

The stream of Odists who came to visit Sasha in the days and weeks after the excursion to Jonas's was surprising. They seem to have accepted her change in identity far easier than expected. There were no instances of deadnaming (unless they were specifically talking about her past as True Name, as requested), no fights, no arguments.

Not everyone was happy, to be sure. Many of the discussions from those who stopped by were quite serious and, even though many took place in cones of silence, Ioan imagined that there was much in the way of airing of grievances. It was always done with an eye towards catharsis and reconciliation, however.

Serene, for instance came over the day after the whole kerfuffle, surprising the three of them well into the evening. They'd settled for a middle ground of dinner out on the extended balcony — close enough to the house for them to cook a proper dinner without leaving Sasha feeling cooped up inside — when the ping against their sensoria caused the three to jolt as one.

"That will be Serene!" May said excitedly, setting her half-finished plate down and hopping to her feet. "I opened the ACLs to a few, hope you do not mind."

"Opened— wait, when?" Ioan asked, setting eir own plate down. "And to how many?"

But the skunk was already gone, bounding inside to greet the fox with a hug and excited chattering.

Ioan and Sasha followed after more sedately, both waiting until May had gotten her greeting out of the way before bowing to Serene.

"Ioan, a pleasure! It has been too long," she said, grinning widely. The grin faded, and she nodded to the spotted skunk. "And Sasha."

"Serene, thank you for stopping by. I was not expecting to see you so soon."

"I do not imagine so. May Then My Name has been conspiring behind the scenes, so this was all worked out ahead of time."

"Oh? How cheeky," Sasha said, laughing. "Were you really that confident that everything would work out, dear?"

May shook her head. "Reasonably confident, but I want Arrowhead Lake back no matter what, so I arranged for us a little meeting."

"Skunks, I swear." Ioan shook eir head. "Well, welcome all the same. We've got pasta, if you'd like."

Once she'd heaped a plate high with pasta, Serene followed them out onto the balcony to join them for the rest of their meal. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of the plain. "I suppose this was the best one could do on short notice, yes?"

"It wasn't too much, and it fit the need, yeah."

"It has served its purpose," Sasha said. "And it is not so bad close up. A little too flat, perhaps, but the river is nice."

Serene nodded and finished a mouthful of food before setting her fork down again. "I have at least come bearing a gift."

"Did you find your student?"

"Yes. He was still about, though he has...changed much in the intervening years. He was not as pleased to see me as I might have liked."

Sasha dipped her snout. "I am assuming that he has picked up on the sentiment surrounding the clade."

Serene nodded. "He read the *History* and came to the same conclusion that the rest of the System did. Our name is not mud, but, my dear, relationships changed after that knowledge became public."

"I understand."

"I do not want to hear you say that you are sorry, Sasha. I do not think that is how this works as you are now. I do not want to hear your justifications and explanations; I can understand them as well as anyone. I just want to hear your acknowledgment."

After setting her plate and fork down on the low table again,

Sasha folded her paws in her lap, sat for a moment in silence, then said. “For as much as I tried to do — for as much as Jonas and I both tried to do — I do not think we had nearly the effect on the world around us as we thought we did, not on the grand scale. We played our games of politics and influence, but it was a game of relationships from start to finish, you are correct. True Name changed relationships. May Then My Name changed relationships. End Waking played his part. I do not know if it was for the better or for the worse, but I do acknowledge that it made a good many of them far more difficult.”

“Well, okay. Perhaps one apology.”

“I am sorry, Serene; Sustained And Sustaining.”

There was another moment of silence, then Serene’s wild grin returned. “Well, that felt good. Praiseworthy did all that shit, too, so, fuck it. Let me finish my pasta and I will fuck your sim up but good.”

Ioan blinked, looking between skunk and fox. “Wait, that simple?”

“Of course, my dear,” Serene said around a mouthful of pasta. “I already told you of my thoughts on the matter. I have done my processing.”

“And now you cannot simply say something about skunks being brats,” May chimed in. “Though I am pretty sure we all knew that foxes were, too.”

Serene made a rude gesture, still grinning.

Once they’d finished dinner, Serene stood, stretched, and then leaned against the railing staring out over the plain. Her expression was calm, pleasant, though focused on something ey couldn’t see. “Ioan, I will need ACLs over at least the exterior, including your yard, though I will do my best to keep it intact.”

Ey nodded, focused, and made the grant.

“Thank you. Now, you may stay out here and watch, but I warn you that it can be a bit dizzy-making.”

Ey exchanged glances with the two skunks and shrugged. “I think we’re all eager to see.”

“Suit yourself. It was your dinner. Thank you, by the way.”

There was no further announcement. Nor, even, any change in Serene. She still looked out over the railing with a dreamy, far away look on her face even as the world dropped out beneath them.

