

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Ioan quickly began to wish for boredom. They'd made it into April and so many things had happened. Assassination attempts, centuries of merging, overflowing...

Ey just wanted to be bored.

At least they'd settled into a routine once more, and it was far more comfortable than either of the previous ones — when True Name had first moved in, and then after End Waking's merge — so ey couldn't complain too much.

True Name managed May's merge much more easily than she had End Waking's, and ey could see now the benefits of that week of negotiation beforehand. Nearly two months later, and she still occasionally mentioned a pressing memory or two from End Waking demanding attention.

It was just another part of the routine. A rocky routine, and an exciting one, but still a routine.

It wasn't all bad, of course. For every talk they had about meeting with Jonas or what Zacharias had become or some boundary one of them had crossed, there were still the pleasant meals, the shared quiet, and, ey had to admit, ey rather liked who True Name had become.

Ey had certainly liked who she was, of course. Three years of coffee dates stood as testament to that, but a large part of this, ey'd come to realize, came with just how much more settled in herself she was. Even that drive she cherished about herself had

been tempered into something smoother, less laser-sharp. She was more well-rounded, more able to relax, more able to work without it occupying the whole of her.

The weirdest part, though, had to be sleep. They spent two nights staying with True Name while she processed first the memories and then the conflicts before trying to go back to sleeping separately.

She spent the next day distracted and out of sorts, first begging off breakfast to sit outside, then joining them in the common areas before getting anxious and slipping off to go lay down again. That night, she woke them a few hours after they'd gone to bed, tearfully asking to join them.

"This is so fucking stupid. I feel like a fucking kid," she'd said between sniffles. "I am sorry."

May had shushed her and held up the covers for her to climb in, letting her settle back into much the same position she had those first two nights.

It had certainly worked well enough, with Ioan rising at eir usual eight o'clock while the two skunks slept in for another two hours. Later that day, May had instructed her how to get at least some comfort out of sleeping curled up with a fork.

Still, once a week or so, they'd wake to her asking to join them, and eventually Ioan had given in and expanded the bed by a foot to at least make it roomier when she did join them. She'd at least been quite understanding when May had requested that it not be every night.

Ey was unsure of eir feelings on the matter. On the one hand, it was still intensely weird to see True Name, of all people, openly seeking affection and a shared bed, and stranger still to see just how much May's opinion of her had softened.

On the other, so had eirs. The nights when she joined them weren't unpleasant, even if it would be a while before ey was used to sharing a bed with anyone other than May. This was to say nothing about the shyness ey felt about eir body. The first few times she had joined them, ey had wrapped emself up in a

sheet before leaving the bed to maintain some sense of modesty, though given that these nights had often included the skunks sleeping in, ey eventually gave up on that.

And ey was genuinely pleased to see her happy, or at least on her way to happiness.

((they have been seeing Sarah again))

It took some convincing — on all three of their parts; ey needed to convince emself as much as True Name and May — but eventually, Ioan worked up the courage to leave the house, seeking out some much needed solitude, even if it was only in the anonymity of public spaces.

The coffee shop ey'd frequented for so long may have been safe, but given that eir last visit had included an attempt on a friend's life, ey stayed away, opting instead for an afternoon in a library. The one ey frequented also felt fraught, given its association with all of those meetings with Jonas and so many others during the research for the *History*, so ey chose one ey'd never been to before from the directory. Besides, the information was technically available anywhere, libraries just provided a familiar physical location to access it, a social place for gathering around the topic of information, and some physical tools used for manipulating that information that individuals rarely had room for.

Beyond that, though, it was just the very idea of the space that appealed to em and so many others. Ey'd long ago let go of eir desire to be a librarian. Codrin#Pollux had that covered, and ey'd made eir choice, influenced as it was by eir life with May, to settle into theatre.

That didn't remove the appeal, though. Ey could still go to the building and wander through the stacks, dragging fingertips along the spines of books or poring over maps. Ey could still go sit beside a window with a book ey may not even enjoy and, if nothing else, enjoy the sun.

This library had eschewed the flashy exterior of eir normal haunt, opting instead for a low and flat building, one that took

its majesty from the way it sprawled out over its campus, buildings connected by breezeways or tunnels, scattered seemingly at random in such a way as to form irregular courtyards full of benches, gardens, or, in on notable case, a small gallery ey initially mistook for another garden, but for the fact that all of the foliage was made of glass.

Ey liked it immensely.

The busiest section of the library was far and away the wing that had been built to house the massive information dump from Artemis. This took the form of a squat, pentagonal building — one wall for each race and one for their shared knowledge — that bored its way deep into the ground, a slow-sloping spiral winding down along the shelves to allow visitors to browse their way back in time until, at the very bottom, only firsttrace had any material.

Ey stayed away from this for the day. Ey wanted cozy, not awe-inspiring.

Eventually, having loaded up on a few random finds — trashy sci-fi, some intriguing contemporary fiction from decades after ey'd uploaded, even a bit of furry fiction from early in the 21st century ey considered bringing home to show May — ey parked emself in the glass garden and arrayed eir finds out before em on the table.

The sci-fi proved to be a little *too* trashy for eir tastes, and while the contemporary fiction was certainly intriguing, it was far too dense for reading when ey was trying to have a lighter, easier day. The furry book struck a nice middle-ground, at least, even if ey couldn't keep the species straight in eir head.

Eventually, though, ey gave up and just sat in the sun, watching the way it filtered through the glass leaves and branches of the trees.

No better way to realize just how tense you are than by relaxing, ey thought.

Ey didn't doubt that the two skunks also would appreciate some time out of the house, too. Doubtless there were some sims

they could visit that would be reasonably safe. Douglas's field, End Waking's forest...well, no longer Arrowhead Lake.

"Hi Serene," ey began, starting up the simplex sensorium message before ey lost both the nerve and the train of thought. "I know it's been a while since we've spoken, so I hope you're well. I have a strange question that might turn into a really big request. After some...very dramatic events, one of our favorite places is no longer safe for us. I guess that's what happens when you just kind of adopt an abandoned sim without knowing much about it.

"Still, it's become personally meaningful to us over the years, and we're finding ourselves missing it. I don't know if we necessarily need a copy of it, but would it be possible for you to come take a look at it and see about what all would go into creating something similar? Would be a modification of my home sim. There's no rush, and if nothing else, it'd be good to say hi sometime. Talk soon."

Further reading was largely a failure. Ey couldn't get back into any of the books ey'd started, and a certain listlessness tamped down any desire to head back to the shelves to hunt more. Ey left them on a page's cart, an act that almost certainly just reshelfed them, and hunted down tea.

Serene sent a gentle sensorium ping just as ey picked up eir tea.

Ey quickly stepped into another courtyard — this one full of actual greenery, hot and humid — in order to reply. "Hi, Serene. Thanks for getting back to me."

"No problem," she said, the lack of any smile in her voice quite conspicuous. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"Of course, no one better."

"Flatterer," she replied, a hint of the usual humor returning. It quickly fled, though. "Are you in a place where you can speak freely?"

"I...well, give me a moment, and I will make sure of that."

Ey stepped home quickly, stopping in the entryway to sweep

emself. No spies. *Thank God*, he thought. *Wouldn't have put it past them to bug me at the library.*

Blinking a visually secured cone of silence into being, ey spoke into the sensorium message. “Okay, secure now.”

Serene laughed, “Oh, I had just meant away from crowds, no need to go through this much trouble.”

“Well, given all that’s been going on...”

There was the sense of a sigh on the other end of the message. “Yes, I suppose you are right. That is why I messaged you back, actually. While it is certainly feasible and I would ordinarily be more than happy, I am not yet ready to engage with True Name.”

“That’s fair,” ey said after a pause. “I know things are complicated. Do you know of any—”

“Oh goodness, I did not say I would not do it! I will, just...not yet. Please give me some time, my dear.”

Ey frowned, looking down at eir shoes as ey scuffed one against the parquet floor. “Right, okay. May I ask how you’re feeling about this, then? I’ve had precious little contact with...well anyone.”

There was another sigh. “I do not know yet, Ioan. I am not unhappy for her. I am not displeased that things are coming to a head with Jonas, as that will mean there will be a change, for better or worse. I am just not yet able to engage.”

“Of course.”

“Give me the address of the sim, at least. I will take a look and let you know what I think.”

“Peak Lake#587a9383.”

“Seriously?” Serene laughed. “I have not heard that address in decades.”

“Wait, did you—”

“It is not mine, no, but a student of mine made it. I do not imagine they still have ACLs, but I will ask.”

Ey shook eir head. “You guys seriously have your hands in everything, don’t you?”

"It is not *not* true."

"There are billions of people here, I don't know how that'd even be possible."

"How many sim designers focusing on nature do you think there are?"

"I haven't the faintest."

"How many of us do you think there are?"

"Right." Ey smirked. "'Nominally' a hundred."

"There you go," she said, voice sly. "We are old and we are many."

"I bet," ey laughed. "Well, thanks for considering the request. I got something off the exchange that is less than ideal, and I miss that place. It's just got bugs."

"Gross."

"Very. Keep in touch, okay?"

"Will do, my dear. Say hi for me."

And with that, the message ended. Ey straightened up, went to rub at eir face, realized ey was still holding the cup of tea from the library, and turned the motion into taking a sip.

Ey dropped the cone of silence and let out a shout. The ACLs had blurred the area outside the cone enough that the sight of two skunks standing just outside its edge, staring intently at em and whispering to each other caught em off guard.

"What the hell?"

Both skunks laughed.

"We could ask you the same, my dear," May said, stepping up to get her arms around eir middle. "What an awkward place to have a conversation."

"I had to get somewhere secure," ey said, voice muffled as ey placed a kiss between her ears. "Serene says hi, by the way."

"What were you talking about that required security?" True Name asked, still grinning.

"Nothing too serious, actually. Just an abundance of caution, there. I was seeing what it would take to get our own copy of Arrowhead Lake."

Both skunks perked up at that. “Is that something she can do?” True Name asked.

“Apparently one of her students made it, so she’s going to ask and see if they have ACLs. Otherwise, she said she’s happy to make something similar down the line. Maybe once this is all over.”

True Name nodded. “I will look forward to it. The field is fine for now when I get restless, but I miss the lake.”

Ey nodded. “Same. Gonna let me in, May?”

“Absolutely not,” she said. “You will have to pick me up and carry me if you would like to enter your own home.”

Ioan poked at her side until ey found a ticklish spot. “Skunks are such brats.”

