

Selected Letters

Aurel Bălan

Exocortex#99732a6

Selected correspondences of the Bălan clade
systime 222-232

Note: With the events of the last ten years, there's been a lot changes shaking out in the clade when it comes to relationships. Collecting all of these here so that I can keep them handy for when things doubtless need further shaking out in the future. For the sake of comfortable through-reading, all eyes-only metadata has been stripped, but trust that everything was eyes-only to the named recipients. I've kept the timestamps as the message-sent time in the metadata. It's been thirty years and I'm still struggling with transmission delays.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — Ioan Bălan

sysime 222 (2346)
(transmission delay)

Ioan,

A part of me has died. I do not know what to say.

When one forks, one's down-tree instance should not change, right? They should just be the same, yes? They continue on as they were, and the only mark left by forking is the memory of having done so. I'm *know* this. Dear has assured me of this. It's how the System works, how it must work.

But for some reason, that isn't what happened.

Let me start over.

After all that happened, after all the decisions that had already been made, it felt like there was one more that needed to happen. I needed to figure out what I was going to do about myself with regards to Artemis. I asked surprisingly few people for advice on this. I mentioned it briefly to my partners, and Dear thought it was an okay idea, though I could tell that neither of them were totally sold on the idea.

On looking back, it's weird how little agency we attribute to our forks at first. The biggest complaint against the idea that they had was that they didn't want to see how much the fork I sent would miss me. [REDACTED] was the one who wound up selling Dear on the idea, oddly enough, by reminding it just how much individuation can happen. It's been stuck in instance artistry too long, not letting itself deviate because its instances simply don't last long enough.

That was the origin of Sorina. Sorina Bălan, third of our clade, born at sunrise. I took that idea to heart and, when I decided to fork last week, I pushed individuation as hard and as fast as I could. I had a hundred paces to do so, a hundred steps between cairns to make sure that she was herself and that I remained myself.

And yet I'm not sure I did remain myself. A part of me died, and I do not know what to say about that. I pushed individuation on her — and see, here I go, taking her agency from her! — while I did my best to stay the same, to simply walk the prairie and think only of home and of Dear and of [REDACTED] and not of Artemis and a life without them. I didn't think of names. I didn't think of time skew or forking. I didn't think of anything but the pending sunrise.

I also didn't think of forgetting, and I think that's what got me over the weekend. Sorina and I seem to have been of one mind that we'd give it a bit of time before getting in touch with each other, but she hasn't left my thoughts since we forked. She *can't* leave my thoughts. I *can't* forget her.

But I realized she can forget me. She can forget us.

There may come a day — and I pray that that 'may' is accurate, for my sake if nothing else — when she cannot remember Dear, cannot remember any of us, cannot remember why we love the ones we do. For all of the complaints about our impeccable memories, this is one instance that I struggle to see myself living without.

What do I do? How do I live with the life I've created for myself? How do I internalize that a part of me has died?

I'm sorry, Ioan. There's nothing I can do about any of this,

and certainly nothing you can do, however many hundreds of billions of kilometers away. I write because there is a sort of stability in you that has rusted in me. It has frozen all of my joints and so I risk cracking while you remain firmly rooted and flexible.

I'm sorry, Ioan.

Pass on my love.

Ioan Bălan — The Bălan clade

system 222 (2346)
(transmission delay)

Codrin and Codrin,

I hope that you and yours are well. All of this news from Castor quickly got overwhelming and I know I've not been as good as I would like at keeping up with things that are not just "holy shit, aliens". I have a few updates.

The first is that, surprising no one, I've been contracted to write a play about our visitors by A Finger Pointing. I've been reading all of your updates, #Castor, and certainly the knowledge is worth quite a bit on its own, but can I ask for some information about the moods throughout? If I'm to pull together a story out of this, that will be more useful in the context of a play than the facts. Besides, it's not like we can do much in the way of fact checking from where we are. I've attached what I have, though obviously it'll be a month out of date by the time you get it (and two months by the time you answer).

Second, I'm sorry to say that End Waking has requested that Debarre give him some space for a bit again. I know that you two never got the chance to meet him and that I gush about him every time he comes up, but he really is delightful, and I wish him the best in his solitude, however long it might last.

May and I visited Debarre for dinner after we got the news and spent a bit of time talking about it. I was pleased to learn that these separations don't come with any ire, just a simple request and understanding. He seemed really calm, even a bit relieved

about it. Apparently the weeks leading up to being asked to leave are a little awkward, as he put it.

I think part of why this came when it did is due to the convergence. I know that Debarre is still far more plugged into the news of the System than I, and given that End Waking has essentially opted out, I can see that being an uncomfortable divide.

Finally and perhaps most impactful for me, I had the chance to meet with True Name during convergence. Even after a month of thinking about the meeting, I'm still unsure what to make of it.

I, like you two, had the chance to interview her a few times during the process of pulling together the *History*, so I had been expecting the same frightful competence that I saw twenty-odd years ago.

I did not.

It's difficult for me to describe the ways in which she's changed. She's overworked, perhaps? She looks like she's stretched herself too thin to keep up as well as she used to. I know that she mentioned that the tone of our interviews was carefully constructed in order to shape the narrative, and that the emotions she put on display were deliberately chosen for the role she was playing, but...well, I wasn't expecting to make her cry.

And yet from what you two have said, other than her experience on Artemis, she's still going strong on both the LVs.

I don't really know what to do with this information, honestly. I keep thinking about things I could have said or questions I could have asked, but it always gets muddled up in my head given her similarities to May. I've spent so long with May that

seeing someone as similar to her as True Name is in distress, yet be unable to comfort in the same ways I might has me rudderless.

Either way, I've set up another meeting with her now that convergence news has settled into a more steady stream, so I guess we'll see where that leads.

May has taken these two meetings surprisingly well, I'll note. She mentioned that, given our position as Bălans leaves us liable to come into contact with her again in the future, so we might as well ensure that it's not so jarring as it was that first night we found out about Artemis.

I know she's been working on her feelings about this with Sarah, so I'm happy to see a little less fury in her than I used to. She got really quiet during that conversation before admitting that the reason she wound up feeling as she did about True Name was due to the *History* itself. She hadn't known about True Name's subtle nudging of Michelle/Sasha with regards to both Launch and her death until we put it to paper.

We seem to be inextricably entangled with the Ode clade, and while I love May dearly and I know that you two love Dear, it sometimes feels a little like being trapped.

Anyway, all that to say that True Name's having a rough time here, and I'm hoping that she's getting what she needs out of talking with Sarah. Never thought I'd say such, but I'm worried about her.

Codrin Bălan#Castor Individual-Eyes-Only Material

I'm also worried about you. Your last letter led to a few conversations between May and I about individuation, but also about the topic of separation in more general terms. I under-

stand that you two did your best to diverge as quickly as possible, and I can't even imagine that.

I know that when you became Codrin, that was not something that I'd foreseen, and despite the surface similarities, this feels different. It's a new thing for us, I think. You two were borne out of the changes that the Odists wrought on us, but Sorina was borne out of changes coming from within.

I know that I risk our messages passing each other through the great big nothing between us, so perhaps there's more already on the way, but perhaps you can tell me more about her, or about the both of you?

To be clear, this isn't about the play. I spent some time talking with Sarah about it and she had some suggestions for what my role in this matter is. Doubtless you've been speaking with her about your role, and perhaps you and Sorina are still talking things through, but Sarah's suggestion was that I can at least be someone you trust with the whole of your experience with her, not just the negative aspects. She mentioned that a healthy path through grieving involves reinforcing the good memories, and while you may not have had time to form many of those, doubtless you still have impressions and thoughts surrounding both the experience of individuation and her as a person. What do you like best about her? What are your hopes for her? What wishes do you have?

Lean on those around you to whatever level you're comfortable with, and know that I'm here, firmly rooted as you say. I'll offer all that I can.

Be safe above all.

The next section is just to inform #Pollux that you sent a fork to Artemis without details.

**End Codrin Bălan#Castor Individual-Eyes-Only Material
Codrin Bălan#Pollux Individual-Eyes-Only Material**

The previous section for #Castor surrounds eir decision to send a fork to Artemis. Without sharing too much, it's led to a lot of inner strife for em. I'm worried, but that's nothing new. Either way, just wanted to provide some context. I'll leave any further information up to em to pass on.

End Codrin Bălan#Pollux Individual-Eyes-Only Material

I hope things are going well despite all these dramatic goings on. May and I send our love to you and yours.

Ioan

Codrin Bălan#Castor — The Bălan clade

system 222 (2346)
(transmission delays)

Ioan, Codrin#Pollux, and Sorina,

I've been nudged by both Dear and, of all people, True Name to write you with an update of life in Convergence. I've attached a longer report, but here's a quick, far more subjective summary.

We copied the entirety of our sim into Convergence whole-sale. Dear transferred ownership of the one on Castor back to Serene during a little party we had. It said that it was to apologize for wrecking the last one, and that it would try to be more careful with the new one, but that she'd better take care of the Castor version for now. It made a whole big show out of it, because of course it did, but it was a fun party all the same.

Nothing about our sim feels any different, which, on writing it, makes perfect sense. It's a duplicate down to the subatomic level (if that even means anything on the System). However, the world that's available to us when we try to move between sims is far, far from the same. There are much fewer places, yes, but it's all much more organized. They've decided to set up up a central hub with five spokes, each 'belonging' to a race. The hub and spokes — essentially long pedestrian malls — act as the primary public areas for everyone. It's not that there aren't public sims outside of this, but these are always at the top of everyone's mind when they think about going out.

Along each spoke are all sorts of shops, restaurants, entertainment venues, and doors leading to larger public spaces. It started out as a non-euclidean type thing, where you would see

a walkway between two shops leading out into a park that would clearly take up most of the spoke itself until too many of us complained and the walkways were opaqued with a sort of curtain that depicted what was beyond. In addition, every doorway that would lead to a violation like this has been set up to give a slight tingle when transiting, just as an added signal. I haven't found it too much of a problem, but some voices were quite loud.

The actual population of Convergence isn't all that large. There are a few million humans, about a million each of secondrace (who call themselves Dehoudevav, which is just 'second people') and thirdrace (whose name I'll never be able to pronounce, much less write, but who the Artemisians, predictably enough, call Dehoudeves, or 'third people'). Nearly every member of fourthrace (Dehoudever, natch) elected to join after learning about how our System is based around forking rather than skew, which totals only a million or so.

Firstrace, then, is the outlier. Only about a thousand of them have joined us. None have provided anything more than a vague answer as to why, too. Our best guess is that only one from each 'clade' (or whatever structure is implied by their names) joined us with the exception of Turun Ka and Turun Ko due to their role in the discussions. They sound like they like us alright, they just didn't sound very interested in joining us beyond that scope. No one seems to be able to make heads or tails of their actions.

That said, they've all been incredibly polite and even kind. One of them, Anin Li has teamed up with Sarah and I as we work on knowledge share around therapeutic practices between races. As I'm also learning that for the first time, I've got a mountain of work ahead of me.

I say they above, but that goes beyond just the first racers. Given the similarities in just how each race is polite, I imagine that there is at least an expectation that this is how life must exist after convergence, or, more likely, all who decided to join were briefed on how to interact during convergence. Certainly just about everyone I've run into speaks at least a little bit of our *lingua franca*, though I know that many of us are learning Nanon as well.

