

Mitzvot
and Selected Letters

Mitzvot
and Selected Letters
Post-Self book IV

Madison Scott-Clary

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Mitzvot

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Mitzvot

When you make a vow to your God יהוה, do not put off fulfilling it, for your God יהוה will require it of you, and you will have incurred guilt; whereas you incur no guilt if you refrain from vowing. You must fulfill what has crossed your lips and perform what you have voluntarily vowed to your God יהוה, having made the promise with your own mouth.

— Deuteronomy 23:22–24

Part I

Conversation

Ioan Bălan — 2349

How has this become my life? Ioan thought, as ey always did, when stepping away from home to the now familiar café.

May had, as she always did, dotted her nose against eir cheek, licked at eir nose a little too wetly, and said, “Good luck, have fun, say hi for me, and do not die,” and then ey stepped from home to arrive in front of the squat wood paneled coffee shop. The same sign proclaiming “Open 24 hours” fading in the sun. The same chipper baristas. The same sparkingly clean espresso machine. The same couch in the corner.

The same thing, month after month, stepping into the coffee shop to order the same coffee — delicious as always — and wait for the same True Name to arrive.

Their standard greeting would be for Ioan to stand and bow — ey was always there too early — set up a cone of silence, and share a bit of chit-chat before settling back down on the L-shaped couch, each to work on their own projects.

The only thing that seemed to change was the topics they talked about and True Name herself.

She was always smartly dressed, she always smiled brightly to em, always ordered the same mocha with extra whipped cream, and would always seem to get dabs of it on her nose-tip, but over time, the skunk had slowly picked up some ineffable quality about her that Ioan could only ever describe as ‘stressed’ or perhaps ‘harried’. It wasn’t in her grooming, for her whiskers

were always neat and orderly, the longer fur atop her head well brushed, and her claws neatly trimmed. It wasn't in the things she talked about, for she always had some interesting bit of news about any of the three — four, if one counted Artemis — Systems out there.

It was, ey decided, something to do with her eyes, her cheeks, the way her hands moved. It was in her voice, in her mien, in her bearing.

Once a month, ey'd meet True Name for coffee, and each time, she seemed that much more worn down, carrying that much more tension in her features, looking just that much older.

When ey first described this to May, the skunk had spent a silent minute staring out into the yard, or at least the corner visible from her beanbag, then stretched out on her belly, draping over the cushion. "Have you asked her, my dear?"

Ioan had shaken eir head. "It never felt polite to."

"Some day you should," she had said. "Though it is my suspicion that she is, as you have said, losing her easy confidence. She is struggling with the fact that she must constantly dump energy into keeping up the appearance of always being so competent."

Ioan had leaned back in eir chair, ey remembered, and stared up at the ceiling. "That certainly tallies with what she's said in the past."

"She is the type of person who will always take more upon herself, more and more and more until she cracks," May had murmured, quiet enough that Ioan had to strain to hear. "That she has been at this for more than two and a quarter centuries and the strain is only now showing is a testament to her strength."

Ever since that conversation, that conversation would rise to the fore of eir memory whenever ey met up with the other skunk for coffee. They would have their conversation, sip their coffees, and then get down to whatever projects they were

working on, and there would always be a small portion of eir mind dedicated to squaring what ey knew of her with just how old she was.

What ey'd not managed to bring up in that conversation, however, was that ey seemed to have some deep-seated desire to find a way to help. Ey wanted to find what it was that was wearing so much on True Name and find a way to ease it. There was a problem there, and problems were made for solving, yes?

It was something about em that May doubtless knew, but which ey'd never shared with the skunk, because ey knew that her response would either be the gentle teasing that she was so good at or the gentle inquisition that she was equally adept at conducting. She'd ask em where the feeling stemmed from; was it from within eir mind, or within eir heart? Was it related to all problems? Was it because True Name looked so much like her, eir partner? Never mind if it were a problem that ey could not solve, as was almost certainly the case, what would ey do if it was a problem she did not want solved?

