

# Part IV

## Reconcilliation



## Ioan Bălan — 2350

Of all that had happened over the past several weeks, Ioan was surprised to find that it had taken until now for literally anything to feel like it had been planned. Clearly none of them had planned on Jonas coming after True Name, but all of the decisions that had been made after that had been made on the spot. Snap decisions that had led to True Name moving into their house, to End Waking merging down, to the three of them all overflowing at once.

All of those had been made under what felt like intolerable pressure, and it was only now that they had time enough to relax. There was an uneasy (and certainly temporary) stalemate between Jonas and True Name that gave them enough time to properly consider a decision instead of feeling compelled to make it right away.

Ey'd harbored a concern, one borne out of stress, that May might just merge down without talking further, but ey kept that to emself, doing eir level best to reason emself out of it. The last thing they needed at the moment was eir mind playing tricks on em.

And she certainly didn't. In fact, she drew the negotiations that followed that first discussion out by nearly a week, putting lie to that concern. Much of these discussions took place between the two skunks as they walked out on True Name's prairie.

At first, ey'd felt left out. After all, didn't ey also have boundaries to negotiate and concerns that needed addressing?

After bringing this up with May, however, she had laughed and poked em in the belly, explaining, "I do not mean to leave you out of anything, my dear. We are discussing elements of the past that kept me from merging down, and elements of the future of the relationship between me and her. You are not missing anything so important, but if you would like, I am happy to keep you apprised of the general content."

"Given how anxious I've been, I'd appreciate that," ey had said. "But no need to share anything private."

And so now ey got updates on the conversations with sensitive or personal information redacted.

They spent much of their time discussing various parts of May's life and how comfortable she'd feel sharing those through a merge, and if not, why not. Surprisingly, they also talked with End Waking several times, the third skunk of the stanza coming out to visit her prairie so that they could discuss the ramifications of their merge and how to be more thoughtful with May's.

This wasn't to say that ey didn't have a chance to sit with them at times and discuss eir thoughts on the matter, of course.

"Feelings are complex, Ioan," True Name explained as they sat around a low fire before her tent. "If they are created by memories, then there is little that I can do to completely control how I might feel about something beyond picking and choosing the memories carefully. However, one can never be sure what memories may lead to which feelings. If they come from something more intrinsic to one's personality and thought patterns, then it is even more difficult to attempt to control them."

Ey nodded. "That much I can certainly understand. I trust the idea that you'll be a synthesis of your various histories rather than simply May's feelings tacked onto you."

"Yes. I cannot predict how I will feel about you after this. Your relationship and existing boundaries will take precedence over whatever happens, though. I will respect that."

“I have been wondering how your feelings toward Debarre have shifted,” End Waking said.

“It is complex, not least of which because I accepted the whole of your merge so blithely. I will not be doing the same with May Then My Name’s.”

He frowned.

“I am sorry,” True Name said, shrugging helplessly. “There is little that I could have done in the moment to avoid it, and there is certainly nothing that I can do now to fix it.”

May dipped her muzzle and apologized as well, saying, “I do feel bad about how that worked out, no matter how much you tell me it is okay.”

“It is not okay,” End Waking said, then hastened to add when his cocladist flinched away, “It is what we have to work with, and it is perhaps what the times called for.”

May nodded.

“I am of two minds,” True Name said. “I remember having loved Debarre. I remember still loving him, and perhaps even I, even True Name, still love him in some roundabout way. However, I am what I am, and that is a being of two minds. That of me which is you, End Waking, loves him, and that of me which is True Name, respects him from a distance, respects his distaste for me, that feeling I engendered to minimize his impact within the council by making it so purely emotional, as uncomfortable as it was to do so.”

“The same as you did with me and Codrin?” Ioan asked. “With the history, I mean.”

She nodded. “It was— it felt like a necessity at the time. I am not some cold, unfeeling bitch, it is just that my drive and my abilities, such as they are, outweigh — or at least outweighed — those feelings. I worked to distance myself from them.”

“I remember so little of that,” May said.

True Name shrugged. “As you intentionally moved towards feeling, I worked to minimize it within myself after you came into being. I became a being of negative commandments. I lived

the 'shalt not's while you performed your *mitzvot* of loving and caring."

May sighed.

"I will not say that I am proud of it, my dear, but neither will I say that I regret it."

"Perhaps you will learn from your merge," End Waking said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps it will become a part of me, perhaps it will live within me alongside that of you and that of True Name."

"Still feeling fractured?" Ioan asked.

