

Nevi'im

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Qoheleth

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If you race only with foot-runners and they exhaust you, how then can you compete with horses? If you are secure only in a tranquil land, how will you fare in the jungle of the Jordan?

— Jeremiah 12:5

Tycho Brahe — 2346

It took Tycho Brahe what felt like an age to remember Codrin Bălan, and then it took em a panicked age longer to remember that, yes, sensorium messages were a thing, had been a thing for more than two centuries, and a third age still to remember how to send one.

There was some unknown urgency within him, and even though he supposed that there was no need to hurry, he nonetheless did not fork, deeming it not worth the time in his rush. Instead, he simply sent a message to the historian beginning with a jolt of adrenaline, and began talking.

“Codrin, uh, Mx Bălan, I really, really need to talk with you. Like, right now. I need to talk with you right now. Can we meet? It’s incredibly urgent, I’m sorry. I know it’s late. Can we meet?”

As soon as he finished, he began pacing once more and waited for a response, doing his level best not to send another sensorium ping immediately to wake Codrin up, just in case.

Instead, he walked around the small hill in the center of the clearing, muttering now down to the grass, shouting now up to the sky. Half words, half sentences, anything to vent the pressure he felt building inside him, but there was nothing to be done.

When the response finally came, he realized he’d only made it halfway around that hill. Time seemed to have stretched itself out long. The response was a mumbled, sleepy-sounding ad-

dress.

Tycho left before his next footfall hit the ground.

Low clouds hung above the low house on the shortgrass prairie. He forced himself to walk, not run, up to the house, where already he could see a light turning on, vague shapes moving behind the glass. The soft chime that announced his arrival led to those two shapes, one human, one not, perking up, and before ey even made it to the house's door, Codrin was already there, much as he remembered, though much more tired.

"Tycho Brahe, yes?" ey asked. "Is everything okay?"

He tore his eyes away from the figure beside the historian, what looked to be some large-eared vulpine standing on two legs, looking just as tired as Codrin.

"Uh, yes." He stammered. "No? I don't think so, at least. I'm sorry for waking you. I don't think things are okay, though."

Codrin nodded and stepped aside, gesturing to welcome the astronomer in and guiding him to a seat at the table.

"I will make tea," the fox said. "Though I think perhaps one without caffeine."

"Who..?"

"That's my partner. Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled."

Gears crunched to a halt in his mind, thoughts stalling and whatever words he had prepared scattering. "An...an Odist?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

Tycho knit his brow. "Well, I mean, the histories..."

"I know. Not all of them came out in the best light," ey said, smiling tiredly. "But it's a good one, I promise. Now, can you tell me what's happening?"

He forced himself to remain seated at the table, not giving in to the overwhelming urge to pace. "But...I mean, do you remember our conversation years ago? The one about the Dreamer Module?"

Codrin nodded warily. "That some of the Odists were against it, yes."

"Then certainly you can see my concern!" Tycho hissed, leaning toward Codrin.

The historian startled back. "I'm afraid I don't follow, Mr. Brahe, I—"

"Can we at least step outside?"

"If you would like me to be elsewhere, I can, Mr. Brahe," the fox said, standing at the entryway to the kitchen, three mugs in its paws. *"But I do hope that you will trust me."*

Tycho stared at the fox.

It stepped forward, set the three mugs down on the table, each smelling of chamomile. *"You must forgive me for eavesdropping, but I did hear you mention the Dreamer Module. I can assure you that I share little in common with the elements of the clade that were against its inclusion. It is not something that I particularly care about, but it is, fine, I am sure."*

"I can vouch for it," Codrin said, reaching for eir mug but simply holding it in eir hands rather than sipping. "If we absolutely must step outside, you understand that if it's my partner, I'll likely tell it about our conversation anyway, right?"

After a pause, Tycho's shoulders slumped as he let out the pent up tension within them. "Alright, alright. Besides, it doesn't sound like there's much use in trying to hide anything from them."

Dear rolled its eyes, but sat at the table anyway. *"You could hide whatever you like from me, Mr. Brahe, I will not look. As you guess, though, the same is not true of other Odists."*

"I read some of your histories, Codrin," he said at last. "So I know you know what's on the Module."

Codrin froze, mug halfway lifted. Dear's ears stood erect, and all sleepiness fled from its features.

"You understand why I'm concerned, then, right?"

The historian set eir mug back down on the table without taking a sip, saying, "Tell me all that you can."

So he recounted the events of the previous hour. Of the sudden interruption of an impersonal message, a simple note from

the perisystem architecture informing him, the astronomer on duty, of the signal received.

"What signal was it? Were the primes echoed back to us?" Dear, asked.

He shook his head and recited from memory, "We hear you. We see you. We are 3 light-hours, 4 light-minutes, 2.043 light-seconds out at time of message send. Closing at 0.003c relative velocity. Closest intercept 5 light-minutes, 3.002 light-seconds in 972 hours, 8 minutes, 0.333 seconds. We understand the mechanism by which we may meet. We have similar. Instructions to follow."

There was a long moment of silence around the table as the words sank in.

"The mechanism," Codrin said, finally breaking the silence. Ey sounded hoarse, unprepared. "The Ansible? The instructions for creating a signal that it'll recognize?"

Tycho stared down into the pale yellow tea. "Yes."

"Did you respond?" Ey frowned. "Is that even possible? I never thought to ask."

The silence fell again, and he could feel the expressions of the other two deepen into frowns as he kept his eyes on his tea.

"Tycho," Dear said, and he couldn't understand how the fox could keep its voice so level. *"Did you respond?"*

"Awaiting consent," he mumbled. "That was the last bit of message. Awaiting consent."

"You responded." A statement. One spoken with no small amount of awe. *"You did, did you not?"*

"Yes."

"What did you send?" Codrin said.

"Consent granted."

With the repetition of those words, he pushed the untouched mug of tea further away from him, folded his arms on the table, and rested his forehead on them.

The longest silence yet followed as both Dear and Codrin appeared to take this information in and he, poor, stupid Tycho

Brahe, he soaked in his own guilt. It seeped through his clothes, squished in his shoes, matted his hair and pushed against his face.

It was Codrin that spoke first, voice sounding calm, somewhere between professional and empathetic. An interviewer's voice. "Have you told anyone else?"

"No," he said, lifting his head, though still not meeting their gazes. "I don't know who I'd tell."

"Are there no other astronomers working with you?"

"There are. Of course there are. I'm sure they've even read the message by now, and doubtless my response." He shrugged, realized that he'd started crying. "But what would I tell them? Extraterrestrials contacted us, asked to board, and I just said 'yes'? Didn't ask anyone, didn't wait to have a conversation, just up and said yes?"

"Well, okay," Codrin said. "Why me, then? We've not spoken in twenty years."

"Instinct?" he said, voice choked with half laughter, half tears. "I have no idea, Mx. Bălan. You listened to my story back then, and I read your histories, and you seemed nice, and I guess you're just always at the center of things."

The fox across the table giggled — there was no better way to put it — and there was a tink of ceramic as it bumped its mug to Codrin's. *"You, my dear, are so caught in stardom that even astronomers know your name."*

None of that amusement showed in the historian's voice as ey said, "I am, at that, aren't I? Well, Tycho, what are the next steps?"

"I don't know," he said, finally looking up to the pair, to Dear's grin and Codrin's frown. "I was hoping you'd know."

Ey sighed, leaned over and patted him on the shoulder. "Well, since I'm sure as hell not sleeping anymore, I guess coffee's next. Coffee, and figuring out what to do with our wayward astronomer and upcoming guests."

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Tycho stayed until they could talk him down from the plateau of anxiety he had at first seemed determined to hold onto for as long as he could. They fed him tea, then leftovers, then ice water, anything they could do to help. They talked to him about how to prepare for the inevitable discussions that would be coming from the other astronomers aboard as well as from the inevitable contact that would come from the Odists or Jonases, seeking answers to why he had done the things that he'd done.

And, once he was able to talk without the volume of his voice continually rising, once he was able to smile again, they sent him on his way, to go get some sleep, even though the sun was beginning to color the eastern sides of the house in salmon and orange.

"It's alright," he had said, laughing tiredly. "It's always night in the field. It's always night outside, isn't it?"

Which left Codrin and Dear to sit in silence for a few minutes, which, after making coffee, they moved out to the patio despite the chill of the morning.

"*What do you think, my dear?*" the fox asked, cradling his mug close to its chest.

"Mm? I don't know that I'm thinking anything. I think my brain's too full with new information packed in around sleepiness that I can't actually process anything."

"*I would suggest drinking your coffee to wake up, but if it is the*

same feeling that I have had, that will simply replace the sleepiness with caffeine, and you will be no more easily able to process.”

Codrin grinned, nodded, and sipped at eir coffee. “I’m a little disappointed I didn’t fork to get up so that at least some part of me could keep sleeping and just deal with it in the morning.”

Dear laughed. *“You jumped out of bed so fast I thought that we were under attack. I do not think you would have been able to get back to sleep even if you had tried.”*

“Probably not, at that.”

They sat in silence, sipping their coffee, and watching the sun creep up until the horizon reluctantly let it free. When they realized that they were squinting and shading their eyes too much to actually see anything, they went back inside to claim the couch, huddling under a throw to warm themselves up while Dear’s partner puttered sleepily around the kitchen.

This led, of course, to second cups of coffee and warm sweet rolls, and a long hour of Codrin and the fox catching their partner up to date.

“Well,” they said, frowning. “How do you feel?”

“That is a very Codrin question.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. I feel...” Ey paused, frowning down to eir coffee. “I feel overwhelmed. I guess that’s not a complete emotion, though.”

“You want help teasing it apart?”

Codrin slouched down into the couch further, resting the coffee mug on eir stomach. Tiredness clung to em in a thin, sticky film. “I guess. I mean, I think a lot of it is due to tiredness.”

“Seconded,” Dear mumbled. *“I am surprised you slept through that, my love.”*

“I’m one of the lucky ones who can sleep through anything,” its partner said, grinning. “But Codrin dear, first, how do you feel about being woken up so early?”

“I don’t think that really entered into my mind. That’s how I met Dear, after all. A jolt of adrenaline and then a sensorium

message.”

“I do hope that mine was not so panicked. From what you said, Tycho was a bit shouty.”

Ey laughed. “He was, at that. I hope we sent him home a little calmer. But I suppose that made me anxious. Given that I was still fighting my way out of a dream, it felt rather like waking up into a nightmare, rather than out of one.”

“Alright,” they said. “And how do you feel about meeting him?”

“That’s a little tougher. Equally anxious, I guess. Frustrated as well, given how poorly he reacted to Dear. I think he’s very much a tasker and hasn’t experienced individuation before.”

Both Dear and its partner nodded. *“I am not Michelle, and I am certainly not True Name, which is who I imagine he has experience with.”*

“I suppose, yeah. So it was frustrating hearing that his first reaction was — or that anybody’s first reaction to one of my partners was one of, I don’t know, distrust? Disgust?”

Dear’s ears flinched back, but it nodded all the same. Codrin suspected it had had more than its fill of dealing with the rest of the Odists by now.

“So,” the fox’s partner said. “Anxious, frustrated, maybe a bit defensive?”

Ey nodded.

“And what about the topic of the conversation? How did that make you feel?”

“I think that’s where I’m struggling the most. I’ve worked on so many projects through the years, and this has the potential of being far and away the biggest of them all.”

“Have you accepted it as a project, my dear?” Dear said, grinning slightly.

Codrin knit eir brows, staring down at eir coffee, then taking a sip to gain some time to mull that over in eir mind. “I think I have, though I don’t know what shape that’ll take yet.”

“So, how do you feel about that?”

“If we consider the scope of the History as ten times that of Qoheleth, and if we give this one a cautious estimate of ten times that of the History—”

“Ten times?” Dear’s partner frowned. “A hundred times the size of Qoheleth?”

“Size maybe isn’t the best descriptor. Intensity, maybe?” Ey shrugged. “Working on the Qoheleth project never had me screaming into the void or shouting at the sky. The History was longer, but while I can see this one being perhaps shorter, the intensity is going through the roof. I’m not sure how much of that is just being exhausted, though.”

“That is about the topic of work, though. How do you feel about the topic? Aliens sending us copies of Douglas? Us sending aliens copies of...well, whoever we decide?”

“Frightened? Excited? Anxious? It feels too big to think about, in a way.”

“Agreed,” Dear and it’s partner said at the same time, then laughed.

“But also, I guess to tie those two together, I think my first reaction — the very first thing I thought as soon as I connected Tycho’s mood with the topic at hand — was”God damnit, not again“.”

Dear frowned. *“Do you feel obligated to take on the project, rather than simply wanting to?”*

Codrin shrugged. “I don’t know what else to say other than that. Obligated, then worried about scope, as though I’d already accepted the burden, such as it were.”

“Do you need a vacation, my dear?”

“Good lord, no,” ey said, laughing. “I don’t go as nuts as you, fox, but sitting around idly is decidedly uncomfortable. It’s not quite an”I hate my job” feeling, either. It’s just more of a “Why is it always me? Why do I always wind up at the center of these enormous happenings?” type feeling.”

As though on cue, both Codrin and Dear’s partner looked over at the fox, who burst into giggles. Ey felt so loopy from

exhaustion that ey was soon joining Dear in the fit.

"I will accept a portion of that responsibility," it said when it could speak again. *"But the rest falls on my cocladists. I may be one of them, but I am no metonym."*

"I'll accept that," Codrin said.

"We're not wrong, though, you know. Even if True Name and her stanza nudged you towards Dear, you wound up here. You wound up so influenced by the project that you almost resented Ioan when you needed to merge back for the project. I know there were a few tense discussions between you two when it came time to decide who would write the history."

Ey wagged a hand. "Tense is maybe too strong a word. We were both excited, and it came down to whether it was me because my memories weren't tainted by what ey'd experienced in the interim, or whether those memories would help add to the, uh...damn, what'd you call it, Dear?"

"Umwelt? One's worldview combined with one's experience of the world? I know that I have overloaded the term somewhat, and I am not sorry."

"That's the one. If Ioan's combined knowledge of what I experienced via my memories as well as eir own experiences during the project would provide a better worldview as a canvas for the project. We decided that I'd write and ey'd consult."

"I left you with a tainted soul," Dear said, still sounding loopy.

"So dramatic," ey said, rolling eir eyes. "But you changed me enough that I became a Codrin rather than a Ioan, while Ioan remained one."

"Then My Then My Name tainted em in turn."

"I miss them," Dear's partner said. "I can't imagine seeing them together would be anything but adorable."

"Saccharine, even."

"Don't be a jerk, fox."

"I am not! I am simply stating the fact that my teeth might rot from just how adorable that must be."

"Do you think True Name is pissed?" Codrin asked.

“That May Then My Name settled down with someone? Refused to fork for her, then even to talk with her? That May Then My Name has taught herself how to hate specifically to hate her? Of course she is pissed. It is her own stanza rebelling against her.” It laughed.

“From what we’ve seen, it sounds like their — True Name’s and Jonas’s — attempts to control the outcome worked fairly well, but also that True Name hasn’t been seen around nearly as much in the last few years. Sounds more hurt than pissed, I guess.” Ey shrugged. “I imagine having your own clade that upset at you tempers your devotion to a cause.”

“Much of the liberal side of the clade distanced themselves from the conservatives when the History came out, yes. The definition of ‘Odist’ is quite diluted now, I think. I do not believe that True Name lost much in the way of tools, such as it were; I think she just had to write many of us off, or think of us simply as safe places to store other tools, as she did with you, my dear. She has likely replaced them with yet more finely tuned versions of themselves.”

“That’s a rather horrifying way of looking at it. It sounds so sterile.”

“I am not so far removed from them that I do not feel some empathy. True Name is still a fully realized person. She is not a truly sterile being, I do not mean to imply that. She does still have emotions, they simply come from a place that we cannot access.”

Codrin finished eir coffee and set the mug on the table, sitting up straighter and rubbing at eir face. “I’ll grant you that, though it’s still going to take some work to internalize.”

“There is no rush, my dear.”

“Isn’t there?” Dear’s partner asked. “Can you imagine True Name not getting involved in this? I’d honestly be surprised if she wasn’t already stringing Tycho up by his toes for what he did. If Codrin’s to wind up working with her again, maybe ey does need that empathy.”

The fox only frowned.

“Anyway,” Codrin said. “I probably ought to send them a message. Dear, you’re welcome to chime in as well, but I also

want to share my thoughts on this with Ioan. How long's the transmission time, these days?"

"I think about seven, eight days? Somewhere around there. Tycho would know, but I don't think asking him right now is a great idea."

Codrin nodded. "Well, nothing for it. I'll write to Ioan and May Then My name, Then get ready for the shitshow that's doubtless coming down on us."

Tycho Brahe — 2346

Tycho returned to that field beneath the stars after the conversation with Codrin and Dear to find someone already waiting for him.

They'd discussed this potential. There were two branching paths that they had ruled most likely, which was that he'd meet another of the astronomers. Were that the case, he was to calmly explain the situation, exploring the ramifications of the messages both received and sent.

If, however, it was someone more aligned with the politics of the System — Codrin had left him with a short list of names — then the conversation would take several different forms based on what they already knew. For instance, if they knew that a message had been received but not what its contents were, he was to explain it calmly and plainly, beginning with the intent of speaking to a lay person. If they knew the contents, he was to explain the import behind him.

If they knew that he had responded, however, the chances were that they were there specifically to interrogate, berate, or potentially cut his access to the perisystem architecture that dealt with the Dreamer Module. Hell, at that point, they might as well cut everyone's access to that bit of the architecture, at that point, and completely run the show.

The person who met him, however, immediately made his throat seize up.

“If it is True Name,” Dear had said after providing a description. *“Then there is absolutely nothing you can do but go along with what she says.”*

“That bad?” he had asked.

“Oh, do not worry, it will all go quite well for you if she herself is there. The outcome might not be what you wanted when you met her, but you will leave feeling as though a great deal has been accomplished. It is difficult to describe or get across in text, as you likely have a very dramatic view of her from reading the History.”

And there, sitting on the mound in the center of the field, was the precise skunk that he’d been warned about. Long, thick tail. Short, cookie-shaped ears. Tapered snout pointed up to the sky as she leaned back on her paws.

Well, he thought. *Nothing for it.*

He walked over toward that small rise and, once the rustling of his steps became audible, True Name turned her head toward the sound. It was too dark to see her expression, so his mind flashed through several. Were her teeth bared? Was she smiling kindly? Was she secretly joyous about the news?

“Tycho Brahe, yes?”

Tycho pulled out his red-filtered flashlight and the spare he kept with him, turning them both on as he made his way up the hill. “Yes. You must be True Name.”

“My name precedes me, I see.” She laughed. It didn’t sound like a mean or wicked one, just completely earnest. She accepted the red-filtered light from him and then patted the grass beside her with a paw. “Come, sit with me. This place is absolutely fascinating! I had absolutely no idea that such a thing was possible here.”

Tycho sat on the mossy ground beside the skunk. “I used to keep it as a place for work or just unwinding, but some years back, I moved in and have just set up camp over in the trees.”

“It is delightful,” she said, and he could hear the awe in her voice. “How does it work? I thought that there was no way for images to make their way into the System.”

He leaned back on his hands beside her to look up into the night sky. “It takes in all of the information from the fisheye telescope — or any of the telescopes, really — and converts it into data that one can read, and then reconstructs it in here. When it’s just stars, just little points of light like this, it’s simple enough to display. Color temperature, relative intensity, estimated distance, and so on. If we were to get close to something, as we did with the Jupiter slingshot, there was too much data, as there would be from any video feed, and the sim just quit displaying anything.”