Ey knew she'd ask em those questions because whenever ey asked them of emself, ey heard them in her voice. Even when ey'd asked Sarah, eir therapist (or, well, all three of their therapists), there was some subconscious overlay of the skunk's lilt-ing voice floating above the question, and ey'd find emself dropping contractions and leaning on the anaphora that the Odists seemed stuck with.

"You seem particularly lost in thought today, Ioan."

Ey jolted at the sudden intrusion of a voice on eir thoughts, then smiled sheepishly at True Name. "Sorry about that. I hope I wasn't mumbling to myself."

She grinned. "Not this time, no, though your lips were moving, so I suspect you were not far off."

Shaking eir head, ey capped eir pen, tucking it into a pocket and closing eir notebook on one of the place-marker ribbons. "I don't doubt it."

"What was on your mind, if I may ask?"

Ey hesitated, considering eir options. The desire to fix, to help, to aid and assist, still hung around em, but it'd be imprudent for em to just offer that out of nowhere. Instead, ey said, "Something May said. About you, I mean. Hopefully that's not weird."

The skunk laughed. "It depends on what she said, does it not? Though I am flattered to have been in your thoughts. What did she have to say?"

"That you're the type of person to take on whatever's in front of you, even if your docket's already full. I was trying to piece together how much of that applies to the rest of the clade, too." After a moment, ey shrugged and added, "And myself, for that matter."

True Name looked up to the ceiling, head tilted thoughtfully. "I do not think there is any disputing that I will load myself up with responsibility to the point of overloading. I remember some of that from before I was forked, though I do not think Michelle was of quite the same temperament. She took on more than she could handle more out of a sense of social obligation than...whatever it is that drives me."

"Determination? Persistence?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps. What is it that Dear says so often?" "I do not make art because I know why; if I knew why, I would not need to make art"? It is like that for me. I do not strive because I know what drives me. If I knew what that was, who knows if I would continue to strive?"

Ey marveled, as ey so often did, at just how many of the Odists seem to speak in well structured paragraphs. Hook, hypothesis, synthesis.

"It seems like it's wearing on you," ey said. Realizing that it had been nearly five minutes of em trying to psych emself up to say so, ey added, "All that you've got going on, I mean."

She frowned, leaned forward to pick up her coffee, and took a lapping sip. "Does it? I am feeling increasingly overloaded, yes, but that is not new. How is it visible?"

“You just seem more tired every time I see you.”

She nodded. “I am, yes.”

“Is there—” Ey caught emself up short, forcibly tamped down the urge to ask what ey could do to help, and instead said, “I mean, what all are you working on? I can never tell with you and May. It just looks like thinking.”

“It is perhaps a problem with doing all of one’s work in one’s head.” she said, laughing. “We are not blessed with your affinity for paper.”

“Or curse.”

She grinned, “Your words, not mine. But, well...with the understanding that I cannot tell you everything that I am working on, I will say that there is much to be done when it comes to shaping sys-side sentiment around all of the various new tech.”

“Oh?”

“The expanded ACLs on cones of silence, for example. It is nice to be able to obscure the occupants, yes? No more hiding one’s mouth or expression. But how does one pass on the knowledge of the upgrades to the System? There are various feeds, yes, but even something as small as that requires some thought put into how to announce it. Do we hail it as a technological advancement, or do we put a tone of resignation on it, as though we have been given something no one wanted? Perhaps we announce it with a resounding chorus of “fucking *finally*”.”

“It seems to have gone over well, at least.”

“It did, yes.” She grinned, then, with a tilt of her head, ey felt the ACL-scape of the cone they were within shift, and there was a subtle blurring to the world around them as she opaqued the cone from the outside. “Now considers the effects of A/V transmission between sys- and phys-side.”

Ey blinked and sat up straighter. “Wait, what?”

“You see? Much thought must be put into managing expectations.”

“Back up a moment. Are we going to actually get that?”

“It is already enabled in a select few locked-down sims, yes.”

“Holy shit.”