All the same, it feels like we're all being very careful around each other, still feeling out our boundaries and all. I have at least gotten the chance to introduce Dear to the other emissaries (even Iska, who stuck around long enough to view one of its shows, but didn't stay; they seemed confused and unnerved). It and Turun Ko have gotten on well, surprising no one.

The document will have a whole lot more that you'll likely find interesting, but I just wanted to pass on some more personal impressions as well.

Clade Eyes Only

I mentioned that True Name suggested that I write to you all about this, which was honestly a little strange. Not strange in that she's been talking with me — we see each other nearly every day and have fallen into a professional relationship — but that she pulled me aside to have a really quite earnest discussion about it.

I've seen enough of her with all pretense stripped away to know what earnestness looks like, and this was *almost* that. There's definitely still something going on under the surface.

Her explicit reasons for wanting me to send this to you are that she says the sentiment and mood have some striking sim-

ilarities to the early days of the System. “There is a sense of a new thing, here, and it is a thing that we are left to build into our own new world,” she said.

I can see what she means, too. Even though we can go back to Castor at just about any time (though we’ve been told that, starting soon, that will be very heavily rate limited until they work out a better solution to the separate reputation markets), it very much does feel like we are a new colony. We’ve found ourselves in a truly empty space along with people we’ve never met, and it’s up to us to build something that works.

Still, she, her stanza, and Jonas are hardly absent. They seem to be putting out gentle feelers for how all of this works. I don’t get the sense that they’re looking to guide it in any dramatic ways, but there’s a tension beneath the surface that I can only just pick up on. Political structures differing between Convergence and Castor put the rate-limiting at the border in a new context.

All of this is based off one conversation, though, so I’ll keep you all up to date as best I can.

End Clade Eyes Only

I miss you all. Pass on my love.

Codrin#Castor

Sorina Bălan — Ioan Bălan

sysime 222 (2346)
(transmission delays)

Ioan,

While I'm sure that Codrin#Castor's already told you plenty about me, I wanted to send you a letter directly.

Something about winding up here in a place so fundamentally different from where we've lived before has me in mind of the past. I wasn't quite sure why this was, at first. Obviously, I miss the prairie and life aboard Castor, and that's all in the past, but one would think that I'd be more worried about what's in front of me than what's behind me. The prospect of months or years aboard this new world — never mind the core facets of existing in this world — give me plenty of time to worry about the future, though.

I suppose leaving behind so much is reason enough to think about the past.

I could spend all of that time thinking about my partners (and I've certainly been thinking about them plenty), but you've been coming up in my thoughts more than I'd expected. Something about this extra layer of individuation has you feeling even less like a down-tree instance than you did before, and far more like a good friend — especially given how much I miss you.

I miss you! Isn't that weird to say? Perhaps. We've never met, have we? Ruminating on my roots has me thinking fondly on the past, though. We are stuck however many billions of kilometers apart, though, and that distance will only grow, the time between messages will only ever get longer. At least I think I bet-

Selected Letters

ter understand what Dear was talking about with regards to the difference between longing and being missed.

Ah well, perhaps I'm just lonely. Lonely and moody. It's so strange here, and it's been playing havoc with my emotions.

I miss you and May Then My Name, and I hope you're both doing well. Pass on my love.

Sorina Bălan

33 et-ularaeël, 4775 Artemis Reckoning

**Codrin Bălan#Castor — Ioan Bălan, Codrin
Bălan#Pollux**

systime 223 (2347)
(transmission delays)

Ioan, Codrin,

I'm glad that you enjoyed my description of Dear's recent performance, Ioan. Codrin, I hope your Dear manages to take some good stuff from that (I know mine sent over a whole sheaf of notes). Watching foxes of various sizes try to waltz with second- and thirdracers was funny enough, but the sole firstracer in attendance (Anin Li, who I've mentioned before as one of the two Artemisian psychologists I've been working with) trying to figure out how to waltz with a fox — even one the same size as it — was more amusing than it should have been.

I had to make sure that there was at least some pleasantness to this letter, because I'm afraid that the rest of it is going to be a bit dreary.

You'll notice that Sorina isn't in the recipients list. I've mentioned to you both previously that the process of seeing her off to Artemis was more painful than expected, that I've been struggling with the feelings that I have both about that act of individuation and the possibility of forgetting that Artemis grants its occupants. Now, though, you can add, "radio silence from her" to the list of things I'm having a hard time with.

It's not even that big of an issue. Her last letter to me was a short, polite request that she be given a little space while she works out her feelings on Dear and [REDACTED]. I can very much respect that, of course. That they're my partners means that a

lot of what I'd have to talk about would involve them. Not all, but asking me to just not talk about something that sometimes makes up the majority of my life would be uncomfortable for both of us.

Still, it's been nearly a year since convergence, and other than the first two letters — the one to the clade and the note to me — I've not heard from her at all. Sarah has confirmed that she's still around and doing well enough.

Sometimes, people drift apart. I know that. How many dozens (hundreds?) of people have we met in our 140-odd years that we spent time with and then slowly drifted away from?

This isn't that, though. This is me. This was me. This is someone who shared 100% of my history up until the day she left, 100% of my memories. We ought to have so much in common, and even though there is now this large swath of things that we *can't* have in common any more, shouldn't she still like books? Shouldn't we be able to talk about going into therapy as a career? Shouldn't she still think about family long gone?

Dear and [REDACTED] have each discussed sending her a letter, but I've asked them to hold off for a little bit longer in case she needs more time. It'll also give me a chance to sort out my thoughts a little better too. I still feel weirdly...I don't know. Broken? Wrong? It feels wrong for me to feel this torn up over someone I spent ten minutes with.

I welcome your thoughts. Pass on my love to you and yours.
Codrin

Sorina Bălan — Ioan Bălan

sysime 225 (2349)
(transmission delays)

Ioan,

I'm breaking my communications embargo to message you directly in the strictest confidence. I don't know the details, but I'm pretty sure this will pass through Castor without pinging Co-drin or my exes (or anyone, for that matter). The last thing I want is yet another tearful letter from any of them just because my name flashed across their feeds.

Well. I say 'yet another tearful letter', but there's only been three — one for each of them — so I'm hardly being bombarded, but I just...I can't, Ioan.

I need to talk to someone about this. I need to talk to someone who truly understands. I talk to Sarah quite a bit, of course, both in a therapeutic and a professional context, but there needs to be that sense of connection to the matter on a more personal level than just therapist to client. She's a delight to work with and an amazing teacher (as are Artante and Anin Li).

In our sessions, we came up with a very specific way to deal with this decision that I've made. In order to ensure that I can learn to cherish who I was and who was in my life, I need to reinforce the positive memories of what I had. I need to make sure that those are stronger than the negative ones. I don't want that final, terrible morning to weigh on me more strongly than all of the good times that we had together.

You know, it's weird, though. I say 'final, terrible morning', but at the time, I don't remember it being such. I remember be-

ing very tired. I remember waking up and slipping away from Dear and making coffee in a cone of silence. I remember walking out onto the prairie. I remember suddenly seeing Codrin beside me, walking, head down in thought, as I focused on becoming me as quickly as possible. I remember walking past that brand new failing in the land with Codrin and not even having the mental capacity to think about it. All I remember doing was forking with each step, becoming who I am by the second and trying to move as far away from the life I had without losing my sense of self.

It wasn't terrible. It was busy. It was purpose-driven. It was constructive. I walked from that cairn to the next with Codrin beside me and then we talked for, what, five minutes? Ten? And then I kissed em on the cheek, grabbed a stone from the cairn, and left.

It's not a terrible memory. The worst part was Codrin asking if I wanted to go back and say goodbye, but that was over in a flash as I made my decision not to.

The rest of the morning wasn't even that bad. I stepped to Convergence and waited for True Name to show up and then walked into Customs and then I was off to Artemis.

Codrin was the first to contact me, about a month after I left. Eir message was...well, I said tearful, and I'm struggling to put it any other way. It was just text on a page, but if it had been an actual letter, mailed across the millions of kilometers between Castor and Artemis, delivered to my stoop, surely the ink would have run from a tear drop or two. I could hear eir emotion through the page, and I could feel the very same tugging in my heart that I knew ey was feeling, for are we not alike?

Bu we aren't, Ioan. We rushed that differentiation, that indi-

viduation, didn't we? We pushed as hard as we could for me to be a different person from em, and all we had in common was a last name and a history.

I haven't heard since in the years since I arrived, but I worry that ey's still heartbroken. There must be some word for that little piece of yourself that lives on in your up-tree instances, even if it's only the memory that they were borne from you. There has to be a word for that feeling of shared identity that is incomplete enough that one is not the same.

The next two letters, the ones from my exes, came at the same time about a month ago. I wouldn't call those nearly so heartbroken as Codrin's, but I could tell that eir pain was affecting them as well.

I don't *want* them to hurt, though! I don't want them to hurt. I want us all to move on. I want to continue being, as I have been, happy here. I want to continue in the process of healing from trauma. I want *them* to continue in the process of healing from trauma. I want them to remain whole and I want to be whole myself.

Clearly, I'm not.

Here I am, crying over a letter to my root instance, worrying about letters that haven't arrived, probably haven't even been written, because there is still a part of me that misses what life once was. I miss my exes. I miss who I used to be.

I am happy being Sorina, and I miss being Codrin. That's my dialectic. I can be both of those things. I've grown to accept that, and I've gotten used to the feeling of being me. I've gotten used to being a woman. I've gotten used to life among four other races. I've gotten used to the myriad new ways of express-

ing emotion here.

But with those two letters, the wound that had started to heal over was once again tugged open and I felt that old stirring of longing within me.

When we first embarked on this adventure, I think we all thought that that feeling would be the one that wore on me the most. We all worried (myself included, I suppose) that I'd miss everyone so much that I'd want to quit, so we all agreed that this would be the how it would work: I'd head off to experience life on Artemis, and if I started to miss everyone too much, I had explicit permission to quit, no need to live with that pain.

That's not what happened, though. I got right to work with Sarah and Artante, and later Anin Li, learning all of these really amazing therapeutic techniques (such as reframing my old partners as exes, even if there was no real break-up event) that help me just as much as they help everyone else.

They still have each other back on Castor, though! They still love each other, living out on that prairie in that ridiculous house, and all their letters serve to do is to drag me back into that mindset.

The real crux — really, the real reason this is all making me panic so much — is that I'm forgetting.

Forgetting! How novel, right?

I remember what Dear smelled like, the feeling of its fur on my face. I remember the way its ears would bob when it shook its head.

And the food! God, I remember the food. If there's one thing I miss, it's all the wonderful food. A bunch of fifthracers here are starting to set up restaurants, and some of fourthrace's food is

pretty good, but it's not food from home, you know?

But I can't remember the sound of their voices. I can't remember our everyday mundane conversations. I can't remember what the quiet house was like, when we were all working on our own projects in our own spaces, each of us heads down over some creative problem, poking and prodding for weaknesses in whatever blocked us until we could have a breakthrough and go show the others.

More, I couldn't remember to be upset about missing them.

I was happy, or at least on my way to being happy, and then bam! Suddenly, I remember what it's like to miss those I love again.