She laughed and shoved herself away from em. “Rude. Come on, my dear. I have been pestering True Name with my monologue, and we are both bored loopy. Tell us about your excursion.”

Ey was chivvied into the living room and sat down on the beanbag so that May could slouch against eir side while True Name claimed a spot on the couch. Ey described the seemingly endless library and all its odd-shaped courtyards, then talked about each of the books ey’d picked up — the only one either seemed interested in was the furry one, though neither had heard of it — finally ending with, “It was good to get out. Like, really good. Got me wondering, though, how are you two doing cooped up here?”

May groaned and slumped dramatically back onto the beanbag. “I am frankly losing my mind. I want to get back to the theatre. I do not even need to be performing, I would not mind even building sets or just falling asleep on that ratty old couch in the dressing room. I miss the stage. I miss the people. I miss drinking until two with Vos and A Finger Pointing. I miss restaurants, Ioan. *Restaurants.*”

“Getting sick of my cooking?”

"It is the experience I miss. Your cooking is fine." She hesitated, then shrugged. "Though you are not very good at sushi."

"Do you feel like you are not able to leave?" True Name asked. "I do not think you would be in much danger."

"I would not wish to test that." May shrugged. "It has me anxious that both Jonas and so many of us are out there and have so much out for you. They may not be after me in particular, but I do not want to encounter any of them at the moment."

Ey nodded. "What about friends' sims? You've been to End Waking's and Douglas's since Secession day, but I'm sure there are others who'd be willing to sweep and have you over just to get out of the house. Hell, I bet Debarre would love to see you, and he seems the paranoid sort, anyway."

She laughed and squirmed around until she was laying on her front, tail draped over eir lap. "You are right, as always. I will ping one of them at some point."

A motion from the couch drew eir ey. True Name slumping over onto her side and stretching out. "So many names," she said, voice distant. "I have not seen Debarre in centuries, and yet I saw him just a few months ago. I have not met Douglas and yet I know him well."

"You will see them one day, my dear," May said. "I do not know when, but I do not doubt you will."

"Not today. Not yet," True Name mumbled. The skunk shook her head, then smiled over to May and Ioan. "But you should, May. Go make fun of End Waking for his cooking. Go sit too close to Debarre and make eyes at him until he squirms."

May laughed. "I do not know if End Waking has welcomed Debarre back, or I would get to do both at once."

"Of course. Go visit the field and Douglas. Do not lose your mind when you have options yet. I will have the plain. I will have the deck. I will have planning to do, and I can lean on experience from End Waking."

May looked to Ioan, who said, "I'm with True Name on this. Go on, get out of here."

“Will you not come with?”

Ey shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s not what we’re discussing, though. We’re trying to figure out how to get you out of the house.”

“Pushing me out the door, now?” She smirked.

“No, of course not,” ey said, ruffling a hand over her ears. “Just making sure you get what you need, too.”

“I am,” True Name said lazily, still stretched out on the couch. “I have been you, I have a guess as to how you might be feeling.”

“I would call this mean if you were not both so right,” May said, waving a paw dismissively. “Give me a moment, then.”

When the skunk went silent, True Name looked to Ioan, who shrugged.

“Alright,” May said. “Would you like to do dinner with Debarre, my dear? He invited me over a while back, and I am taking him up on that.”

“Wait, tonight?”

“He is free, so why not?”

Ey furrowed eir brow. “I was expecting in a few days or so. Maybe, I guess?”

“You do not have to, Ioan,” she chided. “I know you enjoy alone time as much as anyone.”

“Well, ask me before you head out, then, maybe I’ll get some work done in the interim.”

She leaned up to dot her nose against eir cheek a few times, laughing. “It is nearly six. I was going to head out now, my dear.”

“Wait, really?” Ey frowned, twisting around to see the darkness already falling outside. “Damn.”

“Just stay. Do your work. Enjoy a bit of solitude.”

“Alright, alright.”

She stood up and stretched, padding over to brush some of True Name’s head-fur into order. “And you enjoy your time outdoors. Or melting on the couch, or whatever it is you are doing.”

“Mm. Do enjoy yourself, May.”

Once May had changed her clothes and stepped away, a few long minutes of silence fell. Ioan finished eir tea. True Name got lost in thought, or perhaps dozed.

It was, ey realized, the first time they'd been alone together in weeks. The three of them had been cooped up together since both skunks had overflowed. The circumstances had rather forced their hands in the matter, at least until today when they'd apparently started feeling well enough to get out.

There was some lingering discomfort in the air, though, some careful distance between them. Something about what memories True Name had of em — something ey couldn't possibly know — and what that meant for them still made its presence known. It wasn't that they hadn't interacted. Far from it, actually. She'd opened up far more than ey'd expected after the merger, watching May practice her monologue, talking about the decades and centuries before ey'd known her, about the time lost between her and May.

And it wasn't as though they'd not touched. The nights she'd spent in their bed were beyond simple casual touches.

But it was all still very cautious. Those nights felt like a necessity borne out of overwhelming emotion. She and May had touched plenty — True Name had taken to resting her head in the other skunk's lap, enjoying doting affection — but she'd maintained a sheen of that True Name-brand polite professionalism with em. Friendly, to be sure, but still distant.

You can just ask, too, you know.

"Hey, True Name?"

"Mm?"

"Have things been awkward since the merge?"

She yawned and levered herself up to a sitting position again, rubbing her paws over her face. She certainly looked like she'd dozed off. "Awkward how?"

"Well, I mean, we spent all that time talking about May and I's relationship beforehand." Ey pushed emself up to sitting on the beanbag, as well, adding, "Which I have no clue how to feel

about, to be clear. Just asking.”

“Well, we are of one mind on that front, at least,” she said, grinning. “I have no idea, my dear. I am...I remain confused about the conflicting memories. Something about the base of my experience of you from the point of view of me *qua* True Name over the last few years feels more...real, perhaps. May I tell you something in confidence?”

Ey knit eir brow and nodded. “Of course.”

“Even at her friendliest and most open, May believed that these merges would make me, in some way, a more complete person. Even I began to believe such. The whole clade has spent too long accusing itself of being incomplete people based on our origins, perhaps.” She paused to collect her thoughts, looking down at her paws. “But she killed me, in her own kind way. She who was True Name is dead ((bring this up when Ioan’s mumbling)), and now I am of three minds. I am True Name and I am May and I am End Waking. There is some unified core — there must be — as I am not strictly May or End Waking, and perhaps that core will yet have some other name, but I am of three minds.”

“In terms of conflicts?”

She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I do not feel the pressure of merge conflicts. Not many, at least. I feel tripled. I feel now like True Name, perhaps, and then I feel like May and some time later I will feel like End Waking. I lack the language to describe it. I felt something similar when I was Michelle and Sasha, but even that was not the same. The reconciliation that remains is one of ensuring that those facets can coexist peacefully, as Sarah says.”

“I’m sorry, True Name, that sounds...I don’t even know. Impossible.”

“Oh, no, do not get me wrong,” she said, smiling. “It is not unpleasant. It is not what May — or even I — wanted, but it does not feel like a bad thing. It is difficult, however, as some contexts remain confusing. You are one of those contexts, dear.”

Not knowing what to say to that, ey simply nodded, feeling the flush of warmth to eir cheeks.

“Yes, see? Look at you.” She laughed. “It is complex for all of us. We are all hyper-aware of boundaries, not even wishing to test them. May is...of me, and now I am of her, so that boundary is smaller between us, perhaps, but we are all three very aware of your boundaries.”

“You’re telling me,” ey said, smiling cautiously. “Every time I think about it, I just wind up feeling super awkward and freeze up, so I have no clue as to how to even begin to approach it..”

“Well, here. May I sit next to you? If it is awkward, then it is awkward, but then at least we will know and quit fucking tiptoeing around the topic, yes?”

Ey stiffened, trying to cover a wave of anxiety with a chuckle of eir own. “Uh...well, sure.”

For all the confidence in her words, the skunk looked as jittery as ey felt, if the bristle to her tail and cant to her ears was anything to go by. Still, she pushed herself up off the couch to pad over to the beanbag and settle down next to em.

Or try to, at least. One does not simply sit next to someone else on a beanbag. The mechanics of an amorphous cushion had the skunk almost immediately slouching against eir side. She flailed, nearly elbowing em in the stomach in the process.

“Jesus...you would think...I would know how this works,” she growled, pushing at the cushion to try and get herself organized.

“Here, just– Oh.” Ey laughed as the skunk gave up and leaned forward with a groan, resting her elbows on her knees and her face in her paws. “I’d call that pretty awkward, though I don’t know if that’s what you meant.”

“Not exactly, no,” came her muffled voice. “But I also feel dreadfully overwhelmed.”

Ey leaned away from her as best ey could to give her some space. “Sorry, True Name.”

After a few slow breaths, she shook her head and slumped over to the side, draping herself across eir lap, face buried in the

beanbag on the other side of eir legs, a jumble of skunk. “This is stupid, Ioan. This is stupid and it is awkward and it is confusing, just as expected,” she grumbled. “Pet my ears, please.”

“Uh...yeah. Stupid, awkward, and confusing is about the long and short of it– What? Oh.” Ey hesitantly brushed fingers over her ears as ey’d done countless times before with May. Her fur felt exactly the same, her voice was very nearly the same, and were it not for the difference in clothes and the benefit of two and half decades of time spent living with May, ey could probably have confused one for the other. “Too awkward?”

“I do not know. The closer to another I get, the more May I feel, so the greater part of me is simply pleased to be touched, and by none other than you,” she mumbled against the beanbag. “But I am not her, so the rest of me is unsure of what to make of it. Completely baffled, even. Do I feel like her to you? We are cut from the same cloth, are we not? This ought to feel the same, yes? Does it?”

“Almost exactly,” ey said, then laughed. “And not at all.”

The skunk squirmed enough to get her tail off to the side and her face away from the fabric of the cushion, resting her chin on folded arms instead. “That is where I am. It is not unpleasant, and I think I may even enjoy it once the confusion subsides, but I will forever be of three minds.”

“Right. I think I understand a little better.”

She nodded. “It may yet be enough for Jonas, but even if not, I think that it will be enough for me. It is stupid and awkward, but– no, do not stop,” she interrupted herself, laughing, when ey pulled eir hand away. “Awkward, but not bad.”

They fell into thought, then. Or at least ey did. Ey kept up the careful petting while trying to tease apart eir feelings on the matter. It all felt too big, leaving em feeling in far over eir head. Even trying to define what True Name was now felt far above eir pay grade. Ey’d read up on plurality in the past, and this felt similar, yet inexact. The comparison was there to be made, and doubtless much that had gone in to working with plurality

would prove useful here, but the addition of the concurrent nature of their memories added a layer of complication.