True Name had set the flashlight against her thigh, pointed vaguely up toward her so that he could see her in more detail. Her face was kind, open, and clearly excited. Something about the bristle of her whiskers, the angle of her ears, and the relaxed state of her cheeks worked with her smile to give the impression of happiness, though if he were pressed, he would’ve had a hard time defining why.

“Beautiful.”

They sat in silence for a while, simply looking up at the stars, both with their red lights pointed toward them to light themselves up. Because it was beautiful, he knew. The night sky, one as pure as this, demanded a reverence, an acknowledgement.

“Which ones do you suppose they came from?” the skunk asked.

“It could be any, at this point,” he said. “We have no idea how old their vehicle is. We know their speed and position with some accuracy, but who knows how much that has changed since they launched.”

“Do you mean they might have, ah...attitude jets, I believe they are called?”

“Almost certainly, but more than that, any time they get too close to any system with any appreciable gravity, it’ll influence their course.”

She nodded in the dim, red light. “Much as they are doing now, perhaps.”

“Yes.” He thought for a moment, then shrugged. “They’re coming up over the plane of the ecliptic, so there’s a good chance that they just used our sun as a gravity assist. A slingshot.”

“Picking up a bit of extra speed, then?”

“Yep, it’s free energy.”

She rested her cheek on her shoulder to look over at him, grinning. “Or perhaps simply to hide where they came from. Maybe they are using the possibility of that assist to obscure their trail!” She laughed, waving a paw up at the stars. “Or they are spying on us, investigating us, Earth, the L5 system. But listen to me, here I am speaking like this is some grand space opera.”

He nodded, grinning as well. “Their speed and the laws of physics make all of those very unlikely. The only reason they may have even bothered to contact us is because we have a chance at some sort of contact that won’t immediately fade into light-days.”

“They did say that they were moving fast, did they not? I suppose that helps alleviate some of those old space-opera-fueled fears.” She returned her gaze up to the sky. “Though, you know, it got me thinking. How many things like this LV might be zooming around the galaxy at incredible speeds? We can be sure now that there are at least, three, yes? Our dear home, Castor, then Pollux way on the other side of the sun, and this new one.”

“True, true. Maybe everyone’s just figured out that this is the safest and easiest way to travel.”

“You took the words from my mouth,” she said with a laugh. “It makes one wonder, perhaps this is the Great Filter. Perhaps Kardashev was wrong all along, and we should not be looking at the energy usage of a civilization but on the scale from Earth-bound, spaceflight, and then uploading, and it is only civilizations that reach that third state that might pass through that filter.”

“I’d not thought of it that way.”

“There was, of course, no need for you to rush back, but that is what I have been thinking about while waiting for you. Thank you for the light, by the way.”

The sudden departure from the topic of the sky above to the here and now shocked Tycho out of the realization that he’d fallen in such easy conversation with the skunk. They’d talked like friends, like those who had known each other but perhaps had just met for the first time.

He saw now what Dear had meant, and he was helpless before it.

“Well, thank you for stopping by,” he said, keeping this new anxiety out of his voice as best he could. “I’m assuming you wanted to talk about the message and response?”

True Name sat up, dusted her paws off on her thighs, and then turned to face him, switching to a kneeling position. The friendliness was still there in her face, but was now tempered by a down-to-business professionalism “Of course. Can you tell me more about the ramifications of this? I can understand the mechanics of it well enough, but I want to hear from you what the next steps are.”

This had not been the question he was expecting, so he took the act of sitting to face True Name, cross-legged, to think about his response. “Well, I suppose they’ll send over something uploadable which will drop it in the DMZ. I don’t imagine they’ll start that for a while yet, given the distances between us. They’ll probably want to talk more before doing so, I imagine, and if they’re sending us instructions on how to make an exchange of personalities, that’ll give us time to work on that.”

“If we want to,” the skunk said, nodding. “And, as you were out and we are now gating messages from the Dreamer Module through us, we will keep an eye out for such. We will do our best to keep you in the loop, of course.”

He blinked. Gated? He supposed that meant that they’d cut his access and would be sharing only what they chose with him.

“I didn’t mean to...I mean, I hope that my response was not too far out of line.”

She smiled to him, and while her expression remained friendly, there was the smallest note of pity in that smile. “Do not worry, Tycho Brahe, you are not in trouble. We have been running simulations on the various possible outcomes ever since this portion of the Dreamer Module was okayed. This possibility was on our list and well within our parameters. We know what it is that we will be doing going forward, and that does not include reprimanding you in any way.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, before he could even stop himself. “I probably should’ve asked.”

The skunk waved a paw as though the comment was simply irrelevant. “You will even keep access to the Dreamer Module; I meant what I said when you will still be kept in the loop. We will simply have *first* access.”

He nodded, hoping that there was still enough red light shining on him that she could see the gesture.

“In fact, that was the primary purpose of my visit. It was nice to get your view of the ramifications, of course, but I wanted to ensure that you would be willing to work with us on this. You keep access to the Dreamer Module, we learn all we can from you. A mutual arrangement wherein you do what you love and we help you out in that, and in exchange you teach us all you can in the process.” She held out her paw, grinning lopsidedly. “I know that the concept is rather outdated on the System, but what I am really here to do is offer you a job.”

Once the import of her words had sunk in, he laughed and clasped her paw in his hand. “Oh, of course! If it’s all the stuff I love, and also I get to talk about it to someone, that sounds...well, perfect, actually.”

She laughed and shook on it. The handshake was almost picture perfect: the right balance between firm and gentle, the right speed, the right duration. He could see as though from three feet above himself the precise ways in which he was being

played like a fiddle.

“Excellent, excellent. I will also be in touch with your friend Codrin Bălan, as well, as I believe ey will be a good person to document much of this, so please expect further contact from em. You will also be in touch with a few of my cocladists — Beyond Dear, that is — who will be working with you in various capacities.”

He nodded, frowning. *How did she know that I’d met Dear?*

“I know that you consider yourself a tasker and that maintaining multiple forks is not your usual MO,” she continued. “But if possible, I would like you to keep at least one additional instance to work with us while you continue to work out here and with Codrin, but if you have the bandwidth for others, we may have additional tasks. Please keep that in mind, and consider how open to the prospect you will be should you be asked.”

“Oh, uh, okay. I guess I just never fork because it seems like an awful lot of trouble. One mind is a lot to deal with as it is.”

True Name grinned, said, “I do not begrudge you that. They are rather a lot. These will be long-running, however, so you need not worry too much about the burden of handling the memories for a while, and if you do not want to deal with that at all, so long as everyone is on the same page with me and my team, you need not accept the memory load.”

“Well, alright.”

“Can you fork now, please? I will take one of you with me and we can work on arrangements there. You are free to get some sleep, if you need.”

Tycho nodded, closed his eyes, and dug back through memories to remember just how to create a new instance, taking a good minute and a half before he managed it.

“Sorry, it’s been a long time,” the original him said.

“It is quite alright. We have much practice under our belts.” She nodded toward the new instance. “Can you tag yourself something memorable so that you can tell yourself apart? I suggest ‘Artemis’, as that is what we have decided to name the re-

mote vehicle.”

Both of him frowned, and after a moment’s thought, the new instance was tagged Tycho Brahe#Artemis, all while scanning his memory for the reference. Goddess of the Moon, yes, but of the hunt? Wild animals? Artemis with her bow? There were too many correspondences and not all of them savory.

“Why Artemis?” he asked.

“They are flying like an arrow through the night sky, are they not?” True Name said.

“Does that make the others on the ship Artemisians or whatever?”

The skunk stood, offered a paw to help Tycho#Artemis help in standing. “That or Sea People.”

“Sea People?” he asked, accepting her paw. As he stood, he realized that he was a good foot taller than the skunk, a fact which had missed him as they sat there on the hill.

“We had better hope for Artemisians, but we must also be prepared for Sea People. Come, Tycho. #Artemis, we will have a place for you to stay. #Tasker, you may stay here, and expect contact soon.” She looked up to the sky one last time, and said. “Do you know the poem about your namesake?”

Tycho#Artemis shook his head while #Tasker stood.

“Reach me down my Tycho Brahe, — I would know him when we meet,” she quoted. “When I share my later science, sitting humbly at his feet; He may know the law of all things yet be ignorant of how We are working to completion, working on from then till now.”

“I—”

“You are both, Tycho. We may yet share our later science with them as they may share theirs with us. Perhaps we shall take our turns sitting at each others’ feet. But Tycho,” she said, smiling. “That is a poem about death. Please understand that there is risk here, as well. Now, come with me.”

After True Name and Tycho#Artemis left, he stood there on the top of his hill, in the middle of his field, surrounded by his

ring of trees, and looked up into the night sky, thinking on all that it meant to be powerless.

Codrin Bălan — 2346

It took both both eir partners to talk Codrin down from eir desire to simply get right to work.

“My dear, if, as he said, Tycho was going to take a nap, perhaps you ought to do the same.”

“I know,” ey replied, shoulders sagging. “It’s hard to get out of that mindset of having to just work.”

“I know it’s enjoyable,” the fox’s partner said. “But seriously, Codrin, even if you’re not going to take a nap, take a thermos out onto the prairie and walk for a bit. Tycho is going to need quite a bit of help, given what you told us of him—”

“And if True Name is already involved.”

“That too, yeah. So it’s probably best to go into the whole thing prepared for jittery astronomers and...well, whatever True Name is, these days.”

Codrin nodded. “That makes sense, at least. Do we even have a thermos?”

“Probably. I’ll go digging. Might as well make a fresh pot, while I’m up.”

“You, my love, are a true delight,” Dear said, tail flitting this way and that.

They grinned, walked off to the kitchen, and started clattering around in cupboards for a coffee therm.

“Dear, have you talked to True Name recently?” Codrin asked after a polite pause.

It shook its head. *“Not in terms of a conversation, at least. I have received a few messages from her in the intervening years, several of which were sent to several Odists as a group.”*

“She does that? What are they? Orders or something?”

It shook its head, ears flapping slightly at the movement. *“No. Or, well, not exactly. They are simply updates, or replies to other, ongoing conversations. Many of us still communicate with each other on a somewhat regular basis, and I have been looped into several of those conversations over the years.”*

“Wait,” not exactly “?”

“You have met her. She does not need to order, oftentimes. She simply suggests.”

Ey frowned. *“I sometimes worry that we’ve been attributing almost magical manipulative abilities to her, honestly.”*

Dear shrugged. *“Perhaps, but she also has had more than two hundred years of study under her belt to find all of the best ways to interact with people. May Then My Name was something of a let-down for her, I think, even from the very beginning, so she had to learn to take on that mantle herself.”*

“Especially over the last few years, you mean? With Ioan?”

“Perhaps, though I think that might be ancillary to the fact that our dear May is not on the LVs at all.”

Ey blinked, laughed. *“Okay, well, fair. I’d almost forgot.”*

The fox gave em a strange look. *“You forgot that May Then My Name was not here?”*

Their partner showed up, a cup of coffee in one hand and a (far too large) thermos in the other. *“Are you forgetting things again, Codrin?”*

“No, no,” ey said, accepting the thermos with a frown. “Or, well, kind of. I didn’t forget that May Then My Name wasn’t here, just the ramifications of that, that True Name might not have her as a tool.”

“That is more understandable, yes,” the fox said. “Perhaps the True Name here on Castor has diverged from that on the L5 System in that respect, perhaps not. I suspect that both are disappointed, in their

own ways.”

Codrin fiddled with the thermos, ensuring that the lid was a mug when removed — two nested ones, actually — then nodded, standing. “I don’t know how many dimensions she’s thinking on, but I also wouldn’t be surprised if she had a cost-benefit analysis on losing her to Ioan.”

“I would not be surprised, no, which would mean that she has planned around that eventuality. I am sure that May Then My Name is keeping an eye on that. Do not let us keep you, though, my dear. Go for your walk. Think about something else. Enjoy the cold, build a cairn around your worries, and then return safe.”

Ey smiled, leaned down to kiss the fox between the ears, then eir other partner on the cheek. “I didn’t know that was possible, but I’ll try. Back in a bit.”

Ey made it two cairns out before caving to the desire to simply get started, and stepped over to Tycho’s field. There was a ping of amusement from Dear, to which ey replied with a guilty apology and an acknowledgement that ey’d return soon, all while waiting for eir eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness.

The next sensorium message was a gentle ping to Tycho — nothing so loaded with anxiety as the one ey’d received this morning, just an acknowledgement, a view of the stars.

A voice came from somewhere behind em. “Codrin?”

Ey whirled around to see a dim cone of red light shining on the ground, illuminating feet in a pair of well-worn boots. “Tycho? Sorry for intruding like this. I hope I’m not waking you or anything.”

“No, no. Come in. I haven’t been able to sleep since True Name left.”

There was a small click and then a ray of further red light spread out from a doorway, showing a small hut nestled within the trees. Ey let emself be guided into the door, finding a sparsely decorated room — a desk, a bed, and a massive cork board nailed to the wall, covered in at least three overlapping layers of notes.

“Thanks for having me,” ey said, sitting on the offered chair while Tycho claimed the edge of the bed. Once the door was shut, a switch shifted the red light to a normal, warm desk lamp. “I should’ve mentioned that I’d be coming over, first.”

He waved away the apology. “I knew you’d be here, though I didn’t know when.”

Codrin paused in the middle of unscrewing the lid to the thermos. “You knew?”

“True Name said you would.”

Ey frowned, finishing opening the thermos and offering Tycho one of the two mugs of coffee. “What did she say about me?”

“She didn’t talk with you?”

Ey shook eir head. “Did she say she would?”

Tycho sipped at the coffee, winced, and set the mug aside to cool. “No, she just talked as though she had, or at least that she knew you’d be working with me.”

“Of course she did,” ey murmured. “She knows me too well.”

The astronomer ground the heels of his palms against his eyes. “I feel like she knew me too well, too. We had what felt like a wonderful conversation where she offered me a job, asked me to fork to send an instance with her to keep working with her, but then quoted some bit of poetry at me and I couldn’t tell if it was a death threat or a warning or whatever. I’m still trying to recover from that.”

“I’m guessing you said yes to both the job offer and the fork?”

He nodded. “It all just sounded so normal. There didn’t seem like anything else to do.”

“Can you tell me more about both?”

“Well, she said that she a good deal about the communications and that she’d like me to come help her with the mechanics of that. She’d help me out with resources and I’d teach her about Artemis as I learned it.”

“Artemis? Is that what they’re calling the remote...ship? Vehicle?”

He nodded. "Vehicle, I think. She said they're calling it Artemis, that I should tag my fork #Artemis, and that those on the ship were either Artemisians or Sea People, which I didn't get."

Codrin leaned back in the seat, thinking. "Sea People might be a reference to something from the Mythology, or it could be a reference to a theory about a marauding group of seafarers during the Bronze Age collapse. There was a bunch of talk about how this group had sacked much of the ancient near east and northern Africa, leading to the prolongation of the collapse."

Tycho's eyes grew wide. "Do you think that's what she's getting at with the reference? That these are going to be some marauders coming to mess with the LV?"

Ey shrugged. "Who knows. Probably both, honestly. Maybe there's even some reference that we're missing. She's True Name, there really is no way of telling."

Nodding, Tycho scooted back on the bed until his back was to the wall, then brought his knees up to his chest. He looked small to Codrin, somehow diminished after the events of the last...goodness, had it only been a day? Diminished, yes, and younger, though he'd always looked as though he was not yet out of his forties in his well-groomed salt-and-pepper hair and well-kept beard.

They sat in silence for a while. Codrin could not guess what the astronomer was thinking about, though ey could see his eyes occasionally darting this way and that, as though connecting one idea to another in the air as well as in his head.

On eir part, ey began structuring the project. There would have to be the journalistic aspect of it, much closer to that of the Qoheleth project than the History, but if the conservative Odists were also involved, there'd likely also be far more observing than researching.

"Tycho," ey said, startling him out of a reverie. "Do you know what an amanuensis is?"

"Like a recorder? Someone who takes notes?"

“Well, in part, but also someone who thinks about what they’re writing,” ey said, tapping at eir temple. “They aren’t a scribe or a court recorder, but someone there to witness and digest a conversation.”

“Like a clerk?” He grinned. “We used to have one of those for our club, who would take minutes of the meetings and such.”

Ey nodded. “Certainly closer to that than a recorder, yeah. I bring this up because that will be my job in all of this, but I think it’ll also be yours. Things like the History are all well and good, and I loved putting the work into it, but I also really enjoy doing this. I may wish that the things I get caught up in weren’t always so dramatic, but I’ll take what I can get.”

“What do you mean, it’ll be my job too?” he asked.

“Just that you will also be witnessing and thinking about this project, and then coming up with ideas related to it to be compiled into a coherent understanding. That’s why we’ll be working together, I think. I’m trained to do this work in particular, but I’ll need your help in making sense of it. I’ll experience it with you as much as I’m allowed, but you’ll have to ensure that I actually understand what’s going on.”

Tycho laughed. “Well, I’ll do my best, but it’s not like I have much experience working with Artemisians, either. I’ll help with the technical aspects as best I can, though.”

“Excellent,” Codrin said. “Thank you for that. I’ll be managing most of that, so you won’t have to worry too much about the minutiae, but I figured it’d give you a better idea of what to expect when we work together.”

He nodded.

“On that note, lets come up with a basic idea of our next steps. We mostly talked about immediate next steps, but it might be a good idea to start thinking on a larger timescale.”

“I guess. I’m assuming it’ll be pretty loose, given that we can’t guess the particulars?” He waited for Codrin to nod, then continued. “Then I guess we have a few weeks before they reach their closest approach as long as we both stay on our own head-

ing.”

“Does that mean a few weeks before they upload?”

He shrugged. “Not necessarily. They can upload whenever they want, so long as our Ansible is on and the DMZ is ready. I don’t think it’s on, yet, though.”

“Alright. Have we received any further communications from them? Their message said that they had a similar mechanism in place. Is that something we’ll be able to use? Or even want to use?”

“No further communications that I know of,” he said. “But True Name said that all communications will be gated through her, and I don’t know if that means that I’ll be getting them or just Tycho#Artemis. Hopefully both, if you and I are to be working on this as well.”

Codrin frowned. “Well, okay.”

“As for us using their mechanism, I guess it depends on if it’s something we can reconfigure our Ansible to use, or if we will need to construct something new. If we’ll need to construct something new, then we might not be able to do so in time. Our manufactories are meant for repairs rather than construction. Theoretically they could be used for such, but I don’t know how long that’d take without someone phys-side to help.”

“And would we want to?”

“That feels like a question for True Name, not me,” he said after a long pause.

Ey finished eir coffee and replaced the cup on the cap of the thermos. “One of us will have to work up the courage to ask her, sometime. But for now, is it something you would want to do?”

“What? Upload to Artemis?” He looked startled by the question.

“Yes. If it’s possible, I mean. I figure it could just be an instance rather than completely investing, though I’d also be curious to hear your opinions on that.”

Tycho tilted his head back until it hit the wall of the hut, staring up toward the ceiling. He sat like that for a good five

minutes, during which Codrin remained silent, before leaning forward to grab his cup of coffee now that it had cooled down. “Yes. I don’t know that I’d invest completely, but yes, I think I would. Would you?”

Ey smiled, though ey felt just how tired ey was as ey did so. “Perhaps. I have attachments here, though. So the Codrin who uploaded — if ey remains a Codrin — would be severed completely from those ey loves. As romantic as the idea of sailing away on some alien spacecraft might be, it’d be painful to leave, even knowing that a Codrin remained.”