"I am of two minds, Ioan. I do not know if I will feel... I do not know. I am not comfortable speaking further on this just yet."

They spent the rest of the night in quiet, May leaning against eir side while TN and End Waking spoke quietly about the plain and the forest.

Finally, though, a week to the day after the topic had first come up, Ioan awoke to find May and True Name already sitting at the table, speaking earnestly in a cone of silence. Once they noticed em, True Name waved it away and May grinned, saying, "Sorry, my dear. We did not want to wake you."

Ey poured emself a cup of coffee before joining them. "Appreciate it. Hope I'm not interrupting."

True Name shook her head. "We are discussing our plan for the day."

Ey knit eir brow, taking a sip of coffee. "Is today the day, then?"

"May Then My Name thinks so, but we were also waiting for you to join us to make sure."

"Well, if it were solely up to me, I'd just spin my wheels worrying about it until we ran out of time, so I suppose I'm alright with it. What all will go into it?"

"Well," True Name began, a fork appearing next to her. "First I fork and she will head to the tent."

The new instance of True Name bowed. "Then the perilous path was planted, And a river and a spring On every cliff and tomb," she said before waving goodbye and padding back out

through her room.

Ioan stared after the departing skunk and shook eir head. "You guys are so weird."

They both laughed.

"Then we will set up a space for me to rest in the meanwhile," True Name continued. "And then I suppose that is all there is to it. May Then My Name will fork and quit and I will process the merge."

"And your fork is just there in case something goes wrong?"

"Or if the result is not acceptable."

"'Not acceptable'?"

"If the merge does not go well or if I wind up being unable to work as I would like."

"Or if all of my emotions get overwhelming," May added. "Since I do rather have a surfeit."

Ioan leaned over and ruffled a hand over the skunk's ears. "Yeah, you definitely do."

"Yes, yes, and you love me for it." She laughed and pushed eir hand away, straightening the mussed up fur. "Breakfast first, though, and then we can work from there."

After another Scandinavian-style breakfast, the three of them re-organized True Name's room. The bed was made set in a corner instead of up against one wall, allowing a collection of pillows to be placed against the walls in case she wanted to lean against them or organize them into a nest.

"Are you sure you don't want to set up something out in the prairie?"

"I did consider it, but May Then My Name talked me out of it, stating that she would like to be at hand without having to spend all of her time out there, herself. Besides, if I learned one thing from End Waking merging down, it was that the less I have to think about my body, the easier it is. Comfort will only ever help."

They also supplied her with ready water, coffee, and a few comforting snacks on one of the bedside tables so that she

wouldn't have to get up just to go to the kitchen.

Another beanbag was added for May, in case True Name requested that she stay in there for any length of time, and a more comfortable bench-swing was added to the balcony in case she needed to go outside but wasn't feeling up to walking down to the prairie itself.

It felt like rather a lot of preparations to make just for a merge, but then May had last merged down 83 years before ey had even uploaded — nearly 64 before ey'd even been born — and after seeing how intense End Waking's merge had been, none of them felt up to cutting any corners and having to rush comfort after the fact.

Finally, though, there was nothing left to do, no further preparations to be made, so May took eir hand to hold em still so that ey'd quit pacing.

"I don't even know why I'm fretting so much, I'm not even the one merging."

True Name smiled faintly and shrugged. "I am fretting too, my dear, do not worry."

"It is a big event," May added. "It will be an even bigger merge and, while it may be more comfortable than End Waking merging down as she has said, it will be no less complex."

Ey sighed and nodded, squeezing her paw before tugging eir hand free. "Right, right. I'll relax and leave you to the rest of it."

"Please stay, Ioan," True Name said quietly.

"Stay?"

"Yes. Please stay. I do not think it will be dramatic, but, well..." She frowned as though hunting for words. "You are a grounding person. Is that not what my counterpart on Castor said about Codrin? I do appreciate your presence."

Ey considered any number of responses ey could give before just nodding. If nothing else, ey didn't want to hold either of the skunks up from what would most certainly affect both of them more than it would em.

May forked and the new instance climbed up onto the bed



with True Name, the two skunks kneeling, facing each other, amid all the blankets and pillows.

Both Ioan and True Name watched as the down-tree instance of May scrubbed her paws over her face vigorously for a moment, gave a shaky wave, and then quit. True Name winced and screwed her eyes shut, and the May who had knelt with her on the bed reached out and took the skunk's paws in her own.

"Go ahead."

