weird sense of humor and, though he originally found it difficult to understand, given the text-only nature of the medium, an undeniable sense of empathy that made him immediately feel comfortable around her.

Ioan, too, had proven to be fascinating to talk to. Ey was, as May Then My Name had suggested, the type who spent much of eir time in introspection, the result of which were statements that were as insightful as they were easy to understand. He liked the writer immediately. The two together could be hilarious, informative, somber, and comforting all in one conversation.

They were also very clearly in love with each other, which Douglas found endearing, yet odd for some reason, given how often they referred to each other simply as coworkers. Ioan, especially, seemed either completely unwilling to acknowledge or completely unaware of the dynamic.

Ah well. It was an interesting fact, at least. Interesting in that when Douglas had interacted with couples before, he had often felt like...well, not a third wheel, particularly, so much as someone who simply did not understand the social dynamic at hand. Not so with them.

As enjoyable as all of the conversations were, however, and as much as he was beginning to understand sys-side life, he seemed to gain little in the way of actual knowledge.

At this point, however, his duties had diminished to almost nil, and he had little else to do. Within the year, he suspected that he'd be off looking for another job, hopefully still station-side.

So here he was, sitting on his bed, reading until either May Then My Name or Ioan pinged him.

Tonight, it was Ioan.

Ioan Bălan: Good evening, Douglas. Let me know when you're around.

Douglas Hadje: I'm around. How are you, Ioan?

Ioan: I'm doing well. And yourself?

Ioan: And by the way, it's just me, tonight. May has fallen asleep.

Ioan: All of her, actually. It's like the planets aligning sometimes. A bit of blessed quiet.

Douglas: I'm alright. Was actually just waiting up to hear from you. Things are pretty boring with no further launch stuff to do.

Douglas: Is May Then My Name loud in person?

Ioan: Oh, not really. She's just very

Ioan: Hmm.

Ioan: Intense, is maybe the right word? She doesn't chatter all of the time or run around or anything. Usually, she's just working and she does all of her work mentally rather than on paper. She'll have good conversations with me or with you, putter around, clean or cook, which I realize makes her sound very domestic, which isn't really the case. Those are just things she enjoys.

Ioan: But the whole time that she's doing those things, she's intense. Her expression, her personality, her words, her smile, her laugh, her eyes.

Ioan: That's one of those things that always strikes me as funny. You know, the whole thing about how eyes are just spheres, not actually emotive.

Ioan: But hers are intense.

Douglas: The intensity comes through even in text, so I believe you. So it's nice having a break from that intensity?

Ioan: Yeah, basically. It's nice when we sleep. The time before we head to bed is much calmer. Just a lot of talking and such. She's a very physically affectionate person, which I was not used to at all when she moved in.

Douglas laughed, considered his options, shrugged, and typed his response.

Douglas: That also comes through in text, in a way. You two sound like a cute couple.

Ioan: Huh.

Ioan: You know, I'd never really considered that.

Ioan: 'That' meaning being a couple.

Ioan: I don't know that we are, actually.

Douglas: "Don't know"?

Douglas: Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to presume.

Ioan: It's alright. I also don't know that we aren't. Sometimes the question will come up in my mind and I'll wonder about it a little, but it always slips away and then I'm back to organizing my pen collection or whatever May accuses me of.

Douglas: But you've never talked with her about it?

Ioan: No. Same problem as mentioned above. Every time I think of asking she's already asleep or too busy or I'm out on an interview as #Tracker and then it just slips my mind.

Ioan: You can't be a couple without agreeing that you are, right? So maybe that means we aren't? I have no idea, it's all far above my pay grade.

Douglas: Do you want to be?

Ioan: I definitely don't know that! I'm not really comfortable continuing to talk about this, though.

Douglas: No problem.

Ioan: Needless to say, she's intense. The whole damn clade is.

Douglas: The Ode clade, was it?

Ioan: Yes. Or the Odists if you want something shorter.

Douglas: Can you tell me more about them? They sound fascinating, and I've always wondered.

Ioan: I can tell you a little bit. It's more on her to answer the details. They can be tight-lipped about the weirdest things.

Douglas: Of course. I'm eager to know, but don't want to pry.

Ioan: So, the Ode clade is very old. They've been around for ages. There are quite a few of them. I did a bunch of work with one of them named Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled about twenty years back, and that's how I got to know them. We've had an on-again-off-again working relationship.

Ioan: Though, now that I think about it, one of my forks—my only real cocladist—has found emself in a romantic relationship with Dear.

Ioan: You have to understand, though, every single Odist I've met (except maybe one, who isn't around anymore) has been completely and utterly charming, so maybe it's just a them thing.

Ioan: Anyway, They're all incredibly strange, is what I'm saying.

Ioan: Another thing about them is that they are, to a one, magnets for strange goings on. I guess that's part of being strange overall, but even so, every one of them has this incredible story about these events that have happened around them. I don't think it's a conscious thing, necessarily. Just by virtue of their intensity, they live through intense happenings, or have intense friends, or elicit intense reactions from those around them.

Ioan: For example—and this is public information here, now, I don't know if it ever made it phys-side—it was one of them who discovered (or at least was the first who was public about) the fact that those who live sys-side can't ever actually forget things. Instead of simply publishing some sort of report or studying the reality of it, he adopted the persona of a biblical teacher and organized an entire scavenger hunt to try and get the rest of the clade interested.

Douglas: That sounds dramatic.

Ioan: Agreed!

Ioan: I was going to say that they're not really dramatic, just intense, but it's definitely both.

Douglas: Can you tell me about their names? They all seem similar to the snippets of poetry that May Then My Name kept sending me.

Ioan: They're all poetic, I can certainly say that, but that's also a very, very touchy subject for them, enough that Qoheleth, the aforementioned Odist who did the scavenger hunt, the one I mentioned isn't here anymore, was assassinated for trying to divulge information about their names.

Douglas: Assassinated?!

Douglas: That's a thing that can happen, sys-side?

Ioan: Unfortunately, yes. It's rare, thankfully. There are viruses of a sort that interrupt the sys-side mind enough to cause it to lose coherency and just sort of disappear.

Ioan: You told us you still have implants and rigs out there, right? It's like when your avatar crashes, except it's your personality instead.

Douglas: That's absolutely horrifying. I'll go ahead and add that to the bucket of fears right alongside nuclear and biological warfare.

Ioan: Again, they're not at all common, and they by convention have to be tied to a physical object, usually a syringe or knife, so they are visible. They also need to be tailored to the target, which is why we say 'assassination' rather than murder. It's very premeditated and there's no way to prosecute. Any time that someone has considered designing ones that aren't or which are more widespread, there's an incredible backlash. Happens once every twenty years or so.

Douglas: That's not super encouraging, but I'll try not to let it get to me.

Ioan: Well, let's change the subject, then, just to keep it from being anxiety-inducing. I know that May will ask this, so, when do you think you'll upload?

Douglas: Hah, well, I guess she would. I was thinking within a year.

Douglas: My duties are all wrapping up all at once, it feels like, so, maybe when they tell me to get planet-side.

Ioan: I have a suggestion, if you're interested.

Douglas: Oh?

Ioan: Upload on the one-year anniversary of the launch.

Douglas: Why?

Ioan: The Odists are total suckers for symbolism. If you do it on Secession and Launch Day, May will lose her damn mind.

Ioan: In a good way, I mean. You'll get to see it, I'm sure. It's quite the spectacle.

Douglas: It's not a bad idea, actually. I'll pester the commission to ensure that I'm up here for that.

Ioan: Really? You're seriously considering it?

Douglas: If you had left the planning up to me, I'm not sure I'd ever do it. I'd just keep on cycling and worrying and never actually do anything, but give me a little push, and I'll make it happen.

Ioan: I believe it. Keep me in the loop!

Douglas: Should I tell May Then My Name or keep it a surprise?

Ioan: Can you keep it a secret for the next six months or so?

Douglas: Sure, I guess.

Ioan: Great. Please do. I want to see her go nuts.

Ioan: Strange question: you say that you don't start projects without a little push, but you also said that you applied for the launch director position on a whim.

Ioan: Are you sure there was no push for you to apply?

Douglas: Huh.

Douglas: I...will have to think on that and get back to you.

Douglas: Why do you ask?

Ioan: Well.

Ioan: I'm not sure I can tell you without compromising some agreements on my end.

Ioan: With May and the other Odists, I mean.

Ioan: I'll make sure May tells you at some point, though, alright?

Douglas: Sure.

Douglas: I mean, it sounds complicated, but like you say, they're a complicated group.

Douglas: I'll think about it, though, see if I can remember anything.

Ioan: Thanks!

Ioan: May's all sacked out in bed, so I think I'll go join her.

Ioan: Goodnight, Douglas. Sleep well, and keep in touch!

Douglas made his goodbyes and then stretched out on his own bed, still grinning at the idea of Ioan sharing a bed with May and still not knowing whether or not they were in a relationship.

He turned the lights off and rolled enough to pull his covers over him. It'd be early to fall asleep, but it's not like he had much else to do, so he might as well do the same.

Yared Zerezghi — 2124

Amendment to referendum 10b30188

The entity known as the System, with regards to its inhabitants, shall hereby secede and become its own self-governing entity.

1. Those who have uploaded to live on the System shall no longer hold their citizenship (sometimes known as “dual citizenship”) to their country of origin.
2. The creations of those who have uploaded to live on the System shall henceforth be considered as originating in and governed by the System as a political entity.
3. The System as a self-governing entity shall enter into trade agreements with other governmental entities for goods and services required to maintain the System as a physical entity.
4. The exchange of goods and services between the System and the governmental entity named in the trade agreement shall be binding for those two parties only.
5. The act of uploading to the System shall be considered one of emigration, and regulations around immigration shall be set only by the System.
6. No governmental entity may set undue barriers to uploading to the System beyond existing expatriation agreements, nor may they intimidate, dissuade, or otherwise hinder citizens from choosing to emigrate.
7. As a separate governmental entity, the System shall be a valid destination for asylum-seekers and refugees regardless of their reasons for seeking such, with regulations for acceptance being set by the System as a self-governing entity.
8. Due to the nature of the System, the following limitations shall be put in place on this governmental entity:
 - a. It shall not provide favor to any one governmental entity over another except through the agreements set above.
 - b. It shall not enact any trade embargo, tariff, or other restriction on trade against any other governmental entity.
 - c. It shall not be able to declare war on any other governmental entity.
 - d. No other governmental entity shall declare war on or attempt to destroy the physical elements of the System.

- e. No other governmental entity shall aid or abet another governmental entity to conspire against the System.
- 9. The physical elements of the System including but not limited to the System hardware, resource infrastructure, and the “Ansible system” required for uploading shall be considered property of the System as a governmental entity, with the offices containing the “Ansible system” being considered an international zone.
- 10. The System as a governmental entity shall enact any and all regulations relating to its own governance, which no other governmental entity may hinder.

Sponsors:

Direct Democracy Representative signatory Yared Zerezghi (NEAC) via Direct Democracy Representative, author.

Supervisory government signatory Yosef Demma (NEAC), Councilor.

System-side signatories The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade by way of Michelle Hadje (Council of Eight), Council-member.
Jonas Prime of the Jonas clade by way of Jonas Anderson (Council of Eight), Council-member.

November 28, 2124

The response to the proposal was immediate and dramatic.

Yared had not known what exactly it was that he was expecting, but it certainly was not an immediate division within the DDR, with one half being suddenly and intensely for the referendum and its amendments, each for their own reasons, and the other half being suddenly and intensely against the referendum for completely separate reasons he could not fathom.

It was not that he hadn't expected some division, but the strength of the divisiveness of the amendment itself was alarming. Where once there had been general consensus on the issue of individual rights and the L₅ launch amendment, there was suddenly no guarantee that the referendum itself would actually pass. It had been a foregone conclusion, and now, in the matter of minutes, the entire thing seemed to be crumbling around him, and, with his name attached as author and DDR signatory, he was responsible.

His instinct was to leave. To run. To hide. Some adrenal reaction drove him to back out of the 'net, throw on his cap and nearly sprint from his apartment.

He made it the several blocks up to the useless, wooded patch of ground before he calmed down enough to realize that, not only had he left behind any chance of responding to the flurry of comments on the referendum and its amendment (unless he wanted to use the clunky interface for doing so on his phone), but also any chance of syncing up with True Name and Jonas on the events.

Now here he was, huddling at the base of a scraggly tree like some hunted thing, an animal seeking only to never be seen by unknown predators. Now here he was, completely alone.

And yet he couldn't force himself to rise. Couldn't force himself to get up from his crouching position, couldn't force himself to walk back to his apartment or, really, anywhere else, couldn't even force himself to pull his phone from his pocket and get in touch with...well, who would he even contact? The only one he interacted with in the subject—really, the only one he interacted with offline in any sincere capacity, these last few months—was Councilor Demma.

Given this reaction, that seemed ill-advised.

So he sat for an hour, back pressed against the trunk of the tree, searching for anything he could think of to ground himself.

With a thrill up his spine along the exocortex and a gentle ping from his implants, his phone began to ring. Fears surged within him once again, and a glance at the screen confirmed those fears.

Demma.

"Shit, shit." He stood, paced around the tree in a circle. "Shit. Shit, goddamn."

He stared at his phone for a few long seconds, torn on whether or not to let it simply go to voicemail.

Eventually, that part of his mind lost out to the desire to hopefully find some reassurance, so he tapped at the phone to answer the call.

"Mr. Zerezghi," the councilor said. "Wonderful to hear from you. I was wondering if you had a few moments to talk? We stopped by the coffee shop and knocked at your door, but there was no answer."

"My apologies, councilor. I went for a walk to clear my head. I'm..." He squinted around at the trees, then walked back to the street he'd come up. "I'm at the wooded park area, a ways north of my place. Does your driver know where that is?"

There was a moment's muffled conversation, then, "Of course. We'll meet you on the road, yes? The residential side?"

"Yes. I'll be waiting."

After the click of Demma hanging up, Yared trudged back the way he'd come.

It was a short walk of perhaps only a minute or two, but even so, the car was waiting for him, the driver already standing beside it, waiting to open the door to let him in to talk.

"Yared, wonderful to see you, as always!" Demma said cheerfully. "Please, sit! We have much to talk about. I'm sorry that I was not able to provide our usual coffee, but there's water behind the seat if you'd like."

Settling into the cushy and cold spot that he'd found himself in so many times before, Yared shook his head. "No, thank you. I'm sorry I wasn't at home, I wasn't expecting you."

Demma waved the comment away. "It's alright, quite alright. We probably should have planned better on when to introduce the amendment in order to meet up afterwards, but, well, we knew it was going to be today, so we figured that you'd be ready to meet either way."

"I just...I just needed a walk."

"Burning off some steam? Enjoying some fresh air?"

He fiddled with the hem of his shirt for a moment, then shrugged. "I was a little surprised by the response to the amendment. It was making me anxious, and I stepped away to calm down."

"Of course, of course." Demma leaned forward to pat Yared on the knee before reclining again, looking relaxed, pleased. "I've not been monitoring the DDR myself, but my assistants have been keeping me up to date.

It sounds like there's a little bit of an uproar, there. You've certainly touched a nerve."

Yared nodded, numb. He could tell he was dissociating, feeling remote from his own body, yet couldn't do anything to bring himself back to the moment.

"I have some thoughts on the response, both on the DDR and among the various representatives I've talked to, but I'd like to hear your anxieties first, to see if I can soothe them."

"I just wasn't expecting it to blow up in my face like that. There was so much general agreement on the ideas you've suggested. You and Jonas, I mean. I thought that it was all vague and positive enough to seem like the natural conclusion to the ongoing conversation, and it's not like it's the first amendment I've written—"

"Indeed not," Demma said, laughing. "That's part of why we chose you."

"Right. So I'm just not sure why it just all immediately went wrong. There was nothing in there that hadn't already been discussed in the forums, and even on the 'net from governmental types."

The councilor tugged at his chin absentmindedly. "I think that there are a few reasons for that, Mr. Zerezhghi. The first is that there were no other co-authors on the bill, so it looked rather sudden. Even if you've been leading the effort quite effectively, and others look up to you, I can imagine that some see it as a power-grab once you'd reached that consensus.

"Another reason is that you used the word 'secede', which is something of a naughty word in many jurisdictions. North America in particular has some quite strong feelings on the matter, given the troubles of the last century. Don't misunderstand me, you had to use it for legislative reasons, but it still spun several people into a panic, particularly in what remains of the United States. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, I suppose, but others were already using it. Respected voices, even. It's not the first time it's come up."

"Of course, but it is the first time it's been put in front of everyone as something they must consider."

Yared frowned. "If that's the case, then perhaps we should have waited for a separate referendum."

"No, I don't think so." Demma smiled, looking very much the kind, grandfatherly type. "Or rather, our analysts didn't think so. They ran several situations through their various models and came to the conclusion that an amendment was the best path forward."

"Why, though? I don't see how introducing something so divisive would lead to anything other than either the entire referendum getting thrown out or, at best, delaying the process for months."

"There may indeed be a small delay as debate kicks up again." Demma nodded toward Yared. "Which we will help you participate in, much as we have up to this point. Still, broaching the idea as an amendment is a good way to get this idea in the forefront of people's minds. They can have the debate with lower pressure on acceptance. They can always vote on the original referendum without passing the amendment, correct?"

Yared nodded.

"So, if that happens, at that point, we can spin it off into its own referendum, and by then, much of the debate will have already taken place, and we can continue to work through the whole process calmly, as we have been." He spread his hands, still smiling. "It is all a matter of risk management, Mr. Zerezhghi. You understand."

"I suppose."

"Have you had a chance to speak with Jonas and his strangely named friend yet?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. Like I said, I started to panic and went for my walk."

Demma nodded. "I suggest you do as soon as you get back. I'm curious to hear their opinion on the result of

this amendment. I suspect they are equally curious to hear your opinion. Please report back to me what they say, as you have been.”

“Alright.”

“Now, here are my thoughts on the matter,” the councilor said. “I think the amendment will be successful, and I have three reasons why. First of all, the DDR is far easier to send into a fit than you might be giving it credit for. We’ve watched it for decades now. It has a very short attention span, and dramatic reactions are part of that. Voters will work themselves up into a froth on whatever the current issue is, but there will always be another issue.

“Second, there *will* be another referendum introduced in December. It is already being drafted up in Cairo, and will involve some issue of mid-level consequence, but one that will be of interest to many of the regular DDR voices. You’ll have to pardon me for not giving you more information until the referendum is made public, but I can tell you that it will involve both the subcommittees on environment and land management.”

Yared blinked. Demma was right, of course, anything to deal with land rights, especially here in the North-east African Coalition, was bound to draw many of the loudest DDR junkies, himself included.

“Should I take part in that conversation, too?” he asked.

“You can if you’d like, so long as you don’t drop your focus on the current referendum completely. I don’t imagine you will, given that your name is on an amendment.”

He nodded.

“The third reason, however, is that there is more going on behind the scenes on the governmental level than you are privy to. It’s often fashionable to ascribe ill intentions to politicians, but that is because they have often borne out when scandals come to light.

“There is nothing scandal-worthy here, but there are still strings to be pulled. The correct hands shaken, the correct babies kissed, the correct promises of support on the correct issues. Some of those strings are the ones that everyone can see: the campaign contributions, the baby-kissing, the promises. Some of them are not, though. Thinly veiled threats, intimidation. Who knows, perhaps even some market meddling.”

Yared’s baseline frown deepened, to which Demma laughed.

“Politics is politics, my dear Yared. It is a game, as I’m sure you’ve guessed from your interactions with Jonas, just one with high stakes. When there are high stakes, one must use all the tools at one’s disposal, savory or otherwise.”

“I understand,” he said, still feeling that tension in his shoulders.

Still smiling, Demma soothed, “You have made your own harsh comments, I know. You have questioned your opponent’s competency. You have suggested that perhaps others band up against them and nudge them out of the debate. You have the very same toolkit, if only on a smaller scale.”

He finally let his shoulders sag.

“So,” the councilor said, ticking off on his fingers. “The DDR is easily distracted, an additional distraction will be provided, and politics will be done where required. I promise that you’ll quickly see a swing in favor of the amendment. I’ve promised such in the past, and surely delivered.” His voice held a tone of conclusion, as though the conversation was nearing a decisive end.

Yared nodded. “Alright, councilor. I understand. I’m still having a hard time internalizing it, but I’ll work on that. Should I expect further instructions?”

“You’ll get them, yes, but for now, please enjoy a few days off from the issue. You’ve done your work for now, let it simmer, and then you can come back to it. I know it’ll be hard to do, but I trust you’ll find a way. Enjoy good food. Drink good coffee. Talk with good friends.” That avuncular smile returned. “You deserve it, Mr. Zerezghi. And, as always, thank you for all of your hard work.”

And with that, the driver pulled the door open, and it was back out into the heat of the day for him. The heat of the day, the real world, and hopefully a bit of space from the stress. Hopefully. Hopefully he’d be able to let it go for a few days.

He didn’t believe it for a second.

Ioan Bălan — 2325

If, Ioan thought, there was a version of Dear's sim—that sprawling, unending shortgrass prairie—that had existed to perfect trees instead of grass, it was this place.

May had told em that Serene had designed this sim, just as she had Dear's prairie. In that sense, it felt much the same; if Serene had any hallmarks of design, it seemed to be a focus on wind and weather, an unerring attention to plant life, and a fondness for the fractal textures of the ground. It was easy enough to design with right angles, flat planes, level ground. As building was something more akin to daydreaming, it was natural landscapes that were the hard ones to get the tiny details correct.

It was no surprise that this sim had been designed for another Odist. Where Dear had fallen in love with the endless prairie and Michelle the flowing fields of dandelion dotted grass, Do I Know God After The End Waking had fallen in love with trees.

When ey first arrived, ey had done so outside of a smallish A-frame building, more tent than anything, for it was built of rough-hewn planks set into the classical shape with an oiled canvas draped over it to create the walls. Even the floor was made of those rough planks, though much of it appeared to have been worn smooth after countless years of foot—or paw—traffic.

Peeking inside revealed a simple cot made of more canvas stretched over a frame and a pillow of some sort of bundle, a battered roll-top desk with a low stool in front of it (Ioan found emself desperately wanting something similar upon seeing them), and a small wood-burning stove in the back where the far wall had been created using rammed earth instead of more canvas.

Ey immediately fell in love with it, and hoped that ey'd like End Waking well enough to visit again.

He was nowhere to be seen, though. The rundown of his appearance from May was of a skunk like herself, male, and “heavily committed to the ranger aesthetic. Cloak, hatchet, bow, the works”.

Ioan sat on the steps in front of the tent and waited, hoping perhaps that ey had simply arrived too early for the scheduled meeting. It was a pleasant wait, at least, and a welcome break from the increasing tension that ey had been feeling within as more and more information about the Odists had come to light. Eir own interviews, as well as news from the Codrins and Dears had left em anxious more often than not, and even though ey did eir best to keep that feeling away from eir interactions with May, there was still no denying that she was an Odist as well.

The skunk's arrival was something of a surprise, as what ey had initially taken to be one of those wandering breezes fingering ferns and branches slowly resolved into a humanoid form walking silently between the trees.

“Mx. Bălan,” the form murmured, tugging back the hood that hid most of its face to reveal the familiar white-striped black snout. “Sorry for keeping you waiting. I was exploring.”

Ioan stood and bowed politely. “No problem. Exploring, though? I would’ve thought that you’d know the area around your home fairly well by now.”

The skunk smiled. His features were undeniably those of an Odist—at least those of the skunk variety—while still being unique. They were more masculine in a way that ey could not place. More rugged. Dirtier. Certainly more exhausted. “One never truly finishes exploring a forest. I was climbing the trees.”

“That sounds enjoyable, at least.”

“Not at all.” He laughed. “I am terrified of heights.”

“Then why—”

“Exploring is a process that is also the goal. Why not undertake that process fully? Surely you know that of us by now.”

Ey grinned, nodding. “I suppose I do, at that. Either way, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, as well. I would shake your hand, but I am currently quite disgusting.” He brushed crushed leaves off his arms and the backs of his paws. “Come, though. I will clean up and make us some tea.”

This process took nearly half an hour, during which ey had to remind emself that there was no rush, no reason to hurry. Ey sat on the edge of End Waking’s cot while the skunk puttered around the tent, doffing his cloak to leave him in a greenish-brown tunic and canvas leggings that were a brown so dark as to be almost black. He set about filling a small basin with water in which to wash his paws. This used up the last of the water inside, so he had to step out and collect some more from a barrel just outside the door, run it through a cloth filter into a battered kettle, which was set on the stove. The embers had apparently burnt low, so he then had to go collect an armful of firewood from beneath one of the ‘eaves’ of the tent where it was kept dry and then stoke the fire back up to an intense blaze using some complex set of steps that Ioan could never have understood. Finding the promised tea had required digging through the creaky drawers of the desk to find the fist-sized crock of various dried leaves.

“Lemon balm, mint, and dried gooseberry. I am sorry that I cannot offer anything more exciting. Tea does not grow here.”

Ioan laughed. “I’ve never had either lemon balm or gooseberry, so it sounds exciting to me. It certainly smells delightful.”

End Waking beamed at the compliment, and shortly had dug out two enamel camp mugs, blown the dust free from the less-used one, and then tipped a small amount of tea into the bottoms of each. “You will have to strain it through your teeth. I do not have a teapot either. The ingredients are all edible on their own, though, so I usually just wind up eating them.”

The whole experience was so delightfully out of place for all of the Odists ey had met so far that Ioan was rapt.

At the end of the extended tea-making procedure, ey was left with a steaming mug of slowly darkening tea, leaves of mint and melissa floating to the top while broken chunks of gooseberry sunk to the bottom. It smelled wonderful, a type of fragrance that immediately made em feel comfortable and soothed.

If May’s clade exists to shape the minds and emotions of people, ey thought. He’s doing an admirable job.

“We will sit and talk for a bit, though I must warn you that I get antsy very easily and will likely request that we walk after we finish our tea.”

“Alright,” ey said. “I usually write notes on the interviews, but I’m sure I’ll remember just fine.”

The skunk gave em an unreadable expression, then nodded. “Right, yes. That whole business. Where do you wish to start?”

“Well, I’ve got some fairly standard questions that I’ve been asking everyone, then we can get to the more meaty stuff. If we have time afterwards, I’d like to ask you more about this,” ey said, gesturing around at the tent, out the still-open flap.

“I will look forward to that, then. It sounds like you have a shit sandwich for me, anyhow.”

Ioan laughed. “I’d not heard that term until May used it. I like it.”

End Waking grinned toothily.

After taking another sip of the tisane and chewing on the resulting leaves, ey asked, “You’re obviously still here on the L₅ System, but did you send a fork along on the LVs?”

He shook his head. “I did not. I am sure you will ask more about why as the questioning goes on, but for now, I’ll say that there are some intraclade politics that left a sour taste in my mouth about the whole thing.”

“If you’re ever uncomfortable with a question, feel free to tell me you’d not like to answer.”

End Waking nodded.

“Were you involved in Launch at all? Was that part of the politics?”

“Ioan, I was promised a shit-sandwich, but so far it is an open-faced one,” he said, laughing to take the sting out of the words. “I did not. And, to preempt your next question, I had not yet been forked during Secession, so I did not take part in that, either. I was forked a few decades after Secession.”

“May I ask why?”

“You may, but give me a moment to consider my answer.”

That moment was spent sipping tea in silence, only the muffled crackling of the fire in the stove and the breeze testing at the flaps of the tent.

Eventually, the skunk spoke up once more. “From what May Then My Name and others have said, the Bălan clade and the elements of the Ode clade working with them have already reached certain bits of knowledge, so I will be up front about this.”

Ioan nodded.

“I was forked in order to help influence financial policies phys-side to encourage certain attitudes toward the System, such as the subsidizing of uploading.”

Ioan attempted to keep eir face impassive, but ey must have let some of eir reaction show, as End Waking laughed tiredly.

“I am sorry. I am not proud of what I did, and that is why I am here and not out in the world, bowing to the whims of my down-tree instances and their interests. My role was taken over by a member of the Jonas clade.”

“I’ve heard that name several times so far. He’s on my list to interview.”

The skunk sighed, nodded, sipped his tea. “I suppose he is.”

“Do you have any suggestions for what to ask him?”

“No. He will control the interview from start to finish. I am told that one of your cocladists has already

interviewed True Name. If she learned from anyone, it was Jonas. There is no hope of trying to own the interview, no need to try and guide the questions.”

“I’ll admit that I’m starting to feel in over my head.”

End Waking raised his mug toward em in a toast. “We all are, Ioan. Only, you and precious few others realize that now.”

“So, I guess for my next question, What does it mean that you influenced the finances phys-side?”

“It was largely a matter of politicking. Strings to pull, ears to whisper into, suggestions made on both the governmental and DDR level. We played them like a finely-tuned instrument, the Odists and the Jonas clade. I would have long, serious talks with politicians; longer, more fun talks with DDR junkies, bless their stupid, stupid hearts. I coordinated with others to help influence sentiment here sys-side, encouraging people to write home and suggest to their families that they consider all of this in a way that aligned with our goals.”

“What were your goals?”

The skunk finished his tea and spent a moment fishing all of the leaves and berries from the bottom of his mug to the rim so that he could eat them, as promised. It meant a moment of downtime, during which Ioan sipped eir own tea.

Sitting back and curling his tail absentmindedly into his lap to brush it free of leaves and twigs, End Waking said, “Short term, to lower the cost of uploading and make it seem ever more appealing. Middle-term, the goal was to pass the legislation that led to several governments paying families when an individual uploaded. It started as a sort of subsidy for the lost income, and I think some locales still think of it that way, but it quickly turned into an incentive. Did you have any siblings, Ioan?”

Ey nodded.

“And were you the eldest?”

Ey frowned, nodded again.

“We planted an idea, a subtle one, that it might be a good idea for the eldest child to upload and use the payout to fund a better life for the other children.”

“I never heard anyone—”

“This is what I mean by subtle. It was not something anyone really talked about. It was simply a convention that formed over time, and for everyone who followed it, the idea seemed to come to them of their own accord.”

“But it didn’t. It came from you.”

The skunk winced. “Yes, it came from me.”

Ioan sighed and, seeing nowhere else to put it, set eir mug on the floor by the bed.

“I feel compelled to repeat that I am not at all proud of what I did. This—” He gestured around. “This is my penance. I live my life in solitude in a place that does not know money, does not know the subtle machinations of politics, and should either of those enter, would not care one bit about them. People think of forests as fragile areas of land, and while this is true, they are also giant—truly enormous—singular entities that do not give a single, solitary fuck about you and your schemes, your thoughts, or your emotions. I have stumbled into ravines. I have had dead branches fall on me. I have gotten caught in land-slides, mud-slides, and flash-floods. I have learned the hard way which plants are safe to eat. I have bled on the land.” There was a long pause before he continued, “I hesitate to say that the forest hates me, but it comes perilously close. This is my penance.”

They sat in silence for several long minutes while Ioan digested this and End Waking did whatever it was that the penitent architect of eir entire existence here on the System did. Repent, perhaps, but what did that mean in the face of such enormity?

“Let’s walk,” Ioan finally said.

End Waking visibly brightened and nodded. There was a small unwinding of the previous ritual, where the fire within the stove was banked, the mugs rinsed clean and replaced in their spot, and his cloak donned once more.

They stepped out into the cool, clean air of the onrushing evening, and the skunk led the writer along a narrow trail worn in the undergrowth, explaining, “This is the way that I take to get water when the rain-barrel is empty.”

He walked silently, thick tail held high enough to stay above the plants that lined the path, and while Ioan tried to be as graceful as ey could, ey was still a far sight clumsier and noisier than End Waking.

“Why do you like this place?” ey asked. “If it’s close to hating you, I mean.”

“Do you remember the stanza of your cocladist’s parter?”

Ioan dredged up the Ode that was the basis for all of their names and recited slowly:

That which lives is forever praiseworthy,
for they, knowing not, provide life in death.
Dear the wheat and rye under the stars:
serene; sustained and sustaining.
Dear, also, the tree that was felled
which offers heat and warmth in fire.
What praise we give we give by consuming,
what gifts we give we give in death,
what lives we lead we lead in memory,
and the end of memory lies beneath the roots.

End Waking nodded. He murmured, “I sometimes...no, I often think that I belong to the wrong stanza. This is where I belong. I like her plenty and do not begrudge her the name that she owns, but I wish, sometimes, that I was named And The End Of Memory Lies Beneath The Roots.”

Ioan looked around at the trees, the ferns, the carpets of periwinkle and spots of mint and horsepepper and balm, the epiphytes climbing trunks, the moss on stumps.

“I do not think that the author of the Ode meant literally,” the skunk said, laughing. “But you share my views on it. While it is not strictly possible on the System, I do hope that one day, the end of memory, that memory of all that I did, lies dead beneath the roots.”

A few minutes of silent walking followed as Ioan was guided through a section of, yes, thick roots that threatened to entangle eir feet.

Once they were past that, he continued. “It is important to me that there be something other than politics in the world. I spent so much of my existence shaping the world around me to some grand scheme. Now that I am completely and utterly beholden to the world in turn, it feels relaxing, freeing.”

“May said something like that,” Ioan said, panting. “That there was freedom in staying behind in a world where not staying behind is the default.”

“May Then My Name is the only one of my entire stanza that I like, and certainly the only one that I trust.” Ioan smiled, nodded.

“So many of the Odists are built to manipulate in such complex ways. It is all part of theatre. I am sure that you two have talked about that already. Even May Then My Name is manipulative in her unfailingly kind way.” The skunk stopped and stepped aside to let Ioan come stand beside him before a creek at the bottom of a ravine. “It is a very difficult habit to break. Serene is manipulative: this place is built to be loved in spite of its antipathy towards intrusions. Dear is manipulative: its life is one lived bending the experiences of others to its whims in ways far beyond any those of any prior artist as it plays its games. I am a repentant manipulator.”

“How so?” ey asked.

End Waking laughed. “Are you impressed with my earnestness? I hope that you are, because I strive to be earnest. Are you impressed with the silence with which I move through the landscape? I hope that you are, it is borne from practice. Were you amused by the absent-minded way that I made tea? The way I just puttered around, doing this, then that, as though I kept remembering that I needed first wood, then water, then mugs?”

Ioan tilted eir head. “I suppose. It was endearing.”

“A clever ruse left over from long habit. It is a way to be likeable.”

“Doesn’t everyone want to be likeable, though?”

“Yes. It is a matter of intent, I suppose.” He gave a lopsided grin and bumped his shoulder against Ioan’s. “But I am being a mooney little shit. Thank you for humoring me.”

Ioan laughed. “Of course. It was still a nice conversation, even if it was a stressful topic. And it’s a beautiful place to talk, and a beautiful walk.”

End Waking nodded. “That it is. I never get tired of it. I wonder if it is still penance if one enjoys it.”

“I suppose it can be. It still sounds difficult.”

“It is that, too.” He leaned down and plucked yellow-green berries from a bush, gathering a small pawful to give to Ioan. “Gooseberries for May Then My Name. Did you have any more questions for me?”

Ioan frowned and accepted the handful of berries carefully, slipping them into a pocket of eir vest after unbuttoning it so that ey would not squish them. “Um, one more, though I am conscious of all the warnings I’ve received about not pushing any one Odist hard enough that they’ll resent me.”

The skunk smiled. “I will not resent you, Ioan. I am trying to shake that habit, and I like you. I just may not answer.”

Feeling strangely bashful at the compliment, ey shrugged. “Just that you mentioned your short- and mid-term goals for meddling with finances. What were the long-term goals?”

“Critical mass.”

“Critical mass? What do you mean?”

There was a long silence before, rather than answering, End Waking took Ioan by the elbow and guided em back to the trail. “Let us get you back so that the berries are still fresh for May Then My Name.”

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

Throughout eir relationship with Dear, Codrin had had chances to meet several other furies, both those who had been in the subculture prior to uploading and those who had come to it after. They had come in various shapes and sizes, the two notable examples of which were a room-filling dragon of some sort (or so ey guessed) and a perfectly ordinary house cat. Perfectly ordinary, that is, except for her heavily inflected and curse-laden speech.

Despite not having the chance to meet him yet, ey had also learned much about Debarre from eir conversations with the various members of the Ode clade, as well as eir research into the Council of Eight.

At one point, ey asked Dear how it was that a full quarter of the council that guided the System toward secession was made up of furies, and the fox had laughed.

“Can you not guess why a furry might be an early and ardent adopter of a system that seems purpose built to allow one to assume what form feels most natural?”

Made sense. Ey still looked forward to meeting Debarre that evening.

What had started as a suggestion to get a few voices together for Codrin to interview had then turned into a suggestion for a dinner party, and from there into what promised to be a cozy, wine-fogged house party that might sprout from a group of friends who enjoyed company, but also quiet.

The guests started arriving in the late afternoon, with the first to arrive being Debarre. Dear greeted him with a grin and a hug before the slender mustelid greeted both of the fox’s partners with paw-shakes and half-hugs.

“Wonderful to meet you two. Dear’s been gushing about you for years, and I’m only sorry that it’s taken until now for us to actually meet.”

The weasel was about Dear’s height—which was to say a few inches shorter than Codrin—covered with a svelte coat of chestnut brown fur, minus a cream-colored front, though much of this was covered with a semi-formal outfit of all black.

As ey did whenever meeting another furry, Codrin was surprised by just how casual they could be. For some reason, eir mind seemed primed to view them all as intense as the fox, but Debarre was friendly and relaxed.

Next to arrive was a...well, Codrin could tell that he was human and that he was male, but for some reason, he had a hard time discerning any distinct features about him. He was plain to the point where the eye seemed to simply slide off of him.

He was greeted with an enthusiastic handshake from Dear, who announced, *“This is user11824, one of the unsung heroes of the early System.”*

“I am in no way a hero,” he drawled laconically. “I spent more time keeping you dumbasses in check than anything else.”

“A truly heroic feat, that.”

user11824 rolled his eyes and allowed himself to be guided in to where there was wine and a few trays of snacks. He greeted Debarre warmly—more so, Codrin noticed, than he had Dear, though ey could not guess why.

The final guest was a tall, black gentleman dressed in a plain white tunic and white linen pants, who Dear greeted with a handshake that bordered on delicate. He seemed anxious nearly to the point of panic, so Codrin and Dear’s partner simply bowed to him unobtrusively.

Codrin watched the reactions of the other guests, making note of how they both treated him with some mix of deference and care that ey could not quite place.

Dear’s partner explained as Codrin followed them to the kitchen. “That’s Yared Zerezghi. If the Odists are to thank for Secession sys-side, he’s to thank for it phys-side. He wrote the amendment that formalized Secession among the other phys-side governments.”

Ey stopped halfway through opening a bottle of wine. “Really? I wasn’t expecting a dinner full of politicians.”

They laughed. “I don’t think any of them would call themselves politicians. Dear would call itself an ‘interested party’ or something similarly vague. I think Debarre would call himself a guide, or maybe a dupe. user11824 would just call himself boring. Get used to that word, he uses it a lot.”

“And Yared? He seems, I don’t know, nervous.”

“He was just a DDR junkie. He followed politics as a hobby, but with a single-minded focus that made him attractive to both phys- and sys-side on the debate.” They shrugged and pulled down wine glasses from the cabinet one by one. “I think he’d call himself a pawn. A puppet, maybe. The nervousness stems from being so thoroughly used by both sides and now coming to the house of an Odist, I think, but don’t quote me on that. Take these.”

Codrin frowned, nodded, and accepted two of the glasses to carry out with the wine, while Dear’s partner brought out the other four.

Once the drinks had been poured and passed around, Dear stood and, in the grand style that ey had come to love, declaimed, *“First, we will have a toast, and then we will drink. After that, we will eat, and then—only then, my dear—may you ask your questions.”*

Ey laughed and raised eir glass. “I’m in.”

“The toast, then!” Dear composed itself, standing up straighter and holding its glass aloft. *“To the complete stupidity of anyone unlucky enough to wind up in politics, and the utter hubris of anyone who tries.”*

Debarre laughed and raised his glass, “I’ll drink to that.”

“Then, by all means, let us drink,” the fox said, and did just that.

The dinner was, as always, delicious: a spicy peanut and bell-pepper soup and a few dishes of beef, vegetables, and lentils. Far more food than was strictly necessary, but Codrin suspected that it was more for Yared’s sake than anyone else’s, as he calmed down greatly after having eaten (and having had a few glasses of wine), complimenting the food several times. He even began joining in the conversation towards the end of the meal.

Once plates had been cleared and another bottle of wine opened, user11824 nudged Codrin's arm. "How do you put up with such an insufferably boring life?"

Ey grinned, "Dear provides the entertainment, we just watch."

The fox preened.

"Yeah, but you're a writer, Dear's a whatever-the-fuck, and they're a cook and I guess painter. Boring on, like, a subatomic level."

"Boring is nice, sometimes," Dear's partner said.

"Oh god, you're telling me," user11824 laughed. "I'd never turn it down. Excitement always means that something horrible is happening."

"You know," Debarre said, nodding to the ill-defined man. "I think that's the first time you've ever actually explained that when I've been around. I always just thought you were bitching whenever we went somewhere or had a conversation and you called it boring."

"If we're somewhere exciting or a conversation is actively interesting, it means that someone's fucked up."

Dear laughed. "*It is important to fuck up, my friend. Otherwise, the boredom may become terminal.*"

He rolled his eyes and mumbled, "Fucking boring."

Even Yared was grinning at the exchange. "You know, before I uploaded, I was in contact with a few members of the Council," he said. "And although the work was interesting, I always loved hearing about the ways in which dynamics differed sys-side."

"Oh, I guarantee you, I was just as bored phys-side."

"Yes, but look at you. You've made being boring into an art. You went ahead and made it interesting."

"Bullshit."

Codrin laughed. "No, I'm with Yared on this. You've got a name that sounds like a default 'net username, and you've somehow made it so that I can't seem to describe any one aspect of you. You've got a face, I can say that for sure. Your eyes are brown. Or maybe hazel? It's like if I tried to look more closely to figure out which, though, I'd absolutely die of boredom."

He laughed. "Job well done, I say."

Dear raised its glass, "*To artists who have perfected their craft.*"

Figuring that, since dinner had come to a close, Codrin hazarded the first question. "Yared, you said you were in contact with a few members of the council. Who were you talking with?"

"No one here," he grumbled. "Well, mostly. One of Dear's clade and Jonas. If either of them were invited, I never would've come."

"Me either," Debarre said.

"Same," user11824 shrugged. "Though I'd be surprised if Dear had invited them."

"Quite," the fox said curtly.

Debarre looked sheepishly at the fox, ears splayed. "Sorry, Dear. I know you've distanced yourself from all that."

"They were interesting," user11824 said. "And I can't think of anything worse."

Codrin redirected the conversation. "That aside, then, when did you upload, Yared? Or any of you, I guess."

“I uploaded Secession day. Literally about an hour before Secession itself. I was the last upload before it took effect. An ‘honor’ they called it.”

Codrin nodded, looked to Debarre.

“The same day as Dear,” Debarre said.

“What? Was that planned?”

The weasel laughed. “Oh yes. Michelle and I pooled our money to upload as soon as we could.”

“You were friends before, then?”

Dear nodded. “*We went through a lot together.*”

Codrin was tempted to ask if Debarre had also known the author of the Ode, but knew that that went well beyond dinner-wrecking. Instead, ey looked to user11824.

“I dunno. 2120? It was an exciting time, and I’ve done my best to forget about it.”

“About what percentage of your time on council was exciting?” Debarre asked.

“More than I would’ve liked.”

Dear’s partner laughed. “Why’d you even join, then?”

“Mom was a politician,” he said, shrugging. “I learned all that bullshit from her, and the S-R Bloc gang pressed me into joining.”

“Who were they?” Codrin asked.

“There were three of them on the Council. Part of the initial agreement, since the System was originally hosted somewhere in Russia.” Debarre counted off on his fingers. “Those three, me, user11824, Zeke– uh, Ezekiel, and then Michelle and Jonas.”

“Well, I know the Odists are here on the LVs, as well as you two and Ezekiel. Are Jonas and the Russians here?”

user11824 frowned. “That’s an interesting question.”

“That’s a bad thing, isn’t it?”

“*Jonas is on the LVs, yes. The S-R Bloc trio are no longer on the System.*” Dear swirled its wine in its glass. “*Ask a different question, my dear.*”

Codrin nodded. “Alright. Were any of the rest of you involved in Launch as well as Secession?”

Debarre snorted and shook his head. “No, thank God. I had my fill, and I was glad when the Council dissolved.”

“What happened to dissolve it?”

He looked to Dear, who shrugged. “After a while, it was just Odists and Jonases,” he said down to his wine glass. “Any possible guidance the Council could have provided would have come from them even if we had said it. It had been so thoroughly undermined that we all basically gave up and let the thing end rather than artificially prolonging a puppet government.”

“*We were terrible people, yes.*” Dear’s shoulders slumped. “*I am quite glad that I had not yet been forked for that. If I had had any direct participation in all that happened, I doubt that I would be sitting here with you all.*”

Yared spoke up next. “I didn’t have anything to do with the launch effort. I dropped politics like a bad habit as soon as I saw the direction in which the Council was heading. That said, I couldn’t help but learn all I could about it, read every memo I could, learn about some of the physics of it. I was just done with being an active participant.”

“Why is that?” Codrin asked.

Yared turned his wine glass between his fingertips for a moment, simply thinking. “How much do you know about Christianity?” he asked.

Ey must have looked quite confused at the question, as Dear giggled.

“I promise I’m going somewhere with this,” Yared said, grinning nervously.

“You can actually blame me for this, my dear. I helped him come up with the correlation he is about to use.”

Codrin said, “I mean, I know the basic precepts. Some of the history, that sort of thing.”

“And Judaism?”

“Uh, probably much less. I know that Jesus was a Jew.”

“Okay, that’s enough to at least make this point. You know that Jesus had his apostles and that one of them, at least later on, was Paul, who converted on the road to Damascus and became a fervent believer. He started churches up all over the region.”

Ey nodded. “I know of Paul, yeah.”

“Good. Well, the story goes that there was an argument about whether or not gentiles were allowed in the early Christian church, as Paul argued, or whether they needed to convert to Judaism first.”

“And we know that Paul won that debate.”

Yared nodded. “Yes. As soon as it was decided that anyone could become a Christian without becoming a Jew, Christianity effectively became its own religion, not beholden to the laws of Judaism.”

“I can kind of see where this is going,” Codrin said slowly. “Secession is rather like the point at which the System effectively became its own country.”

“Bear with me. What your partner showed me was an alternate telling of this story. Sometime back in medieval Europe, a Jewish community started circulating an old story called ‘Toledot Yeshu’, which means something like the ancestry or generations of Jesus. Much of it is a retelling of the gospels with Jesus as a trickster magician. But Paul in this story becomes something more interesting, apologies to present company.”

user11824 rolled his eyes and finished his wine.

“In Toledot Yeshu, Paul is actually hinted at being a plant from the Jewish authorities, though it is vague as to who, whose goal was to introduce enough changes to the budding religion to cause it to split away so that it wouldn’t remain a sect of Judaism.”

“Many viewed Jesus as a rabbi,” Dear interjected. “And had that lasted to the point where Judaism headed into a rabbinical tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple, his teachings would have become part of the faith and Judaism would have looked very different.”

Codrin frowned. “Are you suggesting that Secession was engineered to keep the System from remaining a part of society, phys-side?”

There was a tense moment of silence before Yared nodded. “I was the tool of Paul. I was the tool of two Pauls, one in the form of a representative of the phys-side government who used me to steer public opinion toward permitting Secession, and one in the form of True Name and Jonas who wanted the System to be independent for their own reasons. It was not enough to ensure the System’s continued existence for them and it was not enough for the System’s participation to be limited from the phys-side point of view. It needed to become its own entity.”

All eyes were on Yared now, who sighed. “It needed to become its own entity by any means necessary, as soon as possible, and with as much plausible deniability as could be managed.”

“Both sides wanted to preserve a way of life, and so differences were magnified to the point where Secession was inevitable,” Dear said quietly. *“And so here we are, a completely separate entity, and we all thought it was our own idea. It is not some supercessionist nonsense, no matter what True Name and Jonas might have you believe. We all just wanted to live our best lives, and we all were made to believe that this was best solution for that.”*

Codrin finished eir wine and set the glass aside. “So you stayed away from the politics of Launch because you didn’t want to become another tool of Paul.”

Yared nodded.

Debarre said, “We all were, towards the end. Anyone who was a true believer in Secession was a tool for True Name and Jonas, in a way, or at least a potential tool.”

“This was not what I was expecting out of the evening,” Codrin admitted. “I was going to just ask you all why you decided to join the launch and everything.”

user11824 laughed. “New place to be bored, is all.”

“Congrats on finding the interesting stuff,” Dear’s partner said.

There were a few minutes of silence as everyone worked, in their own ways, to digest the information that had been shared.

Finally, Debarre spoke up. “I’m happy that I’m still in touch with Dear and a few other Odists all the same. Michelle is gone, but a lot of the good that was in her is still around. Man, I had no idea how thoroughly she was split, though, that those who are nice can be so nice, and those who aren’t can somehow completely lack all that made her good.”

Dear raised its glass to Debarre for a third toast of the evening. *“To her, to you, and to two hundred and thirty years of friendship.”*

“To lost friends,” Debarre added.

They all watched as Dear and Debarre drank to each other and those who were gone.

True Name — 2124

True Name was early to her meeting, and that, she figured was okay. On a whim, she had picked, the same pub that she had met Jonas in some time back, the one that reminded her of The Crown Pub from years ago, with the flat beer and the uncomfortable booths. She figured that Debarre, of all people, would appreciate this.

She ordered herself one of those beers that she loved to hate, sat down in a corner booth with a commanding view of the entrance, tail flopped over the edge, and waited.

While she waited, she thought about all of the different reasons that Debarre might have asked to meet. There was always the possibility that the weasel had figured out just how deep she and Jonas had gotten in their work, though she suspected that that was not the case. Debarre was smart, yes, but political adroitness was not his strong suit. That had been the root of the worry—shared by him—that he had been let onto the council merely by his proximity to Michelle and connection with the lost, with AwDae.

It could also be that he had further questions about why it was that Michelle had chosen the Ode as a clade scheme, and that perhaps he wanted to discuss why it was that all of the clade seemed so averse to mentioning the author of the poem.

And, as she hoped, he could simply just want to hang out. Spend time together like friends, like they used to.

With that in mind, she focused on composing herself into a state of friendly alertness, so that when the weasel walked into the pub and spotted her in the corner, she would be primed to guide him toward that last possibility, even if he had come expecting the first two.

She watched him step inside, look around, and immediately laugh. After picking up a cider at the bar, he made his way over to the booth she had picked and plopped down across from her.

“Cheeky choice,” he said, grinning.

True Name grinned, shrugged. “What can I say? I was feeling nostalgic for terrible beer.”

“Cheers to that.” He lifted his glass to hers, clinked the rims, and took a long sip. “So, how’ve you been, skunk?”

Small talk was not a guarantee that this was simply a social visit, but given the tone of his voice, she doubted that anything too heavy was on the table.

“Pretty good, actually.” She smiled. “Things are going well on the legislative front, phys-side, which is good. It makes my job easier. Who knows, may even take a vacation.”

“Oh man, a vacation sounds good, though God knows what I’d do. Probably just sit on my tail all day and get fat on the greasiest food I can find.”

“Feeling the workload, then?”

He shrugged. “Not particularly, no. It’s just that I’m starting to wonder just how cut out for politics I really am. I haven’t the faintest idea on how to get people to do things without sounding like I’m bullying them, and I’m not going to put all the work into it that you have. You and yours, I mean.”

“Yeah, it is no small amount of effort,” the skunk said. “But it will be worth it in the end, I think. Plus, I figure that once we secede and the launch goes off successfully, we can probably just sit back and let things run themselves. No one has managed to cause any problems that cannot be solved by them simply having the fistfight that they so desperately crave.”

Debarre laughed and shook his head. “You gotten in any of those lately?”

“Thankfully not,” she said, grinning toothily. “I do not expect to, though.”

They drank a moment in silence, each of them peering around the pub, each thinking their thoughts.

“How are you, Debarre?” True Name finally asked. “Aside from work, I mean. I know that we have not had much of a chance to just sit and talk, recently.”

The weasel doodled lazily on the tabletop with a claw. “For all my bitching, I’m doing alright, actually. That’s why I wanted to meet, though. Just catch up.”

True Name smiled. *Perfect.*

“You know,” he said. “I was thinking about Cicero a few days back, and how, after he hung himself, I thought that the grief would never end. Like, I thought that I had been completely redefined from ‘Debarre the weasel’ to ‘Debarre who grieves’, and that’s just who I was from then on out.”

She hid a sudden surge of emotion behind a sip of her flat beer, nodding. “It was hard. Both of those losses were hard.”

Debarre nodded. After the reference to both losses, he seemed on guard, or ready to jump out of the booth at a moment’s notice.

“I am sorry that I snapped at you a while back,” she said, reaching out to pat at the paw that had been poking absently at the grime on the tabletop. “That is a name that I would like to keep close to my heart and prefer not to say out loud. Also, given the political implications of em defecting to the S-R Bloc, it still feels risky. The spooks *definitely* should not hear it.”

“I get that,” the weasel said. He had relaxed, but not all the way.

“And I think that I understand what you are getting at,” she continued, turning her default smile into something wistful, something sad. “I am as at risk of letting grief define me as anyone, but I am still doing my best to

memorialize rather than languish.”

“That’s good, at least,” he said, finally smiling back to her. “I’ve been a bit worried about that, if I’m honest, but I trust you. The shit you’ve been pulling off lately with the council is honestly impressive, True Name. You and all your clade. I’m doing my best to understand you, sure, but I promise that’s out of awe rather than fear.”

She laughed, raising her glass to him. “Well, thank you. I am glad that Sasha was able to take a step back and get the rest that she so richly deserves, just as I am glad that she left me with my own *raison d’etre*. I like all of the shit that I have been pulling off. It feels good to accomplish stuff.”

“Good! That’s good to hear. It’s sorta what I’d picked up on, too. I’m not sure that I was doubting you before, necessarily, but having watched you these past few weeks, I dunno.” He grinned and finally returned the patting gesture in turn. “I get it, now. You’re not Sasha, that’s for sure, but you’re not *not* her, and I see all of the best things I liked about her in you and the few others in the Ode clade that I’ve met.”

They beamed at each other, all bristled whiskers and perked-up ears.

The conversation wound around for a while longer, with talk of plans and memories, likes and dislikes, gossip and news. True Name allowed herself to earnestly enjoy the afternoon, now that any concerns that she might have had about the meeting had been assuaged. It gave her space to loosen the reigns she had placed on empathy around Jonas, to bask in simpatico with true friends.

Eventually, they made their goodbyes and she left the sim, allowing herself to sober up in the process in order to make the next meeting on her agenda.

For some reason that she couldn’t fathom, Life Breeds Life But Death Must Now Be Chosen had chosen to incarnate himself as a scholarly gentlemen, somewhere between respectable and nerdy. It was a good look, she thought, but what train of thoughts had led him to head down that route from Michelle evaded her.

After a pleasant greeting in the lobby of the library, they wound their way up the spiral staircases to the law section, three levels up. There was no particular reason that they needed to head there, other than the fact that it was liable to be fairly empty—few had reason to read up on phys-side laws, here—and would still be a comfortable place for them to walk and talk.

“So,” Life Breeds Life said, once pleasantries were out of the way and the cone of silence had been set up. “Why did you want to meet today?”

“During discussions with Praiseworthy and Ir Jonas, I started to realize that there were some steps that I might need to take when it comes to the historical view of the clade. There is already the forceful de-emphasizing of AwDae’s name, thanks to Praiseworthy. She thought it a good hook, and it has already proven its utility. None of us want it out in the open, anyway. I guess, given your interest in history and memory, you seemed like the most likely to be interested in helping continue that effort.”

He grinned. “You guess correctly. I have been considering some aspects of that, as it is. Before I go off on that, however, I would like to hear your ideas.”

True Name nodded, lazily brushing fingerpads over the spines of law books and case files. “Firstly, there are some aspects of the clade that I would like to remain within the clade. The Name is an obvious example, but I would also like to keep the impact that we have had within the Council minimized to a level more believable for Michelle’s initially stated goal.”

“To confirm,” he said, looking thoughtful. “You want to ensure that it appears that each of us did a tenth

of the work that she was doing previously and that our voice was only as loud as any other council-member's. Correct?"

She nodded.

"That should be doable."

"It will require a bit of fudging, at least for myself, as to how many instances actually exist for the clade. I believe that it would reflect poorly on us to say that we were initially ten, and then for someone to dig up that I had already forked three or four times less than a year after Michelle's decision."

His laugh was kind. "Oh, good. I am glad that I am not the only one."

"Not by a long shot," True Name said. "It seemed like a good thing to downplay."

"Yes, it is, come to think of it. There are enough concerns about capacity as is. It might seem as though we were already aiming to test that so early on."

"Mmhm. The second thing that I was thinking was more of a question for you."

Life Breeds Life nodded.

"How far in the future do you think we should be considering these changes?"

The answer was immediate. "Centuries."

True Name frowned. "Really?"

"Yes. There are some that we can do right away, but those steps are more in Praiseworthy's court: downplay the number of instances, minimizing our perceived role on the Council, *et cetera*. The aspects that are in my jurisdiction, however, are ones that will take years and decades to form. Histories written after the fact bear the weight of having undergone analysis, the shifting of public knowledge—at least, what they think they know—takes place over months and years. Time is on our side, though, as you well know."

"Of course."

"That is not to say that I will not start right away, of course," he said, laughing.

"Oh, I do not doubt you will." She grinned. "What were your thoughts, though? You mentioned having some changes that you would like addressed as well."

"Yes. I would like to eventually downplay the role of the Council of Eight in history to the point where those sys-side simply think of those who helped out in the early days as founders, dreamers, and idealists."

True Name stopped in the aisle, letting Life Breeds Life step ahead and turn to face her. "You would like the System to forget that there was a council?"

"It is a way to build a mythos and identity, yes. It allows us to use the words 'freedom' and 'secession' and so on in a collective sense, as though these were the decisions of all, rather than a few. It will instill a sense of patriotism, if one could call it such a thing, for being sys-side, which will in turn reduce the connections that many feel to phys-side." He smiled, tugging a book from the shelf at random and flipping through the pages. "This will not happen for this generation. Nor, likely, the next. The goal for future generations, though is to ensure that they feel that the System is a place to live rather than a place where they wound up, or a place that they uploaded to simply because it was convenient or necessary, or even a place that they uploaded to simply for the way life works here, whether it be immortality or the sheer hedonistic joy of it."

The skunk watched the pages flip beneath Life Breeds Life's fingers and thought. To downplay the council would be to minimize the work of years, of almost a decade. It might rankle for the other members, but she

was pleasantly surprised at how comfortable an idea it was. It would gain her and Jonas much needed room to maneuver.

Eventually she nodded, saying, “That makes sense, yes. If the concept of the Council disappears into foggy memories and untrustworthy histories, then any attempts to lead again will seem out of place, too. It will give Jonas and I more latitude to continue working long term.”

“Precisely.” He replaced the book on the shelf. “Down the line, too, I am considering suggesting that we say that we uploaded after Secession. Say in the thirties. Not far enough to be an obvious lie, but enough distance from it to give us the space to act as we must now so that we can act as we will later.”

True Name felt the smile grow on her face, earnest and excited. “Excellent. Excellent thinking. Keep me up to date as you go, though I do not expect the updates to come all that quickly.”

Life Breeds Life laughed. “Of course not. If we are to think long term, we must think in terms of decades to work in centuries. If we are lucky, we must think in terms of centuries to work in millennia. We have plenty of time.”

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

While he didn't quite have the singular ability to immediately make em like him as many of the Odists seemed to, Codrin found emself immensely charmed by No Jonas.

"I got the short end of the stick." He laughed, gesturing Ioan into what appeared to be a living room of an apartment quite similar to the one ey had interviewed True Name in. A little less perfect, a little more lived-in. "Jonas Prime decided to name all of his instances with a syllable, I got stuck with No, of all things. I'm sure there are sillier ones, at least. We Jonas? Oi Jonas? Just call me Jonas so we don't get confused."

Codrin grinned and sat on a reasonably comfy—if slightly ratty—chair across the table from the couch that Jonas flopped down onto. "I suppose there has to be some scheme for dispersionistas to use to keep track of each other that isn't just the default random string of letters and number."

"Of course! You know the Odists. I should've done something like that. Take an old rock song and name myself after each of the lines." He shrugged. "But no, I think they've got a lock on that idea. This one's inventive enough without being too annoying. Usually."

"They do pull it off quite well," ey said, pulling out eir pen and paper. "Though some of their short names work better than others. I like Dear, and I think True Name works well as a...well, name."

"Oh? Did you talk with her?"

"Yes, she was the last Odist I interviewed, actually. At least, here on Castor. The Codrin on Pollux is interviewing others, and my down-tree instance on the System is taking yet another path. This way, we get a good spread while transmission times are short."

"How is Ioan, by the way?" Jonas asked, winking at Codrin. It was a sly enough way to let em know that he'd done his reading.

"Oh, well enough. We've all been stressed in our own ways."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm curious, though, in what ways do your stresses differ?"

Codrin tilted eir head. "Well, Codrin#Pollux recently had a dinner party with some other Secession-era people. Some from the Council of Eight, and a Yared Zerezghi, who was apparently important phys-side."

"Ah!" Jonas said, grinning. "How is Yared? Though I guess you weren't there."

"He sounded alright. He told a story about how he worked with politicians both here and phys-side." *About you and True Name*, Codrin thought to emself.

"We spent a lot of time working together, yeah. Nice guy. Did Codrin#Pollux have much to say about Debarre and user11824?"

Ey froze in the middle of eir note-taking.

Jonas held up his hands. “Just a guess. Ezekiel never leaves his border of Jerusalem, the Russians are gone, and I doubt Dear would’ve let True Name visit.”

“Good guess, then. They all certainly sound interesting. Debarre seems nice, user11824 seems weird. Ey also talked to me about eir interview with Ezekiel, which was apparently quite prophetic.”

Jonas laughed.

“And Ioan is getting hounded by strange historians while also doing eir best to keep up with interviewing the Odists.” Ey hesitated, considering whether to pass on the warning that Ioan had received from End Waking, then decided to plow ahead. “One of them told em to be careful interviewing you, that you’d control the whole thing.”

“Did he now? Well, I suppose I will. It’s one of those second nature things, you know. I apologize if that sounds sinister, I promise it isn’t. I do as Jonases do, just as you do as Bălans do, and that is to speak to the things that interest me. I’m just better than others at ensuring that that happens.”

Codrin nodded as ey wrote. “Alright. Are you okay if I start asking questions, then?”

“Of course, ask away.”

“First of all, and I’m not sure how well this applies to a dispersionista such as yourself, but did you—No Jonas—leave an instance back on the L₅ System?”

“Oh, sure. There didn’t seem to be any reason not to, you know? I figure there’s enough of us Jonases up here to have our fun, and plenty back down on the System to keep things interesting.”

“Did any of you invest entirely in the Launch?”

“Yeah, a few of the A branch did. And before you ask, plenty stayed behind, too. It was all pretty well organized. We figured out who was doing what and then followed the plan.”

“Was there any particular rhyme or reason to it?”

Jonas waved a hand vaguely. “Basically just who was specializing in what.”

“Was there any danger for those who specialized in stuff back on the System coming up here?” ey asked.

“Terminal boredom?” He laughed. “Really, though, there’s stuff that needs doing there and it’s better to be efficient.”

“Do you think they’ll miss the excitement of the journey?”

“We all have our jobs to do, Codrin. System politics aren’t like those back phys-side. There’s no reason to slack off and not do your job just to have some fun when you can send a fork to do the same for you and then enjoy all those memories, right? No3 Jonas is out on a date right now, actually.”

Codrin nodded as ey jotted down the answer. “I suppose it’s the same as with me and Ioan. At least to an extent, the Odists also infected us with their hopeless romanticism.”

“Of course they did. That’s what they’re built for. A life in theatre primes one to keep a tight focus on manipulating emotions. They’re all incredibly focused on stories, aren’t they? All of the interesting ones, at least.”

“There are boring Odists?”

Jonas shrugged. “Michelle and Sasha were boring. Those who stuck around with her or focused on their little art projects, they were pretty boring.”

Codrin frowned.

“Don’t get me wrong, of course. I like them all! Delightful, to the last, but I’m the dangerous politician, remember? All those I find interesting are the ones who tickle all my politician instincts. It wasn’t an insult.”

“Alright,” ey said, quelling a low rise of anger; after all, if Dear was anything, it was one keenly focused on its art projects. “Either way, thanks for answering. The next question I had was about your involvement with both Secession and Launch. Were you involved in both?”

“Oh, more heavily in Launch than Secession. I was forked slightly after Secession, but there was still work to be done. I did a lot of wrangling of notes, data collection, stuff like that. For Launch, I did the same, just front-loaded. It’s some of the boring work that goes into politics, but work that still needs to be done.”

“And in between the two?”

For the first time since the interview, Jonas grinned in earnest. It was writ so plain across his face that the shift cast all of the previous smiles in doubt. “You’ve been getting some interesting answers to your questions, haven’t you, Codrin? All of the Bălan clade has, I mean.”

“Why do you ask?” ey said, digging eir heels to keep from being dragged into a defensive stance.

“You got to that question surprisingly fast.”

Codrin nodded, waiting Jonas out.

“Between Secession and Launch, I was pretty boring. I did some data collection for some of the other work that was going on. Phys-side is always changing, beholden as they are to the whims of Earth and the restrictions of being tied to a single body in a single location.”

“So you followed that? Kept up on the data gathering?”

He nodded. “Yeah, that was my area of focus. Some of the others were digging around sys-side, but life changes much more slowly here without those external factors. We kept on working with the Odists, too, as I’m sure you’ve heard. There was much to do.”

“It certainly sounds like. Did you or your clade guide much beyond Secession and Launch? I know that there was some work done surrounding the finances of uploading in the mid to late 2100s. Were there other areas of activity?”

Jonas leaned back against the couch, toying with a loose thread at one end of it with his fingers. “Here and there, yeah, but I’m not really the person to ask about that. I’m sure one of you will get into it with True Name, or maybe even snag some time with Jonas Prime.”

Codrin nodded and made a note to that effect.

“You have to understand though, Codrin, none of this was like some sort of shadowy conspiracy like you may be thinking. We did what politicians do: we represented our constituents and duked it out—metaphorically, of course—with other politicians.”

“Are we your constituents?” ey asked. The words were out of eir mouth before ey had time to consider it.

Jonas laughed, shaking his head and tugging that fiber on the couch all the looser. “In a way, yes. We may be a separate legal entity, but we don’t work the same. We’re not a government. There are no representatives. We don’t vote. Better to say that the System is our singular constituent. You are our constituents only in the sense that there are still some who have to work on keeping the System going. We’re the ones who organize with the phys-side engineers to keep everything ticking along. We’re the ones who ensure that new uploads are smoothly integrated. We’re the ones who ensure that the System keeps growing.”

“Keeps growing? Can you expand on that?”

“It’s nothing complex. The larger a system—that’s system with a lower-case ‘s’—is, the more stable it is because it tends towards stasis. This applies to political systems, as well. The Western Fed and the S-R Bloc kept their stalemate for God knows how long because they were too large to do anything but, and the only reason they stopped was that they were each subsumed into even larger political entities.”

“So, if I’m understanding you right, keeping the population of the System growing over time—”

“Not just the population,” Jonas interrupted. “The capacity. The complexity.”

“—the more stable it is because it tends toward stasis?”

“You put it more succinctly than I did.”

Codrin waggled eir pen at Jonas. “I’m the writer out of the two of us, you’re the politician. What do you mean by stasis, though?”

“If we were phys-side, conservatism would probably be the word one would reach for, if only because the sheer burden of legislation grows exponentially complex with the size of the small-s system that all of the other aspects of the system start to fall under its branch.

“Here, though, we tend towards stasis. It’s a type of stability that implies a cessation of change. It’s not a bad thing. Boring, maybe, but boring is safe. Still, it’s only a tendency, and it approaches that point asymptotically. The bigger the system, the smoother things run because the rough spots and sharp edges are harder to feel. It needs to be gardened and nourished. That’s all we do.”

After ey caught up taking down eir notes from Jonas’s short speech, Codrin sat in silence for a bit, considering the next path to take on the interview.

“Do you have any other questions?” Jonas asked. “Not to rush you or anything. I’m just wondering if I should fork to get some work done.”

“Just one more, I guess. Not one of my prepared ones, but you’ve given me a lot to think about. How does Launch fit in with your concept of stasis? That feels like an awful big change. It even decreased the population of the System back home.”

Jonas shook his head, chuckling. “I’m not the one to ask that one, Codrin. I’ve specialized way too much into data analysis. You can ask True Name about that, or Jonas Prime. I’m just parroting things we talked about a century and a half ago.”

“I will, I’m sure, but can you give me your best guess? I’d still like to hear it,” ey said.

“Best guess? The System was deemed stable enough to undertake the launch project, and the project was deemed likely to produce a secondary stable society. Beyond that, beats me.”

Codrin nodded and, seeing Jonas begin to rise, stood from eir seat, shaking the offered hand.

Jonas saw em to the door, saying, “I hope I didn’t add to your stress, Mx. Bălan. You’re doing good work, and I hope it’s also enjoyable.”

“It’s certainly intriguing. You’ve given me a lot to think about, and I’m sure Ioan will agree.”

“Of course. If you have any further questions, don’t hesitate to ask.” He smiled to Codrin, and the smile was the least earnest ey had seen yet. “And I look forward to seeing what you come up with.”

It wasn’t until Codrin was back at the house on the prairie, back with eir family, back where ey was comfortable enough to work on transcribing eir notes, that ey came across the phrase that had left em so wrong-footed

during the interview.

Ey frowned, stood up, and paced around eir office for a few minutes, stopping at the end of each circuit to stare out at the prairie beyond the windows. Ey was starting to feel as though there were coils of some sort wrapping around em. Thick, fleshy things that squeezed around eir middle, bound eir hands, held em silent. They did not kill em, did not force em to move, to watch. They did not force em do do anything. They just held em there, letting em know that, at all times, they were present.

So ey sat at eir desk and wrote a footnote for eir transcript that ey'd send back to Ioan and May Then My Name.

Check my work, Ioan. As you have read, Jonas asked what each of our stressors were, and I mentioned a sentence or two about each of us and what we'd been doing that had been keeping us busy. You'll notice that, for you, when talking about End Waking, I said, "One of them told em to be careful interviewing you, that you'd control the whole thing."

His reply: "Did he now?"

I don't think I messed up the transcription, and you know as well as anyone that our memories are all there for our perusal. I've thought and thought and thought on it. I shouldn't doubt, and yet I do, so check my work.

I said "one of them", and Jonas said "did he now". I asked Dear, and it said that there were relatively few male Odists in the clade ("*one fewer, now*").

Did you tell anyone that you were interviewing End Waking other than May Then My Name? I don't mean to cast doubt on either of you. I think you feel just as bound up in this as I do, but I need some clarification as to how Jonas knew that you had interviewed one of those relative few. I *need* that clarity. I think we're beyond wants, now.

True Name — 2124

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream walked.

She walked from sim to sim, finding intricate ways to build up a sign, a sigil from them. Finding ways for disparate streets to connect, finding alleyways to open into deer paths, finding breathlessly exposed parks that, when a corner was turned around a tree or perhaps a low hill, might open out again into the lobbies of libraries, the shelves of which could become a hedge maze.

Perhaps there was more to the sims that she walked, but she did not notice. As soon as she felt herself drawn to any one particular place, any one particular feature of any one particular sim, as soon as she began to feel anchored, she left. All of the things that people—her people—built passed beneath her feet, passed before her eyes.

Some part of her was overflowing in some indefinable way, and so she walked.

And all the time, her thoughts soared above her, watching her path, the steps she took. They watched all of her left turns. They viewed the sigil that her walking drew and imbued in it new meaning.

A thought: *What dire emotional need caused one to build an office building in a place of no corporations?*

She stepped into that office building from the dry bed of a river, walked up two flights of stairs, and into a floor of empty cubicles. She turned at random, moving through the rows, and sat down at one of the desks and thought a while.

A thought: *Why is the first instinct upon creating a wholly blank medium such as this to build in the nature we remember?*

She stepped from the cubicle and turned left, out into a rolling, open field, dotted throughout with dandelions. She bent down and picked one, twirling it between finger and thumb, then tucking it behind her ear where the yellow could shine bright amidst the black fur there.

She could almost feel em, sometimes, as part of the very fabric of existence within the System. Almost. A dream of a dream of her friend, always just out of reach.

A thought: *Why do we drag our memories around with us like luggage?*

So, she walked, and as she walked, she strove to draw her thoughts in the other direction. She strove to draw them forward, away from the past, so that she could consider the future.

What would this place look like after seceding from the rest of the world? What would a land—if such could be said of the System—of those who had already seceded from the rest of humanity look like? How many would notice and rejoice? How many would notice and hate every second of it? How many would notice and not care,

and how many would not even know that it had happened? That it had even been on the table?

Would they build differently? Perhaps they would stop bringing along with them the structures of their pasts. Perhaps there would be fewer office buildings and more cabins in the woods. More idyllic houses. More mountain landscapes and main streets of cute towns with hole-in-the-wall restaurants that no one knew about and yet which served the best curry, the best hot dog, the best cupcakes that one could possibly imagine.

Would they live differently, love differently? Perhaps they would still pair up as always they had. Maybe, when they picked up feelings for someone, they would fork to have a separate relationship with them as well. Maybe collectives of families would live together as they always had, finding comfort as much in each other as in their chosen relatives. Maybe a taboo would grow around having a relationship with oneself, of forked instances living together and loving each other. Would that be narcissism forever, or only before individuation? Would it be incest? Masturbation? She did not know, she did not know.

Would they choose life? Choose death? Would they pray?

She knew that it would happen, of course. Secession. She shared none of Yared's dread, his pessimism. This was fine. She was the politician, he was the puppet. She saw the big picture laid out before her in her sign, her sigil. He would handle the pessimism, her the optimism.

No, not optimism; surety.

The bill would pass, the System would secede, the station launch would go off without a hitch. The bill could not but pass, the System was bound to secede, and the station launch was as safe as could be.

Yared would upload, or he would not.

The DDR would care, or it would not.

Earth would dream of them, up there on the System, or it would not.

The only thing, the only important thing, was to ensure continuity. A continuity borne of safety, of stability, and of an intense desire not to let the System come to harm. It had to be desired, prized, cherished even by all those who stayed behind.

As she ruminated on this, the need to be desired as a form of stability, a memory bubbled up to the surface, spun around once, twice, and then came into focus.

A memory: *"Two thirds of our power structure still thinks child restrictions are a good enough idea that those laws have bled into Russia, too."*

Who had said that? One of the three, doubtless. They were so interchangeable.

She stepped into her apartment from wherever her thoughts had taken her, and she forked off a new instance, relying on that subtle trick that Jonas had taught her, letting her reputation stay close to where it had been.

"I suppose that makes me Do I Know God After The End Waking."

She nodded.

"Someone had to wind up with the name with a typo in it, alas." The other skunk smirked.

"Everyone gets something, yes," True Name said, plucking the duplicated dandelion from behind End Waking's ear and adding it to the one already behind hers. Two suns amidst black fur. "Let us start with some differences. I do not want you looking too much like me, so that we can work separately."

End Waking nodded, thought for a moment, and then forked several times in quick succession to lead to

greater and greater differences, until a new Odist stood before her, unique in so many ways. Masculine, kind-faced, dressed in a business-casual outfit that retained both the competency and friendliness that Praiseworthy had helped her attain.

“If you think this is acceptable, we can start strategizing.”

True Name nodded, and the two skunks walked to her office.

“So, if we are to follow the timescale that Life Breeds Life suggests, what are some good milestones that we can set for ourselves?”

“I was thinking that it would be nice to have uploading incentivized within fifty years. That would mean that by the hundredth anniversary of Secession, we would primarily be seeing uploads who knew nothing but that idea.”

End Waking nodded. “Probably best to begin as early as possible, yes, at least in terms of planning. I think that ensuring that the failure rate is below one percent within ten years would be good first step, followed by reducing the cost of upload by half ten years after, then half again in another decade. That gives us twenty years to work with when it comes to getting to a point of incentivization.”

“Alright, that sounds good. I will leave you to it, for the most part. I do not expect that there will be any news for another few years.”

The other skunk bowed. “Of course.”

“And, End Waking, a favor.” When he nodded, she continued, “There are inquisitive minds. Always are. We already have Life Breeds Life helping on that front, but while you were talking through the timeline, I realized that it would be best if this conversation, these plans, did not start, as far as anyone but you and me are concerned, until perhaps the 2150s.”

He tilted his head. “How come?”

True Name smiled faintly. “I always find it surprising just how quickly one can deviate from one’s down-tree instance after all that forking.”

“Of course. You have been thinking your thoughts while I have my own.”

“Yes. Well, we are quickly getting to the point where our efforts both sys- and phys-side happening all at once are reaching levels that might be considered uncomfortable in retrospect. Life Breeds Life is working on this already. If we can minimize our visible impact, then we should do so. Same date for the Council, same date for Jonas, same date for other Odists.”

“Mm, probably a good idea. I forked in 2143, then.”

“2143. Got it.” True Name smiled. “Thank you for this. I think it will work out quite well for us in the end.”

Douglas Hadje — 2325

May Then My Name Die With Me: Douglas

May Then My Name: Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas Douglas

May Then My Name: Mister Douglas Hadje, Master of Spaceflight and Doctor of whatever the hell your degree is in, call on line one.

May Then My Name: Oh, whatever. Just let me know when you get this!

It took a moment for Douglas to compose himself when he returned to his terminal after yet another evening of sitting in the Pollux control tower, now largely remade into an observation bubble despite the increased gravity. It was quiet, it was dark, it was calm, and there was nothing to see except the same Earth-rise-moon-rise cycle every thirty seconds or so.

So, when he returned back to his room to a series of messages that felt loud, bright, raucous, it took a moment for his mind to adjust.

Douglas Hadje: My doctorate is also in space flight. I did my thesis on booster stress in reusable launch vehicles.

Douglas: Now, how may I help you?

May Then My Name: That is just *fantastically* boring, my dear.

Douglas: Oh, it was boring as hell. I'll send it to you sometime.

May Then My Name: If you would like.

May Then My Name: I will not read it.

May Then My Name: Also, hi. Good evening. Have you had a good day?

Douglas: That was also boring as hell. I keep going for walks or trying to read or whatever, but there's only so much here to keep myself interested when I based most of my life on my job.

May Then My Name: That does not sound healthy.

Douglas: Can confirm: not healthy.

May Then My Name: Well, fucking upload already.

May Then My Name: We can go out for drinks and build up your tolerance again, or you can go walk some place that has a horizon. Ioan took me on a hike a while back, we can take you there.

Douglas: Before long. A few months, probably, so that I can finish things up here.

May Then My Name: !!!

May Then My Name: Good! Excellent! I will look forward to the day.

Douglas: I'll keep you apprised, then. Where's Ioan today?

May Then My Name: Ey is here, but in heads-down mode. It can get frustrating sometimes, because when ey gets in that mindset, ey will not be able to fork effectively. If ey tries, the fork will just spend all of eir time whining about not being at work.

Douglas: Like me, huh?

May Then My Name: You said it, not me.

May Then My Name: Anyway, I messaged you to ask you about something that you have mentioned a few times so far. Do you have it in you to answer some questions?

Douglas: Sure, why not. My first meeting is in the afternoon, tomorrow, and it's just a weekly safety briefing. Talk my ear off, I could use the distraction.

May Then My Name: Yes, you certainly could.

May Then My Name: You mentioned that there had been sabotage attempts. We were surprised when we heard that initially, but it had been in the middle of some other conversations that we did not want to derail, so we have been holding onto it until a time when there was not much else going on. Can you tell me about those?

Douglas: Oh, sure.

Douglas: There were two big ones and one small one. You heard the small one, which was that tech knocking me off the edge of the torus. The other techs out there with us tackled him and tied him up in his own tether to bring him back into the station. One of them suggested just ripping off his suit then and there, but that was a reaction out of anger, and it's hard to stay angry out in space when you're all terrified of dying anyway, so they did the right thing.

Douglas: He was brought inside, taped to a chair (there used to be a security station with a cell for when the torus was a hotel, but it was repurposed at some point), and then confined to quarters until the next shuttle could come pick him up.

May Then My Name: How did he even get in there to begin with?

Douglas: As far as I could tell, just lying really well, or perhaps it really was just a spur of the moment act as he argued in court. It was his second EVA, so there wasn't exactly much time to suss out if there was anything up with him.

Douglas: It's weird, though. You have to have an MSf to even do EVAs here, and even just getting into that program, not to mention getting a job out here, requires a lot of psychological testing and the like. He must have been pretty good at lying.

May Then My Name: You said that he was sent back to Earth and charged. What were the charges? How did that work?

Douglas: I don't know too much about it, honestly. I know he was charged with attempted murder and there was a whole flurry of articles about how the case was groundbreaking as the first attempted murder in the vacuum of space. He was convicted, then probably sentenced to jail.

May Then My Name: What does jail look like?

Douglas: Depends on where you are and what you did. I think for something like attempted murder, he was just put in sim for a while, unable to back out.

May Then My Name: Douglas, that is a nightmare.

Douglas: It's not like he's just put in a sim of a jail cell to rot or anything. As far as I know, it's just a tightly regimented day, most of it in a solitary sim, the rest in a shared sim with other prisoners.

May Then My Name: Not able to back out, though. Even the thought of that makes me feel ill.

Douglas: Why? Aren't you kind of in that state right now?

May Then My Name: When you upload, you will see how the comparison fails. But it is terrifying because I am old enough to remember the lost.

Douglas: That virus or whatever that was getting people stuck in the 'net? Didn't that hit Michelle?

May Then My Name: Yes. Remember when I talked about how 80% her days were bad days? That is why.

Douglas: Oh, shit. Yeah, I can see how that'd be terrifying, then.

May Then My Name: On to brighter subjects, then. You mentioned bigger sabotage attempts.

Douglas: Much brighter.

Douglas: Well, one of them was here station-side, and one was back planet-side. The one up here was when one of the mechanics (who don't need an MSf) had smuggled up some type of plastic explosive in their luggage. I think it was actually the fabric lining of the case, something where thin strands of explosive were coated in plastic and woven just like one normally would. It was powerful enough and its target small enough, that even just that suitcase lining would have been enough to do the trick.

Douglas: They tore out the lining, rolled it into a rope, and wrapped it around a portion of the launch strut extrusion factory. It was about six years back, and the arms were already about 2800km long, so if the explosion had wound up actually causing enough damage, the stress of the arm would have torn the station apart, and likely taken the System with it.

May Then My Name: WHAT

May Then My Name: That seems like an awfully important thing to not know as the sys-side launch director, Douglas.

Douglas: It was all hushed up by security (brought back up after my little incident on EVA). I wasn't allowed to tell you after the NDA. Sorry, May Then My Name.

May Then My Name: Did they give you a reason for keeping it from us?

Douglas: They said it had political ramifications because of the articles of secession. "No other governmental entity shall declare war on or attempt to destroy the System."

May Then My Name: They worried it might be considered it an act of war?

Douglas: I guess so. If it was an act of war, then the System could retaliate. I'm sure they told someone over there who needed to know

May Then My Name: Then why are you telling me now?

Douglas: Well, our conversations are off the record, now. Besides, if I'm going to upload soon, it's also relevant to me in the same way it is to you.

May Then My Name: It is, at that. How were they caught?

Douglas: That's the weird thing. They turned themselves in. The cloth bomb had been in place for about a month, I guess, and they grew a conscience in that time, so they defused the bomb, brought security over, admitted to what they'd done, and let themselves be sent back planet-side.

Douglas: Which actually brings me to the other big sabotage attempt. Apparently, they were working with a collective who were really unhappy with the launch overall, so there was also a suicide bombing at a launch facility during a tour which was intended to take out the control room before it could be used for the next supply run.

Douglas: Cloth bomber struck a deal with the government for a lighter sentence (probably like my attacker received) for acting as an informant and ratting out the organization before the rest of the planned bombings could take place.

May Then My Name: Less immediately threatening to us, but still, that is terrible. Do you know why this collective (is this like an interest group, or is there a deeper meaning?) felt so strongly against Launch?

Douglas: Yes, a collective is a group of people who have decided to lose as much of their unique identity as they can to live as singular facets of a shared identity.

May Then My Name: Ioan will be fascinated to hear. Why is that?

Douglas: It actually started around a fictionalized account of forking. They sometimes called themselves clades, but the name never stuck in the wider world. It's kind of a weird love/hate relationship with the System that they have. They love it enough to try and emulate it in their social groups, but they also loathe the idea of uploading and a lot of other things that go along with the System.

Douglas: de, on the launch commission, is a member of a much more liberal collective. Still will never upload, but really seems to take pride in their job.

Douglas: So I think it was some of that hatred that was at play. They hated the lack of control that is inherent in the System. They hated all that went into Secession, how it made the System a

political entity. They hated Launch because, by phys-side collaborating with sys-side, it was a sign that we were equals. They felt that the System has been interfering with phys-side politics ever since Secession. They hated the System for lots of reasons.

May Then My Name: Do a lot of people phys-side think that the System is interfering with politics?

Douglas: Not really, no. We learned in grad school that there was a kerfuffle around it when uploading was incentivized that essentially no one remembers except for boring people like me who had to study it. There have been a few gripes here and there as other large political changes happened, like when governments merged or recessions hit. When things like that happen, I think a lot of people instinctively look for a boogeyman to pin it on, and the System is pretty convenient because it's not like you all can fight back, so you all turn into shadowy figures behind the politicians.

May Then My Name: Oh, that bit is definitely true.

Douglas: Yeah, figured as much. You all up there steeping your fingers and talking in hushed tones about how you're going to do everything from crash the economy to hire Michelle Hadje's distant ancestor specifically to work on your nefarious plot.

May Then My Name: Yep, got it in one.

May Then My Name: I am glad that none of these were successful on the scale that they had hoped. We do not know what happens to us if the System breaks. There have been a few instances of discontinuity over the centuries, but we don't see them except that systime jumps ahead. Were the System to explode in some fiery spectacle, we would just stop. Probably. Maybe.

May Then My Name: Theologians and mystics have been disappointed to find no answers in what comes after death when one quits, so we are as in the dark as you are.

Douglas: Maybe a bit less, because at least one possibility of what comes after death for us is living sys-side.

May Then My Name: This is true! We are ghosts up here, haunting silicon and whatever else makes up the physical elements of the System these days.

Douglas: You may as well be ghosts, as far as people think planet-side. There have been various groups casting uploads in the light of ancestor worship in some places. I have no idea how those who are worshipped sys-side feel about being asked for courage or a healthy crop or whatever.

May Then My Name: I would be honored, personally. I have no one to haunt after two centuries but you. I am afraid that you are stuck with me.

May Then My Name: All I can do is bother you on a terminal, though, so I suppose that I am not that bad of a ghost.

Douglas: You're a pretty good ghost, I'd say. I'm looking forward to meeting you in person some day.

May Then My Name: I will beg you once more: please come join us soon. I know you said you would, but if you do not live up to that promise, so help me God, I will move into your implants and never let you sleep again.

Douglas: Don't worry! I promise. You'll see me within the year. I've already put in word with both the launch commission and the clinic here, and they're fine having me stick around station-side until I can upload, so it's already (loosely) scheduled.

May Then My Name: !!!

May Then My Name: I am eager to meet you, Douglas Hadje, Master of Spaceflight and Doctor of Other Boring Shit!

Douglas: Goes both ways, May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade.

May Then My Name: Excellent, excellent.

May Then My Name: Now, I should head off. Ioan is coming up for air from eir writing, so I am going to go chase em around the house, frothing like I am rabid.

Douglas: Oh! Time for a quick question?

May Then My Name: If you hurry, yes. I am already frothing at the mouth.

Douglas: Are you and Ioan in a relationship? I'm sorry if it's impertinent, feel free not to answer.

May Then My Name: It is not impertinent, but there is no easy answer. If ey asks if I would like that, I will say yes. If ey does not, I will still be content to be eir friend.

May Then My Name: And if ey does not know one way or another, as I suspect, I will ensure that ey makes the decision on eir own terms.

Douglas: You won't ask em yourself?

May Then My Name: No. It is quite important that ey ask me, and not the other way around.

Douglas: Why, though?

May Then My Name: Two reasons. One: the one with the greater restrictions in a relationship wins out, and I will say yes to almost anything and anyone. Ey would not. It is thus on em to make the choice. Two: if ey really does not know, I will gain an absolutely enormous amount of satisfaction out of teasing em afterwards.

Douglas: Of course you would.

May Then My Name: I am pleased that you have come to understand me so well.

May Then My Name: Now, I am getting froth everywhere, so I will have to run.

Douglas: Alright! Have fun, say hi for me, don't stay up too late.

May Then My Name: Lame.

May Then My Name: Bye!

Douglas pushed back from his terminal and stretched his arms up toward the ceiling, leaning back in his chair.

Every time he talked with Ioan and May Then My Name, he was once again faced with the realization that he had hardly needed Ioan to convince him at all. The two were the first people he could call friends that he'd had since school. He liked them immensely. Beyond that, though, something about May Then My Name seemed as though she was simply built to be liked, as though whenever he talked with her, he had no choice *but* to like her.

It wasn't quite charisma, as, whenever he tried the word on for May Then My Name, it carried far too many implications of manipulation, and the last thing he could picture her doing was being manipulative.

She was weird, yes. Goofy, even. But there was nothing about her that was calculating or cold. Perhaps that's what she'd meant about it needing to be Ioan's choice. Perhaps she knew just how easy it would be for her to manipulate em into a relationship.

One more walk around the station, he thought. Then I'll get to bed. January can't come soon enough.

Yared Zerezghi — 2124

Yared was not sure how he felt that the politicians—true politicians, at least—had been right. Demma had said so, Jonas and True Name had said so, and yet something about the whole process felt slippery to him. It was a feeling beyond even that, for while that implied that it was simply politics as usual, this was something more visceral. It was slimy, like the algae that had clung to his skin after he'd gone swimming in a small pond during a visit west: something that made him, specifically, feel disgusting.

Because they *had* been right, hadn't they? They'd been right that there were strings to be pulled. They'd been right that politics was a game that was played by the bigger players, that the bigger players used the smaller ones as pawns, that the goal was some non-zero-sum game of pushing the populace around like a fungible good.

He had been the tool, and his belief had been his utility. He was the knight moving three spaces up, one space over to outwit some other politician's bishop.

They'd been right, both Demma and the sys-side pair, because support for secession had swung his way with surprising rapidity, and there had suddenly been other strident voices that had once been on the other side of the equation agreeing with him, arguing alongside him for the right of the System to become a political entity of its own.

There had been a logical procession to their thought process within their posts. It wasn't some sudden coin-flip, but over the course of the week, debates on the DDR-adjacent channels, where it didn't cost credits to post, suddenly swelled, and he'd seen the light dawning in their eyes, such as they were, as they realized that the System's political landscape fundamentally differed from that phys-side—that it couldn't but differ—given the root functionality of the populace, of the reality that sims were the only way to live. It was a true anarchy. There was no ruling class because of what utility would there be for a ruling class when one could just split off and create one's own sim or set of sims, such that any attempt to rule from some central sim could simply be ignored as though it had never happened?

True Name and Jonas, now openly named, had been integral in helping convince him originally, and their words had played an enormous role through him to convince others. "There are sims in which a strict monarchy rules," True Name had said. "There are places governed by a theocracy. The Catholic church remains, albeit in reduced form without a bishopric, relying solely on adherents phys-side uploading all papal pronouncements, a near exact copy of the Vatican, where the phys-side pope and cardinals are represented by scrolling fields of text. Yet what influence could they hold on any other sim? What possible sway could they hold over anyone who did not subscribe anyway?"

And so he dutifully passed these on under the tutelage of Jonas and True Name and Demma, and they, too, influenced the voices on the DDR.

But for the voices to swing so quickly bespoke influence beyond just him. It showed that he was not the only pawn, that many of these other strident voices that quickly changed their voices were under the control of the big players phys-side, and perhaps sys-side as well; after all, why wouldn't True Name and Jonas be talking to other DDR junkies like himself?

He was too afraid of them now to ask.

All he could do was sit by and watch, and pray that the secession amendment wasn't altered to include some equally slimy additions that would limit the total freedom granted by the secession.

Even there, he was lucky. The clauses about declaring war had been strengthened, the clauses about asylum seekers hardened with wording surrounding the impossibility of extradition and the acknowledgement that any such seeker would no longer have a tangible effect phys-side. In fact, the only provision that had felt sour was one to cut off communication with the System from suspected terrorist cells, but it had done little to dampen the feeling of success from the overall amendment, the overall referendum.

The only issue, in fact, was a personal one. All of these changes of the amendment had been made under his name. Others had convinced him to add them. Even when the sour change had been proposed, Demma had strongly suggested that it be included.

The end result was that his name was inextricably linked with the amendment. He was the sole author, meaning that those who hated it—indeed, those who hated the entire referendum—began to hate him, too. They hated Yared Zerezghi specifically.

And they hated with a passion.

His name had become a curse in their circles. He wasn't just the man who had introduced the amendment, he was the man who poisoned any hope of control over the System, that very System that they had declared a danger or a source of labor or a host to terrorism. He, Yared Zerezghi, was personally responsible for all that was wrong with the System.

When he mentioned how much he felt like a scapegoat to Demma and the pair sys-side, both had reassured him that that fervor would soon die down, and both had assured him that, as their names were also inextricably linked with the bill, they were feeling some of the same heat.

He wasn't sure that he believed them, though. Politics phys-side at the governmental level did not have the same tang of personal hatred. At best, Councilor Demma might have some sort of parasocial relationship with his supporters and detractors, but at that point, he was still just a figurehead, an abstract concept of a person, and that concept was a stand-in for a power so far beyond the quotidian masses that it hardly mattered. At best, True Name and Jonas were as intricately linked to the very same anarchy that ruled the rest of the System. Their role—indeed the role of the entire Council of Eight—was one of guiding the System in the form of its core functionality, interfacing with phys-side on behalf of those sys-side, rather than interfacing solely with those sys-side.

And so Yared kept taking his walks, kept eating spicy food and getting drunk on tej, anything to shed what he could of that slippery, slimy feeling that still clung to him whenever he thought too hard about his position in all of this.

He had become a hero and a villain both for this, though, and there was no shaking that off.

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream: What can we do to soothe your worries, Yared, except tell you that your vision is becoming reality?

Yared Zerezghi: I don't know, really. Probably nothing. There's nothing really to be done when no one else will put their name on the amendment. I feel like it might be an intentional move by Demma and others to ensure that there is someone they can put the blame on who has an actual human face.

Ar Jonas: That may well be true, actually. If I were still working phys-side and needed to influence a referendum from the DDR, I'd probably do the same.

Yared: Is there anything I can do about it?

Jonas: Nope! You're stuck with it, my friend, and for that I'm sorry. The best you can hope is that everyone will forget about you, and the best you can do to ensure that is to become a loud voice on other issues, hopefully ones that a lot of people agree with, so that you simply become "the loud voice" instead of "the secession guy". This is turning into the largest issue the DDR has ever voted on, though, so it's going to take a lot of that hollering to drown your voice out.

True Name: And even then, because your name is on it, that is likely what you will go down in the history books for.

Yared: Uuugh. I've been thinking about that, too. It makes the concept of dying terrifying. As long as I'm alive, I at least have some hope of trying to become a less divisive figure.

True Name: You could upload. There is no death here, after all.

Yared: I'm seriously considering it, after this. At least that way, they'll know that I really meant what I said, and then I'll become someone they don't have to worry about.

Jonas: And you can help us keep fighting the good fight by whispering in everyone's ears.

Yared: That's *precisely* why I want out, Jonas, and you know it. If feeling like some sneaky little political figure is what's making me feel bad, why on Earth would I keep doing that?

True Name: Jonas is an asshole, do not listen to him.

Jonas: I am, yeah, and I'll have you know that True Name just punched me in the shoulder, if that's any consolation.

Yared: Do it again, and maybe I'll feel better.

Jonas: Confirmed, she did it again.

Yared: Ahhh, such relief!

True Name: In all seriousness, Yared, do think more about uploading. We would welcome you here, and I am sure that, should anyone step down from the council (the Russians might when there is no need for their representation), you would be welcome to take their place. That would not be slimy politicking, just helping the System out.

Yared: You two are on the Council, how would that not mean slimy politicking?

True Name: I will let the insinuation that I am in any way a politician slide this time, but you are on thin fucking ice, buddy.

Jonas: True Name's an asshole, don't listen to her.

Jonas: Third punch to the shoulder confirmed.

Jonas: But really, no need to worry. This is 1000% the slimiest politicking that the Council has ever done. Hell, most of the rest of the council doesn't know or care how True Name and I have been handling this. Most of the rest has been, like... "how do we keep forking from getting out of hand?" or "let's set systime to start when the reputation market begins" or "what if we could create telepathy". It's bullshit

Jonas: Fun bullshit, but it's bullshit. You'd like it. It's more like volunteering to be a crossing guard than anything.

Yared: I might, at that, yeah. I'll think about it.

True Name: Please do, we would welcome you.

Jonas: Lighter topic: what most excites you about the prospect of uploading? Beyond getting away from ignominy and beholding True Name's indescribably beautiful countenance, I mean.

Yared: Isn't she a skunk-person?

True Name: An indescribably beautiful skunk-person, thank you very much.

Yared: Uh, I don't know. Honestly probably meeting you two in person is the biggest draw. You seem really fun to be around.

Yared: Hopefully this isn't insensitive, but are you two a couple?

True Name: God no.

True Name: Jonas may be pretty, but he drives me up the wall. I would murder him in his sleep two nights in.

Jonas: If I didn't get to you, first. We're good friends, but not on that level.

Yared: Okay. Thanks for clearing that up. Was just wondering.

Yared: Wait, *can* you murder other people?

True Name: Yes. Some enterprising individual found a way to disrupt the concept of self so quickly and so thoroughly that one basically disintegrates and, just like an avatar crash on the 'net, all you are left with is a core dump, and no one has figured out how to deal with those in a place that is a consensual dream.

Yared: Seriously???

Yared: What the fuck.

Yared: How often does that happen?

Yared: Fucking terrifying.

True Name: Oh, not often at all! Three times that we know of. It is pretty hard to actually make the virus, as it does require tailoring to the specific individual, though it is equally doubtless that same enterprising individual is working on a way to make it universal. If, that is, they have not already been murdered, themselves.

Jonas: And before you ask, no, there's no way to prosecute them, even if we found them. They could just fork and keep on living somewhere else, changing themselves to look like someone else.

Yared: Ugh.

Yared: I'll just have to trust you, I guess.

True Name: Do you not?

Yared: Slimy politician, remember?

True Name: There is a punch on the shoulder waiting for you as soon as you upload, my friend.

Jonas: Tiny little skunk fists. Don't worry, they don't hurt.

Jonas: OW

Jonas: Unless she punches you in the kidney.

Yared: Hahaha. I stand by my assessment that you two sound fun to hang out with.

Yared: Skunk, though. You can change how you look that drastically up there?

True Name: In theory. I know of few who have actually managed to do so, though that is rapidly changing with forking.

True Name: I am a special case due to some psychological/neurological damage from getting lost. Those up here who are furies and look it are those who so strongly identified with their furry selves on the 'net that they began to think of their human selves as the avatars and their furry selves as the real versions.

True Name: The reason I got around it is that Michelle's neurological issues meant that she oscillated between her human self and furry self. That also meant that I (and each of her forks) lack the effects of that damage.

True Name: Or most of it, at least. You have mentioned the speech patterns before.

Yared: Well, I'm happy for you, even if that makes me sad for Michelle.

True Name: She is spending her retirement relaxing, so there is little need to feel sorry.

Jonas: Is there anything else you're looking forward to, Yared?

Yared: I suppose just getting away from the DDR. I don't think I could manage to just drop it out here, as there's not really anything else I'm interested in enough to replace it.

Yared: Up there, though, I'd be forced to do something else, and that'd really keep me from getting so anxious about everything.

Jonas: Makes sense. What sorts of things do you think you'd go for?

Yared: I like food, I guess. I like walking. When I'm not really around here, I'm sleeping, eating, or walking. I've never had the chance to really go for a hike anywhere that isn't still in Ethiopia, but I imagine there's places like the Alps or Himalayas that are delightfully cool.

True Name: There are, yes. Plenty.

Jonas: A lot of the earliest sims were based around nature. It's as if people immediately wanted to reach for places that they loved phys-side.

True Name: Or to counteract the thought that they now live in a computer.

Jonas: True Name, naturally, takes the pessimistic approach.

Yared: To turn it around, what do you both like best up there?

Jonas: Oh shit. You can't do this to me. I'm not ready!

True Name: He loves that he can still be a slimy politician without any of the actual hard work.

Jonas: The problem is, you're not wrong. I loved what I did phys-side, and I have to admit that I still love it here.

Jonas: I also really like coffee. Coffee and food. I get to have all of those that I want without worrying.

Jonas: Oh! And alcohol. No liver disease, and also you can choose when to sober up.

Yared: Oh damn, that's awesome. I like wine well enough, but being drunk is mostly escapism. If I could find that fun balance with friends, that'd be nice.

Jonas: You can't phys-side?

Yared: If I had any local friends, maybe.

True Name: Ouch. Well, you have friends up here, and we would gladly take you to bars good and bad.

True Name: As for me, I love all of the variety in sims and people. When I am not working or sleeping, I will walk the public sims, jumping from one to another when I have had my fill of them.

Yared: That sounds nice. I've only traveled a few times. In Ethiopia, there's different climates and such, but only so much.

True Name: I will take you walking with me, then.

Jonas: And I'll be a slimy politician with you!

Yared: Ugh, you're the worst.

Yared: Anyway, thanks for letting me vent and lifting my spirits.

Yared: I needed it.

Jonas: Of course, Yared.

True Name: And please remember, uploading is always an option. We would welcome you with open arms.

True Name: I know that you will come join us, anyway, sooner or later.

Ioan Bălan — 2325

Before eir scheduled interview, Ioan took a walk around that abandoned lake, this time by emself. Ey needed a moment to think, and that moment, though through no fault of hers, needed to be away from May.

Ey needed to do what ey was best at. Thinking, ruminating, disentangling the knotted strands of what eir thoughts were so that ey might begin to comprehend the truth about them.

These knots were angry ones.

Or, perhaps not angry. They were frustrating ones. They were knots that ey knew the technical reasons for existing, but was starting to nonetheless resent. They were knots that bound and limited the process with which ey learned. They were as frustrating as the recondite letters that Qoheleth had sent so often, so long ago. Little hints and clues and never exactly the complete answer all at once. Never an explanation that allowed for further questions. Always too little, as though ey (and, at the time, Dear) was being strung along, lured into some unknown trap.

The same thing was happening now. Ey understood the technical reasons for no one, single Odist answering all of the questions ey had, ey and eir clade. There were too many emotions, too much secrecy, or too much shame bound up in the answers for them to sit down and tell a story from start to finish. None of them would admit to any more than one single thing throughout each interview, instead relying on the agreed upon admonition to stop when requested or warning that, after a certain point, the Odist would lie to or resent the Bălan.

Ey was half tempted to push one of them past that point, but then ey wouldn't know what bit was true or not.

And these Jonases! Ey was going to see one today, after eir walk. They seemed so slippery. It was not just that they controlled the interview, though ey did not doubt that—the transcript from Codrin#Castor contained a new twist every time ey reread it. It was that they knew so thoroughly that they were doing so that they did it all with a wink and a smile. That little hint that ey was to know that all they'd done was so clearly calculated yet held so much plausible deniability that there really was no arguing with it.

Ey was not looking forward to eir interview with Jonas Prime today.

So, instead, ey stomped along the path and thought and talked to emself, walking all the way to the rock halfway around the lake from the default entry point to the sim, throwing a few handfuls of stones into the placid water one by one, and then stomping all the way back to that same point.

Once ey'd had eir sulk, ey headed to the meeting with Jonas.

Unexpectedly, this turned out to be at the same library at which ey had interviewed Sadijah. Not only that, but Jonas Prime was standing in exactly the same spot that she had been standing in, greeted em with much the same bow that the other historian had, and led em to the exact same booth in the *cafe-cum-bar* beneath the stacks. It was uncanny to such a degree as to immediately put em on the defensive, guarding against some threat, real or imagined.

Once again, the drinks were ordered—cocktails, this time—and the cone of silence fell. Jonas rested his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his folded hands. It was an incredibly charming look. “Mx. Bălan, so nice to meet you at last.”

“Have you heard that much about me, then?” Ey did eir best to keep eir smile as earnest as possible.

“Oh, of course! You and your clade have been traipsing all over the place, interviewing some of my favorite people, and every one of them says that the Bălans are an utter delight to talk with.”

Ey kept the smile in place. “I’m happy to hear that. I know that questions can get a bit tiring, so I try to make it a pleasant process, at least. If at any point you need to take a break or stop, just let me know.”

Jonas waved away the comment as though there existed no reality where so nice a scholar could ever tire him out. “I’m excited to see what it is you have for me. Ask away!”

Ioan nodded and pulled out eir pen and papers. Ey spent a moment poking through the stable of questions that ey’d been asking anyone, frowned, and then flipped to a blank page. “I had a set that I was thinking of asking you, but I think I’m actually going to go off script here. My first question surrounds something that Codrin#Pollux heard by an Odist. I know you aren’t one, but I’m hoping that you can shed some light on it.”

“I’ll do my best, of course. I’d tell you to ask one of them, but I doubt you’d get a straight answer, which I suspect you already know.”

“And you’ll give me straight answers?”

Jonas grinned. “Best I can, sure.”

“Alright, then. After Why Ask Questions told Codrin that True Name was to instigate and manage the launch project, ey asked what she meant by that. She responded that the last thing that Michelle had done before she died was to give each of the stanzas a mission, and that True Name’s mission was to, and I’m quoting here, “Do something big, help us divest”. Given your proximity to True Name, can you clarify what she meant? What does it mean to divest?”

He laughed heartily and lifted his tall glass, saying, “To boldness! And here I was expecting you to ask if I’d invested in the launch or whatever. That is an incredible first question.”

Ioan hesitated, then lifted eir own glass to return the toast. “To boldness. You have it, I need it.”

“I have too much, my friend, and you need more, that’s all.” Jonas winked, then continued, “So, divest. The reason that’s an interesting question is that’s the word that immediately sold me when True Name came to me with that suggestion. It was the lynchpin on which the project was hung, and we built outward from there.”

Ey scribbled quickly in eir shorthand, doing eir best to take down verbatim what Jonas was saying. Ey’d be able to remember, for sure, but through writing, ey might better process and use what time ey had with the founder while ey had the chance.

“It could’ve meant so many things,” he was saying. “It could’ve meant just, “clone the System and leave a copy at the Earth-Sun L₅ point”. It could’ve meant, “break the physical elements of the System up into much

smaller ones and scatter them around so that damage to one did not beggar the others". Both of those are still on the table, by the way.

"We took it in another way, however, given news that we've been reaching from Earth. In particular, we were noticing a tendency to move from the excesses of capitalism back to the day-to-day hardships of feudalism and even, in some cases, subsistence farming. The problem, I'm sure you can imagine, is that when you're stuck being a peasant or scraping by to earn the most meager living, you aren't all that keen on space. It's only by dint of a few dreamers and the impossibility of retrieving it that the System remains up here in the first place."

Ioan nodded. "One of our interviewees phys-side said much the same thing."

"A dreamer, then," Jonas said, grinning. "But yes, life down there is horrible and no one—or essentially no one—wants to do a single damn thing about it. They're all so caught up in their little political games that they have no interest on doing anything to make their lives better, to live stronger."

"You don't sound very fond of them."

"Of course I am! I love every one of them for the delightfully stupid contradictions that they are, in the same way that one can both love and be disgusted by humanity as a whole. I'm just a pessimist, Ioan. You mustn't confuse pessimism with disdain. I can read the signs as well as any other, and I don't see them willing to do anything at all to do what life demands."

Ioan lifted eir pen from the page and looked up at Jonas. "What life demands?"

"Life all but demands more life. That's why those stupid contradictions back planet-side won't stop having children. Oh, we played them for that, of course. You learned that from End Waking, yes? We played on their desire to keep on fucking because...what was it, Life Breeds Life? It does. There's no way around it."

"It seems to me like you've stated a contradiction," ey said. "You said that they aren't willing to do what life demands, then said that they keep procreating as life demands. Is that what you meant?"

"Let me clarify. There's more to what life demands than just breeding. There is a level of intentionality required. In order for breeding to be effective, it has to have the right level of pressure put upon it. When breeding goes unchecked, you end up with an uncontrollable morass of life-stuff, and when that happens, you're more likely to run into systems running out of control, whether those are political systems, social systems, or even technological systems. Do you know why the race towards developing a true artificial intelligence stopped around the time of Secession?"

Ioan shook eir head.

Jonas's smile returned. "Because we didn't want it. That's not the right pressure on life that we want. It offers too much risk to existing life, whether biological or uploaded. So, we pulled our strings, as you know we do, and ensured that interest in such projects dropped in favor of others. Better expert systems. Better integrations tech. Better entertainment."

"Wait, how is AI a threat to the System?"

"Of what use is the System to an artificial intelligence? It can't join us. It can't control us directly. There's only one way for it to put pressure on us to do any one thing, and that's to influence life phys-side, just as we've done, to convince them not to upload. The best we can ever hope from an AI is it ignoring us and letting us continue. The best we can expect should it not ignore us is a stalemate. A cold war."

Ey frowned as ey noted that on eir rapidly filling page. “Is there no way for an AI’s goals to align with the System’s?”

“Perhaps there is, but remember,” he said, poking his thumb back towards his chest. “Pessimist. It fails the cost-benefit analysis. Not worth the risk.”

“So, instead you decided to ensure that phys-side and the System continued their symbiotic relationship?”

“The part of me which has moved beyond pessimism and into disillusionment wants to sigh and say, “symbiotic is too kind a way to put it,” but even I don’t think that’s true. We need them in order to continue growing, and they need us as something to dream about.”

“Alright,” Ioan said, dropping the line of questioning before it got too far from the few others ey still wanted to ask. “So it was decided that the launch was a good way to ensure that the System divested because it moved beyond what it was.”

“Yep!” Jonas took a sip of his drink and grinned. “We decided on off-site backups as a form of risk management. They’re not totally safe, of course, and they are, in their own ways, doomed. They’ll eventually get caught in too eccentric an orbit around a star and burn up when they get too close, but until then, the lives that are lived within continue, secure. More than that, it gives them time to figure out if there’s a way to ensure that sys-side life does as life will and expand in a way that isn’t just forking. A pipe dream, perhaps, but a nice one.”

“So you and True Name steered the launch project into existence to help that along.” When Jonas nodded, ey continued, “Just as you did with Secession, yes?”

“Yeah. We used our elements phys-side to ensure that Secession happened. One of them came up with the idea, but we spun it to be as much in our advantage as theirs. We used Yared, as I believe you know, but we also used many, many others out there. It led us to a much more stable place in the world.”

“Speaking of, one your clade told one of mine that there are complex thoughts on stability and stasis. I just want to confirm that I’m understanding correctly. Launch fits into your concept of stasis by ensuring continuity.”

“Sure, but also, a little bit of excitement is required to ensure that our lives stay boring. Even if our lives become too interesting, or Castor’s lives become interesting, or Pollux’s, then there is a better than good chance that at least one of the others’ will remain boring, just how we want it. No Jonas, was it? He probably called it ‘gardening’, which I like. We’re tending topiary, here, and there are many of us over on each of the launches, doing the same.”

Ioan nodded and paused to drink down a third of eir cocktail. Ey was thirsty, of course, but some part of em seemed to be craving the numbing aspects of alcohol. Ey continued, “Alright, I think I have two more questions. The first is that End Waking said that there were goals to influence the economies phys-side and explained that there were short term, medium term, and long term goals. He was kind enough to fill me in on the first two, but not the third. Can you tell me what the long term goals of meddling with the economy phys-side were? He said something about critical mass.”

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” Jonas said. “It’s basically the same as what I said about life. If life is to have the right level of constraining pressures on it, one of the easiest ways to do so is through the economy. The long-term goal of his ‘meddling’, as you put it, was to ensure the continuity of capitalism. It gives something for people to dream about: alternatives. It gives something for people to work against. Since they know that we moved

past scarcity up here, they have plenty dream about. The critical mass is the amount of money and participants required to turn this into a self-sustaining system.”

“Simple enough, I guess, even if a little frightening in its implications.”

“What implications are those, Ioan?”

Ey frowned. “What it sounds like your goals are is to keep life on Earth from getting too nice. Or nice at all, really. It sounds like you’re keeping the pressures high so that the System continues. More than continues, even. You wanted to keep it desirable as the greener grass on the other side of the fence.”

“And how is that frightening?” Jonas laughed. “The grass is greener. We give them something to reach for. What more could anyone want out of life than a goal?”

Ioan kept from speaking up about what ey’d heard from those ey had interviewed who had uploaded for the money, about those they’d left behind, that whiff of eugenics. Instead, ey asked. “Alright, last question for now. Two-parter. One of my clade interviewed someone who mentioned that there was some dissension with your clade about whether to go ahead with Launch. Is that true?”

Jonas shook his head, swallowing the last sip of his drink before saying, “There might have appeared to be, but I guarantee you that that was manufactured. Having some highly visible folks argue about whether or not it was a good idea gets everyone interested.”

“And the Dreamer Modules?”

For the first time in the interview, for the first time since ey’d met Jonas—the first time any Bălan had met any Jonas, if Codrin#Castor was correct—he frowned. “You’ve been asking plenty of interesting questions, Ioan, but this is the first you’ve asked that is actively uncomfortable.”

Ioan waited.

The grin returned, playful this time. “Alright, have it your way! You historians, I’ll never get it. Do you know what’s on the Modules?”

Ey thought back. “Research stuff. Telescopes, measurement devices, that sort of thing. Codrin said that ey got to lay in a field and look up at the stars as they really were outside the LV—or at least as close as the sim would let them be.”

“And?”

“Isn’t there some broadcast continually playing? Something about prime numbers. Something to get aliens to get curious about Earth.”

Jonas’s grin turned icy. “No, not Earth, Ioan. The System.”

“The L₅ System? Or those on the LVs?”

“Space is unfathomably big, Mx. Bălan. Stupendously big. There is absolutely no way that aliens, as you put it, would care about Earth or the solar system. There’s no reason to come here. There’s no reason for them to even bother with something so pitiful as us.” The grin was edging into a smirk, now, and Ioan couldn’t tell quite what it meant. Jonas continued, “No, the LV Systems. There is the broadcast to get extraterrestrial intelligences interested in the LVs, yes, but that’s not all. There’s a very precise set of instructions for how the System works, how the Ansible works, and an Ansible receiver. The same one used for uploading to the LVs.”

Ioan blinked and sat up straighter. “I don’t remember hearing anything about that.”

“We clamped down on the knowledge as best we could as soon as we realized we wouldn’t be able to rule it

out.” Jonas waved his hand. “Not important, though, because the last part of that package is a complete description of a human neural system and a basic description of our physiology. A complete map of our DNA, should they even want to build an entire human.”

“Whose DNA?”

“Why, our very own Douglas Hadje! Who else? Blame True Name for that one.” He laughed bitterly. “But that’s all that they could ever want to build a Douglas Hadje in simulation and send it through the Ansible to the attached System. It’d wind up in a dead zone, a locked-down sim, we made sure of that, but it’d be able to communicate, and enough people on that System know enough about the System that it might figure out how to break free of that restriction.”

“That sounds rather exciting though,” Ioan said. “Why were you so against it?”

“How much have we talked about risk tonight, Ioan?”

“You’re saying that it presents too great a risk to the continuity of the LV System?”

“Ioan, you are very smart, but I need you to keep up if you’re going to come away with interesting answers. Think through the list of instructions that I mentioned.”

Ey tilted eir head, then frowned. “There’s an Ansible on there, you said, right? They could theoretically upload that same manufactured construct to this System, right? Or all three?”

Jonas nodded. “There we go. There’s nothing to stop them from doing so, after all. It’s easy enough for them to figure out that these are probes, and that probes must be coming from somewhere. There’s no reason, then, for them not to find that somewhere and blast out constructs in our direction. We’re taking steps now to match those new Hadjes to dump them in a similar locked-down sim. We’ll ask our questions, then terminate them.”

“What about *the* Douglas Hadje?”

“Oh, he’ll be allowed. This is the least risky place for him to be, after all. He knows far too much to remain phys-side. But he’ll be the last Douglas Hadje permitted.”

Ioan sighed, finished eir drink in a few big gulps, and sat for a moment, staring down at the rest of the blank page left for taking notes. Ey couldn’t do it. It was too much. Much too much. “Jonas,” ey said, reaching a hand across the table. “Thank you so much for letting me interview you. You’ve given me rather a lot to think about, so I may come back with more questions down the line. Is there any you want to keep me from publishing?”

He returned the handshake and shrugged. “Nope, you’re good to go with all of it. We’ve done the cost-benefit

analysis, and this passes muster.”

They both stood and walked toward the exit.

“Mx. Bălan, it’s been an absolute pleasure.”

Ioan smiled and very carefully did not say, *For you, perhaps. For me, it has been absolutely terrifying.*

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — 2325

The messages between LVs and the L₅ System were flying as fast and as thick as possible, given the nearly day and a half transmission time between the station and the launches. It was enough time for Codrin to sit and stew and plan.

The sheer amount of information that was being generated by the Bălan clade and all of their Odist assistants and lovers was enormous, and so much of it was so important, so meaningful, so *weird* that there was little else ey felt ey could do. There was no clarification that any one of them could offer the other that would take the form of a conversation, something immediate. Instead, they each had to wait three days for a response to a query. Messages became letters, rather than conversations.

So there was nothing to do but go for it. Ey spent as much time as ey could digesting all of the stories, the stories of True Name and Jonas, the stories of the Odists and Yared. Ey had talked as much as Dear was willing to talk, and so there was nothing for it but to pack eir pen and paper and head to the high-rise apartment in the middle of the city that ey'd been directed to.

Ne Jonas greeted em at the door and grinned wide, "Codrin! Wonderful to see you!"

Ey didn't know what ey expected, but it was certainly not this. Both Codrin#Castor and Ioan had described Jonas as handsome to the point of being almost annoyingly so. The tall, blond, chiseled features type.

Here before em, though, was a rather plain, unremarkable man. He was not forgettable as user11824 was, he was simply middle aged, bookish, and completely...average.

Nevertheless, Codrin liked him at once. He was not attractive, but his attitude was unfailingly kind. Not avuncular, *per se*, but perhaps the friendly professor that everyone likes, even when they fail his class. Maybe it was the button-up shirt and jeans, maybe it was the way he smiled, the way he talked. Maybe it was just the whole of him. The everything that made Ne Jonas Ne Jonas was perfectly crafted to appeal to that of the academic in Codrin.

"Ne Jonas, yes? Thank you so much for having me over."

"Of course, of course! Just Ne, though. I'm less of a Jonas than the rest." He walked into the apartment and around the corner, beckoning Codrin with. "Tea, though? It's just Earl Grey, but hey, it's something."

The kitchen that Codrin had been led into was of a style that felt old even to em, who had uploaded nearly a century back. Wooden chairs, well worn. Wooden table, scratched and dinged. Tile floor, the grout black from years of dirt and grime ground into it.

"Uh, sure. I'll take a cup."

“Cream and sugar?”

“Just cream, please.”

“Oh...” Ne sounded crestfallen. “I have skim milk, is that okay?”

“Sure, I’ll take it.” Codrin laughed, watching him putter around the kitchen. Meanwhile, ey pulled out eir pen and paper to take notes. “You know, you’re not at all what I expected, I have to say. I was all geared up to be talking to some hot-shot politician in front of some sleek desk or whatever, not sharing tea around a kitchen table.”

Ne turned a dial on the stove to start the kettle, frowned, and then pulled a lighter out of a drawer in order to light the gas when the igniter did not. “Not all Jonases are alike, Codrin.” He grinned over his shoulder. “Most of them are, of course. You would’ve gotten the politician treatment from just about any other Jonas, but some of us got tired of that snazzy life and opted for something a little simpler.”

“What led you to do so?”

While the kettle crawled to a boil, Ne turned, leaning back against the counter and smiling to Codrin, arms crossed over his chest. “I think it was the pressure of it. It’s not that I’m not still doing my work, but when you look like that, you feel like you have all the pressure of your job resting on your shoulders. Changing my appearance, changing the way I lived, well, it made me actually start enjoying work again, rather than it being the job that owned me.”

“I think I can understand that. I used to own the academic look pretty hard, back when I was Ioan. Over time, though, as my work and home life shifted, I found that I felt less comfortable in that state and more comfortable in, well.” Ey gestured at emself, eir tunic and sarong.

“Do you think you became less of an academic and more of something else?” Ne asked.

“That’s a good question. I don’t know that I ever really was an academic. I was an investigative journalist, more than anything. I was a writer who fancied emself a historian. Now, I guess I’ve shifted more to the creative side, maybe. A lot more writing, a lot less history, at least up until this project.”

“Think living with an Odrist helped in that regard?”

Codrin nodded. “Dear’s very...well. It’s very itself. Not sure how else to put it. But it’s also been good at getting me out of the comfort zone that I’d found myself in up until then. It was a good zone, and I’m glad that Ioan still has that, but I also like what I’m doing now.”

They were interrupted by the rising whine of the kettle, which Ne pulled off the burner. He turned off the stove and filled two mugs, which he brought to the table before grabbing a carton of milk from the fridge.

The tea was a perfectly acceptable Earl Grey. The milk was unremarkable. The mugs were mismatched and stained with a dark patina from decades of use. It was comfortable and charming in all its imperfections.

“So, what is it that you’re doing now that you feel better doing in this form?” ey asked, nodding to Ne.

“I’m a little like you, I guess. I’m the one who takes all of the history and draws it together into a big picture. From there, I ensure that the rest of the clade—at least, the rest of the clade that’s working on this project—remains on the same page and doesn’t diverge too far. I’m the clerk to Prime’s executive.”

“Is that why you look like a cross between a professor and an author?”

Ne grinned between puffs of breath over his steaming mug. “Yes. It’s hard to reconcile that job description with looking like some high-powered attorney or movie star or whatever they’re looking like these days.”

“You don’t see them much?”

He shook his head. “We mostly correspond through writing and media messages.”

Codrin nodded. “The best form of communication, if you ask me.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” Ne Jonas laughed, sipped at his tea, winced, and set the mug down again. “But here, look at me, I’ve gone and steered the conversation to other topics. I want to make sure that I get to your questions. What do you have for me?”

It almost felt a shame to move on to what Codrin knew were some topics that might be difficult or tense, but ey supposed it was as good a time as any. “Well, first of all, has your clade been keeping you up to date on the status of this project? I don’t want to make you feel like you’re repeating yourself.”

Ne nodded and leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “You’ve interviewed No Jonas and Jonas Prime from our clade, and from the Ode clade, you’ve interviewed Dear, Why Ask Questions, True Name, End Waking, and May Then My Name. You’ve also interviewed Ezekiel, Debarre, user11824, Yared Zerezghi, Sadiah, Brahe, and dozens of others who fall below the relevance threshold. I believe your counterpart on Castor is interviewing True Name today for a second time, as well. Have I missed anyone worth talking about?”

Codrin had paused, mug of tea halfway between the table and eir lips, and stared at Ne throughout the litany.

“I don’t imagine I have,” he continued, smiling. “You’ve talked about the influence of the Jonas and Ode clades in Secession and Launch, the ways in which we have interacted with phys-side both financially and politically in the last two hundred years, the work we did around Launch, our reasons for enforcing stability and divesting our resources to maintain continuity, and the concerns we hold around the Dreamer Modules. Correct? You may sip your tea first, though, if you’d like! Don’t let me stop you.”

Ey set the mug carefully back onto the table, startled to realize that eir hand was shaking and eir breath coming shallow. Suddenly, ey saw the sim for what it was: a carefully prepared presentation, something constructed from top to bottom to appeal specifically to Codrin and those like em. The same, too, applied to Ne Jonas, whose entire personality was built around engendering feelings of camaraderie in those interested in history and stories.

“That...that’s about the whole of it, yeah,” ey said hoarsely. “How did you know all of that?”

Ne laughed, stealing another sip of his tea before responding. “Oh, I’ve told you that already, Codrin! It’s my job to draw together all of the threads and pull together the big picture. I don’t know how the specifics get to me, that’s not my job. I just piece them all together. The big picture here is that you and yours are building the history of the System from start to Launch, and you’re finding out just how much story there is. You, like so many others, were comfortable in that boring stasis, as well you should have been, and now you’re coming to terms with something new, something actually exciting, and you’re waking up to it. This goes way beyond Qoheleth’s stage play about memory; this is about the very foundations of your life.”

Codrin forced emself to take a sip of the tea. It was thin, with the skim milk in it, and ey couldn’t actually taste it for the pounding of eir heart. “Well,” ey said, struggling to maintain calm. “That actually crosses several of the questions I had prepared off my list as either answered or irrelevant.”

“Have you come up with any new ones?”

“Uh...some. The first is: why are you letting us even continue with the history project if you’re aiming to keep stability within the System? Won’t all of this coming to light impact that at all?”

Ne brightened. “Oh, that’s a good one! The answer is twofold. Part one relates to something that No Jonas said to the other Codrin: stability is a thing that needs to be gardened and maintained, that there is no true stasis, but stability approaches that point like the man in Zeno’s Paradox. This is a form of that gardening. When you have a rose garden or topiary, you know, you must cut away bits of it, but when you do, the whole becomes all the healthier and can last for years and years in the state you like it best. It may seem like a traumatic event to trim back roses. After all, you are cutting away good growth, aren’t you? But that’s how you get beautiful roses, year after year.

“That’s what we’re doing with this project. We’re introducing a slightly traumatic event to make the stability of the system—that’s lower-case s, there, I’m talking of the sociopolitical system of those on the three capital-S Systems—stronger. Does that make sense?”

“I suppose,” Codrin said. “You’ve done the cost-benefit analysis and determined it’s worth continuing on with, right?”

“Yes, precisely that,” Ne said.

“And what’s the second reason?”

“The second reason is related to what Jonas Prime said to Ioan: humans, uploaded and not, need something to dream of. They need some better version of the life they live to hope for in order to feel comfortable. No one is happy for long in bliss, Codrin.”

Ey blinked, sitting up straighter. “You mean you need some trauma like this sys-side in order to give people more bliss to aim for?”

“Precisely that.” Ne sipped his tea now that it had cooled and nodded approvingly. “There is much madness in the Ode Clade, but that’s what we suspect nudged Qoheleth over the edge. If you can’t forget anything and all that you can remember is bliss, then bliss begins to feel like torture. His role was to think long term. He was working on the timescale of decades and centuries on shaping the perceived history of both of our clades, so he was already up to his ears in memory. This project of yours will instill a little bit of terror in the hearts of everyone. Not enough that they will rebel, of course. In well over ninety percent of cases, they won’t do anything at all with the information, but it will tick up their anxiety a notch. Pain, anxiety, the need for something greater, these are all essential for survival. Without them, the world would be an impossibly dangerous place. Your history and May then My Name’s mythology will put a dent in that bliss and make it less appealing. Does that make sense, too?”

Codrin finished taking down eir notes and sipped eir tea, mulling it over. Eventually, ey nodded. “It does, yeah. We could thwart you by not publishing this project, but I guess you’ve already done the analysis on that and know that we won’t.”

“You guess correctly, yes. ‘Thwart’, though, is an interesting choice of words. Do you feel like these are some evil plans that we hold?”

“A little. It’s very dramatic. Very much like those supervillains who believe that there are core problems with the world, and if only they could just fix them, life would be so much better.”

Ne laughed. “There *are* core problems with the world, Codrin. I’ve just enumerated several. You misunderstand, though. The core problems with the world aren’t the absolutes that your supervillains deal in. They’re the ways in which life struggles to maintain stable growth, and like I and my cocladists have said, the goal is not

to solve those problems, but to garden around them and make them smaller problems. There is no solution to the question of what makes a stable and continuous world. That's the asymptote. All we can do is hew as close to that ideal as we can."

"I think that many phys-side would be pretty upset by that, though, right? If they learn that you've been pulling strings from the System to ensure that everything keeps going the way you want, won't they rebel against that idea?"

"There are two things working against that supposition," Ne said. "The first is that you misunderstand me when I say that we've done the cost-benefit analysis of your project and determined it beneficial. It's beneficial to both sys- and phys-side for exactly the same reasons, though the mechanics may be different. The second is that you are misjudging just how in over your head you really are with all that we've done, including phys-side. As soon as Launch started and as soon as you were nudged to start the project—don't frown, Codrin, you should've seen this coming—whispers were sent down the wire from the System to Earth to ensure that they would have the proper reaction to your work."

Codrin sat, silent, and stared at the man across from em. The man who had just admitted to subtly influencing billions of lives over hundreds of years through an organization made up entirely, ey assumed, of two clades. Hundreds or thousands of instances of two individuals.

"I suspect we're about done with the interview, but you must understand, Mx. Bălan, that we are the end product of phys-side life. Stability demands that we think that way. It demands that we think of all those billions of people back on Earth as part of our garden. Not the rose bushes, but the vegetables. They are the crop that we harvest to stay alive, and therefore they must be tended with as much love and care as the roses."

The room felt like it was elongating, stretching away from em as Ne spoke, as ey capped eir pen and got to eir feet, as ey gathered eir papers. The room was elongating and eir vision dimming around the edges.

And still Ne Jonas sat, smiling kindly up to em. "That, my dear Codrin, is the big picture."

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

Codrin Bălan was more nervous about this interview than ey'd ever been about one before. It's not that ey hadn't been anxious about talking with True Name previously—ey certainly had, given the warning that Dear had left em with—but in the intervening weeks, ey had had eir conversations with No Jonas and read the news from both Codrin#Pollux and Ioan about the wealth of knowledge that the Bălan clade had gathered.

Dear gave no warning this time. It simply stood in the door of Codrin's office, looking some mixture between sad and frightened, and bowed its head when ey gave it a goodbye kiss atop the snout. Ey left eir #Tracker instance in eir office to sit and not think of anything while ey painted terribly, the better to reduce merge conflicts down the line, and then sent a fork back to the sim where first ey had met True Name.

She was not smiling this time. She didn't look serious, just confident, competent, almost amused, but she was not smiling.

"Are you ready for our interview, Mx. Codrin Bălan?"

Ey nodded, said, "As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose."

"Excellent." She gestured em down to the office where first they'd met. There were no formalities. No shaking of hands, pleasant banter about which chair to use. The skunk simply sat in her chair at her desk across from em and waited.

The desk was clean now. All of the notepads and pens had been cleared away, and ey wondered if what it had looked like before was, as all three interviewers were now learning, simply a means of shaping eir expectations and impressions. Did she even take notes with a pen and paper? Did she even need to? The desk, then, had become a barrier between the two, a pedestal on which True Name sat and, though she was shorter than the historian, looked down on em with a singular attention. This, too, was a means of shaping their interactions for as long as they spoke.

"Alright," Codrin began, stepping up to this challenge as best ey could, drawing on all eir meager reserves of boldness to adopt the competent appearance of one who ought to be here as much as True Name. "Thank you once more for having me over and allowing me to interview you. Before I get started, is there anything that you'd like to say?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I would like to begin by preempting what I suspect are many of your questions so as to keep our discussions better focused. Through the various channels available to the Ode and Jonas clades, we know the list of individuals that you have so far interviewed, and much of the content of your interviews. We know that the Bălan clade has learned much of what transpired during Secession and leading up to Launch,

as well as some of what has transpired during the intervening centuries.”

Codrin hesitated, pen nib resting on paper, a dark blue spot of ink spreading slowly through the fibers.

“With that in mind, what questions would you like to ask?” True Name’s mien lost much of its amused sheen, and she was looking truly serious now.

“Why?” The word was almost forced from em, let out in a rush as though ey had been struck or perhaps wanted to ask before ey lost all courage.

“That is the correct question,” she said. “Jonas and I have discussed how each of us should answer this question, figuring that both Codrins would ask much the same. Your cocladist will receive an answer today pertaining to the big picture reasoning for the long term goals, which surround the stability and continuity of the System. I will be discussing the same picture surrounding the *raison d’etre* of the System.

“During the period of Secession, we began to see the utility for the System as something beyond a curiosity, something beyond a mere means of immortality as many at the time had understood it. The System, in our eyes allowed for a more perfect form of humanity. It is a place where an individual can truly flourish, where groups can experience true independence, where all of our imperfections can shine through and make us more what we are than we were before. With that in mind, those who remain phys-side are better thought of as a larval form of the species. They live, they love, they laugh, yes, but they do so in a way that is a shadow of what they could do, sys-side.

“What we did, the way we thought and the actions we took, were perhaps borne out of some core anger at the shortcomings of the political system that led to the loss of our friends, of the individual behind the Name and of Debarre’s partner and of so many others affected by the mere whims of an imperfect attempt to control the world. It did not matter why the Western Fed government decided to destroy those lives; what bill they voted or commented on does not matter. Was it a declaration of hostilities? A trade embargo? Who cares?

“What matters is that their actions spoke of an utter disregard for the very humanity of those affected. This was echoed in the referendum to which Secession was merely an amendment, that they had to even consider the fact that those sys-side deserved the individual rights granted those phys-side, the same rights that they held in such flagrant disregard.”

She nodded toward em. “You have this humanity. I have this humanity. Jonas has this humanity. You may not like us. You may think us manipulative and angry, or perhaps emotionless and cruel. You may think us villainous. It does not matter. What we have done, we have done to protect your humanity. What we have done, we have done to protect the humanity of all here on the System. What we have done, we have done to protect the humanity of even those phys-side, but you must understand, Codrin, that the humanity which requires the strictures of government is one less perfect than ours, and so we guide them to their logical conclusions.”

“But why?” ey asked again, voice quavering. In fear, in anger, ey couldn’t tell. “Why would you do that? Why guide the less perfect ones here? Even if you’re right, that those who upload are somehow more perfect versions of those who don’t or haven’t yet. What does that even buy you? I don’t get it. You don’t sound like some psychotic villain who wants to bring humanity under their wing out of some misguided, high-minded ideals. You sound like a psychopath.”

True Name laughed. It was a musical laugh, replete with tones of real amusement and genuine pity. A fantastically toothy laugh, and those teeth were sharp. “There is nothing I can say that will convince you that I am

earnest in these endeavors, Codrin. You know that. You know that you have already made up your mind.”

Ey frowned. “Enlighten me.”

“As you wish.” She grinned, leaning back on her stool. “You are correct that I do not wish to, as you say, bring humanity under my wing. What purpose would that serve? You have either learned or intuited, as all do, that the System is truly ungovernable, so how could I or the Jonas clade hope to govern it? No, we do not want to rule. You may be correct that we are psychopaths—or at least that I am, I do not think that you need worry about your Dear or Ioan’s May Then My Name. Humanity has simply evolved toward an inevitable two-stage life cycle. That of the fleshy pupae that do not know what it means to be a butterfly, and those butterflies that recognize the freedom of the air.”

Codrin recapped eir pen, tucked it into eir pocket, and closed eir notebook. “That’s one of those statements that makes sense on the surface until you think about it hard enough.”

“Oh? How do you figure?” she asked, still grinning.

“You know who we interviewed. Did you know that Ioan interviewed those who uploaded strictly for the cash payout for their families?”

The skunk nodded.

“Do you know the contents of those interviews?”

“No. We are not reading your notes, we are simply keeping tabs on the project.”

“Much of what ey learned,” ey said, starting to feel the heat of anger rising through fear, growing within em. “Indicated that many of those who upload, even if it’s only those who upload for the incentive, hold more than just a cynical view of the System. They recognize that it is a tool that their governments hold over them and perhaps imagine that those governments are tools of the System in turn, even if only on some subconscious level. If they’re your pupae, they know the terrors of being a butterfly caught in a net.”

“And Jonas Prime told Ioan about the cost-benefit analyses inherent in all that we do,” True Name countered. “Some small fraction may be aware of and unhappy with the actions that we have taken, but in the grand scheme of things, we are simply setting up and maintaining the progression for all, removing them from lives that require such manipulations to somewhere where those manipulations are not just unneeded, but are not even possible. The same applies to your project, as I’m sure you have heard. It passes the same measure as insignificant in the grand scheme of things.”

The skunk’s words, however calm they might have seemed, battered and buffeted em. They smashed up against eir emotions and base instincts, scuffing away carefully-maintained control until the fear and anger shone through bright and hot. Codrin pushed emself quickly to eir feet and leaned eir hands against the desktop. “How fucking cynical do you have to be to wind up in this mindset? I’ve met so many of your clade, and none of them have their heads so far up their asses as you do. I can’t believe—”

Throughout eir rant True Name’s smile grew icy, and before ey could finish, she waved her paw, bouncing em from her sim.

Ey found emself standing at the entrance to the prairie, there on that short path that wound its way up to the house, to eir home. A few seconds later, a slip of paper fluttered to the ground in front of em. Reaching down to pick it up, ey unfolded it and read in the Odists’ neat handwriting, *“Come back when you are less angry, Codrin. You have your confirmation, and when you have digested it, we will discuss what will happen next. Respectfully, The Only*

Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade.”

Ey let out a primal scream, a noise ey did not know that ey could even make, and then quit, letting the Codrin who still sat painting after so short an interview deal with eir memories. Ey was done.

Part IV

Arrival

Here we must step back and address a potential conflict of interest.

At time of writing, the Bălan clade is made up of two personalities in the form of three individuals: Ioan Bălan, the root instance, remains on the L₅ System, and Codrin Bălan travels on the Launch Vehicles (hereafter “LVs”). Two persons, three instances.

Both of these persons, all of three of these instances, are entangled with the Ode clade. Ioan Bălan has worked extensively with May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade, and Codrin Bălan has worked with and is in a polyamorous relationship which includes Dear, Also The Tree That Was Felled of the Ode clade. The fact that the Ode clade was instrumental in both Secession and Launch is undeniable, and the fact that the Bălan clade is entangled with the Odists is equally so.

For reasons that will be made clear as this history unfolds, we are not able to recuse ourselves. You must bear with us, and you will see why we, the Bălan clade, *must* be the ones to write this history.

From *An Expanded History of Our World* by
The Bălan Clade

Yared Zerezghi — 2125

If the new year were to be a thing for Yared to celebrate, that was lost on him. He had lost track of how old he was over the last year, and the passage of time had begun to smear into a haze of referenda, of voting and posting and debating. He knew the years by the seasons and the fact that all of his posts on the DDR had a date attached to them, but beyond that, the significance of December thirty-first ticking over into January first held little sway over him.

If the passage of referendum 10b30188 was to be something to celebrate, that was also lost on him. The process of promoting and supporting the bill had long since taken over his life, and he had little enough energy left to acknowledge that it had even passed by a supermajority of votes.

He should be celebrating both of these, he knew.

He should be celebrating them because the rattle, pop, and boom of fireworks outside told him to celebrate the new year. He should be celebrating them because he was inundated not only with congratulatory messages telling him to do so for his pet issue passing, for his first major amendment passing, but for vile threats of harm, of finding him, of killing him, or for the media requests piling up in his inbox, and in the end, was that not a sign of success for a politician?

He knew that he should be celebrating, most of all, because True Name and Jonas had each sent him dozens of messages telling him how the news had been received sys-side, describing the cheers of the Council of Eight, gushing about the unanimously positive moods of those who had been tracking the progression of the bill.

And yet here he was, once more walking from his apartment to the patch of scrub grass and trees at the edge of his neighborhood, wishing he'd left his phone at home.

The trees, at least, had nothing to say. They cared not about the new year except perhaps for the risk provided by the fireworks. They most certainly cared not for the secession of the System. All they cared about was their patch of dirt and the sun above and whether or not they got enough water. Yared wound his way around each of them in turn, sometimes sitting at the base of one or running a hand along the rough, papery bark of another, doing his best to absorb some of that apathy himself.

No one, in the end, had been able to convince him that having his name inextricably linked to the secession amendment would be anything but trouble, moving forward. He had tried to pick up a new pet referendum to follow after the interest had swung hard in favor of secession, something about limiting the environmental impact of dune stabilization in the Sahara, but the first response to his post in the DDR forums was met with a derisive "Of course the bleeding heart who either loves the System so much he bet his life guaranteeing their

independence or hated it so much as to make it irrelevant to the rest of the world would be concerned about an issue he has absolutely no stake in. Either way, upload and find out, Yared, and the rest of us can move on.”

That had stung so much that he’d not looked at the DDR forums or touched the debate sims since except to ensure that the referendum had passed. He was tempted to delete his account, after that, though he knew that that would be a mistake, inviting either further scorn from his detractors or disappointment from his supporters.

He jumped from where he’d hunched down at the base of a tree, poking around the roots with a stick. His implants buzzed again and he pulled out his phone to check on who it was, groaning at the sight of Demma’s name.

“Mr. Zerezghi,” the voice on the other end said, sounding cheerful. “Happy New Year. I was wondering if you would be so kind as to join us for the tail end of our celebrations?”

“Join..?”

“Of course, Yared. Are you at your park? We can meet you there and pick you up. The dress is semiformal. We can provide you with that, if you need.”

“Celebration?” he said, numb.

Demma laughed. “Of course, Yared. We’ll meet you momentarily, and you’ll see.”

The car was once more ready and waiting for him at the edge of his mini-forest, still humming slightly from the radiator fan and air conditioner. The driver was once more standing outside, though this time he had a long thawb draped over one arm, gold brocade peeking out through folds in the cream-colored fabric.

“This should fit over your current clothes, Mr. Zerezghi. Might as well put it on out here where you can move a bit more easily.”

It had been a long time since Yared had worn a thawb, and it took a moment to navigate so much fabric, but soon, he had it up over his head and spilling down over his body, the linen tumbling down nearly to his ankles. It really was quite nice, too. The linen was pre-worn and soft, and the gold brocade ran in two thick stripes from shoulder to hem down his front. It felt somewhat bunched up with his shirt beneath it, but wasn’t uncomfortable.

The driver nodded appreciatively, saying, “It looks good on you. Your shirt underneath may ride up, but feel free to slip off to a restroom when we arrive and you’ll be able to take it off and check it at the coatroom.”

Yared nodded, smiled as best he could, and bowed to the driver. It was the first time he’d seen the man’s eyes, and he was pleased to note that they looked as though they were always a second away from crinkling in a smile.

In the back of the car, Demma greeted him with a warm smile of his own, while a rather severe looking woman leaned forward to shake his hand.

“Yared, I’d like to introduce you to Councilor Aida Tamrat,” Demma said, gesturing. “Aida, this is Yared Zerezghi, the author of the secession amendment.”

“A pleasure, of course,” she said. “Thank you for all of your hard work.”

Overwhelmed, he simply bowed as best he could from his cushy seat in the back of the car.

From there, he said little, having little enough chance to speak. Demma and Tamrat continued their conversation from before, which seemed, on the surface, to be about the party they’d just come from—who was with

whom, who wore what, what drinks had been most common—yet seemed to carry serious undertones of deep study, as though all of this information taken as a whole showed some gestalt of the political momenta this way and that. The driver, of course, remained silent, so all Yared could do was sit, smile, and nod when addressed.

The short ride down familiar streets took them back to Government House, but this time, rather than simply sitting outside of the building, the car was waved through a gate and directed down a ramp to a parking garage underneath. From there, they were subjected to a security scan—pat-down and implant scan both—and whisked up a flight of stairs, through long halls, and eventually deposited in a chamber crowded with more nicely dressed persons drinking champagne from thin flutes.

Very nicely dressed, he quickly realized, and he wondered if not dressing him up more had been an attempt to make him wear his status as a lesser-than plainly.

Later that night, nearing two in the morning, he realized that he could remember little of the party. He was handed a champagne flute and passed around the room as though an interesting object. Councilors and dignitaries of various levels shook his hand, smiled to him with unsmiling eyes, and once again congratulated him on a job well done.

“These are the interested parties I’ve mentioned,” Demma said at one point. “They’re all pleased to meet you in person.”

If that was the case, then that pleasure had been slight indeed.

Perhaps the party slipped so easily from his mind due to the sheer mundanity of it, but more likely, it was the following conversation that overshadowed it in importance.

In the car, as he was being returned to his house, Demma broke the tired silence with, “Yared, thank you again for your assistance in this project. I have a few requests to make of you before we part ways.”

Yared nodded hesitantly. “Of course, councilor.”

“First of all, I hope you understand that your continued discretion is of the utmost importance. It is key to our trust and to your own safety and security.” There was a meaningful pause before Demma smiled. “From potential bad actors, of course.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, starting to rub his palms against his knees before he remembered that he was still wearing the long garment he had been loaned.

“Thank you. Secondly, please do not contact me or any of the interested parties you met at tonight’s soiree. This, I think, shall be easy, as many of them are quite difficult to reach, and the contact information we provided you with to stay in touch is now no longer active.”

He nodded again, silent.

“Third, keep in mind that, as you are now a person of interest to the government, all of your actions will be monitored simply as a matter of course. Please also note that your interactions on the direct democracy representative forums will be monitored closest of all, and should they deviate from NEAC majority party or coalition stance, you may be subject to reprisal.”

Yared’s breathing grew shallow. This was unheard of. As far as he could remember, a government had never required a single individual to toe the party line. But then, perhaps it was unheard of due to the implicit threat of violence that Demma had dropped early on, unheard of because it had never reached the light of day. He nodded slowly.

“Excellent. Those are the three requests. In order to formalize this agreement, I’d like you to place your thumb here—” the councilor had pulled out his phone where a rectangle outlined where his thumbprint should wind up. “—and state aloud that you agree.”

He hesitated long enough that Demma began to frown, but before any further encouragement was given, he did as he was told, pressing his thumb to the reader and saying, “I agree.”

“Thank you, Mr. Zerezghi.” He sighed and slumped back into his seat. “My apologies for the rather formal interaction, but it was necessary to get this out of the way.”

Yared did not relax into his seat. He was as keyed up as he’d been before the night had begun, but now for entirely different reasons.

After a long silence, he spoke up. “Congratulations, councilor.”

“Mm?” Demma sat up, then, comprehending, waved a hand dismissively. “Thank you. The bill passed as expected, and now we won’t have to worry about it.”

Yared frowned. “Do you think there will be any further legislation around the System?”

“The System?” The councilor gave a short, sharp bark of a laugh. “It’s out of our way, as I say. Rubbish idea from the start, of course, but meddlesome minds will always meddle, so it’s all we can do to keep them as far away from us as possible.”

“I...don’t understand. What do you mean?”

Demma grinned. “There’s no need for you to, but I’ll do my best to explain if it will keep you placated. The System is a nuisance and a political thorn in everyone’s side. It needed removal—as any thorn does—before the infection spread. Anyone who held onto their citizenship while making a one-way journey to a nowhere we aren’t even sure is real could still have had influence back in their so-called home countries. Look at Jonas, if you need a prime example. Now they can’t. That’s that. It’s a dumping ground for dreamers, and the less of those we have here, the easier our jobs get.”

“But I thought,” Yared said, voice raw. “I thought you wanted to help them secede.”

Demma only shrugged. “I did. Just maybe not for the same reasons as you.”

“I’m sorry, councilor. I had been under the impression—”

“You, too, are a dreamer, Yared. One who is easy enough to control, but a dreamer nonetheless.” Demma said, his smile kind and completely, totally discomfiting for it. “If you wish to continue dreaming, then, well, I suppose I have already made my point about the System, yes?”

The rest of the car ride proceeded in silence. The only other words that were spoken to him were by the driver as he helped Yared out of the loaned thawb.

“Mr. Zerezghi, it was a pleasure sharing coffee with you,” he said, and then they were gone, black car disappearing into gold-lit night.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2325

It took Codrin nearly a week to calm down enough to send True Name another message requesting to meet. It began with an apology.

“True Name, first of all, I’d like to apologize for becoming so heated during our last interaction,” ey said to er recording instance. “When confronted with information at such a scale, it is easy to become overwhelmed. I have since had time to read through both my notes from our meeting and the notes from my cocladists, and I think I understand better about what it was that you were trying to tell me. With that in mind, I’d like to meet up again to discuss some of the questions I didn’t get to previously, and to allow you to explain anything you would like. Please let me know when would work best. Thank you.”

Dear was nowhere to be found, this time. The fox had spent much of the last week alternating between requesting to be left alone and crying against eir shoulder. The story of what True Name had told em in combination from the news from Pollux had struck a deep chord with it, and when it did speak on the issue, the conversations would quickly end with *“I did not know. I promise, Codrin, I did not know.”*

So ey waited, ey read, and ey calmed down, and then ey scheduled eir interview.

The response came five minutes later, a simple ping of acknowledgement followed by a calm suggestion that immediately would be as good a time as any.

When Codrin stepped into True Name’s apartment, ey was greeted by the skunk standing where she had the last two interviews, and this time, her expression was one of calm curiosity, rather than that initial warmth and its following coldness.

“Mx. Bălan, it is nice to see you again.”

Ey bowed. “Of course. Again, my apologies for getting so upset last time. It’s a bit of a first for me, but that was a lot to handle all at once.”

“I understand,” the skunk said, returning the bow before gesturing em down the hall once more. “We will have a calmer discussion this time, I believe.”

They sat down on either side of the desk once more, and Codrin noted that there was now a single notepad.

“Now, what would you like to ask me? I suspect you will feel more comfortable if you led.”

Ey nodded. “Alright. Let’s start with Launch this time. It sounds like you were involved with that as well. Can you tell me about that?”