“And if your partners uploaded with you?”

The thought caught em up short, and several trains of thought crunched to a halt within em. “If they...” Ey laughed, shaking eir head. “You know, I hadn’t considered that, yet. I wonder why? But yes, if they chose to do so, then yes, I’ll go with them.”

The conversation wound on from there, picking apart a few possible next steps that lay ahead of them, but throughout it all, at least one thread of eir mind was dedicated to picking at that question.

Why had ey not considered whether or not Dear and its partner would want to upload? It wasn’t as though ey didn’t attribute the agency to do so to them, ey knew just how independent and intelligent they were on their own. Nor was it that ey hadn’t made any guesses as to whether or not they would — ey suspected that Dear would jump at the opportunity.

The root of the issue lay within emself, ey knew. Why was ey not able to make that decision without them doing so first? Was ey really such a follower? Or, to put it in a way that was more kind to emself, was ey really so stuck living five minutes behind them that ey couldn’t imagine making the decision in the face of the possibility of simply reacting to it? Would ey be able to say yes or no to that question if they asked?

Would ey be able to argue one way or the other, to convince them to come with em or not?

Tycho Brahe#Artemis 2346

Tycho#Artemis was unsure if what he was seeing was a flurry of chaotic activity or some tightly choreographed dance. Part of this assessment, he guessed, was due to the relatively small number of individuals for the number of instances moving around. There were at least a dozen instances of True Name that he could see, and then at least that many of a gentleman who looked to be in his well-preserved forties, slender without being lanky, tall without being looming.

And that was it. Well over twenty instances of two individuals milling around what appeared to be a farm of cubicles, each walled with glass, the upper half of which was frosted.

Ringed this bank of cubicles were walls of frosted glass, broken at regular intervals with doors which they supposed must be offices. Between those doors were couches, looking pleasantly soft in his exhaustion, and an array of padded stools or chairs with interrupted backs which he supposed must be perfect for those endowed with tails, given the occasional skunk or man — Jonas, perhaps? — relaxing in them, chatting amiably during what must be either breaks or informal meetings.

And yet, for all that activity, it was incredibly quiet. There must be dozens of cones of silence set up, spanning cube walls, covering banks of couches, even hovering over those walking the aisles.

“What is this?” he asked the skunk standing beside him.

She gestured him to a couch already containing a young woman, picking at her nails. Short, curly black hair framing a round face. “Headquarters, though that makes it sound far more formal than it really is. It is a place for Jonas and I to work together in our various instances.”

He sank down into the couch beside the woman. “That sounds kind of formal to me. What are you working on that requires cubicles?”

True Name laughed, claiming a stool facing the couch where she sat, straight-backed. “The informal aspect of it is that we are working on essentially whatever we want. Co-working space, perhaps? It is a space where we can have conversations, write, think. If there are a dozen of us, there are three dozen projects.”

“And the message from Artemis is one of them?”

“It is several of them, yes. It has spun off a few projects of its own. Ah! Jonas. Which are you?” she said when one of the men blipped into existence, already seated in one of the chairs.

He grinned, crossing his legs in front of him at the ankles. “Di5.” He nodded toward Tycho. “Just call me Jonas, though. True Name is just being a snot.”

The skunk kicked out at one of his ankles.

“Deserved that,” he said, grinning. “You must be Mr. Brahe, yeah? Nice to meet you.”

He nodded, said, “Just Tycho is fine.”

Jonas nodded absently. Without any visible signal a cone of silence fell over the area, dimming what noise remained outside of it to the barest murmur.

“I am Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help,” the woman said in a tone that seemed to sit just shy of laughter. “Answers Will Not Help will do.”

“Answers, in a rush,” Jonas said, at which she kicked his free ankle.

“If you call me Answers, I will beat the shit out of you,” she said though that near-laugh took any sting out of the words.

“To business, then.” True Name gestured towards Tycho.

“Tycho, here, is the one that answered the message, as you all know, so I have encouraged him to fork and join us. Tycho#Artemis will be working here, and Tycho#Tasker will be working with—”

“Codrin?” Jonas asked, grin turning sly.

“Of course.”

“Well, if you are the one to thank for kicking this whole thing off, perhaps you can enlighten us as to why?”

Tycho felt anxiety tighten within his chest. “I uh...I don’t know. I guess I was the first one to read the message, and I didn’t know what to do with that, so I just replied without really thinking, I guess.”

“You were not the first to read the message,” True Name said, smiling almost pityingly at him. “And you need not be anxious. As I have already said, we have been wargaming this possibility since we were forced to concede that aspect of the Module.”

He frowned. “Well, if you read it first, why’d you let it through so that I could see it?”

“We are not the astronomers,” Answers Will Not Help said, shrugging. “That is your job, is it not?”

“Don’t you want to control the situation or something, though?”

True Name shook her head. “It is not our job to control.”

“But the History—”

“Do you remember the motto of the Council of Eight, Tycho?”

He frowned. “To guide but not to govern, right?”

True Name nodded. “We are not controlling anything. We are guiding. Of what use would be control in a place such as this? People can do whatever they want.”

“Was the History wrong then? That you didn’t control Seccession and Launch?”

“We guided them both,” Jonas said, waving his hand. “Just as we guided the History. Even the Bălan clade knows this.”

“Why, though?” Tycho asked.

“Social engineering,” True Name said, then nodded toward Jonas. “We should not get too sidetracked, though. Jonas, you had more questions?”

“I did, yeah. First off, can you give me an overall breakdown of the time frame involved here?”

“Well...wait, can you tell me how long it’s been since the message arrived? I haven’t slept in I don’t know how long.”

“A little less than a day.”

“Well, then we have a little less than forty days until their closest approach, at which point they’ll start moving away from us again.”

“And what does that approach mean for us?”

Tycho rubbed at the back of his neck, searching for the best way to explain it. “All it means is that that is the point when the transmission times between our two vehicles will be the shortest, then it’ll start getting longer again.”

Jonas nodded. “And that approach isn’t all that close, is it?”

“Oh god no. Three light-seconds is, uh...nine hundred thousand kilometers? Something like that.”

“Good, thanks for confirming. I’m going to ungate the next set of messages. Ready?”

Jonas did not actually wait for confirmation before Tycho was given access. Or, rather, access was forced upon him. Rather like a sensorium message, the text from the perisystem architecture forced itself into his mind.

If possible, in 900 hours orient down 0.3142 radians relative to your sun reference point source of this transmission to align courses. If possible, accelerate 0.00029c to approach matched velocity. Confirm actions taken.

Instructions for matching consciousness-bearing system transfer mechanism to follow. Confirm actions taken.

Prepare airgapped area with locked-down edit permissions dimensions 20m by 20m height 5m and two sandbox areas for rest for us and you dimensions 20m by 20m height 5m. Confirm actions taken.

Prepare party of five consciousness-bearing systems containing one element of leadership, one to record in any capacity, one scientist, two of own choice. Duplicate, prepare to send one set to us, and send other set to above location. Prepare receive five in turn, similar roles. Expect four categories of consciousness-bearing systems. Confirm actions taken.

We welcome you.

Turun Ka of firstrace, leadership

Turun Ko of firstrace, recorder

Stolon of thirdrace, scientist

Iska of secondrace, representative

Artante Diria of fourthrace, representative

A long silence stretched over the group while the others waited for Tycho to digest the sudden onslaught of information.

"This is," he said, took a slow breath in, then continued, "A lot."

"Talk us through your thoughts," True Name said. "That will help you process, and you may catch something that we have not. This is your role here, Tycho Brahe."

He nodded. "Okay. So, from the top. They suggest we make some course alterations to, I suppose, keep us traveling parallel with them, and then accelerate to get closer to their velocity. Does that sound right?"

Jonas nodded. "We've talked with the perisystem engineers who work with the attitude thrusters and propulsion. They say that they can accommodate the maneuver. We can accelerate a little bit if we use half our fuel, but we're beyond the point where

the solar sail is doing us much good, and we want to preserve some.”

“How much acceleration? I mean, I don’t have any training in the physics of spaceflight—”

“We’ve got that covered.”

“Oh. Well, how much acceleration, then?”

“About a third of what they asked. It’ll extend the period of time that we’re in useful Ansible range by a few days.”

“If you say so.” he shrugged. “I guess this is to help extend the duration that we can transfer back and forth?”

“Yeah, basically,” Jonas said. “Do you have thoughts on that?”

Tycho frowned. He wasn’t sure why they kept asking him questions about his sentiments on things far outside his area of expertise. Of what use were his thoughts on the matter. “I mean, it makes sense, as far as any of this done.”

“How much astronomy you hope to learn from the Artemisians will rely on how long we stay in contact.” Answers Will Not Help grinned at him. “Does that bit make sense, at least?”

He sat up straighter. “Oh, uh...you mean someone will be gathering all that information? Will we be able to request it via radio?”

True Name smiled, and this time there was pity in the expression. “I know that you said starting from the top, but Tycho, you must understand that you are ideally situated to be the scientist among our party of five. You were the one to answer their call, were you not?”

He couldn’t tell what expression or expressions crossed his face, but it must’ve been amusing, as Answers Will Not Help laughed and slapped him on the knee. “You will be fine, Tycho.”

“Why me, though?” he stammered. “There have to be smarter people on board! People who would love to meet aliens and know just what to ask them.”

The skunk across from him waved her hand to dismiss the

comment. "You will be the scientist. We do not want someone who is smarter than you. We do not want someone who knows just what to ask them. We want you because you are the type of person who grants consent to join us without consulting anyone first. That and a few other factors that we have taken into account leave our decision clear."

"Besides," the woman beside him said, still giggling. "You will get to ask four spacefaring races astronomy questions. Does that not excite you?"

"I...four?" His head was swimming, not aided by the stilted way these Odists seemed to talk.

"Four categories of consciousness-bearing systems. Firstrace through fourthrace. Seems pretty obvious what they are saying to me."

He swallowed dryly.

"You will be the scientist," True Name said. "I will be acting in a leadership capacity, having lost the coin-toss with Jonas. Codrin Bălan will be our recorder. One of my uptree instances, Why Ask Questions Here At The End Of All Things will be one of the other representatives, and we are searching for the second."

"Two of you?"

"Sending two members of the same clade who look different will give us an idea of how they view forking." Jonas shrugged. "That's why I cheated to win the coin-toss, at least. I want to see what they do with one skunk Odist and one human Odist, as Why Ask Questions is."

"And I will run interference here," Answers Will Not Help added. "I will be learning much the same as Why Ask Questions so that I can interpret messages from the DMZ and Artemis. She is better at working crowds."

Tycho nodded. He felt slow, somehow. He felt stupid. It wasn't even that they were speaking about things he didn't understand because he hadn't learned them yet so much as they were speaking as though their actions took place on some higher plane of existence, some place completely inaccessible

to him.

“Apologies for sidetracking your top-to-bottom reading. Please continue,” True Name said.

“Uh, alright.” He shook his head to try and clear it. It did not work. “Instructions for transferring a consciousness-bearing system...I’m assuming that’s their version of the Ansible?”

“Yes. We received the specifications for that immediately after this message. I will not bore you with their contents, but the sys-side Ansible techs assure us that it works much the same as ours and will require only software changes, nothing physical. That will be ready within a few weeks.”

He hesitated, then, seeing no possible reply that wouldn’t make him sound like an idiot, continued. “Alright. Then they want us to prepare a space for them. I don’t know what air-gapped means, though.”

“We’re assuming they mean as in a DMZ. Something completely separate from the rest of our System, which is what we were planning, anyway.” Jonas grinned lopsidedly. “It’s a tech term which means that there is no physical connection between two devices, so they can’t possibly communicate unless one intentionally does so. Maybe that’s what they meant? We’ll just have to hope we get it right.”

“So, a secure place to meet, which we were planning on anyway. Do you think they’re worried we’ll attack them or something?”

True Name and Jonas exchanged a quick glance, and the skunk, suddenly more serious than she’d been since he’d met her, said, “Expand on that.” Not a question. A command.

He mastered the urge to shy away from her. “I just mean that, if we can’t promise them that we’re universally on board with having them visit us, that puts the talks at risk, right?”

She leaned back in her chair, frowning, as two more instances of her forked off and dashed down the aisles to a cubicle. “This is why we are talking with you, Tycho. Thank you for proving your worth so quickly.”

“This wasn’t part of your calculations or whatever?”

“It was,” Jonas said. “But the fact that you thought of it so quickly was not.”

He shook his head. “I still don’t understand why me, though.”

“You are in absolutely no way special, my dear.” Answers Will Not Help slapped his knee, her voice once more full of smiles. “You are in absolutely all ways average. This allows us to use you as a barometer for how we can expect the rest of the System to react.”

“I mean, I guess I’m average, but that doesn’t seem like much data. Aren’t you asking more people?”

She was back to laughing. “How many people do you imagine know about this, Tycho?”

He sighed, slouching further down into the couch. “Right. Okay. Twenty by twenty by five meters for the conference room and their rest area. Uh...maybe that says how big they are?”

“And maybe just the size of their DMZ so that we can meet on equal grounds on both sides,” Jonas said. “We won’t know until it happens. It does show us that they rest, though, or at least expect to take breaks from the talks. That they say two means that they think we will as well.”

Rest, he thought. Rest sounds good.

Aloud, he said, “And I guess the next bit we’ve talked about some. Maybe four races. They say ‘consciousness-bearing systems’ and don’t name their races, so maybe it’s complicated. If they’ve picked up three other races before meeting us, maybe very, very complicated.”

“I have been thinking,” the woman next to him said, sounding thoughtful. “Perhaps some of them were not biological races. They did not say people or species.”

“AIs, you mean?”

She shrugged. “Or something. It might also be a caste thing. You will notice that there are two firstrace emissaries, one of which is the leader, and then secondrace and fourthrace only

get representatives, no titles. There are many possibilities.”

After a pause, he asked, “And is that”We welcome you” an invitation to join them?”

“Maybe,” Jonas said. “We don’t know yet. We’re going to keep talking to them and try and get a better feel for it. If it means”You’re welcome to join us“, that’s certainly better than”We welcome you because you have no other choice“. We’re working on it.”

Tycho laughed tiredly. “Way above my pay grade.”

True Name laughed. “It is, yes.”

“Any thoughts on the names?” Jonas asked.

“Well, I guess it’s interesting that the two firsttrace people...individuals...er, consciousness-bearing systems share a name. Maybe they’re a clade, like...I mean...”

“Like me?” Jonas said, smirking. “Don’t worry, Jonas Ka and Ko already had their laugh over it. But no, we don’t know that one way or another.”

He felt heat rise to his cheeks, but nodded all the same. “The rest, I don’t know. They all sound different, I guess. The fourthtrace one is the only other one with two names.”

“We cannot make any real guesses, ourselves,” True Name said. “We have been told that a stolon is a botany term, but that is likely only a coincidence.”

“Well, only other thing I can think of is that they ask for confirmation on all actions taken. What are you going to say to those?”

True Name’s eyes grew distant as, he imagined, she accessed an exo with the response text prepared. “To the first,”We will orient as described and accelerate 0.00014c“. To the second,”Instructions received, integration commencing immediately, estimated time to completion 428 hours“. To the third,”Areas prepared“. To the fourth,”Preparing party, we will duplicate and be ready to send on an agreed upon time“.”

“Anything for the”We welcome you” or the list of names?”

“We will repeat the”We welcome you” message, and it will be signed with your name.”

He stood up so quickly it made him dizzy. “What?”

The other three laughed, True Name eventually continuing, “It will be signed”True Name, leadership“. We will send them the complete list of names when it is confirmed. You need not worry, Tycho.”

He remained standing, swaying slightly and trying to blink away dancing black spots. “I think...I think I need to lay down.”

The skunk nodded, stood, and took him by the elbow. “You likely do. You have been awake for almost fifty-five hours. We have a room prepared for you.”

Jonas stood, dusting off his slacks, and shook Tycho’s hand. “Welcome aboard. And hey, congrats on first contact.”

Codrin Balan — 2346

Codrin found emself in possession of a blissful two days of peace after that sudden pile-on of news. He acknowledged a request from True Name to act as amanuensis with a faintness of heart that ey hoped the skunk did not notice, and then went back to spending the rest of eir day napping, catching up on a writing project ey had been poking at, shoving Dear around for fun, and watching the fox rehearse its next performance with its partner. This one was to be a ballroom dance where everyone invited would dance with instances of Dear, which would begin disappearing one by one while the rest grew steadily more anxious, as though worrying that they would be next.

It was all very Dear, and Codrin enjoyed the idea immensely.

It was comforting, in a way, to sit on the couch and watch eir partners dance, stumble, laugh, start dancing again, all while this big project loomed outside. It was there, ey knew. It was hovering outside like a storm rolling inexorably over the prairie, ready to lash the sides of the house with bands of rain and rattle the glass with peals of thunder.

But for now, ey was safe inside, laying in supplies, even if they were simply emotional and intellectual reserves for what ey knew would be a taxing endeavor.

The only conversation ey'd allowed about the entire affair came at night, when the three of them had piled into bed, each in their familiar order but pressed now up against each other,

perhaps drawing comfort against the onrushing storm.

“How’s it going to feel working alongside True Name instead of against her?” Dear’s partner asked, voice muffled by a pillow as the fox kneaded at their shoulders.

Codrin replied, voice equally muffled against the back of Dear’s neck, “I don’t know if I was working against her, necessarily. It felt like it at the time, but now it just feels like we were both doing our jobs.”

“You just hated hers.”

Ey laughed against Dear’s neck, which got a giggle out of the fox in turn. “I guess. It’s hard to hate entirely because good things came of it, but also you can’t say for sure that the same thing would’ve happened if she hadn’t been there. Her, Jonas, the lot of them, they were all helpful in bringing about Secession and Launch how they happened, but who knows? Maybe they would’ve happened regardless, just with different people at the helm.”

There was a long moment of silence, broken only but the occasional noise of contentment from Dear’s partner as the fox continued in its back rub. Codrin spent the time plastering those thoughts over with better ones. Ey thought about how the fox smelled, how its fur felt against eir face. Ey thought about how, once, ey’d wound up between eir two partners in much the same position and it had led to an overwhelming wave of anxiety, a sense that things were wrong, a feeling that ey needed to escape, and how they’d comforted em and then simply fallen back into the habit of laying like this, instead. The fox seemed to draw a sense of security, sandwiched between them, just as Codrin did by having no one at eir back.

“*Did you hate her?*” Dear said, breaking the silence and eir rumination. It had stopped in its massage and settled for a simple hug instead. “*Do you still?*”

Ey hooked eir chin over the fox’s shoulder, humming thoughtfully. “Maybe, in a way. I thought I did at the time. I thought I hated that she was part of the hidden level of control

that everyone suspects but no one can prove. All she needed was a black suit, black sunglasses, and an earpiece.”

Dear and its partner laughed.

“Now, though, I think resentment is a more accurate word than hate. I resent the feeling of being controlled with no recourse. She may have the brainpower and manpower and analytical skills to read everyone as thoroughly as she did, but I resent how cold she was in actually doing so. I don’t dislike the System as it stands after her and Jonas’s manipulation, but I resent the cynicism it took to get here. I don’t resent being here, but I do resent the phys-side manipulations that led to me being here.”

After yawning, Dear’s partner asked, “Think you’ll be alright working beside her while you resent her?”

“If it was just me, no,” ey said. “If that cynicism is directed at the Artemisians and Tycho and whoever else, rather than just at me, It’ll be fine, I think.”