The plain rippled and stretched, arching up high to the sky as though stretching after a long nap. Trees pried their way from the soil. Rocks broke free from the land. The river — the one immediately before them, at least — collapsed into itself to form a wide lake. The rest of the echoed versions of the plain where not occupied by mountains crinkled into some more complex geometry, the remainder of the range echoed outside the valley.

It was a little vertigo-inducing, too, but the worst of it wasn't due to the sudden change in the shape of the landscape, but in just how, well...serene it all was. The river shaping itself into the lake was not accompanied by some grand splashing of waves, simply the remaking of the water. There were no falling rocks or grand earthquakes, just the reshaping of the world. The light shifted. Gravity swayed, settled. All of it was silent.

And then it was done.

“H-holy fuck,” ey managed, clutching at the railing of the balcony. Both May and Sasha stood defiantly against the change, though neither looked as casual as the fox.

“I have set your house up the hill a ways from the default entry point to the old sim,” she said, gesturing them down the steps from the balcony. They landed on a concrete pad set into the bed of pine needles, a small trail winding its way down the slope toward the water. She gestured toward the small ridge that rose next to them. “I had to modify the terrain a little bit to keep your yard level. You should be okay, but if you run into erosion problems, do let me know. I have been told of your affinity for weather, Ioan.”

Sure enough, the fence remained level, wrapping around a small rectangle of hidden grass, the tops of lilac bushes overflowing.

The trail teed with the long familiar deer trail that wound around the lake, and, out of habit, they all started down towards the rock.

“Fauna?” Serene asked.

“Please.” Sasha grinned sheepishly. “I would not like a repeat of that particular mistake.”

Grinning and nodding, Serene kept up her steady pace, humming a little under her breath. There was no change that ey could see, though ey imagined her counting deer, rabbits, squirrels, and birds into existence.

For eir part, ey simply walked, hand in paw with May, and marveled. Ey’d discovered the lake decades ago, had spent countless days out here on walks, and at least one night camping. Still, it felt somehow new. Ey was rediscovering this place that ey’d not seen in months — though ey’d spent longer stints away from it in the past — and marveling at the detail all over again. A glance back over eir shoulder showed eir flat-roofed house peeking shyly from amid the trees, but other than that, it was, ey assumed, the same as it had bit.

After so long away and after so much stress it felt all the more real.

They sat on the rock near the end of the lake and enjoyed the last of the sun. It was a little tight for four, but May tucked quite nicely up against eir side and Sasha, having slipped more into an End Waking mindset, had settled off to the side. She looked antsy, and ey suspected she’d request time to hike soon enough.

“How is the rest of the clade taking this?” she asked. “I sent a clade-wide message, but have not received responses.”

Serene looked up from where she was investigating a few pine needles plucked from a branch on the way over with a discriminating eye. “I think that reactions will be largely positive. Several of my stanza have been been talking, and many feel as I do. It is fine, I am sure, and I have processed what I needed to and gotten what I wanted.”

“Of course. I have been abandoned by the rest of my stanza,

but at this point, the larger part of me does not want to have anything to do with them, anyway. I do not imagine Loss For Images and her ilk will take it well. I do hope that A Finger Pointing and I will have a chance to speak soon, as I am now enough May that I would enjoy attending a play or two.”

“‘May’?” Serene said, tilting her head and looking to the other skunk. “Have you forgiven her, then?”

May nodded. “Forgiven is maybe not the best word. I have internalized the way things are and accepted the way things are. I am pleased to know Sasha and who she has become.”

The other skunk smiled faintly, nodded. “Though for all Ioan talked about trying to fix things, I place the largest part of who I have become on you, dear.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Ioan said, grinning.

May elbowed em in the side. “Hush, you.”

“I will not laugh at you two too much, then.” Serene laughed. “What are your plans moving forward? I trust that you are essentially locked out of what you were working on as True Name.”

“Yes, and while there is a part of me that remains disappointed about this outcome, there is little to be done about it but move forward.” Sasha brought her tail around to her lap to brush it out. It was shorter than a striped skunk’s tail, it seemed, but no less thickly furred. “I will take a vacation, first. I will sleep a normal amount. I will eat good food. I will wear myself out on the hunt and take what comfort I can while I remain here. I will rest, and then I will write.”

“Write? Really?”

“Yes. I will be careful not to influence, lest I bring on Jonas’s ire, but I would like to share the story of the last few centuries from my point of view. I do not know who will be interested except perhaps our two clades, but I will write.”

“Well, if it’s anything like the *History*,” Ioan said. “It’ll wind up wildly popular and then fade into part of the mythos of the System.”

May grinned. “And all will be as it should.”

“Of course. I will not complain. So long as I am better able to understand who I have become and fill my time with something fulfilling, then I will be happy.”

“Will you be happy?” Serene asked.

There was a long silence as Sasha finished brushing out her tail and spent a few minutes simply staring across the lake, perhaps mapping the opposite shore and marking spots for future exploration.