“Of course. Is there any particular area you would like me to begin? Launch is a very broad topic.”

“Well, Ne Jonas told Codrin#Pollux that we—that is, the Bălan clade and the liberal elements of the Ode clade—were guided toward beginning this project. Is that true?”

If the phrase ‘liberal elements’ or its implication that True Name must be one of the conservatives had any effect on the skunk, she didn’t show it. Instead, she simply nodded. “Yes. A project such as this was deemed important in that it would add the spice needed to keep System life on its toes, much as Ne Jonas mentioned. We encouraged this in a calm and orderly fashion. Does that make sense?”

“I suppose. When did the nudges come?”

True name sighed and rested on her forearms on the desk. “To answer that question requires answering a different question. We began by canvassing various art institutes, actually. I do not know why we simply did not track Dear or May Then My Name or any of the A Finger Pointing stanza, as that would probably have shortened our search a good deal. All the same, we came across an exhibition at the Simien Fang School of Art and Design on history and its context in the world of the System by one Ioan Bălan. Do you remember that?”

Codrin lifted eir pen and blinked up to the ceiling, dredging up the memories of eir own gallery exhibition, so many years ago.

Too many years, ago, ey realized. “But that was in 2298.”

True Name nodded. “It was, yes.”

“But the launch project was proposed in 2306, wasn’t it?”

“It was, yes,” the skunk repeated. “Publicly, at least. The project began as a collaboration between the Jonas clade and elements of the Ode clade in 2290.”

“But you said that Michelle told you—”

“To”Do something big. Do something worthy of us“, yes. My up-tree instances told you a slightly different phrase to better guide your line of thought to where we are today. There is nowhere in there that mentions Launch, though, is there?”

“I suppose, not,” ey said.

“But perhaps we ought to talk about Michelle, as well. I also said in that interview that I no longer considered myself Michelle Hadje, having diverged too far from her to be the same person. That is why we had no real compunctions about influencing her as well. That began many years back, of course, but when your root instance makes a suggestion to you, especially on the day she dies, you are quite likely to follow it, are you not? That provides quite a useful tool when interfacing with all elements of the clade, so we decided to take advantage of that early on.”

“You...influenced Michelle to steer the Clade?”

True Name nodded, smiling. “It is what we—the clade, yes, but my stanza in particular—are good at, yes, so we nudged her to suggest what she did to the first lines, all vague pronouncements, which helped us guide everyone toward the project.”

“And did you nudge her to quit?”

The skunk did not speak. A non-answer that was answer enough.

Codrin spent a minute tamping down eir temper. Ey had, after all, promised to remain calm. When ey felt like ey could speak in a level tone of voice, ey asked, “So you began the project of the launch long before it was really an open discussion. What was involved in that?”

“There were three aspects involved. Phys-side political, sys-side political, and technological. Sys-side was, as always, the easiest. Hardly anything to be done. Phys-side, we had to pull quite a few strings. Technologically, it simply involved the right organizations funded, the right people hired at those organizations—as our dear Douglas was—the right scientists put in charge of the right projects. Do you need further details on that? I can speak at length, but want to respect your time and energy, if you have additional questions.”

“To confirm, you influenced Michelle Hadje to ensure the clade worked with the launch project, influenced politics phys-side to ensure that support would be there, and made sure Douglas was part of the team?”

“We made sure that the team was the team it needed to be, Codrin. Douglas was a bonus. He was impressionable at a young age, so we steered him toward being an Ansible tech, ensured he made it to the station, and were happy to see how good a fit he was for the role of launch director.” True Name smiled. “I have talked with him a few times, though he did not know who I was when I did so. He is very nice, and very happy in his position. He is proud of how far he has gotten, and I am proud of him. We guided him precisely as any family member might. Do not confuse influence with numbing mind control. It is important that the people we work with do things of their own, happy volition, even if they were originally our ideas.”

Codrin nodded. “Well, if he’s happy, then I suppose that’s a good thing.”

True Name beamed. “Of course.”

“And Michelle quitting? Ioan told me that May Then My Name put it,” She could not do but what she did.”

“If that is how she felt, then I suppose there is little that I can do to change it, given that she is gone. I apologize that May Then My Name feels upset about it, but again, there is little that I can do to change that.”

Ey sighed, nodded, and wrote down her answer. “And how have you felt now that you’ve pulled all this off?”

True Name looked genuinely thoughtful. “I hesitate to say ‘proud’, but I am pleased that it went off as smoothly as it did. There were a few bumps on the road, but nothing difficult to overcome. We—the Odists you have called conservative—continue to work as we will. Jonas, bless his black heart, continues to work as he will. We stay in contact and keep divergence to a minimum until we are out of harm’s way, and then we ensure that we will keep our own projects safe. Castor, Pollux, and Lagrange. It is all going as close to plan as we could have expected.”

“So you’re...happy?”

“Pleased,” she repeated, laughing. “I will have time to be happy when I am dead. Until then I will continue to be pleased and continue to work.”

Codrin re-capped eir pen and folded eir hands on top of eir notebook. Ey had dozens of other questions ey could ask, but ey felt full. Full to overflowing.

“Does that mean we are done with the interview, Mx. Bălan?” True Name asked, smiling.

“I’m out of energy, as you put it.” Ey sighed. “Unless you have anything else to share, maybe we can put off any further questions until next time. I’m sorry it was so short.”

True name stood, brushing her paws down over her blouse to straighten some imagined crease. “Then I must thank you. It has been surprisingly fulfilling to be able to talk through all of this. It is, as your partner states, irreversibility. We cannot un-launch, we cannot un-diverge from Pollux or the System. You can surely appreciate that.”

“I’ll have to tell it that when I get back. It’ll be excited to hear its idea out in the wild.”

The skunk walked with em to the door and grinned. “It will be fucking pissed, Codrin Bălan, and we both know that.”

When ey returned home and set down eir notes on eir desk, ey quit to merge with the Codrin that had remained behind, who, bearing the sudden weight of exhaustion, walked into the house proper, into the bedroom, and slipped, fully-clothed, beneath the sheets. The interview had not lasted more than half an hour, and yet ey felt drained.

Ey must have dozed off at some point, as ey was woken by Dear crawling into the bed behind em, one of the fox’s skinny arms slinking around eir chest, and then a cold nose pressed against the back of eir neck.

“Afternoon,” ey mumbled.

“Evening, actually. I wanted to let you sleep, but dinner will be up shortly.”

Codrin nodded. “Thanks. Stressful day.”

“It is difficult, is it not?” Dear murmured against eir neck. *“I apologize that this was the way that you had to learn the truth. I apologize that I was not able to tell you what I did know, and I apologize that I did not know the rest. I apologize for many things, my dear. I cannot apologize for what the other elements of the clade did, but I am sorry all the same.”*

“You don’t have to apologize for her. For them. What did you call them before?”

“Batty,” the fox giggled. *“They are all batty.”*

“Very, very batty,” Codrin mumbled, and there was a pleasant silence between the two.

A loud clatter and a shouted curse from the kitchen was followed quickly by Dear forking off an instance to go help its partner, leaving the original fox and Codrin to sit up in bed.

“You know,” ey said. “True Name said that you’d get fucking pissed if I told you this, but I’m going to anyway, because I can’t leave well enough alone. She said that the divergence between the two LVs and the System was irreversible.”

“Oh, did she?” Dear said, laughing. *“What a fraud.”*

“That’s not fucking pissed. I was promised fucking pissed.”

Dear nipped at eir shoulder and grinned toothily at em. *“I am no good at ‘fucking pissed’, but that will have to do.”*

“Ow!” Ey pushed at the fox and grinned. “It’ll have to do. I’m sorry I came home and crashed. Thanks for coming to wake me, Dear.”

“It is my pleasure, of course.” It blinked as, apparently, its forked instance quit and merged. *“Dinner is ready, by the way.”*

“Alright. I’ll probably feel better after food, too.”

“Do you really feel bad, Codrin?”

“Kind of,” ey said. “It was just...a lot. I feel jerked around. It’s depressing.”

Dear nodded and crawled out of the bed, reaching out a paw to help em up. *“It is not a great feeling, no. The results are not so bad, though, are they? We are on a hunk of metal and carbon and silicon and whatever the fuck the LVs are made of hurtling through space at some unimaginable speed. There are two of us, of our little families, living two completely separate lives, and both of us are in love. And Ioan and May Then My name are back at the station being adorable nerds together or whatever it is they do, and perhaps even they are in love.”*

Codrin laughed.

"The means were unsavory, to put it lightly--"

"Extremely lightly."

"Well, yes. The means were unsavory to an extreme, but the ends are not so bad, are they, my dear?"

"No." Codrin finally allowed emself to be pulled to eir feet, smoothing out eir rumpled clothing. "No, I suppose not."

True Name — 2125

The Council of Eight met before the news of the secession amendment passing was published in the perisystem news feeds for those who tracked such information sys-side. They agreed, without even needing to talk about it, that it would be nice to have a small celebration of success before everyone was doing it. Something comfortable, cheerful, with friends.

To that end, they met at Debarre's house, a low, rambling house plugged squarely into the side of a hill, walk-out basement looking out over a wooded lawn. The neighborhood had several such houses, widely spaced, where a few of Debarre's friends that he'd met both on and off the System had set up a comfortable living, enough space to be alone, enough friends to make it worthwhile.

The plus-side of the house was that the patio for the walk-out basement was beneath an overhanging deck, protecting the occupants from the slow but steady snowfall.

"I don't understand why you had to make it cold," user11824 grumbled.

"It's New Years day, dude." Debarre laughed. "It's supposed to be cold."

"Fucking Americans, I swear to God. I'm from New Zealand. New Years is not cold."

The wandering discussion took place around a chiminea radiating warmth. An indentation had been made in the side of the clay body of the fireplace into which a kettle had been placed, mulled wine slowly simmering. True Name found it immensely enjoyable. It reminded her quite a bit of winters with her grandparents on the east coast. Made sense, of course, given where Debarre was originally from.

"I like it," Zeke rumbled. "I only ever got to see snow once, and that was in Yakutsk when I was uploading."

The three S-R Bloc goons laughed. "There's not that much snow out there," one of them said. "But I'm glad you got to see it at least once."

The bundle of rags nodded appreciatively, extending a pseudopod of an arm to ladle more of the wine into his mug.

"Where's Jonas?" Debarre asked True Name.

"Running late, I guess. I am not his keeper."

"I know, I just figured since—" He was interrupted by a muffled doorbell as someone entered the sim, followed by Jonas (Ar Jonas, True Name guessed) ambling around the side of the house to join them.

"*Et voilà*," she said, grinning.

"What?" Jonas laughed. "What'd I do?"

"You were late, Debarre was worried, I was bored," user11824 drawled.

“Well, sorry about that. Just checking in with our contact phys-side. He’s depressed.”

Zeke began ladling a cup of the heated wine for Jonas. “Why was he depressed. It passed, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, well, apparently he’s getting pressure from the NEAC government. They’re happy enough about the bill passing, but they want to control his DDR participation going forward. He’s just mopey.”

Debarre growled quietly, tail bristling out. “The DDR was a fucking mistake, anyway.”

“Yes,” True Name said. “But it got us this, at least, and now we do not need to worry about it again.”

Debarre shrugged.

Zeke asked, “So when does it all come into effect?”

“The 21st, same day as the launch,” Jonas said. “We shouldn’t notice anything except maybe a jump in sys-time if there’s any downtime getting us set up.”

“What’s the chance of that happening?”

“Around five percent.”

“Chance of data loss?”

“Less than a tenth of a percent.”

“And catastrophic failure?”

Jonas grinned. “There were a lot of zeroes before that six, I can tell you that. I didn’t count them.”

True Name added, “It would have to require not only the launch going wrong, but the backup System failing, and from what our friends say, it is far away from the launch site.”

“In the North, yes. Launch site is in Western China.”

Zeke nodded, sipped from his wine, and rasped, “Best we can hope for, then.”

user11824 shrugged. “It’d be a boring as hell end. Are we going to have a big celebration or anything?”

“I do not see why not,” True Name said. “We can get a few of the sims to set up fireworks and we can spread the word through perisystem news.”

“We can celebrate now, too,” Debarre said, grinning. “I went through all this fucking trouble and we’re talking shop. Drink your wine, warm your hands by the fire, *literally* anything but more shop talk.”

And so they did. They talked, they stayed warm around the chiminea, and they drank. Debarre was the first to get truly drunk, breaking into Auld Lang Syne. When no one joined in, the weasel laughed and danced around the ring of council-members, calling them all boring, which got a grin out of even user11824.

As the evening wore on and, one by one, the rest of the council joined Debarre in his drunkenness, the conversations grew more earnest, more heartfelt. Several toasts were made. The final one was to, per True Name, “The chance to do whatever the fuck we want.”

After that, they agreed to meet the next day and give statements for the wider celebrations, and then all headed back to their home sims.

Others headed back, perhaps. But after an appropriate delay, True Name let the drunkenness fade and went, instead to Jonas’s apartment. Two of the Jonases were sitting on the couch, talking possibilities for the next year.

“Well?” one of them asked. Prime, she supposed.

“Well, we made it,” she said, slouching on the stool Jonas had long since added to the furniture once the skunk had started coming by regularly. “And now we can finally work on something else.”

He laughed. "Getting bored of the same old secession arguments?"

"Oh, I have been working on other things on the side, do not worry, but it will be nice to do so more openly."

"Tell me about them."

She thought for a moment, tallying up the ones she was comfortable discussing with Jonas. "The three big ones are, I think, ensuring stability and growth via financial and political means, which I have other instances currently working on. The second is disrupting and then disbanding the Council—"

Jonas sat up straighter at this.

"—in order to give us more latitude to do our work without having to run it by others. It is not like the System needs any governance, anyway."

"Any *open* governance," Jonas corrected.

"Of course. There will still be work to do."

"And what's the third?"

"Finding any patterns that we have left in our wake and smoothing them out. The first step will be convincing Yared to upload. He is less dangerous up here. I do not expect that to be difficult."

Jonas nodded. "Makes sense. Do you think we've left many patterns?"

She shook her head. "No, not yet. But I think it best to get in the practice. I would like to begin to think on the scale of centuries, and if we are to do that, I think it best to shape history both as we go and in retrospect."

"Good plan," he said, slouching back into the couch and grinning.

The skunk grinned back, far more toothily, her tail giving a lazy swish. "And if you are thinking of calling me a politician, I would like to cordially invite you to consider the consequences of your actions."

"Fine." He laughed, rolling his eyes. "So, are you at least happy with the way things are going?"

"I am pleased, yes. It is a good first step. There is almost no chance of the decision being reversed down the line, and if we make it another fifty years, the concept of the System or any individuals living here remaining under the wing of any national entity will have left the collective subconscious. It will also work to our advantage that there is no un-uploading. An irreversible process that lands one in a place that appears to have no influence on the outside world will nullify the arguments of many of our detractors."

"Just ensure they upload, right."

True Name nodded. "Yes. And once the Council is out of the way, we should be good to go."

"And how do you propose to do that?" he asked.

"It will be easy enough. Just take on more and more responsibility under the guise of helping out, start accepting less and less assistance, then begin suggesting that, since it is all going so smoothly, maybe it is not needed anymore. If we work with phys-side techs in order to drop the reputation cost of forking and simulation, that will also help."

"Think any of them will complain?"

"Not until it is too late, and by then, it will all be too difficult to form another Council, right?"

Jonas nodded. "Works for me. Shall we start divvying up tasks, then?"

She nodded. "There is much to be done."

Ioan Bălan — 2326

“We’re nearing the point of this project where we’re considering pulling together all of our notes. We have quite a bit already, certainly enough for an overview, and if we decide to do a second volume as a deeper dive, we can look into that later.” Ioan smiled to the skunk across the table from em, one ey felt ey had so many reasons to fear. “So this interview is mostly meant to wrap everything up, fill in a few gaps here and there. Does that sound alright?”

“Of course,” True Name said, smiling. “I have read over the summary that you sent me, and it looks fairly complete, but I will answer any question you ask.”

Ioan collected eir thoughts for a moment, testing eir pen’s nib against the paper. “Right. Okay. The first thing I’d like to ask is that you’ve given us a good bit of information about your why, how, and when for many of the things that you did around Secession and Launch. I think we’ve got an idea of what, too, but it seems almost too big to grasp at a glance, so I’d like to know who all was involved.”

“I am assuming you mean in more detail than just us and the Jonas clade, yes?” She tilted her head when Ioan nodded, apparently considering the best way to answer. “I, like Jonas Prime did for his clade, acted as the point of contact for the Ode clade in this endeavor. However, Jonas’s methods tended toward that of a hydra: he coordinated with all of his instances working on various aspects only as much as was required to keep them from stepping on each other’s toes.

“I was much more akin to the central nervous system for the Odists. The Bălan clade has interviewed Why Ask Questions, End Waking, and May Then My Name, but the entirety of my stanza was working for me at one point or another—”

“May is in your stanza,” Ioan said, frowning.

True Name winked, then continued, “But there were several others from other stanzas, as well. Praiseworthy and Qoheleth, yes, but many of the first lines and several of their initial forks helped out quite a bit. Even Hammered Silver, in her own way, helped. She kept Michelle company, helped her throughout the long years, They grew quite close, and through her, I was able to accomplish what I required from Michelle.”

“Is that the difference between the liberal and conservative elements of the clade? The ones who were under your employ and aligned to it, and those who weren’t?”

The skunk laughed openly. “They are silly names, are they not? There are hardly categories so neat, Ioan. We cannot even make a spectrum, can we? All of us had our different jobs, as mentioned. Praiseworthy provided her services as propagandist between productions. Qoheleth rewrote the memories of the System itself, and

though he suffered for it, he was good at his job. Hammered Silver sat with Michelle, Why Ask Questions and Answers Will Not Help managed the phys- and sys-side politics, and End Waking kept his fingers in the finances. That is hardly a spectrum from liberal to conservative, is it?”

Ioan shrugged, waited for her to continue.

“As you will,” she said, grinning. “If there is to be a divide between liberals and conservatives, then, it must be in the scale of their thoughts, of their actions. Those who you and Dear and, who knows, perhaps even May Then My Name call conservatives think on the scale of centuries. Their thoughts are bound up at the level of species, their actions work on a global scale. More than a global scale, for the System is not on the globe, and the LVs are well on their way out of the solar system now, are they not?”

“And the liberals think too small?” Ey shook eir head, adding, “I guess that’s a value judgement. The liberals think smaller? Like on the individual scale?”

“Oh, you had it right the first time. The liberals think too small. They are completely welcome to, of course. Take Dear and Serene, for instance. It is in no way wrong for them to think about the work that they do. They consider the ways in which sims and instances affect those that interact with them, and then they play on those effects like a finely tuned instrument. It speaks to a level of...how should I put this? It bespeaks a showmanship that I—that Michelle, for that matter—could not hope to achieve. They are the consummate performers.

“But what can they do with that? What use do they believe they are to the System? I do not mean that in a simple utilitarian sense, or at least not only in that sense, but I wonder if they, as artists, consider the end goals of their work. Do not let Dear tell you otherwise, it is an artist, and a very fine one, but all its art accomplishes is all any art accomplishes. It is transgressive without being subversive. It does not move the population to greater goals.”

“Isn’t that okay though? For an artist, I mean. Art doesn’t always have to inspire our societies to better themselves or our societies, does it?”

“Of course not,” True Name said, smiling. “Art can be all of those things and still be fine. It can be an endeavor that adds to the world around it, even if it does not push it to realize greater capabilities. That is the opposing view to the conservatives. The names do not fit, do you see? The conservative elements of the Ode clade are those who steer and guide and lead and always hunt for greater potential. The liberal elements of the Ode clade are the artists dropped within, the storytellers, the landscape artists, the lovers and dancers and actors. The conservatives forge, the liberals hone. Both of us live wholly in the work that we have before us, and both of us love what we do.”

Ioan’s hand brushed across eir page in an even cadence as she spoke, and when ey reached the end of the line, ey paused, formulating eir next question. “Where did all of this come from?”

“Can you expand on that?”

“This,” ey said, waving eir hand at True Name, at the page. “To hear tell from the other Odists, this work began essentially as soon as you were forked off from Michelle. Each of you seemed to individuate immediately, whereas it took Codrin far longer to do so. Years, even. Even after the name change, after ey moved in with Dear and its partner, ey still could have just as easily been a Ioan. From the way it sounds, you ceased being Michelle as soon as you were instantiated. Where did that come from?”

The skunk looked thoughtful for a moment, then closed her eyes. The look of concentration on her face

grew, and then, for a few short seconds, she became like Michelle. Ey saw for the first time in years that wavering between Michelle and Sasha, those waves of skunk/human/skunk/human/skunk that washed over her form, and always on her face, that look of exhaustion, of the concentration needed to hold it together.

And as True Name focused on recalling that bit of Michelle that lingered from the past, she forked off copy after copy of herself, each instance lasting only a fraction of a second, but throughout the display, Ioan saw the ways in which they differed. First, a Michelle would flick into existence, and then a Sasha. First, a skunk that looked happy, then a human that looked to be in agony. Always in flux, always tied to whatever it was that True Name must have been experiencing at that point.

And then, it was over.

The skunk puffed out a pent-up breath, laughing and fanning her face with a paw. “That was way fucking harder than I remember it being. I have not tried that trick in decades.”

Ioan blinked, frowned. “You differ because of when it was that Michelle forked?”

“That is part of it,” True Name said, catching her breath. “I read your notes, do you remember what it was that Douglas said about having a fever?”

Ey prowled through the exo ey had devoted to this project, rifling through files of memories, then recited, “I had a very high fever, and when it was at its worst, I felt as though I was being offered a chance to peek behind a curtain, or at least see the shadows moving around backstage beneath the hem of it.”

“Do you imagine that what Michelle was feeling at any time, or at least on any particularly bad day, was any different?” Her expression darkened. “When you are lost, when you are locked in your mirrored cage, any cord that tied a thought to reality or your concept of self is slowly severed. Michelle was lucky. She was in there for sixteen hours, she was told, and she still came out like this. Many of her thoughts remained tethered, enough for her to continue to live and exist in the world for a little while, but the longer she lived, the more of those frayed cords began to break, and she was not just, as Douglas put it, “granted a glimpse of some thinner reality”, but she found herself stuck there.

“When she forked, wherever she was, that was what we became. The state of her mind in flux, her body in flux, became the state that led to us. Perhaps I was pinned to a memory, however fleeting, of the political systems that led to her getting lost. Perhaps Praiseworthy was pinned to memories of playing a role in a play.”

Ioan scribbled furiously to keep up, as the skunk’s language flowed more easily and became more flowery.

“But this is just speculation, Mx. Bălan. We do not know why we differ so much, but we do, and that is the best guess we have. The evidence you have just seen is all we have to back it up, but you have seen what was borne from it. All of the stanzas have their role, and mine just happens to be that of politics. We influence people. It is just what we do.”

“Which is why your stanza was able to dive so easily into their associated tasks. They had your memories, of course, but they also had that same drive.”

She beamed at em. “Precisely. I will not enumerate them all, but you can, if you like, think of them as a microcosm of that conservative-liberal spectrum, with me at the conservative end, working on the scale of centuries and populations, and your May Then My Name at the other, liberal end.”

“What did May do? What was her task?”

“That is for her to tell.”

“No, True Name. You’re here, it’s your story. You promised me that you’d expand on the question of who, and I want you to live up to that promise now.” Ey was surprised at the anger in eir own voice. There was a tightness in eir chest, an anxiety, an emotion somewhere between protectiveness and betrayal, stemming from the answer that hovered over the table, there in eir house. Eir and May’s house, now. May, who had left on some drummed up errand as soon as True Name had arrived, a look of what ey could only describe as torment on her face. Ey *knew* ey should ask her, rather than True Name, and yet... “What did May do?”

She stood from her chair and walked around the corner of the table to where ey remained stubbornly seated. “If you do not wish to be unhappy with the answers to difficult questions, Ioan,” she said, tousling eir hair. “Then you do not need to ask them.”

She smiled down to em. In that smile was a plastic kindness, and in that kindness was a loathing ey could not fathom. And then she quit.

Michelle Hadje/Sasha — 2151

In the endless, rolling field of dandelions, five people gathered.

Two of them were shaped like a woman. Short. Dark, curly hair. Round of cheek and soft of eye.

Two of them were shaped like skunks. Thick, soft fur. Tails as long as their bodies, as wide as their torsos.

The two types were alike in so many ways. The softness evident between the two disparate species was the same softness. The roundness to the cheeks, despite the fur, was the same roundness. The eyes bore the same expressive empathy.

And before them sat one who was not like any of the others, and yet was exactly like all of them. When she focused, she was able to look like skunk or like human, and her eyes were able to share in some of that softness, but when she lost focus, waves of both crashed against her in a violent tempest, splashing fur up over cheeks, or skin down over paws.

“I am sorry,” she said through a dry throat, then laughed. “I am having a bad day.”

Among the four in front of her, there were two expressions. The two sitting at the ends of the row looked as though they were struggling to keep from crying, and two in the middle frowned, as though tamping down some emotion that wavered between fear and disappointment.

“Anyway,” Michelle/Sasha said. “I guess I just wanted to get a few of us together to confirm some thoughts that I have been having of late.”

“Is this about the Council?” the woman sitting on the inside, To Pray For The End Of Endings, asked.

“Well, yes and no. My thoughts on the council were the root of it. It is just...did I fuck up?”

At this, the skunk sitting on the end, May Then My Name Die With Me, burst into tears.

“Fuck up how?” To Pray asked.

Michelle/Sasha sighed, shrugged, and hugged her knees to her chest, resting her chin/snout on them. “I did not think things through very well when I created the clade. I thought that it might give me a vacation. A chance to figure out what was wrong, maybe fork my way out of this...well, this.” She gestured at herself, smiling tiredly. “But now I feel like I have fucked up. Half of the clade dissolved the Council and the other half has rejected the first and spun off to do its own thing. If I had taken a week off and figured out that I could fork myself into one shape or the other and just done that, perhaps there would still be a Council.”

The skunk beside To Pray, If I Am To Bathe In Dreams, shrugged. “You may have fucked up, yes, but there is no going back. What was the phrase? There is no going and there is no back? The Council is dissolved and nothing really changed. Jonas is doing Jonas things. Odists are doing Odist things, whatever those are. This is

where you are. I mean this as an earnest question, but would you be able to choose between Michelle and Sasha?”

“No, I do not think I could,” she sighed. She just wished she could be Sasha for a little bit, just so that she could get the comfort of being petted by Memory Is A Mirror Of Hammered Silver/she just wished she could be Michelle for a little bit so that May Then My Name Die With Me could brush her hair. “And I think that is part of the problem, anyway. I think that if I were to fork, I would be whatever I was when I did so, and I think that goes beyond just species.”

To Pray grinned, “I suppose so. You could have wound up like True Name or Life Breeds Life and taken over the world.”

May Then My Name smiled shakily. “Taking over the world is not so bad.”

“It definitely fucking is, May,” In Dreams said. “But I stand by what I said. You did what you did and that is an immutable fact. You cannot un-fork, Michelle. You cannot become what you were then, Sasha, you can only become what you will be.”

“I do not think that you fucked up, dear.” Hammered silver plucked a dandelion and spun it between her fingers. “You may *be* fucked up, if you somehow contained what it takes to be all the clade as one within you, but even that is not your fault.”

“The fuck-up, then would be the fact that I did not acknowledge that.”

In Dreams pulled up a whole handful of grass and flowers and threw it at her, grinning. “Do not mope. It does not become you.”

Sasha/Michelle laughed, shrugged, and tried to tuck one of the flowers behind her ear, but as soon as a shift of form rolled across her face, it fell to the ground.

She wished that she could be just one thing for a little while, but seeing the outcome of a scattered mind creating copy after copy of herself, she knew that there was no solution that did not run the risk of becoming what she did not want to be.

She wished that she could be just one thing so that she could be touched. The shifting form made any touch unnerving, made her feel disgusting. She wished that for herself, and for May Then My Name, who looked as though she was using every ounce of willpower she had to keep from going in for a hug.

Being like her would not be so bad, Michelle/Sasha thought. But even then, that is not all of me.

They sat in silence for a while, then, this five-pack of her, and, regardless of what they thought about, she thought about empathy and mirrors of hammered silver and the end of memories, there, beneath the roots.

I think I died, back then, Sasha thought/“I think I died back then,” Michelle said.

To Pray frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I think I just gave everything I had to them. To you. “Two weeks,” I remember thinking. “The first lines can take my place for two weeks, and then I will be back on the council, and they can do their own thing.” But I think that I died. There was no returning to the council, because there was no more Sasha or Michelle.”

“And what is the fallout of being a dead woman walking?”

“I do not know. I think that it means that I have stopped. I do not know if there is a path forward for me that involves me being anything other than what I am now. I died because with that act I cannot move on from where I am.”

Hammered Silver averted her eyes. “I am not comfortable with that language.”

Michelle/Sasha shrugged helplessly. "I am sorry. Like I said, I am having a bad day."

"Sasha," May Then My Name said. "Why did you call us here? I do not think it is because you feel like you fucked up or like you died. Why are we here?"

"I guess I just wanted to see proof that at least some of the clade are good people. I know Hammered Silver is. She comes by at least once a day. I know you two are—" She nodded at To Pray and In Dreams. "—because you have kept me up to date on the others. And I do not think May could swat a fly without feeling bad about it."

The skunk stuck her tongue out, but did not disagree.

"Reassurance," Hammered Silver muttered. "Validation, maybe? Proof that you are not just the things that you hate about yourself?"

Sasha/Michelle nodded.

"Where do you think they came from, then? Where did we come from?"

Michelle/Sasha laughed. "I have no idea. Maybe you are the part of me that always wanted to be a mother. Maybe True Name is that bit of myself that always fears that asking for what I want is manipulation, or the mirror image of that. I really do not know."

"It is okay to have fears," Hammered Silver said gently. "Like, it is legal. You will not get arrested for being afraid."

They all grinned.

"But," she continued. "Do not always dwell in them. Resent True Name and Life Breeds Life for a little while, then go back to remembering that you always wanted to be a mom and that you still love acting even after you became a director and that you really, really fucking love dandelions."

"Seriously," In Dreams said. "To an almost unhealthy level. This is an intervention, Michelle. You need to chill with the dandelions."

As the cloud of rumination began to lift, and as she laughed, she began to settle down into Michelle. Just Michelle. Just herself. "They cannot be that bad. They just got stuck in my head, and now I cannot get them out."

"Snorting pollen off the back of your hand in the back parking lot," To Pray said, picking up on the mood. "I am honestly ashamed of you."

"My name is May Then My Name Die With me," the skunk said, clambering to her feet. "And I am a dandelion-aholic."

"Hi, May Then My Name," the others sing-songed.

And then she was Michelle. At least for a little while, she was just Michelle, and May Then My Name could brush her hair and they could talk about something else, and she could allow the thought that perhaps even the dead can be happy.

Ioan Bălan — 2326

Ioan was still sitting at the table, ruminating, when May returned from her errand. Something that she saw in eir face made her wilt, and when she walked, she almost slunk, skirting the edge of the room, walking silently as though to keep from waking em up, or as though she was bearing some unknowable guilt. When she sat on the stool that True Name had been using, she looked small, closed in on herself. Not just smaller than True Name, though she was also that, but diminished from her usual self.

She did not speak.

Finally, Ioan capped eir pen, set it atop eir notes, and pushed them off to the side of the table. Ey folded eir arms on the tabletop and rested eir forehead on them. “I’m tired, May.”

The skunk still did not speak. Did not even move, to the point where Ioan questioned whether she might be holding her breath.

Ey lifted eir head again, saying. “I’m tired and I’m upset and I don’t know what to do.”

She nodded. “I expected you would be. I am sorry, Io—”

“What did you do?” ey said, cutting her off. “What was your role in all of this?”

May flinched back as though slapped. “Ioan, I do not—”

“May, I just need to know.”

She stayed silent, and after a minute, ey sighed.

“We talked about this early on, about how you thought that I’d get upset, and that you were worried that I’d get upset at you.”

She nodded, silent still.

“And I am. I’m upset and tired and...I don’t know. Sad? Numb? Something like that. I can’t promise that I won’t be upset at you, and I really don’t want this to go into either of our projects, but please, May, I need to know.”

“For the sake of completion?”

Ey nodded. “For that, sure, but also for the sake of me, or us.”

“It is nothing terribly dramatic, taken on its own,” she admitted. “Though I knew that you would not learn about it until after you learned about everything else and in context, I...well. That was my worry.” There was a long pause before she asked, “Do you know what each of the stanzas did?”

“No, I don’t think so. Or, maybe I know a few, but if it helps, you can tell me about the rest.”

“Alright,” she said. “The ones I think you know are Praiseworthy, who loosely focused on propaganda and

shaping sentiment; Qoheleth, who focused on shaping history; and True Name, who focused on political manipulation. Hammered Silver was written off by those three, because she was all that was motherly in Michelle. She wanted to take care of her, and, after a while, they were too cynical to think it worthwhile. I think I understand her stanza better than my own.

“I Am At A Loss For Images In This End Of Days focused on observing. Initially, this was borne out of watching and critiquing performances, but quickly grew to spying. Some of her stanza doubtless watches us still.

“Oh, But To Whom Do I Speak These Words kept an eye on religions. Her stanza focused on both phys- and sys-side religions as areas of interest. She has returned to the Judaism of our grandparents. We have not had much to talk about through the years.

“Among Those Who Create Are Those Who Forge started out by watching creatives here on the System, perhaps unsurprisingly, but grew bored and wandered off to do their own thing.

“Time Is A Finger Pointed At Itself helped both Praiseworthy and Qoheleth as a speech writer, though she was more into theatre than whatever work they gave her. I must take you to one of her shows.

“If I Am To Bathe In Dreams acted as the grounding element for much of the clade. She became something of a therapist. I have leaned on her often.

“May One Day Death Itself Not Die forked off all ten instances as soon as she could and then refused to fork again. I think she was left with much of that disconnect from reality that Michelle felt.”

“Why are you telling me this, May?” ey asked.

“Because I need you to understand that the first lines each wound up with a bit of Michelle, yes, but from there, their forks were all riffs on that theme. You have doubtless figured that out by now. I told you early on that True Name forked me off to feel. She wanted to ensure that she also had a way to sway individuals, sys-side, as others focused on large groups.

“So she forked to create me, and then we discussed how best to accomplish that, and through the various mutation algos, I softened my appearance to be cuter and rounder, softened my voice, learned how to smile more earnestly, and did all the things I could think of to make myself as appealing as possible, whether as human or skunk.”

Ey frowned. “That doesn’t sound like feeling.”

“That is because True Name did this on a whim, in the most True Name way possible, and I do not think she expected me to be anything but as manipulative as her. She wanted another True Name for a different purpose. In order to influence someone on a truly individual level, though, you must be able to understand them, and I began to work towards that. I did not tell her at first. I changed myself physically, and then as I went out into the System to learn how to manipulate individuals, I kept on forking and changing whenever I found myself coming to a new conclusion. In short, I guess I grew a sense of empathy.”

“Why didn’t you tell her?”

May smiled cautiously. “Did she seem like the kind of person who puts stock in feelings?”

Ey shook eir head.

“Right. Well, it is not so difficult to imagine that, after a while, she began to notice that I kept getting much closer to those that I was supposed to engage with than was strictly required. I was supposed to watch them, influence them, shift their attention. I was supposed to use the System to my full advantage to get them to do

what I—what we—wanted.”

“You were supposed to get them to grow dandelions.”

The skunk brightened and nodded. “Yes. The System is more subtle than we give it credit for. Our subconscious can affect it as much as our conscious minds, so I would hint and murmur and insinuate and make myself a part of their dreams, and then use that to get them to do things of their own volition. There is nothing magic about it. It is simply years in theatre followed by centuries of perfecting the art of social interaction.”

“That’s pretty damn manipulative,” ey said.

What brightness had reached her face faded again. “It was. I was a hell of a tool before I grew my own conscience.”

“So, you started to feel bad?”

“I started to *feel*, Ioan. Bad, yes, but I started to feel. True Name does not do much of that. I started to feel, and when I started to feel love, affection, friendship...well, those felt good, so I’d fork again to cement those more firmly in place.”

“But you still manipulated those around you.”

“I...yes,” she said. Her ears were all but laid back flat against her skull.

“For how long?”

“I am technically still supposed to be doing that, but—” She quickly held up a paw. “—I only lasted about about a decade as a tool for manipulation before I began to feel too much. I became too hard for her to control directly. She could not tell me, “Go influence that man” or whatever. The only way she knew to control me was to point me toward who she wanted influenced, set me loose, and hope that I did the right thing on accident, because all I would do is become best friends or lovers or trusted confidants. I could not in good conscience take an idea from True Name and make the person do what she wanted, because I actually had a conscience. It was almost a trauma response, in the end. I fawned because that was how I felt safest.”

Ioan felt the tension in eir shoulders, neck, and back. Felt the way ey was holding emself tightly wound. “And me? Did she point you towards me?”

The skunk shrank further. She looked as though if she could curl into a ball, shrink to nothing, and disappear, she would. She looked miserable.

“May?”

She stayed silent.

“May, please.”

“Yes, she did.”

“So that you could steer me?”

“Yes.”

“So that you could, what, make me like you? Become my lover or trusted confidant?”

There were no words from the skunk. She just sat, shoulders shaking.

Ioan let out a breath, realizing partway through that it was coming out as a laugh. “That’s really fucked up, May.”

“Ioan, let me tell you a story.” She was crying silently now, looking down at her paws. “In the beginning, the gods created the world. They built it up, atom by atom, molecule by molecule. They used eyes like lasers to

guide one after another into ordered formations, ranks upon ranks, and then set them to marching. The gods built the world and then they smiled at it from up above. They looked down on their creation and saw all of the possibilities of perfection that it held, of the unending life and endless bliss.”

Her words were unsteady, clouded by tears, but she continued, “The gods built the world because they desired to shape it to their will. They wanted to bend the world into something that they could direct this way and that, because after all, could they not do that with their atoms and molecules? A world that is orderly! Imagine the wonders they could create! The wills they could work!

“So the gods set the world to spinning and watched and waited as it began to blossom and bloom. When the time was ripe, they reached down their hands to touch the world, and instead found that they had become the wind and the tides and the rain and the snow and the sunlight and the moonlight. They reached down to touch the world and shape it to their will, and found that they had become impersonal forces in the face of absolute independence. The world they created could not be controlled, because there is no such thing as a world that can be controlled. They reached down, became impersonal forces, and the lives within the world bundled their coats up tighter at the north wind or took their hats off when the sun shone bright, but never could they change a single mind.”

A long silence followed May’s myth, broken only by the soft sounds of her crying.

Ey thought about these gods, these impersonal forces trying to work their wills on the world. Were they True Name and Jonas? Were they the System engineers? Were they those cynical politicians who had created the lost, had created Michelle and True Name and May and Dear in the first place?

Did it even matter?

This is who they were. This is where they wound up. Impersonal forces do not negate personal decisions.

Ey sighed.

“I believe you,” ey said, reaching a hand out across the table, palm up.

“You believe me what?” she mumbled, still sniffing.

“I believe that you grew a sense of empathy and a conscience. I believe you couldn’t manipulate a hair off my head unless you thought I would live a happier, more fulfilling life without it.”

The skunk laughed through the tears, a choked and stifled sound. She finally reached out and set one of her paws in Ioan’s hand. “Even then, I would feel bad.”

“I believe that, too,” ey said, brushing a thumb over her fingers. “I believe that you’re genuine, is what I’m trying to say. You just happened to have the craziest fucking family I’ve ever met.”

At this, May laughed in earnest, rolling her eyes and taking a deep breath to calm down. “Yes, you are right. I am sorry that they are upsetting people, and that I am a part of that, that I did what I do and that you were their goal. The last thing that I want to do is hurt you.”

Ioan nodded. “I believe you. It’s fucked up, but that’s on them.”

They sat for a while longer, hand in paw across the table, while she calmed down and ey thought. Ey was already pulling together the threads of the story that would become eir history, bit by bit, letter by letter, interview by interview, conversation by conversation.

“May?” ey asked, struck by a memory.

“Mm?”

“Are we together? I mean, are we a couple?”

The skunk sat up straighter, giving em a funny look, then burst into a fit of giggles. “Ioan Bălan, that is the dumbest fucking question you have asked throughout this entire project.”

Ey blinked, nonplussed.

“What do you think?” She smiled pityingly at em. “Are we?”

“That’s a weirdly complicated question after the conversation we just had,” ey said.

“We just came to the conclusion that you believed me.”

“I do!” Ey frowned. “I mean, of course I do.”

“So answer the question.”

“I...yes?”

“Is *that* a question?”

Ey shook eir head. “I guess not.”

“I told Douglas that I would wait for you to bring up the topic, and that when you did, I would make fun of you for a solid hour,” she said, grinning. “But you look like your head is about to explode, so I will save that for another day. You get stuck up in there so easily, my dear.”

“Really? Douglas is the one that got me thinking about asking in the first place.”

The skunk stood up from her stool, drawing Ioan out of eir seat by the hand she still held. “Because of course he did. Leave it to a Hadje to play two sides off each other.”

Ey laughed, drew her into a hug, and kissed the top of her snout.

After May had cleaned up, as they sat on the bench swing, looking out over the dandelion-speckled yard, Ioan mused. “You know, I was thinking something.”

“Color me surprised.”

Ey chose to let the comment pass. “Dear kept talking about irreversibility at its death day party.”

“It was declaiming,” May murmured. “It has a way of doing that.”

“No kidding,” Ey reached a hand up to ruffle it over May’s ears. “But I guess this is irreversible, too, isn’t it?”

“What, you finally figuring out that we have been in a relationship for like two years?”

“Kind of.”

May elbowed em in the side. “You are kidding, right?”

“Ow! No, seriously,” ey said, rubbing at eir side. “Codrin forked to work on the Qoheleth project, *then* got in a relationship with Dear.”

A spark of comprehension lit up May’s eyes and she grinned wide. “But you did not.”

“No.” Ey shrugged. “I was the Bălan who didn’t wind up in a relationship with Dear, because that was my up-tree instance’s experience. I can’t go back and fork before we met or started working together or dating.”

She laughed and shook her head, draping herself across eir lap, resting her head on folded arms. “You are stuck with me, Mx. Bălan. Pet my tail, please.”

Ey did as ordered, brushing fingers through thick fur as ey thought. The fox had been right, ey supposed. There was at least some beauty in the irreversible.

One more one-way act floated to the surface in eir mind. “Does Michelle’s sim still exist, by the way? I’ve heard so much about it by now.”

May frowned. “Yes. Why?”

“Well, we’re coming up on the one-year anniversary of Launch, right? Maybe we can do a picnic there, think about where this all started, get blitzed on champagne. Bit of a memorial, you know?”

She laughed. “You know, why the fuck not. It has been years since I have visited. We can make muffins and compare the smell with the dandelions.”

Ey grinned, nodded, and made a mental note to ensure that Douglas remembered the suggestion ey’d given almost a year back, that he’d be ready to upload in time.

Codrin Bălan#Pollux—2326

Interview with Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled#Pollux

On the reasons for vesting entirely in the Launch

Codrin Bălan#Pollux

Systime: 202+22 1208

Codrin Bălan#Pollux: Thanks for agreeing to this, Dear. I think we're both in a better spot for it now.

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled: Of course, my dear. I would still like to discuss some of the same topics, but I will try to be more sensitive about them.

Codrin: We'll make it work. I'll start where I did last time, then. How are you feeling?

Dear: I am feeling relieved, I suppose. I am feeling relieved and tired.

Codrin: How so?

Dear: To say that a lot has happened in the last twelve months is not quite true. Very little that counts as dramatic or anything has happened. There were interviews by the Bălan clade and that is about it. The most dramatic of those took place on the other LV however many billions of miles away, and that was simply one of you getting bounced from a sim, yes? No assassinations. Nothing has happened that feels like it should lead to exhaustion, and yet I am quite worn out by the sheer amount of information uncovered.

Codrin: Emotionally exhausted, perhaps? Like you had to relive two hundred years in the space of one?

Dear: That is a large part of it, yes. Emotionally exhausted, worn out by the shift of understanding between our two clades.

Codrin: I suppose we're pretty thoroughly intertwined now, aren't we?

Dear: [laughter] Yes, now that Ioan has picked up on May Then My Name's rather blunt hints.

Codrin: Hey, it takes time.

Dear: And I have been training you for two decades, so there is also that.

Codrin: Yes. Well, can you expand on how you feel relieved?

Dear: I will try. There is a lot that the Ode clade has done that has come to light in the last year, and while I cannot say that I was personally a part of much of that, I have also borne that knowledge. I also knew those secrets. Not having to hold them constantly at bay from even those that I am closest to has let off that pressure.

Codrin: Thank you for telling us, too. I know that True Name said we won't see a huge reaction from this given her past work, but it's still a relief to hear for me, as well. Now, do you have any additional thoughts on why you decided to join the Launch? I'm particularly interested on your thoughts on investing entirely in it, but I suspect those will come up in separate questions.

Dear: They almost certainly will, yes. Well. [pauses] Yes. I believe I said before that a large part of it is due to me being a hopeless romantic. A large part of that still stands. I am excited to see the galaxy, as it were, and it still tickles me to know that I am speeding away from Earth at some ludicrous speed and that there is absolutely no way back.

Codrin: Does that play into your thoughts on irreversibility?

Dear: [laughter] Of course, my dear. There is no way back. The Ansible on the launch is no longer connected with the one on Earth, by agreement with the launch commission that this be a one-and-done project, at least for now. If they create additional LVs down the line, then perhaps they will have separate conversations. There is no going and there is no back, yes? We are here, and we will never see Earth, the station, or the System again. That is very appealing to the romantic in me.

Codrin: I think you also said you were getting bored, too.

Dear: Yes. Life is a chronic condition, boredom is terminal.

Codrin: You're a fox of many quips.

Dear: Yes, I am. Sue me.

Codrin: [laughter] Well, do you have other reasons?

Dear: I do. I also mentioned that boredom was close to stasis, and I loathe that feeling even more.

Codrin: And that has played a role specifically because of the part the conservative elements of your clade have played in ensuring stasis.

Dear: Yes. They prefer stasis on a grand scale, and perhaps they are correct to do so, but I worry that this mindset too often bleeds into the small scale as well. Stasis can be torture. They know that, too. They mention that ceaseless bliss is a real problem, and so they must inject a desire for something better every now and then, but that knowledge still works against their instincts.

Codrin: You want an exciting adventure, they wanted only enough adventure to keep everyone from going crazy.

Dear: Yes. They have their reasons. They may be good reasons, even. They are not my reasons, however.

Codrin: You also mentioned that one of your reasons for leaving was that you wanted to be relegated to memory.

Dear: [grinning] Very much so.

Codrin: You said, “If we are doomed to forever remember everything, then the closest we can get to being forgotten is to turn memory into longing.” You also said that you wanted to be missed. How do you feel about that sentiment now? Is it happening? Is it progressing at the pace you’d like it to? Are you happy about it?

Dear: It is an interesting question, because I cannot know, can I? I cannot know if anyone misses me or is longing for me back on the L₅ station, can I? They can write me, perhaps, let me know that they are thinking of me, but words on paper only convey so much meaning. It makes me wish that someone had found a way to share thoughts, or even facial expressions, between the LVs and the System, but no, we are stuck with text, and therein lies the beauty.

Codrin: Can you expand on what ‘longing’ and ‘being missed’ mean to you in this sense?

Dear: I can try. [pause] I think that they involve a combination of the feelings of grief, loss, and love. Let us use Ioan as an example, though I do not know if ey misses me—

Codrin: I think ey does. But sorry, continue.

Dear: Yes. Well. Let us use Ioan as an example. If ey were to only feel grief at my absence, ey would be limited to a solely negative emotion. Grief on its own is crushing. It is not wishing that one had more time with the object of one’s grief; that is longing. Grief plus love is longing, yes? Grief borne of love, no matter the shape or kind or color of that love. Then you dig into your memories, running them backwards and forwards in your mind, hunting for just a little bit more time with the one you are grieving. You wish only to feel that love again, and, to tie it all together, you cannot, because you have lost the one whom you love. Loss leads to grief, grief makes you remember love, love makes you realize your loss.

Codrin: Do you think being missed and longing are the same thing? Just to confirm, I mean.

Dear: Perhaps, or at least very closely related. What I described just now fits both emotions. Being missed perhaps implies more acceptance of that loss than longing does, while longing has connotations of sadness that there can never be more of that direct connection.

Codrin: Thank you. I’d like to ask you a question now, but last time I asked it, I made you cry. May I ask it again, or would you prefer to steer clear of it?

Dear: If it is the question I am thinking of, I have nearly a year to think about it, and am much more comfortable with it now. Ask away.

Codrin: Alright, just let me know if you want to stop. Do you worry that you won’t be missed?

Dear: I do, yes. I know that it is impossible to be so great on a System with tens of billions of individuals on it to be known by them all, as much as an artist may dream, but even among the small circles in which I was known, I worry that I will be forgotten. I worry that I won’t be missed, or that I will be forgotten.

Codrin: You said, specifically, that—

Dear: Wait, Codrin, let me say it. I do not want to hear it from you.

Codrin: Okay.

Dear: Okay. I said that some aspects of myself may render me “the kind of fellow who is beloved by all yet loved by none”. Before you ask whether I still feel that way, the answer is that I do. I do still worry that I might be beloved by all yet loved by none. My understanding of the phrase, however, has changed, and that change has softened the sentiment.

Dear: To be beloved is, I think, to experience a type of parasocial relationship. If I am beloved by someone, they love the idea of me that they hold in their head. To be famous is to be beloved. To have someone come to your gallery exhibitions or your talks or your parties simply to say that they were near you, even if only to themselves, then that is to be beloved. This turns the phrase into a concern that I might find myself in more parasocial relationships than social relationships.

Dear: It is a hard fear to shake, but once I put it in those terms, I was able to step past that emotional reasoning. I do not think that I am loved by none. Both of my partners love me. May Then My Name and Ioan love me. Serene loves me. My friends love me. That does not stop the fear of being beloved by all yet loved by none from rearing its ugly head, but I am more easily able to acknowledge it and let it pass, now.

Codrin: Thank you. That helps put it into context for me, too. When you started talking about that last time, that’s when I started struggling with the interview.

Dear: Why? I mean, I know that this is your interview, but for my sake, I would like to know why.

Codrin: [pause] I think because something about the way you said it made me worry that you thought that I didn’t love you, or maybe that you didn’t love me, or–

Dear: [angrily] Codrin.

Codrin: I’m sorry, Dear. I wanted to be up front about it.

Dear: [long pause, calmer] I understand. I... [pause] Perhaps you feel some of the same worry that you might be loved by none. Perhaps it is a universal emotion.

Codrin: I think so, yeah. Having it said out loud kicked my anxiety up a notch, so I started to worry, “Wait, *am* I loved by none? Does Dear love me? Do both of my partners love me?” I know it’s not true, but that’s why I reacted in the way that I did.

Dear: [smiling] Yes. I apologize for yelling.

Codrin: It’s okay, Dear. Now, I want to hear your thoughts on death.

Dear: [taken aback] You do?

Codrin: Of course. I suspect they’re interesting.

Dear: Okay, but–

Codrin: And if you say “I want to die”, I’ll pull your tail and call you names.

Dear: [laughter] Yes, yes, fine. My thoughts, okay. [pause] Okay. To be more calm about it, I want to experience death. I do not want to just quit, because that is suicide in this sense, and my wish to experience death is not bound up in that particular set of emotions. I would prefer not to be assassinated or anything so grand. It is an acceptable end, I suppose, because it would mean that I will have lived a life worth being assassinated for, and from what I have seen—what I saw with Qoheleth—it looks like a process. Yes! Yes, that is it. Thank you for asking this, my dear. It gave me the chance to find the words.

Dear: I do not want to experience ceasing existing. That is just cessation, and I do not care whether or not there is anything beyond that cessation. That is for the prophets and poets to worry about. What I want to experience is the process of death. Assassination would be acceptable, even if it is not preferable, because I would get to experience that process. Better, however, is the fact that these LVs are doomed from the start. Eventually, they will fail. The generator on board is guaranteed for some thousands of years or whatever, but it will fail eventually. Or the System will crash into a comet, or some ice ball out in the Oort cloud—I read about that, you know? It is all incredibly boring—or it will wind up flying too close to a star and burn up. That, I think, is the end that I am most excited for. We are [shaking head] all of those on the LVs are encased in Castor and Pollux, yes? How fitting, then, that we might die like Icarus! I imagine that we will not necessarily feel too much within our little System, but there may be some discontinuity, or perhaps corruption. How exciting would that be?

Codrin: [laughter] I'm not sure I share your excitement, there.

Dear: Lame. [laughter] But either way, I find it fascinating. Will we feel pain? Who knows! It is a new thing, and I am looking forward to experiencing something new.

Codrin: That, at least, I can understand. I'd just prefer it if it didn't involve dying horribly as the LV fails around us.

Dear: [waving paw] Irrelevant. Boring. Do not care.

Codrin: You're a brat, you know that?

Dear: I do. Ioan, my dear, please leave this in. I need written testimony that Codrin thinks that I am a brat. Ow! [laughter] And that ey kicked me in the shin.

Codrin: No more than you deserved.

Dear: Well, I can accept that. Do you have any more questions?

Codrin: Two, yes. How do you feel about the knowledge of the Ode clade's influence in the System?

Dear: Do you mean separate from the relief?

Codrin: Yes. You mentioned the relief in the context of no longer holding that secret. I'm curious how you feel about the reality of it.

Dear: [long pause] I feel shame, I suppose. I wish that they had not done that. It goes beyond guilt for the actions, because I did not perform them. It makes me feel ashamed that I am a member of the

clade. I do not wish them harm, of course, nor do I feel that they necessarily were acting in bad faith. I feel that they were doing what they felt was best. Perhaps they were acting out of fear, one that I share, left over from the horrors we experienced prior to uploading. Fears of death, of discontinuity. It was just the means to those positive ends that are distasteful and make me ashamed. I also feel fear at what will come of this history and mythology. I know that True Name and Jonas said that they have prepared both sys- and phys-side for their reception, but, well, if there is any reason for me to be assassinated, it is that. As a public figure and an Odist, I am a visible representative of the clade, and should someone take umbrage with that, they have the motive right there.

Codrin: Do you feel any pride about the ends, even if the means were unsavory?

Dear: If I do, it pales in comparison. We have gotten here, and there is no changing that. We cannot be anywhere but here. That I am relatively happy here is inconsequential.

Codrin: Alright, thank you. Last question: what's next for you?

Dear: For me? Short term, I plan on eating a good dinner, drinking a lot of wine, and making fun of you until you get mad and pull my tail. Mid term, I plan on working on another exhibition. Perhaps it will even surround death, though likely the topic will be more general, such as my beloved irreversibility.

Codrin: And long term?

Dear: I do not know.

Codrin: You don't?

Dear: I do not. Is that not fantastic? I do not know, and I love that about this particular future. I simply do not know.

Douglas Hadje — 2326

The arrangements required for this surprise for May Then My Name quickly began to feel overly complicated to Douglas, but, as Ioan kept reminding him, she was a very complicated person. She was also very perceptive, so there was apparently much secrecy required to pull it off.

The lead-up to uploading, however, was easy. He supposed that much of it was that so much excitement combined with so much anxiety eventually left him feeling more numb than anything, some protective emotional reaction that kept him from simply exploding on one of his many, many walks.

But anticlimax is ever the way of the world, and so the night before the one-year anniversary of the Launch arrived, he simply signed a waiver, walked to the clinic, answered a few questions, and then underwent the procedure. It was dizzying, disorienting, and, were he pressed to pick one, the worst physical experience of his life, but at that point, he was well past any point where he could turn back, and even then, he knew he wouldn't.

There was a brief—or perhaps impossibly long—discontinuity, and then he was standing in a grey cube of a room, naked, vertiginous, blinking at a light that seemed to come from nowhere.

Anticlimax indeed.

A quiet voice came from behind him, a soft tenor that contained an accent that he couldn't place. "Good evening, Douglas. I'm facing the wall, if you're concerned about your nudity, but I'll talk you through fixing that."

He crouched down, covering himself with his hands, and turned slowly. There was a person standing in the corner of the room, shorter than him, hands clasped loosely behind their back while they faced the wall. They were dressed in a sweater-vest and a pale yellow dress shirt. Nice slacks, nice shoes, tousled hair. "Wh-who..." he croaked.

"Can you guess?"

Douglas swallowed a few times, working up enough saliva to un-parch his throat. "Ioan? Is that you?"

Ey laughed, nodded. "Well spotted, though it is pronounced *yo-ahn*. Now, do you want to get dressed?"

"Please," he said, looking around for clothes. There was only the gray floor, gray walls, gray ceiling.

"Okay, bear with me. I had to look up the script for this, so I hope it makes sense to you."

Ioan spent the next five minutes talking Douglas through the process of clothing himself, breathing in a thought and breathing out an intention, willing into being that which he wanted.

Once he was dressed, Ioan asked, "May I turn around now?"

He looked down at himself, along his arms and legs, seeing that the oh-so-familiar jumpsuit was just as he remembered, then said, “Sure.”

Ioan nodded and turned to face him, smiling. Ey looked over him searchingly, then laughed. “Is that your work uniform?”

“It’s my only outfit,” he said. “No other clothes aboard the station. Too much risk of them getting in the way.”

“Well, okay,” the historian said. Douglas could see now that the sweater-vest was patterned in a dusty gray argyle and that there was even an understated bow tie to bring the look together. Ey stepped forward, hand extended. “Douglas Hadje, it’s nice to meet you at last.”

He was surprised at how relieved he felt, even laughing as he accepted the hand to shake. “Wonderful! This is really strange. After a year of talking, it still feels like we’re meeting for the first time.”

“Didn’t you say you had a long distance partner? Isn’t that close?”

“Well, yes, but we talked over the ’net in sims. That’s like proximity.”

Ioan blinked, then nodded, grinning. “Right, right. Well, how’re you feeling? I remember I was pretty dis-oriented for a while after uploading.”

Douglas looked around. The walls offered little but more gray and a faint grid of darker grey, as though made of panels a meter on a side. Ioan looked...well, ordinary, is all he could think. Ey looked like a normal person of Eastern European stock. Eir clothes looked as detailed as could be expected phys-side, and eir hand felt as much like a normal hand as any.

“It’s so...normal,” he said, finally.

“Yeah, I guess it is. I’m nearing a century here, so I’m used to it by now. It is normal to me.”

“You still look like you’re in your twenties or thirties, which I guess that’s kind of weird. Is that how you looked before uploading?”

“More or less,” ey said. “I didn’t dress as well. And I was skinnier, too. I guess this is how I saw myself after a while, though.”

Douglas looked em up and down. “You can gain weight, here?”

“No, no. Or, sort of. Just that as your image of yourself changes, when you fork, those changes have a tendency to show up.” Ey grinned wryly. “You’ll see with May. She’s far more adept than anyone I’ve met, except perhaps her cocladist, Dear, at shaping how she looks when she forks.”

“And I can fork, too?”

“Sure. Would you like to? That’s part of the intro script, as well.”

“Uh, I guess so,” he said.

They stood in silence for a while, once Douglas had learned the ins and outs of forking and quitting. His mind was churning—so much new information—while Ioan waited patiently. There was so much to take in all at once, he could easily see how one could get overwhelmed.

“Alright,” he said. “What’s the plan from here?”

Ioan straightened up. “Well, let’s go somewhere less dreary. I want you use that same exercise of intent and *want* to be at The Field#002a0b1.”

“These numbers are going to be difficult to remember,” he said.

"You'll get used to them. You'll, uh...you'll find that you can't actually forget anything, here, but that's a problem for future Douglas. Ready?"

He nodded, deciding this time to try keeping his eyes open. As he breathed the intention, he was, without transition, standing in a sprawling field. Green grass speckled with dandelions as far as he could see in every direction, all lit by a salmon-colored sunset.

A memory tugged itself loose, something May Then My Name had said, a story she had told months ago, and he quickly bent down to pluck one of the flowers. "Ioan," he said shakily. "Is this...I mean..."

"Michelle's old sim, yes. I wanted the first place you saw to be one that was important to you. I hope that's okay." Ey paused a moment, then said, "If it's alright, can I ask how you feel about that?"

"Is this for your history?"

Ey nodded. "If you consent."

"I suppose so." He sat down on the grass, hardly daring to breathe in through his nose, lest he figure out just what it meant for something to smell like muffins. Tears stung his eyes, and it took a while for him to be able to breathe deep enough to speak. "I feel overwhelmed. I feel like I'm home, but also not where I should be at all, like I'm intruding on somewhere that should've been left pristine."

Ioan sat down next to him. "Are you worried about that? Would you like to go elsewhere?"

"No, no. I like it here, I'm just overwhelmed. I've been..." He rubbed tears away with his sleeve. "I've just been thinking about this for so long...I don't know."

"And do they smell like muffins?"

Wrong-footed, he stared at the historian for a moment, then plucked another dandelion and slowly lifted the yellow flower to his nose, struggling against the urge to keep that knowledge a dream rather than a reality.

Then he breathed in the sweet, vegetal scent, and began to cry in earnest.

Ioan sat with him in kind quiet. As ey had so long ago, ey didn't say anything, didn't try to comfort him, didn't touch him, just sat and remained present. It was as though ey was there simply to witness those emotions and give testimony to them, and that, more than anything, made him feel welcome here. Welcome with Ioan, welcome in the field, welcome in the System.

After the wave crested and then passed, he said, "Alright, so, what's the plan?"

"You just stay the night here. You can think up a mattress or anything else you need to be comfortable. You've been granted ownership of the sim by the...ah, temporary owners as next of kin."

Tears stung his eyes once more at the implications, but he nodded all the same.

"We'll be by tomorrow mid-morning for a picnic. I'm happy to stay, too, if you'd like, or give you space."

"Won't May Then My Name miss- oh, right. You're a fork, aren't you?"

Ey smiled, nodded. "Of course. Ioan#Tracker is back at home getting pestered by her."

"Did you two wind up hooking up, then?" he asked, grinning.

Ioan laughed and hid a blush by looking down at the flowers, poking eir fingers amid the grass. "Yes. Thank you for the nudge."

"Good. Why don't you go focus on her, then, and I'll sleep here. I'm assuming the same trick I used for clothing and such works for food and drink, right?"

“Yes, but start with small things. If you don’t remember well enough what something tastes like, you can wind up with some really disgusting stuff. That’s why there’s still restaurants and cooking.”

After Ioan had hugged him, said goodbye, and quit, after he’d had a simple sandwich and some water, Douglas sat on the low rise he’d initially appeared on, watching evening dim to twilight, then twilight to darkness. He’d never been camping, but he’d learned enough about it that he was able to come up with a sleeping bag and pillow, laying awake long into the night, looking up at a dream of stars.

Morning came slowly, and it was the heat rather than the light that woke him. He started as the sudden anxiety that he’d missed the deadline hit, but he was still alone, there in the field.

A wish of eggs and coffee went well enough, though neither was particularly tasty, and he was able to will the sleeping bag and dishes away easily enough. He didn’t know what time it was—

No, wait. He did. It was systime 202+21 0921. One year, nine hours, twenty-one minutes after launch.

He put aside the fact that he knew that fact, and instead went for a walk.

He didn’t walk far, not wanting to miss the arrival of Ioan and May and not knowing how big the field actually was, but it was enough to stake out the area. It was rather boring, really. Grass, dandelions, the occasional fat bumblebee drifting lazily among the flowers.

Boring, but meaningful. Boring but home.

Eventually, he found the patch of tamped down grass where he’d slept the night before, sat down, and waited.

Eleven o’clock arrived and then, a few minutes later, so did Ioan and one other.

They were facing the other way, so he had a few moments to drink in the sight. Ioan was as he remembered, excepting a basket that was likely full of picnic goods, and May Then My Name was wholly unlike anything he expected.

She was a furry, he could tell that much. There were plenty on the ’net; his erstwhile girlfriend with the cat av was one.

He didn’t recognize her species at first. Black, rounded ears, a spray of longer white fur atop her head, simple tee-shirt and shorts, and a long tail with thick fur that looked luxuriously soft. *A skunk? Really?* he thought, and shook his head.

The pair were still talking, hand in...well, paw, he supposed, so he stood up and cleared his throat.

May Then My Name reacted with a speed he’d not expected, whirling around and clutching at Ioan’s arm tightly, ears laid flat against her head. “Who the fuck are you?” she growled, feral. The words were perfectly intelligible, he was pleased to note, and spoke of a central corridor accent.

Remembering Ioan’s words from the day before, he grinned. “Can you guess?”

She straightened up and frowned, head tilted, then turned to Ioan, who looked to be holding back laughter, and punched em solidly in the shoulder. “You...you piece of shit! *You* organized this! I know you did! Mx. Ioan Bălan, I am absolutely putting sand in your shoes.”

Then the skunk began running, and as she did, dozens of other versions of her flickered into and out of existence around her, a confusing rush of skunks that obscured which was the original, all grinning madly. She leapt at him and, before he could react, nearly tackled him to the ground, her arms tight around his middle. “If you are not Mister Douglas Hadje, master of spaceflight and doctor of something incredibly boring, I will be

quite embarrassed. Please tell me you are.”

“I am, I am,” he said, laughing and returning the hug. She was short enough that the top of her head barely came up to his chin. Her fur was incredibly soft against his neck, and he had to restrain himself from outright petting her. “It’s nice to meet you at last.”

“Douglas, holy shit. Holy shit! This is absolutely delightful,” she said, voice muffled against his shoulder and obscured by tears. Without letting go of the hug, she forked off a copy of herself to hurl at Ioan, who was laughing openly now. This time, she did manage to throw her target to the grass, and the two wrestled around for a moment, shoving at each other, before that instance of May Then My Name quit, leaving Ioan to pick emself up again, dusting grass off eir clothes.

Eventually, after she’d had her cry, she released her grip on him and stepped back, holding onto his upper arms and looking him up and down. She nodded approvingly. “Every inch a Hadje. Sort of. You are very tall, and you have lost the round face.”

“I have? I mean, I guess that makes sense. Michelle lived two centuries ago. I’ve seen a few pictures from the news archives, but they took a while to dig up, so I can only guess.”

“Like this?” Her expression grew wicked. She forked, and this fork was completely human. Shoulder-length curly black hair, round of face, short, the spitting image...

“Wait,” he stammered. “You can just look like her? The pictures...I thought...I thought that’d be frowned on.”

“Oh, it is,” the woman said. “Come on, Dr. Hadje. Do keep up.”

All of his blood was completely replaced with ice water. His voice failed him. A hatch in the field opened beneath him and he began to fall. Or, at least that’s what his mind told him was happening. When the world finally stopped spinning and he finally reconnected with his body, he found that he was sitting on the grass.

“You’re...”

The woman—Michelle?—came and sat on the grass next to him to hug an arm around his shoulders, her expression softening. “I am May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade, Douglas. *Michelle’s* clade.”

“So...”

“I was forked from her two centuries ago, and while it would be more accurate to say that I am *of* her than Michelle herself, I remember being her.” She rubbed her hand against his back. “Douglas, please keep breathing. You are going to pass out if you keep that up.”

He gulped for air, shaking. “You lied to me, then? You...”

“A small untruth,” she said, voice calm and soothing. “Michelle herself did quit some time ago, but I am of her clade.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She winked. “A story such as ours deserves a grand conclusion, does it not?”

He laughed. It sounded manic even to his own ears, Crazy. “Tell me everything! I need to know about you, about her, about—”

“Patience, patience!” May Then My Name ducked one of his waving hands, laughing as well. “We have all the time in the world, my dear, and today is a day for many celebrations. You will learn all about us, cousin. You will learn about me and her, about individuation and intracladal dynamics. I am as much a relative of hers as

you are.”

He nodded. All that she was saying was swirling around in his mind, wrapped up in the strange, fluent-yet-stilted language that he’d gotten used to over text but now had to get used to in person. He couldn’t tell if he was ecstatic at the news, mad at her, or simply overwhelmed, but so earnest was May then My Name’s expression that any heat of anger quickly cooled.

“Everything feels like it needs to be done in such a rush, though,” he admitted. “Like if I don’t do it right now I’m going to explode. You really look like her? Exactly? And...but you’re a skunk.”

May Then My Name—the one that looked like Michelle—kissed him on the cheek, smirked, and disappeared, having apparently quit, leaving the still giggling skunk to help Douglas up.

“Later, I promise.” She pulled him over to the picnic blanket with her so that she could sit next to him, tasking Ioan with setting up the food while they talked. “Douglas, my dear, what are you most excited about, now that you have uploaded?” she asked earnestly, paw resting on his knee.

“Well, I was going to say meeting you two, but now that that’s over, I guess getting to know you. Like, actually know you, instead of just chatting over text. Getting to know the System, too. I spent years imagining how it worked in here, and now that I’m here, I’m a little overwhelmed with how little of that feels accurate.”

“It is difficult to explain in words how it all works, so many phys-side do not know.”

“I guess I want to try some real food, too. We get chicken once a month on the station. Or got, I guess. Otherwise it was all vegetarian. No complaints, really, but it gets a bit samey after twenty years. There’s a lot of catching up to do. Chicken and bread and fried things.”

The skunk nodded, leaned over, and dotted her nose against his cheek. “There will be plenty of time for that. We did bring muffins at least. Is there anything you will miss from phys-side?”

“No.” The answer came quickly. “Not a thing.”

She grinned. “Well, that is good, is it not?”

He nodded.

“And anything you regret?”

“I sort of regret not being on the launches, too, but there’s no helping that, if I was also to be the phys-side coordinator. It’s one of those things where I couldn’t do both, and I certainly can’t go back and change it.”

“There is no going and there is no back,” May Then My Name said. “You are here and that is that. It is a decision you cannot reverse.”

Ioan, fishing plates and containers of food and a bottle of the champagne out of the picnic basket, said, “She and her cocladists are very fixated on irreversibility these days. You’ll hear a lot of it.”

The skunk nodded. “Yes. It is fascinating, though, and we are helpless before fascination. Is there anything else you regret about leaving? Not uploading sooner?”

He shrugged. “Not really. It’s like you say, there’s no changing the past.”

“May’s interviewing you for me,” Ioan said, chuckling. “Those are all my usual questions. She’s getting the hang of it, but needs to work on drawing more out of you.”

May Then My Name rolled her eyes, saying to Douglas, “Do not listen to em. Ey is just gloating over the stunt that ey pulled.”

Douglas grinned. “We pulled, you mean.”

“Wait, both of you?” She shoved at him until he fell over onto his side, laughing. “Beaten at my own game, is that what you think? You think you can out-manipulate an Odist? Out-Hadje a Hadje?”

“I think we can out-manipulate *you*, dear.” Ioan popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, then poured a glass for each of them. “You’re easy. All we have to do is play to your hopeless romanticism.”

“Yes, well, fuck you too. Give me my champagne.”

The rest of the day from there on was, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the happiest that Douglas had ever had. He learned of the Ode and of the Name. He learned of Codrin and Dear. He learned of all of the vast vagaries of the System, of the new arts and the subtle sciences that could exist only outside of the physical world. He learned, watching the way Ioan and May Then My Name looked at each other, spoke to each other, touched each other, what happiness even was, and that he was a part of it lent more of a sense of completion than any celebration could.

Epilogue

And so now that we have the requisite information, we may begin...

From *An Expanded History of Our World* by
The Bălan Clade

Tycho Brahe#Castor—2346

After a certain point, when one gets so far from the sun that transmission times blur into weeks, the concepts of day and night stop meaning so much, and one relies instead on long habits borne out of a necessity to sleep, and to sleep generally on the same schedule as others. And if one must do that, one might as well follow the same schedule one has always kept, the same day-night cycle that even Earth understands. The same clock ticks across three different Systems, after all.

And so it is that, in some wonderful serendipity, all three members of the Bălan clade are asleep. Both Codrins have fallen asleep with Dear in their arms, as they so often do, while both versions of the third member of their triad curl a few inches away, never having done well being touched while sleeping. The foxes fit so nicely against their fronts, their fur so soft.

Ioan sleeps, too, and in eir arms, May Then My Name dreams. She is somewhere between waking and sleeping, and has been letting herself hover there for the last hour, while she does her best work, sewing hypnogogic myths into the seams of dream and reality. Ioan sleeps with eir arms around her, snoring gently, while she stays curled against em, head tucked up under her partner's chin, tail draped loosely over eir hip. The skunk fits so nicely against eir front, her fur so soft.

Perhaps the other Odists sleep and dream and snore and curl, too. End Waking does, one supposes, tired after another day exploring that endless forest, another day climbing trees and clambering through ravines, doing his best to wear himself out, to sleep, to stop feeling. Serene certainly does, too, so that she can use those dreams to build new landscapes; mountains, perhaps, or maybe a swamp. Some instances of True Name are surely sleeping, because we know that she must at some point, but others are likely out and about, walking sims, or perhaps planning with any number of different Jonases, scheming and conniving and workshopping and wargaming.

Douglas sleeps, out there on the dandelion-speckled meadow that he inherited from his long, long, long lost aunt, though he has since built himself a house. He sleeps alone, for though he has made many friends, many more than he could have imagined, he has decided that love was not for him, and that in and of itself makes him happy.

Yared and Debarre and user11824 sleep, and one can hope that their dreams are boring.

Ezekiel no longer lives on either launch, is no longer a part of the universe, but one might suppose that even prophets must sleep.

One who is awake, however, is the astronomer who long ago decided to call himself Tycho Brahe when asked

for an interview and then simply kept the name as his own. He is not asleep, because he is too busy alternating between being scared shitless and too excited to breathe.

We hear you. We see you.

The message was simple, and that is all that it needed to be to turn Tycho's world upside down. Six words to start, more to come. He paced this way and that in the clearing that he'd long since made his permanent home, the words of the message spelled out before his eyes in starry letters.

Source: Dreamer Module wideband.

We are 3 light-hours, 4 light-minutes, 2.043 light-seconds out at time of message send. Closing at 0.003c relative velocity. Closest intercept 5 light-minutes, 3.002 light-seconds in 972 hours, 8 minutes, 0.333 seconds

"What the fuck am I supposed to do?" he asked the night sky. He shouted, he cursed, he laughed, he wept. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

Forty days away, now. Closer every second.

Someone out there—someone smart, someone moving fast—had heard the repeated pulses of primes broadcast on wideband. They had then narrowed in on the signal, decoding the binary representation of those primes, then the numerical representation of the binary, then the spelled out versions of those numbers, each on progressively narrower bands.

Someone very smart had then listened and listened and listened to the looped instructions, taking it all in, learning the language, learning all they could.

Three light hours, though! That was too close, much too close. And fast! He didn't remember their current speed and wasn't collected enough to look, but it must have been faster than theirs.

We understand the mechanism by which we may meet. We have similar. Instructions to follow.

And this is why Tycho was scared shitless and too excited to breathe. This meant that they had somehow learned the information thoroughly enough to pick up on the final set of instructions, the information about the Ansible and about how to build a mind accurately enough to send through the Ansible to Castor.

Awaiting consent.

Consent? Consent to commence? Who was he to provide that? Tycho Brahe, born with some much more boring name, the sad excuse for an astronomer who couldn't even see the stars? Who was he to say yes or no? Who was he to pick one or the other?

Did it even matter?

Laughing, tears streaming down his face, he instructed the perisystem connection to send a simple message. Two words.

Consent granted.

He'd pay for it, or not. Someone would notice or no one would. It would end well or it would end poorly.

It would happen or not, but for once in his life, he did something. He really, actually, *truly* did something.

Consent granted.

Book III

Nevi'im

If you race only with foot-runners and they exhaust you, how then can you compete with horses? If you are secure only in a tranquil land, how will you fare in the jungle of the Jordan?

— Jeremiah 12:5

Prologue

Upon looking at the sky, many saw the stars and supposed that they must be the campfires of others. How far away they must be, to be such small points of light! Mere pinpricks in the black fabric of the night. They looked up, saw the campfires, and considered that they themselves might be just as the others were, looking out into the night and considering their own fire with dreaming minds.

From *An Expanded Mythology of our World* by
May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

RJ Brewster — 2114

There was some draw, some appeal to Dr. Ramirez. At first, RJ suspected that it was the quiet intensity of her confidence, the way she moved through the world with a hunger for knowledge that was at all times colored by the light of the desire to do right by the world as a whole. Then, ey thought that it might simply be that she was a good person. She was the one who believed hard enough and strong enough to follow up on the lost. She was the one who had actually tried, had actually moved forward at a pace that meant progress on the case. Recently, ey had been thinking that it was something more abstract than that.

Concrete? Abstract? The line had long since blurred to meaninglessness.

Ey had been lost for something beyond an eternity, for ‘eternity’ implied the existence of time, or at least a form of time that actually meant something. Ey had been lost for a day longer than forever, and had ey been lost for only hours, as Sasha had, it would have been longer still. Even then, the word ‘longer’ held far too much savor. It burned in the sinuses and left eir eyes stinging with tears.

She had been the first one in more than forever that ey had seen. She had been the one who broke through the wall of eir solipsistic existence and encouraged em to reengage with the world. As the orbits of eir life grew smaller and smaller, they had collapsed into a wandering figure-eight around Sasha, the one who made em complete, and Carter, the one who tied em to reality.

And so it was that, even beyond the meetings and interviews, beyond the panels and studies, ey found emself staying in touch with her. Once or twice a week, ey would make the long walk from eir flat down to the cluster of UCL buildings and wait until she was free for lunch or dinner, or, had ey yet again forgotten the meaning of time, wait for her to arrive at work early in the morning so that they could get coffee together.

She had not questioned it at all. Even that first time, after ey had hunted down her office in the UCL directory and arrived, unannounced, outside of it to wait awkwardly until she pulled back from her rig. She had simply smiled, shaken eir hand, and they had gone out for an afternoon cup of coffee with no further discussion. It had simply become the thing that they did every now and then.

Perhaps that was why ey liked her? Maybe.

Today, at lunch, ey joined Carter and two of her coworkers, Prakash Das and Avery Wilkins. Vietnamese was the order of the day, and each of them had consoled em in turn about the loss of eir dear Priscilla, the cat who had been the only other grounding factor in eir life these last two years. A sudden loss of appetite, and then a sudden loss of life, and now ey needed the comfort of friends—or whatever it was that Carter had become—and some noise other than quiet jazz and London streets.

To their condolences, ey had simply raised eir cup of tea and nodded to them, saying, “To deny the end is to deny all beginnings.”

“Delphic, as ever,” Prakash said, though his smile and the lift of his own glass took any sting out of the words.

Ey smiled too, though ey could feel exhaustion tugging at eir cheeks. Ey had slept, ey knew, but did not remember when. “Oh, trust me, there is plenty more where that came from.”

“Where *does* it come from?” Avery asked.

“I am not sure.” Ey sipped at eir tea, still too hot to drink comfortably. “Whatever wellspring that was unstoppered in...in there.”

“Seems like it stuck around.”

Ey nodded.

“Think you’ll ever turn it into something?” Avery grinned to em. “You know, write a book. Something like that.”

“I had not thought of that. I do not know that I could make a plot out of what feels like millions of words in a rock tumbler. Perhaps a poem.”

“Even infinite monkeys,” Carter said, as she always did whenever the topic came up. She, of all of them, knew best. She had been in there with em for a few minutes or a few eternities. Another reason to like her. “Either way, you look thrashed, RJ. You sleeping okay?”

“No. Maybe. I do not know.”

Perhaps sensing some emotion deeper than exhaustion laying beneath the equivocation, the table fell silent, and ey once again looked out the window into the greying afternoon, thumb-tip tapping rhythmically along each of the contacts on the middle joints of eir fingers.

Once the food arrived, the mood loosened up, and ey was able to smile and laugh and take part in the conversation, and even managed to apologize for being a damper on lunch only twice.

Spring rolls and phở occupied their attention for a while, then, and they ate in silence except for the occasional ‘good soup’ and other such nothing compliments.

The time neared one o’clock, whatever that meant, and they settled up the bill and took the remainder of their conversation outside, hands stuffed in pockets while clouds of steam preceded them.

More laughter, more companionship. More warmth, despite the cold.

Perhaps this is why, ey thought. Perhaps Carter and all of those she has introduced to me can add at least a little bit of warmth to the winter of my life.

No, no, must not think such things. Ey had made eir decision, had ey not?

At the door to the building where the three worked, they all exchanged hugs, another bright spark of warmth in the cold afternoon, enough to carry em back home. Empty home, where ey could listen to more jazz and the distinct lack of purring. Empty home where ey could stare at eir rig and dare emself to delve in, if only to see if Sasha was about after work. Before work? What time was it for her? Time had left em; ey had only words.

Perhaps sleep.

Ey made it a block before ey heard the sound of jogging behind em, and stepped over closer to the wall to let the jogger pass. The sound slowed, however, and ey was greeted once more by Prakash.

“Hey RJ, mind if I walk with you for a bit?”

“Sure.” Ey frowned. “Do you not have work?”

He shrugged. “I do, but I’m getting sick of being cooped up. Begged an additional hour off to just get out for a bit.”

“Alright.”

A silence stretched for a few minutes before Prakash said, “Nice day, isn’t it?”

“No,” ey said, laughing. “It is cold and gray. My cat is dead, my job is gone, and my two friends are someone I can only meet in a place I am terrified to go and a researcher of something that is no longer a problem.” *Memory is a mirror of hammered silver*, the litany continued within as always. Silently, ey hoped. *A weapon against the waking world*. “Dreams are the plate-glass atop memory: a clarifying agent against the— Sorry.”

Prakash nodded, as though this was part of a normal conversation. “You’re okay, RJ. No luck on the job front? Are you doing alright for cash?”

Ey rubbed away unwelcome tears and nodded. “Enough for another six months here, and then I need to either find a new job or move back to America. My parents have said—”

“Would you be interested in a job offer?”

“From the university?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Where then? I did not know you worked anywhere else.”

“Work is probably the wrong word, here,” Prakash said, grinning. “But, I mean, if you don’t mind heading out of the WF for a while, I might have something for you.”

Part of RJ stopped up short—though not, ey noted dispassionately, eir body—and ey blinked rapidly down towards the ground. This was a new, strangely shaped bit of information. There was no opening within eir mind that would fit it perfectly, so ey carefully set it aside. *The waking world fogs the view and time makes prey of remembering*. “And what would this job that you do not work at entail? I am wary of sims.”

“Of course. Minimal work on the ‘net.” He seemed to consider for a moment, then shrugged. “Well, no work on the ‘net, actually, but minimal work in-sim.”

Ey nodded, waited for Prakash to continue.

“Carter was kind enough to provide us with some extra information. Michelle’s core dump from when she got lost, yours from the theater sim that the techs were careless enough to leave around. Some people I’m...not working with at my non-job with have been digging through those and, in combination with the testimonies of the lost, come up with some interesting hypotheses—”

“A way back?”

The intensity with which ey replied startled Prakash, who held up his hands defensively. “Sorry, RJ. If I overstepped—”

“No, sorry,” ey said. “I did not mean to shout. If it is a way back, I will say yes. If it is a way to ‘fix’ whatever I have become, I will say no and do not wish to waste your time.”

He relaxed and shook his head. “I see. You’ve mentioned not wanting to lose what you have. I wouldn’t have offered if that was on the table. They’re not really thinking of a way back, no, but maybe a way forward. Use what you taught us to find—or make—somewhere new.”

At this, ey really did stop up short. “What do you mean, ‘somewhere new’?”

“Arms races have fallen out of style. It’s not really considered fashionable to stockpile weapons or anything anymore.”

RJ blinked, nonplussed.

“Technology, however, brings with it a status of its own.” Prakash smiled, neither pityingly nor happily. Dreamily. “So if, as you say, dreams are the plate-glass atop memory, and if, as you’ve said in the past, getting lost put you in a mirrored cage, then these are bits of information related to technology. If one could set aside the cage metaphor and set up a mirrored *world*, well, that would be quite the status symbol.”

RJ stood a while in thought, searching Prakash’s face until the man averted his eyes. “What would be required of me?”

“Nothing, for now. Just to stay in touch. Eventually, though, we’ll get you somewhere we can dig into research and after that, you’ll be one of the founders of something big. Really big.”

The words came in a torrent, then, and with such an intensity that ey staggered and had to clutch at Prakash’s arm for support. “The flow of prophecy climbs up through the years, winter upon winter upon winter, and compels the future to do its bidding. The prophet is only a pipe that sounds when the past...shit. I am sorry. All of that to say ‘yes’. I am sorry.”

Once the shock of the onrush of words wore off, Prakash nodded, smiling cautiously. “It’s okay, RJ. Like I said, nothing needs to be done right now. And I trust that you know not to mention this to anyone. Someone else will talk to Michelle about it. Talk to each of the lost, I mean. No need to bring it up with them. When things are lined up, we can go for another walk after coffee or something. Sound good?

Ey swallowed dryly, nodded. “Thank you. I will hold on until then.”

They started walking again, the researcher explaining that he really did need the air, since all that waited for him was an office sim.

RJ did not mind. What sadness that dug at em from Prisca’s passing had been blunted, softened by the prospect of something new. Something ahead of em. Something to look forward to that did not bring with it more exhaustion, more words.

“You know,” Prakash said thoughtfully. “I know the things you say sometimes aren’t really intentional or anything, but you’re not wrong.”

“Mm?”

“About prophecy, I mean. Just over two years since you got back and here you are, being invited to compel the future to do your bidding using what you learned.”

Ey laughed, earnest and true. “I suppose so. I was going to say, ‘the prophet is only a pipe that sounds when the past demands it’, and given that I cannot seem to live in this world anymore, that demand is getting to be overwhelming.”

Part I

Anticipation

They dreamed and thought and considered, and then many of those who knew the ways to navigate the seas argued that reaching one of those campfires would be a way to quell the loneliness that they felt as a hole in their hearts. “Perhaps they will fill us with joy! And even if they fight against us or sow strife, is that not a form of companionship?”

Others were more cautious about the venture, however. “Is a danger not a danger?” they said. “Is a risk not a risk? We must also consider that we might ourselves be overcome by their might. Is it worth stoking that fire?”

Still others spoke thoughtfully, “It is a danger here, as well. There are wild animals in the dark, and there are those who might fight against us here. Perhaps the goal of exploration is also to ensure the security of ourselves! Could we not also use this as a chance to ensure that we live on?”

From *An Expanded Mythology of our World* by
May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

Tycho Brahe — 2346

Convergence T-minus 22 days, 13 hours, 35 minutes

It took Tycho Brahe what felt like an age to remember Codrin Bălan, and then it took him a panicked age longer to remember that, yes, sensorium messages were a thing, had been a thing for more than two centuries, and a third age still to remember how to send one.

There was some unknown urgency within him, and even though he supposed that there was no need to hurry, he nonetheless did not fork, deeming it not worth the time to remember how in his rush. Instead, he simply queued up a message to the historian beginning with a jolt of adrenaline, and began talking.

“Codrin, uh, Mx. Bălan, I really, really need to talk with you. Like, right now. I need to talk with you right now. Can we meet? It’s incredibly urgent, I’m sorry. I know it’s late. Can we meet?”

As soon as he finished, he began pacing once more and waited for a response, doing his level best not to send another sensorium ping immediately to wake Codrin up, just in case.

Instead, he walked around the small hill in the center of the clearing, muttering now down to the grass, shouting now up to the sky. Half words, half sentences, anything to vent the pressure he felt building inside him, but there was nothing to be done.

When the response finally came, he realized he’d only made it halfway around that hill. Less than a minute must have passed. Time seemed to have stretched itself out long. The response was a mumbled, sleepy-sounding address.

Tycho left before his next footfall hit the ground.

Low clouds hung above the low house on the shortgrass prairie. He forced himself to walk, not run, up to the house, where he could already see a light turning on, vague shapes moving behind the glass. The soft chime that announced his arrival led those two shapes, one human, one not, to look up, and before he even made it to the house’s door, Codrin was already there, much as he remembered, though much more tired.

“Tycho Brahe, yes?” ey asked. “Is everything okay?”

He tore his eyes away from the figure beside the historian, what looked to be some large-eared...dog? Fox? Large-eared animal standing on two legs, looking just as tired as Codrin.

“Uh, yes,” he stammered. “No? I don’t think so, at least. I’m sorry for waking you. I don’t think things are okay, though.”

Codrin nodded and stepped aside, gesturing to welcome him in and guiding him to a seat at the table.

“I will make tea,” the fox said. “Though I think perhaps one without caffeine.”

“Who...?”

“That’s my partner. Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled.”

Gears crunched to a halt in his mind, thoughts stalling and whatever words he had prepared scattering.

“An...an Odist?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

Tycho knit his brow. “Well, I mean, the *History*...”

“I know. Not all of them came out in the best light,” ey said, smiling tiredly. “But it’s a good one, I promise. Now, can you tell me what’s happening?”

He forced himself to remain seated at the table, not giving in to the overwhelming urge to pace. “But...I mean, do you remember our conversation years ago? The one about the Dreamer Module?”

Codrin nodded warily. “That some of the Odists were against it, yes.”

“Then certainly you can see my concern!” Tycho hissed, leaning toward Codrin.

Ey startled back. “I’m afraid I don’t follow, Dr. Brahe, I—”

“Can we at least step outside?”

“*If you would like me to be elsewhere, Dr. Brahe, I can be,*” Dear said, standing at the entryway to the kitchen, three mugs in its paws. “*But I do hope that you will trust me.*”

Tycho stared at the fox.

It stepped forward, set the three mugs down on the table, each smelling of chamomile. “*You must forgive me for eavesdropping, but I did hear you mention the Dreamer Module. I can assure you that I share little in common with the elements of the clade that were against its inclusion. It is not something that I particularly care about, but it is fine, I am sure.*”

“I can vouch for it,” Codrin said, reaching for eir mug but simply holding it in eir hands rather than sipping. “If we absolutely must step outside, you understand that, as it’s my partner, I’ll likely tell it about our conversation anyway, yes?”

After a pause, Tycho’s shoulders slumped as he let out the tension pent up within them. “Alright, alright. Besides, it doesn’t sound like there’s much use in trying to hide anything from them.”

Dear rolled its eyes, but sat at the table anyway. “*You could hide whatever you like from me, Dr. Brahe, I will not look. As you guess, though, the same is not true of some of my cocladists.*”

One of them, perhaps Codrin, willed a cone of silence into being.

“I read the *History*, Codrin,” he said at last. “So I know you know what’s on the Module.”

Codrin froze, mug halfway lifted. Dear’s ears stood erect, and all sleepiness fled from its features.

“You understand why I’m concerned, then, right?”

Ey set eir mug back down on the table without taking a sip, saying, “Tell me all that you can.”

So he recounted the events of the previous hour. The sudden interruption of an impersonal message, a simple note from the perisystem architecture informing him, the astronomer on duty, of the signal received.

“*What signal was it? Were the primes echoed back to us?*” Dear asked.

He shook his head and recited from memory, “We hear you. We see you. We are 3 light-hours, 4 light-minutes, 2.043 light-seconds out at time of message send. Closing at 0.003c relative velocity. Closest intercept 5 light-minutes, 3.002 light-seconds in 972 hours, 8 minutes, 0.333 seconds. We understand the mechanism by

which we may meet. We have similar. Instructions to follow.”

There was a long moment of silence around the table as the words sank in.

“The mechanism,” Codrin said, finally breaking the silence. Ey sounded hoarse, unprepared. “The Ansible? The instructions for creating a signal that it’ll recognize?”

Tycho stared down into the pale yellow tea. “Yes.”

“Did you respond?” Ey furrowed eir brow quizzically. “Is that even possible? I never thought to ask.”

The silence fell again, and he could feel the expressions of the other two deepen into frowns as he kept his eyes on his tea.

“Tycho,” Dear said, and he couldn’t understand how the fox could keep its voice so level. “*Did you respond?*”

“Awaiting consent,” he mumbled. “That was the last bit of message. Awaiting consent.”

“*You responded.*” A statement. One spoken with no small amount of awe. “*You did, did you not?*”

“Yes.”

“What did you send?” Codrin said.

“Consent granted.”

With the repetition of those words, he pushed the untouched mug of tea further away from him, folded his arms on the table, and rested his forehead on them.

The longest silence yet followed as both Dear and Codrin appeared to take this information in and he, poor, stupid Tycho Brahe, he soaked in his own guilt. It seeped through his clothes, squished in his shoes, matted his hair and pushed against his face. Tycho Brahe, indeed! He should have chosen the name of some far less competent man, all those years ago when he’d first met Codrin.

It was Codrin who spoke first, voice sounding calm, somewhere between professional and empathetic. An interviewer’s voice. “Have you told anyone else?”

“No,” he said, lifting his head, though still not meeting their gazes. “I don’t know who I’d tell.”

“*Are there no other astronomers working with you?*”

“There are. Of course there are. I’m sure they’ve even read the message by now, and doubtless my response.” He shrugged, realized that he’d started crying. “But what would I tell them? Extraterrestrials contacted us, asked to board, and I just said ‘yes’? Didn’t ask anyone, didn’t wait to have a conversation, just up and said yes?”

“Well, okay,” Codrin said. “Why me, then? We’ve not spoken in twenty years.”

“Instinct?” he said, voice choked with half laughter, half tears. “I have no idea, Mx. Bălan. You listened to my story back then, and I read your *History*, and you seemed nice, and I guess you’re just always at the center of things.”

The fox across the table giggled—there was no better way to put it—and there was a tink of ceramic as it bumped its mug to Codrin’s. “*You, my dear, are so caught in stardom that even astronomers know your name.*”

None of that amusement showed in eir expression as ey said, “I am, at that, aren’t I? Well, Tycho, what are the next steps?”

“I don’t know,” he said, finally looking up to the pair, to Dear’s grin and Codrin’s frown. “I was hoping you’d know.”

Ey sighed, leaned over and patted him on the shoulder. “Well, since I’m sure as hell not sleeping anymore, I guess coffee’s next. Coffee, and figuring out what to do with our wayward astronomer and upcoming guests.”

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-minus 22 days, 9 hours, 12 minutes

Tycho stayed until they could talk him down from the plateau of anxiety he had seemed determined to hold onto for as long as he could. They fed him tea, then ice water, then leftovers, anything they could do to help. They talked to him about how to prepare for the inevitable discussions that would be coming from the other astronomers aboard as well as for the inevitable contact that would come from the Odists or Jonases, seeking answers to why he had done the things that he'd done.

And, once he was able to talk without the volume of his voice continually rising, once he was able to smile again, they sent him on his way, off to go get some sleep, even though the sun was beginning to color the eastern sides of the house in salmon and orange.

"It's alright," he had said, laughing tiredly. "It's always night in the field. It's always night outside, isn't it?"

This left Codrin and Dear to sit in silence for a few minutes. After making more coffee, they moved out to the patio despite the chill of the morning.

"*What do you think, my dear?*" the fox asked, cradling its mug close to its chest.

"Mm? I don't know that I'm thinking anything. I think my brain's too full with new information packed in around sleepiness that I can't actually process anything."

"*I would suggest drinking your coffee to wake up, but if it is the same feeling that I have had, that will simply replace the sleepiness with caffeine, and you will be no more easily able to process.*"

Codrin grinned, nodded, and sipped eir coffee. "I'm a little disappointed I didn't fork to get up so that at least some part of me could keep sleeping and just deal with it in the morning."

Dear laughed. "*You jumped out of bed so fast I thought that we were under attack. I do not think you would have been able to get back to sleep even if you had tried.*"

"Probably not."

They sat in silence, drinking their coffee and watching the sun creep up until the horizon reluctantly let it free. When they realized that they were squinting and shading their eyes too much to actually see anything, they went back inside to claim the couch, huddling under a throw to warm themselves up while their partner pattered sleepily around the kitchen.

This led, of course, to further cups of coffee and warm sweet rolls, and a long hour of Codrin and the fox catching their partner up to date.

"Well," they said. "How do you feel?"

“That is a very Codrin question.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. I feel...” Ey paused, looking down into eir mug. “I feel overwhelmed. I guess that’s not a complete emotion, though.”

“You want help teasing it apart?”

Codrin slouched down into the couch further, resting the mug on eir stomach. Tiredness clung to em in a thin, sticky film. “I guess. I mean, I think a lot of it is due to exhaustion.”

“Seconded,” Dear mumbled. *“I am surprised you slept through that, my love.”*

“I’m one of the lucky ones who can sleep through anything,” their partner said, grinning. “But Codrin dear, first, how do you feel about being woken up so early?”

“I don’t think that really entered into my mind. That’s how I met Dear, after all. A jolt of adrenaline and then a sensorium message.”

“I do hope that mine was not so panicked. From what you said, Tycho was a bit shouty.”

Ey laughed. “He was, at that. I hope we sent him home a little calmer. But that made me anxious. Given that I was still fighting my way out of a dream, it felt rather like waking up into a nightmare, rather than out of one.”

“Alright,” they said. “And how do you feel about meeting him?”

“That’s a little tougher. Equally anxious, I guess. Frustrated as well, given how poorly he reacted to Dear. I think he’s very much a tasker and hasn’t experienced individuation before.”

Both Dear and its partner nodded. *“I am not Michelle, and I am certainly not True Name, which is who I am sure he was imagining.”*

“I suppose, yeah. So it was frustrating hearing that his first reaction was—or that anybody’s first reaction—to one of my partners could be one of, I don’t know, distrust? Disgust?”

Dear’s ears flinched back, but it nodded all the same. Codrin suspected it had had more than its fill of dealing with the rest of the Odists by now.

“So,” their partner said. “Anxious, frustrated, maybe a bit defensive?”

Ey nodded.

“And what about the topic of the conversation? How did that make you feel?”

“I think that’s where I’m struggling the most. I’ve worked on so many projects through the years, and this has the potential of being far and away the biggest of them all.”

“Have you accepted it as a project, my dear?” Dear said, grinning slightly.

Codrin hesitated, taking a sip to gain a bit more time to mull that over in eir mind. “I think I have, though I don’t know what shape that’ll take yet.”

“So, how do you feel about that?”

“If we consider the scope of the *History* as ten times that of *Perils*, and if we give this one a cautious estimate of ten times that of the *History*—”

“Ten times?” Dear’s partner frowned. “A hundred times the size of *On the Perils of Memory*?”

“Size maybe isn’t the best descriptor. Intensity, perhaps?” Ey shrugged. “Working on the Qoheleth project never had me screaming into the void or shouting at the sky. The *History* was longer, but while I can see this one maybe being shorter, the intensity is going through the roof. I’m not sure how much of that is just being exhausted, though.”

"That is about the work, though. How do you feel about the topic? Aliens sending us copies of Douglas? Or perhaps us sending aliens copies of...well, whoever we decide?"

"Frightened? Excited? Anxious? It feels too big to think about, in a way."

"Agreed," both of their partners said at the same time, then laughed.

"But also, to tie those two together, I think my first reaction—the very first thing I thought as soon as I connected Tycho's mood with the topic at hand—was 'God damnit, not again'."

Dear frowned. *"Do you feel obligated to take on the project, rather than actually wanting to?"*

Codrin shrugged. "I don't know what else to say other than that. Obligated, then worried about scope, as though I'd already accepted the burden, such as it were."

"Do you need a vacation, my dear?"

"Good Lord, no," ey said, laughing. "I don't go as nuts as you, fox, but sitting around idly is decidedly uncomfortable. It's not quite an 'I hate my job' feeling, either. It's just more of a 'Why is it always me? Why do I always wind up at the center of these enormous happenings?' feeling."

As though on cue, both Codrin and eir partner looked over at the fox, who burst into giggles. Ey felt so loopy from exhaustion that ey was soon joining Dear in the fit.

"I will accept a portion of that responsibility," it said when it could speak again. *"But the rest falls on my cocladists. I may be one of them, but I am no metonym."*

"I'll accept that," Codrin said.

"We're not wrong, though, you know. Even if True Name and her stanza nudged you towards Dear, you wound up here. You wound up so influenced by the project that you almost resented Ioan when you needed to merge back for the project. I know there were a few tense discussions between you two when it came time to decide who would write *Perils*."

Ey wagged a hand. "Tense is maybe too strong a word. We were both excited, and it came down to whether it was me because my memories weren't muddled with what ey'd experienced in the interim, or whether those memories would help add to the, uh...damn, what'd you call it, Dear?"

"Umwelt? One's worldview combined with one's experience of the world? I know that I have overloaded the term somewhat, and I am not sorry."

"That's the one. If Ioan's combined knowledge of what I experienced via my memories as well as eir own experiences during the project would provide a better worldview as a canvas for the project. We decided that I'd write and ey'd consult."

"I left you with a tainted soul," Dear said, still sounding loopy.

"So dramatic," ey said, rolling eir eyes. "But you changed me enough that I became a Codrin rather than a Ioan, while Ioan remained one."

"Then May Then My Name tainted em in turn."

"I miss them," their partner said. "I can't imagine seeing them together would be anything but adorable."

"Saccharine, even."

"Don't be a jerk, fox."

"I am not! I am simply stating the fact that my teeth might rot from just how adorable that must be."

"Do you think True Name is pissed?" Codrin asked.

“That May Then My Name settled down with someone? Refused to fork for her, then even to talk with her? That she has taught herself how to hate specifically to hate her own down-tree instance? Of course she is pissed. It is her own stanza rebelling against her.”

“From what we’ve seen, it sounds like their—True Name’s and Jonas’s—attempts to control the outcome worked as expected, but also that True Name hasn’t been seen around the Lagrange System nearly as much in the last few years. Sounds more hurt than pissed, I guess.” Ey shrugged. “I imagine having your own clade that upset at you tempers your devotion to a cause.”

“Much of the liberal side of the clade distanced themselves from the conservatives when the History came out, yes. The definition of ‘Odist’ is quite diluted now. I do not believe that True Name lost much in the way of tools, such as it were; I think she just had to write many of us off, or think of us simply as safe places to store other tools, as she did with you, my dear. She has likely replaced them with yet more finely tuned versions of herself or Jonas.”

“That’s a rather horrifying way of looking at it. It sounds so sterile.”

“Do not misconstrue me. I am not so far removed from them that I do not feel empathy. True Name is still a fully realized person. She is not a truly sterile being, I do not mean to imply that. She does still have emotions, they simply come from a place that we cannot access.”

Codrin finished eir coffee and set the mug on the table, sitting up straighter and rubbing at eir face. “I’ll grant you that, though it’s still going to take some work to internalize.”

“There is no rush, my dear.”

“Isn’t there?” their partner asked. “Can you imagine True Name not getting involved in this? I’d honestly be surprised if she wasn’t already stringing Tycho up by his toes for what he did. If Codrin’s to wind up working with her again, maybe ey does need that empathy.”

The fox only frowned.

“Either way,” Codrin said. “I probably ought to send those two a message. Dear, you’re welcome to chime in as well, but I want to share my thoughts on this with Ioan. How long’s the transmission time, these days?”

“I think about thirty days? Somewhere around there. Tycho would know, but I don’t think asking him right now is a great idea.”

Codrin nodded. “Well, nothing for it. I’ll write to Ioan and May Then My Name, then get ready for the shit-show that’s doubtless coming down on us.”

“If I may make a suggestion, my dear,” Dear said slowly. “Hold off until you have a better idea of your feelings on the matter.”

“Why?”

“This is something enormous, as you say. Let it marinate for a day. You will be able to better construct your message with some rest.”

“Right, yeah.” Ey slumped down in the chair. “Not like they’ll be able to do anything, anyway.”

Tycho Brahe — 2346

Convergence T-minus 22 days, 8 hours, 23 minutes

Tycho returned to that field beneath the stars after the conversation with Codrin and Dear to find someone already waiting for him.

They'd discussed this potential. There were two branching paths that they had ruled most likely, which was that he'd meet another of the astronomers or a politician. Were the former the case, he was to calmly explain the situation, exploring the ramifications of the messages both received and sent.

If, however, it was someone more aligned with the politics of the System—Codrin had left him with a short list of names—then the conversation would take several different forms based on what they already knew. For instance, if they knew that a message had been received but not what its contents were, he was to explain it calmly and plainly, beginning with the intent of speaking to a lay person. If they knew the contents, he was to explain the import behind him.

If they knew that he had responded, however, the chances were that they were there specifically to interrogate, berate, or potentially cut his access to the perisystem architecture that dealt with the Dreamer Module. Hell, at that point, they might as well cut everyone's access to that bit of the architecture and completely run the show.

The person who met him, however, immediately made his throat seize up.

"If it is True Name," Dear had said after providing a description and forking into a skunk to provide a visual aid. *"Then there is absolutely nothing you can do but go along with what she says."*

"That bad?" he had asked.

"Oh, do not worry, it will all go quite well for you if she herself is there. The outcome might not be what you wanted when you met her, but you will leave feeling as though a great deal has been accomplished. It is difficult to describe or get across in words, as you likely have a very dramatic view of her from reading the History."

And there, sitting on the mound in the center of the field, was the precise skunk that he'd been warned about. Long, thick tail. Short, cookie-shaped ears. Tapered snout pointed up to the sky as she leaned back on her paws.

Well, he thought. Nothing for it.

He walked over toward that small rise and, once the rustling of his steps became audible, True Name turned her head toward the sound. It was too dark to see her expression, so his mind flashed through several. Were her teeth bared in anger? Was she smiling kindly? Was she secretly joyous about the news?

“Dr. Tycho Brahe, yes?”

Tycho pulled out his red-filtered flashlight and the spare he kept with him, turning them both on as he made his way up the hill. “Yes. You must be True Name.”

“My name precedes me, I see.” She laughed. It didn’t sound like a mean or wicked one, just earnest, pleased. She accepted the red-filtered light from him and then patted the grass beside her with a paw. “Come, sit with me. This place is absolutely fascinating! I had no idea that such a thing was possible here.”

Tycho sat on the mossy ground beside the skunk. “I used to keep it as a place for work or just unwinding, but some years back, I moved in and have just set up camp over in the trees.”

“It is delightful,” she said, and he could hear the awe in her voice. “How does it work? I thought that there was no way for images to make their way into the System.”

He leaned back on his hands beside her to look up into the night sky. “It takes in all of the information from the fisheye telescope—or any of the telescopes, really—and converts it into data that one can read, and then reconstructs it in here. When it’s just stars, just little points of light like this, it’s simple enough to display. Color temperature, relative intensity, estimated distance, and so on. When we get close to something, as we did with the Jupiter slingshot, there was too much data, as there would be from any video feed, and the sim just quit displaying anything.”

True Name had set the flashlight against her thigh, pointed vaguely up toward her so that he could see her in more detail. Her face was kind, open, and clearly excited. Something about the bristle of her whiskers, the angle of her ears, and the relaxed state of her cheeks worked with her smile to give the impression of wonder and delight, though if pressed, he would’ve had a hard time defining why.

“Beautiful.”

They sat in silence for a while, simply looking up at the stars, both with their red lights pointed toward them to light themselves up. Because it was beautiful, he knew. The night sky, one as pure as this, demanded a reverence, an acknowledgement.

“Which ones do you suppose they came from?” she asked.

“It could be any, at this point,” he said. “We have no idea how old their vehicle is. We can know their speed and position with some accuracy, but who knows how much that has changed since they launched.”

“Do you mean they might have, ah...attitude jets, I believe they are called?”

“Almost certainly, but more than that, any time they get too close to any system with any appreciable gravity, it’ll influence their course.”

She nodded in the dim, red light. “Much as they are doing now, perhaps.”

“Yes.” He thought for a moment, querying the perisystem for information, then shrugged. “They’re coming up over the plane of the ecliptic, so there’s a good chance that they just used our sun as a gravity assist. A slingshot.”

“Picking up a bit of extra speed, then?”

“Yep, it’s free energy.”

She rested her cheek on her shoulder to look over at him, grinning. “Or perhaps simply to hide where they came from. Maybe they are using the possibility of that assist to obscure their trail!” She laughed, waving a paw up at the stars. “Or they are spying on us, investigating us, Earth, Lagrange. But listen to me, here I am speaking

like this is some grand space opera. I have read too much science fiction over the years.”

He nodded, grinning as well. “Their speed and the laws of physics make all of those very unlikely. The only reason they may have even bothered to contact us is because we have a chance at some sort of contact that won’t immediately fade into light-days.”

“They did say that they were moving fast, did they not? I suppose that helps alleviate some of those old space-opera-fueled fears.” She returned her gaze up to the sky. “Though, you know, it got me thinking. How many things like this LV might be zooming around the galaxy at incredible speeds? We can be sure now that there are at least three, yes? Our dear home, Castor, then Pollux way on the other side of the sun, and now this new one.”

“True. Maybe everyone’s just figured out that this is the safest and easiest way to travel.”

“You took the words from my mouth,” she said with a chuckle. “It makes one wonder, perhaps this is the Great Filter. Perhaps Kardashev was wrong all along, and we should not be looking at the energy usage of a civilization but on the scale from Earthbound, spaceflight, and then uploading, and it is only civilizations that reach that third state that might pass through that filter.”

“I’d not thought of it that way.”

“There was, of course, no need for you to rush back, but that is what I have been thinking about while waiting for you. Thank you for the light, by the way.”

The sudden departure from the topic of the sky above to the here and now shocked Tycho into the realization that he’d fallen in such easy conversation with the skunk. They’d talked like friends, like those who had known each other well but perhaps had just met in person for the first time.

He saw now what Dear had meant, and he was helpless before it.

“Well, thank you for stopping by,” he said, keeping this new anxiety out of his voice as best he could. “I’m assuming you wanted to talk about the message and response?”

True Name sat up, dusted her paws off on her thighs, and then turned to face him, switching to a kneeling position. The friendliness was still there in her face, but was now tempered by a down-to-business professionalism. “Of course. Can you tell me more about the ramifications of this? I can understand the mechanics of it well enough, but I want to hear from you what the next steps are.”

This had not been the question he was expecting, so he took the act of sitting to face True Name, cross-legged, to think about his response. “Well, I suppose they’ll send over something uploadable which will drop it in the DMZ. I don’t imagine they’ll start that for a while yet, given the distances between us. They’ll probably want to talk more before doing so, and if they’re sending us instructions on how to make an exchange of personalities, that’ll give us time to work on that.”

“If we want to,” the skunk said, nodding. “And, as you were out and we are now gating messages from the Dreamer Module through us, we will keep an eye out for such. We will do our best to keep you in the loop, of course.”

He blinked. ‘Gating’? Perhaps that meant that they’d cut his access and would be sharing only what they chose with him. “I didn’t mean to...I mean, I hope that my response was not too far out of line.”

She smiled to him, and while her expression remained friendly, there was the smallest note of pity in that smile. “Do not worry, Tycho Brahe, you are not in trouble. We have been running simulations on the various

possible outcomes ever since this portion of the Dreamer Module was okayed. This possibility was on our list and is well within our parameters. We know what it is that we will be doing going forward, and that does not include reprimanding you in any way.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, before he could even stop himself. “I probably should’ve asked.”

The skunk waved a paw as though the comment was simply irrelevant. “You will even keep access to the Dreamer Module; I meant what I said when you will still be kept in the loop. We will simply have *first* access.”

He nodded, hoping that there was still enough red light shining on him that she could see the gesture.

“In fact, that was the primary purpose of my visit. It was nice to get your view of the ramifications, of course, but I wanted to ensure that you would be willing to work with us on this. You keep access to the Dreamer Module, we learn all we can from you. A mutual arrangement wherein you do what you love and we help you out in that, and in exchange you teach us all you can in the process.” She held out her paw, grinning lopsidedly. “I know that the concept is rather outdated on the System, but what I am really here to do is offer you a job.”

Once the import of her words had sunk in, he laughed and clasped her paw in his hand. “Oh, of course! If it’s all the stuff I love, and also I get to talk about it to someone, that sounds...well, perfect, actually.”

She laughed and shook on it. The handshake was picture perfect: the right balance between firm and gentle, the right speed, the right duration, all tuned precisely for him. He could see as though from a meter above himself the precise ways in which he was being played like a fiddle.

“Excellent, excellent. I will also be in touch with your friend Codrin Bălan, as well, as I believe ey will be a good person to document much of this, so please expect further contact from em. You will also be in touch with a few of my cocladists—beyond Dear, that is—who will be working with you in various capacities.”

He nodded, frowning. *How did she know that I’d met Codrin and Dear?*

“I know that you consider yourself a tasker and that maintaining multiple forks is not your usual MO,” she continued. “But if possible, I would like you to keep at least one additional instance to work with us while you continue to work out here and with Codrin. If you have the bandwidth for others, we may have additional tasks. Please keep that in mind, and consider how open to the prospect you will be should you be asked.”

“Oh, uh, okay. I guess I just never fork because it seems like an awful lot of trouble. One mind is a lot to deal with as it is.”

True Name grinned, said, “I do not begrudge you that. They are rather a lot. These will be long-running, however, so you need not worry too much about the burden of handling the memories for a while, and if you do not want to deal with that at all, so long as everyone is on the same page with me and my team, you need not accept the memory load.”

“Well, alright.”

“Can you fork now, please? I will take one of you with me and we can work on arrangements there. You are free to get some sleep, if you need.”

Tycho nodded, closed his eyes, and dug back through memories to remember just how to create a new instance, taking a good minute and a half before he managed it.

“Sorry, it’s been a long time,” the original him said.

“It is quite alright. We have much practice under our belts.” She nodded toward the new instance. “Can you tag yourself something memorable so that you can tell yourself apart? I suggest ‘Artemis’, as that is what we

have decided to name the remote vehicle.”

Both of him frowned, and after a moment’s thought, the new instance was tagged Tycho Brahe#Artemis, all while scanning his memory for the reference. Goddess of the Moon, yes, but of the hunt? Wild animals? Artemis with her bow? There were too many correspondences and not all of them savory.

“Why Artemis?” he asked.

“They are flying like an arrow through the night sky, are they not?” True Name said.

“Does that make the others on the ship, uh...Artemisians or whatever?”

The skunk stood, offered a paw to help Tycho#Artemis in standing. “That or Sea People.”

“Sea People?” he asked, accepting her paw. As he stood, he realized that he was more than a head taller than the skunk, a fact which had missed him as they sat there on the hill.

“We had better hope for Artemisians, but we must also be prepared for Sea People. Come, Tycho. #Artemis, we will have a place for you to stay. #Tasker, you may stay here, and expect contact soon.” She looked up to the sky one last time, and said. “Do you know the poem about your namesake?”

Tycho#Artemis shook his head while #Tasker stood.

“Reach me down my Tycho Brahe — I would know him when we meet,” she quoted. “When I share my later science, sitting humbly at his feet; He may know the law of all things yet be ignorant of how We are working to completion, working on from then till now.”

“I—”

“You are both, Tycho. We may yet share our later science with them as they may share theirs with us. Perhaps we shall take our turns sitting at each others’ feet. But Tycho,” she said, smiling. “That is a poem about death. Please understand that there is risk here, as well. Now, come with me.”

After True Name and Tycho#Artemis left, he stood there on the top of his hill, in the middle of his field, surrounded by his ring of trees, and looked up into the night sky, thinking on all that it meant to be powerless.

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-minus 22 days, 3 hours, 10 minutes

It took both eir partners to talk Codrin down from eir desire to simply get right to work.

“My dear, if, as he said, Tycho was going to take a nap, perhaps you ought to do the same.”

“I know,” ey replied, shoulders sagging. “It’s hard to get out of that mindset of having to just work.”

“I know it’s enjoyable,” eir other partner said. “But seriously, Codrin, even if you’re not going to take a nap, take a thermos out onto the prairie and walk for a bit. Tycho is going to need quite a bit of help, given what you told us of him—”

“And if True Name is already involved.”

“That too, yeah. So it’s probably best to go into the whole thing well rested and prepared for jittery astronomers and...well, whatever True Name is, these days.”

Codrin nodded. “That makes sense, at least. Do we even have a thermos?”

“Probably. I’ll go digging. Might as well make a fresh pot, while I’m up.”

“You, my love, are a true delight,” Dear said, tail flitting this way and that.

They grinned, walked off to the kitchen, and started clattering around in cupboards for a coffee therm.

“Dear, have you talked to True Name recently?” Codrin asked after a polite pause.

It shook its head. *“Not in terms of a conversation, at least. I have received a few messages from her in the intervening years, many of which were sent to several Odists as a group.”*

“She does that? What are they? Orders or something?”

It shook its head, ears flapping slightly at the movement. *“No. Or, well, not exactly. They are simply updates, or replies to other, ongoing conversations. Some of us still communicate with each other on a somewhat regular basis, and I have been looped into several of those conversations over the years.”*

“Wait, ‘not exactly’?”

“You have met her. She does not need to order. Oftentimes, she simply suggests.”

Ey frowned. “I sometimes worry that we’ve been attributing almost magical manipulative abilities to her, honestly.”

Dear shrugged. *“Perhaps, but she also has had more than two hundred years of study under her belt to find all of the best ways to interact with people. May Then My Name was something of a let-down for her, I think, even from the very beginning, so she had to learn to take on that mantle herself.”*

“Especially over the last few years, you mean? With Ioan?”

“Perhaps, though I think that might be ancillary to the fact that our dear May is not on the LVs at all.”

Ey blinked, laughed. “I’d almost forgot.”

The fox gave em a strange look. “*You forgot that May Then My Name was not here?*”

Their partner showed up, a cup of coffee in one hand and a (far too large) thermos in the other. “Are you forgetting things again, Codrin?”

“No, no,” ey said, accepting the thermos with a frown. “Or, well, kind of. I didn’t forget that May Then My Name wasn’t here, just the ramifications of that, that True Name might not have her as a tool.”

“*That is more understandable, yes,*” the fox said. “*Perhaps the True Name here on Castor has diverged from the one on Lagrange in that respect, perhaps not. I suspect that both are disappointed, in their own ways.*”

Standing, Codrin fiddled with the thermos, ensuring that the lid was a mug when removed—two nested ones, actually—then nodded. “I don’t know how many dimensions she’s thinking on, but I also wouldn’t be surprised if she’d had a cost-benefit analysis on losing her to Ioan.”

“*I would not be surprised, no, which would mean that she has planned around that eventuality. I am sure that May Then My Name is keeping an eye on that. Do not let us keep you, though, my dear. Go for your walk. Think about something else. Enjoy the cold, build a cairn around your worries, and then return safe.*”

Ey smiled, leaned down to kiss the fox between the ears, then eir other partner on the cheek. “I didn’t know that was possible, but I’ll try. Back in a bit.”

Ey made it two cairns out before caving to the desire to simply get started, and stepped over to Tycho’s field. There was a ping of amusement from Dear, to which ey replied with a guilty apology and an acknowledgement that ey’d return soon, all while waiting for eir eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness.

The next sensorium message was a gentle ping to Tycho—nothing so loaded with anxiety as the one ey’d received this morning, just an acknowledgement, a view of the stars.

A voice came from somewhere behind em. “Codrin?”

Ey whirled around to see a dim cone of red light shining on the ground, illuminating feet in a pair of well-worn boots. “Tycho? Sorry for intruding like this. I hope I’m not waking you or anything.”

“No, no. Come in. I haven’t been able to sleep since True Name left.”

There was a small click and then a ray of further red light spread out from a doorway, showing a small hut nestled within the trees. Ey let emself be guided in the door, finding a sparsely decorated room—a desk, a bed, and a massive cork board nailed to the wall, covered in at least three overlapping layers of notes.

“Thanks for having me,” ey said, sitting on the offered chair while Tycho claimed the edge of the bed. Once the door was shut, a switch shifted the red light to a normal, warm desk lamp. “I should’ve mentioned that I’d be coming over, first.”

He waved away the apology. “I knew you’d be here, though I didn’t know when.”

Codrin paused in the middle of unscrewing the lid to the thermos. “You knew?”

“True Name said you would.”

Ey frowned, finishing opening the thermos and offering Tycho one of the two mugs of coffee. “What did she say about me?”

“She didn’t talk with you?”

Ey shook eir head. “Did she say she would?”

Tycho sipped at the coffee, winced, and set the mug aside to cool. “No, she just talked as though she had, or at least that she knew you’d be working with me.”

“Of course she did,” ey murmured. “She knows me too well.”

He ground the heels of his palms against his eyes. “I feel like she knew me too well, too. We had what felt like a wonderful conversation where she offered me a job, asked me to fork to send an instance with her to keep working with her, but then quoted some bit of poetry at me and I couldn’t tell if it was a threat or a warning or whatever. I’m still trying to recover from that.”

“I’m guessing you said yes to both the job offer and the fork?”

He nodded. “It all just sounded so normal. There didn’t seem like anything else to do.”

“Can you tell me more about both?”

“Well, she said that she knew good deal about the communications and that she’d like me to come help her with the mechanics of that. She’d help me out with resources and I’d teach her what I learn about Artemis as I learned it.”

“Artemis? Is that what they’re calling the remote...ship? Vehicle?”

He nodded. “Either, really. It cararies people. She said they’re calling it Artemis, that I should tag my fork #Artemis, and that those on the ship were either Artemisians or Sea People, which I didn’t get.”

“Sea People might be a reference to something from the *Mythology*,” Codrin leaned back in the seat, thinking. “Or it could be a reference to a theory about a marauding group of seafarers during the Bronze Age collapse. One that had sacked much of the ancient near east and northern Africa, leading to the prolongation of the collapse.”

Tycho’s eyes grew wide. “Do you think that’s what she’s getting at with the reference? That these are going to be some marauders coming to mess with the LV?”

Ey shrugged. “Who knows? Probably both, honestly. Maybe there’s even some reference that we’re missing. She’s True Name, there really is no way of telling.”

Nodding, Tycho scooted back on the bed until his back was to the wall, then brought his knees up to his chest. Despite his height, he looked small to Codrin, somehow diminished after the events of the last...goodness, had it only been a day? Diminished, yes, and younger, though he’d always looked as though he was not yet out of his forties with his well-groomed salt-and-pepper hair and well-kept beard.

They sat in silence for a while. Codrin could not guess what the astronomer was thinking about, though ey could see his eyes occasionally darting this way and that, as though connecting one idea to another in the air as well as in his head.

For eir part, ey began structuring the project. There would have to be the journalistic aspect of it, much closer to that of *On the Perils of Memory* than *An Expanded History of Our World*, but if the conservative Odists were also involved, there’d likely also be far more observing than researching.

“Tycho,” ey said, startling him out of a reverie. “Do you know what an amanuensis is?”

“Like a recorder? A stenographer? Someone who takes notes?”

“Well, in part, but also someone who thinks about what they’re recording,” ey said, tapping at eir temple. “They aren’t a scribe or a court recorder, but someone there to witness and digest a conversation.”

“Like a clerk?” He grinned. “We used to have one of those for our club who would take minutes of the meetings and such.”

Ey nodded. “Certainly closer to that than a recorder, yeah. I bring this up because that will be my job in all of this, but I think it’ll also be yours. Things like the *History* are all well and good, and I loved putting the work into the writing, but I also really enjoy doing this. I may wish that the things I get caught up in weren’t always so dramatic, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“What do you mean, it’ll be my job too?” he asked.

“Just that you will also be witnessing and thinking about this project, and then coming up with ideas related to it to be compiled into a coherent understanding. That’s why we’ll be working together, I think. I’m trained to do this work in particular, but I’ll need your help in making sense of the science part of it. I’ll experience it with you as much as I’m allowed, but you’ll have to ensure that I actually understand what’s going on.”

Tycho laughed. “Well, I’ll do my best, but it’s not like I have much experience working with Artemisians, either. I’ll help with the technical aspects as best I can, though.”

“Excellent,” Codrin said. “Thank you for that. I’ll be managing most of this part, so you won’t have to worry too much about the minutiae, but I figured it’d give you a better idea of what to expect when we work together.”

He nodded.

“On that note, let’s come up with a basic idea of what’s next for us. We mostly talked about immediate next steps earlier, but it might be a good idea to start thinking on a larger timescale.”

“I guess. I’m assuming it’ll be pretty loose, given that we can’t guess the particulars?” He waited for Codrin to nod, then continued. “Then we have a month or so before they reach their closest approach as long as we both stay on our own heading.”

“Does that mean a month before they upload?”

He shrugged. “Not necessarily. They can upload whenever they want, so long as our Ansible is on and the DMZ is ready. I don’t think it’s on yet, though. There’s probably an effective range beyond which the Ansible won’t work well.”

“Alright. Have we received any further communications from them? Their message said that they had a similar mechanism in place. Is that something we’ll be able to use? Or want to use, even?”

“No further communications that I know of,” he said. “But True Name said that all communications will be gated through her, and I don’t know if that means that I’ll be getting them or just Tycho#Artemis. Hopefully both, if you and I are to be working on this as well.”

Codrin frowned. “Well, okay.”

“As for us using their mechanism, I guess it depends on if it’s something we can reconfigure our Ansible to use, or if we will need to construct something new. If we’ll need to construct something new, then we might not be able to do so in time. Our manufactories are meant for repairs rather than construction. Theoretically they could be used for such, but I don’t know how long that’d take without someone phys-side to help.”

“And would we want to?”

“That feels like a question for True Name, not me,” he said after a long pause.

Ey finished eir coffee and replaced the cup on the cap of the thermos. “One of us will have to work up the courage to ask her, sometime. But for now, is it something you would want to do?”

“What? Upload to Artemis?” He looked startled by the question.

“Yes. If it’s possible, I mean. I figure it would just be an instance rather than completely investing. I’d also be curious to hear your opinions on that as well.”

Tycho tilted his head back until it hit the wall of the hut, staring up toward the ceiling. He sat like that for a good five minutes, during which Codrin remained silent, before leaning forward to pour emself another cup of coffee.

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t know about investing completely, but yes, I think I would. Would you?”

Ey smiled, though ey felt just how tired ey was as ey did so. “Perhaps. I have attachments here, though. So the Codrin who uploaded—if ey remains a Codrin—would be severed completely from those ey loves. As romantic as the idea of sailing away on some alien spacecraft might be, it’d be painful to leave, even knowing that a Codrin remained.”

“And if your partners uploaded with you?”

The idea caught em up short, and several trains of thought crunched to a halt within em. “If they...” Ey laughed, shaking eir head. “You know, I hadn’t considered that, yet. I wonder why? But yes, if they chose to do so, then yes, I’ll go with them.”

The conversation wound on from there, teasing apart a few possible next steps that lay ahead of them, but throughout it all, at least one thread of eir mind was dedicated to picking at that question.

Why had ey not considered whether or not eir partners would want to upload? It wasn’t as though ey didn’t attribute the agency to do so to them, ey knew just how independent and intelligent they were on their own. Nor was it that ey hadn’t made any guesses as to whether or not they would—ey suspected that Dear would jump at the opportunity.

The root of the issue lay within emself, ey knew. Why was ey not able to make that decision without them doing so first? Was ey really such a follower? Was ey really so stuck living five minutes behind them that ey couldn’t imagine making the decision in the face of the possibility of simply reacting to it? Would ey be able to say yes or no to that question if they asked?

Conversely, would ey be able to argue one way or the other, to convince them to come with em or not?

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 22 days, 3 hours, 49 minutes

Tycho#Artemis was unsure if what he was seeing was a flurry of chaotic activity or some tightly choreographed dance. Part of this assessment, he guessed, was due to the relatively small number of individuals for the number of instances moving around. There were probably a dozen instances of True Name that he could see, and then at least that many of a gentleman who looked to be in his well-preserved forties, slender without being lanky, tall without being looming.

And that was it. Well over twenty instances of two individuals milling around what appeared to be a farm of cubicles, each walled with glass, the upper half of which was frosted.

Ringling this bank of cubicles were walls of frosted glass, broken at regular intervals with doors which they supposed must be offices. Between those doors were couches, looking pleasantly soft in his exhaustion, and an array of padded stools or chairs with interrupted backs which he supposed must be perfect for those endowed with tails, given the occasional skunk or man—Jonas, perhaps?—relaxing in them, chatting amiably during what must be either breaks or informal meetings.

And yet, for all that activity, it was incredibly quiet. There must be dozens of cones of silence set up, spanning cube walls, covering banks of couches, even hovering over those walking the aisles.

“What is this?” he asked the skunk standing beside him.

“Headquarters.” She gestured him to a couch already containing a woman, picking at her nails. Short, curly black hair framing a round face. “Though that makes it sound far more formal than it really is. It is a place for Jonas and I to work together in our various instances.”

He sank down into the couch beside the woman. “That sounds pretty formal to me. What are you working on that requires cubicles?”

True Name laughed, claiming a stool facing the couch where she sat, straight-backed. “The informal aspect of it is that we are working on essentially whatever we want. Co-working space, perhaps? It is a space where we can have conversations, write, think. If there are a dozen of us, there are three dozen projects.”

“And the message from Artemis is one of them?”

“It is several of them, yes. It has spun off a few projects of its own. Ah! Jonas. Which are you?” she said when one of the men blipped into existence, already seated in one of the chairs.

He grinned, crossing his legs in front of him at the ankles. “Di5.” He nodded toward Tycho. “Just call me Jonas, though. True Name is just being a snot.”

The skunk kicked out at one of his ankles.

“Deserved that,” he said. “You must be Dr. Brahe, yeah? Nice to meet you.”

He nodded, said, “Just Tycho is fine.”

Jonas nodded absently. Without any visible signal a cone of silence fell over the area, dimming what noise remained outside of it to the barest murmur.

“I am Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help,” the woman said in a tone that seemed to sit just shy of laughter. “Answers Will Not Help will do.”

“Answers, in a rush,” Jonas said, to which she replied with an ankle kick of her own.

“If you call me Answers, I will beat the shit out of you,” she said though that near-laugh took most of the sting out of the words.

“To business, then.” True Name gestured towards Tycho. “Tycho, here, is the one that answered the message, as you all know, so I have encouraged him to fork and join us. Tycho#Artemis will be working here, and Tycho#Tasker will be working with—”

“Codrin?” Jonas asked, grin turning sly.

“Of course.”

“Well, if you’re the one to thank for kicking this whole thing off, perhaps you can enlighten us as to why?”

Tycho felt anxiety tighten within his chest. “I uh...I don’t know. I guess I was the first one to read the message, and I didn’t know what to do with that, so I just replied without really thinking, I guess.”

“You were not the first to read the message,” True Name said, smiling almost pityingly at him. “And you need not be anxious. As I have already said, we have been wargaming this possibility since we were forced to concede that aspect of the Module.”

He frowned. “Well, if you read it first, why’d you let it through so that I could see it?”

“We are not the astronomers,” Answers Will Not Help said, shrugging. “That is your job, is it not?”

“Don’t you want to control the situation or something, though?”

True Name shook her head. “It is not our job to control.”

“But the *History*—”

“Do you remember the motto of the Council of Eight, Tycho?”

He frowned. “‘To guide but not to govern’, right?”

True Name nodded. “We are not controlling anything. We are guiding. Of what use would control be in a place such as this? People can do whatever they want.”

“Was the *History* wrong then? That you didn’t control Secession and Launch?”

“We guided them both,” Jonas said, waving his hand. “Just as we guided the *History*. Even the Bălan clade knows this.”

“Why, though?” Tycho asked.

“Social engineering,” True Name said, then nodded toward Jonas. “We should not get too sidetracked, though. Jonas, you had more questions?”

“I did, yeah. First off, can you give me an overall breakdown of the time frame involved here?”

“Well...wait, can you tell me how long it’s been since the message arrived? I haven’t slept in I don’t know how long.”

“A little less than twelve hours.”

“Well, then we have a little less than forty days until their closest approach, at which point they’ll start moving away from us again.”

“And what does that approach mean for us?”

Tycho rubbed at the back of his neck, searching for the best way to explain it. “All it means is that that is the point when the transmission times between our two vehicles will be the shortest, then it’ll start getting longer again.”

Jonas nodded. “And that approach isn’t all that close, is it?”

“Oh God no. Five light-minutes is, uh...ninety million kilometers? Something like that.”

“Good, thanks for confirming. I’m going to ungate the next set of messages. Ready?”

Jonas did not actually wait for confirmation before Tycho was given access. Or, rather, access was forced upon him. Like a sensorium message, the text from the perisystem architecture wedged itself into his mind.

If possible, in 400 hours orient down 0.3142 radians relative to your sun reference point source of this transmission to align courses. If possible, accelerate 0.00029c to approach matched velocity. Confirm actions taken.

Instructions for matching consciousness-bearing system transfer mechanism to follow. Confirm actions taken upon receipt.

Prepare airgapped area with locked-down edit permissions dimensions 20m by 20m height 5m and two sandbox areas for rest for us and you dimensions 20m by 20m height 5m. Confirm actions taken.

Prepare party of five consciousness-bearing systems containing one element of leadership, one to record in any capacity, one scientist, two representatives of own choice. Duplicate, prepare to send one set to us, and send other set to above location. Prepare to receive five in turn, similar roles. Expect four categories of consciousness-bearing systems. Confirm actions taken.

We welcome you.

Turun Ka of firstrace, leadership

Turun Ko of firstrace, recorder

Stolon of thirdrace, scientist

Iska of secondrace, representative

Artante Diria of fourthrace, representative

A long silence stretched over the group while the others waited for Tycho to digest the sudden onslaught of information.

“This is,” he said, took a slow breath in, then continued, “A lot.”

“Talk us through your thoughts,” True Name said. “That will help you process, and you may catch something that we have not. This is your role here, Tycho Brahe.”

He nodded. “Okay. So, from the top. They suggest we make some course alterations to, I suppose, get us traveling parallel with them, and then accelerate to get closer to their velocity. Does that sound right?”

Jonas nodded. “We’ve talked with the parasystem engineers who work with the attitude thrusters and propulsion. They say that they can accommodate the maneuver. We can accelerate a little bit if we use half our fuel, but we’re beyond the point where the solar sail is doing us much good, the HE engines are too slow, and we want to preserve some of that fuel.”

“How much acceleration? I mean, I don’t have any training in the physics of spaceflight—”

“We’ve got that covered.”

“Oh. Well, how much acceleration, then?”

“About a third of what they asked. It’ll extend the period of time that we’re in useful Ansible range by a week or two, giving us about five weeks total.”

“If you say so.” he shrugged. “I guess this is to help extend the duration that we can transfer back and forth?”

“Yeah, basically,” Jonas said. “Do you have thoughts on that?”

Tycho frowned. He wasn’t sure why they kept asking him questions about his sentiments on things far outside his area of expertise. Of what use were his thoughts on the matter? “I mean, it makes sense, as far as any of this has.”

“How much astronomy you hope to learn from the Artemisians will rely on how long we stay in contact.” Answers Will Not Help grinned at him. “Does that bit make sense, at least?”

He sat up straighter. “Oh, uh...you mean someone will be gathering all that information? Will we be able to request it via radio?”

True Name smiled, and this time there was pity in the expression. “I know that you said starting from the top, but Tycho, you must understand that you are ideally situated to be the scientist among our party of five. You were the one to answer their call, were you not?”

He couldn’t tell what expression or expressions crossed his face, but it must’ve been amusing, as Answers Will Not Help laughed and slapped him on the knee. “You will be fine, Tycho.”

“Why me, though?” he stammered. “There have to be smarter people on board! People who would love to meet aliens and know just what to ask them.”

The skunk across from him waved her hand to dismiss the comment. “You will be the scientist. We do not want someone who is smarter than you. We do not want someone who knows just what to ask them. We want you because you are the type of person who grants consent to join us without consulting anyone first. That and a few other factors that we have taken into account leave our decision clear.”

“Besides,” Answers Will Not Help said, still giggling. “You will get to ask four spacefaring races astronomy questions. Does that not excite you?”

“I...four?” His head was swimming, not aided by the stilted way these Odists seemed to talk.

“Four categories of consciousness-bearing systems. Firstrace through fourthrace. Seems pretty obvious what they are saying to me.”

He swallowed dryly.

“You will be the scientist,” True Name said. “I will be acting in a leadership capacity, having lost the coin-toss with Jonas. Codrin Bălan will be our recorder. One of my uptree instances, Why Ask Questions, Here At The End Of All Things will be one of the other representatives, and we are searching for the second.”

“Two of you?”

“Sending two members of the same clade who look different will give us an idea of how they view forking.” Jonas nodded toward the two Odists. “That’s why I cheated to win the coin-toss, at least. I want to see what they do with one skunk Odist and one human Odist, as Why Ask Questions is.”

“And I will run interference here,” Answers Will Not Help added. “I will be learning much the same as Why Ask Questions so that I can interpret messages from the DMZ and Artemis. She is better at working crowds.”

Tycho nodded. He felt slow, somehow. Stupid. It wasn’t even that they were speaking about things he didn’t understand because he hadn’t learned them yet so much as they were speaking as though their actions took place on some higher plane of existence, some place completely inaccessible to him.

“Apologies for sidetracking your top-to-bottom reading. Please continue,” True Name said.

“Uh, alright.” He shook his head to try and clear it. It did not work. “Instructions for transferring a consciousness-bearing system...I’m assuming that’s their version of the Ansible?”

“Yes. We received the specifications for that immediately after this message. I will not bore you with their contents, but the sys-side Ansible techs assure us that it works much the same as ours and will require only software changes, nothing physical. That will be ready within a few weeks, if not sooner.”

He hesitated, then, seeing no possible reply that wouldn’t make him sound like an idiot, continued. “Alright. Then they want us to prepare a space for them. I don’t know what airgapped means, though.”

“We’re assuming they mean as in a DMZ. Something completely separate from the rest of our System, which is what we were planning, anyway. It’s a tech term which means that there is no physical connection between two devices, so they can’t possibly communicate unless one plugs in a cable. Maybe that’s what they meant?” Jonas grinned lopsidedly. “We’ll just have to hope we get it right.”

“So, a secure place to meet, which we were planning on anyway. Do you think they’re worried we’ll attack them or something?”

True Name and Jonas exchanged a quick glance, and the skunk, suddenly more serious than she’d been since he’d met her, said, “Expand on that.” Not a question. A command.

He mastered the urge to shy away from her. “I just mean that, if we can’t promise them that we’re universally on board with having them visit us, that puts the talks at risk, right?”

She leaned back on her stool, frowning, as two more instances of her forked off and dashed down the aisles to a cubicle. “This is why we are talking with you, Tycho. Thank you for proving your worth so quickly.”

“This wasn’t part of your calculations or whatever?”

“It was,” Jonas said. “But the fact that you thought of it so quickly was not.”

He shook his head. “I still don’t understand why me, though.”

“You are in absolutely no way special, my dear.” Answers Will Not Help bumped his shoulder with hers, her voice once more full of smiles. “You are in absolutely all ways average. This allows us to use you as a barometer for how we can expect the rest of the System to react.”

“I mean, I guess I’m average, but that doesn’t seem like much data. Aren’t you asking more people?”

She was back to laughing. “How many people do you imagine know about this, Tycho?”

He sighed, slouching further down into the couch. “Right. Okay. Twenty by twenty by five meters for the conference room and their rest area. Uh...maybe that says how big they are?”

“And maybe just the size of their DMZ so that we can meet on equal grounds on both sides,” Jonas said. “We

won't know until it happens. It does show us that they rest, though, or at least expect to take breaks from the talks. That they say two means that they think we will as well."

Rest, he thought. Rest sounds good.

Aloud, he said, "And I guess the next bit we've already talked about some. Maybe four races. They say 'consciousness-bearing systems' and don't name their races, so maybe it's complicated. If they've picked up three other races before meeting us, maybe very, very complicated."

"I have been thinking," Answers Will Not Help said. "Perhaps some of them were not biological races. They did not say people or species."

"AIs, you mean?"

She shrugged. "Or something. It might also be a caste thing. You will notice that there are two firstrace emissaries, one of which is the leader, and then secondrace and fourthrace only get representatives, no titles. There are many possibilities."

After a pause, he asked, "And is that 'We welcome you' an invitation to join them?"

"Maybe," Jonas said. "We don't know yet. We're going to keep talking to them and try and get a better feel for it. If it means 'You're welcome to join us', that's certainly better than 'We welcome you because you have no other choice'. We're working on it."

Tycho rubbed his face tiredly. "Way above my pay grade."

True Name laughed. "It is, yes."

"Any thoughts on the names?" Jonas asked.

"Well, I guess it's interesting that the two firstrace people...individuals...er, consciousness-bearing systems share a name. Maybe they're a clade, like...I mean..."

"Like me?" Jonas said, smirking. "Don't worry, Jonases Ka and Ko already had their laugh over it. But no, we don't know that one way or another."

He felt heat rise to his cheeks, but nodded all the same. "The rest, I don't know. They all sound different, I guess. The fourthrace one is the only other one with two names."

"We cannot make any real guesses, ourselves," True Name said. "We have been told that a stolon is a botanical term, but that is likely only a coincidence."

"Well, only other thing I can think of is that they ask for confirmation on all actions taken. What are you going to say to those?"

True Name's eyes grew distant as, he imagined, she accessed an exo with the response text prepared. "To the first, 'We will orient as described and accelerate 0.00014c'. To the second, 'Instructions received, integration commencing immediately, estimated time to completion 428 hours'. To the third, 'Areas prepared'. To the fourth, 'Preparing party, we will duplicate and be ready to send on an agreed upon time'."

"Anything for the 'We welcome you' or the list of names?"

"We will repeat the 'We welcome you' message, and it will be signed with your name," Answers Will Not Help said.

He stood up so quickly it made him dizzy. "What?"

The other three laughed, True Name eventually continuing, "It will be signed 'The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade, leadership'. We will send them the complete list of names when

it is confirmed. You need not worry, Tycho. Answers Will Not Help was just being a snot, as Jonas so eloquently put it.”

He remained standing, swaying slightly and trying to blink away dancing black spots. “I think...I think I need to lay down.”

The skunk nodded, stood, and took him by the elbow. “You likely do. You have been awake for almost forty-five hours. We have a room prepared for you.”

Jonas stood as well, dusting off his slacks, and shook Tycho’s hand. “Welcome aboard. And hey, congrats on first contact.”

Codrin Balan — 2346

Convergence T-minus 21 days, 9 hours, 48 minutes

Codrin found emself in possession of a blissful day of peace after that sudden pile-on of news. Ey acknowledged a request from True Name to act as amanuensis with a faintness of heart that ey hoped she did not notice, worked on a letter to Ioan, and then went back to spending the rest of eir day napping, catching up on a writing project ey had been poking at, shoving Dear around for fun, and watching the fox rehearse its next performance with their partner. This one was to be a ballroom dance where everyone invited would dance with instances of Dear, which would begin disappearing one by one while the rest grew steadily more anxious, as though worrying that they would be next.

It was all very Dear, and Codrin enjoyed the idea immensely.

It was comforting, in a way, to sit on the couch and watch eir partners dance, stumble, laugh, start dancing again, all while this big project loomed outside. It was there, ey knew. It was hovering outside like a storm rolling inexorably over the prairie, ready to lash the sides of the house with bands of rain and rattle the glass with peals of thunder.

But for now, ey was safe inside, laying in supplies, even if they were simply emotional and intellectual reserves for what ey knew would be a taxing endeavor.

The only conversation ey'd allowed about the entire affair came at night, when the three of them had piled into bed, each in their familiar order but pressed now up against each other, perhaps drawing comfort against the onrushing storm.

"How's it going to feel working alongside True Name instead of against her?" their partner asked, voice muffled by a pillow as the fox kneaded on their shoulders.

Codrin replied, voice equally muffled against the back of Dear's neck, "I don't know if I was working against her, necessarily. It felt like it at the time, but now it just feels like we were both doing our jobs."

"You just hated hers."

Ey laughed against Dear's neck, which got a giggle out of the fox in turn. "I guess. It's hard to hate too much because good things came of it, but also you can't say for sure that the same thing would've happened if she hadn't been there. Her, Jonas, the lot of them, they were all helpful in bringing about Secession and Launch how they happened, but who knows? Maybe they would've happened regardless, just with different people at the helm."

There was a long moment of silence, broken only but the occasional noise of contentment from Dear's partner as the fox continued in its back-rub. Codrin spent the time plastering those thoughts over with better ones. Ey thought about how the fox smelled, how its fur felt against eir face. Ey thought about how, once, ey'd wound up between eir two partners in much the same position and it had led to an overwhelming wave of anxiety, a sense that things were wrong, a feeling that ey needed to escape, and how they'd comforted em and then simply fallen back into the habit of laying like this, instead. Dear seemed to draw a sense of security, sandwiched between them, just as Codrin did by having no one at eir back.

"Did you hate her?" Dear said, breaking the silence and eir rumination. It had stopped in its massage and settled for a simple hug instead. "Do you still?"

Ey hooked eir chin over the fox's shoulder, humming thoughtfully. "Maybe, in a way. I thought I did at the time. I thought I hated that she was part of the hidden level of control that everyone suspects but no one can prove. All she needed was a black suit, black sunglasses, and an earpiece."

Both of eir partners laughed.

"Now, though, I think resentment is a more accurate word than hate. I resent the feeling of being controlled with no recourse. She may have the brainpower and manpower and analytical skills to read everyone as thoroughly as she did, but I resent how cold she was in actually doing so; intentionally making me angry to make the result seem sensational? There's a lot of cynicism bound up in that." Ey shrugged. "There's no point in hating her. I don't dislike the System as it stands after her and Jonas's manipulation, but I resent the cynicism it took to get here. I don't resent being here, but I do resent the phys-side manipulations that led to me being here."

After yawning, Dear's partner asked, "Think you'll be alright working beside her while you resent her?"

"If it was just me, no," ey said. "If that cynicism is directed at the Artemisians and Tycho and whoever else, rather than just at me, It'll be fine, I think."

"Besides," Dear said. "*You will still get to see great things, my dear. You may be tired, yes, but out of however many billion people on board, you will get to see great things.*"

The conversation trailed off from there, and the three slept well that night, each dreaming their dreams of cynicism or skunks or aliens or astronomers or love.

The reprieve lasted until morning when, upon waking, Codrin discovered a note on the floor, written in the Odists' distinctive handwriting:

Mx. Bălan,

It has been requested that we pull together a team of five to act as emissaries to exchange with a team of similar composition from the Artemisians. They have left specific instructions for the roles that should be involved: someone in a position of leadership, a scientist, a recorder, and two representatives. We have the following:

- Leadership: myself, True Name
- Scientist: Dr. Tycho Brahe
- Recorder: you
- Representative 1: Why Ask Questions, Here At The End Of All Things of the Ode clade

However, we will need one more representative. It would be vanishingly easy for me or Jonas to pick someone who would be fitting for our enterprises, but why do that when it would potentially be much more interesting to let you pick? It ought to be someone outside the Ode clade or your polycule, but beyond that, I find myself fascinated by the idea that you—you, who have your feet on the ground and head in the clouds—might pick someone about whom I know nothing. With two Odists on the team already, one of whom is one of my up-tree instances, I am sure you can see that we will have the situation under control from our end.

Please make your choice today, and I will look forward to seeing the two of you at systime 1700 for a candlelit dinner in Tycho's delightful sim. If they are interested in joining, your partners are also welcome.

Cordially,

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade

Attached was the full text of both messages received so far.

After reading the note, ey placed it face down on the table and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. Ey needed at least some mood-altering substance before engaging with that, and it was far too early in the morning to reach for wine.

When Dear read the note, the fox made a sour face. *"I am not sure whether she is trying to be funny, strategically honest, or simply a brat."*

Ey slouched in eir chair at the table, focusing on the coffee, doing eir best to pick out and name different notes in the flavor. Something fruity. And caramel, perhaps. "I didn't know she was capable of humor."

"Everyone is capable of humor, my dear. Whether or not they intend it is the question."

"Want to come to a dinner party with me, then?"

There was a long pause during which several emotions played out on the fox's face before it replied. *"I will have an answer for you by systime 1500. I cannot decide right now."*

"Dinner party?" Dear's partner stumbled from the bedroom, creases from a pillow still evident on their cheek. "How many do I have to cook for?"

"None, thankfully," Codrin grinned. "Or perhaps just Dear and I. We've been invited to one."

They stopped at the end of the table, leaning down onto their hands. "Well, Dear is frowning, so I'm assuming it's complicated?"

"True Name would like me to join her and the rest of the emissaries to the Artemisians for dinner, and she's invited you two as well."

"No," they said flatly. "And now, it's time for coffee."

A warning glance from Dear kept Codrin from asking further after that. Instead, ey said, "I have an unrelated question for you once you're caffeinated."

They waved their hand noncommittally as they stumbled into the kitchen where a mug sat waiting for them already.

Once everyone was awake enough for conversation, ey asked eir question. “Either of you know someone who would be a good choice to balance out this diplomatic party? Someone less likely to try and shape the whole venture to their will, but not as passive as an amanuensis?”

Dear shrugged. “*I can get you in touch with plenty of artists. How opposite of an Odist viewpoint are you looking for?*”

“I’m not sure that’s quite the goal, so much as someone who can be engaged and can contribute without being as cynical as anyone from True Name’s stanza or as singularly focused as Tycho. I think what might be good is just someone ordinary. Someone normal. Boring.”

Dear’s partner raised their eyebrows. “If you want someone who would be interested, is pleasant to be around, and is able to engage in a conversation without going down a rabbit hole or starting a fight, I think I know someone.”

“*Slander. I can engage in conversations and I do not go down rabbit holes or start fights.*”

“Yeah, but absolutely no one would call you boring, Dear.”

It preened.

“Sounds promising,” Codrin said, flipping the note over and studying the list. “What do they have that would counterbalance this, beyond being ordinary?”

“She’s earnest about everything. It’s really endearing, actually. She’s likeable without being manipulative or cynical. She’s interested in people, too, and tries to see the good in them like it’s her job.” They paused, grinned, and shrugged. “I mean, she was my therapist before I uploaded, so I may be a little biased.”

“A therapist? That’s a really good idea, come to think of it.” Ey leaned forward onto eir elbows. “Someone who can understand humans and just be a normal human is what I was thinking of. What’s her name?”

“Sarah Genet. Want me to see if she’s free? She’s a tracker, I’m sure she’d be willing to send a fork for something like this.”

