

Toledot



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This preview contains spoilers for *Qoheleth*! Like...really big ones. If you haven't read it yet, you can find it over on [qoheleth.makyo.ink](http://qoheleth.makyo.ink) — if you've already read it, please enjoy the first part of the book!





*Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"*  
*Jacob said, "Swear to me first."*  
*So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.*

— Genesis 25:32-33





Part I

# Departure



## Ioan Bălan — 2325

The first thing that Ioan did when ey arrived before that low-slung house, there among countless acres of rolling buffalo grass, was laugh.

The prairie was as ey remembered. Grass tickled at eir lower calves even through the socks and slacks; clouds threatened rain as they always did; wind tugged at eir hair in all the very same ways it first had however many years ago now — was it really twenty? And yet the house! Banners were hung about in deepest black, streamers running from pole to pole in a welcoming path, guiding visitors. The house itself was lit about with flames of all sizes: tea-lights scattered among the dandelions, elaborate candelabras set upon tables, braziers set upon tripods, wall sconces set beneath the cantilevered roof. A glow painting the grass beside the house suggested a bonfire out back.

And there, the largest banner of them all, draped from that roof, shouted in stately capitals: “HAPPY DEATH DAY”.

Still shaking eir head, ey walked up along the streamer-lined path up toward the house. When the threshold was crossed, a chime sounded from within.

Ioan need not have looked hard for Dear; the fox was already sprinting around the corner of the house. Foxes, ey realized, for as it ran, it forked off copies of itself of all sorts: that iridescent fennec ey remembered, yes, but also scampering foxes no larger than a double-handful, a few grinning copies of the Michelle Hadje of its past, and even a shoulder-high lumbering beast with eyes that crackled with a light of their own.

Dear — the real Dear — was easy to pick out, for it was dressed in mourners garb. A black suit, almost-but-not-quite masculine, with its eyes hidden by a gauzy black, almost-but-not-quite feminine veil.

One by one, the various forks quit, and Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled skidded to an unceremonious stop in front of the historian.

*“Ioan! Mx. Ioan Bălan! It has been too long! I have missed you.”*  
The fox held out a paw.

Ioan bypassed this and went straight for the hug. “Dear, this is patently ridiculous.”

The laughter against eir ear was giddy as the hug was returned. *“I hold no patent on the ridiculous. It is precisely as ridiculous as it needs to be. Come! Come around back. You are early, and that is perfectly fine, but folks will want to say hi.”*

Following after the fox and laughing at the way the occasional non-anthropomorphized fennec would blip into being, scamper into the grass with a (frankly rather horrifying) screech, and then disappear, Ioan tried to chat with Dear.

The fox was short on speech after the greeting, eventually hushing em. *“We’ll all talk together.”*

*“Ioan! Goodness!”*

Ey smiled. “Codrin, you’re looking well.”

What similarities the two had borne early on had since started to blur. Codrin had started out, as a matter of absent-mindedness, an identical copy of Ioan. While Dear could fork out all the unexpected shapes it wanted, Ioan had never mastered the art. Time changes much, however, and eir up-tree fork had deviated in style from Ioan’s stolid adherence to form. Codrin’s hair had long-since grown past Ioan’s tousled look, and the curls ey hated so much adopted as an integral part of em. Eir face, too, had changed, adopting a femininity that suited eir features. The warm-colored sarong and tunic ey had last seen em in, however, had been replaced with clothes as funereal as Dear’s.

Matching, Ioan realized. They were a triad now, Codrin, Dear, and Dear’s partner, and ey supposed there was no reason that the three of them shouldn’t match on their so-called death day.

There were hugs all around, and Ioan hid eir secret smile at the uncanny act of embracing one’s own fork, however far they had diverged.

“How are you three? Excited?”

“Nervous is more like it.” Dear’s partner laughed. “At least, I am. I can’t speak for Codrin, but Dear hasn’t shut up about this for months.”

The fox looked quite proud of itself. “*Guilty.*”

Ioan looked to Codrin, who shrugged. “I play the moderate, as always. I’m nervous and excited in equal parts. The nervousness comes from the irreversibility, and the excitement from the inevitability.”

*“Ey has a way with words, as always. I have been unable to be nervous, even about the irreversibility.”*

“A new project, then?” Ioan guessed.

It smiled wryly. *”You know me well. Yes, I cannot seem to think of anything else. Fewer things in life than we imagine are truly irreversible. Time is the one that everyone thinks of, and whenever they name some other process in life that seems irreversible, it really boils down to the ways in which it is bound by time. Breathing? Digestion? Aging? Death? All time-bound aspects that only bear the semblance of irreversibility.*

*“And yet we have short-circuited so much of that here. We have found ways to take time and set aside some of the constraints that it puts on those processes. Breathing, digestion, and aging are all optional, and death, as we must know, is something that must be chosen. Even then, a true death remains elusive. Perhaps we quit and merge down tree, but is that death? Perhaps all of our instances quit, but even this lacks some of the savor that a true death contains.”*

“You’re declaiming again.”

Dear stuck its tongue out at its partner, a gesture that bordered on cute on that vulpine face.

Its partner laughed. “It took you a surprisingly short time.”

*“It has already been established that I am excited. Permit me this.”* After a pause, it continued. *”Now, however, we have been permitted the wonder and curiosity that drives so many images of the afterlife. Now, we get as close as ever to knowing that an afterlife exists, and ghosts will speak to us from beyond the heavens.”*

“For a time,” Codrin said.

*“For a time, and even that carries with it the irreversibility of time.”*

The ideas touched on some subconscious musing that Ioan had carried with emself ever since the choice to remain had been made, and the group settled into a silence broken only by the crackling of logs on the bonfire. Ey didn't know what the others were thinking, there in the flickering light, but for em, the weight of that decision settled at last on em, and eir thoughts scattered before the implications.

Ey had made eir own irreversible choice, and while ey knew that ey could technically reverse it up until that final point of no return later this evening, ey knew that ey would not.

“Ioan?”

Ey realized that the triad were staring at them. Ey shook eir head to dispel the rumination. “Sorry. Yes?”

“Where is May Then My Name?” Dear's partner asked.

“Here.”

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

Dear brightened and bounced up to the skunk, part of its own clade, and once she stood straight again, hugged her. “*My dear, a pleasure as always.*”

Ioan waited for Dear to release May Then My Name Die With Me before getting eir own hug. After, she looped her arm through eirs, letting em play the escort and settling into a familiar pattern of constant touch.

“Glad you could make it,” Dear's partner said.

“I would not miss it for the world. Besides, I am one of the honored guests, right?”

Codrin smiled. “We've only invited honored guests.”

*“Of course! And here come more.”*

For the next hour, the chime of arrival was near constant as guest after guest arrived. Much of the Ode Clade showed, though Ioan noted that some of the more conservative members were absent, grudges remaining even to this day. Michelle Hadje herself, the root instance, was notably absent, and a tug of still-unprocessed emotions pulled at the insides of eir chest.