She laughed. “Holy shit, indeed. I have no clue as to the tech that goes into it, which is made all the more complicated from it being inspired by our dear Artemisian friends, but what I do know is that this will shift many of the plans in place around stability. When I sit here in silence, drinking my coffee and looking deep in thought, I am working on that. I write my speeches or talk with my cocladists or other versions of myself, and fill out the exo I have dedicated to the topic.”

“And that wears you out?” Ey hastened to add, “Not to say that it isn’t work, of course.”

The skunk gave a hint of a bow in acknowledgement. “It is part of a larger work landscape in progress, yes. So much to keep in my head, so many conversations to be had, so many tiny social interactions to monitor, both in person and over the text of the perisystem feeds.”

Ey nodded. There was so much to process in just the new tech, not to mention the reminder that, even if ey’d long since started thinking of True Name as a complete and complex person, she still had her fingers in just about every political pie that could possibly exist on the three incarnations of the System.

“Does writing not wear you out, Ioan?”

“Well, sometimes,” ey hedged. “I guess it depends on what all is going into whatever it is that I’m writing. The *History* wore me out at some points, particularly during research, but for the most part, writing was just...what I did. It didn’t wear me out any more than breathing might.”

She laughed. “And theatre?”

“Oh, that definitely wears me out.”

“I remember that, yes. Even just standing backstage, waiting for one’s moment to enter felt exhausting sometimes. I would get all worn out and want nothing more than to go home and fall over, afterwards.”

“Didn’t you go get shitty diner food or whatever?”

“Oh, nearly every time,” she said, grinning. “I would never let so sacred an act be spoiled by something as silly as sleep.”

Ey nodded. “A Finger Pointing holds to it like a ritual, yeah. It’s a toss up whether or not she drinks me under the table.”

“Of course.” The skunk grinned and finished her coffee before setting it down on the table. “We studied long and hard to build up such a tolerance.”

“Doesn’t sound super healthy.”

“I suppose not. At least, not back phys-side.”

“I noticed that seems to be unevenly distributed,” ey said. “May and I rarely drink unless it’s with someone else, but Dear and its partners seem to drink quite a bit.”

“So I have heard. There are a few aspects of our past life that wound up only picked up by a few of us, beyond the obvious interests. Drinking, theatre and art, furry, that sort of thing. I have never figured out whether there is any rhyme or reason to it.”

Ey nodded. “Makes me wonder if I might’ve done the same, if I were more of a dispersionista.”

“Perhaps,” she said, shrugging. “Codrin has diverged quite a bit from you. They both have. You can put at least some of that on us, though. May Then My Name and Dear, at least.”

“Right,” ey said, laughing. “May’s fond of saying that it’s the Odists’ job to fuck with us until we loosen up.”

True Name folded her paws in her lap primly, grinning to em.

This is it, ey thought. This is why I keep coming back. Even if she is consciously turning up the friendliness to maintain some weird status quo, or even if she is only doing it subconsciously, she’s still nice to be around.

Ey considered letting the topic continue, but the thought was intriguing enough to voice out loud. “Why do you do this, True Name? Get coffee with me, I mean.”

“There is nothing nefarious about it, if that is what you are asking,” she said, bowing her head briefly. “In confidence?”

“Of course. I imagine most of what you say is in confidence.”

“Indeed. I trust that you will not share the news about the A/V advancements yet.”

Ey nodded.

“Right. Then I suppose it is just nice to have a friend, for lack of a better term.”

A conversation from years back wafted up through eir memory. “You said back during the convergence, ‘We will never be close, you and I’. Has that changed?”

“I do not know. Has it?”

Ey frowned.

“That is why I say ‘for lack of a better term’. We are on good terms, are we not? We are able to co-exist, to talk about news and nonsense, yes? To chat?” She shrugged, smiled to em. “That is perilously close to friendship, I think. If you do not feel that the label fits, I understand, but I stand by what I said: it is nice to have a friend. Someone who is not another me.”

“Aren’t you friends with Jonas?”