Finally, she said, “I think that I will be. I am of three minds and will ever be such. I will have moments of happiness, moments of sadness and terror and regret, but they will ever be in thirds.”

“Are you okay with that?”

Sasha stood and stretched, finally turning her gaze back to them. “Himself has but to will And easy as a Star Look down upon Captivity And laugh.”

With no further explanation, she bowed and edged around them on her way down off the rock. She moved quietly and efficiently, and it was a matter of seconds before they lost sight of her in the trees.

They sat, silent, through the remainder of the evening.

The next Odists to visit were A Finger Pointing and Slow Hours, once more arriving as a pair and hugging Sasha in turn. They set up a cone of silence and spoke together for a scant twenty minutes before dropping it again and inviting Ioan and May to join. They pulled the beanbag a little closer to the couch and settled down on it together to listen.

“It is easy to say that all is full of love,” Slow Hours began, smiling to Sasha. “But now, I think, you have a sense of your own.”

The skunk smiled and bowed her head.

“Life will be easier for a while, and then it will be harder. You will share your loves, first with another and then with solitude,

and with each you long for the other until you return. Does not matter a bit, though, so I would not worry.”

“Mere breath?” Sasha asked, grinning.

“A chasing after the wind, yes.”

“And you will come to a performance,” A Finger Pointing added. “I am no oracle, but if you do not come, I will hunt you down myself. It has been too long, my dear.”

She laughed. “Of course, of course. So many threats to hunt me down, these days. But yes, thank you.”

“And if you do not watch me perform my monologue, I will trim your claws too short in your sleep,” May said. “There is a monologue night coming up soon.”

“Far worse than being hunted down, that. I will be there.”

May preened.

After that, they fell into quiet conversation. Sasha joined Ioan and May on the beanbag to get some pets — the talk having apparently nudged the affectionate part of her to the fore — while Slow Hours spoke in less ‘will’s and ‘shall’s and settled down into the normal conversational mode of the rest of the Odists. They spoke of performances past, going all the way back to before the founding of the System, with the four Odists performing a small segment of the Dickinson play they always seemed to quote from, a first for any of the Bălans in nearly fifty years.

It was nearly a month before Debarre, Douglas, and Sasha agreed to meet. Debarre’s side of the conversation remained somewhat stiff and distant, while Douglas seemed to have set aside any sense of caution, speaking with palpable excitement. As soon as he’d learned of the change of name back to something more closely associated with his distant relative, he’d hardly talked of anything else.

The meeting was set up for dinner on the dandelion-dotted field, a small potluck picnic late in the evening so that the skunks wouldn't overheat in the sun.

Everyone arrived simultaneously by Debarre's request so that no one was left waiting for anyone else. Ioan, May, and Sasha stepped into the sim just in time to see Debarre and End Waking arriving. The six of them stood in a circle in front of Douglas's stoop, dandelions and evening bumblebees tickling at their ankles.

Or, at least they stood in a circle for a moment. Sasha stumbled backwards from the group, turning in two slow, wavering circles before falling to her knees.

"Sasha?" Ioan said, watching anxiously.

"Too much," she mumbled. "Too much at once."

May padded over to kneel next to her. "May I hug?"

After a moment of strained silence, Sasha slumped against May's side, and the two sat together while she let out that overwhelming emotion within a cone of silence.

Ioan, Debarre, End Waking, and Douglas took the time to set up the picnic, a rickety table bearing plates of various salads, roasted vegetables, and the makings of venison sandwiches, courtesy End Waking. They moved in silence, hesitantly, each pausing every now and then to watch as Sasha slowly worked to calm herself.

"That was not the greeting that I had intended," she said, once she had cleaned up in Douglas's house and joined them at the table to pick up a plate. "I was hoping that I would be able to greet you all politely, settle into some easier conversation, but that of True Name has not been here in too long. This place is too charged with memories, as are your faces. Even for that of End Waking and May, there is too much bound up in the last few months."

"Are you feeling better now?" Douglas asked.

She nodded. "I am leaning on the other portions of myself now. I will have much processing to do yet, but tonight is for

dinner with friends, or at least with those I hope will be friends.”

“I mean, I hope we can be friends.” Douglas laughed. “I mean, those are the first words we’ve ever really spoken to each other, but I’m happy to have the chance to meet you.”

“Or at least a third of me.”

“Well, yes, but you’re still a new person to me and very...uh,” he trailed off, frowning down to his plate. “Well, very close to someone I’ve thought a lot about, I guess.”

She smiled and leaned over to pat his shoulder. “We will talk, dear. That part of me has heard so much about you and is so colored by what the other parts of me know, that I am eager to learn, as well.”

Debarre remained stiff and awkward, even as they settled down on the blanket to eat, plates piled high with various dishes and cups of sangria set carefully in the grass behind them. He wouldn’t make eye contact with Sasha and seemed hesitant to speak to Ioan and May.

