

Toledot

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Madison Scott-Clary

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Qoheleth

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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

Beginnings

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 much as ey remembered. Grass tickled at eir lower calves even through the socks and slacks, clouds threatened rain as they always did, and wind tugged at eir hair in all the very same ways as 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 up to the house. This was lit about with flames of all sizes. Tea-lights scattered among the dandelions, elaborate candleabras 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 soft chime sounded from within and outside the house.

Ioan need not have looked hard for Dear, for 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 fox ey remembered, yes, but also scampering fennecs 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 the academic.

“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 musical 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 disappear, Ioan chatted 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 long 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 hastily combed look, and now resembled an artfully tousled mop. Eir face, too, had changed, adopting a roundness that suited eir features well. The usual warm-colored sarong and tunic, 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 hugging 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 hazarded.

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 has already been established that I am excited. Permit me this!" After a laughing 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 exist, 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 implica-

tions.

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 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 the watch the skunk, similar to Dear in so many ways but for species, padded around the corner. She smiled apologetically and bowed. “Sorry I am late.”

Dear brightened and stepped quickly to the skunk, part of its own clade, and, once the bow completed, 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.

“Of course! 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 nearly constant as guests upon guests 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 into motion. She was unfailingly kind, though if madness rode the whole of the Ode Clade, it seemed to affect her deeper than the rest, and 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 usual 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 mephitidine 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 was rare for the fox to leave the end of a sentence unsaid, 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 mad 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 can't believe you're 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, or Praiseworthy for

short. The entire clade, all one hundred of them, had each taken for their names a line from a long poem, 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 an appearance 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.

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 detect a hint of nervousness that had not been there before.

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 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 of them forked in turn, the forks bowed, and disappeared.

The weight of inevitability began to crest as midnight reared its head.

No speech was forthcoming, but 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.

Should old acquaintance be forgot
and auld lang syne?

Ioan realized that ey was crying, that many in the circle were crying, and without any signal, all within the circle burst into the chorus.

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. The landscape around them crumbled into voxels, and those voxels joined together by powers of two, and with a soft chime, 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 entry-way, 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 Bălan — 2325

Ioan and May Then My Name 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. The conversation wound down, and then the two sat in silence. It did not seem time yet to snap sobriety into being.

It had taken Ioan a few days 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 surprised, and ey had needed to have a series of awkward conversations discussing boundaries and intentions.

Now, as she slouched against eir side on that bench swing and ey settled eir arm around her, he asked, "What is the story behind your fork? Or your stanza?"

"Mm?"

"Well, Dear said that it and Serene were forked when Praiseworthy wanted to explore an interest in instances and sims. Is there something like that which led to...to whatever your down-tree in-

stance is 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.”

“Were the early days busy?”

“Very busy. We were one of the first, 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 word is something of an elision that has become shorthand for experiences rather than thoughts.” Her voice was soft, 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. We were all starry-eyed dreamers, and so were the engineers phys-side. Hard problems remain hard, however, and it kept getting deprioritized. Michelle and the rest of the Council of Eight provided arguments for the means by which we have consensual sensoria, as well as additional sensorium tools such as the messages.”

Ioan restrained the impulse to bristle at this. The Ode clade was notorious for their fondness for sensorium messages, those sensa-

tions and images that barged in on one's senses. Ey found them unnerving. Instead, ey said, "Just how much of the early System did your clade influence."

May Then My Name's laugh was musical. "I am sure we have lost count. The first lines of each stanza quickly picked up interests of their own — they were in much better communication back then — and each picked up a project of their own, and whenever a new project would come along, they would petition the rest of the clade for the use of a line for a long-running fork. Everything was much more expensive back then, and we would sometimes have to pool our reputation."

"What was your stanza's project?"

"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. The first line of mine, though, The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream — True Name — was instrumental in the secession of the System."

Ioan blinked, startled. "I had no idea. That early?"

"That was before we started using systime, yes."

-{"Two centuries ago? I thought Dear said Michelle uploaded after Secession."}(This whole bit is a continuity error)

She shrugged noncommittally, then rested her head back on Ioan's shoulder. The alcohol of the night still dogged em, but

"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 we have settled on once a decade, of late. We will merge once this project is finished.”

“You haven’t diverged too far?” Ioan asked.

“We try not to,” the skunk murmured. “That is why I am acting as coordinator. It is a familiar role.”