Ioan had only met her once before, shortly before this whole plan had been set in motion. She was unfailingly kind, though if madness rode the whole of her clade, it seemed to affect her deeper than the rest. She was often taken by long silences, sometimes in the middle of sentences. During these, she lost coherence, her form rippling and changing, waves of skunk rolling down her form, followed by equally tumultuous waves of her human self. These spells would last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes, and even after they were quelled and the conversation resumed, afterimages of mephit muzzle and ears would ghost suddenly into place and just as quickly disappear.

After that visit, Ioan had asked Dear about them. Its features darkened and it had averted its gaze. *“We all have our ways of dealing with loss. She could seek change if she wanted, but...it is complicated.”*

It was rare for the fox to leave a thought unfinished, but Ioan could not think of a way to ask it to continue.

While every guest was noteworthy in their own way, a few names stood out to em. Dear’s sibling instance, Serene; Sustained And Sustaining, arrived, a deranged grin on her face as she ran directly at Dear and tackled it, the two foxes wrestling briefly on the ground before standing up and dusting them-



selves off again, both laughing.

“I cannot believe you are going to destroy this place, you asshole. I spent weeks on the grass alone!”

Dear grinned lopsidedly. *“It is not yours anymore, however, and I am a sucker for grand gestures.”*

“Some gesture!”

“Asshole, remember?”

Serene had arrived with her and Dear’s down-tree instance, That Which Lives Is Forever Praiseworthy. The entire clade, all one hundred of them, had each taken a line from a poem for their names, the shortest of which was What Right Have I, and the longest The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream, a jumble of syllables often shortened to just True Name. Both were present.

Ioan was surprised by a guest who arrived late in the evening when the champagne and wine were already flowing. Simien Fang, the head of an institute that both Dear and Ioan had worked for at times in the past, made his appearance in classic understated style. He was dressed in all black, but only when viewed head on. He had apparently made an agreement with Dear to allow the occupants of the sim’s vision to be modified such that when viewed out of the corner of the eye, his outfit flashed in a whirlwind of phosphene colors. Not only that, but his normally calm features distorted into a devilish grin, no matter the expression seen directly.

The party rolled on inevitably. Good conversation, good wine, good food, good company.

And riding along with it, a sense of impending change, of anxiety and excitement in unequal measure.

A sudden peal of thunder, louder than any Ioan had ever heard, brought silence in its wake.

*“It is time! It is time! Please gather around the fire!”* Excitement filled Dear’s voice, though Ioan thought ey could now detect a hint of nervousness that had not been there before. *“There is no time for speeches, there is no time for goodbyes! It is time!”*

The fox forked off several copies, all wide-eyed and feral-grinned, who helped to herd the hundred-and-change guests into a loose ring around the bonfire with shoves and snapping teeth before quitting.

Ioan and May Then My Name took up places about a third of the way around the fire from Dear and its partners, the better to see without flames in the way.

The triad stepped forward, and the circle closed behind them. Each forked in turn, the forks bowed, and disappeared.

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

The three within the circle began to sing.

Should old acquaintance be forgot  
and never brought to mind?

Something about their posture forbid everyone else from joining in just yet. Their voices were raw, earnest all the same, carrying above the roar and crackle of the fire.

Should old acquaintance be forgot  
and auld lang syne?

Ioan realized that ey was crying, that May Then My Name was crying, that many in the circle were crying, and when Dear

raised its arms to the sky, all the gathered attendees around the fire began to sing as one.

For auld lang syne, my dear,  
for auld lang syne.  
We'll take a cup of kindness yet,  
For auld lang—

Before the final note of the song could be sung, Dear gave a jaunty salute, bowed with a flourish, and quit along with its partner and Codrin Bălan.

With a deafening silence, the landscape around them immediately crumbled into voxels, those voxels joined together by powers of two, and with a soft chime, a descending minor triad, all the members of the party were shunted off to wherever they called home.

Ioan stumbled and fell to eir knees on the parquet of eir entryway, May Then My Name standing, defiant against the change in scenery, in air and light and gravity, beside em.

“What an asshole,” she laughed.

Ioan and the skunk let the intoxication of the night cling to them a while longer while they sat on the balcony of Ioan's house, overlooking that perpetually lilac-scented yard, and talked. They talked of the party, of the modern house on the prairie, of Dear and the contradiction of formal intensity and playfulness that it seemed to embody, and then they talked of nothing at all as they sat in silence.

It did not seem time yet to snap sobriety into being.

It had taken Ioan several weeks to get used to the skunk's affectionate nature. When she first moved in as the intensity

of the project began to ramp up, it had taken em by surprise. Even the act of her moving in was unexpected and new. Ey had needed to have a series of awkward conversations discussing boundaries and intentions.

Now, it had become comfortable and familiar. May Then My Name was as she should be and Ioan had grown to enjoy that

As she slouched against eir side on that bench swing and ey settled eir arm around her, ey asked, “What’s the story behind your fork? Or your stanza?”

“Mm?”

“Well, Dear said that it and Serene were forked when their down-tree instance wanted to explore an interest in instances and sims. Is there something like that which led to...to whatever your down-tree instance forking?” Ey supposed that, were ey sober, ey might have better luck dredging up the lines from the stanza. Something about true names and God.

May Then My Name shrugged, shoulder shifting against Ioan’s side. “In the early days, I — Michelle, that is — did not have much direction to her forking. Forks were created at need essentially to handle the increased workload. The first ten were created all at once in a burst of activity so that she could take a break.”

“Were the early days busy?”

“Very busy. We were one of the founders you know, and there were a lot of details that needed to be seen to before this place became what it is today.”

Ioan nodded. “Dear said that Michelle had campaigned to include sensoria in the system.”

“Yes, though that is something of an elision that has become

shorthand for experiences rather than thoughts.” Her voice was clear, though it still held the careful articulation of one who has realized that they are not sober. ”We were not beings of pure thought, there were still experiences, but there was no guarantee that they would be shared. It was chaotic, as you might imagine from a set of unique individuals trying to dream the same dream.

“This was back in the early days, you understand, before the System had become a dumping ground for the world’s excess population.” She smiled, far off. “We were all starry-eyed dreamers, you know, and so were the engineers phys-side. Hard problems remain hard, however, and it kept getting deprioritized. Michelle and the rest of the founders provided arguments for the means by which we have consensual sensoria, as well as additional sensorium tools such as the messages.”

Ioan relished the long-faded impulse to bristle at this. The Ode clade was notorious for their fondness for sensorium messages, those sensations and images that barged in on one’s own senses. Ey still found them unnerving. Ey said, “Just how much of the early System did your clade influence?”

May Then My Name’s laugh was quiet and muffled beside em. “I am sure we have lost count. The first lines of each stanza quickly picked up interests of their own — even then they were rarely in communication — and each picked up a project of their own, and whenever a new project would come along, they would have to generate enough reputation to fork again. Everything was much more expensive back then, and we would sometimes have to pool our resources.”

“What was your stanza’s project?”

She waved a paw vaguely. “We lost the idea that the whole stanza would be working on similar projects after a while, so they are not as tightly connected any more. Early forks were much more likely to share similar interests, if only because the individuation had not set in as strongly. The first line of mine, though, *The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream — True Name*, you met her briefly tonight — was heavy in the politics of the early System and its relations to phys-side.”