“Besides,” Dear said. *“You will still get to see great things, my dear. You may be tired, yes, but out of however many billion people on board, you will get to see great things.”*

And then the conversation tailed off from there, and the three slept well that night, each dreaming their dreams of cynicism or skunks or aliens or astronomers or love.

The reprieve lasted until morning when, upon waking, Codrin discovered a note on the floor, written in the Odists’ distinct handwriting:

Mx Bălan,

It has been requested that we pull together a team of five to act as emissaries with a team of similar composition from the Artemisians. They have left specific instructions for the roles that should be involved: someone in a position of leadership, a scientist, a recorder, and two representatives. We have the following:

- Leadership: myself, True Name
- Scientist: Tycho Brahe
- Recorder: you
- Representative 1: Why Ask Questions Here At The End Of All Things of the Ode clade

However, we will need one more representative. It would be vanishingly easy for me or Jonas to pick someone who would be fitting for our enterprises, but why do that when it would potentially be much more interesting to let you pick? It ought to be someone outside the Ode clade or your polycule, but beyond that, I find myself fascinated by the idea that you — you, who have your feet on the ground and head in the clouds — might pick someone about whom I know nothing. With two Odists on the team already, one of whom is one of my up-tree instances, I am sure you can see that we will have the situation under control from our end.

Please make your choice today, and I will look forward to seeing the two of you by, say, systime 1700 for a candlelit dinner in Tycho's delightful sim. If they are interested in joining, the other members of your polycule are also welcome.

Cordially,

The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade

Attached was the full text of both messages received so far.

After reading the note, ey placed it face down on the table and made eir way to make coffee. Ey needed at least some mood-altering substance before engaging with that, and it was far too early in the morning to reach for wine.

When Dear read the note, the fox made a sour face. *"I am not sure whether she is trying to be funny or strategically honest or simply a brat."*

Ey slouched in eir chair at the table, focusing on the coffee, doing eir best to pick out and name different notes in the flavor. Something fruity. And caramel, perhaps. "I didn't know she was capable of humor."

"Everyone is capable of humor, my dear. Whether or not they intend it is the question."

"Want to come to a dinner party with me, then?"

There was a long pause during which several emotions played out on the fox's face before it replied. *"I will have an answer for you by systime 1500. I cannot decide right now."*

"Dinner party?" Dear's partner stumbled from the bedroom, creases from a pillow still evident on eir cheek. "How many do I have to cook for?"

"None, thankfully," Codrin grinned. "Or perhaps just Dear and I. We've been invited to one."

They stopped at the end of the table, leaning down onto their hands. "Well, Dear is frowning, so I'm assuming it's complicated?"

"True Name would like me to join her and the rest of the emissaries to the Artemisians, and she's invited you two as well."

"No," they said flatly. "And now, it's time for coffee."

A warning glance from Dear kept Codrin from asking further after that. Instead, ey said, "I have an unrelated question for you once you're caffeinated."

They waved their hand noncommittally as they stumbled into the kitchen where a mug sat waiting for them already.

Once everyone was awake enough for conversation, ey asked eir question. "Either of you know someone who would be a good choice to balance out this diplomatic party? Someone less likely to try and shape the whole venture to their will, but not as passive as an amanuensis?"

Dear shrugged. *"I can get you in touch with plenty of artists. How opposite of an Odist viewpoint are you looking for?"*

"I'm not sure that's quite the goal, so much as someone who can be engaged and can contribute without being as cynical as anyone from True Name's stanza or as singularly focused as Tycho. I think what might be good is just someone ordinary. Someone normal."

Dear's partner perked up. "If you want someone who would be interested, is pleasant to be around, and able to engage in a conversation without going down a rabbit hole or starting a fight, I think I know someone."

"Slanderous. I can engage in conversations and I do not go down rabbit holes or start fights."

"Yeah, but absolutely no one would call you boring, Dear."

It preened.

"Sounds promising," Codrin said, flipping the note over and studying the list. "What do they have that would counterbalance this, beyond being ordinary?"

"She's earnest about everything. It's really endearing, actually. She's likeable without being manipulative or cynical. She's interested in people, too, and tries to see the good in them like it's herd job." They paused, grinned, and shrugged. "I mean, she was my therapist before I uploaded, so I may be a little biased."

Ey raised eir eyebrows. "A therapist? That's actually a really good idea, come to think of it. Someone who can understand humans and just be a normal human is what I guess I was thinking of. What's her name?"

"Sarah Genet. Want me to see if she's free? She's a tracker, I'm sure she'd be willing to send a fork for something like this."

"Why not? She sounds like a nice enough person to meet either way."

Dear nodded enthusiastically. *"I am always curious to meet friends of others from before they uploaded! You are not exempt from this, my love."*

They smirked, looked up at the ceiling for a minute or two,

then nodded. “She’s getting ready, and will be over at noon or so.”

Codrin had never seen a therapist either before or after uploading. Before, it had been a luxury that eir family couldn’t afford, and after, ey had been so busy — first with getting used to uploaded life, then with study, then with work — to have considered it much.

He had, however, seen a counselor in school as mandated by the school itself. Mr Nicolescu had been a kindly old gentleman, but one who seemed perpetually on the bring of collapsing from exhaustion. It made sense, too, given the size of the school, the requirement to meet with every student once a year, and the lack of any other counselors. Ey had been a good student and a quiet kid, and seeing him any context other than the required visit was often a sign that something had gone wrong.

Sarah Genet immediately reminded em of Mr. Nicolescu in so many ways. The way she walked, the way she held herself, her smile, the way she listened with her whole intention on whatever someone had to say.

Ey liked her immediately, a feeling which ey’d questioned ever since composing the History.

“So, all I was told coming into this was that I was needed for a project that might interest me,” she said, once she’d been offered coffee, snacks, and a seat at the table. “If you’re going to go all mysterious on me, I’m probably already going to say yes, but make your pitch.”

“Quick pitch?” Codrin grinned. “Aliens found our Dreamer Module signal and are going to upload a diplomatic party in a few weeks, and you were suggested as a good candidate.”

A few moments of quiet followed, before Dear’s partner laughed. “Sorry Sarah. You see why I wanted you over here to have this conversation in person?”

“You’re telling me, good Lord.” She shook her head, folded her hands on the table, and smiled. “Alright, now give me the longer pitch.”

“Alright. The Dreamer Module broadcast, in short, broadcast instructions on how to build a message that would work with our Ansible, allowing anyone who found it to upload to the LVs. A few nights ago, someone picked that up and answered.”

Ey slide the note from True Name across the table and waited for her to read.

When she had finished, Sarah said, “Whew, alright. That’s a lot. So in however many hours, we should expect a team of five of them, and we’ll send a team of five in turn. Any idea what we’ll be talking about?”

“No clue. Clearly science of some sort, given their request for a scientist. Probably coming to an agreement, if they’re asking for a recorder of some sort, though that’s just a guess on my part. The “We welcome you” bit sounds promising, at least.”

She read through the note once more, set it down, and sipped at her coffee. “Well, you already know that I’m in, but I’m happy to say that this doesn’t change my decision. Why me, though?”

Dear’s partner answered, “Have you read the Bălans’ History, yet? An Expanded History of Our World? I know I pointed you to it.”

“More than pointed,” she said, laughing. “You all but forced me to read it, so, yes, I’ve read it.”

“So you know of True Name, right?”

“The one who tried to guide everything? Yeah, I remember. I didn’t miss her name on there, either.”

Codrin sighed. “I had the chance to interview her — me and my root instance both did — and she’s a lot to deal with. I’m sure it’s some calculated gesture that she leaves the last choice up to me, but all the same, I wanted to pick someone who was the opposite of her.”

“So you figured a therapist would be good? A psychologist?”

“Yeah, someone who can maybe understand the Artemisians better without doing so specifically to manipulate them.”

She held her coffee cup in her hands, tilting her head thoughtfully. "You know, it's a good intuition, but you might also want to be prepared for there to be nothing I can offer. They're clearly similar enough to us that they can learn our language, but that may be where the similarities stop. They may be so alien to us that we might not be able to understand them at all, at least not truly."

Codrin frowned.

"Not that it's hopeless, of course. I'm still happy to help. Honored, even! Just an eventuality you might want to prepare for. Have they sent us anything to teach us their language?"

"*One of their languages, perhaps,*" Dear chimed in. "*There are apparently four different species.*"

"One of them, then," she said. If she was surprised by the fact, her expression didn't betray it. "We apparently only sent them our lingua franca, though, so maybe they have similar."

"I don't know, actually. Those are the messages I have, but I don't know if they're the only ones," Codrin said. "We'll probably learn more tonight. You alright creating a long-running fork for the project? That's what she made Tycho do."

"Oh, that's fine. It'll be my first time working on a big, organized project like this."

Ey laughed. "Same here. I've worked on big projects and organized projects, but not both at the same time."

"I'll look forward to dinner, then." She looked down, plucked at her blouse, and shrugged. "Think this is good enough for it?"

"If it's at Tycho's, it'll be too dark to tell, but I don't think he owns anything other than flannel shirts and khakis. You should be fine."

"Alright. I'm curious to see what someone who tried to shape large swaths of recent history looks like."

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

Despite the exhaustion that had come down on him like a hammer, Tycho found it incredibly hard to get to sleep. It weighed him down like stones on his chest, even as he lay in the bed that True Name led him too, but even then, he lay there in the dark, staring up at the ceiling with eyes that burned.

He did not know how long it took him to actually fall asleep, but when next he woke, ten hours had passed, and dreams of Artemisians clung to him still. They were always just out of sight, and their conversations were just slightly below the level that he could hear them, and yet, he knew it to be them. Knew they were there, just around the corner. Knew that, above all else, he wanted to meet them.

When laying in bed any longer brooked him no progress on disentangling himself from the dream, he climbed out, showered in the en suite, and, when he was dressed, opened the door to find True Name waiting across the hall, two coffees in hand.

“Do you feel more well-rested, Tycho?”

“I guess, yeah,” he said, accepting the offered coffee. “I hope I didn’t sleep through too much.”

True Name began walking, letting him fall into step behind her, and shrugged. “Only the arrival of the Artemisians.”

He stopped dead in his tracks, gaping at her.

She laughed. “Of course not, my friend. Nothing much that you need to worry about has happened in the last few hours. We

have been working on information control and hunting down those willing to help with the effort for setting up the Ansible system to upload to Artemis. That is what you will be working on today.”

So out of place was the humor that it took him several silent steps and a sip of his coffee to relax from the adrenal rush of the statement. “Well, if you say so. No further communications from them?”

“One, but I will not ungate it on you yet, as it is quite large. It is instructions for one of their languages. Secondrace, apparently. I will ask you to learn some of it in a few days, enough to be polite, but Answers Will Not Help is working on that with more forks.”

Tycho quickstepped enough to fall in beside True Name as they made their way back to the central hub of the complex. “That feels somewhat out of place to me.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, if firstrace is there in a leadership capacity, why not send that language?”

The skunk shrugged. “We do not know. They did not include any of that information in the message. It will be something that we can ask, whether prior to or at the conference.”

He nodded and looked out at the bustle of the room, as active as it was when he had arrived and when he had gone to sleep. He wondered if the various forks shifted their sleep schedule such that there were always True Names and Jonases at work.

“So, uh...what’s on the schedule for today?”

True Name tilted her head momentarily, then nodded. “You will be working with Answers Will Not Help and two others to help spin up the effort to work on getting the upload side of the Ansible working to their specifications.”

As if on command, Answers Will Not Help appeared before them, followed shortly by two others. Tycho supposed that the skunk must’ve sent each a sensorium ping.

The woman grinned to him, then gestured to each of the new

guests in turn. “Sovanna Soun is a sys-side Ansible tech, who will be working on that part, and–”

Tycho was already leaning forward to shake the hand of the other guest, a slight gentleman who looked every one of his seventy years. “Dr. Verda, wonderful to see you again.”

“You two know each other, then?”

Tycho laughed, nodded. “Paolo was one of my teachers, yes.”

“Well, what do you know,” Answers Will Not Help said, laughing. “Right, then. If the three of you will follow me?”

They made their way to a conference room where they sat around a long table, both True Name and Tycho still nursing their coffees. Answers Will Not Help pulled a wheeled whiteboard over and uncapped a marker, beginning to diagram on the board.

“I will be managing the effort,” she said, writing ‘AWNHN’ and circling it at the top, two lines were drawn diagonally down from that. “As mentioned, Ms. Soun will be working on the Ansible software modifications. Dr. Verda will be working on the math side required to have the Ansible track the ship as it moves. It was built to be mobile in case we did need to send or receive anyone from L5 in an emergency, but I am told that it was meant to require manual intervention.”

Tycho frowned. “Two people working on all of that?”

“Two clades, yes. As discussed, Ms. Soun will begin with a clade of 10 to work on the software, and Dr. Verda will begin with a clade of two. Both can expand as needed. We need to ramp this up and complete the changes required within two weeks, so it is important that we be able to move quite quickly.”

“And what about me?”

Answers Will Not Help laughed and wrote his name next to hears, then drew connecting lines to all three names already on the board. “You will be acting as Artemis consultant. We will deliver all messages through you and you will pass on any information required bidirectionally. Due to your relative inexperience

with forking, your specialized knowledge of our visitors, and a certain bold *je ne sais quoi*, we will be keeping you at one fork for the time being.”

Dr. Verda laughed. “Boldness? Our Joh- er, Tycho?”

He felt a heat rise to his cheeks as Answers Will Not Help replied, “He is the one who said yes to the Artemisians before we had the chance to do anything about it.”

Everyone looked at him.

“Uh, sorry.”

“What the fuck, man,” Sovanna said, laughing. “So all this is your fault?”

Answers Will Not Help laughed as well, waving her hand. “Do not be too mad at him. Or do, but do not tear into him too much. He has already received the Odist third degree.”

“I have?”

“True Name threatened you with death, did she not?”

Tycho froze. “I...what?”

“Smart, bold, but not very socially adept.”

Sovanna laughed and patted him on the arm. “Don’t worry, Tycho. I was just giving you shit. No idea what Answers is talking about.”

Answers Will Not Help capped the pen and, with startling speed, threw it at Sovanna. It struck her in the shoulder, getting a yelp from the Ansible tech and making both Tycho and Dr. Verda jump. The grin never left her face as she spoke, but her voice was frigid. “You are not permitted to call me ‘Answers’, Ms. Soun. Understood?”

Eyes wide and hand holding onto her shoulder where the pen had struck, Sovanna sat, wide-eyed, and nodded.

“Now, if there is no further need for third degrees, shall we begin?” Her voice was back to its normal, joyous self with a surprising adroitness.

The three nodded together, silent.

“Excellent. One second, then.”

After a moment of stillness, the three walls of the room that

did not contain the door quickly expanded outward, leaving a road, open room. Fourteen desks sprouted from the floor, divided into a group of ten and two groups of two.

“Cubicle walls?” When Sovanna shook her head and Dr. Verda nodded, both pods of two sprouted cubicle walls around them. With a final flourish of a bow, Answers Will Not Help welcomed them into the room. Above the pod of ten hung a sign that read ‘Ansible’, and the two pods were labeled ‘Astro’ and ‘Admin’ in turn.

It was all quite skillfully done, but Tycho still felt a slight pang in his chest. It was generally considered unethical for public sims to violate Euclidean space, but private sims were beholden only to the holders of the ACLs. This room would occupy at least one office on either side, if not more.

He found it quite unnerving.

Answers Will Not Help spoke as she walked. “Begin by estimating your work. We will meet in one hour. After that, we will meet twice a day or more often as needed. Please feel free to ping me if you need anything. I have granted you all access to cones of silence, which you may use at your discretion or when requested. Tycho, dear, with me.”

Sovanna forked as she walked, further instances of her blipping into existence beside her, each one walking up to claim a desk. It took Dr. Verda longer to fork, but soon, there were two of him.

Tycho simply followed his new boss to the admin pod and gestured him to one of the cubicles while she took the other. Once they sat, the wall between the cubicles lowered itself and he found that their two desks faced each other. At a gesture, a cone of silence fell over them both.

“Alright, Mr. Brahe. I am going to grant you access to the language dump that they sent our way. I would like you to take a look at it over the next hour and see how easily you might be able to pick it up. From what it sounds like, they already have a good grasp on English, but in order to be polite, we ought to

also work on learning one of theirs.”

He nodded. He could already feel the presence of that information lingering on the periphery of his memory. “I’ll give it a go. I’ve never learned another language but I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Excellent, thank you. Again, you do not need to gain mastery over it. That will be my job. I have several instances working on it already. If you find yourself in need of assistance, let me know and I will request a merger for them so that I can pick up what they have learned.” She waved a hand and a few notepads spooled out of the air between them, along with several pens. “I do not know your preference, but here are some materials for you should you need. You are also welcome to create further copies if you need, and should you require anything more advanced, ping me and I will make it happen.”

He collected the notepads into a pile on his desk, setting the pile of pens next to them. Each was unique, which, he supposed, was to give him a variety to choose from.

“Please also be prepared to set aside your work should the others request any further information from you. I believe Dr. Verda would be the most likely, as you are not an Ansible tech, but one never knows, yes?”

“Alright,” he said, jotting down a list on one of the nicer pads with one of the nicer pens to jot down a list of what he was to do. “Language, be available. Anything else?”

“Nope, that’s it! Your #Tasker instance will be working on separate items.” She waved a hand again and the cone of silence dropped as the cube wall once more raised up between them. Muffled on the other side, he heard, “See you in an hour.”

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Ey was not sure what ey expected out of a dinner in the middle of a clearing beneath the stars, but ey immediately found it pleasant. A round table had been set up atop the hill on which ey had interviewed Tycho so many years ago, along with six chairs evenly spaced around it. The whole table was lit by a single candle burning in the center and the starlight from above.

True Name greeted eir party of three with a bow when they entered the sim. “Mx. Bălan, Dear, wonderful to see you two again. Ms. Genet, a pleasure to meet you.”

The three bowed politely in turn. While the dark was pleasant, ey wished for at least light enough to see her expression, as well as to see Dear’s. As far as ey knew, the fox hadn’t seen the skunk in at least two decades, if not more.

“Nice to meet you too, The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream,” Sarah said.

“Please, just True Name is fine, but welcome all the same. Shall we?”

“*Please.*” Dear sounded its usual self, Codrin was pleased to note. No sourness or anger colored its tone.

At the table, introductions were made. Tycho remained as nervous as he had before, but ey was happy to see that he had at least gotten some sleep at some point, and none of the exhaustion that had gnawed at him last they spoke was evident.

Answers Will Not Help looked much as the Odists that re-

sembled Michelle did, though far happier and more ebullient than any Codrin had met. She seemed always to be smiling or on the edge of laughter. “Delighted to meet you all. Codrin, I have heard so much about you. And Dear, how long has it been?”

The fox grinned, nodded its head to her. “*I believe nigh on sixty years. You are looking well.*”

“As are you! Your partner did not wish to join us?”

In the light of the candle, Codrin watched as the fox’s grin faltered, and ey suspected that it was taking it a good amount of energy to maintain a pleasant façade for dinner. “*They were not able to make it, no, but they send their best.*”

They had not. There had even been a discussion that occasionally veered towards argument when Dear stated that it would be joining Codrin.

“Dear, you’ve had nothing positive to say about True Name basically ever. Why the hell are you going to this?” they had asked toward the end.

“*Because I want to learn more if I can.*” It had paused, then added in a quieter voice, “*And because Codrin is going and I want to be by eir side, if only as a fork.*”

It’s partner had sat up straighter at that and nodded. “That, at least I can understand. I love you both, is all, and I’m not comfortable with either True Name or her up-tree instance. I want you to be careful, but I suppose you’re right. Put that way, having the two of you there makes me feel a little better than just Codrin.”