Ioan nodded. “Close enough to Secession, I suppose.”

Another moment of silence. The academic permitted some of the drunkenness from the evening to drift away, allowing him to think more clearly. May Then My Name relaxed further against eir side, and ey suspected she was not far away from sleep. Tomorrow, the work would begin in earnest, so ey was tempted to let her sleep, but a question nagged at him.

“May?”

“I like it when you call me that.”

“It’s a good name.” Ioan grinned. “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 start of the System?”

“You, my dear, are a fucking genius.” She was on her feet now, 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 talking 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. Then what’s your secret?”

“I want to write an early history of the system to parallel the current. They are very similar, you know, but it has been two hundred years. We are well past history, and doubtless there are histories already written. Yes, I remember. Of course I do. I remember the secession, I remember uploading, I remember getting lost, I remember everything. The 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 write a mythology.”

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 we 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 hand-

ful more of those nose-dot kisses. “You get it!”

“I worked with Dear, you nut. Of course I get stories.” Ey laughed and reached 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. 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.

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 that 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, 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 they 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 diamond 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 kick away from the cylinder out 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 system 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 end of the cylinder facing the sun, 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 he 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 asteroids 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 Force Engines that kept the rotation of the system constant as the arms had been extruded from its surface, or of course the two new cylindrical systems 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 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 ancestor dwelt.

Douglas was the launch director. He was the *director*. He was high enough on the food chain that he had 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 and type up a letter, run it past security, and 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 systems, those two smaller cylinders that would be, before long now, released from either end of the launch arms at incredible speed. 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 MTMNDWM, perhaps she would know. He could ask her. She could mediate.

And still, he never did.

Douglas Hadje — 2325

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 199+364 1303

.1 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 L₅System: 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. Congratulations, as always, for another step closer to launch.

.2 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 extrasystem 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, Cap-

tain, 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 desert sand, you suddenly look down and see a tortoise crawling toward you. You reach down and flip it over onto its back. The tortoise lies there, its belly baking in the hot sun, beating its legs, trying to turn itself over, but it cannot do so without your help. You are not helping. Why?
- 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 question, 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 199+364 1515

Digital signatures:

- Douglas Hadje

- **Launch commission:**
 - de
 - Jonathan Finnes
 - Thomas Nash
 - Woo Hye-won
 - Hasnaa

.3 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 arm integrity*: 100% (go)
 - * *Launch arm path*: Clear (go)
 - * *Launch arm cameras*: 100% (go)
 - * *Launch vehicle path*: Clear to transsolar 1.8AU, 5 nines confidence (go)
 - * *Capacitor charge*: 6 nines, on track to 100% (go)

- * *Speed*: 100% (go)
- * *Expected acceleration*: Nominal (go)
- * *Expected expected jerk*: Nominal (go)
- Pollux:
 - * *Launch arm integrity*: 100% (go)
 - * *Launch arm path*: Clear (go)
 - * *Launch arm cameras*: 100% (go)
 - * *Launch vehicle path*: Clear to cissolar 1.2AU, 5 nines confidence (go)
 - * *Capacitor charge*: 6 nines, on track to 100% (go)
 - * *Speed*: 100% (go)
 - * *Expected acceleration*: Nominal (go)
 - * *Expected 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!

.4 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 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 essentially 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 poor fucks.

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 with-

out leaving a fork. I will have Ioan (my pet historian) ask 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, and 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. As planned, we are hogging all of the entanglement bandwidth with communication, some of which you will be receiving on other streams. 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 Co-drin (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, and 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 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 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. 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. Life Breeds Life But Death Must Now Be Chosen 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 murmured, many of the clade joining her as the recognized the words. “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 five minutes — for some had diverged so far that a great amount of effort was required — 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 there 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.

“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 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, in through the head, out through the heart, 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 that 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 years ago beneath that blanket of numbness — which took him to an unassuming office complex.

Unassuming from the outside, at least. Inside, ey 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 a ey was instructed to disrobe and push his arms through the sleeves of a paper gown and 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 nickle-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...

And then he was 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, familiar 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. So familiar...

“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 will be in the System?”

There was a pause, and then a laugh. “You already are. The upload has complete, 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 am 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 her paw. “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-stripped 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 hand 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 quiet 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?”

“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 my nice thawb.”

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.”

Jared 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 — at least, she seemed 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 grid-ded 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.”

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. I will have to save up a bit if I want to do that again.”