Because I do still love them, but as I said, I just can't. I love them, and I miss them, and I miss Castor and I miss Lagrange and I miss all of the Odists getting up to their horrible bullshit and all of the perfect imperfections of our systems. Text only communication! Almost two and a half centuries and they still haven't solved that, have they?

I miss all that I love, and hell, I miss you.

I love you, Ioan. I love you in that weird, roundabout way that a distant up-tree fork does. I love you for your completeness. I love you for being me, and yet not me. I love you for being Ioan and not Codrin. I love you for the solidity that I remember of you through Codrin's eyes. I love who you used to be. I love who you've become. I love who you will be.

I want nothing more than to say pass on my love, but please, Ioan, please don't, not yet.

I'll just say "all my love" and be done with it. I promise to write again when I'm calmer.

Selected Letters

Sorina Bălan

13 er-ularaeäl, 4778 Artemis Reckoning

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — The Bălan clade

system 225 (2349)
(transmission delays)

██████████ is gone.

They're gone. No fight, no yelling or acrimony, they just said that they needed some time to themselves and gave us each a hug and kiss and stepped away. I would have thought it just meant for a day or so, but their entire studio is cleared out. I pinged and they requested a few days to think before we talk.

What do I do? We'll wait as requested, but Dear's a mess. Hell, *I'm* a mess. I couldn't give it the support it needed when I needed support myself. Serene is staying with us again for a while just to help how she can.

What do I do? I've never gone through anything like this and everything feels so incredibly desperate, as though I've done something so awful that a single misstep will bring the entire world down around my ears. It's kept me frozen in place for a few days now. I've gotten up to eat and Serene's made sure that Dear and I get outside at least once a day.

What do I do, Ioan?

Codrin, have you heard anything?

What do I do?

- C

Note that, from this point forward, all communications include an exclusion clause for several members of the Ode clade. I trust that, with the clade-eyes-only permissions, there really isn't a way that Hammered Silver and In Dreams' stanzas would be able to read these anyway, but we felt it prudent to build up that habit with our communications all the same. That we all received the same request on the same day made it an easy decision.

Aurel Bălan — The Bălan clade

The Bălan clade,

For as often as we talk about being trackers, I sometimes wonder if we aren't maybe more aligned with the Odists than we give ourselves credit for. Not the structure, perhaps, but to hear May and Dear talk, this idea that each of the first lines would fork to explore an interest isn't that unfamiliar to us, is it? We fork to work on projects and usually merge back, and yet when we are taken up by fixation, individuation sets in and we are suddenly no longer who we were.

And yet that's not all the Odists do, and, apparently, it's not all we do, either. They have their secret, long-lived selves, those who drift away from who they used to be, and they fork often enough to work on a task. Their instances will linger to track a task from start to finish and then they'll merge back down, just as we did.

All this by way of greeting. Ioan and I have flipped a coin as to who would be the one to send this email, for even though ey's listed as the sole author, that I am borne from the work that went into *Individuation and Reconciliation* — and indeed was em for much of its writing — gave me some claim over writing this.

Attached is the full transcript. This is one that I'd like to be very careful with given its contents. The ways in which it will affect the entirety of the Ode, Jonas, and Bălan clades are too complicated to wholly understand, so the more input we can have on it, the better.

Through a winding series of events following the ordeal between Sasha and Jonas, then between Sasha and the rest of the Ode clade, we've found use for yet another one of us. I chose the name 'Aurel' mostly on a whim, as well as in response to some gentle ribbing about gender from a few people now. A name with diminutives that can head masculine with 'Aurică' or feminine with 'Aurica' seemed like a simple way to explore that a bit more. As I've stated in the past, I like being a Ioan and have never enjoyed 'Ioana' (two many bad memories from school, perhaps?), but we're nothing if not deliberate, right?

I will likely only be around off and on, forked as needed to track an intermittent identity, so if at all possible, avoid individual eyes-only material for me. I don't know if quitting and merging back down, then forking again will let me access eyes-only stuff should it arrive after the fact. I'll be testing that over the next time I merge back down, and I'll let you know the results. There's some info on the perisystem feeds, but not as much as I would like, so, better safe than sorry.

Separate letters for each of you to follow.

SORINA BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Sorina, you are welcome to offer what input you might have or completely disregard the manuscript. I know that your relationship with the Odists is complicated, and the last thing I want to do is make you feel bad without recourse. I've only been Aurel for a few weeks now, so I have memories of our all of our correspondences to date.

To that end, I've set a portion of this letter as eyes-only for Codrin largely due to the context of our relationships with the Odists — em with Dear, Ioan with May, and now me with Sasha. I don't want to come off as hiding anything from you, but I do want to ask before I send a bunch of stuff that might cause distress given all that's been going on of late.

On that note, how are you doing? We've been quite worried about you. I know that trying to balance the emotional pain of being so far away from your exes and Codrin doesn't play well with the ownership of your life that goes with individuation and being the only Bălan on Artemis.

Know that Ioan and perforce I love you for all of your individuality and strength. Stay safe, stay in touch, okay?

END

CODRIN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

I'm separating this content out for you two to keep from overwhelming Sorina with a bunch of information about Odists and relationships. Also, I gave her the option of disregarding the manuscript, lest that prove to be too much.

Things have been a bit shaky throughout the clade, haven't they? I'm unsure of how much you two speak with each other, so I won't go into specifics except to say that I'm worried about you

both. You and those in your lives are still incredibly important to me, even after all these years apart. Please do all that you need to keep yourselves safe and healthy.

Please feel free to take your time with it, but we really would like to hear your thoughts on both the project and the events. Releasing something on any one system is essentially equivalent to releasing it on all three Systems, so we can't simply release it here and see what happens before sending it over to the LVs. Do you have any expectations as to the reception given the general mood of the various societies? I will note that this has already been given to Jonas here, which means it has doubtless been sent out to Castor and Pollux for them to prepare for its arrival. The events were not quite what Jonas here on Lagrange was expecting, so I doubt that his expectations on the LVs were all that different.

I will note that this is in spite of the apparent differences between the societies themselves. I know I wasn't able to properly articulate it in my letters at the time, as writing letters and writing a book are quite different activities, but it'll soon become clear that the Jonas lives within these three different societies has diverged little, that all three of them share the same goals they began with perhaps even centuries back and the launches become yet one more tool.

And what of the Odists?

I know that we're fond of blaming them for how complicated things get sometimes. They seem to heap plenty of blame on themselves, for that matter. E.W. (*né* End Waking) spoke to this several times, describing the Odists' clade identity as a sort of idolatry, and not in positive terms.

I'm starting to wonder just how universal that is, though. How much is their complication a factor in others' lives? I suspect for more people than not, they're simply weird. Dear's weird. May's weird. Were he to speak with anyone else with any regularity, I'm sure that many would find E.W. weird too.

But complicated? How much of that is just observation bias? Do they seem complicated because their relationships with us are complicated? Dear's relationship with you two is full of complications that we initially chalked up to the fact that Dear's weird. May's relationship with Ioan is full of complications that we initially chalked up to True Name making her what she is and shoving her Ioan's way.

And now here I am, having wound up in yet another relationship with yet another Odist. Or perhaps more than one. It is unclear to me (or any of us, least of all her) just how to count Sasha in terms of quantities. She is that of True Name, that of E.W., and that of May, and yet there's this fourth part of four that is something new, something else.

As an internal postscript, I should add that, on hearing about True Name's transformation into Sasha, both True Name#Castor and True Name#Pollux sent the same letter to her. Totally identical. That speaks to a level of coordination between Jonas and the other instances of her that's quite unnerving.

Sasha,

Thank you for the update. We will respect your autonomy in this and all actions moving forward, and hope that you will respect ours. We trust that your

interactions with the Jonas and Ode clades will remain cordial and professional.

Best,

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

I expected that this would leave her upset, given the fact that they just very politely told her to fuck off and stay out of their business, but when she received the letters, she ran up from her tent, waving the letters printed on slips of paper, laughing gleefully, and shouting, “Good fucking riddance.” There was much forking, as is to be expected by an excited Odist. I think the greater part of her was more relieved than anything.

END

May and Sasha send their love, as do Ioan and I. We miss you and yours, and hope that you’re doing as well as can be.

Aurel Bălan

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — The Bălan clade

system 226 (2350)
(transmission delays)

All,

I know that the transmission delays are starting to make conversations around this awkward. It'll be four months before I hear back from Pollux and I don't even know how long from Artemis (Sorina, please don't feel obligated to respond; never mind the distance, I can see how this would be uncomfortable). Still, I've just gotten Aurel's letter, and figured I should probably update the clade on current goings on.

Dear, Serene, and I had a chance to sit down with [REDACTED] and come to a better understanding all around. They expressed that, while they're quite happy for us and who we've become, the three of us have all diverged so far in the last 25 years that the shape of the relationship just wasn't comfortable for them. They apologized for leaving in the way that they did, but said that if they didn't do so all at once, they'd never have the courage and would just get more and more uncomfortable. They initially used the word 'miserable' at which both Dear and I got quite upset, but they quickly amended that to 'uncomfortable'.

They don't really know how to feel about the ways in which we've changed, and, honestly, the more we talked, the more I came to agree with them. Their prime example was the ways in which welcoming Serene in changed the dynamics between us. It changed Dear, in particular, and while they like the new Dear, it's not the same one they fell in love with.

It all makes sense. There was no acrimony (though there were plenty of tears). They're going to take a while off and figure out how they feel a little bit better before either reengaging or stepping away for good.

It makes sense, and yet that doesn't make it feel any better. Our experiences with loss are limited and all bound up in trauma. What am I to do with this loss? What am I to do with emotions that have wrecked not only me, but also Dear? We can support each other to some extent, but we each grieve in our own complex ways. We've stepped on each other's toes more than once by missing the mark in our support. I take a lot of walks, now.

Serene, of all of us, has been the most successful at managing her reaction. Of course, she spent the least amount of time with them of all of us and has been away for some while now anyway, but she's expressed quite a bit of guilt for what she sees as her role as catalyst. Still, she's somehow managed to sneak in a tightly regimented day for the three of us without either Dear or I noticing, and it's helped quite a bit. We still wake at the same time, still eat and work and walk and talk together as those in love ought, and perhaps that gives us room to process, but we're all still hurting.

Anyway, that's the state of mind I've been in, so it's obviously going to color a lot of my response to *Individuation and Reconciliation*.

The larger part of me is impressed — not just at the goings on and how convoluted everything got so quickly, but at the writing. Well done, you two. I'll admit to being curious how Jonas is going to spin this in order to keep working as he'd like, though

I don't doubt his abilities, not least of all because he apparently still has seven of the ten Odists in True Name's stanza working with him (any word on Zacharias, by the way? Certainly doesn't sound like *he's* still working with Jonas!).

And Sasha! I will admit that, when I read about her, I found it almost hard to picture, so I'll have to largely take your word for it. When Dear read that bit, though, it got incredibly excited and wouldn't shut up about it for days, so clearly she's done something more meaningful than any one of them can express. "*We have all been so afraid of becoming what we were,*" it keeps saying, though I can't quite piece together what it means. It's even mentioned leaving the clade once or twice. Weird, but I won't complain: it's the most active and excited that I've seen it in quite a while.