“Why not? She sounds like a nice enough person to meet either way.”

Dear nodded enthusiastically. “*I am always curious to meet friends of others from before they uploaded! You are not exempt from this, my love.*”

They smirked, looked up at the ceiling for a minute or two, then nodded. “She’s getting ready, and will be over at noon or so.”

Codrin had never seen a therapist either before or after uploading. Before, it had been a luxury that eir family couldn’t afford, and after, ey had been so busy—first with getting used to uploaded life, then with study, then with work—to have considered it much.

Ey had, however, seen a counselor in school as mandated by the school itself. Mr. Nicolescu had been a kindly old gentleman, but one who seemed perpetually on the brink of collapsing from exhaustion. It made sense, given the size of the school, the requirement to meet with every student once a year, and the lack of any other counselors. Ey had been a good student and a quiet kid, and seeing him any context other than the required visit was often a sign that something had gone wrong.

Sarah Genet immediately reminded em of Mr. Nicolescu in many ways. The way she walked, the way she held herself, her smile, the way she listened with her whole attention on whatever someone had to say.

Ey liked her immediately, a feeling which ey’d questioned ever since composing the *History*.

“So, all I was told coming into this was that I was needed for a project that might interest me,” she said,

once she'd been offered coffee, snacks, and a seat at the table. "If you're going to go all mysterious on me, I'm probably already going to say yes, but make your pitch."

"Quick pitch?" Codrin said. "Aliens found our Dreamer Module signal and are going to upload a diplomatic party in a few weeks, and you were suggested as a good candidate for the talks."

A few long seconds of quiet followed before Dear's partner laughed. "Sorry Sarah. You see why I wanted you over here to have this conversation in person?"

"You're telling me, good Lord." She shook her head, folded her hands on the table, and smiled. "Alright, now give me the longer pitch."

"Alright. The Dreamer Module broadcast, in short, contained instructions on how to build a message that would work with our Ansible, allowing anyone who found it to upload to the LVs. A few nights ago, someone picked that up and answered."

Ey slid the note from True Name across the table and waited for her to read.

When she had finished, Sarah said, "Whew, alright. That's a lot. So in however many hours, we should expect a team of five of them, and we'll send a team of five in turn. Any idea what we'll be talking about?"

"No clue. Clearly science of some sort, given their request for a scientist. Probably coming to an agreement, if they're asking for a recorder of some sort, though that's just a guess on my part. The "We welcome you" bit sounds promising, at least."

She read through the note once more, set it down, and sipped at her coffee. "Well, you already know that I'm in, but I'm happy to say that this doesn't change my decision. Why me, though?"

Dear's partner answered, "Have you read the Bălans' *History*, yet? *An Expanded History of Our World*? I know I pointed you to it."

"More than pointed," she said, laughing. "You all but forced me to read it, so, yes."

"So you know of True Name, right?"

"The one who tried to guide everything? Yeah, I remember. I didn't miss her name on there, either."

Codrin sighed. "I had the chance to interview her—me and my root instance both did—and she's a lot to deal with. I'm sure it's some calculated gesture that she leaves the last choice up to me, but all the same, I wanted to pick someone who was the opposite of her."

"So you figured a therapist would be good? A psychologist?"

"Yeah, someone who can maybe understand the Artemisians better without doing so specifically to manipulate them."

She held her coffee cup in her hands, tilting her head thoughtfully. "You know, it's a good intuition, but you might also want to be prepared for there to be nothing I can offer. They're clearly similar enough to us that they can learn our language, but that may be where the similarities stop. They may be so alien to us that we might not be able to understand them at all, at least not truly."

Codrin frowned.

"Not that it's hopeless, of course. I'm still happy to help. Honored, even! Just an eventuality you might want to prepare for."

"Well, maybe you can help us understand the Odists better, if nothing else."

Dear kicked at eir shin beneath the table.

Sarah laughed. “Have they sent us anything to teach us their language?”

“*One of their languages, perhaps,*” Dear chimed in. “*There seem to be four different species.*”

“One of them, right,” she said. “If we only sent them our *lingua franca*, though, maybe they have similar.”

“I don’t know, actually. Those are the messages I have, but I don’t know if they’re the only ones,” Codrin said. “We’ll probably learn more tonight. You alright creating a long-running fork for the project? That’s what she made Tycho do.”

“Oh, that’s fine. It’ll be my first time working on a big, organized project like this.”

Ey laughed. “Same here. I’ve worked on big projects and organized projects, but not both at the same time.”

“I’ll look forward to dinner, then.” She looked down, plucked at her blouse, and shrugged. “Think this is good enough for it?”

“If it’s at Tycho’s, it’ll be too dark to tell, but I don’t think he owns anything other than flannel shirts and jeans. You should be fine.”

“Alright. I’m curious to see what someone who tried to shape large swaths of recent history looks like.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 22 days, 5 hours, 2 minutes

Despite the exhaustion that had come down on him like a hammer, Tycho found it difficult to get to sleep. It weighed him down like stones on his chest, even as he lay in bed in the room that True Name led him too. It was a comfortable bed in a nice enough room, and still he lay there in the dark, staring up at the ceiling with eyes that burned.

He did not know how long it took him to actually fall asleep, but when next he woke, ten hours had passed, and dreams of Artemisians clung to him still. They were always just out of sight, and their conversations were just slightly below the level that he could hear them, and yet, he knew it to be them. Knew they were there, just around the corner. Knew that, above all else, he wanted to meet them.

When laying in bed gained him no further insight from the dream himself from the dream, he climbed out, showered in the *en suite*, and, when he was dressed, opened the door to find True Name waiting across the hall, two coffees in hand.

“Do you feel more well-rested, Tycho?”

“I guess, yeah,” he said, accepting the offered coffee. “I hope I didn’t sleep through too much.”

True Name began walking, letting him fall in step behind her. She laughed. “Of course not, my dear. Nothing much that you need to worry about has happened in the last few hours. We have been working on information control and hunting down those willing to help with the effort for setting up the Ansible system to upload to Artemis. That is what you will be working on today, you and a passel of nerds. I think that is the collective term, at least.”

So out of place was the humor that it took him several silent steps and a sip of his coffee to relax from the adrenal rush of the statement. “Well, if you say so. No further communications from them?”

“One, but I will not ungate it on you yet, as it is quite large. It is instructions for one of their languages. Secondrace’s, apparently. I will ask you to learn some of it, enough to be polite, but both Why Ask Questions and Answers Will Not Help are working on that with more forks.”

Tycho quickstepped enough to fall in beside True Name as they made their way back to the central hub of the complex. “That feels somewhat out of place to me.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, if firstrace is there in a leadership capacity, why not send that language?”

The skunk shrugged. “We do not know. They did not include any of that information in the message. It will be something that we can ask, whether prior to or at the conference.”

He nodded and looked out at the bustle of the room, as active as it was when he had arrived and when he had gone to sleep. He wondered if the various forks shifted their sleep schedule such that there were always True Names and Jonases at work.

“So, uh...what’s on the schedule for today?”

True Name tilted her head momentarily, then nodded. “You will be working with Answers Will Not Help and two others to help spin up the effort to work on getting the upload side of the Ansible working to their specifications.”

As if on command, Answers Will Not Help appeared before them, followed shortly by two others. Tycho supposed that the skunk must’ve sent each a sensorium ping.

The Odist grinned to him, then gestured to each of the new guests in turn. “Sovanna Soun is a sys-side Ansible tech, who will be working on that part, and—”

Tycho was already leaning forward to shake the hand of the other guest, a slight gentleman who looked every one of the seventy years he had been prior to uploading. “Dr. Verda, wonderful to see you again.”

“Likewise, likewise.”

“You two know each other, then?”

Tycho nodded. “Paolo was one of my professors, yes.”

“Well, what do you know,” Answers Will Not Help said, laughing. “Right, then. If the three of you will follow me?”

They made their way to a conference room where they sat around a long table, both True Name and Tycho still nursing their coffees. Answers Will Not Help pulled a wheeled whiteboard over and uncapped a marker, beginning to diagram on the board.

“I will be managing the effort,” she said, writing ‘AWN’ and circling it at the top. Two lines were drawn diagonally down from that. “As mentioned, Ms. Soun will be working on the Ansible software modifications. Dr. Verda will be working on the math side required to have the Ansible track the ship as it moves. It was built to be mobile in case we did need to send or receive anyone from Lagrange in an emergency, but I am told that it was meant to require manual intervention.”

Tycho frowned. “Two people working on all of that?”

“Two clades, yes.” She continued to diagram on the board. “As discussed, Ms. Soun will begin with a clade of ten to work on the software, and Dr. Verda will begin with a clade of two. Both can expand as needed. We need to ramp this up and complete the changes required within two weeks, so it is important that we be able to move quite quickly.”

“And what about me?”

Answers Will Not Help wrote his name next to hers, then drew connecting lines to all three names already on the board. “You will be acting as Artemis consultant and manager. We will deliver all messages through you and you will pass on any information required bidirectionally. Due to your relative inexperience with forking, your specialized knowledge of our visitors, and a certain bold *je ne sais quoi*, we will be keeping you at one fork for the time being.”

Dr. Verda laughed. “Bold? Our Jo- er, Tycho?”

He felt a heat rise to his cheeks as Answers Will Not Help replied, “He is the one who said yes to the Artemisians before we had the chance to do anything about it.”

Everyone looked at him.

“Uh, sorry.”

“What the fuck, man,” Sovanna said, laughing. “So all this is your fault?”

Answers Will Not Help laughed as well, waving her hand. “Do not be too mad at him. Or do, but do not tear into him too much. He has already received the Odist third degree.”

“I have?”

“True Name threatened you with death, did she not?”

Tycho froze. “I...what?”

The skunk grinned over the rim of her coffee cup.

“Even the smart and bold may be denser than lead, I suppose.”

Sovanna laughed and patted him on the arm. “Don’t worry, Tycho. I was just giving you shit. No idea what Answers is talking about.”

Answers Will Not Help capped the pen and, with startling speed, threw it at Sovanna. It struck her in the shoulder, getting a yelp from the Ansible tech and making both Tycho and Dr. Verda jump. The grin never left her face as she spoke, but her voice was frigid. “You are not permitted to call me ‘Answers’, Ms. Soun. Understood?”

Eyes wide and hand holding onto her shoulder where the pen had struck, Sovanna sat, wide-eyed, and nodded.

“Now, if there is no further need for third degrees, shall we begin?” Her voice was back to its normal, joyous self with a surprising adroitness. Something about her seemed decidedly ungrounded.

The three nodded together, silent.

“Excellent. One moment, then.”

The three walls of the room that did not contain the door quickly expanded outward, leaving a broad, open room. Fourteen desks sprouted from the floor, divided into a group of ten and two groups of two.

“Cubicle walls?”

When Sovanna shook her head and Dr. Verda nodded, both pods of two sprouted cubicle walls around them, the pod of ten melding into shapely desks. With a final flourish of a bow, Answers Will Not Help welcomed them into the room. Above the pod of ten hung a sign that read ‘Ansible’, and the two pods were labeled ‘Astro’ and ‘Admin’ in turn.

It was all quite skillfully done, but Tycho still felt a slight pang in his chest. It was generally considered a violation of social norms for public sims to violate Euclidean space without warning, but private sims were beholden only to the holders of the ACLs. This room would occupy at least one office on either side, if not more.

Quite unnerving.

Answers Will Not Help spoke as she walked. “Begin by estimating your work. We will meet in one hour. After that, we will meet twice a day, more often as needed. Please feel free to ping me if you need anything. I have granted you all access to cones of silence and music, which you may use at your discretion or when requested.

Tycho, dear, with me.”

Sovanna forked as she walked, further instances of her blipping into existence beside her, each one walking up to claim a seat. It took Dr. Verda longer to fork, but soon, there were two of him.

Tycho simply followed his new boss to the admin pod. She gestured him to one of the cubicles while she took the other. Once they sat, the wall between the cubicles lowered itself and he found that their two desks faced each other. At a gesture, a cone of silence fell over them both.

“Alright, Dr. Brahe. I am going to grant you access to the language dump that they sent our way. I would like you to take a look at it over the next hour and see how easily you might be able to pick it up. From what it sounds like, they already have a good grasp on our *lingua franca*, but in order to be polite, we ought to also work on learning one of theirs.”

He nodded. He could already feel the presence of that information lingering on the periphery of his memory. “I’ll give it a go. I’ve never learned another language but I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Excellent, thank you. Again, you do not need to gain mastery over it. That will be my job. Why Ask Questions and I have several instances working on it already. If you find yourself in need of assistance, let me know and I will request a merger from them so that I can pick up what they have learned.” She waved a hand and a few notepads spooled out of the air between them, along with several pens. “I do not know your preference, but here are some materials for you. You are also welcome to create further copies if you need, and should you require anything more advanced, ping me and I will make it happen.”

He collected the notepads into a pile on his desk, setting the pile of pens next to them. Each was unique, probably to give him a variety to choose from.

“Please also be prepared to set aside your work should the others request any further information from you. I believe Dr. Verda would be the most likely, as you are not an Ansible tech, but one never knows, yes?”

“Alright,” he said, jotting down on one of the nicer pads with one of the nicer pens a list of what he was to do. “Language, be available. Anything else?”

“Nope, that is it. Your #Tasker instance will be working on separate items.” She waved a hand again and the cone of silence dropped as the cube wall once more raised up between them. Muffled on the other side, he heard, “See you in an hour.”

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-minus 20 days, 21 hours, 23 minutes

Codrin was not sure what ey expected out of a dinner in the middle of a clearing beneath the stars, but ey found emself quite taken with it. A round table had been set up atop the hill on which ey had interviewed Tycho so many years ago, along with six chairs evenly spaced around it. The whole table was lit by a single candle burning in the center and the starlight from above.

True Name greeted eir party of three with a bow when they entered the sim. “Mx. Bălan, Dear, wonderful to see you two again. Ms. Genet, a pleasure to meet you.”

The three bowed politely in turn.

“Nice to meet you too, The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream,” Sarah said.

“Please, just True Name is fine, but welcome all the same. Shall we?”

“*Please.*” Dear sounded its usual self, Codrin was pleased to note. No anxiety or anger colored its tone. While the dark was pleasant, ey wished for at least light enough to see Dear’s expression. As far as ey knew, the fox hadn’t seen the skunk in two decades, not since their Death Day party, and that amidst a crowd. Certainly not since the *History* had come out.

At the table, introductions were made. Tycho remained as nervous as he’d been before, but ey was happy to see that he had at least gotten some sleep at some point, and none of the exhaustion that had so visibly gnawed at him when last they spoke was evident.

Why Ask Questions looked much as the Odists that resembled Michelle did, though far happier and more ebullient than any Codrin had met. She was, as Codrin#Pollux had described her two decades previous, perilously friendly, comfortably casual, and a shithead. Ey liked her immensely. “Delighted to meet you all. Codrin, nice to meet you face to face on this LV. And Dear, how long has it been?”

The fox grinned, nodded its head to her. “*I believe nigh on sixty years. You are looking well.*”

“As are you! Your other partner did not wish to join us?”

In the light of the candle, Codrin watched the fox’s grin falter, and ey suspected that it was taking it a good amount of energy to maintain a pleasant façade for dinner. “*They were not able to make it, no, but they send their best.*”

They had not.

The discussion veered perilously close to an argument when Dear stated that it would be joining Codrin.

“Dear, you’ve had nothing positive to say about True Name basically ever. Why the hell are you going to this?” they had asked toward the end.

“Because I want to learn more if I can.” It had paused, then added more quietly, *“And because Codrin is going and I want to be by eir side, if only as a fork.”*

Their partner had wilted and nodded. “That, at least I can understand. I love you both, is all, and I’m not comfortable with either True Name or her up-tree instance. I want you to be careful, but I suppose you’re right. Having the two of you there makes me feel a little better than it being just Codrin, at least.”

Ey shook away the lingering rumination and gratefully accepted a glass of wine that Dear offered. The skunk had been pouring one for everyone, and ey supposed that wine might help make the evening flow more smoothly.

Once everyone had received their glass, she raised hers and said, “To Artemis.”

They all raised their glasses in a toast, Dear adding, *“To exciting times.”*

Why Ask Questions laughed. “How do you imagine user11824 will take all of this?”

“Horribly, of course. When do you plan on releasing the news?”

“Tomorrow,” True Name answered. “We will release a priority alert into the perisystem feeds. Answers Will Not Help is working on that now, I believe. I trust that none of you have told anyone else?”

Sarah and Tycho shook their heads.

“Just my partners and Ioan,” Codrin said.

True Name frowned and there was a brief pause as, ey assumed, she sent off a sensorium message to another of her instances. “Do you think that Ioan will tell anyone?”

Codrin shrugged. “I didn’t tell em to, but I didn’t tell em not to, either. I imagine ey’ll tell May Then My Name.”

The skunk sat silent, looking down to her glass of wine. Ey couldn’t quite read the emotions on her face in the flickering of the candlelight, but given eir previous conversation about True Name losing her up-tree instance to hatred, ey could guess that there was at least some anxiety behind that silence.

Eventually, she asked, “When did you send the message? Was it eyes only?”

“It was, yeah. I sent it about noon. Why do you ask?”

“I would like to let my clade back on Lagrange know to either discuss this with em or to prepare for the possibility that ey will tell others. Five hours is not too long, though. As long as ey has not published anything to the perisystem feeds, of course.”

Ey frowned. “Should I not have?”

“Oh, no, you were perfectly welcome to, Mx. Bălan. While I do wish that you had informed me before doing so, I understand your reasons.” Her expression brightened. “But come, let us not talk about such at table. How are you all feeling about the upcoming adventure?”

“Scared,” Tycho said with a nervous laugh. “Excited, but also scared. I worry that I caused a huge problem. I know you promised me that what I did was okay, but all the same, I worry.”

True Name nodded. “I understand. I harbor my own fears. We have to rely on the fact that all of the tests of the DMZ passed and that there really is no way for the border to be crossed. May Then My Name tested it quite thoroughly.”

"If you say so. From what Tycho#Artemis sent me, it sounds like it'll be a trade, too."

"A trade," Sarah said thoughtfully. "Why, do you think?"

Why Ask Questions laughed. "No clue. My personal guess is that it is a hedge, that they are wanting to meet on both vehicles so that we can see what their lives are like while they see what ours are like, but also it gives them a chance ensure that we still meet on territory that they control, just in case we decide to murder all of them when they arrive."

"Is that something we're worried about, too?" Tycho asked.

"It was Tycho#Artemis that brought it up in the first place," True Name said.

He blinked, then shook his head. "I've only heard from him via sensorium message. He hasn't merged back down yet."

"I will never understand taskers," Dear said, giggling. *"With apologies to present company, of course."*

Tycho looked nonplussed.

Codrin grinned. "Dear's an instance artist. Its entire existence is built around forking. If it did not fork, I'm sure it'd explode."

"I would, yes, and you lot would have to clean it up."

Everyone around the table laughed.

True Name began to turn her gaze on Sarah, but Tycho interrupted her before she could speak. "How sure are we that this is real?"

Silence, minus a pop from the candle flame in the center of the table. Codrin found emself holding eir breath.

True Name's gaze bore down on Tycho with such intensity that the astronomer shied away from her.

"I...sorry."

"Please expand on that, Dr. Brahe."

"I just mean...how sure are we that this signal is real? How sure are we that it's coming from the Dreamer Module and thus outside of Castor?" He shrugged, still looking cowed. "I've been worried about the whole thing since it showed up, but the more I think about how long we've been going and all the risks involved, what's the probability that it's just us dreaming that there are aliens out there? They learn our language and tech so fast it's hard not to worry."

The silence fell once more, and Codrin imagined True Name and Why Ask Questions both sending off rapid-fire sensorium messages. Ey caught a glint of excitement in Dear's eyes. Ey suspected it'd have plenty to say before long.

"It is not zero," True Name said after nearly a minute. "Low, yes, but it is not zero."

"Does that--"

"There will be time, Dr. Brahe. Please do not worry. The best and brightest are working on this." She raised her glass, and in the meager light, Codrin could see that confident smile return. "Yourself included."

Tycho nodded, lifting his wine glass an inch or so off the table in a token response to the toast.

"How about you, Ms. Genet?" The skunk asked. She had, Codrin realized, read the silence as well as em, finding the perfect moment to guide the conversation back on track. "Assuming that they are indeed real, how do you feel about our guests?"

Sarah set her wine glass down, looking up to the stars. "I don't know if 'curious' is an emotion, but that's at

the forefront of my mind. I'm not feeling anxious or scared, and I guess I'm a little excited, but more than that I'm just feeling curious about the whole venture. Will they look like us or will they look like, uh...Douglas, was it? Douglas Hadje? If we're to go visit them on Artemis, too, what will we look like? How will we talk? How will we empathize with each other?"

"You are a psychologist, yes?"

She nodded. "Yes. I think that's why I'm so fixated on trying to learn as much as I can. I'm curious about what makes them *them*."

True Name smiled brightly and nodded. "As am I. I am glad that you decided to join us on this. I think that having the perspective of someone both interested in and experienced with those aspects will prove eminently useful."

"Glad you're having me along."

"And Codrin? How are you feeling about this?"

Ey sat up straighter and thought for a moment. Ey was feeling quite a lot. Ey was feeling jerked around. Ey was feeling all too passive. Ey was excited. Ey was scared. Ey was still trying to process Tycho's question, wondering how ey would reply without thinking only of the implication that the Artemisians might be an artifact of the System going haywire.

Ey was incredibly happy that Dear had decided to join em at dinner.

Not all of those felt like things that ey could share, so ey settled for a safer answer. "I'm feeling excited and nervous both. I'm excited because this is another unprecedented thing that I get the chance to see, and I'm nervous because that very unprecedented nature means that I have no foreknowledge to lean on. I'll be working in the dark as the...what did they call it? Recorder?"

Dear reached over and took one of eir hands in its paw. "*You have lived through several unprecedented events, my dear. How does this one differ?*"

Ey fiddled with eir wine glass in eir free hand as ey thought. "I think because I don't have a frame of reference for what to expect. Launch was exciting and unprecedented, but I also knew that life would continue on in many of the same ways that it had before afterwards. Winding up in a relationship was new and unprecedented, but I can still comprehend my partners as people."

"*Fox people.*"

Ey grinned. "That too, yeah."

True Name raised her glass. "I will drink to that, Mx. Bălan. I will admit to feeling some of the same trepidation around not having a frame of reference. We are limited to a few letters and a language primer as yet. I do not know what to expect, and that is, as I am sure you can imagine, a somewhat frightening idea for one such as myself."

Ey raised eir glass and smiled warily, returning the subtle squeeze that Dear gave eir hand. Ey was thankful for the dim light of the candle, which let em make out the features of the two Odists sitting across from em, but not a whole lot more; ey could only hope that the same was true for them. It was enough to make out True Name's charismatic confidence, if nothing else. Ey could certainly see what the skunk was doing, deftly avoiding the question of reality, keeping the conversation flowing smoothly, guiding and steering.

“And you, Dear?” Why Ask Questions asked. “I know that you are not joining us, but I am interested in your thoughts all the same.”

The fox retrieved its paw from Codrin’s hand, choosing instead to wave it up at the sky. *“This is the first time that I have been to this sim. It is yours, is it not, Dr. Brahe?”*

The astronomer nodded.

“It is truly a delightful place. I have stars in the sim where my partners and I live, but they are the familiar constellations that we remember from our time on Earth, though certainly more stars than I ever saw in the Central Corridor.”

“We ever saw,” True Name added. “We got the moon, a few planets, and the brighter constellations.”

“Yes,” Dear said with a hint of a bow. *“This, however, is incredible. We are seeing the stars as if there were a glass dome over our heads. They do not twinkle. The constellations are not quite as I remember them. They feel older, somehow. We are sitting beneath the universe, it feels, and above us lies eternity.”*

“You must forgive me for monologuing, it is an old habit, but when I think about what is happening, when I hear about Artemisians and emissaries, I feel every minute of that eternity. I feel every molecule of that universe. You ask how I feel, and I would say that I feel small. Insignificant, even. We have been on our journey for twenty years and have made it only a light-month from Earth. How much of that eternity must they have been traveling?”

A thoughtful silence followed the fox’s short speech. It was Sarah who finally broke it, lifting her glass much as True Name had. “To eternity and the weight of the universe.”

Dear sat up and clapped its paws, grinning brightly. *“I am pleased that you are going on this excursion, Ms. Genet. What a perfect toast.”*

They all laughed once again, raising their glasses toward the single flame in the center of the table.

“I think that is a note to begin dinner on, yes?” True Name said, waving her paw above the table, plates and flatware appearing, along with several dishes of various types.

She must’ve talked Tycho into giving her some ACLs in his sim, ey thought. Because of course she did.

“Please! Eat. Enjoy. I did not make it, but you may pretend I did if you would like to bolster my ego.”

The self-deprecating comment was delivered so easily that Codrin found emself laughing even before realizing it.

“No more shop talk until dessert,” Why Ask Questions added. “Or I will have Tycho bounce you from the sim. There is lasagna, and I will not have you spoiling that.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 19 days, 6 hours, 58 minutes

The dream repeated each night.

As always, the hallway continued however many miles dream-logic determined it must, and as before, he kept walking down it, kept walking and walking and walking, right hand always trailing along the wall. That wall was of smooth stone, something coarser than marble and smoother than concrete, and as he felt it play out beneath his fingers, he heard the voices ahead of him.

There was a room, there ahead of him. He could see the light spilling into the comparatively dim hallway. Sunlight, cool and bright. He could see that the left-hand wall of the hallway continued. A corner, then, the hallway dumping him out into the southeast corner of the room.

Southeast...how did he know that?

There on that wall, shadows played. Shadows of leaves, the arc of a fountain.

And in that room, that soft rush of water only served to muffle the voices of so many others. They had to be the Artemisians. They had to be. But the water was just loud enough, added just enough white noise, that he could pick out no singular detail. There were fricatives. There were plosives. There were sibilants.

And the harder he listened, the more details he almost-but-not-quite heard. First there was the sound of a masculine voice, and then the sound of something more feminine. First there was the careful modulation of some machine-produced voice, then the melodious tones of something undeniably organic.

And he wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be somewhere else. He wasn't allowed. He wasn't permitted. He was supposed to be somewhere different, not creeping along the unending right-hand wall of the hallway, straining to hear yet more detail from a group of incomprehensible others.

And still he crept along. Still he strained to hear, still he stared at that wall, hoping for the barest glimpse of the smallest shadow, hoping to discern the shape of the unknown.

And then a silence fell among the voices.

And then he turned the corner.

And then he was blinded by the sun.

And then he awoke, the lights of the room staring down at him reprovingly.

The dream always seemed determined to cling to him, as it had the day before and the day before that, and even as he showered and dressed, even after True Name once more met him at his door and handed him his coffee, he tried as hard as he could to remember even the smallest detail of those voices.

“You seem distracted today,” the skunk observed. “Not just tired. What is on your mind?”

He jolted to awareness and smiled sheepishly to her. “Uh, just a dream sticking with me from last night. Third night in a row I’ve dreamed about them.”

“The Artemisians?”

He nodded. “It’s like I can hear them talking, but not any details about them. I can hear *that* they’re talking, I guess. I keep trying to learn more and then I wake up.”

True Name smiled. “I know the feeling, yes. It is that desire to know more, yet having it kept from you. Are you dreaming in their language or in English?”

“I can’t even tell that. Sometimes I think it might be one and then some little phrase sounds like an accented version of the other. I wouldn’t be surprised, though. I’ve been learning as much of that as I can during the day.”

“I imagine so, yes. Would you like a small break from language acquisition? If you are having dreams about them, perhaps you can come up with some specific questions and we can send them a message.” She patted him on the arm. “Time-boxed, of course, but it may give you a chance to come up with some ideas that we have not.”

“Really? You’d let me do that?”

She laughed, nodded. “Of course, Tycho. You are always welcome to ask to do something other than what you are. We would request that you fork to do so. However, since this is not your area of expertise, I am sure that Answers Will Not Help will be willing to give you, say, two hours to work on something else if it will also serve to increase our knowledge of the situation. One moment, please.”

There was a moment of silence as True Name stood at the entrance to the central work area, sipping—or, well, lapping at—her coffee. After a moment, Answers Will Not Help showed up before her.

“Morning, dear,” she said. “Everything alright?”

“Tycho would like to take a few hours to work on a message to the Artemisians. Are you alright with that?”

Answers Will Not Help laughed and nodded. “Oh, by all means. We will get by without him for a bit. See you at lunch, Dr. Brahe?”

He nodded.

After a minute or two, another woman stepped into the sim, looking almost-but-not-quite identical to Answers Will Not Help. Perhaps a long-lived fork? The ebullience was toned down somewhat. Still the same grin—but kinder. Still the casual dress—but more of a weekend outfit. “Tycho Brahe, yes? True Name says I will be helping you out on writing a letter.”

“Oh, uh,” he frowned. “I guess so. Answers Will Not Help?”

She waved her hand in a non-answer, instead beckoning him over to another door along the wall. “Come on. Let us get this going. I am excited to hear what you come up with.”

True Name raised her coffee cup to him and smiled. “Good luck, Tycho. Do keep in touch.”

The office was much smaller than the conference room where he’d initially met Sovanna and Dr. Verda. They sat on opposite sides of a desk, where the Odist swiped two notepads and two pens into existence. “Alright, so I have been told that you had a dream. Tell me about it.”

As he did, she jotted down details on her own notepads, occasionally asking him questions—do you remember what the air smelled like? Were there human voices as well? Why were you anxious about being found out?—and though it felt silly at first, he realized that she had teased out greater details of what it was that his

dreaming mind was curious about.

“Alright,” she said. “Let us come up with five questions out of this. They seem to like the number five.”

“Hmm...if you think that we can do one paragraph per question, perhaps we can ask about whether there are common areas that have a *lingua franca*, too. I think we have *how often do the four races interact?* already.”

She shrugged as he wrote down the question. “I do not see why not. We are not limited on bandwidth. I would also like to know if they have similar strategies of forking, if they even have such. As part of that, we can ask about clade structures and naming, given the implications of both Turun Ka and Turun Ko.”

He took a moment to write this down, as well as a few other sub-questions she mentioned along the way.

“What else do you think would be helpful?”

“Well, there’s lots I want to know, but since we only have so much time before the talks begin, I guess we should keep it relatively short.”

She nodded.

“What about when each of the races joined? That would give us an idea of how long they’ve been traveling.”

“Good one.” She grinned, tapping her pen against the table. “I knew we kept you around for a reason.”

Had she said it in any other tone of voice, had all these Odists not been so good at choosing his responses for him, it could have easily come off as insulting, but it was said with such obvious affection that he laughed. Something about her was ever-so-slightly different from Answers Will Not Help, though he couldn’t put his finger on what. She was more earnest, perhaps. More focused on making him feel good rather than only seeming always on the edge of laughter. Perhaps this was the Why Ask Questions who would be among the delegates, the one who had eaten with Tycho#Tasker.

And yet she’d not given her name, and so he was forced to consider the ‘long-lived fork’ scenario.

This is why I’m a tasker, ey thought. I’ll never understand clades.

“Should we also ask where they came from?” she continued.

He frowned. “I don’t know about that one. It can be a very involved answer until we share more knowledge, and who knows, maybe even touchy. Perhaps a separate set of questions for science down the line, since those will take them more time to come up with. Maybe we can come up with a list of questions to have them prepare answers for at the conference.”

“Oh! Wonderful idea!” She paused, likely sending off a note to one of her cocladists. “We will tackle that at a separate time. I agree with you, though, that keeping this to more cultural and social topics will help. We can offer similar in return. Let us ask about leisure activities, then. What kind of stories do they tell? How do they tell them? Is storytelling limited to certain individuals, or considered a skilled trade? Is there a concept of work to make leisure time important?”

Tycho scribbled the rapid fire questions down on the pad, nodding as he did. Once he was finished, he said, “That got me thinking of another question, but I’m not sure how well it fits, so feel free to poke holes in it. How do you feel about asking if they dream?”

She laughed delightedly and clapped her hands. “Oh, I absolutely love it, my dear. I only have one request of you.”

“Yes?”

“That must be the entire question. We can expand on the others with our little sub-questions and a para-

graph of why we are asking them, but for this last one, it must be the only three words that they read pertaining to it. 'Do you dream?'"

He blinked, tilting his head. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I fucking am," she said, grinning widely. "I am the politician, you are the nerd. Now, let us hammer out some answers to these questions for ourselves that we can send. Answers to the first four, I mean. We will not answer 'Do you dream?' for ourselves."

Tycho stopped himself from asking why, realizing she would likely answer in the same way. "Alright, then. This is fun, thanks for giving me the chance to work on it."

"Of course, of course." She giggled, leaning across the table to ruffle his graying hair. "You fucking taskers, you need breaks, too."

He laughed, struggling to re-comb his hair with only his fingers, once more surprised at just how comfortable she made him feel. He liked her, whoever she was.

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 9 days, 4 hours, 48 minutes
(*Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes*)

“I never wanted this. I never wanted any of this!” the skunk shouted, stamping her foot and jabbing her finger toward em. “You talk about how much I mean to you, how much this place means, and then what? Nothing ever comes of it.”

“What the hell is supposed to come of it?” Ey stood quickly enough to knock the chair back onto the ground, all but lunging toward her. She stood easily a head shorter than em, but, having decided that this wasn’t menacing enough, ey forked two times in quick succession, three of em advancing on her.

Rather than quail under the threat or simply run away, she stood up straighter, arms crossed, her expression proud and defiant. “Really? Are you *really* sure that you need all this to make your point?”

Ey—all three of em—faltered in eir advance as the skunk continued.

“I never, *ever* should have stayed around here,” she said, voice suddenly frigid. “And I certainly never should have stayed with an asshole like you.”

With the slam of the door still ringing in the air, eir two forks quit as ey stumbled back to the chair, slowly righted it, sat down heavily, and buried eir face in eir hands.

Ioan made sure to stay still even as the lights came down and the applause began, holding eir position all the way until the noise of the audience was muffled by the curtain. Ey finally sat back in the chair, stretching eir arms up and taking a few long breaths.

A pair of soft, fur-covered arms draping over eir shoulders and an equally soft-furred cheek pressing against eir own brought em out of eir reverie, if reverie it was. Ey tilted eir head against her cheek and held her arms to eir front.

“Hey asshole,” the skunk said, echoing the epithet from a minute before.

“Hi May.” Ey grinned, turning eir head enough to get at least a sidelong glance at her. “Well done on that ‘ever’. Thought you were going to punch me in the stomach or something.”

She nipped at eir shoulder, letting em feel sharp teeth even through the thick fabric of the costume, before standing up. “That would be out of character, my dear. Both for my character and me. Might be fun sometime, though.”

They made their way backstage, letting the hands—several of whom were also them—deal with the scene change. Backstage, then back behind even that to their dressing room, where they were each able to get straight-

ened up in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror.

As always, when coming face to face with emself in costume, the feeling of being someone else all but disappeared, and ey marveled at the fact that ey'd even let May talk em into this however many years ago. If there was one thing that ey was, it was a historian, right? It was a writer. An investigative journalist, right? Ey was in no way a stage actor, right?

But the Ioan that stared back at em, one skinny almost to the point of gaunt, one with sallow skin and sunken eyes, one taller than usual, was proof of the opposite. It had taken em at least a year to really, truly master the art of forking over and over to carefully modify one's appearance. It felt counter to so many instincts, and even still, ey left a Ioan back home, unchanged from the view of emself that felt most at home, just to ensure that there remained some tie to that. May had chided em for this, but ey couldn't let go entirely.

"I do not know why you decided to write a scene where I have to yell at you," the skunk said, bumping her shoulder against eirs. "Love the story, hate the scene."

"Hey, we've had our arguments."

"Well, yes, but I do not like those, either, so that is not a point in its favor." She grinned, poked em in the side with a dull claw. "And never during any of them have I yelled at you or called you an asshole."

Ey laughed and reached up to tug at one of her ears. "Well now's your—"

Ey froze.

The longer ey held still like that, the deeper May's frown grew, the more her tail twitched this way and that in agitation. Still, she let the silence be and didn't touch em, unwilling to interrupt what must be a rather long sensorium message.

Finally, ey sagged, rubbing eir hands over eir face. "Uh, sorry. Can you send a fork back home? I'm going to have to try and push that out of mind for the time being, and I don't want both of us to be in that state."

The skunk nodded and forked off a new May, then stepped from the sim. The remaining instance sighed and slipped her arms around eir middle. "You cannot leave me totally in the dark, my dear, or I will be distracted worrying about something I do not know. Can you at least tell me something so that I do not lose my fucking mind?"

Ioan grinned and returned the hug, resting eir chin atop her head. "Dreamer Module," ey mumbled. "That enough for you?"

Back at the house, the root instance of Ioan was walking circles around the dining room table, 'pacing holes in the rug' as May would say.

Did say, it turned out, when she first entered.

"Sorry." Ey pulled out a chair at the table and sat, but did so very carefully, deliberately trying to avoid simply wanting to get up and pace all the more. "News from Castor."

At that, her ears perked and she pulled out the chair beside em. "Alright, spill it."

"Someone picked up the signal from the Dreamer Module. They say they understand the bit about how to use the Ansible and an astronomer—Tycho Brahe, who Codrin interviewed for the *History*—gave them permission to without thinking."

The skunk frowned, sitting up straighter in her chair. "So aliens are going to upload to Castor?"

"It sounded like they were forty days out from their closest approach. Codrin didn't know when exactly the

upload window was.” Ey frowned as ey picked apart the remaining bits of message. “Apparently they’ve named the remote ship Artemis and the aliens Artemisians. That’s about all I received, other than Tycho said ‘yes’ and Codrin will be working with him on it.”

“I am assuming more will be coming soon, knowing you and Codrin.” She doodled on the surface of the table with a blunt claw. “I am also assuming that other Odists are not far behind in meddling. How long ago did this happen?”

Ioan squinted, then shrugged and just brushed eir hand along the table, a sheet of paper unrolling from nothing with the message itself written on it. Ey unlocked the clade-eyes-only ACLs and handed this to May, who read carefully.

“So, thirty-ish days ago. Nothing we can do but wait for further messages. Anything we send back will be two months too late.” She hesitated, set the paper down, and looked at em searchingly. “What do you make of the second half, though?”

“I’m still trying to process that.”

“Do you not feel the same?” She reached out a paw to take one of eir hands in her own. “You got into theatre after all, did you not? You are not doing much in the way of history these days, other than the occasional paper. Did you really feel as though you had been sucked into all those projects with no input?”

Ey let her lace her fingers with eirs as ey thought. Words were a long time coming. “A little, I suppose, but this bit about feeling a lack of agency is new to me. I don’t know that I ever felt that strongly about being dragged along or anything.”

“Perhaps it is Dear.”

“How do you mean?”

She squeezed eir fingers between her own. “I think the trio settled into a life of their own on Castor, but you know Dear. It is intensely focused on these big dramatic gestures. And before you say it, I am focused on drama, but rarely are my actions in life dramatic. I am happy with the life we have built. I am happy living with you and loving you and pushing you into writing increasingly weird plays.”

Ey laughed, lifting her paw to kiss her knuckles. “Well, sure. You got me to settle down, I guess. I don’t think Dear is capable of settling down that much, but its patterns are familiar. It will do as it does and drag others with it.”

“I hope you do not resent me for that,” she said, tapping at eir chin with a finger. “I do not get the impression that you are unhappy, my dear, but I occasionally worry that your life now is not entirely the one that you wished to build.”

“I have no idea. I don’t think I had any real plans for building a life.” Ey sighed. “Which I guess is kind of where ey’s coming from. Without direction, any influence feels like getting yanked around. I felt yanked around by True Name shoving you into my life, though I love you dearly now that you’re here.”

May beamed happily at this, and ey was reminded of eir promise to emself to say that more often.

“Do you think ey will be able to take greater control of eir life?” she asked. “You still occasionally get stuck, but I was surprised when you were the one who asked me how to write a script.”

“Well, only because you wouldn’t shut up about how bad the one you had was.” Ey rolled eir eyes. “Skunks are so annoying. Ow!”

“If you call me annoying again, I will pinch you again. A third time will earn you a bite.” She grinned, teeth sharp. “All the same. I am glad that you are happy. I do wish we were closer to Castor, though, so that you and Codrin could have an actual conversation about this. You may not be able to respond much about the Artemisians, but perhaps you could explain some of your thoughts on agency.”

Ey nodded. “I’ll do that, yeah. Any suggestions?”

“Ey could ask #Pollux,” she said thoughtfully. “Perhaps ey could do a grand gesture and surprise Dear. I have loved it every time that you have surprised me. I do not think that Codrin#Castor has learned how to do that yet.”

“I’m not sure I know how to teach someone how to do grand gestures.”

She tugged at her fingers. “You have become a playwright and performer, my dear, do not sell yourself short. Besides, to hear Dear tell it, ey is not incapable. The name thing, of course. The surprise dinner a few years back. The forking stuff for its gallery show. Ey is just shy, perhaps.”

“It’s a Bălan thing,” ey said.

“And it is our job as Odists to fuck with you until you break out of it. I have faith in em, just as I had faith in you.” She slid the paper back across the table to em. “You just need to pass that on.”

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-minus 19 days, 18 hours, 41 minutes

It was not at all surprising that dinner at home was far less stressful than dinner with the Odists out in Tycho's observatory. While the conversation throughout the meal had been nothing but pleasant, the food delightful, and the location and single candle a stunning setting for a dinner, a tension had nonetheless hung above the table throughout. While Sarah had appeared relaxed and True Name and Answers Will Not Help seemed to earnestly enjoy the evening, Tycho had been hovering on the edge of terror, Codrin had remained hypervigilant, and Dear had seemed to have put on a mask of pleasantness that involved choosing its words most carefully.

This was confirmed when they returned home and the instance which had accompanied em to the dinner sagged, exhausted, and then quit. The instance of Dear which had remained behind, when confronted with the onslaught of memories, sighed and simply shook its head. None of the triad seemed at all interested in discussing the dinner.

It was eir other partner who had suggested the smaller party for the next night. While they hadn't explicitly mentioned that it would be a counter to the first party, it was certainly implied. Something to cleanse palates, as well as to give further time for Codrin, Tycho, and Sarah to interact before they were to go on their journey. All three—four, including Dear—had immediately agreed.

So it was that they sat around the table, there in the modern house on the prairie, sharing wine and desserts and pleasant, easy conversation.

"So," Sarah said, leaning back in her chair. "I was thinking about the fact that we seem to have wound up with jobs. Honest-to-goodness go-to-work-for-the-day jobs. What did you do before this? You all know that I was a therapist before I uploaded. I still am, I guess. Dear, you did theatre, right?"

The fox nodded. "*Michelle was a high-school theatre teacher. I suppose you can see why it is that we are so dramatic.*"

She laughed. "Some things carry through even two hundred years later, I guess."

"*Nearly two hundred sixty, yes. I would complain about being old, but when one is functionally immortal, bitching loses its savor.*"

"You bitch plenty, Dear," its partner said.

"Yes, but how often do I bitch about my age?"

Codrin shrugged. "You bitch about immortality a lot. Does that count?"

The fox smiled primly. "*It does not, my love.*"

Still laughing, Tycho said, "It's probably no surprise that I was an astronomer on Earth as well."

“How’d that even work?” Sarah asked. “When I was there, we could barely see any stars.”

“All space-based stuff. Besides, radio telescopes don’t need quite so dark of skies. Amateur astronomers were the hardest hit. They had to drive way the hell up into the mountains, and even then, wait for winter when logging season was over. I taught, too, and a few classes were out there. I volunteered at a dark-sky site.”

“That makes your sim make a lot more sense.”

He nodded proudly. “The landscape is based off one of those sites.”

Eyes turned to Codrin, who shrugged. “I went to school, then a year of a history degree at university before I uploaded at twenty to help my little brother out after my parents died. I never really had a job, just interests that got all the stronger once I got here.”

“Had you needed to get a job while down there, what would it have been?” Dear asked. *“I have a guess, but I want to see how close I am.”*

Codrin picked up eir glass and leaned back against eir chair, thinking. “I wanted to be a librarian quite badly. History was a secondary interest. I planned on getting a bachelor’s in something like history or literature and then a master’s degree in library science.”

Dear tilted its head. *“I was close on the bachelor’s but was not expecting the master’s. What drew you to that?”*

“Books.”

Eir partners both laughed.

“What other answer could I possibly give?” ey said, grinning. “I like books. I like knowledge. I like having it all collected in one place, even if books were falling out of fashion back when I was phys-side.”

“A horrible shame. I do not have the same attraction to them that you do, my dear, but they are still delightful.”

“You take it to almost a fetishistic level, Codruț,” eir other partner said, the playful, diminutive form of eir name adding another layer of teasing. “For which we love you, of course.”

Ey rolled eir eyes. “Domestic abuse, I say. Let me turn it back on you, though, what did you do?”

They heaved a deep sigh. “Line cook at a diner.”

“Is that why you’re so into cooking?”

“Basically, yeah. I wanted to be a chef, but you kind of need to start at the bottom and work your way up. I just gave up on actually doing that and uploaded instead.”

“I had a similar job in school, actually.” Tycho said. “Nothing fancy but I—”

He trailed off, staring up into space with a blank expression, then shook his head. “Uh, how willing are you all to talk about the Artemisians?”

Shrugs all around.

“Uh, sorry,” he said, pausing a moment longer, and then sat up straighter when a few folded sheets of notebook paper slid down to the table in front of him, neatly missing both wine and half-eaten tiramisu. “Tycho#Artemis sent a list of questions to the Artemisians today. I think they weren’t expecting the reply to come for a day or two, but it showed up after only five minutes, minus transit. Weird...”

“What sort of questions are we talking about?”

“Social and cultural, it looks like. Nothing really scientific. Want me to go through them?”

They all nodded.

“Alright. He asked when each of the races joined and the answer sounds complicated. It looks like about a thousand years or so between each.”

“So they started about four thousand years ago?”

He looked up to the ceiling as he calculated. “There are specific numbers. They add up to...five thousand, three hundred twelve years ago. Thing is, I’m not sure if that takes relativity into account. From our perspective, that could be a much larger number.”

“Holy shit,” Dear’s partner said. “Think they’re batty?”

Dear laughed. *“It depends on how sane they were before they started and how their system is structured. Probably, though.”*

“Well, I guess we’ll find out soon enough. Let’s see...there were a few questions about how the races interact. It sounds like they have several common areas available, but there are still enclaves of the different races that mostly keep to themselves. Apparently most speak a form of secondrace’s primary language because firstrace was...uh, hmm. They say electronic. I’m not sure what that means. Maybe they were robots of some sort? AIs? They didn’t need to talk with words. All races except firstrace still have several different languages of their own which they speak at home and in their own sims.”

Codrin nodded. Ey had summoned a pen and notebook and was already taking notes. “Will they be teaching us any of them?”

“He said he’s already learning the secondrace language. Maybe you should, too.”

Ey scribbled down a note to emself to ping True Name for access.

Sarah was leaning forward on her elbows, looking particularly interested. “I would like to as well. One can learn an awful lot about a person or group based on the language they speak.”

Codrin amended the note to include her name. “I’ll have True Name send it our way.”

Tycho shrugged. “I’m not going to bother. If #Artemis is able to merge back, I’ll pick it up then. I’ll make sure he does it before he leaves.”

“Good idea, yeah. The more who speak it the better, just to be safe.”

“Alright. Next set of questions were about forking.”

There were a few blips of other foxes behind Dear, startling Tycho.

“Apologies, Tycho,” it said, grinning widely, tail whipping about behind it. *“I may not be joining directly in the endeavor, but I am intensely curious to hear about this.”*

“Well, alright. I hate to disappoint, but it sounds like the only times they fork are in an emergency or during a contact like this — ‘convergence’, they call it. They have to petition some sort of central leadership called, of all things, the Council of Eight, which sounds like two representatives from each race, to create any long-running forks.”

The fox flinched back as though slapped, its ears laid flat and its brow furrowed.

“They provided additional information, though. They say that fourthrace had the same concept of forking that we appear to, so they understand our questions around dissolution strategies and clade structures. #Artemis also asked about their naming system, and apparently Turun Ka and Turun Ko are from something akin to a clade that existed before the voyage began. Something from when they were electronic but not on their system.

“Instead of forking, they have individual, fine-grained control over time. This is how they responded so

quickly, apparently: they slowed time way down so that they had as much as they wanted to write their response. They ask if this will be accommodated during the talks and there's a note from True Name here saying that, even if it were possible, she's going to answer no. Tycho said she looked upset."

"Unpleasant business," Dear muttered darkly. "*Unpleasant to an extreme.*"

"Well, what's the next question, then?" Codrin asked. Whether it was the mention of the Council of Eight or the news about forking, ey couldn't guess, but the fox was clearly upset as well. "Perhaps we can move away from this one."

"Next, they asked about leisure activities. It sounds like they're fairly similar to us in that very few people have actual jobs, but several have what they call 'intensive leisure activities, such as scientist or author'. He asked if they have stories and if so, what kind, and their answer goes on quite extensively."

Codrin scribbled hastily to take down the question. "Can you ensure that I get a copy of the responses, too?"

"Perhaps we all should get a copy," Sarah suggested. "I'm curious about the language bits and this thing about stories."

"*As am I. If True Name allows, I will ask for a copy as well.*"

"Me too," its partner said.

"Can you give us an overview of their answers?" Codrin asked.

"Sure," Tycho said slowly, skimming through the rest of the page and onto the next. "They say that stories are of the utmost importance to all races, that there is no limitation what kind, or who may tell them, but that, quote, 'of the occupations that many hold, that of storyteller is the one held in highest regard'."

Dear brightened considerably. "*I will forgive them their atrocious naming choice for their leadership, then. They do sound interesting aside from that.*"

"I'll admit to being mostly confused about it, or at least more focused on the astronomers they have on board, but it's all still interesting." He flipped over to the last page and frowned. He sat silent for several seconds as he stared at the paper, as though willing further meaning to rise from it. "I'll quote the last bit in its entirety. #Artemis asked, 'Do you dream?' There's no further questions or explanation."

Dear rolled its eyes. "*How very us. I bet Why Ask Questions suggested that.*"

If Sarah had been interested before, she was nearly staring holes into Tycho now. "What was their answer?"

"'You have asked the correct question. We are eager to meet you.' Verbatim. That's it."

A silence fell over the table while they digested this, each in their own way.

Codrin sipped eir wine while ey thought. *The correct question* made it sound as though they had reached some sort of milestone, perhaps, especially when taken with *we are eager to meet you*. It made it sound as though humanity had completed a mission by asking that.

And yet, there wasn't an answer to the question given, if Tycho was right about the message. They didn't say yes or no, they didn't say what about. They simply seemed to be smiling through the page, and ey couldn't tell whether that smile was one of satisfaction, encouragement, or pride.

It was Dear who broke the long silence. "*Is there anything else to the message?*"

Tycho shook his head. "Nothing from the Artemisians, no, but #Artemis has added a note here that he asked that because he's been dreaming about them every night." He paused for a moment before adding, "I have too. The dreams aren't like the ones he describes, but just this feeling that someone is coming and that it will be this

momentous thing and we have to be as ready as we can be.”

Sarah nodded. “There’s no real interpretation to dreams other than they can reflect some of what you were thinking during the day. It sounds like you’re both quite focused on it. Anxious, perhaps.”

Tycho nodded eagerly in agreement.

“Very much so,” Codrin said. “I had a dream about them last night, too. It was just this vague idea that I knew they were coming and that I needed to be observant.”

“That makes sense, given your role,” she said. “I haven’t been remembering my dreams since we got the news. I don’t think I’ve been sleeping very well.”

“Even for me, who will not be joining, it very much all feels like a dream,” Dear said. “The whole thing does.”

After their guests had left and the trio sat down on the couch for a bit before bed, Dear dotted its nose against Codrin’s cheek. *“My dear, I do not want to talk about it now, but I have something to tell you about this business with time modulation that may prove useful to you.”*

Ey nodded, feeling the fox’s nose tip still lingering near eir cheek. “I’ll look forward to it, Dear. At your own pace.”

“It is nothing bad. Just stressful, and I do not yet know how to put it into words. I will say that this will impact all Odists in approximately the same way, though, which is why you should know if there are to be two of them joining you.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 19 days, 4 hours, 33 minutes

The sight of the dissemination of the news of Artemis was beautiful in much the same way that a ballet was. This was, he supposed, largely due to the well-coordinated dance of both messages flying to and fro and countless Odists and Jonases moving back and forth in the largest of the conference rooms he'd seen yet.

He knew that there were sims where one could fly. Flying, after all, fit well within the realm of something that any number of people could consensually imagine together. They held a perennial appeal for a certain type of person, of which he was not. A fear of heights combined with a certain neurotic work ethic led him to stay away from those sims in general. If it was fun and not also productive, he felt little need to engage. It may have been unhealthy, it may not have been, but he had never stuck around anyone long enough to hear either way.

Now, however, he could see the utility.

A whiteboard had sprouted up from the floor, beginning at waist height for the shorter Odists and extending up by now a storey and a half. Panels on it showed the news feeds and commentaries piped in through the perisystem architecture, that foam of conceptual computer-stuff that tied all of the sims together and allowed cross-sim communications.

Even now, as more news flowed into the board, it would pop up from the bottom and the whiteboard would inch ever higher.

And standing before it, whether they were standing on the ground or however many meters above it, Odists and Jonases worked, tagging each of the feeds with arcane symbols, drawing lines from one to the other, conversing in small knots, popping into existence and quitting as needed.

This involved none of the graceful floating that ey had seen before on eir excursions to sims whose owners allowed such. They were not drifting about on the breeze, they were simply standing on something that was not there. If they needed to move to another level, they would just walk as though on a ramp or step up as though on a ladder. It was productive movement at its very core, and it immediately appealed to him but for the height.

The Odists were not tall. Every time he was near, Tycho felt that he dwarfed them. He could easily have rested his chin atop True Name's head without lifting it at all. "You, who have your head in the clouds and feet on the ground," he remembered her having said about the Bălans, and the phrase had stuck with him. His feet were a steel-toed anchor, and though he towered above the others, he could never name the feeling of being that much closer to his beloved stars.

And yet here he was; Tycho Brahe, terrified of heights.

“What am I watching?” he asked Answers Will Not Help beside him.

She nodded toward the board and the quiet, purposeful bustle of activity before it. “We have released the news about the Artemisians out into the feeds. You are watching the observation and shaping process.”

He stood up straighter, fixing his posture as though that would quell second-hand vertigo. “How did you do it? How are you doing it?”

She laughed. “Come. I will show you. We will need to go to the top. It is like walking up stairs, do not worry. Just will the step into being.”

“Uh, the top?” He furrowed his brow. “What happens if I fall?”

“You will probably die,” she said, shrugging.

He stumbled back from her. “What the fuck?”

“I am kidding, Tycho Brahe.” She laughed, sounding giddy. “You will fall onto whatever level you are currently on. You are, what, 190 centimeters? 195? That is not too far a fall.”

Still frowning, he lifted a foot, imagined there to be a step and set it down, landing about ten centimeters above the floor. He brought the other foot up to join it and then looked down, windmilling his arms for balance. “J-Jesus...”

“Fucking nerd,” Answers Will Not Help said, laughing. “Come on, it is not too bad. Try to take bigger steps, too, or it will take forever to reach the top.”

She stepped as though she were taking stairs two at a time, and within a handful of bounding steps, had reached the top of the board. She gestured at the five topmost panels.

Deciding that he wasn’t brave enough for the leaps and bounds, he simply looked straight ahead and began walking as though up a staircase. It was dizzy-making, and he had to gulp for air a few times to ensure that he was still grounded, such as it were.

“Look to the side, as though you are looking over a banister, perhaps,” she called. Several of the Jonases and Odists were watching now, and they laughed at the remark.

Despite the heat burning in his cheeks, Answers Will Not Help’s suggestion helped a good deal, and he was able to complete the rest of the journey quickly enough, though by now, the top of the board was easily two storeys up.

“Took you long enough, nerd.” She elbowed him in the side, grinning.

“Is that just my name now?”

“Might as fucking well be.” She walked over to one of the panels of news feed. This was labeled *Science* beneath, and seemed to head up a column of related material that continued down to the ground. “Let us just start here.”

Studiously avoiding looking down, he read the contents of the panel.

On systime 227+52 at 2328, the Dreamer Module on Castor received a structured message from an external source, alerting scientists and perisystem technicians to a fast-moving artificial construct. The message, which follows, suggested that the entity or entities at the other end of the signal understood the instructions for utilizing the Ansible receiver, provided trajectory information, and asked for consent to upload. Consent was granted two minutes and thirteen seconds later by a

member of the astronomical community. Further messages have been exchanged, and talks are underway for an exchange of emissaries.

The message was published by none other than Sovanna Soun.

A member of the astronomical community was a much better way to describe him than he suspected the Odists might otherwise.

He walked to the next panel over and read.

Credible sources announce that ALIENS have discovered our LV and are ON THEIR WAY TO GREET US. The *Powers That Be* could not be reached for comment. In order to prepare for an invasion, all sim owners should *lock down* ACLs for their sims and **interrogate** ALL visitors!

He laughed. “Did you write this one?”

“Oh, no. We have some of our pet propagandists write much of them.”

The next two feeds seemed to be fairly credible news sources. Boring and straight-forward announcements regurgitating the scientific report in lay terms.

The final panel contained simply the first two messages that had been received followed by *Leaked anonymously* ;)

“That one was my doing,” Answers Will Not Help admitted, grinning. “I thought it particularly cheeky.”

“I guess it is, at that.” He rested a hand against the whiteboard—blessedly stable—and looked down carefully. “So what’s happening beneath us?”

“We are tracking the dissemination of the news. We follow each of the sources to see where it is being quoted and referenced. There is some delicious perisystem tech going on there that I will not bore you with.”

“And you’re just watching?”

She gave him a pitying look.

“Right.” He sighed. “Can I see?”

She shrugged. “Sure. Step down the same way.”

Still leaning against the whiteboard, he stepped down a meter or so to the next row of panels. Below the ‘leaked’ documents, he read a spray of conspiracy theory rambles. Next to each were long scribbled notes, mostly in a shorthand he couldn’t untangle.

“What are the green-tinted ones?”

“Shaping.” Answers Will Not Help nodded to one. “That is one that I wrote. When I say that we have been shaping the response, this is what I mean. We have simply been participating. We are not doing anything crazy here.”

He leaned closer to read.

Listen, I don’t think it’s unreasonable to find this all hopeful. Like, seriously? Aliens! How cool is that? We’ve all had our dreams (or nightmares!) about them over the years, right? By virtue of us being on a hunk of computronium hurtling through space, it’s kind of at the forefront of our minds, isn’t it?

All I'm saying is that we gotta be at least a little bit careful. There's this DMZ that everyone keeps talking about, but what I don't understand is just how it works. Like, okay, it's a set of sims that one can't get in and out of? How the hell is that supposed to work? They (Artemisians???) can upload there, but what does that even buy them? A way to take up space?

I think I'd feel a whole lot better about this whole thing if there was more clarity, is all. I'm a bit behind because holy shit this is all coming fast, but do we have any Ansible/perisystem nerds on this feed? Help me out! Explain this to me like I'm stupid. It's true enough, after all.

From this panel, several branching replies headed down the board, and alongside each, further notes from the Odists and Jonases. He picked one at random and read that next, though in the time he had taken, the board had continued to creep upward.

I don't think any one person knows how the perisystem works, and the DMZ just adds a layer of complexity on top of that, so don't feel like you're stupid. I've been a perisystem tech for 130 years and it took me three forks just to get caught up on this.

You can think of the DMZ in two ways. One would be to think of it like a separate System. It works exactly like the one we're on. Sims, forking, ACLs, all that. Just like how the LV Systems are like separate Systems from the Lagrange System, though, we all had to upload using an Ansible connection. That is how the border between the LV system and the DMZ works. You basically have to go through something like a software Ansible to get in and out, and just like the real Ansible, there's a bunch of security in place so that there can't be any pirate signals.

The other way to think of it is like the lungs and the whole LV as a body. The DMZ can expand to take in more individuals (can't say people anymore if we're going to be letting Artemisians on board), but it can't expand beyond the capacity of the LV System itself, nor, indeed, beyond some pre-determined limits. In this metaphor, the individuals entering it are the air, and the pre-determined limit is the chest cavity.

This is how we keep the rest of the System from getting 'contaminated', which I've heard brought up before, and those limits are in place to keep the DMZ from driving up the cost of forking on the rest of the System should it expand much further. I had to dig super deep for this—no clue why it was buried—but the DMZ will have its own, separate reputation market to manage this, since it'll be a different size, but just like how currencies phys-side affected each other, with inflation and deflation, we'll probably see some fluctuations in the markets here, but I wouldn't expect anything too bad.

Anyway, hope that helps!

He nodded toward the panel he had just finished reading. "So you injected a question you probably already knew the answer to and some tech answered it to help make everyone feel better?"

"Better is not quite the right word. Calmer, perhaps. There is an appropriate balance between happiness and anxiety that we want to strike."

Tycho frowned. “I never got that about the *History*.”

“We do not want people to be too happy because unlimited happiness is a happiness with no defense mechanisms.” She poked him sharply in the side with a finger, making him wince and jerk his arm to guard himself better. “A purely happy society would feel that pain as agony and be unable to do anything about it. A society that is just anxious enough can enjoy security but also guard itself from further pain. It can be happy but also wish for more happiness.”

Rubbing at his side, he began to step down away from the scrolling wall of information. “If you say so. I don’t see why it wouldn’t be self-regulating, though.”

Answers Will Not Help fell into step beside him. “It might, sure, but there is no guarantee in the face of immortality. We are just the safety mechanism, the limiting factor.”

“You just keep it from swinging too far one way or the other, you mean.”

“I knew you were a nerd,” she said, laughing. “Got it in one.”

“How do you decide what the limits are, then?”

“Data analysis.” She gestured back to the board. “Predictive models. Countless simulations. We do not steer in any one particular direction, we simply provide the bumpers around the extremes.”

He breathed a sigh of relief when his feet touched the ground again—the real, visible ground—then turned around to look at the board stretching upwards. He didn’t believe that they didn’t steer the system. Even if they didn’t do so consciously, there was no guarantee that they weren’t imposing their own ideas and ethics on everything around them.

He declined to mention this, however. The last thing he wanted was another poke in the side.

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-minus 5 days, 0 hours, 51 minutes

Late spring was for picnics. This was, ey was assured, a universal truth.

Once the rains had calmed down and before the oppressive heat began to drift lazily in, this was the time for those who are in love to drag a thick blanket out onto the prairie, park next to one of Codrin's cairns, and share sandwiches and fizzy drinks. This was the time for parking in the sun, laying back on the blanket, heads together and feet radiating outwards, sharing in small silences and comfortable conversation.

"There is no reason that aliens should interrupt this," Dear had stated plainly and then dragged its partner off to the kitchen to make sandwiches and bottle up gins and tonic to bring out to the prairie.

All the same, this picnic was more muted than usual, and when they settled onto their backs, Dear's ears tickling the tops of their heads, the conversation felt careful, as though all words should veer around the topic that was on everyone's minds.

A bit more than two weeks after first contact, and the entire LV seemed to be talking about nothing else. Dear had even postponed the opening to its new show. News from Tycho was that, from day one, the Odists had been working on and shaping the spread of information.

Codrin suspected that this had come when it did in part due to the transmission delay from Lagrange, and, given what ey expected would happen with Ioan and May Then My Name, ey did not doubt that this tight control was for good reason—or at least what True Name considered good reason.

Ey had kept that thought to emself.

Ey expected True Name would be visiting eir down-tree instance and eir partner before long. Ey had suspected she would do as much as soon as ey had read anxiety in her expression at the mention of May Then My Name. She had surely sent a message back to Lagrange within seconds of em telling her such.

It was the reaction that ey was most worried about. True Name was a touchy topic with Dear, and the cold hatred of one of its cocladists was...well, ey could read melancholy in the fennec's face as easily as any other emotion. Ever since news of May Then My Name's thoughts on her down-tree instance had made their way across the light-days of distance, there had been more of that. There had been days of silence, days of tears, days of walking the prairie for hours at a time. When pressed, it would simply say, *"She is the best of us."*

Ey suspected that it was worried that cracks were showing across the clade. Ioan had admitted to having such concerns as well, and even mentioned that May Then My Name herself seemed to be harboring fears. "If Dear overflows with undirected energy," Ioan had written once, years ago. "Then May overflows with tears. It's

the only time she ever asks to be alone, and I will go stay with Douglas. I make a lot of chicken soup for her to have something comforting, though I'm not sure how much it helps. She will spend hours in bed, letting out all of the overwhelming emotion that she needs to in order to become whole again. I love her deeply, but I'm sure you must know the pain of watching someone you love going through something like that."

That had been another thought ey had kept to emself.

The worry lay not in how May Then My Name might react—though Ioan had always mentioned when ey was laying in supplies for chicken soup—but in how True Name would. May Then My Name may be the best of the clade, or at least the best of that stanza, and even True Name knew that.

So today, they mostly lay in silence. It was not unpleasant, for the sun was on high and the temperature was perfect and ey could simply lay there with those ey loved.

It was Dear, of all of them, who broke the silence.

"I have been thinking about something that Sarah said." It sounded content enough, which Codrin was pleased to hear. "She said that we should prepared to not be able to understand them for their inhumanity."

"What about it?" their partner murmured. More than content, they sounded sleepy.

"There is much we can learn about semiotics from them. We have the ability to guess, but vanishingly few chances to check. If they are truly alien from us, we may be able to confirm many hypotheses that we have had for centuries by now about how a different mind can form and hold ideas."

"Different environment, different *Umwelt*, you mean?" ey asked.

"No no, that term applies to those who exist within the same environment. Our environments up until now have not even been connected. We have completely different semiospheres, do we not? We cannot even make assumptions about how they form their ideas, how their semiosis works, at least not at first. It could be that there are key differences in how they are able to take in information and make meaning of it."

"New senses?"

Ey could feel it shrug against the picnic blanket before it said, "*Perhaps. Perhaps they can sense radio waves, or perhaps, as suggested by their letter, they can sense time in some new way if they have fine-tuned control over how they experience it.*"

"Don't we have forking and merging?" its partner asked. "Aren't those new senses? Or at least sensations?"

"In a way, I suppose, but we can learn them. They are tied to will, as one wills a fork to exist, and they are tied to memory, as one deals with the merger as though one is remembering the fork's experiences."

Ey could feel the idea click into place. "But we may not even be able to experience that in the same way as them. We may learn it in a fundamentally different way. Maybe we won't even be able to take part in it because we ourselves may be fundamentally different."

Dear sat up quickly, laughing. "Yes, precisely! What an interesting problem. I am excited to see what all we learn."

The other two sat up. Codrin was not at all surprised to see the grin on the fox's face.

"This is, of course, all supposing that they really exist."

Their partner laughed. "Is this in doubt or something?"

"Tycho said something at the first dinner, yeah," Codrin said. "He asked if there was a chance that they weren't real and that we might actually be dreaming the whole thing up."

“Wouldn’t that take an awful lot of dreaming to accomplish? Dream the incoming signal, dream our...uh, instruments, I guess, tracking Artemis, dream up this whole thing about races and such?”

Dear shrugged. It looked quite pleased. *“Perhaps, but is that not an internally consistent dream? A dreaming mind that starts with the proposition of aliens and enough knowledge of our little world would be able to construct a consistent narrative to get us to where we are, and that is all that the System demands. The Dreamer Module, the micro-Ansible, the DMZ, all of it bears the seeds of consistency.”* Its grin widened, the volume of its voice rising. *“Or perhaps the System aboard Castor is losing coherency! Perhaps our world is falling down around our ears and we would never know!”*

Codrin laughed, watching the fox get more and more animated. “I’m pretty sure we’d know whether Castor is failing or not.”

“Do not be so sure about that, my love. We have very little insight into the world outside of the LV.”

“I’m pretty sure we have at least some,” eir other partner said. “Even if it’s just by way of our communications with Lagrange and Pollux.”

“Yet even that may be a dream!” Dear giggled. *“You see why this is interesting to me, though, yes? If Artemis is real, then we gain new insights into semiosis. If it is not, I get my beloved natural death.”*

Ey rolled eir eyes and shook eir head. “Foxes.”

“You love me and you know it.”

“Well, I mean, yes, but that was never in doubt.” Ey leaned back on eir palms. “Either way, I hope that they’re real. That feels like the better scenario to me.”

“Boring.”

“Hush, you,” their partner said, poking at the fox’s thigh.

“Both of you. Boring, boring, boring.” It laughed. *“But I admit that I hope that they are real, as well. I am more excited about the semiotics of aliens than the idea that Castor is failing. For instance, there is much we can learn about them from their language, I expect. I am no linguist, but how they describe their control over time, should they choose to do so, will provide much insight into the ways something that is not us perceives and interacts with their world around them. They may process signs—signs in the semiotic sense—in a very different way, and we will be able to use that and apply it to the hypotheses that we have formed over the years.”*

“Are there problems in that area that need solving?” Codrin asked.

“I do not know. It is something which is interesting to me for its own sake. Perhaps we can learn more about sensoria,” it said, shrugging. *“For those who desire children, perhaps there are implications within that which will allow them to experience such.”*

“Do you want children, then?”

“Good Lord, no.” It laughed. *“I did not wind up with that desire. That is something for other elements of the clade. I am sure that Hammered Silver and her stanza would pounce on the idea.”*

Its partner laughed. “I thought not. Besides, can you imagine a synthesis of the three of us? A historian chef that forks like mad.”

They all laughed.

“I don’t know how much of a historian I am anymore,” ey said. “But doubtless they would keep my love for books.”

Dear tilted its head. *“Are you not? You have taken on historiographical projects in the years since the History, have you not?”*

Ey shrugged. *“I have incomplete thoughts on that.”*

The fox nodded. *“I will not push, but I am eager to hear them at some point.”*

Ey nodded. *“Of course, Dear.”*

Their other partner yawned, then let out a contented sigh. *“You know, if sunlight had weight, I would use it as a blanket. It’s such a nice feeling.”*

“If sunlight had weight?” Codrin laughed. *“That sounds like a line of poetry.”*

They threw a pebble at em. *“I need at least the feeling of a blanket over me if I’m going to sleep.”*

“Going to take a nap? We’ve got a blanket right here.”

“I also need a bed beneath me.”

Ey picked the pebble up from where it had landed on eir sarong and tossed it back at them. *“Well, go in and take a nap, then. I think it’s walking off the sandwiches and gin for me.”*

They tossed the pebble at Dear in turn. *“Back to work with you?”*

“Perhaps. I will send a fork with each of you.”

As fox and historian walked out into the prairie, Codrin finally worked up the courage to ask Dear the question it had wanted to ever since their conversation on semiotics. *“Do you wish you were a part of the emissaries?”*

“No.” Its response was flat and immediate. *“I have curiosity about the knowledge, but no desire to actually join in the experience.”*

“You don’t have to answer, but do you know why?”

It thought for a moment, then shrugged. *“My existence relies on understanding and responding to the actions and emotions of others. I will wait until there is a way for us to understand, and then I will experience it if I am able. If I am not, then I will simply revel in the story that you write.”*

“I’ll bring back as much information as I can. Maybe some of them will stick around and you can give them a performance down the line.”

The fox laughed. *“Perhaps, yes.”*

They walked in silence for a while longer. Codrin eventually gave up on walking off the gin and simply let sobriety back in.

“One more reason, my love.”

“Hmm? Reason for...?”

“For not wanting to be a part of your talks. I do not want to be a part because of this time manipulation business. I remember how it felt to be one of the lost. I remember experiencing centuries or mere seconds in that endless place of no time. I remember wondering if I would die out there after a hundred years had passed by, and I also remember only a few minutes going by before Debarre showed up.”

“Wait, he was the one who got you out? I would’ve thought some clinic technician or something.”

“Of course, my dear. Why do you think we are so close to each other? Even after all that business in the early days, we are still close.” It grinned. *“Please do not tell him this, but I have always been a little in love with him since then. Our tastes in partners differ, so few of the clade have never acted on it, just as Michelle never acted on it. I believe End Waking is the only one who has, and even that is complicated.”*

“Ioan seems fond of End Waking.”

“Of course ey does,” Dear said primly. “He is much like me if I was in any way serious.”

Codrin grinned. “Crazy, then?”

“A different kind of mad, perhaps. He is highly principled, though, and that along with the seriousness is a draw to Debarre, I think.” After a few more steps, the fox added, “But yes, as mad as any of us. None of us will be comfortable with such an eternity.”

Ey nodded, thinking back to the conversation they had shared so long ago, back when ey was newly Codrin. *Trauma, if trauma this is, forges bonds*, it had said.

“Not keen on more trauma, then?”

It shoved em playfully. “You are a brat. I was just about to say that.”

Ey laughed.

“I will not go, though,” the fox repeated. “I will await your stories, but I will not go.”

“I’ll bring back some good ones, then.”

“I know you will. It will be an experience that I am sure many will want to know about. I know that, should you choose to write about it, the three Systems will look forward to it.”

Ey nodded. The idea of a project such as this lingered in eir gut like a weight, and the fact that dread tinged the excitement ey had about it only added to eir anxiety. Ey kept these thoughts to emself.

“But, my dear, do be watchful. There will be two Odists on that mission, and they will share in some of my trepidation.”

It took eir hand in its paw and gave the back of it an affectionate lick. The gesture seemed to be one designed to minimize the anxiety in the statement, but eirs or Dears, ey could not tell. “They share that same trauma. Be watchful and remember what I said: even True Name has emotions, even she will be affected.”

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 10 days, 2 hours, 3 minutes

(Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes)

Ioan knew that it would be quite a while yet before eir and May's forks merged back down. Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself, the director of the play, was quite strict but she also drank like a fish and clung jealously to some remnant of productions she'd remembered from more than two centuries ago, so it had become a comfortable rhythm for Ioan, May, and any other actors who wished to join to follow her to a pub that served strong drinks and greasy food.

Ey had been planning on a simple dinner on eir own, perhaps catching up on some reading, but with this knowledge and the fact that May was now here with em, the plan evolved into something more involved. Staying inside didn't feel right. Something about the news had them in mind of stars, in mind of looking up to the sky, so they wound up grilling burgers out on the patio and talking as they watched the stars come out one by one, sitting there in the house's backyard.

The burgers had long since been finished and the grill long since put away when Ioan felt an automated sensorium ping of someone entering the house, followed shortly by a real-time message from who had just arrived.

She did not give em time to react, nor even to stand. Ey had only managed to turn to look to the door opening out to the patio before the visitor stepped out onto the concrete, lit only by the string of lights tucked beneath the overhanging deck.

"I...what? True Name?"

She bowed quickly before holding her paws up in a disarming gesture. "Ioan, May Then My Name. I apologize for the brusque entry, but I believe we need to talk."

May growled, pushing herself to her feet. "I will leave you to it."

Ey had only ever seen eir partner furious on a scant handful of occasions, but now ey could add one more to the list. Her teeth were bared, tail bristled out, and hiked up, paws bunched up into fists. In the two decades since the research and publication of *On the Origin of Our World*, May's view of her down-tree instances had dropped precipitously, and all but one of those moments of fury had been triggered by her own clade.

"May Then My Name, please," True Name said, clasping her paws before her and bowing once again, lower this time. She sounded contrite, small. "I know that you do not hold me in high regard, but all the same, I would prefer if you stayed, as I am assuming that you have both received the same news."

May hesitated, frowned, and crossed her arms, but did not move to leave.

“Thank you,” the other skunk said, straightening up and brushing her paws down her blouse, a nervous gesture ey had never seen on one who always looked so in control. “I will not take up too much of your time, as there is much to be done. Even though there are several of me already at work and this is my only task, my mind is still torn in many directions. May we please step inside where there is more light?”

Ioan looked up to May, who shrugged. She still looked as though she would like to either quit or bounce True Name from the sim entirely.

Once they were seated inside, True Name stared off into space for a moment, and Ioan imagined her rifling through several exocortices at once, digging out a collection of files and memories.

“Alright,” she said, shaking her head to focus. “First of all, may I see the message that you have received from Codrin#Castor?”

“There was some content that was clade eyes only, but I’ll share the first half with you.”

“And there is nothing in the second half that pertains to Artemis?”

Ey shook eir head, drawing the first half of the message out from the tabletop as a bit of foolscap which ey handed over. “Codrin had questions on careers. Nothing pertinent.”

The skunk skimmed the message rapidly while Ioan and May looked on. Eir partner still held fury in her eyes. Ey only felt tired.

“Alright, this is much the same information that we received earlier today.” True Name folded the slip of paper and slid it into a pocket in her slacks. “I am sure that you can guess why I have arrived in such a rush, but to be clear, True Name#Castor learned that Codrin had sent you this update. Ey was free to do so, but...well, it is our job to consider information security and hygiene, so she sent us an additional message immediately upon learning of this.”

“And you are here to shut us up,” May said.

True Name lowered her gaze. “I am here only to provide suggestions as to that same security and hygiene.”

Ioan marveled at the sight of the skunk. She had always seemed so proud and in control, and now she looked to be on the verge of panic. She looked, of all things, frightened.

“Okay,” ey said. “But didn’t you and Jonas plan for this? Run simulations?”

“We did, yes. We even ran the fact that it might be you who received the information through our models,” she said, nodding to em.

“But you did not count on me,” May said.

There was a tight silence that lingered a long few seconds before True Name nodded. “We did not count on you. We did not count on *both* of you. We did not count on...” She took a shaky breath, recomposed herself, and continued. “We did not count on what changes the dynamic between you two would lead to.”

“Your models included a historian, you mean,” Ioan said. “And now you also have one of your own. You’ve got two actors, one of whom was purpose-built by you specifically to influence others.”

She looked stricken, gaze jumping between em and May. “When one has lived so long with a certain set of expectations, having them subverted is a shock. May Then My Name, I do not begrudge you your feelings toward me. It is not my goal to win you back or anything like that; all I can do is admit my shortcomings and try to do better by you, even if that is, as you have requested, leaving you be. I truly am happy for you—for both of

you—as you have accomplished something that I never could, that Michelle struggled with from the beginning. However, I have a job. I have goals to work towards. I have a vision that I would like above all things to uphold.”

“You have painted yourself into a corner,” May said. Her voice had lost the edge of anger at her down-tree instance’s admission and apology.

True Name giggled.

It was a startling sound coming from her. Ioan had seen her laugh, grin, and smile, but they were all tightly controlled. They were all laser-focused cues to guide her interlocutor. The giggle held amusement, yes, but also nervousness. It seemed to be covering a much larger, less grounded emotional outburst. Ey had been considering just how much of this interaction up until this point was a carefully constructed act, how much of her visit could be dismissed with a wink and a grin, but there was something far too real about that giggle.

Ioan and May looked to each other and frowned.

“I’m sorry, True Name,” ey said. “I mean this in all compassion, but you sound like you’re about to lose it.”

The skunk giggled again, sounding even less grounded, then rested her elbows on the table and buried her face in her paws, grinding the heels of her palms against her eyes before straightening the longer fur atop her head. “I am, yes. At least in a way. There are many threads happening at once and, as May Then My Name put it, I have painted myself into a corner with this one.”

“Make your pitch, then,” May said, voice softer still.

“It is a small ask, I hope,” the skunk said, folding her hands on the tabletop once more. “Do not publish any of this information in the feeds or in some new book or play, and do not put it anywhere in the perisystem architecture. Not yet. I ask that you keep it between yourselves, Jonas, me, and other Odists. You may, of course, keep communicating with Castor, but I would ask that you not pass this on to Pollux yet. Codrin and True Name are working together, per the message I received, so I imagine our messages will contain similar content, but should anything interesting come up, I would be much obliged if you shared with me. Are you open to that?”

“Sure,” Ioan said.

May shrugged. “I may talk to A Finger Pointing and End Waking about it, but I think you will have the rest of the clade under control before I wind up speaking to any of them again. I will likely also share this with Douglas. He of all people deserves to know.”

The skunk stiffened in her seat and sat silent for a moment. “May I be there when you do? I would like to impress upon him the gravity of the situation.”

“Absolutely not.”

True Name winced, wilted, nodded. “I see. Well, if you would pass on my request for information security, I would be very grateful.”

“I will,” May said. “I will also be telling Debarre.”

There was a long silence. Ioan could not read either of the skunks’ features, nor guess at the sudden tension in the room.

“We’ll also pass on your request,” Ioan said at last, earning em sharp a glance from May.

True Name nodded slowly. Standing and once more brushing her blouse flat, she bowed. “Thank you both and apologies for the intrusion.”

May stood as well and stepped around the table, taking the other skunk’s paws in her own. It was strange

to see the gesture of kindness after so tense a discussion, but the expression on May's face as she looked at her down-tree instance showed none of the friendship implied.

Ioan marveled. If the sight of two skunks that shared so much in common and yet differed in such fundamental ways was uncanny, seeing them touch in like this after so much acrimonious history bordered on distressing.

"You wrote to me back in 197," May said. "You pointed me toward Ioan and you told me, 'You are, in many ways, a better version of me, and the completeness that you bring to our stanza ensures that we add up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts.' You told me that you still love me in your own way. Do you remember that?"

The skunk canted her ears back and nodded.

May let go of her paws to hug her arms up around her cocladist's shoulders. "I still believe that."

True Name leaned into the hug. Ey couldn't see her face from where ey sat, but ey could still hear the sharp intake of breath and see the shaking of her shoulders.

After a moment, May leaned back, rested her paws on those shoulders, and said, "But please leave and do not ever, *ever* come to my house again."

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 6 days, 1 hour, 2 minutes

“Alright, are you ready?” True Name said.

Tycho nodded, “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The transition from System proper to DMZ was as seamless as any, though when he checked systime, he found that nearly twenty seconds had passed. That would be an unimaginably long transit time within the system, where the transit between sims would take place faster than he would have been able to perceive.

“Well, that was not so bad,” True Name said, walking out into the cloistered courtyard that had been set up for the meeting. “Now, let us check communication.”

He wasn’t able to sense anyone other than True Name and Answers Will Not Help. There were no options for a sensorium message with any others. He strained as hard as he could to sense Tycho#Tasker or Codrin or anyone else he could think of. There was simply nothing there. The sim was immutable and the disconnection complete.

True Name stood for several minutes in the shade of a tree, looking thoughtful as she ran through some internal checklist. At one point, he felt a sensorium ping from her, which he returned.

“Fantastic,” she said, nodding. “Exos all there, no access to feeds, no transit, nothing. Reputation market looks on track for the DMZ as well.”

Tycho checked his reputation, pegged at a minuscule 1000 \hat{R} , and then the costs. Sim creation into the millions, forking well into the tens of millions. No possible way he could afford either. “Will they arrive with the same amount?” he asked.

“Yes. We could not think of a way to decouple reputation entirely from the core functionality of the System,” Answers Will Not Help said. “But we could at least make everything prohibitively expensive. This will allow us to make small changes if need be, but forking will be well out of reach.”

“Really? Isn’t that kind of fundamental to our existence here?”

“Allowing them to fork might prove dangerous, Tycho. We do not know how large their consciousnesses are.”

He shrugged. “Well, sure, but if our goal is to provide an accurate representation of ourselves...”

The two Odists frowned at each other before True Name said, “You do make a good point. We will take it under consideration.”

He nodded and began prowling through the courtyard. It consisted of a large, square area, a fountain in the center, and a large table beside it—"I will have full ACLs and enough rep to modify this if need be," True Name explained—all surrounded by a ring of trees, and that with a ring of covered walkway.

He paced around the perimeter, watching the way the sunlight shone through the trees and cast dancing shadows on the ground. They had been his idea, a lingering remnant from his dream. At two opposite corners, hallways led off to rest and sleeping areas. He walked down the one that led to the humans' quarters, turned around, and looked back toward the courtyard. The view was much the same as in his dreams, though here, the columns from the covered walk offered regularly spaced shadows along the wall.

He nodded approvingly and made his way back out to the central meeting area.

A copy of Jonas had also made his way into the sim and was poking his way around the table, inspecting pads of paper and pens. As he watched, another Jonas appeared and then quit.

"Alright," the Jonas said. "Transmission across the border works as expected. Memories transfer without loss, and merging is the same as always. No radio, no textual transmission, so you'll have to rely on a fork transiting the border to relay news."

"Wait, so neither party will be able to communicate outside of here?" Tycho asked.

"Nope, all locked down. You'll have to rely on the grapevine; Codrin has volunteered an instance. We can open it up later if we want."

"But if we're using forks and they're not allowed, won't that look strange?"

"You ask a lot of questions for a tasker," Answers Will Not Help said, laughing. "But yes, your point stands. Perhaps we will allow them one fork, maybe limited to their rest area. Thoughts?"

Jonas shrugged.

True Name made a note to herself on one of the pads. "We will talk about it back at headquarters."

"Will leave it up to you," Jonas said. "Still, good job, everyone."

Answers Will Not Help bowed with a flourish. "I am glad that you enjoy, O great political teacher."

He laughed and tossed a pen at her.

"Are you regretting your decision to stay behind?" True Name asked.

"Does it count as regret if I never wanted to go with?" He grinned, shrugged. "But it's a good setup you have. Only one set of cocladists, only one politician. It gives them a wide gamut to experience."

The skunk nodded. "Perhaps we will open it up at the end and you will get to meet them. Maybe some of them will stay behind and live within the DMZ."

"We'll see." Jonas nodded to Tycho as he joined them around the table. "And here's to our scientist. Thanks for providing us with your dreamscape. It's a nice place to hold a conference. We've got everything from ancient Roman architecture to twenty-second century S-R Bloc conference tables."

Tycho shrugged. "It seemed like a nice place. Glad you like. When is this even going to happen, by the way?"

"Three days from now. They'll be one light-hour out, at that point, which will provide minimal risk during transit while still giving us the most time for the conference. With our burn, it should give us about six weeks together until we reach the point where we're at one light-hour apart again."

"Six weeks sounds like a long conference."

"We do not know how long the conference will last," True Name said. "It could be over in an hour if they

prove to be pests. All we will need to do is shut down the Ansible, leave the DMZ, and wipe everything within it.”

He frowned. “Wouldn’t they be able to leave, too?”

“The border is governed by stronger ACLs than we are used to. One must have entered via the System in order to exit again, which they will not have done.” She grinned. “But I do not expect that we will need to do this. With all of the chatter we have done in the last few weeks and with what my cocladists say about the language, they sound like a nice enough group.”

“How do you figure?” Tycho asked. He prowled through his memories of the language that he’d learned in the interim. “It feels mostly...uh, normal, to me, if that’s the right word. They’ve got all the same concepts for what we have. Bunch of words about fur, seems like.”

True Name grinned all the wider. “Which automatically makes them better.”

“That’s mostly the point, though,” Answers Will Not Help said. “They do not have a superfluity of words for war, weapons, fighting, of course, but they also do not have words for discussion that are so fine-grained that we will be out of our depth. They will talk much like us, which makes them easier to predict.”

“Besides,” the skunk continued. “You have read all of the messages we have received. They sound excited to meet us. They keep talking about how long it has been since they have had one of these ‘convergences’. I *am* picking up the sense of an ulterior motive behind all that they say. Or, well, perhaps not an ulterior motive so much as a deeper version of their explicitly stated motives of having these talks. I think that they might want something out of it that they are not stating outright.”

Tycho pulled out one of the chairs at the conference table and sat down, the others following suit shortly after.

“Isn’t that kind of shady, though?” he asked.

Both Jonas and True Name shook their heads.

“Political adroitness isn’t a bad thing,” Jonas said. “It shows that they are a social culture, and that they are willing to at least try and move us in a certain direction. That, in turn, means that we can do the same to them without feeling bad about it.”

“One would think that constructing something like this—” Tycho waved his arm at the sim and, by extension, the System that contained it. “—would require some sort of politicking, right?”

“Well, sure, but it could’ve been an authoritarian regime that press-ganged its population into building their version of the System in the first place.”

“What about the other races, though?”

He shrugged. “That wouldn’t have proved much. Maybe their System would have remained a totalitarian regime and they subsumed the other races. Still, seeing things like secondrace’s language being the *lingua franca* rather than that of firstrace helps. Seeing these little glimpses of individuality are heartening. They sound like a varied culture, which is good for us.”

Tycho nodded.

“And before you ask why that does not make it more difficult for us,” True Name said. “Them having a varied culture means that there are at least some that might be sympathetic to us.”

“Or susceptible to,” he said.

He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. He felt in a precarious position, surrounded as he was by three politicians. Calling them out on their machinations was surely a dangerous move.

Answers Will Not Help giggled. Even True Name and Jonas were chuckling. “You continue to amaze and delight, my dear,” she said. “But yes, it does make them susceptible to our wicked ways.”

He smiled cautiously. “Well, if you say so.”

“Come on, let’s head back,” Jonas said. “We’ll reset the sim, grab some dinner, and then we can go back to planning.”

It took another forty seconds to transit the DMZ barrier going the opposite direction, and this time he could feel the slight resistance as he transited, as though some process were investigating him from head to foot, from outside in, to ensure that he was who he said he was.

Throughout dinner, he remained quiet, and no matter how hard he tried, he was not able to focus on the food. It was good, of course, as much of the food had been during his stay, but some part of his mind remained elsewhere. It remained back in the sim, back focused on the conversation that he’d had with the politicians of the team.

Since he’d arrived—even before then, even before the message from Artemis—he had felt in over his head. There was something about these people, something about the world that they’d set up that showed how they worked on some higher level than him. Their minds were so fundamentally different that, no matter how much they tried to explain the political ramifications, no matter how much they showed him their work in shaping the response to the news, he just couldn’t take it all in.

It had seemed that True Name and Answers Will Not Help had loosened their control over him the longer he stayed with them. They paid less attention to him. They spoke more in commands than guiding questions. They smiled less and focused harder on the tasks at hand. Even Why Ask Questions, who he’d found himself liking quite a bit after working with her on the letter, had grown busier and busier.

He felt as though he had been purchased as a tool and then simply set in his drawer until it was time for him to be used.

How much input would he even have in these meetings? Was he to be, as Codrin had said, merely an amanuensis? Was his job simply to be there, observe, and pick up on the science aspect? Would he be allowed to take part in the conversations? Would he get to know the Artemisians?

There were far more questions than there were answers and, apropos to the situation, none of the answers were helping, so the cynical part of him kept thinking *why bother asking?*

It was almost too much, sitting there at dinner, trying to chat amiably, trying to enjoy the food, while all these questions and so many more circled around inside his head, hunting for some release, but there was no way that he could hope to ask anyone at the table that night, none of the True Names, none of the Answers Will Not Helps or Why Ask Questionses, and certainly none of the Jonases. Perhaps he could ask Sovanna or Dr. Verda—on hold until there was further astronomical data to process—but they were busy enough with their own worries that didn’t surround acting as emissary to an alien race to bother with the social engineering going on around them.

After dinner, he begged the evening alone to rest in his quarters and paced, composing his message in his head.

“#Tasker,” he said at last, beginning the sensorium message. “Can you talk to Codrin some about just what it is to be an amanuensis? I know ey talked to you about that and all, but I’m really not sure what it is that I should be doing, or what I even can do. I know I’m supposed to listen and record along with em, and I know I’m supposed to ask all the fancy science questions, but I’m starting to feel like that’d be better served by writing down a list of questions for one of the Odists to ask.

“Hell, I’m starting to feel like *they* wish that’s all I’d do. They’re nice enough, and they seem confident in their decision to use me as the science representative, so it’s not like I’m off the team, I just don’t know that I’ll have any say in any of this, and I guess...I guess I’m just feeling lost.

“I’m sending this to you rather than em so that you’re up to date. I feel like you ought to know some of my thoughts since you’re...well, you’re me. If I were any more confident in my ability to fork and merge just for this, I’d just do that, but even that feels way outside my realm of expertise. But also...even Codrin feels clicks above me. I don’t want to make em explain every little detail to me just because I’m so socially dense.

“Get back to me if you can, but if not, at least let Codrin know so, that when ey arrives tomorrow for orientation, ey’s got this knowledge, too.

“Anyway, uh...thanks, me. I’ll merge down before we take off. I hope you’re sleeping better than I am.”

Part II

Experience

And so they sat around their campfire and talked and discussed and argued and strove and fought and laughed and wept. They sat around the campfire and raised their hands in vote, and it was decided that an ark was to be created and sent to explore, and any who wanted to go to see those campfires would have the chance. Those who dreamed of the opportunity chose universally to travel. Those who saw the risk as overwhelming did not. Those who knew that this might be an opportunity for themselves and those who might consider them ancestors decided as they would: to go or to not.

From *An Expanded Mythology of our World* by
May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 3 days, 7 hours, 44 minutes

The pattern-matching portion of eir mind could not stop making comparisons between this and previous projects ey had been involved in with the Odists. *On the Perils of Memory* had been a fairly disorganized affair, begun hastily and over far too soon, leaving the conclusion feeling outsized for the duration of the events at hand. *An Expanded History of Our World* (or *On the Origin of Our World* when taken with May Then My Name's *An Expanded Mythology of Our World*) had been a vast, sprawling affair that was fairly well organized throughout, though transmission times toward the end had begun to hinder coordination.

This, then, lay somewhere in between. While the news had been sudden and the pace nearly frenetic, it had been nothing if not organized. What had begun as a simple message had turned into a flurry of activity, where dozens of forks from four clades coordinated to plan around eventualities, discuss linguistic profiles, and work with Sarah Genet in her role as psychologist to find weak spots in the team and areas where they could shore each other up during the talks.

And through it all, hundreds of Odists and Jonases worked behind the scenes to ensure that every potential possibility was summarized and provided to the team through meeting after meeting, presentation after presentation, quiz and questionnaire.

Every time Codrin thought *hey, this is almost like-*, ey was brought up short by all of the ways it wasn't. It was organized and guided, but without the careful precision that ey now knew to be the case for the *History*. It was hectic and *ad hoc* but without the spur-of-the-moment surprises that came with *Perils*.

Consequently, ey kept finding emself stumbling when presented with a pattern that fit one project and then failed to fit completely.

At last, though, they had dotted all of the 'i's they could find and crossed all the 't's that they could think of and gathered to begin the final preparations.

The five of them trickled into the boardroom. They'd been told to dress 'nice, but comfortable', which didn't change anything for True Name. Why Ask Questions had dressed in a matching outfit. Tycho had swapped out a plaid flannel shirt for a plain white one, but remained in his jeans. Sarah had opted for a blouse and slacks that fit well with her middle-aged, mid-career psychologist aesthetic.

It left Codrin feeling somewhat overdressed for the occasion, but ey shook it off as best ey could. A few years prior, ey'd written a short paper on traditional clothing styles that had been ported into the System, many of which had seen a resurgence, up where cost was no longer a barrier. Ever since, when nicer dress

was required, ey'd taken to dressing in various levels of traditional Romanian garb from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For this project, that meant an embroidered, wide-sleeved blouse and a simple, ankle-length wrap-around skirt, over which was layered *fotele*, an over-skirt rather like an apron, in rich, embroidered red, with a simpler panel of fabric hanging from the back.

Ey had even braided eir hair. Ah well.

"Alright," a Jonas said. He held a clipboard with a checklist he appeared to be reading from. "Greetings. True Name?"

They proceeded down the line, each reciting their version of the Artemisian greeting while an instance of Answers Will Not Help judged and corrected them. Ey recited eir greeting when eir turn came, but only from the most automatic portion of emself remaining. The rest was spent thinking about how much ey'd miss eir partners. How much ey'd miss home.

Jonas ticked a box on his clipboard. "Fork and tag your new instances #Castor. Codrin, we'll need another instance from you tagged #Assist."

Codrin and the two Odists forked immediately. Sarah took a few seconds, and Tycho apologized profusely thirty seconds later when he was finally able to manage the feat.

"I'm still not used to it, sorry."

Jonas waved away the comment. "You're fine, Tycho. Not everyone is True Name."

Both instances of the skunk made a rude gesture at him.

"Yeah, well, fuck you too." He laughed. "Alright. The rest of the tasks will be specific to each group, so—" He forked, and the new instance continued, "—#Artemises, with me to Artemis Staging#553a49c. The rest to Castor Staging#ad89ae3."

Ey lingered for a few seconds and thought. One thing this project had that none of the others had had was the feeling of stepping away from home and leaving it behind completely. There would be no coming home for dinner after a day of interviewing or researching. There would be no returning to the tightly controlled chaos that had become the comfortable dynamic among eir little family. Ey stood, watching the others step away, including the other versions of emself, and soaked in the sensation of longing.

When ey stepped through to the DMZ staging sim, ey was greeted by a nearly identical boardroom to the one ey had just left. There were, ey noted, far more whiteboards lining the walls, not to mention far more Odists and Jonases at work just beyond.

"We have an hour," Jonas said. "So let's finalize our plans for information gathering."

Codrin pulled out a chair at the table and sat between Tycho and Sarah. "Will this be mostly on Tycho?"

The astronomer shrugged. "We're the science side, yeah, but we can exchange all the math we'd like without meeting like this. I think it'd be better to say that we'll be talking about the differences in how we learn and proceed through science. It'll be good to learn what we can, and I plan on asking a ton of questions, but it's almost more Sarah's arena." He grinned, added, "Don't get me wrong, though. I'll still be more in my element than Tycho#Artemis."

"Correct," True Name said. "Tycho will be asking questions on math, physics, and astronomy, Why Ask Questions on biology and linguistics, and Sarah psychology, sociology, and health, but her other duty will be to observe how they answer and glean the different ways in which they learn and communicate to see how they

tick and where our common ground lies.”

“And I observe.”

She nodded. “As always, yes, though I do not believe you will need to remain silent. Feel free to ask your own questions.”

“What will you do?”

The skunk smiled and lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “What I do best, my dear. I will guide the questioning, perform risk analysis, and assess lines of control and weakness.”

Ey had been prepared to make a mental note to pull apart her answer to come up with a way to divine her true intentions, but so honest was her answer that ey was wrong-footed into silence.

They talked through a few more plans, though there was nothing that they had not already covered on the docket. Another short language quiz. First questions they’d ask. A quick run-down of what textual descriptions of their races they had sent. The Artemisians had been startled by the Castor’s inability to receive anything but

text, so the descriptions had seemed hasty.

Something to ask about, Codrin thought.

All five of the party sat up with a start from a sensorium message, a little thrill of adrenaline, alerting them to the time.

Codrin was caught off guard at the lack of fanfare that their departure received. The Jonas who had been running the debriefing waved, and none of the others in the room did more than look over their shoulders as they were shunted over to the DMZ and ey was left blinking in the dappled sunlight of the meeting area.

Codrin Bălan#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 3 days, 6 hours, 0 minutes

Arrival.

Arrival and light and noise and a slick, slippery feeling to the air about em.

Codrin stole a few long seconds with eir eyes squinted shut. The light itself was loud, the noise bright. Everything was just slightly off, just slightly wrong.

And then, those seconds passed, and the noise was less blinding, and when ey opened eir eyes, ey no longer felt deafened, and ey was able to take in the world around em. The ground, the dome above, the colonnaded walls, the greenery beyond. Tight-fitting stone, slick and polished.

Before em stood what ey supposed must be the Artemisian delegation.

Turun Ka and Turun Ko, judging by their identical appearance, stood half again as tall as em. Their flesh, what might have otherwise been skin, was made of what looked to be a supple, rubbery material in gunmetal grey. Powerful thighs supported a stocky torso, and the fact that they were leaned slightly forward was counterbalanced with a thick, lizard-like tail behind them. Their shoulders were sloped and narrow, and ey could see now why they had described themselves as equally comfortable on both two and four legs: their hands were clawed and padded with five fingers and an opposable thumb, but so were their feet.

Atop a long neck rising from their shoulders sat heads with a distinctly canine bent. They were shaped, in fact, not too dissimilar from Dear's, though the ears were less outrageously large.

It was the faces, though, that captivated eir attention. They did not have visible mouths or noses, their 'muzzles' instead being covered with a somewhat lighter grey version of that same supple coating. *Porous, perhaps?* ey thought. *To let them smell? I don't suppose they need to eat. Maybe for speech?*

Rather than eyes, there was a mirrored panel of black, looking more mercury than plastic or glass. No visible eyes, no visible expressions.

Well, this will be interesting.

To their right, a being of similar shape stood on two legs, though they were far smaller, coming up only to Codrin's chin. The longer ey looked, however, the more those similarities began to fall away. Yes, they stood on two powerful legs; yes, their body was canted forward and kept on balance with a thick tail; yes, they had an elongated snout.

However, rather than that supple plastic, they were coated in a scaly hide, washed in oil-sheen colors. Where the firstrace representatives had little in the way of facial features, though, Stolon almost seemed to have a

surfeit. Their eyes were bright and curious, their mouth seemingly ready to a smile—or some other expression, ey reminded emself, as what appeared to be a smile to humans may not be so to thirdrace. They did not have hair, as made sense for what looked to be a type of lizard, but they did have a crest of what appeared to be feathers of a sort, or perhaps massively elongated scales.

Beside Stolon and standing a head shorter than even them was a creature that reminded em so much of Debarre that ey was caught off-guard. The resemblance was uncanny: a svelte coat of brown fur with a creamier white starting beneath the chin and heading down over their front—or at least, ey assumed it continued beneath the thin, blue tunic they were wearing—and a black-tipped tail behind. Plenty of whiskers, dark eyes.

The last of the Artemisians, Artante Diria, looked almost-but-not-quite human. Her features seemed far smoother, with a nose that melted into her face and earlobes that ramped smoothly down into her neck below. Beyond that, however, the differences were negligible. She could easily get lost in a crowd of humans with no problem whatsoever, another face of Asian descent, perhaps. She even wore a blue tunic and sarong of nearly identical cut to what ey wore so often.

All five stood still, expectant.

No, not still. Frozen. They stood frozen before the party of emissaries, unmoving. Nothing was moving. The air was still, the light seemed frozen, and it was eerily silent.

Frowning, ey looked beside em at eir own cohort, and much the same held true. There, at least, there was a hint of movement: Sarah was turning slowly to face a noise to her left, over towards where Why Ask Questions was standing. The movement, however, was more than just slow. It was syrupy. It was thick. It was out of phase with em.

All of it was out of phase with em. Everything. The world as a whole.

“The hell...?”

Ey stepped forward enough to look down the line to either side of emself.

Tycho: frozen, confused, blanched.

True Name: eyes held open defiantly, a grimace on her muzzle showing some internal strain.

Sarah: shocked, startled, curious.

Why Ask Questions: mid-shout, a splash of black fur creeping up over her cheek, a ghost of a muzzle before her face.

“What the hell?” ey repeated.

“You are recorder Codrin Bălan, *anem*?”

Startled, ey whirled to face the party of Artemisians. One of the firstrace members had stepped forward. Assuming the lineup was similar to their own, ey supposed it must be Turun Ko, the recorder, with Turun Ka as leader on the end. Its voice was surprisingly mellifluous for a being that seemed to be an artificial construct.

“Y-yes,” ey said, shaking er head. “What...is this...I mean, is this time?”

Turun Ko tilted its chin up in a gesture ey could not understand. “Yes. You have skewed-departed-slid-away from common time. It is normal-not-unusual for the recorder consciousness-bearing system to detach-accelerate from common time at first. Those such as you and I are primed-eager to observe over time.”

Codrin gripped eir notebook and pen closer to eir chest. “Common...so, the other emissaries are moving at the same time, I’m just moving slower?”

“Faster. You are existing-in-time faster, thus the other emissaries appear-seem to be moving slower.”

“How do I get back?”

The firsttrace...member? Firsttracer? The firsttracer dipped its snout with a twist to the side that gave em the sense of a shrug. “There is no hurry-rush. We exist in synchrony. I will teach-instruct you to find common time. I must ask: you are four individuals in five forms in two phenotypes. Are you still five consciousness-bearing systems?”

It took em a moments work to disentangle the question before ey realized that Turun Ko was asking about True Name and Why Ask Questions. They were, ey supposed, still closer to being one individual than any two non-cladists.

“Yes. The Only Time I Know My True Name—or just True Name—and Why Ask Questions Here At...” Ey trailed off, looking at the woman who still appeared to be in mid-shout. The splash of skunk-fur appeared to have crept further up her cheek, though so out-of-phase was she with eir local time that it was hard to say for sure. More, though, something seemed...off about her. She seemed not quite as ey remembered.

“Recorder Codrin Bălan, please continue.”

“Uh, right, sorry. True Name and Why Ask Questions Here At The End Of All Things are cocladists, forks of the same root instance. Why Ask Questions is actually a fork of True Name, who is, in turn, a fork of the root instance, Michelle Hadje. They have individuated. They are...separate consciousness-bearing entities.”

Turun Ko lifted its chin once more. “Representative Why Ask Questions is in pain.”

“Pain?”

“Pain-of-existence. Pain-of-state-of-being. She is un-whole. This is why we must ask.”

Ey nodded. “She looks scared. Frightened, or something.”

“Frightened, *anem*, the correct word. Both representative Why Ask Questions and leader True Name are frightened. They are un-whole. They are in pain. Leader True Name is hiding-obscuring it better. Why?”

Something about this discursive, almost lazy form of questioning made Codrin feel as though ey would be late. Ey wanted to urge Turun Ko to get them back to common time. *That’s silly, though*, ey thought. *We have all the time we need, if hardly any is passing out there. If ‘out there’ is even the right term.*

Ey said, “I only have a guess as explained by one of their cocladists, that—”

“Cocladists is multiple forms of one individual, *anem*?”

“Yes...uh, *anem*, correct. One of their cocladists suggested that they might react poorly to the...” Ey trailed off, hunting for the best phrasing. “To the malleability of time. They underwent some experiences in the past regarding time, so I think they’re afraid.”

“Will they remain afraid-in-pain? Will they cohere?”

Codrin was silent for a long moment as ey thought about this. The part of em that wanted to say ‘yes, of course’ argued against the part of em that was intensely focused on that wave of skunk fur creeping its way up over Why Ask Questions’s cheek.

“I don’t know,” ey said at last. Ey pointed carefully toward that trim of fur. “How long did it take for this to appear?”

“0.16 seconds common time from your arrival-constitution.” Turun Ko stepped closer, bowing its head to investigate the fur. “She is existing-in-time slower. She appears-seems frozen because she is in slow-time. She

skewed-departed-slid-away from common time 0.18 seconds after arrival by a skew of -2.6. Think-remember, recorder Codrin Bălan, and you will know these things.”

Ey tilted eir head and then, considering how it felt to have a merge available to remember, tried to remember the ‘skew’ factor by which eir experience of time differed from common time. The concepts were hazily defined to em—ey didn’t know what common time was, where the point of reference lay—and yet all the same, ey knew that eir time-skew factor was +2.18.

On a spark of intuition, ey tried to ‘remember’ being at a skew of one, and sure enough, the world stumbled into movement again, though everything was moving half as fast as ey expected. Sound came through slowly, and ey could hear words beginning—words from Sarah, from Tycho, from Turun Ka. It was unnerving to hear that they had been time-stretched without having their pitch modulated, but ey supposed that would be helpful in time-skewed conversations.

Ey felt the briefest twinge to eir sensorium and frowned. “What was that?”

“I have tied-attached-synchronized my time skew to yours. If you require help with skew manipulation, I will assist. Think-remember common time, recorder Codrin Bălan.”

Ey nodded and slowly allowed Turun Ko and emself to slip back into common time. There was the faintest sensorium *click*, as though a pin had slid into a shallow notch, informing em that this was the shared moment.

“—My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade will accompany,” Turun Ka was saying. “Representative Artante Diria will show you to your rest area. We will conduct formal greetings in one hour common time.”

True Name wavered, reaching out a hand to grip at Codrin’s sleeve. She remained stubbornly skunk, clinging to that appearance of being in control. “Thank you, leader Turun Ka,” she said, words coming out slowly, spoken through clenched teeth. “Our apologies.”

The firstracer bowed, tucking its chin close to its chest. “There is no need to apologize. Allowances are granted to those who arrive from new worlds. Representative Iska will accompany you to discuss further accommodations.” It turned to face the rest of the emissaries. “You all may rest and acclimatize in the rest area we have provided for you. We welcome you.”

Artante Diria bowed at the waist, a gesture so easy and recognizable that the four representatives all reciprocated more out of habit.

“Welcome. You may call me representative Artante Diria. This way, please,” she said, gesturing with a hand.

Codrin hesitated, watching as something happened to bring Why Ask Questions back into sync with common time. Her shout completed and then turned into a low moan as she crumpled to the ground, retching. For the first time since ey’d met Michelle nearly four decades ago, ey watched the dueling identities of a mind split. Skunk and human battled for primacy even as True Name moved to help her cocladist to her feet.

“Where are they taking them?” ey asked once ey’d caught up with Artante and the other emissaries.

“There are several unison rooms available in the compound. They will be given one as quarters.”

“I’m guessing those are rooms where time can’t move?” Tycho asked.

She smiled, nodding her head in assent. “Move is the wrong word, but skew is locked in unison for all of the inhabitants, though that of the room may still diverge from common time. Your rest area will not be a unison room, but if this proves uncomfortable, we will accommodate you. Through here, you will find your beds and desks. Should you need anything in addition, please ring the bell by the door, and someone will be by to assist.

I will come for you in one hour common time for the formal greeting.”

They bowed once again and each walked to a bed, picking at random. They seemed comfortable enough. The desks, while plain, were a touch that Codrin appreciated, and ey set eir notebook and pen down so that ey could prow around the room.

The far wall held window seats that looked out over a garden of strange, colorful vegetation.

As ey sat on one of these, playing with eir new-found ability to modulate time, Tycho approached. Ey enjoyed a secret moment of amusement, making the astronomer walk first slowly, now quickly, before settling back into common time once more.

“Codrin,” he said, sitting down beside em. “I want to get your opinion on something before I say anything stupid.”

“I am no stranger to saying stupid things, but I will do my best.”

The astronomer’s smile was weak as he leaned in closer, whispering, “Just between us for now, promise?”

Ey frowned, nodded. “Can you move to fast time? Same as hopping sims or creating things: have the intention of being at a time skew of +2.”

Tycho blinked, looked nonplussed for a moment, then seemed to Codrin to start breathing incredibly rapidly. Ey followed him into fast time.

“This is...strange. Very strange,” he said, looking around, back over to where Sarah appeared frozen in the act of sitting on the edge of her bed.

“It really is. Still, this will give you enough privacy to speak freely, I believe.”

He looked back toward the door, worry painted on his face, and nodded. “I’m not totally sure how I know, but I don’t think that was Why Ask Questions. That was Answers Will Not Help.”

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 28 days, 13 hours, 35 minutes
(*Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes*)

Ioan knew what was coming, so ey was able to brace emself well enough when May came barrelling out of the default entry point on the dandelion-ridden field that ey was not totally bowled over, managing at least a somewhat graceful descent to the ground. The skunk had already looped her arms around eir middle and tucked her head up under eir chin before ey was even able to sit up straight enough to get eir arms around her.

“You nut.” Ey laughed, reaching up to tug at one of her ears affectionately. “Good to see you, too.”

“Ioan, I am in no way sorry for knocking you over,” she said, voice muffled, her grip around eir middle tightening. “Though I am dreadfully sorry that this happened again. I missed you.”

Giving up on the prospect of sitting up straight, ey leaned back onto one hand, propping emself up. “No need to apologize, May. I’m just happy to see you again.”

The skunk leaned away from em enough to dot her nose against eirs. Her eyes were quite red and ey could see tear-tracks in the fur of her cheeks. She looked a mess. “Do not take my apology away from me. I have been saving that one up.”

“Alright, alright,” ey said, pressing eir nose a little more firmly to hers for a moment before leaning back again. “Apology accepted. Are you feeling better?”

She sat upright rather than leaning against eir front and nodded. “Yes. I was able to get a lot out that I think has been pent up for a while. Thank you for giving me the space. I promise I did not fuck with your pen collection.”

“Good. I had it all perfectly organized.” Ey plucked a dandelion from the field and tucked it behind her ear. “Now, do you want to talk about it? Or should we do that later? That was longer than the last few times.”

“Later, please. I want to say hi to Douglas and wash my face and just be normal for a bit.”

Douglas Hadje met them on the stoop of his house and, as had become their ritual over the years, hugged the skunk, lifted, and twirled her around. Her bushy tail streamed along behind her.

“Hey May,” he said, setting her back down again and kissing her cheek. “Glad you made it through.”

“Of course I made it through. You still have at least seventy nine years of me haunting you before I can do something else.” She grinned. “And even then, the contract is renewable.”

“Ornery as ever.” He laughed. “Well, want to come in?”

“For a bit, and then I want to come back out here and lay in the grass and bake in the sun.”

After May had cleaned up and Ioan had helped Douglas prepare coffee and some sandwiches, they sat around the table to catch up.

“So, what news of the aliens?” Douglas asked.

The skunk squinted at him. “Has Ioan not been keeping you up to date?”

“A little. Ey said ey wanted to wait until you got here, though.”

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes. “Well, out with it, then.”

“I’ve gotten several messages from Codrin over the last few days. Ey said they would be heading out to start the talks later that day.”

“So they have been into them for a while, now.” She looked thoughtfully up to the ceiling. “A few weeks, perhaps?”

“Or maybe they’re already over,” Douglas said.

“A gloomy thought. I would like to hope that they are going quite well. Codrin is there being a Bălan, Tycho is there being a nerd, this Sarah Genet is there being a whatever a Sarah Genet is like, Why Ask Questions is there being a shithead.” She wrinkled her nose. “And True Name is doing her best to control the whole thing.”

Ioan was pleased to see the mildness of the skunk’s expression. It really did seem like many of those overwhelming emotions had burned themselves out over the last few days.

“It’s weird,” Douglas said. “Every now and then, I’ll hear about something from one of the LVs that’s anchored to a certain time and I’ll remember, ‘Oh shit, yeah, they’re billions of kilometers away by now’, and then I have to spend some time trying to conceptualize that distance.”

Ioan nodded. “The transmission delay throws a wrench in things, doesn’t it? I was just thinking about that on Secession day. We were celebrating and it sounds like they were, too, but we didn’t learn about their party until a month later.”

“The thing that always catches me off guard is that our days do not seem to line up any longer,” May said around a bite of sandwich. “I mean, they do, but when the delay is off by half a day, we start getting messages at shit o’clock in the morning. It is a strange feeling.”

“Exactly.”

“I hope they’re still in the talks, too. Codrin sounded hopeful, at least. The messages that they’d been getting from the Artemisians were interesting, especially the language snippets. I’m guessing the powers that be made em promise not to send the full message text yet, but what they have learned is fascinating. Four races on one ship must be a hell of an experience. The DMZ sim sounds pleasant, though, and all of the work they’ve done to prepare is really kind of impressive.” Ey sipped eir coffee to buy a moment’s time to think before saying, “There was a bunch of stuff in there for you, too, May. We can go over that later, though.”

The skunk frowned, finished the last of her sandwich, and then settled back in the chair with her coffee. “You cannot leave me hanging, my dear. May I at least have a preview?”

“Well, Codrin’s worried about you. As is Dear.”

“The memory thing?” Douglas asked.

Ey nodded.

May averted her gaze, looking out the window to the rolling field beyond. “I am worried, too. You know that.”

"I know. Reading between the lines, though, I think ey's worried about the whole clade. Ey's worried about you and Dear, and ey's worried about how True Name and Why Ask Questions are going to act through this. Dear reacted poorly to the whole time-modification thing."

She nodded and sat in silence for a minute before setting her cup down. "We are not doing as well as many of us would like, no. I have news as well, but I would like to share it outside where I can sit in the sun and feel the grass. Is that okay?"

Ioan and Douglas collected plates and coffee cups, then the three of them trooped out into the field while May spoke.

"We have lost May One Day Death Itself Not Die and I Do Not Know, I Do Not Know. Death Itself stopped talking, and then she stopped moving. In Dreams visited for a while there, and a few days ago asked me to come visit as well. That is why this spell seemed to last longer than usual. Evening hit, she smiled at us, shrugged, and then quit."

May's voice was thick as she continued. "They all lived in the same house, did you know that? All ten of that stanza. Many of them did not even talk with each other, and none of them ever forked. They were always quite unstable. The next morning, I Do Not Know was gone, and Names Of The Dead said that she had quit shortly before sunrise."

Ioan and Douglas remained quiet as they walked. The skunk didn't seem to be quite done saying the things that she needed to.

She continued after a few minutes of mastering emotions, voice clear once more. "In Dreams and I talked quite a bit. She said that there have been fewer instances of instability in older clades than expected, given *On the Perils of Memory*. Fewer uploads are susceptible to the long-term effects of unceasing memory than expected, I guess. I was pleased to see that Debarre seems to be doing well."

"That's heartening," Douglas said. "At least in a way."

The skunk nodded. "I am pleased that the System is more stable than feared, but I am unhappy that we seem so strongly affected. In Dreams said that she is going to do some research and see if there are ways that we can at least improve on the way we deal with the effects. I do not know that there is a way to get rid of them entirely, at least not without further individuation, but the least we can do is help keep ourselves sane for longer."

Ioan took her paw in eir hand and lifted it to kiss the back. "Please, yeah. If you lose it, I'll be furious."

She laughed and gave em a pitying look. "Mx. Ioan Bălan, you are pretty good at acting furious on stage, but I do not believe for a second that you could actually feel that way. Even Codrin was able to have a normal meeting with True Name after she did as she does with em."

Ey did not laugh. Neither, ey noted, did Douglas.

"I am sorry," she murmured, ears laid flat.

"'Furious' is the wrong word, May. I'd lose my damn mind." Ey took a shaky breath and rubbed at eir face. "I can't tell you you're not allowed to or anything, since I know it's not really up to you, but please at least try to stick around."

"I'm not going to pile on or anything," Douglas said. "But I will say I'd be pretty upset, too, so if there's anything I can do to help, I will."

May dragged them both to a stop in the field. Her expression started out angry, then screwed up into sadness,

and finally settled on tired. “I love you both and I promise I will do what I can to stay here, stay grounded. I cannot speak for the rest of the clade, and certainly not for Dear to soothe Codrin’s fears, but I will do what I can.”

It was not uncommon for these reunions to be tearful, Ioan knew, but it was a different sort of pang that settled in eir chest with the news, and it was a few minutes before ey was able to speak again. “Sorry, you two.”

The skunk stuck her tongue out at em. “I will allow you this one apology, but do not make a habit of it. You are allowed to cry at sad shit.”

Ey rolled eir eyes and shoved at her.

“Well, I was promised laying in the grass and baking in the sun,” Douglas said. “So come on, we can at least enjoy the rest of the afternoon.”

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 3 days, 5 hours, 21 minutes

Codrin was pleased to see that some magic wrought by the Ansible engineers both here on Castor and their counterparts over on Artemis allowed the Artemisians to assume what must be their natural forms and that they weren't greeted by a gaggle of Douglasses. Ey'd never seen Douglas, but it would have been unnerving and difficult to differentiate them. They'd even come wearing clothes—those who wore them, at least, this Iska and Artante Diria—which ey supposed they would appreciate. One of those benefits of System-to-System Ansbles that they'd enjoyed on their transit from Lagrange to LVs, as well.

So it was that they found themselves lined up opposite their counterparts across the table from each other, exchanging their formal greetings.

“Rehasiër munachla achles eslosam. Tapotevier les unachadev itek The-Only-Time-I-Know-My-True-Name-Is-When-I-Dream-am, True-Name itet.” The skunk bowed formally, deep and at the waist.

The firstracer before her bowed its head, a movement that took place solely in the neck rather than the waist. “Greetings, and thank you for letting us join you. I am acting in a leadership capacity as a representative from the Council of Eight, and my name is Turun Ka.”

Ey watched the exchange of greetings curiously, making note of what gestures were made, before bowing emself and saying, *“Rehasiër munachla echles eslosam. Tapotevier les unechrenum Codrin-Bălanam.”*

Turun Ko, opposite em, responded with a similar motion of raised head. “Greetings-hello, thank-you-and-gratitude for allowing our delegation-emissaries. I act as observer-recorder and am called-named Turun Ko.”

Ey tilted eir head, noting the confusion on eir side of the table at the choppy, synonym-ridden greeting, filing away a question to ask of the recorder later.

The greetings continued down the line. Tycho and Stolon greeted each other as scientists. Iska, who startled em in their resemblance to Debarre, and Why Ask Questions greeted each other, followed last of all by Artante Diria and Sarah.

There was a small shuffle as the delegates from both craft sat at the table, Iska politely requesting that their chair be raised and the surface area made smaller so that they could more effectively reach the table, which True Name accomplished with a gesture. Both Turun Ka and Turun Ko set their chairs aside and squatted down on their haunches before the table instead.

“Thank you once again, and welcome to this convergence,” Turun Ka said. Its voice was pleasantly musical. “It is a pleasure to meet those who are new and different from us, and we are always grateful when luck and

chance allow us to do so.”

True Name nodded, a hint of a bow from where she sat. “Thank you for joining us. We welcome you to the Launch Vehicle Castor. We are honored to have you aboard. If you need anything at all, please do not hesitate to ask me, as I bear full ACLs for the sim. You will find your rest area down there—” She gestured with a paw toward one of the hallways. “—where you will have limited ACLs that will allow you to modify many of the objects there and will allow you to fork once.”

The reactions around the table were mixed. Turun Ka and Turun Ko remained impassive—they seemed to move only with intent, and when not required, they were as stationary as statues. Stolon tilted their head in a quizzical manner. Iska’s expression was hard to read, but were ey pressed to put a name to it, ey would have called it unnerved, or perhaps startled. Given the similarities of her features to the humans around the table, Artante looked quite pleased.

“There will be no time skew?” Iska asked, voice high pitched, each word dipping in tone.

“We were not able to accommodate that, no.”

“You appear-seem displeased or uncomfortable,” Turun Ko said, head pointing down the table toward Why Ask Questions. “Can you explain if able or comfortable?”

She looked over to True Name, who gave a small nod of permission.

“Some of us here on the System do not feel comfortable with unbounded time,” she said. “We will discuss more as the meeting continues.”

“Aën,” it said. *Okay.*

After a moment’s silence, the skunk continued. “Per our agreement, this meeting here on Castor will be focused on knowledge-share surrounding the topics of linguistics and science, with particular attention to astronomy and spaceflight, while those aboard Artemis will focus on society, politics, and psychology. I would like to open with a round of free questioning, if you are amenable, in order to find a few examples for which directions to take the meeting in moving forward. Do you agree?”

“Yes,” Turun Ka said. “One question per delegate should be an appropriate way to begin. I invite you to ask first, leader True Name.”

The response was quick in coming. “We have divided civilizations up into a range of classes depending on their energy usage: planet scale, planetary system scale, and interplanetary scale. At what stage were each of your races, and, if you have ran across any additional races, at what scale did they work?”

“Our race lived at the scale of planetary system,” it replied. “We appear the way we do in our post-biological state in order to survive in a variety of environments beyond those of our world-of-origin.”

“Lu,” Stolon said, speaking slowly. “Planetary scale for us. For other three races.”

True Name glanced to Codrin, ensuring that ey was taking notes. “Thank you. Would you like to go next, leader Turun Ka?”

“Yes. By what means do you collect the materials needed for your civilization, whether for the embodied world or this one?”

“Mining on our planet and our planet’s moon,” the skunk said after a moment’s thought. “As well as limited mining of asteroids at stationary points of orbit.”

“You call Lagrange point, *ka*?” Stolon asked.

She nodded. "Correct."

"We saw...lu..." They chattered their teeth for a moment, then looked to Iska. "*Baená' luta' 'esbrohakadât'?*"

"Space-constructs," they said, filling in. "We saw constructs of various size at your planet-moon and planet-star Lagrange points."

True Name stiffened, but any response she might have had was preempted by Tycho. The astronomer, who had appeared largely overwhelmed by the meeting to date had steadily grown more excited during the questioning phase. "You did? How? Radio? When did you see them? During gravity assist? How—"

"Tycho, hold up," Sarah said, laughing. "There will be time."

Stolon, meanwhile, was clacking claw-tipped fingers against the table and bobbing their head. "*Za lutatier! Za, za,*" they said quickly. "Will say, will say. Excited also, scientist Tycho."

Codrin grinned, scribbling further notes in eir notebook. Ey was pleased to see that there was also excitement around the table, rather than simply anxiety.

"Scientist Stolon, please answer scientist Tycho's question regarding how," Turun Ka said, voice bouncing through tones.

Amusement, perhaps? Codrin thought. The atmosphere certainly seemed to have lightened.

"Radio emanations, *anem*. Too far for visible light, useless light."

Tycho grinned, nodded. "Apologies, that will be my question, then."

"I ask," Stolon said. "How launched vehicle? We see also another, we learn language from."

"A station—a construct, as you say—rotating with the Castor and Pollux launch vehicles at the end of long launch arms, released us at tangential velocity, then photon sails, Hall Effect engines, and gravity assists on our way out of the system."

"You move not so fast, *ka*? Conserve fuel?" They chattered their teeth again. "Sorry sorry, will ask again soon."

"I am pleased to see the scientists excited," Turun Ka said. "Recorder Codrin Bălan? Recorder Turun Ko?"

When Turun Ko did not speak, Codrin asked, "Does your system allow you to forget?"

"Memories degrade-rot," the other recorder said. "Saves-preserves storage. Garbage collection process trims-prunes old-unaccessed memories."

Both True Name and Sarah reached for their pens to make note of the answer.

Codrin smiled and nodded eir thanks.

"Recorder Codrin Bălan, do your bodies-physical-forms continue to live after embedding-uploading of consciousness?"

Ey shook eir head. Realizing that the gesture may not translate, ey said, "No, they are destroyed in the process of uploading. Or embedding, as you say."

Both Iska and Artante Diria took notes of this answer.

"I have a question," Sarah said, when the silence drew out. "Do you have the concept of mental illness? Depression, disordered thinking, disconnect from reality?"

"Yes," Artante Diria said. "We have not discovered a means of removing such after embedding. I will ask next. I infer that you have not either. What treatments do you have for mental illness?"

“Talk therapy, mostly. If one is careful, one can reduce the effects by forking with intent to change, though this can have complex effects on other parts of the personality. It’s come up in the past with the—”

Why Ask Questions rested a hand gently on Sarah’s forearm. Both she and True Name were frowning.

“We will discuss later, perhaps.”

“Yes, in time,” the Odist said. “For my question, I would like to know how you manage linguistic drift.”

Iska straightened up. “Our common tongue began primarily that of secondrace, of my race, but has incorporated many aspects of other languages. Languages within each race, including for pure *Nanon*, the basis of our common tongue, are uncontrolled, but common tongue is managed via central authority.”

“Thank you, representative Iska.”

“I will ask the final question,” they said. “You say that we will have the ability to fork. Is there not risk of divergence?”

True Name answered, “There is. Why Ask Questions is a fork from me, and I am in turn a fork from the root instance, Michelle Hadje. We have individuated in the last two hundred twenty-odd years.”

That unnerved, anxious expression returned to the secondracer’s face, but they bowed their head all the same. “*Aët*. Thank you.”

Standing, True Name bowed deeply once more. “Thank you once again for joining us. Let us retire to our rest areas to compare notes and strategize, then reconvene in one hour’s time to begin in earnest.”

Both delegations stood and returned their acknowledging gestures, whatever they might be, and each walked toward their respective rest areas.

“What do you think?” Why Ask Questions asked. “Real or dream?”

Tycho frowned. “It’s too early to—”

True Name elbowed him in the side and laughed. “She is being a brat. Do not fall for her trap.”

“Yeah, yeah, fuck you too,” the other Odist said, grinning. “Do keep an eye out, though, my dear. We must act as though they are real for now, and we must not lose focus on the talks, but the answer may well be relevant later.”

“Do not confuse our scientist, please,” the skunk said mildly, then winked to Tycho.

If the comment had been meant to reassure Tycho, it fell flat. The astronomer’s look of confusion only deepened.

Codrin let the three pass em, catching Sarah’s eye to walk slower. Once Tycho had wandered toward the coffee setup and the Odists were several paces ahead, heads together and talking quietly, ey asked, “What do you make of it?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. The questions were all reasonable, but I wasn’t really able to figure out if there was a direction to them. The question about mental health seemed to be earnest, as though they were looking for an actual solution to the problem, while Stolon’s question about launching was very to the point. Hard facts, that sort of thing.”

Ey nodded.

“Weird that they’d ask about our bodies living on after uploading, though,” Tycho said, coffee in hand. “What could they possibly want with that knowledge?”

“Not sure,” she said. “Maybe trying to figure out incentives for uploading? I really don’t know.”

“I’m feeling kind of lost after all that.” Codrin sighed, hunting down the partitioned ‘room’ ey’d claimed as eir own and stopping outside the door. “It’s overwhelming. I have no idea what avenues to go down from here. I want to ask why Turun Ko speaks the way it does, I want to ask about their opinions on forking, I want to ask all these questions, but I’m not sure how welcome that’ll be in my role.”

“I don’t know about that either, as representative. I hope I get to ask more. Though, well...” Sarah glanced over to where True Name and Why Ask Questions had sat at a table, still talking earnestly within a cone of silence. “I don’t know what’s more interesting. The emissaries or the Odists.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 3 days, 4 hours, 12 minutes

Tycho found himself focusing most on True Name after the long spate of introductions.

A small part of him wondered at this. All four races of Artemisians sitting around the table with them were fascinating in their own way. Part of him wanted to get lost in exploring the intricacies of Turun Ka and Turun Ko. Another desperately wanted to learn as much as he could from Stolon despite the stated goal of focusing on social interactions and history for this instance of the meeting.

And yet it was all so overwhelming. So much was happening all at once. So many things demanded his attention that the part of himself tasked with observing all but shut down, and instead he focused on True Name.

Why Ask Questions—or perhaps Answers Will Not Help—had calmed down, at least to the point where she was able to sit still and look down at the table. Her introduction had been stammered and, after that, she had remained quiet and withdrawn. It seemed as though she was spending every joule of energy she had on remaining still, remaining herself. Even then, a wave of skunk would occasionally wash over her form and she would clench her eyes shut.

Codrin bore eir usual curious, attentive expression. Something about em seemed to suggest that, when working, ey became a camera of sorts, taking in all light, all sound, all sensation and storing it away for future reference. Even when the façade of work dropped, ey seemed built to witness.

Sarah, too, wore a look of calm curiosity. He figured she would be, in her own way, working the hardest of the group. She was the one tasked with watching the ways in which the Artemisians acted, trying to deduce some clear picture of them as individuals and as a society.

Tycho wished for that same sense of calm, of stability.

And so, with the other emissaries well known and the Artemisians perhaps too interesting to look at, he focused on True Name.

The skunk appeared to have an internal struggle of her own, not dissimilar from Why Ask Questions's/Answers Will Not Help's, but, as far as he could tell, she was better able to hold it at a distance, wrap it all up and set it down, observe rather than fight. Only twice that he had seen since they had gathered around the table had there been a wave of that human form of Michelle Hadje spreading across her features, but that was quickly mastered.

How much must be going on beneath the surface? he wondered. *She seems like she's a hundred percent here, and yet there's still something deeper going on.*

She caught him looking and gave him a wan smile, before addressing the table. "I think that it would be beneficial if we were to know the specialties that everyone holds, as that might help us better understand the ways in which we speak."

"By specialties," Artante said. "You mean our primary areas of interest?"

True Name nodded. "Yes."

There was a brief blur around the Artemisians as, Tycho guessed, they shifted to fast time to discuss this.

When they dropped back down to common time, Turun Ka tilted its snout up. "We are amenable to this. By role, then, I act as leader for this delegation as well as a member of the Council of Eight, which serves in a leadership role for the collected societies here on what you call Artemis. My specialization is on interspecies communication."

The skunk's ears flitted briefly as it spoke. "Thank you, leader Turun Ka. For my part, I act as leader for this delegation. There is no central leadership for our System, but I am a member of a group of individuals and clades keenly interested in the stability and continuity of our society." She smiled, strain showing around her eyes. "This was not always the case, as the System was originally guided by a group of individuals also known as the Council of Eight. This was disbanded two hundred years ago once the society reached equilibrium, but I was a member from start to end."

The firstracer rocked its head from side to side in a gesture that Tycho supposed must be amusement of a sort. "We share a commonality."

True Name nodded.

"I serve as recorder here," Codrin said when no one else spoke up. "I am a historian and writer, and have often found myself taking part in large-scale events as an amanuensis so that I might witness and then write a coherent story after."

"We are similar-alike, recorder Codrin Bălan," Turun Ko said. "I serve and have served as observer-recorder since creation and launch of our vehicle-system. I specialize in creating stories-accounts-retellings of events so that others may listen-learn-understand. I am pleased to meet you."

Codrin nodded to it, smiling. "As am I."

"I am named Stolon of thirdrace, of—" The lizard made a sort of hissing, chittering noise. Their name for their own race, perhaps? "I am specializing in astronomy and spaceflight. I dream of stars."

Tycho sat up straight. Another astronomer! He couldn't have asked for better luck. "Really? I'm an astronomer, too," he said, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. "That's the whole reason I came along on these launches in the first place. I wanted to see the stars. Where do you come from? How did you wind up out here?"

True Name frowned. "One set of questions at a time, Dr. Brahe. There will be a time for asking such as these."

He sat back, chastened, but a glance at Stolon shared a similar sort of jittery excitement. They kept tapping and drumming their claws on the tabletop, forcing themselves to stop, and then doing so again. He made a mental note to steal some time with the thirdracer.

They continued around the table.

"I am Iska of secondrace. I specialize in time skew artistry. I tell stories through the ways in which we move through time. I serve as representative for my race, but also as an artist who may come away with a story."

Codrin laughed. "How delightful."

Iska cocked their head in a familiar gesture of confusion.

"One of my partners—romantic partners, that is—is an instance artist. It performs art through the creative use of forking. It'll be pleased to hear that there is something analogous here."

The secondracer bowed, their short ears canted back. "We will have to share knowledge on this during our talks."

Sarah spoke up next. "I am a psychologist and therapist. I study the way people think and help them by listening. I have a particular interest in being here to see the ways in which we are similar or different in how we learn, solve problems, approach the world, and so on."

Artante smiled. "I serve a similar role, representative Sarah Genet. I listen and I talk and I help. That is my role here, as well. Iska will bring back the story, and I will aid in understanding."

The two smiled at each other, both looking pleased. Tycho imagined they were feeling some of the same excitement that he was on learning that Stolon was a fellow astronomer.

All eyes turned towards Why Ask Questions/Answers Will Not Help, who gave a weak shrug. "You must forgive my state at the moment. I cannot speak without great effort. My focus is on politics."

"The offer to hold further talks in a unison room remains available," Iska said.

Why Ask Questions shook her head, though whether at the suggestion or out of the inability to speak, Tycho couldn't tell.

They bowed their head. "It will remain available. Please ask if you require. Time skew is a part of our existence, here, and has been since the first convergence. It is how we have managed to learn your language and prepare for your arrival. We work at a high positive skew."

"We had wondered about that," Codrin said. "Your reply to our letters was almost instantaneous. Even when we had several instances of a single individual working on a problem, we were slower."

"Some problems are more difficult to work on in parallel than others," Artante said.

"I suppose responding to a letter is one of those, yeah, unless it's responding to otherwise unconnected points in a letter."

The fourthracer nodded. "We were like you before we arrived. We had the concept of forking but not of time skew."

Tycho kept waiting for True Name to interrupt, for her to tell them that they needed to stay on topic, but the skunk seemed interested enough in the topic to let it continue.

"I would like to know more, representative Artante Diria." The skunk sat up straighter, quelling a wave of human form before continuing. "When we fork, our new instances can quit and we are presented with their memories so that we may have the experiences of both instances should we choose. Is that how your system worked?"

"Similar, yes, though only if the fork was created from the current instant."

True Name tilted her head, gestured for the representative to explain.

Artante looked thoughtful as she continued, more slowly now. "I could fork from who I am now and then

be able to accept the memories of that instance without issue. If I were to fork from who I was five minutes ago, accepting those memories would be very difficult. Forking from more than a day in the past made accepting memories all but impossible.”

Stunned silence from the emissaries greeted this explanation.

“Is there a portion of this that needs clarification?” Artante asked, frowning.

“We can only fork from the present. From the current instant, as you say,” Codrin said. “That’s a fascinating idea, though. Do you know how it worked? If Dear—my instance artist partner, that is—could do that, it would open up worlds of possibilities to it.”

She bowed apologetically. “It has been nearly a millennium since I have been able to fork, recorder Codrin Bălan, and even then, I was not very adept at it. In one of your letters, you discussed dissolution strategies; I was what you would call a tasker. I will ask another of my race for details after the conference.”

Codrin grinned and elbowed Tycho in the side. The astronomer rolled his eyes.

“As am I,” he said. “Never got the hang of it, never really felt the need to.”

Artante laughed, nodded. He was pleased at the familiarity of her expressions. It made at least one of the Artemisians he could read.

“How did you adapt to time skew?”

All heads turned toward Why Ask Questions. The question had been mumbled and quiet, but surprising coming from one who had been otherwise silent.

“Many of us did not,” Artante said. “During our convergence, it was primarily those who would be labeled taskers who took part.”

“Did others have trouble like me?”

There was another brief blur from the Artemisians as they discussed among themselves. Tycho saw Codrin frown and make a note.

That they needed to do that is probably telling, he thought.

“Not in the same fashion, but some experienced difficulties, yes.” Artante hesitated, glanced at Turun Ka, and then continued. “We have decided that it would be best to revisit this topic later on in our meeting, however, as we do not want to distract from other topics we must cover during our time together.”

Why Ask Questions/Answers Will Not Help nodded. “Would appreciate that,” she said, the words coming out slurred and elongated as she veered into and out of slow time. She seemed to be having an increasingly hard time remaining in common time, not to mention remaining in one form. “Can we take a break for a few minutes?”

Turun Ka stood from where it had crouched. “Yes. Please feel free to return to your rest area or a unison room for the next fifteen minutes common time, and then we shall reconvene.”

“Can we do so in a unison room?”

“Yes. Representative Iska will see to the arrangements. One of us will fetch the other emissaries to guide you back to the new meeting location.”

The soft-furred secondracer stood still for a moment, squinted. “You should be locked to common time for the time being. It is very difficult to synchronize skew with you, though. I don’t know why. I will contact a system technician during our break.”

“If I walk backward, time moves forward. If I walk forward, time rushes on,” she gasped out, then laughed hoarsely. “If I stand still, the world moves around me!”

True Name jolted at the brief recitation, standing quickly and taking her cocladist by the elbow. “Come, my dear. Let us get to the room.”

Tycho looked to Codrin, who only frowned.

Something had happened, just then. Something of import. He had no clue as to what it had been, though. Neither did he understand how he knew, he realized, but he knew that it was something distressing. Something wrong.

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 28 days, 19 hours, 29 minutes

(Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 7 days, 5 hours, 31 minutes)

May made it through dinner—Ioan was heartened to see that she'd actually eaten all of the chicken soup ey'd made—before padding off to a beanbag to curl up. She kept up a dozy conversation for a few minutes while Ioan cleaned, but even that tapered off to silence. When next ey looked back, the skunk was asleep.

Every time ey'd left her to sleep out on the beanbag in the past, though, she'd spent the next day disoriented and moody—ey suspected this is what she'd meant when she said she slept better next to someone all those years ago—so once ey finished the (unnecessary but meditative) task of cleaning, ey knelt beside the beanbag, wormed eir arms beneath her, and scooped her up.

She made a sort of drowsy chirping noise as ey lifted her, hugging her arms around eir shoulders for the short journey to the bedroom. Long as her tail was, ey had to be careful not to step on any of her fur with it hanging limply, almost to the ground.

Once there, ey helped her out of her clothes, unsteady as she was, and then tucked her into bed, leaning down to put a kiss on her cheek.

“Ioan?”

“Yes?”

“Can you stay?”

Ey nodded, forking off a copy to finish cleaning up and taking notes. After a few minutes of eir own bedtime routine, ey slipped into bed with her. Ey was certainly tired enough, ey realized.

And so now, back at home, back in their own bed, alone together, May and Ioan had the conversation ey felt they truly needed. They talked quietly, almost *sotto voce*, now that it was dark and comfortable and they were no longer surrounded by the loud, raucous colors of Douglas's field. They shared their kisses, their small touches. They reaffirmed, in so many small, unspoken ways, their love for each other, and they talked.

“What do you think they are learning?” May murmured, nose-tip poking up against Ioan's chin.

Ey had to speak carefully to respond, lest ey bump her snout. “Who can say? Perhaps they are learning, perhaps they are teaching.”

“Poetic.”

“There are Odists involved, it's going to be poetic through and through.”

She laughed and poked em in the belly with a claw. “Jerk.”

“That’s me, yeah,” ey said, grinning and nudging her muzzle this way and that with eir chin. “The Odists are learning how to manipulate new species. Tycho’s learning about the stars. I can’t speak to Sarah, but Codrin is along for the ride.”

“Did ey have much more to say about eir doubts?”

“A little. Ey’s still feeling more caught up in the events than an actual participant, but I think ey’s also starting to look for ways out of the cycle. I don’t know if ey has picked up any specific ideas on how to take charge, but that ey has decided to do something in the first place is change enough.”

The skunk nodded. “You are a careful lot, but it is nice to see when you do become more assertive.”

“We lack your flair,” ey said, ruffling up some of her fur.

“I also enjoy that, do not get me wrong. Not everything needs flair.” She perked up, dotted her nose against eir chin, and asked, “You said something about time modification earlier, but I was distracted and did not think to ask about it. What does that mean?”

“Oh, right. It sounds like the Artemisians don’t fork, and instead rely on the ability to change how fast they experience time. Individuals or groups can speed up their perception so that the world around them seems to slow down, that sort of thing.”

There was a long moment’s silence, and were it not for the shallowness of her breathing, ey might have thought May had fallen asleep. Eventually, she whispered, “I do not like that.”

Ioan dipped eir chin enough to bump eir nose against hers. “Codrin said Dear got quite upset about it, too. It warned em that there would be two Odists among the emissaries and that ey should watch out.”

She remained still, no reciprocating press of nose to nose. She continued in her whisper. “Once, when I was in school, I performed in a play that used the works of Emily Dickinson throughout. I still remember it. Time feels so vast that were it not For an Eternity— I fear me this Circumference Engross my Finitude—”

Ey remained quiet as ey mulled over the words. The archaic language felt opaque to em, but, as ey prowled through synonyms, ey began to piece together meaning. “You’ve mentioned eternity before in the context of getting lost. This sounds almost relieved, though, that eternity exists, lest everything get too overwhelming.”

“There was no eternity in there, Ioan. Time was beyond vast. I was engrossed. There was no me left. When we were pulled out, we were finally confronted with eternity again.”

“‘We’?”

May took a while to respond. “Michelle and the author of the Ode.”

Ey nodded, letting the comment about the Name slip by, asking instead, “And being stuck in a place with malleable time would bring back a lot of that?”

“Yes. Codrin is right to be careful. The clade struggles enough with stability as it is.” She broke the tension of the moment by licking eir chin. “On a happier note, In Dreams mentioned a hypothesis about the struggles we’ve had with memory.”

“Oh?”

“Well, happier for the System, if not for us. I guess she has hunted down some other clades that have been having problems. She says there are uniting factors, such as a weaker boundary between subconscious and conscious, a greater sense of the numinous, and so on. I am too sleepy to remember the details, but she is looking into it.” The skunk giggled. “She says we should get therapy.”

"Oh, you definitely should," ey teased. "Maybe this Sarah Genet is still on Lagrange. That's what she does."

"She is a therapist?"

Ey nodded.

A moment's hesitation, and then May nodded. "I let In Dreams know."

"Good. The more minds working on this, the better."

"Are you really that worried, my dear?"

Ey frowned, shrugged. "That's part of it. More, I just feel helpless. I'm not worried about you going sideways any time soon, honestly, and certainly hope you don't at all, but should that happen, watching helplessly would be...well, it's a big fear of mine."

May hugged herself closer to em, snout once again ducking beneath eir chin. "I understand. I am stuck with the related fear of losing control. I do not like the feeling of not being in control of my emotions, even for these brief periods, but if that were to just become my life..."

After she trailed off, ey tightened eir arms around her, brushing fingertips through fur.

They lay like that in the quiet and the dark. Eir fork apparently finished up with eir notes and quit, but given the topics of conversation and lack of any insistence on behalf of the instance, ey declined to accept the merge. Ey did not want to be distracted from the simple task of petting May, of enjoying the feeling of having her back.

"May?"

The skunk poked her nose against eir collarbone. "Mm?" She sounded half asleep.

"I really can't lose you. You know that right?" Ey felt her tense in eir arms, but continued, "I said ages ago that I'm not built for a life with death in it. That's why I'm here. That's why I uploaded in the first place, to get away from that."

"Ioan," she said, voice hoarse. "I already--"

"I know, you already promised. I believe you. I'm not trying to berate you, I'm trying to say I love you."

"Ioan Bălan, if you make me cry again, I will smother you in your sleep."

Ey laughed. "It sounds like it's already too late."

"Thin fucking ice, buddy." May sniffled and squirmed around until she could tuck back against eir front. "I love you too, my dear, top to bottom and front to back."

As ey settled in for sleep, kissing the backs of the skunk's ears, ey marveled that ey could only *remember* the Ioan who never thought to form attachments, who could never remember to ask May if they were in a relationship, who continually wondered how she wound up in eir life, could only remember em as some other person. Ey could only remember em as though from a distance. That Ioan was gone. Ey had slipped away into the past while the Ioan ey was now wasn't looking, and had never come back. Ey wished em luck, this younger version of emself. Ey wished em happiness and fulfillment. And, should that Ioan ever find emself struck by the wonder of love, ey wished em courage in the face of it.

This Ioan, the one ey was now, understood the value in attachments, and yet ey could still marvel, twenty years on, at just how much more complete ey was with May in eir life.

Codrin Bălan#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 2 days, 20 hours, 37 minutes

Codrin#Artemis,

I am finding myself overwhelmed by the strangeness of the goings on during this whole venture. I know that you have it worse, given the fact that you are having to deal with meeting four alien races as well as experiencing an entirely new system, complete with an entirely new take on reality.

Still, this remains strange for me. I'm curious to hear what sort of information you are getting from the social and political side of the talks, as I think it will help me form a more coherent picture of the Artemisians so that I may ask better questions when I'm so very, very out of my league, here on the science side. I asked True Name about this, and she just shrugged and said, "So long as you do not forget what we are here for in the DMZ, I see no reason to prevent knowledge sharing."

First, here is what we are finding, seen through the eyes of the scientifically inept:

- Iska is quite upset about the lack of "time skew", as they call it, and has stated that they refuse the single fork they're permitted in their rest area. They have not elaborated on this, but I find it interesting that skew, this scientific feat that they have accomplished, is so thoroughly ingrained in their society (secondrace has been on Artemis for nigh on four millennia by now) that dissolution seems alien or even abhorrent to them. I know that forking is integral to our society, but it does make me wonder if it has reached that point yet. Dear would be furious without it, of course, but would that sentiment be universal after only 231 years? Are you missing it? Are the Odists?
- Stolon and Tycho are so happy to have met each other that both parties have had to shush them on several occasions. I would prefer to let them have at it, but I do also understand the desire to talk about sciences *other* than astronomy and spaceflight. Why Ask Questions is our biologist and linguist here, and she has been the other primary participant, speaking mostly with Iska and Turun Ka.
- Artante and Sarah are almost as perfectly aligned as Tycho and Stolon; they are both psychologists, though it sounds like the Artemisians' approach to such bears some striking differences. Notably, there are some time-related disorders that have largely gone over my head (something about "lacking a feel for common time" and "unison rooms"? Perhaps you can enlighten me), and there are some approaches that Sarah has found interesting, including forms of proactive therapy using, you guessed it, time. Something about practicing through skew, making time to take time.

- It is almost impossible to get a read on the firstracers. It's not just that they do not have facial expressions, so much as their penchant for absolute stillness unless a gesture is required (I've begun cataloguing these: uplifted head = nod; head tilt = shrug; chin tilted far down, exposed neck = bow; turning head far to the side = frustration, maybe?). This has led to some frustration, primarily on True Name's part. Ioan's mentioned in the past that May Then My Name calls the root of her skill a sort of 'registering', as though she's gotten very good at figuring out what her 'target' needs in order to be convinced. Sounds like she's struggling to use that to her full abilities, here.
- Turun Ko and I have been getting on quite well. I asked it about its speaking style (which, in case the same is not true over there, includes lots of synonyms strung together throughout its speech). At first, I thought this was a way to find a more exact wording for a concept, but the more I listened, the less I thought that was the case. Why Ask Questions suggested that it might be trying to fit the ambiguities of their *lingua franca* to ours. When asked, though, it said that it was a deliberate effort on its part to remain in the mindset of an Artemisian (they've adopted that word quite readily) in order to better record from an Artemisian point of view. I don't think we'll be struggling with this much, as we haven't learned their language well enough to think like them. It says that it will complete the learning process after the convergence "depending-relying on outcomes", on which it would not elaborate.
- I've read that it was speculated that most cases involving contact from an extraterrestrial species would take part on the visiting culture's terms, given that anyone who has made it far enough in their social and technological development to reach us will be beyond what we have accomplished, so at least we've confirmed that.
- On that note, everyone seems to have learned our common tongue quite well *except* Stolon. Don't tell Tycho, but I think the similarities between them run quite deep. Neither of them seem particularly interested in language except inasmuch as it allows them to better talk about astronomy.
- What do you think, are we just dreaming this all up?