Ioan blinked, startled. ”I had no idea. I’m guessing that’s back when it was a bigger deal?

“Very much so, yes.”

“I thought there wasn’t much political interaction after Se-  
cession, though.”

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

“And the reason for your fork?”

“To feel.”

“To feel?”

“To feel. True Name kept spinning off instances to work on such concrete things, I think she forgot how to feel. Emotions became distant out of habit. Touch became a distraction. I was to become her anchor. We would merge every few months after that, though it has been a long time since we last did so. She says that we will merge once this project is finished.”

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

“She would like us not to,” the skunk murmured. “That is why I am acting as coordinator. It is a familiar role.”

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

Another moment of silence. Ey permitted some of the

drunkenness from the evening to drift away, allowing thoughts to come more clearly. May Then My Name relaxed further against eir side, and ey suspected she was not far away from sleep. Tomorrow, eir work would begin to pick up in earnest, so ey was tempted to let her sleep, but a question nagged at em.

“May?”

“I like it when you call me that,” she mumbled.

“It’s a good name.” Ioan smiled. “I had a question, though. How much do you remember from back then?”

She sat bolt upright, wrenching at eir shoulder. “What did you say? Sorry.”

Ey reclaimed eir arm, rubbing at the shoulder. “It’s okay. How much do you remember from the early days of the System? Around the time you uploaded, I mean.”

“You, my dear, are a fucking genius.” She was on her feet within a second, pacing back and forth in front of the bench swing. She paused mid-pace to lean down and bump her nose against Ioan’s forehead; her form of a kiss. “Fucking genius.”

Given that she appeared to have sobered up, Ioan allowed emself to do the same. “What do you mean?” ey asked.

“I want to modify the project scope. Can I tell you a secret?” She was speaking quickly now.

“Yes, of course.”

“I want to modify the project and add in an early history of the system, of Secession. Do you think you would be up for adding that in?”

Ioan frowned. “If can I fork for it, I suppose.”

May Then My Name laughed. “You are talking to an Odist, of course you can fucking fork.”

“Alright, alright. What’s your secret, then?”

“I want to write an early history of the System to parallel the current. They are eerily similar, you know, but it has been two hundred years. We are well past history, and doubtless there are histories already written. I remember the secession, I remember uploading, I remember getting lost, I remember everything. Yes, I remember. Of course I do. All the great and terrible things that we did. We could write a history, but that is all already there. There are paper trails and journals and everything phys-side already knows about us, but—”

Ioan’s eyes went wide as ey picked up on her idea. “You want to turn it into a story.”

She clapped and bounced excitedly on her feet. “Yes! Yes, a mythology. I know I have mentioned them before, and we had talked about incorporating that aspect with Dear and Codrin. The history is important, and perhaps you can write that too, but now is not the time for *only* history. Now is the time for—”

“Stories.”

In a decidedly Dear-like move, the skunk forked several times over, crowding the balcony before the bench swing with copies of herself, all of which had the same expression of glee. They quit quickly, and May Then My Name leaned forward to give Ioan a handful more of those nose-dot kisses. “You get it!”

“I worked with Dear, you nut. Of course I get stories.” Ey laughed, reaching up to grab her around the waist and haul her back onto the swing beside em.

How different she was than Dear. Individuation is born in the decades and centuries, though. Ey would never have thought to be so physical with the fox, but as she laughed and



slumped back against eir side, ey realized ey had long since fallen into the habit of physicality, of touch. Of, ey realized, feeling, just as she'd said.



## Douglas Hadje — 2325

When Douglas Hadje pressed his hands against the sides of the L5 System, he always imagined that he could sense his aunt along with however many 'great's preceded that title, sense all of those years separating him from her, and he pressed his hands against the outside of the system every chance he could get. If he was sure that he was alone — and he often was — he would press his forehead to the glassy, diamondoid cylinder and wish, hope, dream that he could say even one word to her. His people, humanity, now nearly two centuries distant from the founding of the System, forever felt on the verge of true speculation, of mutual incomprehensibility, from those within. Did they still think they same? Did they still feel the same? Their hopes were doubtless different, but were their dreams?

But always his hands were separated from the structure by that thin layer of skinsuit, and always his helmet was in the way of the carbon shell, and always he was at least one reality away from them.

He would spend his five minutes there, connected and not by touch, thinking of this or that, thinking of nothing at all, and

then he would climb away from the cylinder down the ladder, down the dozen or so meters to the ceiling of his home, climb through the airlock, and perhaps go lay down.

Others knew of this. They had to. All movement outside the habitat portion of the system was tightly controlled. Everything was on video, recorded directly from his eyes through his exo. All audio was recorded.

But he never spoke, and he always closed his eyes. For some unknown reason, he was permitted this small dalliance.

The System sat stationary at the Earth-Moon L5 point, a stable orbit with relation to the earth and moon such that it only very rarely required any correction to its position. Once a day, as the point rotated beyond Earth from the point of view of the sun and more briefly by the moon, it fell into darkness, but other than that, it was bathed in sunlight unmoderated by atmosphere. It rotated at a stately pace in relation to the moon and Earth such that its vast solar collector was always pointed toward the sun.

The station itself comprised three main parts. At the core of the station was the diamondoid cylinder, fifty meters in diameter and five hundred meters in length. The solar collector was attached to the sunward end of the cylinder, spreading out in a series of one hundred sixty thousand replaceable panels, one meter square each, held in a lattice of carbon fiber struts. Surrounding the cylinder was a torus, two hundred meters in diameter and as long as core cylinder itself, such that it was forever hidden from the sun by the solar collectors. Seventy-seven acres, of living space, working space, factories, and arable land, all lit by bundles of doped fiber optic cables which collected

and distributed the light from space and cast it down from the ceiling. The entire contraption rotated nearly three times per minute, fast enough that they had an approximation of Earth's gravity.

That is where Douglas lived along with about twenty others.

To fund such a project, the torus had originally operated as a tourist destination. Many of the living spaces consisted of repurposed hotel rooms. It had long since ceased to serve in that capacity as humanity's curiosity for space dwindled and space-flight from earth once again began to rise in price.

To build such a project, the area had been cleared of much of the Trojan asteroids that had collected there, either used for raw materials or slung out into space into eccentric orbits that would keep them from impacting earth or winding up once again captured in the same Lagrange point. Even still, one of the many jobs was to monitor the area for newly captured rocks and divert or collect them as needed. The material could be used for new solar panels, or perhaps the two five thousand kilometer long launch arms sprouting on opposing sides of the torus, the Hall Effect Engines that kept the rotation of the system constant as the arms had been extruded from its surface, or of course the two new cylindrical systems at the tips of those arms that had, over the last two decades, been constructed as half-scale duplicates of the core.

Little of this mattered to Douglas.

He was, he was forever told, a people person. He was an administrator, a boss, a manager. It was his job to direct and guide and herd people into doing what was required for this twenty-year project. He was forever told that he had the empathy and

skills to lead, though he forever doubted it.

He simply cared about this with a fervor that was dimmed only by the idea that, somewhere within the mirror-box that was the System cylinder, his distant ancestor dwelt.