It was still another ten seconds or so before True Name managed to relax enough to permit the merge to progress, and even then the only visual indication was a slow slump of her shoulders and a relaxing of the muscles of her face.

Ioan stuffed eir hands in eir pockets and did eir best to feel rooted to where ey stood, hoping against hope that ey could keep from pacing. May watched True Name carefully, eyes searching her features for what ey could not tell. She seemed almost frozen, breathing shallowly despite the relaxed set of her features.

And ey stood and watched them both.

The three of them stayed like that for nearly five minutes — two skunks kneeling on the bed while ey watched from beside it — before True Name moved again.

"Oh...oh, I cannot..." she whispered, and started to sag over to one side.

The other skunk shushed her quietly and helped her to lay out on her side before settling down with her. They curled together, still facing each other, nearly snout to snout and still holding paws.

Ey stood and watched. Then ey sat on the beanbag and watched. Watched and waited, though ey knew not what for.

It was more than an hour later before May forked beside em, took eir hand, and led em from the room. Neither of the skunks on the bed had moved or made a sound other than May asking True Name if she was okay in a quiet murmur at one point and the other skunk shaking her head.

Once the door was shut behind them, May let out a shaky sigh and padded over to the kitchen. “That was very hard.”

“Why, do you think?” ey asked.

The skunk took a moment to pour herself a glass of water before replying. “I want to be here with you, and I also want to be in there with her, and I also want to go back in time and tell her I do not want to merge, and I also want to go back in time and merge instead of End Waking, and...a-and...”

“Come here, May.”

She clutched the water to her chest with both paws, stumbling blindly around the kitchen counter so that ey could guide her to the beanbag.

She sat down and let Ioan rub her back. Only once she could manage a sip or two of water, she said, voice hoarse, “Did I fuck up, Ioan?”

Ey was still teasing apart the day — or perhaps the last month — but all the same, ey did eir best to respond to what ey suspected lay beneath the surface of the question. “Do you think she resents you for not just letting her be True Name?”

May whined and set the water glass aside, shifting on the beanbag until she could rest her head on eir thigh. “I worry that the real reason she wanted to do this was because there is no going back to who she was. One of those”fuck it, why not” situations.”

“There could be some of that, but is that so bad?”

“I do not know,” she mumbled.

“Can you imagine her being okay staying as True Name and being all cooped up for the rest of eternity?”

She snorted. “God, no. I think she would lose it.”

“Same, yeah. She’d probably try to pull a Dear or something.”

“And hate every minute of it. You heard her, she likes who she was and all that she did. I cannot imagine her letting that go.”

Ey nodded and combed eir fingers through the fur on the nape of her neck. “So she’ll be left with a complex view of that

— or, well, a couple of them, I guess — maybe enough for her change how she moves through the world. Think it'll be enough for Jonas?"

The skunk rolled until she was resting nearly face down against eir thigh to let em pet. "I do not know," she mumbled. "I do not think even she knows."

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Sleep was the first obstacle they ran into.

While True Name had, at one point, sat up long enough to drink half a glass of water, she had yet to leave the bed, and with her still down for the count, the version of May who had remained was unwilling to leave her side, even for dinner, which she declined.

"You don't think sleeping with her will be enough to keep you comfortable through the night?"

She rolled her eyes and poked em in the stomach with a dull claw. "It is not just that I do not want to sleep alone, my dear. I want to sleep with you."

Ioan blinked, laughed, and rubbed at the back of eir neck. "Right, sorry, I guess I've been stuck on logistics mode for a bit."

"Is this not emotional?"

"It is! I'm just...overwhelmed or something."

May nodded and looped her arms up around eir shoulders. "That much I understand, my dear."

"Would it make sense if I added a cot or something in there? I could at least sleep nearby."

She perked up and tilted her head. "One moment. Or...well, come with me."

May led em to True Name's room where the skunk was slouched over on the bed, head resting in the other instance of May's lap, the two of them tucked into the nest of pillows in the corner.

"Let me reduce..." The May who had stayed with Ioan quit, leaving the other instance of her to quickly incorporate the

merge and continued, "...conflicts. True Name, are you able to speak?"

The answer was a long time coming. "Some," she croaked.

May nodded. "I am not going to leave, but it is getting close to bedtime. I am also not comfortable not being near Ioan. May ey sleep in here with us?"

True Name slowly rolled her head to the side enough to squint at Ioan through one eye. Her cheek-fur was a mess of tear tracks. "Ioan?"

"I can make a cot by the bed," ey said, then laughed. "Or just another, smaller bed, I guess. No need to make one of those uncomfortable things."