The hesitation was brief, but still notable. “We make pretty good colleagues, and we have a mode of interaction that is comfortable for us, but the dynamic that you and I have is far closer to friendship than that of mine and his.”

Ey tilted eir head, asking, “Was that always the case?”

The skunk’s expression never changed, but her tone grew far more careful as she bowed her head politely and said, “I am not comfortable with this topic, my dear.”

“Of course. Sorry, True Name.”

She nodded once more. “Thank you for being understanding. All of that to say that I enjoy our coffee and co-working sessions because there is a sense of friendship to them, and even I need that sometimes.”

“Well, I’m happy to provide,” ey said. The Bălan clade seemed to have undergone a collective reevaluation of True Name over the last few years, but even so, the plain earnestness led to a moment of tamping down suspicion that ey was simply

being played. "And for what it's worth, that lines up with my thoughts. Glad we have the chance to do so."

She raised her cup in acknowledgment. "Thank you, Ioan. That is perhaps a good note to end on, as I would like to reconcile memories across my instances."

Ey nodded. "Sure. Until next time?"

The skunk stood and bowed. "Yes. Until next time. Enjoy the rest of your day, my dear."

The cone of silence dropped, letting in a jolt of noise, and the skunk stepped from the sim. Ey finished eir coffee, then stepped back home.

"I am pleased to see that you did not die," May said, looking up from her notebook, grinning.

Ey kicked off eir shoes and set down eir own notebook on her desk before walking over to give the skunk a kiss between the ears. "Nope, not yet. Stuck with me for a while yet."

She set her pen down and stretched her arms up over her head before leaning up to dot her nose against eirs, arms draped up around eir shoulders. "Good, I am not finished wringing all I can out of you. One day, you will be left a broken husk of a Bălan and I will move on to my next victim."

Shaking eir head, ey returned that nosepress before straightening up. "You're doing a crap job of it, May. You keep adding to my life rather than taking away from it."

She laughed. "Even when you are joking, you are adorable. Love you too, my dear. How was True Name?"

"Oh, fine. Much the same, I guess. We just worked and chatted and drank coffee. Nothing unusual."

"Well, that can be good, right?"

"Yeah, comfort in familiarity. She did at least confirm your hypothesis that she's just been overloading herself."

May nodded. "Of all of us, she is most prone to that, I suspect."

"I don't think the Artemis dump is helping out, there. They're pulling all sorts of stuff from it."

“You are as well, are you not?”

Ey laughed. “I suppose I am, at that.”

The skunk reached out and snagged one of eir hands, pulling em down onto the beanbag beside her. Ey lay back and let her rest her head against eir shoulder before settling eir arm around her.

“She said something else that was interesting I’d like to discuss, but I don’t want to keep talking about her if you’re uncomfortable with it. It can be later.”

She shrugged, doodling a dull claw lazily over eir stomach through eir shirt and vest, sitting just shy of ticklish. “I do not mind, my dear. You know that I have been working on it.”

“Sure, I just didn’t want to—”

“I will tell you if I would like to drop the topic, I promise,” she said, then laughed. “Sorry, my dear. I did not mean to interrupt.”

“No, it’s okay. She actually did that quite well today.” Ey leaned eir head back, looking thoughtfully up to the ceiling. “I asked why she kept up with me with the coffee meetings, and she said that it’s just nice to have a friend.”

May tilted her head up, enough to bump eir nose against the underside of eir chin. “Are you? Friends, I mean.”

“That’s what we talked about. Neither of us could really decided on anything beyond ‘friends for lack of a better term’.” Ey hesitated, feeling incredibly conscious of eir partner resting against em, her stated resentment of her down-tree instance, how that had bordered for so long on hatred. Ey continued, speaking carefully, “I like having interesting people to talk to and she’s been pretty good company. She likes having someone to just be around and talk with that isn’t herself or Jonas.”

“Are they still not getting along?”

“That’s where she requested that I drop the topic. She said that they made good coworkers, but not necessarily friends, and I asked if that was always the case, and she said she wasn’t comfortable having that conversation. Very politely, of course.”