Douglas was the launch director. He was the *director*. He was high enough on the food chain that he had ungated access to the textual communication line that connected the phys-side world to the sys-side world. He was the director, and he knew that, if he wished, all he need do was pull up the program, type up a letter, run it past security, click ‘send’, and Michelle, his generations-gone aunt, would somehow receive it.

And yet he never did.

He didn’t know why. He asked himself again and again what it was that kept him from reaching out to her. Was it that speculation? Was it the confounding societal differences? Was it that unfathomable distance between the physical and the dream? He did not know, he did not know.

Instead, he worked. He oversaw the construction of the Launch Vehicle Systems, those two smaller cylinders that would be, in a few days, released from either end of the launch arms at incredible tangential velocity. He worked with the sys-side launch coordinator to ensure that everything was working appropriately, that the micro-Ansible connection between the main system and the launch vessels was appropriately transferring entire identities.

Who this coordinator was, this confusingly-named May Then My Name Die With Me, he had no idea.

He needn’t even message Michelle directly. He had May Then My Name Die With Me, perhaps she would know her. He

could ask her. She could mediate.

And still, he never did.

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Director Hadje,

The launch is tomorrow and communications are looking good. A status report will follow, but before I get to that, I would like to open a dialog with you surrounding topics beyond the launch itself. Please ensure that this is both acceptable by the hierarchy of superiors that doubtless read our communications and yourself, as they are of a somewhat more personal nature. As my role of launch coordinator slowly dwindles, I have been asked by both my clade and a historian sys-side to collect information through extant lines of communication, a sort of oral history of the events leading up to, surrounding, and immediately after the launch.

Thank you,

May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode Clade

2325-01-20 — systime 201+20 1303

## .1 Status Report

- **Micro-Ansible transmission:**
  - *Outbound functionality:* five-by-five (go)
  - *Inbound functionality:* five-by-five (go)

- **Transmission status:**

- *Personalities transferred: 2,593,190,433 / 100% (go)*
- *Individuals by clade transferred: 1,123,384,222 / 100% (go)*
- *Personalities remaining to be transferred: 0 / 0% (go)*
- *Individuals by clade remaining to be transferred: 0 / 0% (go)*
- *Personalities transferred leaving no immediate forks (pct): 3.8%*
- *Individuals by clade transferred leaving no immediate forks (pct): 0.00000018%*
- *Social makeup of transfers: 84% dispersionista / 10% tracker / 6% tasker*
- *Social makeup of L5 System: 23% dispersionista / 38% tracker / 39% tasker*
- *Transfers irrevocably lost: 8 (go)*

- **System status:**

- Castor:
  - \* *Stability: 100% (go)*
  - \* *Clock offset: 0ns (go)*
  - \* *Clock skew: 0ns/ns (go)*
  - \* *Clock jitter: 0ns/ns/ns (go)*
  - \* *Entanglement: 100% (go)*
  - \* *Fork reliability: 17 nines (go)*
  - \* *Merge reliability: 23 nines (go)*
- Pollux:
  - \* *Stability: 100% (go)*



- \* *Clock offset*: 0ns (go)
- \* *Clock skew*: 0ns/ns (go)
- \* *Clock jitter*: 0ns/ns/ns (go)
- \* *Entanglement*: 100% (go)
- \* *Fork reliability*: 18 nines (go)
- \* *Merge reliability*: 21 nines (go)

- **Disposition**: go for launch

*Notes*: the level of transfers irrevocably lost is disappointing but cannot be helped. Still, it is far below the loss from the Earth-L5 Ansible, which, as a matter of course, implies the loss of a clade rather than a personality. One clade was lost irrevocably, but, at the risk of sounding crass, they knew they were signing up for this, and it is always a risk for taskers. That one loss represents 0.005% of the total transfer loss, and is vanishingly small in the grand scheme of things, though I am sure it is of no consolation to their friends. Congratulations, as always, for another step closer to launch.

## **.2 Attachment: history questionnaire #1**

As mentioned, I am working with a historian — or rather, three forks of the same historian — to compile a history of the launch. Due to a certain incorrigible tricksiness, this will take the form of a mythology; something romantic to be passed down through the years. To this end, data collection is ramping up in the form of countless interviews. I have, of course, all the status reports a girl could ever want for the basic facts, all of the trials and tribulations over the last two decades, but that is only a small

portion of a mythology. Should you and your superiors agree, I would like to begin the process of collecting testimonies from those phys-side.

### **Concrete questions**

- How long have you been working as phys-side launch director?
- What is involved with your role as phys-side launch director?
- How long have you been working with the System phys-side?
- What led you to pursue a career working with the System?
- What led you to remain phys-side rather than uploading, yourself? Will you upload in the future? Why or why not?
- What led you to pursue your position as launch director rather than remaining in your previous position?
- Please provide a biography of yourself to whatever level of detail you feel comfortable.
- Please provide a physical description of yourself to whatever level of detail you feel comfortable.
- Do you have any hobbies?

### **On the System**

- How do you feel about what you know of the founding of the System?
- If you were suddenly removed from your position as director, what would you choose to do as a career in its stead?

- If you were suddenly removed from your location in the extra-System station and returned to Earth, how would you feel and what would you expect?
- If the System shut down and all personalities irrevocably lost, how would you feel?

## **Gestalt**

- If you were told that, one year from now, you would die painlessly, what would you do? Would this change if you knew that your death would be painful? Would this change, in either case, if your death was seven days from now?
- If everyone but you disappeared, what would you do?
- How do you feel about being alone for extended periods of time?
- Do you remember your dreams?

## **On history**

- How long wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? Forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?
- When you become intoxicated — whether via substance use or some natural process, such as sleep deprivation — which of the following applies to you?
  1. Ape drunk: he leaps and sings and hollers and danceth for the heavens.
  2. Lion drunk: he flings the pots about the house, calls his hostess whore, breaks the glass windows with his dagger, and is apt to quarrel with any man that speaks to him.

3. Swine drunk: heavy, lumpish, and sleepy, and cries for a little more drink and a few more clothes.
  4. Sheep drunk: wise in his own conceit when he cannot bring forth a right word.
  5. Maudlin drunk: when a fellow will weep for kindness in the midst of his ale and kiss you, saying, “By God, Captain, I love thee; go thy ways, thou dost not think so often of me as I do of thee. If I would, if it pleased God, I could not love thee so well as I do.” — and then puts his finger in his eye and cries.
  6. Martin drunk: when a man is drunk and drinks himself sober ere he stir.
  7. Goat drunk: when in his drunkenness, he hath no mind but on lechery.
  8. Fox drunk: when he is crafty drunk as many of the Dutchmen be.
- While walking along in desert sand, you suddenly look down and see a tortoise crawling toward you. You reach down and flip it over onto its back. The tortoise lies there, its belly baking in the hot sun, beating its legs, trying to turn itself over, but it cannot do so without your help. You are not helping. Why?
  - Two by two, two by two, and twice more. We always think in binaries, in black and white. We remember history two by two. We consider the present two by two. We think of the future twice over, and twice again. I have looked back on history and seen ceaseless progress or steps backward. I look back a hundred years and see illness and failure, and I look at today and see \_\_\_\_\_?