She slowly pushed herself up to a sitting position, though she remained half-slouched against May. "Can you...make the bed bigger?"

"Well, I mean..." ey shrugged helplessly, looking to May.

The skunk tilted her head back against the wall, looking up to the ceiling thoughtfully. "I do not see why not, I suppose," she said, sounding distant.

"Worried?" True Name mumbled.

Ioan shifted eir weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "I just, uh," ey stammered. "I don't want to make things weird. I can't even imagine all you're going through."

True Name laughed hoarsely. "Do not put that on me, Ioan. You can be...uncomfortable." She sighed, sat up further, and rubbed at her face. "Preference...make bed larger and join...second choice, other bed."

Ey nodded. "I can make the bed bigger. Should I make a second set of covers?"

She swallowed several times in a row, a sign of tears to come ey well knew from May. "Can I ask...can you two..."

May got her arms around the skunk and murmured, "We will work it out."

Ioan hesitated a moment longer before willing the bed to expand another few feet in width with a wave of intent. A second

set of covers and pillows spooled themselves out onto it as well, just in case.

Ey paced back and forth a few times, shook eir head, then waved a hand again to bring into being a set of pajamas on the bed. Sleeping in eir usual dress of a pair of boxers didn't seem quite appropriate at the moment.

May blinked down at the clothes, giggled quietly, and shook her head. *"You are such a nerd,"* she subvocalized through a sensorium message so as not to disturb True Name. *"It is a good idea, but you are a total nerd."*

Ey shrugged helplessly, gathered up the loose lounge pants and shirt to go change.

*"I have no clue how tired I even am,"* ey subvocalized once ey returned. *"Or if I'll even be able to sleep here."*

*"If you need to sneak off to sleep in a real bed, you can."*

*"I'm also unwilling to sleep without you, so..."*

Her expression softened. She tilted her muzzle down to whisper something to True Name, and when she received a nod in response, she signed *okay* and patted the bed to invite em up.

Ey nodded and climbed onto the (now much larger) bed so ey could settle down beside May in the nook of pillows. Getting eir arm around her shoulders, ey let her rest her head on eir shoulder. It was a little awkward, with True Name still slouched against her side, but it worked well enough.

*"I'm surprised she's so...physical,"* ey sent.

*"She was not, at first, but I think she is working her way from past to present. She slowly got closer and closer as she learned how I did the same."*

It made sense, at least. Whenever ey'd dealt with a longer merge — eir longest had been around thirteen months, and a particularly boring project at that — it always felt like the memories were interleaving themselves in with the ones ey already had, histories slowly zippering themselves into consensus. Conflicts, then, were the snags one encountered along the way, and one would have to dump energy into either reconciling or dis-

carding memories. It was a very consuming task, and that True Name had been able to speak at all was far more than ey could have done.

*“Think it’s overriding the bits of her and End Waking that aren’t keen on touch?”* ey asked.

*“Must be.”*

*“How are you doing with it?”*

She sighed, at which True Name squinted up to her, then over to Ioan, offering a faint smile, before settling back into processing.

*“I do not know, my dear. It has activated all of my care instincts, so I am happy to make her comfortable in all of the ways I know how. It helps, then, that those are all of the ways she knows now, too, or at least is learning. If I focus on that, I feel very positive. It is only when I get distracted and ruminating that I begin to spiral. It is more comfortable for me to focus on caring for someone now than it is to think about boundaries or Zacharias or Jonas.”*

Ey kissed between May’s ears, murmuring, “You’re a good person, May.”

The skunk lifted her snout to tuck it up under eir chin.

“You two...are disgusting,” True Name mumbled. “Keep it up.”

May laughed and tightened her grip around True Name briefly. “Hush, you. We will work on going to bed soon. I hope that you can get some sleep.”

She shrugged noncommittally.

“Well, either way, I will let you keep the corner nest and be right here. Ioan can take the outside.”

“Keeping em...away?”

May frowned. “I am keeping myself close to you.”

“I kid. I have not...even gotten there, yet,” True Name said, slowly pushing herself up once more and frowning at just how far away the glass of water was. Ioan leaned forward to grab it for her. She drank carefully. “But if it...keeps awkwardness down...that is good, too.”

Ioan accepted the glass from True Name once she finished, re-filling it from the pitcher they'd brought in and setting it on the windowsill near the nook so that she could get to it herself. "We can talk about that later. For now, I think it'll work alright."

True Name nodded and settled down into her nest of pillows.