“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 different, 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 is not like dying.”

“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 determination. And then the memories just ended.

“See?”

He tilted his head, trying to remember anything past that point, but there was nothing else to grasp. “Not really, but I suppose I will 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 is only an hour 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 raining outside, but delightfully warm inside, where silver and red stools lined a bar and the sizzle of eggs could be heard from a griddle.

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 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 least.”

Yared straightened up. “Jonas? Wow. Nice to meet you as well. Is this...are you the Council of eight?”

True Name nodded. “That’s 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 weasel said. “Debarre, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

The rest of the council introduced themselves.

“So, how long until secession?” 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 count-down. 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 bad 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.

“I think this is why you wanted to be the last one,” 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.”

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. There was no way that Codrin or Dear or Dear’s partner could ever return, as the transit was one-way.

”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, eventually hopping to their feet and chasing after the fox in a mad dash, leaving Codrin to sit and smile and watch and think.

There was no more Codrin in the L5 System. Had ey ever ex-

isted? Ey was only memories, and perhaps that is all ey had ever been. Navel gazing and existential crises mixed with the glee of having actually *done* something. No longer just the passive amanuensis, but now the active participant, to whatever extent.

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 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 Elfive 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 de-

struction cannot live there. And so we sought in the evening gloaming and there we found the slavering 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 was the mountain! It *did* dwell in the grass! It *did* live in caves! 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 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.

“That I am!”

“But that was good! 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 him 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 cause 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 choice.”

“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?”

Codrin and Dear’s partner both 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 Dear's 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 tail."

"Pish and also posh, 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 mastery was its master of self, and if it was always focused on the betterment of others, it could neglect itself.

“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 more people that you might suspect. Instead, they are unable to help themselves before that one. It is 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 its self, and so I felt that it was keeping me anchored where I was with 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 be-heading!” 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 for 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.

It was only later, when Dear and Codrin had curled together in bed — Dear’s partner having fallen asleep on the couch — that the fox elbowed 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? Tsk tsk.”

“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?”

“It is always nice to have confirmation.”

“Happy to oblige.”

There was silence for a bit. Codrin had begun 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, however?”

“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 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 amanuenses.”

“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 the Codrin on Pollux did the same?” Dear mumbled.

Ey was awake only enough to say, “I hope so.”

They slept.

Michelle Hadje/Sasha — 2124

Michelle Hadje mastered the urge to vomit.

She knew that could change this. Change all of these things from so many dreams that pressed in against. 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, but fork a dozen times over. Some perks came with being on the council, after all.

But she didn'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 and all her thoughts and all her dreams were mirrored back upon

her. Perhaps she deserved these bouts of lingering disconnection, 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 skunk form won today, anthropomorphized to a comforting degree, sitting just shy of cartoonish. It would do. She would be Sasha 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 Mi-er, Sasha. Hows tricks?” Debarre asked.

“Tricksy, as usual.” She smiled wanly. “How about you two?”

user11824 shrugged. His features were nondescript to the point where Sasha 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 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.

Sasha 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 paws 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.

Sasha forced a tired chuckle and wobbled one of her paws 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 Michelle 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.

Sasha quelled the instinct to shrug again, nodding instead. “I think it would be. At least, 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, then?”

“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 something more serious, and continued. “And if it helps you out, then it’s probably for the best. I’m sorry Sasha, 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. The woman spoke up. “I’m comfortable answering your quest with a ‘yes’.”

They went around the table, and none of the others said con-

tradicted the first vote. Sasha 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 have ten things that need doing, and then I would like a week off.”

Jonas laughed. “You’re allowed a vacation, Sasha. 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. Sasha 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 Sasha 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?”

Sasha nodded eagerly to the sharp dressed man. “Please. It is not my intention to take over work just so I 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 neces-

sity.”

“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,” Sasha 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. Sasha 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 Sasha, 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. You didn’t answer why you two got all weird, though.”

“Complicated stuff. Both Sasha and—”

“We were both among the lost,” Sasha 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. Sasha looked down at her paws.

“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.”

Debarre tilted his head, then laughed. It was an earnest laugh, full-throated, and Sasha realized that Jonas had said precisely the right thing to cut through the tension.

“Do you have some equally stupid clade name?” Sasha said, grinning.

“Oh, just the Jonas Clade. I’m going to keep forking as long as I have reputation, 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 eyelids at Debarre. “Thank you. I try.”