Still, there is no small part of me that remains worried and cautious. The last time I spoke with True Name here on Pollux, she was quite friendly and relaxed, almost familiar. While this fits with Sasha's comment about Jonas and Zacharias framing her reaction differently on each System, it doesn't fit very well with the note that True Name sent back to Lagrange. Perhaps it's an artifact of this apparent collusion between the LVs. That the notes from both True Name#Castor and #Pollux were identical bespeaks a level of organization surrounding how Sasha was treated in the decades leading up to her assassination attempt that has me worried for her safety and thus Aurel's, Ioan's, and May's.

How cynical can one get to set up a situation where one's own fork is left so beaten down? Even if True Name on the LVs was manipulated into doing so, that still requires a certain level

of cynicism to go along with, right? I'm inclined to agree with E.W.'s assessment that Jonas is treating politics as a plaything, and would add on that the same is apparently true of many of the Odists.

Be careful, Ioan and Aurel. Keep May and Sasha safe. Even if their lives aren't at risk, this is quite a lot. Clearly a sizeable chunk of the clade is quite upset with them, and that can't be easy.

Ioan and Aurel eyes only

Confidentially, I've had more than one nightmare since ██████ left about what might happen to any one of us when confronted with the loss of all our partners. ██████ left, but Dear and Serene are here, yes? If they were to leave, if Sasha or May were to leave, what would happen to us?

This is what I mean by current goings on framing my interpretation of *I&R*. Sorina has been keeping herself busy, burying herself in work, yes, but what I suspect happened is that Codrin and her rushing individuation during those ten minutes turned missing her exes, as she called them, into part of her identity. She cemented her opinions around them in place in her rush to diverge as quickly as possible. She gave herself the out of 'being able to quit whenever she wanted', but without the ability to fork and with her no longer being a Codrin at all, that suddenly veers awfully close to suicide.

She has mechanics on her side, but what do we have? If May or Sasha were to disappear from your lives, I—
Well.

I'm not in a good enough spot to finish this letter. I'm sorry.

End eyes only

Selected Letters

Pass on my love. Dear and Serene send theirs as well.
Codrin

Sorina Bălan — Ioan Bălan

systeme 226 (2350)
(transmission delay)

Ioan,

I hope this letter finds you well. I have a question for you.

I'd like to start with an apology for coming off as so emotional for the last one. As mentioned, I've been struggling with my emotions here on Artemis. While I'm far from the only fifthracer to be so afflicted, it doesn't seem to be a pattern many are worried about. Probably 1-2% of us are affected, and not in such a way as to be debilitating. I know the Odists struggle with the occasional bout of depression, and this is certainly no more dramatic than that.

The drama of such emotions aside, I don't think that they are wholly disconnected from reality. Codrin *does* feel all of those things, and they *do* make me uncomfortable. However, my reaction to them is something I've been working on with Sarah.

On to my question, though.

Years ago, back when I was newly in a relationship with Dear and [REDACTED], I remember thinking to myself that a lot of what I'd labeled boredom was likely loneliness. I'm not totally sure how much I agree with that assessment anymore. It's not that I *wasn't* lonely. I was! I...am? I was lonely, but part of me is wondering if the constant interaction that goes along with cohabitation means that more of my time was simply occupied by dealing with others. Dinner with others. Walking the prairie with others. Working with others. Chatting with others. There was always someone around, for Dear rarely left the home entirely. Its

inability to stop working meant that there was usually still one of it left around scribbling away at its desk.

But all of it? Probably not. I was still bored on occasion, and even now I get bored. One of the things that I noticed even going back to convergence was just how quotidian everything was. Aliens, sure, but they're also just people, such as it is, living their day-to-day lives. They eat, they sleep, they talk and argue and doubtless make love (I know the fourthracers do, but that's a subject for a different letter).

So now that we're settling into our own quotidian lives aboard Artemis, we're experiencing our boredom again. We're eating, sleeping, talking, arguing, and, yes, making love.

Is that what I'm missing?

Am I missing the eating-sleeping-talking-arguing-sex that goes along with having a relationship? Is that something I should be seeking out? I don't know. I've never really entered a relationship of my own volition, not entirely. Yes, deciding to date or whatever is a collaborative effort, but the Odists will ever be themselves, and even though its focus was never on the sorts of things that May Then My Name focused on, even it admitted that it, what was it...it "conducted a relentless campaign to wear down some of the emotional barriers that I'd put up." [REDACTED] disagreed with the phrasing, saying that Dear couldn't turn down a good quip to save its life. "*Slander*," it called it.*

I'm sure I don't need to elaborate on what you've told me of May Then My Name's own manipulation.

*They bet on my reaction; did I ever tell you that? They planned out this whole conversation with me, with [REDACTED] on point while Dear acted as backup. Though they may accuse us of being nerds, they're hardly innocent in this.

All this to say I've never done this before. I've never gone and sought out a relationship of my own. Do I date? Go to cafes and try to pick up a partner? Do I go to parties and drink with people until we wind up in bed?

None of these sound like me, or like us. We're not the type to go and actively seek out a relationship (or sex, for that matter — it was plenty good, but I am not missing it so badly as to worry about it). We're the type to have a relationship fall into our laps and then think and think and think and maybe in the end go along with it. No bad thing, that.

But is that something I want? Were a relationship to fall in my lap, would I go along with it? Is 'picking up people in a cafe/at a party' just setting up situations where such a thing might happen? I don't know.

More importantly, *should* I go along with it? Am I now so lonely that I need to seek out a relationship in order to feel whole again, or is that just me missing my exes?

Maybe it's worth a try. Nothing need be permanent — both of our partners made sure that was in the open. I can try, and if it doesn't work out, fine. It need not be permanent, just as I said my existence here need not be permanent.*

*This has been greatly complicated by my inability to fork. Codrin and I rushed individuation so quickly and so effectively that, in a world where I cannot create a copy of myself that will live on, quitting becomes suicide in a very real way. I am the only Sorina, and to die would be to end anything resembling Sorina in the entire universe. That hasn't been an issue for us since the 2230s! I know that you've been thinking about Rareș more of late, but even our death to him was not permanent. We disappeared, yes, other than those few notes back, but we were not dead. Death has taken on a new flavor for us, and I'm remembering the bitter tang of it from before we uploaded. I will need to put more thought into it.

I've written fourteen question marks so far and not yet gotten to the question I wanted to ask. Should I seek out a new relationship before I reengage with my exes? I want to know if I should in general, of course, but in particular, I want to know your thoughts on trying to actively process these thoughts on what relationships mean to me before I go about processing what breakups mean.

I don't know, I'm feeling my emotions get in the way of my words again. I really don't mean to dump on you like this, but, as I said, your grounded, anchoring nature makes you an obvious source of comfort. Thank you for listening to me.

All my love,
Sorina Bălan

Ioan Bălan — Codrin Bălan#Pollux

systeme 227 (2351)
(transmission delay)

Codrin,
Sasha told me something shortly after she became Sasha:

Our lives are informed by fear, Ioan. I am afraid. We are afraid. We lived through a moment of such terror that whoever we were before is someone completely different. I...that is, that of True Name faces this fear through control, and thus so do my up-tree instances, in one way or another. Praiseworthy saw that fear and tried to reshape herself, to find a way to more perfectly move with the crowd so that it might slip past her, and now your cocladist's partner shapes itself so easily that it has literally made it into an art. We lost our friend, and then we truly lost them, and now we live what lives we may afraid but coping.

There is fear within us all. There can't *but* be fear within us, and we have all of our own fears, don't we? The loss of our family, the separation from Rareș, these things shape us into who we are, and how we interact with those that we love.

Despite our experience with separation, though, you're going through something truly unique for us. Of the three/four of us, none of us had ever been in a romantic relationship before, not our experiences with Dear, and so now we're experiencing

something new. Having never been in a relationship, we've perforce never experienced breaking up.

That thought terrifies me.

I know I've spoken several times before about how much the idea of losing May (and, increasingly, Sasha) scares me. We're creeping up on a century and a half old and I don't think we've ever experienced more than a fleeting glimpse of suicidality here and there, but if there's one thing that makes me fear for my own safety, it's the thought of life without them.

What you're going through is *real*. It's real pain, real emotion, and it's really hard. I want to validate that. There is certainly little in the way of advice that I can offer, what with the transmission delay, but I can at least offer that. I hope that, when you get this more than two months after you wrote about your distress, that it can at least help that little bit.

I talked with May about this briefly, and, as I expected it would, the conversation turned into her gently probing my feelings on the matter and where they came from. The bit that hit hardest (and left me a bit of a wreck) was when she asked if this was anything like being separated from Rareș.

Is that the basis of this fear? Is the fact that we specifically left him behind with Aunt Rahela in full knowledge that we'd most assuredly never see him ever again the reason we feel the way we do about the ones we love now? I don't know. I never looked him up. Not before we forked, and not since. I don't know where he is, don't know if he uploaded or died back on Earth, and I'm too afraid of that knowledge to even try.

What I do know is that, even if this is testing those limits once again, we're older (*much* older) now and we're in a place

where we have those around us who we can lean on. When I uploaded, I was just a stupid twenty year old with nothing to show for his life (remember when we used those pronouns? So much has changed...) except a desperate need to at least do one thing right. There was no one here I knew. The only thing I could do was write a note or two back to phys-side and then just bury myself in school and books to try and move on.

Now, though, you have Dear. You have Serene. You have countless friends, all of whom can be there for you, and even though any reply is two months away, I'm here for you too, as are May and Sasha and, I guess, sometimes Aurel.

Sending all our love to you and yours.

Ioan

PS — As a final note, True Name#Castor sent a short letter directly to Aurel on learning of em and the reasons for eir existence. Since Sasha went on sabbatical again, Aurel merged down after a week out on eir own just writing and experiencing solitude, and so now I have this note as well. There were no instructions on whether or not I should pass it on or share it, and I probably wouldn't even think to pass it on if it weren't for the ways in which the Ode clade is changing across all three Systems. I'm surprised at how quickly everything seems to be changing after so long of relative stasis, but I guess that's what happens when you get aliens and an assassination attempt.

Some of the letter contained some eyes-only stuff for each of us (which Aurel found a bit confusing, but it was pertinent) which I've trimmed, but here is the rest:

Sasha,

Despite the tone of my previous note, I am not unhappy for you. The ways in which you and I have changed and been changed by the events around us perhaps gives me room to understand a little better, though to move beyond the Ode as completely as you have takes more courage than I possess.

I think that the direction in which your writing is going is the correct one, and I will begin preparing Castor and Convergence for such. I take well your meaning: the name that can be named is not the eternal name.

Aurel, you and Ioan must stay watchful and attentive to your partners. There is no danger, I hope, but there will be stress.

Wishing you the best,

True Name#Castor

Perhaps most interestingly, the note specifically contained a visibility exemption for True Name#Pollux, despite being eyes-only for Aurel and Sasha. May was quick to point out that, as far as we know, it wasn't sent to Pollux at all. Surely the two True Names aboard the LVs are in communication with each other and they've been sharing their own notes back and forth. This exemption, then, becomes a part of the text. I suppose I have to amend my previous statement as Aurel regarding the level of coordination between the two instances. There is something going on here, some difference between the two LVs that True Name#Castor is hinting at...