Ey shook away the lingering rumination and gratefully accepted a glass of wine that Dear offered. The skunk had been pouring one for everyone, and ey supposed that wine might help make the evening flow more smoothly.

Once everyone had received their glass, she raised hers and said, “To Artemis.”

They all raised their glasses in a toast, Dear adding, “*To exciting times.*”

Answers Will Not Help laughed. "How do you imagine user11824 will take all of this?"

"Horribly, of course. When do you plan on releasing the news?"

"Tomorrow," True Name answered. "We will release a priority alert into the perisystem feeds. Why Ask Questions is working on that now, I believe. I trust that none of you have told anyone else?"

Sarah and Tycho shook their heads.

"Just my partners and Ioan," Codrin said.

True Name frowned and there was a brief pause as, ey assumed, she sent off a sensorium message to another of her clade. "Do you think that Ioan will tell anyone?"

Codrin shrugged. "I didn't tell em not to, but I didn't tell em to tell anyone, either. I imagine ey'll tell May Then My Name."

The skunk sat silent, looking down to her glass of wine. Ey couldn't quite read the emotions on her face in the flickering of the candlelight, but given eir previous conversation about True Name losing her up-tree instance to hatred, ey could guess that there was at least some anxiety behind that silence.

Eventually, she asked, "When did you send the message? Was it eyes only?"

"It was, yeah. I sent it about noon. Why do you ask?"

"I would like to prepare my clade back on the System to either discuss this with em or to prepare for the possibility that ey will tell others. Five hours is not too long, though. As long as ey has not published anything to the perisystem feeds, of course."

Ey frowned. "Should I not have?"

"You were perfectly welcome to, Mx. Bălan. While I do wish that you had informed me before doing so, I understand your reasons." Her expression brightened. "But come, let us not talk about such things at table. How are you all feeling about the upcoming adventure?"

"Scared," Tycho said with a nervous laugh. "Excited, but also scared. I worry that I caused some huge problem. I know you promised me that what I did was okay, but all the same, I worry."

True Name nodded. “I understand. I harbor my own fears. We have to rely on the fact that all of the tests of the DMZ passed and that there really is no way for the border to be crossed. May Then My Name tested it quite thoroughly, too.”

“Yeah, if you say so. From what Tycho#Artemis sent me, it sounds like it’ll be a trade, too.”

“A trade?” Sarah asked.

“Yes.” It was Answers Will Not Help that spoke, this time. “We will meet their emissaries here on the LV System in the DMZ, but we will also be sending forks of our own as emissaries to talk on their system.”

“Why, do you think?”

The Odist laughed. “No fucking clue. My guess is that it is a hedge, that they are wanting to meet with on both spaces so that we can see what their lives are like while we see what theirs are like, but also it gives them a chance ensure that we still meet on territory that they control, just in case we decide to murder all of them when they arrive.”

“Is that something we’re worried about, too?” Tycho asked.

“It was Tycho#Artemis that thought about it in the first place,” True Name said.

He blinked, then shook his head. “I have only heard from him via sensorium message. He hasn’t merged back down yet.”

“*I will never understand taskers,*” Dear said, giggling. “*Apologies to present company, of course.*”

Tycho looked nonplussed.

“Dear’s an instance artist.” Codrin grinned. “Its entire existence is built around forking. If it did not fork, I’m sure it’d explode.”

“*I would, yes, and you lot would have to clean it up.*”

Everyone around the table laughed.

“How about you, Ms. Genet?” True Name asked.

She took a sip of wine and set her glass down, looking thoughtful. “I don’t know if ‘curious’ is an emotion, but that’s at the forefront of my mind. I’m not feeling anxious or scared,

and I guess I'm a little excited, but more than that I'm just feeling curious about the whole venture. Will they look like us or will they look like, uh...Douglas, was it? Douglas Hadje? If we're to go visit them on Artemis, too, what will we look like? How will we talk? How will we empathize with each other?"

"You are a psychologist, yes?"

She nodded. "Yes. I think that's why I'm so fixated on trying to learn as much as I can. I'm curious about what makes them *them*."

True Name smiled brightly and nodded. "As am I. I am glad that you decided to join us on this. I think that having the perspective of someone both interested in and experienced with those aspects will prove eminently useful."

"Glad you're having me along."

"And Codrin? How are you feeling about this?"

Ey sat up straighter and thought for a moment. Ey was feeling quite a lot. Ey was feeling jerked around. Ey was feeling like a follower. Ey was excited. Ey was scared. Ey was incredibly happy that Dear had decided to join em at dinner.

Not all of those felt like things that ey could share, so ey instead settled for a safer answer "I'm feeling both excited and nervous both. I'm excited because this is another unprecedented thing that I get the chance to see, and I'm nervous because that very unprecedented nature means that I have no foreknowledge to lean on. I'll be working in the dark as the...what did they call it? Recorder?"

Dear reached over and took one of eir hands in its paw. "*You have lived through several unprecedented events, my dear. How does this one differ?*"

Ey fiddled with eir wine glass in eir free hand as ey thought. "I think because I don't have a frame of reference for what to expect. Launch was exciting and unprecedented, but I also knew that life would continue on in many of the same ways that it had before afterwards. Winding up in a relationship was new and unprecedented, but I can still comprehend my partners as

people.”

“Fox people.”

Ey grinned. “That too, yeah.”

True Name raised her glass. “I will drink to that, Mx. Bălan. I will admit to feeling some of the same trepidation around not having a frame of reference. We are limited to a few letters and a language primer. I do not know what to expect, and that is, as I am sure you can imagine, a somewhat frightening idea for someone such as I.”

Ey raised eir glass and smiled warily, returning the subtle squeeze that Dear gave eir hand. Ey was thankful for the dim light of the candle, which let em make out the features of the two Odists sitting across from em, but not a whole lot more; ey could only hope that the same was true for them.

“And you, Dear?” Answers Will Not Help asked. “I know that you are not joining us, but I am interested in your thoughts all the same.”

The fox retrieved its paw from Codrin’s hand, choosing instead to wave it up at the sky. *“This is the first time that I have been to this sim. It is yours, is it not, Mr. Brahe?”*

The astronomer nodded.

“It is truly a delightful place. I have stars in the sim where my partners and I live, but they are the familiar constellations that we remember from our time on Earth, though certainly more stars than I ever saw in the Central Corridor”

“We ever saw,” True Name added, laughing. “We got the moon, a few planets, and the brighter constellations such as Orion and Ursa Major.”

“Yes,” Dear said with a hint of a bow. *“This, however, is incredible. We are seeing the stars as if there were a glass dome over our heads. They do not twinkle. The constellations are not quite as I remember them. We are sitting beneath the universe, it feels, and above us lies eternity.*

“You must forgive me for monologuing, it is an old habit, but when I think about what is happening, when I hear about Artemisians and

emissaries, about the I feel every minute of that eternity. I feel every molecule of that universe. You ask how I feel, and I would say that I feel small. Insignificant, even. We have been on our journey for twenty years and have made it only seven-and-change light-days from Earth. How much of that eternity must they have been traveling?"

A thoughtful silence followed the fox's short speech. It was Sarah who finally interrupted it, lifting her glass much as True Name had. "To eternity and the weight of the universe."

Dear sat up and clapped its paws, grinning brightly. "I am pleased that you are going on this excursion, Ms. Genet. What a perfect toast."

They all laughed once again, raising their cups toward the single flame in the center of the table.

"I think that is a note to begin dinner on, yes?" True name said, waving her paw above the table, plates and flatware appearing, along with several dishes of various types.

She must've talked Tycho into giving her some ACLs in his sim, ey thought. Because of course she did.

"Please, eat! Enjoy. I did not make it, but you may pretend I did if you would like to bolster my ego."

The self-deprecating comment was delivered so easily that Codrin found emself grinning even before realising it.

"No more shop talk until dessert," Answers Will Not Help added. "Or I will have Tycho bounce you from the sim. There is lasagna, and I will not have you spoiling that."

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

The dream continued.

And as before, the hallway continued some however many miles dream-logic determined it must, and as before, he kept walking down it, kept walking and walking and walking, right hand always trailing along the wall. That wall was of smooth stone, something coarser than marble and smoother than concrete, and as he felt it play out beneath his fingers, he heard the voices ahead of him.

And there was a room, there ahead of him. He could see the light spilling into the comparatively dim hallway. Sunlight, cool and bright. He could see that the left-hand wall of the hallway continued. A corner, then, the hallway dumping him out into the southeast corner of the room. Southeast...how did he know that?

And there on that wall, shadows played. Shadows of leaves, the arc of a fountain.

And in that room, that soft rush of water only served to muffle the voices of so many others. They had to be the Artemisians. They had to be. But the water was just loud enough, added just enough white noise, that he could pick out no singular detail. There were fricatives. There were plosives. There were ejectives.

And the harder he listened, the more details he almost-but-not-quite heard. First there was the sound of a masculine voice,

and then the sound of something more feminine. First there was the careful modulation of some machine-produced voice, then the mellifluous tones of something undeniably organic.

And he wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be somewhere else. He wasn't allowed. He wasn't permitted. He was supposed to be somewhere different, not creeping along the unending right-hand wall of the hallway, straining to hear yet more detail from a group of incomprehensible others.

And still he crept along. Still he strained to hear, still he stared at that wall, hoping for the barest glimpse of the smallest shadow, hoping to discern the shape of the unknown.

And then a silence fell among the voices.

And then he turned the corner.

And then he was blinded by the sun.

And then he awoke, the lights of the room staring down at him reprovingly.

The dream seemed determined always to cling to him, as it had the day before, and even as he showered and dressed, even after True Name once more met him at his door and handed him his coffee, he tried as hard as he could to remember even the smallest detail of those voices.

"You seem distracted today," the skunk observed. "Not just tired, I mean. What is on your mind?"

He jolted to awareness and smiled sheepishly to her. "Uh, just a dream sticking with me from last night. Second night in a row I've dreamed about them."

"The Artemisians?"

He nodded. "Just like I can hear them talking, but not any details about them. I can hear *that* they're talking, I guess. I keep trying to learn more and then waking up."

True Name smiled. "I know the feeling, yes. It is that desire to know more, yet having it kept from you. Are you dreaming in their language or in English?"

"I can't even tell that. Sometimes I think it might be one and then some little phrase sounds like an accented version of

the other. I wouldn't be surprised, though. I've been learning as much of that as I can during the day."

"I imagine so, yes. Would you like a small break from language acquisition? If you are having dreams about them, perhaps you can come up with some specific questions and we can send them a message." She patted him on the arm. "Time-boxed, of course, but it may give you a chance to come up with some ideas that we have not."

"Really? You'd let me do that?"

She laughed, nodded. "Of course, Tycho. You are always welcome to ask to do something other than what you are doing. We would just request that you fork to do so. However, since this is not your area of expertise, I am sure that Answers Will Not Help will be willing to give you, say, two hours to work on something else if it will also serve to increase our knowledge of the situation. One moment, please."

There was moment of silence as True Name stood at the entrance to the central work area, sipping her coffee. After a moment, Answers Will Not Help showed up before her.

"Morning, dear," she said. "Everything alright?"

"Tycho would like to take a few hours to work on a message to the Artemisians. Are you alright with that?"

The woman laughed and nodded. "Oh, by all means. We will get by without him for a bit. See you at lunch, Mr. Brahe?"

He nodded.

After a moment, another woman showed up, looking almost identical to Answers Will Not Help. Perhaps a long-lived fork, though the ebullience was toned down somewhat. Still the same grin, still the weekend outfit. "Tycho Brahe, yes? True Name says I will be helping you out on this writing a letter."

"Oh, uh," he frowned. "I guess so. Answers Will Not Help?"

She waved her hand in a non-answer, instead beckoning him over to another door along the wall. "Come on. Let us get this going. I am excited to hear what you come up with."

True Name raised her coffee cup to him and smile. "Good

luck, Tycho. Do keep in touch. I look forward to seeing what you come up with.

Once they'd made it into the office — much smaller than the conference room where he'd initially met Sovanna and Dr. Verda.

They sat on opposite sides of a desk, where the woman swiped into existence two notepads and two pens. "Alright, so I have been told that you had a dream. Tell me about this."

As he did, she jotted down details on her own notepads, occasionally asking him questions — did he remember what the air smelled like? Were there human voices as well? Why were you anxious about being found out? — and though it felt silly at first, he realized that she had teased out greater details of what it was that his dreaming mind was curious about.

"Alright," she said. "Let us come up with five questions out of this. They seem to like the number five."

"I think we have *how often do the four races interact?* already. If you think that we can do one paragraph per question, perhaps we can ask about whether there are common areas that have a *lingua franca*, too."

She shrugged as he wrote down the question. "I do not see why not. We are not limited on bandwidth. I would also like to know if they have similar strategies of forking, if they even have such. As part of that, we can ask about clade structures and naming, given the implications of both Turun Ka and Turun Ko."

He took a moment to write this down, as well as a few other sub-questions she mentioned along the way.

"What else do you think would be helpful?"

"Well, there's lots I want to know, but since we only have so much time before the talks begin, I guess we should keep it relatively short."

She nodded.

"What about when each of the races joined? That would give us an idea of how long they've been around."

“Good one.” She grinned, tapping her pen against the table. “I knew we kept you around for a reason.”

Had she said it in any other tone of voice, had all these Odists not been so good at choosing his responses for him, it could have easily come off as insulting, but it was said with such obvious affection that he laughed. Something about her was ever-so-slightly different from Answers Will Not Help, though he couldn’t put his finger on it. She was more earnest, perhaps. More focused on making him feel good rather than just seemingly always on the edge of laughter.

“Should we also ask where they came from?” she continued.

He frowned. “I don’t know about that one. It can be a very involved answer. Perhaps a separate set of questions for science down the line, since those will take them more time to come up with. Maybe we can come up with a list of questions to have them prepare answers for at the conference.”

“Oh! Delightful ideal!” She paused, and he imagined that she must be sending off a note to one of her cocladists. “We will tackle that a separate time. I agree with you, though, that keeping this to more cultural and social topics will help. We can offer similar in return. Let us ask about leisure activities, then. What kind of stories do they tell? How do they tell them? Is storytelling limited to certain individuals, or considered a skilled trade? Is there a concept of work to make leisure time important?”

Tycho scribbled the rapid fire questions down on the pad, nodding as he did. Once he was finished, he said, “That got me thinking of another question, but I’m not sure how well it fits, so feel free to poke holes in it. How do you feel about asking if they dream?”

She laughed delightedly and clapped her hands. “Oh, I absolutely love it, my dear. I only have one request of you.”

“Yes?”

“That must be the entire question. We can expand on the others with our little sub-questions and a paragraph of why we

are asking them, but for this last one, it must be the only three words that they read pertaining to it.”Do you dream?””

He blinked, nonplussed. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I fucking am,” she said, grinning widely. “I am the politician, you are the nerd. Now, let us hammer out some answers to these questions for ourselves that we can send. Answers to the first four, I mean. We will not answer”Do you dream?” for ourselves.”

Tycho stopped himself from asking why, realizing she would likely answer in the same way. “Alright, then. This is fun, thanks for giving me the chance to work on it.”

“Of course, of course.” she giggled leaning across the table to ruffle his thinning hair. “You fucking taskers, you need breaks, too.”

He laughed, struggling to re-comb his hair with only his fingers, once more surprised at just how comfortable she made him feel. He liked her, whoever she was.

Interlude: Ioan Bălan — 2346

“I never wanted this. I never wanted any of this!” the skunk shouted, stamping her foot and jabbing her finger toward em. “You talk about how much I mean to you, how much this place means, and then what? Nothing ever comes of it.”

“What the hell is supposed to come of it?” Ey stood quickly enough to knock the chair back onto the ground, all but lunging toward her. She stood half a head shorter than em, but, having decided that this wasn’t menacing enough, ey forked two times in quick succession, three of em stomping toward her.

Rather than quail under the onslaught or simply run away, she stood up straighter, arms crossed. “Really? Are you really sure that you need this to make your point?”

Ey — all three of em — faltered in eir advance as the skunk continued.

“I never, *ever* should have stayed around here,” she said, voice suddenly frigid. “And I certainly never should have stayed with an asshole like you.”

With the slam of the door still ringing in the air, eir two forks quit as ey stumbled back to the chair, slowly righted it, sat down heavily, and buried eir face in eir hands.

Ioan made sure to stay still even as the lights came down and the applause began, holding eir position all the way until the noise of the audience was muffled by the curtain. Ey finally sat back in the chair, stretching eir arms up and taking a few

long breaths.

A pair of soft, fur-covered arms draping over eir shoulders and an equally soft-furred cheek pressing against eir own brought em out of eir reverie, if reverie it was. Ey tilted eir head against her cheek and held her arms to eir front.

“Hey asshole,” the skunk said, echoing the epithet from a minute before.

“Hi May.” Ey grinned, tilting eir head enough to get at least a sidelong glance at her. “Well done on that ‘ever’. Thought you were going to punch me in the stomach or something.”

She nipped at eir shoulder, letting em feel sharp teeth even through the thick fabric of the costume, before standing up. “That would be out of character, dear. Both for my character and I. Might be kinda fun sometime, though.”

After Ioan stood, they made their way backstage, letting the hands — several of whom were also them — deal with the scene change. Backstage, then back behind even that to their dressing room, where they were each able to get straightened up in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror.

As ey always did when coming face to face with emself in costume, the feeling of being someone else all but disappeared, and ey marveled at the fact that ey’d even let May talk em into this however many years ago. If there was one thing that ey was, it was a historian, right? It was a writer. An investigative journalist. Ey was in no way a stage actor, right?

But the Ioan that stared back at em, one skinny almost to the point of gaunt, one with sallow skin and sunken eyes, was proof of the opposite. It had taken em at least a year to really, truly master the art of forking over and over to carefully modify one’s appearance. It felt counter to so many instincts, and even still, ey left a Ioan back home, unchanged from the view of emself that felt most at home, just to ensure that there remained some tie to that. May had chided em for this, but ey couldn’t let go entirely.

“I do not know why you decided to write a scene where I

have to yell at you,” May said, bumping her shoulder against eirs. “Love the story, hate the scene.”

“Hey, we’ve had our arguments.”

“Well, yes, but I do not like those, either, so that is not a point in its favor.” She grinned, poked em in the side with a dull claw. “And never during any of them have I yelled at you or called you an asshole.”

Ey laughed and reached up to tug at one of her ears. “Well now’s your—”

The longer ey held still like that, the deeper May’s frown grew, the more her tail twitched this way and that in agitation. Still, she let the silence be and didn’t touch em, unwilling to interrupt what must be a rather long sensorium message.

Finally, ey sagged, rubbing eir hands against eir face. “Uh, sorry. Can you send a fork back home? I’m going to have to try and push that out of mind for the time being, and I don’t want both of us to be in that state.”

The skunk nodded and forked off a new May, who quickly stepped from the sim. The remaining instance sighed and slipped her arms around eir middle. “You cannot leave me totally in the dark, my dear, or I will be distracted for worrying about something I do not know. Can you at least tell me something so that I don’t lose my fucking mind?”

Ioan grinned and returned the hug, resting eir chin atop her head. “Dreamer Module,” ey mumbled. “That enough for you?”

Back at the house, the root instance of Ioan was walking circles around the dining room table, ‘pacing holes in the rug’ as May would say.

Did say, it turned out, when she first entered.