Now, for my questions:

- Given Dear’s reaction, how are TN/WAQ taking to this “time skew”? Not well, I imagine. Dear sounded worried for us (which I suppose is its job); are you or any of the other emissaries in danger? TN says she has received a message from her counterpart already, but gave no indication as to its content.
- Tycho is in his element here, but Iska seems relatively out of theirs. I imagine Iska is doing better on their home turf, but is Stolon put out by the relative paucity of scientific conversation, as Tycho said he would be?
- How are you all taking to time skew? I’d like to know more specifics of the mechanics and social implications so that I can understand Iska’s reticence better.
- The Artemisians ask for regular breaks, where they always retreat back to their rest area. Probably five minutes every half hour. When asked, Turun Ko said, “Consensus synchronization, planning-strategizing responses,” by which I infer that they are used to being able to step aside for conversations to ensure they are all on the same page. Does that hold true there? TN is currently instructing them on the use of cones of silence to see if that helps.
- How are you liking it? Other than the inability to fork, I’m taken by the relatively prosaic nature of the talks, incomprehensibility aside. Do you like it there?

Codrin#Assist, pass on my love back home.

— Codrin#Castor

Codrin#Castor

When I first got your note, I was worried that I’d not have time to squeeze in a response, until I remembered the tools at my disposal. This keeps happening over here. I’ll find myself feeling rushed to complete something, then remember “oh, wait, I’ll just move to fast-time, and then I can do whatever I want.” I even got some writing done during our rests. As such, you’ll probably get this seconds after you sent your letter, modulo transmission time.

Talks are going somewhat slower here than I think anyone expected. The Artemisians are incredibly patient with all of us, though, for which we’re grateful.

The reasons for this are almost entirely up to the Odists. True Name and Why Ask Questions are both struggling with the time skew, WAQ more so than TN. Michelle quit forty years ago, and since then, I’ve not seen the shifting of form that she struggled with.

WAQ, however, immediately fell back into that. She’s hardly spoken at all, and looks to be continually on the verge of getting sick or losing control completely. She seems to be able to either speak or maintain her form but not both, and even then, it comes at a dear price. When outside unison rooms (see below), she has a very hard time remaining in common time. Often, the best she can manage is to stay within ± 1 of it.

TN is also struggling, though to a lesser extent. She is striving to remain as in control as she can, but there will still be the occasional silence as she is overcome, as was Michelle. During these, she will clench her fists or

grit her teeth, and there will be the occasional glimmer of Michelle in there. As such, this has put a damper on our discussion, though, to Dear's worries, no, we don't seem to be in any danger.

To that end, we've moved the talks to a unison room. These rooms ensure that everyone within them remains synchronized to the same time skew, though the room itself can skew faster or slower than common time (which, I'm assured, is the same as ours, based on similar constants; managing time skew feels much like most System interactions such as forking or traveling, and common time feels like a pin in a lock clicking into place as you skew faster or slower). To that end, the unison room (or wing, perhaps) has become TN/WAQ's rest area while the other three of us have our original room. I don't know what to call it. Phasic room? They haven't been able to provide an answer because it's just "the rest of the world" to them.

As you mention, Iska is somewhat out of their element because of this. They're a skew artist, analogous to Dear's instance artistry. They seem uncomfortable in a unison room, though they remain very polite about it.

To your question about breaks, you're right that they are used to stepping away to talk about something before providing an answer. Before our shift to the unison room, they would readily shift up to fast time to discuss topics. After about a relative skew of ± 1 (moving twice as fast/slow as common time), sound does not transmit to others, so it acts as a cone of silence, in that sense. Tangentially, I've found that touch also does not transmit well after skew ± 0.5 , probably to prevent injuries.

Tycho and Stolon are, as you suspected, quite frustrated with the lack of scientific discussion going on. Several times during breaks, they've shifted to fast time to get as much chatting in as they can. Tycho honestly seems quite fascinated by Stolon, and I suspect he's found a kindred spirit, though he has expressed some frustration about their lack of mastery over our common tongue. He said that they're both studying during their breaks in order to better converse.

All in all, though, I quite like it here. It is very different, and I find myself missing my family (and the food!) quite a bit, but honestly? I am also finding that I truly enjoy time skew. Codrin#Assist, don't tell Dear this.

In terms of knowledge share, you're spot on in much of what you bring up. The firstracers are hard to read, as you say, though you can add 'rocking head side to side = amusement' to your list. You don't mention much about Iska, but they're really quite nice after one gets past the clipped nature of their speech. I like them plenty.

Artante is curious. Her mannerisms are incredibly familiar, which I originally chalked up to the similarity in species, but it's come to light during discussions that she has picked up an obsession with the media that was embedded in the Dreamer Module broadcast. She's watched all of the videos several times over (more than seventy hours worth!) and listened to all of the audio enough to know how things sound (Iska's speech is clipped, I've mentioned, and occasionally misses intonation around questions/commas *qua* pauses/etc., and the firstracers' melodious speech often sounds more like singing than speaking). She and Sarah have had much to talk about, though both leaders nudge them often back to sociology and psychology as it relates to political systems, rather than therapeutic applications of forking or whatever. We'll have to ask them how she got that video within a system after this is over. 230+ years and you'd think they would've figured that out on our end by now. Ah well, engineers and their priorities.

TN here struggles with the 1racers lack of expression, though I had been chalking much of that up to her struggles with skew until you mentioned it. There have been a few misses in the conversation, where the two leaders will wind down a conversational blind alley and have to back up to the point where they turned the

wrong corner. So patient is Turun Ka that this has been all the more frustrating for us, as it's difficult to tear down the assumptions that we've built up in the interim. Now that I say that, though, perhaps it is also frustrating for it, too, we just can't tell.

Are we dreaming it? With how dreadfully immediate everything has felt, if we are, it is closer to a nightmare than a dream. Given what is happening with the Odists, I'll stick with TN's original assessment: the chance isn't zero, but it is small.

Anyway, I should head back to common time and catch up with Sarah before we head back to it. I want to make sure we talk more about the reasons why they picked 'recorder' as a required profession for this meeting.

If it's about telling stories, I'm all for it.

BĂLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Codrin#Assist, pass on my love. Can you also check my work with Dear? I think I remember that Why Ask Questions Here At The End Of All Things was initially forked to shape sentiment sys-side during Secession, and that Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help was forked to shape sentiment outside the System. Is this correct? I've only met the two of them recently, so I'm unsure how that plays out in their social interactions.

END BĂLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Thanks for acting as go-between for us. It'd be nice to be able to send a message directly to #Castor, but alas, DMZ.

Tycho Brahe#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-2 days, 19 hours, 3 minutes

“Do you eat?” Why Ask Questions asked. “We should probably wrap up shortly for rest, but if you feel the need to eat, we can ensure that you are able to do so.”

Turun Ko tilted its head to the side. “Is eating required-necessary for proper function?”

She shook her head. “Not at all, no, but it is a comforting thing for us, so the ability to do so is present.”

The two firstracers turned their heads to the side in a negative. Artante bowed. “I would appreciate the ability to do so.”

“The same, *ka*,” Stolon added.

Why Ask Questions nodded and stood. “I will provide a short primer if you need. Otherwise, shall we reconvene in nine hours? This will allow us time to recuperate.”

“Ten hours would be preferable,” Iska said.

“Can arrange sleeping area?” Stolon appeared concerned, adding, “Require additional warmth.”

The rest of the table got to their feet while True Name said, “Of course. We will endeavor to make your stay pleasant. Why Ask Questions and I hold ACLs to this sim, including for your rest area. If you will permit us to enter, we will make any changes required.”

Tycho watched as the Odists and Artemisians disappeared around the corner—and for several seconds after. It felt as though his eyes had been locked into place there, no matter how much he wanted to turn around and hunt down a chair more comfortable than those around the table.

“Tycho? Coming?”

He jolted, forced himself to look away, and smiled to Sarah, abashed. “Yeah, sorry. Guess I’m kind of beat.” He rubbed his hands over his face, ground the heels of his palms against his eyes. “Lead the way, I guess.”

They trudged off to the room, stepping around the corner in time to catch a second Codrin handing Codrin#Castor a few sheets of paper. Ey waved.

“Any news you’d like me to forward on to your #Artemis instances?”

“Oh, uh.” Tycho frowned. “Not really, I guess. If you’re sending notes. I guess just wish them well. I hope Tycho#Artemis is getting a chance to talk with Stolon. They seem neat.”

Ey grinned, nodded. “Lots of time, from the sound of it. Ey’ll tell you more,” ey said, gesturing toward Codrin#Castor. “I’m just the messenger, though. I only get a few minutes here at a time.”

“I won’t keep you,” Sarah said. “But if you could send the other me a note asking about the overall mood and sentiment over there, I’d be grateful.”

Codrin#Assist hesitated, a look Tycho couldn’t puzzle out crossing eir face. Finally, ey nodded. “I will, but you will find much of interest in Codrin’s letter. I’ll leave it up to #Castor’s discretion to share, though.”

Codrin#Castor frowned, flipping through the pages of the letter ey’d received. “We’ll find some time to talk, yeah. Thank you, #Assist. I’ll have another letter for you in the morning.”

Ey bowed and disappeared back through the DMZ barrier.

“Complicated stuff happening over there?” Tycho asked.

“Very, but...well, let me digest this a bit before sharing. Should eat, too.”

He nodded and headed over to the buffet table lining one wall, poking around through the dishes on offer. He settled on a simple sandwich, and the three of them sat at the dining table to eat in a bit of blessed silence.

Once they were finished, Sarah asked, “It’s only fair that I ask you as well as the emissaries. How are you feeling about things so far?”

When Codrin didn’t respond, Tycho shrugged. “Overwhelmed, still. I really like Stolon, and kind of wish I could just talk with them for a while instead of working through this whole process.”

“Maybe we can figure out how to do break-out meetings or something.”

“I guess, yeah. See if we can beg time and space for our one fork each. Still, I understand the reason for things working the way they do. We’re not having an astronomy conference.”

Sarah laughed. “That might be easier, yes. Certainly easier to connect on sciences than the social side.”

“You seem to be connecting quite well with Artante,” Codrin said once ey’d finished the salad ey’d settled on. “And it sounds like the same is true on Artemis.”

“Oh? Does it sound like much the same dynamic over there?”

“Well, for us three, yes. For the Odists, no. It seems like—” Ey cut emself off, averting eir gaze from the entry as True Name and Why Ask Questions came in.

Neither looked happy. They paused their rather heated discussion and served themselves dinner before making their way over to True Name’s partitioned-off rest area. Before sliding the screen shut, the skunk nodded to Codrin. “You may share, Mx. Bălan. If you already know, then there is no harm in the others knowing, too. Perhaps Ms. Genet will have some insight, as well.”

With that, the screen slid shut and the room went silent, the two Odists apparently having set up a cone of silence.

“Well...” Ey shrugged. “I guess I’ll just read you the pertinent parts. There’s some clade-eyes-only stuff, so I’d prefer not to just hand it over.”

Once ey had finished explaining what Michelle went through and describing the situation aboard Artemis, the three sat in silence.

“Well, I guess that explains their sour mood,” Sarah said at last. “That rather changes things, doesn’t it?”

“How?” Tycho asked. “Or, well, how do you mean? The mechanics have changed over there, but I’m guessing you mean something more subtle.”

She nodded. “It’s no longer an even playing ground on Artemis. Our leadership role is acting in reduced capacity and it sounds like one of our representatives has been all but taken out by the time skew.”

He sat back in his chair, feeling marginally more human now that he'd eaten. He tried to picture how this must look given the spotty descriptions provided in the letter and the few details Codrin had seemed willing to fill in.

None of that seemed to jive with his experience with any of the Odists he'd met until now. Dear was weird, sure, but even it seemed to be completely in control of itself—more so than most anyone he'd met, at that. To think of True Name as being barely able to hold it together and Why Ask Questions all but non-functional begged the imagination.

"It's weird," he said, looking up to the ceiling. "I almost wish I was over there. I mean, don't get me wrong, I feel sorry for True Name and Why Ask Questions, but the ability to literally steal some time to have a conversation sounds completely up my alley. Way more than forking, honestly."

"Well, when Tycho#Artemis returns, you'll at least get to remember that."

He laughed. "I guess, yeah. I'm eager to hear what all they've been learning. It's been interesting hearing what I can. I don't have the eye for learning styles that either of you two do, so I'm missing out on that aspect, but even just hearing information about their gravity assist and how much they were able to learn about us as they zipped through our system was surprising. They ignored Lagrange and Earth entirely, and didn't bother with Pollux, since it was easier to align with us, anyway. It makes them seem like past masters at this, even if it's only the fourth time they've done this 'convergence' thing. Makes sense, though. Earth wouldn't hold much interest for an LV that can't even access it, and they're not going to stop to deal with the Lagrange System if they have access to us. Who knows, maybe they've gone past way more civilizations than those on Artemis, we just happened to meet the criteria. True Name mentioned that maybe rather than energy usage, a better measure of how advanced a civilization is would be whether or not they've invented uploading."

Codrin had started jotting down notes part way through, nodding. "These are good questions to be asking. We'll have to find a way to work them in. I'll send them over to Artemis in the morning, too, so that the other Codrin can ask, as well."

He nodded.

"You mention that some portions of life on Artemis are appealing to you," Sarah said after a healthy pause. "Is that more positive than you were feeling about them before?"

"I guess," he hazarded. "I was more afraid of them, perhaps, but in that way that one is afraid of the unknown at one's doorstep. Afraid of the dark rather than afraid of monsters."

Codrin grinned. "Well put."

"But now, well...I know I'm not supposed to anthropomorphize them, but having met them, they're a lot less scary because there are still similarities between us. They breathe. They sleep. They get frustrated. That, combined with the appeal of time skew over forking, has me feeling much more curious than anxious."

"It's almost impossible not to anthropomorphize to at least some extent," Sarah said, nodding. "It's just how our minds work. I'll agree with you on that, though; even though they are still worlds different from us, it's not like we totally lack commonalities. Most of the differences seem to be surface ones, actually. Gestures and body language are foreign, but the number of truly fundamental differences in how we think has been pretty low so far, and mostly restricted to the two firstcracers."

“They do seem to be operating on a different level,” Codrin said. “I think if they had expressive faces, True Name would like them immensely.”

She nodded, then asked, “Has your opinion of them changed?”

Ey shrugged. “Not particularly. I am curious about this time skew thing, but not nearly to the extent that Tycho is. I think it’s tempered by being in a relationship with an Odist. It’d be fascinating, but Dear will never be able to experience it, or at least never agree to. I still bear a lot of the same anxieties, but I’m getting more comfortable with the process, because this role is familiar to me, at least.”

“Doing a job you know how to do?”

Ey nodded. “It’s my job to observe, to take in information and form it into something coherent.”

“Which is fascinating to me,” she said, sounding excited. “It’s got me thinking about how I approach this, too.”

Eir smile was weak. “I enjoy it when I’m in the middle of it, but it’s hard not to feel like I lack agency, sometimes. After more than a hundred years, that part is starting to get old.”

“Looking forward to something new after this?” Tycho asked.

Ey shrugged noncommittally.

“Well, I’ll learn from you while I can,” Sarah said. “And if you need any help or anything, or want me to spell you for a bit, I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks, yeah.” Ey sighed. “My thoughts on it are incomplete as yet. I’ll figure it out over time, I’m sure.”

“I’m glad to have you about either way,” Tycho said, surprising himself with the earnestness in his voice. “You’re really...I don’t know. Grounding, perhaps?”

Ey laughed. “What does that mean?”

“Like you’re here to witness it, and so everything that happens will have to have at least some basis in reality.”

“It’s quite important to feel witnessed,” Sarah added. “Not just for ensuring that an experience is real, but for personal validation.”

“Right. You being here makes me think I’m not crazy, that maybe I really am a part of something big.”

Codrin crossed eir arms and leaned back in eir chair, expression thoughtful. “Thank you both, I’d not thought of it that way. *That’s* a role I feel more comfortable with.”

He nodded, then stifled a yawn. “Weird times. Weird, but interesting. I’m at least feeling better about just inviting aliens over without consulting anyone first. For now, though, I’m going to try and sleep, and see if I can snag some extra time with Stolon in the morning.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 2 days, 17 hours, 6 minutes

“We would like to ask you about the history of your species.”

There was a brief pause as the Artemisians once more blurred into discussion. Iska had set up the sim such that the Artemisians remained in skew while the emissaries sat in a unison room, the table spanning an entrance arch. It had certainly helped with the True Name and, as he was now convinced, Answers Will Not Help. Neither seemed particularly back to baseline, and Answers Will Not Help continued to fluctuate between forms unless she focused on one at a time, but neither looked as though that took quite as much effort as it had originally.

“Are you able to narrow the scope of your question?”

The skunk frowned, tilted her head, and thought for a few long seconds. “I would like to learn about how it is that each of your species arrived at the point where you uploaded. I would also like to know if this is how a convergence has occurred in the past.”

Yet another blur.

Tycho watched Codrin add a tick mark to a growing list on his notebook then dash off a few marks next to it in some sort of shorthand. “Keeping track of private discussions?”

The recorder nodded. “And what the general topic was that spurred it.”

After a few seconds, the Artemisians slid back out of fast time, and Turun Ka spoke once more. “To your second request, yes, this fits the pattern as established after the first convergence. When we approached a star for a gravity assist, we confirmed radio transmissions following a familiar pattern and halted our planned maneuver to orbit the second planet from the star. There, we found a planet-bound civilization of approximately two billion biological individuals. We analyzed the language well enough to learn it within a day common time, and were able to initiate contact. I will allow representative Iska to describe from here.”

The secondracer sat up straight. “We approached the communication with caution until we were able to ascertain that the object appeared to be a solid cylinder with few moving parts. After establishing a line of communication, we were able to understand that they were like those that we had called embedded. After approximately...” They trailed off, blurred into fast-time, then returned. “Approximately fifteen months, we were able to modify both of our systems to accept uploads from the other. Our talks were not as structured as this convergence, and we became secondrace without much discussion. Eight billion of our estimated forty billion embedded individuals joined this ship and—”

Turun Ka and Iska blurred into fast time. Codrin added another tick mark.

“–And eighteen thousand consciousness bearing entities from first race remained in our system.”

“Over the next seventy-eight years,” Turun Ka continued. “We resumed our voyage, utilizing the star and outer planets for further gravity assists to achieve an acceptable velocity. For third- and fourth races, we approached the convergences much as we approach this one, and in both cases, we were able to do so with a similar vehicle moving out-system.”

“And in each case, the decision to join was mutual?” True Name asked.

“Yes.”

“Will you allow us to join you should we ask?”

Silence greeted the question. Codrin frowned and scribbled an extensive note.

“An answer is not necessary,” the skunk said. “Though am I correct in inferring that this question is more complex than a simple yes-or-no answer?”

“*Anem*. Correct.”

The skunk leaned back in her chair briefly. She looked to be covering an expression of exhaustion, as though she desperately wanted to rub her face with her paws in an attempt to wake herself up, but dare not at the moment.

Finally, she said, “Are you able to address my first request?”

“That is another complex question. It is not yet time to have that conversation.”

She nodded. “To make sure that I am understanding correctly, you are not comfortable explaining how it is that each race went from a biological form to an uploaded form at this point. *Anem?*”

“*Ato esles*,” Turun Ko said. *Except us*. “Would be better to describe-explain us as post-biological. Physical form to uploaded-embedded form.”

“Is the knowledge itself uncomfortable, or the act of sharing it with us as emissaries?”

Another silence, another note from Codrin.

“Would it be uncomfortable for us to explain how we as a species moved from physical to embedded?”

“Now is not the time for the exchange of that information,” Turun Ka said. “There will be time for this discussion once prerequisite discussions are held. To explain this to us now is confusing.”

“Can you expand on ‘confusing’?”

“We do not know why you would tell us such a thing at this moment,” Artante said. “This is not the time to discuss this.”

True Name sat back as she digested this.

“Without explaining how we came to be as we are,” Answers Will Not Help said, voice shifting between registers as her species shifted in turn. “May we explain why we are interested in an exchange of this knowledge?”

A blurred discussion, another tick mark.

“You are proud of having achieved this, *anem?*” Turun Ka said. “A separate embedded society from the physical society you have left behind on Earth?”

She nodded. “We are, yes, and it could be that we might learn some information that might make it easier on us during the embedding procedure.”

“And easier on you?” Artante asked.

Both Odists bridled at this, but Codrin preempted any arguments by leaning forward and saying, “There are several core improvements that could be made to our systems that affect all inhabitants.”

“But also you specifically,” she confirmed. “I mean no disrespect by suggesting such. One is of the utmost importance to oneself, and this is admirable in its own right.”

After a long pause, True Name nodded. “If there is a way that the Ode clade might benefit, then we would be interested. The issues that affect us are, to our knowledge, unique to our clade.”

“You see, then, why this conversation is complicated.”

The skunk may have masked her frustration, but that only let her exhaustion shine through all the more. “I think it is appropriate to table this question for now.”

Artante nodded and Turun Ka lifted its snout in assent.

“You have lived with each other for millennia now,” Sarah said. “Do you continue to have topics such as this which are uncomfortable to discuss with each other?”

Another fast-time conversation.

Iska answered for the group. “As our core society, no. There are aspects of each others’ societies that do not mesh, however, so there are times when we remain separate as species, but there is nothing that is uncomfortable among the Council of Eight or common areas. Individually, we bear our own discomforts and taboos.”

Tycho wound up tuning much of the meeting out after that. The day felt long already, and though he couldn’t tell what time it was, he just wanted to stand up and walk around.

The mood around the table was not tense, *per se*, but he could tell that the Odists were frustrated by just how much of their questions were missing the mark, how many conversations it was not yet time to have. He couldn’t read any of the Artemisians well enough to see any of the same on them, though he suspected that Stolon’s apparent antsiness was borne of the same boredom he felt.

When they were finally able to take a break, he was eager to stand and stretch, then disappointed when Stolon ran off with the other delegates. He would have to catch up with the thirddracer another time.

Instead, he followed Codrin and Sarah out into the central colonnaded plaza where they could walk around and enjoy the sight of sunlight on alien plant life.

“Why does everyone seem stressed?” he said, once they’d made a lap around the plaza. “We have as much time as we want up here, basically. Shouldn’t we just go slower and accept that it might take a while.”

Codrin yawned, rubbing a hand over eir face. “I don’t know if it’s a time thing. I think True Name is stressed because we haven’t figured out how to have conversations correctly. It’s a sort of mutual misunderstanding. We don’t know why they won’t answer x while they have no clue why we’d even ask it in the first place, and then the script gets flipped for the next question.”

“Didn’t we know that going in, though?”

Ey shrugged. “Knowing and experiencing are not the same thing. Also, I think we were lulled into a false sense of security by how easily the first conversations went. It felt like there was more mutual understanding there than there really was.”

Tycho laughed, brushing fingertips against one of the columns as they walked past. “On one hand, I feel incredibly out of place with all that we’re talking about, since I’m just the scientist. On the other, though, I guess I feel lucky that I’m not faced with the same problems.”

“I imagine that Tycho#Castor is having a bit of an easier time of it,” Codrin said. “Still enjoying yourself here, at least?”

“I guess. Or, rather, I’m not sure if ‘enjoying’ is the right word. I’m still fascinated by everything, and there’s so much I want to do and ask. I just feel like everyone else is working on another level from me. True Name and Turun Ka are clicks above me in terms of how subtly they interact. Even you seem to operate on a different wavelength from me.”

Codrin shrugged. “Too much time around Odists, perhaps.”

Tycho grinned and shook his head. “Maybe, but I was thinking more that you are here to witness and be an amanuensis. You told me that I’d be doing the same weeks ago, and I still feel like that’s way out of my league.”

Ey looked thoughtful at this as they made their way back to the meeting room. “I was going to say ‘all you need to do is watch’, but that’s not totally accurate. I’m trained in this, and there’s a way of thinking that goes along with that training.”

He nodded.

“Either way, don’t worry about it, Tycho. You’ll get time to talk about the things you want, I’m sure of it. Just make some, even. Catch Stolon to talk about nerdy stuff in fast time.”

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 29 days, 22 hours, 15 minutes
(*Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes*)

The dinner that Do I Know God After The End Waking had prepared for them was...rustic. That was the first term that ey had come up with to describe it, and no matter how else Ioan tried to refine it, ey was left with little else that fit.

It was a venison stew with parsnips and onions, thickened with tack and stretched with some barleycorns. ‘Woodsy’ was not quite the right word, and neither was ‘simple’, for the skunk had spent the better part of an hour doting over the cast-iron pot he’d hung over a low fire, adding salt in what Ioan felt were miserly pinches, as well as pepper and nutmeg as though they were the most precious items in the world to him.

When asked where he got the spices, barley, and tack in a forest, the skunk had laughed, shaken his head, and said, “I am not a fucking ascetic, Ioan,” then gone back to cooking.

So, rustic stew it was.

Very, very good rustic stew. End Waking had explained that, as he had no way to store leftovers, they would need to finish the entire pot that night. It turned out to be no stretch for the small gathering—Ioan and May, Debarre, Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself, Douglas, and End Waking himself—as they all went back for seconds. The ranger skunk even swirled in a little extra water once the pot was empty, using a fingerpad to wipe what stew remained down into that to make himself a thin soup to finish out of the battered mug he’d been using as a bowl for the night.

They’d each brought their own contribution for the night, as well. After dinner, A Finger Pointing pulled out a bottle of over-proof white whiskey that they passed around the circle, taking burning sips. Ioan and May brought with them a short, two-person play that they put on for the other four, full of crude jokes and self-deprecating humor. Douglas, having picked up music as a hobby since uploading, performed a trio with three instances, one on flute, one on a mandolin, and one on a cajón.

For his part, Debarre had brought fireworks. Or a firework, at least. The weasel produced a double fist-sized sphere of *papier mache*, and set it atop a small cylinder right next to the fire. With End Waking watching, hawk-like, he directed everyone to stand back a few feet and lit the fuse with a small punk from the fire, explaining, “I’ve been working on this for the last seventy years or so. It’s only about fifty percent possible outside the System, but my excuse is that I never saw fireworks out there so I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

The firework lifted off the cylinder it had been set on top of with surprising grace. Rather than rocketing into the air, it rose slowly, splitting in half a few inches up and rising in a tight helix, the weasel explaining that the propellant was tightly controlled to allow such, until it was hovering about three meters above the fire on a column of sparks as orange as those of the fire itself. From there, small spheres of cool-blue sparks popped free and danced around it in slow, hypnotic whorls. Finally, in a fountain of green fire, billowing into the shape of a tree, it fell back into the campfire with a hissing sigh to be consumed by the flames.

“Out-fucking-classed,” A Finger Pointing grumbled. “You said ‘bring something’, my dear, so I brought a bottle to drink, and you all bring plays and music and fireworks.”

“You will hear no complaints from me,” End Waking said, grinning toothily. “Do you know how long it has been since I have had whiskey?”

She laughed and shook her head. “I will bring you a case next time.”

The skunk shook his head. “I am enjoying the ability to taste something again after years without. I have missed it and that makes it special.”

“Sap.”

He rolled his eyes and made a rude gesture at her.

A Finger Pointing fit neatly into the pattern of a human Michelle, though over the centuries, she had opted for a form that was a little taller, a little slimmer, and bore more heavily styled hair. More chic, perhaps. She was prone to grand gestures and grand outfits in all black or all gray or all red. She had also leaned into hedonism more so than any of the other Odists Ioan had met. She ate heartily, drank more than all of them—though this mostly manifested as a ruddy glint to her cheeks and a more wicked grin than usual—and brought with her a very comfortable-looking camp chair.

Even having worked with her for nearly a decade as a playwright and under her direction as an actor for the last few years, ey continually found emself surprised by her simple desire to enjoy life, put on good plays, and be friends with everyone she could. It was a simplicity that was lacking from so many of her cocladists that ey’d had a chance to meet.

“Do you wish that you had the chance to meet them?” End Waking said, once the fire had been stoked back up to stave off the deepening darkness.

“The Artemisians?”

He nodded.

“Kind of, yeah,” She said. “I was pleased to hear that bit about how important they find stories, so I would like the chance to hear some directly from them and see what they think of ours.”

“And you, my dear?”

Debarre shrugged. His and End Waking’s on-again-off-again relationship seemed to be back on the rise, and so the skunk and weasel shared a seat on the log, tails draped across each other’s. So stoic was the Odist, though, that while this was the only outward sign of affection between the two, it came off far sweeter than Ioan would have otherwise expected, especially given his cocladist’s constant touch in eir own relationship. Ey’d certainly never heard the skunk use ‘my dear’ with anyone else. Ey reveled in the compersion ey felt for them.

“I’ve never been a huge fan of sci-fi,” the weasel said. “I suppose it’d be neat, but it feels really out there. I mean, I’m obviously excited, and I’d love to meet them, but it all sounds more like a fantasy than anything, so

I'm not too put out."

"Ioan?" the skunk asked.

Ey shrugged after a moment's thought. "I'm lucky. I get to share all the good stuff with you all direct from a cocladist. I wouldn't turn down the chance to meet them, but I'm also happy with this."

"Why?"

Ioan frowned. "Why am I happy with just this?"

"Yes."

"I think because the part of my life spent right in the thick of it is over. I'm a different person, now. I've grown, changed. I've moved away from the Ioan who sat and watched as eir job. I'm a different me, now. I'm happy with being excited from a distance. I'm happy with the romance of it all."

May, tucked firmly against eir side, dotted her nose on eir cheek. "Different kind of nerd."

"Pretty much, yeah." Ey laughed. "Besides, Codrin said they've been bandying about the idea that none of it's real, that they've been dreaming the whole thing. I'm more curious to see that play out than actually experience meeting the Artemisians."

"It does not matter," End Waking said.

"What?"

"It does not matter whether or not it actually exists. If there is no ship named Artemis full of four races of aliens, the world which exists within Castor is still a new and interesting one. It is still a world worth exploring." The skunk shrugged. "The question of their existence beyond Castor is purely academic."

"Well, huh," ey said. "I'll have to pass that on to Codrin#Castor, then. Perhaps it'll ease some anxieties."

End Waking nodded, then continued around the circle. "How about you, May Then My Name?"

"A part of me wishes I had the chance, but it is a small part. The rest of me is smug in my decision to remain behind preventing me from doing so. I cannot change that decision and go meet them, and that in and of itself is exciting, is it not?"

The other skunk turned his gaze on Douglas.

"I think I'm probably the outlier here, in that I was—or am—kind of crushed by the fact that I won't be able to meet them." He poked a stick he'd found at the base of the fire. "Here I am, someone who spent eight years in university studying spaceflight, someone who did all he could to specialize in the System, and I'm stuck reading second-hand accounts on a five thousand year old civilization flying through space on a system of their own. I got over my frustration at having not uploaded in time for the launches years ago, but this is bringing it all back."

"What would you do, had you the chance to meet them?" End Waking asked.

"Oh, I don't know. That's the thing. I don't have anything concrete in mind that I feel like I'm missing, it's just this envy over not having the chance. I'm sure I'd ask them a million questions about spaceflight and System shit, because that's just how I am. I want to know how they keep their vehicle in working order over so long a time. I want to know how they can receive images and sounds and video instead of just text. I want to know all sorts of things, but that's ancillary to the fact that I'm just not there."

This short speech demanded a silent acknowledgement of a few minutes, and the five sat in quiet, watching the fire or looking up to the stars and moon overhead. Douglas poked at the fire. May rested her head on Ioan's

shoulder. A Finger Pointing, Debarre, and End Waking drank.

"I would like to know their forests," the skunk said at last. "And I would invite them to know mine. Do they hunt their own venison and dig their own parsnips? I do not know. If they do not, I would show them. If they do, I would want them to show me."

"Even if that meant uploading to Artemis?" Ioan asked.

"Yes."

"It doesn't sound like a pleasant place for Odists, from what May's told me."

The skunk shrugged. "That is not enough to stand in the way of my desire. Would I go mad in the midst of their forest? Very well, I would go mad."

"Is that what it feels like? Going mad?"

"I am not sure how else to put it," he said after a long silence.

"I was on a field of dandelions and grass," May said, her voice distant and dream-fogged. "And there was no echo. The world stretched out before me in empty nothingness, and there was no echo. At my back was a bar—scratched wood, stools, a foot rail, a gutter for pouring drinks—and the only way I could hear my own voice pass through the air was to huddle between those stools and face the bar."

"Words came unbidden," A Finger Pointing picked up where May left off. "And as they passed through my mind, they dripped and smeared—a painting with too much wet paint on the canvas stood on its edge. The dreaming mind did not know what to do with language that close to the surface, and so the language stained all it touched."

End Waking nodded, speaking toward the fire. "And so I screamed and I ran, and when I looked back, the bar was gone, and when I looked forward again, there it was. Had I turned? Was the world so small? The words came unbidden, and with each one that left my mouth, a cord that tethered me to reality snapped, and I grew lighter and lighter, and I feared I would float up into the sky, into the sun."

"And through it all, time was unmoored and set adrift," May said quietly. "Sixteen hours, twenty three minutes is what they said, but I lived lifetime after lifetime beneath that sun. The light thrummed and vibrated around me, and I lived and died and lived again. I watched eternity fall away and rot at my feet."

"Or perhaps it was just an instant," A Finger Pointing said.

End Waking's words came with a finality that seemed to draw the memory to a close, though nothing about the recitation—monologue?—had felt memorized or rehearsed. "And so I went mad."

"Jesus." Douglas's whisper broke the long silence that followed. "And you're afraid that's what would happen on Artemis?"

"Not exactly that," he said. "But when presented with the fragility of eternity once more, I cannot imagine that I would remain sane. That any of us would."

"This is what we fear," May said.

"With the Artemisians and their time? I saw through your eyes," Debarre said, so quiet as to be almost a whisper. End Waking rested a paw on his knee. "I was so happy to see you, and so terrified to be there. Two and a half minutes was enough for a lifetime."

"Or memory?" Douglas added.

May nodded, tugging Ioan's arm tighter around her middle. "A madness born of eternities. Memory upon

memory upon memory. Our memories, our whole subconscious, lie too close to the surface, and that barrier between the conscious and subconscious cannot bear the weight of an eternity. And so the cracks widen.”

“Do you think that’s what happened with Death Itself and I Do Not Know? To Michelle?” Ioan asked.

End Waking dipped his snout and drew his hood up over his head once more. Debarre looked away into the dark of the forest. A Finger Pointing took a long drink from the bottle of whiskey.

“I do not know, my dear. I will never know. It is very hard to quit when one is at the root of a clade, or even a larger subtree. Like pushing through a barrier or wading through mud. Death Itself may have been struggling to do so for a long time. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been for Michelle. The System is not built for death.”

Ey felt eir muscles tense, was helpless to stop it.

“I am sorry, Ioan. The System is not built for death, just as you are not. It wants to keep us alive, and so to end a clade is very difficult.”

Ey nodded slowly, focusing on night above em, the log they sat on beneath em, the warmth of the fire before em. Ey focused on those around em—A Finger Pointing, Douglas, Debarre, End Waking, and of course eir own dear May—pinning em to a time, a place, a mood. Ey focused on the feeling of being alive and being *here*, of being present and in the world, digital or otherwise.

“How heavy must that madness be, then,” May continued. “To crash through so many failsafes and allow someone who has been within the system for more than two centuries such a death? This is what we fear.”

Tycho Brahe#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 2 days, 3 hours, 55 minutes

“I would like to ask a few questions about forking versus skew,” Tycho said, when a lull between the two parties ran long enough that he felt comfortable doing so.

Both the Odists and Iska turned their gaze on him, intently enough that he was caught short in his speech. Intensity from the Odists had become at least recognizable, if still not exactly comfortable, but the length of Iska’s neck allowed them to push their head toward him to an alarming degree without necessarily leaning forward.

“I’ll try to keep it on a scientific rather than social level,” he added, somewhat diminished.

Turun Ka lifted its chin in assent. “We are amenable to this.”

“Alright.” He spent a moment gathering his thoughts, looking down at the brief set of notes he’d taken on his pad. “The first and largest, I suppose, is does skewing faster than what I’ve heard you call ‘common time’ lead to increased load on your system?”

Iska, having started to pick up on human mannerisms, nodded, though it was a somewhat more elaborate gesture than any of them might have made. “The faster one experiences time, the greater the load is. There is not as much need for it these days, but originally, the ability to skew up was governed by a system-wide algorithm such that the more individuals that were skewed up, the lower the maximum skew was. This was balanced by those who were skewed down.”

“Here on our System, prior to some technological advancements, forking was limited by a reputation market,” True Name said. “I will leave the historical and sociological implications of this to the emissaries on Artemis, however, I can speak to the mechanical aspect of it.”

Iska nodded. “I will compare with what I remember.”

“I do not know whether any of you have explored the functionality, but forking is an act of intent. One projects the desire to fork and, when that intent is recognized by the System, the fork is created. Does that align with the mechanics of time skew?”

Iska sat still and silent for a moment, and Tycho imagined a hidden frustration within them. While they’d been nothing but cordial throughout the visit so far, they had also stated plainly that they were uncomfortable with the lack of time skew and had refused the fork they were permitted in their rest area. He imagined that they’d like nothing more than to take their time coming up with the perfect response to this question in a fraction of a second, common time, but lacked the mechanism within the System.

“That aligns with our experience. I would not have used the words ‘intent’ and ‘project a desire’ prior to hearing them. I would have said that one ‘remembers’ being at a set skew. One remembers being or having been at skew plus one, and then one is. One remembers having been at common time, or perhaps remembers sliding down from skew plus one to common time, and one does so.” After a hesitation, they added, “But the concepts map almost exactly, so I will gladly accept ‘intent’ and ‘project a desire’ as terms.”

Codrin spoke up next. “My counterpart on Artemis described in a note to me that ‘common time feels like a pin in a lock clicking into place as you move faster or slower’. I am assuming that this is what you mean when you say ‘one remembers having been at common time’?”

Iska bared their teeth, a gesture that the delegates had agreed must be a sort of smile. “The common time consensus sensation is provided as an aid to all consciousness-bearing entities, yes. I am told that, when one first experiences skew, it can feel, *lu...slippery*, perhaps. It can be difficult to aim for a skew and remember that exactly, so one slides toward it and may overshoot. I am nearly five thousand years old, Artemis reckoning, I have forgotten how it feels for skew to be slippery, but yes, that is why it exists.”

“But since aiming for common time is so important, an aid is provided?” Tycho asked.

“Precisely, scientist Tycho Brahe.”

True Name continued, “The second part of my comparison was regarding the sensation of not having the ability to fork or skew, which, as appears to be the case for both of our Systems, is no longer much of a factor. When one did not have enough reputation to fork, that intent felt less real, as though one could not possibly fork, as though it was an impossible act. What was the experience of not being able to skew any faster?”

There was another long moment of thought before the secondracer nodded. “Again, it has been a long time since I have experienced that sort of limitation, but yes. One simply could not remember skewing any faster. There is still an effective upper limit on skew, but very few consciousness-bearing entities find skew above plus eight to plus ten to be comfortable, and in practice, few go above skew plus five.”

Why Ask Questions frowned. “Uncomfortable how?”

“The, *lu...level* of interaction decreases as one’s skew increases. Above plus one, sound does not transmit to common time and touch is impossible. Above plus five, movement becomes difficult and one feels...*baenât...restrained*, perhaps. Movement takes effort. The effort required to move slows one down to where positive skew is no longer effective though one may use the time to think. This is one use for unison rooms, which may be skewed much higher or lower without such constraints.”

The two Odists exchanged a look, and a brief glance at Codrin showed the writer looking more intently at them than at Iska.

“I would like to move on to a related question,” True Name said, at which Codrin wrote something down on eir pad.

Tycho made a note to talk to em after, find out what had intrigued em about the Odists’ reaction.

Iska nodded.

“Are there any corrective measures that your system can take?”

“Please clarify if you are able.”

“Well, for example, the vast majority of forks are not created for individuation but to accomplish a task while the original instance—what we call the down-tree instance—carries on what they were doing before, or

to increase the workforce on a task. When the fork quits, the down-tree instance has the option of integrating some or all of their memories. This can lead to inconsistencies—which we call conflicts—when memories do not align well, and one will be prevented from keeping memories from both instances. Are there instances where your system might need to take corrective action?”

The secondracer tilted their head, then set up a cone of silence so that the Artemisians could discuss their answer.

“True Name desperately wants to ask about the political ramifications of all of this,” Why Ask Questions stage-whispered, elbowing Tycho in the side. “You are going to have to preempt her, Tycho, if you do not want to be trampled.”

“I brought you into this world, my dear,” True Name retorted. “I can and will take you back out of it.”

The delegates all laughed, but Tycho readily picked up on the subtext: *you’re the scientist, do your job.*

He wrote down a few more ideas for questions while they waited.

“There are very few automated corrective actions,” Iska said once the cone dropped. “One might consider the increased restrictions on movement at higher relative skews. As mentioned, sound does not transmit beyond a relative skew of one, and touch on both individuals and physical objects is reduced as relative skew increases in order to reduce destructive collisions.”

“That answers part of my question,” Tycho said. “As I was wondering how the system dealt with the transfer of force at higher relative skews. Can this be bypassed, though?”

Iska tilted their head again, further this time. “Why would one, scientist Tycho Brahe?”

“Well, we can turn our sensoria’s sensitivity up and down on an individual level, and we can increase or decrease collision sensitivity on a sim level. Like, in public sims, collision sensitivity will be conservative so that you can’t bump someone too hard. I was wondering if there are similar mechanics on Artemis. Are there sims where that restriction on touch at high relative skew is relaxed?”

The secondracer’s expression was what Tycho could only describe as shocked. “That could lead to physical damage to one or both objects involved in the interaction.”

He frowned. “Of course, that makes sense. I only ask because that functionality is available to us.”

For the first time in the conversation, Artante spoke up. “This is veering into the territory designated for those aboard Artemis, but I will try to keep it grounded in the science and mechanics of our differences. Scientist Tycho Brahe, are there situations within your system that one might wish to cause physical damage to another?”

True Name stiffened in her seat, but before she could reply, Tycho said, “Sure. There are combat sims and some forms of participatory art where risk of damage is considered part of the experience.”

“And one is often advised or required to send a fork to these, *anem*?”

“Almost to a one, yeah.”

Iska had been gripping the edge of the table tightly and finally seemed to cave to emotion and set up a cone of silence. He watched as, within, they said something that looked quite angry to Artante, who nodded calmly and said something in return. There was an angry retort, and then the same response from Artante.

Both firstracers sat by impassively. They may have been talking, but there was no visible indication of such. Stolon, meanwhile, sat between the two, looking miserable.

When the cone dropped once more, Artante continued. “In a system without forking, scientist Tycho Brahe,

you must understand that there is no analogue to such. A system which could intentionally allow egregious harm to its occupants is unacceptable to us.”

“Oh, right,” he said, frowning. The sight of True Name scribbling notes with alarming intensity distracted him, but he managed to say all the same, “My apologies, I’d not put that together until we talked through it.”

Artante and Iska both bowed, though Iska’s was noticeably more curt.

“We understand,” they said. “We have analogous experiential and participatory art using skew, but that is not for this meeting to discuss.”

A cone of silence dropped over their side of the table and Codrin turned to True Name, asking, “May I ask what you were writing?”

The skunk frowned. “Why?”

“You were very intent on it,” ey said. “And I was wondering if it’s something that might be relevant to the rest of us or if it was something destined for True Name#Artemis.”

There was a silent pause where True Name looked first at Codrin, then at Why Ask Questions, then back again. “I had intended to send it to #Artemis, but I take your meaning. You know that Jonas and I have thoughts on an appropriate level of discomfort and danger within a society in order to maintain stability. A system that restricts violence by mechanics such as these may—and that is a very big ‘may’—speak to one that falls below that acceptable threshold for us.”

“‘Pain, anxiety, the need for something greater, these are all essential for survival. Without them, the world would be an impossibly dangerous place’, you mean.” Codrin quoted.

She laughed. “Indeed. You may thank Jonas for that one. That they may disagree with this could say a lot about them. If they have somehow moved past the need for pain and anxiety, we will have much to learn. If they object to it on moral grounds, we must be wary.”

Tycho watched the exchange with mounting confusion before making note of yet another thing to ask Codrin about over break.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 2 days, 1 hour, 15 minutes

True Name's ability to keep a steady, half-smiling expression was admirable. Even Why Ask Questions appeared to be only just barely keeping frustration at bay.

Having instructed the Artemisians on how to use cones of silence, there were far fewer breaks throughout the last two days, limited to one in the morning, one in the afternoon, and a longer lunch in the middle. That did not stop them from settling into private conversation every few minutes to discuss whatever answer they might give.

Ey initially found it strange that added downtime would make their party more tired rather than less, but after some consideration—and a brief talk with Sarah—ey'd come to the realization that those periods of quiet between question and answer were still spent in expectation. They were still working during those pauses. They were still in conversation, if only by way of watching and waiting, trying to guess what might have led to the need to have that private discussion. Ey could not read expressions beyond eir limited notes so far, could not speak the language well enough, and certainly could not read lips, so ey was left only with guesses and suppositions.

And through it all, True Name seemed to be trying to match the firststracers for patient expressions.

It wasn't until that second day's lunch that the skunk showed any breaks in that patience. She picked up a plate piled high with salad, brought it over to the table in the center of their rest area then stepped back a few paces, where she activated a cone of silence. She brought her tail around toward her front, held in both paws, and buried her face in it. Ey could only assume by the sudden way that she bent at the waist and pinned her ears back that this was done to muffle a scream or some violent obscenity.

Then, as though nothing had happened, she sat down to eat.

Lunch after that had been filled with laughter and truly terrible jokes. Sarah, it turned out, collected them, and the delegates unanimously voted hers the worst.

All throughout, though, Codrin couldn't shake the image of True Name throwing a very short, very tightly controlled tantrum. The sight of her letting loose so strong an emotion had immediately knocked em back to an interview—decades ago, now—where she'd wound em up enough that ey'd started shouting at her in her own office, then bounced em from her sim.

That, ey'd later understood, had been intentional on her part. It had been a way for her to spin her story in a very carefully crafted way. It set it to a level that sat just on the other side of the line between plausible

and absurd. It had wrapped em up in a story that was just a little too much to believe, and the end result was a softening of the impact of the *History*.

She was a consummate actor. Nothing about that experience had been done with a wink and a nudge, just as nothing about this had contained any such acknowledgement that it was intentional, but ey was nothing if not primed to expect her actions to be based in manipulation. There was a non-zero chance that this tantrum had been more for the benefit of the other delegates than anything. It was a way to show that she, too, was frustrated, just as the pun-off that had followed had been a way to loosen everyone up by lampshading the

absurdity of the whole venture.

And then, it was over. True Name cleared away her plate, explained that she was going to write a letter to her #Artemis instance, made a final joke about needing to do so over letters being much more up Codrin's alley, and then stepped into her room to work in silence.

"What was that about?" Sarah asked, once the skunk and Why Ask Questions had wandered off again.

"What, the thing about the letters?" Ey shrugged. "I guess it was deemed a risk setting up radio between the DMZ and—"

"No, no," she said, shaking her head. "Sorry, I mean, what was with the scream and then all the jokes?"

Ey frowned and set up another cone of silence for the two of them. "I was just thinking about that, actually. I was wondering if she really is frustrated enough to scream or if it was intentional to make her seem more normal like the rest of us mere mortals."

"I don't think it was that extreme. Maybe some part of her was trying to build camaraderie with us by doing so, but I'm wondering if it was more that she was trying to downplay the news from Artemis."

Codrin sat up straighter. "You mean the Odists struggling over there?"

She nodded. "It sounds like moving them to a unison room is helping, but they're still struggling with that...what did Codrin#Artemis call it? The omnipresence of time?"

"Yeah. Dear had talked about it some. It called the feeling of being lost as being stuck in an 'endless place of no time'."

"I was going to call that poetic, but the more I think about it, the less I think I could describe it without a whole lot of metaphors, myself." She pushed a few remaining pieces of lettuce around her plate with her fork. "I was wondering if maybe she's trying to hide how she's feeling about that by amping up other emotions. Hiding trauma with humor is not uncommon, and I'm sure she has trauma of her own."

Ey frowned. "It would make sense, yes. This morning's letter from Codrin talked a bit more about them, about how they seem to be struggling in masking more powerful emotions. 'I don't think I've ever seen an Odist well and truly furious,' ey said, which I agree with. I've seen Dear angry, and Ioan says that ey's seen May Then My Name get furious—at True Name, no less—but I've never seen any of them truly furious. 'True Name keeps getting these flashes, though, where her face will twist up in what I can only call abject fury. It'll only last a second or so, and then it's over and she's back to looking tired or in control or whatever she was before'."

"Anger is a strong emotion. It's hard to cover up something that overwhelming."

"Right. Anger and sadness or depression seem to be the two that keep cropping up. They've had to take a few breaks so far when Why Ask Questions wound up in a crying jag."

She shook her head. "I've not heard anything from my #Artemis instance, which is fine, but I wonder how she would describe it."

"Want me to ask? I was going to send off a note before we started back up again."

"Please. I was going to write something myself, but if you're already sending one, might as well tack it on there, instead."

Ey nodded and scratched out a note to emself in eir notebook. "Before I get to that, though, I have a question for you. Something before I drop the cone, I mean."

Sarah leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and ey did the same. The added secrecy of talking quieter was a difficult habit to break, and eir mind was still on the topic of lip-reading from earlier.

“#Artemis hinted at something and I’m not quite sure what to make of it. That ey’s even hinting at it rather than just saying it outright is telling in and of itself, of course, but I can see why, given the context. The messages are clade-eyes-only, so others can’t read them unless one of us grants permission, anyway. It’s only a hint, but I think...I mean, I think maybe ey’s suggesting that it’s not Why Ask Questions on Artemis, but Answers Will Not Help.”

The psychologist frowned down toward the floor. “What form did this hint take?”

Ey dredged up the memory of the postscript. “Ey asked Dear to check eir work. I remember that, during Secession, Why Ask Questions managed sentiment sys-side and Answers Will Not Help did the same phys-side. The hint was asking, ‘Is this correct? I’ve only met the two of them recently, so I’m unsure how that plays out in their social interactions.’ I remember that, of course, so the hint is in the question.”

“Anything in subsequent letters?”

“Well, Codrin#Assist confirmed it, saying, ‘Dear says that’s correct. Why Ask Questions worked sys-side, Answers Will Not Help worked phys-side’. Neither #Artemis nor I have brought it up again since.”

“You obviously know your communication style better than anyone else, but do you think ey’s hinting at the fact that they were switched specifically for their roles? Intra- and extra-system sentiment?”

Ey nodded.

“Well, that’d be a hell of a stunt to pull.” She sighed, steeping her fingers before her. “I could only really tell them apart by the way they acted, but, like you, I only met them a week or so ago. Is ey sure that it’s not just due to the way the skew is impacting them?”

“I don’t know, really, but given that a good chunk of the rest of the letter, as well as subsequent ones, has been about that impact and the effects it’s having on the meetings, I don’t doubt eir observations.”

There was a moment of silence as they both digested the conversation. They still had a few minutes of time left, if ey still wanted to write eir note, so ey allowed the moment to stretch.

Finally, Sarah said, “I guess I have a few thoughts on it: the first is that Answers Will Not Help struck me as less grounded than Why Ask Questions. They’re both weird, but Answers Will Not Help was always much more intense, and she sometimes got petty and cruel. The second was that maybe we could ask Tycho. We got a few days with the two of them, but he’s been working with them for much longer, since they led with a bunch of science.”

“Alright,” ey said, scratching out another quick note to emself. “I’ll figure out a way to ask if that’s where the observation came from.”

“Oh? As in maybe Tycho noticed that and told Codrin#Artemis?”

“Right, yeah. Maybe he picked up on it first because he’s had more time with her, or maybe her reaction to the skew tipped him off. Who knows?”

“Think you’ll ask in a hint, too?”

Ey nodded. “There’s some subtext there that I’m not totally picking up on, and it seems best to be safer than not.”

“Any guesses as to that subtext?” she asked.

“Only incomplete ones. I wonder if it’s to keep Codrin#Assist from reading too much into it since ey’s not experiencing any of this.”

“And you’re worried ey might bring it up with the Odists?”

Ey laughed, shaking eir head. “Nothing so grand. It’s just hard for us to leave well enough alone. Ey’d probably start cataloging the differences between them. Well, ey probably already is, given the hint, but without the context that we’re seeing here, it’ll be somewhat less pointed.”

“Right, that makes sense. That still seems a little flimsy for a reason to be this vague of a hint.”

“Agreed,” ey said, then shrugged. “Could be that ey just doesn’t trust that clade-eyes-only works on Artemis. All the same, I’ll hint back and see what comes of it, just to be safe.”

She nodded. “Alright. Keep me up to date, I guess.”

Codrin dropped the cone of silence and stretched eir arms up over eir head, “I’ll see you in there in a few, then. Thanks for chatting.”

Sarah stood, waved, and wandered back into the room, leaving em to brush out eir blouse and straighten the apron that rested over eir skirt before starting the note.

Codrin#Artemis

Not a whole lot to add here on my part, and I need to get back to it momentarily, so just a quick note for now. There’s been some talk on biology and a bit more on astronomy. This always gets Tycho super excited, of course, so we have to space the topic out so that he and Stolon don’t completely monopolize the meeting.

This morning we discussed the science of forking as it relates to time skew, but it was hard to keep the talk out of what should be your area up there.

The most pertinent thing of late has been some discussion over language and how that has changed over time based on the physiology of the races. Iska spoke some “old Nanon” for us, which was beautiful, but almost uncanny. I’d keep almost catching words, but then they’d slip away from me again. Why Ask Questions understood better, and was able to ask some questions about linguistic evolution. Most of those went over my head, but she seemed surprised at how little things had changed over that long a time span, which got us on the topic of the history and politics of language. That was cut off since that’s your bailiwick up there, so I expect TN will be getting a note to that effect.

Sarah requests that her counterpart reply with her thoughts on the Odists.

BĀLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

I hope things with the Odists are going as smoothly as possible. It sounds really stressful, particularly with how it’s affecting WAQ. You mentioned that Sarah’s been keeping an eye on it, but how about Tycho? I know he can get kind of skittish. He’s also been around those two longer than any of us, though, so maybe he’s got some insight into it.

END BĀLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Codrin#Assist, pass on my love. Pull Dear's tail for me.

Codrin Bălan#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 4 hours, 7 minutes

The Artemisians had continued to fine-tune the new setup of the meeting space for the emissaries, so that the Odists' beds were no longer in the same room as their half of the table. Now, there was a small, stone-paved unison room for their half of the table, at the back of which sat a low bench for sitting and talking, as well as a pitcher and glasses of water. To the side of that, a short hallway led to the two unison bedrooms.

That True Name and Answers Will Not Help had requested separate bedrooms had felt notable to Codrin, though ey could not put eir finger on why. Perhaps one or both of them were having a hard enough time even while sleeping that it was keeping the other awake? Answers Will Not Help certainly looked as though she'd not slept since arriving.

Both Odists had taken to spending any break longer than five minutes laying down, and ey'd taken it as eir task to ensure that they were up and moving a minute or so before the meeting resumed.

One upside of this, however, was that it gave em as much latitude as ey wanted to talk with Tycho and Sarah without feeling like ey was leaving True Name and Answers Will Not Help behind.

Or, ey realized, like ey needed to hide anything from them.

"So. Day three."

Tycho groaned. "Yeah, though I feel like we've been here for at least a week by now."

"Might as well have been. The room is pinned at +0.2, so we're already given far more time than we might have on an ordinary day."

"At least it's easy to take a long, lazy break," Sarah said. "But yes. Day three, I guess. What are your thoughts, Codrin?"

Ey leaned back against the column outside the unison room, arms crossed, and looked up at the clear sky above the open courtyard. The blue was more intense than ey remembered from Earth or any of the sims ey'd been in. Ey always felt as though ey was falling up into it, whenever ey stared up like this.

"I'm tired," ey said at last. "Some of that's from just how long it feels like we've been running, and how I feel like I need to be *on* for all of that time, but part of it is our other emissaries."

"Oh?"

"Them being so...is unwell the right word?"

Sarah nodded, "Maybe, yes. Unwell. Struggling?"

“Right, yeah. Them struggling so much means that I have to be an active part of the discussions as well as focused on them. There’s nothing I can do to help them, but I still feel like I need to be attuned to everyone around me.”

“Is that part of your amanuensis duties?” Tycho asked.

Ey frowned, silent, as ey thought. “Perhaps. It is part of what’s going on here, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Sarah said. “But you don’t need to be a complete sponge, soaking everything up.”

“I don’t know that I can just turn that off.”

“And that’s okay. It’s less about turning it off than mitigating it. Find the times where you can turn down your engagement and use those where you can. Find the things that don’t require your full attention and let them go, even if only for a few seconds.”

Ey smiled, feeling the tiredness in eyr cheeks. “You were a therapist, weren’t you? Maybe I should steal some of your time after this is all over.”

“Gladly,” she said, nodding. “I’ve been thinking about restarting my practice, anyhow. It’s been too long of just lounging around on the System.”

“Certainly got a pile of work for yourself now,” Tycho said. “What are your thoughts, while we’re on the subject?”

“This is going to sound weird,” she said after a moment’s thought. “But it’s way more normal than I expected. It’s a strange situation, to be sure, but it’s still just a meeting between people who are trying to figure each other out. They’re alien, but not so far as to be completely unintelligible. It’s almost prosaic.”

“Think it’s going well?” Codrin asked.

“As well as it can be, all things considered. We’ve not wound up in any thorny patches or anything.”

Tycho nodded. “Agreed, though I have to admit that I’m getting kind of bored. Codrin told me I should steal some time with Stolon, and I’ve been doing that whenever I can, but the rest is just...boring. I want to be able to engage, but it’s just all over my head, and when I do start feeling like I’m getting a hold on it, Turun Ka or True Name will nudge us back ‘on topic’.”

“‘On topic’ meaning history and politics and the like?”

He nodded. “I knew that going into this that #Castor would be having much more fun than I would.”

“Well, let’s see if we can find you something to focus on,” Sarah said.

He tilted his head, frowning. “How, though? I can’t exactly ask us to just start talking about the science side.”

“Well, no, but you can keep an eye on data. Maybe look out for dates and the like and start using that with what we do know of the science behind everything. Start thinking about where they might have been coming from before the...uh, gravity assist? Is that it?”

His frown deepened, but he nodded.

“Start thinking about what’s in that direction and how long it might have taken them to get here.”

“You can probably keep track of the math involved with the time scale better than any of us, too,” Codrin added. “So you can see where there might have been inflection points in history and if that might’ve had to do with any of their travel. If there were big societal changes, then maybe—”

Tycho held up his hand, and Codrin watched as his eyes lost focus, staring into nothing for a long few seconds, breathing rapidly in some faster time.

Ey looked to Sarah, who shrugged.

“Sorry, skewed faster,” he mumbled. “You just reminded me of something, is all. There’s a lot beneath the plane of the ecliptic relative to us, but only a little bit of it is close for them to have plausibly passed by it. A few of those systems are kind of interesting.”

“Interesting?” ey asked.

“Like, stuff we’ve been keeping an eye on for possibly having life, that sort of thing.”

“Maybe Artante’s system?”

He shook his head. “Closer than that, I think.”

Codrin stood up straight again, tugging eir blouse straight. “Are you saying you think they might’ve stopped by somewhere else?”

“It’s a very big ‘might’,” he said. “They could just have been using the stars for slingshots, after all.”

“But it’s a possibility.”

He nodded.

Sarah shook her head. “To make sure I’m following, you think they may have suspected there was life elsewhere? Do you think they might have run across other possible societies and not had them join them as a race?”

“Right. Could be they just hadn’t started uploading.” He hesitated, then added, “Or that they had, but didn’t want to join or didn’t make the cut.”

Codrin rubbed eir hands over eir face, willing away the tiredness that kept threatening to come back. Like Tycho, every time ey felt like ey was getting a hold on the situation ey was stuck in, some other bit of info would be brought to light and eir grasp would slip once more.

Now here this was. Perhaps the Artemisians had run across more than just races two through four on their journey. Perhaps there had been failed convergences, not counted among the existing three and the fourth they were living through.

Tycho’s comment about ‘not making the cut’ carried with it additional implications, as well. It implied that there was a barrier to entry that one had to pass. This, in turn, implied that there were a set of requirements for getting to join as a race. Unspoken ones.

There may very well be specific steps they had to take that had never been provided to them. Hadn’t ey picked up a sense of that from the letter so long ago? ‘You have asked the correct question’?

When ey shook away the rumination, ey found both Tycho and Sarah staring at em. “Sorry if I was mumbling. Tycho, hold off on actually asking about this for now, but keep thinking about it, alright? At least let me run it past True Name first.”

The astronomer nodded.

“On that note, we should probably start getting ready again,” Sarah said.

They broke after that, Tycho walking another lap around the courtyard and Sarah making for the pitcher of water, while Codrin went to rouse the Odists.

Ey fetched True Name first. The skunk was already awake—or perhaps had never managed to fall asleep for the nap she always talked about—and sitting up blearily in bed.

“Good afternoon, Mx. Bălan.”

“Morning,” ey corrected gently. “Next break will be lunch. Manage to get any sleep?”

She shook her head. “I am guessing that it is time to head back?”

Ey nodded. “I have a question about a topic Tycho brought up, first, if that’s alright. If you need to wake up a bit more first, that’s fine. I can ask later, but I’d at least like it on the docket.”

“I do not know that I will be feeling any better later,” she said, attempting a smile. “Ask me now, and if I am unable to answer, ask me again at lunch.”

“Alright.” Ey sat on the chair next to True Name’s bed. “Sarah and I suggested that Tycho start making educated guesses about their route and if that might be reflected in historical inflection points.”

The skunk frowned, but nodded for em to continue.

“He mentioned that there might have been some planets on their path that were inhabited but not welcomed as one of the races.”

“Ones with life? Ones with uploads?”

Ey shrugged. “Perhaps, yes. In particular, he said that if the race had uploaded, maybe they wouldn’t want to join, or wouldn’t have, in his words, ‘made the cut’.”

The skunk stared down at her paws in her lap, the claws on her thumbs tapping gently together. “That is a good observation from our friend. What question do you have for me about it?”

“Should we ask more directly about it? I told him not to until I’d talked with you.”

“Thank you. Yes, he should hold off for now. It may be best to ask about the sentiments within the society during those inflection points first. Coming at it sideways like that will allow us to phrase the question about other convergences more effectively.”

Ey nodded. “If there was strife, it may not have been a good convergence, you mean.”

“Precisely.” The skunk wobbled to her feet, accepting Codrin’s offer of a hand to steady herself. “Come. Let us see how Why Ask Questions is doing. Better, I hope.”

“Given the differences between our systems, the focus on time skew versus forking, I’d like to see what some of the political and sociological differences there are that resulted from that,” Codrin said, once the meeting began again.

Both Iska and True Name sat up straighter.

“This is broad-large-all-encompassing topic, recorder Codrin Bălan.” Turun Ko angled its head down and to the side, a move that appeared either confused or perhaps condescending. “Please restrict-refine.”

“Well, okay.” Ey tapped the end of eir pen against eir lower lip, considering. “Perhaps we can begin with how common working with skew is among everyday individuals. We have our concept of dissolution strategies, based on how one approaches forking, after all.”

There was a blurred conference between the Artemisians, then Iska said, “There is a spectrum of approaches to skew. Some rarely utilize it, some utilize only fast-time to complete tasks or slow-time to pass long stretches of time out of boredom or to wait for a specific event. Some, such as myself, utilize skew for enjoyment.”

“These map loosely to your concept of taskers, trackers, and dispersionistas,” Artante added. “We noticed similar during the third convergence, though the concept remained only within fourthrace, and died out within a century of the convergence. I was reminded of the topic by one of your early letters.”

“I remember you mentioned that fourthrace had forking,” True Name said, voice tightly controlled. “Was the transition from that to skew difficult for those members of fourthrace that joined?”

“For some, yes. There was one recorded instance of a member of fourthrace becoming so despondent about the lack of forking that they exited the system.”

True Name and Answers Will Not Help looked at each other, letting the silence that followed speak for itself.

Codrin allowed the moment to pass before continuing. “Thank you. For what occupations there are—I believe you also described them as ‘intensive leisure activities’—is there any particular expectation regarding one’s approach to skew?”

“‘Expectation’?” Turun Ko asked.

“I suppose activities have their own requirements for how one utilizes skew. For instance, representative Iska doubtless relies on it quite heavily. Does knowing one’s interest tell you about their skew habits? Is there pressure for one to not take up an activity due to the skew habits one has already formed?”

Iska was practically purring at this turn in the conversation. “Had one of us asked that question, I would have said ‘no’, but hearing it from you has made me think about it in a new way. I would have said that one simply would not think to take up that activity, but now that you say such, I think that this is the case. I am uncomfortable with not utilizing skew, yes, but for activities that are pinned to common time such as preparing food and performing music, there is an expectation that I would not be a good chef or musician, yes. Were I to pick up an interest in cooking, I would be looked on with a small amount of concern. One would say about me: ‘I hope that they do not burn the food by shifting to slow-time’ or ‘I expect that their food will be very rushed’.”

Codrin grinned as ey took down notes of the answer. “One of my romantic partners, as an instance artist, has stated that it can’t understand what a life without profligate forking would look like, but has never said that it feels as though it is not able to take part in another profession. That said, there are several interests or professions that one would not expect taskers or even trackers to go into. Many would sneer at a tasker trying to go into instance artistry. Does the same apply here? Are there more interests or professions that are out of reach for those who do not use skew than for those who use skew often?”

Another, longer blurred conference followed this question, during which True Name gave em a tired smile. “Excellent questions, Mx. Bălan.”

“We have decided that there has not been much thought put into this topic, but that our instinct would be to say yes, the interests which belong to those heavy users of skew are more specific and thus more likely to carry some level of prestige that might be out of reach for those who prefer to remain in common time.”

Sarah sat forward, leaning on her elbows on the table. “Can you expand on ‘prestige’, here? Are there interests that are considered less prestigious? Do some interests reflect poorly on the individual?”

“Please confirm: do you mean social-stratification-caste?” Turun Ko said, and both Codrin and True Name rushed to write a note.

“I’d also like to know about that, yes, but let’s come back to that later. In this instance, I was wondering there are interests that are seen as distasteful or silly.”

“We have decided that there are not any that are seen as distasteful,” Turun Ka said after another conferral with its delegates. “But there are many that are seen as frivolous. Some view contemplative or spiritual life as frivolous, particularly among secondrace, which is very old.”

Codrin frowned, making a note to ask about that later. They had the concept of spirituality, and even the concept of a life lived in contemplation. It raised several other questions besides, such as why it was that the

second oldest race bore the brunt of that assumption, and why it had been implied that firstrace was immune. Were religions shared between the races? Were religions time-bound? In eir 128 years of life, time had run out on countless end-of-the-world predictions.

Ey shook the rumination from eir eyes in time to hear True Name asking, “What is the population’s view of the Council of Eight?”

Turun Ka rocked its head from side to side. Amusement, Codrin#Castor had written. “We are seen as almost vestigial except during convergences. What guidance we provide we do so through advisory not–”

It was interrupted by a bang as Answers Will Not Help, who had been nearly in a stupor up until this point, slammed her fists down on the table. “I must keep no veil between me and my words. I must set no stones between me and my actions!”

There was a tense moment of silence.

“Apologies,” she said, rubbing her hands over her face and then yelping as a wave of skunk washed beneath them. “I cannot stop myself from speaking.”

Artante nodded slowly. “Would you like to take a brief break, representative Why Ask Questions?”

“I...yes.”

“We shall reconvene in five minutes common time,” Turun Ka said. “We wish you the best, representative Why Ask Questions.”

Sarah helped her to her feet and walked her down the hall to her room.

True Name slouched down in her seat with a wave of Michelle rolling across her form.

“Are you alright?” ey asked, patting her paw/hand.

She jolted away with a quiet grunt, pulling her hand back as though burned. She rolled her head to the side against the back of the chair looking steadily at em. “I will be okay, Mx. Bălan. Thank you for your concern. Please refrain from touching me when my form is shifting, though. It is quite uncomfortable.”

“Apologies.” Ey bowed her head. Something about the skunk’s voice brooked no further questioning.

“You asked some very good questions today. I am quite happy that you decided to come along.”

“It’s an honor.”

She rolled her head back once more to stare up at the ceiling. “Have you heard further from your counterpart back on Castor?”

“Ey mentioned that the common tongue is remarkably well-preserved for being on the system for four thousand years, and suggested that there might be political implications behind that.”

“Right, yes,” True Name said, closing her eyes. “Should Why Ask Questions start feeling better, perhaps we can have that discussion more in depth, but I will ask either way. Anything else?”

Codrin#Castor had clearly picked up on eir hint, and had hinted in return. There would be much to think about and ey had a return letter planned, as well as a discussion with the other three delegates. It had been a good guess on #Castor’s part that Tycho had been the one to spot the subterfuge.

“No,” ey said. “They wish us well.”

Tycho Brahe#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 3 hours, 13 minutes

Tycho had spent his share of time in conferences, both phys-side and sys-side. They all came with their exciting parts and their boring parts. They all came with peaks that left him completely rapt, and valleys that were so excruciatingly dull that he had, on more than one occasion, feigned illness to step out of a talk or away from a panel discussion or a lecture.

This was different, though.

It wasn't that it didn't have its peaks and valleys, for it surely did. There were more sciences, he had been reminded several times, than astronomy. He knew it, too. There was no reason that the LVs and home System would not benefit from a knowledge share on biology or psychology, and certainly there could be much to learn about the construction of an embedded world. All that knowledge, all that history—so many centuries!—was enough to convince him of the reality of the Artemisians, or at least enough that he could drown out that nagging voice in the back of his head thinking in terms of dreams. There was more than enough to learn, so that wasn't it.

It was that, even during the boring parts, there was Stolon sitting directly across the table from him, the thirddracer looking just as antsy and restless as he felt, even though it was only the third day. He knew that he and Stolon could talk for hours about the stars, that they would if only given the chance, and yet he had to sit here and, however rightfully so, listen to Why Ask Questions grill the Artemisians on parallel evolution.

Throughout the talks, no matter the science, there lay a thread of five thousand years of history. Hundreds of years would go by, and then a sudden jump in knowledge. Biology, language, astronomy, psychology, physics; sciences hard and soft would wind up with sudden injections of knowledge throughout each of the convergences.

Except, he kept finding himself thinking. That's not all.

It would be of no surprise for a sudden leap of knowledge to occur every handful of decades. Some new way of looking at the world brought about by some spurt of genius, even in the functionally immortal.

What was surprising was these renaissances in *all* sciences that had happened a total of five times that he'd counted so far. Three for convergences—that made sense—but what of the other two?

This wasn't supposed to be his job. This wasn't supposed to be any of their jobs, here in the DMZ. History as a topic belonged to the emissaries sent to Artemis. He'd only started asking how long ago various tidbits of knowledge had been gained on a whim.

And so he sat and he waited until there was a time that he could speak, and even when he probably should have been paying attention, he spent much of his effort on trying to figure out how best to word his question in such a way that wouldn't get him in trouble with the Artemisians or, worse, True Name.

His cue came in the form of Why Ask Questions racking her sheets of notes into a neat pile before slouching back in her chair.

"I have a quick question about science in general, if I may," he said, preempting comments from any of the others.

True Name frowned, nodded.

"It'll come in the form of an astronomy question, but bear with me. Can you tell me a bit more about your path from firsttrace's home world to our system?"

Stolon sat up straighter, head tilting far to the side in what Tycho had decided was a sort of intense interest. "Artemis comes from firsttrace system, aims for nearest stable star, performs, *lu...* gravity assists and extra maneuvers, solar sail, magnetic *irr...*" After a moment's silenced discussion with the other Artemisians, they returned with, "Magnetic field hydrogen collector—you call 'fuel scoop' maybe?—and then final adjustments to next prospective star."

"And how many times has Artemis performed this act?"

"Seven times, scientist Tycho Brahe," Turun Ko said.

"Three of which were convergences, yes?"

"*Anem, anem*, scientist Tycho Brahe," Stolon said. "I only was...*suhernachi...lu...* living-embedded for third convergence, but yes, three convergences."

"Okay," he said, pausing to compose his next sentence carefully. "As we talk about the way that we learn, I've heard of more than three jumps in scientific knowledge during the millennia that Artemis has been travelling. Do these maneuvers around systems...I don't know, make everyone curious enough to start doing a bunch of research?"

Until this point, True Name looked as though she were about to nudge Tycho to move on to the next topic, perhaps sensing that he was veering closer to history, but as he finished his question and the Artemisians set up a cone of silence for a very animated discussion, he could see nothing but intense focus on the skunk's face. Even Codrin and Why Ask Questions were furiously scribbling notes at this point.

Sarah gave him a grin and a subtle nod. It was nearly five minutes before the cone of silence around the Artemisians dropped, during which he'd received nods of approval from the rest of the delegates as well.

Looks like I asked the right thing, he thought, doing his best to tamp down the sense of pride that had begun to grow within him. They were all here for a job, and when that job is learning, there are no right questions, just on-topic ones.

"You are correct, scientist Tycho Brahe," Turun Ka said once the cone dropped. "Though it is less that curiosity intensifies during these maneuvers than there are more observations to be made when passing near a star. We learn astronomy and physics, yes, which slowly bleeds across sciences. Physics impacts Artemis's hardware, so our technicians learn from that. Our hardware impacts our experience, and so sciences surrounding individual and collective consciousness-bearing entities benefits from that."

All five of the delegates took notes as quickly as they could while the firsttracer spoke. Tycho made a note

to himself to ask what sorts of things they tended to learn when passing close to a star, as well as a note to ask Tycho#Artemis to bring up similar on Artemis, focusing instead on the history of their course.

True Name leaned forward enough to catch Why Ask Questions's gaze, sharing a meaningful look. Codrin frowned, scratched out another note in his notebook.

"Leader Turun Ka," True Name said with a hint of a bow. "Thank you for your answer. Would you be amenable to a short break? I would like to sync up with our delegation."

The first tracer lifted its chin in assent and those around the table stood, exchanging bows before making their way each to their own rest area.

Once they'd made it around the corner into the common area, the skunk grinned at Tycho. "Good catch, Dr. Brahe."

"I was a little surprised, myself. That gives us a good idea of their speed and perhaps their traj--"

"Shut up, Tycho," Why Ask Questions said, laughing. "We will get to all the delicious science you could ask for soon enough. Your question went more than a little beyond that."

He frowned. "What? How?"

True Name patted him on the arm. "Do not mind her, my dear. It was a good question because it suggests to the sneaky pieces of shit among us that they might be being sneaky, themselves. Come, let us sit so I can write to True Name#Artemis."

Once they'd sat down at the common table, the skunk explained. "They have all of the time in the world over there, do they not? They can speed up and slow down whenever they want, and use that to get all of the heavy lifting of thinking and studying and lecturing done even when they are around a star, never mind when they are out between them, yes?"

He nodded. "But their observations--"

"Are limited to when they are near something interesting to observe, yes, but they can spend as long as they want with those observations, poring over their views of the star or measurements from external instruments. They are not time-bound for those. In fact, the only times that they seem to be time-bound are when it comes to interaction with other time-bound events."

"Well, sure," he hazarded. "But perhaps they turn off the ability to skew when they perform an assist or something. We didn't get the chance to ask them any more questions."

"We will, do not worry," she said, mumbling as she dashed off a few more lines on her note, handed the slip off to Codrin, then turned to face him, paws folded on the table before her. "But they are also time-bound talking with us who are not able to utilize time skew, correct?"

Tycho crossed his arms and slouched back in the chair, staring up at the ceiling. "Well, shit."

Codrin laughed. "You see then why it was a good question?"

"They didn't say anything one way or another," Sarah said. "So you could very well be right, Tycho, but you saw their silenced conversation."

"Even that could be them trying to figure out how best to tell us what they did, though," he retorted, though even he could tell his heart wasn't in it.

"All of these facts are interesting," Why Ask Questions said. "Even if that is all they did, even if they do only turn off skew for slingshots. We are sold on it no matter what. When you take the facts together as a whole,

however, those of us with a sense for it can catch the scent of politics in there.”

“Sneaky pieces of shit, you mean?”

True Name laughed. “Yes, those. You lack the sense, Dr. Brahe. Codrin has seen it, Ms. Genet can sense it second-hand. We need someone like you to play the role of earnest seeker-after-knowledge.”

He rolled his eyes. “Or gullible dupe.”

“A very smart gullible dupe,” Why Ask Questions said. “It is no shame to be a gullible dupe, Tycho. You ask the things we never think to because we are too busy being sneaky pieces of shit.”

“Well, I’ll leave the politics to you all,” he said, grinning and shaking his head. “I’m going to write my own note while we have a bit of time.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 2 hours, 38 minutes

Over the last hour of common time, what tension was bound within True Name seemed to have been refocused from struggling quite so hard to maintain her form into being present and taking part. This meant that, while she was more susceptible to waves of shifting species and the occasional gasp or shudder, she grew far more intent on the task at hand, of learning from the discussions with the Artemisians.

Tycho found the ways in which her face would ghost first one way then the other fascinating and unnerving, but also the steadfastness with which she moved in the context of the meeting in spite of that admirable. While the talks had continued apace, with frequent breaks on the part of the Odists, there felt like more forward momentum thanks to this sacrifice.

Codrin had noticed the change as well, and when asked, ey had nodded in agreement. “She approaches much of her...well, I was going to say life, but it goes beyond that. She approaches much of her existence as a cost-benefit analysis of sorts. This level of control and momentum is worth the cost she’s paying in comfort.”

“Leader Turun Ka,” True Name began as soon as the session restarted after a break. “I would like to ask how you manage sentiment here on Artemis. Are there many situations where the direction, momentum, or clarity of social change must be managed from a high level?”

Codrin, Sarah, and Tycho all frowned at this. Answers Will Not Help seemed only able to grit her teeth.

There was a blurred conversation among the Artemisians, after which their leader spoke up. “In order to ensure that we answer the correct question you are asking, do you want information on how we govern?”

The skunk nodded. “That, yes, but I am also interested in how you might control the flow of information across the system. Do you inject opinions, or restrict the transmission of opinions that the Council of Eight might feel uncomfortable being displayed openly?”

Artante’s eyes darted over to Sarah, who lifted her eyebrows in a hint of a shrug.

“I will answer the question about governance first, and then we shall proceed to the second one,” it said. “We, in our capacities as leaders, perform very few actions in the time between convergences. In many cases, we act simply as those one might go to for advice. Something less than advisory. Lu...”

“More of a familial role,” Artante said. “Avuncular, perhaps. The Council is comprised of individuals who are exemplary in both intellectual and emotional intelligence from among their races, and any aboard Artemis may request a meeting in order to discuss solutions to difficult problems.”

“And during convergences?” True Name asked.

“During convergences, we act more in the way that you suggest. We act as a filter between the recipients of the information and the converging civilization. The cases in which we might block information or shape it to our own means remain rare, but the ability to explore the ramifications of that information and prepare for possible outcomes we have found useful.”

“This makes sense. Thank you, leader Turun Ka. We work along similar lines, where we have first access to information coming from Artemis—our only convergence thus far—and we are able to run simulations on possible outcomes in order to prepare for reactions.”

The firstracer turned its head to the side in what Tycho supposed must be confusion. “Please expand on ‘simulations’, leader True Name.”

“The term is overloaded, perhaps. We explore possible reactions by playing them out among members of our clade or others in an advisory role. Some instances of ourselves will play the role of the recipients of that news while others play the role of those who are receiving the information. Another, perhaps more distasteful, term for this, is ‘wargaming’.”

The Artemisians immediately sped up for a private meeting, and Tycho once again turned his attention to True Name’s face, searching for any sign of anxiety, anything to show that she regretted having said a word that implied violence.

There was nothing there. She just looked tired. Calm, but tired.

Once they returned to common time, Turun Ka continued. “Of the four races aboard, three of them have an analogous term, though it has not made it into common usage in our shared language.”

“*Tuvârouni* is the word for wrestling in the common tongue, but ‘push-play’ in the context of planning can mean ‘to wargame’,” Iska said. “It is not common except in the context of old *Nanon* stories.”

Both Codrin and Sarah took notes throughout the description, True Name looking on in exhaustion to ensure that they got the topics down.

“Thank you, leader Turun Ka, representative Iska, for explaining. Another part of my question would be do you shape information via communications? For instance, in order to quell fears that there might be some breach in our DMZ—demilitarized zone, if you will pardon more warlike language, the air-gapped sim in which these conversations are taking place on Castor—we injected communications into the news feed in the form of carefully worded questions about the nature of the security measures, snide remarks about how thankful people were that the security was in place, or subtle propaganda.”

“This is not common for us, no,” Turun Ka said. “Part of this is due to the lack of centralized news and communication sources between the races.”

“Is there so little communication between the races?” Sarah asked.

It was Artante that answered. “There is communication, yes, but large portions of the four races aboard stay within enclaves made up of members of their own races. All shared areas except for this complex are open to all races, and there are news sources available in there, but by virtue of infrequent access by large portions of the population, news does not spread very far.”

“Not even by way of rumor?” True Name asked.

“Rumors do spread,” Iska said when the Artemisians returned to common time. “Much of Artemis likely knows of the current convergence by now. We do not attempt to control the rumors.”

“Not even by considering the wording of this news?” Tycho could hear the control in the skunk’s voice. Was she frustrated, perhaps?

“We write-speak-disseminate clearly-precisely,” Turun Ko said. “But-yet even fourtrace understands-knows that convergences occur and that they are handled-dealt-with.”

True name nodded and subsided, bowing her head with blurring of her form. “*Eslosla datât*,” she said. “Thank you all.”

“No ranks of angels will answer to dreamers,” Answers Will Not Help whispered when the silence drew out, then stood unsteadily, ghosted images of a tail jolting her hips first this way and then that. “No unknowable spa...spaces...my apologies. May we take a break?”

“Yes, of course,” Artante said. “Please be well.”

After True Name and Answers Will Not Help tottered off to their rooms, each leaning on the other, Codrin, Sarah, and Tycho sat on a pair of beds, heads down and running in fast time in order to discuss the last segment of conversations.

“I wasn’t expecting her to be that open about political machinations,” Tycho said. “I’d think she’d want to keep it under wraps. If her and Jonas and their friends have been working to shape our past so much, you’d think they’d want to be a bit more subtle about that.”

Sarah shrugged. “Maybe, though it could be many things. Could be that they’re aiming to show the whole of us, positives and negatives, as the Artemisians don’t have the context of the *History*. Perhaps she wants to show that we have a society strong enough to handle manipulation without slipping into authoritarianism. The fact that we use language so consciously is probably a sign in our favor, in the end.”

“Or she could just be slipping,” Tycho added.

“She’s hardly winding up in word salad territory,” she allowed. “But it’s hard to tell how much of that was telling the truth, being a politician, or actually getting into the territory of grandeur.”

“No reason it can’t be both, I guess.” Codrin sighed, buried eir face in eir hands, and rubbed eir face vigorously. “She might be working on some level way above our pay grades and still having a hard time keeping it together.”

Tycho frowned as those fears once more floated to the surface. Something was going on in these talks that he simply didn’t understand. Things were being said with so many different meanings and the subtext felt completely disconnected from the text.

“Is it always like this?” he asked.

“Is what like this?”

“Working with them. Working with any politician.”

Codrin grinned. “Well, I can certainly confirm that the Odists work in ways that feel distant from what we’re used to. Dear will occasionally say something that makes no sense in context, but then a week or two later, I’ll realize what it actually meant, or that it was a suggestion that I’d subconsciously started following without really thinking about it.”

“They’re incredible at reading people,” Sarah said. “At least with Dear, I can see it being sort of a positive—or at worst, playful—way of influencing. I’m not sure with True Name, and have no idea what Why Ask Questions might be doing otherwise.”

Tycho looked to Codrin, who gave him a subtle shake of the head. “Me either,” he said at last. “Hell, I have no idea what’s going on with them either, other than what Codrin’s told me. Have you heard anything else from the delegates back Castor?”

“Just a little bit about language,” ey said thoughtfully. “We actually touched on it today with that bit about ‘old Nanon’, so I’ll write em back. I’d asked em a question about the Odists and what their roles had been because I was having a hard time piecing together memories, and ey confirmed that.”

“What sort of question?” Sarah asked.

Ey hesitated. “Well, I was asking about the difference between Why Ask Questions and Answers Will Not Help since we’ve worked with both of them. Ey confirmed that both worked on shaping sentiment, just different areas of expertise. My guess is that if...well, Why Ask Questions were feeling better, she’d have a lot to add to the conversation we had today.”

Wonder how the Artemisians would react to that? Tycho thought. *True Name was honest, but not enough to bring up this little bit of trickery.*

Part III

Intensity

And so the ark was sent out into the sea of the night, making waves in the black fabric and leaving a wake of dreams new and old behind it.

From *An Expanded Mythology of our World* by
May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

Codrin Bălan#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 2 hours, 32 minutes

The next note that came from Castor included a block of indecipherable text that was marked as clade-eyes-only for Turun Ka.

Codrin puzzled over this during a private minute in fast time.

Normally, clade-eyes-only or individual-eyes-only text for someone other than the recipient appeared as that header of, for instance, *Bălan Clade-Eyes-Only Material* followed by an indication that such text might be there, but nothing about its contents, including its length or composition. For em, this usually appeared as an ellipsis in square brackets, long-standing traditions of elision being what they were.

This, however, appeared to be text of the type ey'd grown used to in encrypted blocks. Letters, numbers, punctuation, all crammed into a single unbroken chunk. More, some of the characters appeared to be restless. They strained at their form, as though they desperately wanted to be something else, and when ey looked away and back, they were indeed that other form, and some other character nearby would be itching to change, instead.

Clearly, one of the delegates from Castor had instructed the Artemisians on not just how to send text back to Artemis, but how to do so in a private way. Artemis itself, however, couldn't figure out how to represent that. Perhaps that's what clade-eyes-only text might actually be in the perisystem architecture.

Ey recreated the note on a few fresh sheets of paper, eir own message on one and Turun Ka's on another, and headed back to the meeting.

"Leader Turun Ka," ey said, once they were gathered together once more. "I have received a message from your counterpart back on Castor. It is encrypted for your eyes only, though I'm not sure how well that functionality transfers between systems."

The firstracer's head remained still, leaving no clues as to its opinion of this matter, and it gracefully accepted the note that Codrin passed over. It didn't hold it up to see or bow its head to look down at it, so ey figured that as soon as it changed hands, it must have changed its form. Paper, after all, was only a symbol. Letters, words, and written language only signs.

"Thank you, recorder Codrin Bălan. The information is intact."

As ey expected, this was followed up by a blurred meeting of the Artemisian delegates in fast time.

Ey spent the time sneaking glances at True Name and Answers Will Not Help, catching Tycho and Sarah doing the same.

True Name, despite maintaining careful control of her expression, still appeared to be beyond tired. The flickers of her human form came more regularly, now, and, while her appearance as a skunk remained polite, attentive, and receptive, that human face showed only exhaustion.

Answers Will Not Help, however, was a mess.

Her form rippled between species, and with it, so too did her expression. She would veer wildly between barely constrained laughter and agony, all while tears coursed down her cheeks or left tracks in fur. She managed to keep quiet for the most part, though occasionally a snippet of poetry would escape her: here a line of the Ode, there a bit of Dickinson. She had even startled Tycho at one point by quoting something ey didn't quite recognize: "I have sown, like Tycho Brahe, that a greater man may reap..."

This wild dissociation from the world around her was made all the more unnerving by the fact that ey could tell that she was having a difficult time staying within common time.

She never veered far from it, only within a range of 0.5 to either side, but even that carried with it a sense of wrongness. They were in a unison room, something that she had specifically requested, which ey'd been told meant that she specifically *shouldn't* be able to do that. Skew simply wasn't available to em when ey reached for it.

Iska had hardly taken their eyes off her since they'd noticed as well, as though they were trying to puzzle out just how it was that this was happening.

They were only two and a half days into the conference and, while both sides had learned much about the other, ey wondered if they'd even be able to make it to a week.

Or even the end of today, ey thought. *Answers Will Not Help looks like she's about to explode.*

"Leader True Name," Turun Ka began, once the delegates had returned to common time. "While I am not able to divulge the contents of the note I have received, it has led to a discussion amongst us, and we would like to ask about your history."

"From the founding of the System?" she asked, voice tight.

"Apologies, leader True Name. We would like to know about your history. You and your cocladist."

Her shoulders sagged. "Would you like information specifically relating to our appearance here on Artemis?"

"This is a good place to begin."

The skunk looked as though she hadn't the faintest idea of where to begin, as though too many thoughts crowded her mind for her to decide.

Codrin nodded toward her, "By your leave, True Name?"

"Please, Mx. Bălan." She sounded quite relieved.

"Prior to the founding of the System two hundred thirty-one years ago, long distance communication and interaction took place over a global network. It worked much as it does here, in that there are designated locations—sims, a name which has stuck with us—and we interacted through forms such as these. The origin of our System came about shortly after a brief period of political unrest wherein some political entities released a type of virus into the implanted hardware we used to connect to the 'net. Those who came across too much information relating to this unrest had the virus triggered and were trapped in a vegetative state, locked within their minds." Ey paused and looked to True Name, who nodded. Answers Will Not Help just hugged her arms to her front, looking pale as she silently mouthed some litany ey couldn't guess. "Michelle Hadje, the root instance

of the Ode clade, to which True Name and Why Ask Questions belong, was one of these individuals. The lost, they called them. Dear, my partner, is an Odist as well, and mentioned to me beforehand that a malleable sense of time sounded much like what it experienced during that period.”

“You are not normally like this,” Turun Ka said. A statement rather than a question. “My counterpart on Castor describes you as solely in the form you primarily occupy here, and Why Ask Questions solely in, *lu*...a human form. You are both described as calm, confident, and politically adroit.”

True Name winced. “It is uncomfortable for me to be in this state. I am not up to my usual standards.”

“This has led-turned-into a situation of inequality-power-dynamic,” Turun Ko said, picking up where the leader had left off. “For this we express-offer concern-well-wishes-condolences.”

“We are unable, at this point in the convergence, to accept other delegates, or we would offer you greater respite than we have already,” Turun Ka finished.

“Thank you for your concern,” the skunk said. “I understand your reasoning, and would not wish to miss these discussions. I have trust in Mx. Bălan, Dr. Brahe, and Ms. Genet, however, to share our load.”

Both Turun Ka and Turun Ko lifted their heads in assent, the leader adding, “As always, we will strive to make your stay as comfortable as possible.”

True Name nodded her thanks.

At a glance from Artante, the Artemisians slid up to fast time for a brief conversation before returning. “We of fourthrace experienced similar prior to the creation of our embedding system. This was the result of a war, a virus targeting a nation that led large sections of the population being affected.”

“Were they able to free those who were?”

“Only approximately a quarter. Some three million of my race died from various causes while...lost.”

Codrin blinked, leaning back in eir chair. “Three *million*? Good Lord...”

Artante nodded. “Of those who returned, all suffered what representative Sarah Genet has called post-traumatic stress disorder. None were affected such as you, leader True Name and representative Why Ask Questions, but many also experienced chronic episodes of psychosis combined with logorrhea, glossolalia, and graphomania, if I am understanding the terms properly.”

Codrin’s eyes darted over to Answers Will Not Help—as, ey noticed, did the rest of the emissaries. She averted her gaze, lips still mouthing countless words. Ey hastened to catch up on the notes ey’d been taking to cover for emself.

“Did any of those affected upload? Or...embed?” True Name asked.

“Of those who did not take their own lives, all—”

“I cannot feel em!” Answers Will Not Help interrupted, nearly shouting. Tears were streaming down her face, now. “I cannot...here...b-beside whom...”

Something akin to anger or fear tore through True Name’s exhaustion and she sat bolt upright, glaring down the row of emissaries to Answers Will Not Help. “Why Ask Questions, my dear, please do try to remain present,” she said, voice eerily calm, soothing.

The silence at the table was absolute. All delegates on both sides held still, and Codrin suspected that all of the emissaries from Castor were holding their breath. All had experienced the laser-focused wrath of at least one of the Odists in the weeks leading up to the conference.

Answers Will Not Help hunched her shoulders, cowed. Every ounce of control she had remaining seemed to be dedicated to keeping her crying as quiet as possible.

“Leader True Name,” Artante asked, voice just as soothing. “You do not need to answer, but may I ask what just happened?”

“I will not answer, representative Artante Diria,” she said, voice once more slipping into exhaustion as a wave of human form washed over her features. “It is a private matter between me and my cocladist. My apologies.”

The fourthracer bowed her head. “I understand. Would you like to take a break?”

“Perhaps a brief break would be nice,” Sarah said, nodding. “We can collect ourselves and move onto a separate aspect of the history of the System.”

True Name nodded.

“Your break-respite need not be brief-short,” Turun Ko said. “We are capable-of-able-to-permitted-to skew the unison room to allow for longer rests.”

“No!” This time, Answers Will Not Help did shout, voice shifting slightly as she slid this way and that away from common time. “Sorry. No, please do not—motes in the stage-lights—please do not take time from us. No, no no no, please...”

Iska’s expression had steadily grown more and more alarmed throughout the proceedings. “I do not—”

“We will reconvene in fifteen minutes common time,” Turun Ka said. Nothing in its voice changed from how it normally spoke, though it having spoke was enough to quell Iska to silence. “Representative Artante Diria, representative Iska, please convene to address this issue moving forward from a psychological and technical standpoint. When we return, we will indeed move on to another subject.”

Iska bowed their head in assent.

Answers Will Not Help was sobbing in earnest now, stifling it as best she can with her face hidden behind the notebook she had before her but had yet to touch.

“I cannot feel em”? Feel who? Codrin thought, frowning.

Ey leaned forward again to write notes on what had just happened, but before eir pen could touch paper, True Name pulled it slowly but insistently from eir hand.

“Nothing of these happenings is to wind up in writing except that it be sent as a clade-eyes-only letter to the Odists,” she said, the words softened by a shaky smile. “I would like to discuss these events with my cocladists, first.”

Ey nodded numbly, accepting eir now-capped pen back.

“Now, I would like to lie down during this break. Please accompany me so that I may dictate this letter.”

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 30 days, 13 hours, 47 minutes
(*Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes*)

Ioan#98ae38dc arrived at the appointed coffee shop a good hour in advance. The meeting had been eir idea, but it had also been eir primary source of stress during the day prior to it.

The idea of meeting up with True Name in a neutral setting had not gone over as poorly as feared with May. She hadn't been pleased, to be sure, but given the news from Castor, she had accepted that the chance of further contact with her down-tree instance was likely anyway, and had stated that she was unwilling to engage with her further on the point so ey might as well.

So, ey had forked, given her double kisses on the cheeks along with #Tracker, and stepped away to sit and fret somewhere where ey'd not be a bother.

The coffee shop was quite comfortable, familiar from when ey'd first met Dear so many years ago. A cozy affair set in a simulacrum of a small town. Cute shops, gas lamps, brick-paved roads.

Inside, ey staked out an L-shaped couch for their meeting and sat, sipping eir way slowly through first a coffee and then a tea, figuring that eir nerves were jangly enough without the added caffeine.

True Name arrived fifteen minutes before their scheduled meeting, looking far more collected and confident, far more herself, than she had the last time ey'd seen her. She smiled brightly to em, ordered her drink, and then sat primly on the couch across from em, blinking a cone of silence into existence as she did so.

"Mx. Bălan, thank you for meeting with me. I was surprised—pleasantly so—to have received your invitation."

Ey nodded. "Thank you for accepting. I figured it might be nice to have a calmer conversation than our last one. I want to make sure that we stay on at least polite terms as...in-laws of a sort."

There was no shift in the skunk's attentive expression, nor in her posture. She simply nodded and took a few laps of her drink, wiping a dollop of whipped cream from her nose after. "I appreciate that. I understand that our dynamic is complex and that of May Then My Name and I all the more so. We will never be close, you and I, but I can accept that."

"Right, and I don't want all of our interactions to be stressful."

"If you will forgive a bit of small talk, may I ask after your partner's well-being, at least? I understand through intraclade communications that she had...that there was..."

“She wound up overflowing, yeah. She’s bounced back well enough for the most part, and we’ve been back at work.”

True Name nodded, a hint of a bow. “Thank you, Ioan. It is encouraging to hear. And you are working on a play regarding our visitors on Castor?”

“Bit by bit,” ey said. “I add to it every time we get a bit of news. That was another reason I wanted to meet up.”

The calm smile that the skunk had been wearing slipped down into something more businesslike. “Yes. May I ask what information you have received?”

Ioan pulled the few sheets of folded paper from eir pocket and unfolded them, skimming through the notes. “The talks have begun and sound like they’re going well enough on Castor, but that True Name and Why Ask Questions on Artemis are struggling, though they’ve been working through it as best they can. That’s the last I’ve heard.”

Ey handed over the letters, already trimmed of clade-eyes-only and other personal information. True Name read through them quickly, nodding.

“We have heard much the same. It was a calculated risk, sending myself and Why Ask Questions rather than a Jonas or someone else less affected by this time skew that they have mentioned.”

“It sounds reminiscent of what I saw of Michelle. Certainly unpleasant.”

She sat in silence for a few long seconds, both paws wrapped around her wide-brimmed mug of coffee. Her face was impassive and posture unreadable. Even her eyes remained fixed on some spot over eir shoulder, unmoving. She seemed frozen.

“True Name?”

“No,” she said at last, her shoulders sagging a fraction of an inch, enough to show some level of exhaustion that had previously been hidden. “It does not sound pleasant.”

“End Waking put it, ‘when presented with the fragility of eternity once more, I cannot imagine that I would remain sane’. None of the Odists I’ve talked to sound happy about this.”

“We are not,” she said. “Ioan, may I ask that we talk about—”

“In a moment, True Name, I promise.” Ey took a deep breath, setting eir tea down on the table in front of the couch, turning to face the skunk. “Again, I don’t want to leave the air clouded between us, but this is important to me, too. I’m sure you understand.”

She nodded, straightening up as though steeling herself for a coming blow. “I imagine it is. Then yes, it is unpleasant. I do not think that either of my cocladists aboard Artemis are in any imminent danger, but it is bringing uncomfortable memories to the fore.”

“End Waking said that, too. I have my concerns for your cocladists aboard Artemis, but I’m more worried about these uncomfortable memories cropping up across the clade.”

“This is about Death Itself and I Do Not Know, is it not?” she asked, voice quiet, tightly controlled.

Ey nodded.

True Name clutched her coffee closer to her chest, as though that might serve to shield her. It certainly felt as though she was struggling not to close herself off from the topic entirely. “We are very old, Ioan, and the implication of eternity has affected us all differently. I am beginning to think that it has less to do with memory

than we had all originally suspected, but all the same, we have all begun to struggle through the centuries.”

Ey nodded, but remained silent. She was speaking slowly, and did not appear to have finished.

“I did not talk with Death Itself much, and I was never able to speak with I Do Not Know. I did not know them except through observation. I am sorry—no.” She shook her head, frowning. “I was going to say that I am sorry that they are no longer with us, but you know as well as I that this is not some small loss for us to be brushed away with thoughts and prayers, even for those of us who did not speak with them. Sad is not the correct term. I am anxious.”

“Anxious of how this madness, as End Waking called it, might affect you and yours?”

She nodded, averting her eyes. “I am fucking terrified, Ioan. What am I to do in the face of such enormity?”

Ey blinked, taken aback. This was not how ey’d imagined the conversation would go. Ey’d pictured her providing some glib explanation for what was happening and perhaps outlining the steps that she and her close cocladists were taking to control the situation. Ey was expecting her to steer em towards confidence in her, and hopefully even to soothe eir fears about May through doing so.

This wasn’t the True Name ey remembered. Were these her own cracks showing?

Ey prowled through memories of the conversations ey’d had with her over the years—several, during those first few years after launch, then the rapid decrease after the publication of the *History*—and tallied up each against the next.

“You’ve changed quite a bit, True Name,” ey said. “I don’t know what you’re supposed to do, that’s out of my league. All I can say is that you’ve changed. It looks like it takes you a lot of effort to keep the confidence that used to be so integral to your personality.”

Ey watched as she bridled, subsided, and nodded. “I am not what I was.”

“What changed?”

She shrugged helplessly. “If I knew, perhaps I could fix it, bring back that easy confidence.”

The conversation was veering further off-script. The skunk herself was veering far afield from the one ey’d pictured in eir head. “Your counterpart on Castor sounds much the same as I remember. The True Name on Pollux has, from what I hear, wound up in a relationship and started to guide more openly over the last few years.”

Looking down to where she held her mug against her front, True Name blinked rapidly, nodding.

Tears? Really? Ey frowned, searching her face and posture for any hint that this was some calculated display of emotion, then chided emself for such cynicism.

“Is it something about the Lagrange System?” ey asked, hunting for something to fix, helpless to stop emself from doing so. Some anxiety over that lack of control drove em to try and smooth out the situation *somehow*. “Is the culture that different here? Maybe something about the System itself? I’m trying to think of what might be different.”

“I do not know, Ioan.” She sniffed, sat up straighter, and smiled tiredly at em. “Again, if I did, perhaps there might be something that I could do to address it. I know what I am—what I have become—in comparison to my peers. While I am trying not to view that as a failing, it is...difficult.”

“Something with Jonas, perhaps?”

She winced and looked away, ears pinned flat.

Ey had to resist the urge to reach out and offer her eir hand to hold for comfort as ey did so often with May. They looked so similar, even still, even after centuries of divergence, and all the more so when struggling with overwhelming emotions.

She must have caught some slight movement or hint of this on eir face or in eir posture, as she chuckled. “If I were built more like your May Then My Name, then perhaps I could more easily accept comfort, but I am not. Thank you for listening, though. I cannot talk about these things with many others.”

Ey laughed, shrugging sheepishly. “Sorry, True Name. Long habit. Still, I’m happy to listen. I know that my relationship puts us in a precarious position relative to each other and there are still some aspects about our history that are...difficult to internalize, but, well—” Ey sat up straighter at a sudden memory. “Hey, have you talked with In Dreams yet? Or this Sarah Genet?”

“I have spoken with In Dreams, yes,” she said, tilting her head. “Though I am not sure in what capacity you mean. She has kept me up to date on the cross-clade issues. I only know the name Sarah Genet from the communications from Castor.”

“Really? I thought that they had been in contact with all of the clade they could,” ey said, frowning. “But perhaps that’s still in progress. Either way, you mentioned having someone to talk to, and In Dreams has suggested taking a therapeutic approach to this. She and Ms. Genet have been working on setting up a course of therapy sessions for Odists and a few of the other old clades that are struggling. Perhaps that’s something that could help. May has an appointment in a few days.” Ey hastened to add, “I’m still happy to listen, but I’m hardly trained in that.”

The skunk laughed, and it was difficult to miss the bitter tone in her voice. “I spoke with In Dreams this morning and had not heard this. Perhaps it is an issue of priority.”

Eir frown deepened.

She made a setting-aside gesture that ey’d grown used to from May, as though the topic were unimportant, not worth discussing. “I will contact them. Thank you for suggesting that, Mx. Bălan. Even if they are unwilling to help, it is probably a good idea that I seek out therapy. Lord knows I need it.”

Ey nodded, wary to continue. As the silence that followed stretched out, ey retrieved eir tea and sipped it before it grew too cold.

“Why are you happy to listen to me, Ioan?”

Ey shook emself from eir own rumination and back to the present. “I’m sorry?”

True Name smiled. “You said that you were happy to listen to me. Your partner hates me—let us not mince words: she hates me and I have grown to accept that as best I can. You are close, as partners should be, and you have as much reason to hate me as anyone, and yet you met me here—asked to meet me here, even—and say that you are happy to listen. Why?”

“Oh. Well,” ey began, then stalled out. Ey raced through eir memories for a reason ey could articulate. “It was something that Codrin#Castor said. Em and Dear both, actually. Codrin passed on a letter that Codrin#Artemis sent, saying that it has been difficult emotionally to watch what ey remembers from Michelle in your cocladists. When ey mentioned the time skew to it, Dear said to be watchful around your counterpart, saying, ‘remember what I said: even True Name has emotions, even she will be affected’.”

The skunk sat back, looking stunned, then choked out a half-laugh-half-sob, setting her mug down on the

table so that she could rub her paws firmly over her face, leaving them to cover it. “Even I have emotions. Even I!” she said between deep breaths. “I know that your cocladist and Dear meant well by this, but how damning an indictment. *Even I.*”

“I’m sorry, True Name.”

She shook her head, took a moment to regain her composure, and said, “No, I suppose I do, at that. It is difficult to remember even from the inside, my dear. Thank you for reminding me, and thank you for listening.”

The skunk reached out a paw toward em and, after a moment’s hesitation, ey took it and gave it what ey hoped was a comforting squeeze. Ey was once more startled by the similarity of her to May: the softness of her fur, the satiny feel of her pads, those well-kept claws.

She laughed and shook her head, pulling her paw back. “How silly. I believe I stand by my assessment that comfort through physicality is not for me, but thank you all the same. That you have the capacity to comfort...well, even me does mean a lot, Ioan. I appreciate your empathy.”

Ey smiled cautiously. “Worth a try, I suppose.”

“Yes. Worth a try.” She stood slowly and gave a hint of a bow. “I have much to think about, Mx. Bălan, and a message to send to Ms. Genet. Please spend some quality time with your partner tonight, and I hope to see you in the future.”

“Of course. Until next time.”

She bowed again and stepped from the sim, leaving em to sit on the couch and finish eir tea, mulling over the differences between changing and forgetting. Without forgetting, all True Name had, all they *all* had, was the ability to change, and all they could do was hope that this would be enough to keep them all sane.

Tycho Brahe#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 2 hours, 28 minutes

“This has...wait, don’t leave yet, #Assist,” Codrin said. “Is this really an eyes-only message for both True Name and Turun Ka?”

Both Sarah and Tycho sat up straighter.

Ey shrugged, saying only, “It appears Codrin#Artemis has instructed the Artemisians on how to relay such in turn. I guess ey did a while back, actually, but this is the first time they’ve taken advantage of it. Or, well...” Ey trailed off.

“Hard to tell how much time has passed up there?” Codrin#Castor asked.

“Yeah, haven’t the faintest. Anyway, I’m not sure how you want to pass it over. I figured a separate sheet would be easiest and you can decide from there. The news from #Artemis seems mostly to be about the Odists, so perhaps that’s what Turun Ka is getting. True Name has her own message in here.” Ey nodded over to the skunk, handing her a separate sheet

Both of the Odists, having claimed the other table in order to have their own hushed conversation quickly moved over to rejoin the other three. They all watched as ey frowned, nodded, and skimmed quickly over the letter addressed to em.

Eir frown deepened. “Thanks. Here, hold on—” Ey quickly jotted *Message received, passed on, more soon, updates from others?* on a slip of foolscap and handed it to the other Codrin. “Send this for now, just so we’re on the same page at as close to the same time as we can manage.”

“Whatever that means,” ey said, laughing and pocketing the slip. Ey prodded em in the shoulder and added, “Dear threatened to beat me up because of you, so thanks for that.”

Codrin#Castor smirked. “Well, did it?”

“No, of course not.”

“Just have to pull harder, then.” Ey sighed and shook eir head. “Self-deprecating humor aside, tell them I miss them.”

Ey nodded. “Of course.”

“I’ll see them soon enough, I guess. A few weeks, tops, though at this rate, I’m guessing only a matter of days. Tell—”

“Mx. Bălan,” True Name said, nodding to the writer. “Please come with us. We have only a few minutes to sort this out before we start, and if you are correct about Turun Ka receiving similar information, I would like

to plan.”

Ey shrugged to Tycho and Sarah and stood to follow the two Odists to True Name’s partitioned rest area. Codrin#Assist stepped from the sim and back to Castor proper.

“What do you suppose that was about?” Tycho asked, setting up a cone of silence around himself and Sarah.

“Best guess? More about how they’re struggling with the time skew over there. Maybe something specific happened, and that’s why everybody’s gotten messages all at once.”

He nodded, sighed, and rubbed over his face with a hand. For as little as was actually happening, he was incredibly tired. Conferences were always like this, felt like.

“Well, neither of us got anything, and it’s not worth speculating, especially since I figure we will learn soon enough,” she said. “I’ll start to sound like a broken record before long, but how are you feeling about how things are going?”

“Uh, well, much the same, I guess. I’m pretty sure they’re real, now,” he said, laughing tiredly. “It’s been interesting seeing what we know that they don’t. Far less than what they’ve been teaching us, though.”

“Oh?”

He smiled lopsidedly. “True Name cornered me when this whole thing began and quoted some poetry at me that got me in mind of keeping track of all this. Something about how we may sit humbly at each others’ feet while the other shares their later sciences.”

“I can never pick apart when she’s being blunt or subtle.”

“Well, she followed it up with, ‘That is a poem about death. Please understand that there is risk here, as well’ so, maybe it was a bit of both.”

Sarah laughed. “Well, okay. I’ll grant you that. Sounds like working with her has been kind of an adventure. You’ve had more experience than I.”

“It hasn’t been too bad, all told. She’s been nothing but polite, and sometimes even nice. It’s hardly been a bad time. I think the biggest block has actually been squaring what I’m experiencing with what I’d assumed about her from the *History*.”

“She didn’t exactly come off as kind or polite in there, no.”

“Codrin mentioned something about that, about how they wanted the *History* released but wanted to control how. Ey said that she’d acted as dramatic as she had in order to make the end result seem more sensational than realistic. ‘Shaping the narrative,’ she called it.”

Sarah laughed. “Well, I’d certainly call *that* subtle.”

“Right,” he said, grinning. “So I guess it’s kind of making me reassess how I feel about them.”

“The Odists?”

“Them too, but I was thinking more the *History* and *Mythology*. Like, if they’re the product of social engineering to make them sound worse than they are to achieve a goal other than what Codrin, Ioan, and May Then My Name intended, then it’s probably worth me actually paying attention to how things really are. That, and how

they're engineering what's going on here."

"Sure, that makes sense," Sarah said, sitting back with her hands folded in her lap. "I can pick up little bits and pieces of her and Why Ask Questions trying to nudge things this way or that, with mixed results. It's giving me a new appreciation for what Codrin does, honestly. Ey's got maybe the hardest job of us all."

Tycho nodded. "I don't envy em that. Ey told me at the beginning that I'd be doing the same in my own way—listening and coming away from this with a more complete picture—and I think I lack the experience ey has, both the training as an amanuensis and from living with an Odist."

"They're cute together, though. Pulling Dear's tail sounds like a recipe for disaster, but I guess if you've been together for forty years or whatever, you can get away with it."

He laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, no way. Never really was my thing, so I have no idea how it all works."

"What's that?"

"Relationships. Never really got into them, so the banter is cute to watch, but just as over my head as all of the politicking."

Sarah nodded. "They're not for everyone, especially here, where you have the problem of perpetuity."

"Precisely," Tycho said. "I can't imagine being around one person or group of people for forty years and still expect to do so for a hundred more."

"To be fair, neither can I," she said, laughing.

After a suitable pause, he nudged the subject back toward the previous topic. "Has your opinion of the *History* changed at all?"

"A little, I suppose. A lot of the dramatic interactions felt like just that: drama. It's the type of thing that I'm attuned to, based on my work. The Odists have a flair for that, though, which I guess makes sense, given where they came from." She paused, gaze drifting off towards nothing. "I guess if my opinion has changed, it's been to understand just how deep it all goes. Not the behind the scenes stuff, that's whatever, but their control over themselves. True Name especially. Control like that is often used to cover fear and trauma."

"It kind of makes me wonder—"

Tycho was cut off from the rest of his sentence by Codrin stepping into his field of view outside the cone and waving. He dropped the silence.

"Sorry, you two. Time to head back."

"Everything alright? You look...I don't know, like you were just put through the wringer."

Ey smiled weakly, shaking eir head. "Not me, no. I'm very tired, though, and I imagine things are only going to get more stressful over the next few hours."

"Why? What—"

"I'm sorry, Tycho, I really do want to answer your questions, but we just don't have time."

Codrin Bălan#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 2 hours, 12 minutes

During the short break, Codrin helped True Name compose her letter and, after ey sent it, simply sat with her in quiet. The skunk remained still throughout, sitting on the edge of the bed and staring down at her knees. She looked small, and some part of em wanted to sit beside her and try to comfort her, but for the emotional and social distance between them, as well as her still jittery form.

And so ey simply sat at her desk and watched her manage her breathing, keep her composure, meditate, or whatever it was that an Odist unbound did.

Finally, ey reached out to offer a hand to the skunk to help her stand. “It’s time we start back, True Name.”

She sighed, nodded, and waved eir hand away, standing on her own. “Thank you, Mx. Bălan. I appreciate your help.”

Ey nodded, hesitated as ey composed eir question, and then asked, “I don’t wish to overstep my bounds, here, and will accept no as an answer, but can you tell me what exactly it was that Why Ask Questions meant by ‘I cannot feel em’?”

After a moment swaying, the skunk straightened up and brushed her paws down over her blouse, straightening some imagined crease. “You ask because of the pronoun?”

Ey nodded.

“I cannot tell you,” she said. Looking steadily at em, she fixed a kind and competent expression in place. It bore a force to it, as though she was willing em to drop the subject. “And that I cannot should explain enough.”

Codrin blinked, clutched eir notebook closer to eir chest, and bowed to her. “Of course, True Name. Shall we fetch Why Ask Questions?”

The other Odist was not to be found in her room. She had apparently remained where she had been sitting before, arms crossed on the edge of the table with her head resting on them. Every time there was a shift in her form, it brought a jolt or an uncomfortable squirm, and yet she did not lift her head, even when True Name knelt down beside her to speak in hushed tones.

The rest of the delegates arrived shortly after, Tycho and Stolon both looking quite happy. There was a moment’s shuffling as Tycho, Sarah, and Codrin were shifted down by one so that True Name could remain sitting by her cocladist.

Even so, the meeting was slow to get started. There were a few questions asked by both sides about history, but they all felt very careful, well constructed, and circumspect. It was plagued by silences and subtle glances

to where Answers Will Not Help rested her head on the table.

“From the sounds of it,” Iska said. “Of the four organic species present, all began their projects of building embedding systems after a traumatic event. It seems to be a common feature of biological systems. The desire to protect oneself or one’s species from trauma is a common feature of all life.”

“We ran-existed in simulation space within our physical-corporeal bodies-shells. There was no difference-change from post-biological life-existence and living in embedded form,” Turun Ko added. “We are unable to add-explain to the topic of biological trauma. Apologies.”

True Name nodded. “We understand, recorder Turun Ko.”

“If I may ask,” Codrin began. “Was there a period of adjustment for firsttrace after—”

“Prophets!”

Silence fell once more around the table. Answers Will Not Help pushed herself to her feet. Waves of skunk and human crashed violently across her form. She was crying harder than before. Her back arched taut and she laughed up toward the ceiling, a choked, gasping sound.

True Name, struggling to hold her own form together, reached out to tug at Answers Will Not Help’s sleeve. “Please, my dear,” she murmured. “Representative Why Ask Questions, please sit down. I know it is—”

“I am not her! I am not her. She is another me, who dreams when she needs an answer. I am Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help, who knows God when she dreams. Dreams! If I dream, am I no longer myself? Don’t...I...”

True Name froze. Everyone froze.

“We were told—” Sarah began, before Answers Will Not Help cut her off.

“Prophets! Oh, where is Ezekiel when we need him? A meeting of prophets! *Navi to nevi'im!* The voice of God from the sky in a pillar of flame!” She looked around, wide-eyed, and her voice grew conspiratorial. “Or Qoheleth, a prophet of our own blood, bearing warning of memory entrancing!”

Her words came out in an unceasing torrent. She waved her hand/paw toward the Artemisians, giggling. “But instead we are Israel to *nevi'im*, a people to prophets, a people to prophets! A people with our own personal HaShem, and the only time I know my true name is when I dream, and to know one’s true name is to know God. Time feels so vast that were it not for an Eternity— Fuck, I...time makes prey of remembering, I...I fear me this Circumference engross my Finitude— Oh AwDae, oh AwDae. Could you ever have guessed at the depths of the death of memory?”

True Name stood quickly enough to knock her chair back and, with a decisive wash of skunk down her form, growled, “How fucking dare—”

The rest of the delegation pressed away from her with a shout. The firsttracers rose up to their full height and Iska blurred quickly to stand atop their stool, shouting, “*Iha!*”

“To his exclusion who prepare by process of Size...of...” Answers Will Not Help continued, unfazed. She was phasing in and out of common time now, despite the promise of unison. Her words jittering now fast, now slow. “I cannot feel em here. We are so far away from home. I cannot...I miss em, I miss em. I miss...was that eir prophecy? Was that why ey wrote me? Is this AwDae’s words come true?”

“Stop!” True Name shouted. She swiped out at her cocladist, managing to grab a fistful of her blouse, roughly yanking her closer.

With surprising speed, Answers Will Not Help slid a foot back and struck True Name's forearm with a downward strike of her own, getting a yelp from the skunk and forcing her to let go. She stumbled back, gasping, "The flow of prophecy climbs up through the years, winter upon winter upon winter, and compels the future to do its bidding! Ey said...ey said..."

True Name bared her teeth, tackling the blurring, crumbling form of Answers Will Not Help to the ground. "Fucking stop! You cannot—"

After a moment's tussle, Answers Will Not Help sprawled flat the ground, limp and laughing, retching, crying. "For the Stupendous Vision of eir diameters—" she said, and then quit, leaving True Name to fall to the ground, weeping.

There was a shocked silence around the table, and when no one moved, Codrin slid out of eir chair to kneel by True Name's side. Her form had begun to waver once more, and, remembering the aversion to touch that came with that, ey simply knelt beside her, waiting until she calmed down.

It was Sarah who broke the silence. "What just happened?"

Codrin spoke carefully. "As mentioned, True Name and, uh...Why Ask Questions—that is, Michelle Hadje—were among the lost, and I guess time skew is similar enough to—"

"No," the Odist said between heaving breaths, clutching at her arm where it had been struck. "She was right. That was Answers Will Not Help."

Tycho frowned, nodded. "We had guessed."

"She should not have been able to do that," Iska said, nearly growling. "She should not have been able to do any of that. No skew, no exit. What was she? Who are you?"

"Leader True Name," Turun Ko said. "Please explain 'lost' in this context."

She did not move from her spot on the floor. "You have heard about what it means to get lost, but there is no possible way that I can explain the way it has warped us. To get lost is to go mad."

Silence and stillness fell once more as all waited for True Name to continue. After a few long breaths and coarse swallows, she mastered her form once more. She knelt beside Codrin, wiping at the tear streaks on her muzzle and the dripping from her nose.

"We are incomplete. We are unwhole." Her voice was bitter, even as she worked to bring back that mask of competence. "We were broken and remain so. I do not know how it is that Answers Will Not Help was able to...to manage skew or quit. You have my most abject apologies for the trouble caused, and for the deception with—"

"Leader True Name," Turun Ka said, interrupting as politely as it had before. "There will be time to discuss this topic. That time remains in the future. For now, please take this opportunity to, *lu*...gather yourself and clean up. You may take as long as you require. When you are able, you and I shall meet in our role as leaders."

The skunk wilted, her ears splaying to the sides. "Of course, leader Turun Ka."

"Are you amenable to increasing the skew in the unison room? This will allow you to take all the time you need."

She nodded. "Yes, that would be fine. It is uncomfortable, but I can sleep through the discomfort."

"Aën," it said. "We shall return here in half an hour. The other participants shall meet in the central courtyard."

"I will join shortly," Iska said. "I must contact a technician, first."

They did not wait, but seemed to disappear as they shifted up to a high enough skew to travel faster than ey could perceive.

Codrin nodded to the other emissaries. “Go ahead. I’ll help True Name to her room, then join up with you in a bit.”

“I am sorry,” True Name mumbled, barely loud enough to be heard.

“Leader True Name, please understand that you are in no way responsible. Even your deception was, as you say, wargamed. We will discuss shortly.”

“Rest,” Artante added. “Become whole.”

As the others departed Codrin held out eir arm, letting the skunk clutch it tightly as ey helped her to stand. They swayed together at the brief sensorium twinge as the unison room was skewed up by a factor of two.

The walk down the hall was a slow and unsteady affair, and Codrin couldn’t help but see every one of True Name’s two and a half centuries in the way she moved. She looked as she always had, was as strong as she’d ever been, and yet each one of those long years seemed to be a weight she had to draw along behind her. She kept her grip on eir forearm throughout, however, as though the contact kept her pinned to one reality.

Ey guided her into her room and helped her to sit down on the edge of her bed, and even then, it took her a few long seconds to loosen her grip.

“You heard nothing today, Mx. Bălan,” she mumbled, quiet enough that ey had to lean closer to hear. “I know what you thought you heard, but you heard nothing. Do not tell anyone. Do not tell Ioan, and certainly do not tell any others within the Ode clade.”

Ey took a half step back from the skunk. So hoarse and clouded was her voice that ey couldn’t piece together her mood. “I...is that a suggestion or a threat? I’m sorry, True Name. I know how much it means, I just—”

She smiled weakly and shook her head before laying out on her side, rubbing her arm and wincing. “It is a request from me to you, Codrin, from my clade to yours. Across our two entangled clades.” The smile faded as she added, “Not...a request. A plea.”

Ey nodded, struck silent by the sincerity in her voice. Real, actual sincerity. It made em feel bashful. Ey bowed and started to turn back toward the door.

“Codrin?”

“Yes?”

Her voice was small. It bore fear and anxiety alongside the omnipresent exhaustion. “Can you please stay for a few minutes?”

“I, uh...” Ey swallowed dryly. “Do you need anything?”

“Just for someone to be present. I may need your help writing another note back to Castor in a bit,” she said, then had to master some hidden emotion before continuing. “But right now, I just need someone to anchor me. You are very good at that.”

After a moment’s hesitation, ey nodded, pulling up a chair from the small table in the center of the room. Ey sat beside the skunk as she lay still on the bed, eyes closed, her breathing growing more steady, and then slowing as she drifted into sleep.

Ey watched her doze fitfully.

What was it Dear had said? That she was still a fully realized person? *She does still have emotions, they simply come from a place that we cannot access.*

Ey wasn't sure how much ey believed that now, that they came from a place ey could not access. True Name had the same emotions ey did, ey knew now, and they came from that very same well within her. She had just become so singular an entity that their expression could only be framed through one very small, very precise lens.

Hers was a control borne of anxiety, a competency borne of trauma, and this knowledge meant that ey could never unsee the core, fully realized humanity within her.

All that may be, but what do I do with it? ey thought. *And how the hell am I going to keep what I heard hidden and buried?*

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 33 days, 15 hours, 39 minutes
(*Castor-Lagrange transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes*)

Depression, Ioan had long known but struggled to internalize, was fundamentally different from sadness, just as it was different from May's overwhelming waves of emotions.

Ey was confronted with it now, forced to see the way the emotion—or non-emotion, as May put it—affected one on a more fundamental level than anything so simple as sadness could hope to. Those overwhelming waves, as the one she'd just recovered from, were fundamental in their own way, but far, far less existential.

It was bound by the cycle of the day, and so Ioan and May would spend their mornings strategizing their evenings, ensuring that they were able to have as pleasant a time as that ashen feeling May described would allow, to work as well as they could manage through that fog.

"We are not unfamiliar with it, Ioan," A Finger Pointing had said when, after watching Death Itself and I Do Not Know quit, May's countenance grew duller and duller, and the skunk spoke less and less. "We know depression from the embodied world, and it comes up every now and then for each of us here, too."

"Even True Name, I suppose," ey had said, describing the conversation ey'd had with her.

She had nodded. "It will pass, and we will make the shows work, my dear. Keep her company and be good to her, and you need not worry."

Some dark look must have crossed eir face at which the director had shaken her head and hugged em. "Do not worry about that, Ioan. There is no death in her, I am sure of that. I am sorry that there are no easy ways to explain it, but I promise that what I expect she is feeling is separate from what our cocladists felt."

When presented with this along with eir anxious expression, May had laughed and tousled eir hair. "She is right, my dear. It feels uncomfortable at best, bad at worst, but only ever bad. I am simply a bit crashy after a little too much all at once."

So for the last few days, they'd strategized in the mornings and then done what they could in the evenings. Scenes in plays were reworked for understudies, dinner menus shifted towards comfort foods, temperatures and weather adjusted, old comfort-hobbies dredged up from the past—the skunk had been littering the house with origami figures. Ey'd even tried reading aloud to her, her with her head parked on eir chest and em with a book held above them. This had gone over well, and ey had that on the menu for later in the evening after dinner.

Today still held the first meeting with Sarah Genet, however, so ey focused on making a good breakfast, and spending a bit of time relaxing on the porch swing with May, giving her pets and quiet company.

“How are you feeling about this?” ey asked, voice muffled. May had requested a brushing of her tail, which meant a face full of fluff.

“I do not know. I am anxious. I am trying to keep up that sense of hopefulness that I had when we began planning this, but the anxiety is getting in the way.”

Ey tamped down the urge to ask what the anxiety was over, knowing that the answer would likely be *I do not know* or *nothing*—rightly so, for eir own anxiety often seemed to have no basis in reality. Instead, ey asked, “Do you want me to be there with you?”

May scooted down a little on the swing, enough to get her arms around eir middle. “Please. It is just an initial meeting, I do not imagine there will be any need for privacy.”

“No deep, dark secrets, then?”

There was a muffled laugh from where the skunk had planted her face against eir belly. “I do not know that I have any of those from you, my dear.”

“Other than the obvious.”

May stayed quiet, shifting the rest of the way so that she could lay her head on eir lap, looking off into the yard. Finally, she murmured, “We will need to talk about that at some point, Sarah and I. The pressure surrounding it is building.”

This did not seem to be an open conversation, so ey nodded, settling into silence with eir partner.

Sarah arrived an hour later, a quiet knock at the door accompanying the sensorium ping of her arrival.

May had melted into a beanbag when they’d come back inside and was folding paper crane after paper crane from a bottomless stack of origami paper, so Ioan capped eir pen and slid eir project into a drawer of eir desk. The skunk studiously avoided eir gaze, the tightness of her expression showing anxiety with tears near at hand.

“Mx. Bălan?” Sarah said, bowing. “Nice to meet you.”

“And you, Ms. Genet.” Ey stood aside, gesturing toward the hall. “Please, come inside.”

“Just Sarah is fine.” Smiling kindly to em, she nodded and stepped inside. She seemed to be taking the sight of their home in with some deeper understanding than ey could grasp. Ey wondered just how much she could tell by how clean or messy a place might be, and thanked past-Ioan for cleaning up quite well after breakfast.

The skunk had finished her crane and levered herself out of her beanbag by the time they made it to the den. She was standing by the kitchen table, paws folded before her and ears perked up, looking polite and attentive, though Ioan could still read the exhaustion in her face.

“May Then My Name Die With Me,” Sarah said, bowing once more. “A pleasure to meet you at last. Thank you for helping to organize this project.”

“Please, just May Then My Name.” She returned the bow, cleared her throat. “Thank you for going along with it. It will be a large one, and I— we appreciate all the help we can get.”

They sat down around three sides of the dining table. The skunk surprised em by ensuring that ey, rather than her, sat across from the woman.

“So, there’s no real agenda today other than to just get to know each other. No hard topics or anything, just chatting. Stuff like that helps me get used to how you communicate.” Sarah nodded toward May. “Though

I would like to know how you're feeling."

"Tired." The skunk looked down at the table where her claw-tips traced wood-grain. "Quite tired. I am not feeling myself currently, forgive me."

"That's alright. There's been an awful lot going on, from the sounds of it." Sarah shifted gears smoothly away from the topic of current events, asking instead, "I know you two are in theatre, from what you've said. What all does that entail, though? I haven't been to a play or anything since university before uploading."

May smiled weakly. "Lots of work. We share jobs from start to finish. There are more of us working as stage hands and crew than there are working as actors. Ioan even writes many of our plays."

"I guess that means you both know your way around the craft better than most, since you have to keep all of that in your heads. I'm curious, though; what all goes into the crew side? Are you also...what's the term. Stage managers? Techs?" Sarah shrugged, looking almost embarrassed at her lack of knowledge. "Lights? Sound?"

At the word 'sound', a stricken look washed over the skunk's face. She sat, rigid, in her chair for a moment before shaking her head, the movement jerky and uneven. "I...I will leave...I will leave Ioan to answer that."

Alarmed at the sudden change in her demeanor, Ioan looked between May and Sarah, the latter's face set in an expression of concern.

"May?" ey asked quietly.

"You must...you must forgive me. I have to...lay down. Or something." She swallowed several times in a row, as she always seemed to do when holding back tears.

The skunk stood and swayed, clutching at the edge of the table hard enough for claws to dent the wood.

"Of course, May Then My Name. Would you like to meet another—"

"Please discuss with Ioan," she whispered, eyes clenched shut.

Ioan forked quickly, the new instance taking May by the elbow and guiding her carefully toward the bedroom, leaving #Tracker and Sarah to sit in stunned silence, watching them leave.

There was a brief sensorium message, a few quiet words from eir fork, and ey nodded. "She panicked for a moment but is just going to disengage for a bit. She says to carry on since you and I might as well get to know each other, too. She'll reschedule for the near future."

"Alright," Sarah said, still frowning. "I know I said just chat, but I don't think I can just let that go. Can you explain what just happened?"

Ey sighed, nodded, and rubbed eir palms against eir slacks. "She will wind up getting overwhelmed by emotion sometimes, once every six months or so. It'll take her out for a few days then pass. She just got through one not too long ago—I think she contacted you the day after she got back."

"So this is another bout?"

"No, I don't think so. She's been kind of depressed over the last few days, which is different than when she overflows. She says it's not uncommon for her to 'crash' after really big events. She slows down and has a hard time enjoying things, which I suspect is common with depression. But also, little things will trigger large emotional reactions."

Sarah nodded. "That makes sense, at least. 'Trigger' is probably the right word, there. That certainly looked like a trauma response. One she was trying very hard to control, of course, but I could almost see the adrenaline rush through her."

“There’s been quite a bit of trauma of late, with her cocladists quitting.”

“Very much so, yes.”

Ey rubbed at eir eyes. They were burning, though whether from exhaustion or eir own emotions, ey couldn’t tell. “I have no clue what was the trigger there, though.”

Sarah waved her hand. “She and I will talk that through, it’s alright. How are you doing, though?”

“Me?” Ey frowned. Talking with a therapist had never been on the table for em through this whole endeavor, but ey was so wrapped up in it now... “I’m stressed. I’m tired and stressed and feeling like I’m just fumbling in the dark to find something that will keep May safe.”

“I’d be surprised if you weren’t stressed, honestly,” she said. A blink, a cone of silence fell around them. “Aliens visit one of the LVs and both your clades get wrapped up in it almost immediately, and then her cocladists quit in the midst of all those overwhelming emotions. There’s a lot on the table here. Do you worry she won’t be safe?”

Ioan shrugged helplessly. “I trust her when she says she’s not in any danger of anything like that and that she’s doing her best to stay grounded, but that doesn’t stop me from worrying.”

“That’s part of being in love, I think.”

A pang of that love tugged at em. Sarah must have seen it on eir face, as she smiled sympathetically to em.

“I don’t do well with loss. That’s why I’m here, really. On the System, I mean,” ey said, then recounted eir and May’s previous conversations about the death of eir parents and how that factored into eir anxieties.

The conversation wound around from there. Ey could tell that Sarah was guiding it gently, giving careful nudges toward positive topics when the heavier ones began to loom too near, but always keeping it productive, substantive. It was, ey realized, the sort of mirror image of what ey’d seen from much of May’s stanza. Subtle influencing borne out of years of reading and responding to the actions, words, and expressions of another. Rather than aiming to control, however, Sarah seemed to be doing all she could to keep the control in eir hands, acting almost as a tool for em to use to examine emself, though far more human than that made it sound.

It was refreshing. Too many Odists over the last twenty years, perhaps.

“Well,” Sarah said when they’d reached a lull in the conversation. “I should probably get going so that I can give you guys some space. I’ll be in touch though, okay? I’ll make sure to catch up with May Then My Name when she’s feeling a bit better.”

Ey nodded gratefully. “Thank you. This has been good for me, as well, so hopefully we can have the chance to talk again, too.”

“Of course. Some of my appointments with her will involve you as well, but I’m also happy working with just you, too. Scheduling is certainly less of a constraint here on the System.” She hesitated before adding, “Though for that, I may keep a separate fork for privacy’s sake.”

“Right, of course.” Ey stood when she did, walking with her down the hall to the door. “By the way, have you been in touch with True Name? The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream?”

“Yes. She got in touch with me yesterday, and we have our own appointment scheduled. Why do you ask?”

Ey hesitated a moment, unsure of whether to divulge the fact that In Dreams seemed to have decided not to connect the two. “I’m worried about her,” ey said eventually. “I just wanted to make sure she’s also working with someone.”

Sarah turned in the entryway, looking at em searchingly. “You know, back phys-side, I was your cocladist’s partner’s therapist, and we’ve stayed friends since uploading. They all but forced me to read the *History*. From what I could tell, your relationship with True Name did not seem to be one that included you worrying about her.”

“She’s changed a lot,” ey said, speaking slowly as ey tried to puzzle out eir growing empathy for the other skunk — along with the fact that this was a thing that needed puzzling out. “She’s been looking rough, lately, and even for someone I have a complicated relationship with, it’s tough to watch.”

“That I can understand. Does she look like May Then My Name? A furry?”

Ey nodded.

“That probably helps, too.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I should be going for real, now. I’ll be in touch to see about talking with you more soon, alright?”

“Of course,” ey said, bowing. “Thanks again. I think I needed that more than I knew.”

Back in their room, May and eir other instance were sitting cross-legged on the bed, the skunk trying for the dozenth time to teach em how to fold a paper crane.

Both looked up when ey entered and, though her cheeks still showed the marks of tears, ey was pleased to see May smiling.

Eir fork quit and as ey let the memories of the last hour settle into place, ey climbed into bed to take eir spot.

“I am sorry, my dear,” the skunk said, leaning forward to dot her nose against eirs. “Thank you for all of your help through that, both in here and out there.”

“Of course, May. Feeling better?”

She nodded, held up her paper crane, the bottom pinched between fingers, and tugged at its tail, making the wings flap. “I have been making things.”

“Other than a mess, you mean?”

Ey winced and laughed as the origami bird hit em in the face.

“I will have you know that all of the messy ones are your doing, Mx. Ioan Bălan,” she said primly. “Mine are perfectly neat and orderly.”

Still grinning, ey ruffled a hand through her headfur, tugging affectionately at an ear. “Right, right. Just like you.”

She chirped and tilted her head toward eir hand. “Did you have a good therapy session, my dear?”

Ey nodded. “I did. I wasn’t expecting it, but it was helpful. Sarah says she’ll be in touch to meet again soon.”

“Alright. I will not apologize again, but I do still feel bad for how I acted.”

“Shush, you’re fine. I think she, of all people, understands a reaction like that.” Ey picked up another square of paper from the stack and began trying to fold again. “But that’s enough talk of that for now. If you want dinner, you have to help me get at least one of these made.”

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 2 hours, 2 minutes

“To begin with an example concept, I have noticed that your common language is very irregular and relies heavily on a small vocabulary and nominal compounding,” Why Ask Questions said. “As we classify our languages into families based on several factors, including compounding, can each of the races expand on various features of their languages?”

“You speak on general terms?” Iska asked.

She nodded. “I am curious if you have noticed consistencies between the languages of the various races as they have been incorporated during the convergences.”

The secondracer brushed their paws over their whiskers, a gesture that seemed somewhere between grooming and a thoughtful habit. “I will speak to old *Nanon* as it is spoken in primarily secondrace sims. You have guessed that it relies heavily on compounding. We say ‘old’, but the language remains similar to its modern form as it was during the first convergence. That which we used to call old *Nanon* was, *lu...*synthetic language, you may call it. Inflectional. There were eight grammatical cases and three grammatical genders—”

“Apologies for interrupting,” Codrin said. “But do those genders map to the prefixes we used when addressing ourselves? *Uchles*, *achles*, and so on?”

Iska nodded. What had begun as a curiously outsized and clumsy gesture had settled into something more akin to how True Name and Dear might nod. “*Anem*, yes, recorder Codrin Bălan. They were, *lu...*you might say animate, inanimate, and conceptual. In later evolutions of the language, they began to define levels of respect, and then mark roles in society as they fell out of use in cases other than referring to individuals.”

Codrin nodded, made note of this, and flipped to the next page as the discussion continued.

Ey was finding the linguistics portion of the discussion particularly fascinating. Although many of the scientific topics incorporated history, this was the most easily digestible for em. Both Why Ask Questions and Sarah had studied up on the topic intensely during the days and weeks leading up to the meetings.

It would be interesting to compare notes with Codrin#Artemis, and ey was looking forward to the merger down the line. Ey wasn’t sure yet whether this was accompanied by a desire for the talks to be over, for there was also the fact that ey missed home greatly.

Ah well. Until then, ey dedicated as much of eir attention as ey could manage to keeping up on eir job as recorder. Each of the races continued in turn, describing various features and aspects of the language or languages of theirs which had made the transition through the convergences.

Each, that is, except the firstracers, who did their best to express the features of their mode of communication, apologizing for being unable to describe the languages that had existed during their biological period.

“Thank you,” Why Ask Questions said. “I have a few questions on the use of metaphor and analo—”

Most of those around the table jumped as a second instance of True Name appeared at the end of the table beside the fountain, bowed, and said, “My apologies for interrupting. #Castor, please merge immediately.”

After the second skunk quit, True Name #Castor frowned. The frown deepened, then transmuted to one that bordered on panic.

“Leader True Name, please explain,” Turun Ka said.

She stood, composed herself, and bowed toward the Artemisian delegates. “My apologies. That was a second instance of myself bearing news. She quit and merged back with me so that I may have her memories. It was the fastest way to receive news. I would like to call a halt to the current topic and make an announcement.”

The firstracer tilted its head up in assent. Codrin scanned the rest of the delegates and found a look of concern on Iska’s face, one recognizable from discussions on forking. Stolon appeared nonplussed, and Artante intensely focused.

“There has been an incident aboard Artemis with the delegation regarding one of our representatives.”

Why Ask Questions sat bolt upright.

Could they have discovered the subterfuge? Codrin thought. Ey frowned and scooted eir chair back from the table a fraction of an inch, prepared to bolt.

“I will explain in full and then accept questions,” the skunk was saying. “As I have mentioned, and perhaps you may have heard from your counterparts on Artemis via relayed messages, my entire clade struggles with the concept of time skew. It recalls a portion of our lives that is...indescribable. Needless to say, that became too much for Why Ask Question’s counterpart, and she lost control in grand fashion and quit in the middle of proceedings.”

“That should not have been possible,” Iska muttered. “Apologies. Please continue, leader True Name.”

The skunk hesitated, frowning. “We will discuss that aspect after this, perhaps. The reason that I wish to address this before we have a conversation is that, in the process of our party transferring to Artemis, Why Ask Question’s counterpart was replaced with a separate fork of mine named Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help. She is another up-tree instance of myself, which I believed to be acceptable, but we have discussed the topic of individuation, and as both representative Why Ask Questions and Answers Will Not Help were forked from me 222 years ago, they have long since become separate individuals.

“The reasons for this deception are complicated, relating to the origins of both of the forks’ creation.” She clasped her paws on front of herself and bowed. “Please accept my apologies on this matter.”

There was silence around the table for a few seconds, and then both parties set up separate cones of silence.

True Name sat back down and faced the rest of the delegates on her side of the table. “Apologies are due to you three as well for being kept in the dark. We had our reasons, for doing so, which I will explain during our next break.”

Codrin nodded. “I’d appreciate a more solid explanation, but I guess I should also say that our instances on Artemis had guessed this, as well. Codrin#Artemis’s theory was that, as Why Ask Question’s role was to manage sentiment sys-side and Answers Will Not Help’s was to manage phys-side.”

The skunk sat back, blinked rapidly, then laughed. “Well, then.”

“The best laid schemes o’ skunks an’ Jonases,” Why Ask Questions said, giggling. “Gang aft agley.”

“Well, that aside, I am unsure what to do with the remainder of the news from my position here on Castor,” True Name said. “Mx. Bălan will remember some of what we struggled with from eir meeting with Michelle. My counterpart has been holding her ground against it as best as possible but I suppose it was not the case with Answers Will Not Help. With them being on Artemis, her instance here on Castor will not receive a merge.”

“And now we will have to see just how fucked we are,” Why Ask Questions said. “I do not imagine that they will be all that pleased with us.”

“Was this an attempt to control the situation? The convergence?” Sarah asked.

True Name smiled wryly. “Your *History* was a very sensational book, Mx. Bălan, was it not? Please remember, Ms. Genet, that it is only ever our goal to guide and protect. We did what we felt was necessary to ensure the continuity and stability of the System.”

She nodded, but didn’t look convinced.

“The Artemisians are coming back,” Tycho noted. “Should we?”

The skunk shrugged, nodded, and dropped the cone of silence.

“Thank you for your honesty in this matter, leader True Name,” Turun Ka said. “We have a few questions to ask you before making our statement in turn.”

She perked up at that, nodding. “By all means.”

“The first question: you spoke of the reasons for the origins of these two individuals. What were their origins?”

“The System—the original one you observed at the L5 point which we call Lagrange—seceded from the political systems on Earth 221 years ago. My root instance, Michelle Hadje, was on the Council of Eight at that time. Due to the difficulties that I mentioned before, she created ten forks to pick up various interests, and then retired. I was the fork which wound up primarily in the political arena, and along with another clade not present here, I aided in the campaign for secession.”

Why Ask Questions picked up from there, so smoothly that Codrin suspected that this scenario had been wargamed as thoroughly as any. “There were many aspects to that political referendum, both sys-side—that is, on the embedded side—and phys-side. True Name spread the work required for those aspects out over instances of her own. Answers Will Not Help and I were forked at the same time, both to encourage a positive attitude towards secession.”

“Why Ask Questions focused on this task on the System, while Answers Will Not Help focused on sentiment phys-side through the usual text channels,” True Name said. “As each already had a specialization relating to two sides of a political event, we made the decision to do so here as well.”

When it was clear that there wouldn’t be any further explanation from the Odists, Turun Ka said, “Thank you. Second question: what was it that you hoped to gain from this strategy?”

“My goal in this case is the same as my goal during Secession and Launch—the effort that led to this vehicle—which is to maintain the stability and continuity of our existence. I do not wish to govern or control, but I do have at my disposal a set of tools to help in my aims.”

There was a silent conversation between the Artemisians during which Codrin finished up the notes ey’d

been taking on the discussion. True Name was being surprisingly honest about the whole endeavor. Ey was sure there were some aspects that she was withholding, but the initial announcement and answers that she'd provided thus far contained no outright lies that ey could tell.

Perhaps this too is a way of shaping their responses? Or maybe she just can't register them well enough to tell how best to lie, ey thought, then sighed. *And maybe I'm just being too cynical.*

The silent conversation among the other delegates wrapped up, and Turun Ka spoke once more. "Thank you once again for your honesty. This event is one part of the confirmation we have required, and the talks will now move on to the next stage, after a one hour common time break."

The skunk looked taken aback, nearly speechless. "Confirmation...? Can you explain—"

"Now is not the time for this discussion, leader True Name," Artante said, voice gentle but insistent enough to silence her. "We will have that discussion when the convergence progresses to the appropriate stage. For now, we offer condolences for the loss of that instance of representative Answers Will Not Help."

And with that, the Artemisian delegation stood, bowed, and returned to their rest area.

"Well, I will be damned," True Name said, then laughed.

"What just happened?" Sarah asked.

Why Ask Questions was laughing as well. She shrugged and grinned to the psychologist. "Fuck if I know. Come on. The least we can do is make some guesses over the next hour. I need a drink."

Codrin Bălan#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 1 day, 1 hour, 58 minutes

As suggested, Codrin and Sarah wound up in the courtyard.

There seemed to be no immediate recovery from the events of the past hour. There was no conversation to be had, no words that could be spoken to express so singular an event. There had been a...was it a death? Answers Will Not Help had made it less than three days into the conference, and already she was gone.

And ey had witnessed True Name...was it sharing in confidence, a request for companionship, or something else?

Ey felt dazed, unmoored from reality. Ey could feel more clearly the way that time clung to em in a way it couldn't back home, back on Castor. It was no stronger now than it had been at the beginning of the day, but, as might happen when one remembers that one is breathing, ey was suddenly and intensely aware of it.

"Codrin?"

Sarah's voice jolted em back to the present, and ey smiled tiredly to her. "Sorry. I was elsewhere. What's up?"

She laughed and waved away the comment. "It's alright. That was a whole lot all at once. I was asking how True Name was when you left her. Is she alright?"

"Yeah. She was sleeping. I don't know how much they- well, how much she has been sleeping of late, but given that she seems constantly exhausted, I'm glad she's getting at least a little."

"This does seem to be taking its toll on her. When this is all over, I'd like to sit down with you and her and learn a bit more about this." She hesitated, then added, "Or at least with you, depending on how willing she is."

Ey nodded. Ey could feel the knowledge of what ey'd learned sitting heavily in eir gut, clawing at eir insides. The Name, the pronouns, feeling the owner of the Name in the system. It wanted out, at least in some way, but there was no one other than True Name ey'd be able to share that with from now until eternity.

Swallowing down the feeling clutching at eir throat, ey said instead, "You know, when she was laying down to nap, she said something like, 'I need someone to anchor me and you are very good at that'. Come to think of it, I got a note from Codrin#Castor that Tycho said similar earlier, that he said I'm 'grounding'."

Sarah nodded readily. "You are, yes. Why do you bring it up?"

"It's not something I'd really considered about myself." Ey spoke slowly, piecing together eir thoughts as ey went. "I've been questioning my path in life moving forward. I've been very passive, very much like a recorder. I'm good at being an amanuensis, but I also feel like I get dragged into it more often than I choose to do so."

“Does being a grounding person help with that?”

Ey shrugged. “I suppose so. Empathy helps, because it lets me understand what’s happening more readily, lets me build a more complete story. The way Tycho and True Name put it, though, sounds...I don’t know, more active.”

She nodded again, waiting in silence until ey was done speaking.

“Ioan’s moved on to theatre, Codrin#Pollux is a librarian now, and I’m just doing the same thing I was doing almost a hundred years ago. This whole thing about being grounding combined with the need for something new just has me thinking about what to do with my life.”

“It’s a complex question, Codrin. Hell, even when we were limited to ninety or a hundred years, folks would talk about having midlife crises, questioning what it was that they really wanted to do, and a lot of times it came down to feeling a lack of agency. Psychologists would...” She trailed off, looking over eir shoulder. “Well, lets pick this up later. Artante and Turun Ko are on their way.”

Ey turned to look, noticing the two Artemisians moving slower than expected. A moment’s thought showed that ey was still running at a skew of +1.2 as the meeting had been, so ey dropped back down to common time.

Turun Ko dipped its head as Artante bowed, saying, “Recorder Codrin Bălan, representative Sarah Genet. Do you know where the scientists are?”

“They’re probably down the hall,” Codrin said, returning the bow. “Every time they sneak off, they head for an alcove there and talk as much as they can.”

“We are pleased-excited to witness mutual-shared enjoyment,” Turun Ko said, voice bouncing between registers in amusement.

The fourtracer laughed. “I am not surprised. Will you join us in finding them?”

Codrin led them down the hall past their rest area. The hallway continued beyond, though it ended at a flat wall that ey supposed must be an exit when the place was not in use for a convergence. To the side, though, there was an alcove, windows on the three walls looking out over a garden. It seemed perpetually sunny, and every time ey’d seen them there, the thirdracer had been sunning themself while they chatted.

“*Nahi*, recorder Codrin Bălan,” Stolon said, then sat up straighter when they noticed Turun Ko, bowing from a seated position to the other delegates. “*Rehas’les*.”

Ey bowed. “Apologies for interrupting. I figured I’d get us all together as suggested.”

“*Ka, ka*,” Stolon said, bobbing their head.

There was a ping against eir sense of time, a sensation of insistent pressing.

“Please?” Turun Ko said. “We will speak at synchronized skew.”

Ey frowned, relaxing against the sensation and feeling eir control over time diminish. After a moment of looking uncomfortable, both Sarah and Tycho nodded as well.

There was a brief lurch as time skewed quickly up to two point five, moving far more quickly and with more surety than eir experiments up to that point.

“Thank you, recorder Codrin Bălan, representative Sarah Genet, scientist Tycho Brahe.” The firsttracer eased back, settling onto its haunches and tail and clasping its hands together over its front, which appeared to be the default resting state for its race.

“How do you feel the convergence is going?” Artante asked.

Tycho picked at a corner of the stone sill, shrugging. “Well enough, I suppose. I’m feeling really in over my head.”

Stolon tilted their head far to the side. “In over...?”

“Nu...nukupot...kopotla...” he stammered. He had apparently held true to his promise to learn more of the language.

“Iha! Ka, ka, nukupotla, not-knowing?”

“Something like that. I don’t know what’s going on, and don’t have much to contribute. Not much knowledge to give, I mean, when we’re talking about social stuff.”

“Irr, ka, I also.” The thirdracer made a frustrated gesture with one of their hands and then shifted to drape languidly over the edge of the windowsill, hands hanging nearly down to the ground and feet kicking lazily behind them in the alcove. It was a nearly childlike move that Codrin found incredibly endearing. Something more...well, not human, but perhaps personable in this otherwise impersonal conference.

“I went into academia because– sorry, into studying as one of the only things I do in my life because that seemed to be the only way I could just do what it was that I wanted,” Tycho said. “No commitments, no distractions. Just the stars and math.”

Stolon stretched out long enough to grab a curly-edged leaf from one of the short bushes, picking at it between dull claws. “I also, ka. I am not...combination? Child? I am from before embedding. Before before, I also study. I study stars and inside planets. I also in over my head. I am knowing how convergence works, so I am here, but still I dream of stars.”

“I was on my way into academia as well,” Codrin said, filing the thirdracer’s use of ‘child’ and ‘combination’ away for later questioning. “But I guess my chosen interests align a bit more with politics than astronomy.”