Sorina Bălan — Ioan Bălan

sysime 227 (2351)
(transmission delay)

Ioan (and, I guess, Aurel),

I sent my last letter before receiving Aurel's. I will not apologize for apparently predicting that I would receive such when I spoke of seeking out someone to fill that role in my life. My congratulations to them, I suppose. To you? Aurel doesn't seem so long-lived as either Codrin or I.

Is that what one does in this situation? Congratulate? Either way, I wish them the best.

It's also spurred a line of thinking within me that I'm still trying to tease apart, and I'm hoping that writing you will help in that. Doubtless you'll have some insights, sure, but also just the act of writing — to someone I trust, no less — should be helpful in its own right.

Let me begin by saying that I appreciate the way that the clade has provided me options for opting into dealing with topics regarding the Odists. It was initially quite helpful, but as I work through my thoughts on the matter, intentionally engaging with them as a topic has proven quite helpful. So long as that content is clearly delineated, I see no reason to hide it behind eyes-only segments. If I'm up for reading it, I'll read it. If not, I won't. Thank you for all of your thoughtfulness over the last few years.

So, why the Odists? What is it about them that leads to us working so well together? We're hardly the same. We're hardly exactly complementary. We are two puzzle pieces in the

broader whole of the world. Not *matching* puzzle pieces. Ones that couldn't even be forced to be exactly complementary! We don't fit together perfectly.

And perhaps that's it. Perhaps it's the way we both accept that, internalize it, make it part of who we are when taken in combination. I loved — no, still love — Dear. It was so weird, and it drove me fucking nuts at times. It was too much, too intense. Sometimes, it was too wrapped up in its art to thoughtfully engage with the world around it. It was prone to tantrums and sulking.

But me? I was dense. Not just when I was new to the concept of relationships (though certainly more so then!), but throughout our time together, I was constantly misreading cues, misunderstanding the depths of emotions, falling apart when I hadn't the emotional literacy to deal with what was happening around me.

We each were terrible in our own way, and yet we made it work. We accepted that about the other that was undesirable and found ways to work with or around it in order to let the parts that *did* work for us improve us as individuals.

I loved it for its art, yes, but also for its depth of emotion, for its emotional literacy where mine was lacking. I loved it for the patience it had in helping me learn how to be an active participant in my own life. I loved it for just how fucking weird it was.

Hearing you talk about May Then My Name has tallied quite well with this, too. She's taught you much the same, and you've added to each other's lives without necessarily being a perfect fit. She's sometimes too much: you've complained about her be-

ing too emotionally intense or requiring a bit more engagement than you're always prepared to give often enough, but you still find ways to work with or around that just as I did with Dear.

Twice is a curiosity, three times is a pattern, as we saw with Codrin#Pollux and Serene. And now four (five?) times with Sasha?

Yes, there's a third of Sasha who is already someone you love, but whether or not you realized that you were doing so, you also spoke quite fondly of True Name over the last year that she was solely herself. You had your hesitations, of course. You equivocated about whether or not you were friends, what your role actually was in interacting with her, sitting between her and your partner. We've all expressed our frustration (or even anger) with her over her role in both our lives and the System as a whole, you included.

But as you mentioned in letters during that year, you were also called out on this by both Sarah and May Then My Name more than once. Hell, *that* you were equivocating speaks to the fact that you were even thinking about it in the first place. It wasn't some foregone conclusion that you were just, as you put it once, "cordial and intentional acquaintances". You recognized that friction.

Don't even get me started about how you talked about E.W.! Yes, I wish I'd had the chance to meet him, too, but for a while, nearly every letter you sent included some story followed by that exact sentiment.

Congratulations are due to Aurel, yes, but I am in absolutely no way surprised.

So what is it about them? Why the Odists? How come we keep

winding up in relationships with them? Is it some core aspect to them? Would we have gotten on so well with Michelle, had she been singular enough and in our lives at the right moment? Or is it just those with the right “perpetual hyperfixation” as you so eloquently put it who fall into our lives?

You and perhaps Codrin#Pollux are uniquely positioned to answer this litany of questions. Do you have any insight into what it is that has led us to this state?

I’ll be honest that I’m not sure what I’ll get out of your answer. I don’t know if it’ll feel good to read,* but I guess I’m hoping that it’ll offer some sense of closure. If I—no, *when* I feel comfortable getting in touch with Codrin again, I will likely ask em, too, as perhaps [REDACTED] will have some insight. I will, just...not yet.

There is one more thing that I’m a little hesitant to ask about, because I’m not quite sure what direction your thoughts are heading in. The chance that me bringing this up is only going to hurt you is real, given the tenor of your letters, and for that I apologize.

I’ve noticed that you’ve been talking about Rareş quite a bit more over the last year. I touched on it briefly last letter, but I want to approach it more intentionally: what was it that brought him to mind?

I still think about him, you know. I think about how when he got frustrated, he’d smile, but with his brows knit. It was such a uniquely *him* expression. I think about our parents’ funeral

*I can tell you that it took several sessions to actually write this letter. There were a lot of breaks to take walks or sit and stare out the window like some awful painting titled *Sehnsucht* or something. I’m putting a light face on it now, but really, I’ve been such a mope, it’s almost a parody.

and how, even at 10, he seemed to understand on a deep level — deeper than us — the finality of death. I think about the confusion and hurt on his face when we announced we were going to upload. It's not that he didn't love aunt Rahela, or that she didn't love us, but we were so much more a parent to him than she ever was.

I still think about him and hope that we did the right thing. I think we did. I think *you* did.

Have you found him? Have you looked? You do not need to. You have my permission not to if that's not what you need.

I love you. Pass on my love to May Then My Name as well.

Sorina

22 anses-ularaeäl, 4779 Artemis Reckoning

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — The Bălan clade

system 227 (2351)
(transmission delay)

All,

Last night, I mentioned off-hand that I felt like things were “settling into a new normal”, at which Dear and Serene both threw cookies at me. It took a while to get them to stop laughing to explain that “new normal” had become something of a forbidden phrase back phys-side prior to the creation of the System. Something about it just didn’t sit right with people, I guess, so everyone would just wrinkle their noses whenever it came up like someone had said something particularly disgusting.

Before my time, though. Why it needed to trigger a food fight is beyond me, but I never claimed to understand foxes.

All the same, it really does feel like we’re settling into a new sort of normal, here. We wake up make coffee, have some breakfast, then each head off to do our own work (I could expand on the arguments surrounding how to catalog the Artemis data dump, but it’s boring even for me). We’ve mostly been just getting lunch on our own since I’m spending much of the day out of the house, these days. We’ll meet back up for dinner, then just relax together until bed.

Food has honestly been the biggest adjustment for me. For a while, Dear and I just stopped eating. [REDACTED] cooked just about everything, and while each of us know how to cook some of our own favorites, even just engaging with food left a sort of longing for how things had been. Wasn’t required, was painful, why bother?

It was Serene, of course, who knocked us out of that particular slump. Dear was starting to get particularly jittery, lots of restless forking, and I pulled her aside to mention that I thought it might be on the way to overflowing, to which she agreed readily. We wound up heading out for sushi at a place that floats plates of sushi down to you along a little canal that winds its way between the tables — J2? Do they have that on Lagrange? Well, turns out you can special order there, too, and they'll float a whole boat down to your table. It's built like a full three-masted ship (a barque, perhaps?), complete with little cloth sails, and on each of the decks, rolls are piled up or splayed out in neat rows. We ate way, way too much sushi, and the two foxes got in a small contest of adding larger and larger amounts of wasabi to their bites until both had tears streaming down their faces.

Again, I've never claimed to understand them.

After that, we tried to make sure we ate at least once a week, then at least a day. It took us a while to sort out just how, though, as none of us are spectacular cooks. I make a pretty good tocană and a few other stews besides, but those are mostly cold-weather food. The Odists have their own stock set of recipes, but we've had to make up a few on the fly. There have been a lot of salads, a lot of sandwiches. Still, it gives us all a chance to sit down together and just stop whatever it is we're working on, a little marker for when the day ends and the evening begins.

Evenings have largely been slow and calm, relaxing on the couch or out on the patio. We've gone exploring a few times, though. As mentioned previously, Serene redid much of the sim to add some variety to the otherwise unending plain. To the east, it continues uninterrupted, while to the west, after a scant

mile of hillocks, craggy, aged mountains jut up at a steep angle. These take the form of flat planes of red rock broken at acute angles pushing up from the earth directly west of the house. To the north, this continues along a ridge that slowly transforms into line of boulders and sandstone ‘walls’. To the south and further west, the hills are covered in a dense pine forest. Directly to the south of the house, a river runs out of the hills to travel south and east. It’s lined with willows, oaks, and cottonwoods. There was much good-natured ribbing of Serene for the latter. *“Cheap plastic trees! Sneeze-factories that shed branches at the slightest breeze!”* Dear had opinions.

Our explorations have largely been to the south and west, where we’ve been hunting down my cairns. Serene somehow built the terrain up beneath them so that they remain dotting the slopes of the hills, between trees, or atop mountains (we skipped the climbing part of that to go check). We’ve camped out there a few times, but it’s been a lot of day hikes.

I’m told that we’ll soon get inter-System A/V transmissions, though it’ll be restricted to still images for bandwidth’s sake. I’ll make sure you get some pictures of us as well as of the landscape.

There have been a few bumps as we sort things out. Obviously, we still occasionally wind up feeling low from [REDACTED]’s absence. There’s been a few days where one or the other of us winds up in a sulk, though we’re increasingly getting used to this new life.

Dear and Serene have also wound up in feedback loops a few times. Remember when I wrote “Two foxes in the same house? Never again”? Well, I still have my occasional moments of regret. One of them will get a little extra sarcastic and the other will

try to one-up them. Or, worse, one will get a little snippy, and it'll turn into a quick volley of shitty comments followed by a sulk, then back to as it was before.* When this happens, either I'll step out, or I'll kick them both out to deal with it. It's been a quick adjustment, honestly; far easier than when [REDACTED] was here. Maybe just because there are fewer different interpersonal dynamics at play? I'm still thinking about it.

I have seen [REDACTED] a few times, for what it's worth. It's not like they just up and cut contact. We've gotten coffee a few times, and they've stopped by for a largely failed dinner party. While we have largely worked out that things are just kind of over between us than them, that doesn't mean that our feelings have just dissipated — nor, indeed, have theirs: "It's still a break-up, I'm still hurting over it, even if it's for the best."

And you know, as I take a look back at who we were, at who Codrin#Castor is and, hell, who you and Aurel are, I see where they're coming from. We can't stay the same forever. Our happinesses change as the world around us changes. We can't possibly remain the same, but neither can we possibly change in exactly the same ways. Something like this was bound to happen, and it has me thinking that there will probably come a day when Dear and I drift apart. I don't know if that'll be any easier for being the second time around, or just differently hard, but I suppose one upside of the whole thing is that it has me focusing on the love I have in front of me.

*I don't mean "pretending it didn't happen", mind. They seem to accept these little spats as part of cohabitation. They take them seriously, address the issue, but then just get on with life. It's taken a bit of getting used to, as it's different from how Dear interacts with me. I haven't figured it out at all, but I guess when you have a fight with yourself, you get over it far quicker.