Doubtless there was some way ey could just approach this simply, could just share uncomplicated time with friends. Something about the Odists just made that feel inaccessible, though. All of them were so complicated in such roundabout ways, and now True Name triply so.

If only I could just turn off the overthinking, ey thought. Aloud, ey said, “What do you think you’ll do after all of this?”

The skunk started at the sound of eir voice. “Sorry, dear. I was dozy. What was that?”

Ey smiled and ruffled a hand through the fur between her ears before petting it down again. “What will you do after this stuff with Jonas? You mentioned the change would be enough for you, but what will that look like?”

“I will relax,” she said, pushing herself slowly upright once more, slouching against eir side more intentionally, this time. “I will perhaps have a good night’s sleep. I will walk sims for days. I will go camping. I will pester you and May, if you two are not sick to death of me by then.”

“No, it’s fine. A break while you’re camping might be nice, but I don’t imagine we’ll kick you out forever and never see you again,” ey said, laughing. “And I hope you won’t disappear.”

“I will not, you need not worry.” She shrugged against eir shoulder. “Beyond that, I do not know. I may write.”

“What sorts of things?”

“Perhaps a companion volume to your *History*. Something from the inside, such as it were. I will have had three perspectives to draw upon without doing any interviews, yes?”

“That would’ve made life so much easier.”

“Why?” She said, smirking up towards em. “No shitty skunks getting you all worked up so that you yell at May?”

“I didn’t yell at her!” Ey shook eir head, laughing. “I just called her manipulative.”

“Yes, yes, and you called me a crazy in-law.” She patted eir

thigh. “But yes. I am most looking forward to just unclenching. I would like to travel and see friends and meet people.”

“Think you’ll try and meet Douglas and see Debarre again, like May said?”

There was a long silence, the skunk’s features drawn in in thought. “I remain of three minds. A third of me would like to bask in more solitude than I already have. Another third of me is filled with touch-hunger and love for friends I have never met and would like to surround myself with all these people.”

“And the True Name third?”

She sighed, bringing her tail around to groom it absentmindedly. “She is scared and unhappy and lost. She, of the three of me, is of two minds. Half of her would like to plan and scheme and wargame and rip that smug look off Jonas’s face, and the other half would...but, well, there has been enough quitting in the clade.”

Unsure of what ey could possibly say to those thoughts, ey just nodded.

“But come, that is enough of that,” she said decisively. “Five sixths of me still want to rip that smug look off Jonas’s face, so that sad-sack part of me can go have her sulk another time. I would also like to get out. I would like to go to restaurants again, yes, and even see one of your plays, should I be welcome. I want to eat greasy food and drink myself silly after performances. I want to hop sims and dream. New deadline: one month. I want out of here within one month.”

“You mean for the meeting with Jonas?”

“Yes. I will not schedule it with him yet, just pencil it in, but having that deadline will only help.”

“Well, we’ll help you get as ready as we can until then,” ey said. “And probably get ready ourselves. We’ll need to tell End Waking, too.”

“Of course, dear,” she said, then dotted her nose against ihr cheek, one of those skunk-kisses ey’d grown so used to.

They both froze.

“Fuck. I am sorry, Ioan, a habit–”

“Well, that was–” ey said at the same time, then shook eir head. “Sorry, True Name. Wasn’t expecting that.”

She pushed herself quickly to her feet and began pacing before the beanbag, paws brushing over her face, from whiskers all the way up over her ears. “Do not apologize. That crossed a boundary, and I need a moment.”

Ey frowned. “It was unexpected, but I don’t know if it crossed–”

“It crossed one of *my* boundaries,” she said, then forced herself to stand still and slow her breathing as she stared out into the night through the windows. “Sorry, dear. Like I said, it is awkward and confusing. I feel like I have been given control of some new, unwieldy machine and am only learning how to use it through trial and error.”

Ey nodded, tamping down the urge to apologize again. “Take the space you need.”

Her shoulders slumped. “I would like nothing more than to disappear out on the plain, but I should probably stop just running away from such things.” She smiled tiredly to em and held out a paw to help em stand. “Come. The least we can do is make dinner. Then we can discuss it further when your partner returns.”

May’s response to the discussion of encroached boundaries, later that night when she’d returned, knocked both Ioan and True Name off-kilter. She laughed and tousled both eir hair and the fur atop True Name’s head, saying, “Well, took you long enough.”

“Wait, what?” ey asked.

“I have been placing bets with myself on how long it would take until it came up. Whichever part of me guessed”the minute I leave you two alone together” wins, I guess.”

True Name stared coolly at her. “And here I was worried that you would blow up at me.”

((You can do better than this))

“Of course not, my dear. If you are like me, then I, of all people, can guess the hows and whys. My position remains that, so long as everything was discussed in the open, veto-able, and come by earnestly, we will make it work.” She smiled and sat beside True Name, patting the skunk’s paw. “Which is not to diminish *your* feelings on the matter. How are you doing?”

“If I say ‘confused’ one more time, I am going to lose my mind. I do not have a better word for it, though. I do not know how I feel about the touch itself. It was fine, I am sure, but I am starting to think that what is so jarring to me is that it was almost an automatic action.”

Ioan nodded. “It felt a bit incongruous because it’s a hundred percent something you’d do, May, but not the same context.”

“And perhaps that is why it feels fine to me: it is what I would do, I would expect nothing less from someone with so much of me as part of them now. I would like you both to feel comfortable, of course, but I am more...well, ‘concerned’ is not quite the right word, but attentive to the emotional side than you two just physically touching,” May said, shrugging. “Though I do appreciate you keeping me apprised. I trust you on that.”

“Well, thank you,” True Name said, rubbing at her face, though whether out of exhaustion or to forestall tears, ey couldn’t tell. “The other thing we discussed, though, was setting a deadline of one month to get this shit with Jonas out of the way.”

May perked up. “Are you feeling ready, then?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “I do not think I ever will, but there is little that I can do to change that. I will change and he will do whatever the fuck he wants and I will do my best to wash my hands of it. Will you be ready?”

“Sure. I do not imagine my part in it will be big. Just be there to witness, perhaps lose an instance if he decides to go after us, too. Have you spoken with End Waking?”

“I sent him a simplex message,” she said. “I will ping again tomorrow if he has not replied.”

“If he has not had another tree fall on him,” May grumbled. “And you, Ioan?”

Ey shrugged. “I’ve got my notes all in order. I don’t want to do it at all, but I’m ready, I guess. Did you talk with Debarre about this?”

“No. I...well, he is not ready to engage, I think. I would like End Waking to bring it up with him, if possible. I have meddled a bit much of late.”

True Name smirked, leaned over and tugged at May’s tail. “You have, yes.”

May pulled her tail around to hug it protectively. “Yes, yes. I know.”

The conversation trailed off from there, Ioan and May cozying up and chatting via sensorium messages once True Name had started to doze, using May’s thigh as a pillow. She caught em up on gossip from Debarre — one of his boyfriends visited and was, apparently, quote the looker — and ey accused her of leaving em for the weasel, as ey always did when she visited him.

Eventually, even they fell to silence, and when May started to nod off as well, ey roused the two skunks. “Come on, beds are comfier than couches.”

True Name nodded groggily and stood, swaying for a moment before gaining her balance once more. “Thank you two for talking this evening.”

“Would you like to stay with us tonight?” May asked. “If you are this exhausted, I imagine you need it.”

She stood silent for a few moments, then nodded. “If you are willing, yes. I am also happy to sleep out on the plain. Either would be good for me.”

May shrugged. “That is why I asked, yes.”

When May looked to em, ey sighed. “Perhaps tomorrow? Need a night to think on things.”

True Name’s face fell, but she bowed. “Of course, dear.”

Ey reached out and gave her paw a squeeze. “Thanks, True Name. Tomorrow.”

She smiled gratefully and, after a hug from May, made her way to her room and out to her tent on the plain, visible as a bobbing lantern moving through the grass.

Ioan and May made their way to their own bed and, once they were settled in, May asked, “I do not want to push, my dear, but I would like to hear your thoughts if you need to think on things.”

Ey stretched out on eir back and stared up at the ceiling, letting May settle in against eir side to use eir shoulder as a pillow. “As nerve-wracking as it was in the moment, I think I’m just...over it. Maybe it’s the fact that my introduction to your stanza was through you getting all cuddly that it just doesn’t feel like a huge deal to me.” Ey ducked eir chin to kiss atop her snout. “Though obviously it’s complicated, since that led to you and I getting together, but you’re also just a cuddly person all around.”

She tucked her snout up under eir chin, rubbing it against eir jaw at the ticklish kiss. “I am, at that. What do you mean by ‘over it’, though?”

“I guess after a certain point, it just felt like the anxiety about touch was wildly out of proportion to whatever worries I had.” Ey grinned, adding, “She just about fell over when she tried to sit on the beanbag. Would’ve been funnier if she hadn’t also started panicking.”

“I think she is struggling with touch-hunger, yes.”

“She said as much, yeah.” Ey shrugged, then mumbled an apology for jostling her. “I guess I’m just used to the fact that one just pets skunks.”

“That is just what one does,” May asserted. “And, I will note, not what you are doing right now.”

Ey laughed and ruffled a hand over her ears before petting the fur down again. “Fine, fine. But that’s what I mean, I guess. It’s just how skunks are. I’m sure some of it’s my denseness around this sort of thing at play, but what made me anxious was her freaking out. She’s done a pretty good job of taking our con-

cerns to heart, but I hadn't picked up on her own anxieties until then."

"Well, perhaps all of our preparations only made her more anxious," May mumbled, chin dipped low as ey rubbed behind her ears. "She still has all of those memories of solitude and professionalism, as well."

Given what True Name had said in confidence, ey could certainly imagine a boundary around physicality being tested even in the slightest pushing the May portion of her back and letting that of End Waking and True Name come to the fore. Ey supposed, had ey internalized that better beforehand, the conversation that had followed True Name's spike in anxiety would have been different, and perhaps more productive. Ey could have spoken to her as ey might have spoken to True Name *qua* True Name, rather than as ey might to May.

The context shift had just been so fast, though, and despite all the differences ey was primed to see between them, the two skunks still looked and sounded so much alike. Oh well. If it had been fast and confusing for em, doubtless such a shift would have been triply so for her.

"My dear, I do not know if you intended to say that out loud," May murmured. "May I respond to it?"