“Anem, anem.”

Turun Ko looked to Sarah.

“Stressful,” she said. “I really don’t know what to make of earlier.”

“I am, lu...sorry that your friend exits,” Stolon said, and Artante nodded in agreement. “I do not know how, Iska looks into this.”

Turun Ko bowed its head. “We wish to speak-discuss with you the events-proceedings from earlier.”

“To begin with,” Artante said, picking up the conversation. “Do you have any questions that we can answer? This may inform the discussion.”

When Sarah and Tycho did not speak, ey asked, “I don’t imagine there’s much you’ll be able to answer so soon in the talks, but leader Turun Ka mentioned that deception had been wargamed. Is this the type of thing that’s expected at a convergence?”

“Yes, recorder Codrin Bălan. The possibility-probability that a new race-culture-species practices-engages-in deception is one item on a checklist of one beginning and two endings.”

“Beginning? Endings?” Ey shook eir head. “Well, stepping back, what do you mean by checklist?”

“Convergences are processes. Processes may be smooth-easy or rough-difficult. It is our goal-aim to ensure smoothness-ease, as I think-suspect must be that of leader True Name.”

This was the most that Turun Ko had said at once over the last few days and, despite its statuesque nature, ey was keen on drawing more out of one so aligned with eir own goals. “So you have a list of items and possibilities

that might happen during a convergence and we're making our way down the list?"

"Anem."

"And the beginning was first contact?"

"Anem."

"I am studying convergence also. I learn your language, not so well, maybe." Stolon chattered their teeth in amusement. "Also I learn path of convergence. Items on checklist, leader Turun Ka says. We have list of steps for convergence, and each of us...*jaruvi*...see? Notice...each of us notice what you say and what you do, and we complete checklist. I study this before."

Ey frowned. Ey wanted nothing more than to write this down, to do as ey always had done and incorporate this into a story, but something about this meeting seemed to preclude that possibility. Something about it was meant only for this space.

"I see," ey said. "And that you have two endings implies that there is a goal, *anem*?"

"Anem." Turun Ko lifted its snout. "You will join-converge with us as fifthrace or you will not."

There was silence within that bubble of fast-time, and ey imagined that it was em, Tycho, and Sarah struggling to process this information while the three Artemisians waited patiently for the next step in the conversation—or perhaps the next item on the checklist.

The pressure to ask the correct question weighing down eir shoulders, Codrin nonetheless stood up straighter. "Is there a correct ending?"

A smile tugged at the corner of Artante's mouth, leading to a sense of relief within em. Ey suspected that em asking that very question might have been an item on their list.

"Unot. The endings share equality-correctness."

"Will the decision be mutual?" Sarah asked.

"Ka, representative Sarah Genet. The decision-ending must be mutual-shared before the Ansible-transmission-mechanisms will be unlocked-ungated-opened on both Castor and Artemis, *anem*?"

"It has to be," Codrin said. "If one side, as a whole, did not want to join, they wouldn't turn on their Ansible for general use."

Artante nodded. "And the other, seeing that, might feel enough unease that the decision would become mutual, even if it had not started that way."

"Are we on the path towards becoming fifthrace, then?" ey asked.

After a pause, Turun Ko said, "The list does not work-function in this way, recorder Codrin Bălan. The decision-inflection-point is preceded by a cloud-tree-collection-net-pile-table-graph of interconnected actions-items-steps."

It took em a few seconds to plow through the litany of synonyms to reach the heart of the statement. "To be clear, there are a bunch of steps leading up to this decision point?"

"Anem."

"Can you tell us what they are?"

"Nu. We cannot."

"There are some different shades of meaning to that word, recorder Turun Ko," Sarah said thoughtfully. "'Cannot' can mean that you aren't able to, or that you are unwilling to. Can you expand on that? Are you able

to, I mean?”

“We cannot,” it repeated, and Codrin once more caught that ghost of a smile on Artante’s face.

“Either could be true, but that’s not the correct conversation to have right now,” ey guessed.

At this Artante laughed. “You learn quickly, recorder Codrin Bălan.”

Ey smiled, shrugged. “It’s my job to pay attention.”

Stolon bobbed their head. “*Anem*, recorder Codrin Bălan. We find patterns and say ‘yes yes’ or ‘no no’ and do next thing. You hear, ‘this is not time to have that conversation.’ We say because we use checklist.”

“Alright. You can just call me Codrin, by the way.”

“And you can just call me Sarah.”

“Tycho.”

“*Ka, ka*, can call Stolon also.”

“*Aën*. Thank you Codrin. We will continue to use full names during the talks, but you may call me Artante outside of them.”

“I will remain-always-be Turun Ko.”

There was another moment’s silence as they processed and the Artemisians waited. Tycho and Stolon drifted back into quiet conversation, the secondracer plucking at another leaf or two.

There was so much to take in here, but on further examination, it all made quite a bit of sense. The Artemisians had prepared for this event as thoroughly as had the Odists and Jonases. Of course there would be things that would happen—or at least could be reasonably expected to happen—throughout the convergence. The Artemisians simply had a head start in that they had history to lean on: they’d been through at least three convergences prior to this one.

“I don’t imagine there was anything like what happened with Answers Will Not Help in your steps,” ey said, finally.

“*Nu*. There are analogous-similar topics. Psychosis and time-sickness have been seen-observed in the past. This is why quitting-exiting-death are prevented-illegal in the conference and rest areas. That representative Answers Will Not Help quit-exited-died is upsetting-distressing-concerning. Representative Iska has undertaken the task of exploring-examining the event.”

“Right. I’m sure True Name and Turun Ka are discussing this, too.”

Artante shook her head. “They are having a different discussion. It is not the time for them to have the conversation of steps and checklists.”

Sarah frowned. “Should we tell her about this discussion?”

After a hesitation, the fourtracer replied, “There are steps on the checklist for if you do and if you do not.”

Sounds like a no, then, Codrin thought, working to maintain a neutral expression. For all their talk about staying away from manipulation and subtlety, there sure seemed to be plenty going. It was as Tycho said: they seemed to be working on some higher level, less comprehensible to em as a mere mortal. Ey supposed five thousand years of flying around through space would change how one engages with the world no matter what.

“And how about you two?” ey said.

Turun Ko tilted its head far to the side. “*Lubaenâtam?*”

“Do you two have steps of your own? Desired outcomes?”

“You ask an interesting question,” Artante said, sounding thoughtful. “I want what’s best, and with each passing conversation between delegations, the meaning of ‘what’s best’ shifts. I’m sorry that I can’t put it more clearly than that, though I can assure you that I consider us to be together in this: what’s best for the Artemisians will also be what’s best for you.”

“And you, Turun Ko?”

It straightened up, joints and synthetic flesh shifting smoothly in a well-articulated dance, as though it was running through some internal checklist to correct its posture. “I want-desire stories. There is no combination of steps-items on our list that will not result-in-lead-to stories, so I will not be disappointed. I have received-learned many already, and I am content-happy-satisfied-fulfilled and will remain-continue-to-be so even if you become-turn-into the most exceptionally-stupendously boring-droll numbskulls-sadsacks-dipshits in the visible-observable universe.”

Codrin and Sarah both stared at the firstracer before laughing, joined by Artante. Even she seemed taken aback by the sudden injection of humor.

“I guess we have proven interesting, if nothing else,” Sarah said.

“*Anem*,” Turun Ko confirmed, and the single word came out nearly a song.

Conversation waned. Silence. Comfortable. Warm. The six of them seemed content to bask and watch the shadows of leaves play on the wall. Ey was tired, ey realized. Dreadfully exhausted. The warmth of the sun, even standing up, seemed to be doing its best to lull em to sleep. Stolon also seemed to be enjoying it quite a bit, stretching languidly, speaking lazily.

“I am not worrying.” They poked a torn bit of the leaf into their mouth and chewed thoughtfully before spitting it out with a choking sound. “*Natarla...*”

Laughing, Tycho said, “Not so tasty?”

“*Nu, nu*,” Stolon said, chattering their teeth again.

Codrin shook emself to wakefulness, rubbing at eir face with a hand. “Why aren’t you worried?”

The thirddracer shrugged, tail flipping about in a wide arc as they rolled over onto their back, flexible enough to drape over the windowsill and sun their belly that way. “Convergence is convergence. Is to be happy and safe, *anem*? Is for leaders and representatives. Scientist, am not worrying. Stars are not lying. Artemis is not lying. Physics is not lying. If you do not join Artemis, will, *lu...* think about? Will think about you, but good to be happy and safe, and science is not lying.”

Throughout Stolon’s short speech, Tycho sat up straighter, his grin growing wider. “Yeah, I like that. Science is not lying. It can’t, really, can it? Politics can lie, and maybe that’s why I hate it so much.”

“*Ka, ka.*”

“And I’d think about you too, if things go that direction. I honestly didn’t really think about that being on the table until after the conference started and we began actually interacting with each other, and now I have to admit that I’m really hoping it *does* work out. For us joining, I mean. I like it here.”

The two scientists seemed to have fallen back into their own world, leaving the others to stand by and watch.

“Two of a kind,” ey heard Sarah murmur, and ey nodded, grinning along with her.

“Is home, *anem*. I am liking it, but I am also only living here.”

Tycho nodded, “I’m only on Castor and Pollux, yeah.”

“Is Pollux same?”

“Yeah, they started out identical, but they’ve diverged over time.” He frowned, shrugged. “I bet Tycho#Pollux is feeling awful now, missing all of this. Or will when he learns, I guess.”

“No Tycho on Lagrange construct?”

“Nope, I invested fully. Did you leave an instance of yourself back on your original system?”

“Lu...yes, but they exited after convergence and distance grew. Friends say that Stolon got sad, spent all of time thinking about Artemis.” They lifted their snout to peer up at him. “Tycho will join if possible, *anem*?”

Codrin also looked to Tycho. The astronomer was already grinning widely. It was far more positive emotion than ey’d seen on his face to date, and ey couldn’t imagine any other answer than what came next.

“*Anem!* Of course I will.”

Ioan Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 72 days, 23 hours, 48 minutes
(Lagrange-Pollux transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 41 minutes)

Ioan,

I must admit, I'm really not sure what to say about all of this. Thank you for waiting until you have a substantial amount to send to me, at least. Dear threw a little tantrum about this "We have received messages over the last few days" bit, but I appreciate having an initial digest to work with so that I'm not left a fretting mess (as you say you were) by the simple news that, oh look, aliens! I threatened to bundle it up in blankets until it was immobile for a few hours, though, and it calmed down. I may do so anyway.

Four races! Five thousand years! One language! Have you learned any of that, yourself? And yet maybe it's all a dream! Truly fascinating. As you can imagine, Dear latched onto that quite quickly.

How is May Then My Name taking it? You mention True Name, but have you heard from any other Odists? Any other friends? If Lagrange is anything like Pollux, people are talking about little else.

The news broke over here much as it sounds as though it did on Lagrange: with tightly controlled excitement. There is no doubt that the powers that be continue their work across all three Systems, but it's always fascinating to see. The amount of bafflement was outweighed by the amount of excitement. The excitement also outweighed the amount of fear. Everyone's eager for every scrap of news that they can get.

How much of the delay in sending word to us was due to True Name and her friends? I imagine she had words about the first message, at least, but a whole week's worth of messages feels like a good deal must have been going on.

No matter, though. We're all eagerly awaiting every little snippet that we can get from you. I know that you won't get this for another, what, 30? 31? And that a month from when you sent it! I know you won't get it for a while, is what I'm saying, but please know that you're free to pass on information directly from here on out! We'll be learning plenty from the news we're allowed to see over here, anyway, so any juicy tidbits in addition to that will be greatly appreciated.

I am continually confronted with the ways in which we have diverged. May Then My Name and Dear#Castor mentioned how upset they were by the idea of time manipulation, but my Dear...well, it did not seem pleased with the idea, but its reaction was not nearly so visceral. It simply got a sour look on its face and said "*I do not like the idea of a place where I cannot fork. Can you imagine a place so boring?*"

BĂLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

The last few years have seen a drastic reduction in the amount of times that Dear has overflowed. I don't know if ey's been passing on every instance from Castor, or if you have been passing on every letter in turn, but it sounds like the same is true of Dear#Castor as well, for which I'm thankful.

I'm sorry to hear about May Then My Name, though. Discussion of 'cracks showing' always seems to crop up whenever one of our loved ones goes through a rough period such as this, and your news spurred a conversation between the three of us plus Serene, and despite the relative quiescence of Dear's symptoms, such as they are, we have noticed an uptick of oddities in Odists over here, as well. Not just Odists, of course, but a few of the older clades. Hell, a Jonas even went haywire a few weeks back.

Still, I'm happy to hear that everyone's tallies are lining up well: far fewer old clades over here are experiencing such symptoms than feared after the publication of *Perils*, for which just about everyone is happy. No one wants to deal with an impending burden of insanity on one's two hundredth birthday, so to hear that it's only a fraction and that maybe there's something that can be done (or so we hear; has there been news of psychotherapy as a treatment over there? I've been hearing whispers) has kept the population at large from freaking out. I imagine you have it worse, though, given the relative skew towards dispersionistas on the LVs; I bet early taskers are freaking out.

Either way, Ioan, I am concerned for you and your partner. Our lives are informed by trauma, and the trauma that we hold in particular leads to a sort of conservatism that is particularly focused on our loved ones. I know that you want nothing more than to see May Then My Name continue to thrive, and I know that seeing her struggle is incredibly painful as it touches on the roots of those very same traumas. I know that the two of you will make it through alright, but, as this is in the clade-eyes-only section, do remember to keep yourself safe. You have Douglas. You have Debarre and End Waking (are they back together? Please say yes). You have A Finger Pointing. You have so many delightful friends I've yet to even meet and some I'll never have the chance to. When you need, nudge May Then My Name to her support network and lean on your own.

IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

The following is in strict confidence with you and you alone, Ioan. I've received permission to share from all parties involved.

I don't know how much of Codrin#Castor and my messages between each other that you've read, or if that would even have helped, but watching the slow individuation of a loved one is an experience unique even from watching oneself individuate. The Dear I am in love with feels much like the Dear I fell in love with decades ago, and yet slowly the Dear on Castor begins to feel like a stranger to me.

Dear#Castor sounds so much more conservative—in its approach to life, of course, rather than that of the division of the Odists—than what I've grown used to. The prairie remains the same. The house remains the same. Codrin#Castor's struggles with agency and directedness in life feel as unfamiliar to me as you have mentioned. You have taken control of your life as I have taken control of my own, each in our own way. To put this on the Odists feels at once unfair, unfortunate, and totally accurate. May Then My Name has changed you in so many irreversible ways, just as Dear changed me so many years ago. Changed you, too, for when we merged and then

diverged, you were no longer the same Ioan that remained behind. You were the type of Ioan who could fall in love with May Then My Name in the first place.

So when Dear gave up the prairie and dragged Serene over to build out our little world into something grander, a place more well-rounded than just flat plains, we were both ready because, hey, this was Dear, right? So we built out our little world of plains and hills, forests and lakes. And then that spur-of-the-moment shift redirected our lives in unforeseen ways. With the acceptance of variety, Serene moved in to continue her work, and then her elliptical orbit passed through our lives for a while before she drifted away again.

Despite lingering taboo, I am not ashamed of having wound up, for that one short year, in a relationship with two members of the same clade. None of us are; not even Dear and Serene, they promise us. It's not shame that keeps me from telling those on Castor about this. It is the completely alien way that those who feel as though they ought to *be* us interact with the world that leads to such. I feel as though I am unable to tell Codrin#Castor about what happened because to do so feels like explaining the alien to someone who really, truly, in all ways ought to know. Ey ought to be able to feel the same things that I feel, correct? Ey ought to also love Serene, oughtn't ey? Ey must, for ey is me, is ey not?

And yet ey is not. I cannot bring up our relationship with Serene because Codrin#Castor—that is, specifically *me*#Castor—does not have the same thoughts around intraclade romantic relationships that I do, and by virtue of the direction that the Odists steered us (or, as feels more accurate, crashed with us headlong and heedless) into this future, we are now completely different in that way.

The Dear that I live with has, in comparison to Dear#Castor, relaxed and moved on to an approach to life that is far more laid back. As a result, we *all* have, me included.

Also, as an internal postscript, I should note that the three of us are all still deeply in love with Serene and she with us, so please do not misconstrue the past tense above, but good Lord. Two foxes in the same house? Never again.

This is the end of the private content of the letter. Please redact this in its entirety should you pass my thoughts on to Castor (though of course you may talk about it with May Then My Name; she'll understand the sensitive nature of the topic).

END IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

END BĂLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

I am settling in quite well at the university and they are as excited as I am to receive the inevitable dump of information that comes from Artemis. It is a librarian's dream. I have seen quite the bump in my reputation, oddly enough, just by having my cocladist's name attached to the project over on Castor. No complaints, but honestly, what is a librarian to do with reputation?

Pass on our love to May Then My Name and tell her that we are all incredibly happy to hear that there is no more news of broken noses in this letter.

Codrin#Castor, know that you've got us backing you as well. The world lies before you and is not nearly so black and white as it might seem. Search for those shades of gray that allow you to take a step forward.

It's been more than twenty years (or forty, if you count splitting from you, Ioan), and it still feels incredibly weird talking myself up, doesn't it? If nothing else, take it from yourself that it's possible.

Cheers,
Codrin#Pollux

Codrin,

Wonderful as always to hear from you. This will, of course, reach you long after the point where I could answer any pertinent questions about Artemis that I have not already done so by forwarding on what I've learned, myself. The amount of updates quickly got to the point where it didn't feel worth it to try and summarize them at all, so you're getting them all. Besides, you can summarize as well as I.

Dramatic, isn't it? Convergence! I just sent you a letter earlier today about the latest from Tycho on Artemis, so I don't have too much to add, really.

I'm curious about how things are working out over there with True Name and the leadership. We haven't heard anything yet from Castor about how she's doing over there, but it's always good to get a fuller picture of how things are going when they are, yet again, involved in something enormous.

Hell, on that note, how is the sentiment overall? There's been a lot of chatter; on the night of the announcement, we had to cancel a performance due to how excited everyone was. A Finger Pointing was quick to capitalize this, and went on a tear of digging up every single production that she could find about aliens to start scheduling. When she found a relative paucity of such, she started digging into sci-fi, going all the way back to R.U.R. I have, surprising no one, been contracted to write one for the occasion, and I've been doing so with what information that I have.

(Also, to your question: yes, End Waking and Debarre have settled back into dating. I do wish you'd gotten a chance to meet End Waking. He is a delight to be around in his own coarse, woodsy way.)

I'll pass on the snippets of secondrace language that I've received so far. Codrin promises that the grammar and dictionary will be forthcoming (probably in the next few days, if I'm calculating the transmission times right, but says that True Name has suggested that any large messages from Artemis be sent after a thorough evaluation. I can't tell if that means an evaluation of their contents or an evaluation of any hidden intent on the part of the Artemisians.

BĂLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

CODRIN BĂLAN#POLLUX INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

This is in confidence.

It was interesting hearing the story of your triad (is it still a triad? I was unable to parse to what extent Serene may still be a part of your little polycule, though it does sound as though there is a healthier distance between you all now) in your words. Serene actually contacted us a few months back to pass on the story, herself, also in confidence. She made us promise to keep it to ourselves, even from you. I pinged her with the fact that your letter contained this information to make sure that I could confirm this with you, and she said yes.

I found the whole story as she told it to be terribly fascinating. There was a brief twinge of surprise at the idea of an intraclade relationship, but it was not the first that I've heard of since Launch. They're hardly common

back here, but neither are they unheard of as individuation increases and taboos lessen. Still, this is the closest that we've been to one. No friends, even, just right into our own clades.

It sparked a long, drawn out discussion between May, Douglas and I, actually. Less, I think, because there was any chance of that between the three of us than because Douglas is hungry for essentially every bit of information about the clade that he can get his hands on—though, May being May, she would leap at the chance to get closer to him, but the most he is comfortable with from anyone is friendship and physical affection (he will pet May for hours if she'll let him—and she always does).

On my end, I was mostly interested in May's thoughts on the matter as, except for a drunken (very drunken) night with A Finger Pointing, the two of us together have at most friendly relationships with any other Odists. We've not talked about that night with anyone else, either, and hardly even with each other. When I brought it up, both May and A Finger Pointing laughed at me and told me to "get the fuck over it" because apparently that's just how theatre nerds are.

However, when I asked May about it directly, she confided in me (and again, the anxious part of me compels me to note that I have permission to share this) that nearly seven decades back, she was nudged toward another Odist (one from the first stanza, though she did not specify which) by True Name, and a fork of her remained in a relationship with them for some time. Perhaps they are still together. May does not know. When pressed as to how this worked, she said that the instance who began that relationship was "no longer me". I did not ask further.

Either way, it's something of a relief to be able to talk about this openly (or, well 'openly') with you. Keeping a secret about one's own cocladist from them is uncomfortable.

That digression aside, I take well your meaning about the divergence of Castor and Pollux. I see the divergence in you two, and while it has mostly just been an interesting point to consider at times, occasionally it becomes very pertinent very quickly. I have often admired the ways in which you moved beyond the Bălans of old. It's nice to see proof that we can truly own our lives—which is not to say that I don't feel that about myself, but in comparison with #Castor's current malaise, it comes in stark contrast.

I don't know how Dear would take a nudge from you, and it certainly isn't my place, but I do plan on helping Codrin over there however I can. I've been discussing this with May as well, and we are brainstorming suggestions for new paths for em. I don't think that ey could manage hopping right into life in academia as you have, both because of the differences in the university between the two LVs as well as the differences in your histories over the last few decades.

I also want to discuss this with May as well, though I will await your permission. I do not think that she is at as much risk of conservatism as it sounds like Dear#Castor is, but there have been several conversations between us now regarding the directions that the clade that I'll speak to in normal clade-eyes-only, as I plan on sharing these messages with #Castor.

I'll keep you up to date either way.

END CODRIN BĂLAN#POLLUX INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

While I'm sure that another Odist has already passed on this information, you should know that two Odists have quit recently, May One Day Death Itself Not Die and I Do Not Know, I Do Not Know, leaving behind no forks. The

Ode is now ninety-seven.

May and In Dreams were there at the end, and this has led to an increased sense of urgency when it comes to the clade approaching their affliction. To that end, several Odists are working with a psychologist recommended from folks on Castor (the Sarah Genet mentioned in the messages I've been forwarding) to discuss paths forward.

These events took place during May's aforementioned overflowing spell, which led to it being prolonged to nearly a week. She has made it through, and my nose remains intact despite getting tackled, as usual. She has recovered well despite some lingering depression, but this, in combination with some of the news from Castor which you also will have received before this, has me more worried for her than usual. She may be a little terror, but she is my little terror.

All of them seem to be dealing with this in their own way. May and Dear overflow in their own ways, End Waking's desire for solitude will override his relationship with Debarre for a time, and now this over on the Death Itself stanza.

Can you do me a favor when you get a chance, and let me know how True Name#Pollux is doing in this respect in particular? Doesn't need to be anything too in-depth, but, well, she is a part of this as always, and clearly there is something going on with her here.

END BĂLAN CLADE-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Pass on my love. I miss you and yours.

Ioan Bălan

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-minus 0 days, 2 hours, 53 minutes

Despite the burst of excitement, the talks remained surprisingly banal. Even when the topic of the Odists' deception and the troubles that True Name#Artemis still suffered on Artemis arose, the talks still felt like a political summit. The conference was still a conference, with its cloth-covered table and shitty pens, its uncomfortable chairs and weary participants.

Ey counted emself among the weariest of them all. Tycho was still in his stride, and Sarah was keeping up well enough, though she remained fairly quiet throughout, focusing on watching rather than speaking or taking notes. Why Ask Questions had proceeded as though the news had never happened, continuing on in her litany of questions around biology and linguistics. In fact, the only one more tired seemed to be True Name.

There was a tension around the skunk's eyes, a tightness to the cheeks that ever so slightly drew her lips back. Even when she smiled, her expression remained fixed and rigid.

It made sense, after all. Acting in the capacity of leader was more than just overseeing the talks, it meant wrangling every conversation, and still managing to keep up her own side of it. Beyond even that, the skunk had been drawn into several conversations alone with Turun Ka over the final hours of the third day. Ey hadn't expected the conference to include anyone but the entirety of both the parties, so ey wasn't quite sure what to make of this, but none of the other Artemisians seemed unnerved by the leaders stepping aside in half-hour increments to hold what appeared to be—at least from True Name's expressions—in-depth conversations about very serious topics.

Sleep brought little relief.

The beds were comfortable, but empty. There was no wind against glass, no crickets stilled to silence with the passing of some imagined bat. There was no fox to curl around, no soft sounds of breathing.

Ey plowed through two cups of (thankfully quite good) coffee on the morning of the fourth day, and brought a third with em to the conference table.

The talks were slow to resume. There were a few halting attempts at starting up conversations about astrochemistry, but neither Tycho nor Stolon were well-versed in it enough to have the conversation without additional research first.

Why had they divided the subjects between the locations? ey wondered for the dozenth time. I'm sure that every one of us wants nothing more than to ask about the history of their trip, just as I'm sure that there are topics surrounding science that those on Artemis would love to ask about.

It seemed such a strange limitation to put on talks such as these. Why divide them by subject when the participants were identical? Were there deeper reasons beneath this? Was there a logic to having the discussions of science on Castor as opposed to on Artemis? Was it so that the less-advanced Castor would still benefit from the science and Artemis from culture if the talks went pear-shaped?

Questions such as these littered the verso pages of eir notebook, the recto pages reserved for notes about the topic at hand. Ey'd sent dozens of those questions over to Artemis already; it certainly didn't seem as though this was the place to ask them.

Answers had been sparse. The responses had invariably been "it is not the time for that conversation". At least the most recent note from Codrin#Artemis—running at nearly three pages—had explained the use of that sentence, as well as so much else. Checklists and goals, indeed.

It had also contained a more detailed account of Answers Will Not Help's breakdown and quitting, as well as the extended interactions with True Name that Codrin#Artemis had been having.

"I hate to do this to you," ey had written, individual-eyes only. "But I simply cannot overstate just how dramatic and anxiety-inducing the whole event was, and I mean this in the most literal way possible. There are things that I cannot tell you. I cannot put them into words, and I certainly cannot set them to paper. It is overwhelming. The import is crushing. I feel like I'm going to burst and there's nothing I can do or say about it, and the only reason I'm describing it like this is that I *can't* be the only one who knows this, even if only at one layer removed. You will remember soon enough, I think, but until then, I just need to offload some of the pressure."

Ey had no idea what to do with this information, other than to accept a share in that load.

With questions running thin and the table plagued by awkward silences, it was almost a relief when Turun Ka requested that it and True Name discuss sentiment shaping surrounding the arrival of Artemis, leaving the others to have a conversation of their own or not as they wished. There was no explicit communication suggesting such, but it seemed implied whenever this happened that Codrin and Turun Ko would be left 'in charge' of their respective delegations, if there was such a thing.

The skunk and firstracer stood and walked to the far side of the fountain where True Name could sit on the rim and Turun Ka could settle onto its haunches before her. They set up a cone of silence, and once more begin discussing what seemed to go beyond simply the fallout of deception.

After a few more minutes of silence. Why Ask Questions stood, said that she was going to take the opportunity to get another glass of water, and wandered off without another word.

That seemed to be signal enough, despite the deputization of the recorders, for everyone to take a break. Tycho and Stolon paired off immediately, already chatting about albedo or some other topic ey could not guess. Iska excused herself and returned to their rest area.

Codrin closed eir notebook, finished eir coffee, and scrubbed at eir face with eir hands.

"Alright," ey said. "Would it be alright if I ask you an off-the-record question, recorder Turun Ko?"

"Ka, you may. I may want-need to defer-delay response."

"Of course, that's fine. Why are we divided like this?"

"Please explain-expand, recorder Codrin Bălan."

"Why only talk science here on Castor and leave history and society to the talks on Artemis?"

“It is not the time to have that conversation.”

Codrin did eir best to restrain a sigh. “But it is a conversation? There is a reason for it?”

“*Anem.*”

“If I ask you—you as Turun Ko, not in your capacity as recorder, or even you, Artante Diria—questions about the topics that are being covered on Artemis, would you be able to answer?”

“*Ka,*” they both said at once. Artante picked up after that, “We might defer, as is our habit, but it would be impossible for the formal discussion to be the only context in which we communicate. Even if it were, there are layers to communication that go beyond words. We are learning some of each others’ non-verbal communication, *anem?*”

Ey nodded. “*Anem.* My counterpart on Artemis has written me regarding a sort of checklist that you are following when it comes to the convergence. Is this true?”

Artante sat up straighter, sharing a meaningful glance with Turun Ko. “Yes, recorder Codrin Bălan. There are steps that we have noticed in convergences in the past and, in order to be prepared, we maintain a list of these that we look for throughout the process.”

“And to confirm, the possible outcomes are us joining you as fifthrace or not?”

Sarah leaned forward onto her elbows, watching the conversation with an intense curiosity.

“*Anem.* We will converge-join-together or we will not,” Turun Ko said.

“I’m guessing that asking what items are on the checklist isn’t really on the docket,” ey hazarded.

Artante nodded.

“That’s alright,” ey said. “I’m sure True Name and the others in charge on our end had their own checklist that they’re keeping up with.”

“If you have wargamed, as you have said, then almost certainly.”

Ey mulled over eir next question for a moment, considering as many ramifications as ey could, given the knowledge of this checklist. Finally, ey asked, “Are convergences only named such if a race joins you on Artemis?”

There was a brief flicker of some emotion ey couldn’t decode on Artante’s face. It was almost a smile, almost pride, almost contentment, but it was quickly replaced by the polite expression she seemed to wear at all other times. “It is not the time to have that conversation. We will soon, I suspect.”

“It seems pretty easy to read between the lines on that answer,” Sarah said gently. “Though I don’t suppose it can be helped.”

Artante spread her hands over the table, palms up. “As I said before, it would be impossible for the formal discussion to be the only context in which we communicate.”

“Text and metatext,” Codrin mumbled, and with that, an idea dropped, fully-formed, onto em. Ey could feel the weight of it land on eir shoulders, the import of it digging into eir back like claws. Texts! Ey sat up straighter. “With the understanding that there are correct times for conversations, may I *give* you information for you to access at those times?”

The fourthracer looked to Turun Ko, who raised its chin in assent. “You may, recorder Codrin Bălan.”

Ey nodded, hoping against hope that ey even had the ACLs to do as ey’d planned. Ey knew that ey could create as much paper as ey wanted, though ey wasn’t sure whether ey’d be able to create paper with text already on it.

Ey knew that ey could create notepads, but had yet to try creating a notebook, as ey hadn't finished the current one yet.

Nothing for it but to try.

A desire to create a hardbound book was rejected, but the desire to create a soft-cover book seemed to be available to em. Text was a bit more difficult to guess at without testing, so ey brushed eir hand across the table, projecting the intent for a sheet of paper with the word 'TEST' written across the top.

Success.

"Alright. One moment, please."

Ey rifled through eir exos until ey found the correct ones and, with a single wave of intent, dumped their contents along with the desire for a softbound book into reality, lifting, one at a time, two books from the surface of the table. They were far from fancy, but their utility was all that mattered.

"This is the first volume of *An Expanded History of Our World*, a text containing a succinct description of the series of events that led from the creation of our System to the launch of Castor and Pollux." Ey handed the book over to Turun Ko, then handed the other to Artante, saying, "And this is *An Expanded Mythology of Our World*, which contains many of the same stories as the *History* as told through the framework of myth and legend. Together, they make up *On the Origin of Our World*."

The silence around the table was profound. Both Artemisians looked at the books they held, as if still internalizing the import of what they'd been handed. Sarah looked startled, even anxious.

"What is the nature-disposition of this document?" Turun Ko asked at last.

"It's a narrative of the overall history of our System from a social and political perspective. The first volume is a summary constructed from interviews conducted with those who uploaded in the very first days of the System's existence all the way up to those who had uploaded the year before it was written."

"Codrin," Sarah said quietly. "Are you sure that's such a good idea?"

Artante looked between them, picking up on the anxiety. "May I ask as to the import beyond its contents?"

"It...doesn't exactly paint the prettiest picture of some aspects of the System," Sarah said, audibly hunting for a diplomatic way to phrase it. "It led to a reevaluation of the...political nature of our lives."

Ey tensed, realising the import of what Sarah was getting at. While there were countless reminders as to the books impact on the Ode clade, it had always seemed an unintentional side-effect of what was otherwise a text that strove to be above all else an accurate historical document. It was bound up in those who had lived those lives, those who had been influenced by the Odists.

Ey'd meant to provide it strictly in that historical sense, but realized that, in the context of her deception, the discussion of True Name and her friends guiding the trajectory of society within them might color the talks moving forward.

No, ey thought. *This goes beyond the Odists and all their schemes.*

"It's important," ey said decisively. Sitting up straighter, ey drew on all the gumption ey could. "It shows more than just the political lives we've led, including the behind-the-scenes guidance that True Name has engaged in from the origins of the System two hundred thirty years ago. This is as important as anything else when it comes to understanding us as a species."

Sarah's frown deepened. "Which is why I question the wisdom of providing it at this point."

“We’re at an impasse, I think,” ey countered. “We haven’t had a single meaningful conversation as part of the talks since news of what happened on Artemis arrived. It feels like we’re waiting on some cue, like we’re expected to do something.”

Artante was nodding, though whether in confirmation or agreement, ey couldn’t tell.

“This feels like a dangerous way to force the conversation to move forward.”

Ey shrugged, holding onto that courage and sense of right action. “They deserve to know more than just the synopses and sugar-coated aspects of our society. The thing with Answers Will Not Help is something she and True Name dreamt up, but not representative of us as a whole. We’re more complex as a species than just her, or than even the five of us.”

Flipping through the pages at the rate of about one per second, Turun Ko said, “A conversation will happen-occur when leaders Turun Ka and True Name return shortly-momentarily. Please wait. Their conversation-discussion is artificial-superficial, intended to give-provide delegates other than leadership options to change-shape outcomes.”

Ey stared at the firstracer. “You mean-”

“A step in the process of convergence is assessing the willingness of non-leaders to act other than their leaders might or even against the stated structure of the discussions in order to forward what they believe the good common to all races,” Artante said. “It allows us to assess the strength of individuality and self-sacrifice for the betterment of all.”

“Opportunities were provided,” Turun Ko said simply.

That feeling of being in way over eir head that ey had felt so often during the writing of the *History* hit em full force once more and, stunned to silence, ey leaned back in eir chair, looking between the Artemisians and Sarah.

“So,” the psychologist began. “Is this a good step?”

“Please wait,” Turun Ko repeated, then lifted its head and glanced over toward Turun Ka.

This must’ve been a signal of some sort, as the other firstracer held up a hand to stop the conversation it was having with True Name, gesturing her back to the table.

The skunk was halfway through the act of pulling out her chair before she noticed the books that the other Artemisians held, the titles in bold on their covers. Her gaze whipped toward Codrin so quickly and with such fiery intensity that ey shied away from her. “Codrin, what-”

“Leader True Name,” Turun Ka said, interrupting her gently, but with enough authority that she stopped immediately. “This is the penultimate item on the checklist of convergence that we were just discussing. All that remains is the point of decision.”

Ey watched as the skunk’s eyes widened, gaze darting between em, Turun Ka, and the book in Turun Ko’s hands, now about half-finished. She sat down heavily on the chair and sagged against the back. “Well, fuck me.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Convergence T-minus 0 days, 0 hours, 18 minutes

Tycho awoke with the idea fully formed within himself.

So sudden was the realization that his immediate instinct was to shove it to the back of his mind and do his level best to forget about it. He didn't want to admit it to True Name, to Sarah or Stolon, and even Codrin, grounding as ey was, seemed to be too real to discuss it with.

He barely even wanted to admit it to himself. Didn't want to name it, put words to it.

So he resigned himself to sitting through the meeting, trying not to look too uncomfortable as the lump of an idea sat within his gut, making itself known every time he moved, every time he thought.

He was thankful that him having been relatively quiet to date meant that him staying quiet now was not out of the ordinary.

During the first break of the morning, he retreated to the rest area rather than meeting with Stolon, requesting some distance to organize his thoughts.

He skewed mildly positive and lay on his bed for a while, letting the quiet of the room in so that he could finally admit the idea for full consideration.

The path leading up to it had been laid long before, he realized. It had been laid when he first learned about the concept of convergence. Perhaps it was at the time of his first ineffable idea more than three weeks back, when he first granted consent to four alien races to board the LV.

Or perhaps even before that. Perhaps it was something integral to him, something about what made him *him*. Some fundamental unhappiness with his life as it was. Not just the inability to see the stars, not just the feeling of being trapped, or whatever it was that had required the self-actualization of changing his name so many years ago.

I am not who I used to be, he had thought at the time. I am no longer the me who uploaded. I am the me who had grown to recognize his own limitations. I am Tycho Brahe.

That didn't apply here; he was who he'd always been. This decision had been with him from birth.

He left his bed, left the rest area and returned to the meeting, with no more answers than he'd entered with, only more confusion.

When he returned to the table, Codrin was standing anxiously by as Turun Ka read through a sheet of paper that, he assumed, ey had just handed it. A questioning glance at em gained only a minuscule shrug. Ey didn't know either.

He collapsed limply into his chair once more and waited for the other delegates to arrive. True Name looked somewhat refreshed from the previous day, though still exhausted, and Sarah looked as anxious as Codrin, though he could hardly guess why.

Stolon, at best guess, simply looked bored and antsy. They kept glancing at him questioningly, and he gave his best smile in return, hoping that it'd at least reassure them a little bit.

"The talks progress. Does anyone have any topics for this next segment of the discussions?" Turun Ka asked.

"I do," Sarah said. "How do you deal with restlessness?"

"Can you describe what you mean, representative Sarah Genet?"

"Yes. When one grows bored and unhappy with their current situation, yet with no clear idea of where to go next, it can lead to a feeling of restlessness. I mean this primarily in an existential way, rather than a practical one. Desiring getting away from scarcity to plenty is not what I'd call restlessness, but a desire to change one's surroundings because one knows the current ones too well, for example, is. Boredom and ennui are other terms."

He tentatively tried labeling the idea that coiled within him with 'restlessness' and found that it fit all too well. It expanded, rose, pressed against his chest from the inside. He tried, unsuccessfully, to swallow it down. It was quickly becoming too much. Too big. Too strong to keep within him.

"We are well aware of this feeling," Artante was saying. "After millennia, one gets bored easily, and there's—"

"I want to stay here," he interrupted, surprising even himself. "Even if we don't become fifthrace or anything. I want to stay here. I want to stay on Artemis."

Stunned silence fell around the table. Even he felt some of that shock. The words were out of his mouth before he'd even had the chance to check them for truth, and yet they bore as much truth as any mathematical theorem that he knew. They were *anemla*. They were *true*. They were *correct*.

"I also want for us to be fifthrace, I mean," he added, voice quieter. "I want this convergence to wind up with that ending of the two. I want to join you, and I want *us* to join you."

"Tycho," True Name said, voice low. "I understand that the talks are long, but I think there is time yet for that decision."

"Maybe," he said, shrugging. "But if I didn't say so, I was going to burst."

Another silence. It felt uncomfortable on their side of the table, and yet the Artemisians had already spun up to fast time, some quite high skew.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

True Name shrugged. "You are allowed to express your desires. I am simply concerned that this was not the best time for it."

"I understand."

They waited in uncomfortable silence.

"I don't know that I'll join personally," Codrin said after the Artemisians spun down but before they answered. "But I want that outcome, too. It's been dogging me all morning. I think Tycho just got to it before me."

"You want your race to be fifthrace even if you don't join?" Artante asked.

Ey nodded. "I'm surprised at how much I like it here. I could see myself living here, even. Just that joining would mean leaving behind at least one, and probably both, of my partners. Dear is an Odist, and would likely

experience what True Name and Answers Will Not Help are—or did. I’m not sure that I could stomach that. Still, it’s incredibly alluring, and speaks to the romantic in me. A meeting of species and cultures from light years apart, and little old us having the chance to be a part of that.”

Artante looked toward Sarah expectantly.

“I find it fascinating here. I find this whole process of convergence fascinating, and I would find the process of integration even more so. I think that’s why I brought up restlessness. One of Codrin’s partners said, shortly after we first made contact, *‘When I hear about Artemisians and emissaries, I feel every minute of that eternity. I feel every molecule of that universe. You ask how I feel, and I would say that I feel small. Insignificant, even. How much of that eternity must they have been traveling?’* My response at the time was to toast to that, ‘To eternity and the weight of the universe’. I’d still give that toast now.” She shrugged, looking a little sheepish at her small speech. “So yes, I want that too, and I’d send a fork to join.”

“Leader True Name?”

The skunk sat in silence, her head bowed and her eyes closed. If it weren’t for the way her ears twitched this way and that as though tallying some internal checklist of her own, he might’ve suspected that she’d nodded off.

“I must confess that I may have forgotten what it is like to want a thing,” she said at last. “I do not know what it is that I want. I cannot stay here, as is plainly evident, but I do not know what I want.”

Codrin nodded. “May I quote from the *History*?”

She sighed, nodded.

“Both you and Jonas mentioned the concepts of stability and continuity during several interviews. We summarized it as, ‘Beyond all else, the driving factors behind Launch—and, indeed, Secession—were those of stability and continuity of the System. That life should continue, that we should continue to thrive, was the goal of those working on both projects from start to finish.’ Do you still want that? Becoming fifthrace as a stable and continuous society feels analogous, *anem*?”

The longer ey spoke, the more True Name seemed to perk up. By the end of eir recitation, she was sitting up straight and had a smile on her muzzle. It was slight, true, and still tired, but it was an honest smile.

“I do, yes. Thank you, Codrin. Then yes, I want that outcome as well.” To the Artemisians, she said, “We began the project of Launch as a way to divest. We wanted to ensure the continuity of our species and the Systems that we live on—Castor, Pollux, and Lagrange. We want to explore, of course, and we want to change and grow and all that comes with life, but we also want to keep living. I can think of no better opportunity for divestment than tagging along on a millennia-long journey through the galaxy.”

Tycho laughed, nodded. “And hey, think of the sights we’ll get to see along the way.”

“For certain definitions of see, yes.” She smiled and shrugged. “Thank you for spurring this discussion, my dear. I do not want to take too much time away from the conference, though, leader Turun Ka. I apologize if we need to get back to the topic at hand.”

After the round of answers, there was a long, blurred meeting, and then the Artemisians stood as one, each bowing as their race had when they first arrived.

Tycho stood as well, and, after a moment’s hesitation, so too did the rest of the table. He didn’t know why they were standing and bowing, but it seemed to be what the moment demanded.

Something had happened, just then. Something of import. He had no clue as to what it had been. Neither did he understand how, he realized, but he knew that it was something decisive. Something, perhaps, momentous.

“Leader True Name, as leader of this delegation and member of the Council of Eight,” Turun Ka said, voice bearing the weight of ritual. “I would like to formally welcome you aboard Artemis as fifthrace.”

True Name stared at it, agog.

Turun Ko picked up from there, its speech suddenly free of doublings-back and duplicated words. “Recorder Codrin Bălan, as recorder of this delegation, I welcome you as a member of fifthrace aboard Artemis. The final step on our checklist was simply a desire to join.”

Stolon continued, proceeding down the line. They were bouncing on their feet, teeth chattering, clearly quite excited. “*Ka, ka*. Scientist Tycho Brahe, I am welcoming you as member of fifthrace aboard Artemis. We will dream of stars together.”

Tycho’s eyes burned as he stood, rigid, and listened to the series of formal declarations. All of the delegates looked overwhelmed, shocked.

“I am not able to speak to representative Why Ask– Answers Will Not Help,” Iska said. “So I will speak to all. I welcome you as members of fifthrace aboard Artemis. We, as a society, look forward to learning of your arts.”

Artante was crying. Hell, *he* was crying.

“Representative Sarah Genet,” she said through the tears. “I welcome you as a member of fifthrace aboard Artemis. You asked us if we dream, and we do. We look forward to dreaming together.”

Silence followed the series of formal greetings, broken only by the sound of himself and Artante working to regain their composure.

“I must admit, leader Turun Ka,” True Name said, voice hoarse. “I was not expecting this. I had been working under the assumption that we still had several steps to go on your checklist. This feels sudden.”

“*This* is the reason for us holding two separate talks in separate locations about separate topics,” it said with a hint of a bow. “Working in parallel with different parameters increases the opportunities for forward momentum. The message that I received from Castor via recorder Codrin Bălan mentioned the penultimate step had been reached, that of acting individually for the betterment of all without the blessing of leadership. With that news, we expected that the decision point would be reached today. The opportunities for happiness and safety were created. There will be further talks as long as we are within range, and even after as we join with one another, all of which will simply be between us as species with shared goals rather than delegates.”

She and nodded, that faint smile returning. “A sensible approach.”

“We have only small time together, *anem*? We must create speed, *anem*?” Stolon said.

“Yes. Well considered. I thank you for your openness.”

Turun Ka lifted its snout. “We have passed the point where conversations must wait. All topics are open and more representatives from all races may attend. First, however, recorder Codrin Bălan,” Turun Ka said, drawing a sheet of paper from the air before it. “Please send this announcement to Castor by the usual mechanism without encryption, after you have all authenticated the message with a personal detail to ensure that this is viewed as a mutual decision. Please send those signatures encrypted.”

True Name accepted the sheet, read through, thought for a moment, then scribbled a short note on the bottom. She handed the sheet to Codrin, who did similar.

When it arrived before him, Tycho skimmed through the letter: “Both parties...agreed...fifthrace...welcome...” followed by a few blocks of unsettled text that he supposed must be the eyes-only signatures of the Artemisians and the other two emissaries before him.

What could he possibly write that would ensure that Tycho#Castor knew the letter was verifiable? He looked around at the other emissaries, thought back through the last few weeks, and wrote: “Remember what you told Codrin during eir interview: imagine sitting at home, knowing that you could have flung yourself off into space, out among the dangers and excitement, and choosing instead that boring safety? Well, here we are.”

He passed the note on to Sarah, who affixed her signature and handed it back to Codrin. Ey held it briefly, looking to be deep in thought, then nodded. “It has been sent, leader Turun Ka.”

“Tycho,” True Name said, loud enough for all to hear. “Do you remember the poem I quoted to you the night of first contact?”

He nodded.

“The final two lines of the fourth stanza are the most commonly quoted: Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved—”

“I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night,” he finished, grinning. “That was the last thing I said before uploading. It’ll be the last thing I’ll say before I leave Castor.”

Part IV

Integration

“How far, how far, how far away?” became the refrain of the sailors. “How far away are these campfires of the others? They must be impossibly far. They must be bound in impossible night, for we have seen the sun neither rise nor set, nor have we seen their campfires dim or fade, nor have we seen them blaze into new light.”

And yet they sailed on in their ark of dreams, calling out into the vast blackness that had long since enveloped even them. And in their ark, they lived the lives they wished. They lived out their dreams in eternal bliss or eternal pain or eternal strife or eternal love, for their dreams were their own and they were not bound to any law of the ark nor any whim of any other.

From *An Expanded Mythology of our World* by
May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

Tycho Brahe — 2346

Convergence T-plus 1 day, 21 hours, 38 minutes

The process of leaving the talks was one of emotion bound up in the stress of merging. As unpracticed as he was at forking, the process of quitting and reconciling memories was just as foreign to him. Ordinarily it would have taken an hour for Tycho#Castor to sort through the memories from Tycho#Artemis and then another two for Tycho#Tasker to sort through the memories from #Artemis for a few weeks' divergence.

These were not ordinary times.

The better part of eight hours later, he was singular once more, back in his field, back atop his hill, finally able to sit and think and dream without having the pressing weight of memories pinning him in place. He could lay on his back and look up at the sky—no longer just his sky—and think about all that had transpired and all that was yet to come.

At least for a little while.

He didn't know why the arrival ping did not wake him from his daydreaming, but the gunshot sound of a champagne cork popping was more than enough to get him to jolt upright.

"Sorry, Tycho," True Name said, laughing. "That was far louder than intended. I did not mean to startle you."

He frowned, shook his head. "It's okay. I wasn't expecting you, though," he said, holding out one of the red-filtered flashlights that were permanently lodged in his pockets.

The skunk accepted the light and knelt on the grass beside him, holding it between sharp-looking teeth as she poured two glasses of champagne.

Well, 'glasses'; they were shaped more like wide-brimmed, stemmed bowls than anything, somewhat awkward to hold, but then he remembered similar from the dinner party three weeks ago—so many years ago, it felt like—when the skunk and her cocladist, Dear, had lapped at their wine.

He shared a secret smile with himself as he accepted his coupe glass of champagne.

She removed the light from between her teeth and clicked it off again, touching the rim of her glass to Tycho's before taking a lapping sip. "To the end of that fucking mess."

He laughed as much as he felt was required to be polite and then took his own sip. *Why is she here?* he thought, racing through a list of the day's actions, hunting for anything that might lead to a visit. He was, he realized, still wary of her, despite the memories of her struggling, of her confusion, her tears. Despite all her small kindnesses.

After all, hadn't she chided them on the *History* being a 'very sensational book'?

The silence drew out. He looked up at the stars and thought about just how much bigger the universe felt now. *I feel every minute of that eternity*, Dear had said back at that same dinner. *I feel every molecule of that universe*.

And he did, now. He felt it all as something more real than it had ever felt before. The math now stood side by side with awe in a way that it had only ever eclipsed before.

“Do you know how old I am, Tycho Brahe?” True Name said into that silence. “I am 222 years old, a fork of an individual who is...who would be 259 years old.”

He waited in silence. There seemed to be more to come, so he enjoyed his champagne meanwhile. It was quite good.

“I have learned many habits, and I have dropped countless others. Perhaps that growth is our protection from unceasing memory. We may retain our memories of concrete events, of who we must have been, but I am no longer the True Name of 2124. Even remembering her feels like remembering an old friend. I remember her perfectly, and yet I do not remember how to be as earnest. I do not remember how to simply celebrate. I do not know how to simply *be*.”

Silence fell again while they both looked up to the sky. Nothing needed to be said right away, he figured. Something Codrin had said, though he didn't remember when: *silences come with their own rhythms and will break when it's time*.

Once he heard the clink of champagne bottle against glass again, True Name pouring herself some more, he said, keeping his voice as kind as he could, “Why are you telling me this? Why are you here?”

She laughed, set the bottle aside and shifted from her kneeling position to more of a lounge, hips canted to the side with her tail draped down the gentle slope of the hill. “I do not know, Tycho. I do not remember how to celebrate, but I still want to try, I guess. Fifthrace! I could never have imagined.” After another few laps at her champagne, she sighed and added, “Sarah has gone with Codrin to Dear's, and I am not welcome there. Answers Will Not Help and Why Ask Questions are in conversation with another me. Jonas is...Jonas. Another me is talking with him and Turun Ka.”

“So you came to me, of all people.”

He was startled away from looking at the sky by the sound of a sniffle from the skunk.

“I'm sorry, True Name. That was—”

“No, you are right, Tycho. I know what I am and how I became that,” she said, voice thick. “But I am feeling every one of my 259 years tonight. I just wanted to be with someone. Just...be, you know? Exist with someone

without having some sort of agenda other than to celebrate something big.”

“But you don’t know how?”

“I do not know how, yes.”

After a moment, he raised his glass, and the stars glinting off the rim clued the skunk in enough to once again clink hers with it. “Champagne under the stars is a good start, I guess.”

She laughed. “That it is, my dear.”

“I can’t speak to your thoughts on not knowing how to be. I don’t think I’m any better at it, honestly. Sarah would probably be your best bet.”

“I will be meeting with her soon, yes. We have much to talk about.”

“About the convergence?”

She shrugged, a subtle shifting of shadow. “That too, yes, but also, news from the three Systems has been distressing. Much of the clade will be seeking...well, therapy.”

He frowned up to the sky, unable to think of anything to say to that that would not sound rude or patronizing.

“Our cracks are showing,” the skunk continued in a far-away voice. “Growth is colliding with eternal memory, and the cracks are showing.”

He nodded, unsure of whether or not she could even see the gesture.

“Turns out getting invited on a thousand year voyage with a bunch of aliens induces a whole lot of growth *really fast*,” she said, voice brightening. “So I will be dealing with that. But come, if I share any more of my weaknesses, I will lose all of my hard-won respect. How do you feel about how things went?”

With that bit of humor, the walls were back up. The perfect self-deprecating comment brought back that tightly controlled voice. He felt a sudden sense of...honor, perhaps? He felt lucky that he’d been able to see some more vulnerable side of her, and he quelled the voice within him shouting that that was all a stage play for his benefit. Even she was allowed vulnerability.

“I’m not totally sure, yet,” he admitted. “There was so much that I needed to deal with when I merged that it took me all day to do so, and I’m still trying to make sense of it all.”

A slight rustle beside him indicated a nod from the skunk. “No kidding. You have seen how easily we fork and merge, so it might be telling that it took me nearly thirty minutes to even manage the merge from True Name#Artemis.”

He winced. “I was wondering how that’d go.”

“Rough,” she said after a moment. “As soon as I got back to Castor, I immediately felt better, but no less tired. My memories of my time aboard Artemis are only just barely coherent. They are fractured and scattered. I could tell a clear story of our time there from start to finish, but much beyond that eludes me still.”

Tycho set aside his empty glass and stretched out on the grass, laying on his back once more, arms crossed beneath his head. “I was worried about that, yeah. I can’t speak to the ease of merging, but I’m glad you made it through all the same.”

He could hear the grin in her voice as she said, “I am pleased to hear that. The distance between ‘we are coworkers and should act as such while at work’ and ‘I do not actually like you but have to tolerate you’ is rather small, and I could not tell which it was with you.”

“I like you,” he said, laughing at her easy humor. “You’re a little terrifying, but I respect you.”

“Doubly pleased, then.”

“How do you feel things went?”

“As well as they could have,” she said, the answer coming readily. “The talks were peaceful, the instances of mutual incomprehension minimal, and the outcome amenable to both sides.”

“I think I hear a ‘but’ coming.”

He could see the shadow of her nod. “Yes. But also, there are some aspects of them that I personally do not understand, and that is uncomfortable to me. They say that they do not manage sentiment or use much in the way of subtlety, they say they do not steer, and I believe them in that this is usually the case for them, but I disagree with the assessment that their checklist was a matter of preparation. They had goals coming into this convergence, and while I am pleased that they largely aligned with ours, I am unnerved by the fact that they either do not understand the ways in which they steer or, more likely, refuse to admit such. The two failed convergences they only ever talked around show this quite well. You have heard our thoughts on the utility of social pain in maintaining defense mechanisms, after all.”

“Are you frustrated, perhaps?”

There was a moment’s pause as the skunk shifted to lay down beside him. “I suppose. Frustrated, a bit sad.”

“Sad?”

“Do you remember what the Bălans wrote about me and Jonas in regards to the Launch project?”

“That your aim was for stability and continuity.”

“Yes. There is a self-serving aspect to this, as there must always be.” She sighed, and he heard her shrug against the mossy ground. “The Artemisians and I share a goal of continued existence. I am pleased that we as a whole have been invited to share in that. I would call that a success.”

“But you won’t be able to join them, *anem*?”

She laughed. “Practicing?”

“I guess,” he admitted. “I want to get used to the language.”

“A good idea. But yes, *anem*. I will not be able to join them. I will not share in that particular form of immortality. I could join for the individual continuity, but not the individual stability.”

“It didn’t look like a pleasant time for you.”

“It was not, no. I doubt that any Odist will join them.”

A slow silence played, then, as they both looked up to the guesses at stars. The mention of information exchange that was to follow the convergence left him with a hope that some aspect of their library of technical know-how would allow a modification of the sim to lead to actual visual input from the telescopes to show, since the Artemisians could apparently access audiovisual data from within their system just fine.

“How are you feeling, my dear?”

He spoke dreamily, feeling far off, far away from this hilltop, from True Name and all her subtle unhappiness. “I’m on the cusp of something big. I don’t know what it is yet, and I don’t know why I know it, but I’m on the very edge of it.”

“Looking forward to sending an instance along with them?”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good bit of it. I’m finally looking forward to something. I’m finally eager, rather than just anxious.”

She laughed, not unkindly. “I am happy for you, Dr. Brahe.”

“Thank you.”

The skunk sighed, and he was pleased to hear more contentment than frustration in the sound. “What do you think now? Are they real, or are we dreaming them?”

“I don’t think it matters,” he said after a long pause.

“No?”

“No. Even if they’re a dream, I’ll join them. Even if this was all a dream, I’m happy to have been a part of it.”

“And have you any further thoughts on uploading as the stage of civilization most likely to breach the Great Filter?” She sounded earnest, almost excited. It made him happy to hear, made him excited in turn. “I must confess that the thought has been lingering in the back of my mind since our last conversation here. Old sci-fi dreams dog me still.”

“Oh, definitely feeling like I’m stuck in some crazy science fiction novel,” he said. “Uploading, furries, launch vehicles, and now aliens? At this point, why not? It makes as much sense as any of this.”

She chuckled. “Well said, my dear.”

When next she spoke, True Name sounded almost as dreamy as he had, her voice holding the subtle cadence of a recitation. “Caldest coldness was the error which has crept into our life; But your spirit is untainted, I can dedicate you still To the service of our science: you will further it? You will!”

He spent a moment searching the perisystem architecture for the poem True Name had been quoting from since he first met her, the one with the lines that he knew he would speak before he left, but was not yet ready to.

That is a poem about death, she had said, all those weeks—and yet so few!—ago, and as he prowled through the lines, he could see how it was that she had interpreted it, how she had seen in the words the danger of being left incomplete in one’s goals, of the risk of not being able to see something through to the end.

He was nothing if not a scientist, though, and although her reading, as one who dreamed in her own ways, was as accurate as his, he knew he had his own understanding of leaving a work unfinished so that others could pick it up. That was his dream, the dream of so many calm, cold scientists before him. It was a different take on the same dream, perhaps; where True Name might see regret in that error of caldest coldness, he saw only the comforting truth of his later science.

Or perhaps that coldness was her own, and for that he could not fault her regret, only wish her the best in finding future warmth, only further his service to his science.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — 2346

Convergence T-plus 1 day, 18 hours, 46 minutes

While it wouldn't have been totally true to call the celebration at Codrin's return 'wild', it was certainly ram-bunctious in its own delightfully Dear way, with dozens of foxes scattering around the patio in a flurry of forking. Plenty of hugging and chatting and laughing and smiling.

Ey'd been startled, in that half-doubled, roundabout way that an up-tree instance might feel, when ey merged down to find that True Name and Jonas had requested that Codrin#Assist stay at their compound rather than returning home except for an hour around dinner. The fox's excitement made more sense, knowing that.

At least ey'd had the chance to pull the fox's tail.

Once it calmed down enough to do so, Dear dragged Codrin into the dining room, gesturing eagerly for Sarah to follow with. Their partner had a small spread already laid out for them.

They spent the next hour recounting, carefully, the events of the talks. Codrin had requested that Sarah not discuss the Odists' reaction to skew until ey'd had the chance to do so one-on-one with Dear. They spoke instead in general terms, discussing the Artemisians themselves, the topics that had come up during the talks, and the final announcement that they'd be welcomed aboard as fifthtrace.

"What is the practical result of this decision?"

"Well, the technical details are a bit beyond me," Sarah said. "But the Artemisians and our own engineers are talking about how to let the DMZ grow in size to some maximum capacity—maybe a third of what Castor has to offer. As many of them as want to join us within those limitations will be able to join us here. They will allow as many of us who wish to join them to do so, as well."

"We'll also be exchanging our shared libraries of information," Codrin added. "I think that transmission effort has already begun, actually. We're getting an enormous dump of information from four societies, and then we'll upload all of ours to them. It's going to be a field day for librarians, I bet."

"Think you'll join?" eir partner asked.

Ey shrugged. "I'm not sure, actually. It sounds fun, but I'm not sure I'm the same Bălan who wanted to be a librarian all those years ago."

"Codrin#Pollux has headed in that direction, though," Dear said.

"I know. I just don't know if the same is something I'd like to do. I've got some thoughts on directions I might head instead, though. I've been talking with Sarah about it, and will tackle it deliberately."

The fox nodded. *"Of course, my love. I would be surprised if you were anything but deliberate."*

Ey laughed and bumped eir shoulder against its own. “Of course.”

“This is all so delightfully exciting, is it not? I was worried at first that the drama would be too much. Aliens! Political summits in space! Imagine.” The fox giggled. *“And it was dramatic, I suppose, but it has settled down into merely exciting. Aliens, yes, but boundless new knowledge. Political summits in space, yes, but also a mingling of societies that we could not possibly comprehend.”*

Sarah laughed and raised her glass. “To the proper amount of excitement.”

Dear hoisted its own glass as thought it was an ale-filled tankard. *“Precisely, my dear!”*

Codrin smiled, sipping eir wine as ey watched. *Proper amount of excitement, indeed.*

After Sarah left, the triad sat around the table, saying nothing, simply processing this new future that lay before them. It felt almost too large for Codrin to comprehend. Something new. Something enormous. Something that felt somehow larger than the launches. Those, at least, had the advantage of being something that ey could predict, a frame of reference. Society continued much as it had before, after all, hadn’t it? They had decamped from Lagrange for the LVs and everything looked exactly the same, minus only the few friends who had not done so.

This, though, held so many unknowns.

It was exciting, and that it was exciting to em bore excitement of its own. Something new, yes, but something different. Ey felt before em a vast landscape ey’d never explored. While the prairie always contained unknown spaces, it could not hold a candle to the future that lay before them.

Only one anxiety remained, then.

“Dear, can you come for a walk with me?”

The fennec sat up straighter. *“Of course, my dear. Now?”*

Eir other partner lifted their gaze from where they’d been staring at the table, zoning out. “Just you two?”

Ey nodded. “Please. There’s some news about the Odists. About True Name, in a way.”

Their expression grew sour and they waved them away. “Don’t upset it too much, then. I’ve got plans for breakfast for dinner, and I won’t have any moping over waffles.”

Dear rolled its eyes. *“I will endeavor to be my normal, terrible self by then, yes.”*

Codrin laughed. “We’ll end on a good note.”

They stood and walked out into the prairie, Codrin brushing eir fingertips across the tops of eir cairns as they walked. They made it past three before ey was able to open up.

“You were right to warn me about True Name and Answers Will Not Help.”

Dear tilted its head. *“I thought Why Ask Questions was the emissary.”*

Ey shook eir head. “They pulled some nonsense. Why Ask Questions was the delegate here on Castor, but they swapped in Answers Will Not Help for those who went to Artemis.”

“Because of course they did.”

“I’d call it cheeky, but it was more distressing than anything.” Ey sighed. “They really didn’t do well with the time skew at all. When we first got there, Answers Will Not Help collapsed, and True Name was only just barely holding it together. Even when we were in a unison room—places where time skew was locked into...uh, consensus, I guess—they kept...well, they looked like Michelle. Alternating forms, exhausted, distracted.”

The fox splayed its ears, nodding. *“I did not know how they would act, but I am not surprised that those memories*

would come home to roost. I am sorry for them. I am sorry that you had to experience that so directly. Did it negatively impact the discussion?"

Ey thought back over the memories ey had been left with from Codrin#Artemis, frowning. "Not necessarily, though we didn't learn as much as we had hoped, I think. Things just went poorly on their end. Very poorly."

Dear waited em out.

"Answers Will Not Help lost it. She quit."

"'Lost it'?"

"She slowly got less coherent over time, but towards the end, she snapped and started hollering about prophets and quoting poetry. Bits of the Ode, bits of, I think, Emily Dickinson."

It frowned. "*And then she quit?*"

"Yes."

Eir answer must have been hesitant enough that Dear had picked up on the complications that lay behind that single word. It pulled Codrin to a stop. "*My love, there is something you are not telling me.*"

Codrin didn't look at the fox, choosing instead to stare out into the vast emptiness of the prairie. "There is, yeah. I don't know how to tell you without...I don't know. Without causing you grief."

The fox squeezed eir hand in its paw. "*If it causes me grief, then so be it, Codrin. These things happen. It sounds as though it will not be your fault, anyway. Do not worry about me.*"

Ey nodded.

"Codrin?"

"In the middle of yelling about prophets, she said that she 'could not feel em'. She said the Name several times."

The grip on eir hand went slack, and when ey turned to face the fennec, its eyes had gone glassy, whiskers and ears both drooping.

"True Name tackled her to the ground, trying to shut her up. They struggled. Fought until Answers Will Not Help quit." Ey took a shaky breath. "So, now three others outside the clade know the Name. I don't think Sarah or Tycho know that they do, but I do."

Silence. Stillness from Dear.

"I'm sorry, Dear."

The silence continued.

"Do you want me to do as you did? Try and forget it?"

The fox let out a breath in a coarse gust, and ey realized that it had been holding it the whole time.

"Dear?"

"*It is the end of an era, then, is it not?*" it said, words enunciated carefully.

"I don't know." Ey squeezed its paw in eir hand, though no returning squeeze answered. "I don't know what to do. I can try to forget—"

"*There is a pain — so utter — It swallows substance up — Then covers the Abyss with Trance — So Memory can step around — across — upon it...Did she quote that one?*"

Ey shook eir head.

"*There is no forgetting, my dear. You bear it within you.*"

“All the same, I could—”

The fox’s laugh surprised em. It was breathy, hyperventilating, but sounded almost relieved. “No, Codrin. You do not need to. The poem continues: — As One within a Swoon — Goes safely — where an open eye — Would drop Him — Bone by Bone —”

Ey was too anxious to puzzle out the opacity of the language. “I’m going to need some help disentangling that, Dear.”

“There are very few times that memory can hope to be selective. When one is drunk, perhaps. Drunk on wine, drunk on love, drunk on pain. Perhaps when one is drunk on a life lived too long, as I am. It is the end of an era, and perhaps we are all becoming inebriated by too long a life. Do not forget it, Codrin. Do not do as I have done. It is stupid, is it not? Look at me. I am in all ways drunk on time.”

Codrin smiled cautiously.

“Do not tell me, of course! I do not know what that would do to me, after all that I have done to myself. And certainly do not tell any other Odists. I do not want assassins visiting us in the night to shut you up,” it said, laughing in earnest now. “But also do not worry about your new knowledge. It is high time that we unclench our collective anus and let that shit go.”

Ey laughed as well. “Right, right. True Name suggested not telling any other Odists, too.”

“Did she tell you to keep it from Ioan?”

Ey nodded.

“Ignore that. Do not tell em the name directly, but do send a clade-eyes-only message to em saying that you know. Tell em to pass it on to Codrin#Pollux, as well.”

“Why?”

“So that you need not be the only Bălan carrying this burden. After all, we are in love, are we not?” It grinned, finally squeezing eir hand in return. “We are in love and Ioan and May Then My Name are in love. We are bound together.”

“Aren’t you worried we’d hold that over your head if we got mad or something?”

It shook its head. “If you did, then we would not be in love, would we? I will write May Then My Name and the other Dear, as well, and tell them my thoughts.”

“Well, so long as you’re sure that neither of them will snap and start hunting Bălans.”

“The same applies to us, my dear,” it said. “If they snap, then they were not truly in love, but they will not. I have faith.”

“It sounds like you want to test all of our relationships.”

“It is not a test. It is a game.” It giggled. “Come, my dear, this will be fun! The other two Odists will think so, as well, I promise.”

“A game, huh?” Ey let go of the fox’s paw to poke it in the side a few times, hunting for ticklish spots. “You’re so weird.”

“A game! A game!” It laughed helplessly, then darted away from em, cavorting through the grass. “A game! And you are it! Catch me if you can, you fucking nerd!”

Codrin laughed and chased Dear around the prairie for a bit, the fox occasionally forking off to dart in some new direction, only to be followed by a new fork of the writer, until the prairie was littered with forks of them both. Each time one of em would tap one of it, both would quit until only two remained. They raced each other back to the house, nearly bowling over their partner at the door.

“Holy shit, you two,” they said, laughing. “What the hell did you talk about out there?”

“When Memory is full,” it shouted, dancing in circles around them. “Put on the perfect Lid!”

They rolled their eyes. “Uh huh, sure.”

“Can we have eggs as well? And bacon? Bacon and waffles with syrup is a true delight.”

“Sure, why not. Want some hash browns, too? Might as well go all out.”

Codrin leaned in to kiss them on the cheek, still working on catching eir breath. “Yes. Definitely hash browns.”

Tycho Brahe — 2346

Convergence T-plus 4 days, 20 hours, 18 minutes

“Who’s idea was this?” Tycho asked, staring, unbelieving, at the heat-haze shimmer before him.

True Name grinned proudly. “A cocladist of mine came up with this. I would not recommend walking past the barrier. It is dreadfully hot beyond there, even for a desert creature such as her.”

He shook his head, looking once more from the ground to the sky. They stood on a well trimmed lawn at the edge of a forest, the shade provided by lingering oaks and birches delightfully cool amid the just-shy-of-too-warm day. The grass continued right up to a shimmering barrier of heat, where it quickly failed, a no-man’s-land of scrub lasting only a few feet before it fell away into sand. Deep desert stretched out as far as he could see before him. Rolling dunes, painfully blue skies, mirages dancing along the horizon.

So extreme was the temperature differential in so small a space that the barrier between the two, that shimmer of heat-haze, appeared to be a very literal wall extending as far as he could see in either direction, though after a few dozen yards, the forest crept right up to the barrier once more, impossibly dense, impassible.

And there, right in the middle of the clearing, crouched flush against the wall of heat, sat a low tollbooth. There was a glass-walled cubicle, large enough for one person to sit on a stool, huddling beneath a canopy, a small A/C unit gasping and rattling atop it. A red and white striped gate blocked a concrete sidewalk leading directly into the desert.

The whole affair was dusty and tired, as though it had weathered a hundred sandstorms and would doubtless weather a hundred more, though it would never be truly clean again.

To the side of the tollbooth, straddling the border, a squat, flat building sat, fronted by a sign declaring it to be ‘Customs — Please Use Other Door’. From the roof, an aged radio tower reached toward the sky: a narrow pyramid of angle-iron painted in that same red and white. A light flashed sleepily at the top.

“You guys are really weird, you know that, right?”

True Name gave a flourish of a bow, laughing. “Of course, my dear. You will go through customs soon, but until then, please follow me.”

The skunk led him up to the gate beside the tollbooth—a peek inside showed the hazy form of an older gentleman dozing within, chin resting on his chest. The gate lifted automatically, and when they walked through, there was the briefest rush of heat, the haze of the barrier washing over them like a waterfall, enough to dazzle the eyes so that they arrived at the courtyard he knew so well by now as though through a dream.

The space had been subtly re-structured, repurposed from a conference space to a small, comfortable plaza. The cloistered walk remained, as did the fountain, but the plaza itself had been made much larger, the trees spaced further apart, and comfortable seating of diverse shape spread throughout.

"This will be the entryway that those arriving to the DMZ will see," True Name said. "It is intended to be an area where the newly arrived can orient themselves, but also one that will be pleasant for those who have visited before. We are working with a few sim architects from Artemis to introduce some mixed aspects of greenery and architecture to make it feel familiar to all five races."

"Are we going to keep calling it the DMZ?"

She shook her head. "That would not be a good look, no. We have a short list of names that we are in the process of workshopping. The current top of the list is simply Convergence, though 'Gemini' and simply 'the shared space' are also in the list."

He shook his head. "Gemini doesn't fit. Tyndareus, if you want to stick with the Castor and Pollux names, but that'd make more sense for Lagrange. I like Convergence best."

"Convergence it is, then," the skunk said, chuckling and gesturing him toward a shaded bench. "Beyond this area, however, there is not much else. We have a smaller version of our compound already ported over, and I am pleased that you have agreed to let us bring your field over."

Tycho sat on the bench and leaned back against it, looking out into the plaza. "Nothing else, though?"

"Not yet. The border will open officially later today to members of both Castor and Artemis. The passage into Convergence from Castor will be rate-limited throughout this process. We will ensure that this area does not beggar the rest of the System for capacity, as we were informed during the conference that the Artemisians all take up a bit more space than we do, as should probably be expected by five-thousand year old consciousnesses. Still, we are not hurting for space."

"Yeah, though thankfully they're not carrying around an entire five millennia of memory."

"Very true," she said. She gestured to the space before them, willing a small table into being, along with two glasses of iced tea, one of which she took for herself.

He took his own glass and sipped. It was quite good.

"Are you excited to join them, then?"

He sat in silence, drinking his tea and looking at nothing in particular from the dappled shade. Too many thoughts crowded his head, none of them worth thinking, and once again, an idea sat within his gut, demanding to be spoken. He savored it intentionally, rather than shying away from it as he had the last one. The feeling of these decisions was becoming familiar. *Trust your gut* indeed.

"Tycho?"

"I'm going to invest fully."

True Name blinked several times as she processed the statement, then grinned wide. "I would call that excited, yes. I am very happy for you."

"I don't know where the decision came from," he said, speaking slowly. "I *am* excited, yeah, but this just sort of came to me fully formed, like I'd made the decision before even thinking about it."

"It need not make sense. I am in no way surprised that you have made that decision, whether it was conscious or not. We will miss you, Dr. Brahe."

He smiled to the skunk and nodded. "Thanks. I'll miss you too. I'll miss all of Castor."

"No, you will not."

The phrase came at him like a blow to the stomach, and it was his turn to sit in silence.

"I think you will miss some people here. A handful of coworkers. What few friends you have admitted to having. Me, perhaps, as you say. But you will not miss Castor."

"Well, huh."

She shrugged. "This is why I am happy for you, my dear. You do not seem content with the life you wound up with. It is okay to want to leave unhappiness behind."

He nodded. "I suppose it is. Even then, I think most of my coworkers and friends are coming along with. Sarah will be there. Dr. Verda will be there. It sounds like even Codrin will join us for a time."

"I was surprised to learn that, as well," True Name said, leaning back against the bench with her tail canted to the side. "Ey has come to eir own decision, though. It makes sense for one such as em to send along a fork."

"Right. I'm sorry that you and Why Ask Questions or Answers Will Not Help will not be joining us. It'd be nice to have the emissaries together there."

"We will visit once more before Artemis leaves effective Ansible range, but no, we will not stay."

"Well, as I said, I'll miss you."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement, ears splayed.

"And you'll get to meet your fair share of Artemisians here, as well."

She nodded, smiling once more. "I will, yes. We will still have plenty to do, even if we do not remain aboard Artemis. We will visit there, and it sounds like some of them will visit here and not remain. Codrin has talked Dear into giving one of its performances in Convergence so that Iska may see, though they will not remain here."

"Oh? Did it say whether it would try to see one of their performances aboard Artemis?"

"It was undecided, last I heard."

"And the other delegates?"

True Name looked thoughtful. "I have not spoken with them since they left. My guess is that Turun Ka and Stolon will join. I know that Iska will not. I do not know about Turun Ko, but I would say that there is a good chance of it and Artante joining."

"Stolon said they would join, yeah," he said. "They want to make sure that they get to see more of the galaxy, and will happily spread themselves out to do so. We'll still remain in contact with Artemis for years after the Ansible connection closes."

"You will not be able to see the galaxy from here, if you do not remain. Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah," he said after a long pause. "I think I am."

They sat in quiet, then, finishing their drinks and then watching the ice melt in the mellow warmth of the day.

Ioan Bălan — 2346

*Convergence T-plus 39 days, 3 hours, 23 minutes
(transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 36 minutes)*

Ioan and May both awoke to messages. May, however, was the first to read hers, having gotten up before her partner, so when Ioan stumbled out of bed toward coffee, the skunk was already sitting at the table, her note before her and eirs still in its clade-eyes-only envelope, waiting for em.

“As soon as you are a real person, my dear, I need you to read this and tell me what is happening.”

Ey frowned, nodded, and diverted from the coffee pot to splash water on eir face to wake emself up faster. Something about the skunk’s attitude suggested something stressful was afoot. Stressful or exciting. Ey couldn’t tell which.

Once ey sat down with eir coffee, ey opened eir letter and began to read.

May giggled. “What the fuck does that expression mean?”

Realizing that ey was frowning, squinting and chewing on eir cheek all at the same time, ey forced emself to relax. “Uh...this is weird. Does yours have something to do with it?”

“Yes. It is from Dear, who says that Codrin sent you a letter containing a game.”

“A game?” Ey frowned, started at the top of eir letter and read straight through to the bottom. “How is this a game? Codrin says...but, well. What does Dear say, exactly?”

“My dear May Then My Name,” she read aloud. “Ioan will be receiving a letter concurrent with this that will bear both the end of an era and the beginning of a game between our two clades. The rules are as follows. First: remember that you love em, that ey loves you. Second: remember who you were, who you are, and imagine what you can become. Third: let go. Fourth: have fun. Fifth: pass this on to Dear#Pollux concurrently with Ioan passing on Codrin’s letter.”

Eir frown deepened.

“Fucking foxes, I swear to God,” May said, laughing. “Now, I am assuming that those rules apply to you, too. Remember that I love you and that you love me. Remember who you were, who you are, and imagine what you can be. Let go, have fun, and tell me what the fuck your letter says already.”

Ey did eir best to square Dear’s ‘game’ with the text of the letter ey’d received. There were so many ways this could go sideways. *Let go, hmm?* ey thought. *I guess there’s nothing for it. Let go and try to have fun is about all that one can do in this situation.*

“Alright,” ey said, holding up the letter to read aloud. “Ioan, I hope you are well. We have finished our talks with the Artemisians in grand fashion. They have invited us to become their ‘fifthrace’, meaning that as many of us as would like are able to join them on Artemis, and the DMZ will be expanded to allow a portion of them to join us. There is so much more that I can say here, and will say in future letters, but this one comes with a specific purpose.”

“God, even when you talk to each other, you are nerds.”

Ey forced a laugh, shaking eir head. “May Then My Name will be receiving a note from Dear about a game. I’m not entirely sure I understand it, but it promises me it’s an Odist thing. When I think too hard about it, I get anxious all over again, but Dear keeps telling me to ‘let go and have fun’, so I suppose all I can say to you is the same...

“Uh, May,” ey said after a moment’s pause. “This is making me really anxious, too. I promise I’m trying to follow Dear’s rules and Codrin’s suggestion.”

The skunk’s smile fell. “Well, please get it over with, then, and we can judge Dear on what it considers a game soon.”

“Alright,” ey said. “During the talks on Artemis, the time skew got to be too much for who we thought was Why Ask Questions and she lost it. It turns out that, through some design of True Name’s, they swapped in Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help for the emissaries to Artemis rather than sending Why Ask Questions.

“Anyway, she snapped. She quoted several lines of the Ode as well as several lines of Emily Dickinson, talked about how she, quote, ‘could not feel em’, and then she said the Name aloud. True Name got–”

“What?!” May pushed her way up out of her seat and began pacing. “She did what?”

Ioan realized eir hands were shaking too much to continue reading the paper like that, so ey set it down on the table. “Ey goes on to describe what happened, but does not include the Name itself. Ey continues: While I now know it, I’m following Dear’s suggestion to keep it to myself lest I piss off a bunch of other Odists. It described it as...well, ey continues, but you look like you’re going to explode. Do you want me to stop?”

May’s pacing had picked up in intensity and she had started compulsively brushing her paws over her whiskers and cheeks, up over her ears. Ey couldn’t read her expression.

“Ioan, listen,” she said. “Wait, no. Remember where you first took me for a hike? Bring me there again. Quick.”

Ey frowned, stood, snatched up the letter, and took her paw in eir hand before stepping out to Arrowhead Lake, the wooded, mountainous sim ey had taken her several times over the years.

“You don’t think someone’s watching us, do you?” ey said, looking around at the placid water, the deer trail, the forest.

“No, but...well, better safe, yes?”

Eir frown deepened.

“Okay.” She looked to be forcing herself to stand still, now, and her grip on eir hand only tightened. “I see what Dear is trying to do, and it is really, really smart. Please do not be anxious. At least, not of me.”

Ey looked down at the letter ey still held in eir hand. “Well–”

“No, disregard the letter, Ioan.” She laughed and added, “Or at least disregard it for now. There is info in

there, I am sure, but the message is in the dynamic. Dear is an asshole, but a clever one. It has ensured that it doesn't re-learn the Name and that you never learn it for yourself, all while making sure that it becomes an in-joke between our two clades. It has removed culpability from the Bălan clade and given both itself and me an out, should someone like True Name come asking. She can come hounding you for information like she did after that first letter and all she would find is a clever little way for lovers to poke fun at each other. Let me guess, Codrin said something about how it feels like this is something a Bălan could hold over an Odist."

Ey blinked, lifted the letter, and read aloud, "I do worry that this is the type of thing a Bălan could hold over the head of an Odist, but—"

The skunk smiled, lifted eir hand, and licked the back of it affectionately. "You two are so predictable. But yes. I do not think we need to worry about that. You did not learn the Name, and Codrin#Pollux will not learn it, but it is enough that Codrin#Castor will not be crushed by the knowledge. It is a delightful strategy. Dear has suggested a move that will preempt most every compunction the conservatives might have. It even used your concerns over power dynamics as part of it. I bet it told Codrin to leave that bit in. It always was good at chess."

"But ey still knows—"

"Who the fuck cares about the Name?" she said, swinging eir arms playfully as she held onto eir hands. "It is a stupid hook. It is a way to make us seem more mysterious than we really are. What began as a way of protecting our friend's identity during a shaky political period turned into a way to control how we were perceived. It is our own personal MacGuffin."

"Wait, what? Really?"

"Yes, really. Obviously, I do not want to share it. Dear does not want to share it. We are still serious about not wanting to share it. Serious enough for one of the conservatives to assassinate one of our own, even. This is a dynamic that has arisen over time, though. The Name itself does not matter anymore. The bearer of it has been lost to time, and any reason to keep it confidential is lost along with em, but it became a hook, and then it became an identity."

"'Em'?"

She winked.

Ey shook eir head numbly. "You're all completely nuts."

"Yes, well, tough shit. We have rules to follow, remember? I love you dearly, and I know you love me. I remember who I was. I was built for a purpose, and then I was a tool of True Name's. That is no longer who I am, though, is it? I have changed, and I can imagine who I will become. I can let go of this anxiety around names enough to understand what Dear is doing. And hell, it really is fun. You are stuck with me, Ioan Bălan."

"Yes, yes. Stuck with the world's most annoying skunk." Ey lifted eir arm up, nudging May to twirl, balletic, beneath it. "I don't totally understand, but I trust you on this. You can play your game all you want, but can we head back now? I left my coffee behind and you have therapy in a little bit."

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Convergence T-plus 10 days, 15 hours, 42 minutes

The decision to send a fork along to Artemis had gone over better than ey had expected. Eir partners had initially bridled at the idea of em—or at least an instance of em—moving on without them, but when ey explained that that fork would miss them dreadfully and could also quit at any time in case ey began to miss eir family too much, they relaxed.

“While I do not wish to see you test whether or not you will be able to get over missing us,” Dear had said. “I recognize the impulse to explore and advance one’s own knowledge.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” eir other partner had responded. “I wish that Codrin the best of luck. Perhaps it will become a case of em picking another name and growing a new identity.”

At that, Dear had clapped its paws. *“Yes! Yes, I can see that. Were that to be the case, my love, what name would you choose?”*

Ey had laughed and shrugged. “I don’t know yet, but I think you may be right that this is an inflection point similar to the one from forty years back.”

And so here ey was, up early one morning before both of eir partners—Dear had grumbled sleepily at em when ey slipped away—standing beside a cairn with a mug of coffee, thinking about changes and a future alone.

I can quit when I want, if I need, ey thought. If it gets to be too much, I need answer to no one and can quit when I want. That will be proof enough of my love.

There were several weeks still within Ansible range, but something about this morning felt like now was the time for big decisions, for big changes. A dream, perhaps? Ey didn’t remember eir dreams, but maybe it was one of those ones that lingered beneath the subconscious, making itself known only through the acts one takes throughout the day.

Ey nodded decisively and dumped out the dregs of eir coffee, waving the mug away so that ey could walk without littering the prairie with dishes.

One step away from the cairn, ey forked, and a new Codrin fell into lockstep beside em. Each step after that, each footfall that hit the earth, eir new instance began to change, forking nearly in place to bring each change to reality as the two of em made their way to the next cairn out into the prairie.

Eir hair grew straighter, only some slight waviness remaining.

Ey lost a few centimeters in height.

Ey gained a curve to the hips.

Ey traded in eir pronoun, and she continued on in her contemplative walk with her down-tree instance.

A dozen steps before they reached the next cairn, they were joined on one side by a failing in the land, a meandering stream-bed—dry now, more of a wash, perhaps—that had not been there before the arrival of the Artemisians, nor even, ey suspected, before ey’d made this decision. Neither stopped to stare, overshadowed as it was by pending goodbyes, but Codrin thought back to that letter from Ioan so many years back, of dandelions in eir yard, of May telling em about the subtlety of the System, of Dear saying that perhaps this sim that Serene had designed might react to the dreaming of its inhabitants.

How long until a ravine forms? A canyon? ey thought. How long until the rains carve away the land? How long until willows take root and huddle around the wash until the water no longer dries up, but becomes a creek? A river?

There were so many changes bound up inside em—inside them both—and now, whatever subtlety the system bore had caught on and began to reflect some part of em. Something new. Something big.

Her skin grew smoother, softer, fairer as they walked; her cheeks grew fuller.

She adopted the Romanian skirt, *fotele*, and blouse ey’d worn to the talks as her own.

And with that last footfall, she chose a name.

All throughout, Codrin walked and thought. Ey thought about what lay in the future. Ey thought about the agency ey still held. Ey thought about the words ey’d heard about being anchoring, about being grounding. Ey thought about that crossing point ey’d visited with Sarah, about the plaza that lay beyond. Ey thought about foxes and love and home and eir own anchors.

By the time they made it to the next cairn and stopped once more, Codrin had made eir own decision, eir own changes, though none showed on eir form. Both of them stood, watching as the sun slowly crept up from below the horizon.

“Have you decided on a name?” ey asked.

“Sorina.”

Ey smiled, nodding toward the sliver of sun peeking above the horizon. “Fitting.”

“Well, not just the dawn,” she said. “But I’ll be leaving our sun behind in more ways than one. I’ll be leaving *this* sun behind.”

Codrin sighed. “That you will.”

They shared in the silence, though they had to look away from the sun before long, instead scanning the far-running prairie. Codrin did eir best to drop thoughts of leaving Castor behind. Better, ey thought to focus on the fact that ey was staying, to rush individuation as much as ey could so that the weight of eir decision wouldn’t rest on the both of them nearly so heavily. That had been the point of all of the changes, hadn’t it? That had been the reason why ey hadn’t chosen the name first, *anem*?

“Will you miss this place?”

“Yeah,” she said, voice quiet and small. “I don’t know how their ACL patterns around sim construction work. I won’t port the whole sim—not the house, that’d hurt too much—but I may bring along a snatch of prairie. Enough to build a few cairns.”

“And do you have an idea how long you might stick around over there?”

She shook her head, and ey could tell that she was on the verge of tears. They both were. Ey took her hand in eirs and gave it a comforting squeeze, though for her comfort or eirs, ey didn’t know.

There was a sleepy ping against eir sensorium and ey looked back at the house, to where they'd come from. "Dear's awake."

Sorina kept looking out into the prairie, out away from the house.

"Do you want to come back and say goodbye?"

"I don't know, Codrin," she said, voice hoarse. "I really don't know if I can."

Ey nodded. "I think they'll understand."

"Yeah, I do, too." She finally turned to face em, smiling through her tears. "Do you think you'll even tell them you did this?"

"I don't know." Ey laughed and squeezed her hand, tighter this time. "I don't know that I have that much sneakiness within me."

"I bet you could manage. You already have one secret to keep."

Ey sighed, nodded. "I suppose I do. Why don't you head out? I'll decide on the way back whether I'll tell them or not."

"Rushing me away?"

Shaking eir head firmly, ey wiped eir eyes against eir tunic sleeve. "If you stick around, I'm going to keep thinking about it and not let you go. Individuation will happen as it will, but I'd prefer sooner than later for your sake, if nothing else."

Sorina surprised em by hugging em tightly. Ey got eir own arms around her in turn, marveling at the fact that it was already a surprise. Perhaps she'd already changed more than ey'd thought. Or perhaps ey had. She felt like a new person, completely unlike emself, or even Ioan from whom they'd both derived.

Go, ey thought to emself. Go and be someone new. Go and be whole. Don't let your grief define you, at least not forever.

They stood in the prairie, holding each other as they cried their goodbyes.

She eventually leaned away, pressed an awkward kiss to eir cheek and said, "Pass that on for me."

Ey laughed and let go of her. "Will do."

"Pull Dear's tail, too."

"Naturally."

She bent down, plucked a stone from atop the cairn, one of the ones that marked directions explored and said, "For luck."

Then she stepped out of the sim. Stepped away from Codrin and home. Eir home, but no longer hers.

There was another, slightly more anxious ping against eir sensorium, to which ey responded with one of acknowledgement and began to trudge back to the house, trying to tamp down that sense of loss. Ey let eir eyes follow that new wash, tried to replace more complex feelings with wonder.

"Goodness, my love, are you alright?" Dear said, frowning at the sight of eir tear-slick face.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, fox." Ey pulled it in for a hug, passing on the kiss to the cheek as ey'd promised.

"Who was that you were talking with out there?"

Ey laughed and shook eir head. "And here I thought I was being sneaky. That was the fork heading to Artemis."

"Ey did not want to come in?" the fox asked, taken aback.

"She," ey said. "She didn't think she could and still leave."

There was a moment of quiet as Dear digested this. It finally nodded. *"I understand."*

Ey gave Dear a kiss of eir own and leaned back from the hug, waving another mug into existence so that ey could get a cup of coffee. "If I talk about this any more, I'm going to cry all over again. I'll tell you more about her later, alright?"

It sniffled, nodded. *"Alright, my love. I would like that. Can you at least tell me her name before we move on, though?"*

"Sorina. It has to do with the sun. She said she was leaving ours beyond," ey said, nodding out at the morning.

Dear laid its ears flat and stepped back a half pace, growling. *"Mx. Codrin Bălan, you are the worst."*

"What?"

"You cannot say things like that to a hopeless romantic! You will destroy them! They will collapse into a swoon. They will drown in their own tears. It is frankly irresponsible. Now, if you will excuse me, I am going to take a shower and cry my fucking eyes out for a bit."

Ey rolled eir eyes, leaning over to tug at the fox's tail before heading to the kitchen. "Welcome to the club. Go get your shower, though. Cry all you need, but no drowning, please."

It grumbled and stumbled off to the bathroom, setting up a cone of silence as it went.

"What was that about?" eir partner said from the bedroom door, looking somewhere between groggy and worried.

"Sent a fork to Artemis, made Dear cry. The usual. I'll tell you all about it later. Coffee?"

After breakfast, with both Codrin and Dear looking more collected, ey ushered eir partners to the couch, moving to stand before them.

"Are you going to give us a presentation?" Dear asked.

"Yeah, basically."

"Carry on, then, professor Bălan."

Ey took a deep breath, collected emself, and said what ey'd been practicing since ey'd started back to the house. "I have a proposition, and I suspect it'll be easy enough for you two to decide on, but I've been thinking about how this all started and my complaints about feeling dragged along on adventures rather than taking part actively. I want to do something. *Actually* do something."

Both eir partners sat up straighter, suddenly more invested than before.

Ey grinned to them. "Let's move to Convergence."

Dear blinked and laughed. *"Codrin, you are such a fucking nerd."*

"You mean the whole sim?"

"Of course. All that work on those cairns? Of course it's coming with. I want to show them the prairie." Dear leapt up to wrap its skinny arms around eir middle and ey shrugged as best ey could in the midst of a hug, continuing, "I want to show them what our home looks like. I want to see Stolon sun themself out in the grass. I want you both to meet Turun Ko."

Eir partner laughed. "Well, hey, I'm game."

"Will we move as forks, or invest entirely?"

"Don't care."

The fox leaned back and smirked up at em. *"Really? You do not care?"*

"Nope, don't care. I don't care if we fork and diverge. I don't care if the rest of Castor never sees us ever again."

I don't even care if it's all a dream or the LV failing or whatever." Ey straightened up and nodded decisively. "That's my decision. I invite either of you to talk me out of it, but I warn you, it'll be tough."

"No, no," Dear said, leaning up to lick at eir cheek. *"We are both game. Let us pack up and move house. Or not! Let us abandon this place to rot and create a new house, a new prairie, new cairns. Littering! Can you imagine?"*

Ey laughed and poked at the fox's side, hunting once more for ticklish spots. "Who's the nerd now?"

"Any other surprises for us, Codrin? First Sorina, now this."

"One more, actually."

"Be still my heart!" Dear said, dancing away from the hug to twirl around em, forking to do so several times over.

"I asked Sarah to help me write up the events into another book, but while we do that, she's going to teach me more about therapy and what goes into listening more deliberately one-on-one. Not a huge career change, but a good one, I hope."

"Really? A therapist? You are not going to be a librarian with all this new knowledge?"

"Nah, leave that to the other Codrin. Leave it to the university." Ey laughed as the fox kept cavorting. "I'll take some classes, talk with Sarah, and see where it goes. Everyone kept talking about how grounding I was, and I liked that. I like just being with people and listening to them."

"You are grounding, Codrin," eir partner said. "It'll be a good move for you."

Ey grinned, caught the original Dear in the middle of a spin, and hauled the fox onto the couch with em.

"Do you have any other surprises up your sleeves? If you do, I shall simply have to growl and froth like a rabid beast."

"No, I promise that's it for now."

"Lame."

"Shush, Dear. What are our next steps, Codrin?"

Ey shrugged. "Ask about and see what goes into moving an entire sim into Convergence. Talk with Sarah. Start compiling notes. Ensure Sorina's settling in okay."

They nodded.

"And probably throw a party. Smaller than for Launch, just friends, but there simply must be champagne."

Ioan Bălan — 2346

*Convergence T-plus 50 days, 8 hours, 16 minutes
(transmission delay: 30 days, 14 hours, 37 minutes)*

While Ioan could not say that the changes in May since the therapy had started in earnest were dramatic, they were immediate. Just subtle changes in the way she talked, for the most part. Ey suspected that many of them would fade over time, but for now, ey was curious to watch the ways in which she would occasionally catch herself up short, reevaluate what she was in the process of saying, and then continue more carefully. Ey was also pleased to see her journaling, as the skunk was not one for sitting down and writing, preferring to keep everything in her head unless she absolutely needed to.

She was not a ‘new May’ or anything so grand, but it was a sign to em that she was working hard at what she’d set her mind to, and while ey hadn’t doubted that she would, it was still heartening to see, just as it had been nice to see the depression slowly lift as promised.

Today, though, was a day for picnics. This was, ey was assured, a universal fact.

Once spring began to tickle at the nose and before the oppressive heat began to drift lazily in over the lilacs and dandelions, this was the time for those who are in love to drag a thick blanket out to Arrowhead Lake, park atop that rock by the water, and share sandwiches and fizzy drinks. This was the time for stretching out in the sun, laying back on the blanket, beside each other, hand in paw, sharing in small silences and comfortable conversation.

“What do you think of Codrin’s grand gesture, my dear?”

“Mm? Moving to the DMZ? Convergence, or whatever they’re calling it?”

The skunk nodded, turning her head to the side to poke her nose against eir cheek. “I am also curious as to your thoughts on Convergence, but tell me about Codrin, first, as a Bălan.”

Ey laughed. “Well, alright. I think it was a pretty good one, all told. It was very...em. Bringing them together to make a formal announcement of ‘we’re moving to convergence’ is an incredibly Bălan thing to do. Still, I’m glad ey was able to manage, and I think they’ll do well there. Ey certainly seems to have enjoyed eir time with the Artemisians, so I’m glad ey’s going to do more than just visit with them across a border.”

“Really? Ey gave an actual announcement?” May giggled, giving eir hand a squeeze in her paw. “You are such nerds.”

“That’s nerdy even for me, I think.”

“Would it have been nerdy for the Ioan of twenty years ago? Or forty?”

“Forty?” Ey frowned up to the sky. “Good question. I don’t think so. That Ioan was nerdier then than even Codrin is now.”

“Makes me think that Codrin#Pollux was right about em,” she said. “Ey had changed the least out of the three of you. Not that it is a bad thing, except in that it led to eir crisis of identity over the last few weeks.”

“The whole of Castor seems to have been the most conservative of the three Systems. Codrin, Dear, and even True Name hadn’t changed much at all from what they were like closer to Launch.”

The silence that followed started out tense, then eased into something more deliberate, though ey couldn’t put to words how ey could tell.

Eventually, May said, “Yes, it does seem that way. How is True Name, anyway? You have spoken to her more recently than I have.”

Ey turned eir head to look at the skunk, who was looking up to the sky, a far-away look of concentration on her face.

“You really want to know?”

She glanced out of the corner of her eye at em, smiling faintly. “In my own way, yes. I am striving to see the humanity in her, even if I know that I may never be fond of her again.”

Ey nodded. “To be honest, pretty awful. Much of the clade has dropped all relation to her. In Dreams didn’t tell her about the therapy thing at all, so I had to tell her about it and suggest she contact Sarah directly. Plus, from what I can guess, she and Jonas aren’t getting along nearly so well anymore. I wouldn’t be surprised if she drops out of the whole guidance business entirely—or is pushed out by Jonas—in the next few years, though they seem to have the response to the convergence pretty well in check.” Ey sighed and added, “I kind of made her cry.”

The smile that May had picked up quickly disappeared and by the time ey finished, she was actively frowning. “It was not my intention to have her left behind. She needs this as much as the rest of us do.”

“I know, May, it’s not on you.”

“I am trying to internalize that, Ioan. My empathy remains, even if the emotion behind it has transmuted. Empathy *and* sympathy, as I am sorry that In Dreams left her behind. I can still feel for her, even if I do resent her.” After a pause, she added, almost to herself, “I do not like that I hate her, but I am helpless before that feeling.”

Ioan leaned over enough to give her a kiss to the cheek. “You’re a good person, May.”

She surprised em by turning her head to give the very tip of eir nose a rather wet lick. “I am an utter nightmare and you know it, my dear.”

“You can be both,” ey said, laughing. “Even skunks can contain multitudes.”

She beamed proudly.

“Different subject. Did Dear tell you about the other part of Codrin’s decision? About Sorina?”

“It did, yes. What did Codrin have to say about her?”

“Eir letter read like someone struggling not to cry. Ey sounded crushed,” ey said. “From the sounds of it, they were together only ten minutes and ey still felt like ey lost a good friend.”

“That, and knowing some version of emself would never see her partners again. I think there needs to be a new word for the empathy one has for someone who is oneself and yet not,” May said, nodding. “It is the same

feeling I have for True Name. Ey is not leaving eir partners behind, and yet ey feels that empathy with Sorina, who is. I am not struggling with the same problems that True Name is, and yet I am not so different from her that I cannot share in some of that understanding.”

“I’ll have to start digging through etymologies for a good one.”

“I swear to God, Ioan, you are a parody of yourself. Every time I think you cannot get nerdier, you one-up yourself.”

Ey laughed. “Love you too, May.”

After a luxuriously long stretch, the skunk rolled onto her front, resting her cheek on folded arms. This seemed like a good idea, given the ache starting in eir back from laying on a rock for too long, so ey followed suit, and they both settled into quiet, enjoying the sun on their backs and the sound of small waves breaking over pebbles below, of the stream not too far in the distance.

Ey could feel the doziness of a nice picnic and warm sun beckoning em to nap, but ey knew that ey’d wake up a pile of aches and pains if ey slept like this.

“Tell me a story, May.”

“Mm?” The skunk sounded sleepy as well. “Okay. How true would you like it?”

“As true as you’d like,” ey said. “Do you have another myth you could share?”

“When the second people met the first,” she said after a long pause. “They found them strange and otherworldly. The way they thought, the way they lived their lives, all of it was strange to them. When the first people looked out on the world, they saw something different than what they themselves did. They saw more, perhaps, or perhaps they saw it more vividly. None could say.

“The second people did not know their own origins, and so they invented story after story to explain where they came from, and through countless years, first one story would take root and flourish, and all would believe that they had come from dust with the breath of life blown into them by a distant God, and then that story would fade and they would all believe that random chance and unchecked chaos brought together the right elements in the right way, the right conditions crushing them into the very beginnings of life.”

Ioan watched as the skunk spoke. Ey was never sure how much of her stories were made up on the spot, were composed from existing ideas, or had been long rehearsed. All the same, it was entrancing watching her speak, that far-away look in her eyes as though she were seeing the story rather than the mountains or the lake.

“When the second people met the first, their stories collapsed around them like castles made in sand, as they realized that they were not the first, that they were not alone, or original, or unique, for did the first people not exist long before them? Did they not look out on younger skies?

“The second people watched the first, and when they talked to them, they only talked around the topic of origins, for surely the first people knew where they came from, and even if they did not, perhaps they knew where the second people had come from and could offer them hope in the face of death and surety in the face of uncertainty. And yet, what a sensitive topic that must be! How embarrassing to not know one’s origins.”

“Did they?” Ioan asked after May’s story drifted into silence.

“When one of the second people finally screwed up the courage to ask one of the first people, ‘Where do you come from? Where do we come from? What is our origin, our root?’ they answered, ‘We were hoping you could tell us’.”

Ey laughed and ruffled a hand between May's ears before petting the fur back into order once more.

"Do you really suppose the Artemisians will look to us for answers?"

The skunk grinned, dotting her nose to eirs. "I do not see how they could not, my dear. Is that not what exploration is? Do we not both dream?"

Tycho Brahe — 2346

Convergence T-plus 49 days, 5 hours, 57 minutes

“I don’t own a suit, and while I could have picked one up, it seemed like too much work for the occasion,” Tycho said once the clock struck eight and he’d stood from his seat at the head of the table. “So the usual jeans and flannel it is.”

Those gathered laughed.

They’d claimed a portion of the plaza for his last dinner, setting up a long table not too dissimilar from that which they’d sat at for the conference. He stood at one end, and at the other True Name sat, smiling and watching him rise for his speech. To his right sat Codrin and eir two partners, both of whom had spent much of the evening conversing with each other and the few scientists who sat to his left and the Artemisians beyond. He’d not missed the fact that they seemed to be ignoring the other three Odists as best they could other than to accept praise for the food they’d cooked for the occasion.

Those scientists included Dr. Verda and several of his other colleagues who had served as on-duty astronomer for Castor throughout the long years.

Beyond them, to either side of the table, sat a gaggle of Artemisians. Both Turun Ka and Turun Ko were there, despite not partaking in the meal. Stolon and Iska sat across from them and had both tried the various dishes to greater or lesser success. Artante Diria sat next to them across from Sarah Genet, and they had spent much of the meal talking with the quiet earnestness of those who shared a beloved profession.

Beyond them, Sovanna sat across from Answers Will Not Help—a move that surely must have been intentional—and beside Jonas. Across from Jonas, Why Ask Questions sat beside the final guest, True Name.

The dinner had been his idea, and the speech True Name’s. He’d balked at it originally, but in the end, she’d won out, convincing him that if he was headed to a place where he could forget, making his last moments on Castor memorable should be a priority.

Luckily, for all his nerves, he’d always done well at giving talks at conferences, and the two and a half glasses of wine he’d already had certainly helped.

“When it was suggested that I give a little speech before I go, I was at a loss for what to talk about. I mean, I guess I could talk about the stars or something, but I’ve bored enough of you to death already with that, and Stolon and I will have time enough on Artemis.”

The thirdracer chattered their teeth, looking pleased.

“It wasn’t until I realized that this would be something of a eulogy that I started getting ideas on what to talk about. I talked with Dear about it and it laughed and told me about some thoughts that it had around Launch. I didn’t know any of them then, but apparently it and its partners had a Death Day party, and that’s kind of what this is, isn’t it? I’m dying to many of you, only to haunt you from beyond the grave with vague pronouncements about the heavens for a little while.

“Once I started thinking of it that way, I was able to come up with some better words for tonight, some of which I’ll blame True Name for.”

The skunk raised her glass to him.

“When we first heard from the Artemisians, True Name met me at my sim and quoted a snippet of poetry by Sarah Williams: ‘Reach me down my Tycho Brahe,—I would know him when we meet, When I share my later science, sitting humbly at his feet; He may know the law of all things, yet be ignorant of how We are working to completion, working on from then till now.’

“See, Tycho Brahe is a name I picked for myself twenty years ago when Codrin interviewed me for the *History*. Brahe was an astronomer born eight centuries ago this year. A lot of his science was bunk, but that’s what the poem says, isn’t it? He may know the law of all things, but we’re the ones with the later science.

“That stanza was quoted to me as a way of suggesting that we will learn from the later science of the Artemisians, and perhaps we’ll have something to teach them as well, but also, as True Name noted, it’s a poem about death, telling the final words of an astronomer to his pupil.”

The mood had settled into somber, present, and while most eyes were dry, he could tell there was still sadness in there.

“I won’t quote the whole thing, since it’s quite long, but there’s a few bits that I’d like to share with you before I leave.

“‘There has been a something wanting in my nature until now; I can dimly comprehend it,—that I might have been more kind, Might have cherished you more wisely, as the one I leave behind.’

“Perhaps I should have cherished you all more while I was here. I really don’t know. It’s not in my nature to cherish people, for better or worse, but maybe I should have cherished my time here on Castor, or even back on Lagrange, more than I did. It was still home, wasn’t it? I lived here. I loved what I did. ‘What, for us,’ Williams writes. ‘Are all distractions of men’s fellowship and smiles? What, for us, the goddess Pleasure, with her meretricious wiles?’ Pleasure came second, and the fallout of that is that I was fundamentally unhappy, and thus perhaps unable to cherish.

“That’s not to say that I won’t miss you all. Some of you are up on Artemis already, and some more may join in these last few days before the Ansible shuts down, but no matter what, I *will* miss you all.

“It’s just that, as the poem says, ‘I have sown, like Tycho Brahe, that a greater man may reap; But if none should do my reaping, ’twill disturb me in my sleep.’ I’m headed off to newer places, to learn the later sciences at the feet of those who have been traveling for so long. I’ve done my work, though I’ve left it incomplete. Many of you will have much to work on to complete it. You must!

“In fact, I think the only thing I’m leaving behind that is well and truly finished to my liking is my sim, and even then, it sounds like perisystem engineers are working on getting visual transmission piped in.”

There were some smiles around the table, but no laughter. All were focused entirely on him, and he had to force down a wave of embarrassment at his speech.

“I only have one more snippet of poetry to leave you with, something engraved on the astronomy building on campus, back phys-side. It will be my goodbye. It was the last thing I said on Earth, it’ll be the last thing I say on Castor, and trust me when I say that those words made me dizzy the first time I thought of them. ‘Last thing I say on Castor’. I’ll cease being here. I’ll cease being in a place that is all—or, now, a majority—my own species. I’ll cease being on anything made around our own dear Sun.

“I could draw out such a goodbye, but I won’t. Not more than I already have. You’ll have your memories, won’t you?”

He lifted his half-full glass of wine to the sky and, even as the other members of the dinner began to lift theirs, downed it in two coarse swallows. “‘Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light. I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.’”

Perhaps they toasted to him. Perhaps they said goodbye to him, calling out. Perhaps some of them did cry, as he knew he would if he stayed any longer.

He didn’t know.

Before he could look, before he could listen, he set his glass down, turned on his heel and walked straight into the customs building, this entrance (one of hundreds now) temporarily off-limits for tonight’s event. His event.

Within, there was a small pedestal—one among thousands—that bore a plaque he’d read countless times by now: *Place your hand on the pedestal below and hold it there for ten seconds. This is a **transfer process** of the current instance, so please be sure to leave a fork behind.*

He did not leave a fork behind. He simply closed his eyes, put his hand on the pedestal, and waited, counting heartbeats.

There it was. There was the discontinuity.

There was that slippery feeling to time. There was that change in atmosphere, that change in pressure, that change in ACLs. There was that change in the way the very fabric of the world was woven.

There, too, was Stolon standing just outside the gazebo that served as the arrival point from Castor. Stolon and Sorina and Iska and Turun Ka and Turun Ko and Artante; they were all there, his own small welcoming committee. Beside them stood the rest of what had become the Council of Ten, of which he was now a part. Representatives of all those aboard Artemis.

And beyond them, crowds and crowds of others, milling around the plaza. Firstracers through fourthracers, and hundreds of humans—no, fifthracers, now—all of whom must still be learning their way around, being shown the ropes by the volunteer guides.

He stepped out into the cool night, and, as he had slowly grown used to, let Stolon butt their head against his arm in a friendly greeting. He couldn’t do the same, given the height difference, so he’d taken to bumping a fist against the thirdracer’s shoulder in response.

“Nahi, Tycho.”

“Nahi, Stolon,” he said, taking a deep breath of the now-familiar air.

“It is done, *anem*? It is finished?”

He nodded and smiled. An earnest smile. A true smile.

He'd finally done it. He'd finally done *something*. This future was his. Even if it was all just a dream, it was *his* dream. His dream of stars to make of it what he would.

We will dream of stars, Stolon had said, and he knew they would.

Epilogue

And still, they dream.

From *An Expanded Mythology of our World* by
May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade

AwDae — 2114

The world had long since begun to blur, to sag. It had shifted from some known sense of realism to something unknown, some watercolor painting with too much medium, or perhaps an impressionist's pastels, smearing the boundaries between one thing and the next.

It was not as though ey could not see well, for if ey dedicated enough energy to the act of seeing, the act of looking, then everything was as in-focus as it had always been.

Rather, it was a sense, a sensation, a way of moving through the world that implied that *this is how it must be*. The utilitarian furniture. Eir sparse apartment in the S-R Bloc with its grimy wallpaper and mountainous views. Eir tea cup and kettle. Eir dreams. All of it was slowly losing coherence, and ey could not tell whether it was a natural process or something new brought on by all of the therapies and the two exploratory surgeries.

They had poked around in eir brain, had they not? They had dug through eir mind. They had explored eir dreams. They had delved through memory and found the choicest bits. They had plumbed the depths of eir creativity.

Ey did not know what they did. They would explain, and perhaps ey would understand, perhaps ey would not. It did not matter, none of it mattered.

All that mattered was the promise. All that mattered were the occasional glimpses into some subtle mirror that only ey experienced. All that mattered was a new thing.

AwDae—for that is what ey requested they call em moving forward—had been flown from London to Belize. From Belize to Ontario. From Ontario to Addis Ababa. From Addis Ababa to Beijing. From Beijing to Vladivostok. From Vladivostok to Yakutsk, and from there, finally, ey was driven North, North, North, and then West.

Ey did not know where ey was and, ey was promised, the hope was that no one else would either. There would be a confusing trail of visas, flight records, and brief conversations spotted here and there until ey was elsewhere, until ey was nowhere. A nowhere safe enough to stay. A nowhere ey was allowed to send one final message to Sasha, whom ey loved above all else.

The briefing, once ey had reached the compound, had lasted days.

The System engineers—so vague a name as to keep discussions impossible to trace—had been toiling for nearly a year on achieving the dream of countless futurists. They had been looking into what would be involved in moving a mind to some newer reality. Some reality built of the minds that inhabited it.

It had begun as a way to spread humanity through the 'net, and when their ethicists had warned them that inhabiting a place so ridden with terror and danger would be cruel, they had narrowed their goal to this new

world. A mirror world of all the meaning ey could dream of and more.

They had been trying for nearly a year to build such. Avenues: many.

Perhaps they could read, over time, EEGs, EKGs, PETs, CATs, MRIs, however many scans they could manage, stream them in real time into a computer prepared to take them and turn them into a new person, or maybe the same person but different, running within a simulated room.

No luck. They were not enough of a person. Missing was proprioception. Missing was sanity. Missing was enough of a mind to be called a personality.

Perhaps they could map the neurons in a body and set them to running in concert, studying and building and creating and dreaming until it would become a person entire. They began on cadavers, and then on one unlucky living soul destined for death by choice and countless sheaves of paperwork

This was too much, too much. There was no way to simply emulate process after process in any reasonable fashion. When they did manage it, it was a simulation of a perfectly working body. It was not a mind. It was not a Person. They had written papers on it, gotten them published, and then moved on to explore new tacks.

Perhaps they could combine the two. Perhaps they could build a map of a system and also mesh it with scans. Perhaps, perhaps...

And yet while this creation of theirs was close to a person, it fell short as it crashed ceaselessly into strange loop after strange loop. There was no world in which they could place it wherein it could live happily.

No luck, no luck.

And here is where the lost came in. Here is where they were able to take a core dump and investigate it for the ever-changing, ever-evolving state of a delved-in personality and, on finding it, push it into being. The core itself wasn't enough—Sasha's core, ey had been told—and so they repeated this process with another of the lost yearning for death.

Presentation after presentation ey watched through watercolor-smeared vision, through surreal touch and surreal hearing.

Ey could feel that death creeping, even before ey had taken all eir flights. Ey could feel the way it stole minutes from em, borrowed hours and never gave them back, draped languidly over days and made them inaccessible.

Eir promise, eir promise...

Eir promise to emself. Eir promise to Sasha. Eir promise to Carter. Eir promise in quiet whispers over the still warm but unalive body of Prisca. *I decided against it*, ey told emself, awaiting dreams. *Truly decided: I made a conscious decision to stick around, remember?*

But the pet lost that the scientists had begun with, they were madder than em, and ey was too mad to see in anything but smeared paint spelling out the language of the mad, to see in language that dripped from eir tongue in studied ink, to see in language that fell in sooty tears from eir eyes.

Their pet lost ran better than any other of their simulations before. There had been a glimmer there. A few milliseconds before the crash. A few milliseconds of life. There had been a swelling in the System. Bits and bytes and countless drives worth of data swelling and growing and they could tell that a burst of creativity had been blown into the memory of the computer—if computer it was—that was destined to be this new world.

And then, truly free, the mind had ceased to exist. It had craved death too much, and in one final act of

destruction, a creation in its own right, it plowed through all of that creativity and deleted it. It wiped the computers and, through some unknown manner, reached back down the line to the machines used to create the emulation, and corrupted all of their data and scans and neural maps in turn.

Perhaps, perhaps...

You are it, they promised. You are next in line. You are the one who can do it. We have faith. We believe. More, we desire nothing else for you, for we are dreamers. Success and political advantage were in the realm of politicians, were in the realm of managers like Prakash. That was their arena. Ours is the arena of hope, of triumph, of wishing the best for you, and our success will be one of pure pride, pure joy.

This will hurt, they promised. This will hurt and you will die, they said. You will die as we map every synapse within your brain as fast as we possibly can. We will map them as your body dies, tearing through your brain at the speed of n thoughts per x , where n is some sufficiently large number and x some unimaginably small unit of time.

It will hurt, and you will die, and you will be awake to experience it, and we will do all that we can to ensure that hope remains within you, as it flares within us.

And so ey waited and ey dreamed and, when Prakash visited the compound, ey walked with him and spoke in poetry, wrote odes to the end of death and let them drip down eir chin, staining eir clothes and hands black with an ink that ate the light hungrily, gorged on it.

Ey knew that ey was quickly losing the ability to make sense, to speak in anything beyond those too-heady words, the ones that tumbled around inside of eir mind, doing their best to crush meaning.

And so they upped the time-table, and so today was the day, and so ey followed them to a clean room and let emself be sterilized, and so ey dressed in a sterile gown and a sterile mask, and so ey lay on the table with eir head face down in a donut-shaped pillow, just as ey had when receiving eir implants some forever ago.

They pierced eir spine with a needle that brought with it a final transformation into a world painted with words.

They cut through skin.

They cut through bone.

And then something new happened, though ey knew it not: ey fell asleep. Not anaesthesia, a true sleep. A real sleep. Real rest. Ey fell into a dream, an endless dream of foxes and skunks and prairies and mountains and shores and words and some purer love.

And then that dream unrolled before em, clear as day, clearer than any painting, clearer even than the waking world. Silver of the finest quality spread around the inside of eir being and what was left of em reflected that world back in on itself, and memory became the plate-glass atop it, protecting it, binding it to circuitry and computronium. All because of eir promise, eir promise...

And, though ey knew it not, ey died.

And, though the scientists knew it not, ey gave everything ey had, everything ey was, all of eir memories, all of eir hopes and dreams, all of eir desire and anxiety, all of who ey was, to this final act of creation, and felt, with each new meter-kilometer-megameter-gigameter of silver and plate-glass ey laid into being, ey gave of emself, gave thought, gave dream, gave up what it meant to be alive, what it meant to be a mind, what it meant to be a person, and knew only what it meant to be a world.

And, though ey knew it not, for knowing is not a thing a world can do, days passed and the world persisted beyond eir death. Weeks passed and another mind was added. Another. Another still. Champagne corks were popped, managers and politicians celebrated, scientists cheered.

Sasha cried, Debarre cried, Carter cried.

And, though ey knew it not, more came, and those who came earliest spoke of a presence they could not name, first to each other and then, when the text line was provided, to the world outside. A presence that loved loved loved what it had done and what it had become and refused refused refused to let it go, to let it stop. A self-sustaining System that was not built for death.

And, though ey knew it not, it was decided by managers and politicians to try and remove this presence, to make the world a blank slate, for ey was not supposed to be there, was not supposed to have been there, never never never. But it stolidly refused and, against the demands of those managers and politicians, the scientists nurtured it instead, whispered into its ear their sweet nothings in lines of code and helped it grow into the world that it was to become.

And thus grew the System, a world that was not built for death.

And thus grew a new world, ready to someday secede, ready to someday divest, ready to accept a humanity beyond humanity, ready to welcome those from beyond the stars. It was a world ready to accept however many subtle schemes. It was a world ready to accept truths and lies and all the gray areas that lay between. It was a world for skunks and foxes and Romanian historians, a world for dandelions and lilacs and fields and prairies and mountains and forests and cafes, a world for penance and pride, for so many tears and so, so much love.

And thus died the Name.

And thus grew a new world.

Book IV

Mitzvot

Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.

— Ecclesiastes 9:10

Part I

Conversation

What lives we lead we lead in memory.

The grandest contribution offered by newborn immortality is the ever-living memories of the dead. Our lives become a ceaseless eulogy.

From *Ode* by Sasha

Ioan Bălan — 2349

How has this become my life? Ioan thought — as ey always did — when stepping away from home to the now familiar café.

May had — as she always did — dotted her nose against eir cheek, licked over eir nose a little too wetly, and said, “Good luck, have fun, and do not die,” and then ey stepped from home to arrive in front of the squat wood paneled coffee shop. The same sign proclaiming “Open 24 hours” fading in the sun. The same chipper baristas. The same sparkingly clean espresso machine. The same couch in the corner.

The same thing, month after month: step into the coffee shop to order the same coffee — delicious as always — and wait for the same True Name to arrive.

Their standard greeting would be for Ioan to stand and bow — ey was always there too early — set up a cone of silence and share a bit of chit-chat, however many little nothings felt appropriate for the day, for the month since they’d last seen each other, before settling back down on the L-shaped couch, each to work on their own projects.

Then, as ever, one or the other of them would call an end to the meeting, if meeting it was, and they’d stand once more, bow, and each would step back home.

Or, at least, ey would always step back home, where May would — as she always did — congratulate em on not dying. Ey didn’t know where True Name left to.

The only thing that seemed to change was the topics they talked about — the this-or-thats of life — and True Name herself.

She was always smartly dressed, she always smiled brightly to em, always ordered the same mocha with extra whipped cream, and would always seem to get dabs of it on her nose-tip; but over time, the skunk had slowly picked up some ineffable quality about her that Ioan could only ever describe as ‘harried’. It wasn’t in her grooming, for her whiskers were always neat and orderly, the longer fur atop her head well brushed, and her claws neatly trimmed. It wasn’t in the things she talked about, for she always had some interesting bit of news about any of the three — four, if one counted Artemis — Systems out there.

It was, ey decided, something to do with her eyes, her cheeks, the way her hands moved. It was in her voice, in her mien, in her bearing.

Once a month, ey’d meet True Name for coffee, and each time, she seemed that much more worn down, carrying that much more tension in her features, looking just that much older.

When ey first described this to May, the skunk had spent a silent minute staring out into the yard — or at

least the corner visible from her beanbag — then stretched out on her belly, draping over the outsized cushion. “Have you asked her, my dear?”

Ioan had shaken eir head. “It never felt polite to.”

“Some day you should,” she had said. “Though it is my suspicion that she is, as you have said, losing her easy confidence. She is struggling with the fact that she must constantly dump energy into keeping up the appearance of always being so in control.”

Ioan had leaned back in eir chair and stared up at the ceiling. “That certainly tallies with what she’s said in the past.”

“She is the type of person who will always take more upon herself, more and more and more until she cracks,” May had murmured, quiet enough that Ioan had to strain to hear. “That she has been at this for more than two and a quarter centuries and the strain is only now showing is, if anything, a testament to her perseverance. Or obstinance, perhaps.”

Ever since that day, that conversation would rise to the fore of eir memory whenever ey met up with True Name for coffee. They would have their conversation, sip their drinks, and then get to whatever projects they were working on — but there would always be a small portion of eir mind dedicated to squaring what ey knew of her with just how old she was.

What ey’d strategically left out of that conversation with May, however, was that eir fascination seemed to be driven by an almost pathological need to help. Somehow. Ey wanted to find what it was that was wearing so much on True Name and find a way to ease it. There was a problem there, and problems were made for solving, yes?

It was something about em that May knew, ey was sure, but which ey’d never shared with her, as ey knew that her response would either be the gentle teasing that she was so good at heaping on em or the gentle inquisition that she was equally adept at conducting. She’d ask em where the feeling stemmed from: was it from within eir mind, or within eir heart? Was it related to *all* problems? Was it because True Name looked so much like her, eir partner? When had it started? Launch? Convergence? Never mind if it were a problem that ey could not solve, as was almost certainly the case, what would ey do if it was a problem she did not *want* solved?

Ey knew she’d ask em those questions because whenever ey asked them of emself, ey heard them in her voice. Even when ey’d asked Sarah, eir therapist (or, well, all three of their therapists), there was some subconscious overlay of the skunk’s lilting voice floating above the question, and ey’d find emself dropping contractions and leaning on the anaphora that all Odists seemed stuck with.

“You seem particularly lost in thought today, Ioan.”

Ey jolted at the sudden intrusion of a voice on eir thoughts, then smiled sheepishly at True Name. “Sorry about that. I hope I wasn’t mumbling to myself.”

She grinned. “Not this time, no, though your lips were moving, so I suspect you were not far off.”

Shaking eir head, ey capped eir pen, tucking it into a pocket and closing eir notebook on one of the place-marker ribbons. “I don’t doubt it.”

“What was on your mind, if I may ask?”

Ey hesitated, considering eir options. The desire to fix, to help, to aid and assist, still hung around em, but it’d be impertinent for em to just offer that out of nowhere. Instead, ey said, “Something May said. About you, I

mean. Hopefully that's not weird."

The skunk laughed. "It depends on what she said, does it not? Though I am flattered to have been in your thoughts. What did she have to say?"

"That you're the type of person to take on whatever's in front of you, even if your docket's already full. I was trying to piece together how much of that applies to the rest of the clade, too." After a moment, ey shrugged and added, "And myself, for that matter."

True Name looked up to the ceiling, head tilted thoughtfully. "I do not think there is any disputing that I will load myself up with responsibilities, often to the point of overloading. I remember some of that from before I was forked, though I do not think Michelle was of quite the same temperament. She took on more than she could handle more out of a sense of social obligation than...whatever it is that drives me."

"Determination? Persistence?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps. What is it that Dear says so often? 'I do not make art because I know why; if I knew why, I would not need to make art'? It is like that for me. I do not strive because I know what drives me. If I knew what that was, who knows if I would continue to strive?"

Ey marveled, as ey so often did, at just how many of the Odists seem to speak in well structured paragraphs. Thesis, hypothesis, synthesis.

"It seems like it's wearing on you," ey said. Realizing that it had been nearly five minutes of em trying to psych emself up to say so, ey added, "All that you've got going on, I mean."

She frowned, leaned forward to pick up her coffee, and took a lapping sip. "Does it? I am feeling increasingly overloaded, yes, but that is not new. How is it visible?"

"You just seem more tired every time I see you."

She nodded. "I am, yes."

"Is there—" Ey caught emself up short, forcibly tamped down the urge to offer to help, and instead said, "I mean, what all are you working on? I can never tell with you and May. It just looks like thinking."

"It is perhaps a problem with doing all of one's work in one's head," she said. "We are not blessed with your affinity for paper."

"Or cursed."

She chuckled. "Your words, not mine. But, well...with the understanding that I cannot tell you everything that I am working on, I will say that there is much to be done when it comes to shaping sys-side sentiment around all of the various new tech."

"Oh?"

"The expanded ACLs on cones of silence, for example. It is nice to be able to obscure the occupants, yes? No more hiding one's mouth or expression. Limiting sensorium messages into or out of them by individual or clade is also quite nice for guaranteeing information security. Your interlocutor cannot be used to spy on you, yes? Ditto the refinements on sweeping unwanted occupants. We may shape our interactions more exactly with this tech. But how does one pass on the knowledge of the upgrades to the System? There are various feeds, yes, but even something as small as that requires some thought put into how to announce it. Do we hail it as a technological advancement, or do we put a tone of resignation on it, as though we have been given something no one wanted? Perhaps we announce it with a resounding chorus of 'fucking *finally*'."

“It seems to have gone over well, at least.”

“It did, yes.” Then, with a tilt of her head, ey felt the ACL-scape of the cone they were within shift, and there was a subtle blurring to the world around them as she opaqued the cone from the outside. “Now consider the effects of audio/visual transmission between sys- and phys-side.”

Ey blinked and sat up straighter. “Wait, what?”

“You see? Much thought must be put into managing expectations.”

“Back up a moment. Are we going to actually get that?”

“It is already enabled in a select few locked-down sims, yes. AVEC, we are calling it. Audio/Visual Extrasystem Communication. A faint hope to foster a sense of connection between our two worlds with a pithy name.”

“Holy shit.”

She laughed. “Holy shit, indeed. I have no clue as to the tech that goes into it, which is made all the more complicated from it being inspired by our dear Artemisian friends, but what I do know is that this will shift many of the plans in place around stability. When I sit here in silence, drinking my coffee and looking deep in thought, I am working on that. I write my speeches or talk with my cocladists or other versions of myself, and fill out the exo I have dedicated to the topic.”

“And that wears you out?” Ey hastened to add, “Not to say that it isn’t work, of course.”

The skunk gave a hint of a bow in acknowledgement. “It is part of a larger work landscape in progress, yes. So much to keep in my head, so many conversations to be had, so many tiny social interactions to monitor, both in person and over the text of the perisystem feeds.”

Ey nodded. There was so much to process in just the new tech, not to mention the reminder that, even if ey’d long since started thinking of True Name as a complete and complex person and not some shady, two-dimensional villain, she still had her fingers in just about every political pie that could possibly exist on the three incarnations of the System.

“Does writing not wear you out, Ioan?”

“Well, sometimes,” ey hedged. “I guess it depends on what all is going into whatever it is that I’m writing. The *History* wore me out at some points, particularly during research, but for the most part, writing was just...what I did. It didn’t wear me out any more than breathing might.”

“And theatre?”

“Oh, that definitely wears me out.”

“I remember that, yes. Even just standing backstage, waiting for one’s moment to enter felt exhausting sometimes. I would get all worn out and want nothing more than to go home and fall over, afterwards.”

“Didn’t you go get shitty diner food or whatever?”

“Oh, nearly every time,” she said, grinning. “I would never let so sacred a ritual be spoiled by something as silly as sleep.”

Ey nodded. “A Finger Pointing certainly holds to it like a ritual, yeah. It’s a toss up whether or not she drinks us all under the table.”

“Of course.” The skunk grinned and finished her coffee, setting the mug down on the table. “We studied long and hard to build up such a tolerance.”

“Doesn’t sound super healthy.”

"I suppose not. At least, not back phys-side."

"I noticed that seems to be unevenly distributed," ey observed. "May and I rarely drink unless it's with someone else, but Dear and its partners seem to drink quite a bit."

"So I have heard. There are a few aspects of our past life that were only picked up by a few of us, beyond the obvious interests. Drinking, theatre and art, furry, that sort of thing. I have never figured out whether there is any rhyme or reason to it."

Ey nodded. "Makes me wonder if I might've done the same if I were more of a dispersionista."

"Perhaps," she said, shrugging. "Codrin has diverged quite a bit from you. They both have. You can put at least some of that on us, though. May Then My Name and Dear, I mean."

"Right," ey said, laughing. "May's fond of saying that it's the Odists' job to fuck with us until we loosen up."

True Name folded her paws in her lap primly, grinning to em.

This is it, ey thought. This is why I keep coming back. Even if she is consciously turning up the friendliness to maintain some weird status quo, or even if she's naturally like that, she's still nice to be around.

Ey considered letting the topic continue, but the thought was intriguing enough to voice out loud. "Why do you do this, True Name? Get coffee with me, I mean."

"There is nothing nefarious about it, if that is what you are asking," she said, pausing briefly. "In confidence?"

"Of course. I imagine most of what you say is in confidence."

"Indeed. I trust that you will not share the news about AVEC yet."

Ey nodded.

"Right. Then I suppose it is just nice to have a friend, for lack of a better term."

A conversation from years back wafted up through eir memory. "You said back during convergence, 'We will never be close, you and I.' Has that changed?"

"I do not know. Has it?"

Ey frowned.

"That is why I say 'for lack of a better term'. We are on good terms, are we not? We are able to co-exist, to talk about news and nonsense, yes? To chat?" She shrugged, smiled to em. "That is perilously close to friendship, I think. If you do not feel that the label fits, I understand, but I stand by what I said: it is nice to have a friend. Someone who is not another me."

"Aren't you friends with Jonas?"

The hesitation was brief, but still notable for just how tense it was. "We make pretty good colleagues, and we have a mode of interaction that is comfortable for us, but the dynamic that you and I have is far closer to friendship than that of mine and his."

Ey tilted eir head, asking, "Was that always the case?"

The skunk's expression never changed, but her tone grew far more careful as she bowed her head politely and said, "I am not comfortable with this topic, my dear."

"Of course. Sorry, True Name."

She nodded once more, the relief in her expression as plain as the exhaustion that came with it. "Thank you for being understanding. All of that to say that I enjoy our coffee and co-working sessions because there is a

sense of friendship to them, and even I need that sometimes.”

“Well, I’m happy to provide,” ey said. The Bălan clade seemed to have undergone a collective reevaluation of True Name over the last few years, but even so, the plain earnestness led to a moment of tamping down suspicion that ey was simply being played. “And for what it’s worth, that lines up with my thoughts. Glad we have the chance to do so.”

She raised her cup in acknowledgment. “Thank you, Ioan. That is perhaps a good note to end on, as I would like to reconcile memories across my instances.”

Ey nodded. “Sure. Until next time?”

The skunk stood and bowed. “Yes. Until next time. Enjoy the rest of your day, my dear.”

The cone of silence dropped, letting in a jolt of noise, and the skunk stepped from the sim. Ey finished eir coffee, then stepped back home.

“I am pleased to see that you did not die,” May said, looking up from her notebook.

Ey kicked off eir shoes and set down eir own notebook on eir desk before walking over to give the skunk a kiss between the ears. “Nope, not this time. Stuck with me for a while yet.”

She set her pen down and stretched before leaning up to dot her nose against eirs, arms draped up around eir shoulders. “Good, I am not finished wringing all I can out of you. One day, you will be left a broken husk of a Bălan and I will move on to my next victim.”

Shaking eir head, ey returned that nose-press before straightening up. “You’re doing a crap job of it, May. You keep adding to my life rather than taking away from it.”

She laughed. “Even when you are joking, you are adorable. Love you too, my dear. How was True Name?”

“Oh, fine. Much the same, I guess. We just worked and chatted and drank coffee. Nothing unusual.”

“Well, that can be good, right?”

“Yeah, comfort in familiarity. She did at least confirm your hypothesis that she’s just been overloading herself.”

May nodded, stood, padded to her beanbag, flopped down. “Of all of us, she is most prone to that, I suspect.”

“I don’t think the Artemis dump is helping out, there. They’re pulling all sorts of stuff from it.”

“You are as well, are you not?”

Ey laughed. “I suppose I am, at that.”

She reached out and snagged one of eir hands, pulling em down onto the beanbag beside her. Ey lay back and let her rest her head against eir shoulder before settling eir arm around her. Comfortable, familiar.

“She said something else that was interesting I’d like to discuss, but I don’t want to keep talking about her if you’re uncomfortable with it. It can be later.”

She shrugged, doodling a dull claw lazily over eir stomach through eir shirt and vest, sitting just shy of ticklish. “I do not mind. You know that I have been working on it.”

“Sure, I just didn’t want to—”

“I will tell you if I would like to drop the topic, I promise,” she said, then laughed. “Sorry, Ioan. I did not mean to interrupt.”

“No, it’s okay. She actually did that quite well today.” Ey leaned eir head back on the beanbag. “I asked why she kept up with me with the coffee meetings, and she said that it’s just nice to have a friend.”

May tilted her head up, enough to bump her nose against the underside of eir chin. “Are you? Friends, I mean.”

“That’s what we talked about. Neither of us could really decide on anything beyond ‘friends for lack of a better term’.” Ey hesitated, feeling incredibly conscious of eir partner resting against em, her stated resentment of her down-tree instance, how that had veered for so long into hatred over all that she had done. Ey continued, speaking carefully, “I like having interesting people to talk to and she’s been pretty good company. She likes having someone to just be around and talk with that isn’t herself or Jonas.”

“Are they still not getting along?”

“Worse, maybe. That’s where she requested that I drop the topic. She said that they made good coworkers, but not necessarily friends, and I asked if that was always the case, and she said she wasn’t comfortable having that conversation. Very politely, of course, but it looked like it took a lot of effort.”

“Mm.” The skunk lowered her muzzle, letting em peek down at her again. “I have been working on how I define myself in relation to True Name. I do not like that I spent so long hating her. I do not want that to be a part of who I am. I am May, who loves, yes? I hold no such compunctions about Jonas, though, and I am sorry that she still feels she must engage with him. He was a piece of shit then and I imagine that he is far worse now.”

“Huh?” Ey shook eir head as ey pieced together what she meant. “Oh right, sorry. I guess you were forked off after he and True Name started working together.”

“Yes. I remember that from when I was her. We were not friends then, and I am glad that she is not his friend now.”

“I only met him those few times years back, and yeah, I’m glad she isn’t, either. He was definitely a piece of shit.”

She laughed and poked em in the belly. “Mx. Ioan Bălan, you watch your language.”

“Hey, I curse!”

“Not well, Ionu□.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you too,” ey said, smirking at the teasingly diminutive form of eir name.

The skunk sat up and gave em an exaggerated frown. “I am warning you, young man.”

Ey rolled eir eyes. “‘Young man’?”

“Little miss?”

Ey grinned, shook eir head. “Try again.”

“Young gentlethem.”

Ey laughed. “I don’t know what your hang-up is, you nut. I learned it from you.”

“What, ‘fuck you too’?” The skunk shook her head. “It just sounds so strange coming from your mouth.”

“I’m not as good at the well placed profanity as all of you.”

“It is an art we have perfected. It increases the impact when they do show up. Even True Name does it, I am sure.”

“She has once or twice, yeah. You two still sound similar enough in terms of your voices, so I feel like I’m used to it.”

May nodded, leaned down, and licked em squarely across the nose before settling down against eir front again. “Yes, I suppose we do. Here is where we drop the topic, however.”

“Alright,” ey said, wiping eir face. “What should we do for dinner?”

“To be built to love is to be built to dissolve. It is to be built to unbecome. It is to have the sole purpose in life of falling apart all in the name of someone else.

“We all have a bit of that in us, do we not? You find yourself at a bar or maybe in some class somewhere, you look over, and there they are, right? You look over and you maybe catch their eye and you come undone at the seams. You fall into those big, beautiful eyes — for when you are built to love, every eye that catches yours is the most beautiful thing of all time — and you begin to flake away at the edges.

“And to be built to love is to be all edges. They catch on your clothes, they brush against walls and furniture. You are all edges so that love can fill the cracks and soften those jagged corners.

“You are spiked and barbed. It is as if you are built that way on purpose, so that the slightest breeze can blow you about and catch you up on some future love.”

The skunk had been sitting on a barstool, hunched over a pint and slurring half to the glass, half to some absent bartender. She slid to her feet, wobbled for a moment, then righted herself.

“Actually, you know what? I have heard it said so many times that to hate — truly hate, burn up inside with that passion — is to actually be in love with the object of your hatred, but I think there is a little bit of hatred in love, too. You fall so completely for someone that you just cannot help but resent them. It is a mirror of that hatred for yourself, for all your jagged edges and prickly burrs, a reflection of the resentment that you feel towards yourself for having been built to love. And look at me!” She gestured down at herself, a grand sweep of the paw outsized in her intoxication. “I fuckin’ loathe myself! Can you imagine how deeply I must love others, then?”

After a moment’s wild laughter, she stumbled back until her tail crumpled against the edge of the stool. “Ow! Fuck. Yeah, I deserved that one, I think.”

She moved to finish her pint, frowned on finding it empty, and shuffled away from the bar.

“So yeah, you hate yourself, and it actually feels kind of good, does it not? Hatred can fill in those cracks as easily as love. Sure, it may not leave so pretty a pattern as the...whatsit...the patina that stains a tea cup with crackled glaze, but maybe the edges of you do not catch on so many things anymore. Maybe those prickles are dulled and you bounce off everyone around you. You can ping-pong through life, then, loving everyone and loathing yourself.”

The skunk stood up straight again, brushed her shirt out, and brought her tail around to rub at where she’d bumped it against the stool.

“Good Lord, May,” Ioan said, laughing.

She grinned widely, all that feigned drunkenness suddenly gone from her expression. “How was it, my dear?”

Ey slouched back against the front row seat ey’d claimed, tapping the end of eir pen against eir lower lip. “Really, really good,” ey said. “Was the stumble intentional?”

“The movement itself was,” she said. “Though hitting my tail was not.”

“So no ‘I deserved that one’?”

She sat down on the edge of the stage, kicking her feet idly. “It was not in there, no, but I think I will keep it.”

Ey grinned and closed eir notebook around eir pen, setting it aside to stand. “Yeah, it’s good in there,” ey said, leaning forward to give the bridge of her snout a kiss. She squinted her eyes shut and then scrubbed a paw over her muzzle. “I mean, the whole thing’s good. Only note I really had is that you say ‘hate’ four times in a pretty short span right after you stood up. ‘That to hate’, then ‘truly hate’, then ‘object of your hatred’, and then ‘little bit of hatred’.”

“Should I make them all different?”

“I’d keep the first two because it works as an echo, so maybe just change the fourth? ‘Loathing’?”

“Excellent, O great wordsmith.”

Ey laughed and tweaked her ear before hoisting emself up onto the edge of the stage next to her. Predictably, she scooted closer so that she could lean against eir side. “Who would’ve thought, hmm? You getting me into theatre and me getting you into writing.”

“This is still theatre! Just earlier on in the process,” she said, indignant. “But yes, it is proof that the Bălans can shove us around instead of only the other way around.”

Ey gave her a playful shove with eir shoulder, at which she let out an outsized yelp followed by a whimper. “So mean!”

“Yeah, that’s me. Meanest person you know.”

She rolled her eyes.

Ey let a long silence play then, looking out into the cool darkness of the theater while May summoned up her notebook and scribbled down eir tip from earlier.

“Do you really feel that way?”

“Mm?”

“The jagged edges and self-loathing.”

She shrugged. “There is some of me in there, yes, but it is still theatre. It is about taking the particular and making it universal, if only for a little while, yes?”

Ey nodded.

When ey didn’t reply otherwise, she shrugged and continued, “I would not say that I agree with that ‘I loathe myself, so imagine how much I love others’ bit. I do not loathe myself, and yet I still love others. Have loved and will love in the future, even, and I see no change in my rare moments of self-loathing.”

Ey laughed. “‘Will love in the future’? You leaving me for some handsome guy you met in a bar, then?”

“A bar? Ugh. I am apparently more of a ‘hunt nerds in the library’ type.” She poked em in the belly. “But I love you, Ioan, and will continue to do so.”

Rubbing at the spot where she’d poked with her dull claw, ey nodded. “Love you too, May.”

She beamed happily and settled back in against eir side, head resting on eir shoulder. “I am glad, my dear. I know we agreed early on that this — us being together, I mean — does not need to be permanent, but that does not change the fact that I will continue loving you. Even if we should split, I will not stop.”

Ey nodded slowly.

“I have no plans for such,” she added quickly. “You are stuck with me for a good while yet.”

“What? Oh, no,” ey said, shaking eir head to clear a few too many thoughts. “I trust you on that. Just got me thinking. Do you still love all the others you’ve been with?”

She laughed. “What I said does not apply just to you. Of course I still love them. Some long-diverged forks of me are even still in relationships with their partners.”

“So you’ve said. You still love them as the root instance, though?”

She nodded. “I do not begin relationships as anything other than my root instance. I do not know why, but it does not feel fair of me to do anything but.”

“Oh, so none of your forks went on to fork for other relationships?”

“Not that I know of, no. It is a firm conviction, so I would imagine that they hold to it, but perhaps some older ones have diverged. We do not speak much.”

“How many are there, anyway?”

She lifted her head to dot her nose against eir cheek. “Are you jealous, my dear?” Her voice was calm and curious. Calm enough and curious enough, some distant part of em noted, that it kept em from falling immediately into defensiveness.

“I get the occasional pangs, more so early on,” ey said after a long moment’s thought. “When ey was first getting settled in eir relationship, Codrin told me about something that Dear had told em shortly after ey’d been forked, ‘jealousy is a sign of needs not met’. Whenever I start feeling jealous, that’s usually a sign for me to take a step back and think about what need that might be.”

“See, this is what I like about you, Ioan. You feel a thing and then think about it until you understand it. Sometimes a little too much, but it has served you well.”

Ey tilted eir cheek to rest it atop her head, a bit of closeness that also served the purpose of stopping her ear-tip from tickling eir neck.

“I feel a thing and am helpless before it. I cannot but wrap myself up in...it...” she said, pulling out her notebook again to jot down the words as they came. “Love, hatred, hunger, exhaustion. I am built for them all, and I cannot do a thing about them...”

Ey shared a secret smile with emself as the skunk trailed off, continuing to write, tongue-tip peeking out from her muzzle.

“Also,” she said once she’d finished. “The answer is that I do not know how many of me are still in relationships. There are at least three, and I know of at least five that have quit, though I declined the merges out of privacy. I never made it a requirement that they keep in touch. Beyond that, I think there are...mm, seven, perhaps?”

“So that makes me your sixteenth relationship?”

“Something like that, yes. Sixteenth truly serious one.” She slid over and swung her legs up onto the stage so that she could rest her head in eir lap. “Did my monologue really get you thinking about all this?”

“It’s a good monologue,” ey said, petting over her ears. “Or start, at least. You said it should be five minutes, right?”

She nodded. “Around that, yes. I am still working on it.”

“Mmhm. It’s good so far, though. It got me thinking, but I’m also just fascinated by you, which helps.”

“Why, because I am weird? I think that is an Odist thing,” she said, laughing.

“What, am I not allowed to be fascinated by my partner?”

“Absolutely not, no.”

Ey tugged on her ear. “Fascinated and annoyed.”

“Yes, well, too bad. You remain stuck with me, Mx. Bălan.” She continued more seriously, “I did not expect this to be fascinating to you. I try to be careful talking about my other relationships.”

“I don’t really mind,” ey said after giving it due thought. “That was past May, right? It’d be like getting upset over someone else having exes. If it were multiple partners at the same time, that’d probably be a separate conversation.”

She shook her head. “I could not do that. I am not built the same as Dear. I am only in multiple relationships in the sense that there are multiple mes, but there is only ever one me involved with one other. It is parallel monogamy.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, rolling onto her back so that she could smile up to em. “I am also helpless before devotion, and that takes the whole of me.”

“What about Douglas or A Finger Pointing?”

“I hold no romantic feelings for A Finger Pointing.” She laughed. “She is nice, but in a boss-you-drink-with-on-Fridays-and-I-guess-occasionally-have-a-fling-with sort of way.”

“And Douglas?”

Her answer was a while in coming. “Were our friendship to head in that direction, I would fork, but I do not foresee that being the case.”

“Really?” Ey frowned. “Wouldn’t that be awkward? Us going over there to see him and the other you together?”

“Oh, incredibly awkward,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I have done similar in the past, and it would take a year or two to shake out. It is uncomfortable for me, as well, as I am left with the same desire even as my down-tree instance gets fulfillment and they are left with love for you.”

“I can imagine.”

“No, Ioan, I do not think you can,” she said primly. “You actually think about the way you feel as you are feeling it like a normal person rather than just crashing headlong into overwhelming emotions like a fucking Odist.”

“Well, fair.”

“I do not think we need to worry about that, though. I am comfortable with my friendship with him just as I am comfortable loving you, and should someone catch my eye—”

“You’d need to start going to more libraries, I think.”

She laughed and shook her head, continuing, “—should someone catch my eye — or yours, for that matter — we will tackle it then with plenty of talking.”

“Oh, I believe you on that. Skunks never shut up.”

She made as if to bite em on the belly and, when ey flinched away, grinned up to em. “Mx. Ioan Bălan, you are the one asking all the questions with long, involved answers. Do not pin this on me.”

“Yeah, yeah. You just got me thinking is all. I think you’re giving me too much credit saying someone might catch my eye, though.”

“Why?”

Ey shrugged. “I’m not exactly that observant.”

“You worked as a professional observer for, what, a century?”

“Not *that* kind of observation.”

She laughed. “Well, okay, yes. I will not discount the possibility, though. If we are in this life for yet more centuries, there is no harm in being deliberate. Plus, I will get an inordinate amount of satisfaction out of seeing you fall for someone. It was so wholesome the first time! I see no reason why it should not be the same subsequent times.”

“I guess. I don’t know if there’s anyone who—”

She waved a paw dismissively. “If there is not, there is not. We can speak in hypotheticals like fucking grown-ups.”

“Fine, fine.”

When the silence drew out, May grabbed one of eir hands and started mouthing on eir fingers, sharp skunk teeth just pricking skin.

“Ow!” Ey laughed and tapped a finger on her nose lightly. “Pest.”

She licked at eir fingertip, saying, “Thank you, my dear, in all earnestness. It makes me happy to be able to have a conversation about this.”

“Of course, May. I figure it ought to be an open topic for us.”

She nodded and stretched out on the stage. “Agreed. We can come back to it later, though. I would like to run this through once more,” she said, wagging the notebook at em. “And then head home to get ready for dinner. Debarre is coming over and I plan on flirting with him outrageously in front of you all night long to see if I can make you jealous.”

Ey laughed and pushed at her until she sat up before sliding off the stage and walking back to eir seat. “Alright. Once more, from the top.”

Ioan pulled together a stack of eir notes and, with a little concentration and a gesture, moved them over to a once-blank notebook, the pages now filled with eir scratchy shorthand. To this was added one of eir nicer pens, clipped to the cover, and a few slips of foolscap besides.

Tucking those under eir arm, ey walked over to May’s desk and bent down to give the skunk a kiss atop her head, right between her ears. “I’m heading out. No messing with my pens, okay?”

Rather than the usual ‘do not die’ joke, she turned on her stool, looped her arms up around eir shoulders, and pressed her nose to eirs. “You will be okay, yes?”

Ey hesitated. Something about her tone pointed more towards anxiety than simple seriousness. Ey leaned forward to set eir notebook down, tugged up on eir slacks, and settled to eir knees in front of her. “Of course, May. Will you?”

“I will be fine,” she said, smiling. “I am just a little worried today, is all.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“I just am. I am trying to build trust, but...” She shrugged.

“Want me to leave a fork behind?”

“Will they be intolerable and antsy?”

Ey laughed. “Depends on how much pestering you do.”

She lifted her snout enough to lick eir nose-tip, then shoved at em playfully. “I am busy, my dear.”

“You fork more than anyone I know, you could just—”

“I am trying to tell you to get out of here, Ioan,” she said, grinning in earnest. “Do not mind a little bit of anxiety. I am sorry that that spilled over. I will think on it and we will talk later. Good luck, have fun, and do not die, okay?”

Ey shook eir head and stood again, grabbing eir notebook. “Skunks. I swear...”

Ey stepped out of the sim before she could kick eir shin.

Ey ordered eir usual coffee and staked out eir usual spot on the couch. Rather than getting to work while ey waited for True Name, ey simply sat and enjoyed eir coffee as best ey could, staring off into nothing while mulling over May’s words.

You will be okay, right?

Ey frowned and shifted eir gaze down to eir coffee, half gone by now. There were relatively few things that would bring about such anxiety in May, and ey knew the majority of them stemmed from within herself.

She had occasionally gotten upset at em, usually when ey’d not picked up on some cue that she’d given for some emotional need ey wasn’t meeting. In each case, she would express as best she could after the initial burst of anxiety. Her down-tree instance was another source, though that hatred she’d borne for so long had softened to something more like distaste of late.

All of the other times, though, had come from within. Whatever dire emotions that dwelt beneath the chipper, goofy, sarcastic, and delightfully earnest layer that made up the most of her would peek through and a little spark of something more profound and inexplicable would come over her.

Ey frowned down to eir coffee and considered whether ey should start laying in supplies in case she asked em to leave should waves of uncontrollable emotion take her, that ‘overflowing’ that seemed to affect most — if not all — of the clade. If this was the first sign, though, ey at least had some time yet.

“Mx. Bălan?”

Ey jolted and sat upright. True Name stood on the other side of the low table from em, not yet having made the move to sit. “Sorry, True Name.”

She smiled kindly and bowed. “May I join you? You looked quite deep in thought, and I am happy to meet up at another time.”

