

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 address.

Tycho left before his next footfall hit the ground.

Low clouds hung above the low house on the shortgrass prairie. He forced himself to walk, not run, up to the house, where 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 un-

touched 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 his 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 pattered 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? Perhaps. I think that it is less that she settled down, however, than it is that the act of doing so was a form of alternate rebellion.*” it said thought-

fully. *“Much of the liberal side of the clade distanced themselves from the conservatives when the History came out. I do not think that True Name lost much in the way of tools such as it were, as I think she wrote many of us off, or simply as safe places to store other tools, as she did with you, my dear.”*

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

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

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 one 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 sling-shot.”

“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 on 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 Dear and its partner 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 communica-

tions 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 thirties 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 heading.”

“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 work-

ing 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 at-

tribute 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, a slender without being lanky, tall without being looming.

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

Ringling this bank of cubicles were walls of frosted glass, broken at regular intervals with doors which ey 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, acceler-

ate 0.00029c to approach matched velocity. Confirm actions taken.

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

Prepare airlocked 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 sci-

entist 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. Answers Will Not Help 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.”

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."

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 airlocked 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. "There's a tech term, air-gapped, which means that there is no physical connection between two devices, so they can't possibly communicate. 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?"

"Or 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 grinned toothily.

“Any thoughts on the names?” Jonas asked.

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

“Like me?” Jonas said, smirking. “Don’t worry, 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 fourthrace one is the only other one with two names.”

“We cannot make any real guesses, ourselves,” True Name said. “We have been told that a stolon is a 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, Cordrin 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 When The Answers Will Not Help 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 Ty-

cho. 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, broad-

cast 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.”

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 mes-

sage. “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 in-

put?”

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.”