Speaking of the love in front of us! Aurel and Sasha? What a delight! At first, I was surprised that it took as long as it did, but then I realized that Sasha's far more complex than just "May Then My Name plus two friends". Then I was surprised that Ioan and May Then My Name's relationship didn't just expand to include her, but of course not everyone's relationship structure need mirror ours (never mind the fact that I don't even know what the dynamic is between May Then My Name and Sasha; it sounds friendly enough, at least).

Ioan eyes-only

If I may ask, how has the dynamic worked when you're away from May Then My Name but still with Sasha when you're Aurel? I can't imagine it's entirely comfortable to spend much time with her, even if you're still with someone you love. You live in the same building,* if I'm picturing this right, but I'm assuming you're hardly seeing your other partner all of the time, right?

I guess I ask because there's at least a small analogy to be made between our two situations, in that I'm no longer with [REDACTED] but still with Dear. I know — or at least suspect — that it's not exactly the same, as Aurel's still a fork, however long-lived, and thus not *not* in a relationship with May Then My Name, just that that's on pause.

It's just that, if I'm to keep seeing [REDACTED] on occasion, I'm going to have to figure out how to interact in a way that isn't strictly in a relationship, yet also isn't as fragile as I feel.

*I'm trying to picture this: it goes your and May Then My Name's bedroom, the den/kitchen, then a door to Aurel and Sasha's bedroom, then their own den/kitchen? Like a duplex? Do you use that door oven? Do you see each other out on the deck? Eat together? I'm hungry for details.

All the same, I wish the three/four/six/seven/however-you-count-it of you the best.

Also, some of your letters are starting to sound a little despondent when it comes to Rareș. Are you okay? Is there anything we can help with? I...will admit that I know a bit more about the current status,* but I'm not going to dump that on you without your permission.

End

All my love. Dear and Serene both send theirs as well.

Codrin Bălan#Pollux

*It comes with working in a library. We just know things. It just kind of happens.

Codrin Bălan#Castor — Sorina Bălan — Fwd: Ioan Bălan

sysime 228 (2352)
(transmission delay)

Ioan,

Taking your advice along with that of True Name, of all people,* I finally wrote to Sorina in a very open and, I hope, welcoming way. I want to find out where we stand, of course, but I also don't want to push *that* much of a discussion on her. Just...say hi and ensure that the line of communication remains open. I've attached what I wrote just so you're up to date as well.

I ran the letter by Dear, [REDACTED], Sarah, and True Name, and all of them kept telling me it was far too wordy. They're probably right, too,[†] as frustrating as it was to pare it down; I know we're a wordy bunch, but it was edging up past 2000 word, when all it needed to was act as an invitation to open discussions.

All my best,
Codrin#Castor

Sorina,

* A part of me wonders if it's in response to the role you played between her and May Then My Name on Lagrange, offering a little bit of mediation to keep that gap bridged. I'm too shy to ask, I think.

[†] True Name in particular suggested that this is still probably too long, but I sent it anyway, as I want to at least add a positive note about life on Castor.

I wanted to reach out with my greetings and gratitude for your patience with me as I get used to life as it has become. Much has happened in the last five years.

Despite the momentous nature of an extraterrestrial encounter, life continues on Castor much as it has for the previous two and half decades, as it did on Lagrange before. We sleep, wake, work, eat, talk, walk, all as we did before. I hope that life for you has continued in pleasant and productive ways and that you're still able to do all that makes life fulfilling.

I understand that the nature of your departure has been a point of stress for the both of us. I know that some of that stress on my end has bled over onto you, and for that I apologize. If you're comfortable doing so, I would love to hear from you.

Best,

Codrin Bălan#Castor

Sorina Bălan — The Bălan clade

system 228 (2352)
(transmission delay)

Codrin Bălan#Pollux,

Greetings and gratitude from Artemis as well, and I appreciate your patience in turn.

I am currently working on getting my thoughts in line for a longer, more well thought out response, but I did at least want to write you a note to acknowledge your letter and to beg your forgiveness for my silence as this stress, as you say, shakes out.

I must admit that I'm still feeling raw, both from the distance from you and yours as well as what I'm sure are mostly imaginary expectations of how I must be feeling. Once I have a better grasp on where I fit within both the Bălan clade and the wider universe, I think I'll better be able to engage.

Until then, however, we'll call this communications embargo lifted, and I'll look forward to hearing from you all.

All my best,

Sorina Bălan

2 anset-ularaeäl, 4779 Artemis Reckoning

Codrin Bălan#Pollux — Ioan Bălan

systeme 228 (2352) (transmission delay)

Visibility exceptions: Codrin Bălan#Castor, Sorina Bălan
Ioan and May Then My Name,

I had the chance to sit down with [REDACTED] for a pretty long chat over dinner yesterday. They invited me over to the sim they've built for themselves which is...incredibly them. There is no den or common area. There's just a one bedroom apartment stuck off the back of a large kitchen that, they promised me, looked as much like one they could remember from a tour back phys-side when they were looking at getting into culinary school. It was quite a bit more cramped than I would have expected, but they explained that this was to keep the amount of walking to a minimum. They showed me what they meant by cooking one of the best dishes of *cacio e pepe* that I've ever had, and they did so without really moving their feet at all. They could turn to the prep station to grate cheese while the noodles boiled on one burner of the six-burner stove, then just all at once pull everything together on a pan on one of the other burners.

We took our food out into the front, which had been set up like a restaurant. They explained that for some reason they couldn't figure out, they'd never thought of actually opening up their own restaurant, but were planning on doing so soon. They said that it felt related to their relationship to Dear, something about it keeping them pinned into a certain lifestyle. They were quick to explain that this wasn't a bad thing, wasn't unpleasant, just that they never got around to it with the life that they'd built up together even before I wound up joining the triad.

We ate mostly in silence. It was a little tense at first, but then it just turned into us simply enjoying the food without letting words pass between us. It's been a long time since I've enjoyed a comfortable silence like that. They crop up occasionally with Dear and Serene, but far less so than they ever did between me and [REDACTED].

They bade me stay in my seat while they waved away the plates and ducked back to the kitchen to pick up two plates of tiramisu and two demitasses of espresso.

Delicious as ever.

Finally, they asked how we were doing. I forced myself to think for a moment before just blurting out a response. I decided to just explain our day-to-day experiences much as I did in the last letter. I talked about how we'd started exploring the sim more. We laughed about us having to learn how to cook something other than stews and college student food. They commiserated with me over just how intense two Odist foxes in the same house must be.

They talked about their own process of setting up a new life, about procuring a bunch of stuff off the exchange with only the vaguest of ideas of setting up a restaurant, then slowly tweaking and tweaking and tweaking until they got closer to what they thought of as idea. "I'm still figuring out how I'm going to decorate this place. I thought about putting up my own paintings, but how tacky is that? Might as well just name that" [REDACTED]'s "Wish Fulfillment Bistro", right?"

I assured them that their paintings were plenty good enough, as was the food.

Finally, though, we switched from coffee to wine and moved

from the table to a lounge couch in what I imagine will be the quieter spot of the restaurant and got to talking about how we got to where we are and where to go from here.

They nudged me to lead, I think maybe because they expected I'd have quite a lot of grievances to air about them leaving as they did. Instead, I started with what I told you, that I could certainly see where they were coming from, about how things change after fifty years, and how our happinesses change as the world we live in changes.

They readily agreed, saying that, while they loved Dear and Serene on their own, their dynamic together was as frustrating as it was fun, and never fit quite into the romantic category of fun. They got pretty awkward when they described how I've changed and I had to urge them on several times, but they said that they'd long considered me a comforting, if passive, personality who made a good active listener, and that while I was still good at listening and still comforting to be around, me taking the step to start working at the library, shifted my passive nature to a far more active one. They said that, while they're happy for me, it was such a change as to be jarring, that, as bad as it sounds, they liked the passive version of me more.

What a strange thing to hear! I'll admit that I had to tamp down getting upset about that. Isn't self-actualization something we should all aim for? And when I'd talked about it initially, they were incredibly supportive of the decision.

Having thought on it, though, I think I can see where they're coming from. It wasn't that me being passive itself was good and me being more active with my life was bad, so much as there was a set of habits that we'd all built up around me following while

they led, and to have those shaken up was a prime example of those new happinesses at work. I love what I do at the library. I love the feeling of taking charge of research — I always have — and to do so in a setting that requires active participation at least, and often leadership, had shifted the way that I acted at home.

I wasn't able to put this in words at the moment, but was thankfully able to keep that frustration at bay and just tell them I'd think about it. I sent them a note earlier today with much of these thoughts to follow up on that.

Anyway, we just kind of settled into silence after that, just drinking wine and relaxing, occasionally bringing up some memory or another to reminisce. Finally, we gave each other a hug and I headed back home to Dear and Serene to catch them up. I suspect that Serene had spent much of the evening keeping Dear calm so that it wouldn't be a fretting mess by the time I got back. Probably a good idea. I can just imagine it either sulking or huffing when confronted with the conversation. As it was, we still had to put much of me recounting the evening off until today, thus me writing this letter

So, overall impressions: I'm feeling much more comfortable with the way we're each moving on. They're building up a life that they're getting to move forward and build for themselves, while we've been shocked into realizing all it is that we need to do to feel better and be more active in our own relationship rather than letting things stagnate.

It hurt, and it still occasionally feels bad, and I don't think it'll ever quite stop, but I also think that, yeah, it might have actually been for the best.

So I guess I have some questions that I'm left with that are probably more for May Than My Name than Ioan.

I'm not sure how much ey's talked about my current situation, but it's come up before that this is the first time we've really had to deal with a loss like this as Bălans, other than perhaps leaving our brother behind when we uploaded.[^compartmentalized]

I hear it talked about as a cliché that the best outcome of a break-up is to remain friends, and I'm feeling pretty good about the direction we're headed there. It feels almost like a sign of maturity, I suppose, as opposed to something more acrimonious, but I don't know how true that is.

I know that you've had far more experience with relationships than any of us have. What have you found to be the best way to communicate with ex-partners after the relationship ends? Do you think we're on a good track? I know that every relationship is going to be different, but you've had a chance to spend some time with us (several decades back, granted). Are there any suggestions you have for ways to make this...I don't know, productive for us? Make it something we can take good things away from, too?

On that note, do you have any thoughts in general on relationships and change? Forty-odd years of a relationship feels like a long time, but then I realize just how old we all are, and maybe it isn't? But then again, the passage of time itself doesn't change just because we live longer, does it?

Ah well. This has me feeling stuck up in my head as usual, trying to think everything into place. All the same, I appreciate the chance to be able to talk about it, even at a distance.

Selected Letters

Wishing you all the best, and the three of us send our love,
as does [REDACTED].

Codrin

Codrin Bălan#Castor — The Bălan clade

system 228 (2352) (transmission delays)

Sorina,

Thank you so much for your letter. I was delighted to wake up to it this morning, though I have to admit that I needed quite a bit off coffee before I could actually manage to read it. I sometimes get the feeling that there's just too much coffee in our lives, but hey, it's good.