After a bit more chatter, Debarre made his goodbyes and left the sim.

Sasha 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, Sasha 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 Michelles 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 con-

tribute 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."

True Name frowned. "What a dick. Is that kind of opinion common out there? I am still coming off the mount 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. What we do have is the ability to communicate."

"Propaganda, you mean."

Jonas smiled, nodded. "Propaganda."

"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? Its 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 fact of the process, but unavoidable. The intellect, the emotions, and all that makes a person an individual are sent to that system 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 patently 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 need to pay for the power requirements for running their system.”

This argument carries weight when it is viewed from a 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 ought to 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 right conversation, here.

“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 crux of almost all of the myriad arguments that I’ve heard. This is the ultimate pillar of cynicism that everyone’s inner sociopath leans against. This is the bit 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: I 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.

I have been talking with 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 Michelle Hadje. I know that the collective conscious moves quickly, and to ask it to keep in mind

a single name from something that happened nigh on twelve years ago, but she is important. She was among the lost, those unlucky few trapped within their own minds and exorcised by the whims of tyranny, and when she was returned to our shared existence from her solipsistic one, she was among the loudest of voices campaigning for change from the systems who failed her and many others. As one of the lost, she was integral to the creation of the System, and has been a part of it from the inside for more than eight years now.

Her memories are real

Her 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 system 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 the 'net cafe. 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 it always was. 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 a 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 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 alarm, 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 had 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 coffee 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, Yared nodded. “It is quite good. May I ask why you are 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. Instead, 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 have not 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 Yared's were dusty and overdue for a wash.

Still, the face was unmistakable. "Councilor Demma?" he asked, voice small.

"Yared! The very one. Please! Come in and sit with me, and we can drink our coffees. They smell delicious."

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 do 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 post on the topic of individual rights on the DDR forums, and 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 NWAC Council is a political body, so of course we monitor the forums. We are not monitoring you specifically, per se, except in that you are a part of 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 Ms. Hadje and Jonas is invaluable. We — that is, the interests in the council that I represent on this topic — feel that you would be a useful addition to our goals.”

“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, though. 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 gain residency, 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 Northeest 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 Yared 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 Russian coffee 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, because they can form a branching tree of personalities. Wonderful! Can you imagine the culture that must spring up around that? 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, 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, "What will you have me do?"

"Excellent." 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 slow, subtle changes to your arguments. 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 man 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? Ms. Hadje and Jonas?”

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, 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 Yared 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.

Anyway, to your questions. These are very strange and cryptic, but in the spirit of building a 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 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 yo

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 folks 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, and who was part of the Council of Eight. 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, 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 r

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

I was born Douglas Fredrick Hadje-Simon on April 9th, 2278 in Saskatoon to the last in a long line of Uranium farmers. 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 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 junior 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 deta

I'm nothing special, I think? Average height, 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. 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 a lag to Earth, it's mostly entertainment sims), 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 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 the number of years that 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 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 stati

See above. I'd rather die than leave the system.

If the System shut down and all personalities irrevocably lost, how would

See above.

If you were told that, one year from now, you would die painlessly, what v

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.

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 and knobs that need doing. 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 works 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 h

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 are always doom-sayers and end-of-the-world-ites, but they have seen a huge uptick in my life

alone, and 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 shitty" or whatever.

Me? I'm not so sure. I was raised thinking much of that, but I also feel like I left those feelings 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?

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

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 desert sand, you suddenly look down and see a

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 b

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 un

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 working at 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 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, 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.

Part II

Progression

Ioan Bălan - 2325

There was a rhythm to research, Ioan had found. The ideas and information did not always flow smoothly, of course. 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 from the world around em.

But despite these crests and troughs, there was a rhythm. Ey would find a pace at which the project would bloom, fits or starts, 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 Dear's Death Day, had knocked Ioan into enough of a different mindset, that this felt much like a new project. Ey supposed that it had to do in part 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’m prone to that, 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 uss 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, she had quickly requested several changes to the house. A desk for her to work at, of course, as well as a private room — a cube with all grey walls — in which to do whatever it that she did when composing. 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 not requested another room or bed, which had initially startled 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. It fits two, yes? If not, just make it fit two.”

Ey had formed few attachments, and certainly none which required sleeping in the same bed as someone. Eir confusion must have shown on eir face, as May had rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“I do not mean anything untoward by it,” she said.