Eventually, he cleared his throat, set his plate down, and stared steadily at Sasha. “I’d like an apology. At least from the, uh...what did you call it? That part of you?”

As she had done with Serene, Sasha set her plate down as well, folded her paws in her lap, and bowed to the weasel. Ioan could tell by the set of her features and the straightness of her shoulders that she was indeed doing her best to keep that part of her at the fore. “I am sorry, Debarre. The things that I did were for what I thought was best, but they wound up hurting everyone. They were not fair to you and I apologize for the pain I caused. While I do not think I even *could* anymore, I will endeavor not to act in such single-minded ways again.”

Ioan couldn’t read Debarre’s expression well enough to judge his thoughts on the matter, but judging by the way he loosened up and joined in more of the conversations after that, speaking even with Sasha, he seemed to at least have accepted the words to an extent.

Debarre and End Waking stayed for a few hours after din-

ner, long enough to see the first stars show themselves above the field, before they stepped back to the skunk's sim.

Shortly after, Sasha stood, the other three following suit. She hugged Ioan and May around the shoulders and gave each of them a nose-dot kiss to the cheek. "If you two do not mind, I would like to go for a walk with Douglas and speak with him alone."

They nodded and returned the hugs and kisses, getting hugs from Douglas as well before they stepped back home.

((Ioan and May talk))

Not all of these visits went nearly so smoothly, of course.

In Dreams arrived early on a Saturday on an hour's notice and bowed formally to Sasha.

"Ioan, I believe Jonas hired you as an amanuensis?" she said.

"He did, yes. Do you need me for that, too?"

"Please. This story is not over, will not be over for a long time yet. Listen. Watch."

Sasha immediately picked up on the mood and stood up straight after returning the formal bow. She offered In Dreams a seat and coffee, both of which were declined, then said, "How may I help you?"

"I have a request from both my stanza and that of Memory Is A Mirror Of Hammered Silver. You will also be presented with this request in writing as an individual-eyes-only message."

Sasha nodded. "I understand."

"We request no contact between you, your stanza, or the Bălan clade moving forward."

"Wait, what?" Ioan said. May edged around a little ways behind em, clutching at eir arm.

"You are too entangled in the matter. No contact with this situation means no contact from you, May Then My Name Die With Me, or Do I Know God After The End Waking. This request is in effect until further notice, and will also apply to our stanzas

on Castor and Pollux. None of us are on Artemis, but I will also be passing this request on to Sorina Bălan. This also applies to general intraclade communication; we will add visibility exceptions to our messages and request that you do the same.”

“I understand, accept, and offer you my best,” Sasha said, bowing once more.

“I do not want your best.” In Dreams said, voice flat. “Ioan?”

Ey blinked, hesitated, then bowed in turn. “I understand and accept.”

“And May Then My Name?”

It took the skunk a moment to swallow back a rising wave of emotions before she could manage a shaky nod and a hoarse, “Understood.”

“We are of one mind, then,” she said, bowed, and stepped from the sim. A few seconds later, three sheets of paper scrolled out of the air above the dining table, all set as individual-eyes-only for each of them. Ioan read through eirs several times with a hollow feeling in eir chest.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the day. Ioan and May collapsed onto the beanbag and stayed there through much of it, each processing in their own way, while Sasha disappeared outside to lose herself in the wilderness, not returning until late that evening, bearing a lanky hair and double-pawful of chantarelle mushrooms, which she cooked down into a simple stew. They ate on the balcony to enjoy the late summer’s evening as best they could.

Sasha joined them in bed that night, and they took what comfort they could from each other’s company.

The last meeting of note came as Autumn began creeping over the edge of the hills.

May stumbled in the middle of a rehearsal, falling to her knees and panting before pushing herself to her feet. She managed to make it through the rest of the scene before forking off

so that she could continue as best as able while her root instance ducked back home.

Once there, she darted over towards where Ioan sat at eir desk, working through the process of writing Jonas's book. She knelt beside em, clutched a pawful of eir shirt and set up a cone of silence. Ey felt the ACL-scape of the cone shift several times until it was just about as secure as could be made.

"May? What—"

"Zacharias! He has been pinging me once every few seconds for the last minute!" She was on the verge of hyperventilation, eyes wide and tail bristled. "I do not know what- *fuck!*"

Ioan slid from eir chair as the skunk started to slump over to the side. Ey helped her to her feet and over to the beanbag. "May, what's happening?"

"He keeps...quitting and...sending high-priority merges..." she gasped. "The cone will not...stop those..."

"You okay for few seconds?"

Slumped over on the beanbag, the skunk nodded.

Ey stepped from the cone, where May had clearly blocked sensorium messages from the fox, so that ey could holler into a message, "What the fuck do you want?"

"Ioan! I need to...can I—"

"No. No coming over."