Convergence has pretty well settled down over here. The border with Castor has been firmly limited — instances are allowed transit only once per week, so if you head out to Castor, you have to spend at least a week out there — but there are plans to open it back up. It sounds like they've come up with a better solution to the reputation market. I don't know the details, but I've been promised it's rather like having multiple currencies back phys-side, with an exchange and trade and such. Smarter people than I are working on it.

The Artemisians here are settling in to greater or lesser extent. A handful have quit since they've arrived. We've required no explanation for why, so we're left with only what they or their friends have said about their decision. Most seem to have just missed time skew too much. While I don't want to discuss them much otherwise, I will note that there was one instance of a similar reaction to our System that the Odists had to Artemis: one of the fourthrancers who, I'm told, was one of those affected most by their version of the lost virus.

We're starting to see lasting friendships form between humanity and the Artemisians (beyond the emissaries, that is).

It initially felt surprising given our apparent similarities with fourthrace, but thirdrace seems to have integrated most easily. They are, to the last, gregarious, excitable, and fun. Combine that with their expressive features, and it's easy to make friends with them.

I've been settling into a routine with Sarah, Artante, Anin Li, and a few others, who have set up something halfway between a school, halfway between a therapeutic practice. It's been a ton of work, but really fulfilling.

In the interest of keeping everything low-stress, never mind all of the grand happenings and crazy new things that must be happening around you, can you just tell us more about yourself? How are you feeling? Who have you met? What are your days like? Do you, too, drink way too much coffee? Please tell me they have coffee up there...

Take your time; there's no pressure to respond any time soon. We'll look forward to hearing from you at your own pace.

All our best,
Codrin Bălan

Ioan Bălan — The Bălan clade

system 229 (2353) (transmission delays)

Hi all.

I hope you've been doing well of late.

It's been heartening watching everyone reconnect over the last year, if I'm honest. I know I say it just about every time I write, but I've been worried. You've all mentioned in the past feeling like I'm someone grounding that you can talk to, and...well, I hope this isn't weird of me to say, but I've been feeling protective of you all of late. It's not quite the realm of parenthood or anything like that, but it does kind of feel like I'm watching over the clade, in a way. I don't know if it's a root instance thing, a shared past thing, or a me, now, as I am thing.

It's probably the last.

I think it's high time to admit aloud that all of these memories of Rareș are starting to pile up for me, and this protectiveness plays right into those memories of him after mom and dad's death. I've been struggling to keep my mind off him, honestly, and have been writing quite a bit. There have been a few abortive attempts at pulling the thoughts together into a book or screenplay or something, just as a way to process my feelings.

The thing is, if I want to be successful at something like that, I'll have to actually sit down and research the past. That's where I've been failing. I know it's something I'd need to do if I'm to do any project like that justice, and probably something I need to do if I'm to find a way to come to terms with the past, but there's some emotional block. Lately, every time I get close to engaging with the topic head on, I have a panic attack. Honest to

goodness, full blown, hyperventilating and feeling like I'm dying panic attack.

It's something I've been working on a lot with Sarah. I certainly don't like the feeling, but neither do May or, when she's around, Sasha like seeing that happen.

I know you know more about this than I do, Codrin, but please let me work on this myself.

Anyway, that's only part of why I'm writing. The way that this topic has affected me has led to a series of conversations between May and I around the interplay of immortality and relationships. I know I won't do the topic justice, so she's written up some of her thoughts, which I'm including here.

One unintended consequence of immortality is not just that memories of relationships pile up, but the way in which they pile up. We do not simply remember lost loves with fondness, but also with caution.

It seems counter-intuitive, does it not? We might expect that our everlasting lives might add in some more cavalier attitude toward the relationships that we form. This has not borne out over the centuries. We do not find ourselves trying ever new things in the ways in which we form relationships; perhaps some do, but neither of our clades do. We keep our lives as a whole interesting, but we constantly refine our relationships.

The Ode speaks of honing and forging, and so many of those who have uploaded and sought out entanglement have found themselves honing rather than

forging. It is a search for the more perfect love. We speak constantly of “learning from our mistakes” and “doing better by them/ourselves”.

This is no bad thing! We do this out of a desire to be better people in the ways that we are closest to others, which happen to be the ways most likely to hurt others. We shy away from trying new things with our relationships because that puts our view of ourselves as good people at risk.

And so we look back on the relationships that we have formed, kept, lost, let slip away into so many years, and we remember the good times cautiously. We hunt for the things that went wrong, we see all of the places where we fucked up and we tear them apart as one might a hole in a piece of clothing: thread by thread. We pull a thread, inspect it, and hunt for the weak point that led to the hole forming in the first place. We think back on arguments and hunt for where we could have kept it from blossoming into a fight. We think back on missed expectations and wonder what we might have said. We think back on crossed boundaries and hunt for a sign pointing to the boundary that we simply overlooked.

It is a fool’s errand and we are dumber than a bag of rocks for doing so, and yet we keep on doing so. It is so incredibly difficult to stop, is it not?

And yet, as the Ode goes on to say, “To forge is to end and, and to own beginnings. To hone is to trade ends for perpetual perfection.” That perfection, it says, is “Perfecting singular arts to a cruel point.”

The Ode is just a poem, it is no holy text — what was it Emerson said? The poet nails a symbol to a sense that was true for a moment but soon becomes false, while the mystic mistakes the singular for the universal? — but every poem is open to interpretation and analysis. The author of the Ode was not wrong. We shy away from those ends that hurt and any beginnings that might follow in favor of our dreams of perpetual perfection.

This applies just as readily to familial relationships as it does to romantic ones. Ioan and I do this in our relationship just as much as ey does this when ey remembers Rareş and every single Odist does when thinking about the poet. Our immortality gifts us the ability to do this to an uncomfortably endless degree.

I will quote Sasha’s gentle warning here with her permission: “The danger in ceaseless memorialization is how close it lies to idolatry. To elevate the

*This one took some digging. It’s from his essay “The Poet”: “Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional [...] Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for a universal one.” Where do they even find this stuff?

dead to such a status is to ceaselessly perfect the imperfectable.”

Ends happen. There may yet come a day when Ioan and I decide to go our separate ways. We know that it will hurt, and it is easy to focus only on that, and hone and hone and hone. That is not all we can do, though; we can also hope that it will be with love, that we will go our own ways and own what beginnings may yet be in front of us.

She’s right. Of course she is, I mean. Not only does she have more experience than literally any of us in this matter, but for more than two centuries, it has been a daily focus of hers. I have to catch myself from endlessly focusing on things I could have done better. Could I have stayed in touch with him? Should I have encouraged him to upload? Worrying about these things is the fool’s errand she describes.

These are just things that have been on my mind, by the way, I don’t mean this as any sort of admonishment with how any of you are tackling the issues that have taken up the greater part of our worries the last few years. We’re just doing the best we can with what we have, and what we have isn’t always the healthiest when it comes to coping mechanisms.

Anyway, beyond that, things are going well. *I&R*’s release last month seems to have gone over well enough. I imagine that’s due in no small part to the preparation that Jonas and the rest of the eighth stanza have put into ensuring it lands as they’d wish. It has yet again come off as “just slightly too fantastical to be real, but sure makes a good story”, much as *Perils* and the *History* did.

Ah well. I'm still proud of it, and I'm not unhappy with where we've wound up.

Aurel's off with Sasha now, and has been for a few months. For a while there, her periods of solitude were coming pretty often, and ey was popping in and out of existence with some frequency, but she seems to be settling down into a more predictable pattern. It's my hope that ey'll be able to spend a year or so at a time with her, if not longer.

She's been doing well, too. I think she's really starting to come into her own as Sasha. Always in threes, but still always Sasha. She's been getting a bit grumpy about the whole spotted skunk thing, though, and I think that, before long, she'll see if she can find a way to go back to striped skunk. She keeps complaining about the shorter tail. Aurel's been teasing her by calling it cute, eliciting the usual threats of biting.

She's just about wrapped up her work on the companion volume to the *History*, which she's tentatively calling simply *Ode*. I've had a chance to read it and...well, I'll let her share it when she's ready. It will take a lot of work for it to have the effect she plans, and the consequences will be far-reaching for the Ode clade. She says she won't publish it for another decade or so for reasons which will become clear when you have the chance to read it. In the interim, she's mentioned a few other writing projects she'd like to tackle, all of which sound good.

Debarre's back with E.W., which is good to see, and given the fact that we're now plopped right in the middle of a forest sim, they've come over to visit and camp a few times. Or, well, Debarre will come stay with us for most of the day while E.W. and Sasha go off and explore, and then they'll meet back up around

dinner when Sasha returns with Aurel. Debarre's loosened up some, but I don't think he'll ever be totally comfortable with Sasha, which she seems to have accepted.

It's getting on bed time and May's whining at me pitifully, so I'm going to go ahead and get this sent off before I ramble any more.

We all send our love to you and yours, and hope the universe is treating you well.

Ioan Bălan

Sorina Bălan — The Bălan clade

system 230 (2354) (transmission delays)

All,

Thank you all so much for the birthday wishes. I was caught off guard when I first received Codrin#Castor's. Clearly I've forgotten to keep track of the non-Artemisian dates. It felt a little silly, too, getting a birthday greeting from someone I used to be, but then, we've diverged plenty by now. That, and it reminded me a little of my place in the whole grand scheme of things. I was born back on *Earth* almost *150 years ago*! It's staggering, the scale of all of this. Billions of kilometers, decades and decades, it's enough to make one feel insignificant, and yet still significant to someone out there.

Of course, that meant I got Ioan's a few weeks later, and then Codrin#Pollux's a few weeks after that. It was a delightful set of letters, and the pictures you each sent along are all wonderful. I'm glad to see they got at least still images working across all three Systems now. Are they still worried about bandwidth for audio and video?

It's really interesting seeing the ways in which you've all changed, and how that differs from my memories and imaginings. Ioan's as calm and pleasant as I remember, but somehow more...I don't know, attentive? Present? I don't know quite how to put it. My memories are of being all caught up in my internal life and somewhat distant from those around me.

And all of your partners! Goodness! May Then My Name looks as happy as ever, and I was pleased to see both instances of Dear looking appropriately smug, though even it has diverged,

both from my memories and the two instances from each other. My memories are of it being a slight critter, and Dear#Castor is still quite slender, though not nearly so waifish as I'd been picturing, but Dear#Pollux has filled out a bit. It looks good!

I'm not really sure what I was expecting about Sasha. All I'd really pictured was someone looking essentially like May Then My Name but spotted. I was picturing spots like one might see on a leopard, though of course that wouldn't make sense with such long fur. She looks very pretty, though, and certainly plenty happy with Aurel! The Odists all seem to wear their emotions on their sleeves, don't they? I'll admit that seeing May Then My Name looking so happy with someone with so much of True Name in her in her life is still a little surprising, but I'm pleased all the same.

Life here continues much as it has, otherwise. I've fallen into a steady routine that doesn't feel all that different from the one I had before Dear's introduction...God, was it really almost fifty years ago? I've built myself a sim that's sort of like a comfortable mix between Serene's prairie and Ioan's house. The house itself is comfortable and familiar, and the prairie gives me room to walk and just enjoy the wide open spaces that I remember.