“Sorry, May.” Ey pulled out a chair at the table and sat, but did so very carefully, deliberately trying to avoid simply wanting to get up and pace all the more. “News from Castor.”

At that, her ears perked and she pulled out the chair beside em. “Alright, spill it.”

“Someone picked up the signal from the Dreamer Module.

They say they understand the bit about how to use the Ansible and an astronomer — Tycho Brahe, who Codrin said ey interviewed — gave them permission to without thinking.”

The skunk frowned, sitting up straighter in her chair. “So they are going to upload to Castor?”

“It sounded like they were forty days out from their closest approach. Codrin didn’t know when exactly the upload window was.” Ey frowned as ey picked apart the remaining bits of message. “Apparently they’ve named the remote ship Artemis and the aliens Artemisians. That’s about all I know about it, other than Tycho said ‘yes’ and Codrin will be working with him on it.”

“I am assuming more will be coming soon, knowing you and Codrin.” She doodled on the surface of the table with a blunt claw. “I am also assuming that other Odists are not far behind in meddling. How long ago did this happen?”

Ioan squinted, then shrugged and just brushed eir hand along the table, a sheet of paper unrolling from nothing with the message itself written on it. Ey handed this to May, who read carefully.

“So, sevenish days ago. Nothing we can do but wait for further messages. Anything we send back will be two weeks too late.” She hesitated, set the paper down, and looked at em searchingly. “What do you make of the second half, though?”

“I’m still trying to process that.”

“Do you not feel the same?” She reached out a paw to take one of eir hands in her own. “You got into theatre after all, did you not? You are not doing much in the way of history, these days, other than the occasional paper. Did you really feel as though you had been sucked into all those projects with no input?”

Ey let her lace her fingers with ears as ey thought. Words were a long time coming. “A little, I suppose, but this bit about feeling a lack of agency is new to me. I don’t know that I ever felt that strongly about being dragged along or anything.”

“Perhaps it is Dear.”

“How do you mean?”

She squeezed eir fingers between her own. “I think Codrin and Dear settled into a life of their own, but you know Dear. It is intensely focused on these big dramatic gestures. And before you say it, I am focused on drama, but rarely are my actions in life dramatic. I am happy with the life we have built. I am happy living with you and loving you and pushing you into writing increasingly weird plays.”

Ey laughed, lifting her paw to kiss at her knuckles. “Well, sure. You got me to settle down, I guess. I don’t think Dear is capable of settling down.”

“I hope you do not resent me for that,” she said, tapping at eir chin with a finger. “I do not get the impression that you are unhappy, my dear, but I occasionally worry that your life now is not entirely the one that you wished to build.”

“I have no idea. I don’t think I had any real plans for building a life.” Ey sighed. “Which I guess is kind of where ey’s coming from. Without direction, any influence feels like getting yanked around. I felt yanked around by True Name shoving you into my life, though I love you dearly now that you’re here.”

May beamed at this, and ey was reminded of eir promise to emself to say that more often.

“Do you think ey is able to take greater control of eir life?” she asked. “You still occasionally get stuck, but I was surprised when you were the one who asked me how to write a script.”

“Well, only because you wouldn’t shut up about how bad the one you had was.” Ey rolled eir eyes. “Skunks are so annoying. Ow!”

“If you call me annoying again, I will pinch you again. A third time will earn you a bite.” She grinned toothily. “All the same. I am glad that you are happy. I do wish we were closer to Castor, though, so that you and Codrin could have an actual conversation about this. You may not be able to respond much about the Artemisians, but perhaps you could explain some of your

thoughts on agency.”

Ey nodded. “I’ll do that, yeah. Any suggestions?”

“Perhaps ey could do a grand gesture and surprise Dear. I have loved it every time that you have surprised me. I do not think that Codrin has learned how to do that yet.”

“I’m not sure I know how to teach someone how to do grand gestures.”

She tugged at eir fingers. “You have become a script writer and performer, my dear, do not sell yourself short. Besides, to hear Dear tell it, ey is not incapable. The name thing, the surprise dinner, the forking stuff. Ey is just shy, perhaps.”

“It’s a Bălan thing,” ey said.

“And it is our job as Odists to fuck with you until you break out of it. I have faith in em, just as I had faith in you.” She slid the paper back across the table to em. “You just need to pass that on.”

Ioan knew that it would be quite a while yet before eir and May’s forks merged back down. Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself, the director of the play was quite strict but she also drank like a fish and clung jealously to some remnant of productions she’d remembered from more than two centuries ago, so it had become a comfortable rhythm for Ioan, May, and any other actors who wished to join to follow her to a pub that served strong drinks and greasy food.

Ey had been planning on a simple dinner on eir own, perhaps catching up on some reading, but with this news and the fact that May was now here with em, the plan evolved into something more involved. Staying inside didn’t feel right. Something about the news had em in mind of stars, in mind of looking up to the sky, so they wound up grilling burgers out on the patio and talked as they watched the stars above, sitting there in the house’s back yard.

The burgers had long been finished and the grill long since put away when Ioan felt an automated sensorium ping of someone entering the house, followed shortly by a real message from

who had arrived.

She did not give em time to react, nor even to stand. Ey had only managed to turn to look to the door opening out to the patio before the skunk stepped out onto the concrete, lit only by the string of lights tucked beneath the overhanging deck.

“I...what? True Name?”

She bowed quickly before holding her paws up in a disarming gesture. “Ioan, May Then My Name. I apologize for the brusque entry, but I believe we need to talk.”

“I will leave you to it,” May growled, pushing herself to her feet. Ey had only ever seen eir partner furious on a scant handful of occasions, but now ey could add one more to the list. Her teeth were bared, tail bristled out, and paws bunched up into fists. In the two decades since the research and publication of *On the Origin of Our World*, May’s view of her down-tree instances had dropped precipitously, and all but one of those moments of fury had been triggered by her clade.

“May Then My Name, please,” True Name said, clasping her paws before her and bowing once again. She sounded contrite, small. “I know that you do not hold me in high regard, but all the same, I would prefer if you stayed, as I am assuming that you have both received the news.”

May frowned, crossed her arms, but did not move to leave.

“Thank you,” the other skunk said, straightening up and brushing her paws down her blouse, a nervous gesture ey had never seen on one who always looked so in control. “I will not take up too much of your time, as there is much to be done and even though there are several of me already at work and this is my only task, my mind is still torn in many directions. May we please step inside where there is more light?”

Ioan looked up to May, who shrugged. She still looked as though she would like to either quit or bounce True Name from the sim entirely.

“We can talk at the dining table,” ey said, climbing to eir feet.

Once they were seated, True Name stared off into space for a moment, and Ioan imagined her rifling through several exocortices at once, digging out a collection of files and memories.

“Alright,” she said, shaking her head to focus. “First of all, may I see the message that you have received from Codrin#Castor?”

“There was some content that was clade eyes only, but I’ll share the first half with you.”

“And there is nothing in the second half that pertains to Artemis?”

Ey shook eir head, drawing the first half of the message out from the tabletop as a bit of foolscap which ey handed over. “Codrin had questions on a career change. Nothing pertinent.”

The skunk skimmed the message rapidly while Ioan and May looked on. Eir partner still held fury in her eyes. Ey only felt tired.

“Alright, this is much the same information that we received earlier today.” True Name folded the slip of paper and slid it into a pocket in her slacks. “I am sure that you can guess why I have arrived in such a rush, but to be clear, True Name#Castor learned that Codrin had sent you this update. Ey was perfectly welcome to, but, well, it is our job to consider information security and hygiene, so she sent us an additional message immediately upon learning of this.”

“And you are here to shut us up,” May said.

True Name lowered her gaze. “I am here only to provide suggestions as to that same security and hygiene.”

Ioan marveled at the sight of the skunk. She had always seemed so proud and in control, and now she looked to be on the verge of tears. She looked scared.

“Okay, I’ll listen,” ey said. “But didn’t you and Jonas plan for this? Run simulations?”

“We did, yes. We even ran the fact that it might be you who received the information through our models,” she said, nodding to em.

“But you did not count on me,” May said.

There was a tight silence that lingered a long few seconds before True Name nodded. “We did not count on you. We did not count on *both* of you. We did not count on...” She took a shaky breath, recomposed herself, and continued. “We did not count on what changes the dynamic between you two would lead to.”

“Your models included a historian, you mean,” Ioan said. “And now you also have one of your own. You’ve got two actors, one of whom is built specifically to influence others.”

She looked stricken, gaze jumping between em and May. “When one has lived so long with a certain set of expectations, having them subverted is a shock. May Then My Name, I do not begrudge you your feelings toward me. It is not my goal to win you back; all I can do is admit my shortcomings and try to do better by you, even if that is, as you have requested, leaving you be. I truly am happy for you — for both of you — as you have accomplished something that I never could, that Michelle struggled with from the beginning. However, I have a job. I have goals to work towards. I have a vision that I would like above all things to uphold.”

“You have painted yourself into a corner,” May said. Her voice had lost the edge of fury at her down-tree instance’s admission.

True Name giggled. It was a startling sound coming from her. Ioan had seen her laugh, grin, and smile, but they were all tightly controlled. They were all laser-focused cues to guide her interlocutor. The giggle held amusement, yes, but also nervousness. It seemed to be covering a much larger, less grounded emotional outburst. Ey had been considering just how much of this interaction up until this point was a carefully constructed act, how much of her visit could be dismissed with a wink and a grin, but there was something far to real about that giggle.

Ioan and May looked to each other and laughed as well.

“I’m sorry, True Name,” ey said. “I mean this in all compassion, but you sound like you’re about to lose it.”

The skunk giggled again, sounding even less grounded, then rested her elbows on the table and buried her face in her paws, grinding the heels of her pads against her eyes before straightening the longer fur atop her head. “I am, yes, at least in a way. There are many threads happening at once and, as May Then My Name put it, I have painted myself into a corner with this one.”

“Make your pitch, then,” May said, voice softer still.

“It is a small ask, I hope,” The skunk said, folding her hands on the tabletop once more. “Do not publish any of this information in the feeds or in some new book, and do not put it anywhere in the perisystem architecture. Not yet. I ask that you keep it between yourselves, Jonas, me, and other Odists. You may, of course, keep communicating with Castor, but I would ask that you not pass this on to Pollux yet. Codrin and True Name are working together, per the message I received, so I imagine our messages will contain similar content, but should anything interesting come up, I would be much obliged if you shared with me. Are you open to that?”

“Sure,” Ioan said.

May shrugged. “Sure. I may talk to A Finger Pointing and End Waking about it, but I think you will have the rest of the clade under control before I wind up speaking to them again. The only other that I would like to share this with is Douglas.”

The skunk stiffened in her seat and sat silent for a moment. “May I be there when you do? I would like to impress upon him the gravity of the situation.”

“Absolutely not.”

True Name winced, wilted, nodded. “I see. Well, if you would pass on my request for information security, I would be very thankful.”

“I will,” May said.

Standing and once more brushing her blouse flat, True name bowed. “Thank you both.”

May stood as well and stepped around the table, taking the

other skunk's paws in her own. It was strange to see the gesture of affection after so tense a discussion, but the expression on May's face as she looked at her down-tree instance showed none of the friendship implied. Ioan marveled. If the sight of two skunks that shared so much in common and yet differed in such key ways was uncanny, seeing them touch in such a way after so much history bordered on distressing.

"You wrote to me in back in 197. You pointed me toward Ioan and you told me,"You are, in many ways, a better version of me, and the completeness that you bring to our stanza ensures that we add up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts". You told me that you still love me in your own way. Do you remember that?"

The skunk canted her ears back and nodded.

May let go of her paws and then hugged her arms up around her cocladist's shoulders. "I still believe that."

True Name leaned into the hug. Ey couldn't see her face from where ey sat, but ey could still hear the sharp intake of breath and see the shaking of her shoulders.

After a moment, May leaned back, rested her paws on True Name's shoulders, and said, "But do not ever, *ever*, come to my house again."

Codrin Bălan — 2346

It was in no way surprising that dinner at home was far less stressful than the dinner with the Odists out in Tycho's observatory. While the conversation throughout the meal had been nothing but pleasant, the food delightful, and the location and single candle a stunning place for a dinner, nonetheless a tension hung above the table at all times. While Sarah had seemed relaxed and True Name and Answers Will Not Help seemed to earnestly enjoy the evening, Tycho had seemed ceaselessly on guard, Dear had seemed to have put on a mask of pleasantness that involved choosing its words most carefully, and Codrin had felt hypervigilant throughout.

This was confirmed when they returned home and the instance of Dear which had accompanied em to the dinner sagged as though exhausted, and then quit. The instance of Dear which had remained behind, when confronted with the onslaught of memories, sighed and simply shook its head. None of the triad seemed at all interested in discussing the dinner.

It was Dear's partner who had suggested the dinner party for the next night. While they hadn't explicitly mentioned that it would be a counter to the party the night previous, it was certainly implied. Something to cleanse their palates, as well as have further time for Codrin, Tycho, and Sarah to interact before they were to go on their journey. All three — four, including Dear — had immediately agreed.

So it was that they sat around the table, there in the modern house on the prairie, sharing coffee and desserts and pleasant, easy conversation.

“So,” Sarah said, leaning back in her chair. “I was thinking about the fact that we seem to have wound up with jobs. Like, honest-to-goodness go-to-work-for-the-day jobs. What did you do before this? You all know that I was a psychologist before I uploaded. I still am, I guess. Dear, you did theatre, right?”

The fox nodded. *“Michelle was a high-school theatre teacher. I suppose you can see why it is that we are so dramatic.”*

She laughed. “Well, alright. Some things carry through even two hundred years later, I guess.”

“Nearly two hundred fifty, yes. I would complain about being old, but when one is functionally immortal, bitching loses its savor.”

“You bitch plenty, Dear,” its partner said.

“Yes, but how often do I bitch about my age?”

Codrin shrugged. “You bitch about immortality a lot. Does that count?”

The fox grinned. *“It does not, my love.”*

Still laughing, Tycho spoke up next. “It’s probably no surprise that I was an astronomer on Earth as well.”

“How’d that even work?” Sarah asked. “When I was there, we could barely see any stars.”

“All space-based stuff. Besides, radio telescopes don’t need quite so dark of skies. Amateur astronomers were the hardest hit. They often had to drive way the hell up into the mountains, and even then, wait for winter when logging season was over. I taught a few classes out there and volunteered at a dark-sky site.”

“That makes your sim make an awful lot more sense.”

He nodded proudly. “The landscape is based off one of those dark-sky sites.”

Eyes turned to Codrin, who shrugged. “I went to school, then a year of a history degree at university before I uploaded to help my little brother out after my parents died. I never really had a

job, just interests that got all the stronger once I got here.”

“Had you needed to get a job while down there, what would it have been?” Dear asked. *“I have a guess, but I want to see how close I am.”*

Codrin picked up eir coffee mug and leaned back against eir chair, thinking. “I wanted to be a librarian quite badly. History was a secondary interest. I planned on getting a bachelor’s in something like history or English and then a master’s degree in library science.”

Dear tilted its head. *“I was close on the bachelor’s but was not expecting the master’s. What drew you to that?”*

“Books.”

Eir partners both laughed.

“What other answer could I possibly give?” ey said, grinning. “I like books. I like knowledge. I like having it all collected in one place, even if books were falling out of fashion back when I was phys-side.”

“A horrible shame. I do not have the same attraction to them that you do, my dear, but they are still delightful.”

“You take it to almost a fetishistic level, Codrin,” eir other partner said. “For which we love you, of course.”

Ey rolled eir eyes. “Domestic abuse, I say. Let me turn it back on you, though, what did you do?”

They heaved a deep sigh. “Line cook at a diner.”

“Is that why you’re so into cooking?”

“Basically. I wanted to be a cook, but you kind of need to start at the bottom and work your way up. I just gave up on actually doing that and uploaded instead.”

“I had a similar job in school, actually.” Tycho said. “Nothing fancy but I—”

He trailed off, staring up into space with a blank expression, then shook his head. “Uh, how willing are you all to talk about the Artemisians?”

Shrugs all around.

“Uh, sorry,” he said, pausing a moment longer, and then sitting up straighter when a few folded sheets of notebook paper

slid down to the table in front of him, neatly missing both coffee and half-eaten tiramisu. “Tycho#Artemis sent a list of questions to the Artemisians today. I think they weren’t expecting the reply to come for a day or two, but it showed up after only five minutes, minus transit.”

“What sort of questions are we talking about?”

“Social and cultural, it looks like. Nothing really scientific. Want me to go through them?”

They all nodded.

“Alright. He asked when each of the races joined and the answer sounds complicated. It looks like about a thousand years or so between each.”

“So they started about four thousand years ago?”

He shrugged. “There are specific numbers. They add up to...five thousand, three hundred twelve years ago.”

“Holy shit,” Dear’s partner said. “Think they’re batty?”

Dear laughed. “*It depends on how sane they were before they started and how their system is structured. Probably, though.*”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out soon enough. Let’s see...there were a few questions about how the races interact. It sounds like they have several common areas available, but there are still enclaves of the different races that mostly keep to themselves. Apparently most speak secondrace’s primary language because firstrace was...uh, hmm. They say electronic. I’m not sure what that means. Maybe they were robots of some sort? AIs? They didn’t need to talk with words. All races except firstrace still have several different languages of their own which I suppose they speak at home and in their own sims.”

Codrin nodded. Ey had summoned a pen and notebook and was already taking notes. “Will they be teaching us any of them?”

“He said he’s already learning the secondrace language. Maybe you should, too.”

Ey scribbled down a note to emself to ping True Name for access.

Sarah was leaning forward on her elbows, looking particularly interested. "I would like to as well. One can learn an awful lot about a person or group based on the language they speak."

Codrin amended the note to include her name. "I'll have True Name send it our way."

Tycho shrugged. "I'm not going to bother. If #Artemis is able to merge back, I'll pick it up then. I'll make sure he does it before he leaves."

"Good idea, yeah. The more who speak it the better, just to be safe."

"Alright. Next set of questions were about forking."

There were a few blips of other foxes behind Dear, startling Tycho.

"Apologies, Tycho," it said, grinning widely, tail whipping about behind it. *"I may not be joining directly in the endeavor, but I am intensely curious to hear about this."*

"Well, alright. I hate to disappoint, but it sounds like the only times they fork are in an emergency or during a contact like this. They have to petition some sort of central leadership called, of all things, the Council of Eight to create any long-running forks."

The fox flinched back as though slapped, its ears canted back and its brow furrowed.

"They provided additional information, though. They say that fourthrace had the same concept of forking that we appear to, so they understand our questions around dissolution strategies and clade structures. #Artemis also asked about their naming system, and apparently Turun Ka and Turun Ko are from something akin to a clade that existed before the voyage began. Something from when they were electronic but not on their system. Instead, they seem to have individual, fine-grained control over time. This is how they responded so quickly, apparently, they slowed time way down so that they had as much as they wanted to write their response. They ask if this will be accommodated during the talks and there's a note from True Name

here saying that, even if it were possible, she's going to answer no. Tycho said she looked upset."

"Unpleasant business," Dear muttered darkly. "*Unpleasant to an extreme.*"

"Well, what's the next question, then?" Codrin asked. Whether it was the mention of the Council of Eight or the news about forking, ey couldn't guess, but the fox was clearly upset as well. "Perhaps we can move away from this one."

"Next, they asked about leisure activities. It sounds like they're fairly similar to us in that very few people have actual jobs, but several have what they call 'intensive leisure activities, such as scientist or author'. He asked if they have stories and if so, what kind, and their answer goes on quite extensively."