May and Ioan stayed up a little longer, chatting through sensorium messages to let True Name process in peace. Cognizant of her mention that she felt better when not thinking about boundaries, ey kept the topics light, asking about favorite things and letting her rant about plays from her past that she'd hated.

Nearly an hour later, True Name yelped and sat up, scrambling back against the wall away from them. "You know!" she shouted. "Codrin knows!"

It took only a moment for the truth to click into place. Both ey and May sat up to give her a bit more space.

"Hush, my dear," May said, voice soothing. "It's okay. Remember Dear's letter."

"I...I cannot- It is too much!"

Ioan held still, hands flat on eir thighs. The urge to wipe the sweat from eir palms was pressing against em, but ey wanted to at least appear calm, even if ey didn't feel such.

May began to crawl towards True Name, then stopped when her cocladist shied away from her. "Codrin has not spoken it aloud, not even with True Name#Castor. I confirmed with Dear: ey only said *that* ey heard it, and that is all that ey told Ioan."

She snatched a pillow from the pile and clutched it to her chest, wide-eyed. "Why?"

"Ey couldn't be the only one," Ioan said quietly. "We don't do as well under pressure as you, we don't...well..."

"Keep secrets?" she growled.

May held up her paws disarmingly. "They keep secrets very well. They just do not keep many."

She glanced sharply at May, then said to Ioan, "Ey did not tell you the name?"

"No. The message was individual-eyes-only. I haven't even

shown May.” After a moment’s thought, ey added, “But I can unlock it for you, if you want. It’s in an exo I haven’t looked at since.”

“Sweep the whole sim,” she snapped.

Ey nodded, swept the sim of everyone but the three of them, and instructed the perisystem architecture to print out the *0 individuals swept* receipt onto a slip of foolscap, which ey handed over.

“Move back, May Then My Name,” she instructed, quieter this time. When the skunk obliged, she crawled closer to em and set up a cone of silence with secure visual ACLs. She was panting and shaking, though ey was pleased to see the anger that had swelled briefly had subsided once more into fear. Ey didn’t think any of them were up for a shouting match. Once she’d knelt beside em, whispered, “Show me.”

Ey nodded and drew the sheet out of the air, holding it up for True Name to see the fully redacted text, then unlocked it for her eyes only and handed it over.

She read it through top to bottom a few times, set it down and kneaded her paws against her face, then picked it up to read it once more.

Finally, shoulders sagging, she handed it back. “Re-secure it and destroy it, please.”

Ey did so and held up eir hands. “I’m sorry, True—”

She patted eir arm with a shaking paw. “Please do not apologize.” After dropping the cone of silence, she continued, “I should have...I should have learned from...I am sorry.”

May held out a paw once more, and this time True Name took it, letting herself be guided back to the nest of pillows, where she slumped down once more, expression glassy. “Too much,” she mumbled.

“Rest, my dear. It is okay,” May said quietly. “Do you want company?”

“Could themself have peeped — And seen my Brain — go round —” After a shuddering breath, she shook her head. “I



will...be fine. We will speak later.”

May nodded and crawled back over to where Ioan, nudging em to lay down so that she could tuck in against eir front. She remained tense, and when ey sent a gentle sensorium ping, she simply shook her head.

Tiredness eventually won them over, though, and, despite the room being mirrored from what ey was used to, the bed was the same, comfortable one ey’d slept in for the last century, the house held the same sense of ‘home’ as ever. May curled against eir front as she always did, and while it was strange seeing True Name just beyond her, it was still where ey belonged.

The last thing ey remembered before falling asleep was watching the way True Name had curled to face May, the two skunks holding each others’ paws, and thinking to emself, *This isn’t how I pictured things winding up if I had somehow been able to fix them, but it could certainly be worse.*

Waking brought confusion. Something about the inversion from their normal bed, of having fallen asleep on eir the other side than ey usually did, induced a subtle sense of vertigo at first. The pajamas were also bunched up around em strangely, adding in a subtle sense of constriction. As sleep slowly seeped away, though, the feeling lessened and ey was able to relax in the warmth beneath the covers.

Warmer than expected, perhaps. May was still in eir arms, as expected, but the position felt off with the addition of a second warm bulk.

Ey tried to puzzle it out through the fog of doziness that still surrounded him. Eventually, ey gave up and levered eir eyes open, blinking a few times to bring the world into focus.

At some point in the night, True Name had apparently rolled over and wound up curled in May’s arms just as she was curled in eirs, and with with eir arm resting atop May’s, ey was left hugging two skunks.