“Mm.” The skunk lowered her muzzle again, letting em peek down at her again. “I have been working on how I define myself in relation to True Name. I do not like that I spent so long hating her. I do not want that to be a part of who I am. I hold no such compunctions about Jonas. He was a shit then and he is far worse now.”

“Huh?” Ey shook eir head as ey pieced together what she meant. “Oh right, sorry. I guess you were forked off after he and True Name started working together.”

“Yes. I remember that from when I was her. We were not friends then, and I am glad that she is not his friend, now.”

“I only met him those few times years back, and yeah, I’m glad she isn’t, either. He was definitely a shit.”

She laughed and poked em in the belly. “Mx. Ioan Bălan, you watch your language.”

“Hey, I curse!”

“Not well, my dear.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you too.”

The skunk sat up and gave em an exaggerated frown. “I am warning you, young man.”

Ey rolled eir eyes. “‘Young man?’”

“Young gentlethem.”

Ey laughed. “I learned it from you, May.”

“What, ‘fuck you too?’” The skunk shook her head. “It just sounds so strange coming from your mouth.”

“I’m not as good at the well placed curse word as all of you.”

“It is an art we have perfected. It increases the impact when they do show up. Even True Name does it, I am sure.”

“She has once or twice, yeah. You two still sound much the same, though, in terms of your voices, so I feel like I’m used to it.”

May nodded, leaned down, and licked em squarely across the nose before settling down on eir front again. “Yes, I suppose we do. Here is where we drop the topic, however.”

“Alright,” ey said, wiping eir face. “Want dinner?”

“To be built to love is to be built to dissolve. It is to be built to unbecome. It is to have the sole purpose of falling apart all in the name of someone else.

“We all have a bit of that in us, do we not? You find yourself at a bar or maybe in some class somewhere, you look over, and there they are, right? You look over and you maybe catch their eye and you come undone at the seams. You fall into those big, beautiful eyes — for when you are built to love, every eye you catch is the most beautiful thing of all time — and you begin to flake away at the edges.

“And to be built to love is to be all edges. They catch on your clothes, they brush against walls and furniture. You are all edges so that love can fill the cracks and soften those jagged corners.

“You are spiked and barbed, you are almost built that way on purpose, so that the slightest breeze can blow you about and catch you up on some future love.”

The skunk, who had been sitting on a barstool, hunched over a pint and slurring half to the glass, half to some absent bartender, slid to her feet, wobbled for a moment, the righted herself.

“Actually, you know what? I have heard it said so many times that to hate — truly hate, burn up inside with that passion — is to actually be in love with the object of your hatred, but I think there is a little bit of hatred in love, too. You fall so completely for someone that you just cannot help but resent them. It is a mirror of that hatred for yourself, for all your jagged edges and prickly burrs, a reflection of the resentment that you feel towards yourself for having been built to love. And look at me!” She gestured down at herself, a grand sweep of the paw outsized in her intoxication. “I fuckin’ loathe myself! Can you imagine how deeply I must love others, then?”

After a moment’s wild laughter, she stumbled back until her tail crumpled against the edge of the barstool. “Ow! Fuck. Yeah,

I deserved that one, I think.”

She moved to finish the pint on the bar, frowned on finding it empty, and shuffled away from the bar.

“So yeah, you hate yourself, and it actually feels kind of good, does it not? Hatred can fill in those cracks as easily as love. Sure, it may not leave so pretty a pattern as the...whatsit...the patina that stains a tea cup with crackled glaze, but maybe the edges of you do not catch on so many things anymore. Maybe those prickles are dulled and you bounce off everyone around you. You can ping-pong through life, then, loving everyone and loathing yourself.”

The skunk stood up straight again, brushed her shirt out, and brought her tail around to rub at where she’d bumped it against the stool.

“Good Lord, May,” Ioan said, laughing.

She grinned widely, all that feigned drunkenness suddenly gone from her expression. “How was it, my dear?”

Ey slouched back against the front row seat ey’d claimed, tapping the end of eir pen against eir lower lip. “Really, really good,” ey said. “Was the stumble intentional?”