- Oh, but to whom do I speak these words?  
To whom do I plead my case?  
From whence do I call out?  
What right have I?  
No ranks of angels will answer to dreamers,  
No unknowable spaces echo my words.  
Before whom do I kneel, contrite?  
Behind whom do I await my judgment?  
Beside whom do I face death?  
And why wait I for an answer?

Please take your time, and remember that the launch takes precedence over your answers.

In friendship,

May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode Clade

---

May Then My Name Die With Me,

Thank you for the updated status report. I am looking forward to the launch, and will provide you the best textual description that I am able as it happens from phys-side. I will attempt to provide real-time updates, though the exigencies of the situation will take precedence. Congratulations on making it this far, and thank you for all of your help. Status report follows.

While we were largely baffled by the nature of your questions, the launch commission and myself have accepted the task of aiding you and your companion

. Douglas Hadje — 2325

in your history/mythology project. Answers(?) will follow in a separate message.

Thank you,

Douglas Hadje, MSf, PhD

Launch director

2325-01-20 — systime 201+20 1515

Digital signatures:

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

### .3 Status Report

- **Station-side status:**
  - *Systems check*: Complete (go)
  - *Staff*: 100% (go)
  - *Gravity compensation*: 100% (go)
  - *Tiedowns*: 100% (go)
  - *Expected rotational impact*: Nominal (go)
  - *Rotational compensation engines*: Nominal (go)
  - *Power storage*: 98% (go)
  - *Power consumption*: 86% (go)
  - *Panel efficiency*: 5 nines (go)

- **Launch arm status:**

- Castor:

- \* *Launch strut integrity:* 100% (go)
    - \* *Launch arm integrity:* 100% (go)
    - \* *Launch arm path:* Clear (go)
    - \* *Launch arm cameras:* 100% (go)
    - \* *Launch vehicle path:* Clear to 1.8AU, 5 nines confidence (go)
    - \* *Capacitor charge:* 6 nines, on track to 100% (go)
    - \* *Speed:* 100% (go)
    - \* *Expected acceleration:* Nominal (go)
    - \* *Expected expected jerk:* Nominal (go)

- Pollux:

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

- **Launch vehicle status:**

- Castor:

- \* *System surface integrity:* 100% (go)
    - \* *System interior integrity:* 100% (go)

- \* *Sabot integrity*: 100% (go)
- \* *Sabot ejection system*: Tests pass (go)
- \* *RTG power rate*: Steady (go)
- \* *RTG temperature*: Nominal (go)
- \* *RTG pre-launch heat sink*: Nominal (go)
- \* *RTG post-launch heat-sink*: Tests pass (go)
- \* *RTG post-launch heat-sink deployment mechanism*:  
Tests pass (go)
- \* *Solar sail integrity*: 100% (go)
- \* *Solar sail deployment mechanism*: Tests pass (go)
- \* *Solar panel integrity*: 100% (go)
- \* *Solar panel deployment/retraction mechanism*:  
Tests pass (go)
- \* *Attitude jet functionality*: 100% (go)
- \* *Raw material capacity*: 100% (go)
- \* *Raw material manipulator functionality*: 100% (go)
- \* *Raw material manufactory functionality*: 100% (go)
- \* *Dreamer Module functionality*: 100% (go)

– Pollux:

- \* *System surface integrity*: 100% (go)
- \* *System interior integrity*: 100% (go)
- \* *Sabot integrity*: 100% (go)
- \* *Sabot ejection system*: Tests pass (go)
- \* *RTG power rate*: Steady (go)
- \* *RTG temperature*: Nominal (go)
- \* *RTG pre-launch heat sink*: Nominal (go)
- \* *RTG post-launch heat-sink*: Tests pass (go)
- \* *RTG post-launch heat-sink deployment mechanism*:  
Tests pass (go)



- \* *Solar sail integrity: 100% (go)*
- \* *Solar sail deployment mechanism: Tests pass (go)*
- \* *Solar panel integrity: 100% (go)*
- \* *Solar panel deployment/retraction mechanism: Tests pass (go)*
- \* *Attitude jet functionality: 100% (go)*
- \* *Raw material capacity: 100% (go)*
- \* *Raw material manipulator functionality: 100% (go)*
- \* *Raw material manufactory functionality: 100% (go)*
- \* *Dreamer Module functionality: 100% (go)*

- **Disposition:** go for launch

*Notes:* We are 1% away from desired power consumption reduction on the station. While this is within tolerances, we are expecting that, with the shutdown of the glass furnace at 2330, we will hit our mark of 15% station-wide power reduction. Congratulations!

---

## .4 Message stream

**Phys-side:** The launch vehicles in their sabots are settled into their creches and the doors are shut. Everyone's excited, but I'm pleased at the calm efficiency of the control tower I'm in (Pollux). We are 1deg offset spinward from the launch arm, so we should be able to see the launch well enough, but the arm appears to disappear into nothingness "below" us after about 100m, so the show won't be great past then. We'll all be watching

the cameras. Even those won't be very exciting, given the speed the LVs will be going. Models suggest that we might feel a jerk and fluctuation in gravity, that will be quickly compensated by the engines.

**Phys-side:** Given your apparent interest in the subjective aspects of the launch, I have to say that I wish there was a big red button I could hit to trigger the launch. Wouldn't that be satisfying? I picture it like one of the keyboards, where there's some sort of spring in there, and a satisfying click as the button snaps down that last bit and makes some physical electric contact. Everything's done on a timer, however, and the chances of any manual intervention being required are essentially zero. Everyone in the tower here is in place to take in data and give reports. I didn't receive permission to pass those on directly, however, so you're left with them being filtered through yours truly.

**Phys-side:** One minute.

**Phys-side:** Thirty seconds.

**Phys-side:** Ten seconds. Godspeed.

**Sys-side:** Godspeed, you poor fucks.

**Phys-side:** 3

**Phys-side:** 1

**Phys-side:** Launch looks good.

**Phys-side:** Watching the struts flex and jolt with the release of mass is quite beautiful.

**Phys-side:** They weren't kidding about the jerk. Two of them, actually, as the engines fired a half second after the jerk reached the torus. We've got two injuries down here - bumps and bruises. Reports from the torus indicate that damage was

minimal. Some sloshing from the hydroponics, but that's easy to clean up. One of the furnaces will need some care. Worst bit of damage, however, is that the solar array suffered a cascading failure: one panel broke loose and tumbled end-over-end across a few hundred others. Power's still nominal, though. We'll get it fixed.

**Phys-side:** Did you feel anything up there?

**Sys-side:** Har har. No, nothing up here. I, like you, wish that we had, though. If there had been some sudden jolt or a flicker of the lights, I think that perhaps this launch would have felt more real. I suspect that my cocladist, Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, would have simulated an earthquake at the exact moment of launch, destroying its home in the process, but alas, it was one of those hopeless romantics who transferred entirely to the LVs without leaving a fork. I will have Ioan (my pet historian) ask it if it did so from the LVs. I would not be surprised.