"Wait, what?" Ey jolted, leading May to sit up, so ey joined her. "Oh, damn. Uh...well, when did I start?"

"A context shift between me and True Name."

"Fuck." Ey rubbed eir hands over eir face and groaned. "Sorry, May. Uh, it was about something True Name shared in confidence."

She frowned, nodded. "I will not ask you to betray that, of course."

"Maybe I'm more stressed than I'm giving myself credit for, if my mumbling's getting that bad."

The skunk's expression softened and she leaned forward to dot her nose against eirs. "I do not blame you. There is so much going on these days."

Ey pressed eir nose to hers before leaning back and nodding. “Right, and I feel like it’s all super important all the time. Oh well. What were you going to say? If I can respond, I will.”

May shook her head, and nudged em to lay back down. “No, it is okay. Whether or not you answer is probably too much information to share. I think we are both perhaps too stressed to continue, anyway.”

When she lay back down as well, ey wrapped eir arms around her and drew her in for a squeeze. “Agreed,” ey said, voice muffled by her soft fur. “Maybe just focus on being cozy for a bit. Can you teach me how to go into screen-saver mode?”

She laughed and squirmed back against em. “You are an enormous nerd and I love you a lot, Ionuț. I would, but you would just mumble more, I am sure.”

Ioan had never been one for bars. Ey knew that there was an enormous variety of them, and that doubtless some would play to eir aesthetic and likes — the one at the base of the System Central Library came quite close — and that not all of them subscribed to the “if it’s louder, that means everyone’s having more fun” school of design.

There was just something about the idea, perhaps. Too much that took place in bars was, at best, confusing. At worst, it was distressing. Ey had no desire to be around the types of drunkenness that bars seemed to attract. May had a list of types of drunkenness she’d gotten from somewhere, ey knew, and ey didn’t like any of them.

Still, this is where Jonas had requested that they meet when ey messaged him.

The venue was of the sultry, dark, wood-paneled variety, with warm, dim lamps hanging pendant over each of the tables and a row of lights above the bar itself. Conversations were kept low by the dimness, with groups of three or four huddled in booths while those at the bar drank alone.

Doubtless Jonas knew of eir distaste, as well, and doubtless this had factored into his decision on venue for this pre-meeting meeting. Ah well, at least it wasn't a club.

Ey stopped by the bar to get a cider of some sort — something sweet; ey didn't know the first thing about ciders — and hunted down an empty booth. The backs of the benches were straight and high, reaching up to the ceiling, leading to a secluded, if not particularly comfortable, space. There, ey sat and sipped eir way slowly through eir cider, waiting for Jonas.

Ey'd shown up, notebook in hand, half an hour early and was half expecting Jonas to be late, sauntering in lazily at quarter past, just as some strange show of power, but he arrived right on time, picked up a drink from the bar, and hunted Ioan down. Ey began to stand to bow to Jonas, then froze. Zacharias stepped into the sim, as well, grinned widely at the sight of Ioan mid-bow and, before even making his way to the table, gave an exaggerated curtsy.

"Ioan, wonderful to see you again," Jonas said, grinning. "My most foppish lackey decided to tag along, I trust you won't mind."

"Of course," ey said through gritted teeth. "The more the merrier."

"Precisely, precisely." Jonas raised his martini glass in a toast and gestured back to the booth and Ioan's half-finished drink. "Shall we?"

Ey nodded and slid back into the booth while Jonas scooted in on the other side of the table, leaving room for Zacharias.

The fox was only a moment in arriving, showing up with some shockingly yellow drink in a coupe glass. "Ioan, my dear. Wonderful to see you again."

"Please don't call me 'my dear'," ey said, setting up a cone of silence. There was anger, there, somewhere beneath the surface, but ey was somewhat surprised to feel it almost completely overridden by exhaustion, something ey hadn't felt before the two had arrived.

“My love? My—” he began, voice mocking. There was a thump beneath the table and he quickly cut off with a loud yelp, jolting away from Jonas, eyes wide.

“Shut up, Zacharias,” Jonas said mildly, plucking the maraschino cherry out of his drink and dropping it in Zacharias’s. “Business now, prattle later.”

The fox sat, frozen, for a moment longer before wiping up some of his spilled drink with a bar napkin. His eyes were still wide, darting between Ioan and his boss. “Right.”

Another show of power, most likely, ey thought. Why else bring him with?

“So,” ey said aloud. “As I said in the message, We’d like to meet in two days’ time. Systime 251+139, 11:00.”

Mid-sip, Jonas waved his hand vaguely. “Of course, of course,” he said, setting his glass back down. “Whenever you’re ready, like I said. But come, how are you Ioan? You look tired.”

Ey stared at him, trying to piece together how worth it was to actually answer the question. Ey was tired, yes. The night before had been a stressful one once ey’d received the request for a meeting from Jonas. True Name stayed up late in conversation with both May and End Waking about some clade business ey’d not been privy to, leading to em pacing in the darkened yard for nearly an hour, spring lilacs leaving the air almost too heady to breathe. Ey’d eventually given up on waiting for the skunks. Ey knew if ey stayed up any later, ey’d simply wind up standing at the windows and watching their fire out on the plain.

“I think I’m going to head to bed,” ey sent May. “I’m just going to keep cycling if I stay up.”

There was a hint of a whine to her reply. “I am sorry, Ioan, I did not realize how late it had gotten. Do you want me to send a fork back?”

“I don’t know, will they be intolerable and antsy?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she replied, and ey could hear the grin in her voice. “But I will still send one if you would like.”

“No, no. It’s alright. Just no sleeping out there, okay?”

“Of course. We will return soon.”

It was nearly two hours later when the skunks returned as promised. Two hours of tossing and turning in bed, fretting and fretting and fretting. Eventually, they fell into their usual positions, though despite the added rest that this usually brought True Name, none of them slept well.

When there was no wink and smile from Jonas, ey let eir shoulders sag and nodded. "Tired, yeah. We're all tired. Just want this shit over with."

"And True Name? How's she?" he asked, still apparently sincere.

"Look, Jonas, what are you after? We're tired. She's upset. We just want to get on with our lives, and it's all on you."

"Well, sure, but now my workload's doubled," he said, and there, at last was the wink. "Though in all seriousness, I'm just trying to gauge what to expect. May Then My Name and End Waking will be there, too, right?"

"Yes," ey said coolly, adding to Zacharias, "Will you?"

"Would not miss it for the world," the fox said. His ebullience was notably restrained, still, but the grin had returned. He tapped the side of his snout, "Cartoonishly evil, remember?"

I liked you better when Jonas was stomping on your toes, ey thought.

"So you said," ey said aloud.

"And how is May Then My Name?" Zacharias asked. "I know precious little about my down-tree instance, you know. I trust that she is well?"

"She is also upset."

The fox gasped, mock-effrontery filling his voice. "Not because of me!"

"It has been a stressful few months. She doesn't want True Name coming to any harm, either."

Zacharias scoffed.

Ey put on eir best smile. "Though yes, she told me that she knew there were still old forks around, but that she'd left them to their own devices and knew nothing about them, so she's sur-

prised to have met you.”

“How very diplomatic,” he replied, grinning. “Well, I can assure you that the pleasure was all mine.”

“So why am I here?”

Jonas shrugged. “You mean aside from the fact that I get to see your face when you talk about your skunks? It’s fun dragging people round.”

Restraining the urge to bridle at ‘your skunks’, ey gave a hint of a bow. “And what can you tell me about this meeting? I imagine you’ve got some grand plans about surprising True Name with your ideas for the future, but if nothing else, it’d help me to know what I’m getting into before I get into it.”

“Oh, excellent question!”

Ey posted the cap of eir pen and nodded for Jonas to continue.

“I said it was an excellent question, not that I’d answer you, Ioan.”

“I think you will.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because you love to hear yourself talk,” ey said. “And because Zacharias is right. This is almost cartoonishly evil, and villains love talking about their grand schemes. I’m ready for your monologue.”

Jonas raised his eyebrows and a slow grin spread over his features. “You see, this is why I like you, Ioan. The whole Bălan clade, that is. You hit that sweet spot between patient and impatient where you can stay calm, but you you don’t just wait forever.”

Ey waited.

“Alright, then, a bit of a preview.” He finished half of his drink in a few swallows. “There’s a bunch of changes coming in the pipeline—”

“This AVEC?”

Zacharias frowned, but Jonas was already nodding, “Got it in one. That’s right at the top of the list. See, that one requires some

hardware changes that neither of the LVs are going to be able to manage, and that puts us in a unique position, here. Suddenly, the we differ from the LVs in a fundamental way. I really can't overstate how big of a deal this is, Ioan."

"Suddenly we have to prove our greener grass to those phys-side?"

"Right. The direction that we need to take with Lagrange can't just be the same old one we've been taking before. In this, True Name and I disagreed." He shrugged, rocking his glass gently back and forth on the table before taking another sip. "She wanted continue on her path of subtlety, I disagreed."

"Disagreed? You tried to assassinate her, Jonas."

He shrugged. "What are bullets but a disagreement?"

Ioan rolled eir eyes.

"We disagree, then. It's like I said, though, sometimes mommies and daddies fight, Ioan. We've spent the past few years trying to hash it out. For all her focus on subtlety in guiding the system, she can be a real bitch when it comes to trying to get her point across."

"Bullshit," ey said flatly.

Jonas laughed. "Oh?"

"Yeah. A few reasons." Ey started ticking off points on eir fingers as ey spoke. "First, True Name didn't start down this path in the last few years that we've been learning from Artemis; she was a mess when she first got in touch with us with Codrin#Artemis's first letter around the convergence, so things were already in motion then. Second, The Guiding Council on Pollux is more than a decade old now, predating the arrival of the Artemisians by nearly ten years, and I think that's because third, you—" Ey nodded to Zacharias. "—apparently dropped everything on her across all three systems at the same time not that long after the launch. You two got more openly together on Pollux, and as far as Codrin#Castor can find in the perisystem, you quit shortly after telling her there. End Waking thinks — and I agree — you're trying to push each of the Systems in a different

direction politically. Maybe you think having different political environments is more stable across societies separated by distance and time. Maybe it's some giant experiment. Who knows. It's your long game."

The longer ey spoke, the more serious Jonas's expression grew, and by the time ey finished, he'd leaned back in his seat. "Well then," he said. "I suppose I don't have much more to add, then, do I? I have my conversation with True Name cut out for me."

"And what conversation is that?"

Jonas was back to grinning. "Oh, fuck off, Ioan. I'm not going to tell you all of my secrets! We have our shit to work through and you have to be a good little clerk and take all of your notes so that you can come back to me with a story. That'll seal the deal, and we'll be ready to go our separate ways."