“The movement itself was,” she said. “Though hitting my tail was not.”

“So no ‘I deserved that one’?”

She walked to the edge of the stage and sat on it, kicking her feet idly. “It was not in there, but I think I will keep it in.”

Ey grinned and closed eir notebook around eir pen, setting it aside to stand. “Yeah, it’s good in there,” ey said, leaning forward to give the bridge of the skunk’s snout a kiss. “I mean, the whole thing’s good. Only note I really had is that you say ‘hate’ four times in a pretty short span right after you stood up. ‘That to hate’, then ‘truly hate’, then ‘object of your hatred’, and then ‘little bit of hatred’.”

May squinted her eyes shut and then scrubbed a paw over her muzzle. “Should I make them all different?”

“I’d keep the first two because it works as an echo, so maybe just change the third?”

“Excellent, O great wordsmith.”

Ey laughed and tweaked her ear before hoisting emself up onto the edge of the state next to her. As always, she scooted closer so that she could lean against eir side. “Who would’ve thought, hmm? You getting me into theatre and me getting you into writing.”

“This is still theatre! Just earlier on in the process,” she said, laughing. “But yes, it is proof that the Bălans can shove us around instead of only the other way around.”

Ey gave the skunk a playful shove with eir shoulder, at which she let out an outsized yelp followed by a whimper. “So mean!”

“Yeah, that’s me. Meanest person you know.”

She rolled her eyes.

Ey let a long silence play, then, looking out into the cool darkness of the theater while eir partner summoned up her notebook and scribbled down eir tip from earlier.

“Do you really feel that way?”

“Mm?”

“The jagged edges and self-loathing.”

She shrugged. “There is some of me in there, yes, but it is still theatre, my dear. It is about taking the particular and making it universal, if only for a little while, yes?”

Ey nodded.

When ey didn’t reply otherwise, she shrugged and continued, “I would not say that I agree with that” I loathe myself, so imagine how much I love others” bit. I do not loathe myself, and yet I still love others. Have loved and will love in the future, even, and I see no change in my rare moments of self-loathing.”

Ey laughed. “‘Will love in the future’? You leaving me for some handsome guy you met in a bar, then?”

“A bar? Ugh. I am apparently more of a ‘hunt nerds in the library’ type.” She poked em in the belly. “But I love you, my dear, and will continue to do so.”

Rubbing at the spot where she'd poked with her dull claw, ey nodded. "Love you too, May."

She beamed happily and settled back in against eir side, head resting on eir shoulder. "I am glad, my dear. I know we agreed early on that this — us being together, I mean — does not need to be permanent, but that does not change the fact that I will continue loving you. Even if we should split, I will not stop."

Ey nodded slowly.

"I have no plans for such, Ioan," she added quickly. "You are stuck with me for a good while yet."

"What? Oh, no," ey said, shaking eir head to clear a few too many thoughts. "I trust you on that, May. Just got me thinking. Do you still love all the others you've been with?"

She laughed. "What I said does not just apply to you. Of course I still love them. Some long-diverged forks of me are even still in relationships with some of them."

"So you've said. You still love them as the root instance, though?"

She nodded. "I do not begin relationships as anything other than my root instance. I do not know why, but it does not feel fair of me to do anything but."

"Oh, so none of your forks went on to fork for other relationships?"

"Not that I know of, no. It is a firm conviction, so I would imagine that they hold to it, but perhaps some older ones have diverged."

"How many are there, anyway?"

She lifted her head to dot her nose against eir cheek. "Are you jealous, my dear?" Her voice was calm and curious. Calm enough and curious enough, some distant part of em noted, that it kept em from falling immediately into defensiveness.

"I get the occasional pangs," ey said after a long minute's thought. "More so early on. When ey was first getting settled in eir relationship, Codrin told me about something that Dear

had told em shortly after ey'd been forked,"Jealousy is a sign of needs not met". Whenever I start feeling jealous, that's usually a sign for me to take a step back and think about what need that might be."