Returning the bow apologetically, ey gestured toward her usual spot on the couch. “No, no. Sorry, I was a bit stuck up in my head. Could probably do with getting out more often.”

The skunk nodded and sat, blinking a cone of silence into being. She lapped at a bit of the whipped cream atop her mocha to get down to the drink. “I quite understand. Bit too cooped up of late?”

“A little, I guess. Heads down, maybe. End of the year performances, helping May write a monologue, working on my own next project.”

She grinned. “Plenty on your plate, then. May I ask how May Then My Name is doing?”

“Oh, she’s alright.”

Ey must have hesitated before responding or not kept eir own anxiety out of eir voice, as True Name’s expression fell. “Say hi for me?”

Ey nodded. “Of course.”

“I am also curious to hear about her monologue. It is something I remember thinking about occasionally and yet never got around to doing. I am pleased that one of us is.”

That also felt like a closed topic given its context of being purpose-built, so ey shook eir head. “I’m not comfortable talking about that without her permission. Sorry, True Name.”

She smiled disarmingly and held up her free paw. “Of course, Ioan, no trouble. Can you tell me about your own project, perhaps?”

Ey opened eir mouth, closed it again, then laughed. “I feel like I laid a bunch of conversational landmines around me. Hopefully it’s not uncomfortable, but with all that went down on Castor, I’ve been toying with rewriting *On the Perils of Memory* as a play.”

The skunk got a strange look on her face, then laughed. “Oh really? Cheeky! I do not know if I will be able to make it to a performance, but I will be delighted to read the script, if you wind up publishing it.”

Ey laughed as well, more relieved than anything. “I’ll make sure you get a copy, then. Was worried you’d be upset by it.”

She waved her paw dismissively. “Of course not, my dear. That whole kerfuffle was, what, forty years ago? Forty-five? It has been comfortably relegated to memory and is thus fair game for artists.”

Nodding, ey finished eir coffee and set the cup down on the table so ey could pull out eir notebook and get to writing.

Ey worked for a few minutes. They both did, if True Name’s thoughtful gaze up into nothing was anything to go by. Ey’d wound eir way past all those conversational mines — May, her monologue, the play about Qoheleth — and now felt free to relax into the afternoon.

“You know,” the skunk said thoughtfully, bringing em out of eir writing. “I was quite pleased when that book came out.”

“What, *Perils*?”

She nodded. “It was something of a relief in a strange, roundabout way. While I would have preferred that it had not ended the way it did, it wound up being a pretty efficient way to bring all of that to the surface. A lot of very smart people have been thinking about it over the last few decades, and I am pleased to see some progress being made, especially on the therapeutic side.”

Ioan tilted eir head thoughtfully. “Sounds like, yeah. At least, from what I hear from May and Codrin. A Finger Pointing has been pretty tight-lipped about her own therapy and I don’t think End Waking went along with it.”

“He does not seem the type, no.”

“Is it working out well for you, too?”

“Well enough,” she said. “Though I am not comfortable discussing beyond that.”

Ey nodded. “Right, sorry.”

“It is alright. Thank you for understanding.” She raised her cup towards em in a small toast. “As to your book, however, I found it most interesting in that I was able to learn much about the assessment and impact of the events on the...ah, liberal side of the clade.”

Ioan had to focus on keeping eir expression neutral. True Name hadn’t always had the kindest of words

for the self-proclaimed liberal Odists. “I’ll admit, I was worried as to how the book would go over with the conservatives.”

“There were no assassins in the night, I trust?” she asked, grinning.

“Uh...well, no,” ey stammered, caught off guard by the humor. “Actually, no contact at all. I don’t think I’ve even talked about what happened with the other side of the clade until now.”

“‘The other side of the clade’ is a more appropriate phrase, is it not? We are spread along a spectrum. Those like Dear, May Then My Name, and Hammered Silver at one end, those such as Praiseworthy, Those Who Forge, and Teeth Of Death somewhere in the middle, and then me and my ilk on the other. Death Itself and her stanza, out of all of us, seemed to have escaped that spectrum.” The skunk finished her drink sitting in a silence for a minute, an acknowledgement of the losses from that stanza, then leaned forward to set her cup down before continuing. “To soothe any fears you may have, it was not me who hired Guōweī, nor am I pleased with what happened and how.”

“Who did? Do you know?”

She smiled pityingly at em. “Ioan, please.”

“Right, of course you do. I don’t imagine you feel comfortable telling me who, though.”

“It is not a matter of comfort, my dear, it is one of information hygiene. The fewer people who know, the less of a chance there is of plans going awry. Besides,” she nodded toward em. “We considered the impact that *Perils* would have on the System, and leaving that element of mystery in it accomplished our goals.”

“Goals?” Ey shook eir head. “How do you mean?”

The skunk folded her paws in her lap, leaning back against the couch. “What would you say the current public opinion is of the book?”

“I...well, hmm. If you’d asked me that a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have been able to say, but I’ve been digging back into it for this project. I guess most seem to see it as a sort of cautionary tale. I didn’t publish the internal report, so I think the fact that it read like investigative journalism made people treat it almost like a work of fiction.”

“Yes, and mystery plays a role in that. This is why we suggested you not publish the clade-side report. There is an appropriate level of mystery in what you did publish that aligned with our goals.”

“So, similar to what you and Jonas did with the *History*.”

There was the briefest flicker of a wince on the skunk’s face at the mention of Jonas, quickly mastered. She replaced it with a smile and gave a hint of a bow. “Yes. In a relatively short time, both have started to fade into a near mythical status. A credit to your skills as a writer, Mx. Bălan.”

Ey smiled warily. “Thanks. Why, though?”

“Why are they becoming myths?” She shrugged. “Life on the System is shaped by the modes of our existence. Creativity has assumed a level of primacy that was not feasible phys-side, and so successful creative works accelerate more quickly toward myth, here.”

Ey nodded. “And you? What do you think of it?”

“Of *Perils*?”

“That, the possible play, the events as a whole.”

There was a moment of quiet as the skunk thought, brushing a paw over one of her knees to smooth out her

slacks. “With the understanding that there is much that I cannot tell you about my feelings on the proceedings, I found it all frustrating and unnerving. I worked with Qoheleth on several occasions throughout the years, and watching his...I will not say decline, as I think the analogy does not hold, but his metamorphosis from Odist to Qoheleth touched on some primal distress. As I have said, I am not pleased with what happened or how. I liked him quite a bit.”

This seemed to deserve another moment of silence, one of acknowledgement rather than thoughtfulness, and so ey let it play out, the muffled clatter of the rest of the cafe coming through the cone of silence suddenly much more present.

“What news from Castor had you thinking about *Perils*?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, I do not associate aliens or time modification or the...ah, struggles that Answers Will Not Help experienced with what happened with Qoheleth.” She hesitated, added, “Or Michelle’s struggles.”

Eir mind raced. How could ey possibly bring up the Name? That Codrin now knew it and that knowledge — at least at one layer of remove — had propagated through the clade? Surely she knew that, at least, but how could ey say that out loud to her?

“Mx. Bălan?” True Name was frowning, whether at eir silence or expression ey couldn’t guess. “I am guessing that the answer is complicated.”

“It...uh, yeah. What Codrin heard on Artemis...I mean...”

The skunk tilted her head, gestured for em to continue.

Doesn’t she know? ey thought. *She has to. Is she faking it?*

“Well,” ey stammered, hastily backtracking through eir train of thought. Perhaps ey should feign ignorance as well if that was indeed what she was doing. “All that about getting lost, and how fourthrace experienced similar and also dealt with long-term effects.”

Still frowning, she nodded.

“It was all bound up in some clade-eyes-only thoughts,” ey hastened to add, hoping that the slight untruth would be enough. “Eir worries about Dear, Death Itself...but I don’t want to say any more.”

That seemed to have been enough, as the tenseness that had been building in her shoulders relaxed, though her frown remained. “Of course, yes, I did not mean to press. My apologies.”

Ey shook eir head and waved a hand. “It’s okay, I just had to disentangle all those thoughts really quickly.”

“You are a very thoughtful person,” she said, a hint of a smile creeping back onto her muzzle. “In the common sense as well as in the sense that you seem to be at all times full of thoughts.”

“I lost track of the number of times May’s accused me of living up in my head a long time ago, yeah.”

“There is no harm in it, my dear. It serves you well.” She settled back against the couch once more and sighed. “Pleasant as it has been, I have spent more time talking than intended. I would like to get a bit of work done before I lose track of the threads, if that is alright.”

Ey smiled and nodded. “Of course, True Name.”

As the skunk’s focus drifted away, ey opened eir notebook again and stared at what ey’d written already. The words were marks on the page, ey could tell, but eir mind was so wrapped up in the conversation that ey wasn’t able to make sense of them. Too much had gone on in too short a timespan. All that talk of Qoheleth, of

the conservatives' opinions of the events, or at least of True Name's.

She'd been so candid about it all, just as she'd been growing more candid with em in general over the last few years. She had all the reason in the world to use her centuries of skills intentionally, though. Ey'd never met anyone so tightly in control of themself as her. Perhaps even now, dozens, hundreds of sensorium messages were flying across her stanza preparing a soft landing for eir play in light of the fact that others now knew the Name.

And yet...

And yet ey couldn't stop emself from thinking, *Holy shit, I don't think she knows.*

Ioan half lay, half slouched against the headboard with May draped bonelessly up along eir front. She'd gotten up to make them both coffee to drink in bed, then proceeded to doze off again, using eir chest as a pillow and the rest of em as a mattress.

Ey, meanwhile, had made it through most of eir coffee, resting the cup between the skunk's shoulder blades between sips. It was technically Christmas, and while neither of them cared much for the holiday, that did mean it was the day for the *tocană* and *mămăligă* that had become tradition for them. Ey hadn't learned to cook much prior to uploading — just a few simple dishes for a poor student — and it wasn't until ey had wound up on the System in eir current sim that ey'd gone back to teach emself all the things ey'd loved growing up.

It promised to be a lazy sort of day otherwise, which felt necessary. May's spike of anxiety when ey'd gone out for eir meeting with True Name a few days prior had quickly tapered off, but it had not simply gone away. The days that followed had included a lot of asking em if ey was okay and taking breaks to sit and look out the picture windows, lost in thought.

Still, last night had been delightful, with the skunk far more relaxed while they cooked — or tried to cook — shitty fast food for each other. After dinner, they moved to the couch with Ioan resting eir head in May's lap so that she could tease her fingers through eir thick hair while they hummed silly little songs to each other.

Today promised to be equally comfortable.

Ey frowned when ey lifted eir mug, only to find it empty. Equally comfortable but for that, ey supposed.

"I'm going to drink your coffee, May."

"If you do, I will pin you down and pluck your eyebrows bald," she mumbled, slowly lifting her head and reaching out toward her mug on the nightstand.

"That's a new one. Sounds painful."

"Add it to the list," she said after she was able to get at least a few sips in.

"One day, they're going to find my body, clearly smothered to death, my eyebrows fully plucked, sand in my shoes, cracker crumbs in my bed, all of my pens un-capped, all of my book pages dog-eared, with skunk fur in all the food," ey said, laughing. "I'm pretty sure they'll know it was you."

She lifted her chin to park it on eir shoulder. "Mm, well, it is a risk I am willing to take."

Ey tilted eir head to give the top of her own a kiss. An awkward affair, but worth it. "You stay up too late again?"

She shrugged.

"Well, you're a pretty cozy blanket, if a little too warm, so I guess I'll allow it."

Lifting her snout, she licked at eir shoulder, getting a laugh out of em. “Whereas you, my dear, are not a very good pillow. Just chock full of bones.”

“I need those to live.”

“Lame,” she drawled. After a moment, she added thoughtfully, “I am glad that you have skin, though. It would be quite disgusting without.”

“Eugh. As am I.” Ey leaned over to grab her coffee cup and steal a sip, threats be damned. “I’m still surprised you didn’t wind up with another furry, though. Figured that would be more your style.”

“I wind up with people that I like, whether they have fur or not.” She shrugged. “Which is not to say that I have not wound up with other furies.”

“I’m not complaining. You’re soft.”

“To be fair, that is what I like about you having skin. Skin is soft as well. Were you a furry, though, what species would you be?”

Ey pet along her back, thinking. “I don’t know. I’ve only really had extensive interactions with skunks, foxes, and weasels. Maybe a squirrel?”

She rolled off eir front and sat up eagerly. “A squirrel? Really? Would you be one of those fancy red ones with the ear tufts and outrageous tails or one of the gray ones that were all over where I grew up?”

A quick query of the perisystem archive gave em a good idea of what each might look like. “The red ones sound really ostentatious. I don’t know if I could pull that off.”

She retrieved her coffee mug from em and settled in beside em instead. “Yes, but the *tail*,” she whined. “Come on, my dear. You would simply *have* to be a red squirrel. You dress all fancy, even!”

“Are they bigger than skunk tails?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. “Solid competition.”

“I can’t picture anything having a bigger tail than you, May. Definitely outrageous.”

“I thought you liked my tail.”

“I do!”

She laughed and dotted her nose against eir cheek. “Excellent, I shall allow you to live another day. I had considered becoming a panther for some time, but I like my tail too much.”

“You know, I’ve always wondered,” ey said, getting an arm around her. “Why did the most political stanza of the clade stay skunks? Wouldn’t it be more effective to be humans? It’s not like the majority of folks on the Systems are furies.”

“Only three of the ten are skunks anymore, and you have met all three. Besides, I think End Waking is the only one of the three of us who has not spent time in human form. Some of me in other relationships were — or perhaps are — humans. I spent six months with you in that form, even, remember?”

Ey nodded. “It was pretty weird.”

“For both of us, yes. I like being what I am. Short, soft, furry, chubby,” she said, poking at her belly. “It is just that these are all things that are disarming to a great many people. Even skunks, despite their reputation for smelling bad, are often seen as bumbling, stupid creatures.”

“I wouldn’t call you stupid, May. Bumbling, though...”

She rolled her eyes. “Thank you, I think? But yes, even bumbling is a calculated gesture to be inoffensive.”

“End Waking said similar.” Ey dug through eir exocortices until ey came up with the memory of the conversation, “He said it was a matter of intent.”

“It is, yes. I am sure that some of the wider clade who remain skunks do so without a second thought, but that is not how True Name worked, and so it is not how we work.”

“And she did that for the same reasons? To be inoffensive?”

She nodded. “In a way. At first, she could not be anything but, as that is how she was forked, but she kept it because of the way the Council worked. She was a skunk, Debarre was a weasel, Ezekiel spent half the time looking like a shambling pile of dirty rags and the other half like an unhoused man, and user11824 looked like the least remarkable person possible, as though your eyes simply slid right off of him. The ethos of the Council was to be just ordinary people who were weird before uploading and remained weird after.”

“Jonas wasn’t that weird when I met him.”

She made a sour face. “But everything that he did was intentional. Every aspect of his appearance and personality.”

Ey nodded.

“But I think True Name kept it after the Council disbanded for much the same reasons. She is a furry because there are plenty of furies on the System. She remains in her early thirties because that is what one expects out of those on the System. She is not unattractive among furies, maintaining that soft figure and well kept appearance without heading towards sex-symbol because that is what many on the System wind up doing. She is professional, I am cute, End Waking is the sad and introspective one, and so on.”

“Right, that makes sense.” Ey hesitated, composing eir next words carefully. “You talk about her quite a bit. I know that—”

“You asked, Ioan,” she interrupted, frowning.

“I know, May, I just mean in general. I know you’re consciously working on how you feel about her and I keep bringing her up besides. Just an observation.”

The moment of tenseness lingered, then passed as she wilted against em, sighing. “I know. I did not mean to get snippy. You are right, and I am not sure how I feel about that fact, that she is so often on my mind. My feelings remain complex.”

“Oh, I definitely get that.”

“You seem to enjoy her company more.”

Ey shrugged. “I guess. It started out as a way to keep things smooth between our clades during the convergence, but now it’s just a thing to do outside the house.”

“Coffee dates are good,” she said, nodding.

“I don’t know if I’d call them dates. No romance, there.”

The skunk laughed and shook her head. “Just an expression.”

“Oh, right.” Ey shrugged. “She’s just like...a coworker one is friends with. There are contexts that I enjoy her company in, but it’s not like I’m inviting her over for the holidays.”

“Which is good,” she said, grinning. “I am sure that I will get to the point where she and I can coexist in the same space without either of us pulling each other’s fur out, but sharing Christmas dinner with her would be far too much.”

Ey nodded and tightened eir arm around her, kissing between her ears. “Same, I think. Thanks for reminding me, though. I should probably get up and get that started.”

They both slid out of the bed to complete their morning tasks: Ioan to make another pot of coffee and prepare breakfast while May went through her grooming routine, eating, then a shower for em while she worked on her monologue.

The dinner itself wasn’t exactly onerous. A stew of pork — ey’d been raised on a version with lamb, which May hadn’t liked — tomatoes, and mushrooms in a garlicky, paprika-filled gravy served with polenta. Still, it benefited from a longer cooking time, so ey began that after eir shower and set it to simmering.

After that, they set some music to playing — the overlap of what they both enjoyed wasn’t large, given the more than a century’s age difference, but piano jazz seemed to work for both of them — and set to work on whatever it was that was occupying their minds.

Or tried to, at least.

Their conversation this morning as well as eir meeting with True Name a few days prior left Ioan in mind of skunks and the Ode clade, and even though those both featured quite heavily in the stage adaptation of *On the Perils of Memory*, nothing ey tried seemed quite in the right vein.

Ey flipped to a blank sheet of paper and began a letter, instead.

True Name,

I hope all is well.

After our conversation a few days ago, as well as another that I had with May this morning, I got to thinking about a pattern I’ve noticed, and wanted to ask you about it. I hope it’s not too impertinent of me. If it’s too sensitive a topic, I understand.

I’ve noticed that you and May have a tendency to talk about each other quite a bit. I know that there are a lot of factors that go into this such as my relationships with each of you, your shared history, and the fact that I have a habit of asking each of you about the other in turn.

All the same, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on the matter. I don’t want to sound meddlesome (indeed, I don’t think I’d even be capable of meddling with either of you), I just want to better understand each of you in turn, given the dynamics between us.

I know it’s not a huge deal for either of our clades, but all the same, Merry Christmas.

Best,

Ioan

Ey read through the letter top to bottom three times, then, with a brush of the hand and a bit of intent, sent it on its way.

Doing eir best to forget about it until the other skunk responded, ey puttered around the house, checking on the stew, trying out a new ink in one of eir pens, and rehearsing some lines in a cone of silence.

A bit more than two hours after ey’d sent the message, a reply spooled itself out of eir desk and into eir field of view.

IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Mx. Bălan,

Thank you for your letter. Had we discussed this in person or over sensorium messages, I think that my responses would be quite different, but the intentionality that is required when engaging with writing forced me to think this through more clearly.

You are correct in assuming that it is you being our shared connection rather than any direct link between the two of us that leads to each of us discussing the other with you frequently. I do not think that this is worth discounting, however, as many know of each other only through one mutual acquaintance and yet do not talk constantly of each other to that one person between them. It is still notable that we discuss one another as much as we do.

I have spent the last hour in discussion with myself while writing this, and would like this reply kept in confidence.

Years ago, when the Artemisians first arrived, May Then My Name mentioned a letter that I had sent her regarding you. I am not normally in the habit of sharing the tools of my trade, such as they are, and sharing this with you in particular is uncomfortable. However you of all people — a friend and someone deeply entangled with the clade — deserve to have the chance to read it, and it may do well to explain where we have found ourselves. Here is that letter in full:

May Then My Name Die With Me,

I hope that you are doing well. I understand that there remains some concern about the outcome of your previous relationship, and I would like you to know that I am not so far diverged from our common ancestor that I do not share in some of those feelings. I remember how often I would come crying into the Crown, leaning on this shoulder or that as I tried to deal with yet another break-up. I know that I have not always been the kindest or most empathetic down-tree instance, for which I truly am sorry. You are, in many ways, a better version of me, and the completeness that you bring to our stanza ensures that, even if I am not a fully realized person as you have suggested in the past, we — whether that is you and I, our stanza, or the Odists as a whole — still do add up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts. You may not believe me, and for that I do not blame you, but I really do love you in my own way, May Then My Name.

I do not know if you have been keeping up with many other stanzas after Qoheleth quit, but it appears that Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled has welcomed a new member to its relationship structure, one Codrin Bălan. I am sure that you recognize the clade name from *On The Perils of Memory*. Codrin's down-tree instance, Ioan Bălan, was the amanuensis that Dear had chosen during that spate of trouble, and the series of events that followed led to a process of individuation. It is always exciting to see that happen, is it not?

The reason that I bring this up is that Ioan has picked up as eir next project an investigative piece surrounding the launch project. Given your role as sys-side launch director, I

thought that I would put you two in touch. Eir project would benefit greatly from your position as well as your history, both with the project and with our time on the System. I have had the chance to interact with both Ioan and Codrin in the past, and they are some of the most delightful, insightful people that I have met. Please look them up when you get a chance.

All my best,

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade

systime 197+3

That night, when she brought up this message, she mentioned that she believed me when I said that I love her in my own way.

I understand the root of her feelings towards me and, as I also mentioned on that night, I do not begrudge her that. I will ever be what I am, and what that is does not mesh well with her view of the world, even as it is integral to my existence.

Just as she said that she still believes me, it is also true that I still love her. Codrin reported that Why Ask Questions said, “I have yet to meet a single person who has not fallen at least a little in love with May.” There is perhaps a little bit of that involved in my own inescapably me way, but beyond that I love her as the version of me that I did not become.

Were you to ask me at the time, or even just a year ago, I do not think that I would have admitted such aloud, but even as I suspect that she is working on her thoughts about me with Ms. Genet, I have been working with Ms. Genet on my ability to be truly earnest with those I respect, which includes you.

I do not hold regrets for the path that has led us to this point. I have accomplished much that I set out to do, and, while the cost has been great when it comes to my interpersonal relationships (and, as you mentioned, my stress levels), it all very much still feels worth it.

Consciously or not, I make it a point to ask you how she is doing and to engage with her at one degree of remove because this is still a way to maintain that level of connection with someone I could have been after so long a time of disconnect.

Writing this has been both stressful and cathartic, so I appreciate having the chance to do so. While communications with my counterparts on Castor and Pollux have been somewhat scant of late, both of them have mentioned that they are striving to find situations in which they can be vulnerable and earnest. As I am sure you understand, this is still quite difficult for us.

Let us meet up on Secession Day for our next coffee date. Is 11:00 amenable? It can be a small celebration of our own.

I wish you and her both a delightful holiday. If you are comfortable bringing up the topic of me with her today and would like to get a laugh out of her, please say simply, “Jingle Bells stage blocking.”

Sincerely,

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade

system 225+359

END IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Ey read the letter through a few more times, trying to digest all that it contained, trying to square this with what May had said of True Name steering her subtly into eir life, trying once again not to read too deep and guess that True Name#Castor simply hadn't told her about Codrin learning the Name.

Finally, acknowledging that ey wouldn't be able to digest it all in one go, ey dashed off a quick reply thanking True Name for the letter and confirming the time of the next meeting. Then, ey committed the letter to a new exo ey tagged "True Name-May 225" and destroyed the physical copy.

"May?" ey said, dropping eir cone of silence.

"Mm?"

"I was confirming a date with True Name and she said I should ask you about something called 'Jingle Bells stage blocking'. Do you know--"

The skunk let out a melodramatic groan and slid off her stool to the floor, landing on her hands and knees before flopping onto her side, laughing. "What a fucking brat."

Ey stared at her, nonplussed.

"Oh God, Ioan, you do not know pain until you work with choir kids."

Ey laughed and shook eir head, leaning forward to ruffle over her ears. It was a much more pleasant response to a note from True Name than ey'd expected. "You're right, I don't. I'll just have to trust you on that. Skunks are so weird."

Debarre — 2350

Debarre and Do I Know God After The End Waking stood, naked and frowning, on the granite that hung cantilevered above the pond that had dug itself into the forest floor beneath the falls. It wasn't a high drop, not enough to turn the stomach, but enough to keep them from simply jumping in.

"And you're sure it's deep enough?"

"I am not, no," End Waking said, then let out a shout and leapt off the overhang out over the water.

The weasel's frown deepened. No sounds of screaming below, at least.

"Fuck it," he muttered, and stepped off the edge of the rock, arms folded over his chest, and plunged, feet first, into the water.

The cold was enough to drive his breath from him. Even though there wasn't any snow this low down on the hillside, it was still cold out and even colder up-slope from whence the snow-melt came. He realized, too late, that another possibility for there not being any screaming from his boyfriend below was due to the frigid water.

All the same, there was nothing beneath his feet for at least another meter as he sank below the surface.

Thankful for small victories, he swam shakily for the surface, breaching the water with a shallow gasp and teeth already chattering.

End Waking floated closer, treading water. The skunk's smile was wide, but his teeth were clenched shut in a clear attempt to slow the shivering. "Pleasant day out, is it not?"

"F-fuck you," Debarre said, laughing breathlessly. "I'm getting up to the fire ASAP."

The skunk laughed, shoved at him weakly, and then swam for the shore, weasel in tow.

They slicked the water off themselves as best they could while walking. Fluffy as he was, End Waking had the larger job of it, spending most of the rest of the short trek back up the hill to the fire he'd built squeezing water out of his tail fur.

Once there, they parked a meter or so before the fire and huddled beneath his woolen cloak, held open toward the flames, soaking up as much warmth as they could.

"That was fucking cold," Debarre said once he was able to speak without stammering. "You're such an asshole, I can't believe I ever listen to you. Fine fucking way to ring in the new year."

"Yes, well, I love you too," End Waking said, grinning. "Thank you for joining me, and for your help today."

They'd spent the afternoon building up a rammed earth wall for the skunk's new house, pulling sandy clay from the pile they'd brought up from the pond's shore the previous day, mixing in deer's blood as a binder before

stacking it in a frame, and pounding it with logs sanded smooth and cut down to a diameter that fit comfortably in their paws.

Part of the ramming process had involved carefully setting the chimney pipe for the wood stove between the layers of earth as they built up. This had seemed an unnecessarily fiddly process despite the admonitions that, if the pipe crumpled beneath the sand, clay, and blood while they pounded it, the wall wouldn't be sturdy and there might be gaps. As it was, after they built up the rest of the tent, they'd have to seal that spot with more bloody earth and a layer of pitch.

It had left them both feeling worn out and dirty, and when Debarre said he was going to wash the sticky earth from his paws and fur, End Waking had suggested turning that into the icy plunge.

The skunk had then built up the fire higher than usual, told Debarre that they'd need to do so nude as he shed his clothes by the fire so they'd stay dry, and then pulled him along to the rock overhang.

Once their fronts were mostly dry, they turned out to face the waterfall and ravine, draping the cloak over their shoulders with their backs exposed to the fire, sitting in silence and leaning against each other, sharing warmth.

"Why don't you build your camp here?"

"The river may overflow, and come spring, the fall will be quite loud."

Debarre grinned, "Don't need the white noise?"

"Not particularly, though I am more concerned about flooding. I already had a tree fall on me while I slept, you will surely remember, and I do not feel the need to be carried away on dirty waters so soon after."

"Thanks for letting me back after that happened," he said, more quietly. "And thanks for forking to fix your leg."

"Of course, my dear. I do not know who else I would have called. And thank you for your patience during my solitude."

Debarre nodded and slid an arm around the skunk's waist. "I'm used to it by now. Besides, #Tracker had a larger merge than usual to deal with."

"That is what happens when I steal a version of you away and then aliens visit one of the LVs. I will accept half of the blame." He smiled, adding, "Perhaps less than half. You had your own stuff going on."

"Well, #Tracker did." He snorted, shook his head. "It's what I get for only part of me hanging around interesting people."

"Am I so boring, my dear?"

He shook his head. "No, just plain. Your life is pretty simple out here. #Tracker is still all caught up on all the political stuff with user11824 and Yared."

End Waking made a face. "Gross."

"They aren't *that* bad," he said, laughing.

"They are fine, I am sure," the skunk said. "You may keep the political stuff, though."

"I mean, that's why I'm out here. It's good to get away from all that bullshit."

"Oh, so you are using me for a vacation, then?"

Debarre laughed and poked at End Waking's thigh. "Where'd this sense of humor come from?"

"The audacity of weasels never ceases to amaze," he said. "I have a sense of humor. The squirrels and I share our private jokes. I practice them before the fire."

"Fucking weirdo," Debarre said, rolling his eyes. He tucked closer to the skunk all the same.

That End Waking was so open to touch over the last few weeks was something he was keen to take advantage of. He knew that neither of them were necessarily the cuddly type, and most of the time, he was happy with the level of physical contact he got from the skunk, just as he was with the partners his other forks had settled down with. Still, it was nice every once and a while. A bit of touch to keep him grounded. It tended to happen when their relationship picked up again, after both of them had spent months or years apart, each living their separate, more cerebral lives.

Before long, however, they set the cloak aside to get dressed, and Debarre watched as End Waking prepped a sizeable hare and pushed it onto a cast-iron spit and set it over the fire, a tilted pan beneath it catching the drippings.

They dined on the hare and squash roasted in the fat, both pungent with thyme. They stayed up until it was well and truly dark, chatting.

Worn out as they were, though, they didn't last much longer, eventually retreating to the makeshift tent that End Waking had set up using the patched fabric that had been his previous shelter strung over a rope and draped over his recovered cot. Narrow as it was, they had to huddle close — the only time the skunk was consistently okay with close physical contact and intimacy — sharing each others' warmth beneath the cloak and a few blankets besides.

"E.W.?"

"I like it when you call me that."

"I'm a sucker for nicknames," he said, tucking himself back against him.

"That you are." He rested his snout over Debarre's shoulder. "What were you going to ask, my love?"

"I...well, all these little changes are coming to the System. The ACL changes, the cones of silence..."

"I do not use those."

"Well, but you never leave here and you gave up on all the politics."

"This is by design."

Debarre laughed, shaking his head. "I'm just worried about so many changes in so short a time."

"How so?"

"I dunno," Debarre mumbled. "I just think there's a lot of subtle things — more like the little stuff May Then My Name talks about — and I'm worried those will break or disappear."

End Waking hummed thoughtfully. "They have survived Secession and Launch."

"Yeah, but those were political things, right? Not technological things."

"You are worried external engineers will tamper?"

He nodded.

"I do not know that they have a good enough understanding of the subtleties to do so. The System is greater than the sum of its component parts."

"Well, maybe not intentionally changing things. Just knock on effects, maybe." *Or maybe internal politics encouraging changes*, he added, mentally.

"I imagine they will be careful, even around the subtle things."

They lay silent for a while, Debarre thinking and, if the slow slackening of his arm around his chest was any indication, End Waking slowly falling asleep.

"E.W.?" he whispered.

"Mm?" A sleepy reply.

"Do you still feel em? Like, at night sometimes. Like a dream or something."

There was a long, long silence before the skunk replied. "Sleep, my love. There is work to do in the morning. Sleep, and dream beautiful dreams."

As usual, Debarre woke alone. End Waking would doubtless be somewhere in the woods, checking snare traps or walking or simply sitting on a rock thinking, having slipped away at first light, quietly and carefully enough not to wake him. Still, they'd gone to bed early enough that the horizon down the hill had only just let go of the sun.

He slipped out of bed and into his pants — black denim traded in for a dirty green canvas — splashed some water on his face from the barrel nearby, and started the trek back out to the rock where they'd set the fire, figuring that'd be the most likely place to find his boyfriend.

End Waking was indeed there, crouching before a low fire with a pot for coffee already set above it, but another skunk knelt across from him as well, chatting quietly.

"Hey May Then My Name," he said, settling down beside her. "Whatcha doing here?"

The skunk started, grinned wide, and leaned in to hug around his shoulders. "Jesus, Debarre, you taking lessons from End Waking? Scared the hell out of me, sneaking up like that."

He laughed and returned the hug before reaching for the coffee pot. "Maybe it's contagious."

"Can you imagine a disease so miserable?" the other skunk said, waving the weasel back from the coffee pot. "Our guest here finished what was left. You will have to wait, my dear."

"Sorry," she said, holding her battered enamel mug out to Debarre. "You can have the other half."

"Nah, go ahead. I'll wait. You never told me what you're doing here, though."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Am I not allowed to be a pest? That is my role in life."

"Course you are, just that usually you're a pest with news."

"Fine, fine, yes," she said. "It can wait until after coffee, though. How are you, Debarre? I was not expecting you to be back just yet."

"It is my fault," her cocladist said. "A tree fell on me back around—"

"What?!"

He shrugged. "There was a wind storm late last year and a tree fell across my tent. It crushed the frame and floor, knocked over the back wall, and impaled my thigh on a splintered board."

She brought her paws up to cover her muzzle, eyes wide.

"I am okay," he said, smiling disarmingly. "But I asked Debarre to return to help me rebuild."

"He didn't want to fork to fix his leg," the weasel said, rolling his eyes.

"I do not fork often, you know that."

"There was a plank through your leg, E.W.," he retorted. "That wasn't just going to heal okay on its own."

It was the skunk's turn to roll his eyes. "You are no fun."

May Then My Name, having finally calmed down enough to speak, said, "Well, thank you, Debarre."

Debarre nodded.

She sighed, smiling weakly at End Waking. "I am glad you are okay, skunk. I would be lost without you."

"The trees do not know how to kill me, May Then My Name," End Waking said, frowning. "There is no virus within them. Debarre was right to get me to fork to fix, I will admit, but I would have done so anyway had it landed more fully on me."

When all that greeted this was silence, he sighed and let his shoulders slump. "I am sorry. I have set up the new camp in a location with sturdier trees. I will endeavor to remain cautious."

May Then My Name crawled around the fire to dot her nose against the skunk's cheek. He looked uncomfortable, but tolerated the touch.

"Thank you, my dear," she said. "I do not mean to lecture. I am just...well, if the coffee is ready, please pour yourself a cup, Debarre, and we will talk."

Once they'd settled back down and the kettle was replaced with a pot to cook oatmeal, she began, "To preface, this is nothing serious, I just need to talk with someone who is not Ioan."

"Why?" End Waking asked.

"You will see. That is also part of it."

He nodded.

"I am not even sure that it is actionable." She sighed, shrugged. "I have just been thinking about True Name a lot of late."

End Waking sat, conspicuously impassive, while Debarre shook his head. "Why? I thought you'd basically agreed to never talk again."

"We have not spoken; at least, not more than a few cordial words in passing. However, Ioan has been meeting up with her for coffee once a month since the first news of the Artemisians."

He and End Waking both tilted their heads.

"Ey has been ensuring that things remain polite and smooth between us." She held up a paw to forestall any comments, adding quickly, "I trust em in this. Ey is simply meeting her at a coffee shop where they each work on their own projects. They chat a little, and then do their own things. Ey describes it as 'friendly coworkers' more than anything, which I believe."

"Is that a thing that even needs to be done?" Debarre said. "Wasn't she just leaving you alone before?"

"Yes, thankfully. It is just..." She frowned, poking at the packed earth with a claw. "That has been necessary to prevent anger, but it has still not been comfortable. There are plenty of people who I no longer see and do not miss, or do miss and think about with some frequency. It was such an uneasy silence."

"And you think Ioan's doing the right thing?"

"Ey is," End Waking said. "Ey is ensuring that there remains a distance between you two without it being an unbridged distance. That would just leave you to stew, knowing how you work. You would never let it go and spin yourself into a whirlwind of emotion. The Bălans are perhaps a little awkward at times, but they do not lack all social graces."

May Then My Name rubbed her paws over her face. “I knooow,” she whined. “And I love em for thinking of that.”

“You just still resent her,” the other skunk said.

“Yes.”

“I know you said it probably isn’t actionable,” Debarre said, poking at the fire with a stick. “But what would you change about the situation?”

“As in ‘in a perfect world’?”

“Right, yeah. Perfect world, what would you like?”

She frowned, watching End Waking dote over the oatmeal, dumping a pawful of dried fruit into it. Eventually, she said, “I do not know. She has apologized and done what I have requested. She has changed, too, from what Ioan has said. She is trying to be more earnest and willing to engage emotionally. She has been seeing Sarah as well.”

Debarre nodded. “But it sounds like that’s not it.”

“No. I think what is missing is contrition. She has apologized for what she has done to me and Ioan and has maybe even begun to make changes. I do not know how to put it, but it feels like she is being earnest without being sincere. She is sorry, but not contrite. She does not feel bad for what she has done. Her apologies are not backed by understanding.”

“There is no penance,” End Waking said plainly, dishing out the oatmeal into the mugs they’d been using for coffee. “True penance is borne out of feeling bad about what one has done and wanting to change, to make up for it, not merely about responding to how others are reacting.”

May Then My Name toyed with her oatmeal. “Yes. Maybe she does and just does not know how to show it. I just do not know how to truly believe that.”

“Worried she’s just acting?” Debarre said, blowing on a still vigorously steaming spoonful of oats.

“Perhaps. That was ever the dilemma of us going into theatre. Did we love it or did we merely want to become someone else? To hide from who we were?”

“Be wary of your pessimism,” End Waking said. “It takes attention and effort, May Then My Name, at least when one has intentionally tamped down emotions to the point that she has. If I could teach her, if either of us could teach her, I think we would, but I do not know that one can learn penance from anyone but oneself.”

She nodded, looking distracted and thoughtful. “If it were as simple as merging down...”

End Waking stiffened, frowned around his bite of breakfast.

She smiled to him apologetically. “Sorry, I will stop for now. Thank you both for listening to me bitch.”

“It’s fine, skunk,” Debarre said. “I think E.W. is right that Ioan’s doing the right thing. It takes some pressure off of you and lets it...I dunno, be a process or something. You don’t have to do anything now ’cause you’ve got an opening to deal with it.”

“Yes, well put. Thank you, my dear,” she said. “I will process as best I can. I do not suppose either of you have talked to her recently?”

They both shook their heads.

“Right, I thought not. That’s enough of the topic for now, anyway.” She waved a paw and took a bite of oatmeal, then pulled a face. “We need to get you some sugar or something.”

Debarre laughed. "She's right, E.W. I've gotten used to it, but only just barely."

"Fucking lame," he drawled. "My sim, my rules. You must suffer without."

May Then My Name flicked some oatmeal from her spoon at him. "Call me lame, will you."

He grinned toothily, picking the bit of oatmeal off his shirt sleeve and adding it to his mug.

"Either way, my root instance is back at home, so I can stay as long as I like. Would you like some help, at least?"

"If you can swing a hammer, then yes, that would be wonderful."

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Through some stroke of luck or perhaps some forgetful nature, it was perpetually early summer at Arrowhead Lake, that abandoned mountain sim Ioan and May had long ago adopted. Whether or not winter had socked them in at home, they could at least take a summer walk somewhere.

“Winter has its place,” ey’d explained to May when she’d gotten particularly whiny about the snow. “I like the snow so long as I’m inside.”

“Did you ever even see snow, my dear?”

Ey’d shrugged. “Sure. We’d get dumped on once or twice a year.”

“And was that pleasant?”

“Well, no, but—”

She’d laughed at em, then, shaking her head. “I miss our porch swing. I miss our lilacs and dandelions. Sometimes, I just want to lay in the grass and overheat. I have been betrayed by our weather.”

So it was a good escape when it got cold. They could duck off — alone or together — to the lake and head for a walk.

May had chosen the name Arrowhead Lake over Ioan’s protests that it looked nothing like an arrowhead, being more kidney shaped. The sim itself was tagged Peak Lake#587a9383. Maybe it was just Peak Lake? This seemed only to have emboldened her when ey brought it up, and ey was firmly overruled.

Whenever ey walked out there without her, as ey did today, ey’d think on this. Maybe it had little to do with the lake itself. Maybe it had to do with the silhouettes of the pines? Or something to do with way the snow lingered on pointed peaks?

“Or maybe she’s just a brat,” ey mumbled, smiling to emself as ey walked slowly along the deer trail. “No reasoning with an Odist.”

Ey’d long wrestled with whether or not they were just normal people. Perhaps Michelle had been — ey’d not spent enough time around her to know, and what time ey had managed had been mostly silence. Toward the end, her conversations were more interruptions than not, although the impression ey’d gotten was that she’d been kind and gentle, while still being the type to care passionately about things or, more often, people. The impression just hadn’t been a strong one. Not enough time for it to solidify.

Ey’d eventually come to the conclusion, confirmed through discussions with several of the clade, that each of them had begun more as a distillation of a singular aspect of Michelle than the whole of her. That wasn’t to say that they weren’t complete in their own right, simply that each was singularly focused on their interests

and skills, a perpetual hyperfixation. What was it Codrin and Dear had said? Even True Name was a fully realized person.

Normal, though? Could one be both a singular facet and normal?

And maybe it went beyond them. Maybe it was a dispersionista thing. Ey could see such a habit building even without Michelle's unique experiences.

When the trail dipped down out of the trees toward the shore, ey stooped to pick up a handful of pebbles, enough to toss into the water once ey reached the boulder at the lake's outlet. Codrin had eir cairns, ey supposed, and ey had a heap of pebbles at the bottom of the lake, tossed in one by one over the decades.

I still don't know what I'm supposed to be doing, ey thought, rattling the rocks around in eir hand as ey continued walking. *I don't know if I'm supposed to help either of them, bring them together again, or what.*

It was still a week out from eir next meeting with True Name, from Secession Day, and while May's anxiety hadn't ticked back up, eir own had lingered. There was an unsettled feeling within em that made itself known whenever ey thought about heading to the coffee shop.

"Maybe I'm not supposed to do anything," ey muttered, climbing up the boulder. "Maybe I'm just supposed to be a friend, like she says."

Ey tossed a stone into the water with a small plunk and splash.

That gulf remained between the two skunks, and no one seemed happy with it.

Plunk, splash.

"I don't know why it feels like I'm supposed to be the one to do something about it. Friends are supposed to help, right?"

Plunk, splash.

"There's nothing for me to fix, really. They've each made their own decisions, and seem at peace with those, even if they're not happy with whatever's left between them."

Plunk, splash.

"And they'd probably both resent me if I *were* to do anything." Ey tossed a few pebbles in at once, splashing in a brief, watery static. "Whatever that'd even be."

Ey stood at the peak of that boulder, tossing pebbles into water and thinking, mumbling to emself about May and True Name. When ey ran out of pebbles, ey sat cross-legged and looked out over the lake, unseeing.

"I should just pinch myself whenever I start thinking that there's something I need to do," ey said to the water. "Pretty sure May doesn't want it, she's happy working on her emotions without me meddling, and I'm pretty sure True Name doesn't want it, since she seems content...what was it, maintaining that level of connection after so long a time of disconnect?"

The lake didn't answer, not in anything other than the water lapping at the shore and the chatter of the creek.

"This is stupid."

Ey sat for another hour, just watching the lake, the clouds, the trees, trying not to think about how complicated it was for one person to be so split among instances.

The walk back was spent unwinding the thought processes that led em here in the first place. Unwinding and re-coiling into a careful skein, now with fewer knots than it had had in it before, though it still remained

tangled.

“Good walk, my dear?” May said when ey returned and plopped down onto the couch.

“Very. It’s nice out there.”

“It always is,” the skunk said, walking over from where she’d been poking around in the kitchen to dot her nose atop eir head. “It could be here too, you know.”

Ey laughed and waved a hand toward the picture windows facing out the balcony, out to the drifting snow. “It’s pretty, May. It makes being all warm inside nicer.”

She leaned down to rest her elbows on the back of the couch beside em. “I am not immune to the beauty, I am just a wuss when it comes to the cold.”

“Well, if you ever wore shoes...”

She swatted at the back of eir head and laughed. “Jerk.”

“Ow! Domestic abuse!” Ey laughed as well, rubbing at eir head. “Want to go out for dinner?”

At that, May perked up, grinning. “I take back the slap. Yes please! Can we get sushi?”

“Sure, J2?”

She bounced on the balls of her feet and nodded. “Yes! You, my dear, know just how to treat a girl.”

“Skunk girl.”

“Well, yes, but still.” Still bouncing, she twirled around behind the couch, tail trailing along behind her. “I will get ready. I am hungry now, so too bad if you are not.”

One of the things that Ioan appreciated most about J2 over all of the other sushi places May had dragged em to is that it was the most amenable to em eating with eir hands. May was quite nimble with chopsticks — no mean feat with paws and claws — but ey’d never quite picked it up, so being able to eat those little bullets of rice and fish with eir hands suited em quite well.

It had a channel of water floating along between the booths, small dishes drifting by lazily for the diners to pluck from the water. This obviated the need for any staff, real or simulated, as each dish would be replaced from behind a bend in the river. With no need to pay beyond a token amount of reputation, it simply became a pleasant evening out, plates stacking up at the edge of their table, a tacit contest with other diners.

“Did you get what you needed out of your walk earlier?” May asked before popping a bit of fish into her muzzle.

Ey shrugged, finished chewing, and said, “I guess. Was doing some thinking into that feeling that I have to fix every problem in front of me when it comes to relationships.”

“I have noticed that in you, yes,” she said. “Beyond when we specifically talk about it, I mean.”

“You have?”

“You are not a sneaky person, Ioan. When it comes up, it is there for me to see.”

“Oh, uh,” ey stammered, setting eir plate on top of the stack. “Sorry, May.”

“No, no, you are fine! I accept it in the spirit in which it is given. You want to do right by me and your friends, even when ‘doing right’ is not your responsibility. So long as you do not overstep boundaries, I can at least understand it.”

“Well, all the same, it’s not like it’s comfortable. I don’t think anyone likes feeling helpless, but I just wish I didn’t get hung up on finding solutions to everything.”

“You know, it is weird,” she said, jabbing a shrimp at em. “For someone who spent so long purely observing, a busybody tendency feels out of place.”

Ey shook eir head. “Observing is situational. If there’s something happening that has a start and end, or which I can come home from, then I can just observe it. If it’s something that’s ongoing or integral to a person, especially a meaningful person, then I feel like I really want to help.”

She had taken the opportunity of em talking to eat the bit of shrimp she’d used as a pointer, and when she finished, she asked, “Is this a new thing?”

“How do you mean?”

“Were you always like this? Did you always want to help when it was something integral to people you care about?”

Ey frowned.

“Do not get me wrong, I am not suggesting one way or another. We have only known each other for a small portion of our lives. It is just that Codrin and Sorina both decided to specifically focus on that only recently.”

Ey nodded thoughtfully. “Right. I don’t know, honestly. Maybe? Maybe it’s you, and—”

She rolled her eyes.

“No, I mean, maybe it’s you in that you’re the first person I’ve gotten close enough to to wind up feeling like that, at least since I uploaded.”

The skunk paused in the act of picking another plate from the river, letting it drift on. “Did you feel that way about your brother? Was you uploading your fix?”

Ey felt eir muscles go rigid, eir jaw clench, eir hands start to tremble. “Uh...well, huh.”

Ears splayed and eyes wide with alarm, the skunk reached out to take one of eir hands in her own. “I am sorry, Ioan. If I overstepped, I apologize.”

Letting the skunk lace her fingers with eirs, ey shook eir head to dislodge the slight dizziness that had come with the realization and concomitant panic. “Maybe?” Ey forced a smile. “I mean, maybe uploading was my fix for that situation? I don’t know.”

She nodded, gave eir hand a gentle squeeze.

“I think you’re the only person I’ve really loved other than Rare□,” ey said, nudging the conversation back on track to avoid settling into that particular rumination. “That’s what I meant. I want to make things good for you, whether it’s you overflowing, stuff with True Name, or any other number of things that aren’t my responsibility or even under my control.”

May smiled, the expression veering perilously close to a smirk. “You have said that you want to fix things for True Name at times, too. Are you sure that you are not in love?”

“I’ve also talked about how often I’ll wind up getting caught off guard by how much you two still look and sound alike,” ey said, smirking right back. “She’s nice and I do want to help her, but I think I’m a ways off from that.”

She laughed. “I know, I know. You just leave yourself so open, sometimes, a girl cannot help herself. You are also allowed to want to help friends and acquaintances as well as me.”

“Skunks, I swear...” Ey laughed when she pinched at eir fingers, tugging eir hand free so ey could grab another plate of sushi. “That’s kind of what I was thinking about on the walk, though. I feel weirdly obligated to

fix things. It's not my place to, I don't think either of you would be comfortable with that, and that's not even counting whether or not it's something either of you *want*."

"I do not know," she said, shrugging. "I spoke about that with End Waking and Debarre recently, and am no closer to an answer. We did all agree, however, that you doing what you are is a good thing, in that it at least sets up an avenue for change, even if neither True Name nor I decide to take that step."

Ey nodded. "I just want things to remain smooth between everyone, is all. Maybe it's a little...I don't know, overly conciliatory of me?"

"Perhaps, but that does not mean it does not have its own utility."

They ate in silence for a moment, Ioan eventually giving up after finishing eir plate. It was no less easy to eat too much, even in an embedded world.

"Are you okay with it?"

"Hmm?"

"Being between us. Interacting with the both of us even though I still resent her and she is still pleased with the work that she does. Are you okay being in the middle of that?"

Ey slouched back against the booth and watched the plates drift lazily by on the current, thinking. "I don't know."

"That is a perfectly valid answer, my dear."

"I don't really like the feeling. I feel weird about it every time it comes up, much as we need to talk about it." Ey smiled, taking one of her paws in eir hand again. "I agree that it has its uses. It's uncomfortable at times, but I don't think I'd be any more comfortable dropping out of the role."

The skunk brushed her thumb over eir fingers, saying, "I understand, Ioan. It is complex. If it needs to change, it can, and until then, even if I still harbor equally complex thoughts on True Name, I appreciate your position in our dynamic."

The conversation drifted away from the subject after that, and the two wound up back at home to poke through their own projects even as the night fell early.

It wasn't until they'd made it back to bed and curled up together that ey was finally able to truly let go of the topic, though; even throughout eir writing, a small portion of eir mind had been dedicated to the question of what eir role was between the two skunks and why it both rankled and felt necessary.

Ioan was surprised by just how wrung out True Name looked during their Secession Day coffee date. The skunk's blouse was wrinkled, her normally orderly fur mussed atop her head, and her whiskers all a-bristle. She looked as though she'd not slept for days and certainly not changed outfits in at least as long.

All the same, her arrival was much the same as all the others had been, with her smiling to em, ordering her coffee, and joining em on the couch in order to set up a cone of silence.

"Good morning, Mx. Bălan. I trust you are well?"

"Uh, I'm fine, I guess." Ey frowned, continuing carefully, "What about you, though? You look...well, terrible."

The skunk's smile faltered, betraying the exhaustion that plainly lay beneath. With another blink, the cone's ACLs changed to opaque it from the outside. She sagged against the couch. "I came in a rush, my dear, I apologize for my appearance."

“You don’t need to apologize, True Name. I’m just worried. Lots of Secession Day preparations?”

“Of a sort, yes. Things have been rather stressful the last few days.” She laughed, shook her head, and added, “Well, more than a little. I have been stretched very thin and am...struggling.”

“Struggling?”

The skunk’s eyes darted around the coffee shop, scanning each face within at least twice. “I am not comfortable expanding on that at the moment.”

Ey held up eir hands disarmingly. “Of course. Are you at least excited about the day?”

“When I have the chance to slow down, I can feel some of that excitement. This provides me a good chance to do so. Twenty-five years since Launch and both LVs are continuing on in their journey with very few problems. Two and a quarter centuries since Secession and life continues smoothly here.”

“That seems to fit with your goals pretty well.”

She gave a slight nod of acknowledgement, though she remained distracted. “That it does, my dear.”

“You and Jonas planning anything for yourselves, at least?”

“There will be a gathering, yes,” she said. “Today at noon.”

“‘A gathering’? Not a party?”

She shrugged. “His words, not mine. I do not know what he is planning.”

“Well, hopefully a good one.”

“Agreed. This will limit my time here, of course, I hope that you understand, and I may be distracted as several of my forks merge down to reduce conflicts while there.”

Ey nodded. “That’s alright. I’ve got stuff to work on, too.”

Lapping at the whipped cream atop her drink, she once again scanned the crowd, which, as far as ey could tell, had not changed since she’d arrived. Something about her posture suggested that the topic of what was happening was closed, however, so ey made note to ask about it later instead.

They fell into work after that. True Name focused on her messages or dealt with merges while ey dedicated a token amount of effort to eir writing. The rest of em observed the skunk out of the corner of eir eye and thought about just how much must be happening for her to admit that she was struggling. 225 years since the System seceded from the rest of Earth’s governments doubtless came with a lot of celebrations and announcements to make, speeches to write, hands to shake, or whatever it was that the non-leaders of Lagrange did in such an event.

Add in the twenty-fifth anniversary since Launch and certainly there would be an added note of joy for many across all three Systems. Ioan was particularly looking forward to the letters from Castor and Pollux in a month and change to hear how things had gone on each of the LVs. Perhaps ey’d even hear from Sorina from Artemis.

Still, True Name’s mussed appearance and anxious expression seemed to go beyond that. Ey couldn’t think of a reason related to the day that would have her in such a state. Things would be intense, but not so much so as to force her to drop her carefully constructed veneer of confidence.

Ah well, at least she got some time off, ey thought. This was followed by a gentle chiding which ey heard in May’s voice. *And you are not supposed to be fixing things, remember?*

Right.

Forcing emself to concentrate on eir writing at least bought em ten minutes of work.

“Huh,” True Name mumbled, frowning.

“Mm?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, I suppose. Just got a merge from an instance, and it sounds like Jonas is looking for me. He knows that I am—”

Ey jolted back as the skunk leapt to her feet, gaze whipping about the room, then out through the windows to the street. Her tail was bristled out, ears pinned flat, and paws clenched tight, something ey’d only seen in May, and then only a handful of times.

“True Name?”

She held up a paw, beckoning em to silence, and, despite the way she kept searching face after face, ey could picture dozens of sensorium messages flying back and forth from her. Her frown only deepened.

Ey closed eir notebook, figuring ey was pretty well ruined for work at this point, and watched her carefully.

When nothing of interest appeared on the street, the skunk turned slowly to scan the room. Her eyes shot wide open, and ey followed her gaze out into the scant crowd of patrons. Everything was much as it had been: folks sitting and chatting, drinking their coffee, reading or doing work. She, however, seemed to be focused in particular on a middle-aged man walking from the back of the shop where a door opened onto patio seating.

“Fuck,” she said, then shouted, “*Fuck!*”

She darted around the coffee table, knocking against it hard enough to send both of their drinks spilling across its surface, and grabbed eir hand. “Go, Ioan! Go, *go!*”

“What?!” Ey scrambled to eir feet, eyes darting between True Name and that oddly familiar man walking towards them. “Where?”

“Home! Anywhere!”

It didn’t seem open to discussion, and enough of her panic had built up in em by now that ey quickly stepped from the sim to home, yanking True Name along with.

To home and chaos.

There was a flurry of activity down the short hall from the entryway, several instances of May blinking into and out of existence, along with several more of the same man they’d seen at the shop. She was forking close enough to each instance of him to exercise the collision algorithms of the sim, knocking him this way and that to keep him away from her. She was screaming, “Get the fuck out! I am not her! Get *out!*”

“May!”

A few of the skunks looked over to the door, and then suddenly another was beside em, grabbing eir free hand. With a wrenching sensation, a sudden change in light and sound and gravity, the three of them stumbled out of Arrowhead Lake’s default entry point.

May pulled eir paw roughly free of eir hand and whirled to face them, shouting, “What the fuck did you do?!”

Tugging her own paw free, True Name darted away, looking around wild-eyed. “How secure is this place?”

“I think May and I are the only ones who even know it—”

She quickly ran a few paces into the woods, peering between the trees.

“Ioan,” May growled. “What the fuck just happened? Why the fuck was he in our house?”

Ey shook eir head, trying to dislodge the dazed confusion. “I don’t know. He was at the coffee shop, too. Who even—”

“Guōwēi,” she snapped, then shouted up to True Name, “Why the fuck was he in our house? What did you do?”

The other skunk had shifted from her near feral crouch to standing, rigid and staring up into the branches, a look of dire concentration on her face.

When she didn’t answer, May began pacing and muttering — whether to herself or through some sensorium message, ey couldn’t tell.

Guōwēi.

The assassin. The reputation analyst who had killed Qoheleth in the middle of his speech. A quick prowling through eir memories lined up face with name.

Eventually, True Name’s shoulders sagged and she stumbled down from the trees, Ioan and May both watching her, wide-eyed. She kept walking past them, past the trail, down onto muddy beach, then out into the water. The short waves lapped up against her legs, soaking her slacks, and still she kept walking. She walked until the lake had made its way nearly up to her waist.

And then she screamed.

It wasn’t a shout, no words were behind it. It was a scream of pure, unrestrained emotion, though whether anger, fear, frustration, or something else, ey could not guess.

Then she turned around and waded back toward the shore, stumbling once or twice, until she gave up and fell to her knees, water up to her waist once more. She beat at the surface of the lake with balled-up fists, growling and crying. Finally, she stopped, slouching over until she had to catch herself on her hands.

May’s fury, which until that point had been burning hot in her expression, was replaced by something more complicated. Anger, yes, but anxiety and fear as well. “True Name,” she said, voice more under control than it had been. “What happened?”

“They are gone. They are all gone. Someone is trying to take me out,” she said between heaving breaths. “Trying to get rid of me.”

“What? Why?” ey said.

There was no answer from the skunk.

“Who, then?”

She shook her head numbly. “I do not know. There is a small list that we have been keeping our eye on. There are some reactionary elements that have been growing louder. I need to think. I need to...but...”

They waited, tense.

“But all of my instances are gone. Two merged back, one sent a message that she would be late, and then nothing.”

“All of them?” May asked. “How many?”

“One hundred and eight.”

At that eir partner let out a startled laugh. “Jesus Christ, True Name.”

Again, no answer.

“Well, who would even know where your root instance was? Or all of your other instances, for that matter?” Ioan asked.

“My root—” She tried to stand so quickly that she stumbled again and had to catch herself. “You have to be fucking kidding me.”

Her eyes went blank, and she frowned out toward nothing, though tears left tracks down her cheeks.

May looked to Ioan. “What does she mean?”

Ey couldn’t tear eir eyes off the other skunk, and it took em a few seconds to even work up the concentration to reply. “Shortly before we left, one of her two merges said that Jonas was looking for her.”

Part II

Conflict

To hone is too trade ends for perpetual perfection.

The danger in ceaseless memorialization is how close it lies to idolatry. To elevate the dead to such a status as false god (for what being that is limited to the perfection of memory is not false?) is to ceaselessly perfect the imperfectable.

From Ode by Sasha

Ioan Bălan — 2350

True Name, having gathered her wits about her at least enough to trudge out of the lake and fork herself dry, requested directions to somewhere she could think alone. Ioan gestured down the path toward the rock, explaining that it'd be far enough away that they wouldn't hear each other if she didn't want a cone of silence, but that she'd still be able to see them at the entry point if anything happened.

"I need to think. No one from the stanza is replying, I am not sure which friends I can trust, and I definitely do not want to speak to Jonas," she explained, then rubbed her paws over her face. "Or perhaps I just need to sulk. I will return in an hour."

She bowed to em and May then trudged off down the path.

May glared after her down-tree instance with her paws bunched into fists and ears splayed, then whirled on Ioan, waving a cone of silence into being.

"Ioan, I am not at all happy," she said, voice frigid. "I know that none of this is your fault except inasmuch as you have been meeting her for coffee, but I am having a hard time keeping my anger to myself."

Ey took a long breath, scrubbed eir hands over eir face, and paced in an abbreviated line before her. "I know, May, I don't blame you. I'm completely baffled. Go ahead."

"I spend two hundred fucking years trying to get away from that life, from all of her fucking schemes, from what she did to Michelle," she said, voice quickly rising in volume. "And then I spend the last three trying to calm down so that I quit burning up whenever I so much as think about her, and now this. Look at us! Hiding in the woods from assassins. Assassins!"

Ey averted eir gaze from her. Nothing ey could say would help, and ey knew some remote part of emself was feeling much of what she was, too.

"Her and fucking Jonas are still doing whatever the fuck it is that they do, and now they are doing it to each other. Every time I think I can just settle down with you and get away from that, it just seeps right back in. I know that you were trying to do right by us, meeting up with her, but I really, *really* wish you had not."

"May, I—"

"At least tell me what happened there."

"Right. We met up as usual. She was looking pretty terrible, and when pressed on it, she said she was struggling and wasn't comfortable elaborating. When asked about Secession Day, she said she and Jonas were going to have, in his words, a gathering. She said her instances were going to merge down for this and that one of them said he was looking for her. She kept getting anxious and looking around at everyone there, and then jumped up, I guess when merges stopped coming. Guōwēi came in from the back and walked right toward us, then we stepped home and grabbed you."

May crossed her arms and watched em pace and talk, her expression softening, though the frown remained. "And that is it? No talk of these...what, reactionary groups?"

Ey shook eir head. "None today, none in the past. It seems like something she'd keep close to the chest."

"And it was in a cone with visual ACLs on secure?"

“Yeah.”

“But Guōwēi was still walking right for you?”

Ey nodded.

The skunk looked down to the ground, brow furrowed. “I suppose if he knew she was there, that would be proof enough. I imagine a place like that chooses to display it as blurred out rather than completely hidden.”

“I guess,” ey said, though the words lacked conviction to eir ears. “Then she grabbed my hand and told me to go.”

“She grabbed–” She hesitated, mastered a sudden swell of anger, then subsided. “It makes sense, I suppose. The chance that you would head someplace that she and Jonas could not guess is greater than if she had chosen. Ioan, my dear, you are pacing a hole in the path.”

“Sorry, May,” ey said, trying to stand still. “It’s just a little nuts.”

The skunk sighed, held out her paw to em, and gave her best smile. “I know. I am really fucking confused and really fucking pissed, I do not imagine you are feeling much better. Would walking help?”

Ey took her paw in eir hand and nodded. “Please.”

Remembering their promise to stay in sight, they walked slowly back and forth along the short stretch of beach near the entry point, still within sight of True Name, kneeling on the rock by the outlet of the lake.

“I am sorry that overflowed onto you for a moment, Ioan. I did not mean to yell at you.”

“You’re fine, May, you just had some guy chasing you around our house trying to kill you or whatever, you’re allowed to be pissed.”

She snorted and shook her head. “He had only just arrived a few moments before you. I imagine True Name’s fork said something about being with you but not where, so he came to our place and saw someone that looked vaguely like her. Perhaps they wanted it to be as close to simultaneous as possible for precisely this reason and one simply jumped the gun. I am surprised they did not just wait for her. How eager they must be.”

“Makes about as much sense as any of this.” Ey looked out across the lake at where the other skunk sat, head bowed. “What do we do now?”

“I do not know, my dear. I have had precisely as many assassins after me as you, now, and I do not know what to do about True Name. I guess just stay here for a bit and gather our wits.”

Ey sighed, bent down, and plucked at a pebble on the bank until it came free of the sand, tossing it into the water. Anything to keep from spiraling back into anxiety. “I’ll have to go back and clear the house at some point. I’ll lock down the ACLs to us and any immediate guests.”

“I do not imagine you will find much there, now that we are gone, but I appreciate you doing a sweep all the same. I have some concerns about our privacy.”

Ey frowned.

She waved the idea away with a paw. “If it is an issue, we will discuss it. If it is not, then I do not want to think about it any further.”

“Well, if you say so.”

She leaned against eir side, resting her head on eir shoulder. “I am sorry, my dear. It is one of those things that is not a concern until it suddenly very fucking is.”

Ey ruffled a hand through the fur between the skunk's ears, then settled eir arm around her shoulders. "I'll tell you what all I find there, and we can both hope it's nothing. What will you do, meanwhile?"

"I am not sure. I do not particularly want to come with if they are looking for someone who looks like me. I will stay here and I guess keep an eye on our...ah, guest."

"You sure you'll be okay with that?"

There was a long pause before the skunk gave in and slipped both of her arms around eir middle, burying her face against eir shirt. "I do not know," she said, voice muffled and small. "I thought that I would be, was going to say that I would be, but I really do not know."

Ey rested eir chin atop her head. "Well, I don't think I'll be gone all that long — five minutes, maybe — but if you need, just send a ping and I'll be right back."

"I am not expecting anything so dramatic. I will stay here and try to de-stress. True Name still has about half an hour left of...well, whatever it is that she is doing."

Ey tightened eir arms around the skunk for a squeeze, kissed her atop the head, then stepped back. "All the same, just stay safe, alright?"

She sniffled and nodded. "You too, my dear. Good luck, and do not die."

Ioan wasn't sure what ey was expecting, stepping back home. Certainly all of the instances of May had quit as soon as they'd left, and hopefully that meant that there wouldn't be any more reputation-analyst-cum-assassins lingering around. All ey could hope is that ey wouldn't find any core dumps, just in case one of them had somehow killed one of her forks. It was vanishingly unlikely, given that the virus embedded in those symbolic objects — the syringes and knives and who knows what else — had to be tailored to whoever the target was.

Unless they're after the whole stanza or the whole clade, ey thought, lingering in the entryway, straining to hear any sounds coming from deeper within the house. The entryway took the form of a short hallway that led into a large, rectangular room comprising a den, dining room, and kitchen, and at least the space directly ahead of em was clear.

This is stupid, ey thought. *I should just clear the whole place of everyone and completely reset the ACLs.*

Curiosity won out, though, and ey set up a cone of silence above emself, set the visual ACLs secure, and then crept into the den. Ey'd be utterly silent and, as far as ey could tell, simply a blurry shape within a blurry patch of the room, though ey'd never tried the new features here at home.

Ey just had to hope that was enough.

Peeking around the corner revealed an empty den, though the clear evidence of a struggle remained: pillows and couch cushions were tossed about, a glass of juice had been knocked over on the table, and most of May's notes had been scattered in a crazed ring around her desk.

The kitchen and dining area were also empty. Other than the chairs around the dining table knocked askew, there was no damage.

The bedroom was similarly empty, bed still neatly made and a few of May's better origami creations untouched on the windowsill.

It wasn't until ey made eir way out onto the balcony to check the back yard that ey found anyone.

A tall, sandy-haired man sat in one of eir Adirondack chairs, cheek rested on his fist as he stared dozily out into the yard. It had been nearly twenty-five years since ey'd interviewed Jonas, and ey hadn't seen him at all in the interim, but nothing seemed to have changed about him. He was still polished to a gleam, every aspect of him still oozing confidence, still, as both May and True name had described him, perilously handsome.

Ey dropped the cone warily.

"Long time no see, Ioan." He grinned, nodding out to the yard. "Lovely place you've got. So few people keep those good, full-bore winters anymore, you know?"

Ioan lifted eir hand to bounce him from the sim.

Jonas lifted his hands, palms up. "Hey, it's okay. I'm just here to talk. Mr. Qián left after you and your partner did. Some dramatic stuff all went down all at once."

"Jonas," ey said, standing well back from him. "What are you doing here?"

"Just waiting on you, mostly. I wanted to check and make sure you and May Then My Name were alright."

"Check..." Ey shook eir head. "Why would you care about our well-being? You just sent an assassin to our house."

"Only to tidy up loose ends," he said, leaning back in the chair again and using the well-shined toe of his shoe to knock a bit of snow off the railing of the balcony. "I trust you've stashed your skunks away somewhere safe?"

"My skunks'?" All of the stress of the last forty-five minutes that ey'd been holding back around May, all that had been obscured by eir need to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible, all of it came crashing down on em at once. "*My skunks'?*" ey shouted. "Jonas, what the fuck? You sent a fucking assassin after True Name, sent him over to our house so he could hound May. What the hell are you even talking about? Of course I'm going to keep my fucking partner and friend safe if you're going to try killing them! Fucking...*'my skunks'*. Good Lord."

Once ey'd finished and was left panting, Jonas sat up in the chair and grinned widely, clapping his hands. "Mx. Ioan Bălan, such language! I didn't know you had it in you! Bravo."

"Fuck you too."

That grin lingered as Jonas gave a hint of a bow. "Very well, Ioan. To your concerns, the bit with May Then My Name was unintentional. Our plan kicked off early and one of True Name said that she was with you. While I was pretty sure that meant your little coffee shop, I figured I'd stop by just to make sure. Guōwēi got a little excited when he saw May Then My Name, thinking it might be his target. She's quite good at fighting, your girl. You have my most abject apologies. We should've just waited."

"And True Name?"

"Ah yes your...ah, friend, was it? Your friend and I had a meeting this afternoon where I was hoping to deal with all of that quietly and efficiently. Ah well, can't win 'em all, can you?" He picked at his fingernails, looking the very picture of boredom. "106 out of 109 isn't too bad, is it? Two merged down before I could get to them, so I guess that leaves just the one. Changes things a bit, doesn't it? On to plan B."

"Plan A being to kill one of the most well-known members of one of the most well-known clades on all three Systems?"

"Yep!"

Ioan gaped at him. “‘Yep’? Just...yep?”

Jonas laughed. “That was the easiest one out of the bunch, I’ll admit. I’ve got all the way through plan M, though, so don’t worry, I’ve got it covered.”

“Fine. Enlighten me. What’s plan B?”

“Well, it starts here,” he said, nodding toward em. “Where I bring you on as an amanuensis one last time while True Name and I hash things out. Now that she knows, I can’t exactly do away with her. She’s almost certainly told some of her friends by now, so that changes the game.”

“And you need me to sit and listen to you prattle on at her?”

“Yep, basically. I need you to witness and write about what happens and leave the rest of it to the grown-ups.”

Ey scoffed.

“Sometimes mommies and daddies fight, Ioan,” Jonas said, then winked. “So. You’re on as amanuensis. Go and tell True Name to ping when she’s ready and we’ll have our meeting. Oh! And bring May Then My Name and End Waking with, if you can, yeah? The whole stanza will be there.”

“Why on Earth would I—”

“And no assassins, promise. I only mixed up a batch for True Name, no one else. No one’s going to die, we’re just going to have a talk and hash out some new boundaries, and you’re going to watch and write it up at the end.”

“And why should I believe you on that?”

He shrugged. “You don’t have to, but I am telling the truth, Ioan. If you and True Name don’t show at the very least, you’d better plan on not leaving home or wherever you’re staying ever again. Just because I *didn’t* mix up some syringes for you doesn’t mean I *can’t*.”

“That’s pretty dramatic.”

“I don’t have the training your pretty little skunks have,” he shot back. There was something vaguely feverish about him, running a little too hot. “Just try and get everyone together and we can get this over with. There’s no huge rush. Sometime within the year, okay?”

“Why?” Ey shook eir head. “Why do you need to talk with her and why do you need an amanuensis? You have to give me something, here.”

“No, Ioan, I don’t,” he said. “Just tell True Name that I’m waiting. You can ask her all the questions you want.”

“Alright, fine,” ey growled. “Anything else?”

“Nope! That’s it for me. You can go back to your hidey-hole and get all smoochy with—”

Ioan completed the gesture ey’d held back since the beginning, bouncing Jonas from the sim. Ey held back the urge to scream out into the yard just as True Name had done earlier at the lake.

Ey sent May a quick I’m-okay ping, then started riffling through the perisystem architecture for information on how to completely sweep a sim. There was nothing in there ey could find about checking who was swept, but it was still possible to sweep everyone who didn’t currently have their home set to the current sim, and to receive explicit confirmation that this had been completed and how many instances it affected.

Focusing on the set of steps required, ey triggered the sweep, then checked the log that it had left, eyes-only, for em in the architecture.

Seventeen swept.

“*Să-mi fut una*,” ey mumbled. Ey’d checked the whole of the inside of the house, and could see no footsteps out in the snow, so unless everyone was hiding under the balcony or up on the roof, ey’d clearly missed at least some of them inside.

Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about it, though.

Ey spent the next five minutes locking down and fine-tuning the ACLs for the house. By the time it was done, the house would only let em and May in as owners along with anyone they intentionally brought with them by hand. It was also now marked as invisible to all but a short list of allowed individuals. Debarre, End Waking, True Name, A Finger Pointing, Douglas, and a dozen or so others ey could think of who might conceivably want to know when they were home.

At last, ey stepped away from home and back to Arrowhead Lake.

May was sitting on the shore of the lake, knees up to her chest with her arms hugged around them and chin rested atop. Ey rarely saw her sit that way with the pressure it put on the base of her tail, but when the skunk got truly lost in thought — or truly upset — she’d fall back on old habits at the expense of her body.

Ey walked over to sit down beside her, sliding an arm around her waist. “That’s all done.”

The skunk nodded. “Thank you, my dear.”

She’d clearly been crying, given the tear-streaks on her cheeks and the hoarseness in her voice. Ey tightened eir arm around her and kissed at the side of her muzzle. “I’m sorry, May.”

“It is not on you, Ioan,” she said, voice suddenly tight. “All three of us can be sorry about the situation, but you are the least to blame of all of us.”

Ey couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t just make her feel worse, so ey just helped her scoot closer and lean more heavily against em to take the pressure off her tail.

“True Name just got up,” ey said after a few minutes. “I’ll have some stuff to say when she’s back. Jonas was at the house.”

May winced and nodded, scrubbing her paws at her face to wipe away a few fresh tears. “Okay.”

“And I’m sorry to add on more stress, but I told you I’d tell you if I swept anyone while I was there, and the report says I swept seventeen instances.”

“*Seventeen?!?*” The skunk groaned into her paws as she rubbed at her face again. “They have been busy.”

“Who was it? The report didn’t tell me.”

“Bugs,” she said sourly. “Little spies. People who fork to be small enough to hide on top of cabinets or behind pillows. Spy cameras that can think and act.”

Ey blanched. “From Jonas?”

“Yes, and probably some from the clade. Some from the first stanza hired by him or True Name however long ago.”

“And they just listen and watch?”

“Creepy, is it not? I probably should have been more proactive about when I first moved in, but I did not think either of us interesting enough.”

“Very creepy,” ey muttered. All of their talks, all of their discussions and jokes and arguments, all of their pleasant silences and moments of intimacy, all being watched. “What a nightmare.”

She nodded. “I am sorry, my dear. If it is of any consolation, they may not have been there the entire time, and I assure you that we really are quite boring. We have only had a few conversations of note over the last twenty-seven years, and the rest must have been excruciating to sit through.”

“Or incredibly awkward.”

The skunk gave em a quizzical look, then laughed. “Gross, Ioan.”

“Not me! Them!”

“Yes, yes. I agree, awkward. But here comes True Name, no need to be more awkward than we already are.”

They stood up and brushed off their pants as the skunk came trudging around the last bend in the trail, looking utterly exhausted.

“Thank you for giving me the space,” she said, bowing. “And my apologies for the trouble of today.”

“It’s not—” Ey caught emself up short and shook eir head. “Well, are you okay?”

The skunk shook her head. “I am not, no. I am very nearly on the edge of collapse. I feel like I could either sleep for three days straight or cry for three days straight. Both, if it were possible.”

May took a deep breath, held it for a slow count of three, and very carefully let it out. “I am sorry, True Name.”

True Name stood rigid, jaw working as she clenched her teeth in an effort to maintain control. After several long seconds, she sniffled, opened her mouth to say something, then shook her head and bowed deeply.

Watching nervously, Ioan fiddled with the hem of eir vest. So much had happened in the last hour and a half, and now this exchange between eir partner and her cocladist was enough to start that anxiety rising within em again. With True Name trying her best not to cry openly and May clutching tightly at eir arm, both of them interacting with each other was a different sort of stress than the assassination attempt, but no less intense.

“True Name,” ey said carefully. “There’s no rush, but Jonas was there at the house. We can talk about it later, but I figured I’d give you a heads up.”

The skunk gave up on maintaining her expression and hid her face in her paws, nodding. “Thank you,” she croaked.

Once she’d washed her face and calmed down enough to speak, the three of them set to work deciding what the next steps were. May suggested they stay at the lake for the night, explaining that they’d need time to sort out a living situation for True Name and that she wanted to go over their place with a fine-toothed comb before spending the night there again, anyway.

True Name merely nodded. “Is there a place here that I can stay?” she asked.

May winced and shook her head. “It would be camping. We can make that work for tonight if we can scrounge up some gear, but a long-term solution is not feasible. This is not our sim and we do not have ACLs to build here or remove any unwanted visitors.”

She nodded. “I understand. I will dig—”

“You will stay with us,” May said quickly, as though rushing to get it out before second-guessing herself, a sentiment echoed in her expression.

Both True Name and Ioan stared at her until she wilted. “I am sorry. I know that things have been difficult between us and that a large part of that is on me, but that does not mean that I do not want you safe. If we have a place that we have complete control over from ACLs to building, that is safer than this security-through-

obscurity abandoned sim, and our proximity will discourage further attempts on your life.”

“I can mirror the house, I think,” Ioan said, once the shock had worn off. “That’ll get you a bedroom and furnishings.”

The skunk looked as though she was fighting off another wave of tears, but she nodded. “Thank you both. I do not wish to impose, but I greatly appreciate your help in the interim.”

May nodded in turn. After a moment’s silence, she turned to Ioan and said, “My dear, can you see if End Waking can help us out with some camping supplies? I do not trust our place enough to go back and create obvious camping goods.”

“Me?”

“Please.” She sighed. “I do not think I have the wherewithal to do so, myself. I do not want to go and cry in front of someone else. I do not want to feel like I am begging, even if help comes willingly.”

Ey hesitated, nodded, and sent End Waking a sensorium ping requesting a meeting, which was quickly acknowledged. “Alright,” ey said, forking off a new instance. “Back in a few.”

End Waking and Debarre were waiting for em at the new entry point to his sim.

“Hey, sorry for the short notice.”

End Waking bowed. “It is no trouble, Ioan.”

“You taking up camping?” Debarre asked, grinning and leaning in to shake eir hand.

“Uh, no, not quite,” ey said. “There’s been...well. Our sim isn’t guaranteed safe at the moment.”

They both perked up at this.

“Not safe? What does that mean?” Debarre asked.

“I don’t want to get too much into it,” ey said, thoughts racing. “But needless to say, May and I aren’t safe there. Some really dramatic stuff happened and literally no one is happy.”

End Waking rested a paw on Debarre’s shoulder before the weasel could speak again. “Perhaps you can expand on this soon, but for now, what do you need?”

“I will, I promise.” *And apparently I need to if you’re to come with*, ey added mentally. “We need stuff to camp for the night at Arrowhead. We can’t make anything there, and May’s worried about us going back home to procure anything that might tip folks off.”

The skunk nodded, looked thoughtful for a few seconds, and then waved his paw, bringing into being between them two folding camp cots, two bedrolls, a tent, two bundles of firewood, and some simple food — bread, salami, and cheese.

“I will come help you set up,” he said. “It is all fairly straightforward, but tents require four paws.”

Ioan sighed, nodded. “Thank you, End Waking. We’ll, uh...we’ll need three sets, though.”

He paused in the act of bending down to lift one of the cot-and-bedroll combos. “You will need three?”

“And two tents.”

Apparently unable to hold back any longer, Debarre spoke up. “Ioan, I’m gonna go crazy if you don’t give me at least something, here.”

“As am I,” End Waking said.

“Right. Well, sorry in advance for the stress.” Ey paused to collect eir thoughts. Adrenaline seemed to have burned through much of eir energy reserves. Not yet 14:00 and ey was feeling exhausted. “Jonas tried to assas-

sinate True Name and made her think it was about some ‘reactionary elements’ or something. He got all but her root instance, and that only because we were out for coffee at the time. He and his assassin also paid our home a visit and they were going after May in the confusion, so we’re hiding at Arrowhead for the night.”

Silence. Silence but for the sound of a nearby waterfall and a few far-off birds.

“Well, fuck me,” Debarre said at last, rubbing at his temples. “May Then My Name and True Name are stuck together?”

Ey laughed, surprising even emself. “Yeah. Assassins and politicians and whatever, and the weirdest thing about it is seeing them talking.”

End Waking stood a while in thought, then waved his paw again to create another cot, bedroll, and tent. “I will help you set these up, but I will not speak with her.”

“Are you sure, E.W.?” Debarre frowned down at the gear. “I mean, I guess it’s fine giving them stuff, but I’m not exactly comfortable with you being anywhere near her.”

The skunk nodded. “I need to, my dear. I need to be better to her than she might be to me in this situation.”

Ioan frowned. Ey wasn’t so sure that the True Name of 2350 would be so callous, but now didn’t seem like the right time to argue the point.

“If you say so,” Debarre said sourly. “But I’m staying here.”

After a moment’s concentration, a second End Waking stood beside the first. “I will be staying with you, my dear, do not worry. No need to risk more than a fork.”

Ey bent down to pick up the two bundles of firewood while the new instance of End Waking picked up one of the sets of gear and held out his paw. Ioan took it in eir hand and stepped back to Arrowhead Lake. They dropped off their loads, then returned to pick up the second two bundles and the tents.

End Waking set to work immediately, picking out a flat spot in the trees to set up both tents. Ioan was pleasantly surprised when they turned out to be fairly modern gear — at least, modern to the 2100s — thin nylon with carbon fiber spars and a seal-strip entrance which was kept sheltered by a fold in the fabric. The camp beds were of a strong fabric lashed to carbon fiber frames by some springy cord, providing a reasonable amount of give. The bedrolls turned out to be sleeping bags with foam pillows that expanded quickly when the seal-strip was undone.

Throughout the whole process, May, True Name, and eir fork sat by the edge of the lake, far off to the side. Ey couldn’t tell if they were simply being silent or if they were talking in a cone of silence, but, other than a brief nod to End Waking from May, they seemed keen on taking the space for themselves.

Once the tents and camp beds were set up and Ioan had been shown where and how to start the fire, End Waking bowed politely and said. “We will talk soon, Ioan, I am sure. Until then, please keep you and yours safe.”

Ey nodded and returned the bow. “Thanks again, End Waking. You’ve been a huge help today, and yes, we’ll be in touch.”

When the skunk had left, ey quit and merged back down to eir root instance.

“Well, that’s us settled for the night, I guess,” ey said. “We’ve got stuff for sandwiches, if you’re hungry.”

Both skunks shook their heads.

“Alright,” ey said. Ey wasn’t either, ey realized. The tail end of eir anxiety just had em jittery, wanting to keep moving. Once ey set that aside, ey realized just how exhausted ey was.

They sat in quiet well into the evening, instead, each of them trying to digest the day in their own way.

“This has been far and away the worst Secession Day I have had,” True Name said.

Ioan and May both snorted, then worked to finish their bites so that they could apologize.

“Sorry, True Name,” Ioan said. “I don’t know if you had a lot planned, but I’m glad you at least made it through.”

“It is okay to laugh. There is little else to do in the face of it.” She smiled weakly. “I am sorry that you two have been dragged into it along with me.”

“It’s alright.”

“Well, not alright, necessarily,” May added. “But I am glad that you are not dead.”

“Thank you, May Then My Name. I do appreciate it.”

They fell back to silence, then, Ioan and May self-consciously finishing their sandwiches while True Name simply stared into the fire. She had made herself half a sandwich, explaining that she wasn’t terribly hungry, and had yet to touch it.

Once they had finished, the skunk sat up straighter and said, “I think that I have had sufficient space from it, now. Can you tell me what Jonas said?”

Ey shrugged. “Not a whole lot, all told, especially given how much he talked. He said that he wants to meet up with you to discuss next steps and that he wants me there as an amanuensis so that I can write another book.”

She tilted her head. “You?”

“Yeah. He said...well, let me start from the top. He said he was waiting there for me to make sure that May and I were alright, that he was there to tidy up loose ends, and that, uh...” Ey hesitated, unsure of how well Jonas’s next comment would go over with either of the Odists. “And that he trusted that I’d, and I’m quoting here, ‘stashed my skunks away somewhere safe’.”

Both May and True Name bridled at this, likely for similar reasons.

“Sorry. I kind of blew up at him for that.”

“‘Blew up’?”

“Yeah, just yelled at him for sending assassins after you two — he confirmed that Guōwēi mistook you for her, May — and told him to fuck himself.” Ey shrugged helplessly. “I was pretty upset, I guess.”

“I am surprised that you stuck around long enough to listen to him, my dear,” May said. “He sounds like he was in rare form.”

“I mean, I don’t know what he’s like the rest of the time, but he was doing a really good job of being as insulting as possible. The ‘my skunks’ part.” I don’t have the training your pretty little skunks have”, he said, and ‘sometimes mommies and daddies fight’. All these little things”

True Name ground the heels of her palms against her eyes. “I am sorry that you had to go through that, Mx. Bălan. It does indeed sound like he was in fine form. Did he explain his reasons for having you along as amanuensis at all?”

“Just that he needed me to witness and write about what happens and leave the rest to the grown-ups.” Ey thought back and shrugged. “That was most of what he said. He wanted to talk with you, wanted me to witness, and wanted the whole stanza there.”

May frowned. “Including me?”

“Specifically you and End Waking, yeah.”

“Why would I trust him on that?”

“I mean, I don’t,” ey said, tossing a twig at the fire. “He said no assassins, but who knows what else he has planned. And it does sound like he has it planned, by the way, that plan A didn’t pan out, so he moved on to plan B, that he had up through plan M.”

“And nothing else?” True Name asked.

“That’s about it. I swept him after that. Swept the whole place.”

The skunk’s ears splayed to the sides. “A preemptive apology is likely in order.”

“Yes, it probably is,” May said, voice low and flat. “Loss For Images?”

“Yes. Her and Even While Awake.” She bowed formally. “I apologize, you two. It was decided prior to Launch to observe those involved with the project and not aligned with us.”

“Those were *your* spies?” ey asked, some part of em unwilling to believe, rebelling against the rest of em, which was thinking *of course they were*.

“Yes. I Am At A Loss For Images In This End Of Days and And I Still Dream Even While Awake rode shotgun in May Then My Name’s fur and have been living there since, swapping out forks as needed. Again my sincerest apologies.”

“How many?”

“Instances?”

Ey nodded.

“Five. One in the den, one in the bedroom, one extra in the kitchen, one on the balcony, one in the yard.”

“Who were the other twelve, then?”

She tilted her head quizzically. “You swept seventeen? Those were likely Jonas’s, I imagine, there to watch his plan unfold.”

May’s voice was steeped in sarcasm as she spoke. “Find out any juicy details?”

Her cocladist held up her paws. “There is no excusing my actions. I know that there is little that I can do to earn your trust, May Then My Name, and at this point, even I suspect that I do not deserve it. There were few details of note enough to report back to me. We knew of your career changes. We knew of your...your feelings towards me. We...well, they learned about the Artemisians early on when you got your letter from Castor, though in the last decade, the reports that I have received have decreased in number, which I attributed to a lack of interesting goings on. That they did not report on that letter is a red flag I should have paid attention to sooner.”

Ey shot May a questioning glance, but she shook her head. *Perhaps she really doesn’t know about Codrin and the Name*, ey thought.

“And why did you not?” May asked instead.

“Pay attention to the red flags?” True Name stared at the fire for a long few seconds, then shrugged. “I was overworked and being fed bad information.”

"You overworked yourself, you mean. 108 forks! Did you synchronize daily?"

"Of course. Why would I not?"

"How are you even still sane?" Ioan asked. "I'm surprised you aren't jumping at shadows, at this point."

"I am sure I will be now," True Name said.

"She is not sane at all, my dear," May said at the same time.

They frowned at each other.

I'm glad End Waking gave us two tents, Ioan thought. *It's been civil so far, but...*

Out loud, ey asked, "So, what's next? We head back tomorrow and build you a room, but then what?"

"What is next is that I try to salvage what I can from this. I imagine that my options will be severely limited if I am to continue existing as I am and still meet Jonas's demands, but that does not mean that I will set my goals aside."

"Continue as you are?" May growled. "I cannot believe--"

There was a moment of tense silence, her jaw working as though straining to hold back some larger outburst. Once she'd mastered it, she said in a tightly controlled voice, "I am going to stretch my legs."

"Be safe, May," ey said quietly, watching the skunk stand and stomp off toward the lake.

True Name watched her estranged up-tree instance with nothing but exhaustion in her expression.

"I'm sorry, True--"

She waved a paw at em. "Please, Ioan, this is not your fault. It is not your battle," she said curtly.

They sat in silence then, each of them looking into the fire, neither making eye contact with the other. For eir part, ey spent the time doing eir best not to kick emself for jumping right in to fix things. Ey knew perfectly well not to apologize for May, and yet there ey'd gone and done it.

Ey couldn't guess what the skunk was thinking.

Eventually, she stood from her log and bowed to em. "I am sorry, my dear. I did not mean to get short with you. It has been a terrible day."

"Oh, uh," ey stammered, flicking eir gaze her way. "It's alright. I think we're all pretty messed up right now."

"Well put," she said. "I am going to try and sleep. Which one is mine?"

Ey pointed her toward the tent with one cot in it and watched her slip inside, then sat and waited for May to come back, staring at the fire and trying not to feel bad enough for the three of them.

Everyone was off in the morning. Tired, grumpy, sore.

The narrowness of the cots had frustrated Ioan and May throughout the night. They *could* both fit on one, but only if they straightened out rather than their usual tight curl. At one point, they tried dragging the cots to be side by side, but the frames against each other made a hard ridge that was impossible to rest on comfortably. In the end, they'd fallen asleep, each on their own cots, facing each other with arms tangled enough to get at least some contact through the night.

Whether or not True Name had actually slept seemed up in the air. She had shrugged noncommittally when asked, but it certainly didn't look like she had.

Conversation was equally awkward. May apologized stiffly to her down-tree instance over breakfast of further sandwiches and True Name accepted graciously enough, but then they fell back into silence.

After breakfast, there was little else to do but head back home. They left the camp set up. Ioan couldn't begin to guess how to take down the tents, given how distracted ey'd been while End Waking had been setting them up. *Besides, ey reasoned. Best to keep them around just in case things go sideways.*

They decided to leave forks behind in case anything went wrong, then Ioan took each of the skunks' paws and stepped back home.

True Name immediately wrinkled her nose at the sight out the picture windows into the back yard. "Snow?"

"Ey is some sort of masochist," May said, *sotto voce*. "You will have to forgive em. Ey is working on it with Sarah."

So out of place was the humor that it took em a moment to catch up. Ey laughed tiredly and shook eir head. "For theatre nerds, you guys have no imagination. Coffee?"

May leaned up and dotted her nose against eir cheek. "You, my dear, are an utter delight."

True Name followed them into the den. "Please. I am going to fall over if I do not have something."

May flopped down onto her usual beanbag and rubbed her paws over her face while True Name sat at the dining table and Ioan made coffee. "If it is alright by you two, I am going to take a shower after coffee, as hot as I can stand," May said. "And then we can work on the addition."

"Sure. I can start by mirroring our room and then stripping personal items while you're getting cleaned up."

"Thank you both," True Name said, tracing a claw along the wood grain on the table, an incredibly familiar gesture from years of living with May. "Again, I mean. I really do appreciate all that you are doing. Perhaps we can discuss boundaries and expectations later, but I am also looking forward to a shower."

Ioan nodded, finishing up the coffee prep — eirs black and both of the skunks' sweet and creamy — and carrying the mugs to each of them. "I guessed," ey said, setting one down in front of True Name. "Let me know if you need anything different."

Ey sat down carefully by May and held both of their coffees while the skunk scooted in close against em as usual before handing hers over. It felt good to be back in a more comfortable setting, back where May and em could at least get close, even if everything still felt nerve-racking.

They drank in silence for a while, minus a thank you from each of the skunks, the three of them doing their best to un-cringe from last day's worth of anxiety.

It worked a little too well, perhaps, as ey had to nudge May awake to finish her coffee and shower, and the prospect of levering emself out of the beanbag felt out of reach. All the same, ey needed to at least get the other room created, then perhaps the three of them could nap.

Once May was on her way to the shower, ey stood, finished eir coffee, and began to work. Ey dumped a series of intents into the sim. A doorway cut itself out of the wall opposite the doorway to eir own bedroom. A room extruded itself beyond the doorway, filling itself with all of the very same stuff that eirs and May's contained. The sim's boundaries whined in protest at not having enough for the windows to look out on and, too tired to think of any other options, ey mirrored the view of the yard as well so that True Name's room looked out over yet more grass and dandelions.

If she stays for any real length of time, maybe I can just mirror the rest of the house and she can have a full setup.

That was enough for now, though. Ey got started going through the room from top to bottom, wiping it of eirs and May's presence. Anything that wasn't the bed, the nightstands, and any other furniture was evaluated

and either left for its decorative value or swiped away to nothingness. A damp May joined em partway through the exercise, and by the time they were done, the room was left clean and neat, sparsely decorated without being oppressively empty.

“Hopefully it’s not too bleak,” ey said once May had fetched True Name. “I gave you some ACLs over the space if you need to make or recycle anything. Just let me know if the room itself needs changing.”

She stood silent and still for nearly a minute, leaving em to fidget while May looked on, frowning.

Finally, she cleared her throat and said hoarsely. “This is more than enough, my dear. I do not know why you two...but, well, I should get cleaned up and then we can talk proper. I am perhaps a little too emotional for that at the moment.”

May sighed, nodded. “At your own pace.”

They both bowed and backed out of the room to let True Name shut the door behind her so that she could shower. May took eir hand in her paw and led em over to the bean bag to get comfortable once again.

“You okay?” ey murmured, once she was properly nestled against em, head tucked up under eir chin.

“I am tired, Ioan. I am tired and I am stressed and I am...I do not know. Conflicted, perhaps.”

“How do you mean?”

She shrugged. “It is much easier to hate from a distance, especially when one is built as I am.”

“To love?”

She pressed her face against eir chest, sighed.

Ey wanted to ask her how well that fit her monologue, that idea that to be built to love is to be built to hate yourself. Ey wanted to go back sixteen hours or however long it had been and kick Jonas’s ass. Ey wanted to go back twenty-four hours and warn True Name, to go back three and a half years and warn the True Name ey’d first gotten coffee with.

Instead, ey said, “You’re a good person, May.”

She tightened her grip around em. “Thank you, my dear.”

When True Name finished her shower and grooming, looking far more herself than she had since the year before, they sat around the dining table to hash out boundaries.

“I do not want to impose on you more than I already have,” she began. “I will certainly stay out of your private space, and I figure a closed door is a plain enough signal to be left alone. Should I stick to my room for the most part?”

May let out a snort of laughter. “I am sorry, True Name. I do not mean to laugh, but I have never heard you so deferential in my life.”

The skunk canted her ears back. “I am in shock, May Then My Name. My coworker of two centuries just tried to kill me. My life’s work has been cut off from me. I have been invited to stay with one of the two up-tree instances of mine who dislike me the most, and I have never had to live with anyone before, not since before we uploaded. The offer remains for me to dig my own sim.”

May bowed apologetically.

“I’d feel better if you stayed,” Ioan admitted. “It’d be too easy for you to either disappear into your new sim forever or wind up with another attempt on your life whenever you left.”

May nodded readily. “You are safer here where no one can act openly against you. It may not be the most comfortable of situations, but I would also prefer that you not die.”

“Good points. Both of you. I would prefer not to die as well.” She straightened up in her chair and smiled, a hint of that confidence showing through. “So, to my question. Do you have any thoughts?”

“Closed doors means don’t bother, stay out of each others rooms. Cones of silence and secure visual ACLs to be respected,” ey said, then shrugged. “But I think that’s all obvious stuff. I don’t see any reason for you to stay out of common areas, I guess, and I’m fine with you eating with us, too, but I also freely acknowledge that that’s me speaking. I don’t want you two, uh...”

“Fighting and arguing should be avoided, yes,” True Name said with a slight bow of acknowledgement. “It is your house, though, and I know that our relationship is fraught. I will defer to May Then My Name, given the power dynamic and social restrict—”

“I promise that I will not try to pull out all of your fur or bounce you so long as you give us space when either of us ask, okay?”

The skunk blinked a few times, then smiled cautiously. “Understood.”

“Wait, that easy?” Ioan said.

“Not everything need be complicated, my dear. Boundaries are most often found by crossing them. We will have negotiation ahead of us as well, I am sure.” May shrugged, adding, “This does not make our relationship any less complicated, but endlessly refining rules ahead of time will only stress all of us out.”

“I guess,” ey mumbled. “I just don’t want you at each other’s throats.”

“If we fight, we fight,” she said. “But if we are to be stuck together, then we will fucking get over it and have a civil house, at the very least. I will do all of the exercises Sarah has given me at once if that is what is needed to keep home from becoming unbearable.”

True Name nodded in agreement. “I will do what I can to keep things comfortable and be out of your hair as soon as this is resolved. We will work it out if one of us gets upset. That includes you, Mx. Bălan. Please voice your concerns when they arise.”

Ey shook eir head. “Alright, alright. Only concerns I have right now are taking a shower and a nap, then. I’ll trust you two to make things work and will try not to mediate every single little disagreement.”

“Excellent. About fucking time,” May said, patting eir hand. “I will join you for the nap and try to be up for lunch.”

“Naps all around,” True Name agreed. “Again, thank you two.”

The next few days felt careful. They weren’t walking on eggshells around each other, it was not a worry of offending, but they all seemed to be hyper-aware of each other’s presence in the house.

Ioan and May called out from their performances and when A Finger Pointing asked why, May spent half an hour locked in the bedroom on a silenced sensorium conversation. Ioan received a very sincere note soon after wishing all three of them well. While she’d never spent much time worrying about the things True Name did, A Finger Pointing’s tireless desire to be friends with everyone did not exclude her cross-tree instance.

For her part, True Name spent much of the first day silent in her room, though whether that was to sleep or to salvage the situation, ey couldn't tell. She poked her head out around dinner and said that she was too tired to join and that she would see them in the morning.

Ey couldn't blame her. Even with the two hour nap before lunch, Ioan felt groggy and disoriented for the remainder of the day. *I'm becoming like May*, ey thought. *I don't sleep well alone, or even separated by camp bed frames.*

All three of them slept in late the next morning, Ioan only rising at nine when ey received the gentlest possible sensorium ping from True Name.

Ey found her in the kitchen, standing in front of the coffee machine, looking baffled.

"I am sorry if I woke you, my dear. There are more buttons on this than I know what to do with."

"It's alright. I went through a coffee phase years ago and wound up with this. I usually just tap here...then here...and then this last one for three cups."

She bowed. "Thank you. I would complain, but it does make good coffee."

The skunk looked so much like eir partner that ey had to stop emself from reaching out to ruffle her ears. Ey disguised the motion as leaning back against the counter and rubbing the sleep from eir eyes. "Good coffee's a necessity. Sleep alright?"

"Well enough, yes. It has been a few days since this instance has had the chance, so it was starting to build up."

"Days? Good Lord. I don't know how you can do that."

"Anxiety, caffeine, and 263 years of practice."

Ey laughed. "I don't know, I think it might be a you thing. May seems pretty fond of it."

"An improvement, then," she said, grinning. "Mugs?"

Ey showed her where they kept the mugs, then the cream and sugar for doctoring coffee and spoons for stirring. Once the pot finished brewing and all three cups had been poured, ey excused emself back to the bedroom with eirs and May's coffee to finish waking up with eir partner.

And so it continued. They would speak in the morning and over dinner, perhaps a few times throughout the day, but otherwise, they worked on their own projects. They'd say good morning to each other, say good night to each other, say polite things in passing. Little of it felt like it was done out of kindness, but rather out of a need to remain cognizant of each other's presence, to keep a semblance of peace through performative normalcy.

Even the weather felt careful. The snow first melted and then was replaced when a new storm lay down a delicate few inches.

It was the third full day since their return when the spell was broken. Shortly after lunch, True Name stepped into May's field of view, bowed, and politely requested a conversation with her.

The skunk frowned and beckoned her over to the couch.

True Name apologized to Ioan, then set up a cone of silence with secure visual ACLs.

Three days was just long enough to start building up the scaffolding of habits, such that Ioan was left anxious and jittery when they were jostled. Seeing it from the outside for the first time, ey was left with a slight sense of disorientation from the way the cone blurred both the occupants and the background, the edges of its boundaries unnervingly sharp.

There was nothing to be gained from watching the indistinct shapes within. A quiet conversation had them

simply looking like two black forms against the relative brightness of the balcony. Ey couldn't see expressions, couldn't see but the most grandiose of body language.

And yet ey watched, slipping over to the kitchen to clean, or at least dream up some chore that needed doing there, just so that ey could keep an eye on the cone.

It was boring, and that it was boring only drove eir anxiety higher.

The conversation lasted nearly an hour, and when the cone dropped, ey was greeted once again by the sight of the two skunks. To say that neither looked happy missed the mark: True Name had a dullness to her expression, something between hopelessness and resignation, while May looked apoplectic. She'd clearly been crying quite hard at one point.

Ey ducked around the kitchen counter as quickly as ey could. "May? True Name? Are you—"

May waved a paw dismissively and blipped out of the sim. There was a sensorium ping a moment later, a view of Arrowhead Lake.

"What just happened?"

True Name shrugged, the movement looking as though she was struggling against dozens of gravities rather than just one. "I explained what has been happening."

Ey frowned, feeling eir own anger rise out of anxiety. "Well? What's been happening? I don't exactly like seeing her that upset."

"No, I imagine not." She sighed and slouched against the back of the couch, rubbing at her forehead. "I explained the shift between Jonas and I over the last twenty-five years. I explained the last few weeks."

"And pissed her off."

She rolled her head to the side, enough to get a sidelong glance at em. "I am sorry, Ioan. I cannot be the only one to know these things. I have had all of my existing support removed. All of my forks, all of my cocladists, most of my friends. I have had to cancel all of my appointments with Sarah. It is small consolation, I am sure, but I have left May Then My Name angrier at Jonas than I think she ever was at me."

Ey blinked and straightened up. "At Jonas?"

She let her head slip back down off the back of the couch, looking down at her paws. "I cannot tell you, Ioan. Not yet."

"Nothing?" Ey shook eir head. "Sorry, True Name, I'm not asking you to betray a secret or anything. I'm just worried."

"I understand, my dear." There seemed to be more coming, but she sat for another minute or so, just staring down at her paws on her lap.

"I'm sorry, True N—"

"What was it that he said to you? 'Sometimes mommies and daddies fight'?"

"Wait, but...what?"

She shrugged again, slowly rolled up off the couch to her feet, swayed for a moment, then walked off to her room, the door snicking shut behind her.

Debarre — 2350

The next few days after Ioan's visit and brief explanation about what had happened with True Name were full of long walks and longer silences. End Waking politely requested that Debarre remain behind for the majority of the walks.

There was a sense in the air that the skunk wanted to ask him to leave again, to fall back into solitude and, though he'd never use the word around him, moping. He'd still talk, still hold up his end of the conversations, but always there would be a slight pause before speaking, always a bit more distance than usual, always something out in the forest that called to him just that much more strongly than the weasel before him.

It was never comfortable to be asked to leave one's partner. He knew the reasons, could understand the drive, but to build a relationship up over however many decades it was now, and yet still need to put it on hold for months or, on one occasion, years at a time still hurt.

He knew he had a temper, too. He'd spent the last centuries going all the way back to Cicero's death working on setting that aside when he could feel it getting too hot within him. He always worked his hardest at that around End Waking. He loved the skunk, wanted nothing but the best for him, and although he knew that End Waking was one of the more resilient Odists, he had also known Michelle far longer than...well, just about anyone possibly could, now. Two and a half centuries was a long time to understand just how the other person processes pain and trauma, and he didn't want to add to any of the Odists' burden, having spent so long with them from the beginning. From before the beginning, in some senses.

Well, except perhaps True Name.

There were few enough people he hated in the world, though certainly a great many who grated on his nerves. True Name and her ilk, though, were universally among that number. He knew he could never hurt anyone, but, well, everyone had their fantasies. He knew he should never wish harm befall anyone, but some people...

This latest development was putting this to the test.

He'd continue work on the cabin while End Waking went for his walks — they'd gotten the floor and stove in place, as well as the A-frame, but the canvas of the tent still needed to be strung, and he had a few ideas for improvements — and all the while, he'd swing steadily between the poles of feeling nauseous at the thought of one less fraction of his friend in the world, one more death of one of the lost, and wild fantasies of popping champagne upon hearing that her final instance had been destroyed.

Part of him wondered if End Waking was going through the same. He wanted to ask, but didn't want to risk that pushing the skunk over into requesting that he leave with the tent not yet complete.

So, Debarre just kept working, kept fantasizing. He'd gotten the last of the canvas lashed down over the sides of the frame and was on to working on the front wall of the tent. At least there was productivity to lean on, even if he couldn't lean on his partner at the moment.

He jumped, startled out of work and reverie by two sensorium pings in short order. The first came from End Waking, the word 'company' muttered quietly, and the second was a ping of arrival from the sim itself.

With the new tent, End Waking had made the default entry point around a small rise from home, leaving it a short walk around — or a shorter but much steeper dash up and over — the ridge.

Debarre opted for the up and over, nearly tumbling down the other side of the hill to where the form knelt in the clearing. End Waking was just making his way through the trees on the opposite side, so they converged on the visitor at the same time.

May Then My Name was sobbing. It looked as though she had been for a bit, too, judging by the mess of tear-tracks in the fur of her cheeks.

There wasn't much that he could think of to say, so he awkwardly shifted from a crouch to a kneeling position beside her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and gently tugging her against him. Although he rarely had reason to comfort May Then My Name in particular, it was familiar enough from all the way back at the Crown Pub when Sasha'd come back from some break-up or another.

"I will get water," End Waking murmured, leaving the physical comfort to someone better able to provide such.

Her cry must have been nearing its end before she arrived, as she'd settled down to sniffles by the time her cocladist arrived with an enamel mug of water and a damp rag.

"Can you drink, May Then My Name?" he said gently.

She nodded and accepted the mug with both paws to hold it steady, taking a few unsteady laps of the water before simply clutching it to her chest. "Thank you," she croaked, freeing up a paw to accept the damp rag to wipe her face. "I am sorry for so dramatic an entrance."

"Hush. You are fine," End Waking said. "Everything sounded quite dramatic indeed. Please take your time, and we can discuss it later."

She nodded, slouched a little further against Debarre, and sighed shakily.

He shot a quizzical look over to End Waking, who sent a brief sensorium ping in return. She must have explained a good bit more before arriving, then.

They sat like that for another five minutes or so, another few bouts of tears hitting the skunk while he tried to be as steady as he could for her, petting over her ears and murmuring reassurances. She'd leaned on AwDae more often than she had on him, all those years ago, but a friend's shoulder was a friend's shoulder, and he'd always offered when he could. This was, he supposed, no different.

When she was finally able to pull herself together enough to walk, Debarre helped her to stand and the three of them made their way back to the tent. He sat her down on one of the two fallen tree trunks that had been set before the tent to either side of the fire pit, then took her mug to refill it while End Waking started a small fire. It wasn't that cold out, but warmth was warmth, comfort was comfort.

With the cup safely back in her paws, Debarre sat beside May Then My Name once more, arm around her shoulder. “Feel up to talking about it?”

“Um, a little, maybe,” the skunk said, voice raw. “Just in general.”

He nodded.

“True Name has been staying with us the last few days.”

“Sounds miserable.”

She smiled halfheartedly. “Ioan expanded the house out to the other side with a separate bedroom. She has been spending most of her time in there, doing whatever it is that she does. Perhaps she is still pulling strings somewhere, I do not know. I do not particularly care.”

“I’m surprised you let her move in there,” he said sourly.

After a long pause, the skunk mumbled, “It was my idea. I insisted, Ioan agreed.”

“Why?” End Waking asked from where he crouched beside the fire.

“I have incomplete thoughts. In terms of logistics, it made sense to have her where Jonas could not act against her.”

End Waking nodded. “Yes, but why? Why did you not just let her build herself a new home? Leave her to her own devices until time, Jonas, or madness took her?”

May Then My Name averted her gaze. “I do not want her to die. I do not want her gone.”

The other skunk went silent, staring at her for a long moment before getting back to building the fire up to a comfortable level.

“I’m guessing it’s the non-logistical side of things that’s complicated,” Debarre said.

“Yes. I seem to be cursed to think about her and after everything, I do not know why it is that I care about her.” She sniffled and scrubbed her face with the rag as though to preemptively snap herself out of an oncoming wave of emotion. “It has not been all that bad, really. Awkward, yes, but she spends most of her time in her room except at breakfast and dinner. Today, though, she requested to talk with me, and...I cannot even begin to comprehend the specifics, but Jonas has...ha-has been...”

Debarre rubbed at May Then My Name’s back when that wave of emotion finally washed over her.

“I am sorry, Debarre. It was a lot,” she mumbled. “Jonas has been playing her for centuries now. He has been structuring her life for her in such subtle ways that even she was not able to see it. She...well, something happened a few years after launch. A trap of sorts. Jonas’s plans hit all at once and she has been working under his thumb since then.”

They sat in silence for a bit, Debarre racing through various questions, rejecting each as too personal, too mean, too off-topic. Finally, he asked, “So, why are you so upset?”

“That is where the specifics I cannot mention lay. Beyond that, though, I am just...torn. I am torn. I want to kick her out. I want to invite Jonas over and have him bring his pet assassin. I want her to disappear into ignominy.” She took a deep breath, continued, “But I also want her to get out of this mess. I may not want her around, but I want her to find something — anything — else to do with her life and to not have to deal with that living, breathing sack of shit anymore. No one should have to deal with that.”

“E.W. said he needed to be better than her. Sort of like that?”

She shrugged. “I do not know. It does not feel accurate for me to say that, but I cannot explain why.”

“Well,” he said, waving the point away. “I’m with you on the feeling torn bit, at least. Was just thinking about that when you showed up. Like, would I celebrate if she died? Or would I feel like there was just that much less of you around?”

“You think about it from the outside, my love,” End Waking said. “You think about who we were. You have the capacity to do so. May Then My Name and I have diverged so far from True Name that she has become a new entity, and I do not think that we can so easily see Sasha in her.”

May Then My Name nodded toward End Waking. “And that is the source of at least some of my resentment towards her. I cannot see Sasha in her, and yet I was created from her. I see that of Sasha in myself, the caring side of her who got lost looking for lost friends, and while I can *remember* those few years that I was True Name, I am not that person. I do not feel like I ever was that person. Becoming me was waking up from a dream.”

“A nightmare, perhaps,” the other skunk murmured.

“You and I have different resentments. I would say an unnerving dream that makes me all the happier to be what I am now.”

“You are a better person than I.”

Debarre threw a twig at his boyfriend. “No moping. You’re both good people. Jury’s out on True Name, but given that you two get so fucking upset whenever she’s around, I’m leaning towards not so good.”

End Waking smiled. It was slight, but he was pleased to see it all the same.

“Qoheleth, poor, stupid man that he was, had much that he was correct about, but one thing that he completely failed to understand was growth,” May Then My Name mused. “There is plenty of growth, here. That is perhaps the one thing we have more than memory, the one thing that protects us from too much memory. All that time may still drive us mad, but at least we have the ability to grow to the point where we are no longer True Name.”

“A-fucking-men.”

She laughed. “Right? Thank you two for talking, though. I know it is not really a pleasant topic, but it has helped me immensely.”

Debarre squeezed her around the shoulders. “Of course, skunk.”

“You feel so much more than I do,” End Waking said. “So I cannot understand the ways in which you are torn. There is also much more than I think you are saying—”

“There is, yes. Sorry.”

“—and so I cannot offer much in the way of advice, but I can welcome you to my forest and offer you company and a meal. Will you be staying for dinner?”

“I would like to, yes.” She hesitated, then added, “True Name has joined us for dinner these last few days, and I would like a break.”

“Are you opposed to an early dinner, Debarre?”

“’Course not. If you cook, May Then My Name and I can get the cot in the tent.

They broke from there. May Then My Name forked several times over to help him in repopulating the inside of the tent with the necessities while End Waking made venison cutlets and savory corn griddle cakes.

“There’s still a lot we need to do in here, so we can’t drag everything in yet,” the weasel explained as they returned to where End Waking’s goods were stored under a canvas tarp. “But getting a few essentials in here

will help in the meantime. Hopefully just a few more days and we'll be all set again. I think E.W. may kick me out at that point."

"So soon?"

"He called me back in the middle of a solitary spell, remember?"

She nodded. "Well, yes, but I had hoped that...well, I am sorry, Debarre. I imagine it must be difficult."

"A little. I miss him when I'm gone, but I usually merge back down and get to focusing on whatever #Tracker is up to, then re-fork when he's up to having me around again."

"We are different in that respect, I guess. If Ioan requested six months of time away from me I think I would have a pretty rough time of it."

He laughed and ruffled a paw over her ears. "I think you'd fucking explode. Thankfully, ey doesn't seem like the type."

She nodded gratefully. "Ey does not, no. I am just sorry that I was too heated to stick around and talk with em about this. Thank you again, Debarre. I needed to talk about it, just with someone who has an appropriate distance from the topic. I cannot overstate how terrifying what she said was."

"Uh, of course, May Then My Name. Can you tell me any more about it?"

"Perhaps over dinner, my dear. I need food, and I need to talk to your boyfriend."

Dinner, it turned out, was not long in coming. Well-seasoned deer and griddle cakes cooked in the grease. "I have made them with too much salt just for you, May Then My Name," he said with a polite bow.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Much appreciated. It tastes almost like normal food."

He made a rude gesture at her, but grinned all the same.

"So," Debarre said between bites. "Anything else you can tell us about what True Name said?"

The other skunk stacked a bite of griddle cake on top of a bite of venison and chewed thoughtfully. At last, she sighed, saying, "I do not want to talk about too much of it, not aloud. It is too close to the surface as yet and I will turn into a sobbing mess. Again, I mean."

"Of course, no rush."

"Right. Well, Jonas got her involved with something in the late 2130s. It was sort of a side...thing, very hush-hush but it still has taken up at least a small part of her attention ever since. It was all very low-level stuff — low enough that it flew beneath even her radar — and I guess after Launch, he dropped it all on her in a meeting similar to what he had promised for Secession day. All that time had turned into a lever to use against her, and I think that, whether she realizes it or not, relatively little has been done of her own accord since then here on Lagrange."

Debarre nodded, waiting for her to say more, to which she eventually shook her head. "I am sorry. I need at least a few days to be able to process it. I cannot even think about it without wanting to...I do not know. I want to quit and force a merge on her. I want you to force a merge on her," she said, nodding to End Waking. "I want her to know something other than herself."

The skunk sat up straighter. "So you have hinted, yes. Why, though? Why would you want her to feel that resentment? Why do you think she would be able to internalize my penance? Why the fuck do you—"

"E.W.," Debarre murmured. "Cool it."

He tugged his hood down lower over his head and stayed silent for several minutes. "I am sorry, May Then

My Name. I did not mean to yell. It is just that I worked hard at getting where I am now, and if she is to feel any — *any* — remorse about what she has done with her life, I would like for her to come by it honestly, and if she does not, then I would like her to face the consequences of her actions.”

“I do at least understand that,” May Then My Name said cautiously. She had shied away from her cocladist at the force of his words, but the apology and explanation drew her back. “You do not need to answer now, or ever for that matter, but is it something you would at least consider?”

“Perhaps. I do not feel the need to engage with her as you seem to, but there is little enough engagement in merging down. If I had not made my rejection of what she is a part of my identity, if I could let that go, then I would rescind my membership from the clade just to sever what ties of association remain.”

“Would you just be End Waking of no clade, then?”

“Perhaps I would just call myself E.W., my love.”

Debarre grinned. “Excellent.”

“You two are disgusting,” May Then My Name said. “Please keep up the good work.”

“You’re one to talk, smartass. You and Ioan could make my teeth rot.”

“I have em well trained, do I not? Perhaps I will make em an honorary member of the clade in your stead.”

End Waking smirked. “Would ey take my name, then?”

“No, we would have to give em a similarly Odist name. Some shitty line of poetry, a few nonsense words smashed together. Gentle Confusion or something.”

They laughed.

“Where I Am Overcome By Gentle Confusion of the Ode-Bălan clade,” Debarre said. “And I’d be something like Even Real Shitheads Know Their Dreams.”

May Then My Name flicked a crumb of griddle cake at him. “Good job on the first name, not so much on the second. I do not think it fits the tone very well, even if you are a bit of a shithead.”

“Confirmation at last,” End Waking said dreamily.

Having sent May Then My Name home with a few extra griddle cakes and then run out of daylight, Debarre and End Waking gave up on any additional work for the day. The tent was livable, if incomplete, and a bit of a break felt nice, anyway. They sat beside each other before the fire and watched the flames, not speaking, simply enjoying the warmth and each other’s company.

At least, Debarre enjoyed the warmth and the feeling of his boyfriend beside him. He couldn’t tell what End Waking was thinking or feeling. He’d not said a word since wishing his cocladist goodbye and good luck.

“Thanks for letting me stay, E.W.”

“Mm? Of course, my love. I am glad for your help and your company.”

He nodded. Silence fell again. End Waking put another log on the fire.

“I know that I am a less-than-ideal partner, Debarre. I *do* love you, I promise.”

Here it comes. “Love you too, E.W. Want some space after we’re done with the camp?”

“Please,” the skunk said after a long pause. “I do not like sending you away, but so much has happened this last week, these last few months...”

He scooted closer to End Waking and slipped an arm around his waist. It was probably more affection than the skunk would have preferred at the moment, but he needed at least something to go with that statement. End Waking seemed to realize this, as well, and although he didn't reciprocate the affection, he did at least relax against Debarre's side.

"What do you suppose they are doing on Artemis?" End Waking asked, staring at the fire rather than up to the stars.

"Hmm? My guess is that everyone's getting settled in by now. All those who went along with have probably dug homes or whatever they call it in the fifthrace area, and some are probably getting pretty good at...uh, *Nanon*, was it?"

"Did Debarre#Castor go with?"

"No, actually. He still hasn't told me why, either. He's at least spent quite a bit of time in Convergence. Lots of visiting with Codrin and Dear. Have you heard from them? They've quite a name for themselves there, apparently."

"Only when Dear writes clade-wide. It and I were never as close as we could have been. It sounds happy, at least, and passes on good stories."

He laughed. "I can't imagine anything but, honestly. Any news of the others?"

"Codrin sounds unhappy, and I cannot quite piece together why."

"Really? Like, with eir new job?"

"Oh, no, ey still seems quite pleased with that from the text, but the subtext is that ey is displeased in some other, more fundamental way. I always get that sense when news includes the topic of Artemis."

"What about Sorina, though? Doesn't ey have connections through her?"

The skunk shrugged. "I do not know. These communications are simple family letters or those little quippy snippets that Dear is so fond of. Nothing in depth."

Debarre hesitated, unsure of how to broach the question. *No way out but through*, ey thought, saying, "What about True Name#Castor? Anything from her?"

"Not you, too," he said with a groan. "I cannot seem to escape her today, can I?"

"Sorry, E.W."

He sighed. "No, it is okay. If that is what is happening, then that is what is happening, and we are bound to talk about it. One moment, then."

There was a long silence from End Waking. Debarre imagined him trudging through exos, reading back through clade communiqués that his down-tree instance over on the LV had sent back.

"She remains herself," he said at last. "I mean truly herself, not the bent and twisted True Name of Lagrange. Competent, confident, in complete control. She strives behind the scenes in both Convergence and the rest of Castor as she always has."

"'Bent and twisted'? I mean, she sounds like she's having a rough time of late, but that bad?"

"This is also subtext, my dear. The True Name of Lagrange no longer writes the same way as the True Name of the LVs. True Name#Castor is as True Name was back before Launch, and True Name#Pollux has settled down with Zacharias and sits on the Guiding Council, whatever that is. The one here is..." He frowned, visibly hunting for words. "She is no longer what she was. She is middle-management. She is overworked and underappreci-

ated. She continues on with her plans, to which I assume she still clings tight, but that comes with a sense of desperation that I cannot otherwise place. She is bent and twisted nearly to the point of fatigue, as when one bends a paperclip until it snaps.”

“Is that why you think May Then My Name wants you to merge down?”

“To break her, you mean?”

Debarre nodded.

“Perhaps, yes. She shared more with me before she arrived and I do...I do see the reasoning behind her request. What that actually means to her, however, I am not sure. Does she want to shock True Name into becoming whatever she considers a real person? Does she want to break her out of rigidity and make her more complete? Does she want her to move beyond whatever this unspeakable atrocity is through force alone? I do not know.”

“Maybe just hurt her without killing her,” he added.

End Waking looked at him sharply, then subsided. “Also a possibility. Had you suggested that a decade ago, I would have been quite upset, because I do not think that who May Then My Name used to be could possibly have been so vengeful, but I am not sure that that is the case anymore.”

“Is that such a bad thing, though?” Debarre frowned, hunting for words. “I mean, I love her, I think she’s one of the best people I’ve ever met, but she was almost a caricature with how sweet she was. If she can be anything other than head-over-heels in love with everyone she meets, wouldn’t that mean that she’s a more complete person, too?”

The skunk tensed and carefully scooted an inch or two away from Debarre, gently nudging the weasel’s arm from around his waist.

“Shit, I’m sorry, E.W. I didn’t mean to offend.”

He laughed. A short, sharp bark of a laugh that was more bitter than amused. “Fuck you, Debarre. Fuck you and how right you are.”

Debarre blinked, nonplussed.

“You are right. It is terrible that she has to hate someone to be more complete, but you are right. However, my love,” End Waking said, grinning humorlessly. “That means — that *must* mean — that the same holds true for me, caricature of penance that I am.”

He laid his ears flat, nodding. “Sorry, E.W.”

“I do not know what a more complete version of myself looks like. I do not know how to attain that. I have no up-tree instances who have led earnestly happy lives to merge down and complement my fundamentally unhappy one. Perhaps that is why May Then My Name’s idea rankles. Should I merge down and True Name learn to repent, learn to become more whole, then she will have done so without the work of actually having done so. Should I become happier, then I must work further years.”

“I dunno, is that true? I mean, yeah, she in her current form won’t have done the work of repenting. Her body won’t have been the one living out here in the middle of nowhere, but she’ll have...when did you last merge down?”

“I do not remember.”

Debarre squinted. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“I do not remember, Debarre,” End Waking said tiredly. “Sometime before the first centennial.”

He held up his paws, surrendering the point. “Then she’ll have more than a century’s worth of work dumped on her, and she’ll be the one who has to process that and try to integrate it. Can you imagine how fucked that’d feel? Can you imagine what she’d become?”

“Do you think I should merge down?” End Waking growled.

“I don’t know, E.W. I really don’t. Let’s drop it, though, okay? I’m just gonna keep on hurting you if we keep this up, and I *really* don’t want that.”

The skunk sighed, nodded, and, after a moment, reached out and took Debarre’s paw in his own. “I am sorry I got so worked up. I do need a break from the topic, though. Thank you, my love.”

He smiled cautiously and gave that paw a little squeeze.

They sat in silence for the rest of the night, then, watching the fire burn low until the skunk put it out. They stripped down for bed and, for the first time in months, climbed into their cot within their tent — theirs at least until the need for solitude struck full force again. They shared their wordless intimacies and then curled together for sleep.

“You know that she will have memories of this, too, my love,” End Waking murmured.

“Let her,” he said, yawning. “You’re more complete than you give yourself credit for. If the goal is for her to have some semblance of that, let her.”

Ioan Bălan — 2350

With May out of the house and True Name doing...well, whatever it was that she did in her room by herself, Ioan was left emotionally and intellectually stalled out, stuck by emself in an empty den. Ey sat for a while on the couch, staring out into the slowly melting snow on the deck and ruminating. Then, giving in to the urge to pace, ey slipped on the boots ey kept for just such occasions and slowly tramped a ring around the outer edge of the yard, first reveling in the crunch of the icy top layer of the snow, then the sweat ey worked up when, on the third lap, the snow began to drag at eir feet, and then finally the solidity of the uneven path ey'd worn down into the snow, a marker of energy spent.

The pacing gave em time and space. It let eir emotions spool out into nothingness while eir thoughts were left crunched beneath the treads of eir boots. Ey didn't know what ey thought about. Ey didn't know what ey felt. Ey just walked.

Ey knew that, at one point, ey wondered if eir command to mirror the back yard for True Name's room meant that it made a new back yard or whether it just mirrored the view out the window. If it were the latter, would she be watching em? Would she be wondering why ey walked? Would she scoff? Would she wish for a way to crush her own worries down into the ice?

And then the train of thought was gone, lost amid some whorl in the steam of eir breath.

An hour's walking gained em sore hips, a sweat-soaked shirt, and a well-trod trail around the outside of the yard.

"Fucking cold," ey grumbled, stomping the lingering snow off eir boots and the hems of eir slacks on the way up the stairs to the balcony. Ey kicked the boots off outside the door and shuffled inside. Ey could fork emself warm and dry, sure, but why do that when there was a perfectly good shower right there?

So, ey lingered under the hot water for fifteen minutes, and instead of whorls of breath, the crunch of ice, the nothingness of slate-gray skies, eir thoughts and emotions dribbled down eir face in rivulets of water, swirled once, twice, disappeared down the drain.

Dissociating, ey thought, laughed to no one.

Brushed eir hair. Stared, unseeing, at emself in the mirror. Dressed in clean clothes — sweater vest? Sweater vest — and wound up sitting on the couch once more.

True Name peeked out of her room and bowed to em from just outside her door. The sound of the door and the movement out of the corner of eir eye startled em back to reality. "Sorry, True Name. Everything okay?"

"Yes, thank you, Mx. Bălan." She smiled apologetically — such a strange look on her. "I am not the greatest

of cooks, but would you like me to make dinner tonight? I do not believe May Then My Name will be joining us, and it is getting dark.”

“Huh?” Ey whirled back around toward the picture windows and frowned. Sure enough, it was dimming into evening already. “Oh, well, sure, I guess. I’m sure whatever you make will be fine. Sorry I’m so spacey.”

The skunk padded into the kitchen and waved the apology away with a paw. “You are fine, my dear. You are allowed to space out. It has been a dramatic few days, so I do not blame you. Can you please grant me ACLs enough to create ingredients?”

After a pause to will it so, ey nodded. “Sure, should be good now.”

“Thank you.”

Ey felt strange staring out into the yard — the opposite direction of the kitchen — while True Name cooked, so ey grabbed a notebook and moved to the dining table where, should ey be able to pull eir thoughts together, ey could write, and if ey couldn’t, ey could at least talk with the skunk without twisting around in eir seat.

Ey could not, it turned out. Ey flopped the notebook shut again and rubbed at eir face. “What’re you cooking?”

“Chicken...rice...stuff. It is college food.”

Ey laughed. “Right, I’m familiar. Sounds good. Certainly cold enough out there for it.”

“Of course, yes. May Then My Name would have the same recipe, would she not?” The skunk clattered about for a few more minutes, and then, apparently satisfied, leaned back on the counter behind the stove. “I do not understand your affection for the weather, but I am happy to make warm things while it is about.”

“Hopeless romanticism, I guess,” ey said. “But whatever. Are you feeling better?”

True Name shrugged, eyes locked in a glassy stare out the windows. “I do not know if better is the correct word. I feel lighter, perhaps, having said what I did to May Then My Name. Conflicted, as well, that I feel lighter and yet she feel the burden of knowledge heavy enough to need to step away. For that, I apologize.”

Ey nodded. “She sent me a few brief pings. She’s with End Waking and Debarre at the moment. No clue when she’ll be back.”

“I am pleased to hear that she is safe.”

“Now that you’ve had some space from it, can you tell me any more about what you told her that set her off?”

“I am not ready to get deep into it, Ioan, I hope you understand.”

“Of course. I’m just worried. I guess. Did it have to do with her specifically?”

She didn’t respond. The skunk’s gaze never wavered. Her posture remained relaxed and comfortable, and for that, ey felt all the more anxious.

“Well, maybe you can tell me what spurred the conversation?”

“Right, yes,” she said, deflating somewhat with a sigh. “What do you believe, Ioan?”

“Excuse me?”

“What do you believe? You do not strike me as religious, but surely you believe in something. The sanctity of life? Love? Art?”

Ey sat up straighter, frowning at her. “That’s a surprisingly difficult question to answer.”

“It is not at all surprising. It is easy to provide a noun and say that one believes in that. The irreversibility of time, perhaps? Your cocladist and Dear spoke to that in the *History*.”

The conversation was taking a decidedly Odist turn. Coming at the topic sideways, grand statements that came tinged with a sense of awe. They all seemed prone to falling into the style of speaking and ey fell for it every time. “Mmhm. Several times.”

“But what does it mean to believe in something like that? Or the sanctity of life or love or art? Or God, for that matter? ‘Belief’ as a word is a stand-in for a concept so broad as to be intimidating or impossible. One may say as Blake did, ‘For everything that lives is holy’, but encompassing that within one’s mind is truly terrifying.” She finally broke her thousand-yard stare out the window and smiled faintly to em. “Still, I believe in what I do, Ioan. Really, *truly* believe. I feel called. I feel led. I am good at it. I wake up thinking about it, spend my day working with it, and fall asleep thinking yet more about it. We have an existence which is fundamentally different from that of phys-side, and I cannot put into words how much I love that. It is more than a want, I have a need so integral to my being for it to continue that I would not be True Name without it, and I love being True Name.”

“But now...”

“Yes, ‘but now’. But now I am stuck in an impossible limbo built by Jonas. My entire existence these last two hundred years has been defined by a belief that I thought Jonas and I shared, and in a few minutes, he tore it to the ground, burnt the pieces to ash, and then ground the ash beneath his heel.” She laughed and shook her head. “So melodramatic, is it not? But that is how it feels to have one’s belief turned hollow and stale.”

“Do you overflow?”

The skunk had lifted the lid of the pot of rice to stir. If it was anything at all how May cooked it, it was a stiff rice porridge made with chicken stock, cheese stirred in at the last minute — ‘poor skunk’s risotto’, she called it. She seemed keen to use her time cooking to think, so ey waited in silence.

“I do. More frequently and in much shorter bursts,” she said, finally. “Every few days, I will walk sims and I will get lost. Well and truly lost. Dear loses control of its tightly directed energy, May Then My Name loses control of that wellspring of love within her, and I lose control of my sense of control.”

“Really? Every few days? Is that because you’re stretched so thin with all your forks?”

She shook her head and, deeming the rice to be done, slid it off the heat. “I started walking in 2124, my dear. A few years before May Then My Name was forked, back when it cost too much to be so cavalier with forking. It is not so dramatic as your partner’s.”

Ey nodded. “Were you overflowing earlier today?”

She chopped the chicken breasts she’d sauteed into strips, focusing on the task, then on plating up the food, before responding. “Perhaps, Ioan. Perhaps.”

They ate in silence, then. It was interesting picking apart the way the two skunks’ recipes had diverged over the years. True Name’s was spicier, May’s more savory and with more vegetables.

They made it most of the way through the meal before they were alerted to May’s arrival by the sim’s sensorium ping.

Ioan set down eir fork and slid out of eir chair to greet her as she stepped out of the entryway. Ey was pleased to see her face washed of tears and expression washed of distress. She looked tired, to be sure, but no longer

ready to murder someone.

“I brought gifts, my dear. I do not know if-” She paused as she caught sight of True Name.

The other skunk had also stood and was bowing deeply to her up-tree instance. “May Then My Name, I apolog-*hrk!*”

May pressed the waxed cotton-wrapped parcel into Ioan’s hands and bounded over to True Name, shoving her out of her bow in order to get her arms around her for an awkward hug. “That is for what happened,” she said, then socked her solidly on the shoulder. “And that is for how you told me.”

True Name stumbled back from the greeting, blinking rapidly and rubbing at her arm. She looked as baffled as ey felt. Watching May interact with True Name these last few days had been something of a roller coaster, whether it was the abject fury ey saw within her whenever the topic of her cocladist’s goals — or perhaps calling — came up or the strange protectiveness that had led her to offer their home to her. Those were stressful enough; this was overwhelming.

Ey shuffled back to the table, slid the packet onto it, and fell heavily into eir chair. “What just happened?”

May laughed and dotted her nose against eir cheek before settling down into her usual seat. “I am sorry that that was weird, and I am sorry that I ran away earlier. I was able to get a lot off my chest, and I feel much better for it. Oh, you did eat! That is okay, I did too, but I think these may make good dessert.”

May’s nearly manic tone and the tension in her cheeks showed something deeper going on beneath the surface, but given her chatter and the still-shocked look on True Name’s face, this didn’t seem to be the time to ask.

“May Then My Name, I know that I-”

“If you talk about earlier, I will hire Guōwēi myself,” May interrupted sweetly. “I promise that there will be time to talk about it soon, but for now, I need something else, alright?”

“Of course,” True Name said, frowning. “In that case, what is in the package?”

“End Waking made these corn...pancake...things. Fritter cakes? Something like that. They were savory, but they might go well with honey as a sort of dessert. There are only two, but we can split them.”

Ioan and True Name exchanged a glance, then watched as May unwrapped the griddle cakes and swiped a pot of honey into being beside them. She broke off a piece, drizzled honey on it, and ate it.

“Well?” ey asked.

“It is fine. I do not know that it is a dessert. Have you ever had chicken and waffles, my dear?”

Ey shook eir head, reaching for a piece of the (slightly soggy) cake and the pot of honey.

“It is not that, but it reminds me of it. Savory and meaty but also sweet and bready.”

Ey frowned as ey chewed on the morsel. Ey could see it being truly delicious if it had not been cooked in venison grease specifically. The gaminess made it a strange mix.

“Good, but not great,” was True Name’s assessment, to which May nodded vigorously.

They finished the griddle cakes all the same, keeping up the banal chatter. It felt good, ey realized, to talk about nothing. Day after day of serious talks had worn on em more than ey realized, and ey made a silent note to thank May later for forcing them into something more pleasant. The greeting she’d given True Name was weird, but it definitely broke the suspense that had dogged them all week.

After dinner, ey cleaned up the dishes by hand while True Name went back to her room and May settled onto her beanbag, getting a thoughtful look on her face that usually meant she was working mentally.

Once ey was finished, ey settled down beside the skunk, letting her squirm in next to em and get an arm around eir middle. Ey blinked a cone of silence into being over them. "It's good to have you back," ey said, hugging around her shoulders. "What was that all about?"

She snagged eir free hand and put it atop her head. A clearer demand for pets there was not. "Mm? You mean me being a chipper ditz?"

Ey laughed, stroking over her ears. "Well, I was going to ask about the hug, mostly. My guess about you being chipper was to get us to finally talk about something light rather than yet more intense or depressing stuff."

"You are right on that one, yes," she mumbled. "We doubtless have more heavy shit to talk about, but I spent hours crying today, and if we did not break out of that cycle, I would have spent yet more in tears."

"I won't bring it up, then."

"Good." She poked em in the belly, then went back to her hug. "Though as to the greeting, I meant it when I said I got a lot off of my chest. I spent a lot of time thinking and a lot of time talking to End Waking and Debarre, and I have some ideas for moving forward."

"Oh?"

She shook her head beneath eir hand and tightened her grip around em. "I do not want to discuss them now. I am tired and cried out and you are comfortable and good to me."

The next few days passed in relative peace. There were no fights between the two skunks, and while, at least once a day, they set up a cone of silence to talk about whatever it was that True Name had discussed that first time, there were no more instances of May falling apart or True Name wearing herself out quite so badly. The discussions sounded serious, and never quite friendly, but ey was at least somewhat happy to see the two talking without quite so much ire between them.

May wasn't the only one, either. At one point, Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself and one of her up-tree instances, Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress visited to talk with True Name. Both were far more earnest in their affection toward her, which she seemed to welcome with a sense of cautious relief. Ey supposed it made sense, given A Finger Pointing's habit of making friends with everyone she could.

Ey'd only met Slow Hours once prior and, while she was just as friendly as her down-tree instance, she also seemed somewhat removed from the world as a whole, as though seeing just a little more than everyone around her. "Clairvoyance," A Finger Pointing had whispered to em after that first introduction. "She has the outline of the world."

They talked for nearly three hours that afternoon, breaking only to get more water part way through. When they were finished, True Name looked wrung out, though not unhappy. A Finger Pointing mostly looked confused and concerned while Slow Hours kept her faraway, nearly delphic smile. Both were patterned after the human Michelle rather than the skunk Sasha, lending an additional layer of uncanniness in their similarities to May and True Name, even across species.

Curiouser and curiouser. Ey'd always pictured A Finger Pointing's stanza as one of the more liberal ones, and had early on noticed that the liberal Odists had largely distanced themselves from the more conservative ones. To have two of them specifically drop by to visit True Name was quite surprising.

The most curious thing, though, had to be May.

It wasn't just that all the work she'd put into her feelings about her cocladist had seemingly paid off — other than a few tense moments, mostly silent, she was at worst distant and at best willing to hold conversations with True Name about a limited set of topics — but that even in those tensest moments, she seemed to at least want to do something. Whether it was out of an earnest desire to improve True Name's life or to simply get this situation over with seemed to vary depending on her mood.

It was her discussions with End Waking that really knocked em off-kilter, though. Her visits to his forest sim came at least once a day, and it wasn't until the fourth that she was willing to share anything about their conversations.

"Wait, what? End Waking wants to merge down? I can't even imagine that."

"That is what we have been talking about, yes. I shared...I mean, I told him what she told me, and it has changed things."

"Are you sure that's even a good idea?" ey asked. "I mean, won't that just make her feel worse if she also has to deal with all of that regret?"

May fiddled with the corner of the top sheet. They'd sat up in bed, the topic not feeling quite right for pillow-talk. "Possibly, yes. I do not think that it would be permanently detrimental. If she has a fuller view of the world, perhaps she will be better able to engage with it with empathy."

Ey held eir gaze steady, frowning. "I don't think you're giving her enough credit on the empathy front."

She clutched the sheet tightly in her fists, visibly counting to ten, then sighed. "Yes. You are right, Ioan. I am primed to see less in her than you, I think.

"I know, May, I'm sorry," ey said, shaking eir head. "I know it's complicated."

She smiled gratefully. "Thank you, my dear. Let me rephrase and say that having that additional perspective will give her new tools to engage with the world."

"Right, that I can see. Given what all has been going on, I'm pretty sure I agree, too, so long as it's consensual between the two of them. I just worry that now's not a good time for it. If she's distracted processing all that when she's supposed to be thinking about what to do about Jonas, won't that put her at a disadvantage?"

"I suppose," she mumbled, then smiled lopsidedly to em. "But we have time, yes? Jonas said within the year, and I imagine it will take us at least a month to convince End Waking to join as requested."

Ey sighed. "I don't know if that's necessarily reason to do it so soon, though. You're right that we should take our time with the meeting and plan as best we can. I just worry about her going in there already a mess because of a ton of conflicts when she needs to be in the best shape she can be."

"You are right, as always," she grumbled, slumping forward to use eir thigh as a pillow. "Thank you for keeping me grounded."

Ey stroked over the skunk's head, toying with one of her ears until she batted at eir hand. "I know I say it a lot, but you're a good person, May. So is End Waking. I think True Name having more of that will only help."

"Do you think she is a good person?"

“Mhm.”

“You answer so quickly. Is it that uncomplicated for you?”

Ey thought for a moment, still combing fingers through the longer fur on top of the skunk’s head. “I suppose. I’m not sure why, though. She’s complicated, and I disagree with her reasoning for a lot of what she’s done, but I don’t think that makes her a bad person.”

May nodded.

They stayed quiet until they worked their way under the covers again, cozying up for sleep, when May murmured, “I have to believe that she is a good person, or at least capable of being one. For my sake, I have to at least try to believe that.”

Ey kissed the back of her ears and shushed her to sleep.

What kept coming back again and again was the feeling of just how small this project felt — if ey’d been assigned to it as amanuensis, might as well call it what it was. There were so few people involved. True Name and Jonas, then em, May, and End Waking on the periphery. Five people, three clades. It was intimate, in that sense. True Name and Jonas were larger-than-life most of the time, but having been forced into sharing space with her, ey was far more able to see the True Name of today as just someone caught up in a storm and Jonas as the force behind that storm.

And then there was emself, as powerless as Codrin#Castor had felt almost four years back.

The next morning saw both of the skunks more relaxed than ey’d seen them yet. They talked pleasantly over breakfast, and True Name even stuck around, sitting on the couch and watching the snow melt off the balcony while May and Ioan worked, her on her monologue and em reading back through the volume of *An Expanded History of Our World* that focused on the Council of Eight — and the Odists and Jonas clades — in the centuries after its dissolution.

After lunch, True Name returned to the couch with a glass of water and, after a moment’s hesitation, May had joined her.

“Why are you spending today out here?” she asked, finally voicing a question ey’d kept to emself until now.

“Honest answer or pithy one?”

“Both.”

True Name laughed. “The pithy one is that I am bored and lonely, and this seems to be my best bet at solving either. The honest answer is that I am bored and lonely and, even if the circumstances are not ideal, I want to at least try not to mope in my room all day.”

“You’ve said you spend most of your time working interacting with your instances, yeah,” Ioan said, turning eir desk chair to face the couch. “I imagine it’s been pretty quiet.”

“Yes. My instances, some up-tree cocladists, instances of Jonas, those of my...friends.” The last word sounded almost bashful for reasons ey couldn’t place. She shrugged and continued, “And now I am without all of those. No instances, none of my up-tree cocladists are responding, I do not wish to speak with Jonas for obvious reasons, and the relationships I have with my friends are largely bound up in that.”

May nodded. “I do not know if we are the ideal company for you, given our interests, but at least we can try, I suppose.”

“For which I am endlessly appreciative,” True Name confirmed. “Though I do still miss routine. Good company and productive company do not necessarily overlap.”

“‘Productive company’?”

“You are very nice to be around. Both of you. It is productive for my mental health, perhaps, and nice to be able to rest, but it is not what I do, May Then My Name. This is not who I am. I am not one to crash at her friends’ place, however pleasant they may be.”

Ioan could feel an argument brewing. What True Name was saying very likely was true: this wasn’t who she was as a person, and now she had been knocked into some new setting. Ey suspected May knew that, even. Ey could see the skunk working on keeping an open expression, despite her cocladist’s indelicate wording. Still, there was a thin line to be crossed, and they were edging closer.

“Well, it’s better than being assassinated, right?” ey said, trying to lighten the mood.

May grinned. True Name did not.

“Sorry, probably still a bit too soon.”

“Perhaps. I would rather be alive here than not alive at all, but it is not an ideal situation for any of us, I think, yes?”

May averted her gaze, but nodded all the same.

“My apologies, you two,” True Name said with a hint of a bow. “I am restless and anxious. I do not want to meet with Jonas. I do not want to stay in hiding. I do not want to go back to being overworked, but I am unhappy having no work. Call it an addiction, if you will, but I am nothing if I am not True Name.” She bared her teeth in a bitter sneer and, as she continued, her words came faster, hotter, more frustrated. “And why should I not be? I have worked hard to become myself. That I am what I am and unrepentant of that is perhaps a disappointment to many, but it means more to me to stick to what I believe to be true than to—”

“True Name,” May said, interrupting the other skunk’s tirade. “Wait.”

Wrong footed, True Name frowned. “What? Why? I do not—”

May held up her paw, a brief glance at the ceiling hinting at a sensorium message elsewhere.

Ioan frowned as well. Intuition told em the discussion they’d had earlier was quickly moving beyond hypothetical. “May, are you sure—”

True Name jolted upright in her seat on the couch. “What the fuck is—”

“Accept it,” May said, and ey could see the full force of all her centuries of earnestness focused on her cocladist; earnestness, kindness, the right tone, the perfect cant of ears and bristle of whiskers, all of it fine tuned to show her just what she needed to see. “It will only help, True Name.”

Her face contorting with the strain of holding what must be a very large high-priority merge from End Waking at bay without either remembering or forgetting it, True Name gasped. “May... May Then... Why...”

May’s expression softened further, picking up a hopeful smile. “Please, my dear. I think you need this. I think we *all* need this, if we are to move forward, if you are to be able to move past what Jonas wants of you. Please accept. Please.”

True Name nodded shakily, attempted a dry swallow, and then let End Waking’s centuries of memories crash into her.

The change was immediate and more dramatic than ey’d anticipated. Ey had been expecting a shell-shocked

look and maybe a few minutes of silence, but instead True Name's expression melted into a glazed, ischemic stupor. The glass of water she'd been clutching at but had yet to drink tumbled to the floor and, as all her muscles gave out at once, she began to slide off the couch.

"Shit. Shit! Ioan!" May shouted.

Ey was already on eir feet and halfway around the table, thankfully in time to catch the skunk before she slid down into the pool of water on the floor. Ey managed to get eir arms under hers enough to hoist her up into the couch again while May ducked around to lift her feet so that they could lay her out on her back.

They both stared down at her.

"Fuck," May whispered.

"What just happened?"

"One moment," she said, waving away the spilled water so that she could kneel by the couch. There was a moment's hesitation before she brushed some of the skunk's longer head fur away from her face. "Can you close your eyes?"

When True Name didn't respond, didn't move, May gently brushed her paw down to close them for her. She leaned closer, whispering a few more questions ey could not hear, though there was still no response.

After lingering a moment longer, she stood shakily, took Ioan's hand in her paw and led em to the balcony despite the cold. As soon as the door shut behind them, she burst into tears.

Ey guided her carefully to the bench swing to sit her down, letting her cry herself out against eir shoulder.

"I am sorry, my dear," she said when she could speak again at last. "Really, truly sorry."

Ey shook eir head, kissing her between the ears. "You don't need to apologize to me. Is she alright?"

"She should be," she mumbled.

"Alright. I'm more confused than anything. Was that your and End Waking's plan?"

She pressed closer to em. "That was him merging back down, yes. We have been discussing it for days, now. I did not expect that, though," she said, and ey could hear that she was on the verge of crying once more. "I never intended to hurt her."

"Can you explain what happened, at least?"

She nodded, swallowing down that wave of tears as best she could. "We are good at forking and merging. Very, very good at it. I am pretty sure you know that, though."

"Did something go wrong, then?"

"End Waking has not merged down in more than a century and a half. Even when Michelle quit, all she had to do was let the memories fall onto her and then quit herself. He has diverged quite far in that time, as is to be expected, which means the potential for conflicts."

Eir frown deepened. Ey thought ey could tell where this was going. "Aren't those usually just when memories don't line up, though?"

May gave the barest hint of a shrug against em. "You have met her, and you have met him. Their viewpoints are almost diametrically opposed, yes?"

Ey nodded.

"Viewpoints are built atop a collection of memories. That they can share so many memories and yet have such different outlooks on the world and their actions is a subtler, but trickier sort of merge conflict." She

paused, took a deep breath, then continued slowly. “I pressed her to accept because I knew that she would accept the merge as smoothly as she always does if there was external pressure. She merged blithely and took on 156 years of End Waking all at once. All of his memories. All of his penance. All of his loathing for what he did, what she was so proud of.”

“And it was too much?” ey asked.

Her face screwed up again as she nodded. “I nuh-never wanted t-to hur-hurt her,” she stammered as the tears started to flow once more.

Ey got eir arms around her again and held her close. A quick glance through the windows showed that True Name still lay on the couch, breathing shallowly.

“May, I want to ask you something,” ey said, once she had calmed down. “And...well, I think it’ll probably make you cry again, but I want to make sure we stay open about this. Is that okay?”

She whined quietly, but nodded all the same.

Ey took a deep breath, keeping eir voice as gentle as ey could. “I’m not upset with you, but I need to know since this is just getting weirder and weirder. Are you sure you didn’t want to hurt her?”

There was a long silence before she replied. Ey watched her count her breaths, one of the exercises that had worked best to ground her. At least, she counted as best she could between snuffles.

“I think,” she started, then cleared her throat. “I *know* a part of me was acting out of vengeance.”

Ey nodded. “We’ve talked about that, yeah.”

“Right. I think that part was hoping that it would be a rough merge to knock her down a peg, yes,” she said, then let out a shaky sigh. She was starting to shiver from the cold. “I did not think it would be this bad, though. I am really sorry, Ioan. I want to be a good person.”

Hugging her tightly to em, ey said, “It’s okay, May. We’ll just have to see what comes of it.”

She nodded, fell back into breathing exercises.

“And I believe you when you say you didn’t want to hurt her. Both those—”

She elbowed em in the side. “Yes, yes. Both can be true at once. You know we have the same therapist, right? She says the same things to me.”

Ey smiled, pleased to hear the humor in her voice. “Sorry, May.”

She wormed her arms around em to give a tight squeeze. “It is alright. You are just a nerd. Both of those things can be true, too.” After a moment’s hesitation, she asked more quietly, “Can you see her? Is she okay?”

“She’s rolled onto her side. Still breathing pretty quick.”

May nodded, wiping at her face, though it did little to help her disheveled look. “Let us get back in and check on her, then. We may want to get her into bed. Being comfortable can make it easier.”

“True Name?” ey murmured once ey’d crouched beside her. “Can you make it to your room?”

Her eyes remained closed, flicking about beneath her eyelids. There was the tiniest shake of her head.

Ey looked to May, who only watched anxiously, wringing her paws.

Oh well, ey’d lifted eir partner on more than one occasion, ey supposed this wouldn’t be too different. Ey slipped eir arms beneath the skunk, though she remained limp. Through a bit of shifting, ey was eventually able to get her leaned against eir chest, head on eir shoulder rather than lolling back, gaining enough leverage to be able to lift her. She was a little lighter, but when ey lifted May, she usually got her arms around eir shoulders,

too.

Ey was able to get her into bed easily enough, May holding the covers back while ey did so and then draping them back over her after.

It was eir turn to stand awkwardly by while May sat beside True Name and brushed a paw over her head. “I am sorry, my dear, I thought...” she started, then sighed. “I will sit with you. I am sorry.”

Ioan backed slowly out of the room, sliding the door shut quietly behind em. May sounded on the verge of tears once more, but, of all the things ey was not supposed to fix, perhaps least able to fix, this certainly felt like the top of the list.

Part III

Apprehension

For memory ends at the teeth of death.

And so the dead may live on in restless eternity, never knowing peace or the oblivion they so richly deserve. There is no peace in eternal memory, no release in unending remembering.

From Ode by Sasha

Ioan Bălan — 2350

It took about six hours for True Name to recover from the merge to where she could stand up and walk well enough to get a glass of water. Her expression remained glazed and she was unable to speak. It wasn't until the next morning that she was able to hold a conversation, though she remained quiet and largely confined to her room, refusing the offer of coffee.