Ey 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, but if you feel uncomfortable, I will be fine with a 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. Each of these was larger than Ioan had felt 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 now, feeling the way it molded around em. Ey knew well enough 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,” 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. “Planning. What should we plan?”

“How about your forks?”

“Right, yes. Do you think I should have one for both Castor and Pollux? And probably 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. 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’ll bet. 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 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 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 Ioans 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. “Not to start with, if that’s okay. I’m only just getting used to sleeping with 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 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 that was never really been a need or want, 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, to greater or lesser extent.”

“I suppose so. 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 just never happened. It 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 with 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...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.”

Ioan shifted to the side enough to look down at the skunk. “How do you mean?”

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, visibly searching for the words. “It is like it knows what feels good, but not why, and so it has developed these 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.

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 affectionate name ‘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 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, promise.”

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 laughed and shook her head. “You mumble when you think really hard.”

“Shit, right. Sorry. I trust you on that. I’m not mad or anything, I like where we’ve wound up, 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 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 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 stuff, 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 close to 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 completely 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 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 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, to put it plainly. 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), 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 the laws of physics.

- *Reputation markets:* Well, I say bound by the laws of physics, but on a more base level, they are as well. The System only has so much capacity (though it is growing every few months, these days), 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. 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 collabora-

tion 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 more 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. 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 problem 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 walk 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 man 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 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 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: 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: 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 sudden change in direction.

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 voices 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 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 that they can then 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 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 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 simply 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 cleared 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 something of a pop-up, 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 twirled or clams within the ice, steadily making the drink more and more savory over time.

True Name found it all confusing and jarring. She liked it.

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? Is that 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 hand. “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 anger to a tired 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, 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, because 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.”

And so on, until the table was full and the cone of silence fell.

“Sasha? 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, Yared, 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?”

“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.”

“As do I,” True Name added. “Dr. Ramirez can get chummy with them, and I’m already chummy with her.”

“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.”

“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 sipped at her drink to buy herself some time to think. “I think it’s leaning our way. One of the big arguments remains speculation, but Yared’s turning that into a pro-rights argument instead of a neutral- or anti-rights one. His voice is getting louder, too. It sounds like he’s getting a lot more upvotes on his posts than before.”

“That’s good.”

True Name nodded. “I think so. He’s hardly the biggest voice on the issue, but it sounds like he’s probably in the top ten.”

“He’s NEAC, right?”

“Yeah, Addis Ababa,” Jonas said. “Not exactly the seat of power, but not 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.

“Fair enough, I guess.”

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 steer 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, 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 thinks child restrictions are a good enough idea that those laws have bled into Russia, too. I’m pretty sure they see speciation as a positive. What better way to help in population.”

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 I am going to stay and get well and truly plastered,”

True Name said. “You are all free to stick around or go if you want.”

Codrin Balan#Pollux — 2325

Interview with Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled#Pollux

On the reasons for vesting entirely in the launch

Codrin Balan#Pollux

Systime (relative to Pollux LV): 200+22 1014

Codrin Balan#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, 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? [laughs] There were a few, I think. I am a hopeless romantic, yes. I will not actually be able to see them, but 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 more than two hundred years sys-side, I was getting perilously close.

Codrin: So it's a sense of adventure?

Dear: I suppose, thought 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 aspect of that involved. I 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: [laughs] 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, than 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 pass on that reason.

Dear: Thank you, 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 of quippy saying or well-placed ‘fuck’ when I see your face fall at the request that your history be incomplete.

Codrin: [laughter] Even I am feeling incredibly seen right 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 bring along books, 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, if not earlier. 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 suppose I worry sometimes that, as a public personality, first as Michelle Hadje 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

Codrin Balan#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 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 parter 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 in-substantial 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 eir 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 the fox between the ears, and said that ey would be back soon.

During eir previous expeditions, ey had placed 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 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 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, and many that one thought weren’t could be turned back in one way or another. 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 business 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 Balan clade.

“See what I 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 Balan 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 the long, slow sunset began.

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 it's story, building a 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, eir 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 once or twice, those had been preceded by arguments (both of which had been fallout from eir newness to the concept of relationships), and since this one had not, the two had started to get worried.

"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 Balan!” 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 szekely gulyas and spaetzel 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.”*

Codrin stalled for time by pouring emself some wine, trying to decide where to begin. “Alright. 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 it’s 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, 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 dread and anxiety.