Ey gave a hint of a bow. "As you say. It's settled, then, right? Two days, 11:00?"

"That it is. Bring your pen and paper," Jonas said, lifting his glass in another toast before downing his drink in one go.

"Right."

Ey didn't hear if there was a reply or not. Ey simply quit. #Tracker could take care of the rest.

Ioan#Tracker set eir pen down with exaggerated care, closing eir notebook, then eir eyes. This was anger in so many ways, though it differed from that hot, spiky shape spinning within em that came with Zacharias's bullshit. It was a pressure within eir chest, a tension in eir shoulders, a pounding in eir head.

"Fuck," ey shouted. Ey fell back into the paced breathing exercises that Sarah had showed em years ago. It had been in the context to help May, at the time, but ey needed anything ey could get, now.

"*I take it you are back, then?*" May's words over the sensorium message were tentative, anxious. Clearly everyone's tension was still lingering.

"*Yes. I'm coming outside,*" ey replied.

Ey didn't wait for the ping of acknowledgement. Even if they weren't ready for em to be out there, ey needed to pass at least something on. Ey needed to be around eir partner and friends. Ey needed to be out of that context, away from pens and paper and books and work.

The afternoon was settling into evening, and the plain was littered with dozens of skunks. As ey walked toward True Name's tent, though, they began to quit in small groups until it was just the three root instances kneeling around a small fire, over which they were roasting sausages.

After bowing to End Waking and getting eir hug and skunk-kiss from both May and True Name, ey sat cross-legged between them and, once ey'd gathered emself, said, "That was a whole lot of bullshit. How far off is food?"

End Waking used the tip of his knife to nudge at a few of the sausages, turning them over on the grill cantilevered over the fire. "Not long. Would you prefer to wait to share, then?"

"Yeah. Maybe if I have food in me, I won't shout."

"That was quite loud, my dear," May said, claiming one of eir hands to hold in her paw. "I am glad you did not die."

Dinner was quiet, but not unpleasant. Gentle wind through the grass, the crackling of the fire and the spit of grease from the sausages, the gamy tang of ground venison tempered with barley and herbs.

"Did he wind you up that badly?" May asked.

"Well, yes and no. He and Zacharias were both there."

Both May and True Name flinched at the name, True Name's shoulders slumping. "So, yes. Winding you up."

Ey nodded. "I'd guessed that much, at least. I think the whole meeting was a form of that. He even admitted such, saying that he set it up mostly so that he could 'drag me around'. I called him on it."

"I do not imagine that did any good," End Waking mumbled.

"Oh, not at all. The thing is, it wasn't just winding me up, though. I also think he just wanted to hear himself talk. I think

he wanted to talk about all his plans because he knows his words are going to wind up in whatever I write, so he wants to get all that he can in there.”

“And worded as he would like,” True Name said, nodding. “No matter what we manage to come up with, he wants to ensure that the narrative has him coming out on top.”

“I still don’t understand, though,” ey said. “Why be so transparently villainous if he’s specifically having me write something for public consumption.”

“The same reason I wound you and Codrin up. If it is just a little too sensational to be real, then he can get away with more than he might otherwise. Jonas assassinating True Name? True Name who probably already assassinated Qoheleth? It is just too much to be real, but it sure is good reading, is it not?”

“Makes me feel like something of a punching bag,” ey said, then sighed. “I think I’m starting to understand what Codrin#Castor was talking about in terms of getting yanked about a bit better.”

True Name winced and averted her gaze. “I am sorry, Mx. Bălan.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” Ey reached over to give the skunk’s paw a squeeze. “That was a different you, I’m not trying to put that on you now.”

She patted the back of eir hand with her other paw, a somewhat stiff gesture, and, as always when the topic of strife in the past came up, ey could see more of End Waking in her than True Name or May. “Thank you, Ioan. I do appreciate it. It is an unfortunate reality that politics is the science of yanking people around. Add in being an actor, and, well,” she said, then shrugged.

“I understand, yeah.” Ey retrieved eir hand, choosing instead to gently tug May closer. She leaned against eir side gratefully. “Do you have a plan you think might work out, then? Don’t have to tell me, I know you’re keeping it amongst yourselves.”

End Waking nodded. “There is a good chance of it working,

yes. Not a perfect chance, and there are many possible holes that he may exploit in the moment.”

True Name nodded. “If nothing else, I think that it will buy me a quiet retirement.”

“A quiet retirement alive is still good, right? It’ll be a life,” ey said.

“It may not be an ideal life, but it will be a life, yes.”

“And hopefully still a good one, in the end,” May added.

“Yes. If I am honest, a less than ideal but still good life is far more than I had in front of me even before all of this nonsense.” She smiled, faint but true. “Perhaps I ought to thank him for that. I am not unhappy with what I have now, even.”

The conversation wound down from there, and as evening dimmed into night, they fell into silence. The fire was kept low, only enough light and warmth to keep the dark at bay.

Eventually, with eir lower back hurting and May starting to nod off, they made their goodnights. True Name gave May and em a hug around the shoulders and a nose-dot to the cheek in turn and padded off to her tent. End Waking stated that he was going to watch the fire for a while longer and then head to bed himself — he’d set up a tent of his own a ways off from True Name’s for this fork to sleep in — leaving May and Ioan to walk back to the house together in the dark.

“I’m happy to hear her talking about a future,” Ioan said, once they’d cleaned up and made their way to bed, em slouched against the headboard and May in eir lap, slouched against eir front in turn.

“I am too, yes. I am pleased that other than a few short fits, she has been at worst determined, and at best hopeful.”

Ey nodded and tucked eir chin up over the skunk’s head. “I think that’s where I am, yeah. I want this over with, and sometimes it even feels like this might even be the best outcome for everyone.”

“For everyone?”

“Well, Jonas gets what he wants and he can go play his games

elsewhere, and True Name gets to go live a life doing whatever it is she wants, right?"

She nodded. "And what of us?"

Ey chuckled, the sound somewhat muffled by the position. "Well, I'll be happy for her, and you and I will continue being disgustingly adorable or whatever it is she accuses us of being."

May laughed. "Well, yes. I will be happy for her and will continue loving you."

"Love you too, May."

"See? Gross." She laughed and hugged tighter around eir middle. "Will you let her continue to live here?"

Shrugging carefully, ey murmured, "It'll be a conversation between the three of us. I've gotten used to it, I'd love to have her stick around if she wants."

"Same," the skunk mumbled. "It is not perfect, but nothing that cannot be fixed by modifying the sim and nailing down some boundaries."

"I'm looking forward to getting in touch with Serene, yeah." Ey hesitated, then asked gently, "Are there boundaries she's crossed?"

"No, no. I do not think so, but it might be nice to understand the shape of our friendships when we are not waiting on some potentially life-or-death event."

"I still get tripped up over you even calling her a friend," ey said, grinning. "If she'd needed to move in even a year ago, I think you would've ripped her head off two days in."

May laughed and lifted her snout to nudge at eir chin firmly. "Would not. I would have been impossible to live with, though. Whining and bitching and stress-shedding everywhere."

"Oh, so like normal, then."

She sat up in eir lap and poked em in the chest with a dull claw. "Rude."

Ey grinned. "Well, okay, not stress-shedding, just normal shedding."

She scrubbed a paw at her flank until she came up little bit of

shed fur — ‘skunk pixels’, she’d called it at one point, and it had stuck — to sprinkle over eir front. “Yes, yes. But I can say the same for you, my dear. A year ago, I do not think I could have pictured her giving you a goodnight kiss.”

Covering for the heat rising to eir cheeks by brushing the errant fur off eir front, ey shrugged. “I’m used to skunks being all touchy, thanks to you.”

“Yes, but True Name?”

“I’m not sure she’s that anymore,” ey said carefully. “So I guess you’re right. I couldn’t imagine the True Name of a year ago giving goodnight kisses to anyone, much less you and me.”

She grinned, nodding. “Agreed, yes. And you are okay with it?”

Ey shrugged. “Like I said, I’m used to it. It occasionally strikes me as incredibly strange. Even just talking about it now feels weird. There’s this whole, dramatic plot to take out one of the most prominent people on the System, and here we are, talking about goodnight kisses.”

“It is not that weird. It is an artifact of our lives. Death has a different flavor to it when we fork and quit on a whim, living for centuries at a time.” She set to work brushing her fingers through eir hair. Weird to be petted, but it felt good, so ey never stopped her. She continued, “Which is not to say that it is important and anxiety inducing to have almost lost one’s life, just that, with a modicum of care, she *can* continue living, even if in a restricted fashion. With less fear of death comes greater love.”

Eyes closed and chin tucked nearly to eir chest, ey hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose, yeah. I didn’t have much life outside the System that I can compare, never mind love.”

May giggled. “I was not speaking of romance, my dear.”

Ey snorted, shaking eir head. “Neither was I, you nut. I just meant Dragoş and my parents.”

“Well, touché. We do not have very good language around love, in my defense.” She ruffled eir hair and ey could hear the smirk in her voice as she said, “Not that that will ever stop me

from teasing you about falling in love with her.”

Ey laughed and poked at her side a few times, hunting for a ticklish spot. “Who’s rude now, hmm?”

Giggling helplessly, May squirmed until she tipped off eir lap, curling protectively into a ball. “It is just so easy, Ionuț, do not blame me!”

“I know, I know, and it’s your job as an Odist to fuck with me, *et cetera, et cetera*,” ey said, sipping down into bed alongside the skunk, getting eir arms around her. “I like her, but...well, whatever. It’s complicated.”

She twisted in eir arms and wormed her way back against em, shaking her head. “No, you cannot just leave it at that. You have further thoughts and I want to hear.”

“Further ammo for teasing, you mean.”

“Well, yes, but I do still want to hear.”

Ey sighed. “Fine, fine. I just...well, I guess I’m sort of in the same boat as her, in that it’s something I can picture, even if I can’t understand it. She’s enough like you — in terms of looks and voice as well as personality from the merge — that I can imagine what that’d be like, and both she and End Waking are my friends, so there’s that, too. But the context of her being True Name makes it hard to picture the...I don’t know. Process?”

“The concept versus the mechanics, maybe?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Ey grinned and kissed the back of one of her ears. “But that’s about as far as I get thinking about it before I’m distracted by this or that.”

“Organizing your pen collection is usually what I accuse you of,” she said.

“Mmhm. I guess it’s the same as when you and I got together. I could kind of picture it, but had no clue beyond that.”