**Phys-side:** Your clade sounds fascinating. I don't understand a single bit of it.

**Sys-side:** I will tell you a story one day.

**Sys-side:** How do you feel with 20 years of work gone in an instant?

**Phys-side:** I'm still processing that. Numb? Giddy? Can I be both at the same time?

**Sys-side:** I see no reason why not. Why numb? Why giddy?

**Phys-side:** Numb because there was nothing to see. Not even a flash. The LVs were here, and then they were gone. I'll never see them again. Giddy because it worked. Telemetry is good, speed is nominal, entanglement is nominal, radio communication is nominal, though the rate at which message times are

increasing is surprising, though I knew that this would happen. How neat is that?

**Sys-side:** Very neat. I feel much the same. I feel numb for the reason I mentioned above. They were here, and then they were gone, and there was no feedback from the action. We are still talking despite this. This is where the numb and the giddy cross, as, in some ways, it feels as though they never left (modulo the fact that Dear would almost certainly rather talk via sensorium messages rather than text), but Codrin (Dear's pet historian) is much suited to words. Giddy, though, because this remains exciting for all of us, both here and on the LVs. Already they diverge, already they are no longer the ones who left here, already they are no longer us.

**Phys-side:** That's not something I can picture, but I'll trust you on that.

**Sys-side:** Different worlds, different problems. I must see to Ioan and to writing. Douglas, congratulations once more, and I will stay in contact regarding the LVs and my research.

**Phys-side:** Thank you for all your hard work, May Then My Name Die With Me.

**Sys-side:** You may call me May Then My Name, now that the hard work is over.

**Phys-side:** Thanks! Be well.

**Sys-side:** You too.

## Michelle Hadje/Sasha — 2306

Come to me.

Come alone.

That was all that the message had said.

Michelle had long considered this moment, and just as long considered what she might say. She was of two minds. She was of two minds.

The part of her that desired knowledge, that craved a reason in all things, that part of her felt compelled to give an explanation. It felt the need to rationalize and understand and comprehend, and it craved the knowledge that others also understood.

That part was Sasha.

That had felt inverted to her, at first. Was not Michelle the rational one? She was the one who had maintained her ties to her body. She was the one who remembered all of the *things*, all of the *actions* of her past. She was the one who wanted to fork and keep all of those memories.

But instead it was Sasha who felt incomplete, unwhole, when her reasons were unspoken. Eventually her gestalt came to the awareness that this was because Sasha was the one who

felt, just as Michelle was the one who remembered, and thus she was also the part that desired compassion above all things. She wanted to explain herself so that others would not be left hurt. She was the one who decided, in the end, not to fork, to fix, to repair. Those memories that mattered — really, truly mattered — all of her instances already shared.

Michelle did not want to tell anyone.

She was of two minds/she was of two minds.

So she edited and rewrote and pared her message down. Thousands of words. Hundreds of words. Ninety-nine words. Ten words. Two commands. A duality like her.

Come to me.

There had been a date, a time, an address. *Come to me*, she thought/she thought. *Come to us*.

Come hear. Come learn. Come understand. Or don't, but come all the same, that we might hear, learn, understand.

She was of two minds/she was of two minds.

Come alone.

She had met their friends and lovers and hidden, forbidden selves. She had met their scribes and their amanuenses and their biographer-historians.

*Come alone*, she thought/she thought. *I only want you. I only want us. I only want me.*

And she knew they would. She knew they would. She knew they would come and they would do so without hesitation, for a request from the root instance was a thing that had never

happened before, and it bore more weight than any possible life event or schedule could ever hope to. She knew they would come because she would be there/she would be there.

She was of two minds.

And so on the allotted day and at the allotted time and in the allotted place, they came. They appeared one by one in that field of grass, that field of dandelions. They came and they stood and they waited. Some of them chatted amiably. Some of them were crying, and she knew which was which because she also felt amiable/she also was crying.

They came to her/they came to her.

They came alone.

One hundred and one of her stood in that meadow. Qoheleth was gone, but there were two of her/there were two of her, and the number was still as it should be.

No, not as it should be. Not as it ought to be. There ought to be only one hundred of her there without Qoheleth, but she was of two minds/she was of two minds.

She smiled to them/she smiled to them, and that was enough to bring them to silence. Those who had felt their amiability frowned now, picking up on the sudden anxiety of the meadow, of that green grass yellowed by dandelions.

“I am of two minds,” she said/she said. Waves of Sasha/waves of Michelle rippled across her form, two identities washed through her mind, and she quelled the urge to vomit. “We are of two minds. We do not want to do this, and there is nothing more in life that we desire than to do this. There is too much in me. There is too much *of* me.”

There were more crying eyes in the crowd now, and she was crying/she was crying.

Her voice wavered, but she asked all the same. “Please fork. Please fork and merge down-tree.”

In less than five seconds, the number of copies of her had doubled, and some inner part of her/some inner part of her smiled, sensing now that doubling that she felt as a core part of her being expressed in all those versions of herself that had grown these last nearly two centuries.

“Since then — ’tis Centuries — and yet Feels shorter than the Day—” she thought/she murmured, words borne of a thought/of a memory. A few of the clade who could hear her weak voice joined. “I first surmised the Horses’ Heads Were toward Eternity —”

Many were sitting now, some were pulling at tufts of grass, stalks of dandelions, anything to ground themselves.

“I just want...we just want to experience...a little more,” she choked out. “Can you give us that?”

The reasons for the forks became clear, now, and over the next hour — for some had diverged so far that a great amount of effort was required to reconcile conflicts — they began to merge their outermost instances down-tree, down-tree, down toward the root. Many looked shell-shocked as years and decades and centuries of memories poured into them, and then were passed on down. Many looked as mad as she felt.

She held up her hand when the mergers had completed down to the doubled-versions of the nine first lines and one second line (for Qoheleth had been a first, Michelle remembered/Sasha remembered) standing before her.



“We have a task for each of you who will remain. One last task.” And she walked down the line/she walked down the line, leaning close to whisper into each of their ears, whether they were skunk or human or something new and different, what she wanted them to accomplish, whether it be vague or specific.

“Now,” she said.

Of the twenty before her, ten merged into her, one by one.

“Oh,” she said/she said. “Oh.”

She was laughing/she was crying/she was furious/she was in love/she was knowledgeable/she was a being of emotions/she was an ascetic/she was opulent.

She was.

She was of two minds.

She was of ten minds.

She was of ninety-nine minds.

She was of a thousand times a thousand minds as more memories than any one individual was ever meant to have poured into her and through her and consumed her. She cherished them one by one by one by one by one...

“Oh,” she said, feeling more singular than she had in two hundred years.

And then she quit.



## Yared Zerezghi — 2125

Although Yared Zerezghi was treated with the deference that was afforded to those who had attained such feats as he had, he was also regarded with the wary eyes due to anyone who might be considered hero and villain both.

At least, he realized, until he had made it to the airport. No one wanted to be there. No one wanted to sit through that liminal process. Everyone wanted to be where they were going, not sitting in uncomfortable chairs surrounded by people they were studiously trying to ignore.