"See, this is what I like about you, my dear. You feel a thing and then think about it until you understand it. Sometimes a little too much, but it has served you well."

Ey tilted eir cheek to rest it atop her head, a bit of closeness that also served the purpose of stopping her ear-tip from tickling eir neck.

"I feel a thing and am helpless before it. I cannot but wrap myself up in...it..." she said, pulling out her notebook again to jot down the words as they came. "Love, hatred, hunger, exhaustion. I am built for them all, and I cannot do a thing about them..."

Ey shared a secret smile with emself as the skunk trailed off, continuing to write, tongue-tip peeking out from her muzzle.

"Also," she said once she'd finished writing. "The answer is that I do not know how many of me are still in relationships. There are at least three, and I know of at least five that have quit, but I never made it a requirement that they keep in touch. Beyond that, I think there are...mm, seven, perhaps?"

"So that makes me your sixteenth relationship?"

"Something like that, yes." She slid over and swung her legs up onto the stage so that she could rest her head in eir lap. "Did my monologue really get you thinking about all this?"

"It's a good monologue," ey said, petting over her ears. "Or start, at least. You said it should be five minutes, right?"

She nodded. "Around that, yes. I am still working on it."

"Mmhm. It's good so far, though, yeah. Got me thinking, but I'm also just fascinated by you, which helps."

"Why, because I am weird? I think that is an Odist thing," she said, laughing.

"What, am I not allowed to be fascinated by my partner?"

"Absolutely not, no."

Ey tugged on her ear. "Fascinated and annoyed."

"Yes, well, too bad. You remain stuck with me, Mx. Bălan." She continued more seriously, "I did not expect this to be fascinating to you. I try to be careful talking about my other relationships."

"I don't really mind," ey said after giving it due thought. "That was past May, right? It'd be like getting upset over someone having had relationships in the past, or having exes. If it were multiple partners at the same time, that'd probably be a separate conversation."

She shook her head. "I could not do that. I am not built the same as Dear. I am only in multiple relationships in the sense that there are multiple mes, but only ever one me involved with one other."

"Why?"

"Because," she said, rolling onto her back so that she could smile up to em. "I am also helpless before devotion, and that takes the whole of me."

"What about Douglas or that night with A Finger Pointing?"

"I hold no romantic feelings for A Finger Pointing." She laughed. "She is nice, but in a boss-you-drink-with-on-Fridays sort of way."

"And Douglas?"

Her answer was a while in coming. "Were our friendship to head in that direction, I would fork, but I do not foresee that being the case."

"Really?" Ey frowned. "Wouldn't that be awkward? Us going over there to see him and your fork together?"

"Oh, incredibly awkward," she said, rolling her eyes. "I have done similar in the past, and it would take a year or two to shake out. It is uncomfortable for me, as I am left with the same attachment even as my up-tree instance gets fulfillment."

"I can imagine."

"No, Ioan, I do not think you can," she said primly. "You actually think about the way you feel as you are feeling it like a

normal person rather than just crashing headlong into overwhelming emotions like a fucking Odist.”

“Well, fair.”

“I do not think we need to worry about that, though. I am comfortable with my friendship with him just as I am comfortable loving you, and should someone catch my eye—”

“I think you’d need to start going to more bars, though.”

She laughed and shook her head, continuing, “—should someone catch my eye — or yours, for that matter — we will tackle it then with plenty of talking.”

“Oh, I believe you on that. Skunks never shut up.”

She made as if to bite em on the belly and, when ey flinched away, grinned up to em. “Mx. Ioan Bălan, you are the one asking all the questions with long, involved answers. Do not pin this on me.”

“Yeah, yeah. You just got me thinking is all. I think you’re giving me too much credit, saying someone might catch my eye, though.”

“Why?”

Ey shrugged. “I’m not exactly that observant.”

“You worked as a professional observer for, what, a century?”

“Not *that* kind of observation.”