“Isn’t that what you said?”

“Yes, it was. It was. That was after the launch, 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 it’s 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 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.”

“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 a good chunk 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?”

“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, only *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. Is that how she — the Odists — wound up with more than an equal share of power?”

Dear nodded. “It was slow and subtle, and, at first, unintentional. She was—”

“‘At first’?”

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 and Zeke, one of the other council members, helped 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 when Michelle uploaded, 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 frankly 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 believe Yared — he was our biggest champion — decided on joining the Launch. Perhaps I will nudge Ioan to him if May does not do so first."*

"Dear," Codrin began, softening eir tone. "You don't have to answer this, but do you have regrets about this time."

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, Codrin. 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.

Of course, 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.

Of course, your reply put at least some of that anxiety to rest, for which I am very thankful. 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 on the Council of Eight 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 came up with the idea of forking, 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 weirdly 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 you're working with 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 might 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 (you don't use contractions, for instance), so it got me thinking.
- 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

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 you know) 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 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 dog 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 in

There’s only so many times I can call it a shithole, I guess.

South of the 50th parallel or so, most everyone lives below-ground, 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 governments, loosely dividing the planet into the Northwest and Southeast hemispheres, plus 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). 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 you change?

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.

If you could go back in time and tell yourself any one thing, what would you tell yourself?

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 was, to some extent.

You are given three wishes, with three restrictions: they must have plausible deniability, they must be about the future, and they must be about the System.

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 wowrker 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. Aliens? A rogue asteroid? Some crazy discovery on the moon? 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

This next batch of questions was pretty irksome. They're super 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, probably yes. 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

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, two arms, two legs? Even that's negotiable.

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 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, 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 subtle manner that the girl 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? This is generally an insensitive thing to ask someone phys-side. I don't know how it works sys-side. I'll say yes and leave it at that.

Assuming you have one, where is your favorite place to be touched? Let's

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.

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 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

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 more than a century, 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

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, 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-flyi

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. / T

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 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 Balan — 2325

May Then My Name sat across from Ioan at their low table, looking somewhat diminished from her usual spot beside him.

“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 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 included 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. “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.”

“Tricksy, as always.” 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 said, 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 Balan. 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. It is already fun to see the differences between Castor and Pollux through the eyes of Codrin, 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 preceded 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 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, 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. 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 — I think he will do it within the year — and then drop a bunch of reputation to let him upload into Michelle’s field. There, we will go for a walk, 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, of the man who brought the launches to fruition learning that he is talking to 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. “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 about the clade.”

“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, dear.”

Ioan stood to follow her as she padded from the common room to the balcony, then down the steps from their to the yard, a rectangle of grass hemmed in by a border of mulch, a fence of lilac bushes making up the border. It was 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 just a few millimeters below the tops of the trimmed grass. “What are those?”

The skunk grinned to em.

“May, what did you do?”

“I talked you into a small addition. That is what I did.”

Ey knit eir brows. “Talked me into...how do you mean?”

“You have ACLs over your property, I 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 pedals, grand-toothed leaves clustering the base.

“I am saying that we made these.” She bent down beside em and plucked the flower from its base, lifting it with a dreamlike smile. “I am saying that you trust me, and that life in the System is more subtle than you know. You trust me. You let me into your life as a coworker, then cohabitant, then cosleeper. You let me into your dreams, and your dreams influence this place as much as 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 both shifted to a cross-legged position 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. They were all over back phys-side, though.”

May nodded and waited 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. 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." Ey laughed. "Well, we were dirt poor, I'll say. Most of the weeds were green, leafy things with fuzzy green flowers that would turn into bundles of seeds, but there were a few dandelions scattered about."

"No lilacs?"

"More stuff from media. I have no idea if they're accurate, but I remember loving the smell."

"They're spot on, Ioan."

Ey smiled.

"So you uploaded and made your sim like this?"

"Yeah. It was from 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, then spent a year rebuilding the sim 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. 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 platter carrying food.

"But that is not what I like about them. 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 scent of some baked sweet bread, but that 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.” She laughed, peeking up to em slyly. “Or perhaps we told the story. You asked, so I suggested, 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 shown 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, and a brand new dandelion 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.