The last flight to Yakutsk was dull, but it was that singular type of dullness that allows anxiety to build and grow. He stared out the windows at first, watching the cities and towns that built up around the transit hubs, and then, when all was replaced with desert or windswept grass or bare mountains or burnt husks of forests, he would stare instead at the pages of his book. He could not get the symbols on the pages to line up into words and sentences, but it was better than looking out at the world he was leaving.

The book remained unread when he finally landed in

Yakutsk and, as he was about to pack it into the small plastic bag that was his only luggage, he thought better of it and shrugged, handing it to the passenger next to him.

“Want a book?”

She frowned. “Are you...just giving me your book?”

He turned it so that she could see the cover. It was something on politics. Pop drivel, mostly. “I guess I am, yeah.”

“Why?”

“I won’t need it.”

A look of understanding bloomed on her face and her expression shifted from confusion to a cautious smile. “No, I suppose you won’t. Well, thank you. I’ll give it to the library if I don’t wind up reading it.”

Yared nodded and gave a gesture of thanks. It was only after the conversation was over that he felt a hotness in his cheeks. He had been lucky that the woman spoke English so well. She was very white, and while that might not mean anything, he was flying into the Sino-Russian Bloc, and she could just as well not have been a native speaker.

The act of landing, of deplaning and customs, was as dull and rote as he expected it to be, and yet some protective action of his mind had buried that overwhelming anxiety under a blanket of numbness, which had soon spread to encompass all of his feelings and emotions.

The stop through customs was met with another wide-eyed expression.

“You are the first that I have met,” the agent said.

“Oh?”

“The first of the ones heading to the System.”

Yared nodded.

“I think that I will see many more the longer I work here.” The agent stamped his passport with an expert twist of the wrist, adding a smear to the ink which added a layer of authenticity. It would be all but impossible to mimic that smear. She handed his passport back with a sly smile and a tap to her temple, “I do not think I will go. I am terrified enough of my own head.”

Yared could only smile back and move on through the line.

He was met at baggage claim by a slight man who took him by the hand and led him out into the heat of the afternoon. He was shunted into the air-conditioned back of a black car — so many memories of weeks and months ago beneath that blanket of numbness — which took him to an unassuming office complex.

Unassuming from the outside, at least. Inside, ey was met with white tile and calm, efficient staff who swished on the floor with white, paper booties.

He was directed to a waiting room where he was instructed to disrobe and push his arms through the sleeves of a paper gown. He was even provided with his own booties.

“You have fasted?”

“Yes?”

“Forty-eight hours?”

“More like seventy-two.”

The nurse looked up from her tablet and gave him a kind smile. “Are you nervous?”

“I...don’t know.” He looked down at his hands. They were perfectly still for the first time in three days. “I was. I don’t know

what I am now.”

She nodded and swiped something on the tablet before clipping it to a bandoleer of various medical goodies strapped across her front. “If you would like medication for your anxiety now, I can provide. Your procedure is in ten minutes, however — you understand the rush — so if you can wait that long, you will shortly not feel a thing.”

Her English had the same clipped, stilted accent of the man who had driven him to the medical center, of the customs agent, of all of the flight agents. He wondered briefly if it was some S-R Bloc accent, or if the overwhelming numbness had distorted all he heard.

“Please, Mr. Zerezghi. If you would lay down here. I will place an IV, and we will get you to the surgery immediately. You understand, yes? We are on a schedule, yes?”

He nodded and did as he was told. The numbness, he realized, had extended to the physical as well, as he didn’t notice the needle in the back of his hand until the nurse clipped a line to it.

The surgery was...well, Yared was something not quite awake, not quite asleep for most of it, but what he did remember was that it was in all ways unpleasant. The noises that drifted in and out of his awareness, the last remaining scent, the last remaining taste, both of some nickle-plated sourness that he could not place. The last remaining sight of just light, just light.

And then a stretching. A stretching up of his arms while his feet remained anchored, there on that bed. He stretched up tall, kilometers up, light years. So tall that he began to thin out, tapering in the middle until he thought that he would snap...

Whether there was any discontinuity or not, he did not know. He was simply...there. Simply standing in a cube of grey walls, grey ceiling, grey floor. It was lit by lights that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, and the lack of a shadow was disturbing in a way that he could not place.

A soft, familiar voice spoke to him, then. Or did not come to him. He did not hear it through his ears, but it was there, nonetheless, through something more and less than hearing. “Yared. Can you speak?”

He opened his mouth and exhaled in a gasp. His throat worked at least, though everything was...different. So different.

Remembering — somehow — how to move, he tilted his head forward to look down at himself. Naked, but sharp and clear. He lifted his hands to look at them, seeing the same dark skin, the same well-trimmed fingernails.

But no contacts. None of those silvery pads on his fingers. He rubbed his thumb over the spots where they had once been, then reached his other hand up to touch at the back of his neck where the long-familiar exocortex implant was missing. Smooth, soft skin, with only what hair and blemishes he remembered from this afternoon, from so long ago.

He took another breath, and let it out in a long *aaah*, then another and said, “Yes, I think so.”

“Fantastic,” came the voice once more.

“Is that...are you True Name?”

A soft chuckle, and then, “Yes, it is me. Or a portion of me, at least. You are still in the upload clinic’s system, which cannot easily fit two.”

“So, not in the System yet.”

“No, but the transfer is nearly complete. You will not remember this encounter, I am afraid, but you will have new ones.” The voice sounded as though it was smiling. “So very many new ones. I am just happy to see you move and hear you speak, as it means that the same will be true sys-side.”

Yared frowned. “I will..not remember?”

“This instance is in a temporary location for the purpose of testing, so eventually, you will either quit or be halted, yes.”

“But then I’ll be in the System?”

There was a pause, and then a laugh. “You already are. The upload has complete, and I — the real True Name — am speaking with you.”

“But I will die here?”

“Not die, no. You will quit. You are already living on.”

The words made him tremble. They were so final, which jarred against a tone of comfort, of reassurance. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

The voice still sounded like it was smiling. “There is little I can do to reassure you, so, tough shit. You are already on the other side.”

And with that, Yared Zerezghi ceased to be.

---

“Yared. Can you speak?”

He blinked open his eyes, confronted with a shape of black and white, then shouted and fell backwards.

The shape that stood before him, laughed and leaned down to offer a hand. “I will take that as a yes. I am True Name. Do you remember me?”



He stared up at the shape, something half human and half animal, a tapering snout and white-stripped black fur. Feminine form. Soft tail. Friendly eyes.

“True...Name? The Only...The Only Time...”

“The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream, yes.” It— she was smiling, though Yared was not sure how he knew that. She wiggled the fingers of her offered hand — paw? Paw — and said, “Come on, let us get you up.”

Yared still did not accept the offer, looking around himself instead. He sat atop a small hill in a grass field, dotted liberally with dandelions. The sky was cloudless and blue above him. The sun stood on high.

He shook his head, marveling at the sudden change from cold clinic and unpleasant sensations to so prosaic a landscape, then took the paw at last, letting himself be helped to his feet.

“There you go,” True Name said. “How do you feel?”

“Um.”

“Naked, perhaps?”

He looked down at himself and started back from the animal.  
“Uh...yes. How do I...”

“Picture yourself clothed how you wish. Your favorite outfit, perhaps. Picture that, and then want it. Want to be clothed.”