"A neutral place?"

Ey thought quickly, sent a message to Douglas on a whim. "Do you need May there?" ey finally replied to the fox.

"Yes!"

Ey sighed. "I'll ask. No guarantees."

"No, I...no," the skunk mumbled once ey stepped back into the cone. She'd managed to sit up and the panicked look on her face had calmed somewhat. "Or...well, I can, but he cannot come here."

"I suggested Douglas's to maybe freak him out. I figure if Sasha's reaction was anything to go by, it might quell him, or at least keep him quiet."

The skunk sat, silent, for a moment, holding onto one of eir hands tightly. "Alright. Will Douglas be around to sweep if needed?"

Ey nodded.

"Now?"

"Yeah, I think so. Do you need anything before we go?"

That panic on her face had slowly transmuted to anger, and ey could feel the same rising within em. "No. Let us get this the fuck over with."

She dropped the cone, letting Ioan send a message to Zacharias spoken aloud for May's benefit. "The Field#002a0b1."

The reply was frantic. "What?! No!"

"There or no meeting."

"F-fine."

Ioan helped May to her feet, placed a kiss between her ears before both of them forked and stepped from the sim.

Douglas stood at the top of his stoop, arms crossed, frowning. "Ioan, what is this?"

"Zacharias made it out of the whole thing alive," May growled. "And now he is freaking out and wants to meet. I will not have him at our home."

Douglas's frown deepened. "So you're bringing him here? The ACLs are pretty locked down right now."

"Yes. We need somewhere where someone can sweep him if need be." She grinned, adding, "And if this place freaks him out, all the better."

"If you say so," he said, paused, then continued, "Alright, he should be able to enter."

Ioan nodded and sent a brief ping to the fox.

He arrived within a fraction of a second, yelped, and fell backwards, paws balled up into fists and pressed tight against his eyes.

"How long as it been for you, my dear? Since you were forked?" May said, kneeling down before the fox. Her voice had grown cloyingly sweet, that 'my dear' carrying nothing but

spite.

“Y-yes,” he stammered. “Did...did we have to meet here?”

“Where better?”

Zacharias moaned. He forced himself to lower his paws to the ground, gripping at clumps of grass and dandelions. Finally, he opened his eyes and stared out toward the horizon of the field.

“I-”

“What did you want, my dear? You sounded on the verge of panic.”

“It is Jonas!” he said, finally snapping out of his daze. “Jonas! He killed all of my instances!”

“Did you expect anything else?” Ioan asked.

“I...well.”

“You are the root instance, I am assuming?”

He nodded, the movement jerky. “I have not left home since. I dug a new one, you see.”

“And what can we do for you?”

“Help! You can help me get away from that...that lunatic!”

“Is your home no longer safe, then?”

He reached out to clutch at May’s paws. She startled backwards, but did nothing to push him away. “I cannot...I cannot be alone any longer. I have to...to be near-”

“No,” she said flatly.

“But-”

“No.” The skunk shook her head, leaned forward and pressed her nose to Zacharias’s briefly. “You are on your own, my dear. I will not accept any further messages or merges. No contact.”

He slouched once more, eyes still wide. “May Then My Name, I-”

She extracted one of her paws from his and slapped him firmly across the snout. “And that is for before.”

Yelping, he fell back onto an elbow. He opened his mouth to respond, but May had already nodded towards Douglas, who swept him from the sim.

“I’ve never seen you like that before,” he said, once they’d

made their way inside, the three of them clutching glasses of water. "I knew he was a shitbag, but God damn."

"I am...not okay," she said, whispering down to her glass. "I am not okay."

The skunk refused to say any more that day, and after they made it back home, informed Ioan that she would need at least a day, if not more, on her own.

"Can I move elsewhere in the sim, or would you like the whole place to yourself?"

She shook her head. "Just the house. If you can...I mean, if Sasha will let you stay at her tent, you can stay, but I need the house."

"Now?"

Nodding, she wrapped her arms around em and squeezed tighter than ey knew she could. "I love you more than anything, my dear. Now."

Ey waited until ey could breathe properly after the squeeze, then kissed the top of her head. "I love you too, May. Please be safe, okay?"

She nodded once more, relinquished her grip on em, and nudged em out toward the back door and outside.

Sasha had set up a tent similar to End Waking's though she had skipped the process of building it herself, instead requesting a thorough examination of what he'd accomplished and then creating from similar materials off the exchange. She'd set it up nearly on the other side of the lake from their house, so that she could have the solitude that she needed without having to create some new sim of her own.

Though, to go with that, when the need for solitude struck her, it never quite got to the point that it did with End Waking. She would need away from their presences, she would say. They felt like a constant weight on her shoulders. Light, yes, but continually present.

Ah well. This was the first time that May had overflowed in this living situation — and so dramatically, too; she'd never

given em so little notice — so perhaps it would be helpful after all.