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 time into the 'net, into the DDR, be expected to make any change? He knew that, once a referendum was picked up by the various legislatures, it was hopeless to expect the DDR had any 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 first, the previous bill he had hyper-fixated 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 entry 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 had previously, at least. 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 aspect 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 travel, 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 boundaries. 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 on to the final launch toward 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. 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 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 do 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, drafting 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 laws 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 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. 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.)

It is best to think of the System more as its own country, in this sense. It is nothing if not a remote location with its own customs and social structure.

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.

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*. The 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 things. Psychological breakthroughs? Better ways to keep us happy so that we can produce and consume more things).
- International relations — that is, which group people 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:

- Religion
- Opinions
- Interpersonal relations

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 lets 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.

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 Balan#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 day with enough of a breeze to keep it from becoming outright hot, 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, of course, 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, as well — 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, 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 came with the urge to vomit. She made the right decision to choose her own end.”*

“And the decision to not fix the split-mindedness?”

It frowned down 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.*”

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 quippy 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 foxes paws, opting instead to hug it around the middle. Dear reciprocated by looping its arms around eir shoulders.

“That’s sort of what I wound up suspecting 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, each thinking their thoughts, until by some unspoken signal, they turned the side, of the cairn that hadn’t been explored and began walking.

“What’s next on your list?”

“Mm? 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 suppose that 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. Many of them are quite mad now, however.”

“Mad how?”

“All of the council, all of those who uploaded so early, was 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 around there 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. Much of the strain on their personalities began to show about twenty years ago."*

"Twenty years ago, huh? Around the time of the Qoheleth stuff? 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, True Name had not yet divined.

She felt constantly aware of who was around her. It was 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.

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 knew so well back on the net. Where those had been high-walled, with 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 this 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 well enough written. 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 nor 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 last few posts, I’m seeing a small pattern.”

She drank in silence as she digested this. Yared seemed like an honest and earnest supporter, though perhaps something 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 above. 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 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, and to love you for it.” 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’d ask him what government types are thinking about the launch, if anyone’s 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. 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 at 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 a seceded System will look like, I say we push hard.”

True Name nodded. “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 theater 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 room 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 and 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.”

“Fair enough. 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 near 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, and 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 seem 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 shirt and began the slow walk back to his apartment. He ignored the colored strips on the wall that guided 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 nothing to him 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, 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 per-

sonally aside from May 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 ever been used since the development and construction of the strut-works. It had only ever existed for the pleasure of the tourists who had made the station possible in the first place, for the back wall of the control center was glass, as was a good chunk of the walls to either side, 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, doing their part along with the atmospheric 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 Earthward to outward, then further anti-spinward to the greenhouses, and back Earthward again. He walked and he thought, slowly going through the mental list of things he'd always wanted to Michelle and erasing them, line by line. Why keep them around, now? Why bother?

Having walked back to the Earthward hub, he finished the trip to his room in the hotel. His room where he would remain as 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 Balan: Douglas, nice to meet you! May Then My Name 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 should take up knitting. 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'd 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 our questions at once. They are mostly biographical, and I think that a small biography 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 peo-

ple like you and Ioan who spend all their time thinking. Before that, I was a teachers, 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 in North America, in the Western Federation. Like 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 patterns (and thought patterns) had changed, and since then, language and I have had a unique 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, and 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 solu-

tion.

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 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. 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 a select few. I would ask you to please stick with May Then My Name.

Douglas: Alright. Apologies if I overstepped.

May Then My Name: 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.

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 second time Ioan had referred to May Then My Name as 'May', but he couldn't think of a polite way to ask what that meant.

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. 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, 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 something that makes 80% of your days bad days, then that means that you wind up with 58400 bad days. 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. 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.

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, instead of 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 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 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 there 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: 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 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 Balan#Castor — 2325

The first interview that Codrin Bălan conducted was with an author who had chosen to invest completely in the launches, leaving no one 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 Joseph Rankin, and while Codrin had not read any of his works prior to the suggestion, he had certainly heard the name in 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 were prone to many of the same pitfalls, but this man took it to an extreme that they found frankly unreasonable.

Cousin, to prepare for the interview, had read two of Rankin's books. They were not without their merit, as might any such book that garnered so much attention, but they still took a good bit 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, fairly enticing. This was something that Codrin has never managed to capture emself, and so ey set aside some time to study the ways in which Rankin used surrealism to, without distracting, enhance the story at hand.

Meeting Rankin was exactly as they had expected. There was nothing about him that did not shout Joseph 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 espressos.