She hugged eir arm to her front and nodded. “Well, whatever happens, happens. We will talk about it.”

“Another time,” ey mumbled, pushing eir face into her soft fur. “I can’t imagine I’m going to be able to sleep tomorrow night, so we might as well get some tonight.”

“I cannot help but feel that I am walking into my own execution, tomorrow,” True Name admitted. “I know that I am leaving behind a fork, that I will not be completely destroyed, but that does not wholly negate the sense of impending death.”

Ioan and May both nodded.

“Is it just the finality of it all?” May asked.

“Perhaps. Perhaps it is just the inability to predict beyond that point. I am coming up to a corner I have never seen around, and whatever predictive powers I may have fail me.”

Ioan could at least understand the worries about heading into the unknown. The same feeling had been dogging em since after eir meeting with Jonas, since ey’d seen that cool look on his face when ey’d apparently preempted so much of the upcoming meeting’s discussion. One minute, that felt like a good thing — perhaps they would make it through essentially unscathed — and the next ey’d worry that ey’d made a complete mistake, that ey’d somehow tipped their hand by letting Jonas know just how predictable he was.

Neither True Name nor May could say one way or another when ey’d voiced eir concerns with them.

The whole day had been scattered for them. May spent much of it glued to eir side as ey did eir best to organize eir notes for the upcoming meeting in eir head. She couldn’t seem to pin herself down to one set of feelings, first laughing and joking about beating Zacharias up, then burying her face against eir shoulder and refusing to speak, ears laid flat.

For her part, True Name couldn’t seem to stay pinned to any one of her three ‘minds’ as she had come to call them.

Ey was getting more adept at spotting them in her features. There was a bright attentiveness when that of True Name — the old True Name — in her came to the fore. Her expression would become attentive, defaulting to a slight smile and eyebrows (such as they were on a skunk’s features) just slightly

raised. When that of End Waking showed itself in her, she'd keep her eyes half-lidded, and her gaze was far more attuned to any movement. The rest of her own movements would still, as well. She would walk quieter, more gracefully. She would speak less.

And when that of May came to the fore, that was when ey was at eir most confused.

Ey had had no idea how to feel about her back when she was just True Name. Had ey really been so hesitant to call her a friend? Memories tattled on em, there: ey'd shied away from the term, or qualified it every time it arose. That had only loosened up when her life was at risk, when she'd been forced to move in with them, and ey'd been forced in turn to acknowledge that her words, *I suppose it is just nice to have a friend*, had stuck with em more than ey'd cared to admit. The rest of that conversation had been full of equivocations, clarifications, delineations, and all those habits of guardedness from two decades of wariness over anything that smelt of manipulation had tried to assert themselves over em once more.

But no, there was something about the Ode clade that just happened to click with the Bălan clade, no matter what form or name they took, that just fell directly into friendship. It was the way they spoke, perhaps. Those complete sentences that left em uncoiling parts of emself ey hadn't known were coiled in the first place.

Ey didn't know what it was that they saw in em in turn. There was the unspoken matter of the pronouns of the owner of the Name, and, as May had once whispered to em late one night, eir tendency to lean on rumination, on quietness and exactitude, that reminded her of someone she refused to name. Were they so alike, em and whoever had touched Michelle Hadje so long ago? Ey had no clue how to ask such a thing of them.

All ey knew is that, as Codrin had put it, "The Odists loved hard and they loved deep and they loved fast, and it was hard not to become intoxicated beneath all that love."

So, what was ey to do when that of eir partner, of the one ey

loved most in the world, shone through in someone else? When that of May rose to prominence in True Name's expression, she was not May. She wasn't May at all. She was of three minds, and none of them were wholly absent whenever one asserted primacy.

And yet there it was, all that drew em towards May, even if it wasn't her, right in front of em. What was ey to do with that?

That ey didn't know, that ey hadn't the language, kept em from speaking of it with True Name just yet. It wasn't out of any need to hide, not out of any embarrassment — though ey'd freely admit to eir shyness — that ey kept it from her. Ey just didn't know how to say that, when she seemed most like May, ey was at eir most confused without turning it into a series of questions and I-don't-knows.

The one time ey'd brought it up with May, the idea still as yet unseasoned, she had done as she ever would, and teased em gently about 'falling in love with her' and then settled into a series of gently probing questions, trying to tease out things that ey already knew but did not yet have the language for.

It hadn't gone anywhere. Ey'd eventually had to put the conversation on hold out of a combination of stress and the feeling that ey ought to keep True Name's discussion on her multiplicity in the face of May's desire for some more complete unity to emself.

So they did what they could to prepare or relax the rest of that last day. True name walked her prairie several times over, then came in and sat close by, then busied herself up in her head. May clung to em. Ey sorted notes.

There was no discussion whether or not she would be staying with them that night. The three of them simply wound up in eir and May's bed, sitting or kneeling on the soft mattress while they did their best to talk about nothing at all. Ioan tried to explain Romanian curses to them. May and True Name spoke earnestly about a movie ey'd never heard of. And under it all, an ever-rising current of stress lay, slowly taking over their words

until they couldn't speak any longer, could only curl beneath the covers, sharing some more fundamental comfort.

Surprising all three of them, they did manage to get at least some sleep that night. It wasn't *good* sleep, as, at one point or another, each of them woke with a start, but they managed a few hours of at least dozing.

Once the sky began to lighten, though, they pulled themselves blearily out of bed, Ioan making four mugs of coffee — two black, two sweet and milky — so that they could troop back out onto the plain and wake End Waking up, or at least greet him at the small fire he'd started, and offer him a cup of coffee.

"There is no more rehearsing to be done," he said, once they'd shed some of their grogginess. "We risk practice making permanent, at this point. All we can do is hope to remain as centered as possible throughout."

Both of the other skunks nodded, and Ioan had to quell eir instinct to disagree. They were too tired, too keyed up, too quick to overanalyse to get anything out of forking across the prairie to wargame however many countless scenarios. Better for the four of them to sit around the low fire, sip their coffee, and watch the sun rise, May slouched against eir side and True Name and End Waking sitting apart, silent.

Eventually, however, coffee long gone, they forked. End Waking and True Name's down-tree instances each went to their tents to sit and meditate as best they could, while May and Ioan's down-tree instances returned home to try baking a cake — something demanding enough while still remaining relatively mindless.

The four forks linked hands and paws and with nothing other than a shared shaky breath, stepped from the sim.

End Waking immediately flinched. They found themselves in a boardroom. A large plain of a table, notepads and pens, a table against the wall with a pitcher of water and a stack of too-small glasses.

And yet it still felt too small — even to Ioan, who spent more

of eir life inside than unbound in a forest, the ceiling was just a few inches too low, the chairs just a few inches too close to the walls. Too small, and yet too long. There was room for a table half again as long, and yet the table was huddled in one end of the room, leaving the other end empty and unbalanced. End Waking, who hadn't been indoors, never mind in a room too small, in nigh on a century, looked on the verge of panic. His eyes were wide, tail hiked and bristled, paws clenched in a way that reminded em even of May.

"I do not know if I can—"

May squeezed his paw tightly. "You do not need to keep these memories, skunk, but you cannot leave." She added in a near whisper, "Please do not leave me."

His nod was jerky, distracted, but was still a nod.

And yet, the room was empty. *Perfect time to pull the late-to-the-meeting power move.*

Sure enough, 11:00 rolled around, no Jonas.

It wasn't until nearly ten minutes later that the door swung lazily open and Jonas strolled in, followed by Zacharias and the rest of the eighth stanza strolled in — *no, Zacharias is part of that, too, ey thought. There's only Odists, Jonas, and me here.*

"True Name! Delighted to see you, delighted," Jonas said, grinning widely and giving the barest hint of a bow.

The skunk had apparently amped up all that she could of her old self, as her smile was earnest and wide, and her bow the perfect mix of polite and friendly. "Glad you could make it, my dear. I trust you have been well?"

He shifted smoothly to accommodate this response. "Quite well, quite well. Feels like it's been a bit of a vacation for the both of us, eh? You enjoy a bit of time off at the lake?"

That grin of hers widened, and she nodded. "Quite a bit, actually. We never quite got to roasting marshmallows, but it is really hard to go wrong with potatoes roasted in the embers. They get a little smoky, even the insides."

End Waking stared at True Name as though she was an

Artemisian, suddenly having made their way across the light-days back to Lagrange. Hell, Ioan was staring at her like she was an alien. So quickly and smoothly had her anxiety been transmuted into this calm, friendly social efficiency that it was as though the last months had been erased from her features.

There was some other conversation going on here, too, ey realized. It wasn't just that they were talking pleasantries before a meeting, but that there was some exchange of information that took place on some higher plane of existence. They were feeling each other out, listening to tone of voice more than the content of words, watching features and postures rather than seeing an old friend. There was some deeper level of communication that ey simply couldn't latch onto.

At least, with that in mind, ey could do eir best to focus on the subtler forms of language around the room.

True Name had talked em through the stanza and their roles beforehand, at least. She had been focused on the politics, of course, but also acted as consensus builder among the members of her stanza.

Ey knew well that May had been focused on swaying individual hearts and minds toward a cause that initially had been True Name's, and then later simply shaped by her as best as could be managed.

End Waking had been instrumental in tracking, understanding, and to to whatever level possible, influencing financial markets phys-side, though he'd admitted to Ioan, one night out on the plain, that the chances that he'd actually had any effect on the markets was astoundingly low and that the financial trajectory had likely been set by forces larger than they could manage — at least, that was the hope that had kept him going.

Ey knew the two 'Why's from the history: Why Ask Questions, Here At The End Of All Things was the frightfully friendly crowd-rouser who had worked with groups of individuals sys-side, while Why Ask Questions When The Answers Will Not Help had focused on similar tactics phys-side. However, given that

her task was limited to text, she seemed notably out of her element in in-person interactions, coming off as petty and cruel as often as funny and sarcastic.

The Only Time I Dream Is When I Need An Answer had acted as a manager, scheduler, and clerk for the enterprise. Frightfully intelligent, She had done more than block in times for meetings; she had organized meetings between the right individuals at the right times.

To Know One's True Name Is To Know God had settled firmly into data analysis, collecting both the raw data that she could from the perisystem feeds and the net phys-side as well as the information collected by her cocladists and the Jonases. She was a being of reports.

To Know God Is To Answer Unasked Questions had done her best to specialize in the fields of information and game theory, but this had more often come down to simple information security and hygiene. She decided where and how far information traveled.