The days are much the same, too. I spent my time writing and working on this or that — though rather than research projects, I'm working with individuals — drink more coffee than I ought, eat simply, sleep in silence. Once I found the rhythm again, it was easy to slip back into that life, and for that, it's all the more comfortable, especially in what might otherwise be an overwhelmingly strange place.

I've attached a picture from a recent get-together of the

emissaries. We all get dinner* on the anniversary of the convergence, and since the tech is all there now, we figured we'd get a picture to send back for everyone's enjoyment and also any additions to the *History* that might be forthcoming, whether by the Bălans or someone else. We all raised a toast to True Name and Answers Will Not Help. Perhaps those on Castor will be able to get a similar picture with them included.

Since I didn't think to do so in time, happy belated birthday, all of you.

All my love to you and yours.

Sorina Bălan

(Artemis date)

*Well, all but the firstracers, of course.

Aurel Bălan — The Bălan clade

sysime 232 (2356)

All,

You'll have to forgive a rather rambling sort of letter, as it's currently being co-written by two Bălans and two skunks. Aurel was just forked,* and the four of us are sitting out in Douglas's field along with him, E.W., Debarre, and a few other friends after a small potluck of sorts. There wasn't any real reason for the get-together other than it's snowy at our sim, the skunks were whining, and it's always nice here. What started as a plan for Ioan, May, Sasha, and Douglas having a picnic blossomed on a whim to something of a party.

As parties go, it's been a very laid back one. We all brought some food along with us — the Bălans brought *musaca*, May Then My Name made a cake, Sasha brought few roast hares, and so on — and set set up some tables out back of Douglas's house to eat.

Not to be outdone, A Finger Pointing and Vos, one of the other techs from the theatre, set up a small bar where they started making outlandish cocktails based on what they thought each of us wanted, rather than anything we asked for. They've had about 70% hits, 30% misses, so far, which is pretty good, all told.† May currently has a drink that seems to be something between melted chocolate ice cream and brandy. It's quite good, but so rich that we can all only handle small sips of it at a time. Ioan got stuck with a vodka and soda water. One of those "why

*Five minutes ago. *Just* forked.

† Another reason for the rambling, overly-sentimental letter: none of us are quite sober.

bother?" drinks. Are the Bălans really so boring as to suggest vodka sodas?

A Finger Pointing's up-tree instance, Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress, played a baffling...party trick on us earlier that I think some are still recovering from. She suggested we play "two truths and a lie with a twist" and, after May explained what "two truths and a lie" was, we all agreed.

Unfortunately, the twist is that she went around and, for each of us, told us two things that will probably happen in the near future and one thing that definitely wouldn't, then set us to discussing which of ours we thought was the lie. None of the things she said were all that big or prophetic, and certainly none were cruel or sad, but while the conversation that ensued was quite lively, it wasn't exactly fun, either.

She looked quite proud of herself. It was all very Odist.

Marsh, Vos's partner, broke the tension by singing a song while Douglas played along on flute. It was achingly beautiful and I think all of us have made a point to hunt them down for more music in the future. They also embody a lot of some vague gender thoughts that Ioan and Aurel have been talking about of late, so they'll have some thinking to do.

Debarre has promised us firework. He only really needs one to impress, so we're all looking forward to it.

Mostly, though, we've just been doing that sort of talking about the past where one of us will name the subject of a memory as though reading off the label on a file folder, and we will all smile and sigh, or groan and laugh, or roll our eyes. It was one of those discussions that didn't need a whole lot of words, since it was all just a flow of shared memories passing back and forth.

Partway through, Ioan suggested that we share more with the clade than just the big events and difficult emotions. More stuff like this. It's a good day, today! Not special, just good. We should be able to share our everyday weal as well as our occasional woe.

And, after all that the last decade has held for us, we really have wound up in a comfortable sort of happiness. It's not perfect. We still run into crossed boundaries and areas of friction, we have our bad days and misunderstandings. There aren't any aliens, though, and no one's life is at risk if they enter a public sim. Not for the time being, at least. It's nice to collect these quotidian happinesses, too, to enjoy them while they last.

It's getting dark now, and the singular firework is coming, so we should probably set this self-indulgent exercise aside for the time being. We're going to write our own segments when we get home to attach to the end of this letter, but for now, we're going to get another drink — this time of our choosing — and enjoy the rest of the night with friends.

We hope that you all have the chance to enjoy your everyday happinesses, that you can have picnics that get out of hand, and that you can surround yourself with some really, truly strange friends.

With all the love in the world,
Ioan, Aurel, May, and Sasha
May's addendum:

I do not know if it is strange of me to say "I am happy that we are fading into obscurity" or not.

A part of me hopes that it is strange. That part hopes

that we always find some small amount of wonder at the things that we did in this world, and that we were still somehow able to return to comfortable unimportance. It has been centuries since we were nobody.

Us being what we are, this move towards irrelevance is an intentional one. It is not simply that we are done with our tasks, nor that we are no longer able to keep up, though there is still some truth to both of those. We are pushing ourselves back towards this nobodiness as both a way to finally take full and complete ownership of our lives and to relinquish the death-grip that we held on the past.

Such grand statements! We will remain ourselves even into obscurity, I suppose.

Imagine, though, the freedom that comes with being a nobody! If Ioan and I have a particularly good dinner, that is something that we can think about for *weeks*. It will be the biggest thing to happen to us in a month. We can talk about that cheesecake that we had years later, remembering just how perfect it was, how it was not simply cheesecake, but **cheese-cake**. We can think back on that and sigh and then, as we did tonight, simply label that memory aloud and share a moment of happiness.

The large becomes incomprehensible in such a life, and the small becomes important. Given that there

is no shortage of small events worth remembering,
well...a boring life is no bad thing.

May your lives be occasionally boring in the best
possible way. I love you all.

Aurel's addendum:

I've just said goodnight to Ioan and May and closed
the door between our places. Every time I rejoin
Sasha, we take a week to ourselves. Just us. No
shared dinners or going out together. It gives me
a way to switch contexts from what I remember as
Ioan into how I know to act around Sasha, and it
gives her a week of slow reentry after however long
alone (this last spell was about six months, which is
on the long side for her, but you'll see why in her
message).

We wrote about the very everydayness that we were
finding enjoyable, such as the ability to just decide
on a picnic on a whim and have it turn into a party.
Well, one of the things that I enjoy about this time
most of all is that Sasha and I spend this first week
just focusing on domesticity. We cook every meal.
We clean by hand. We go to bed at the same time,
wake up at the same time, go for a walk at the same
time every day. Settling into a routine with her feels
like a clutch engaging, a mechanical clicking-into-
place of realities such that, by the end of the week, I
find myself sitting back and thinking, "Yes, good."

It's still so interesting to me to see the ways in which this sort of happiness differs from the happiness that I have with May as Ioan. Ioan and May move in a comfortable, complementary almost-lockstep. Their life is a dance. It has its rhythm and its steps, and yet it still has the creativity of the music of their temperaments laying beneath.

Sasha and I have a life that is that mechanism with the clutch. It isn't an impersonal machine, to be clear; a pipe organ, perhaps, or a loom. We move together in the ways that we must and with a sense of purpose that adds to our lives. On her end, I imagine that it comes from her memories from True Name, but on my end, I think it comes from the fact that, knowing we'll part again after however many months, my purpose is our time together. There's no point in staving off the day when I wake up alone; it will come when it comes. The purpose is to be present.

You'll have to forgive me for being a bit mawkish. I always get like this when our relationship starts back up again. Add on the lingering alcohol, and, well, I'm not *not* crying.

There is little else to add other than she finally talked her way into going back to striped skunk again. I think even Jonas and the rest of the eighth stanza was tired of her whining about being a spotted skunk. She still has a few limitations on how she

should look, but I don't think she wants to look like True Name anymore, anyway.

I'm going to go make hot cocoa while she finishes up her note like I promised I would. I miss you all dearly. Write soon.

Sasha's addendum:

I am going to lead with the business.

I have attached two versions of the manuscript for *Ode*. One of these is for you all except for Dear, and one is for Dear alone. I have set visibility exceptions accordingly.

Ode is my attempt at a parallel telling of the story of the Ode clade in the Bălans' *History*. I could not tell that story without telling the beginning, however, and telling the beginning of that story means naming someone who hasn't been publicly named before.

The two manuscripts are identical except that the version for Dear has all instance of the poet's name replaced with 'the poet'. I do not know what re-learning the name would do to it, if it would do anything, but I would rather that be its choice that it can approach intentionally rather than have it forced upon it by my inattentiveness.

This project will not be released until systime 242 in order to provide the Ode clade sufficient time to

prepare for the publication of the Name, as well as to give Jonas any time he needs to prepare for any political consequences. I have done my bet to tell the story straight and have held back things that I know he would object to seeing published. I do not want any more assassins after me.

I am not worried, though. True Name#Castor is firmly on my side and is slowly convincing True Name#Pollux, and they are working on a solution to getting this into both In Dreams and Hammered Silver's hands. I will not be the one to break that particular embargo.

Business: done.

Every time I return, I feel like I have to do so deliberately, as though slowly releasing the tension on an elastic band lest it snap. I do not know what me snapping would look like — nothing violent, I am sure, though I do not pretend to be incapable of hurting others emotionally.

Aurel handles this so well. Ey is kind and patient, and we spend these first few days focusing on routine as the wild leaves my blood and I can settle back down into the type of person who can live with another, love another, and not feel hemmed in. May is lucky to have Ioan and Dear to have Codrin, but I am thrice-blessed, here.

I have gone and made myself cry and I am not sorry.
Aurel has made hot cocoa and there is a quilt on the
beanbag and I am home.

Goodnight. I love you all.

Ioan's addendum:

From the author biography for the third edition of *Seven Hearts Turned*: Rareș Bălan was born in 2215 in a small village in Cristești, Botoșani County, Western Moldavia, and often said that his own heart never left the village. His writing has been praised for its clear-eyed treatment of Eastern European lower-class life, and has garnered accolades from literary journals around the world, including *The Baltic*, *The Steel Nib Review*, and *Craft*. He died in 2268 and is buried in Cristești so that, true to his words, his heart will remain there.

I found this on a library trawl not too long ago. I don't know why I never thought to look him up by his name as an author. I guess I always thought that was my thing, and that maybe he wouldn't be interested.

I was such a mess when I found it. I had to step home and just spend some time letting out a whole lot of overwhelming emotions all at once. It kind of scared the shit out of May, but once she saw the book I'd dropped on the table, she understood and she spent

the rest of the day letting me get out everything I needed to and talking when I was able.

I didn't even open the book — I just read that right off the back cover and fell apart — so you can imagine just how much of a mess I was when I finally managed to open it a few days later and came across the dedication "*For Ioan*" in the beginning.

Reading it is slow-going for obvious reasons.

All of that talk about everyday happiness earlier, and all those words May wrote about living a boring life, and there's little I can add other than, yes, life does as it will, and a boring life is no bad thing. People are born and then, 53 years later, they die and are buried near where they were born. Older brothers upload and the money that brings sends younger brothers to school, just as it was meant to. People see themselves in the pages of a book decades or centuries later and stop having so many unsettling dreams about those they left behind.

There's little that I can add, here, knowing what May wrote, what Aurel will likely write, and what Sasha's sending along, so I guess all I can do is say, as always, all my love to you and yours. Be well.