“So, you are the illustrious Codrin Balan.” His voice was imperious, veering dangerously close to pompous, as he sipped espresso, looking over the rim of the demitasse appraisingly at Codrin.

Something about the man grated at em. Ey was not 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. Nigh on intolerable.

All the same, ey tried eir best to keep up eir smile as ey spoke. “And you’re Joseph 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, ingratiating. 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 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 espresso, Codrin jotted down the author’s words. The first thing that Rankin had done upon meeting up with em was 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 cup aside and made a grand sweep of his arm. “You look around you, and you see so many going about their lives as the 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 about 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 single 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 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 will begin quite similar, and then start 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 at the outline, as well as any similarities that the texts share. Imagine, Rankin#Castor writing," And so, in my heart of hearts, I knew the truth among the stars" while Rankin#blue 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 the 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 only having 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 writing will fall short of yours.”

A little bit of sucking up warmed Rankin 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 focused 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 always 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 until ey reached eir very

first cairn, set eir paper and pens down carefully in the grass, and shouted to the uncaring sky. “What an enormous sack of shit, good lord.”

Then ey picked up eir supplies and walked back to the house.

Dear and its partner 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 around the table 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 full 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 it 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 launch 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.”

“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, it's 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 — 2124

It took Debarre a matter of seconds to answer Michelle's request for a meeting, and 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. "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 it 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 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, she was Sasha. What thoughts before that had kept her as Michelle, as her human self, had at last 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.”

“Two decades.”

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. Hell, 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 lunch across the table and deck me. You don’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 kind of 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. I would very much appreciate this being kept between us, yes, but 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 the same for only the briefest of seconds, but we have long since diverged.”

“That far, though? It’s only been a week or something, 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. At least, not that I can see. Just True Name taking your spot in dealing with the politics stuff. I actually haven’t seen any 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 seemed to have 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 a deliberate choice to fork each instance only when I was in a more singular state. 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 hands again, the weasel took them in his own.

“What keeps you from doing the same, yourself? 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, she shared in the calm that remained after.

“I’m sorry, Sasha.”

“No, 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 that I was going through before uploading, but much of what I feel now what I was going through before, just less visibly."

"Alright, I suppose." 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, instead of speaking.

"Only, I wonder." His voice sounded distant, as though he were speaking to the sky rather than her. "I wonder if your forks changed in ways other than just not being split. I wonder if they're really even you anymore."

Ioan Balan — 2325

“I uploaded as soon as I could. I think it was the 40s?”

“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’m just a little spacey, is all.”

“It’s easy enough to do. I get stuck thinking about whatever 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,” she said, giving a hint of a bow. “For both of them, 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 her confusion. “I read up on you, as well. They sound like a wild bunch.”

Ey laughed. “I’ll say. 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 pretty happy.”

“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 much reference point for that amount. I was compensated — well, my family was — to upload. 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."

"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 scripts! Why not music?"

Ioan laughed. "Of course. That makes sense. Did your music change after you uploaded?"

"I wrote a lot more violin 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. Minimalism was already on the rise again, 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 quite understand. “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 around with minimalism, for the most part. People keep uploading, though, and 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 get out early, often before they’ve got the experience and knowledge that set in later in life.”

“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, frowning.

“Hmm?”

“You were frowning. What happened? Getting tired of my cooking?”

“No, it’s good. Just thinking about something Dear#Castor talked about today.” Ey stabbed at a spear of asparagus. “Ey interviewed some asshole author 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. “Fair enough. 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 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 that only invested in the launches, but the numbers are much higher on our end.”

“You are thinking about the Secession, are you not?” May smiled. “Clever, 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 the Secession, yeah. I was thinking of hunting down some Odists.”

“A good bet, that.” She looked down at her plate and said, more quietly, “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.”

Codrin Balan#Pollux — 2325

The first direction from the L5 System came in the form of a message from May Then My Name Die With Me. “Find Ezekiel,” it said. “Talk with him. Be patient, be kind.”

When ey showed it to Dear, the fox’s ears stood erect, and it had 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 should its head. *“I do not think so, no. Zeke — 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 Zeke 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.”

“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 Balan 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. May 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 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?”

“A prophet.”

Codrin was not sure what a prophet looked like, but the conversation with Dear dogged em all the way until ey was finally able to find Ezekiel and get him to agree to an interview.

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Part III

Arrival

Part IV

Epilogue