Do I Know God When I Do Not Remember Myself and Do I Know God When I Do Not Dream worked as a mismatched pair. When I Do Not Remember worked as a propagandist while When I Dream worked almost entirely on the perisystem, translating back and forth for her cocladists and finding the best way to worm her way through the intersystem text channels.

Were ey pressed to name each of them without knowing this information, ey didn't think ey'd be able to. Ey knew the three skunks of the clade and could readily tell them apart, but the rest simply looked like a gaggle of the very same woman: short, soft, round face and curly black hair. However, there were indeed differences there. Why Ask Questions was just a centimeter or two taller and more open of expression. When I Do Not Remember and When I Dream both had a hunch to their shoulders that ey could not quite explain; perhaps a posture that stuck after too much writing.

As it was, ey could do eir best to guess, and when introduc-

tions made their way around the table, ey found eir guests to be correct to the last.

At last, the parade of bows and greetings out of the way, each of the twelve — for Jonas and Zacharias added to the stanza — pulled out a chair and sat down, though ey noted that End Waking didn't sit so much as hover on the very edge of his seat. He still looked wide-eyed, feral.

"Aaalright," Jonas said, plopping his hands, palm down, on the table. "To business. I'm pleased to see you're alive, but can't say that I'm pleased to see you're about."

"I imagine not, no," True Name replied, folding her paws on the table before her. "From what Ioan says, you know the general facts of what I know. There has been a long-running plan, perhaps mostly operating as a back-up plan, to shift one or more of me to the side depending on the status of the System. This revolved around the use of Zacharias as a tool to shape my responses while the incomplete information kept me from recognizing this. Tell me, though. Are you leaning on the multiple-Systems-multiple-governments strategy?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes. Oligarchy on Pollux, *status quo* on Castor, and invisible monarchy here on Lagrange."

"You still believe that this tripod will be the most stable structure?"

"I know you don't agree, but it's not a tripod, True Name. By this point, the three Systems are so far apart that they are no longer three branches of the same government. They're three countries, and three countries with identical governments yet divergent societies are unstable."

True Name made that setting-aside gesture, as thought tabling the topic for the moment. "And you," she said, nodding to Zacharias. Her expression was calm, curious, interested. "You have been working with Jonas since around 2180?"

"Oh, thereabouts," he said, grinning. "Though if I am honest, I have always been working with the two of you. It is not that your own goals had no effect on me, my little stink-bug. I played

Jonas as much as I played you, and I played my own game when I could.”

“Bullshit,” True Name said calmly, turning back to Jonas. “And so what is it that—”

“Oh, fuck off,” Zacharias laughed. “You do not get to dismiss me so easily. You and I rule together, quite literally, in another life. There is no reason that I should simply be waved away.”

“Nah, it’s bullshit,” Jonas said, just as calm as True Name. “If you were worth anything to this conversation, you would’ve been part of the preparations.”

“What—”

“You’re part of the stanza, aren’t you?”

“I am, but—”

Jonas laughed, “Just shut up, Zacharias.”

“No,” the fox growled, his whiskers all abristle and claws digging at the tabletop. “I played my role, but that does not mean that I am some disposable nothing, here. A role is as much the actor as it is— *stop!*”

There was a loud thump beneath the table, though this time, Zacharias appeared to have pulled his foot away in time to keep his toes from being stamped on, as he instead pushed himself away from the table and to his feet. A brief flicker of something akin to rage flashed across Jonas’s face, but was quickly replaced by that bright, friendly grin.

“Fine, fuck you too, then.”

There was a no signal — or if there was, Ioan missed it — for Guōwēi to step into the sim, hand already raised as if for a slap, a short blade held between his fingers. Unassuming, easy to carry, symbolic, and certainly crowded with whatever it was that induced a crash in one’s instance.

What happened next happened almost too quickly for em to comprehend. Zacharias shouted, but the cry was cut off in a muffled *oomf* as an instance of May appeared by him, almost totally overlapping the space that he’d occupied, knocking him backwards with enough force to slam him against the door, leaving

him to crumple to the floor.

Guōwei's palm came down flat against May's shoulder, but there was no time to see whether or not the virus would affect an instance so far diverged, as that instance of her quit and was immediately replaced with another, this overlapping the assassin's space, knocking him back nearly a meter, only for another instance of the skunk to fork again. With the momentum already in play, this practically sent the man flying, his head cracking against the wall hard enough to leave a sizeable dent in the dry-wall.

And then it was over. Zacharias's yell faltered, and he stared up, wide eyed, with his gaze darting between the remaining instance of May and Jonas. The latter had lurched away, looking more disgusted than startled.

"Get the fuck out of here," the instance of May growled. "And if I ever, *ever* see you again, you had better believe that I will take you out myself."

And then the instance quit, followed less than a second later by the fox rolling to the side to slip out of the sim. Ey imagined that if Jonas, True Name, and May would all do their best to destroy the fox on sight, the chances of seeing him again were low indeed.

"What just happened?" ey whispered to May, who gave eir hand a squeeze in her paw and shook her head. Ey'd have to find out after.

"Are we done fucking around, yet?" True Name asked, voice flat. "Because I just want to know what it is that you want of me so that I can get back to my life."

"Your *life*?" Jonas asked, incredulous. "You want to get back to your life?"

"Life, yes," she said. "Alive. Living. I want to get back to breathing and eating and drinking and sleeping. Do not take my words too far."

He laughed, shooting his cuffs. "Well, if *that's* all you want, then we could have done without all this fuss, couldn't we? All

you need to do is just...go away. Just disappear. Just be gone, True Name. Curl up around your little Name thing and stay there.”

May’s expression remained calm, but ey could feel the tension in her paw increase, and beyond her, ey could see End Waking bare his teeth. Even the Odists on Jonas’s side the of the table flinched. None of them looked pleased. Even Why Ask Questions, jovial as she usually was, seemed to be gritting her teeth.

He doesn’t know, does he? ey wondered. If ever there was a way to keep a group of Odists in check, that might just be it.

Only True Name, of all of them, remained calm. Serious, yes, but calm.

“What does disappearing and being gone look like to you, Jonas? Do you want me to hide away in a hidden sim forever?”

“I wouldn’t say no,” he shot back.

“No.”

“I thought not.”

“So,” she said with exaggerated patience. “What does me disappearing look like to you?”

“You just can’t be around. You can’t be you anymore. You can’t be walking around and having people point and say, ‘Hey, it’s that piece of shit skunk!’ You need to just disappear, because anything else is just going to destabilize your precious System. I’m prepared for that, but I don’t think you are.”

She shook her head, but whether at his words or his audacity, ey couldn’t tell. “Alright, disappear. You want me to stop being a figure and start being a person. You want me to be other than I am.”

“Yep,” he said, grin tight and false.

“I have already begun,” she said, and with a brief pause, ey saw her features relax, and the sudden shift towards an expression ey knew intimately from eir partner fell across her features. She continued in a voice softer than what it had been. Lilt-ing, less space between the syllables. “Because I already am May Then My Name Die With Me—” Another pause, another shift, one more towards stony and stoic voice suddenly dry and simple, al-

most cerebral. “—and I am already Do I Know God After The End Waking.” Finally, she fell back into that first register. “And I remain True Name, and yet I am none of these. I could not go back to that which I was even if I wished to.”

Jonas raised his eyebrows at the shifts in expression and voice. The frowns around the table on the faces of the other Odists only deepened.

“How can I even begin to trust you on that? You merged your two cronies, so what? You going to go cuddle-camping with Zacharias or something?”

Both May and End Waking bristled at this, but neither spoke.

“I am not what I was.”

“I can tell, sure, but you know that’s not enough, True Name.” His voice was intent, serious in a way ey hadn’t seen before. “I am saying that you need to disappear. There is no stable future for the System if you show up in anything close to the same form as you were, and you know that. You were almost assassinated, and doubtless more than you three—” He nodded at May, End Waking, and Ioan. “—know. You show up as you are, and everything crumbles, or at the very least, starts to shift in unstable ways. Plan A was you gone, but plan B relies on you understanding that there’s no recovery from a failed plan A that involves you.”

“You...what, want me to look different? Sound different?”

“You need to go away, True Name. I don’t fucking care how.”

There was a moment’s thoughtful silence from the skunk before she stood, pushed her chair back in, and turned away from the table.

In the most stunning display of forking ey’d ever seen, True Name began to change.

Ioan had seen eir share of Dear’s exhibitions, not to mention those of other instance artists the fox had introduced em to along the way, and the forking involved in all of them had been perfect. They were well rehearsed dances of duplication that told a story.

However, they were, whether by virtue of being related to Dear or by the art itself, fanciful. The duplication was supposed to evoke a sense of magic, of wonder (or the closely related terror).

In eir own work in theatre, both as an actor and as a playwright, ey'd found use for forking within a story that had remained more grounded, more tied to day to day life, and those performances had seen a success of their own through May and A Finger Pointing's guidance.

The Odists as a whole were more familiar and comfortable with forking than anyone ey'd ever met, even among the most dispersionista of dispersionista clades. Both May and Dear navigated that aspect of their lives with a grace ey could only dream of. Even the explosions of foxes or skunks during times of excitement were well done.

This, though, went beyond that.

As they stood watching, True Name began to change. She worked with a singular sense of purpose that left no doubt as to what she was doing. An instance flickered into being before herself and watched with a critical eye as skunk after skunk blinked into existence. Each one bore some slight change from their immediate down-tree instance. Sometimes an array of skunks would wind up in a line before that observing instance, which would nod at one or the other in approval to leave the other to quit. And when a change was accepted, the down-tree instance would quit.

This smooth modification of form was in and of itself impressive for how naturally she began to change — not only did the instance watching have to keep track of what change was happening and what would come next, but so did those doing the actual changing; they all had to be on the same page — but what left em truly impressed was the speed. She began her work with about one fork per second, but before long the changes ramped up to four a second. Five. Nearly ten changes per second of forks flickering into and out of existence, all while the

orchestrating instance watched, her eyes flicking this way and that across them.

And then, it was over.

The result was a skunk slightly shorter than True Name had stood, though still a few centimeters taller than May. She was heavier, as well, with a curve to the hips and belly that was familiar to em from eir partner, but unlike May, this softness was more...well, natural wasn't quite the right term, but where May's weight seemed to be designed to add a sense of both harmlessness and comfort to her form, this new form of True Name simply looked like a pudgy thirty-something who had settled into a comfortable weight long ago and never bothered to change.

Her face had shifted as well, becoming plainer in ways ey couldn't quite explain. Where True Name had always had some aspect of larger-than-life about her, she now just looked...normal. Still a furry, still living in that form that was more comfortable to her than humanity, but normal.