Squinting his eyes shut, Yared did his best to think his clothes into being. He heard a laugh from True Name.

“Relax. Breathe in, and then when you breathe out, think of that outfit and say to yourself, ‘gosh, I wish that I was wearing that right now!’, and then smile.”

“Smile?”

“That part is not necessary, but I find that it helps with the newly arrived.”

*Breathe in.*

*Breathe out.* “I would like to be wearing that nice thawb I got to try on.”

*Smile.*

And then he was. He felt the fabric hanging comfortably from his shoulders. It was not sudden or slow, he did not feel the transition, he just was simply wearing the garment as if he always had been.

“There, see? It will become second nature, and you will not need to smile or speak out loud.”

Yared nodded. Breathed in, breathed out, and then the fabric had two gold brocade stripes heading down from the shoulders to the hem.

“Excellent!” The skunk — as he now remembered her to be — clapped her paws. “I figured you would be a fast learner after so long.”

“Where are we?”

“We are in a private sim. Usually, new arrivals show up in a gridded gray box, and then a guide will arrive and show them basically what I showed you, but you are something of a celebrity, at least among the circles that I run in, and so I pulled some strings with the Council of Eight.”

He nodded absentmindedly, reached down, and plucked at a dandelion. It felt real enough. Finally, he said, “You are not exactly how I pictured you. I’ve seen pictures of Michelle.”

“What were you picturing?”

“I don’t know.” Ey frowned. “I guess I never really internalized the whole ‘skunk’ thing.”

True Name smiled and shrugged. “I look like this. Rather like my av back in the ’net. I can look–” There was suddenly a short woman standing beside the skunk. The resemblance was clearly there in the shape of the profile and the way she moved, but for the fact that she looked like the photos Yared had seen. The human spoke. “–like this, but that is not my preferred mode.”

And then she was gone, with just the skunk standing before him.

“What was that?”

“I forked. I created a new instance of myself from that moment. I just let it slip back into that other form I remember.”

“You can do that?”

She laughed. “I can, though it does cost some reputation if the fork lasts longer than five minutes.”

“And then it just...went away?”

“She quit, yes.”

“And I can do this, too?”

Before she could respond, Yared breathed in, and then two of him breathed out. He let out a shout of laughter.

True Name looked startled, then clapped her paws once more. “Well done! Usually it takes new arrivals a few days to get to that point. Now, one of you – you have not experienced too much that is different from each other, so it doesn’t matter which – one of you think, ‘okay, I am ready to quit’.”

“And what will happen then?”

“Then? Nothing. That instance will stop. If you quit–” she pointed at the newer of the two Yareds “–then you–” and then at

the first “–will have the option of merging the fork’s memories back in.”

“Will I feel anything? Is it like dying?”

“No, Yared. It is fine. The experiences simply stop.” She smiled wryly, adding, “We still have not answered the question of an afterlife, but we are told from outside that system capacity increases when an instance frees up space.”

He frowned, but gestured to the newer fork, who backed away a step and crouched. “If you promise it’s not like dying. I can’t...I can’t have gotten this far just to die.”

“I have never died, so I cannot promise, but when I just forked and then merged, the memories that I received did not include anything that felt like death. They just stop.”

Yared’s fork — he realized he knew it as Yared Zerezghi#323a998a, though not how — slowly straightened up, closed his eyes, and breathed out.

Then disappeared.

There was a sudden, demanding pressure on Yared, as though a memory of something important was *right there*, and all he needed to do was remember it.

So he did. He remembered the suddenness of the beginning of existence. He remembered the sight of himself. He remembered the different angle that he had seen True Name from, so incongruous with where he was standing now. The conversation, the shock of being informed that he should quit, the fear, the determination. And then the memories just ended.

“See? There is nothing after.”

He tilted his head, trying to remember anything past that point, but there was nothing else to grasp. “Not really, but I sup-

pose I'll get used to it."

"You do not need to fork if you do not want to. And you will learn how to control the merger over time, and only remember certain parts. You will learn. But come, secession and launch are only a few minutes away. Think to yourself, 'I want to be at Josephine's#aaca9bb9.' You will also get used to remembering those letters and num--"

Yared's eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim, steamy light of a restaurant. It was chilly outside, but delightfully warm inside, where silver and red stools lined a bar and the sizzle of eggs could be heard from a griddle. There were a few dozen people inside, including a gaggle of other skunks and women that looked eerily like True Name and Michelle.

True Name appeared beside him, laughing. "That was fast. I know that I should not be surprised at the quickness with which you are picking this up, but I am."

The skunk padded over to a corner booth where seven others waited. Three well-dressed individuals, a dirty pile of rags that may have contained a human, a nondescript face that he couldn't seem to focus on, another animal of some sort that reminded Yared of a ferret he had seen once, and a perpetually smiling man with artfully tousled hair.

Both of them slid into the booth, and as they did so, the noise of the restaurant dimmed almost to inaudibility.

"Uh, hi."

"Mr. Zerezghi, a pleasure!" The tousled man reached out his hand and Yared shook it on instinct. "Jonas. Happy to meet face to face at last."

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

True Name nodded. “That’s us, yep. Michelle could not be here tonight, so I am here in her stead.”

“You meet at a diner?”

“We meet all over,” Jonas said. “There is no headquarters, *per se*. We just find interesting places and meet there.”

“Wherever’s most boring.” The nondescript person shrugged.

A mug of coffee was placed before him and Yared lifted it automatically for a sip. He wasn’t sure why this surprised him, but he figured he had a lot to learn.

“You’re the last one,” rasped the pile of rags. “The last arrival before secession. You didn’t want to be the first one after? It’s your big deal, right?”

“No. I don’t know why. I suppose just in case something goes wrong with the launch.”

“Nothing will go wrong. There is a backup facility, anyway,” the ferret-shaped one said. “Debarre, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

The rest of the council introduced themselves.

“So, how long until secession takes effect?” True Name asked.

One of the well-dressed women tilted her head, then smiled. “Ten seconds.”

Yared set his coffee down quickly as the table began a count-down. He looked around and then realized everyone was counting down. Shouting the numbers. Grinning and laughing and clapping.

By the time they hit four, Yared was counting along with them.

“Three!” he shouted.

*This is what it was all for, he thought. Sitting in a diner, drinking terrible coffee, and meeting friends.*

“Two!”

*I dreamed for so long, and I get here minutes before it all happens at once. This is what it was for.*

“One!”

*It was all for these smiling faces and complete and total freedom.*

Everyone began cheering at once. The windows lit up with a fireworks display. True Name stopped clapping in order to hug him around the shoulders, and after a moment’s hesitation, he returned the gesture.

“This is why you wanted to be the last one, isn’t it?” she murmured in his ear just loud enough for him to hear. “You greedy son of a bitch. You just wanted to be the last one to join the party.”

He laughed. “You know, I think you may be right.”





*Toledot* continues Jan 21, 2022

If you have made it this far, email [makyo@drab-makyo.com](mailto:makyo@drab-makyo.com) with the tangential velocity of the launch vehicles from the design SVG for a free (in the US; free shipping for international) paperback version of *Toledot*!