Codrin scribbled hastily to take down the question. "Can you ensure that I get a copy of the responses, too?"

"Perhaps we all should get a copy," Sarah suggested. "I'm curious about the language bits and this thing about stories."

"*As am I. If True Name allows, I will ask for a copy as well.*"

"Me too," its partner said.

"Can you give us an overview of their answers?" Codrin asked.

"Sure," Tycho said slowly, skimming through the rest of the page and onto the next. "They say that stories are of the utmost importance to all races, that there is no limitation what kind, or who may tell them, but that, quote," of the occupations that many hold, that of storyteller is the one held in highest regard.""

Dear brightened considerably. "*I will forgive them their atrocious naming choice for their leadership, then. They do sound interesting aside from that.*"

"I'll admit to being mostly confused about it, or at least more focused on the astronomers they have on board, but it's all still interesting." He flipped over to the last page and frowned. He sat silent for several seconds as he stared at the paper, as though willing further meaning to rise from it. "I'll quote the last bit in

its entirety. #Artemis asked, "Do you dream?" There's no further questions or explanation."

If Sarah had been interested before, she was nearly staring holes into Tycho now. "What was their answer?"

"You have asked the correct question. We are eager to meet you." Verbatim. That's it."

A silence fell over the table while they digested this, each in their own way.

Codrin sipped eir coffee while ey thought. *The correct question* made it sound as though they had reached some sort of milestone, perhaps, especially when taken with *we are eager to meet you*. It made it sound as though they'd completed a mission by asking that.

And yet, there wasn't an answer to the question given, if Tycho was right about the message. They didn't say yes or no, they didn't say what about. They simply seemed to be smiling through the page, and ey couldn't tell whether that smile was one of satisfaction, encouragement, or pride.

It was Dear who broke the long silence. "*Is there anything else to the message?*"

Tycho shook his head. "Nothing from the Artemisians, no, but #Artemis has added a note here that he asked that because he's been dreaming about them every night." He paused for a moment before adding, "I have too. The dreams aren't like the ones he describes, but just this feeling that someone is coming and that it will be this momentous thing and we have to be as ready as we can be."

Sarah nodded. "There's no real interpretation to dreams other than they can reflect some of what you were thinking during the day. It sounds like you're both quite focused on it. Anxious, perhaps."

Tycho nodded eagerly in agreement.

"That makes sense," Codrin said. "I had a dream about them last night, too. It was just this vague idea that I knew they were coming and that I needed to be observant."

“That makes sense, given your role,” she said. “I haven’t been remembering my dreams since we got the news. I don’t think I’ve been sleeping very well.”

After their guests had left and the trio sat down on the couch for a bit before bed, Dear dotted its nose against Codrin’s cheek. *“My dear, I do not want to talk about it now, but I have some thing to tell you about this business with time modulation that may prove useful to you.”*

Ey nodded, feeling the fox’s nose tip still lingering near eir cheek. “I’ll look forward to it, Dear. At your own pace.”

“It is nothing bad. Just stressful, and I do not yet know how to put it into words. I will say that this will impact all Odists in approximately the same way, though, which is why you should know if there are to be two of them joining you.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

The sight of the dissemination of the news of Artemis was beautiful in much the same way that a ballet was. This was, he supposed, largely due to the well-coordinated dance of both messages flying back and forth and countless Odists and Jonases moving back in forth in the largest of the conference rooms he'd seen yet.

He knew that there were sims where one could fly. Flying, after all, fit well within the realm of something that any number of people could consensually imagine together. They held a perennial appeal to a certain type of person, of which he was not one. A fear of heights combined with a certain neurotic work ethic led him to stay away from those sims in general. If it was fun and not also productive, he felt little need to engage. It may have been unhealthy, it may not have been, but he had never stuck around anyone long enough to hear either way.

Now, however, he could see the utility.

A whiteboard had sprouted up from the floor, beginning at waist height for the Odists and extending by now a storey and a half up. Panels on it showed the news feeds and commentaries piped in through the perisystem architecture, that foam of conceptual computer-stuff that tied all of the sim together and allowed cross-sim communications.

Even now, as more news flowed into the board, it would pop up from the bottom and the whiteboard would inch ever higher.

And standing before it, whether or not they were standing on the ground or however many feet above it, Odists and Jonases worked, tagging each of the feeds with arcane symbols, drawing lines from one to the other, conversing in small knots, popping into existence and quitting as needed.

This involved none of the graceful floating that ey had seen before on eir excursions to sims whose owners allowed such. They were not drifting about on the breeze, they were simply standing on something that was not there. If they needed to move to another level, they would simply walk as though on a ramp or step up as though on a ladder. It was productive movement at its very core, and it immediately appealed to him.

“What am I watching?” he asked Answers Will Not Help beside him.

She nodded toward the board and the quiet, purposeful bustle of activity before it. “We have released the news about the Artemisians out into the news feeds. You are watching the observation and shaping process.”

He stood up straighter, fixing his posture as though that would also address the strangeness of the situation. “How did you do it? How are you doing it?”

She laughed. “Come. I will show you. We will need to go to the top. It is like walking up stairs, do not worry. Just will the step into being.”

“Uh, the top?” He furrowed his brow. “What happens if I fall?”

“You will probably die,” she said, shrugging.

He stumbled back from her. “What the fuck?”

“I am kidding, Tycho Brahe.” She laughed, sounding giddy. “You will fall onto whatever level you are currently on. You are, what, a hundred ninety centimeters? That is not too far a fall.”

Still frowning, he lifted a foot, imagined there to be a step and set it down, landing about ten centimeters above the floor. He brought the other foot up to join it and then looked down, windmilling his arms for balance. “J-Jesus...”

“Fucking nerd,” Answers Will Not Help said, laughing. “Come on, it is not too bad. Try to take bigger steps, too, or it will take forever to reach the top.”

She stepped as though she were taking stairs two at a time, and within a handful of bounding steps, had reached the top of the board. She gestured at the five topmost panels.

Deciding that he wasn’t brave enough for the leaps and bounds, he simply looked straight ahead and began walking as though up a staircase. It was dizzy-making, and he had to gulp for air a few times to ensure that he was still grounded, such as it were.

“Look to the side, as though you are looking over a banister, perhaps,” she called. Several of the Jonases and Odists were watching now, and they laughed at the remark.

Despite the heat burning in his cheeks, Answers Will Not Help’s suggestion helped a good deal, and he was able to complete the rest of the journey quickly enough, though by now, the top of the board was easily two storeys up.

“Took you long enough, nerd.” She elbowed him in the side, grinning.

“Is that just my name now?”

“Might as fucking well be.” She walked over to one of the panels of news feed. This was labeled *Science* beneath, and seemed to head up a column of related material. “Might as well start here.”

Studiously avoiding looking down, he read the contents of the panel.

On systime 227+52 2328, the Dreamer Module on Castor received a structured message from an external source, alerting scientists and perisystem technicians to an external source. The message, which follows at the end of the post, suggested that entity or entities at the other end of the signal understood the instructions for utilizing the Ansible

receiver, provided course information, and asked for consent to upload. Consent was granted two minutes, thirteen seconds later by a member of the astronomical community. Further messages have been exchanged, and talks are underway for an exchange of emissaries.

A member of the astronomical community was a much better way to describe him that he suspected the Odists might otherwise.

The message was published by none other than Sovanna Soun.

He walked to the next panel over and read.

Credible sources announce that ALIENS have discovered our LV and are ON THEIR WAY TO GREET US. The *Powers That Be* could not be reached for comment. In order to prepare for an invasion, all sim owners should lock down ACLs for their sims and interrogate ALL visitors!

He laughed. “Did you write this one?”

“Oh, no. We have some of our pet propagandists write much of them.”

The next two feeds seemed to be fairly credible news sources. Boring and straight-forward announcements regurgitating the scientific report in lay terms.

The final panel contained simply the string of messages that had been received so far followed by Leaked anonymously ;))

“That one was my doing,” Answers Will Not Help admitted, grinning. “I thought it particularly cheeky.”

“I guess it is, at that.” He rested a hand against the whiteboard — blessedly stable — and looked down carefully. “So what’s happening beneath us?”

“We are tracking the dissemination of the news. We follow each of the sources to see where it is being quoted and refer-

enced. There is some delicious perisystem tech going on there that I will not bore you with.”

“And you’re just watching?”

She gave him a pitying look.

“Right.” He sighed. “Can I see?”

She shrugged. “Sure. Step down the same way.”

Still leaning against the whiteboard, he stepped down a few levels down to the next row of panels. Below the ‘leaked’ documents, he read a spray of conspiracy theory rambles. Next to each were long scribbled notes, mostly in a shorthand he couldn’t quite untangle.

“What are the green-tinted ones?”

“Shaping.” Answers Will Not Help nodded to one. “That is one that I wrote. When I say that we have been shaping the response, this is what I mean. We have simply been participating. We are not doing anything crazy here.”

He leaned closer to read.

Listen, I don’t think it’s unreasonable to find this all hopeful. Like, seriously? Aliens! How cool is that? We’ve all had our dreams (or nightmares!) about them over the years, right? By virtue of us being on a hunk of computronium hurtling through space, it’s kind of at the forefront of our minds, isn’t it?

All I’m saying is that we gotta be at least a little bit careful. There’s this DMZ that everyone keeps talking about, but what I don’t understand is just how it works. Like, okay, it’s a set of sims that one can’t get in and out of? How the hell is that supposed to work? They (Artemisians???) can upload there, but what does that even buy them? A way to take up space?

I think I’d feel a whole lot better about this whole thing if there was more clarity, is all. I’m a bit behind because holy shit this is all coming fast, but do

we have any Ansible/perisystem nerds on this feed?
Help me out! Explain this to me like I'm stupid. It's
true enough, after all.

From this panel, several branching replies headed down the board, and alongside each, further notes from the Odists and Jonases. He picked one at random and read that next, though in the time he had taken, the board had continued to creep upward.

I don't think any one person knows how the perisystem works, and the DMZ just adds a layer of complexity on top of that, so don't feel like you're stupid. I've been a perisystem tech for 130 years and it took me three forks just to get caught up on this.

You can think of the DMZ in two ways. One would be to think of it like a separate System. It works exactly like the one we're on. Sims, forking, ACLs, all that nonsense. Just like how the LV Systems are like separate Systems from Earth System, though, we all had to upload using an Ansible connection. That is how the border between the LV system and the DMZ works. You basically have to go through something like a software Ansible to get in and out, and just like the real Ansible, there's a bunch of security in place so that there can't be any pirate signals.

The other way to think of it is like the lungs and the whole LV as a body. The DMZ can expand to take in more individuals (can't say people anymore if we're going to be letting Artemisians on board!), but it can't expand beyond the capacity of the LV System itself, nor, indeed, beyond some pre-determined limits which. In this metaphor, the individuals entering it are the air, and the pre-determined limit is the chest cavity.

This is how we keep the rest of the System from getting ‘contaminated’, which I’ve heard brought up before, and those limits are in place to keep the DMZ from driving up the cost of forking on the rest of the System should it expand much further. I had to dig super deep for this - no clue why it was buried - but the DMZ will have its own, separate reputation market to manage this, since it’ll be a different size, but just like how currencies phys-side affected each other, with inflation and deflation, we’ll probably see some fluctuations in the markets here, but I wouldn’t expect anything too bad.

Anyway, hope that helps!

He nodded toward the panel he had just finished reading. “So you injected a question you probably already knew the answer to and some tech answered it to help make everyone feel better?”

“Better is not quite the right word. Calmer, perhaps. There is an appropriate balance between happiness and anxiety that we want to strike.”

Tycho frowned. “I never got that about the History.”

“We do not want people to be too happy because unlimited happiness is a happiness with no defense mechanisms.” She poked him sharply in the side with a finger, making him wince and jerk his arm to guard himself better. “A purely happy society would feel that pain as agony and be unable to do anything about it. A society that is just anxious enough can enjoy security but also guard itself from further pain. It can be happy but also wish for more happiness.”

Rubbing at his side, he began to step down away from the scrolling wall of information. “If you say so. I don’t see why it wouldn’t be self-regulating, though.”

Answers Will Not Help fell into step beside him. “It might, sure, but there is no guarantee. We are just the safety mechanism, the limiting factor.”

“You just keep it from swinging too far one way or the other, you mean.”

“I knew you were a nerd,” she said, laughing. “Got it in one.”

“How do you decide what the limits are, then?”

“Data analysis.” She gestured back to the board. “Predictive models. Countless simulations. We do not steer in any one particular direction, we simply provide the bumpers around the extremes.”

He breathed a sigh of relief when his feet touched the ground again — the real, visible ground — then turned around to look at the board stretching upwards. He didn’t believe that they didn’t steer the system. Even if they didn’t do so consciously, there was no guarantee that they weren’t imposing their own ideas and ethics on everything around them.

He declined to mention this. The last thing he wanted was another poke in the side.

Codrin Bălan — 2346

Late spring was for picnics. This was, ey was assured, a universal fact. Once the rains had calmed down and before the oppressive heat began to drift lazily in, this was the time for those who are in love to drag a thick blanket out onto the prairie, park next to one of Codrin's cairns, and share sandwiches and fizzy drinks. This was the time for parking in the sun, laying back on the blanket, heads together and feet radiating outwards, sharing in small silences and comfortable conversation.

"There is no reason that aliens should interrupt this," Dear had stated plainly and then dragged its partner off to the kitchen to make sandwiches and bottle up gins and tonic to bring out to the prairie.

All the same, this picnic was more muted than usual, and when they settled onto their backs, Dear's ears tickling the tops of their heads, the conversation felt careful, as though all words should veer carefully around the topic that was on, it seems, everyone's minds.

A bit less than three weeks after first contact, and the entire LV seemed to be talking about nothing else. Dear had even postponed the opening to its new show. News from Tycho was that, from day one, the Odists had been working on and shaping the news.

Codrin suspected that this had come when it did solely due to the transmission delay from L5, and, given the news that Ioan

had relayed, ey did not doubt that this tight control was for good reason — or at least what True Name considered good reason.

Ey had kept that note to emself.

The news of True Name visiting Ioan and May Then My Name was not, in and of itself, surprising. Ey had suspected she would do as much as soon ey had read anxiety in her expression at the mention of May Then My Name. She had surely sent message back to L5 within seconds of em telling her such.

It was the reaction that Ioan described that bore the surprise. True Name was a touchy topic with one of eir partners, and the cold hatred of one of its cocladists was...well, ey could read melancholy in the fennec's face as easily as any other emotion. Ever since news of May Then My Name's thoughts on her down-tree instance had made their way across the light-days of distance, there had been more of that. There had been days of silence, days of tears, days of walking the prairie for hours at a time. When pressed, it would simply say, "*She is the best of us.*"

Ey suspected that it was worried that cracks were showing across the clade. Ioan had admitted such concerns as well, and even mentioned that May Then My Name herself seemed to be harboring fears. "If Dear overflows with undirected energy," Ioan had written once. "Then May overflows with tears. I make a lot of chicken soup for her to have something comforting, though I'm not sure how much it helps. It's the only time she ever asks to be alone, and I will go stay with Douglas. She will spend hours in bed, letting out all of the overwhelming emotion that she needs to in order to become whole again. I love her deeply, but I'm sure you must know the pain of watching someone you love going through something like that."

That had been another message ey had kept to emself.

The surprise had been not in May Then My Name's reaction — though Ioan had stated that ey was laying in supplies for chicken soup — but in True Name's. May Then My Name was the best of the clade, or at least the best of that stanza, and even True Name knew that.

So today, they mostly lay in silence. It was not unpleasant, for the sun was on high and the temperature was perfect and ey could simply lay there with those ey loved.

It was Dear, of all of them, who broke the silence.

"I have been thinking about something that Sarah said." It sounded content enough, which Codrin was pleased to hear. *"She said that we should prepared to not be able to understand them for their inhumanity."*

"What about it?" its partner murmured. More than content, they sounded sleepy.

"There is much we can learn about semiotics from them. We have the ability to guess, but vanishingly few chances to check. If they are truly alien from us, we may be able to confirm many hypotheses that we have had for centuries by now about how a different mind can form and hold ideas."

"Different environment, different *Umwelt*, you mean?" ey asked.

"No no, that term applies to those who are alike but have a different environment. Our environments up until now have not even been connected. We have completely different semiospheres, do we not? We cannot even make assumptions about how they form their ideas, how their semiosis works, at least not at first. It could be that there are key differences in how they are able to take in information and make meaning of it."

"New senses?"

Ey could feel it shrug against the picnic blanket before it said, *"Perhaps. Perhaps they can sense radio waves, or perhaps, as suggested by their letter, they can sense time in some new way if they have fine-tuned control over how they experience it."*

"Don't we have forking and merging?" its partner asked. "Aren't those new senses? Or at least sensations."

"In a way, I suppose, but we can learn them. They are tied to will, as one wills a fork to exist, and they are tied to memory, as one deals with the merger as though one is remembering the fork's experiences."

Ey could feel the idea click into place. "But we may not even

be able to experience that in the same way as them. We may learn it in a fundamentally different way. Maybe we won't even be able to take part in it because we may be built fundamentally different."

Dear sat up quickly, laughing. *"Yes, precisely! What an interesting problem. I am excited to see what all we learn."*

The other two sat up. Codrin was not at all surprised to see the grin on the fox's face.

"There is much we can learn about them from their language, I expect. I am no linguist, but how they describe their control over time, should they chose to do so, will provide much insight into the ways something that is not us perceives and interacts with their world around them. They may process signs — signs in the semiotic sense — in a very different way, and we will be able to use that and apply it to the hypotheses that we have formed over the years."

"Are there problems in that area that need solving?" Codrin asked.

"Perhaps we can learn more about sensoria," it said, shrugging. *"For those who desire children, perhaps there are implications within that which will allow them to experience that."*

"Do you want children, then?"

"Good Lord, no." It laughed. *"I did not wind up with that desire. That is something for other elements of the clade. I am sure that Hammered Silver and her stanza will pounce on the idea."*

Its partner laughed. "I thought not. Besides, can you imagine a synthesis of the three of us? A historian chef that forks like mad."

They all laughed.

"I don't know how much of a historian I am anymore," ey said. "But doubtless they would keep my love for books."

Dear tilted its head. *"Are you not? You have taken on historiographical projects in the years since the History, have you not?"*

Ey shrugged. "I have incomplete thoughts on that."

The fox nodded. *"I will not push, but I am eager to hear them at some point."*

Ey nodded. "Of course, Dear."

Their other partner yawned, then laughed. "You know, if sunlight had weight, I would use it as a blanket. It's such a good feeling."

"If sunlight had weight?" Codrin laughed. "That sounds like a line of poetry."

They threw a pebble at em. "I need at least the feeling of a blanket over me if I'm going to sleep."

"Going to take a nap? We've got a blanket right here."

"I also need a bed beneath me."

Ey picked the pebble up from where it had landed on eir sarong and tossed it back at them. "Well, go in and take a nap, then. I think it's walking off the sandwiches and gin for me."

They tossed the pebble at Dear in turn. "Back to work with you?"

"Perhaps. I will send a fork with each of you."

As fox and historian walked out into the prairie, Codrin finally worked up the courage to ask Dear the question it had wanted to ever since their conversation earlier. "Do you wish you were a part of the emissaries?"

"No." Its response was flat and immediate. *"I have curiosity about the knowledge, but no desire to actually experience that."*

"You don't have to answer, but do you know why?"