Most striking, though was the pattern of fur. While much of it was covered, now, ey'd seen the way it had shifted during the process. Gone were the stripes, the ones ey had grown to love on May, replaced now with a set of white splotches in the black of her fur. The pattern was what was so eye-catching, however: the patches seemed to travel in a few uneven lines down over her back and sides, one of them showing a hint of a whorl, another a slight zigzag as it ran from her spine to her side, and others that were almost round spots. This pattern seemed to be mirrored along her spine, leading to a pleasant symmetry. A quick query of the perisystem infrastructure told em that there was indeed a spotted variety of skunk, described much as ey had seen.

Gone were the stripes. Gone, also, were the slacks and blouse, traded in for a linen tunic and a pair of loose-fitting Thai fisherman pants.

When ey was finally able to tear eir eyes away, ey saw that every Odist in the room had picked up expressions that verged from taken aback to startled and angry. May, for her part, looked

startled, yes, but also excited.

“May, what–”

“One moment, my dear,” she said, then turned to face this new True Name with a grin. “Will there be a change of name?”

“There has to be,” Jonas said. While he lacked the context for whatever had surprised her cocladists, even he sounded impressed by the display. “I won’t let you leave as True Name.” ((Probably needs expansion))

The skunk bowed. “You may call me Sasha.”

Ioan didn’t know what ey expected from the room, but pandemonium wasn’t it. May was bouncing on her feet and clapping her paws. End Waking was grinning and shaking his head. Jonas had simply burst out laughing.

All of the rest of the Odists, however, were shouting. None of them looked pleased.

“Not Sasha of the Ode clade, just Sasha,” she said. “I will not relinquish the form, just as I will not relinquish the past, but if you want me out this badly, so be it. I rescind my membership in the clade.”

“As do I,” End Waking and May both said at once. ((Gasp, what?!))

“*That* name is unacceptable,” When I Dream hollered. “No. You will pick something else.”

“No, I will not.”

“Shut the fuck up, When I Dream,” Jonas said mildly. “All of you, shut the fuck up.” He turned to Sasha and grinned. “You always were a little snot. You want to be Sasha? You want to dive back into mediocrity and wear your weakness like a badge? Please, by all means, be my guest. Beg for pity again. Hunt down all your little friends who kept you feeling just bad enough that they could baby you without letting you think you were their plaything. Go. Be Sasha. Live your silly little life. ((way more, and angrier))

“And you,” he growled, jabbing a finger toward Ioan. “Write your little story. That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? Write your

little romance and fuck your little girlfriend and put on your little plays.”

May rolled her eyes.

“Get out. All of you.”

All through Jonas’s tirade, Sasha wore a slight smile. It wasn’t beatific, wasn’t enlightened. She simply looked present. She looked confident in herself in some more earnest way. When it was clear that he was finished, she bowed politely.

“See you around?”

“Fuck off.”

She laughed and reached out to take Ioan’s hand in eir paw, then they stepped back home, followed closely by May holding End Waking’s paw.

There was a long moment of silence in the living room, then Ioan let out a ragged, pent-up breath, eir shoulders sagging. “Can someone tell me what the fuck just happened?”

“Sasha found the one thing she could have done to piss off Jonas,” May said, looking at her appraisingly. “He went in thinking he’d take everything from her and left with no wind in his sails. Well done, my dear.”

Sasha beamed and bowed with a flourish

“And you knew this?” ey asked.

She shook her head. “I saw her unwind all of the changes from the last centuries—”

“All the way back to Praiseworthy’s suggestions before Seccession,” the other skunk said proudly.

“—and other than the spotted skunk thing, she looks just like...well, Sasha. Nice touch, by the way.”

“I do not think I could have gotten away with staying that similar, but yes, I am back to the me of... Shit, when did I make Sasha like this? 2110?”

Ioan shook eir head, dizzy. “This is what you looked like before uploading?”

“What my — *our* — av looked like, yes, all except the change to a spotted skunk. They always felt too flashy, back then, and I

just wanted to look like myself offline except a furry. Completely unremarkable and a species no one likes.”

“It was the outfit that did it,” End Waking said. “It always was our favorite, but for some reason, we never brought it with us to the System.”

Sasha nodded.

“I am proud of you, Sasha,” he continued. “I do not yet know why I feel compelled to say that, but I am proud of you. You have much to make up for, your own penance yet to serve, but that you have done this at all is good step forward.”

Ioan sighed and pulled a chair out from the dining table and sat down heavily. “You’re all completely nuts.”

The three skunks laughed.

“So,” ey said, organizing eir thoughts out loud. “May and End Waking merged down and you... I guess feel more complete with those identities? Enough to head back to who you were before the clade began, I mean. Is that even possible?”

“It is not a statement of reality, my dear. I cannot reintegrate those aspects of myself that are not up-tree from me, and even if I could, there are those who no longer exist or who have left Langerange,” she said, that slight smile growing. “It is a statement of hope, perhaps, or a desire for completion. It is an understanding of the ways in which I fall short expressed in my very name. Will this sense of a more complete life last? Perhaps. It will certainly not always feel good, and will at some point cease feeling new, but I plan on owning it for as long as I am able.”

“And how is it that this pisses of Jonas?” Ey snorted. “He certainly sounded pissed.”

Sasha pulled out the chair across from Ioan and sat down, followed shortly by May and End Waking to either side of em. It was strange to see so many smiles around the table, still strange to see May so happy around her down-tree instance — at least logistically, if no longer spiritually — and stranger still to see End Waking even near her.

“What Jonas was suspecting was for me to remain True Name

in everything except form and name,” she said. “He was expecting someone deeply cowed by his political genius. And do not underestimate him, he is still a genius. He felt that he had won his spot as rightful leader of Lagrange, if such a thing can even be said to exist. He had beaten me down and left me either unable to continue or unwilling to try.”

Ioan jumped at a brief sensorium ping, a request to enter, followed shortly by Debarre popping into existence behind May, who had apparently admitted him. “What was so urgent that you pulled me out of the woods and...” he trailed off, squinting at this new skunk at the table. “Who...but you’re...what?”

“Debarre,” Sasha said, bowing her head. “A pleasure to see you.”

The weasel said nothing, looking stunned.

“This is— was Tr—”

“Sasha. I am Sasha, and I was her as well,” she said, voice gentle but insistent enough to stop Ioan from continuing.

He stepped back a half pace, crouching as though to flee. “Sasha...? What the fuck?”

Ioan, still feeling eir head spinning from so much happening so quickly, tried to pin down eir open question in eir mind while still watching the exchange intently.

“I am not what I was, Debarre. I am not True Name. I am not May or End Waking.” She hesitated, then continued, “I am not even the Sasha you remember, but I am, I think, closer to being her than any of the Ode clade is currently.”

“Bullshit,” he growled. “If there’s even a little bit of True Name in you, you can’t be her. If you’re even the slightest bit her I’m fucking out of here.”

“Wait, my love,” End Waking said. “Please stay.”

Debarre hesitated.

“If I am still here, do you not think that I agree with her? At least to a large enough extent to trust her?”

The weasel straightened up and, when May waved a fifth chair into existence beside End Waking, he slowly sat down, rest-

ing only on the edge as though still ready to bolt. "I'll listen, but this had better be good."

Sasha bowed, sitting quietly while May caught him up on the events of the past few days, letting the other three of them interject with corrections and confirmations. Throughout, Debarre waited, and while he didn't relax fully, by the end of the discussion, he was at least sitting all the way back in his chair.

"So you're now this new Sasha," he said slowly. "I'll buy that, though you still make me nervous."

She laughed. "Do not worry, my dear. I make myself nervous."

At the affectionate *my dear*, the weasel jolted back.

"My apologies," Sasha said quickly. "I was not thinking. If you would like me not to use that phrase, I will do my best not to. I just have enough...well, I am different enough now that it comes automatically."

"You have enough of E.W. in you, you mean."

She nodded. "And May."

"I...well, yeah, please. At least give me some time to get used to this before you call me that."

"Of course."

"So tell me how this gets you anything."

Ioan sat up straight once more, nodding. "You were saying that Jonas thought he'd beaten you."

"Right, yes. He thought that he had left me broken that I might fade away or even quit of my own accord. Instead, I became the one thing he could not control."

"How, though?" ey asked.

"Because of the *History*. The System knows about me. It knows about the Council of Eight and about Sasha and Michelle Hadje. It also knows about True Name, though, and to see that True Name has stepped down and become one of the few sympathetic figures in that same story once again means that he cannot touch me. He cannot risk reinforcing being seen as a villain—"

“Or more of one,” May muttered.

“—by coming after me. Not only that, but with the expectation that the Sasha who was on the Council was in the right when seen in contrast to True Name, I will be seen as a balancing force rather than a co-conspirator. Him working against that risks being seen as either unbalancing an effective system or a return to a two-party system that no one wants.”

“It is not a win, *per se*,” End Waking added. “She has not beaten Jonas or anything like that, but she has entered into a stalemate with him.”

“Can’t he still come after you, though? It’s not like the whole System knows.”

“That is why he was so upset at you, as well, my dear,” May said. “You will write your book and your play, and he will just have to brace himself as best he can.”

“But I haven’t yet, though.”

“Of course, but if he had decided to take Sasha out anyway, you would still be left to write about *that*. Your name is already trusted enough on the System that if you were to write something after her assassination, it would still have gone poorly for him. If he had taken you out as well — something I doubt he was prepared to do anyway — he would be in even deeper shit.”

Ey shook eir head. Ey was feeling very much the foil ((check; reason for others to infodump)) but needed to understand if ey was to write this book. More, ey needed to understand for emself. “So why not become Michelle?”

“Because look at me,” Sasha said, laughing and spreading her arms. “I am a furry. A *skunk* furry, no less. There is benefit to being something that is just a little silly, just as there always has been. Even after all these years, it is difficult to take someone pretending to be a small furry animal seriously, so that disarms me in the eyes of the observers.”

((He answers to his desire for power, I answer only to my desire for stability and continuity. In that I am earnest in my conviction. More about politics as a means to an end, good at it,

enjoy it, willing and able to use it — When did you realize — All the way back to that conversation about Sasha and Debarre not being fit to lead))

“You’re nuts,” Debarre said, rubbing his paws over his face. “You’re all fucking nuts.”

Ioan gestured wildly toward the weasel. “Confirmation! Fucking nuts!”

The three skunks laughed while ey and Debarre leaned across the table to shake hands.

((What’s next))