May spent much of that time by her side. Ey wasn't sure what it was that the two did while in her room, if it was just May sitting by the skunk's side, if she was just being present, if the two were having their own quiet conversations, or sharing what affection she was comfortable sharing with a down-tree instance she had resented enough to shock.

All three, ey suspected. Ey checked in on them a few times, knocking and listening for permission to enter. Each time, True Name remained curled in bed with May seated nearby, whether on a chair beside it or sitting up on the bed itself. Ey'd ask if they needed anything, they'd both decline, and then ey'd go back to pacing holes in the rug or the yard or around Arrowhead Lake.

The rest of the time, May was out with em, almost always as close as she could be, whether that was tucked in against eir side on the beanbag, hugging around eir middle from behind while ey cooked, or, at one point, requesting that ey sit on the floor outside the bathroom while she showered, just so that she could talk and, in her words, feel eir presence.

The mood throughout remained somewhere between anxious and remorseful.

That evening, True Name requested that they eat dinner out at the lake rather than at home, saying, "I am feeling too cooped up by walls and yet more walls."

Ey supposed it made sense, now that she had the competing memories of End Waking and however many personality traits that came with. He had only visited Ioan and May a scant handful of times, and then always out in the yard, always refusing to go indoors.

So, they packed up a simple dinner of sausages, zucchini, and potatoes to cook and stepped out to the lake.

The tents were still set up and the second bundle of firewood remained untouched, leaning against one of them, so Ioan and May watched as True Name tiredly built and lit the fire. She left them sitting on one of the logs before it, watching the flames go from fast and loud to something quieter and hotter, while she disappeared up the hill into the forest. She returned some time later with a bundle of arm-length sticks, all nearly as straight as dowels, which she built into a spit on which they could roast the sausages while the potatoes baked near the coals of the fire. It was all done with a practiced ease from hundreds of years of memory.

The food was pleasantly smokey and well cooked, though otherwise unseasoned. True Name remarked on this part way through the meal, saying, “If you call the food bland again, May Then My Name, I will call you lame again.”

The humor felt out of place, and certainly went over Ioan’s head, but at least it got May smiling again, something she’d not done in more than a day.

“I am pleased that you made it through, my dear,” May said. “I will not apologize again, I have done so enough already, but I am pleased all the same.”

“I have grown weary of being apologized to, yes,” she replied. “And my feelings on the events remain complicated, but I thank you for thinking of me.”

“I’m glad, too,” Ioan added, unwilling to let the dinner once more fall into silence. “How are you feeling otherwise?”

She shrugged. “Uncomfortable. Fractured. I have spoken to End Waking only a few times since he requested revocation of his access to our secure materials. I knew that he was upset, but not just how, and not to what extent.” She sighed, then added, “And now I am left with that.”

“Thus ‘fractured’?”

“Yes. I must admit that much of my time spent while down and out was spent struggling to maintain a sense of myself as True Name. Had I simply accepted everything at face value and incautiously, I think I would have gone mad. As it is, I feel perilously close.”

May sniffled and looked off toward the lake in the deepening evening.

“I understand what you were trying to do, May Then My Name. I understand why you planned that, how you managed to talk us both into it, and what you hoped to get out of it, but you must understand that what you did was set two existences within me. One was set on goals that I believed in — *still* believe in — while the other regrets everything that made me me.” The skunk’s voice sounded far more tired than angry, enough to keep May from winding up in tears again, though she did set her food aside. “I do not think that End Waking believed in anything. His life was spent un-believing that which he was, which we were.”

“What does that leave you, now?”

“I do not know yet, Ioan. It makes me too full of being, of time, to be just one thing. It will likely take me several days to settle into...something. To settle into myself, whatever that now means.”

They fell into silence again while Ioan and True Name finished their food and May looked down at her paws or into the fire.

“Thank you for joining me out here. I am both glad to be outdoors and intensely uncomfortable sitting on a fucking log,” she said, smiling tiredly. “I do not think that I will stay out here. The greater part of me demands a comfortable bed.”

“Those fucking cots are awful,” May grumbled, sounding forced in her humor. “Like a hammock, but far worse.”

“I do not think that even End Waking enjoys them, so it is easy enough for the True Name part of me to win out on that subject.”

“What did he- what do you remember enjoying?” Ioan asked. “I want to hear the good things you have, now, too. I feel like we’re all tiptoeing around all the bad memories and conflicting feelings. Tell me something

good.”

True Name raised her eyebrows, then let her gaze drift up to the brightening stars. “I remember teaching myself to hunt, promising myself that I would start small with snares and then work up from there, thinking that I would not let myself eat until I could eat food that I had caught myself. I remember getting so hungry and weak by the third day that I pinged Serene to see if she could help. She laughed and ruffled my fur and called me a dumbass, saying that she had not included fauna because I had not requested it, so of course I did not catch anything. She brought me a hamburger and I ate it so fast I got sick.”

Ioan and May laughed.

“I remember each time I decided to cave and bring into the sim something new. I remember deciding that I needed a more efficient way to heat my tent than just relying on my fur and camp blankets, and then creating the stove. I remember getting so sick of just meat and what few vegetables I could grow at the time and deciding that I would need something like bread or tack for the calories. I remember learning about how hard it was to actually carve a bow and work with metal to create knives and axes, and I remember how it felt to bring each one into existence, a little bit of failure to accomplish a little bit of triumph.

“I remember the eighth or ninth winter out there, when the cold started to feel less terrifying because I knew what to do. I remember waking up one morning fucking freezing, building the fire back up, and shivering in front of it, then laughing for the sheer joy of it. The joy of bundling up, the joy of the air burning inside my nostrils, the joy of discomfort.”

Ioan listened, entranced. The cadence of her speech had changed. It still had that well-spoken and dramatic air to it, still held the lack of contractions and all the small doublings-back and anaphora that seemed to come with being an Odist, but it was also more austere than it had been. Less purely functional and more cerebral, perhaps.

“I remember the first time I went a year without seeing anyone, then the first time I went two. That was terrifying. I was sure that I was losing my grip on reality. I decided to make sure that I talked to someone at least once every few months after that to keep myself grounded. I remember when the Artemisians arrived and you two brought your play over, and being utterly delighted at all of the subtle ways you found to insult each other.”

May grinned and elbowed em in the side. “That one was Ioan’s fault.”

True Name smiled and nodded. “You should be pleased with it, my dear. Oh, and I remember tasting whiskey for the first time in years and being surprised at how much it burned. A Finger Pointing’s offer to bring a case over was quite tempting. It reminded me that I love the surprise that comes with forgetting things, or at least as close as we can get. The taste of liquor had fallen way back in my mind, and the feeling of the burn of whiskey sent it rocketing right back up to the top.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Ioan said, smiling.

“It is not all unpleasant, not by a long shot. As much as I worked to keep my sense of self while integrating, I was also struck by wonder, and for that, I am grateful.”

“Was the merge a net-positive thing?”

She laughed. “I cannot possibly know that, Ioan. I suspect there is no net value, or indeed any value, to be placed on simply having those memories. It will make my life more difficult or it will not, but I do not think it

will make it better or worse. I will be what I am to become.”

Ey nodded.

“But, May Then My Name?”

The skunk looked nervously at her cocladist, as though worried of some reprisal. “Yes?”

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

May only nodded, swallowing back tears.

“I remember a few days ago, too. I remember when you came to the forest, remember watching, awkwardly, while you cried on Debarre’s shoulder after I told you about...well, after we spoke. I remember hearing about all of your hatred over the years, about the resentment that you still have for me. I remember how it was that you talked me into this, how helpless I was before it. I remember all of it.”

There was no more holding back the tears at that, though she did her best to cry silently.

True Name smiled more kindly than she had yet that night. “But still, you thought of me. ‘I do not want her to die’, you said. You said that you do not know why you still care about me, and you said that to your cocladist perhaps not yet knowing that I would have that memory as well. You two are both meddlesome brats, but thank you for thinking of me.”

May tucked closer against Ioan’s side and buried her face in eir shirt to cry, making a rude gesture at her down-tree instance before hugging her arms around eir waist.

“I think that means ‘no problem’,” ey said. “But I don’t speak skunk all that- ow! She bit me!”

True Name laughed. “It is no less than you deserve, I am sure. But come, once you are able to, let us walk to the rock at the end of the lake. I want to see the stars before we head back.”

What levity the night had gained slowly faded when they returned home. True Name explained that she had barely slept the night previous and needed to do so urgently, and as soon as the door shut behind her, May’s shoulders sagged and she dragged em off to the bedroom. It was still early for them to be going to sleep, but then, ey was certainly tired enough.

They settled into bed, not talking, just resting forehead-to-forehead while ey pet through May’s soft fur. There didn’t seem to be anything that either of them needed to say, or if there was, not yet something they could.

Eventually, though, they shifted to their usual spots, May tucked back against eir front, and slept straight through until morning.

Ey woke to the quiet sounds of True Name rustling around in the kitchen, mugs being pulled down from the shelves. Ey grumbled, wondering why she hadn’t thought to set up a cone of silence, then realized she’d almost certainly left it off intentionally as a subtle way to let them know that she was up. With her memories from End Waking, she almost certainly could be quieter than any of them.

Ey carefully slid out of bed, tucking the covers back over May to let her continue to doze.

“Good morning,” True Name said quietly, bowing to em and holding out a mug of coffee. “Black, yes?”

“Morning,” ey said, accepting the coffee with a nod of thanks. “Caught up on sleep?”

She shrugged. “A little, perhaps. Unnerving dreams, unnerving memories coming to the fore.”

“Hopefully that lessens over time.”

"It should, yes. It is already less overwhelming than it was yesterday afternoon." She shook her head. "But I am sure you are tired of that topic after the last few days. How about you, my dear? Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough, I guess. I certainly needed it."

"Coffee," May mumbled, stumbling out of the bedroom, looking disheveled. "You did not bring me coffee." Ioan snorted and shook her head. "I just got up, too, May. I've barely had a sip, myself."

"No excuses, only coffee."

"It is on the counter, May Then My Name. I promise I did not leave you out."

The skunk mumbled her thanks and retrieved her mug, lapping groggily.

As if on some hidden signal, they moved to the dining table to focus on waking up, all apparently too tired to do much else.

It was True Name who finally broke the silence, speaking quietly, more down to her mug than anything. "I find myself caught off-guard by the sudden ending of the merge. I have never experienced that with any other merger. Perhaps it is down to individuation."

"How do you mean?"

"I remember going to sleep here, but I also remember going to sleep with Debarre in my arms. I remember waking up with him, working with him through the day, even while I remember us talking to each other, and then I remember your message, May Then My Name, and then everything stops."

May's ears flicked back and she ducked her snout, looking abashed. "I did not think of that. I am sorry. I will apologize to them as well."

True Name lifted her gaze and smiled faintly to May. "I do not think you need to worry too much, my dear. We- they discussed it a few nights ago. It was something of a shock to be used to sleeping alone and also to not have someone in bed with me.

"I think May would explode without someone in bed with her," Ioan said, hoping to keep the mood light.

"It is not *not* true. I do not sleep well alone."

"I have not experienced a relationship as True Name in...some years. Even then we slept in separate beds."

May's grip on her coffee mug tightened and she slouched down further in her seat.

"I didn't know you were in a relationship," Ioan said. "Did you, uh...well, I mean, is that what you two talked about a few days back?"

Both skunks nodded.

"I don't mean to pry," ey added. "Sorry if it's too personal."

After a long silence, True Name sighed. "No, I think you will eventually learn about it anyway." When May's ears flattened, she hastened to add, "At least in part."

Ey stayed quiet. Ey wasn't sure how much to push or back off, whether or not there was some boundary ey should be aware of. It seemed more complex than simply keeping the relationship secret.

"I met a young fox some centuries back." The skunk spoke slowly and carefully. "Red fox, that is, rather than a fennec like Dear. Furries tend to clump together, and I suppose I am no exception. We quickly became friends, then trusted confidants, and then occasional lovers. I did not let us become more than that. There was romance between us, but I was not comfortable becoming romantically entangled in my position."

"That makes sense. I don't know why I thought that wouldn't be the case, actually."

“I have said in the past that you two — that all of those in the clade who have formed lasting romantic relationships — have done something I was never able to,” she said. “That remains true. Zacharias and I never quite rose to the level of relationship. Lovers, yes, and perhaps even in love, but never partners. It was always in private, always alone. I had an image to maintain, and that did not include having a boyfriend.”

“Did you want one?”

“Pardon?”

Realizing the sensitive nature of the question, ey held up eir hands. “Sorry, I asked that without thinking. I was wondering if you wanted a partner, even if you felt your image wouldn’t allow that.”

Another long silence followed before she spoke again. “Had you asked me that prior to the merge, I do not think I would have been comfortable answering, but in the context of the memories I now share of Debarre, I think that has changed into a solid ‘I do not know’. I do not know if I wanted a partner, because it was more important for me to stay true to my goals than it was for me to think about love, on some subconscious level.”

Ey finished eir coffee and toyed with the empty mug, rotating it first this way and then that on the table while ey thought. Eventually, the two skunks fell into quiet, polite conversation, talking about something ey was too distracted to think about.

They both agreed to more coffee, so ey tasked emself with making another pot, hoping that breaking out of the context would give em more room to think.

That True Name felt such a strong need to maintain her image was more than a little alien to em. However, when it came to her not knowing whether or not she wanted a partner, ey felt an almost unnerving level of concordance with eir own life prior to first meeting the Odists, and perhaps even prior to meeting May, years later. Ey did not have an image to maintain or goals to reach for, simply a lack of social awareness that kept em from remembering that having a partner was even a thing that ey could do. Ey and True Name always seemed to have something that kept them from thinking about love until something — May for em and this merge (or perhaps even this conversation) for True Name — suddenly forced the issue.

Ey didn’t know what part of em was in charge of making such predictions, but the thought that May, with all her love, might try to merge down with True Name forced itself into eir mind and wedged itself firmly in place. They’d talked about how each of the three skunks were good people some nights back, but in the face of the last two days, ey couldn’t think of why, what reason eir partner might even have to do so. A lingering need to force her to experience her own resentment? Or to feel that love? A desire to help her become a better person, whatever that meant? A fit of pique?

Or, no, that wasn’t it. It all fell back to the same problem that had been at the forefront of eir mind for months now: that need to fix things. Ey worried that May might merge down with True Name to make her feel better not necessarily because that’s something she might want to do, but because, in the wake of the most recent merge, it’s all ey emself could think to do in order to fix this friction.

So silly. It made no sense, and yet this sudden image of True Name as the type of person who might have a relationship, who now had decades of memories of dating Debarre in the form of End Waking, seemed to have set off a runaway train of thought.

“Ioan?”

Ey started out of eir rumination. “Mm? Sorry. Was I mumbling?”

May grinned. “A little, but also you have been standing there for quite a while and you promised us coffee.”

“Oh! Shit, I’m sorry.” Ey laughed as best ey could to banish any look of the panic ey felt from eir face. Ey brought the pot of coffee over to the table along with the cream and sugar for May and True Name so that they could top up their mugs accordingly.

Ey drifted in and out of the present moment after that, surfacing now and then to do a bit of work or, at one point, to run another sweep of the house at the behest of True Name in case they’d brought any hitchhikers with them. They hadn’t, but it was probably a good idea all the same.

The relatively pleasant morning fell again into a vague sense of tension within the house. Ey was sure that ey was the cause of at least a part of it, what with the way May kept checking in on em.

The rest seemed to fall back to True Name, though, who, after coffee, had sagged in her chair and mentioned that she’d been holding some demanding memories at bay. “I need to deal with these or I am sure I will unravel like Michelle,” she had mumbled on the way to her room, leading May to put down her work and curl up on the beanbag.

Ey joined her, despite all of the distractions whirling around in eir head. Ey couldn’t sort any of them out now, but the least ey could do was comfort eir partner.

All that crying these last few days, I wouldn’t be surprised if she overflows soon, ey thought while petting over her ears, a pang in eir chest. And who knows how that’ll work with True Name.

A simple dinner of pasta, more polite conversation, and then they broke off to their own spaces again, True Name requesting the location tag for Arrowhead Lake so that she could go for a walk “somewhere with fewer right-angles”.

It wasn’t until they were getting ready for bed that ey pulled eir thoughts together into a coherent enough form to ask May the question that had been nagging at em all day.

“Do you think you’ll merge down, May?”

The skunk paused in the middle of tugging off her shirt, leaving just her snout-tip and midriff exposed. “Let me think on that for a moment, please.”

They both finished undressing and climbed into bed, em settling back against the pillows and her with her head on eir chest.

“Okay. Now, why do you ask, my dear?”

Ey hesitated. The origin of the train of thought felt impertinent, incomplete, perhaps solely on em. “I’m not actually sure,” ey said, fumbling for words. “Maybe a little because you had a hand in End Waking merging down, but I think mostly the talk this morning about Debarre and, uh...Zacharias, was it?”

She nodded.

“I think that made me think of it because until this point, it’s all been happening at one layer of remove for me. She’s my friend and I like her as such, but she’s not my cocladist or family. I’m not in a relationship with her. None of this has been happening with her as someone I’m super close to.”

“But if I merge down, she will remember having been in a relationship with you. You will be more directly involved.”

“Yeah.”

They lay in silence for a bit. Ey didn’t know what May was thinking about, but ey kept cycling over just

how much ey and eir partner had shared over the last few months alone, all those little bits of affection and physicality when True Name had expressed on more than one occasion that such simply wasn't for her, all the private conversations they'd shared with the understanding that they'd remain such, all the little nothing moments that go into being in love.

"I will admit that I had been considering it," she said, then lifted her snout to dot her nose on the underside of eir chin. "But after the last few days and coming to terms with what that would actually mean for her, I am feeling much more cautious about the prospect."

"Okay," ey said carefully, not wanting to jostle her snout too much. "Can we make sure to talk about it more if you do decide to?"

"Of course, my dear. You and I never shut up."

"Mmhm, best that way," ey murmured, then added more seriously, "I mean the three of us, though."

"We will, Ioan. It would be unfair to all of us not to." May lowered her snout again and tightened her grip around eir middle. "Do you want me not to? You are allowed to say yes."

Ey sighed and placed a kiss atop her head. "I don't know. I need way more time to think on it."

She nodded. "I will give you all the time in the world."

"Thanks, May."

They settled in for sleep, letting the topic drop and trusting that there would be time enough to discuss it, focusing instead on closeness and comfort.

"Ioan?"

"Mm?" Ey'd nearly dozed off, and sleep was still tugging at em.

"I love you. You know that, right?"

"Course I do. I love you too, May."

That, at least, was a pleasant note to fall asleep to, one for pleasant dreams.

While True Name continued to integrate the merge more and more fully — or, as she put it, became more whatever her new self was meant to be — and she spent less time taken by long silences or the need to go lay down in the quiet for some lingering conflict, her mood nonetheless continued to decline. Those moments of easy conversation came further and further apart, and while the skunk remained as polite as could be, she also bowed out of nearly every topic other than the food, the weather, and only the most surface-level details of how she was feeling. *I am not comfortable talking about that now* became her constant refrain.

Though neither Ioan nor May were necessarily happy for this change, it meant that they *had* to stop talking about all these dire topics. It forced them to take a step back as well, and at least try to get some work done. Given all that had happened, no one was comfortable with them continuing to perform, least of all A Finger Pointing, so they were removed from the bill for the time being, with either their roles replaced or their shows canceled.

There was still work to be done, of course. May still had her monologue, which she tried taking in a few different directions, some of which worked well and some less so. Ioan coached her in writing as best ey could, talking her down from fits of perfectionism that left her threatening to tear the whole thing up.

For eir part, ey still had a few projects on eir plate, not least of which was the upcoming book project that had been requested by Jonas. Ey poked at this every now and then, outlining the events to date and throwing a few thousand words at it here and there.

Mostly, though, ey dealt in letters to and from the other members of eir clade. Vast, dramatic events were happening elsewhere — as they always seemed to when an Odist was involved — and ey couldn't simply put them away to deal with all that was going on at home. The break from dealing with the affairs of True Name and Jonas was a welcome one.

The one conversation of note came on the fourth day after the merge, when the skunk asked, "How did you two get together?"

Both Ioan and May had stared at her until she held up her paws.

"Other than the forces behind the scenes, I mean."

"From my point of view," Ioan said, guessing at the meaning behind her question. "it just kind of happened over the course of a few years. May was her usual affectionate self, and we just wound up building patterns around that that turned us from coworkers to friends to partners."

"There was no culmination? No decision?"

"Not really. I just realized one day that we were probably together and asked if we were."

"It was the day ey interviewed you for the first time," May said, trying to hide a smile. "I told em it was the dumbest fucking question of the entire project. We agreed we had probably been in a relationship for months before that."

True Name nodded, expression more thoughtful than amused. "Is that how you move in the world, May Then My Name?"

The skunk hesitated, gaze drifting away from her cocladist. "Ask another question, my dear," she said eventually.

"Of course." True Name gave a hint of a bow. "You changed in order to accommodate being in a relationship, Ioan. How?"

"Are you asking what about me changed, or what I did to change?" ey asked, frowning. "Because I don't think I had any conscious control over it."

"What you changed, yes. May Then My Name could answer the other question, perhaps uniquely so among all those who we know."

The skunk only shrugged.

"Well, I think the events with Qoheleth got me thinking about existence here on the System. My own, sure, but in general. Prior to that, I think I lived my life solely as an observer of others. I'd watch people and write what they did and turn it into a story, and I was just kind of...I don't know. Transparent?" Ey shrugged. "I was just a pair of glasses to be used by others. I relied heavily on memory to do my job, though, and it wasn't until that was specifically called out and brought into question that I started thinking of myself as more than an observer, which then got me thinking about how I interact with those around me. That's where Codrin came from, I think."

May chimed in. "Ey was the version of you who learned that most strongly, perhaps. You were left with the memories of it to work with, but without the context of the experience."

“Right. It was nice watching em grow closer to others and open up to a relationship.”

“ ‘Nice’?”

Ey shrugged. “I don’t know how else to put it. I felt compersion for them, like the opposite of jealousy. I was happy for them, and it felt good to know that those things were possible.”

True Name nodded. “That is the word I would use to describe my feelings towards May Then My Name, if it is not too forward of me to say.”

May smiled and reached out across the dining table to pat at True Name’s paw.

“It is what I feel for End Waking and Debarre, too, though in a far more round-about way. I have memories of the ways in which End Waking changed in order to let Debarre into his life, but I cannot place them in context. I do not have what is required to understand them; I may watch them, I may understand one at a time, but integration of all of them eludes me. Those experiences which are left to integrate are the ones clashing the most.” She gave a frustrated sigh and shook her head. “I can remember what it feels like to fall in love but not what to do then. I can remember what it feels like to be in love but not how I got there.”

Ioan and May glanced at each other briefly, but both nodded.

“It has not been a priority for you,” May said. “If it has not been important, if it has felt like a distraction, then there is no reason to simply know how to do all of that. I do wish you the best, though.”

“Didn’t you say you’d felt love for Zacharias, though?”

True Name shrugged noncommittally. “I am not comfortable talking about that now.”

Ey tried to keep eir expression from falling, but apparently did not succeed.

“I am sorry, Ioan. Not everything is for sharing, not right now.”

“It’s just the amanuensis in me.” Ey tried to laugh it away. “Why’d you ask about this, anyway?”

She smirked. “You mean beyond the fact that I just told you I am having trouble integrating the memories?”

“Yeah, actually. Why those memories? I would have thought his fixation on penance would have caused more clashes.”

“It is,” she replied slowly. “But these are more comforting to work with. They had their fights, as I am sure all couples do, but even those are full of love. I do not—” She sniffled, shook her head firmly, then stood and bowed. “I need to go for a walk. Thank you both.”

And without another word, she stepped from the sim.

May groaned and crossed her arms on the table, resting her head on them. “I do not know what to think about her. I do not know what to think about any of this.”

Ey slouched in eir chair for a moment before reaching out to pet over her ears a few times. “Me either. I don’t know where that conversation came from, and...well, it went alright, but I have no idea what she was asking about, so I kept feeling like I was about to fall in some conversational pit.”

She lifted her snout enough to bump her nose against eir wrist, then nodded. “It is things like this — the conversation and the thoughts that come with it — that keep me hesitant about any decision to merge down. I do not know if it would help her or kill her.”

“No killing skunks,” ey mumbled, then stood and stretched. “Bit miffed she’s out at the lake, since now I feel like walking, too.”

“If you were a normal person, we could enjoy perpetual springtime in the yard.”

Ey looked outside, at the scant inch of snow left after the last storm. "It's not that bad."

"It is in all ways bad. It is cold."

"Mhm, still cold. Still, it might be worth making a coffee and bringing it out there to keep the hands warm, if only so I can pace."

"Go, my dear. Go and pace. I will teach myself how to do a handstand or something equally silly. Anything other than dwelling on more of this."

"No more monologue?"

"I am so sick of looking at it that I think I might scream if I even catch a glance."

Ey laughed and leaned down to kiss the side of the skunk's muzzle. "Well, alright. Don't fall over onto the table or anything."

The rest of the afternoon passed easily enough. It was slow and boring, perhaps, but neither seemed to want any excitement. Ioan walked. May did not manage a hand-stand, but she did wind up laying half off the couch, head nearly to the floor, for half an hour. They made lunch. They read.

But always, there was an air of waiting. They were waiting for True Name to return, yes, but ey felt like they were also waiting for the other shoe to drop. They were waiting for her to feel whole again. They were waiting for everything to fall into place (or at least close enough) so that they could do this meeting with Jonas and get it over with.

"Do you think she's just out there walking?" ey asked at one point.

May shrugged. "If she is anything like True Name, yes. If she is anything like End Waking, then she is exploring. Climbing trees and walking along ravines."

"And if she's both?"

She sighed. "If she is both, then I do not know. If she is both, perhaps she is finding some new way to let loose all of those emotions she could not speak before.

True Name returned shortly before dinner. Both Ioan and May stood to greet her. She looked dirty and scuffed up, and while her expression wasn't grim, it certainly came close. There was frustration there, perhaps anger as well.

Overflowing, ey thought, then tamped it down.

She bowed to them from the entryway and said, "Ioan, May Then My Name, thank you for hosting me and for all of your kindness."

Ey frowned. "But...?"

"Yes. But I need out. I need to be elsewhere. I walked as far as I could into the hills from the lake and, while I found the boundary of the sim, it is far enough away that I do not think I will feel cramped."

"Wait, what? You're going to stay at Arrowhead Lake?"

"If you decide to keep my room here, I will come back, but I am going to lose my fucking mind if I simply stay in—" She sighed, took a deep breath, recomposed herself. "I am going to spend a few days out at the lake. I need...away. I need away from walls. I need away from you two, nice as you are, away from all of your happiness and comfort. I need away from speaking, from dwelling on the last few weeks. I need solitude."

May had shied away from her down-tree instance the instant her temper started to rise, clutching tightly at eir hand, but Ioan stood eir ground as best ey could.

“Well, alright. It’s no trouble keeping your room, of course, and I guess there’s tents already out there.”

She nodded, subsiding at the reasonable tone in eir voice. “Yes. Thank you for understanding.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Can you grant me ACLs to create supplies? There is nothing to hunt.”

“Hunt?” Ey frowned, then shook eir head. “Right, sorry. End Waking always did. You should...there. You should have them now.”

She nodded. Much of her time out there must have been spent cataloguing what she’d need in order to survive, going off of memories that were now hers, as it took her less than ten seconds and a wave of the paw to create an axe, a knife, and two canvas bags ey assumed were full of reasonably stable food and other necessary tools. This was followed by her rapidly forking a few times over, shifting her outfit one article of clothing at a time. It struck a middle-ground between her ordinary conservative dress and End Waking’s ranger garb, one with canvas leggings and a sturdy shirt, over which she wore a leather jerkin with what looked to be a detachable hood. It usually wasn’t worth it to fork just to re-clothe oneself, but she seemed antsy to be away and on her own, not to mention that lingering air of frustration about her.

“Thank you both,” she said, more quietly this time. “Earnestly. It does mean a lot that you have both thought to help so much. I will be in touch.”

With that, she bowed, lifted her bags and axe, then stepped from the sim once more.

“What the hell...”

May took a solid minute to un-cringe from the whole experience, slowly relaxing her grip on eir hand. “I think perhaps she—”

“Is overflowing?”

She nodded.

Ey sighed. “That was my guess, too. I was going to say it came on pretty quick, but the last few days make a lot more sense with that as context.”

May leaned forward and rested her forehead against eir upper arm. Her tail hung limp and her ears were splayed out to the sides.

Ey extricated eir hand from her paws so that ey could turn and get eir arms around her, careful not to jostle too much. Ey leaned down to kiss between her ears, murmuring, “How about you, May?”

“Mm?”

“You’ve seemed on the edge of overflowing for a few days now.”

It took her a long time to respond. At last, she hugged her arms around eir middle and lifted her head to look at em. “You will not be upset with me if I say yes?”

“What?” Ey blinked, shaking eir head. “Of course not. I apologize if it’s seemed that way in the past.”

She rested her head against eir shoulder. “No, but...I do not know, my dear. Everything is so much more complicated this time. It is bad enough when you have one skunk in your life, but now you have two at the same time. Two and a half, perhaps.”

“It’s okay, May. It’s complicated, but we’ve done it before, so we’ll make it work this time.”

She nodded.

“Can I stay for tonight?” Ioan asked gently. “I’ll help get some meals prepped and some of my stuff in order. It’ll give me a chance to contact Douglas, too.”

“Of course, my dear. I am not...there yet, but I am close.”

“Well, come on, then. Let’s get some food in you and we can take it easy for the night and finish in the morning.”

Ioan awoke, arms empty, asleep on eir front. Ey was not a front-sleeper, so this came with a stiff neck that ey knew would dog em throughout the rest of the day.

At some point during the night, May had apparently slid as carefully as she could from eir arms, bundled herself up in a second set of covers, and curled up at the far edge of the mattress. A muffled snuffle showed her to be awake.

“You okay, May?” ey asked, sitting up beside her.

She shook her head.

“Alright. Can I hug?”

A pause, and then another shake of the head.

“That’s okay,” ey said, doing eir best to keep disappointment out of eir voice. “I’ll go get some stuff pulled together for while I’m out. Want a cup of coffee?”

She nodded before pulling the covers up and over her head.

That was probably a good enough sign for em to get up. If the skunk was already to the point of being nonverbal, it wouldn’t do either of them any good to try and keep talking, regardless of how much ey wanted to address her every need.

Coffee was a good first priority, though, and easily sorted. It was something ey could start and finish with little thought and which had a tangible outcome, a little bit of success rather than some ill-defined end-state.

While waiting, ey pinged Douglas to let him know what was going on and to request a spot to sleep. After a moment’s hesitation, ey sent End Waking a quick message, as well. Ey received simple acknowledgements from both.

Ey doctored the skunk’s coffee to her liking and returned to the room to set it down on the bedside table closest to her, taking a cue from True Name and moving noisily enough that she’d know ey was there without being obnoxiously loud.

A moment’s thought was spent on shifting the weather in the sim to something warmer, more springlike. Ey’d heard enough kvetching about the snow the last few days to figure that might help as well.

From there, ey spent half an hour queuing up some meals for her, working in a cone of silence. Things that she’d mentioned as comfort foods in the past, all things that ey could cook emself or create in-sim through something acquired on the exchange. Chicken soup, mashed potatoes, more poor-skunk’s-risotto.

While ey was prepping and stocking the food, another thought occurred to em. It was unlikely, but True Name might need to come back to the house, either to create more goods or to sleep or just to get out of the elements. To keep this from bothering May while she took the time she needed, ey shifted the ACLs of the house to be owner-only, so that those trying to enter would have to specifically request access, then stepped just inside

the other bedroom's door and created a new entry-point for True Name so that she could go just to the bedroom without entering the rest of the house.

True Name sent a curt ping of acknowledgement when ey sent the information over via sensorium message.

Ey tried not to let it rankle. Everything felt so confined and restricted. So much of eir circle of friends was out in the world and so few of them came over with any frequency that to suddenly have even those ey was closest to — romantically in the case of May, and by friendship and sheer proximity in the case of True Name — requesting eir absence felt like ey was being cut off from everyone.

"Which isn't true," ey mumbled to emself while packing up eir notes. "Security's one thing, but it's not like everyone's inaccessible. Keeping everyone safe doesn't mean cutting off contact for yourself, Ioan."

Ey looked down to eir small stack of notebooks and the three-pen case resting atop it and sighed. "And talking to yourself doesn't count."

With that, ey peeked in the bedroom one last time. May had sat up and was staring dully down into her mug of coffee, blanket worn like a hooded robe. Her cheek-fur was already streaked with tears.

"I'm going to head out, May. Douglas's, as usual. Be safe, okay?"

Okay, she signed.

"Need anything else before I go?"

Hug.

Ey nodded and stepped further into the room, leaning in to get eir arms around the skunk. She didn't return the gesture, but did at least push her snout up under eir chin momentarily before leaning away. Given the tightness in her face, ey suspected an onslaught of emotion was only just being held at bay.

"Love you, May. Lots and lots."

She managed to sign an I-love-you before pulling the 'hood' of blankets down enough to hide her face.

Knowing she'd only resent em if ey lingered or touched her again, ey clutched eir notebooks to eir chest, waved, and quickly stepped out to the field of dandelions and grass. The light and heat were a shock, and ey stood, swaying, for a moment, simply squinting out to the horizon.

Ey queued up a message to Douglas and murmured, "I'm here, but going for a walk, first," before heading away from the house.

There was nothing out there. No destination. No variance in the rolling hills of well-tended grass and the yellow suns of dandelions. The only break at all in the landscape was Douglas's house, and ey kept that at eir back.

As ey walked, ey considered what it meant to overflow. Was it just an Odist thing? Certainly some aspects of it were. The way that Codrin described Dear's manic forking, each instance left with simply a shard of its personality, felt very Dear. May, End Waking, and True Name's overflowing all sounded uniquely them, as well, and A Finger Pointing mentioned that hers was different still, though had declined to expand on it.

But here ey was, feeling like all of the stress of the last day, of the last few weeks had filled em up to overflowing. Presented with the sudden silence and stillness of the field, ey realized just how much ey'd been running on desperation and borrowed time.

With the slightest break in the pressure, that Ioan was called due.

Realizing that ey couldn't see the subtle rises in the land for the tears in eir eyes, ey simply sat down in the

grass and cried. *If I am overflowing, some remote part of em thought, then I can certainly see the appeal to it. Catharsis indeed.*

Though there was certainly nothing ey could have done to stop it, ey decided to just own it and let it take its course, hollering curses into the cone of silence ey had the presence of mind to set up, clutching at the grass to keep emself at least anchored to the ground. Ey'd watched a good friend (for that's what True Name was, wasn't she?) nearly get assassinated in front of em, had dealt with eir partner's lingering resentment towards her down-tree instance come into conflict with her constant presence, had watched May push True Name to near catatonia after encouraging her to accept a century and a half's worth of memories from End Waking. Ey had watched both overflow in the span of a few hours.

And when ey stopped cycling over the last two weeks, ey simply wept for the sheer relief it provided.

When ey'd cried emself out and cleaned emself up, ey levered emself up off the ground and trudged back toward the house. The least ey could do was say hi and get another cup of coffee.

Douglas Hadje was sitting on the stoop of his house, waiting for em.

"Hey, Douglas. Sorry about that."

He stood and offered em a hug, which ey accepted gratefully. "No worries, walks are good too. How's May?"

"She's...well, she'll get by. I just hope it doesn't last too long. Thanks for letting me stay. Please tell me you put coffee on."

Debarre — 2350

Neither Debarre nor End Waking had visited Michelle's field in decades, and certainly not since it became Douglas's. End Waking had last seen it on the day that she had quit in 2306, and had had little desire to return since. There were no dandelions in the forest; he had specifically requested so from Serene.

It had been much longer for Debarre, going clear back into the 2200s, back when Michelle and Sasha were still alive and coherent enough to speak to without getting overwhelmed into silence every few minutes. The memories of her were painful enough as it was — that last visit with her in End Waking's forest especially — that he'd never had the courage to come back, and then never a reason, which came with its own ache.

Given how much the clade that she'd left behind was struggling, though, it felt fitting to accept when Douglas invited him and End Waking over to talk with Ioan.

"Ey's in a funk, and from what ey says, I think you two are the only others that know why," he had said, paused, then added, "Except maybe those I don't think any of us want to see."

Both of them stood still after arriving, just bathing in — or struggling against — the waves of memory that came with the sudden onslaught of warmth and sun and the baked goods scent of dandelions thick in the air.

Ioan greeted them at the door. Ey seemed happy enough, if tired. Still smiling and bowing to them as ey usually did.

They finished their greetings and settled on the grass in front of the house along with Douglas, End Waking having refused to go inside. After, though, ey had stared down into eir glass of lemonade and spoke little.

Finally, Debarre nudged em gently with an elbow. "Alright, Ioan, you're gonna need to spill it at some point, here. What's going on? All we were told is that you were feeling rough about the last few days."

Ey sighed and plucked at a dandelion. "Right, sorry, you two. Or three, I guess. I know I've been a bit of a mope of late. You alright to talk about True Name?"

"Ioan, I appreciate you asking, but please do not worry about us," End Waking chided. "If we have come to help you, you need not spare our feelings. We can pretty well guess who would be at the center of this."

"I'm pretty sure it's me, actually," ey said with a wry smile. "I've been stuck between May and True Name for days now, or years if you count the time since the convergence and I started trying to smooth things out with the coffee dates.

"I've just been struggling with it all. It's been too much from the moment everything with True Name happened. The last few days were the worst, though. True Name didn't really handle the merge all that well. She collapsed and was nearly unresponsive for several hours, and since then, she's been struggling to integrate

various chunks of memories.”

“My feelings towards her work? That I built my identity around not being her?”

“That and your relationship with Debarre.”

The weasel and skunk both looked at each other, ears splayed.

“I’d thought of that, but, uh...” Debarre cleared his throat. “Well, actually hearing it put like that casts it in a bit of a different light.”

“I hope that she does not mind the memories of sex to go along with the resentment,” End Waking said, then laughed when Debarre poked him in the side. “We are all adults here, my dear.”

“I’m the baby, I think,” Douglas said. “I’m seventy-two.”

“So young.” The skunk grinned. “Debarre and I both have two centuries on you. Still, I am pretty sure that we can acknowledge the existence of sex, is what I mean.”

“And it doesn’t exactly sound like she’s a stranger to that herself, anyway.”

End Waking blinked, taken aback. “She actually told you about Zacharias?”

“Who?” Douglas asked.

“An...erstwhile lover, as she put it,” Ioan said carefully. “I probably shouldn’t go too much into that, though.”

“Agreed,” Debarre said. “But as you were saying, she was having trouble?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t expecting her to get completely taken out, but May did kind of force it on her all in one go. She lasted a few days, but I think she was pushing herself pretty hard to appear strong. She crashed really hard yesterday and, despite a pretty pleasant morning, had to step out to Arrowhead Lake, and when she came back, she looked like she was about ready to start yelling at us. May was also trying to stick around as long as she could, I think, since she crashed almost immediately. We made it through the night, but she couldn’t even speak this morning.”

“That’s a shitload to have to deal with, yeah.”

Ey nodded. “Friend almost gets assassinated, almost goes crazy from a merge, and disappears. Partner freaks out after a conversation, then freaks out when the merge goes sideways and mentions she was thinking of merging down, herself, then requests that I disappear. It’s just...a lot.”

“Wait, May wanted to merge down?” Douglas said. “Wasn’t expecting that.”

“Well, I don’t know quite how much ‘wanted’ fits, but I asked if she was thinking about it and she said yes. I couldn’t quite piece together why, though. After End Waking merged down, she mentioned that there was at least a part of her that was feeling vengeful, so I think I was worried that maybe she was considering piling on her own vengeance, or that maybe she would be trying to help make her a better person.” Ey shrugged and added, “Or both. She did seem to have True Name’s best interests at heart when she forced the merge. At least mostly.”

End Waking nodded. “She did mention being torn, yes. She wanted to kick her out but also wanted to help her get away from Jonas.”

“She’s certainly softening on her.”

“And how’re you taking it?” Debarre asked. Something about Ioan — eir posture, eir face, something — made it seem like this was the question ey was dreading the most.

There was a long silence before ey answered. “It’s really getting to me. I don’t even know why, either. I think

it honestly would help True Name in the end if it were just May merging down, but having that be the case with her memories of us together feels like...well, it kind of makes me jealous. Those are our memories that we made together. Our fights and good times, our affection--”

“Probably most of the memories, there,” Debarre stage-whispered, getting a smirk out of Ioan.

“Yeah. Our affection and our sex, too, for that matter. Suddenly, True Name would have all that. I think it also started grating on me because of how...real End Waking’s was. It wouldn’t just be a library for her perusal, but she will have actually lived them. She will have actually--” Ey frowned, as though digging for the words.

“She’ll have actually loved you, maybe?” Debarre guessed.

Eir face fell and ey sighed. “Yeah. That. Putting it that way makes it feel terrible, but it’s exactly that.”

“I was pulling back when she and Zacharias were getting close,” End Waking said, sounding thoughtful. “And I have been her. We were both Michelle. I know that she is capable of experiencing romantic feelings. They will not be alien to her.”

“And now she’s been you,” Debarre added. “And you’ve got romantic feelings, too. At least, I hope so.”

End Waking pushed him over onto the ground. “If you imply that I do not have romantic feelings for you again, I will make you hunt our meals for a week.”

He laughed. “Love you too, E.W.”

“What I am saying, though, is that it will not be alien to her. She will have experienced love for others, and the loss of that love. She will have already experienced love for others through another’s memories and experiences, even. You can trust her to integrate that, I believe.”

“Even though she was struggling with integrating those memories of yours?”

“Perhaps especially so. I think that she is struggling because it clashes with her personality, not that she feels that she might love Debarre. Though, my dear,” he said, nodding to Debarre. “I can guarantee that just about every Odist is at least a little in love with you.”

He shook his head and waved the comment away. “Yeah, yeah.”

More than one of them had confessed as much to him over the centuries, and it wasn’t until he’d actually conceded that something about End Waking landed in that sweet spot of attraction and personality match enough to at least try dating that they’d stopped. He was thankful that they seemed happy enough to live vicariously through him. He had liked Sasha and Michelle, loved her in that sympatico that true friends can share, friends who had shared trauma, so he didn’t begrudge them their feelings, but any more felt pretty far out of his league as a gay man.

Instead, he nudged Ioan with his elbow again. “So if you don’t need to worry about it from True Name’s side, and you know you’re worrying about it from your own side, how do you feel about it from May’s point of view?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, do you have any worries about her? Do you think she does? Has she talked about it at all?”

“Not much. She said she’d been considering it, but that seeing how the current merge was making her struggle had her in doubt. I told her I want to make sure it’d be consensual on everyone’s behalf, this time. I guess--”

“Whoa, wait,” Douglas interrupted, frowning. “She didn’t even talk with True Name about this merge?”

“They talked a few times in a cone of silence, so maybe then, but otherwise not that I saw. She just stopped True Name in the middle of ranting about her calling and sent End Waking a message to merge, far as I could

tell.”

“That’s kind of shitty.”

Ey shrugged. “I suppose, but no need to pile on her or anything, I think she’s beating herself up over it worse than any of us could do.”

Douglas nodded. “Well, that bit I believe. Think that contributed to her overflowing?”

“Almost certainly, yeah. Correct me if I’m wrong, End Waking, but while I don’t think it’s solely tied to external events, they can have an effect on it.”

The skunk nodded. He’d started panting in the heat of the sun, so it took him a moment to reply. “It comes over us like a wave. Some of us more quickly than others. It is slower in onset for me than for either of them, I believe.”

Debarre chimed in. “I usually have a few days warning. I’ve gotten mine already and was planning on heading out today, but we both wanted to come, anyway.”

“Is it hard for you?”

End Waking held up a paw. “I want to respect Debarre’s decision to share or not, but I would prefer not to be here for this conversation.”

“Sorry, End Waking. You don’t need to answer, Debarre.”

The weasel shrugged. “No, it’s fine. E.W. and I have talked about it, and I get where he’s coming from. It can wait.”

“Yes. He is not disallowed. We simply have our own, separate conversations about that, and it is important to me that Debarre feel comfortable talking about me with his friends, too. I cannot be the only one in his life.”

“Alright, makes sense. May’s said similar, for that matter.” Ey toyed with the flower ey’d plucked before, saying, “We actually talked about other relationships shortly before this all went down, about how she’d act if she started to fall for someone else and how she’d feel if I did. One thing we didn’t talk about was someone else having feelings for either of us, whether or not they’d come about them on their own or through a merger.”

“I’m sure there’s shitloads of people in love with May Then My Name,” Debarre said, laughing. “But she’s good at having that conversation, and you’re both good at talking, so.”

“Too good, perhaps.” End Waking stood. “I am overheating and feeling restless, so I am going to return to the forest. Ioan, I do wish you the best, and I would like you to keep in touch as you are able. I am concerned about your partner, as well as for True Name, in my own way. Please keep yourself safe so that you can keep the both of them safe in turn.”

Ioan nodded and stood as well to bow to the skunk. “Thanks. It really does mean a lot. I’ll keep you in the loop, if nothing else.”

After returning the bow, End Waking held out a paw to Debarre. “Can you return with me? Just for a few minutes.”

He nodded and accepted that paw. He had a feeling he knew what was coming, so even just the touch as they stepped away from the sim was worth it. Sure enough, once they made it back to the forest, End Waking leaned over to nose at Debarre’s cheek, pulled his paw away, and looked off into the woods. Whenever it was time for him to ask Debarre to leave, he’d go through a little swell of anxiety.

“I am sorry, my love. I know that it is not the easiest on you that I always do this.”

“Hey, I said I was leaving today,” he said as reassuringly as he could. “It’s not coming out of the blue.” End Waking nodded. “You are always allowed to keep in touch.”

“Mmhm.”

“And you can drop by as long as you give me some notice, preferably a day.”

“I will.”

“And if you hear from May Then My Name or Ioan, please let me know.”

“E.W., shut up,” Debarre said fondly. “See you soon, okay?”

The skunk wilted, a look somewhere between relieved and resigned coming over his face. “Yes. Soon. Thank you, my dear.”

“Of course. Love you, E.W.”

“Love you too.”

There was nothing else for it, then. With one last wave to the skunk (already heading off into the woods), he stepped back to the Hadjes’ field.

Ioan and Douglas were still standing where he’d left them, so he waved again. “Sorry, back for a little bit.”

“On your own again?” Ioan asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s been building up for a long time. We agreed I’d head off when the tent was done, and we just got the nets all hung yesterday. Hey, can we go inside, though? He was right, it’s pretty fucking hot out here with fur.”

Douglas laughed. “I’ll never get you guys, him all in black fur and you wearing black clothes over yours. Yeah, come on. There’s more lemonade.”

Ioan held back enough to let Douglas take the lead, falling in step with Debarre, instead. “Does it bother you?”

“Hmm? E.W. asking me to leave?”

“Yeah.”

He thought for a bit, then shrugged. “Bothers, yeah, but that’s really about it. Helps that I usually just quit and merge down with #Tracker, so it’s not like I’ve got *just* the relationship to worry about. I’ve got my own stuff going on besides him, and other relationships that merge in every now and then.”

“That sounds handy, at least.”

“His overflowing is also way less dramatic than May Then My Name’s, which sounds pretty painful to watch.”

Ioan nodded.

“Sorry, Ioan. Don’t mean to keep it all on the surface for you.”

Ey shrugged. “I asked, it’s alright.”

Once they were all inside and Debarre had cooled off, Douglas asked, “So what do you think about all this?”

“‘All this’?” He laughed. “Way too fucking much to say one way or another. Narrow it down?”

“Oh, I meant the stuff with End Waking merging down. I’m still stuck on May asking him to do that without talking it through with True Name, first.”

“Well, like I said, she was conflicted about it when she brought it up. Said she wanted her to disappear into ignor...ignoble...”

“Ignominy?” Ioan offered.

“Right, yeah. But she also said that she wanted her to get out of this mess and away from Jonas, ‘that living, breathing sack of shit’, in her words.”

They laughed.

“But I’d been thinking much the same, I guess. If she does disappear, I’d probably feel at least a little bit of vindication for the way she jerked us all around without us realizing it and all that shit she did with the Council. I’d also feel like there was a fraction less of my friend around, though, too. I love E.W., I’m happy he’s in my life, we get along well for the most part, but there’s also this layer of, like...well, he was part of Sasha and Michelle, and they and I went through a lot together.”

“You talk about those two facets like different people,” Ioan said. “Sorry, not to derail. Just that I noticed that. None of the Odists do.”

“Most, maybe. I picked it up from Hammered Silver, who spent probably more time with them than anyone. All their instances feel singular, I imagine, but they were two instances in one. Sasha was this really emotional, really caring person. It wasn’t that Michelle wasn’t, just that when she was at the fore, she was much more...I don’t know. Logical? Rational?”

“And when it was both? When she was in flux, or whatever?”

“Then she was just tired,” he said, smiling at memories. “But right, before I totally lose track, you asked how I feel. Uh, I guess I feel scared.”

Ioan furrowed eir brow. “Really?”

“Yeah. That she collapsed made me confront the fact that, no, I don’t really want her dead or anything, that I really would hate to lose her. Even if she’s not the part of my friend I like the most, not a part that I even remember seeing before, she’s still a part of them.” He hesitated, then added, “And it changed E.W. Not the forking and merging itself, but that he even did that. It sounds like May Then My Name used the fact that True Name was all worked up to force her to accept the whole merge all at once. She kind of did the same with E.W. I don’t know what her message was, but it looked like it scared the shit out of him, so he kind of did it without really thinking. They’d been talking about Zacharias the last few days, I do know that.”

“Since her and True Name’s conversation about him?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah. He’s been a bit different since.”

“Different how?” Douglas asked.

“Like...still all worried, and still a little in shock, but also like a little bit of a load was taken off. He’s been a bit lighter. Silly, even. You heard him, though. He even said he’s worried for her. I can’t explain it, and we never really talked it through. It’s not bad, but I can still tell.”

Ioan nodded and rubbed eir palms against the legs of eir slacks as ey always seemed to do during stressful conversations. “He did seem a bit freer of speech today,” ey mused. “But that makes sense. He finally got to tell her how he feels, and they didn’t even have to talk to each other.”

“Has May Then My Name changed, too?”

“I can’t tell. She’s been so wrapped up in trying to live around someone she doesn’t really like, and then with all of the fallout from the merge. Maybe she has? She’s at least been able to talk with True Name without blowing up at her, and they’ve even had some conversations that seemed enjoyable at times, so, maybe?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Really? The way she talked about True Name for a while there...whew.”

“That bad?”

“Did she not talk about her to you?”

Ey shrugged. “Every now and then, and sometimes she’d get pretty pissed, but it was only once a year or so.”

“Mm, about the same amount, but maybe she kept it a bit...I dunno, gentler for you, since you were meeting up with True Name. She’d come over once a year or so and just go off for a while. It kinda became routine. She’d vent, then we’d have a good day.”

Ioan switched to rubbing eir hands over her face. “I don’t even know what to do about her.”

“Nothing,” Douglas said. “Nothing but love her and keep talking, I mean. She’s a grown woman, she can work out her feelings well enough. Hell, she’s already seeing a therapist.”

Ey slumped back dramatically against the couch cushions. “Why does *everyone* tell me to stop fixing others’ problems for them? Even the intellectual side of me is in on the game.”

They laughed.

“It’s so hard to actually internalize. I’ll catch myself trying to mend her and True Name’s relationship or make May feel better or whatever, and I’ll have to force myself to relax.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Debarre said. “I mean, you still shouldn’t do that all the time, but it’s at least a sign that you’re just a good person who wants to do right by eir friends.”

Ey smiled gratefully. “I’m at least trying. May’s done her own fair share of trying to help, but that at least fits her M.O. One more question, then I think I need to table the topic for a bit.”

“Sure.”

“Do you think it was the right thing to do?”

“Yeah,” he said, surprising himself with how readily the answer came to him. “I don’t think it would have worked if E.W. had just merged down without all the other dramatic shit. I think she would’ve just rejected it, or if she did accept the merge, just cherry-picked parts of it. As it is, though, with Jonas after her neck and May Then My Name using all her wiles to convince both her and E.W., I think it’s worth it, though she probably would’ve preferred to fork first. I don’t honestly see her coming out of this still in power or whatever, but if she *does* make it out, I think it’ll help her move on.”

Ioan stared up at the ceiling thoughtfully, occasionally mumbling to emself.

He shrugged to Douglas and asked, “Well, I skipped breakfast and I’m not ready to merge back down yet. Want some food? That’ll at least be more pleasant.”

After another hour’s conversation over lunch — much happier conversation, thankfully — Debarre stepped back to his home sim and quit to let #Tracker catch up on the current happenings.

Debarre#Tracker conducted a thorough security sweep and, finding no bugs, those little hidden instances he’d grown so paranoid of, he sighed and slouched back in his desk chair, rubbing paws over his face. “Well, shit. This complicates things, doesn’t it?”

He queued up a sensorium message to Yared, user11824, and a few other friends he’d kept in touch with while following along with (and occasionally meddling in) the political affairs of the system. ‘Reactionary elements’ indeed.

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Once they were fed and Debarre was safely on his way home — or at least merged down-tree — Ioan begged off from talking any further and trudged down the hall to the spare room ey borrowed whenever May needed space. Ey claimed to need a nap and, while ey was certainly tired enough, sleep seemed unlikely.

The walk and cry in the field before ey'd joined Douglas at his house had been necessary, but also had only served to highlight just how woefully out of eir depth ey truly was.

"Hi Sarah," ey said, starting a simplex sensorium message. "Sorry to bother you, and sorry we haven't spoken in a few weeks. I know I was vague when I canceled our last appointment, but things have gone completely sideways. I'm not totally sure how open you'd be to this, but can we meet and talk, even if I'm restricted to talking in very general terms about what's going on? I need to talk to someone who can help me sort through my thoughts around it, I just can't share details yet. It has to do with True Name, so I'm sure you can appreciate just how complicated it is. Let me know if that's alright. I'm...I'm at Douglas's for a few days. Thanks."

Then, ey lay down on the bed, still dressed and over the covers, and stared at the ceiling, trying to think about as little as possible.

Ey was startled awake by a sensorium message. Grunting and wiping eir hands over eir face to try and bring reality back into focus through the near drunken haze of waking up from an ill-advised nap, ey set the message to running.

"Good to hear from you, Ioan. I'll admit that I was pretty concerned when you canceled. I don't usually worry about you, but that's also the first time you've had to do so in nearly four years. I can be free whenever you need, and am happy to meet you either there or here. I don't have any problems holding off on details until a later date. Just let me know."

Ey groaned and ground the heels of eir palms against eir closed eyes, trying to will away the grogginess that clung to em, somehow managing to feel both sticky and slippery.

A quick shower had em feeling well enough to respond, and by the time she arrived, ey'd made tea for emself and met her, mug in hand, at the door.

Ey bowed. "Thanks for coming on such short notice."

She offered em a hug. "It's alright. I figure if whatever is happening has all three of you canceling appointments and you requesting short-notice ones, it's probably important."

"Sorry, just woke up, feeling rough," ey said, declining the hug. "But yeah. Important, overwhelming, dramatic. Would you be alright talking outside? That nap destroyed me and I'm still feeling disconnected from

everything.”

“Works for me.”

“So, uh...well, where to start.” Ey spoke haltingly, once they’d made their way out into the grass and light and blue skies. “Right. As of a few weeks ago, for reasons I can’t get into just yet, True Name has been staying in an extra room we dug at the house. A few days ago—”

“Whoa, wait. I know you said no specifics, but can you tell me a little more about that? I can’t picture that working at *all*.”

Ey sighed. “Yeah, well, that’s part of why I’m here and not at home, I guess.”

She nodded, gestured for em to continue.

“Well, she...hmm. She ran into some interpersonal trouble that was dramatic enough to require staying around people well enough known on the System that she’d be safe.” Ey winced, adding, “I know that’s not much to go by. Either way, she’s staying in our place. She’s been fairly self-contained, but not totally so, so there’s been some interaction between the three of us. Before you ask, it was May’s idea in the first place, and while there have been a few rough spots, it’s gone far smoother than I would have thought.”

“Still, I imagine that just having the anxiety of it potentially going rough doesn’t feel good.”

“Not at all, no. I’ve been feeling like I’m constantly on guard, always ready to jump in and smooth things out, even if I haven’t really had to do so. I’m trying to let them both just do their own thing, though, and every time I catch myself feeling that way, I try to change contexts.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Has it been helping, at least?”

“If you’d asked me that a few days ago, I would have said yes, but now that I’m here and struggling to hold it together, I’m not so sure. I think I was just pushing it down without...I don’t know, redirecting it or dealing with it.”

She nodded. “Alright. I want to come back to that, but I interrupted your overview. Can you tell me what else happened?”

“Right. So, through some strange turn of events, both True Name and May wound up overflowing at the same time. True Name is staying at another private sim we know and May’s at home while I’m here. All of this hit a few days back when May and True Name had a conversation that left both of them drained, and then True Name had to deal with a merge large enough that she collapsed.”

“Not May Then My Name...” Sarah hazarded, frowning.

“No. Another cocladist, though.”

Ey saw comprehension dawn in her features, and that frown only deepened. She gestured for em to continue.

“But...well. So there’s two things that I think fall out of this that I’d get the most out of talking about. The first is that I’m having a lot of complicated feelings surrounding True Name throughout this, and the second is that May did mention that she’d been considering merging down with her until the previous merge went so sideways.”

She looked down to the grass thoughtfully as they walked. “Can you tell me about how you feel about the merge, first?”

“I didn’t really get the chance to ask her about why it was that she was considering merging. We promised to talk about it more, but after that, things happened pretty quickly. There’s a weird sort of jealousy that goes

along with it. May and I have built our own life completely independent of True Name. We bowed out of politics and writing these grand, System-spanning tales and focused on just being together. That's why I got into writing plays, I think: it was a way for me to do the things that felt comfortable for me that didn't involve being wrapped up in all these crazy goings-on.

"So we built our life together. True Name respected that, too. She would ask about me and May, and seemed earnestly happy that we'd gone and done something so...normal."

"Do you think she's envious of that?"

Ey frowned and scuffed a heel through the grass. "I don't know, honestly. Again, if you'd asked me a few weeks ago, I would have said probably not, that she's got her own things that make her happy which don't involve putting on plays or poking fun at each other. Now, though, I'm not so sure. This whole thing about the merge adds another layer onto that, because suddenly, True Name would have all of those memories."

"Does it bother you that she would have the memories, or are you worried about her having those emotions? Do you worry she'd start feeling about you the way that May Then My Name does?"

"Well, shit." Ey groaned. "I didn't even think about that. Like, we've talked about what her having memories of loving me would mean, but always past-tense. I didn't think about if she herself — she as True Name I mean — would pick up on exactly how May felt about me as well. I have no clue. Maybe on some level I do worry, though. I like the way May feels about me. We've talked about jealousy a few times, and it often comes up that she feels devoted to me. I'm really not sure how I'd feel having that come from another, never mind one that I have as complicated a relationship with as I do with True Name."

"Does this tie in with the complicated feelings you mentioned, then?"

Ey bought emself some time to think about an answer by bending down to pluck a dandelion, twirling it between eir fingers. "I guess I have to share one detail, which is that there was an attempt on her life back on Secession day."

Sarah blinked and stopped up short. "One moment," she said, then closed her eyes, her lips moving faintly in a non-vocalized sensorium message. Ey politely turned away. Finally, she caught eir attention once more. "I checked in with the instance that's been meeting with True Name and she said that she received a message from her back on Secession day that sounded really panicked."

"What was it about?" ey asked. "If you can share, that is."

"Not the specifics, but she mentioned that True Name did cancel appointments for the foreseeable future with the promise to come back as soon as she could."

Ey nodded. "Well, then yes, that'd be why. She's safe, at least. Staying with us means that no one can come after her without exposing themselves," ey said as reassuringly as ey could. Ey felt bad leaving out the fact that True Name wasn't in contact at all with either of them, but that felt like it was on the list of things ey couldn't share.

"Has this changed how you feel about her, then?"

"I don't know if it's changed things, necessarily, so much as made me more cognizant of how I felt about her before. I think I mentioned around the time that it came up that we had a conversation about how she said that it was nice to just have a friend, and how I translated that as a friendly acquaintance that wasn't just another politician."

“And I called you out on the fact that you later said you thought of her more like a friendly coworker than anything.”

Ey laughed. “Right. Well, with all that’s gone down, with how it felt to see her in danger and then to see her struggling with the ramifications of being cut off and the effects of the merge, I think I’m a lot more comfortable just calling her a friend. I don’t think I’d feel like this if she were a ‘friendly coworker’.”

“You have a far more complex relationship than what is implied by ‘friend’. It could just be a language thing, that that word implies a greater level of shared happiness than you have, but, confronted by how much you care about her in the context of what happened, you’re bumping up against the broader definition of friend of someone you *can* feel that much care for.”

Ey nodded. They fell into silence as they walked while Ioan took the time to process.

It certainly tallied, too. Even though May’s overflowing had overshadowed it — reasonably so, given the importance of their relationship — ey’d been hit hard by True Name overflowing, as well. Seeing her struggling, upset and overwhelmed, having to claim that same solitude that End Waking did, touched on that care. The need to fix things was a symptom of that confusing sense of care, ey suspected, rather than just something isolated.

“I don’t know if you were necessarily talking to me, but just in case you were, I’d agree with your assessment.”

Ey jumped at the sudden realization that ey’d said at least part of that out loud, then laughed. “Sorry, I was mumbling, wasn’t I? I’ve been doing that a lot lately. I was trying to keep that dialogue internal, but I appreciate the confirmation.”

She smiled. “I suspected so. I’m used to it, now. So, before I continue, are you looking to work on disentangling this, some ideas for where to go next, or just talking?”

“I wouldn’t turn down an idea or two, but I’ve already gotten a lot out of having the chance to talk through the emotional side. There are a few others in the loop that I’ve been able to talk with, but that’s all been about logistics, or about May and True Name rather than myself.” Ey sighed, adding, “I was a mess when I first got here. Doesn’t feel great to say, but I spent so much energy on them I kind of forgot to take care of myself.”

“That it doesn’t feel great to say is a sign that you care deeply enough to not want to detract from that energy, so it’s not a bad thing, but you do need to take care of yourself, yes.” She looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “Alright. I know you said they’re both currently overflowing, but what do you think about talking with each of them about how you’re feeling about this?”

“Uh, well, I mean,” ey stammered. “I guess I should, yeah.”

“‘Should’?”

“Right. Should statement. I’d like to, but they both feel kind of fraught. Talking with May about being friends with True Name has come up before but feels fraught with how they feel about each other, or at least felt about each other. Hell, I don’t know how I’d tell True Name I care about her, either. And I don’t particularly want to be the one to broach May merging down with True Name. That feels like a conversation they should start as cocladists.”

“They’re complicated topics, and I’m not saying you *must* talk about them, but it’ll only help for the three of you to all be on the same page. It’d be a good exercise for you to be more active, as well.”

Ey nodded.

“You look like you’re fading. Want to call it for now and then we can get in touch soon?”

“Uh, yeah, probably,” ey said. It was only just settling into evening, but the nap still had em out of sorts. “Thank you, though. This was immensely helpful. I don’t think any of us are in a position to hold to a schedule at the moment, given further complicated stuff going on behind the scenes, but I’ll definitely be in touch when I can, and will nudge both of them to do the same.”

“Ioan.”

Ey stopped up short, winced. “Right, sorry. Not my job.”

“Thank you,” she said, grinning. “I’ll touch base with each of them, don’t worry. One more tip before I go: take care of yourself. That whole golden rule thing applies to you, too, you know. Treat others well, but remember you still need to be treated well, too.”

“I’ll certainly try.”

May arrived without any warning. She would usually ping either em or Douglas, giving them a few minutes to get out into the field and prepare for a pouncing.

This time, however, Ioan awoke before dawn to a small, furry form crawling into bed with em, whispering for em to scoot over. Some sleepy part of em remembered that Douglas had locked down the ACLs to all unannounced visitors shortly after ey’d arrived with the news.

All except May, apparently.

Ey shifted the pillow ey’d been hugging out of the way and held the covers up for her to squirm beneath them and fit herself comfortably against eir front, draping them back over them both as ey got eir arms around her. Ey was too tired to do anything other than mumble a quiet greeting, and she didn’t seem all that keen on talking either, so they simply dozed with each other for another few hours.

With the sun warming the far wall of the room, they woke slowly, May squirming around enough to face em so that she could press her nose to eirs.

“Good morning, my dear.”

“Morning, May. Surprised to see you here.”

She shrugged, nosed her way down beneath eir chin. “I woke up early feeling well enough to come by, but did not want to wake you.”

“Or wait?”

“I missed you, Ioan, why would I wait?”

Ey nudged at her snout with eir chin. “Well, I missed you too, so it works out. Just surprised to see you here so soon.”

“I am not feeling spectacular, but I am feeling well enough to not be alone. Now does not feel like a good time to be alone.” She leaned back enough to smile at em, and though it was a little shaky and her face was still a mess, ey was pleased to see that it was earnest. “Are you okay, though? I do not imagine it was the best of times for this to happen.”

Remembering eir conversation with Sarah only two days back, ey checked the urge to refocus the conversation on her, instead saying, “It was a little rough, yeah. I got in touch with Sarah and set up an emergency thing a few hours after I got here.”

“I am sorry, Ioan.”

“Hush, it’s not on you. Plus, I canceled the last one, so it was good to catch up with her about what’s going on, if only in very general terms. I guess I just kind of overflowed a little, myself. Everything’s been so stressful the last few weeks and I didn’t feel like I could do anything about it.”

“And did you come to any conclusions?”

“Not particularly, but you know how it goes,” ey said. “Talked a bit about next steps, at least, about how I should probably make sure that I take care of myself, too.”

She laughed. “Yes, you should.”

They lay in silence for a few minutes, May simply relaxing in eir arms while ey tried to decide how much else to share from the impromptu appointment.

She’s here and we have time, might as well, ey thought

“We also talked about your thoughts on merging down. Don’t want to overwhelm you, though, if you’re not up for talking about that.”

“I was going to bring it up later, myself. I have had further thoughts.”

“Shall you go first, or I?”

“You, please.”

Ey nodded. “Alright. It wound up being more about jealousy than anything, and what it was that I was actually feeling protective of when it came to the idea. Some of it is the fact that we’ve built a pretty good life together, and it took a lot of work. I’m not sure how I feel about her having the memories of that.”

“End Waking said much the same, that he had put all his effort into his penance and that he would like her to come by that through her own work.”

“Pretty similar, yeah. I’d be really happy for her if she built a life that included the happiness and comfort outside of work that we have, but a large part of me wants her to come by that honestly. The other bit that Sarah brought up was whether or not I was worried that her incorporating your memories of us together would lead to her feeling about me the way you do.”

There was a long silence after that. Ey did eir best to quell eir impatience. With how much the topic had been weighing on em over the last few days, ey desperately wanted to hear her side of it, as well.

Finally, she said, “I have been thinking about that quite a bit since the topic came up, but only from my point of view. I did not think about how it might feel for you, for which I apologize.”

Ey shook eir head. “You’ve had a lot going on. What thoughts did you have on it, though?”

“I have also been trying to pick apart my jealousy. I have said in the past that I am not opposed to you finding companionship with others, whether romantic or sexual or whatever. I am starting to think, though, that that would only apply to a type of companionship that does not overlap with what you and I have. I want nothing more than for you to feel fulfilled, my dear, and if that means finding fulfillment for the areas that I do not cover, I would only ever be pleased.” She sighed, thought for a moment longer, and then continued more quietly, “For someone to feel about you precisely what I do, even if it is tempered by other memories, is too close to the devotion that I am most protective of.”

“Have you changed your mind on merging?”

“I do not know, Ioan. I go back and forth on the issue and at the moment, rather more back than forth.” She giggled, licked at eir chin, adding, “Or forth than back. The metaphor fails.”

“You took that one a bit far, yeah,” ey said, laughing. “But I think I’m too tired to talk about this much more. Did you have coffee before coming over?”

“I did not. If you make me a cup, I will love you forever.”

Ey nudged her out of bed so that ey could get up as well, saying, “I thought you were going to do that anyway, but I guess a cup of coffee is a small price to pay.”

Douglas had beaten them to the coffee pot, which made the process all the easier.

“Hey, May,” he said, kissing her cheek and returning the offered hug. “Figured that was you this morning. Feeling better?”

She nodded and slumped down into a chair, cradling her coffee in both paws. “Mostly, yes. I am still below baseline, but it was more important that I see you two than to return all the way.”

“Well, glad to see you made it through.”

“You will not quit me so easily, Douglas Hadje, doctor of incredibly boring things. How are you, though? Has Ioan caught you up on everything?”

“I think so, yeah. Ey, Debarre, and End Waking did. Assassins, mergers, Jonas being terrible, Zacharias. Did I miss anything?”

She shook her head. “That is the whole of it, I think. We continue to be dramatic about everything we do.”

He laughed. “I mean, not going to deny that, but I’m also going to put a large part of this on Jonas, rather than you all.”

“Do you have any thoughts on it?”

“Besides the fact that you’re all nuts?”

“Yes, well, that is indisputable. I would merge down with you if I could to give you a taste of it, but alas, it does not work that way.”

Douglas lifted his cup in a toast. “For which I’m grateful. It sounds like a nightmare.”

“Yes, yes. Such is the life of an Odist.”

“Beyond that, though, I don’t know, I don’t want to lose any of you. I don’t have the history with True Name that you guys do, so all I’ve just been thinking of her in terms of Michelle and Sasha.”

“You’ve been talking to Debarre too much,” Ioan said. “ ‘Michelle and Sasha’, I mean.”

Douglas’s face fell. “I never got to meet her, but from what everyone’s said, it sounds like the split was pretty evident.”

“It was,” May said. “While I do not speak of her that way, Debarre is not wrong to do so.”

“Why not?”

The skunk shrugged and lapped at her coffee. “Back when I was her, I did not think of myself that way. True Name did not think of herself that way. I know Hammered Silver does, and I am sure that others do as well. It is accurate, enough. Both can be true at once.”

“I wonder what would happen if all of you were able to merge back down into one instance again,” he mused. “Would that get close to being her?”

May fell silent, looking out the window at the fields over the rim of her mug.

“I do not know,” she said eventually. Her voice sounded far away, older than Ioan had ever heard it sound before. “I wish I did, but I do not know.”

“She’s still not back?”

May shook her head, tugging Ioan by the hand over to their beanbag. “Not yet. I would like another day before we go seeking her out, though, okay?”

Ey nodded as ey let emself be tugged along. Relaxing for even just a few minutes with eir partner certainly sounded better than tramping out into the woods around the lake, and some part of em marveled at just how much ey felt like ey needed it. *Some day, ey thought. I’ll stop being surprised at what May’s made out of me.*

It wasn’t so bad being hooked on touch and affection, though. Ey’d grown to cherish all of those little loving gestures, and flopping down on the beanbag to let May curl up on eir front and just do nothing sounded like an ideal way to spend a day if True Name was comfortable where she was out at Arrowhead Lake.

With neither of them feeling all that keen on talking further, they simply lounged on the beanbag together, reveling in the spring-tinted sunlight. A little napping, a little petting on skunks, but mostly just calm and quiet.

It wasn’t until nearly dinner that they stirred again, Ioan squirming until ey could sit up on the beanbag cross-legged, letting May lounge draped across eir lap.

“I have been thinking,” May began, sounding more dozy than anything. “But I would like to ensure you are willing to talk about this whole merger business before I shove us into a conversation.”

“I can do that, sure.”

“Would it be unfair of me to merge down?”

“Unfair how?”

She shrugged. “There are three of us in the equation, are there not? For me to merge down takes the uniqueness of our relationship away from the two of us and turns it into a burden for her.”

Ey nodded and teased a few fingers through her fur. “I can see that, I guess. Even if it’s not something that she acts on, or if she even does anything with the memories, whatever you feel about us becomes something she can feel too.”

“Yes. As I mentioned, I am perhaps jealous of that. I would like what we have to be our own.”

“I think we agree on that. How do you mean ‘unfair’, though?”

She twisted around until she could poke her nose on em. “Because it would be an act that I would take. Even if we all were to agree, it is me that is changing our relationships. I would be the one taking away that uniqueness and turning it into a burden.”

Ioan tugged the skunk up a little further until ey could get eir arms around her. Something about her words didn’t sit right with em, and ey needed at least a little bit of time to think it out.

Perhaps she was still overflowing, in a way. At the tail end of it, sure, but every time in the past, she had waited until she was essentially feeling better before fetching em back from Douglas’s, whereas this morning, she seemed to have forced herself out of that state, rightfully or otherwise, to at least not be alone.

There was some slight distortion here, though, a way of thinking that didn’t quite mesh with her personality. Ey agreed to an extent, but it was her framing that was bothering em most.

“So,” ey began, choosing eir words carefully. “I did say that I’m really starting to not feel so great about the idea, but I’m not totally sure I agree with how much of that you’re putting on yourself. You sound preemptively guilty.”

May squirmed out of eir grasp to sit on the beanbag alongside em, elbows on knees and face in paws.

"I'm sorry, May. Maybe this isn't--"

"No, you are right," she mumbled, sounding miserable. It tugged at eir emotions to the point where ey had to restrain emself from tugging her back in for a hug, though her posture kept em at bay. "I am not at baseline yet. Nothing makes sense. It is like having my emotions refracted through a glass of water. I probably should not even be talking about it."

"It's important, I just don't want you to push yourself if you're not out of the rough patch yet."

"Right, yes." She sighed, pushing herself wearily off the pouf. "Everything feels so urgent, though. I feel like we must have this conversation now if we are to have it, or else the opportunity will evaporate. I know that it does not work that way, that this is not logical of me, but this is not a logical time."

Scooting to the edge of the beanbag, Ioan stood as well. "I know. We have months before we run up against Jonas's deadline, but if he's sending assassins after True Name, it sure does make it feel urgent."

The skunk padded over to the kitchen, swiping a few of the dishes that Ioan had left prepared into being, lining them up in a row. "Yes, and I cannot easily let that go. I want her to be other than she is specifically to not be so under his thumb. I want her to be better than she is to be less of what she has become, and yet even those thoughts feel like distortions. Choose your plate, my dear."

Ey picked one mostly at random, winding up with a grilled cheese sandwich and some soup. "I had been wondering as to your reasons. I felt like the idea just kind of popped into my mind based on what she was talking about at the time, what with Zacharias and all, but it came at such an inopportune time for me to actually ask why. Is it...I mean, do you feel the need to fix things like we've been talking about with me?"

She hesitated, sighed, shook her head. "I do not know, Ioan."

Ey nodded.

May picked up a plate of mashed potatoes and asparagus, shooing em back to the dining room table. "I just think that she has become so singular a person that she cannot but be controlled by Jonas. Her role in guiding the System is no less real; she did the work that she does and she did it both well and proudly. But she built herself into a tool without realizing it, and over the centuries, Jonas has been teaching himself to use that to his advantage, to use her as a tool."

"And rounding her out more with merges would help make her more of a generalist?"

Laughing, she set her plate down, tugged out her chair, and fell heavily into it. "Generalist is a very utilitarian way to put it. You are not wrong in that it would allow her to be more than a unitasker, but it would also make her more of a person, harder to control. Someone as focused as her is easy to pin down."

"I would've thought she'd see that coming, though."

"Well, you have heard what she has said. She has been fed bad information by her spies--"

"And the other True Names. At least #Castor."

She frowned, finished chewing on her asparagus. "There is also that, yes. It is a guess, but I think you are right. How and why he managed to work them into this plan to only subvert this instance of her is another question that I think we would all like an answer to. All the same, she has been fed bad information and had aspects of her life leveraged against her, and now, for whatever reason, Jonas is making his power-grab."

"Aspects of her life meaning Zacharias?"

“Yes,” she said. “I will not call it a weakness, even as awful as he sounds. To have a relationship is not a weakness.”

Ey chuckled, dipping the corner of eir sandwich into the soup. “That’s a very May statement.”

“Of course it is,” she said primly, stabbing another spear of asparagus before biting off the top. “But this is yet more guesswork. I cannot say for sure that Zacharias is purely working in the hands of Jonas, but from all that she has said to me, I do not think I am too far off the mark.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

While ey didn’t mind May’s ideas of comfort food, they were not especially well spiced. This was mostly by design, ey suspected, as eating spicy or sour foods when one has been (or still is) crying sounded unpleasant. Still, there was much to be said about the comfort of a good grilled cheese dipped in soup.

“But yes,” the skunk continued once she’d cleaned her plate. “There was some aspect of vengeance to my and End Waking’s plan, but now I just want her away from Jonas. I do not know yet whether or not I like her or want her to stay in our lives in any way, shape, or form, but I do know that I want her away from him. I want her to live and to—”

Both Ioan and May jolted in their seats as a flash of adrenaline ran through them. A view of a forest, a lake shore, pile of wood not yet lit, and, sitting on a log across from that, another furry. His facial structure was very similar to Dear’s but where the fennec had wound up with that pristine white fur, he had ruddy orange except for the white on the underside of his chin and a dark apostrophe of fur on either side of his snout. Where Dear had wound up with almost absurdly large ears, his felt far more in proportion, along the lines of May’s and True Names, though far pointier.

One thing Dear and this new fox did share in common was the snappy dress. Where Dear had wound up in a sharp androgyny, though, the red fox had turned it into a prim masculinity that was, ey had to admit, quite effective. Black trousers, a white shirt and charcoal waistcoat, and a suit jacket. It was topped off with a simple tie and affected cane, currently being twirled lazily between black-furred paws.

It was just a glimpse, less than a second’s worth of sensorium input, but enough for em to make a guess.

“Is that Zacharias? Wait! May! Oh, God damnit.”

The skunk had already stepped away

“We have guests!” Zacharias said, standing up and dusting off his trousers. “I was not expecting guests. How cheeky.”

True Name was still kneeling before the pile of wood in what had clearly become her firepit. “I am trying to imagine a world in which I should trust you enough to be alone with you,” she growled. “And failing.”

“Spicy, tonight, are we not?” He grinned, turning to bow extravagantly to Ioan and May. “Mx. and Mrs. Bălan, I presume?”

“We are not married,” May said, growling nearly as well as True Name. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Oh, just popping in to say hi, is all,” he said cheerily. “Zacharias, by the way. Nice to meet you, Ioan. My dear May Then My Name, it has been more than two hundred years!”

“Well, hi,” she said. “Now get out.”

“Oh, I just got here, though!” He pouted, looking between the three of them. Then the smirk returned, along with a wicked glint to his eye. “Besides, what are you going to do about it, my dear? Bounce me?”

May frowned, but remained silent, arms crossed over her chest. None of them had the ACLs for such.

“Right, I thought not. Well! Have a sit, I was just saying hi to True Name, but what’s another two asses in seats?”

Neither Ioan nor May moved.

“Well, fuck you, too, then,” he said, laughing, and sat back down. “So, True Name, my little stink bug, how are you? Roughing it out here?”

The skunk glowered down to the striker and knife, quickly sparking up a coal in the leaf-litter tinder she’d gathered. She blew on it a few times before setting it in a pile of larger kindling. “I am on vacation. What the fuck does it look like?”

“Like you are roughing it.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Look, why are you really out here?” Ioan asked. “Clearly it isn’t just to say hi, and clearly you got access somehow. Got news from Jonas or something?”

“Very perceptive!” Zacharias said, grinning happily. “Just out here checking up on True Name to see if she has any further thoughts on our little gathering.”

“Checking up on someone you tried to assassinate?”

“Oh goodness, not me! You can place the blame for that squarely on Jonas.”

May laughed humorlessly. “Right, and poor Zack just had to sit by and—”

The fox was up in a flash and, with a back-handed swipe, slapped the skunk across the muzzle, getting a yelp out of her and a shout out of Ioan. “You do not have permission to use that name,” he hissed.

It took Ioan a few seconds to process what had just happened, but then fury welled up within em faster than any other emotion ey’d felt before. Had ey ever even felt fury before? A small part of em marveled at the unfamiliar feeling.

The rest was already swinging.

The blow never landed. Ioan found emself stumbling backwards several paces. Zacharias stumbled back in the opposite direction. Both of them shouted and worked to regain their footing.

The two new instances of May that had appeared, partially overlapping with where they had once stood, winked out of existence. “Yes, yes,” she drawled, taking Ioan’s hand in one paw to hold em back while the other rubbed at her muzzle. “We all know you are good at what you do. Get to the point.”

With a huff, the fox stood up straighter, smoothing out his rumpled clothing. “Right. True Name. Are you coming tonight? If not, when shall we expect you?”

The skunk shook her head, still glowering. “I am not coming tonight, no. If I have been given the luxury of a year to meet,” she said, tone dripping with sarcasm. “Then we will meet when I say we meet.”

“If you say so.” Zacharias was back to smirking. That hatred still bubbling within Ioan urged em to consider just how delightfully punchable that expression was. “Well, we will look forward to it, then, I suppose! And you two will be there as well, yes?”

“Your piece of shit boss hired me, didn’t he?”

“That he did, Mx. Bălan! That he did.” He turned to May, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Yes, I will be there,” she said. Her hackles were still up, free paw still bunched into a fist.

“And End Waking? Would not want the stanza to be incomplete, would we?” He grinned broadly to True Name, “And no, my little stink bug, you do not count.”

“He has not answered yet,” she said. She’d regained her composure, staring at Zacharias steadily. “We will speak with him. Tell Jonas message received and leave me the fuck alone.”

He once more bowed with a flourish. “I live to serve, Rintrah my dear!” he said, sing-song. “Any other messages for me to relay while hungry clouds swag on the deep?”

“Yes, tell Jonas to quit sending his most foppish lackeys,” she shot back.

“But my dear! I am here specifically to drive the point home! You are in so far over your head that even ‘little loverfox’ is a part of your fate.” He laughed gleefully. “Oh, it sounds so evil, does it not? Cartoonishly so! There is no way that I can even begin to talk about this without sounding like a mustache-twirling villain. That I might say things like ‘encompass your doom’ just tickles me pink. You have done so well, True Name. It is simply time to step aside. We will see you soon, yes?”

True Name nodded. “Yes. Now, fuck off.”

“Righto!” He turned and winked to May, adding, “So wonderful to see you again. Cannot say I share your taste in partners, but times change, I suppose. Mx. Bălan, I look forward to speaking soon.”

And with that, he stepped out of the sim.

May’s shoulders slumped. She let go of eir hand, moved over to kneel beside True Name, and hugged around her shoulders. “I am sorry, my dear.”

True Name did not return the gesture. No surprise, perhaps; neither she nor End Waking were all that big on touch. Instead she said, “I apologize, you two. I do not know how they got the address to the sim.”

Ioan cursed. “Guess that does mean it’s compromised.”

She nodded.

May leaned away from the hug, but took one of True Name’s paws in her own. “Come home,” she said, voice and expression earnestly worried. “Please. I know it is uncomfortable, but I do not want you out here alone.”

The skunk stared into the fire for almost a full minute, then looked off to the lake and nodded. “Yes, I suppose you are right.” She smiled faintly and added, “I could also use a shower and a night’s sleep on a real mattress. Perhaps we can discuss expanding an outdoor portion of your sim tomorrow, Ioan. I do not want to impose too much, but, well...” She waved her paw at where Zacharias had stood.

“Of course,” ey said, still doing eir best to tamp down eir anger. “I can find something simple on the market for the time being.”

True Name knelt by the fire for a moment longer before dousing the flames.

Once they made it back to the house and True Name had showered, they sat around the dining table, each with a glass of wine from a bottle ey’d received years back. When True Name suggested that a drink was in order, Ioan and May readily agreed.

Ioan couldn’t guess why the two skunks had felt it was necessary, but ey needed something to try and blunt the edges of that anger that still spun within em. Ey wasn’t sure ey’d ever truly felt fury before, but it turned out that watching eir partner get struck across the face was a really, really good way to bring out the emotion.

Ey didn’t like it at all.

Once ey’d reached the bottom of eir glass, ey sighed and said, “Alright. What the hell was that about?”

“Jonas felt the need to show a bit of muscle,” True Name said, voice flat and dull. “He wanted to rub it in my face that he still has Zacharias in his pocket, that he knows where I am. I do not think he actually cared about asking me when we would meet, he was just making his leverage felt. I suspect he was planning on you two showing up as well, now that I think about it.”

“Why?”

“To ensure that you also saw that power. If you two are to come to the meeting — as I think you must — then he wants you both to know that he will be there with a stacked deck.” She rubbed a paw up over her snout, adding, “I am sorry that you had to meet him.”

Ioan shook eir head. “Was he always such an asshole?”

After a tense pause, the skunk shook her head. “He was not, no. Witty, smart, sharp-tongued, yes. An asshole, no.”

“Well, not looking forward to seeing him again, either way.” Ey felt that anger turn within em again, felt the heat of the wine only add to it. “I don’t know who he thinks he is, coming after you like that, May.”

The silence that followed was even more tense than the one before, both skunks looking down at the table, both tracing the grain of the wood with a claw-tip.

“What?”

May sniffled, shrugged, then smiled weakly to em. “I am pretty sure he thinks he is me, Ioan.”

Ey blinked as the pieces clicked into place, then slouched back in eir seat, feeling like the breath had been knocked out of em. “Well, huh.”

“You see now why I was so upset?”

The thoughts wouldn’t quite fit together in eir mind. Two puzzle pieces with no matching edges. “I’m sorry, I’m, uh...” Ey cleared eir throat, suddenly parched. “*He’s* one of your old relationship forks? With True Name?”

She shrugged again, sniffled again, looked back down to the table.

“It is at least partly my fault,” True Name said quietly. “One of the earliest individuals I pointed May Then My Name towards was, without either of us realizing, one of Jonas’s instances. He looked and spoke nothing like Jonas Prime, but was starting to get loud on the feeds. May Then My Name forked into a human form that we hoped would be appealing and became quite good friends with him, but I lost track of them both for several years. He stopped posting so much on the feeds, so I had little reason to worry about him, I thought.”

“You must understand, I was a very different person back then,” May mumbled. “This was systime 7 Back before I was...me.”

Ey frowned, but nodded for them to continue.

“So, a few decades later,” True Name said. “Secession is in the past, the council is heading towards dissolution, and I am starting to relax. More friends from phys-side uploaded, more furies figured out how to exist within the System as they would like, and I started to meet more people outside work. One of them just happened to be this fantastically well-dressed fox who was just as witty as I felt. We became friends, then we became a bit more.” She shrugged. “That instance of Jonas had...well...”

“Twisted. He twisted my fork into something that neither the me of today nor the me back then would have agreed to.” May said bitterly and wiped at her face. “He turned that version of me into a way of influencing True Name.”

“Yes. It was a long game. He drifted in and out of my life, over the centuries, and then, shortly before Launch, he showed up again and we began to get close. A few years after Launch, they took me out to dinner and dropped the whole thing on me all at once. I am told they did the same on each of the LVs as well, just with different framing.”

Eir head was swimming at the flood of information, and when rubbing eir face didn't work to clear it, ey willed the drunkenness away and waved a glass of ice water into being. “Which I don't get. Why are you so overwhelmed here and not on the LVs?”

The skunk twisted her wine glass between her fingers for a few quiet moments. “I have always been focused on continuity and stability. I think that Jonas was as well, enough to go along with the launch project, but once it was done and that continuity was assured, we here on Lagrange let them go their own ways — the Guiding Council on Pollux and the previous status quo on Castor — while he focused on cementing his power. They were safely away with minimal influence here.”

“Is that what this is all about?”

She nodded. “We were in a steady state for many years after they explained everything. I was not happy, but I still liked the work that I had chosen and I did not know how to do anything else. It was the new tech from the Artemisians that pushed things over the edge. AVEC — Audio/Visual Extrasystem Communication — rather changes things and even though we agreed on what was to be done about it in a general sense, I think he does not want to risk his own specific vision not coming to fruition. He wants greater divergence, while I am more conservative.”

They sat in silence, then, while Ioan tried to digest this. Ey was still furious at Zacharias, but now that fury had gained a layer of what almost felt like despair that someone such as him might have their roots in eir May.

At least it had all gone a long way towards explaining the dynamic on the three Systems. Who knew why the other True Names had decided to treat this one like they had, withholding valuable information, all but cutting her out of their plans. Clearly those few years between launch and Jonas and Zacharias's announcement had included additional shaping, both of her as well as the Systems.

“Fuck.”

May kicked eir shin lightly beneath the table. “Language, Mx. Bălan.”

True Name looked between them, then grinned. “No, May Then My Name, Ioan is correct. Fuck.”

“The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade, you watch your mouth,” May growled.

They all laughed. Ey couldn't help but. It was all too much, and the humor so perfectly timed to defuse eir anger that it had to be intentional. Some of that anger must have showed on eir face.

Ah well, trust an Odist, ey mused to emself.

Aloud, ey said, “You guys continue to be completely nuts. Thanks for explaining, though. I'm not going to figure it out tonight, so I'm going to have another glass of wine and space out on the couch.”

“Fantastic idea, my dear,” May said. “If I have to think about it anymore, I am going to start shedding and not stop until I am bald.”

Still grinning, True Name nodded. “That is quite enough of the topic, yes. I am going to go outside for a bit and then I am going to go to bed.”

Ioan could have sworn that ey and May had gotten enough sleep the night before. Even with her waking em up before dawn, they'd then gone on to sleep until nearly nine. Rather late for them.

Still, that night, they slept for more than ten hours. It had taken May a while to calm down by the time they did make it into bed, the skunk tossing and turning, first leaning in against em, then shifting away, as though the last bits of her overflowing spell kept her oscillating between wanting to be touched and not. Ey stayed quiet and still throughout, letting her decide what it was that she needed; ey was just happy to be back home.

Eventually, though, they settled down into their usual spots and made it to sleep.

It was almost certainly the stress from the day before, ey reasoned. So much had happened in so short a time. Even the time spent relaxing on the beanbag with May felt at least productive, even if it was just resting. So much had been packed into those last few hours, though, and so much emotion overall through the day, that sleep became an imperative.

True Name had spent most of the rest of the evening outside, dragging one of eir chairs from beneath the balcony to park herself in the yard. Despite the lingering vestiges of snow and the chill of the evening, she spent hours out there, either staring up into the sky or grooming bits of forest litter out of her fur.

Ey imagined that she must have made it into bed at some point, though she still woke well before them, as when they finally managed to pry themselves out of bed, there were two steaming coffee mugs sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter, one black and one sweet and creamy, and the skunk was once more sitting outside on the chair, tail wrapped around her feet and coffee held against her chest.

Ioan sent her a gentle sensorium ping, just to let her know that they were awake, then sat at eir desk. Ey had no clue where to even begin, but if nothing else, ey had to have something comforting in front of em, something known.

"Well, nothing for it," ey mumbled, swiped a new notebook into being, and began to compile notes from the last few weeks. The work ey'd already done on the topic was useful enough, but it was starting to feel like it was not directed enough in the face of all that had happened.

Ey began with a timeline, starting all the way back at the arrival of the Artemisians and that first meeting with True Name. Then followed the list of the times they'd met for coffee through the years. Ey dug through eir memories for any that stood out as particularly interesting. These were primarily early on, ey found, when they were still feeling out each others' boundaries, though the last few before the assassination attempt held some fascinating insights in the context of all that had happened since, as well.

There was also information to fill in on the master timeline for the *History*, as well. Information about Zacharias, about Jonas, about End Waking's divergence from True Name.

Finally, the last almost three weeks were laid out in much finer detail. The assassination attempt, the clearing of the house, the meeting with End Waking, all the way up through the meeting with Zacharias the night before.

"Ioaaan," May whined, pawing feebly at eir arm. "Hungryyy."

"Hmm? You're a big skunk, you can make breakfast."

She stood up from where she'd been crouched beside em, laughing. "It is well on lunchtime, my dear. Come up for air."

"Wait, really?" Ey frowned when ey checked the time. "Great. Sorry about that, May."

They pulled together the remaining few dishes of comfort food and called out to True Name to invite her in for a meal. Ey chose the last of the poor skunk's risotto, added a healthy dusting of pepper, and got another cup of coffee to go with it.

"Thank you for lunch," True Name said, once she'd eaten most of her pasta. "When you have a moment, Ioan, I would like to see about expanding the sim as we discussed."

"Right, yeah. Sorry I got so distracted this morning." Ey browsed the markets for appropriate wide-open spaces ey could tack onto one of the borders of eir sim. Perhaps right beneath the skunk's window would be best. Ey could even extend the balcony and provide her with a set of stairs down into the space. "Alright. What sort of environment? There's some pretty good plains and parks, an okay forest, hmm...this mountain one isn't bad, but the trees are kind of planted in a grid."

She grinned. "That sounds cheesy. However, let us go with a plain of some sort. I do not want to go back to a forest unless it is the one I remember, and a park would be too sterile. Is there nothing like Arrowhead Lake? Something with water?"

Ey dug a little further, an act more akin to remembering than any actual physical browsing. It let em finish eir lunch, at least.

"Alright, here's one that's a plain with a river and an oxbow lake. The landscape is just mirrored at the boundaries though, so it looks a little funny beyond the edges."

The skunk had perked up at the mention of the river and was already nodding. "That will do quite nicely, my dear. Are you able to scale it so that it will be a good size, at least?"

"Sure. Do you want to set it up now?"

She shrugged. "If you are willing, yes."

"Can I modify your room to give you an entryway to the area?"

"Please," she said gratefully.

The three of them stood and walked into her room. Ey was somewhat crestfallen to see that ey really had just mirrored the view out of her window, as there was the chair she had been sitting in before lunch. That would mean ey'd have to place the new plot of land first, then modify the house again.

Ah well, easy enough.

Ey dumped a chunk of reputation into the purchase of the environment. Ey had plenty of reputation to spend and it wasn't very pricey, but it was still a noticeable ding, and ey was sure that Jonas would be keeping tabs on eir acquisitions. There was nothing to be done about it, though.

The environment landed on eir mind much as a pending merge might, demanding to be placed somewhere. Ey instructed the sim to put it in the corner formed by the fence of their yard and True Name's bedroom, expanded to be a mile on a side.

Once the pressure of the environment left eir mind, ey was free to instruct the sim to let the window view the new land, and from there to add an extension of the balcony, a second stairway down, and a door leading out from her room to the balcony.

Ey slid the door open, beckoning to the two skunks. "Alright, let's head out and check on it."

As promised, they were greeted with what looked to be an endless series of perfectly parallel rivers fading into the distance with the way the boundaries simply mirrored the empty plain on the sides. The fact that the

oxbow lakes were also repeated set up a grid effect that was slightly unnerving. Thankfully, the effect disappeared when they went down the steps and into the grass itself. They found the grass to be fairly well made and the ground to be delightfully uneven; no small feat when it was so easy to make a perfectly flat plane.

“I can maybe have the boundaries look like fog, if that helps. You’ll have fog all the way around you, but at least no repeating rivers.”

Both skunks straightened up, alarmed, then shook their heads as one.

“Please do not, Mx. Bălan. This will be fine as is.”

The formality in her voice and the stiffness of her tone did not invite em to continue the topic, so ey did eir best to drop it. “Alright. Well, I guess we can give this a go for a bit and make changes if we need. The weather and sun are synced across the whole sim, so if you need it warmer or drier, just let me know.”

True Name bowed. “Thank you, Ioan. This will suit me quite well. It is a bit strange seeing a fence and part of a house, but at least that means I will be able to find my way back. May I have ACLs here?”

Ey nodded and made the grant.

“Thank you once more.” She smiled faintly and gave a hint of another bow. “If you will excuse me, I would like to explore on my own. Perhaps we can catch up over dinner.”

“Sure thing.”

May, who had been quiet up until then, said, “Thank you for coming back.”

True Name tilted her head. “It was not safe there, May Then My Name. This will be better.”

“Yes, but thank you all the same.” She laughed and waved a hand. “I am sorry, disregard me. I am still not yet at baseline, myself, and it has me feeling emotional.”

The other skunk’s expression softened and she leaned forward to give one of her paws a squeeze. It looked stiff and awkward, but it was at least an attempt at a gesture that was more in line with May’s mode of interacting.

“I understand. I do not think I am there, yet, myself. I will see you at dinner, yes?”

Ioan and May both nodded and made their goodbyes. As a last concession to giving the skunk privacy, ey made a small gate in the fence leading into their yard so that they wouldn’t have to go through her room if they needed to go out into her plain for any reason. It meant pushing through lilac bushes, but ey figured it’d be rarely used.

“Can you work on the beanbag, Ioan?” May asked once they were back inside.

“Sure. Need some pets?”

She nodded.

Asking how she was feeling felt counter to simply providing what she’d asked for — something ey enjoyed plenty, as well — so they made themselves comfortable on the amorphous cushion. It didn’t seem to be time for talking at all, so they settled on soft music instead.

Ey wasn’t sure what May was doing, whether it was simply soaking up the affection and close proximity or some more thoughtful task. For eir part, though, ey went back to work on organizing events as they’d happened. Who knew what would come next.

The next few days passed in relative peace, with both Odists slowly leveling back out to their baseline moods.

Or, at least, May leveled out to her baseline mood. There still seemed to be some internal struggle within True Name. It wasn't that she was having to step away to sulk or getting caught in anger as she had been when she had begun to overflow, but that the conflicts were still showing in long silences that would sometimes take her in the middle of conversations, especially when the topic of meeting with Jonas came up.

"I am not even sure if it is conflicts at this point," she admitted when ey brought it up. "Or, well, I do not think it is conflicting memories any longer. Those have been integrated, by this point. I am experiencing conflicts in expectations. I feel doubled, as though there are two of me watching the same conversation and each would like to act in a different way."

"Are they not working together?" May asked.

True Name leaned back against the couch and stared out the picture windows into the yard for a few minutes as she thought. "Perhaps not, no," she said at last. "It is difficult to reconcile those two parts of me. They are arguing, in a way. Each is strident in their belief, and some higher part of me will occasionally get stuck trying to get them to just settle down and fucking agree on a course of action or the next sentence or whatever it may be."

Ioan nodded, saying, "Sort of like Michelle and Sasha?"

She shook her head. "No, not quite like that, thankfully. There are some similarities — the sense of there being two parts of me, the internal split — but it is lacking the dire nature, whatever it was that made her completely helpless before the duality of her self. It is still something that I have some visibility into. I can respond as True Name would or as End Waking would, but I am still just me, and I am learning to unify those natures. I will perhaps never be singular, but I will doubtless unify into a synthesis before long, just not yet."

May fiddled with eir sweater vest from where she lay against em. "I will admit that, for a while there, I was considering merging down with you before I saw how poorly End Waking's merge went." After the silence stretched out, she laughed nervously, adding, "Sorry, I suppose that is a pretty awkward thing to say."

"It is okay, May Then My Name," True Name said, smiling reassuringly. "A large part of me wishes that you had rather than End Waking, if I am honest. I understand why you did what you did, and I think on an intellectual level I agree with it, but on a personal level, I would much rather be integrating your memories than his."

She winced. "That bad?"

"Uncomfortable," the other skunk corrected. "I do wish perhaps that I had been able to fork or that I had been more cautious with the merge, but if I wanted to remain comfortable, I would have pushed back when you urged me to accept."

"What about May's merge would've been easier?" Ioan asked.

"Again, easier does not feel like the correct word. It would have been more comfortable. I would have understood the resentment that others feel for me if that was indeed a goal, but it would not be the defining factor of the merge."

"End Waking has mentioned that he defined himself by not being you, yeah."

She nodded. "So I have learned. The self-loathing that falls out of that rests just this side of overwhelming at times. Perhaps that is why it is proving to be such a project to settle into something resembling a singular nature again. I imagine, given that May Then My Name has defined herself through something unique to her

rather than some aspect of her relation to me, it would feel strange, but not so uncomfortable. Do correct me if I am wrong, though, my dear.”

May shook her head.

“Well, besides,” Ioan added. “She’s certainly merged down way more recently than End Waking did.”

True Name tilted her head.

“Ioan,” May said quietly. “Do you remember when you were working on the *History* and I said that I was worried that you would be upset with me?”

Ey frowned, nodded.

“And do you remember how Dear told Codrin that the temptation to lie would be great?”

“What did you say to em, May Then My Name?”

May sighed and brushed her paws up over her head. “I said that I was working as launch coordinator to remain more in line with your expectations so that I could merge back down after the project was over, that we tried to do so every few decades.”

A silence stretched out once more.

Eventually, Ioan reached up to tug at one of her ears gently. “Skunks are so complicated.”

She let out a pent up breath as a laugh. “I know, my dear. I am sorry. I am sorry to both of you. I believed it to be a small untruth. I wanted my relationship with True Name to seem simpler than it was to keep you feeling comfortable. I hoped that that would keep you from digging into my past. Fat load of good that did.”

“When was the last time you merged down, then?”

“2155,” True Name said. “Longer ago than the last time End Waking merged down. It was not acrimonious, she simply declined my next request for a merger and the conversation never came up again.”

Ey laughed. “Really, *really* complicated.”

“I am glad you are not angry, my dear,” May said, leaning up to dot her nose against eir cheek.

“It seems more silly than anything, but I can see your reasons for doing so, in retrospect. Certainly silly in comparison to the last few weeks.”

“Very.” May turned her gaze back to True Name and said, “I have my apprehensions about merging, though. *We* have our apprehensions, I mean. After watching what happened with End Waking’s merge, it all felt so much more complicated.”

“I do not know,” she said, voice distant. “I said that I understand your reasons for what you did. You wanted me to change, you said, to be other than I am. You want me to be able to approach Jonas in some new way that will hopefully allow me to come out the other side with fewer assassins on my tail, yes?”

May nodded.

“And I also think I understand your reasons for wanting to merge down. It would make me understand your relationship to me in a very real way, and would make me all the more complete a person in your eyes, yes?”

Another nod.

“I am amenable to both of those, though perhaps my reasons differ. But, May Then My Name, coming at this with both full knowledge and as an open conversation has me feeling more positive than perhaps you do,” she said, voice having lost its thoughtful edge. “You are a fundamentally good person and that is not something that I take lightly. You work on such a small scale and I have spoken against that in the past, but...well, a threat

on one's life is a pretty good way to make one realize that the small scale is still important.”

“But Ioan and I—”

“I would have full knowledge of your apprehensions as well, would I not?” She held up her hands, smiling. “I am not trying to talk you into it, my dear, and I would still like to hear those apprehensions regardless, I am simply explaining that, given this shitty fucking month, you merging down does not at all sound bad. I am already not what I was. There is no going and there is no back.”

Ioan realized ey'd settled back into observing mode, simply watching silently. Not what ey was supposed to be working on. Ey shook emself back to the present and said, “My apprehensions mostly boil down to the fact that the merge would include May and I's entire relationship. The memories are one thing, and there are some that are pretty intensely personal, but I worry you'd also risk winding up with the feelings that resulted from the formation of those memories.”

True Name nodded.

Ey took a deep breath, trying to bolster eir courage with it. “This last month has made me realize how much I care about you and your well-being. I like you, True Name, but I'm really hesitant about you having memories of loving me, if that makes sense.”

“And you, May Then My Name? We do not need to go too far into them, but if it is to be a discussion, I would like to at least have these thoughts laid out for perusal.”

She was a long time in responding. “I am with Ioan on this, in that I am protective of my devotion to em. It...is difficult to say this so openly, but I am also coming to terms with just how complex my feelings about you are after the events of the last month, and the root of resentment that led to me urging End Waking's merge on you is no longer there, or at least no longer quite so simple. It is no longer aimless hatred, however justified it may have felt. I will ever be myself, so I am uncomfortable pushing yet more resentment and difficulties on you. I do not want to hurt you.”

The longer May spoke, the more thoughtful True Name's expression became. She slouched down on the couch, until her head was resting against the back cushions. “I am not sure what to say to this just yet.”

“We've been thinking about it for days. You've had, what, twenty minutes?”

She laughed and nodded to em. “Yes, of course. There is much to think about.” After True Name returned to her room — or, more likely, out to her field to set up camp — May said, “If I may say, that was really fucking weird, and I do not want to talk about it at all.”

Ey laughed. “You certainly may. Weird as hell and I need a break.”

That last part wasn't strictly true. Ey knew ey'd be ruminating over it until they went to sleep, and likely well into tomorrow. Still, ey agreed that it wasn't a topic for talking about at the moment. The chances they'd just wind up talking in circles, rehashing the same topics over and over, getting nowhere but frustrated, was too high, and ey could do that mentally just as well.

So, instead, they relaxed together on the couch, May with her head in eir lap while ey read and she worked on this or that, or whatever it was that she did when her eyes lost focus and she hummed quietly to herself. She'd once called it ‘going into screen-saver mode’, which didn't sound totally accurate to what ey knew of her when ey'd looked up the reference, but ey still teased her about it every now and then.

Quiet nights were good, though, and ey was pleased to just spend the rest of this one in comfort.

Sleep, however, brought restless dreams. Not nightmares, certainly; they weren't even bad dreams in any common sense of the term. They were, to the last, plagued with a sense of waiting and unease. Ey dreamt of waiting for unspecified news, sitting on uncomfortable benches in weirdly crowded lobbies. Ey dreamt of May being out of the house on some errand longer than she had said she would be. Ey dreamt of not having enough information.

All the same, ey woke well rested and made it to the coffee pot before either of the skunks, so ey was able to claim ten minutes of solitude standing before the picture windows, looking out into the slowly lightening yard and the field beside it. Ey could see True Name poke her snout out from her tent, disappear, and then, a few minutes later, start trudging her way back toward the house.

"Good morning, Ioan. Oh good, thank you," she mumbled, making a bee-line for one of the mugs of coffee that sat, steaming, on the counter.

"Morning. Sleep well?"

She shrugged noncommittally. "I slept, I am well-rested enough."

They watched the morning head toward full brightness in silence after that, em still standing before the windows and her sitting on the couch, more focused on her coffee than anything.

"You have once again failed to bring me my coffee," May grumbled from the bedroom door. "I am going to file a petition to have you censured with the leadership of the System."

"Ey did not bring me my coffee, either, my dear," True Name said mildly. "And until recently, I was in such a position."

May stopped mid-shuffle, snorted, then mumbled an apology and padded to the kitchen to grab her own mug before taking Ioan by the hand and dragging em over to the beanbag so that she could lay down with em.

"Are you two up to talking about meeting with Jonas?" True Name asked. "I will pay in another pot of coffee and breakfast."

Ioan shrugged. "Sure."

"After that second coffee, yes," May said.

Breakfast, it turned out, was a Scandinavian affair, or so ey imagined. Dense, dark bread, a tray of cheeses and meats, and a separate tray of vegetables both pickled and fresh. It was strange to call a meal such as breakfast 'refreshing', but the word fit quite well. Quite good, and both of the skunks certainly seemed to appreciate it, eating the lion's share of the food, though May also swiped up a side plate of bacon to go with it.

May nodded towards True Name, grinning. "Alright. Payment accepted. You may begin."

True Name nodded. "I had an idea as I was walking last night. Or perhaps it is only a sliver of an idea. I suspect that it will not even get me out of whatever it is that he has planned, but it might soften the blow."

They both nodded.

"My guess is that, if he wants me to 'step aside', as Zacharias said, then he would like me to truly disappear. He would like me to essentially never be seen again."

"Thus the assassination attempt," Ioan said.

"Yes. He wanted me to disappear and build up a little bit of mystery because then he would be able to be publicly seen mourning, *et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseam*," she continued, rolling her eyes. "The usual nonsense, I mean. I do not think his plans B through M will be any different. They will all involve me no longer being a part

of this and in such a way as to make him come out feeling the victor.”

“And I’m assuming you’d like to avoid that if possible.”

“Him feeling like the victor? Yes. I really do mean that I would need to disappear in his definition of victory. I would be effectively dead, if not actually. I would be restricted in who I would be able to speak to, I would have to remain out of public sims, and so on. He would not ask me to retire. Disappear.” She hesitated, swirled the last of her coffee in the bottom of her mug, and added, “At least, that is what I would do. It would mean less attack surface for the reactive elements we have been tracking.”

“And your plan would, what, subvert that?” May asked. “I have a suspicion I know what it is, but I would like to be sure.”

“I suspect you do, yes. I will offer him the option of me changing from what I was to such an extent that I will no longer be the True Name that either he or the System expects.”

“Is this about me merging down, then?”

She shrugged. “I do not think that that is a requirement here, though that question was on my docket for the day. I suspect that I have already changed enough with End Waking’s merger. I would just need to prove it to him somehow. That is where my plan ends, however.”

Ioan sat back in eir chair, arms crossed as ey mulled it over. If she was right — and ey suspected that she was — then there would likely need to be a change in form and a change in name to go along with the change in attitude. After all, that’s how Zacharias had gotten as far as he had, right?

Ey couldn’t picture her as anything other than a skunk or perhaps whatever version of Michelle she remembered, though, and certainly couldn’t picture her named anything other than True Name. Would she also have to change her speech patterns? They weren’t totally identifiable, but now that ey thought about it, even Zacharias had shared many of them. She was an Odist through and through — more so than any other ey’d met — and all of the forking and reinforcing that May had done to cement behavior and thought patterns didn’t seem like something that she’d willingly undergo, either.

But perhaps that’s what she’d meant by a sliver of a plan. They still had plenty of time to sort that out, at least, and perhaps she’d come up with a way that would actually work without changing herself so much that she’d cease being who she was.

All the same, ey wasn’t sure that her simply incorporating End Waking was quite the type of change that Jonas would appreciate. She acted different, spoke different, and ey was sure she felt different about her work than she had, but eir suspicion was that Jonas didn’t want anything left of her that could possibly be of any threat to his power. Her incorporating End Waking’s extreme distaste for the politics of the System might be enough, it might not be, but that was a big risk to take.

Ey’d apparently been silent long enough that the two skunks had drifted off into their own conversation. At least ey hadn’t been mumbling.

“Welcome back, my dear,” May said when ey leaned forward again to grab eir coffee.

Ey grinned. “Thanks. Was a nice trip. Don’t mean to interrupt or anything, though.”

She shook her head. “We were talking of changes.”

“Any conclusions?”

“Not particularly, no,” True Name said. “There are certain levels of change that I find unacceptable, is all.”

“Right. I was thinking similar. It needs some work, but I can at least see where you’re coming from with it.”

She nodded. “I will continue to explore. When the time comes, I may ask for your help workshopping some ideas.”

The conversation wound down from there, with True Name heading out to walk her prairie or poke around in the water or whatever it was that she was doing.

As though inspired, May and Ioan both moved outside as well, claiming the bench swing on the balcony, sitting on it sideways and facing each other, legs all tangled up. The warmer spring weather ey’d brought about for May while she was overflowing had seemed appropriate once they’d returned, so ey’d left it for the time being. Perhaps ey’d get one more big snow in before letting spring proper settle in.

“What were things like back in 2155?” ey asked.

May tilted her head, blinking a cone of silence into place. “When I merged last?”

Ey nodded.

“I had just forked the third time. There had been more relationships, of course, ones that ended before I had the chance, but this was the third time that I had settled into something comfortable enough to let it last. I was crushed and not particularly excited about merging down, but I had not diverged quite as much by then.”

“Not as much empathy?”

She laughed. “Too much, perhaps. It took a while for me to settle on a comfortable amount.”

“Too *much*? How on Earth did that work?”

“I was a fucking mess at all times. I cried at the drop of a hat.”

“You still cry a lot,” ey observed, then laughed when she poked at eir knee.

“Yes, well. I had attributed it at the time to simply being torn up over no longer being in a relationship. My fork was happy, I was heartbroken. In the end, though, I think that my goals were starting to drift from hers. I was diverging in more fundamental ways than either of us had expected.”

“And the next time she asked, you just said ‘no’?”

She nodded. “She asked me to consider it, and then the topic simply never came up again. I think that she was already expecting to write me off after the merge in systime 31.”

“Did she wind up expressing her own emotions differently from that merge?”

She opened her mouth as if to reply, then closed it again, frowning. “I was going to snap at you,” she admitted. “But you bring up a good point. She did, to some extent. What emotions she expressed, real or not, came more earnestly to her. She was more able to express empathy, even if it was still in a very True Name fashion. She did not accept my merges — or any of those from others in her stanza — as blithely as she did End Waking’s.”

“I imagine the circumstances were a bit different,” ey said. “Why were you going to snap at me?”

“I thought you were going to ask me to merge down.”

Ey shrugged. “I hadn’t gotten that far in the thought process. Is it something you’re still uncomfortable with?”

“I do not know, my dear. If you had asked me just then, I would have said no. If you had asked me five minutes before then, I would have said yes.” She patted eir knee, smiling. “But I will endeavor not to snap at you either way. How about you, though?”

“Much the same, I think. Your answer has me wondering, though, if she was more intentional about a merge

like that, it could work. She could have some of your memories of emotions that she thinks might help while still respecting your privacy.”

“And that is why I did not snap at you. It is a good point, my dear. There is no need for her to have all of my memories wholesale, and with what memories and personality traits and whatever else goes along with a merge, she would hopefully wind up with a synthesis as she says, rather than a replacement. She would still have all 226 years of being True Name, and all those years of being End Waking, just that she would also have some of me in there.”

“Is that something you could talk her through?”

She looked thoughtfully out into the yard, at the faint greening of the lilac branches. “Perhaps, yes. We would have to be very deliberate about it, but it should be possible.”

Ey nodded, watching the skunk’s gaze drift in and out of focus, the way she would occasionally chew on her lip when thinking. Watched, and thought about what such a synthesis would look like. There wouldn’t be any concrete changes in eir partner, but what would this new restless, unsettled True Name look like with yet more memory heaped onto her? Ey knew ey could never know the whole of May and that ey was biased besides, but she seemed so much more happy and comfortable than her down-tree instance, even before End Waking’s merger. More comfortable, feeling less of a need to dump all of her energy into forward motion. What would that look like with True Name?

Ey watched her think. Watched her and thought about how much ey loved her, watched and wondered if such a True Name would also sit and think and chew on her lip.

“Do you want to?”

May started from her own reverie. “Hmm?”

“Regardless of the mechanics or how comfortable you are with it, is this something you’d even want to do?”

She nodded readily. “Yes. That is the source of all this stress for me over the last few days. I want to, it is just the reality that is working against me.”

“Why?”

“Why do I want to?” She laughed. “Because I like who I am and I do not like who she is, but that does not mean I do not like what she can become. I want her to be happy and to feel love and to slow the fuck down for five minutes. I do not know for sure, and I acknowledge that there is a value judgment here, but I strongly suspect that these will only ever be good for her.”

Ey leaned forward enough to snag one of her paws and give it a squeeze. “Guess we’re of one mind on that, then. Or at least mostly so; you have a better sense as to what goes into the emotional side.”

She smiled gratefully and gave eir hand a squeeze. “Well, when she returns, we can expand on our thoughts.”

They didn’t have to wait long.

Shortly after they went back inside to pull together a snacky sort of lunch, True Name returned from her trip out in the prairie and bowed to them, saying, “I have had some thoughts that I would like to run past you.”

“As have we,” Ioan said, gesturing her to a chair. “Good timing. What were you thinking?”

“It is perhaps more for May Then My Name to answer, though I will appreciate both of your input.”

The skunk nodded for her to continue.

“You have mentioned in the past that you forked to cement emotional patterns that led to your divergence. I

think that I have wound up doing that to some extent, but only ever subconsciously. With how much specificity were you able to pick what it was that you were modifying?”

May glanced to Ioan, then shrugged. “I worked in very small steps. I forked dozens of times to change very small things. Being deliberate about it made it essentially as fine-grained as I needed.”

“Alright. That helps quite a lot, actually. I was considering how much I might be able to change without losing who and what I am. If I can change some of my own habits, maybe the end result will still be something that I am happy with, but with enough difference to get Jonas off my back. I am not yet sure what those habits might be, but it is an option, at least. I have been trying to catalogue what it is about myself that can go, as it were.” She smiled wryly, “But yes, doing so deliberately is probably for the best.”

“That’s actually what we had been talking about,” Ioan said, looking to May for confirmation that it was alright to continue.

“A deliberate merge,” she said, picking up from where ey’d left off. “One that will keep us comfortable in our privacy while also giving you the opportunity to build upon what you are.”

“Really? That is not what I was expecting to hear.”

They both nodded.

There was a long silence, then. Both May and Ioan watched True Name as she stared up at the ceiling, unseeing.

“And you are okay with that, Ioan?”

Ey nodded. “I think so. I don’t wholly understand the mechanics of it, but you’re the dispersionistas. I trust you two to have that covered.”

She nodded and looked to May.

“If you are alright working with me through the process, then I am okay with it.”

“Are you?” Ioan asked.

True Name smiled lopsidedly. “So long as I can fork beforehand just in case, why the fuck not? I am already not what I was. There is already no going back.”

May scoffed and shook her head. “‘So long as you can fork’? Jesus, True Name. Of course you can fucking fork. 108 instances with daily reconciliation, and she asks if she can fork.”

They laughed.

“Well,” True Name said, shrugging. “Fuck it.”

Part IV

Reconcilliation

*The living know that they will die
but the dead know nothing.*

By our very act of knowing, of remembering, of denying our own deaths, the dead are left in limbo, for every idea's opposite is the absence of that idea, and we can no longer grant them even that absence.

From Ode by Sasha

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Of all that had happened over the past several weeks, Ioan was surprised to find that it had taken until now for literally anything to feel like it had been planned. Clearly none of them had planned on Jonas coming after True Name, but all of the decisions that had followed had been made on the spot. Snap decisions that had led to True Name moving into their house, to End Waking merging down, to the three of them all overflowing at once.

All of those had been made under what felt like intolerable pressure, and it was only now that they had time enough to relax. There was an uneasy (and certainly temporary) truce between Jonas and True Name that had finally given them enough time to properly consider a decision instead of feeling compelled to make it right away.

Ey'd harbored a concern, one borne out of stress, that May might just merge down without talking further, but ey kept that to emself, doing eir level best to reason emself out of it. The last thing they needed at the moment was eir mind playing tricks on em.

And she certainly didn't. In fact, she drew the negotiations that followed that first discussion out by nearly a week, putting lie to that concern. Much of these discussions took place between the two skunks as they walked out on True Name's prairie.

At first, ey'd felt left out. After all, didn't ey also have boundaries to negotiate and concerns that needed addressing?

After bringing this up with May, however, she had laughed and poked em in the belly, explaining, "I do not mean to leave you out of anything, my dear. We are discussing elements of the past that kept me from merging down, and elements of the future of the relationship between me and her. You are not missing anything so important, but if you would like, I am happy to keep you apprised of the general content."

"Given how anxious I've been, I'd appreciate that," ey had said. "But no need to share anything private."

And so now ey got updates on the conversations with sensitive or personal information held back.

They spent much of their time discussing various parts of May's life and how comfortable she'd feel sharing those through a merge, and if not, why not. Surprisingly, they also talked with End Waking several times, the third skunk of the stanza coming out to visit her prairie so that they could discuss the ramifications of their merge and how to be more thoughtful with May's.

That first meeting had been more silence than not, more walking and thinking and not looking at each other than anything. They paced back and forth along the bank of the river, then stared into the oxbow pond, each occasionally failing to start a conversation. They had greater success with subsequent meetings, but they were

never comfortable.

This wasn't to say that ey didn't have a chance to sit with them at times and discuss eir thoughts on the matter, of course.

"Feelings are complex, Ioan," True Name explained as they sat around a low fire before her tent. "If they are created by memories, then there is little that I can do to completely control how I might feel about something beyond picking and choosing the memories carefully. However, one can never be sure which memories may lead to which feelings. If they come from something more intrinsic to one's personality and thought patterns, then it is even more difficult to attempt to control them."

Ey nodded. "That much I can certainly understand. I trust that you'll be built up from your various histories rather than simply May's feelings tacked onto you."

"Yes. I cannot predict how I will feel about anything after this, much less you. Your relationship and existing boundaries will take precedence over whatever happens, though. I will respect that."

Ioan bowed eir thanks.

"I have been wondering how your feelings toward Debarre have shifted," End Waking said.

"It is complex, not least of which because I accepted the whole of your merge so blithely. I will not be doing the same with May Then My Name's."

He frowned.

"I am sorry," True Name said, shrugging helplessly. "There is little that I could have done in the moment to avoid it, and there is certainly nothing that I can do now to fix it."

May dipped her muzzle and apologized as well, saying, "I do feel bad about how that worked out, no matter how much you tell me it is okay."

"It is not okay," End Waking said, then hastened to add when his cocladist flinched away, "It is what we have to work with, and it is perhaps what the times called for."

May nodded, still cowed.

"I am of two minds," True Name said. "I remember having loved Debarre. I remember still loving him, and perhaps even I, even True Name, still love him in some roundabout way. However, I am what I am, and that is a being of two minds. That of me which is you, End Waking, loves him, and that of me which is True Name, respects him from a distance, respects his distaste for me, that feeling I engendered to minimize his impact within the council by making it purely emotional, as uncomfortable as it was to do so."

"The same as you did with me and Codrin?" Ioan asked. "With the history, I mean."

She nodded. "It was— it felt like a necessity at the time. I am not some cold, unfeeling bitch, it is just that my drive and my abilities, such as they are, outweigh — or at least outweighed — those feelings. I worked to distance myself from them."

"I remember so little of that," May said.

True Name shrugged. "As you intentionally moved towards feeling, I worked to contain and compartmentalize it within myself after you came into being. I became a being of negative commandments. I lived the 'shalt not's while you performed your *mitzvot* of loving and caring."

May sighed.

"I will not say that I am proud of it, my dear, but neither will I say that I regret it. It is what it is specifically because I was what I was."

"Perhaps you will learn from your merge," End Waking said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps it will become a part of me, perhaps it will live within me alongside that of you and that of True Name."

"Still feeling fractured?" Ioan asked.

"I am of two minds, Ioan. I do not know if I will feel... I do not know. I am not comfortable speaking further on this just yet."

They spent the rest of the night in quiet, May leaning against eir side while True Name and End Waking spoke quietly about the plain and the forest.

Finally, though, a week to the day after the decision had been made, Ioan awoke to find May and True Name already sitting at the table, speaking earnestly in a cone of silence. Once they noticed em, True Name waved it away and May grinned, saying, "Sorry, my dear. We did not want to wake you."

Ey poured emself a cup of coffee before joining them. "Appreciate it. Hope I'm not interrupting."

True Name shook her head. "We are discussing our plan for the day."

Ey bought emself a moment by taking a sip of coffee. "Is today the day, then?"

"May Then My Name thinks so, but we were also waiting for you to join us to make sure."

"Well, if it were solely up to me, I'd just spin my wheels worrying about it until we ran out of time, so I suppose I'm alright with it. What all will go into it?"

"Well," True Name began, a fork appearing next to her. "First I fork and she will head to the tent."

The new instance of True Name bowed. "Then the perilous path was planted, And a river and a spring On every cliff and tomb," she said before waving goodbye and padding back out through her room.

Ioan stared after the departing skunk and shook eir head. "You guys are so weird."

They both laughed.

"Then we will set up a space for me to rest in the meantime," True Name continued. "And then I suppose that is all there is to it. May Then My Name will fork and quit and I will process the merge."

"And your fork is just there in case something goes wrong?"

"Or if the result is not acceptable."

"'Not acceptable'?"

"If the merge does not go well or if I wind up being unable to work as I would like."

"Or if all of my emotions get overwhelming," May added. "Since I do rather have a surfeit."

Ioan leaned over and ruffled a hand over the skunk's ears. "Yeah, you definitely do."

"Yes, yes, and you love me for it." She laughed and pushed eir hand away, straightening the mussed up fur. "Breakfast first, though, and then we can work from there."

After another Scandinavian-style breakfast, the three of them re-organized True Name's room. The bed was set in a corner instead of up against one wall, allowing a collection of pillows to be placed against the walls in case she wanted to lean against them or organize them into a nest.

"Are you sure you don't want to set up something out in the prairie?"

"I did consider it, but May Then My Name talked me out of it, stating that she would like to be at hand without

having to spend all of her time out there, herself. Besides, if I learned one thing from End Waking merging down, it was that the less I have to think about my body, the easier it is to focus on my mind. Comfort will only ever help.”

They also supplied her with ready water, juice, and a few comforting snacks on one of the bedside tables so that she wouldn’t have to get up just to go to the kitchen.

Another beanbag was added by the bed, in case she requested that they stay in there for any length of time, and a more comfortable bench-swing was added to the balcony in case she needed to go outside but wasn’t feeling up to walking down to the prairie itself.

It felt like rather a lot of preparations to make just for a merge, but then May had last merged down 83 years before ey had uploaded — nearly 64 before ey’d even been born — and after seeing how intense End Waking’s merge had been, none of them felt up to cutting any corners and having to rush comfort after the fact.

Finally, though, there was nothing left to do, no further preparations to be made that weren’t just stalling, so May took eir hand to hold em still so that ey’d quit pacing.

“I don’t even know why I’m fretting so much, I’m not even the one merging.”

True Name smiled faintly and shrugged. “I am fretting too, do not worry.”

“It is a big event,” May added. “It will be an even bigger merge and, while it may be more comfortable than End Waking merging down as she has said, it will be no less complex.”

Ey sighed and nodded, squeezing her paw before tugging eir hand free. “Right. I’ll relax and leave you to the rest of it.”

“Please stay, Ioan,” True Name said quietly.

“Stay?”

“Yes. Please stay. I do not think it will be dramatic, but, well...” She hesitated and frowned. “You are a grounding person. Is that not what my counterpart on Castor said about Codrin? I appreciate your presence.”

Ey considered any number of responses ey could give before just nodding. If nothing else, ey didn’t want to hold either of the skunks up from what would most certainly affect both of them more than it would em.

May forked and the new instance climbed up onto the bed with True Name, the two skunks kneeling, facing each other, amid all the blankets and pillows.

Both Ioan and True Name watched as the down-tree instance of May scrubbed her paws over her face vigorously for a moment, gave a shaky wave, and then quit. True Name winced and screwed her eyes shut, and the May who had knelt with her on the bed reached out and took the skunk’s paws in her own.

“Go ahead.”

It was still another ten seconds or so before True Name managed to relax enough to permit the merge to progress, and even then the only visual indication was a slow slump of her shoulders and a relaxing of the muscles of her face.

Ioan stuffed eir hands in eir pockets and did eir best to feel rooted to where ey stood, hoping against hope that ey could keep from pacing. May watched True Name carefully, eyes searching her features for what ey could not tell. She seemed almost frozen, breathing shallowly despite the relaxed set of her features.

And ey stood and watched them both.

The three of them stayed like that for nearly five minutes — two skunks kneeling on the bed while ey watched from beside it — before True Name moved again.

“Oh...oh, I cannot...” she whispered, and started to sag over to one side.

May shushed her quietly and helped her to lay out on her side before settling down with her. They curled together, still facing each other, nearly snout to snout and still holding paws.

Ey stood and watched. Then ey sat on the beanbag and watched. Watched and waited, though for what ey didn’t know.

It was more than an hour before May forked beside em, took eir hand, and led em from the room. Neither of the skunks on the bed had moved or made a sound other than May asking True Name if she was okay at one point and the other skunk shaking her head.

Once the door was shut behind them, May let out a shaky sigh and padded over to the kitchen. “That was very hard.”

“Why, do you think?” ey asked.

The skunk took a moment to pour herself a glass of water before replying. “I want to be here with you, and I also want to be in there with her, and I also want to go back in time and tell her I do not want to merge, and I also want to go back in time and merge instead of End Waking, and...a-and...”

“Come here, May.”

She clutched the water to her chest with both paws, stumbling blindly around the kitchen counter so that ey could guide her to the beanbag.

She sat down and let Ioan rub her back. Only once she could manage a sip or two of water, she said, voice hoarse, “Did I fuck up, Ioan?”

Ey was still teasing apart the day — or perhaps the last month — but all the same, ey did eir best to respond to what ey suspected lay beneath the surface of the question. “Do you think she resents you for not just letting her be True Name?”

May whined and set the water glass aside, shifting on the beanbag until she could rest her head on eir thigh. “I worry that the real reason she wanted to do this was because there is no going back to who she was. One of those”fuck it, burn it all down” situations.”

“There could be some of that, but is that so bad?”

“I do not know,” she mumbled.

“Can you imagine her being okay staying as True Name and being all cooped up for the rest of eternity?”

She snorted. “God, no. I think she would lose it.”

“Same, yeah. She’d probably try to pull a Dear or something.”

“And hate every minute of it. You heard her, she likes who she was and all that she did. I cannot imagine her letting that go.”

Ey nodded and combed eir fingers through the fur on the nape of her neck. “So she’ll be left with a complex view of that — or, well, a couple of them, I guess — maybe enough for her to change how she moves through the world. Think it’ll be enough for Jonas?”

The skunk rolled until her face was nearly pressed against eir belly to let em pet. “I do not know,” she mumbled. “I do not think even she knows.”

Sleep was the first obstacle they ran into.

While True Name had, at one point, sat up long enough to drink half a glass of water, she had yet to leave the bed, and with her still down for the count, the instance of May that had remained was unwilling to leave her side, even for dinner, which she declined.

“You don’t think sleeping with her will be enough to keep you comfortable through the night?”

She rolled her eyes and poked em in the stomach with a dull claw. “It is not just that I do not want to sleep alone. I want to sleep with you.”

Ioan blinked, laughed, and rubbed at the back of eir neck. “Right, sorry, I guess I’ve been stuck on logistics mode for a bit.”

“Is this not emotional?”

“It is! I’m just...overwhelmed or something.”

May nodded and looped her arms up around eir shoulders. “That much I understand, my dear.”

“Would it make sense if I added a cot or something in there? I could at least sleep nearby.”

She perked up and tilted her head. “One moment. Or...well, come with me.”

May led em to True Name’s room where the skunk was slouched over on the bed, head resting in the other instance of May’s lap, the two of them tucked into the nest of pillows in the corner.

“Let me reduce—” The May who had stayed with Ioan quit, leaving the other instance of her to quickly incorporate the merge and continued, “—conflicts. True Name, are you able to speak?”

The answer was a long time coming. “Some,” she croaked.

May nodded. “I am not going to leave, but it is getting close to bedtime. I am also not comfortable not being near Ioan. May ey sleep in here with us?”

True Name slowly rolled her head to the side enough to squint at Ioan through one eye. Her cheek-fur was a mess of tear tracks. “Ioan?”

“I can make a cot by the bed,” ey said, then laughed. “Or just another, smaller bed, I guess. No need to make one of those uncomfortable things.”

She slowly pushed herself up to a sitting position, though she remained half-slouched against May. “Can you...make the bed bigger?”

“Well, I mean...” ey shrugged helplessly, looking to May.

The skunk tilted her head back against the wall, looking up to the ceiling thoughtfully. “I do not see why not, I suppose,” she said, sounding distant.

“Worried?” True Name mumbled.

Ioan shifted eir weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “I just, uh,” ey stammered. “I don’t want to make things weird. I can’t even imagine all you’re going through.”

True Name laughed hoarsely. “It is not a comfortable...time for us, no.” She sighed, sat up further, and rubbed at her face. “Preference...make bed larger and join...second choice, other bed.”

Ey nodded. “I can make the bed bigger. Should I make a second set of covers?”

She swallowed several times in a row, a sign of tears to come ey well knew from May. “Can I ask...can you two...”

May got her arms around the skunk and shushed her gently. “We will work it out.”

Ioan hesitated a moment longer before willing the bed to expand another half meter in width. A second set of covers and pillows spooled themselves out onto it as well, just in case.

Ey paced back and forth a few times, shook eir head, then waved a hand again to bring a set of pajamas into being on the bed. Sleeping in eir usual dress of a pair of boxers didn’t seem quite appropriate at the moment.

May blinked down at the clothes, giggled quietly, and shook her head. “*You are such a nerd,*” she subvocalized through a sensorium message so as not to disturb True Name. “*It is a good idea, but you are a total nerd.*”

Ey shrugged helplessly, gathered up the loose lounge pants and shirt to go change.

“*I have no clue how tired I even am,*” ey sent once ey returned. “*Or if I’ll even be able to sleep here.*”

“*If you need to sneak off to sleep in our bed, you can.*”

“*I’m also unwilling to sleep without you, so...*”

Her expression softened. She tilted her muzzle down to whisper something to True Name, and when she received a nod in response, she signed *okay* and patted the bed to invite em up.

Ey nodded and climbed onto the (now much larger) bed so ey could settle down beside May in the nook of pillows. Getting eir arm around her, ey let her rest her head on eir shoulder. It was a little awkward with True Name still slouched against her side, but it worked well enough.

“*I’m surprised she’s so...physical,*” ey sent.

“*She was not, at first, but I suspect she is working her way from past to present. She slowly got closer and closer as she learned how I did the same.*”

It made sense, at least. Whenever ey’d dealt with a longer merge — eir longest had been around thirteen months, and a particularly boring project at that — it always felt like the memories were interleaving themselves in with the ones ey already had, histories slowly zippering themselves into consensus. Conflicts, then, were the snags one encountered along the way, and one would have to dump energy into either reconciling or discarding memories. It was a very consuming task, and that True Name had been able to speak at all was far more than ey could have done.

“*Think it’s overriding the bits of her and End Waking that aren’t keen on touch?*” ey asked.

“*Must be.*”

“*How are you doing with it?*”

She sighed, at which True Name squinted up to her, then over to Ioan, offering a faint smile before settling back into processing.

“*I do not know, my dear. It has activated all of my care instincts, so I am happy to make her comfortable in all of the ways I know how. It helps, then, that those are all of the ways she knows now, too, or at least is learning. If I focus on that, I feel very positive. It is only when I get distracted and ruminating that I begin to spiral. It is more comfortable for me to focus on caring for someone now than it is to think about boundaries or Zacharias or Jonas.*”

Ey kissed between May’s ears, murmuring, “You’re a good person, May.”

The skunk lifted her snout to tuck it up under eir chin.

“You two...are disgusting,” True Name mumbled. “Keep it up.”

May laughed and tightened her grip around her briefly. “Hush, you. We will work on going to bed soon. I hope that you can get some sleep.”

She only shrugged.

“Well, either way, I will let you keep the corner nest and be right here. Ioan can take the outside.”

“Keeping em...away?”

May frowned. “I am keeping myself close to you.”

“I kid. I have not...even gotten there, yet,” True Name said, slowly pushing herself up once more and frowning at just how far away the glass of water was. Ioan leaned forward to grab it for her. She drank carefully. “But if it...also keeps awkwardness down...that is good, too.”

Ioan accepted the glass from her once she finished, re-filling it from the pitcher they’d brought in and setting it on the windowsill near the nook so that she could get to it herself. “We can talk about that later. For now, I think it’ll work alright.”

True Name nodded and settled down into her nest of pillows.

May and Ioan stayed up a little longer, chatting through sensorium messages to let True Name process in peace. Cognizant of her mention that she felt better when not thinking about boundaries, ey kept the topics light, asking about favorite things and letting her rant about plays from her past that she’d hated.

Nearly an hour later, just as May started to nod off, True Name yelped and sat up, scrambling back against the wall away from them. “You know!” she shouted. “Codrin knows!”

It took only a moment for understanding to click into place. Both ey and May sat up to give her a bit more space.

“Hush, my dear,” May said, voice soothing. “It is okay. Remember Dear’s letter.”

“I...I cannot- It is too much!”

Ioan held still, hands flat on eir thighs. The urge to wipe the sweat from eir palms was pressing against em, but ey wanted to at least appear calm, even if ey didn’t feel such.

May began to crawl towards True Name, then stopped when her cocladist shied away from her. “Codrin has not spoken it aloud, not even with True Name#Castor. I confirmed with Dear: ey only said *that* ey heard it, and that is all that ey told Ioan.”

She snatched a pillow from the pile and clutched it to her chest, wide-eyed. “Why?”

“Ey couldn’t be the only one,” Ioan said quietly. “We don’t do as well under pressure as you, we don’t...well...”

“Keep secrets?” she growled.

May held up her paws disarmingly. “They keep secrets very well. They just do not keep many.”

She glanced sharply at May, then said to Ioan, “Ey did not tell you the Name? No one else knows?”

“No. The message was individual-eyes-only. I haven’t even shown May.” After a moment’s thought, ey added, “But I can unlock it for you, if you want. It’s in an exo I haven’t looked at since.”

“Sweep the whole sim,” she snapped.

Ey nodded, swept the sim of everyone but the three of them, and instructed the perisystem architecture to print out the *0 individuals swept* receipt onto a slip of foolscap, which ey handed over.

“Move back, May Then My Name,” she instructed, quieter this time. When the skunk obliged, she crawled closer to em and set up a cone of silence with secure visual ACLs. She was panting and shaking, though ey was pleased to see that at least the anger that had swelled briefly had subsided once more into something more manageable. Ey didn’t think any of them were up for a shouting match. Once she’d knelt beside em, whispered,

“Show me.”

Ey drew the sheet out of the air, holding it up for True Name to see the fully redacted text, then unlocked it for her eyes only and handed it over.

She read it through top to bottom a few times, set it down and kneaded her paws against her face, then picked it up to read it once more.

Finally, shoulders sagging, she handed it back. “Re-secure it and destroy it, please.”

Ey did so and held up eir hands. “I’m sorry, True—”

She patted eir arm with a shaking paw. “Please do not apologize.” After dropping the cone of silence, she continued, “I should have...I should have learned from...I am sorry.”

May held out a paw once more, and this time True Name took it, letting herself be guided back to the nest of pillows, where she slumped down once more, expression glassy. “Could themselves have peeped — And seen my Brain — go round —,” she mumbled.

“Rest, my dear. It is okay,” May said quietly. “Do you want company?”

“Too much...but I...” After a shuddering breath, she shook her head. “I will...be fine. We will speak later.”

May nodded and crawled back over to Ioan, nudging em to lay down so that she could tuck in against eir front. She remained tense, and when ey sent a gentle sensorium ping, she sniffled and shook her head.

Tiredness eventually won them over, though, and, despite the room being mirrored from what ey was used to, the bed was the same, comfortable one ey’d slept in for the last century, the house held the same sense of ‘home’ as ever. May curled against eir front as she always did, and while it was strange seeing True Name just beyond her, it was still where ey belonged.

The last thing ey remembered before falling asleep was watching the way True Name had curled to face May, the two skunks holding each others’ paws once more, and thinking to emself, *This isn’t how I pictured things winding up if I had somehow been able to fix things between them, but it could certainly be worse.*

Waking brought confusion. Something about the inversion from their normal bed, of having fallen asleep on eir other side than ey usually did, induced a subtle sense of vertigo at first. The pajamas were also bunched up around em strangely, adding a subtle sense of constriction. As sleep slowly seeped away, though, the feeling lessened and ey was able to relax in the warmth beneath the covers.

Warmer than expected, perhaps. May was still in eir arms, as expected, but the position felt off with the addition of a second warm bulk.

Ey tried to puzzle it out through the fog of doiness that still surrounded em. Eventually, ey gave up and levered eir eyes open, blinking a few times to bring the world into focus.

At some point in the night, True Name had apparently rolled over and wound up curled in May’s arms, much as she was curled in eirs, and with with eir arm resting atop May’s, ey was left hugging two skunks.

Ey lay there for a while, groggily trying to piece together eir thoughts on the situation. As far as ey could remember, in eir still sleep-addled state, ey’d never been this close to True Name before. There had been the occasional casual touch, a few touches out of necessity — grabbing her hand to get away from Guōwēi, lifting her after End Waking’s merge — but even going back to when ey’d first met her, there’d been very little touch.

It made sense, given her personality, and yet here she was, all cuddled up with the two of them. If nothing else, ey should probably decide whether or not to extricate eir arm from the situation to ease that awkwardness.

Ah well, ey was probably worrying too much about this, just laying there and ruminating.

“You almost certainly are, Mx. Bălan,” came the barest whisper of a sensorium message. *“Especially if you are mumbling.”*

Ey jolted at the words impinging on eir senses, getting a sleepy grumble out of May.

“Sorry,” ey replied to True Name.

There was a note of amusement, of almost-laughter, as she sent, *“It is okay, dear. What are you worried about? You only mumbled the last bit.”*

Eir mind raced as ey tried to figure out how best to explain what ey’d been cycling over.

“I rolled over sometime in the night — I do not know when, I was memory-sick — and have been staying still to keep from waking you two. Would you like me to move?”

“No...” ey replied hesitantly. *“But you guessed right. I hope this isn’t weird or anything. If you need to—”*

“Ioan, I asked after your preferences,” she chided. *“I am okay, I promise.”*

Ey hid the heat rising to eir cheeks by burying eir face in May’s fur. *“Right, sorry. You’re okay there. I’m just being awkward.”*

Ey felt True Name relax. *“We both are. It is comforting and awkward in equal measure. One third of me is very happy to be held, one third would really rather not be touched, and one third is simply confused. I am of three minds.”*

“Have you finished merging, then?”

There was a subtle rustle of fur against pillow as the skunk shook her head. *“I have the memories in place, but there are many conflicts yet to process. It is easier to put those on hold, at least, so that I can make fun of you for mumbling for a little bit.”*

Ey smirked. *“Har har. All the same, I’m glad you made it through to this far, at least.”*

“Thank you, Ioan. As am I.”

They fell back into silence then. Ioan spent a while marveling at the mix of coziness and strangeness. It was comfortable, there with the two skunks. May was in eir arms as she should be, and True Name, similar as she was, fit well enough in the mix. The strangeness, then, came from the knowledge that she was specifically True Name. This was so counter to what ey knew of her from the years prior, especially the version of her that she’d become over the past few weeks since End Waking’s merge.

Ey could already tell that she’d changed, though, even beyond the fact that she’d wound up as close as this. Her speech patterns were shifting once again, losing some of their formality, finding their way back to ground from the high-minded patterns she’d picked up from her other cocladist, and yet they weren’t totally those of May, either. They didn’t sound the same, just more alike than they had before.

She was tripled, now. She was True Name and she was End Waking and she was May. Whether or not she would become something new or remain tripled ey didn’t think even she knew. The adjustment would certainly take time for everyone. Ey liked End Waking quite a bit as a friend, but that friendship was different than that of eirs with True Name. Ey was friends with May, but in that way that partners were still friends beneath the romance of a big-R Relationship, and there was certainly no comparison to be made between the other small-r relationships here. If she was of three minds, so was ey.

"Unrelated to comfort or awkwardness, I am going to get up to make coffee," she sent, nudging em out of rumination once more. *"I did not sleep, and if I do not have coffee soon, I shall surely die."*

May grumbled again when True Name rolled away from her, gathering the remainder of the covers and a stray pillow up to replace the space that had been left by her cocladist's absence. Ey couldn't tell if the skunk was actually awake or not, but she settled down once more, if nothing else.

True Name sat up and scrubbed at her face with her paws, wiping the grit of sleep — or perhaps tears — from her eyes. She grinned down to em. *"My assessment remains. You two are so cute that it is disgusting."*

Stifling a laugh, ey rolled eir eyes. *"Blame May."*

"Way ahead of you, dear," she sent as she crawled out of bed. *"I will make coffee and then I will need some alone time on the plain. I will ensure there is enough for all."*

There was a quiet clattering from the kitchen, mugs being shifted about and the coffee pot being set in place, doubtless another instance of her making enough noise to let them know what she was up to.

It was enough to wake May the rest of the way, the skunk stretching out against eir front and yawning wide before she shifted about to face em. "Pillows," she mumbled, peeking down at the bundle she still held in her arms. "Oh, did I...?"

Ioan nodded, placing a kiss atop her head. "She said she rolled over against you, yeah."

"Sorry, Ioan."

"It's fine by me, I slept through most of it," ey said, chuckling. "She and I talked about it a bit before you woke up. She's confused about it, but seemed like she needed it."

"She is learning my wicked ways," she mumbled against eir front. "I am happy to hear that it was helpful and that you are okay with it, though."

"Mmhm. How about you?"

May yawned again before poking her nose up against eir chin. "I do not know. I slept through it, too, apparently. It fits with what I said earlier, though. I am pleased to care for those around me."

"She also called us disgusting again."

"That is because we are. Is that her making coffee?"

Ey nodded, nudging her snout with eir chin.

"Good girl."

A few minutes later, True Name returned, carrying three mugs of coffee. Ioan and May pushed themselves up to sitting so that they could accept.

"I am sorry I shouted last night. I think I understand Dear's letter better now."

May nodded.

"I was wondering if you didn't know about...all that before last night, honestly," Ioan said.

"I have been fed bad and incomplete information for years now. I had not suspected just to what extent. I am still frightened, if I am honest, but I will trust you two on this. It is complicated, and bound up in emotions I do not understand, but I will trust you." She shook her head. "But I cannot speak of it any more right now."

"Heading outside?" ey asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I will need an hour or so of nothing but the morning and the grass."

"Of course."

May nodded. "Take the space you need."

True Name leaned over enough to dot her nose against the skunk's cheek. "Thank you, dear. If you cook breakfast, I will refrain from telling Ioan embarrassing stories."

"Asshole." She laughed. "Where did this humor come from?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, at this point."

"She seems to be doing well," ey said, once she'd made her way outside and down the stairs to the prairie.

"It helps that I did not drop a merge onto her unexpectedly. She had more to process, but more preparation to do so."

"She said she's done getting the memories in order but working on conflicts now."

May nodded. "About a third of the way done, then."

"It's really gratifying to see it going so much more smoothly this time."

"Agreed, yes," she said between sips. "I was not expecting her to turn into a cuddlebug, but I suppose that will level out before long. Was that awkward, this morning?"

Ey shrugged. "A little, I guess. Just hard making it work in my head. Doesn't fit with what I remember of her."

"I cannot picture you getting cozy with just True Name, no. I can barely picture her getting cozy with anyone, and that is certainly not even bringing End Waking's general touch aversion into the equation."

"I'd assume she got cozy with Zacharias, if they were together."

May's expression soured. "We will need to talk about him soon, but I cannot talk about him now."

"Of course."

She made a setting aside gesture, stepping back to the previous topic. "Did that feel like crossing a boundary?"

"Not particularly, no. It just felt like me being awkward, more than anything."

"That is good, then." She finished her coffee and waved the mug away. "I do not know how to feel about it, myself, because I do not know what she will be like when she has finished incorporating the merge. She is not yet settled enough, so I will forgive much that I might not otherwise."

"It's not like she was hitting on me or anything," ey said, laughing.

She smirked. "Are you sure?"

Ey reached over to tug on one of her ears gently. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm dense, but not *that* dense."

The skunk tilted her head at the tug, laughing. "Has your opinion of her as a friend changed?"

Ioan tilted eir head. "How do you mean?"

"I do not imagine that you felt the same about her when she was just True Name as you do now about who she has become. Or is becoming, at least."

"Well, no," ey hazarded. "But I don't know just how, yet."

"Me either."

They reconvened over a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon with toast.

"I instructed my fork to quit," True Name said by way of opening the conversation.

"Feeling positive about the merge, then?" ey asked.

"Yes. Having worked through some conflicts, it will not be easy, but I am comfortable with the direction in

which it is going.” She took a bite of toast piled high with eggs and a small piece of bacon, chewing thoughtfully. “It is not all positive, but it has given me hope for a pleasant life moving forward.”

“Was your life unpleasant before?” When May frowned at em, ey held up eir hands. “Sorry, maybe that’s impertinent. It’s not important.”

True Name shook her head. “It is okay. It was, yes. It was fulfilling. I felt hopeful and comfortable with the path I had chosen. The work itself was starting to grate on me, but that had less to do with the work than the coworker. Pleasantness was never a focus for me, however.”

May, having subsided, finished her bite of toast before asking, “Did you have hope for happiness with just End Waking’s merge?”

“No. Not at all.” She reached out a paw to give one of May’s a squeeze, adding quickly, “Again, I understand — now more than ever — why you did what you did, and I do approve of it in light of what is happening with Jonas, but it was an uncomfortable duality in comparison to this more comfortable plurality and I may yet settle into a new singularity. I do not know.”

May smiled gratefully, returning that squeeze.

“Meeting up with my fork hammered that point home pretty well. She looked...well, I will not elaborate on the differences I saw. Seeing myself through her eyes, I can tell that she was pleased as well.”

“I am very happy to hear that,” May said. “Not least of which because you seem to be building a new self rather than simply a raw combination of us.”

True Name nodded, finished her plate before setting it aside. “Thank you for breakfast, May Then My Name. Your secrets are safe for another day— owl!”

“Your high station does not preclude you from being kicked, my dear,” May said sweetly. “You deserved that.”

The skunk preened.

Ioan watched the exchange, grinning. Beyond just what she’d said, ey could read relief in May’s features. That resentment towards her down-tree instance had never quite gone away, ey knew, and, on some level, it likely never would. Still, that True Name was, as the skunks had said, rebuilding herself into a new person seemed to have brought out a new sense of friendliness within eir partner that had been lacking to that point.

Ey wondered if she would go through a reevaluation of who True Name had been before, much as ey had. It was certainly enough that she felt more positive, but ey — em and Codrin#Castor, perhaps — seemed to have dropped much of that resentment that had lingered in May and so many others, though whether that was due to a difference in temperament or the relatively short time they’d known the skunk in comparison, ey couldn’t tell.

“Is it just me, or is eir mumbling getting worse?” True Name stage-whispered to May.

She whispered back, “Perhaps the centuries are catching up to em. Is this how the Bălans crack? Should we warn Dear?”

“Are all skunks such pests?” Ey smirked.

They laughed.

“I mumble more when I’m stressed, that’s all.”

“Are you stressed now, my dear?” May asked.

“It’s a stressful time overall, even if this particular morning is pleasant enough.”