Ey lay there for a while, trying to piece together eir feelings on the situation. As far as ey could remember, in eir still

sleep-addled state, ey'd never been this close to True Name before. There had been the occasional casual touch, a few touches out of necessity — grabbing eir hand to get away from Guōwēi, lifting her after End Waking's merge — but even going back to when ey'd first met her, there'd been very little touch. It made sense, given her personality, and yet here she was, all cuddled up with the two of them. If nothing else, ey should probably decide whether or not to extricate eir arm from the situation.

Ah well, ey was probably worrying too much about this, just laying there and ruminating.

*"You almost certainly are, Mx. Bălan,"* came the barest whisper of a sensorium message. *"Especially if you are mumbling."*

Ey jolted at the words impinging on eir senses, getting a sleepy grumble out of May.

*"Sorry,"* ey replied to True Name.

There was note of amusement, of almost-laughter, as she sent, *"It is okay, dear. What are you worried about? You only mumbled the last bit."*

Eir mind raced as ey tried to figure out how best to explain what ey'd been cycling over.

*"I rolled over sometime in the night — I do not know when, I was memory-sick — and have been staying still to keep from waking you two. Would you like me to move?"*

*"No..."* ey replied hesitantly. *"But you guessed right. I hope this isn't weird or anything. If you need to—"*

*"Ioan, I asked after your preferences,"* she chided. *"I am okay, I promise."*

Ey hid the heat rising to eir cheeks by burying eir face in May's fur. *"Right, sorry. You're okay there. I'm just being awkward."*

Ey felt True Name relax. *"We both are. It is comforting and awkward in equal measure. One third of me is very happy to be held, one third would really rather not be touched, and one third is simply not at all used to it."*

*"Have you finished merging, then?"*

There was a subtle rustle of fur against pillow as the skunk

shook her head. *"I have the memories in place, but there are many conflicts yet to process. It is easier to put those on hold, at least, so that I can make fun of you for mumbling for a little bit."*

Ey smirked. *"Har har. All the same, I'm glad you made it through to this far, at least."*

*"Thank you, my dear. As am I."*

They fell back into silence then. Ioan spent a while marveling at the mix of coziness and strangeness. It was comfortable, there with the two skunks. May was in eir arms as she should be, and True Name, similar as she was, fit well enough in the mix. The strangeness, then, came from the knowledge that she was specifically True Name. This was so counter to what ey knew of her from the years prior, and even the her that she'd become over the past few weeks since End Waking's merge.

Ey could already tell that she'd changed, though, even beyond the fact that she'd wound up as close as this. Her speech patterns were shifting once again, losing some of their formality, finding their way back to ground from the high-minded patterns she'd picked up from her other cocladist, and yet they weren't totally those of May, either. They didn't sound the same, just more alike than they had before.

She was tripled, now. She was True Name and she was End Waking and she was May. Whether or not she would become something new or remain fractured ey didn't think even she knew. The adjustment would certainly take time for everyone. Ey liked End Waking quite a bit as a friend, but that friendship was different than that of eirs with True Name. Ey was friends with May, but in that way that partners were still friends beneath the romance of a big-R Relationship, and there was certainly no comparison to be made between the small-r relationships here. If she was of three minds, so was ey.

*"Unrelated to comfort or awkwardness, I am going to get up to make coffee,"* she sent, nudging em out of rumination once more. *"I did not sleep, and if I do not have coffee soon, I shall surely die."*

May grumbled again when True Name rolled away from her,

gathering the remainder of the covers and a stray pillow up to replace the space that had been left by her cocladist's absence. Ey couldn't tell if the skunk was actually awake or not, but she settled down once more, if nothing else.

True Name sat up and scrubbed at her face with her paws, wiping the grit of sleep — or, more likely, tears — from her eyes. She grinned down to em. *"My assessment remains. You two are so cute that it is disgusting."*

Stifling a laugh, ey rolled eir eyes. *"Blame May."*

*"Way ahead of you, dear,"* she sent as she crawled out of bed. *"I will make coffee and then I will need some alone time on the plain. I will ensure there is enough coffee for all."*

There was a quiet clattering from the kitchen, mugs being shifted about and the coffee pot being set in place, doubtless another instance of her making enough noise to let them know what she was up to.

It was enough to wake May the rest of the way, the skunk stretching out against eir front and yawning wide before she shifted about to face em. "Pillows," she mumbled, peeking down at the bundle she still held in her arms. "Oh, did I...?"