Ey took eir time walking around the shore of the lake, using it to vent the emotions that had built up over the last half hour through tears, through shouting into a cone of silence, cursing.

“Ioan? Goodness,” Sasha said.

Ey’d managed to mostly clean up with a handkerchief, though clearly eir eyes were still red-rimmed and eir countenance...well, who knew? Glum, perhaps?

“Hi Sasha,” ey said, sitting down on the step leading up into the tent. The skunk had been writing at the small desk she’d acquired, but she moved to join em. “May’s not in a good spot, suggested I stay with you, if that’s alright.”

She frowned, nodded. “That bad?”

“Well, she kind of kicked me out of the house, yeah.”

She laid her ears flat. “Zacharias?”

Ey nodded. “Why, did he ping you, too?”

Her expression turned sour. “Several times. May I ask what happened? If it is too fresh, we can discuss it another time.”

“No, I should be fine,” ey said. “I processed a lot of it on the way over.”

By the time ey’d finished describing the afternoon, Sasha had gone quiet, looking out toward the lake. “Without contraries is no progression,” she murmured. “Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.”

Ey started to ask what she meant, paused, then looked the words up in the perisystem architecture. “And here I thought you all were mostly into Dickinson.”

She laughed and elbowed em in the side. “This may be a True Name thing.”

“Are you leaning into the”Good is the passive that obeys reason; Evil is the active springing from Energy” on this, then? Zacharias is evil for all his meddling?”

“Nothing is so simple, dear,” she said, shaking her head.

“Blake was not of our kind, he would not have understood. He did get that right, though that we are a people of dualities. May sees in Zacharias all that she cannot — must not — be, and yet we are not what we are without our opposites. Every idea’s opposite is just the absence of the idea itself.”

Ey sighed. “Maybe. It’s all a bit over my head.”

“I am also a little bit all over the place,” she admitted. “These events have me going in three different directions at once. I am sorry, Ioan.”

“It’s fine,” ey said, shaking eir head. “It’s kind of a lot.”

“That it is. You are a good person, though. You love your partner. She knows this. I know this. You are good to her and it will all be okay. We may hope for neat endings but all we get are more beginnings.” She smiled, added, “And yes, you may stay until she is feeling better.”

May’s stint of overflowing only lasted two nights.

Something about the change in context, about staying with Sasha instead of Douglas, made everything feel tenuous, though. Ioan found it difficult to sleep on the padded cot that she’d added to the tent, and eventually, she must have grown tired of hearing em toss and turn, for she sleepily climbed out of her own bed and into eirs, curling up with em after confirming that it was alright.

Awkward, perhaps, but by then ey was too frustrated and exhausted to think of anything else, and the added warmth certainly worked in getting em to sleep, to the point where ey slept in until a ray of sun, creeping slowly, fell across eir face and warmed em awake.

Sasha had apparently woken up earlier in the morning and snuck away, as there was a lukewarm cup of coffee sitting by the edge of eir bed and no skunk to be found.

Ah well, at least the coffee was good and ey felt better rested than ey had before.

Ey met up with her at the shore of the lake where they talked for a bit, though it was clear that she was antsy to head out into the woods on her own, so ey eventually shooed her off, to which she bowed gratefully and said, “My notes are on my desk. If you get bored, I would appreciate your feedback.”

Ey spent the rest of the abbreviated day reading through what she’d written, making a mental list of ideas and suggestions to pass on to her when things were a little less hectic.

That night was much the same, with the two of them talking until it was well and truly dark, then settling into their own beds until sleeplessness led to them curling together in one.

A ping from May shortly after sunrise woke em, and the jolt startled Sasha awake as well.

“Uh, sorry,” ey mumbled, extricating eir arms from around her. “May pinged”

Sasha levered herself up and squinted out into the orange and pink of dawn. “How is she up before me?” she grumbled.

“Probably because she got good sleep and I kept you up being a mope.”

She shrugged noncommittally. “Slept well enough later on, at least. Did she say anything?”

Ey shook eir head. “No, just a ping. No real urgency, though. Surprised I didn’t sleep through it.”

“You are appropriately keyed to her, dear. I would be surprised if you did.”

“Mm, fair enough,” ey said, grinding the heels of eir palms against eir eyes. To May, ey sent a ping in response, plus a sub-vocalized, “You okay?”

“Better, yes,” came the reply. “Though I am feeling quite bad about sending you off like that. Not about waking you up, though. You sound cute when you are groggy.”

Ey snorted, shook eir head. “Yeah, she’s fine,” ey said to Sasha.

Sasha surprised em by joining em on the trek back to the house, saying only, “I have been worried, as well.”

May greeted them at the balcony with steaming mugs of coffee. She declined a hug, stating that she felt gross, but did at least press her nose to Ioan's, and then to Sasha's cheek.