It thought for a moment, then shrugged. *"My existence relies on understanding and responding to the actions and emotions of others. I will wait until there is a way for us to understand, and then I will experience it if I am able. If I am not, then I will simply revel in the story that you write."*

"I'll bring back as much information as I can. Maybe some of them will stick around and you can give them a performance down the line."

The fox laughed. *"Perhaps, yes."*

They walked in silence for a while longer. Codrin eventually gave up on walking off the gin and simply let sobriety back in.

"One more reason, my love."

“Hmm? Reason for...?”

“For not wanting to be a part of your talks. I do not want to be a part because of this time manipulation business. I remember how it felt to be one of the lost. I remember experiencing centuries or mere seconds in that endless place of no time. I remember wondering if I would die out there after a hundred years had passed by, and I also remember only a few minutes going by before Debarre showed up.”

“Wait, he was the one who got you out? I would’ve thought some clinic technician or something.”

“Of course, my dear. Why do you think we are so close to each other? Even after all that business in the early days, we are still close.” It grinned. *“Please do not tell him this, but I have always been a little in love with him since then. Our tastes in partners differ, so none of the clade have never acted on it, just as Michelle never acted on it.”*

Ey nodded, thinking back to the conversation they had shared so long ago, back when ey was newly Codrin. *Trauma, if trauma this is, forges bonds*, it had said.

“Not keen on more trauma, then?”

It shoved at em playfully. *“You are a brat. I was just about to say that.”*

Ey laughed.

“I will not go, though,” the fox repeated. *“I will await your stories, but I will not go.”*

“I’ll bring back some good ones, then.”

“I know you will. It will be an experience that I am sure many will want to know about. I know that, should you choose to write about it, the Systems will look forward to it.”

Ey kept eir private thoughts on whether ey would actually do so to emself. They were still not fully formed, but ey could sense that doubt lingering.

“But, my dear, do be watchful. There will be two Odists on that mission, and they will share in some of my trepidation.” It took eir hand in its paw and gave the back of it an affectionate lick. The gesture seemed to be one designed to minimize the anxiety in the statement, but eirs or Dears, ey could not tell. *“They share*

that same trauma. Be watchful and remember what I said: even True Name has emotions, even she will be affected.”

Tycho Brahe#Artemis — 2346

“Alright, are you ready?” True Name said.

Tycho nodded, “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The transition from System proper to DMZ was as seamless as any, though when he checked systime, he found that nearly twenty seconds had passed. That would be an unimaginably long transit time within the system, where the transit between sims would take place faster than he would have been able to perceive.

“Well, that was not so bad,” True Name said, walking out into the cloistered courtyard that had been set up for the meeting. “Now, let us check communication.”

He wasn’t able to sense anyone other than True Name and Answers Will Not Help. There was no options for a sensorium message with any others. He strained as hard as he could to sense Tycho#Tasker or Codrin Bălan or anyone else he could think of. There was simply nothing there. The sim was immutable and the disconnection complete.

True Name stood for several minutes in the shade of a tree, looking thoughtful as she ran through some internal checklist. At one point, he felt a sensorium ping from her.

“Fantastic,” she said, nodding. “Exos all there, no access to sensoria, no transit, nothing. Reputation market looks on track for the DMZ as well.”

Tycho checked his reputation, pegged at a simple 1000 $\text{\text{R}}$, and

then the costs. Sim creation into the tens of thousands, forking well into the millions. No possible way he could afford either. “Will they arrive with the same amount?” he asked.

“Yes. We could not think of a way to decouple reputation entirely from the core functionality of the System,” Answers Will Not Help said. “But we could at least make everything prohibitively expensive. This will allow us to pool reputation to modify sim sizes if need be, but forking will be well out of reach.”

He nodded and began prowling through the courtyard. It consisted of a large, square area, a fountain in the center, and a large table beside it — “I will have enough reputation to modify this if need be,” True Name explained — all surrounded by a ring of trees, and that with a ring of covered walkway.

He paced around the perimeter, watching the way the sunlight shone through the trees and cast dancing shadows on the ground. They had been his idea, a lingering remnant from his dream. At two opposite corners, hallways led off to rest and sleeping areas. He walked down the one that led to the humans’ quarters, turned around, and looked back toward the courtyard. The view was much the same as in his dreams, though here, the columns from the covered walk offered regularly spaced shadows along the wall.

He nodded approvingly and made his way back out to the central meeting area.

A copy of Jonas had also made his way into the sim and was poking his way around the table, inspecting pads of paper and pens. As he watched, another Jonas appeared and then quit.

“Alright,” the Jonas said. “Textual transmission across the border works as expected. Memories transfer without loss, and merging is the same as always. Good job, everyone.”

Answers Will Not Help bowed with a flourish. “I am glad that you enjoy, O great political teacher.”

He laughed and tossed a pen at her.

“Are you regretting your decision to stay behind?” True Name asked.

“Does it count as regret if I’ve always wanted to go with?” He grinned, shrugged. “But it’s a good setup you have. Only one set of cocladists, only one politician. It gives them a wide gamut to experience.”

The skunk nodded. “Perhaps we will open it up at the end and you will get to meet them. Maybe some of them will stay behind and live within the DMZ.”

“We’ll see.” Jonas waved to Tycho as he joined them around the table. “And here’s our scientist. Thanks for providing us with your dreamscape. It’s a nice place to hold a conference. We’ve got everything from ancient Roman architecture to contemporary S-R Bloc conference tables.”

Tycho shrugged. “It seemed like a nice place. Glad you like. When is this even going to happen, by the way?”

“Three days from now. They’ll be one light-hour out, at that point, which will provide minimal risk during transit while still giving us the most time for the conference. With our burn, it should give us about six weeks together until we reach the point where we’re at one light-hour apart again.”

“Six weeks sounds like a long conference.”

“We do not know how long the conference will last,” True Name said. “It could be over in an hour if they prove to be pests. All we will need to do is shut down the Ansible, leave the DMZ, and wipe everything within it.”

He frowned. “Wouldn’t they be able to leave, too?”

“The border is governed by the same ACLs we are used to. One must have permission to transit.” She grinned. “But I do not expect that we will need to do this. With all of the chatter we have done in the last few weeks and with what my cocladists say about the language, they sound like a nice enough group.”

“How do you figure?” Tycho asked. He prowled through his memories of the language that he’d learned in the interim. “It feels mostly...uh, normal, to me, if that’s the right word. They’ve got all the same concepts for what we have. Bunch of words about fur, seems like.”

True Name grinned all the wider. “Which automatically makes them better.”

“That’s mostly the point, though,” Answers Will Not Help said. “They do not have a superfluity of words for war, weapons, fighting, of course, but they also do not have words for discussion that are so fine-grained that we will be out of our depth. They will talk much like us, which makes them easier to predict.”

“Besides,” the skunk continued. “You have read all of the messages we have received. They sound excited to meet us. They keep talking about how long it has been since they have had one of these ‘convergences’ that they keep talking about. I am picking up the sense of an ulterior motive behind all that they say. Or, well, perhaps not an ulterior motive such as a deeper version of their explicitly stated motives of having these talks. I think that they might want something out of it that they are not stating outright.”

Tycho pulled out one of the chairs at the conference table and sat down, the others following suit shortly after.

“Isn’t that kind of shady, though?” he asked.

Both Jonas and True Name shook their heads.

“Political adroitness isn’t a bad thing,” Jonas said. “It shows that they are a social culture, and that they are willing to at least try and move us in a certain direction. That, in turn, means that we can do the same to them without feeling bad about it.”

“One would think that constructing something like this—” Tycho waved his arm at the sim and, by extension, the System that contained it. “—would require some sort of politicking, right?”

“Well, sure, but it could’ve been an authoritarian regime that press-ganged its population into building their version of the System in the first place.”

“What about the other races, though?”

He shrugged. “That wouldn’t have proved much. Maybe their System would have remained a totalitarian regime and

they subsumed the other races. Still, seeing things like secondrace's language being the *lingua franca* rather than that of firstrace helps. Seeing these little glimpses of individuality are heartening. They sound like a varied culture, which is good for us."

Tycho nodded.

"And before you ask why that does not make it more difficult for us," True Name said. "Them having a varied culture means that there are at least some some that might be sympathetic to us."

"Or susceptible to," he said.

He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. He felt in a precarious position, surrounded as he was by three politicians. Calling them out on their machinations was a dangerous move.

Answers Will Not Help giggled. Even True Name and Jonas were grinning. "You continue to amaze and delight, my dear," she said. "But yes, it does make them susceptible to our wicked ways."

He smiled cautiously. "Well, if you say so."

"Come on, let's head back," Jonas said. "We'll reset the sim, grab some dinner, and then we can go back to planning."

It took another forty seconds to transit the DMZ barrier going the opposite direction, and this time he could feel the slight resistance as he transited, as though some process were investigating him from head to foot, outside in, to ensure that he was who he said he was.

Throughout dinner, he remained quiet, and no matter how hard he tried, he was not able to focus on the food. It was good, of course, as much of the food had been during his stay, but some part of his mind remained elsewhere. It remained back in the sim, back focused on the conversation that he'd had with the politicians of the team.

Since he'd arrived — even before then, even before the message from Artemis — he had felt it over his head. There was

something about these people, something about the world that they'd set up that showed how they simply worked on some higher level. Their minds were so fundamentally different that, no matter how much they tried to explain the political ramifications, no matter how much they showed him their work in shaping the response to the news, he just couldn't take it all in.

It had seemed that True Name and Answers Will Not Help had loosened their control over him the longer he stayed with them. They paid less attention to him. They spoke more in commands than guiding questions. They smiled less and focused harder on the tasks at hand.

He felt as though he had been adopted as a tool and then simply set in his drawer until it was time for him to be used.

How much input would he even have in these meetings? Was he to be, as Codrin had said, an amanuensis? Was his job simply to be there, observe, and pick up on the science aspect? Would he be allowed to take part in the conversations? Would he get to know the Artemisians?

There were far more questions than there were answers and, apropos to the situation, none of the answers were helping, so the cynical part of him kept thinking *why bother asking?*

It was almost too much, sitting there at dinner, trying to chat amiably, trying to enjoy the food, while all these questions and so many more circled around inside his head, finding some release, but there was no way that he could hope to ask anyone at the table that, none of the True Names, none of the Answers Will Not Help, and certainly none of the Jonases. Perhaps he could ask Sovanna or Dr. Verda — now all but obsoleted — but they were busy enough with their own worries that didn't surround acting as emissary to an alien race to bother with the social engineering going on around them.

After dinner, he begged an hour of rest alone in his quarters and paced, composing his message in his head.

"#Tasker," he said at last, beginning the sensorium message. "Can you talk to Codrin some about just what it is to be an

amanuensis? I know ey talked to you about that and all, but I'm really not sure what it is that I should be doing, or what I even can do. I know I'm supposed to listen and record along with em, and I know I'm supposed to ask all the fancy science questions, but I'm starting to feel like that'd be better served by writing down a list of questions for one of the Odists to ask.

"Hell, I'm starting to feel like they wish that's all I'd do. They're nice enough, and they seem confident in their decision to use me as the science representative, so it's not like I'm off the team, I just don't know that I'll have any say in any of this, and I guess I'm just feeling lost.

"I'm sending this to you rather than em so that you're up to date, but also I just feel like you ought to know some of my thoughts since you're...well, you're me. If I were any more confident in my ability to fork and merge, I'd just do that, but that also feels way outside my realm of expertise.

"Get back to me if you can, but if not, at least let Codrin know so that when ey arrives tomorrow for orientation, he's got this knowledge, too.

"Anyway, uh...thanks, me. I hope you're sleeping better than I am."

Interlude: Ioan Bălan — 2346

Ioan knew well enough what was coming, so ey was able to brace emself well enough when May came barrelling out of the default entry point on the dandelion-ridden field that ey was not totally bowled over, managing at least a graceful descent to the ground. The skunk had already looped her arms around eir middle and tucked her head up under his chin before ey was even able to sit up straight enough to get eir arms around her.

“You nut.” Ey laughed, reaching up to tug at one of her ears affectionately. “Good to see you too.”

“Ioan, I am in no way sorry for knocking you over,” she mumbled, her grip around eir middle tightening. “Though I am dreadfully sorry that this happened again. I missed you.”

Giving up on the prospect of sitting up straight so that ey could keep both arms around her, ey leaned back onto one hand, propping emself up. “No need to apologize, May. I’m just happy to see you again.”

The skunk leaned away from em enough to dot her nose against eirs. Her eyes were quite red and ey could see tear-tracks in the fur of her cheeks. She looked a mess. “Do not take my apology away from me. I have been saving that one up.”

“Alright, alright,” ey said, pressing eir nose a little more firmly to hers for a moment before leaning back again. “Apology accepted. Are you feeling better?”

She sat upright rather than leaning against eir front and

nodded. “Yes. I was able to get a lot out that I think has been pent up for a while. Thank you for giving me the space. I promise I did not fuck with your pen collection.”

“Good. I had it all perfectly organized.” Ey plucked a dandelion from the field and tucked it behind her ear. “Now, do you want to talk about it? Or should we do that later? That was longer than the last few times.”

“Later, please. I want to say hi to Douglas and wash my face and just be normal for a bit.”

Douglas Hadje met them on the stoop of his house and, as had become their ritual over the years, hugged the skunk, lifted, and twirled her around, her bushy tail streaming along behind her.

“Hey May,” he said, setting her back down again. “Glad you made it through.”

“Of course I made it through. You still have at least seventy nine years of me haunting you before I can do something else.” She grinned. “And even then, the contract is renewable.”

“Ornery as ever. Well, want to come in?”

“For a bit, and then I want to come back out here and lay in the grass and bake in the sun.”

After May had cleaned up and Ioan had helped Douglas prepare coffee and some sandwiches, they sat around the table to catch up.

“So, what news of the aliens?” Douglas asked.

The skunk squinted at him. “Has Ioan not been keeping you up?”

“Ey said ey wanted to wait until you got here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, out with it, then.”

“I’ve gotten several messages from Codrin over the last few days, but nothing as of this morning, when ey said they were heading out to start the talks.”

“So they are already a week into them.” She looked thoughtfully up to the ceiling. “Perhaps well into them by now.”

“Or maybe they’re already over,” Douglas said.

“A gloomy thought. I would like to hope that they are going quite well. Codrin is there being a Bălan, Tycho is there being a nerd, this Sarah Genet is there being a whatever a Genet is like, Why Ask Questions is there being a shithead.” She wrinkled her nose. “And True Name is doing her best control the whole thing.”

Ioan was pleased to see the mildness of the skunk’s expression. It really did seem like much of those overwhelming emotions had burned themselves out over the last few days.

“It’s weird,” Douglas said. “Every now and then, I’ll hear about something from one of the LVs that’s anchored to a certain time and I’ll remember,” Oh shit, yeah, they’re billions of kilometers away by now“, and then I have to spend some time trying to conceptualize that distance.”

Ioan nodded. “The transmission delay throws a wrench in things, doesn’t it? I was just thinking about that on Secession day. We were celebrating and it sounds like they were, too, but we didn’t learn about their party until a week later.”

“The thing that always catches me off guard is that our days do not seem to line up any longer,” May said around a bite of sandwich. “I mean, they do, but when the delay is off by half a day, we start getting messages at shit o’clock in the morning. It is a strange feeling.”

“Exactly.”

“I hope they’re still in the talks, too. Codrin sounded hopeful, at least. The messages that they’d been getting from the Artemisians were interesting. I’m guessing the powers that be made em promise not to send the full message text yet, but what they have learned is fascinating. Four races on one ship must be a hell of an experience. The DMZ sim sounds pleasant, though, and all of the work they’ve done to prepare is really kind of impressive.” Ey sipped at air coffee to buy a moment’s time to think before saying, “There was a bunch of stuff in there for you, too, May. We can go over that later, though.”

The skunk frowned, finished the last of her sandwich, and

then settled back in the chair with her coffee. “You cannot leave me hanging, my dear. May I at least have a preview?”

“Well, Codrin’s worried about you, as is Dear.”

“The memory thing?” Douglas asked.

Ey nodded.

May sipped at her coffee, looking out the window to the rolling field beyond. “I am worried, too. You know that.”

“I know. Reading between the lines, though, I think ey’s worried about the whole clade. Ey’s worried about you and Dear, and ey’s worried about how True Name and Why Ask Questions are going to act through this. Dear reacted poorly to the whole time-modification thing.”

She nodded and sat in silence for a minute before setting her cup down. “We are not doing as well as many of us would like, no. I have news as well, but I would like to share it outside where I can sit in the sun and feel the grass. Is that okay?”

Ioan and Douglas collected plates and coffee cups, then the three of them trooped out into the field while May spoke.

“We have lost May One Day Death Itself Not Die and I Do Not Know. Death Itself stopped talking, and then she stopped moving. Bathe In Dreams visited for a while there, and a few days ago asked me to come visit as well. That is why this spell seemed to last longer than usual. Evening hit, she smiled at us, shrugged, and then quit.”

May’s voice was thick as she continued. “They all lived in the same house, did you know that? All ten of that stanza. Many of them did not even talk with each other, and none of them ever forked. They were always quite unstable. The next morning, I Do Not Know was gone, and Names Of The Dead said that she had quit shortly before sunrise.”

Ioan and Douglas remained quiet as they walked. The skunk didn’t seem to be quiet done saying the things that she needed to.

She continued after a few minutes of mastering emotions, voice clear once more. “Bathe In Dreams and I talked quite a bit.

She said that there have been fewer instances of instability in older clades than expected, given *On the Perils of Memory*. Fewer uploads are susceptible to the long-term effects of unceasing memory than expected, I guess. I was pleased to see that Debarre seems to be doing well.”

“That’s heartening,” Douglas said. “At least in a way.”

The skunk nodded. “I am happy that the System is more stable than feared, but I am unhappy that we seem so strongly affected. Bathe In Dreams said that she is going to do some research and see if there are ways that we can at least improve on the way we deal with the effects. I do not know that there is a way to get rid of them entirely, at least not without further individuation, but the least we can do is help keep ourselves sane for longer.”

Ioan took her paw in eir hand and lifted it to kiss the back. “Please, yeah. If you go bonkers, I’ll be furious.”

She laughed and gave em a pitying look. “Mx. Ioan Bălan, you are pretty good at acting furious on stage, but I do not believe for a second that you could actually feel that way. Even Codrin was able to have a normal meeting with True Name after she did as she does with em.”

Ey did not laugh. Neither, ey noted, did Douglas.

“I am sorry,” she murmured, ears laid flat.

“‘Furious’ is the wrong word, May. I’d lose my damn mind.”

Ey took a shaky breath and rubbed at eir face. “I can’t tell you you’re not allowed to or anything, since I know it’s not really up to you, but please at least try to stick around.”

“I’m not going to pile on or anything,” Douglas said. “But I will say I’d be pretty upset, too, so if there’s anything I can do to help, I will.”

May dragged them both to a stop in the field. Her expression started out angry, then screwed up into sadness, and finally settled on tired. “I love you both, each in your own way, and I promise I will do what I can to stay here, stay grounded. I cannot speak for the rest of the clade, and certainly not for Dear,

but I will do what I can.”

It was not uncommon for these reunions to be tearful, Ioan knew, but it was a different sort of pang that settled in eir chest with the news, and it was a few minutes before ey was able to speak again. “Sorry, you two.”

The skunk stuck her tongue out at em. “I will allow you this one apology, but do not make a habit of it. You are allowed to cry at sad shit.”

Ey rolled eir eyes and shoved at her.

“Well, I was promised laying in the grass and baking in the sun,” Douglas said. “So come on, we can at least enjoy the rest of the afternoon.”