Ioan nodded, placing a kiss atop her head. "She said she rolled over against you, yeah."

"Sorry, Ioan."

"It's fine by me," ey said, chuckling. "She and I talked about it a bit before you woke up. She's confused about it, but seemed like she needed it."

"She is learning my wicked ways," she mumbled against eir front. "I am happy to hear that it was helpful and that you are okay with it, though."

"Mmhm. How about you?"

May yawned again before poking her nose up against eir chin. "I do not know. I slept through it, apparently. It fits with what I said earlier, though. I am pleased to care for those around me."

"She also called us disgusting again."

“That is because we are, my dear. Is that her making coffee?”

Ey nodded, nudging her snout with eir chin.

“Excellent.”

A few minutes later, True Name returned, carrying three mugs of coffee. Ioan and May pushed themselves up to sitting so that they could accept.

“I am sorry I shouted last night. I think I understand Dear’s letter better now.”

May nodded.

“I was wondering if you maybe didn’t know before tonight, honestly,” Ioan said.

“I have been fed bad and incomplete information for years now. I had not suspected just to what extent. I am still frightened, if I am honest, but I will trust you two on this. It is complicated, and bound up in emotions I do not understand, but I will trust you.” She shook her head. “But I cannot speak of it any more right now.”

“Heading outside?” ey asked.

She nodded. “Yes. I will need an hour or so of nothing but the morning and the grass.”

“Of course.”

May nodded. “Take the space you need.”

True Name leaned over enough to dot her nose against the skunk’s cheek. “Thank you, dear. If you cook breakfast, I will refrain from telling Ioan embarrassing stories.”

“Asshole.” She laughed. “Where did this humor come from?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, at this point.”

“She seems to be doing well,” ey said, once she’d made her way outside and down the stairs to the prairie.

“It helps that I did not drop a merge onto her unexpectedly. She had more to process, but more preparation to do so.”

“She said she’s done getting the memories in order but working on conflicts now.”

May nodded. “About a third of the way done, then.”

“It’s really gratifying to see it going so much more smoothly this time.”

“Agreed, yes,” she said between sips. “I was not expecting her to turn into a cuddlebug, but I suppose that will level out before long. Was that awkward, this morning?”

Ey shrugged. “A little, I guess. Just hard making it work in my head. Doesn’t fit with what I remember of her.”

“I cannot picture you getting cozy with just True Name, no. I can barely picture her getting cozy with anyone, and that is certainly not even bringing End Waking’s general touch aversion into the equation.”

“I’d assume she got cozy with Zacharias, if they were together.”

May’s expression soured. “We will need to talk about him soon, but I cannot talk about him now.”

“Of course.”

She made a setting aside gesture, stepping back to the previous topic. “Did that feel like crossing a boundary?”

“Not particularly, no. It just felt like me being awkward, more than anything.”

“That is good, then.” She finished her coffee and waved the mug away. “I do not know how to feel about it, myself, because I do not know what she will be like when she has finished incorporating the merge. She is fractured enough now that I will forgive much that I might not otherwise.”

“It’s not like she was hitting on me or anything,” ey said, laughing.

She smirked. “Are you sure?”

Ey reached over to tug on one of her ears gently. “Yes, I’m sure. I’m dense, but not *that* dense.”

The skunk tilted her head at the tug, laughing. “Has your opinion of her as a friend changed?”

Ioan tilted eir head. “How do you mean?”

“I do not imagine that you felt the same about her when she was just True Name as you do now about who she has become.

Or is becoming, at least.”

“Well, no,” ey hazarded. “But I don’t know just how, yet.”

“Me either.

They reconvened over a simple breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon with toast.

“I instructed my fork to quit,” True Name said as a way of opening the conversation.

“Feeling positive about the merge, then?” ey asked.

“Yes. Having worked through some conflicts, it will not be easy, but I am comfortable with the direction in which it is going.” She took a bite of toast piled high with eggs and a small piece of bacon, chewing thoughtfully. “It is not all positive, but it has given me hope for a pleasant life moving forward.”

“Was your life unpleasant before?” When May frowned at em, ey held up eir hands. “Sorry, maybe that’s impertinent. It’s not important.”

True Name shook her head. “It is okay. It was, yes. It was fulfilling. I felt hopeful and comfortable with the path I had chosen. The work itself was starting to grate on me, but that had less to do with the work than the coworker.”

May, having subsided, finished her bite of toast before asking, “Did you have hope for happiness with just End Waking’s merge?”