"Thank you for giving me some space," she said. "I was not expecting the both of you, but I am happy to see you both all the same."

"Of course, May. I'm just happy to see you doing better. Or happier, at least. You look a mess."

She scoffed and gestured a paw down at herself. "I look perfectly fine, thank you very much."

"You look a mess, dear," Sasha confirmed. "You need a shower and a change of clothes, and perhaps another four hours of sleep."

May sighed, nodded. "I do at that. All the same, the wave has crested and gone, and now perhaps I can relax enough to do so. Coffee first, though."

They settled around the dining table and focused on said coffee for a bit. It was good to be back to coffee that didn't require straining out the occasional percolated ground through one's teeth.

"Are you two okay?" May said at last.

"Tired, but that's easily fixed. Looking forward to a real bed tonight."

Sasha kicked her shin beneath the table. "The tent beds are not *that* bad."

"No, they're fine, but they still pale in comparison to our bed."

"Fine, fine."

May looked between the two, then laughed. "I take it this setup worked for me taking some space?"

Ioan shrugged. "Well enough, sure. It's nice to have another option that isn't just crashing at Douglas's."

"It was fine, dear," Sasha added. "If ever either of you need some space, feel free to kick the other down to the tent and I will make it work."

“I am glad,” May said. “Earnestly. Ioan is such a solitary person that I did not ever picture having neighbors when I moved in all those years ago. It is nice to have a friend close by.”

“Aren’t all of your friends equally close now that—”

Sasha cut em off, “Ioan, do you remember how I said that I feel others’ presence around me like a weight on my shoulders?”

Ey nodded.

“I think it is rather like that, though do correct me if I am wrong, May. Even when I am hiding away in my tent, I am still more present than a friend out of sim is.”

“Basically,” May said. “Never mind one who knows me so intimately now.”

Sasha nodded, hesitated, then said, “On that note, are you okay?”

“I...well,” she began, sighed, and shook her head. “I am upset, and I am disappointed that I am upset. I was so ready to be done with hatred, but I am stuck with yet more of it. More than the experience with Zacharias itself, that is what led to the past few days of tears. I thought that I was done.”

“I understand. I would like to talk with you about him at some point — nothing serious, just strategizing future meltdowns of his. Ioan said he kept trying to force merges on you just to get your attention.”

May winced. “Ugh, yeah. I have never felt something so intensely...I do not know. It felt like an invasion of my personal space on an intangible level. What were you thinking?”

Sasha tilted her head. “Now? I was going to suggest in a few days time, once you were feeling better.”

“Why not? I am already a mess, I am already thinking about him, and after this, I would like more than ‘a few days time’ completely disengaged from the topic.” She giggled, adding, “Besides, the more I have to dump on Sarah the next time I see her the better, right?”

“I do not think it works that way, but I am not so much of a brat as you.” Sasha finished her coffee, set the mug down

with a sense of finality, and nodded. "Well, I suppose I am awake enough. If you do not mind, Ioan, may I steal your partner for a little bit longer? I would like to keep this first discussion between us, though I will ensure that you remain caught up."

"Are you up for forking, May?"

She hesitated, then shook her head, pushing herself up from her chair to step around behind eirs. She bent down to hug around eir shoulders from behind, cheek pressed against eirs. "I cannot cope with conflicts right now. I cannot yet work in parallel."

Ey rested eir cheek against hers and frowned down to eir coffee for a few moments, sighed, then nodded. "Alright, but I get the May for the rest of the day, okay?"

They both laughed.

"Of course, Ioan," Sasha said. "If you would like some company out on the balcony or something, I have no such compunctions about forking."

Ey felt May nod against eir cheek. "I am not pushing solitude on you, my dear. Take some coffee and breakfast with you. I do not imagine we will be all that long."

Still conscious of her saying that she felt gross, ey patted one of her paws and turned eir head enough to kiss her on the cheek. "Alright, that sounds good."

Ey pulled together a breakfast of rolls to go along with a thermos of coffee, got one more nose-press of a kiss with May, and stepped back outside with an instance of Sasha.

The house had been set up on a portion of the slope that was turned a little toward the east, meaning that they the sun was not yet hitting the balcony. Autumn had gotten chilly enough at night, though, that they decided instead to walk down to the rock lakeside, which would almost certainly be in full sun, even if it was less comfortable that the deck chairs.

They sat in silence, drinking their coffee and eating rolls with butter and honey.

“Do you think you’ll stay?” Ioan said, once the rhythm of the silence made room for conversation.

“I am too much myself to say that I will stay ‘forever’, but as long as my room is there, as long as you and May are comfortable with me being a part of your lives, I will be happy to call it home. Or at least a home.”

“Really? No bigger and brighter things?”

She laughed and leaned over to dot her nose on eir cheek. “This is bigger and brighter things, dear.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll talk about it plenty, but I see no reason not to keep your room about. I don’t know what you overflowing will look like, but if it involves one third solitude and one third getting lost walking sims, I don’t imagine you’ll be around all the time.”