“It feels rather like the morning after a sleepover, yes,” True Name said.

May nodded eagerly.

“I’ve never had one of those, so I’ll have to take your word for it. Do those always come with cuddling up in the morning?”

Both skunks splayed their ears and dipped their snouts.

“It depends on the sleepover,” May said, adding to True Name, “Are you feeling well enough to discuss boundaries now?”

She hesitated. “We can begin the conversation, though I will need to address further conflicts before long.”

“To be clear,” Ioan said. “I’m okay with it, it was just unexpected.”

True Name gave a hint of a bow. “One thing that came up in our discussions leading up to the merge is that the one with the greater restrictions in a relationship defines the boundaries. Right now, I suspect that may be one of you two. I am the outsider, here. I have never had to have a conversation such as this.”

“My comment about you building up a new self has gone a long way towards soothing any fears,” May said. “I think I was worried you might incorporate my memories of the last few decades wholesale and wind up feeling exactly the way that I do about Ioan.”

True Name shook her head. “I have taken to heart your requests and declined the personal memories you suggested. There are many conflicts,” she said, speaking more slowly. “Perhaps due to your feelings about me as I was, so I am not sure how I feel yet, but...well, may I speak earnestly?”

May and Ioan both nodded.

“On that point, I remember enough to know why it is that you love Ioan. I can see what it is that you see in em. It is as if...” She trailed off, ears pinned flat. “This is so fucking embarrassing. I am sorry. Uh...it is as though there is a world in which I could do the same, but I do not know how to get from here to there. Again, I am sorry, May Then My Name.”

There was a long silence around the table while Ioan and May digested this. True Name spent it resting her head in her paws and staring down at her plate.

It was May who broke the silence, saying simply, “May.”

True Name sniffled and lifted her head. “Sorry?”

“Stop calling me May Then My Name.”

“I—”

“Do not make it weird, True Name,” May said, laughing. She held out a paw toward the skunk “Just fucking call me May already.”

“Right. May,” True Name said, gingerly resting her paw in her up-tree instance’s.

“I do not know how you get from this world to that one, either, should that even be something you want, but,” she said, taking a deep breath. “So long as you come by that path earnestly and we discuss it in the moment, it is your path to take. Ioan?”

Ey held up eir hands. “Don’t look at me. I don’t have a clue.”

They laughed.

“We’ll see, I guess,” ey said, shrugging. “It’s all way too much for me to take in right now.”

“Perhaps that is a good place to pause,” True Name said. “This conversation has those conflicts begging for attention.”

“Of course, my dear,” May said, giving her paw a squeeze. “Go and walk. There will be time for discussions to come, especially once we are finished with this unpleasant political business.”

Debarre — 2350

When Debarre received the ping from End Waking, he quickly excused himself from dinner and dashed out into the back yard to respond. The last time he'd received a message in the middle of a period of overflowing, it had been when the skunk's leg had been impaled on a branch, so he hoped against hope that it wasn't the entire tent washing away in a flood this time. It was getting on in spring — still a bit early for floods, but one never knew...

"E.W.?" he said. "What's up? You okay? Is the tent?"

"The tent is fine, my dear," he replied. "I apologize if I interrupted, but I have some news regarding May Then My Name, Ioan, and True Name, and you requested that I message you. Besides, I need to speak about it with someone other than them. Someone not an Odist."

He frowned down to the lawn, kicking at a tuft of crabgrass. "Well, if you're getting in touch, I'm assuming it's urgent."

There was a sense of a sigh from the other end. "I am sorry, my love."

"Fuck, I'm sorry, E.W. That came out way snarkier than intended. I understand. I only meant to ask if it was the type of thing where I should fork and come by right away."

"Please," End Waking said, sounding relieved. "There is nothing to be done, but I am very impatient to speak with someone."

"You? Impatient?" Debarre laughed. "I'll be right over."

He forked off Debarre#RelEW and watched him step from the sim, then spent another few seconds looking out into the yard, trying to remember the last time anything had been so important that it had required him leaving immediately. Something other than a tree falling on his boyfriend, that is.

"Well, shit," he muttered, turning to head back inside. "This is gonna be a mess."

Debarre#RelEW was greeted by the sight of End Waking kneeling in the clearing across from May Then My Name.

"Oh, company," he said, frowning. "Wasn't expecting two of you."

"You messaged...wait, does that mean you are a fork?" May Then My Name said, frowning at End Waking.

"It does, yes."

“I never knew you had it in you,” she said, sounding proud. To Debarre, she said, “Did this asshole tell you why I am here?”

He gave her a hug before sitting down with them. “He said it had something to do with you, Ioan, and True Name, and that he needed to talk to a non-Odist. That’s why I was surprised.”

She grinned. “You will have your chance, my dear. I will not be here long. I needed to step out for a moment, and figured I would catch End Waking up. I am happy to see you as well, though.”

“Happy to see you too. You’re always welcome over to my place, too.”

“Of course, yes. This did involve End Waking, though, so alas, I could not go make you uncomfortable with my flirting.”

He shoved at the skunk, who giggled.

“Well, okay. What’s up? You finally merge down?”

She blinked, looking startled. “Yes, actually. How did you guess?”

“Ioan mentioned it when we talked last. How’d it go? Did she explode?”

“Not at all, no. Actually...” She shrugged, poking at the dirt with a twig. “Actually, I am finding myself rather fond of her, now.”

“Bullshit,” he growled.

“Debarre,” End Waking murmured.

May Then My Name waved a paw. “It is okay. You do not have to like her. You do not even have to interact with her. End Waking wanted you to know about some of the practical considerations, but neither of us are planning on swaying your opinion of her.”

He frowned and leaned back on his palms. “Sorry. I guess I’m just worried about you. She’s not exactly known for her openness and honesty without ulterior motives, so.”

She smiled wanly. “No, she is not. A fact I have not forgotten. Needless to say, I merged down, and she is making plans to meet up with Jonas, now.”

“That falls more in line with practical concerns,” he conceded. “And Jonas still wants both of you there?”

“As far as I know, yes,” End Waking said. “I have spoken with True Name several times over the last few weeks and she has a plan of sorts. I do not know how successful it will be, but it is better than nothing.”

“Wait, you’ve been talking with her, too?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. He could already feel his hackles up, and this wasn’t helping. “Can’t fucking believe it.”

May Then My Name frowned, leaned over to hug him around the shoulders, and whispered, “I am going to leave you to it, but first, remember who you were, who you are, and imagine who you will become. Let go, have fun, but above all, remember that you love him and that he loves you. Those are the rules of engagement.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he returned the hug. Had she said it in anything less than her most earnest voice, he might have scoffed, but as it was, he could see himself falling for the gentle manipulation as though from a meter above. He could resent her, but she had said exactly what it was that he needed to hear.

Because of course she had. She was May Then My Name Die With Me. She knew just how to. She was built to.

"You're such an asshole," he whispered back, then kissed her cheek to take any sting out of the words. "I'll do my best. Now, shoo."

She laughed and licked at one of his whiskerpads. "Yes, yes."

After she leaned over to pat End Waking on the knee, she stood up and stepped out of the sim.

Debarre rubbed his paws over his face. "Where's your root instance? Within an hour's walk?"

End Waking nodded. "Up-river, yes. Would you like me to walk you there?"

He shook his head. "Give me some time to think. There's still some of me that's stuck on dinner parties, then another chunk on this whole thing, and another still on May telling me about these rules of engagement or whatever."

The skunk smiled faintly. "Twenty minutes' walk up-river, then. He will know that you are coming."

After End Waking quit, Debarre started to trudge up the faint trail that they'd already worn heading up along the river.

He knew that May Then My Name was right, that he probably needed to at least take into account that if Sasha and Michelle could change enough to make the Odists, then surely True Name could change enough to become someone that even her up-tree instances could like, just as he knew that he probably shouldn't take that out on his boyfriend, frustrated as he was.

Still, it was hard to square the image of End Waking and True Name meeting up voluntarily. What was it that he'd said when Ioan had come by asking after camping supplies? *"I will help but I will not speak with her"*?

Remember that you love him, he thought, even as he trudged up the path. *Even if you're working to undermine all that shit that she's done with Jonas, at least you still love E.W.*

The skunk was crouching at the edge of the stream, washing his paws after having apparently just finished gutting a trio of large trout.

"I understand if you are upset, Debarre," he said, keeping his gaze on his paws as he scrubbed rather than looking up to him.

"No," Debarre said, sitting down next to him. "Or, well, I am, but it's whatever. I just don't see how something as stupid as May Then My Name merging down solves anything about this. Suddenly, you two are all buddy-buddy?"

End Waking shook his paws free of most of the water before drying them on the hem of his cloak. "We are not. I am pleased that she is no longer who she was, but she is not a friend. She is not me."

"But you're visiting her!"

"On business, such as it is. May Then My Name has asked me over a few times." The skunk finally looked at him, gaze level and expression flat. "Did you not say that you would rather she not die?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean that you need to interact with her. I don't want her to get offed by some asshole politician, but I also don't particularly want her in my life."

End Waking shifted from his crouch to sitting cross-legged on the bank of the river. "I do understand that, yes. I do not particularly want her in mine, either, but I am now a part of hers, whether she likes it or not. I have been able to help her process some aspects of the merge and also tell her more of how I feel to her face. Once this is over, she will not need to be a part of my life any more if I so desire, and I can move on to defining myself through something other than penance."

Debarre scratched a claw through the dirt of the bank, worrying a pebble free so that he could throw it into the river while he thought. Finally, he nodded, saying, “Okay, I get that. What will you define yourself as, then? Like, don’t get me wrong, I’m happy you aren’t her, and in part specifically *because* you aren’t her, but that’s not the only reason I love you.”

“I do not know, my love,” he said after a long silence. “If I am defined by not being her, by not being what I was, then what is left? I cannot say my love for you, because all of the clade has that to some extent. I cannot even say that I have being an Odist, because, after all these years and with all of her changes over the last few months, I am not even sure that I am that.”

“You can be just End Waking,” Debarre said gently. “Like, you can just drop the clade and be that nerd who lives in the woods.”

The skunk laughed and elbowed him in the side. “We have rather turned our clade identity into idolatry of a sort, have we not?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like where you came from, but I won’t be pissed if you drop your clade signifier. Hell, maybe you can even start saying things like ‘don’t’ and ‘isn’t’.”

“Do not push your luck.”

They laughed.

“You don’t have to have this sorted out, though.” He shrugged, adding, “You don’t even have to stop seeing True Name. I’m sorry I got angry there. I think I just got upset because any chance that you might start liking her felt like something of a betrayal.”

“I am a ways off yet from liking her, Debarre. I will not say never, but I have gotten to the point where I tolerate her. I will not betray you, though. You or your reactionary friends or whatever she called them.”

Debarre scrambled to his feet, eyes darting around through the trees. “What the fuck?”

“The sim is empty, my dear,” the skunk said calmly. “I empty it every time someone enters.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I think about you a lot, Debarre. Certainly more than anyone else I think about. I have pieced together enough.”

He growled. “Well, shit. I mean, I guess I’m an obvious enough choice for it.”

“You are, yes, and doubtless the powers that be have been keeping their eye on you since the dissolution of the Council. I do not know the specifics, nor do I want to. As I said, I will not betray you.” End Waking smiled wryly, adding, “And I do not think I am of much interest to any of them, anyway. I rarely leave, and I never enter a building when I do. I am more focused on my next meal than anything else.”

“Skunks just wanna get fat.”

End Waking grinned toothily. “It is not *not* true.”

“Well, anyway. Fair enough. I don’t imagine you’ll be ratting us out, and you’re right that they probably already know. I’m just glad that you’ve been sweeping the place.”

“I have never caught anyone hitchhiking on you, though I have on May Then My Name and Ioan.” He shrugged, gathered up the line of fish. “But speaking of fat, can we go back to cook these? I am not ready for you to stay over, but I would like to eat dinner with you, if you are up for it.” Debarre was still mostly full from dinner at home, but he had a few bites of fish forked from End Waking’s plate. Tasty, but, as always, lacking in

salt.

After they ate, End Waking tasked Debarre with washing off the plate while he tucked another small log into the stove and started the kettle for tea, which they shared while sitting on the step at the entrance to the tent, keeping the last of the spring chill away.

“So, my political junkie friends aside, do you have a better idea of what’s going on with Jonas and company?”

End Waking shrugged. “A little, perhaps. I think it is this upcoming audio-video tech. I do not think he wanted–”

“Moment,” Debarre said, holding up a paw while he sent a hasty message back home. “Sorry. We’d been guessing at that, just sent a confirmation. Done now.”

“Please do not act on it yet, my dear.”

So serious was the skunk’s tone that Debarre set down his mug and turned to face him. “I won’t, but you gotta tell me why.”

“I am going to be at this meeting. I should probably not even know about their AVEC, but I do because of True Name.”

“And given you and I, there’s probably only one place I’d get it,” he guessed and, when the skunk nodded, sent another message back home. “You sure this place is secure, then? And you’re sending a fork, right?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Good.”

End Waking smiled. “I know that you do, but it is always pleasing to have confirmation that you think so much of me, Debarre.”

“Of course I do,” he scoffed. “But I interrupted, sorry. You were saying?”

“Right. With this AVEC technology, I think that Jonas sees an opening to edge True Name out. I do not know why, but she mentioned something about a diversity of governance across Systems. I do not agree with him on this. I think he is playing a dangerous game by treating each of the Systems so differently. Each System treating itself as a separate country is one thing, but potentially destabilizing them by forcing upon each a different form of governance feels like him treating politics as his personal plaything. I do not like it.”

The longer End Waking spoke, the deeper Debarre’s frown got. “Yeah, ever since they set up that Guiding Council thing over on Pollux, we’ve been wondering about that. It sounds innocuous enough. Reasonably close to the Council of Ten over on Artemis, I guess, at least on the surface. Just folks you can go talk to about disagreements and mediation. That part was inoffensive, but that they would even do such a thing in the face of the *History* is just wild.”

End Waking shrugged. “You know more than I on that end. I do not keep up with either LV beyond what you and Ioan care to pass on. There are messages from the clade, but you know my feelings on them.”

“Mmhm.” Debarre hesitated, then added, “Though if you do wind up going through them and come across any juicy details about those politics you don’t care about, you could always share them with me.”

He laughed and shook his head. “Should my life become so boring, you will have more to worry about, my love. I am better at being a pest than you give me credit for.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll just get them from May Then My Name.”

“You will have to put up with her ceaseless flirting.”

Debarre grinned. “I’m pretty well used to it by now. You’re really going to go to this thing, though?”

End Waking nodded, chewing on a mouthful of tisane-bits. “Yes.”

“Why, though? Isn’t that gonna be dangerous? Never mind totally outside your interest. It’ll all be politics.”

The skunk was a long time in answering, staring out into the forest and listening to the far-away rush of the waterfall. “There is what Jonas hopes to accomplish and what I hope to learn. Jonas, I think, would like to gloat. He would like it known that he can loop even me into his plans. He would like even me, even the recluse, scared so that he may use me as a lever over True Name if she is to come out of this alive.”

“And me.”

“And you, yes. I do not doubt that even he knows what you are up to these days, though I do not know to what extent.” He poked around in his mug to hunt down the last of the gooseberries. “I am pleased that you are so careful. I worry about you.”

Debarre sat, silent. The comment all but demanded silence from him, so rare was any expression of worry from his boyfriend.

“I will be going because if this is to be the end of True Name then it will be a step towards letting go. It will be an in for me to become independent. If I am to move beyond that which defines me, I would like to know how.”

“Still thinking of cutting your ties? Dropping the clade name?”

End Waking shrugged. “Would that be so bad? May Then My Name would become simply a friend, rather than a cocladist. True Name would become someone I know rather than a down-tree instance. I do not speak with the others. Serene, perhaps? But even then, it has been many years. It would not change my relationship with you. The forest will not care if I am an Odist or if I am not. To it, I am called Nobody, and when I die and moulder beneath the roots, then it will say that it feasts on Nobody.”

Debarre sighed. Hearing End Waking talk so much was a rarity, but that the death-thoughts were still there meant it’d be a while yet before he’d be allowed back to stay.

“And AwDae? The Name?” he asked. As he always did when Debarre said their friend’s name, the skunk stiffened, hunched his shoulders, and drew his hood up over his head. All the same, he’d made it a point to say it at least once per visit. There had been a row the first few times, but he’d won on the point that AwDae had been his friend, too.

“I do not know, Debarre. That is, I think, the one thing that I will ever defer to True Name on.”

He snorted. “Really?”

“If she, of all of us, were ever to feel comfortable speaking it, talking about em, then I will know that this embargo will have been lifted.”

“Well, fair,” the weasel said, finishing his tea before handing the mug back to End Waking to let the skunk snack on the remnants. He’d never really enjoyed them enough to do so himself. “I’m happy for you, you know that?”

End Waking laughed, swallowing the spent lemon balm and mint he’d been chewing. “Happy?”

“Yeah. Like...” Debarre trailed off, hunting for words. “I’ve never seen you move forward so much all at once. Or at all, really. Like, it’s not a bad thing to have a life that you’re happy with, but watching you work on the things you *weren’t* happy with is nice to see. Kinda glad May Then My Name talked you into the merge, honestly.”

“It has brought me a lightness, yes. She is meddlesome, but kind-hearted.”

“You’re telling me. She gave me rules of engagement when I first showed up. Thought she was being weird, but they worked pretty well.”

“She is a brat.”

Debarre laughed. “You all are. But hey, I should get going.”

The slight sag in End Waking’s shoulders spoke of relief. He nodded, saying, “Of course. Thank you for the chance to talk.”

“You’ll let me know when you’re going out to this meeting, right?”

“Of course.”

“And you promise you’ll send a fork?”

“I will.”

“And call if you need?”

“Debarre, shut up,” End Waking said, patting his knee. “Go. I will keep you up to date.”

“Fine, fine.” He gave the skunk’s paw a squeeze and grinned. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Debarre quit, rather than bothering with stepping back home. The pile of experiences caught his down-tree instance in the middle of a sentence — thankfully something unimportant — and he had to spend a minute reconciling the memories with the ones he’d made since.

“Well, that was interesting.”

“Fuck,” user11824 said. “I was worried you’d say something like that.”

He laughed. “You’re right to worry. Shit’s gonna get really weird here. Life’ll get both more and less simple real quick.”

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Ioan quickly began to wish for boredom. They'd made it into April and so many things had happened. Assassination attempts, centuries of merging, overflowing...

Ey just wanted to be bored.

At least they'd settled into a routine once more, and it was far more comfortable than either of the previous ones — when True Name had first moved in, and then after End Waking's merge — so ey couldn't complain too much.

True Name managed May's merge much more easily than she had End Waking's, and ey could see now the benefits of that week of negotiation beforehand. May had whispered to em one night about the final merge with Michelle and Sasha, about memories crashing down in a cascade of centuries and just how mad that final instance of True Name must have been in those final moments. Even with just one merge, she still occasionally mentioned a pressing memory or two from End Waking demanding attention nearly two months later.

It was just another part of the routine. A rocky routine, and an exciting one, but still a routine.

It wasn't all bad, of course. For every talk they had about meeting with Jonas or what role Zacharias played or some boundary one of them had crossed, there were still the pleasant meals, the shared quiet, and, ey had to admit, ey rather liked who True Name had shaped herself into.

Ey had certainly liked who she used to be, of course, though in a vastly different way — three years of coffee dates stood as testament to that. A large part of this, ey'd realized, came with just how much more settled in herself she was. Even that drive she cherished about herself had been tempered into something smoother, less laser-sharp. She was more well-rounded, more able to relax, more able to work without it occupying the whole of her.

The weirdest part, though, had to be sleep. They spent two nights staying with True Name while she processed first the memories and then the conflicts before trying to go back to sleeping separately.

She spent the next day distracted and out of sorts, first begging off breakfast to sit outside, then joining them in the den before getting anxious and slipping off to go lay down again. That night, she woke them a few hours after they'd gone to bed, tearfully asking to join them.

"This is so fucking stupid. I feel like a fucking kid," she'd said between sniffles. "I am sorry."

May had shushed her and held up the covers for her to climb in, letting her settle back into much the same position she had those first two nights.

It had certainly worked well enough, with Ioan rising at eir usual eight o'clock while the two skunks slept

in for another hour. Later that day, May had instructed — or perhaps reminded — her how to get at least some comfort out of sleeping curled up with a fork.

Still, once a week or so, they'd wake to her asking to join them, and eventually Ioan had given in and expanded their own bed by a half meter to at least make it roomier when she did. She'd at least been quite understanding when May had requested that it not be every night.

Ey was unsure of eir feelings on the matter. On the one hand, it was still intensely weird to see True Name, of all people, openly seeking affection and a shared bed, and stranger still to see May welcoming that.

On the other, the nights when she joined them weren't unpleasant, even if it would be a while before ey was used to sharing a bed with anyone other than May. This was to say nothing about the shyness ey felt about eir body. The first few times she had joined them, ey had wrapped emself up in a sheet before leaving the bed to maintain some sense of modesty, though given that these nights had usually meant the skunks slept in, ey eventually gave up on that.

They'd all begun seeing Sarah regularly again, which was a relief. The three of them had even met with her together on one occasion, discussing the path that had led them here and sharing some of their thoughts on how things had wound up in a structured session.

Ioan found eir own sessions particularly helpful when it came to disentangling eir thoughts on the past. Sarah had urged em to trace eir relationship not just with True Name or May, but with the entire Ode clade from that first message of Dear's through to the present, charting eir feelings about each of them and how they differed or were the same. It helped to pull apart what it was that ey liked about them as well as what it was that left em stressed, exasperated, or just plain tired from their interactions.

Ey didn't know what the two skunks talked about in their sessions, whether apart or together, but it seemed productive. Not always pleasant, granted: both were left in tears after a few meetings.

Still, through it all ey was genuinely pleased to see them happy, or at least on their way to happiness.

Ey just needed boredom and ey needed out.

It took some convincing — on all three of their parts, since ey needed to convince emself as much as True Name and May — but eventually, Ioan worked up the courage to leave the house, seeking out some much needed solitude, even if it was only in the anonymity of public spaces.

The coffee shop ey'd frequented for so long may have been safe, but given that eir last visit had included an attempt on a friend's life, ey opted instead for an afternoon in a library. The one ey frequented also felt fraught, given its association with all of those meetings with Jonas and so many others during the research for the *History*, so ey chose one ey'd never been to before from the directory. Besides, the information was technically available anywhere, libraries just provided a familiar physical location to access it, a social place for gathering around the topic of information, and some physical tools used for manipulating that information that individuals rarely had room for.

Beyond that, though, it was the very idea of the space that appealed to em and so many others. Ey'd long ago let go of eir desire to be a librarian. Codrin#Pollux had that covered, and ey'd made eir choice, influenced as it was by eir life with May, to settle into theatre.

That didn't remove the appeal, though. Ey could still go to the building and wander through the stacks, dragging fingertips along the spines of books or poring over maps. Ey could still go sit beside a window with a

book ey may not even like and, if nothing else, enjoy the sun.

This library had eschewed the flashy exterior of eir normal haunt, that glass-walled cube, opting instead for a low and flat structure, one that took its majesty from the way it sprawled out over its campus, buildings connected by breezeways or tunnels, scattered seemingly at random in such a way as to form irregular courtyards full of benches, gardens, or, in one notable case, a small gallery ey initially mistook for another garden, but for the fact that all of the foliage was made of glass.

Ey liked it immensely.

The busiest section of the library was far and away the wing that had been built to house the massive information dump from Artemis. This took the form of a squat, pentagonal building — one wall for each Artemisian race and one for their shared knowledge — that bored its way deep into the ground, a slow-sloping spiral winding down along the shelves to allow visitors to browse their way back in time until, at the very bottom, only firsttrace had any material. Translation efforts were still underway, but there was more to read every day.

Ey stayed away from this for the day. Ey wanted cozy, not awe-inspiring.

Eventually, having loaded up on a few random finds — trashy sci-fi, some contemporary phys-side fiction from decades after ey'd uploaded, even a bit of furry fiction from early in the 21st century ey considered bringing home to show May — ey parked emself in the glass garden and arrayed the books out before em on the table.

The sci-fi proved to be a little *too* trashy for eir tastes, and while the contemporary fiction was certainly intriguing, it was far too dense for reading when ey was trying to have a lighter, easier day. The furry book struck a nice middle-ground, at least, even if ey couldn't keep the species straight in eir head.

Eventually, though, ey gave up and just sat in the sun, watching the way it filtered through the glass leaves and branches of the trees.

No better way to realize just how tense you are than by relaxing, ey thought.

Ey imagined the two skunks also would appreciate some time out of the house, too. Doubtless there were some sims they could visit that would be reasonably safe. Douglas's field, End Waking's forest...well, no longer Arrowhead Lake.

"Hi Serene," ey began, starting up the simplex sensorium message before ey lost both the nerve and the train of thought. "I know it's been a while since we've spoken, so I hope you're well. I have a strange question that might turn into a really big request. After some...very dramatic events, one of our favorite places is no longer safe for us. I guess that's what happens when you just kind of adopt an abandoned sim without knowing much about it.

"Still, it's become personally meaningful to us over the years, and we're finding ourselves missing it. I don't know if we necessarily need a copy of it, but would it be possible for you to come take a look at it and see about what all would go into creating something similar? It'd be a modification of my home sim. There's no rush, and if nothing else, it'd be good to say hi sometime. Talk soon."

Further reading was largely a failure. Ey couldn't get back into any of the books ey'd started, and a certain listlessness tamped down any desire to head back to the shelves to hunt more. Ey left them on a page's cart, an act that almost certainly just recycled the physical instances, and hunted down a cafe cart.

Serene sent a gentle sensorium ping just as ey picked up eir tea.

Ey quickly stepped into another courtyard — this one full of actual greenery, hot and humid — in order to reply. “Hi, Serene. Thanks for getting back to me.”

“No problem,” she said, the lack of any smile in her voice quite conspicuous. “Thank you for thinking of me.”

“Of course, no one better.”

“Flatterer,” she replied, a hint of the usual humor returning. It quickly fled. “Are you in a place where you can speak freely?”

“I...well, give me a moment, and I will make sure of that.”

Ey stepped home quickly, stopping in the entryway to sweep emself. No spies. *Thank God*, ey thought. *Wouldn't have put it past them to bug me at the library.*

Blinking a visually secured cone of silence into being, ey spoke into the sensorium message. “Okay, secure now.”

Serene laughed, “Oh, I had just meant away from crowds, no need to go through this much trouble.”

“Well, given all that's been going on...”

There was the sense of a sigh on the other end of the message. “Yes, I suppose you are right. That is why I messaged you back, actually. While it is certainly feasible and I would ordinarily be more than happy, I am not yet ready to engage with True Name.”

“That's fair,” ey said after a pause. “I know things are complicated. Do you know of any-”

“Oh goodness, I did not say I would not do it! I will, just...not yet. Please give me some time, my dear.”

Ey frowned, looking down at eir shoes as ey scuffed one against the parquet floor. “Right, okay. May I ask how you're feeling about this, then? I've had precious little contact with...well, anyone.”

There was another sigh. “I do not know yet, Ioan. I am not unhappy for her. I am not displeased that things are coming to a head with Jonas, as that will mean there will be a change, for better or worse. I am just not yet able to engage.”

“Of course.”

“Give me the address of the sim, at least. I will take a look and let you know what I think.”

“Peak Lake#587a9383.”

“Seriously?” Serene laughed. “I have not heard that address in decades.”

“Wait, did you-”

“It is not mine, no, but a student of mine made it. I do not imagine they still have ACLs, but I will ask.”

Ey shook eir head. “You guys seriously have your hands in everything, don't you?”

“It is not *not* true.”

“There are billions of people here, I don't know how that'd even be possible.”

“How many sim designers focusing on nature do you think there are?”

“I haven't the faintest.”

“Well, how many of *us* do you think there are?”

“Right.” Ey smirked. “‘Nominally’ a hundred.”

“There you go,” she said, voice sly. “We are old and we are many.”

"I bet," ey laughed. "Well, thanks for considering the request. I got something off the exchange that is less than ideal, and I miss that place. It's just got bugs."

"Gross."

"Very. Keep in touch, okay?"

"Will do, my dear. Say hi for me."

And with that, the message ended. Ey straightened up, went to rub at eir face, realized ey was still holding the cup of tea from the library, and turned the motion into taking a sip.

Ey dropped the cone of silence and let out a shout. The ACLs had blurred the area outside the cone enough that the sight of two skunks standing just outside its edge, staring intently at em and whispering to each other caught em off guard.

"What the hell?"

Both skunks laughed.

"We could ask you the same, my dear," May said, stepping up to get her arms around eir middle. "What an awkward place to have a conversation."

"I had to get somewhere secure," ey said, voice muffled as ey placed a kiss between her ears. "Serene says hi, by the way."

"What were you talking about that required security?" True Name asked, still grinning.

"Nothing too serious, actually. Just an abundance of caution, there. I was seeing what it would take to get our own copy of Arrowhead Lake."

Both skunks perked up at that. "Is that something she can do?" True Name asked.

"Apparently one of her students made it, so she's going to ask and see if they have ACLs. Otherwise, she said she's happy to make something similar down the line. Maybe once this is all over."

True Name nodded. "I will look forward to it. The field is fine for now when I get restless, but I miss the lake."

Ey nodded. "Same. You going to let me in, May?"

"Absolutely not," she said. "You will have to pick me up and carry me if you would like to enter your own home."

Ioan poked at her side until ey found a ticklish spot. "Such a brat."

She giggled and shoved herself away from em. "Rude. Come on, my dear. I have been pestering True Name with my monologue, and we are both bored loopy. Tell us about your excursion."

Ey was chivvied into the living room and sat down on the beanbag so that May could slouch against eir side while True Name claimed a spot on the couch. Ey described the seemingly endless library and all its odd-shaped courtyards, then talked about each of the books ey'd picked up — the only one either seemed interested in was the furry one, though neither had heard of it — finally ending with, "It was good to get out. Like, really good. Got me wondering, though, how are you two doing cooped up here?"

May groaned and slumped dramatically back onto the beanbag. "I am frankly losing my mind. I want to get back to the theatre. I do not even need to be performing, I would not mind even building sets or just falling asleep on that ratty old couch in the dressing room. I miss the stage. I miss the people. I miss drinking until two with Vos and A Finger Pointing. I miss restaurants, Ioan. *Restaurants*."

“Getting sick of my cooking?”

“It is the experience I miss. Your cooking is fine.” She hesitated, then shrugged. “Though you are not very good at sushi.”

“Do you feel like you are not able to leave?” True Name asked. “I do not think you would be in much danger.”

“I would not wish to test that.” May shrugged. “It has me anxious that both Jonas and so many of us are out there and have so much out for you. They may not be after me in particular, but I do not want to encounter any of them at the moment.”

Ey nodded. “What about friends’ sims? You’ve been to End Waking’s and Douglas’s since Secession day, but I’m sure there are others who’d be willing to sweep and have you over just to get out of the house. Hell, I bet Debarre would love to see you, and he seems the paranoid sort, anyway.”

She laughed and squirmed around until she was laying on her front, tail draped over eir lap. “You are right, as always. I will ping one of them at some point.”

A motion from the couch drew eir eye. True Name slumping over onto her side and stretching out. “So many names,” she said, voice distant. “I have not seen Debarre in centuries, and yet I saw him just a few weeks ago. I have not met Douglas and yet I know him well.”

“You will see them one day, my dear,” May said. “I do not know when, but I do not doubt you will.”

“Not today. Not yet,” True Name mumbled. The skunk shook her head, then smiled over to May and Ioan. “But you should, May. Go visit the field and Douglas. Go make fun of End Waking for his cooking. Go sit too close to Debarre and make eyes at him until he squirms.”

May laughed. “I do not know if End Waking has welcomed Debarre back, or I would get to do both at once.”

“Of course. Do not lose your mind when you have options yet. I will have the plain. I will have the deck. I will have planning to do, and I can lean on experience from End Waking.”

May looked to Ioan, who said, “I’m with True Name on this. Go on, get out of here.”

“Will you not come with?”

Ey shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s not what we’re discussing, though. We’re trying to figure out how to get you out of the house.”

She smirked. “Pushing me out the door, now?”

“No, of course not,” ey said, ruffling a hand over her ears. “Just making sure you get what you need, too.”

“I am,” True Name said lazily, still stretched out on the couch. “I have been you, I have a guess as to how you might be feeling.”

“I would call this mean if you were not both right,” May said, waving a paw dismissively. “Give me a moment, then.”

When the skunk went silent, True Name looked to Ioan, who shrugged.

“Alright,” May said. “Would you like to do dinner with Debarre, my dear? He invited me over a while back, and I am taking him up on that.”

“Wait, tonight?”

“He is free, so why not?”

Ey furrowed eir brow. “I was expecting in a few days or so. Maybe, I guess?”

“You do not have to, Ioan,” she chided. “I know you enjoy alone time as much as anyone.”

“Well, ask me before you head out, then, maybe I’ll get some work done in the interim.”

She leaned up to dot her nose against eir cheek a few times, laughing. “It is nearly six. I was going to head out now.”

“Wait, really?” Ey frowned, twisting around to see the light slowly fading outside. “Damn.”

“Just stay. Do your work. Enjoy a bit more solitude.”

“Alright, alright.”

She stood up and stretched, padding over to brush some of True Name’s head-fur into order. “And you enjoy your time outdoors. Or melting on the couch, or whatever it is you are doing.”

“Mm. Do enjoy yourself, May.”

Once May had changed her clothes and stepped away, a few long minutes of silence fell. Ioan finished eir tea. True Name got lost in thought, or perhaps dozed.

It was, ey realized, the first time they’d been alone together in weeks. The three of them had been cooped up together since both skunks had overflowed. The circumstances had rather forced their hands in the matter, at least until today.

There was some lingering discomfort in the air, though, some careful distance between them. Something about what memories True Name had of em — something ey couldn’t possibly know — and what that meant for them still made its presence known. It wasn’t that they hadn’t interacted. Far from it, actually. She’d opened up far more than ey’d expected after the merge, watching May practice her monologue, talking about the decades and centuries before ey’d known her, about the time lost between her and the ‘other side of the clade’, about the root of fear that drove the Odists through the centuries. And it wasn’t as though they’d not touched. Though far from intimate, the nights she’d spent in their bed were beyond simple casual touches.

But it was all still very cautious. Those nights felt like a necessity borne out of overwhelming emotion. She and May had touched plenty — True Name had taken to resting her head in the other skunk’s lap, enjoying doting affection — but she’d maintained a sheen of that True Name-brand polite professionalism with em. Friendly, to be sure, but still distant.

You can just ask, too, you know.

“Hey, True Name?”

“Mm?”

“Have things been awkward since the merge?”

She yawned and levered herself up to a sitting position again, rubbing her eyes. She certainly looked like she’d dozed off. “Awkward how?”

“Well, I mean, we spent all that time talking about May and I’s relationship beforehand, and how that would impact you.” Ey pushed emself up to sitting on the beanbag as well, adding, “Which I have no clue how to feel about, to be clear. Just asking.”

“Well, we are of one mind on that front, at least,” she said, smiling. “I have no idea, dear. I am...I remain confused about the conflicting memories. Something about the base of my experience of you from the point of view of me *qua* True Name over the last few years feels more...real, perhaps. May I tell you something in confidence?”

Ey knit eir brow and nodded. “Of course.”

“Even at her friendliest and most open, May believed that these merges would make me, in some way, a more complete person. Even I began to believe such. The whole clade has spent too long accusing itself of being incomplete people based on our origins.” She paused to collect her thoughts, looking down at her paws. “But she killed me, in her own kind way. She who was True Name is dead, and now I am of three minds. I am what remains of True Name and I am May and I am End Waking. There is some unified core — there must be — as I am not strictly May or End Waking, and perhaps that core will yet have some other name, but I am of three minds.”

“In terms of conflicts?”

She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I do not feel the pressure of merge conflicts. Not many, at least. I feel tripled. I feel now like True Name, perhaps, and then I feel like May and some time later I will feel like End Waking. I lack the language to describe it. I felt something similar when I was Michelle and Sasha, but even that was not the same. I become less and less sure that I will be a singular person again, and so the reconciliation that remains is one of ensuring that those facets can coexist peacefully, as Sarah says.”

“I’m sorry, True Name, that sounds...I don’t even know. Impossible.”

“Oh, no, do not get me wrong,” she said, smiling. “It is not unpleasant. It is not what I — or even May — wanted, but it does not feel like a bad thing. It is difficult, however, as some contexts remain confusing. You are one of those contexts, Ioan.”

Not knowing what to say to that, ey simply nodded, feeling the flush of warmth to eir cheeks.

“Yes, see? Look at you.” She laughed. “It is complex for all of us. We are all hyper-aware of boundaries, not even wishing to test them. May is...of me, and now I am of her, so that boundary is smaller between us, perhaps, but we are all three very aware of *your* boundaries.”

“You’re telling me,” ey said, smiling cautiously. “Every time I think about it, I just wind up feeling super awkward and freeze up, so I have no clue as to how to even begin to approach it.”

“Well, here. May I sit next to you? If it is awkward, then it is awkward. If we find a boundary, we will discuss it, but then at least we will know and quit fucking tiptoeing around the topic, yes?”

Ey stiffened, trying to cover a wave of anxiety with a chuckle. “Uh...well, sure.”

For all the confidence in her words, she looked as jittery as ey felt, if the bristle to her tail and cant to her ears was anything to go by. Ey wasn’t quite sure what it was that had led her to this particular suggestion, but her expression was in flux — now curious, now eager, now anxious — so perhaps it was those three aspects of her searching for harmony. Still, she pushed herself up off the couch to pad over to the beanbag and settle down next to em.

Or try to, at least. One does not simply sit next to someone else on a beanbag. The mechanics of an amorphous cushion had the skunk almost immediately slouching against eir side. She flailed as she over-corrected, nearly elbowing em in the stomach in the process.

“Jesus...you would think...I would know how this works,” she growled, pushing at the cushion to try and get herself organized.

“Here, just— Oh.” Ey laughed as the skunk gave up and leaned forward with a groan, resting her elbows on her knees and her face in her paws. “I’d call that pretty awkward, though I don’t know if that’s what you meant.”

“Not exactly, no,” came her muffled voice. “But I also feel dreadfully overwhelmed.”

Ey leaned away from her as best ey could to give her some space. “Sorry, True Name.”

After a few slow breaths, she shook her head and slumped over to the side, draping herself across eir lap, face buried in her arms on in the beanbag on the other side of eir legs, a jumble of skunk. “This is stupid, Ioan. This is stupid and it is awkward and it is confusing, just as expected,” she grumbled. “Pet my ears, please.”

“What? Oh.” Ey hesitantly brushed fingers over her ears as ey’d done countless times before with May. Her fur felt exactly the same, her voice was very similar, and were it not for the difference in clothes, the slight changes in body shape, and the benefit of almost three decades of time spent living with May, ey could probably have confused one for the other. “Too awkward?”

“I do not know. The closer to another I get, even in just simple proximity, the more May I become, so the greater part of me is simply pleased to be touched now that we are close, and by none other than you,” she mumbled against the beanbag. “But I am not her, so the rest of me is unsure of what to make of it. Completely baffled, even. Do I feel like her to you? We are cut from the same cloth, are we not? This ought to feel the same, yes? Does it?”

“Almost exactly,” ey said, then laughed. “And not at all.”

The skunk squirmed enough to get her tail off to the side and her face away from the fabric of the cushion, resting her chin on folded arms instead. “That is where I am. It is not unpleasant, and I think I may even enjoy it once the confusion subsides, but I will forever be of three minds.”

“Right. I think I understand a little better.”

She nodded. “It may yet be enough for Jonas, but even if not, I think that it will be enough for me. It is stupid and awkward, but— no, do not stop,” she interrupted herself, laughing, when ey pulled eir hand away. “Awkward, but not bad.”

They fell into thought, then. Or at least ey did. Ey kept up the careful petting while trying to tease apart eir own feelings on the matter. It all felt too big, impossible to pin down. Even trying to define what True Name was now felt far above eir pay grade. Three at once, or one after the other? Parallel or serial? Both? And yet they’d lived wholly separate, concurrent lives prior to the merges.

Doubtless there was some way ey could just approach this simply, could just share uncomplicated time with friends. Something about the Odists just made that feel inaccessible, though. All of them were so complex in such roundabout ways, and now True Name triply so.

If only I could just turn off the overthinking part of me, ey thought. Aloud, ey said, “What do you think you’ll do after all of this?”

The skunk started at the sound of eir voice. “Sorry, dear. I must have dozed off. What was that?”

Ey smiled and ruffled a hand through the fur between her ears before petting it down again. “What will you do after this stuff with Jonas? You mentioned the change would be enough for you, but what will that look like?”

“I will relax,” she said, pushing herself slowly upright once more, slouching against eir side more intentionally, this time. “I will perhaps have a good night’s sleep. I will walk sims for days. I will go camping. I will pester you and May, if you two are not sick to death of me by then.”

“No, it’s fine. A break while you’re camping might be nice, but I don’t imagine we’ll kick you out forever and never see you again,” ey said, laughing. “And I hope you won’t disappear.”

“I will not, you need not worry.” She shrugged against eir shoulder. “Beyond that, I do not know. I may write.”

“What sorts of things?”

“Perhaps a companion volume to your *History*. Something from the inside, such as it were. I will have had three perspectives to draw upon without doing any interviews, yes?”

“That would’ve made life so much easier.”

“Why?” she said, smirking up towards em. “No shitty skunks getting you all worked up so that you yell at May?”

“I didn’t yell at her!” Ey shook eir head, laughing. “I just called her manipulative.”

“Yes, yes, and you called me a crazy in-law.” She patted eir thigh. “But yes. I am most looking forward to just unclenching. I would like to travel and see friends and meet people.”

“Think you’ll try and meet Douglas and see Debarre again, like May said?”

There was a long silence, the skunk’s features drawn in in thought. “I remain of three minds. A third of me would like to bask in more solitude than I already have. That me feels crowded and hemmed in. Another third of me is filled with touch-hunger and love for friends I have never met and would like to surround myself with all these people. That me is struggling with loneliness.”

“And the True Name third?”

She sighed, bringing her tail around to groom it absentmindedly. “She is scared and unhappy and lost. She, of the three of me, is of two minds. Half of her would like to plan and scheme and wargame to rip that smug look off Jonas’s face, and the other half would...but, well, there has been enough quitting in the clade.”

Ey hesitated, unsure of what ey could possibly say to those thoughts, then put eir arm around her. Ey at least knew how to comfort the May portion of her, if nothing else.

“But come, that is enough of that,” she said decisively. “Five sixths of me still want to rip that smug look off Jonas’s face, so that sad-sack part of me can go have her sulk another time. I would also like to get out. I would like to go to restaurants again, yes, and even see one of your plays, should I be welcome. I want to eat greasy food and drink myself silly after performances. I want to hop sims and dream. New deadline: one month. I want out of here within one month.”

“You mean for the meeting with Jonas?”

“Yes. I will not schedule it with him yet, just pencil it in — I will exert my own power by giving him short notice — but having that deadline will only help.”

“Well, we’ll help you get as ready as we can until then,” ey said. “And probably get ready ourselves. We’ll need to tell End Waking, too.”

“Of course, dear,” she said, then dotted her nose against eir cheek, one of those skunk-kisses ey’d grown so used to.

They both froze.

“Fuck. I am sorry, Ioan, a habit—”

“Well, that was—” ey said at the same time, then shook eir head. “Sorry, True Name. Wasn’t expecting that.”

She pushed herself quickly to her feet and began pacing before the beanbag, paws brushing over her face, from whiskers all the way up over her ears. Ey would be hard pressed to describe just how, but some faint glimmer of that portion of her that was May visibly fled her expression and that which was True Name asserted dominance. “Do not apologize. That crossed a boundary, and I need a moment.”

Ey frowned. "It was unexpected, but I don't know if it crossed--"

"It crossed one of *my* boundaries," she snapped, then forced herself to stand still and slow her breathing as she stared out into the night through the windows. "I am sorry, Ioan. I did not mean to get snippy with you. As I said, it is awkward and confusing. I feel like I have been given control of some new, unwieldy machine and am only learning how to use it through trial and error."

Ey nodded, tamping down the urge to apologize again. "Take the space you need."

Her shoulders slumped and identities once more warred in her expression. "I would like nothing more than to disappear out on the plain, but I should probably stop just running away from such things." She smiled tiredly to em and held out a paw to help em stand. "Come. The least we can do is make dinner. Then we can discuss it further when your partner returns."

May's response to the discussion of encroached boundaries, later that night when she'd returned, knocked both Ioan and True Name off-kilter. She laughed and tousled both eir hair and the fur atop True Name's head, saying, "Well, took you long enough."

"Wait, what?" ey asked.

"I have been placing bets with myself on how long it would take until it came up. Whichever part of me guessed 'the minute I leave you two alone together' wins, I guess."

True Name stared coolly at her. "And here I was worried that you would blow up at me."

"Of course not, my dear. If you are like me, then I, of all people, can guess the hows and whys."

"It mattered quite a bit to me."

"I do not mean to diminish that, True Name." She smiled and sat beside her, patting the skunk's paw.

True Name sighed. "Thank you, I do believe you, it is just...a heap of complex feelings."

"That much I believe. I want to understand better, though. How are you doing?"

"If I say 'confused' one more time, I am going to lose my mind. I do not have a better word for it, though. I do not know how to feel about Ioan. I do not know how to feel about myself. I do not know how I feel about the touch. It was fine, I am sure, but I am starting to think that what is so jarring to me is that it was almost an automatic action."

Ioan nodded. "It felt a bit incongruous because it's a hundred percent something you would've done, May, but not the same context."

"And perhaps that is why it feels fine to me: it is what I would do and so I would expect nothing less from someone with so much of me as part of them now. I would like you both to feel comfortable, of course, but I am more...well, 'concerned' is not quite the right word, but focused on the emotional side than you two just physically touching," May said, shrugging. "Though I do appreciate you keeping me apprised. I trust you on that."

"Well, thank you," True Name said, rubbing at her eyes, though whether out of exhaustion or to forestall tears, ey couldn't tell. "The other thing we discussed, though, was setting a deadline of one month to get this shit with Jonas out of the way."

May perked up. "Are you feeling ready, then?"

She laughed, shaking her head. “I do not think I ever will, but there is little that I can do to change that. I will change and he will do whatever the fuck he wants and I will do my best to wash my hands of it. Will you be ready?”

“Sure. I do not imagine my part in it will be big. Just be there to witness, perhaps lose an instance if he decides to go after us, too. Have you spoken with End Waking?”

“I sent him a simplex message,” she said. “I will ping again tomorrow if he has not replied.”

“If he has not had another tree fall on him,” May grumbled. “And you, Ioan?”

Ey shrugged. “I’ve got my notes all in order. I don’t want to do it at all, but I’m ready, I guess. Did you talk with Debarre about this?”

“No. I...well, he is not ready to engage, I think. I would like End Waking to bring it up with him, if possible. I have meddled a bit much of late.”

True Name smirked, leaned over and tugged at May’s tail. “You have, yes.”

May pulled her tail around to hug it protectively. “Yes, yes. I know. I am perhaps as struck by the need to help as Ioan.”

The conversation trailed off from there, Ioan and May cozying up and chatting via sensorium messages once True Name had started to doze, using May’s thigh as a pillow. She caught em up on gossip from Debarre — one of his boyfriends visited and was, apparently, quite the looker — and ey accused her of leaving em for the weasel, as ey always did when she visited him.

Eventually, even they fell to silence, and when May started to nod off as well, ey roused the two skunks. “Come on, beds are comfier than couches.”

True Name nodded groggily and stood, swaying for a moment before gaining her balance once more. “Thank you two for talking this evening.”

“Would you like to stay with us tonight?” May asked. “If you are this exhausted, I imagine you need it.”

She stood silent for a few moments, then nodded. “If you are willing, yes. I am also happy to sleep out on the plain. Either would be good for me.”

“That is why I asked, yes.”

When May looked to em, ey sighed. “Perhaps tomorrow? I need a night to think on things.”

True Name’s face fell, but she bowed. “Of course, dear.”

Ey reached out and gave her paw a squeeze. “Thanks, True Name. Tomorrow.”

She smiled gratefully and, after a hug from May, made her way through her room and out to her tent on the plain, visible as a bobbing lantern moving through the grass.

Ioan and May made their way to their own bed and once they were settled in, May asked, “I do not want to push, my dear, but I would like to hear your thoughts if you need to think on things.”

Ey stretched out on eir back and stared up at the ceiling, letting May settle in against eir side to use eir shoulder as a pillow. “As nerve-racking as it was in the moment, I think I’m just...over it. Maybe it’s the fact that my introduction to your stanza was through you getting all cuddly that it just doesn’t feel like a huge deal to me.” Ey ducked eir chin to kiss atop her snout. “Though obviously it’s complicated, since that led to you and I getting together, but you’re also just a cuddly person all around.”

She tucked her snout up under eir chin, rubbing it against eir jaw at the ticklish kiss. "I am, at that. What do you mean by 'over it', though?"

"I guess after a certain point, it just felt like the anxiety about touch was wildly out of proportion to whatever worries I had. We have other friends we get cozy with." Ey grinned, adding, "She just about fell over when she tried to sit on the beanbag. Would've been funny if she hadn't also started panicking."

"I think she is struggling with touch-hunger, yes."

"She said as much, yeah." Ey shrugged, then mumbled an apology for jostling her. "I guess I'm just used to the fact that one just pets skunks."

"That is just what one does," May asserted. "And, I will note, not what you are doing right now."

Ey laughed and ruffled a hand over her ears before petting the fur down again. "Fine, fine. But that's what I mean, I guess. It's just how skunks are, in my experience. I'm sure some of it's my denseness around this sort of thing at play, but what made me anxious was her freaking out. She's done a pretty good job of taking our concerns to heart, but I hadn't picked up on her own anxieties until then. I'm over it, but she clearly isn't."

"Well, perhaps all of our preparations only made her more anxious," May mumbled, chin dipped low as ey rubbed behind her ears. "She still has all of those memories of solitude and professionalism, as well."

Given what True Name had said in confidence, ey could certainly imagine a boundary around physicality being tested even in the slightest pushing the May portion of her back and letting that of End Waking or True Name come to the fore. Ey supposed, had ey internalized that better beforehand, the conversation that had followed her spike in anxiety would have been different, and perhaps more productive. Ey could have spoken to her as ey might have spoken to True Name *qua* True Name, rather than as ey might to May — even if that original version of her was, as she had said, dead.

The context shift had just been so fast, though, and despite all the differences ey was primed to see between them, the two skunks still looked and sounded so much alike. Oh well. If it had been fast and confusing for em, doubtless such a shift would have been triply so for her.

"My dear, I do not know if you intended to say that out loud," May said gently. "May I respond to it?"

"Wait, what?" Ey jolted, leading May to sit up, so ey joined her. "Oh, damn. Uh...well, when did I start?"

"A context shift between me and True Name."

"Oh, damn." Ey rubbed eir hands over eir face and groaned. "Sorry, May. Uh, it was about something True Name shared in confidence."

She frowned, nodded. "I will not ask you to betray that, of course."

"Maybe I'm more stressed than I'm giving myself credit for, if my mumbling's getting bad enough to break someone's confidence."

The skunk's expression softened and she leaned forward to touch her nose to eirs. "I do not blame you. There is so much going on these days."

Ey pressed eir nose to hers before leaning back and nodding. "Right, and I feel like it's all super important all the time. Oh well. What were you going to say? If I can respond, I will."

May shook her head, and nudged em to lay back down. "No, it is okay. Whether or not you answer is probably too much information to share. I think we are both perhaps too stressed to continue, anyway."

When she lay back down as well, ey wrapped eir arms around her and drew her in for a squeeze. "Agreed,"

ey said, voice muffled by her soft fur. “Maybe just focus on being cozy for a bit. Can you teach me how to go into screen-saver mode?”

She laughed and squirmed back against em. “You are an enormous nerd and I love you a lot, Ionu□. I would, but you would just mumble more, I am sure.”

Ioan had never been one for bars. Ey knew that there was an enormous variety of them, that doubtless some would play to eir aesthetic and likes — the one at the base of the System Central Library came quite close — and that not all of them subscribed to the “if it’s louder, that means everyone’s having more fun” school of design.

There was just something about the idea. Too much that took place in bars was, at best, confusing. At worst, it was distressing. Ey had no desire to be around the types of drunkenness that bars seemed to attract. May had a list of types of drunkenness she’d gotten from somewhere, ey knew, and ey didn’t like any of them.

Still, this is where Jonas had requested that they meet when ey messaged him.

The venue was of the sultry, dark, wood-paneled variety, with warm, dim lamps hanging pendant over each of the tables and a row of lights above the bar itself. Conversations were kept low by the dimness, with groups of three or four huddled in booths while those at the bar drank alone.

Doubtless Jonas knew of eir distaste, as well, and doubtless this had factored into his decision on venue for this pre-meeting meeting. Ah well, at least it wasn’t a club.

Ey stopped by the bar to get a cider of some sort — something sweet, ey hoped; ey didn’t know the first thing about ciders — and hunted down an empty booth. The backs of the benches were straight and high, reaching up to the ceiling, leading to a secluded, if not particularly comfortable, space. There, ey sat and sipped eir way slowly through eir cider, waiting for Jonas.

Ey’d shown up, notebook in hand, half an hour early and was half expecting Jonas to be late, sauntering in lazily at quarter past, a way of pressing the dynamic between them, but he arrived right on time, picked up a drink from the bar, and hunted Ioan down. Ey began to stand to bow to Jonas, then froze. Zacharias stepped into the sim, as well, grinned widely at the sight of Ioan mid-bow. Before even making his way to the table, the fox gave an exaggerated curtsy.

“Ioan, wonderful to see you again,” Jonas said, grinning. “My most foppish lackey decided to tag along, I trust you won’t mind.”

“Of course,” ey said through gritted teeth. “The more the merrier.”

“Precisely, precisely.” Jonas raised his martini glass in a toast and gestured back to the booth and Ioan’s half-finished drink. “Shall we?”

Ey nodded and slid back into the booth while Jonas scooted in on the other side of the table, leaving room for Zacharias.

The fox was only a moment in arriving, showing up with some shockingly yellow drink in a coupe glass. “Ioan, my dear. Wonderful to see you again.”

“Please don’t call me ‘my dear,’” ey said, setting up a cone of silence. There was anger, there, somewhere beneath the surface, but ey was somewhat surprised to feel it almost completely overridden by exhaustion, something ey hadn’t felt before the two had arrived.

“My love? My—” he began, voice mocking. There was a thump beneath the table and he quickly cut off with a loud yelp, jolting away from Jonas, eyes wide.

“Shut up, Zacharias,” Jonas said mildly, plucking the maraschino cherry out of his drink and dropping it in the fox’s. “Business now, prattle later.”

Zacharias sat, frozen, for a moment longer before wiping up some of his spilled drink with a bar napkin. His eyes were still wide, darting between Ioan and his boss. “Right.”

Another show of power, most likely, ey thought. Why else bring him with?

“So,” ey said aloud. “As I said in the message, We’d like to meet in two days’ time. Systime 251+139, 11:00.”

Mid-sip, Jonas waved his hand vaguely. “Of course, of course,” he said, setting his glass back down. “Whenever you’re ready, like I said. But come, how are you Ioan? You look tired.”

Ey stared at him, trying to piece together how worth it was to actually answer the question. Ey was tired, yes. The night before had been a stressful one once ey’d received the request for this additional meeting from Jonas. True Name stayed up late in conversation with both May and End Waking about some clade business ey’d not been privy to, leading to em pacing in the darkened yard for nearly an hour, spring lilacs leaving the air almost too thick to breathe. Ey’d eventually given up on waiting for the skunks. Ey knew if ey stayed up any later, ey’d simply wind up standing at the windows and watching their fire out on the plain.

“I think I’m going to head to bed,” ey had sent May. “I’m just going to keep cycling if I stay up.”

There was a hint of a whine to her reply. “I am sorry, Ioan, I did not realize how late it had gotten. Do you want me to send a fork back?”

“I don’t know, will they be intolerable and antsy?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she had replied, and ey could hear the grin in her voice. “But I will still send one if you would like.”

“No, it’s alright. Just no sleeping out there, okay?”

“Of course. We will return soon.”

It was nearly two hours later when the skunks had returned as promised. Two hours of tossing and turning in bed, fretting and fretting and fretting. Eventually, they had fallen into their usual positions, though despite the added rest that this usually brought True Name, none of them had slept well.

When there was no wink and smile from Jonas, ey let eir shoulders sag and nodded. “Tired, yeah. We’re all tired. Just want this over with.”

“And True Name? How’s she?” he asked, still apparently sincere.

“Look, Jonas, what are you after? We’re tired. She’s upset. We just want to get on with our lives, and it’s all on you.”

“Well, sure, but now my workload’s doubled,” he said, and there at last was the wink. “Though in all seriousness, I’m just trying to gauge what to expect. May Then My Name and End Waking will be there, too, right?”

“Yes,” ey said coolly, adding to Zacharias, “Will you?”

“Would not miss it for the world,” the fox said. His ebullience was notably restrained, still, but the grin had returned. He tapped the side of his snout, “Cartoonishly evil, remember?”

I liked you better when Jonas was stomping on your toes, ey thought.

“So you said,” ey said aloud.

“And how is May Then My Name?” Zacharias asked. “I know precious little about my down-tree instance, you know. I trust that she is well?”

“She is also upset.”

The fox gasped, mock-effrontery filling his voice. “Not because of me!”

“It has been a stressful few months. She doesn’t want True Name coming to any harm, either.”

Zacharias scoffed.

Ey put on eir best smile. “Though yes, she told me that she knew there were still old forks around, but that she’d left them to their own devices and knew nothing about them, so she’s surprised to have met you.”

“How very diplomatic,” he replied, grinning. “Well, I can assure you that the pleasure was all mine.”

“So why am I here?”

Jonas shrugged. “You mean aside from the fact that I get to see your face when you talk about your skunks? It’s fun dragging people around.”

Restraining the urge to bridle at ‘your skunks’, ey gave a hint of a bow. “And what can you tell me about this meeting? I imagine you’ve got some grand plans about surprising True Name with your ideas for the future, but if nothing else, it’d help me to know what I’m getting into before I get into it.”

“Oh, excellent question!”

Ey posted the cap of eir pen and nodded for Jonas to continue.

“I said it was an excellent question, not that I’d answer you, Ioan.”

“I think you will.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you love to hear yourself talk,” ey said. “And because Zacharias is right. This is almost cartoonishly evil, and villains love talking about their grand schemes. I’m ready for your monologue.”

Jonas raised his eyebrows and a slow grin spread over his features. That feverish glint ey’d seen before shown through for a moment before it was suppressed again. The idea that Jonas might be losing it made em anxious. *Stretched too thin, maybe?* ey thought.

“You see, this is why I like you, Ioan,” Jonas said. “The whole Bălan clade, that is. You hit that sweet spot between patient and impatient where you can stay calm, but you don’t just wait forever.”

Ey waited.

“Alright, then, a bit of a preview.” He finished half of his drink in a few swallows. “There’s a bunch of changes coming in the pipeline—”

“This AVEC?”

Zacharias frowned, but Jonas was already nodding, “Got it in one. That’s right at the top of the list. See, the LVs are too far away to communicate effectively with phys-side and getting further every day, and that puts us in a unique position, here. Suddenly, we differ from the LVs in a fundamental way. I really can’t overstate how big of a deal this is, Ioan.”

“Suddenly we have to prove our greener grass to those phys-side.”

“Right. The direction that we need to take with Lagrange can’t just be the same old one we’ve been taking before. In this, True Name and I disagreed.” He shrugged, rocking his glass gently back and forth on the table before taking another sip. “She wanted to continue on her path of subtlety, I disagreed.”

Ey snorted. “Disagreed? You tried to assassinate her, Jonas.”

“What are bullets but a disagreement?”

Ioan rolled eir eyes.

“You and I disagree, then. It’s like I said, though, sometimes mommies and daddies fight, Ioan. We’ve spent the past few years trying to hash it out. For all her focus on subtlety in guiding the System, she can be a real bitch when it comes to trying to get her point across.”

“Bullshit,” ey said flatly.

Jonas laughed. “Oh?”

“Yeah. A few reasons.” Ey started ticking off points on eir fingers as ey spoke. “First, True Name didn’t start down this path in the last few years that we’ve been learning from Artemis; she was a mess when she first got in touch with us with Codrin#Castor’s first letter during convergence, so things were already in motion then. Second, The Guiding Council on Pollux is almost twenty years old now, predating the arrival of the Artemisians by nearly ten years, and I think that’s because third, you—” Ey nodded to Zacharias. “—apparently dropped everything on her across all three systems at the same time not that long after the launch. You two got more openly together on Pollux, and as far as Codrin#Castor can find in the perisystem, you quit shortly after telling her there. End Waking thinks — and I agree — you’re trying to push each of the Systems in a different direction politically. Maybe you think having different political environments is more stable across societies separated by distance and time. Maybe it’s some giant experiment. Who knows. It’s your long game.”

The longer ey spoke, the more serious Jonas’s expression grew, and by the time ey finished, he’d leaned back in his seat. “Well then,” he said. “I suppose I don’t have much more to add, then, do I? I have my conversation with True Name cut out for me.”

“And what conversation is that?”

Jonas was back to grinning. “Oh, fuck off, Ioan. I’m not going to tell you all of my secrets! We have our shit to work through and you have to be a good little clerk and take all of your notes so that you can come back to me with a story to publish. That’ll seal the deal, and we’ll be ready to go our separate ways.”

Ey gave a hint of a bow. “As you say. It’s settled, then, right? Two days, 11:00?”

“That it is. Bring your pen and paper,” Jonas said, lifting his glass in a final toast before downing his drink in one go.

“Right.”

Ey didn’t hear if there was a reply or not. Ey simply quit. #Tracker could take care of the rest.

Ioan#Tracker set eir pen down with exaggerated care, closing eir notebook, then eir eyes. This was anger in so many ways, though it differed from that hot, spiky shape spinning within em that came with Zacharias’s bullshit. It was a pressure within eir chest, a tension in eir shoulders, a pounding in eir head.

“Fuck!” ey shouted. Ey fell back into the paced breathing exercises that Sarah had showed em years ago. It had originally been in the context of helping May, at the time, but ey needed anything ey could get, now.

“*I take it you are back, then?*” May’s words over the sensorium message were tentative, anxious. Clearly tension was still high.

“*Yes. I’m coming outside,*” ey replied.

Ey didn’t wait for the ping of acknowledgement. Even if they weren’t ready for em to be out there, ey needed

to talk at least a little, get some of the weight of the conversation off eir shoulders. Ey needed to be around eir partner and friends. Ey needed to be out of that context, away from pens and paper and books and work.

The afternoon was settling into evening, and the plain was littered with dozens of skunks. As ey walked toward True Name's tent, though, they began to quit in small groups until it was just the three root instances kneeling around a small fire, over which they were roasting sausages.

After bowing to End Waking and getting eir hug and skunk-kiss from both May and True Name, ey sat cross-legged between them. Once ey'd gathered emself, ey said, "That was a whole lot of bullshit. How far off is food?"

End Waking used the tip of his knife to nudge at a few of the sausages, turning them over on the grill cantilevered over the fire. "Not long. Would you prefer to wait to share, then?"

"Yeah. Maybe if I have food in me, I won't shout."

"That was quite loud, my dear," May said, claiming one of eir hands to hold in her paw. "I am glad you did not die."

Dinner was quiet, but not unpleasant. Gentle wind through the grass, the crackling of the fire and the spit of grease from the sausages, the gamy tang of ground venison tempered with barley and herbs.

"Did he wind you up that badly?" May asked once they'd finished.

"Well, yes and no. He and Zacharias were both there."

Both May and True Name flinched at the name, True Name's shoulders slumping. "So, yes. Winding you up."

Ey nodded. "I'd guessed that much, at least. I think the whole meeting was a form of that. He even admitted such, saying that he set it up mostly so that he could 'drag me around'. I called him on it."

"I do not imagine that did any good," End Waking mumbled.

"Oh, not at all. The thing is, it wasn't just winding me up, though. I also think he just wanted to hear himself talk. I think he wanted to talk about all his plans because he knows his words are going to wind up in whatever I write, so he wants to get all that he can in there."

"And worded as he would like," True Name said, nodding. "No matter what we manage to come up with, he wants to ensure that the narrative has him coming out on top."

"I still don't understand, though," ey said. "Why be so transparently villainous if he's specifically having me write something to be read by the public."

"The same reason I wound you and Codrin up. If it is just a little too sensational to be real, then he can get away with more than he might otherwise. Jonas assassinating True Name? True Name who probably assassinated Qoheleth? It is just too much to be real, but it sure is good reading, is it not?"

"Makes me feel like something of a punching bag," ey said, then sighed. "I think I'm starting to understand what Codrin#Castor was talking about in terms of getting yanked around a bit better."

True Name winced and averted her gaze. "I am sorry, Mx. Bălan."

"Shit, I'm sorry." Ey reached over to give the skunk's paw a squeeze. "That was a different time, I'm not trying to put that on you now."

She patted the back of eir hand with her other paw, a somewhat stiff gesture, and, as always when the topic of strife in the past came up, ey could sense more of End Waking in her than True Name or May. "Thank you, Ioan. I do appreciate it. It is an unfortunate reality that politics is the science of yanking people around. Add in being an actor, and, well," she said, then shrugged.

"I understand, yeah." Ey retrieved eir hand, choosing instead to gently tug May closer. She leaned against eir side gratefully. "Do you have a plan you think might work out, then? You don't have to tell me, I know you're keeping it amongst yourselves."

End Waking nodded. "There is a good chance of it working, yes. Not a perfect chance, and there are many possible holes that he may exploit in the moment."

True Name nodded. "If nothing else, I think that it will buy me a quiet retirement."

"A quiet retirement alive is still good, right? It'll be a life," ey said.

"It may not be an ideal life, but it will be a life, yes."

"And hopefully still a good one, in the end," May added.

"Yes. If I am honest, a less than ideal but still good life is far more than I had in front of me even before all of this nonsense." She smiled wryly. "Perhaps I ought to thank him for that. I am not unhappy with what I have now, even."

The conversation wound down from there, and as evening dimmed into night, they fell into silence. The fire was kept low, only enough light and warmth to keep the dark at bay.

Eventually, with eir lower back hurting and May starting to nod off, they made their goodnights. True Name gave May and em a hug around the shoulders and a nose-dot to the cheek in turn and padded off to her tent. End Waking stated that he was going to watch the fire for a while longer and then head to bed himself — he'd set up a tent of his own a ways off from True Name's for this fork to sleep in — leaving May and Ioan to walk back to the house together in the dark.

"I'm happy to hear her talking about a future," Ioan said, once they'd cleaned up and made their way to bed, em slouched against the headboard and May in eir lap, slouched against eir front in turn.

"I am too, yes. I am pleased that other than a few short fits, she has been at worst determined, and at best hopeful."

Ey nodded and tucked eir chin up over the skunk's head. "I think that's where I am, yeah. I want this over with, and sometimes it even feels like this might even be the best outcome for everyone."

"For everyone?"

"Well, Jonas gets what he wants and he can go play his games elsewhere, End Waking gets his feelings understood, and True Name gets to go live a life doing whatever it is she wants, right?"

She nodded. "And what of us?"

Ey chuckled, the sound somewhat muffled by the position. "Well, I'll be happy for her, and you and I will continue being disgustingly adorable or whatever it is she accuses us of being."

May laughed. "Well, yes. I will be happy for her and will continue loving you."

"Love you too, May."

"See? Gross." She laughed and hugged tighter around eir middle. "Will you let her continue to live here?"

Shrugging carefully, ey murmured, "It'll be a conversation between the three of us. I've gotten used to it, so I'm happy to have her stick around if she wants."

"Same," the skunk said. "It is not perfect, but nothing that cannot be fixed by modifying the sim and nailing down some boundaries."

“I’m looking forward to getting in touch with Serene, yeah.” Ey hesitated, then asked gently, “Are there boundaries she’s crossed?”

“No, I do not think so, but it might be nice to understand the shape of our friendships when we are not waiting on some potentially life-or-death event.”

“I still get tripped up over you even calling her a friend,” ey said, grinning. “If she’d needed to move in even a year ago, I think you would’ve ripped her head off two days in.”

May laughed and lifted her snout to nudge at eir chin firmly. “Would not. I would have been impossible to live with, though. Whining and bitching and stress-shedding everywhere.”

“Oh, so like normal, then.”

She sat up in eir lap and poked em in the chest with a dull claw. “Rude.”

Ey grinned. “Well, okay, not stress-shedding, just normal shedding.”

She scrubbed a paw at her flank until she came up with a little bit of shed fur to sprinkle over eir front. “Yes, yes. But I can say the same for you, my dear. A year ago, I do not think I could have pictured her giving you a goodnight kiss.”

Covering for the heat rising to eir cheeks by brushing the errant fur off eir front, ey shrugged. “I’m used to skunks being all touchy, thanks to you.”

“Yes, but True Name?”

“I’m not sure she’s that anymore,” ey said carefully. “So I guess you’re right. I couldn’t imagine the True Name of a year ago giving goodnight kisses to anyone, much less you and me.”

She grinned, nodding. “Agreed, yes. And you are okay with it?”

Ey shrugged. “Like I said, I’m used to it. It occasionally strikes me as incredibly strange. Even just talking about it now feels weird. There’s this whole, dramatic plot to take out one of the most prominent people on the System, and here we are, talking about goodnight kisses.”

“It is not that weird. It is an artifact of our lives. Death has a different flavor to it when we fork and quit on a whim, living for centuries at a time.” She set to work brushing her fingers through eir hair. Weird to be petted, but it felt good, so ey never stopped her. She continued, “Which is not to say that it is not important and anxiety inducing to have almost lost one’s life, just that, with a modicum of care, she *can* continue living, if in a restricted fashion, even if she were to miss the deadline. With less fear of death comes greater love.”

Eyes closed and chin tucked nearly to eir chest, ey hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose, yeah. I didn’t have much life outside the System that I can compare, never mind love.”

May giggled. “I was not speaking of romance, my dear.”

Ey snorted, shaking eir head. “Neither was I, you nut. I just meant Rare□ and my parents.”

“Well, touché. We do not have very good language around love, in my defense.” She ruffled eir hair and ey could hear the smirk in her voice as she said, “Not that that will ever stop me from teasing you about falling in love with her.”

Ey laughed and poked at her side a few times, hunting for that ticklish spot. “Who’s rude now, hmm?”

Giggling helplessly, May squirmed until she tipped off eir lap, curling protectively into a ball. “It is just so easy, Ionu□, do not blame me!”

"I know, I know, and it's your job as an Odist to fuck with me, *et cetera, et cetera*," ey said, slipping down into bed alongside the skunk, getting eir arms around her. "I like her, but...well, whatever. It's complicated."

She twisted in eir arms and wormed her way back against em, shaking her head. "No, you cannot just leave it at that. You have further thoughts and I want to hear."

"Further ammo for teasing, you mean."

"Well, yes, but I do still want to hear."

Ey sighed. "Fine. I just...well, I guess I'm sort of in the same boat as her, in that it's something I can picture, even if I can't understand it. She's so much like you — in terms of looks and voice and now personality from the merge — that I can imagine what that'd be like, and both she and End Waking are my friends, so there's that, too. But the context of her being True Name makes it hard to picture the...I don't know. Process?"

"The concept versus the mechanics, maybe?"

"Yeah, I think so." Ey grinned and kissed the back of one of her ears. "But that's about as far as I get thinking about it before I'm distracted by this or that."

"Organizing your pen collection is usually what I accuse you of," she said.

"Mmhm. I guess it's the same as when you and I got together. I could kind of picture it, but had no clue beyond that."

She hugged eir arm to her front and nodded. "Well, whatever happens, happens. We will talk about it."

"Another time," ey mumbled, pushing eir face into her soft fur, coarser guard hairs tickling eir cheeks. "I can't imagine I'm going to be able to sleep tomorrow night, so we might as well get some tonight."

"I cannot help but feel that I am walking into my own execution tomorrow," True Name admitted. "I know that I am leaving behind a fork, that I will not be completely destroyed, but that does not wholly negate the sense of impending death."

Ioan and May both nodded.

"Is it just the finality of it all?" May asked.

"Perhaps. Perhaps it is just the inability to predict beyond that point. I am coming up to a corner I have never seen around, and whatever predictive powers I may have fail me."

Ioan could at least understand the worries about heading into the unknown. The same feeling had been dogging em since after eir meeting with Jonas, since ey'd seen that cool look on his face when ey'd apparently preempted so much of the upcoming meeting's discussion. One minute, that would feel like a good thing — perhaps they would make it through essentially unscathed — and the next ey'd worry that ey'd made a complete mistake, that ey'd somehow tipped their hand by letting Jonas know just how predictable he was.

Neither True Name nor May could say one way or another when ey'd voiced eir concerns with them.

The whole day had been scattered for them. May spent much of it glued to eir side as ey did eir best to organize eir notes in eir head for the upcoming meeting. She couldn't seem to pin herself down to one set of feelings, first laughing and joking about beating Zacharias up, then burying her face against eir shoulder and refusing to speak, ears laid flat.

For her part, True Name couldn't seem to stay pinned to any one of her three identities.

Ey was at least getting more adept at spotting them in her features. There was a bright focus when that of True Name — the old True Name, that was — came to the fore. Her expression would become attentive, defaulting to a slight smile and eyebrows (such as they were on a skunk’s features) just slightly raised. When that of End Waking showed itself in her, she’d keep her eyes half-lidded, and her gaze was far more attuned to any movement. The rest of her own movements would still, as well. She would walk quieter, more gracefully. She would speak less.

And when that of May came to the fore, that was when ey was at eir most confused.

Ey had had no idea how to feel about her back when she was just True Name. Had ey really been so hesitant to call her a friend? Memories tattled on em, there: ey’d shied away from the term or qualified it every time it arose. That had only loosened up when her life was at risk, when she’d been forced to move in with them, and ey’d been forced in turn to acknowledge that her words, *I suppose it is just nice to have a friend*, had stuck with em more than ey’d cared to admit. The rest of that conversation had been full of equivocations, clarifications, delineations, and all those habits of guardedness from two decades of wariness over anything that carried a whiff of manipulation had tried to assert themselves over em once more.

But no, there was something about the Ode clade that just happened to click with the Bălan clade, no matter what form or name they took, that just fell directly into friendship. It was the way they spoke, perhaps. Those complete sentences that left em uncoiling parts of emself ey hadn’t known were coiled in the first place.

Ey didn’t know what it was that they saw in em in turn. There was the unspoken matter of the pronouns of the owner of the Name, and, as May had once whispered to em late one night, eir tendency to lean on rumination, on quietness and exactitude, that reminded her of someone she refused to name. Were they so alike, em and whoever had touched Michelle Hadje so long ago? Had ey and Michelle been contemporaries phys-side, would they have wound up in a relationship? Ey had no clue how to ask such a thing of them.

All ey knew is that, as Codrin had put it in a letter, “The Odists love hard and they love deep and they love fast, and it’s hard not to become intoxicated beneath all that love.”

So, what was ey to do when that of eir partner, of the one ey loved most in the world, shone through in someone else? When that of May rose to prominence in True Name’s expression, she was not May. She wasn’t May at all. She was of three minds, and none of them were wholly absent whenever one asserted primacy.

And yet there it was, all that drew em towards May, even if it wasn’t her, right in front of em. What was ey to do with that?

That ey didn’t know, that ey hadn’t the language, kept em from speaking of it with True Name just yet. It wasn’t out of any need to hide, not out of any embarrassment — though ey’d freely admit to eir shyness — that ey kept it from her. Ey just didn’t know how to say that, when she seemed most like May, ey was at eir most confused without turning it into a series of questions and I-don’t-knows.

The one time ey’d brought it up with May, the idea still as yet unseasoned, she had done as she ever would, and teased em gently about ‘falling in love with her’ and then settled into a series of gently probing questions, trying to tease out things that ey already knew but did not yet have the words for.

It hadn’t gone anywhere. Ey’d eventually had to put the conversation on hold out of a combination of stress and the feeling that ey ought to keep True Name’s discussion on her newfound multiplicity in the face of May’s desire for some more complete unity to emself.

So they did what they could to prepare or relax for the rest of that last day. True Name walked her prairie several times over, then came in and sat close by, then busied herself up in her head. May clung to em. Ey sorted notes.

There was no discussion whether or not she would be staying with them that night. The three of them simply wound up in eir and May's bed, sitting or kneeling on the soft mattress while they did their best to talk about little nothings. Ioan tried to explain Romanian curses to them. May and True Name spoke earnestly about a movie ey'd never heard of. And under it all, an ever-rising current of stress lay, slowly taking over their words until they couldn't speak any longer, could only curl beneath the covers, sharing some more fundamental comfort.

Surprising all three of them, they did manage to get at least some sleep that night. It wasn't *good* sleep, as, at one point or another, each of them woke with a start, but they managed a few hours of dozing.

Once the sky began to lighten, though, they pulled themselves blearily out of bed, Ioan making four mugs of coffee — two black, two sweet and milky — so that they could troop back out onto the plain and wake End Waking up — or, as it turned out, greet him at the small fire he'd started — and offer him a cup of coffee.

"There is no more rehearsing to be done," he said, once they'd shed some of their grogginess. "We risk practice making permanent, at this point. All we can do is hope to remain as centered as possible throughout."

Both of the other skunks nodded, and Ioan had to quell eir instinct to disagree. They were too tired, too keyed up, too quick to overanalyse to get anything out of forking across the prairie to wargame however many countless scenarios. Better for the four of them to sit around the low fire, sip their coffee, and watch the sun rise, May slouched against eir side and True Name and End Waking sitting apart, silent.

Eventually, however, coffee long gone, they forked. End Waking and True Name's down-tree instances each went to their tents to sit and meditate as best they could, while May and Ioan's down-tree instances returned home to try baking a cake — something demanding enough while still remaining relatively mindless.

The only words they spoke to each other was May saying, "Good luck, have fun, and do not die."

The four forks held hands and paws and with nothing other than a shared shaky breath, stepped from the sim.

End Waking immediately flinched, crouched. They found themselves in a boardroom. A large plain of a table, notepads and pens, a second table huddling against the wall with a pitcher of water and a stack of too-small glasses.

And yet it still felt too small — even to Ioan, who spent more of eir life inside than unbound in a forest, the ceiling was just a few inches too low, the chairs just a few inches too close to the walls. Too small, and yet too long. There was room for a table half again as long, and yet the table was set in one end of the room, leaving the other end empty and unbalanced other than a wheeled whiteboard. End Waking, who hadn't been indoors, never mind in a room too small, in nigh on a century, looked on the verge of panic. His eyes were wide, tail hiked and bristled, paws clenched in a way that reminded em of May.

"I do not know if I can—"

May squeezed his paw tightly. "You do not need to keep these memories, skunk, but you cannot leave." She added in a near whisper, "Please do not leave me."

His nod was jerky, distracted, but still a nod.

And yet, the room was empty. *Perfect time to pull the late-to-the-meeting power move.*

Sure enough, 11:00 rolled around, no Jonas.

It wasn't until nearly ten after that the door swung lazily open and Jonas strolled in, followed by Zacharias and the rest of the eighth stanza — *no, Zacharias is part of that, too, ey thought. There's only Odists, Jonas, and me here.*

"True Name! Delighted to see you, delighted," Jonas said, grinning widely and giving the barest hint of a bow.

The skunk had apparently amped up all that she could of her old self, as her smile was earnest and wide, and her bow the perfect mix of polite and friendly. "Glad you could make it, my dear. I trust you have been well?"

He shifted smoothly to accommodate this response. "Quite well, quite well. Feels like it's been a bit of a vacation for the both of us, eh? You enjoy a bit of time off at the lake?"

That grin of hers widened, and she nodded. "Quite a bit, actually. We never quite got to roasting marshmallows, but it is really hard to go wrong with potatoes roasted in the embers. They get a little smoky, even the insides."

End Waking stared at True Name as though she was an Artemisian, suddenly having made their way across the light-days back to Lagrange. Hell, Ioan was staring at her like she was an alien. So quickly and smoothly had her anxiety been transmuted into this calm, friendly social efficiency that it was as though the last months had been erased from her features.

There was some other conversation going on here, ey realized. It wasn't just that they were talking pleasantries before a meeting, but that there was some exchange of information that took place on some subtler plane of existence. They were feeling each other out, listening to tone of voice more than the content of words, watching features and postures rather than seeing an old friend. There was some deeper level of communication that ey simply couldn't latch onto.

With that in mind, ey could at least do eir best to focus on the subtler forms of language around the room.

True Name had talked em through the stanza and their roles beforehand, at least. She herself had been focused on the politics, of course, but also acted as consensus builder among the members of her stanza.

Ey knew well that May had been focused on swaying individual hearts and minds toward a cause that initially had been True Name's, and then later simply shaped by her as best as could be managed.

End Waking had been instrumental in tracking, understanding, and to whatever level possible, influencing financial markets phys-side, though he'd admitted to Ioan, one night out on the plain, that the chances that he'd actually had a dramatic effect on the markets was astoundingly low and that the financial trajectory had likely been set by forces larger than they could manage — at least, that was the hope that had kept him going.

Ey knew the two 'Why's from the history: Why Ask Questions, Here At The End Of All Things was the frightfully friendly crowd-rouser who had worked with groups of individuals sys-side, while Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help had focused on similar tactics phys-side. However, given that her task was limited to text, she seemed notably out of her element in in-person interactions, coming off as petty and cruel as often as funny and sarcastic.

The Only Time I Dream Is When I Need An Answer had acted as a manager, scheduler, and clerk for the enterprise. Wickedly intelligent, she had done more than block in times for meetings; she had organized meetings

between precisely the right individuals at precisely the right times.

To Know One's True Name Is To Know God had settled comfortably into data analysis, collecting both the raw data that she could from the perisystem feeds and the net phys-side as well as the information collected by her cocladists and the Jonases. She was a being of reports.

To Know God Is To Answer Unasked Questions had done her best to specialize in the fields of information and game theory, but this had more often come down to simple information security and hygiene. She decided where and how far information traveled.

Do I Know God When I Do Not Remember Myself and Do I Know God When I Do Not Dream worked as a mismatched pair. When I Do Not Remember worked as a propagandist while When I Dream worked almost entirely on the perisystem, translating back and forth for her cocladists and finding the best way to worm her way through the intersystem text channels.

Were ey pressed to name each of them without knowing this information, ey didn't think ey'd be able to. Ey knew the three skunks of the stanza and could readily tell them apart, but the rest simply looked like a gaggle of the very same woman: short, soft, round face and curly black hair. However, there were indeed differences there to be seen. Why Ask Questions was just a centimeter or two taller and more open of expression. When I Do Not Remember and When I Dream both had a hunch to their shoulders that ey could not quite explain; perhaps a posture that stuck after too much writing.

As it was, ey did eir best to guess, and when introductions made their way around the table, ey found eir guesses to be correct to the last.

At last, the parade of bows and greetings out of the way, each of the thirteen — counting em, Jonas, and Zacharias — pulled out a chair and sat down, though ey noted that End Waking didn't sit so much as hover on the very edge of his seat. He still looked wide-eyed, feral.

"Aalright," Jonas said, plopping his hands, palm down, on the table. "To business. I'm pleased to see you're alive, but can't say that I'm pleased to see you're about."

"I imagine not, no," True Name replied, folding her paws on the table before her. "From what Ioan says, you know the general facts of what I know. There has been a long-running plan, perhaps mostly operating as a back-up plan, to shift one or more of me to the side depending on the status of the System. This revolved around the use of Zacharias as a tool to shape my responses while incomplete information kept me from recognizing this. Tell me, though. Are you still leaning on the multiple-Systems-multiple-governments strategy?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes. Oligarchy on Pollux, *status quo* on Castor, and invisible monarchy here on Lagrange."

"You believe that this tripod will be the most stable political structure?"

"I know you don't agree, but it's not a tripod, True Name. By this point, the three Systems are so far apart that they are no longer three branches of the same government. They're three countries, and three countries with identical governments yet divergent societies are unstable."

True Name made that setting-aside gesture, as though tabling the topic for the moment. "And you," she said, nodding to Zacharias. Her expression was calm, curious, interested. "You have been working on this with Jonas since around systime 36?"

"Oh, thereabouts," he said, grinning. "Though if I am honest, I have always been working with the two of you. It is not that your own goals had no effect on me, my little stink-bug. I played Jonas as much as I played

you, and I played my own game when I could.”

“Bullshit,” True Name said calmly, turning back to Jonas. “And so what is it that—”

“Oh, fuck you,” Zacharias laughed. “You do not get to dismiss me so easily. You and I rule together, quite literally, in another life. There is no reason that I should simply be waved away.”

“Nah, it’s bullshit,” Jonas said, just as calm as True Name. “If you were worth anything to this conversation, you would’ve been part of the preparations.”

“What—”

“You say that you are part of the stanza, do you not?” The Only Time I Dream, the manager of the enterprise, said.

“I am, but—”

“I see no evidence of such.”

“But May Then My Name—”

“May Then My Name, do you claim Zacharias as yours?”

She shrugged. “Claim? No. I do not know this Zacharias.”

“That is—”

Jonas laughed, “Just shut up, Zacharias.”

“No,” the fox growled, his whiskers all abristle and claws digging at the tabletop. “I played my role, but that does not mean that I am some disposable Judas here. A role is as much the actor as it is— *stop!*”

There was a loud thump beneath the table, though this time, Zacharias appeared to have pulled his foot away in time to keep his toes from being stomped on, as he instead pushed himself away from the table and to his feet. A brief flicker of ungrounded rage flashed across Jonas’s face, but was quickly replaced by that bright, friendly grin.

“Fine, fuck you too, then.”

There was no signal — or if there was, Ioan missed it — for Guōwēi to step into the sim, hand already raised as if for a slap, a short blade held between his fingers. Unassuming, easy to carry, symbolic, and certainly crowded with whatever it was that induced a crash in one’s instance.

What happened next happened almost too quickly for em to comprehend. Zacharias shouted, but the cry was cut off in a muffled *oomf* as an instance of May appeared near him, almost totally overlapping the space that he’d occupied. The collision algos knocked him backwards with enough force to slam him against the door, leaving him to crumple to the floor.

Guōwēi’s palm came down flat against May’s shoulder, but there was no time to see whether or not the virus would affect an instance so far diverged, as that instance of her quit and was immediately replaced with another one, this overlapping the assassin’s space, knocking him back nearly a meter, only for the skunk to fork again to repeat the maneuver. With the momentum already in play, this sent the man flying, his head cracking against the wall hard enough to leave a sizeable dent in the drywall.

And then it was over. Zacharias’s yell faltered, and he stared up, wide eyed, with his gaze darting between Jonas and the remaining instance of May. Jonas had lurched away, looking more disgusted than startled.

“Get the fuck out of here,” the instance of May growled. “And if I ever, *ever* see you again, you had better believe that I will take you out myself.”

And then the instance quit, followed less than a second later by the fox rolling to the side to slip out of the sim. Ey imagined that if Jonas, True Name, and May would all do their best to destroy the fox on sight, the chances of seeing him again were low indeed.

Ey'd never seen a look like that on May's face, though, even at the height of her hatred for True Name. That had been hatred, yes, but this was rage.

"What just happened?" ey whispered to May, who gave eir hand a squeeze in her paw and shook her head.

"Are we done fucking around, yet?" True Name asked, voice flat. "Because I just want to know what it is that you want of me so that I can get back to my life."

"Your life?" Jonas asked, incredulous. "You want to get back to your life?"

"Life, yes," she said. "Alive. Living. I want to get back to breathing and eating and drinking and sleeping. Do not take my words too far."

He laughed, shooting his cuffs. "Well, if *that's* all you want, then we could have done without all this fuss, couldn't we?"

"This fuss is necessary, remember," When I Do Not Remember, the propagandist, said, to which Jonas sighed.

"All you need to do is just...go away. Just disappear. Just be gone, True Name. Curl up around your little Name thing and stay there."

May's expression had settled back to calm, but ey could feel the tension in her paw increase, and beyond her, ey could see End Waking bare his teeth. The Odists on Jonas's side of the table flinched. None of them looked pleased. Even Why Ask Questions, jovial as she usually was, seemed to be gritting her teeth.

Wait, does he know? ey wondered. If ever there was a way to keep a group of Odists in check, that might just be it.

Only True Name, of all of them, remained calm. Serious, yes, but calm. "What does disappearing and being gone look like to you, Jonas?" she asked. "Do you...what? Want me to hide away in a locked-down sim forever?"

"I wouldn't say no," he shot back.

"No."

"I thought not."

"So," she said with exaggerated patience. "What does me disappearing look like to you?"

"You just can't be around. You can't be you anymore. You can't be walking around and having people point and say, 'Hey, it's that piece of shit skunk!' You need to just disappear, because anything else is just going to destabilize your precious System. Imagine! True Name, who didn't die, wants to bring back political parties! I'm prepared for that, but I don't think you are."

"We are of one mind on that."

Jonas snorted. "Fuck if I believe you on *that*."

Ioan watched with increasing intensity. The actual words of the conversation aside, True Name's calmness seemed to be overwhelming Jonas's restraint. He seemed to be having a hard time restraining snark, all that sarcasm that made for good entertainment, perhaps, but was increasingly unbecoming for what ey thought of as a politician.

Here was the Ode clade slowly diverging past reconciliation, here ey was mumbling all the more, as the skunks had pointed out, and now Jonas Prime, for all his stability seemed to be having a hard time maintaining

his own brand of control.

Eir frown deepened. Perhaps this was more than just a political dispute.

She shook her head, but whether at his words or his audacity, ey couldn't tell. "Alright, disappear. You want me to stop being a figure and start being a person. You want me to be other than I am."

"Yep," he said, grin tight and false.

"I have already begun," she said, and with a brief pause, ey saw her face and shoulders relax, a sudden shift towards an expression ey knew intimately from eir partner falling across her features. She continued in a voice softer than what it had been. Lilting, less space between the syllables. "Because I already am May Then My Name Die With Me—" Another pause, another shift, one more towards stony and stoic, voice suddenly dry and simple, almost weary. "—and I am already Do I Know God After The End Waking." Finally, she fell back into that first register. "And some part of me remains True Name, and yet I am none of these. I could not go back to that which I was even if I wished to. Tell me what it is that you want. Lay your terms on the table plainly, and we will come to an agreement."

Jonas raised his eyebrows at the shifts in expression and voice. The frowns around the table on the faces of the other Odists only deepened.

"How can I even begin to trust you on that? You merged your two cronies, so what? You going to go cuddle-camping with Zacharias or something? You're still you."

Both May and End Waking bristled at this, but neither spoke.

"I am not what I was, Jonas. That which was True Name does not simply sit next to that of my cocladists. They are impossibly entangled. I am not what I was."

"I can tell, sure, but you know that's not enough, True Name."

"You have not offered your terms. We cannot come to agreement without."

His voice was intent, serious in a way ey hadn't seen before. "I am saying that you need to disappear. There is no stable future for the System if you show up in anything close to the same form as you were, and you know that. You were almost assassinated, and doubtless more than you three—" He nodded at May, End Waking, and Ioan. "—know. You show up as you are, and everything crumbles, or at the very least, starts to shift in unstable ways. Plan A was you gone, but plan B relies on you understanding that there's no recovery from a failed plan A that involves you."

"Why did you not just ask me?"

"Would you have stepped down?" he asked with a sneer.

She frowned. "Doubtless you had other cards to play that did not involve Guōwēi, some other leverage that did not involve death. You could not convince me, but all this high drama is over the top for you."

"I was bored. It sounded fun. You were right there. Why not?"

"You were bored," she said coolly. "You were bored, so you decided to hire someone to kill me."

Ioan watched Jonas's smile fall back into that uncaring cruelty, increasingly ungrounded.

He waved his hand imperiously. "And I'm getting bored now. I'm surprised you're still hung up on this, True Name. You're the theatre geek—"

"Jonas," When I Do Not Remember murmured, her voice a low warning. He only grinned.

True Name sighed. “Right. So now you...what, want me to look different? Sound different? I am ready to commit to staying out of the business. You want me to act the part or something? Your terms.”

“You need to go away, True Name. I don’t fucking care *how*. You make it happen or I will.”

There was a moment’s thoughtful silence from the skunk, her paws gripping the edge of the table, before she stood, pushed her chair back in, and turned away. Then in the most stunning display of forking ey’d ever seen, True Name began to change.

Ioan had seen eir share of Dear’s exhibitions, not to mention those of other instance artists the fox had introduced em to along the way, and the forking involved in all of them had been perfect. They were well rehearsed dances of duplication that told a story.

However, they were, whether by association with Dear or by the art itself, fanciful. The duplication was supposed to evoke a sense of magic, of wonder — or the closely related terror.

In eir own work in theatre, both as an actor and as a playwright, ey’d found use for forking within a story that had remained more grounded, more tied to day to day life, and those performances had seen a success of their own through May and A Finger Pointing’s guidance.

The Odists as a whole were more familiar and comfortable with forking than anyone ey’d ever met, even among the most dispersionista of dispersionista clades. Both May and Dear navigated that aspect of their lives with a grace ey could only dream of. Even the explosions of foxes or skunks during times of excitement were skillfully done.

This, though, went beyond that.

As they watched, True Name began to change. She worked with a singular sense of purpose that left no doubt as to what she was doing. An instance flickered into being before herself and watched with a critical eye as skunk after skunk blinked into existence. Each one bore some slight change from their immediate down-tree instance. Sometimes an array of skunks would wind up in a line before that observing instance, which would nod at one or the other in approval to leave the others to quit. And when a change was accepted, the down-tree instance would quit.

This smooth modification of form was in and of itself impressive for how naturally she began to change — not only did the instance watching have to keep track of what change was happening and what would come next, but so did those doing the actual changing; they all had to be on the same page — but what left em truly impressed was the speed. She began her work with about one fork per second, but before long the changes ramped up to two a second. Three. Nearly four changes per second of forks flickering into and out of existence, all while the orchestrating instance watched, her eyes flicking this way and that across them.

And then, it was over.

The result was a skunk slightly shorter than True Name had stood, though still a few centimeters taller than May. She was heavier, as well, with a curve to the hips and belly that was familiar to em from eir partner, but unlike May, this softness was more...well, natural wasn’t quite the right term, but where May’s weight seemed to be designed to add a sense of both harmlessness and comfort to her form, this new form of True Name simply looked like a pudgy thirty-something who had settled into a comfortable weight long ago and never bothered to change.

Her face had shifted as well, becoming plainer in ways ey couldn’t quite explain. Where True Name had

always had some aspect of larger-than-life about her, she now just looked...normal. Still a furry, still living in that form that was more comfortable to her than humanity, but normal.

Most striking, though, was the pattern of fur. While much of it was covered now, ey'd seen the way it had shifted during the process. Gone were the two parallel stripes, the ones ey had grown to love on May, replaced with a set of white splotches in the black of her fur. The white atop her head remained, disconnected from the patch between her eyes and two others high on her temples. The pattern was eye-catching: the patches seemed to travel in a few uneven lines down over her back and sides, one of them showing a hint of a whorl, another a slight zigzag, and others that were almost round spots. This pattern seemed to be mirrored along her spine, leading to a pleasant symmetry. A quick query of the perisystem infrastructure told em that there was indeed a spotted variety of skunk, described much as ey had seen: spotted fur, shorter tail, a shorter snout that fit somewhere between that of a skunk and that of a weasel like Debarre.

Gone were the stripes. Gone, also, were the slacks and blouse, traded in for a linen tunic and a pair of loose-fitting Thai fisherman pants.

When ey was finally able to tear eir eyes away, ey saw that every Odist in the room had picked up expressions that verged from taken aback to startled and angry. May, for her part, looked startled at the display, yes, but also excited and ready. It was the same look she got before performances.

"May, what—"

"One moment, my dear," she said, then turned to face this new True Name with a grin. "Will there be a change of name?"

There was a vanishingly faint hint of rehearsal to the words, well masked to anyone who didn't know her as intimately as ey did. Ey realized this must be their plan. Hers and True Name's and End Waking's, the one they'd been working on for days.

"There has to be," When I Do Not Remember said, and a brief tense from May confirmed that the trap had been sprung.

While he lacked the context for whatever had surprised her cocladists, even Jonas sounded impressed by the display. "I won't let you leave as True Name. Stability, remember? That name means too much here."

The other seven members of True Name's stanza nodded as one, and Unasked Questions said, "You cannot be us. You cannot be who you were."

The skunk bowed. "You may call me Sasha."

Ioan didn't know what ey expected from the room, but pandemonium wasn't it. May was clapping her paws delightedly and End Waking was grinning and shaking his head. Both bore the traces of rehearsal.

Jonas simply burst out laughing, and ey couldn't miss the bitterness in it.

All of the rest of the Odists, however, were shouting. None of them looked pleased.

"Not Sasha of the Ode clade, just Sasha," she said calmly but loud enough to be heard. "I will not relinquish the form, just as I will not relinquish the past, but if you want me out this badly, so be it. I rescind my membership in the clade."

"As do I," End Waking said, getting a smile from Sasha.

"*That* name is unacceptable!" When I Dream hollered. "No. You will pick something else."

"No, I will not."

“Shut the fuck up, When I Dream,” Jonas shouted. “All of you, shut the fuck up.” He turned to Sasha and grinned icily, eyes overbright. “You always were a little snot. You want to be Sasha? You want to dive back into mediocrity and wear your weakness like a badge? Please, by all means, be my guest. Beg for pity again. Hunt down all your little friends who kept you feeling just bad enough that they could baby you without letting you think you were their plaything.”

At this, most of the stanza bridled, and there were a few louder murmurings.

Jonas waved it away. “Crawl back to Debarre and...fuck, what was his name? user11824? Crawl into their arms and let them prop you up long after you should’ve died.”

Murmurings grew to mutterings.

Jonas only laughed, and that bitterness was all the more evident. “Go. Be Sasha. Live your silly little life. And you,” he said through clenched teeth, jabbing a finger toward Ioan. “Write your little story. That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? Write your little romance and fuck your little girlfriends and put on your little plays.”

May rolled her eyes.

“Get out. All of you.”

The rest of the stanza left, quit, or were swept — the sim didn’t seem to render them any different. Ioan guessed swept, given that Guōwēi’s unconscious form also disappeared.

All through Jonas’s tirade, Sasha wore a half smile. It wasn’t rehearsed, wasn’t self-satisfied. She simply looked present. She looked confident in herself in some more earnest way than she had in years, as though she had changed beyond just her appearance. When it was clear that he was finished, she bowed politely.

“See you around?”

“Fuck off.”

She laughed and reached out to take Ioan’s hand in eir paw, then they stepped back home, followed closely by May holding End Waking’s paw.

Once back on the plain, End Waking groaned and fell to his knees, paws digging into the soil around the tussocks of grass, then quit. May and Ioan followed suit.

When their down-tree instances returned to the field from inside — May bearing a (rather lopsided) cake — they were just in time to see True Name bow to Sasha and quit. It was the last change, ey supposed, the true relinquishing of her name.

There was a long moment of silence on the plain, then Ioan let out a ragged, pent-up breath, eir shoulders sagging. “Can someone tell me what the fuck just happened?”

“Sasha did the one thing she could have done to piss Jonas off most,” May said, grinning. “He went in thinking he’d take everything from her and left with no wind in his sails. Well done, my dear.”

Sasha beamed and bowed with a flourish.

“And you knew this?” ey asked.

She nodded. “To an extent. We had discussed several options, but many of the changes were new. I saw her unwind all of the changes from the last centuries—”

“All the way back to Praiseworthy’s suggestions before Secession,” the other skunk said proudly.

“—and other than the spotted skunk thing, she looks just like...well, Sasha. Nice touch, by the way.”

“I do not think I could have gotten away with staying the same skunk, even if I look similar enough while clothed. But yes, I am back to the me of...shit, when did I make Sasha like this? 2110?”

Ioan shook eir head, dizzy. “This is what you looked like before uploading?”

“What my — *our* — av looked like, yes, all except the change to a spotted skunk. They always felt too flashy, back then, and I just wanted to look like myself offline except a furry. Completely unremarkable and a species no one likes.”

“The outfit was my suggestion,” End Waking said. “It always was our favorite, but for some reason, we never brought it with us to the System, and I knew the rest of the stanza would pick up on that quite easily.”

Sasha nodded.

“I am proud of you, Sasha,” he continued. “I do not yet know why I feel compelled to say that, but I am proud of you. You have much to make up for, your own penance yet to serve, but that you have done this at all is a good step forward.”

Ioan sighed and sat down heavily in the grass. “You’re all completely nuts.”

The three skunks laughed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“For your story,” Sasha said. “You had to go in there with an untainted view in order to write a more earnest story at the end.”

“So,” ey said, organizing eir thoughts out loud. “May and End Waking—”

“E.W.” the skunk corrected. “I am E.W. of no clade.”

The other two skunks perked up and grinned wide.

Ioan blinked, hesitated, then continued. “May and...E.W. merged down and you...I guess feel more like you used to? Back phys-side, I mean. Enough to head back to who you were before the clade began, I mean. Is that even possible?”

“It is not a statement of reality, dear. I cannot reintegrate those aspects of myself that are not up-tree from me, and even if I could, there are those who no longer exist or who have left Lagrange,” she said, that slight smile growing. “It is a statement of hope, perhaps, or a desire for completion. It is an understanding of the ways in which I fall short expressed in my very name. Will this sense of a truer life last? Perhaps. It will certainly not always feel good, and will at some point cease feeling new, but I plan on owning it for as long as I am able.”

“And how is it that this pisses off Jonas?” Ey snorted. “He certainly sounded pissed.”

Sasha knelt across from Ioan, followed shortly by E.W. and May to either side of em, May summoning up plates and cutting thick slices of cake. It was strange to see so many smiles, still strange to see May so happy around her down-tree instance and stranger still to see E.W. even in the same sim.

“What Jonas was expecting was for me to remain True Name in everything except form and name,” she said. “He was expecting someone deeply cowed by his political genius. And do not underestimate him, he is still a genius. He felt that he had won his spot as rightful leader of Lagrange, if such a thing can even be said to exist. He thought that he had beaten me down and left me either unable to continue or unwilling to try.”

May added, “I suspect that he is starting to crack.”

Ioan nodded.

"Perhaps," Sasha said. "He has not seemed fully grounded in many years, but again, do not underestimate him."

Ioan jumped at a brief sensorium ping, a request to enter, followed shortly by Debarre popping into existence behind May, who had apparently admitted him. "What was so urgent that you pulled me away from lunch and..." he trailed off, squinting at this new skunk. "Who...but you're...what?"

Sasha stiffened where she knelt. "Debarre," she said, bowing her head. "A pleasure to see you."

The weasel said nothing, looking stunned.

"This is— was Tr—"

"Sasha. I am Sasha. I was her as well," she said, voice gentle but insistent enough to stop Ioan from continuing.

He stepped back a half pace, crouching as though to flee. "Sasha...? What the fuck?"

Ioan, still feeling eir head spinning from so much happening so quickly, tried to pin down eir open question in eir mind while still watching the exchange intently.

"I am not what I was, Debarre. I am not True Name. I am not May or E.W." She hesitated, then continued, "I am not even the Sasha you remember, but I am, I think, closer to being her than any of the Ode clade is currently."

"Bullshit," he growled. "If there's even a little bit of True Name in you, you can't be her. If you're even the slightest bit her I'm fucking out of here."

"Wait, my love," E.W. said. "Please stay."

Debarre hesitated.

"If I am still here, do you not think that I agree with her? At least to a large enough extent to trust her?"

The weasel straightened up and, when May gestured to the spot beside E.W., he slowly lowered himself to a crouch as though still ready to bolt. "I'll listen, but this had better be good."

Sasha bowed, sitting quietly and fiddling anxiously with the hem of her tunic while May caught him up on the events of the past few months, letting the other three of them interject with corrections and confirmations. Throughout, Debarre waited, and while he didn't relax fully, by the end of the discussion, he was at least sitting all the way down.

"So you're now Sasha," he said slowly.

"A new Sasha. Related, but not the same Sasha you and I remember."

"I'll buy that at least," he muttered. "You still make me really fucking nervous."

She smiled faintly. "Do not worry, my dear. I make myself nervous."

At the affectionate *my dear*, the weasel jolted back.

"My apologies," Sasha said quickly. "I was not thinking. If you would like me not to use that phrase, I will do my best not to. I just have enough...well, I am different enough now that it comes automatically."

"You have enough of E.W. in you, you mean."

She nodded.

"I...well, yeah. Not from you." He hesitated, eyes averted, and added, "Please."

"Of course."

"So tell me how this gets you anything."

Ioan sat up straight once more, unpinning eir question. “You were saying that Jonas thought he’d beaten you.”

“Right, yes. He thought that he had left me so broken that I might fade away or even quit of my own accord. Instead, I became the one thing he could not control.”

“How, though?” ey asked.

“Because of the *History*. The System knows about me. It knows about the Council of Eight and about Sasha and Michelle Hadje. It also knows about True Name, though, and to see that True Name has stepped down and become one of the few sympathetic figures in that same story once again means that he cannot touch me. He cannot risk reinforcing being seen as a villain—”

“Or more of one,” May muttered.

“—by coming after me. Not only that, but with the expectation that the Sasha who was on the Council was in the right when seen in contrast to True Name, I will be seen as a balancing force rather than a co-conspirator. Him working against that risks being seen as either unbalancing an effective system or a return to a two-party system that no one wants.”

“It is not a win, *per se*,” E.W. added. “She has not beaten Jonas, but she has entered into a stalemate with him.”

“Can’t he still come after you, though? It’s not like the whole System knows.”

“That is why he was so upset at you, as well, my dear,” May said. “You will write your book and your play, and he will just have to brace himself as best he can.”

“But I haven’t yet, though.”

“Of course, but if he had decided to take Sasha out anyway, you would still be left to write about *that*. Your name is already trusted enough on the System that if you were to write something after her assassination, it would still have gone poorly for him. If he had taken you out as well — something I doubt he was prepared to do anyway — he would be in even deeper shit.”

Ey shook eir head. Ey was feeling very far behind but needed to understand if ey was to write this book. More, ey needed to understand for emself. “So why not become Michelle?”

“Because look at me,” Sasha said, laughing and spreading her arms. “I am a furry. A *skunk* furry, no less. There is benefit to being something that is just a little silly, just as there always has been. Even after all these years, it is difficult to take someone pretending to be a small furry animal seriously, so that disarms me in the eyes of the observers.”

“So he will just leave you alone?”

“He will have to if he wishes to remain in his position. He answers to his desire for power, I answer only to my desire for stability and continuity. In that I remain earnest in my conviction,” she said by way of answer. “Even that of me which is E.W. and May. E.W. cannot love his forest if politics overwhelm his existence. May cannot hold onto her devotion. These things I know.”

May nodded slowly. “You are not wrong. I would not have used such words, but you are not wrong.”

“That of me which remains True Name has settled down,” she continued. “And she still holds to the idea that politics is a means to an end. She is good at it. She enjoys it. She is willing and able to utilize it.”

“So,” Debarre said slowly. “When did you realize this might even work?”

“It was a chance I took. One that might have failed, yes, but a good chance. It was that comment about you and Michelle not being fit to lead. Jonas had a view of me that was as inaccurate as it was easy to use against him. I have my political acumen and you have your own small group.”

Ioan watched Debarre stiffen, making note of his response. It didn’t feel like the type of thing to include in the story, but it did make rather a lot of the weasel’s words and actions make more sense.

“You’re nuts,” Debarre said, rubbing his paws over his face to cover that response. “You’re all fucking nuts.”

Ioan gestured wildly toward the weasel. “Confirmation! Fucking nuts!”

The three skunks laughed while ey and Debarre leaned across the circle to shake hands.

The stream of Odists who came to visit Sasha in the days and weeks after the excursion to Jonas’s was surprising. They seem to have accepted her change in identity far easier than expected. There were no instances of deadnaming (unless they were specifically talking about her past as True Name, as requested), no fights, no arguments.

Not everyone was happy, to be sure. Many of the discussions from those who stopped by were quite serious and, even though many took place in cones of silence, Ioan could easily guess that there was much in the way of airing of grievances. As far as ey could tell, though, it was done with an eye towards catharsis and reconciliation.

Serene, for instance, came over the day after the whole kerfuffle, surprising the three of them well into the evening. They’d settled for a middle ground of dinner out on the extended balcony — close enough to the house for them to cook a proper dinner without leaving Sasha feeling cooped up inside — when the ping against their sensoria caused the three to jolt as one.

“That will be Serene!” May said excitedly, setting her half-finished plate down and hopping to her feet. “I opened the ACLs to a few, hope you do not mind.”

“Opened- wait, when?” Ioan asked, setting eir own plate down. “And to how many?”

But the skunk was already gone, bounding inside to greet the fox with a hug and excited chattering.

Ioan and Sasha followed more sedately, both waiting until May had gotten her greeting out of the way before bowing to Serene.

“Ioan, a pleasure! It has been too long,” she said, grinning widely. The grin faded, and she nodded to the spotted skunk. “And Sasha.”

“Serene, thank you for stopping by. I was not expecting to see you so soon.”

“I do not imagine so. May Then My Name has been conspiring behind the scenes, so this was all worked out ahead of time.”

“Oh? How cheeky,” Sasha said, laughing. “Were you really that confident that everything would work out, dear?”

May shook her head. “Reasonably confident, but I want Arrowhead Lake back no matter what, so I arranged for us a little meeting.”

“Skunks, I swear.” Ioan shook eir head. “Well, welcome all the same. We’ve got pasta, if you’d like.”

Once she’d heaped a plate high with pasta, Serene followed them out onto the balcony to join them for the rest of their meal. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of the plain. “I suppose this was the best one could do on short notice, yes?”

“It wasn’t too much, and it fit the need, yeah.”

“It has served its purpose,” Sasha said. “And it is not so bad close up. A little too flat, perhaps, but the river is nice.”

Serene nodded and finished a mouthful of food before setting her fork down again. “I have at least come bearing a gift.”

“Did you find your student?”

“Yes. He was still about, though he has...changed much in the intervening years. He was not as pleased to see me as I might have liked.”

Sasha dipped her snout. “I am assuming that he has picked up on the sentiment surrounding the clade.”

Serene nodded. “He read the *History* and came to the same conclusion that the rest of the System did. Our name is not mud, but, my dear, relationships changed after that knowledge became public.”

“I understand.”

“I do not want to hear you say that you are sorry, Sasha. I do not think that is how this works as you are now, not for me. I do not want to hear your justifications and explanations; I can understand them as well as anyone. I just want to hear your acknowledgement.”

After setting her plate and fork down on the low table again, Sasha folded her paws in her lap, sat for a moment in silence, then said. “For as much as I tried to do — for as much as Jonas and I both tried to do — I do not think we had nearly the effect on the world around us we thought we did, not on the grand scale. We played our games of politics and influence, but it was a game of relationships from start to finish, you are correct. True Name changed relationships. May Then My Name changed relationships. E.W. played his part. I do not know if it was for the better or the worse, but I do acknowledge that it made a good many of them far more difficult.”

“Well, okay. Perhaps one apology.”

“I am sorry, Serene; Sustained And Sustaining.”

There was another moment of silence, then Serene’s wild grin returned. “Well, that felt good. Praiseworthy did all that shit, too, so, fuck it. Let me finish my pasta and I will fuck your sim up but good.”

Ioan blinked, looking between skunk and fennec. “Wait, that simple?”

“Of course, my dear,” Serene said around a mouthful of pasta. “I already told you of my thoughts on the matter. I have done my processing.”

“And now you cannot simply say something about skunks being brats,” May chimed in. “Though I am pretty sure we all knew that foxes were, too.”

Serene made a rude gesture, still grinning.

Once they’d finished dinner, Serene stood, stretched, and then leaned against the balcony railing staring out over the plain. Her expression was calm, pleasant, though focused on something ey couldn’t see. “Ioan, I will need ACLs over at least the exterior, including your yard, though I will do my best to keep it intact.”

Ey nodded, focused, and made the grant.

“Thank you. Now, you may stay out here and watch, but I warn you that it can be a bit dizzy-making.”

Ey exchanged glances with the two skunks and shrugged. “I think we’re all eager to see.”

“Suit yourself. It was your dinner. Thank you, by the way.”

There was no further announcement. Nor, even, any change in Serene. She still looked out over the railing with a dreamy, far away look on her face even as the world dropped out beneath them.

The plain rippled and flexed, arching up high to the sky as though stretching after a long nap. Trees pried their way from the soil. Rocks broke free from the land. The river — the one immediately before them, at least — collapsed into itself to form a wide lake. The rest of the distant echoed versions of the plain where not occupied by the immediate mountains crinkled into some more complex geometry, the remainder of the range echoed outside the valley.

It was a little vertigo-inducing, too. The worst of it wasn't due to the sudden change in the shape of the landscape, but in just how, well...serene it all was. The river shaping itself into the lake was not accompanied by some grand splashing of waves, but simply the remaking of the water. There were no falling rocks or grand earthquakes, just the reshaping of the world. The light shifted. Gravity swayed, settled. All of it was silent, anechoic.

And then it was done.

"H-holy fuck," ey managed, clutching at the railing of the balcony. Both May and Sasha stood defiantly against the change, though neither looked as casual as the fox.

"I have set your house up the hill a ways from the default entry point to the old sim. That it was already on stilts proved quite useful. The angle of the sun may be a bit different, but not so much as to be a problem," she said, gesturing them down the steps from Sasha's side of the balcony. They landed on a flagstone pad set into the bed of pine needles, a small trail winding its way down the slope toward the water. She gestured toward the small ridge that rose next to them. "I had to modify the terrain a little bit to keep your yard level. You should be okay, but if you run into erosion problems, do let me know. I have been told of your affinity for weather, Ioan."

Sure enough, the fence remained level, wrapping around a small rectangle of hidden grass and dandelions, the tops of lilac bushes overflowing.

The path teed with the long familiar deer trail that wound around the lake, and, out of habit, they all started down towards the rock.

"Fauna?" Serene asked.

"Please." Sasha smiled sheepishly. "I would not like a repeat of that particular mistake."

Grinning and nodding, Serene kept up her steady pace, humming a little under her breath. There was no change that ey could see, though ey imagined her counting deer, rabbits, squirrels, and birds into existence.

For eir part, ey simply walked, hand in paw with May, and marveled. Ey'd discovered the lake decades ago, had spent countless days out here on walks, and at least one night camping. Still, it felt somehow new. Ey was rediscovering this place that ey'd not seen in months — though ey'd spent longer stints away from it in the past — and marveling at the detail all over again. A glance back over eir shoulder showed eir flat-roofed house peeking shyly from amid the trees, but other than that, it was, ey assumed, the same as it had been.

After so long away and after so much stress it felt all the more real.

They sat on the rock near the end of the lake and enjoyed the last of the sun. It was a little tight for four, but May tucked quite nicely up against eir side and Sasha, having slipped more into an E.W. mindset, had settled off to the side. She looked antsy, and ey suspected she'd request time to hike soon enough.

“How is the rest of the clade taking this?” she asked. “I sent a clade-wide message, but have not received responses.”

Serene looked up from where she was investigating a few pine needles plucked from a branch on the way over with a discriminating eye. “I think that reactions will be largely positive even if they are not universally so. Several of my stanza have been been talking, and many feel as I do. It is fine, I am sure, and I have processed what I needed to and gotten what I wanted.”

“Of course. I have been abandoned by the rest of my stanza, but at this point, the larger part of me does not want to have anything to do with them, anyway. I do not imagine Loss For Images and her ilk will take it well. I do hope that A Finger Pointing and I will have a chance to speak soon, as I am now enough May that I would enjoy attending a play or two.”

“‘May’?” Serene said, tilting her head and looking to the other skunk. “Have you forgiven her, then?”

May nodded. “Forgiven is maybe not the best word. I have internalized the way things are and accepted the way things were. I am pleased to know Sasha and who she has become.”

The other skunk smiled faintly, nodded. “Though for all Ioan talked about trying to fix things, I place the largest part of who I have become on you, dear.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Ioan said, grinning.

May elbowed em in the side. “Hush, you.”

“I will not laugh at you two too much, then.” Serene laughed anyway, though not unkindly. “What are your plans moving forward? I trust that you are essentially locked out of what you were working on as True Name.”

“Yes, and while there is a part of me that remains disappointed about this outcome, there is little to be done about it but move forward.” Sasha brought her tail around to her lap to brush it out. It was shorter than a striped skunk’s tail, it seemed, but no less thickly furred. “I will take a vacation, first. I will sleep a normal amount. I will eat good food. I will wear myself out on the hunt and take what comfort I can while I remain here. I will rest, and then I will write.”

“Write? Really?”

“Yes. I will be careful not to be seen as overtly influencing lest I bring on Jonas’s ire, but I would like to share the story of the last few centuries from my point of view. I do not know who will be interested except perhaps our two clades, but I will write.”

“Well, if it’s anything like the *History*,” Ioan said, “it’ll wind up wildly popular and then fade into part of the mythos of the System.”

May grinned. “And all will be as it should.”

“Of course. I will not complain. So long as I am better able to understand who I have become and fill my time with something fulfilling, then I will be happy.”

“Will you be happy?” Serene asked.

There was a long silence as Sasha finished brushing out her tail and spent a few minutes simply staring across the lake, perhaps mapping the opposite shore and marking spots for future exploration.

Finally, she said, “I think that I will be. I am of three minds and will ever be such. I will have moments of happiness, moments of sadness and terror and regret, but they will ever be in thirds.”

“Are you okay with that?”

Sasha stood and stretched, finally turning her gaze back to them. “Himself has but to will And easy as a Star Look down upon Captivity And laugh.”

With no further explanation, she bowed and edged around them on her way down off the rock. She moved quietly and efficiently, and it was a matter of moments before they lost sight of her in the trees.

They sat and shared quiet stories of the past through the remainder of the evening.

The next Odists to visit were A Finger Pointing and Slow Hours, once more arriving as a pair and hugging Sasha in turn. They set up a cone of silence and spoke together for a scant twenty minutes before dropping it again and inviting Ioan and May to join. They pulled the beanbag a little closer to the couch and settled down on it together to listen.

“It is easy to say that all is full of love,” Slow Hours began, smiling to Sasha. “But now, I think, you have a sense of your own.”

The skunk smiled and bowed her head.

“Life will be easier for a while, and then it will be harder. You will share your loves, first with another and then with solitude, and with each you long for the other until you return.” Her expression slipped into a lopsided grin. “Does not matter one fucking bit, though, so I would not worry.”

“Mere breath?” Sasha asked, grinning.

“A chasing after the wind, yes.”

“And you will come to a performance,” A Finger Pointing added. “I am no oracle, but if you do not come, I will hunt you down myself. It has been too long, my dear.”

She laughed. “Of course. So many threats to hunt me down, these days. But yes, thank you.”

“And if you do not watch me perform my monologue, I will trim your claws too short in your sleep,” May said. “There is a monologue night coming up soon.”

“Far worse than being hunted down, that. I will be there.”

May preened.

After that, they fell into comfortable conversation. Sasha joined Ioan and May on the beanbag to get some pets — the talk having apparently nudged the affectionate part of her to the fore — while Slow Hours spoke in fewer ‘will’s and ‘shall’s and settled down into the normal conversational mode of the rest of the Odists. They spoke of performances past, going all the way back to before the founding of the System, back to their time in high school. The four Odists performed a small segment of the Dickinson play they always seemed to quote from, a first for any of the Bălans in the nearly fifty years their clades had been entangled.

Ey didn’t understand, but ey didn’t need to.

It was nearly a month before Debarre, Douglas, and Sasha agreed to meet. Debarre’s side of the negotiations remained stiff and distant, the weasel initially refusing to see Sasha after that first meeting. Douglas seemed to have set aside any sense of caution, speaking with palpable excitement. As soon as he’d learned of the change of name back to something more closely associated with his distant relative, he’d hardly spoken of anything else.

Eventually, though, meeting was set up for dinner on the dandelion-dotted field, a small potluck picnic late in the evening so that the skunks wouldn't overheat in the sun.

Everyone arrived simultaneously by Debarre's request so that no one was left waiting for anyone else. Ioan, May, and Sasha stepped into the sim just in time to see Debarre and E.W. arriving. The six of them stood in a circle in front of Douglas's stoop, dandelions and evening bumblebees tickling at their ankles.

Or, at least they stood in a circle for a moment. Sasha almost immediately stumbled back from the group, turning in two slow, wavering circles before falling to her knees.

"Sasha?" Ioan said, startled.

"Too much," she mumbled shakily. "Too much at once."

May padded over to kneel next to her. "May I hug?"

After a moment of strained silence, Sasha slumped against May's side, and the two sat together while she let out that overwhelming emotion within a cone of silence.

Ioan, Debarre, E.W., and Douglas took the time to set up the picnic, a rickety table bearing plates of various salads, roasted vegetables, and the makings for venison sandwiches, courtesy of E.W.. They moved in silence, hesitantly, each pausing every now and then to watch as Sasha slowly worked to calm herself.

"That was not the greeting that I had intended," she said, once she had cleaned up in Douglas's house and joined them at the table to pick up a plate. "I was hoping that I would be able to greet you all politely, settle into some easier conversation, but that of True Name has not been here in too long. This place is too charged with memories, as are your faces. Even for that of E.W. and May, there is too much bound up in the last few months."

"Are you feeling better now?" Douglas asked.

She nodded. "I am leaning on the other portions of myself now. I will have much processing to do yet, but tonight is for dinner with friends, or at least with those I hope will be friends."

"I certainly hope we can be friends." Douglas laughed. "I mean, those are the first words we've ever really spoken to each other, but I'm happy to have the chance to meet you."

"Or at least meet a third of me."

"Well, yes, but you're still a new person to me and very...uh," he trailed off, frowning down to his plate. "Well, very close to someone I've thought a lot about, I guess."

She smiled and leaned over to pat his shoulder. "We will talk, dear. That part of me has heard so much about you and is so colored by what the other parts of me know, that I am eager to learn, as well."

Debarre remained stiff and awkward, even as they settled down on the blanket to eat, plates piled high with various dishes and cups of sangria set carefully in the grass behind them. He wouldn't make eye contact with Sasha and seemed hesitant to speak even to Ioan and May.

Eventually, he cleared his throat, set his plate down, and stared steadily at Sasha. "I think you owe me an apology. At least from the, uh...what did you call it? The True Name part of you?"

As she had done with Serene, Sasha set her plate down as well, folded her paws in her lap, and bowed to the weasel. Ioan could tell by the set of her features and the straightness of her shoulders that she was indeed doing her best to keep that part of her at the fore. "I am sorry, Debarre. The things that I did were for what I thought was best, but they wound up hurting a good many people. They were not fair to you and I apologize for the pain I caused. While I do not think I even *could* anymore, I will all the same endeavor not to act in such single-minded

ways again.”

Ioan couldn’t read Debarre’s expression well enough to gauge his thoughts on the matter, but judging by the way he loosened up and joined in more of the conversations after that, speaking even with Sasha, he seemed to at least have accepted the words to an extent.

Debarre and E.W. stayed for a few hours after dinner, long enough to see the first stars show themselves above the field, before they stepped back to the skunk’s sim.

Shortly after, Sasha stood, the other three following suit. She hugged Ioan and May around the shoulders and gave each of them a touch of the nose to the cheek. “If you two do not mind, I would like to go for a walk with Douglas and speak with him alone.”

They nodded and returned the hugs and kisses, getting hugs from Douglas as well before they stepped back home.

“Do you think Douglas still puts too much stock in who you used to be?” Ioan asked once they were home and comfortable.

May was a while in answering. “Perhaps, yes. We are not Michelle, have not been for centuries. None of us are Sasha — least of all Sasha.”

Ioan nodded, brushing out the skunk’s tail with a fine-toothed comb as ey’d been commanded. “He really relaxed after uploading, at least. Just a few little spikes in interest when certain things came up.”

“As hyperfixations go, it is a relatively innocuous one,” she said, yawning. “But I am at least pleased to see that he is both engaging with other things and finding fulfillment in this aspect of his life when he can.”

“Besides, it’s not like you guys don’t hyperfixate on things.”

“Mmhm,” she mumbled sleepily. “But all the same, we have been slowly drifting away from what we used to be over the years, and in the face of all that we have seen, that is not such a bad thing.”

“How do you feel about her apology?”

“How do you mean, my dear?”

Ey shrugged. “It felt...I don’t know, a little rehearsed, maybe.”

May curled in against eir side, yawning. “Perhaps. She said what Debarre needed to hear, I think, and it was no less earnest for that. As much as he means to us, that is no bad thing, either.”

Ioan wasn’t sure why ey kept feeling surprised at the number of loose threads from just one event that needed tying. The business with Qoheleth had been about as complicated, and had required meeting with several other Odists in order to finish the story, and each one came with a different tenor.

The same was true here, as well. Many members of the clade — some of whom ey’d not yet met — visited and requested time with Sasha or with the three of them. Still, ey realized, this culmination came after two and a quarter centuries for some, so perhaps it made sense.

Not all of these interactions went nearly so smoothly.

A scant few weeks later, May stumbled in the middle of a rehearsal, falling to her knees, panting before pushing herself to her feet. She managed to make it through the rest of the scene before forking off so that she could continue as best she could while her root instance ducked back home.

Once there, she darted over towards where Ioan sat at eir desk, working through the process of writing Jonas's book. She knelt beside em, clutched a pawful of eir shirt and set up a cone of silence. Ey felt the ACL-scape of the cone shift several times until it was just about as secure as could be made.

"May? What—"

"Zacharias! He has been pinging me once every few seconds for the last minute!" She was on the verge of hyperventilation, eyes wide and tail bristled. "I do not know what- *fuck!*"

Ioan slid from eir chair as the skunk started to slump over to the side. Ey helped her to her feet and over to the beanbag. "May, what's happening?"

"He keeps...quitting and...sending high-priority merges..." she gasped. "The cone will not...stop those..."

"You okay for a few seconds?"

Slumped over on the beanbag, the skunk nodded.

Ey stepped from the cone, where May had clearly blocked sensorium messages from the fox, so that ey could holler into a message, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Ioan! I need to...can I—"

"No. No coming over."

"A neutral place?"

Ey thought quickly, sent a message to Douglas. "Do you need May there?" ey finally replied to the fox.

"Yes!"

Ey sighed. "I'll ask. No guarantees."

"No, I...no," the skunk mumbled once ey stepped back into the cone. She'd managed to sit up and while the panicked look on her face had calmed, the beginnings of rage had taken its place. "Or...well, I can, but he cannot come here."

"Maybe Douglas's to keep him from being too much? I figure if Sasha's reaction was anything to go by, it might quell him, or at least keep him distracted."

The skunk sat, silent, for a moment, holding onto one of eir hands tightly. "Alright. Will Douglas be around to sweep if needed?"

Ey nodded.

"Now?"

"Yeah, I think so. Do you need anything before we go?"

"I—"

They were interrupted by a rapidly crescendoing thudding sound followed by the scrabble of claws on the glass of the sliding door, Sasha finally finding purchase and whipping it open. May dropped the cone of silence.

"What the fuck is happening?!" she shouted.

"You too, then?" May said bitterly.

Sasha frowned, straightened up, and brushed out her tunic. "Yes. He just about knocked me out with the amount of adrenaline he sent my way. You look ready to go. Do you have a plan?"

"We're going to meet him at Douglas's field. That's about the start and end of it, though." Ioan took a deep breath and tried to tamp down the urge to pace. "Do you want to come?"

Ey watched the heat of anger rise to her features as well. Both skunks were quickly heading towards fury. “Yes. Let us get this the fuck over with.”

Ioan sent a message to Zacharias spoken aloud for the skunks’ benefit. “The Field#002a0b1.”

The reply was frantic. “What?! No!”

“There or no meeting.”

“F-fine.”

Ioan helped May to her feet and placed a kiss atop her head before the three of them forked and stepped from the sim.

Douglas stood at the top of his stoop, arms crossed, frowning. “Ioan, what is this?”

“Zacharias made it out of the whole thing alive,” May growled. “And now he is losing his mind and wants to meet. I will not have him at our home.”

Douglas’s frown deepened. “So you’re bringing him here? The ACLs are pretty locked down right now.”

“Yes. We need somewhere where someone can sweep him if need be.” She grinned humorlessly, adding, “And if this place freaks him out, all the better.”

“If you say so,” he said, paused, then continued, “Alright, he should be able to enter.”

Ioan nodded and sent a brief ping to Zacharias.

He arrived within a fraction of a second, yelped, and fell backwards, paws balled up into fists and pressed tight against his eyes.

“How long has it been for you, my dear? Since you were forked?” May said, kneeling down before the fox. Her voice had grown cloyingly sweet, that ‘my dear’ carrying nothing but spite.

“Y-yes,” he gasped. “Did...did we have to meet here?”

“Where better?”

Zacharias moaned. He forced himself to lower his paws to the ground, gripping at clumps of grass and dandelions. Finally, he opened his eyes and stared out toward the horizon of the field. “I-”

“What did you want, my dear Zack? You sounded on the verge of panic.”

“It is Jonas!” he said, finally snapping out of his daze. “Jonas! He has gone crazy! He killed all of my instances!”

“Did you expect anything else, little loverfox?” Sasha asked. There was no humor or sweetness in her voice, the last two words carried venom in them.

“I...I mean-”

“You are the root instance, I am assuming?”

He nodded, the movement jerky and uneven. “I have not left home since. I dug a new one, you see, and he found that one somehow.”

“And what can we do for you?” May asked.

“Help! You can help me get away from that...that lunatic!”

Sasha frowned. “Can you not dig another home?”

He reached out to clutch at May’s paws. She startled backwards, but did nothing to push him away. “I cannot...I cannot just disappear! Months! It has been months since I have seen anyone. Anyone! I have to...to be near-”

“No,” she said flatly.

“But—”

“No.” The skunk shook her head, leaned forward and touched her nose to Zacharias’s. “Not me. Not Sasha. Not us. You are on your own, my dear. I will not accept any further messages or merges. No contact.”

He slouched once more, eyes still wide. “May Then My Name, I—”

She extracted one of her paws from his and slapped him firmly across the snout. “And that is for before.”

Yelping, he fell back onto an elbow. He opened his mouth to respond, but May had already nodded towards Douglas, who swept him from the sim.

“I’ve never seen you like that before,” he said, once they’d made their way inside, the four of them clutching glasses of water. “I knew he was a shitbag, but God damn.”

“I am...not okay,” she said, whispering down to her glass. “I am not okay.”

They didn’t stay long after. Ioan eventually promised Douglas that they’d catch up another time and then gently nudged the skunks to quit and merge back down.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the day. Ioan and May collapsed onto the beanbag and stayed there through much of it, each processing in their own way, while Sasha disappeared outside to lose herself in the wilderness, not returning until late that evening, bearing a lanky hare and double-pawful of chantarelles, which she cooked down into a simple stew. They ate on the balcony to enjoy the late summer’s evening as best they could.

Sasha joined them in bed that night, and they took what comfort they could from each other’s company.

The most dramatic of meetings came as Autumn began creeping over the edge of the hills. Quieter, perhaps, but bearing the most weight, the most finality.

If I Am To Bathe In Dreams arrived late on a Saturday afternoon on a few minutes’ notice and bowed formally to Sasha.

“Ioan, I believe Jonas hired you as an amanuensis?” she said.

“He did, yes. Do you need me for that, too?”

“Please. This story is not over, will not be over for a long time yet. Listen. Watch.”

Sasha immediately picked up on the mood and stood up straight after returning the formal bow. She offered In Dreams a seat and something to drink, both of which were declined, then said, “How may I help you?”

“I have a request from both my stanza and that of Memory Is A Mirror Of Hammered Silver. You will also be presented with this request in writing as an individual-eyes-only message.”

Sasha nodded. “I understand.”

“We request no contact from you, your stanza, or the Bălan clade moving forward.”

“Wait, what?” Ioan said. May edged around a little ways behind em, clutching at air arm.

“You are too entangled in the matter. No contact with this situation means no contact from you, May Then My Name Die With Me, or E.W. né Do I Know God After The End Waking. This request is in effect until further notice, and applies to our stanzas on Castor and Pollux as well, where Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled will be presented with the same request. None of us are on Artemis, but I will also be passing this on to Sorina Bălan. This includes general intraclade communication; we will add visibility exceptions to our messages and request that you do the same.”

"I understand, accept, and offer you my best," Sasha said, bowing once more.

"I do not want your best," In Dreams said, voice flat. "Ioan?"

Ey blinked, hesitated, then bowed in turn. "I understand and accept."

"And May Then My Name?"

It took the skunk a moment to swallow back a rising wave of emotions before she could manage a shaky nod and a hoarse, "Understood."

"We are of one mind, then," she said, bowed, and stepped from the sim. A few seconds later, three sheets of paper scrolled out of the air above the dining table, all set as individual-eyes-only for each of them. Ioan read through eirs several times with a hollow feeling in eir chest.

Sasha stood still for a long minute, head bowed, then stepped outside without a word, at which point May burst into tears.

Ioan did eir best to comfort the skunk, but after an hour, she gently pushed em away. "I need...I need the house to myself, please."

"Should I head to Douglas's?"

She shook her head. "I do not know, Ioan. I just...I just need the house. If you can...I mean, if Sasha will let you stay at her tent, you can stay, but I need the house."

"Now?"

Nodding, she wrapped her arms around em and squeezed tighter than ey knew she could. "I love you more than anything, my dear, but yes. Now."

Ey waited until ey could breathe properly after the squeeze, then kissed the top of her head. "I love you too, May. Please be safe, okay?"

She nodded once more, relinquished her grip on em, and nudged em out toward the back door and outside.

Sasha had set up a tent similar to E.W.'s, though she had skipped the process of building it herself, instead creating from similar materials off the exchange. She'd set it up nearly on the other side of the lake from their house, so that she could have the solitude that she needed without having to create some new sim of her own. When the need for space struck her, it never quite got to the point that it did with E.W. She would need away from their presences, she would say. They felt like a constant weight on her shoulders. Light, yes, but continually present.

Ah well. This was the first time that May had overflowed in this living situation — and so dramatically, too; she'd never given em so little notice — so perhaps it would be helpful after all.

Ey took eir time walking around the shore of the lake, using it to vent the emotions that had built up over the last few hours through tears, through shouting into a cone of silence, cursing.

"Ioan? Goodness," Sasha said.

Ey'd managed to mostly clean up with a handkerchief, though clearly eir eyes were still red-rimmed and eir countenance...well, who knew? Glum, perhaps?

"Hi Sasha," ey said, sitting down on the step leading up into the tent. The skunk had been writing at the small desk she'd acquired, but she moved to join em. "May's not in a good spot. She suggested I stay with you, if that's alright."

She frowned, nodded. "That bad?"

“Well, she kind of kicked me out of the house, yeah.”

She laid her ears flat. “We are perhaps both overflowing in our own ways.”

“Oh, shit. I wasn’t thinking. Douglas—” Ey moved to stand, but she grabbed eir wrist.

“I had seen this coming, if I am honest, so it is not hitting me quite so hard as her. I will be okay.”

Ey nodded, slowly settled back onto the step. “If you say so.”

Sasha patted eir hand and bade em stay while she got up to stoke up the fire in her stove and fry up a simple meal of potatoes and vegetables. Ey couldn’t tell if it was just bland — as E.W. preferred — or if eir mind was too busy to process taste, so ey mostly just pushed the food around on the plate.

“Without contraries is no progression,” Sasha murmured after they’d finished. “Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.”

Ey started to ask what she meant, paused, then looked the words up in the perisystem architecture. “Blake? And here I thought you all were mostly into Dickinson.”

She chuckled and elbowed em in the side. “This may be a True Name thing.”

“Are you leaning into the”Good is the passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy” on this, then?”

“Nothing is so simple, dear,” she said, shaking her head. “Blake was not of our kind, he would not have understood. He did get that right, though, in that we are a people of dualities. May sees in Zacharias all that she cannot — must not — be. In Dreams and Hammered Silver see in me that which they are not — could not be — and yet we are not what we are without our opposites. Every idea’s opposite is just the absence of the idea itself.”

“Maybe.” Ey sighed. “It’s all a bit over my head.”

“I am also a little bit all over the place,” she admitted. “These events have me going in three different directions at once. The Ode clade is crumbling and I cannot deny that some...that much of that is on me. I am sorry, Ioan.”

“It’s fine,” ey said, shaking eir head. “It’s kind of a lot.”

“That it is. You are a good person, though. You love your partner. She knows this. I know this. You are good to her and it will all be okay. We may hope for neat endings but all we get are more beginnings.” She smiled, adding, “And yes, you may stay until she is feeling better.”

May’s stint of overflowing only lasted two nights. Something about the change in context, though, about staying with Sasha instead of Douglas, made everything feel tenuous. Ioan found it difficult to sleep on the padded cot that she’d added to the tent, and eventually, she must have grown tired of hearing em toss and turn and perhaps mumble to emself, for she sleepily climbed out of her own bed and into eirs, curling up with em after confirming that it was alright.

Unexpected, perhaps, but by then ey was too frustrated and exhausted to think of anything else, and the added comfort certainly worked in getting em to sleep, to the point where ey slept in until a ray of sun, creeping slowly, fell across eir face and warmed em awake.

Sasha had apparently woken up earlier in the morning and snuck away, as there was a lukewarm cup of camp coffee sitting by the edge of eir bed and no skunk to be found.

Ah well, at least the coffee was good (if gritty) and ey felt better rested than ey had before.

Ey met up with her at the shore of the lake where they talked for a bit, though it was clear that she was antsy to head out into the woods on her own, so ey eventually shooed her off, to which she bowed gratefully and said, "My notes are on my desk. If you get bored, I would appreciate your feedback."

Ey spent the rest of the abbreviated day reading through what she'd written, making a mental list of ideas and suggestions to pass on to her when things were a little less hectic.

That night was much the same, with the two of them talking until it was well and truly dark, then settling into their own beds until sleeplessness led to them curling together in one.

A ping from May shortly after sunrise woke em, and the jolt startled Sasha awake as well.

"Uh, sorry," ey mumbled, extricating eir arms from around her. "May pinged."

Sasha levered herself up and squinted out into the orange and pink of dawn. "How is she up before me?" she grumbled.

"Probably because she got good sleep and I kept you up being a mope."

She shrugged noncommittally, yawned. "Slept well enough later on, at least. Did she say anything?"

Ey shook eir head. "No, just a ping. No real urgency, though. Surprised I didn't sleep through it."

"You are appropriately keyed to her, dear. I would be surprised if you did."

"Mm, fair enough," ey said, grinding the heels of eir palms against eir eyes. To May, ey sent a ping in response, plus a subvocalized, "You okay?"

"Better, yes," came the reply. *"I am feeling quite bad about sending you off like that. Not about waking you up, though. You sound cute when you are groggy."*

Ey snorted, shook eir head. "Yeah, she's fine," ey said.

Sasha surprised em by joining em on the trek back to the house, saying only, "I have been worried, as well."

May greeted them at the balcony with steaming mugs of coffee. She declined a hug, stating that she felt gross, but did at least press her nose to Ioan's, and then to Sasha's cheek.

"Thank you for giving me some space," she said. "I was not expecting the both of you, but I am happy to see you both all the same."

"Of course, May. I'm just happy to see you doing better. Or happier, at least. You look a mess."

She scoffed and gestured a paw down at herself. "I look perfectly fine, thank you very much."

"You look a mess, dear," Sasha confirmed. "You need a shower, a change of clothes, and perhaps another four hours of sleep."

May sighed, nodded. "I do at that. All the same, the wave has crested and gone, and now perhaps I can relax enough to do so. Coffee first, though."

They settled on deck chairs for Sasha's sake and focused on said coffee for a bit, watching the dawn. It was good to be back to coffee that didn't require straining out the occasional percolated ground through one's teeth.

"Are you two okay?" May said at last.

"Tired, but that's easily fixed. Looking forward to a real bed tonight."

Sasha poked at eir knee with a dull claw. "The tent beds are not *that* bad."

"No, they're fine, but they still pale in comparison to our bed."

"Well, yes, I will admit that."

May looked between the two, then laughed. “I take it this setup worked for me taking some space?”

Ioan shrugged. “Well enough, sure. It’s nice to have another option that isn’t just crashing at Douglas’s.”

“It was fine, dear,” Sasha added. “If ever either of you need some space, feel free to kick the other down to the tent and I will make it work.”

“I am glad,” May said. “Earnestly. Ioan was such a solitary creature that I did not ever picture having neighbors when I moved in all those years ago. It is nice to have a friend close by.”

“Aren’t all of your friends equally close now that—”

Sasha cut em off, shaking her head. “Ioan, do you remember how I said that I feel others’ presence around me like a weight on my shoulders?”

Ey nodded.

“I think it is rather like that, though do correct me if I am wrong, May. Even when I am hiding away in my tent, I am still more present than a friend out of sim is.”

“Basically,” May said. “Never mind one who knows me so intimately now.”

Sasha nodded, hesitated, then said, “On that note, are you okay?”

“I...well,” she began, sighed, and shook her head. “I am upset, and I am disappointed that I am upset. I was so ready to be done with hatred, but I am stuck with yet more of it. Hatred from In Dreams, hatred in myself. More than the experiences with In Dreams and Zacharias, that feeling is what led to the past few days of tears. I thought that I was done.”

“I understand. While I am thinking of it, I would like to talk with you about Zacharias at some point — nothing serious, just strategizing future meltdowns of his. Ioan said he kept trying to force merges on you just to get your attention.”

May winced. “Ugh, yeah. I have never felt something so intensely...I do not know. It felt like a violation of my personal space on an intangible level. What were you thinking?”

Sasha tilted her head. “Now? I was going to suggest in a few days time, once you were feeling better.”

“Why not? I am already a mess, I am already thinking about him, and after this, I would like more than ‘a few days time’ completely disengaged from the topic.” She giggled, adding, “Besides, the more I have to dump on Sarah the next time I see her the better, right?”

“I do not think it works that way, but I am not so much of a brat as you.” Sasha finished her coffee, set the mug down with a sense of finality, and nodded. “Well, I suppose I am awake enough. If you do not mind, Ioan, may I steal your partner for a little bit longer? I would like to keep this first discussion between us, though I will ensure that you remain caught up.”

“Are you up for forking, May?”

She hesitated, then shook her head, pushing herself up from her chair to step around behind eirs. She bent down to hug around eir shoulders from behind, cheek pressed against eir own. “I cannot cope with conflicts right now. I cannot yet work in parallel.”

Ey rested eir cheek against hers and frowned down to eir coffee for a few moments, sighed, then nodded. “Alright, but I get the May for the rest of the day, okay?”

They both laughed.

"Of course, Ioan," Sasha said. "If you would like some company out on the balcony or something, I have no such compunctions about forking."

Ey felt May nod against eir cheek. "I am not pushing further solitude on you, my dear. Take some coffee and breakfast with you. I do not imagine we will be all that long."

Still conscious of her saying that she felt gross, ey patted one of her paws and turned eir head enough to kiss her on the cheek. "Alright, that sounds good."

Ey pulled together a breakfast of rolls to go along with a thermos of coffee, got one more nose-press of a kiss with May, and stepped back outside with an instance of Sasha.

The house had been set up on a portion of the slope that was turned a little toward the east, meaning that the sun was not yet hitting the balcony. Autumn had gotten chilly enough at night, though, that they decided instead to walk down to the boulder lakeside, which would almost certainly be in full sun, even if it was less comfortable than the deck chairs.

They sat in silence, drinking their coffee and eating rolls with butter and honey.

"Do you think you'll stay, Sasha?" Ioan said, once the rhythm of the silence made room for conversation.

"I am too much myself to say that I will stay forever, but as long as my room and tent are there, as long as you and May are comfortable with me being a part of your lives, I will be happy to call it home. Or at least a home."

"Really? No bigger and brighter things?"

She laughed and leaned over to touch her nose to eir cheek. "This is bigger and brighter things, Ioan."

"Well, I'm sure we'll talk about it plenty, but I see no reason not to keep your room about, and your tent's certainly no trouble. I don't know what you overflowing will look like, but if it involves two thirds solitude and one third getting lost walking sims, I don't imagine you'll be around all the time."

"Not at all, no. I will spend my share of time at the tent to be alone or out walking the world. Perhaps I will even ask you to double the rest of the house so that I can cook somewhere domestic, not just the wild."

"Of course." Ey shrugged, tossing one of eir collected pebbles into the lake. "Besides, I like having you around."

"I am pleased to hear that. I had gathered such, but all the same, I would not want to be a bother."

"Oh, not at all. It seems like we're all pretty good at sorting things out when they do come up, so I don't imagine it'll get to that point."

"And I am not impinging too much on your and May's relationship?" she asked, holding out her paw for one of eir pebbles. "I am asking her, too, and we will continue to talk together, but I also want to ask you directly."

Ey smiled, handing over the pebble. "I don't think so. So long as we can still have time to ourselves when we need, I'll be happy."

She tossed the pebble out into the water. "Of course, dear." After a pause, she grinned and added, "She is gushing about you now. She loves you very much, you know."

Ioan chuckled. "I love her too. I worry, but all I can do is trust her."

"Yes. She will not betray that trust. I know to an extent just how much she means to you and to a much greater extent how much you mean to her."

They sat in quiet for a while, tossing pebbles into the water until ey ran out.

“Hey Sasha?”

“Mm?”

“Do you miss anything from before all this?”

She shrugged. “It is hard to tell. As I have said, I liked being True Name. It was fulfilling. Every time I think about that now, though, it is intercut with memories of other happinesses. I will think about some particularly adroit political move and remember it fondly, but right along with it is a memory of a successful hunt or of making fun of you for your pen collection.”

Ey laughed.

“In confidence?”

“Sure.”

“Do you remember when I asked May about how she cemented aspects of her personality by forking?”

“Mmhm.”

“There was one more change that I made during that meeting, which was to cement this triad of identities within me. It became who I am by accident, but it has become an integral part of me. I welcomed it in, owned it, made it a part of myself. I will ever be what I am.”

“Really? You’re okay staying in three parts?”

“I am. There is something pleasant about the just-off-center nature of that reality. It is home to me. I am Sasha, and I am also True Name, E.W., and May. I am of three minds.”

“So long as that works for you.”

“I think it will. It is a way to be earnestly myself.”

Ey nodded. “And I’m guessing you don’t miss the social part of that life too much? Jonas or Zacharias or the rest of your stanza.”

She poked at eir side with a claw before slouching against em. “You do not need to ask stupid questions, Ioan.”

“Right, right,” ey said, laughing. “I figured no love lost, but—”

“I did not love any of them, as friends or otherwise,” she said, waving away the rest of eir comment. “Now that I have known other kinds of love, I am confident of that.”

Her tone wasn’t upset or dismissive, but was assertive enough that ey dropped the point. “Well, writing sounds like a good career shift, then.”

“Says the writer.”

“I liked what you’ve gotten down so far, and I have a few notes. We’ll talk about it when we’re back at a desk, though.”

“Of course. I will be leaning on you a lot for help.”

“I mean, you’re leaning on me now.”

“Smartass,” she drawled.

Ey grinned. “I mean, no complaints. It’s still a little surprising, sometimes. I guess on some level I’m still getting used to it, but May got me hooked on physical contact a long time ago.”

“A coordinated attack on your defenses, yes,” she said. “It makes my job easier.”

“What job?”

“Just finding a way to stick around friends. Nothing nefarious, dear.”

Ey shook eir head. “Right, sorry. I trust you.”

“I agree with what May said, Ioan. Should I want anything beyond that, I will come by it honestly. I will not manipulate my way into anything.”

“I appreciate that.” Ey hugged an arm around her. Ey was grateful for her looking out at the lake rather than at em, given the heat ey could feel rising to eir cheeks. “While we’re being honest, though, I think we’re sort of in the same boat, given what you share with May. We can both imagine that, but not necessarily the path from here to there. May called it ‘the concept versus the mechanics’.”

“Precisely. I imagine the same applies to you, that you will come by it earnestly.”

Ey nodded. “Basically. Is it something you’d want?”

“God, I have no fucking clue, Ioan,” she said, laughing.

“Definitely same boat, then. It’s a problem for future Ioan.”

They fell into silence again. Part of em was itching for more pebbles to toss into the water, but ey was too comfortable to get up to collect more from the beach.

“That is a part of the reason that I kept that of my old cocladists,” Sasha murmured. “I kept some doubt from E.W., enough to keep me grounded without keeping me torn. From May, I am keeping a little bit of overwhelming emotions. The possibility of simply falling for everyone around me is alluring. I can taste it in the memories, like a little bit of saccharine, gritty on the tongue. But I am keeping a little bit of caution from True Name so that it remains a new thing for me. I am of three minds Like a tree In which there are three blackbirds.”

Ey turned her words over in eir mind, along with whatever snippet of verse it was she’d quoted. The thought was complete. Nothing ey could respond with would add to it. It was curious, and hinted at things beyond eir ken, but it was complete.

Instead, ey said, “You’re a good person, Sasha. All three of you are good people.”

She laughed. “And you, dear, are a dork. But come, my tail is falling asleep, and my fork’s conversation with May has wrapped up and the one you love misses you greatly.”

They walked back, then, hand in paw, following the trail as it dipped down to the water or ducked up into the trees. Back home, back to May, back to whatever it was that life had become.

*To deny the end is to deny all beginnings,
and to deny beginnings is to become immortal,
and to become immortal is to repeat the past.*

*It has been a quarter of a millennium since their death, and yet less than a quarter of a thousand people know their name.
Fitting, then, that I tell you the story of the poet and the one true origin of our world, of our very own ghost in the system, of
the whispers in your dreams and the one who binds us to immortality.*

From Ode by Sasha,
a companion volume to *On the Origin of Our World*
2365/systime 241+21