“No. Not at all.” She reached out a paw to give one of May’s a squeeze, adding quickly, “Again, I understand — now more than ever — why you did what you did, and I do approve of it in light of what is happening with Jonas, but it was an uncomfortable duality in comparison to this comfortable plurality.”

May smiled gratefully, returning that squeeze.

“Meeting up with my fork hammered that point home pretty well, and, seeing myself through her eyes, I can tell that she was pleased as well.”

“I am very happy to hear that,” May said. “Not least of which because you seem to be building a new self rather than simply becoming any one of us.”

True Name nodded, finished her plate before setting it aside. “Thank you for breakfast, dear. Your secrets are safe for another day— owl!”

“Your high station does not preclude you from being kicked, my dear,” May said sweetly. “You deserved that.”

The skunk preened.

Ioan watched the exchange, grinning. Beyond just what she’d said, ey could read relief in May’s features. That resentment towards her down-tree instance had never quite gone away, ey knew, and, on some level, it likely never would. Still, that True Name was heading towards being a new person seemed to have brought out a new sense of friendliness within eir partner that had been lacking to that point.

Ey wondered if she would go through a reevaluation of who True Name had been before, much as ey had. It was certainly enough that she felt more positive, but ey — em and Codrin#Castor, perhaps — seemed to have dropped much of that resentment that had lingered in May and many others, though whether that was due to a difference in temperament or the relatively short time they’d known the skunk in comparison, ey couldn’t tell.

“Is it just me, or is eir mumbling getting worse?” True Name stage-whispered to May.

She whispered back, “Perhaps the centuries are catching up to em. Is this how the Bălans crack? Should we warn Dear?”

“Are all skunks such brats?” Ey smirked.

They laughed.

“I mumble more when I’m stressed, that’s all.”

“Are you stressed now, my dear?” May asked.

“It’s a stressful time overall, even if this particular morning is pleasant enough.”

“It feels rather like the morning after a sleepover, yes,” True Name said.

May nodded eagerly.



“I’ve never had one of those, I’ll have to take your word for it. Do those always come with cuddling up in the morning?”

Both skunks splayed their ears and dipped their snouts.

“It depends on the sleepover,” May said, adding to True Name, “Are you feeling well enough to discuss boundaries now?”

She hesitated. “We can begin the discussion, though I will need to address further conflicts before long.”

“To be clear,” Ioan said. “I’m okay with it, it was just unexpected.”

True Name gave a hint of a bow. “One thing that came up in our discussions leading up to the merge is that the one with the greater restrictions in a relationship defines the boundaries. Right now, I think that may be one of you two. I am the outsider, here. I have never had to have a conversation such as this.”

“My comment about you building up a new self has gone a long way towards soothing any fears,” May said. “I think I was worried you might incorporate my memories of the last few decades wholesale and wind up feeling exactly the way that I do about Ioan.”

True Name shook her head. “I have taken to heart your requests and declined the personal memories you suggested. There are many conflicts,” she said, speaking more slowly. “Perhaps due to your feelings about me as I was, so I am not sure how I feel yet, but...well, may I speak earnestly?”

May and Ioan both nodded.

“I remember enough to know why it is that you love Ioan. I can see what it is that you see in em. Perhaps...” She trailed off, ears pinned flat. “This is so fucking embarrassing. I am sorry. Uh...and perhaps there is a world in which I could do the same, I just do not know how to get from here to there. Again, I am sorry, May Then My Name.”

There was a long silence around the table while Ioan and May digested this. True Name spent it resting her head in her paws and staring down at her plate.

It was May who broke the silence, saying simply, “May.”

True Name sniffled and lifted her head. “Sorry?”

“Stop calling me May Then My Name.”

“I—”

“Do not make it weird, True Name,” May said, laughing. She held out a paw toward the skunk “Just fucking call me May already.”

“Right. May,” True Name said, gingerly resting her paw in her up-tree instance’s.

“I do not know how you get from this world to that one, either, should that be something you want, but,” she said, taking a deep breath. “So long as you come by that path earnestly and we discuss it in the moment, it is your path to take. Ioan?”

Ey held up eir hands. “Don’t look at me. I don’t have a clue.”

They laughed.

“We’ll see, I guess,” ey said, shrugging. “It’s all way too much for me to take in right now.”

“Perhaps that is a good place to pause,” True Name said. “This conversation has those conflicts begging for attention.”

“Of course, my dear,” May said, giving her paw a squeeze before letting go. “Go and walk. There will be time for discussions to come, especially once we are finished with this unpleasant political business.”