“Not at all, no. I will spend my share of time at the tent to be alone or out walking the world. Perhaps I will even ask you to double the rest of the house so that I can be alone somewhere domestic, not just the wild.”

“Of course.” Ey shrugged, tossing one of eir collected pebbles into the lake. “Besides, I like having you around.”

“I am pleased to hear that. I had gathered such, but all the same, I would not want to be a bother.”

“Oh, not at all. It seems like we’re all pretty good at sorting things out when they do come up, so I don’t imagine it’ll get to that point.”

“And I am not impinging too much on your and May’s relationship?” she asked, holding out her paw for one of eir pebbles. “I am asking her, too, and we will continue to talk together, but I also want to ask you directly.”

Ey shrugged, handing over the pebble. “I don’t think so. So long as we can still have time to ourselves when we need, I’ll be happy.”

She tossed the pebble out into the water. “Of course, dear.”

They sat in quiet for a while, tossing pebbles into the water until ey ran out.

“Hey Sasha?”

“Mm?”

“Do you miss anything from before all this?”

She shrugged. “It is hard to tell. As I have said, I liked being True Name. It was fulfilling. Every time I think about that now, though, it is intercut with memories of other happinesses. I will think about some particularly adroit political move and remember it fondly, but right along with it is a memory of a successful hunt or of making fun of you for your pen collection.”

Ey laughed.

“If I am honest, a few conflicts remain from both merges, even still. They are not large ones, but they are there, and some jealous part of me who is True Name does not wish to be completely subsumed, so I am keeping them held just at bay. There is something pleasant about the just-off-center nature of that reality. I am Sasha, and I am also True Name, End Waking, and May. I am of three minds.”

“So long as that works for you.”

“I can always address them down the line if it does not.”

Ey nodded. “And I’m guessing you don’t miss the social part of that life too much, Jonas or Zacharias or any of them.”

She poked at eir side with a claw before slouching against em. “You do not need to ask stupid questions, Ioan.”

“Right, right,” ey said, laughing. “I figured no love lost, but—”

“I did not love either of them, as friends or otherwise,” she said, waving away the rest of eir comment. “Now that I have known other kinds of love, I am confident of that.”

Her tone wasn’t upset or dismissive, but was assertive enough that ey dropped the point. “Well, writing sounds like a good career shift, then.”

“Says the writer.” She laughed.

“I liked what you’ve gotten down so far, and I have a few notes. We’ll talk about it when we’re back at a desk, though.”

“Of course. I will be leaning on you a lot for help.”

“I mean, you’re leaning on me now.”

“Smartass,” she said mildly.

Ey grinned. “I mean, no complaints. It’s still a little surprising, sometimes. I guess on some level I’m still sort of getting used to it, but May got me hooked on physical contact a long time ago.”

“A coordinated attack on your defenses, yes,” she said. “It makes my job easier.”

“What job?”

“Just finding a way to stick around friends. Nothing nefarious, dear.”

Ey shook eir head. “Right, sorry. I trust you.”

“I agree with what May said, Ioan. Should I want anything beyond that, I will come by it earnestly.”

“I appreciate that.” Ey hugged an arm around her. Ey was grateful for her looking out at the lake rather than at em, given the heat ey could feel rising to eir cheeks. “While we’re being honest, though, I think we’re sort of in the same boat, honestly, given what you share with May. We can both imagine that, but not necessarily the path from here to there.”

“Precisely. I imagine the same applies to you, that you will come by it honestly.”

Ey nodded. “Basically. Is it something you’d want?”

“God, I have no fucking clue, Ioan,” she said, laughing.

“Definitely same boat, then. It’s a problem for future Ioan.”

They fell into silence again. Part of em was itching for more pebbles to toss into the water, but ey was too comfortable to get up to collect more from the beach.

“That is the conflict I left from May,” Sasha murmured. “I kept some doubt from End Waking, enough to keep me grounded without keeping me torn. From May, I am keeping a little bit of overwhelming emotions. The possibility of simply falling for everyone around me is alluring. I can taste it in the memories, like a little bit of saccharine. But I am keeping a little bit of doubt from True Name so that it remains a new thing for me. I am of three minds Like a tree In which there are three blackbirds.”

Ey turned her words over in eir mind, along with whatever snippet of verse it was she'd quoted. The thought was complete. Nothing ey could respond with would add to it. It was curious, and hinted at things beyond eir ken, but it was complete.

Instead, ey said, "You're a good person, Sasha. All three of you are good people."

She laughed. "And you, dear, are a dork. But come, my tail is falling asleep, and my fork's conversation with May has wrapped up."

They walked back, then, hand in paw, following the trail as it dipped down to the water or ducked up into the trees. Back home, back to May, back to whatever it was that life had become.