The skunk laughed. “Well, okay, yes. I will not discount the possibility, though. If we are in this life for yet more centuries, there is no harm in being deliberate. Plus, I will get an inordinate amount of satisfaction out of seeing you fall for someone. It was so wholesome the first time, I see no reason why it should not the subsequent times.”

“I guess. I don’t know if there’s anyone who—”

She waved a paw dismissively. “If there is not, there is not. We can speak in hypotheticals like fucking grown-ups, my dear.”

“Fine, fine.”

When the silence drew out, May grabbed one of eir hands and started mouthing on eir fingers.

“Ow!” Ey laughed and tapped a finger on her nose lightly. “You’re adorable.”

She licked at eir fingertip, saying, “Thank you, my dear, in all earnestness. It makes me happy to be able to have a conversation about this.”

“Of course, May. I figure it ought to be an open topic for us.”

She nodded and stretched out on the stage. “Agreed. We can come back to it later, though. I would like to run this through once more,” she said, wagging the notebook at em. “And then head home to get ready for dinner, though. Debarre is coming over and I plan on flirting with him outrageously in front of you all night to make you as jealous as I can.”

Ey laughed and pushed at her until she sat up, sliding off the stage and walking back to eir seat. “Alright. Once more, from the top.”

Ioan pulled together a stack of eir notes and, with a little concentration and a gesture, moved them over to a once-blank notebook, the pages now filled with eir scratchy shorthand. To this was added one of eir nicer pens, clipped to the cover, and a few slips of foolscap besides.

Tucking those under eir arm, ey walked over to May’s desk and bent down to give the skunk a kiss atop her head, right between her ears. “I’m heading out. No messing with my pens, okay?”

Rather than the usual ‘do not die’ joke, the skunk turned on her stool, looped her arms up around eir shoulders and pressed her nose to eirs. “You will be okay, right?”

Ey hesitated. Something about her tone pointed more towards anxiety than simple seriousness. Ey leaned forward to set eir notebook down, tugged up on eir slacks, and settled to eir knees in front of her. “Of course, May. Will you?”

“I will be fine,” she said, smiling. “I am just a little worried today, is all.”

“Want me to leave a fork behind?”

“Will they be intolerable and antsy?”

Ey laughed. “Depends on how much pestering you do.”

She lifted her snout enough to lick eir nose-tip, then shoved at em playfully. “I am busy, my dear.”

“You fork more than anyone I know, you can just—”

“I am trying to tell you to get out of here, Ioan,” she said, grinning. “Do not mind a little bit of anxiety. Good luck, have fun, and do not die, okay?”

Ey shook eir head and stood again, grabbing eir notebook. “Skunks. I swear...”

Ey stepped out of the sim before she could kick eir shin.

Ey ordered eir usual coffee and staked out eir usual spot on the couch. Rather than getting to work while ey waited for True Name, ey simply sat and enjoyed eir coffee as best ey could, starting off into nothing while mulling over May’s words.

You will be okay, right? Ey frowned and shifted eir gaze down to eir coffee, half gone by now. There were relatively few occasions that would bring about anxiety in eir partner, and ey knew the majority of them stemmed from within her.

She’d often been upset by her down-tree instance, though that hatred she’d borne for so long had softened to something more like distaste of late. She’d occasionally gotten upset at em, often when ey’d not picked up on some cue that she’d given for some emotional need ey wasn’t meeting. Both of those she’d express as best she could with a little burst of anxiety.

All of the other times, though, it had come from within. Whatever dire emotions that dwelt beneath the chipper, goofy, sarcastic, and delightfully earnest layer that made up the most of her would peek through and a little spark of something more profound and inexplicable would come over her.

Ey frowned down to eir coffee, and considered whether ey should start laying in supplies for her overflowing. If this was

the first sign, though, ey at least had some time yet.

“Mx. Bălan?”

Ey jolted and sat upright. True Name stood on the other side of the low coffee table from em, not yet having made the move to sit. “Sorry, True Name.”

She bowed, smiling kindly. “May I join you? You looked quite deep in thought, and I am happy to meet up at another time.”

Returning the bow apologetically, ey gestured toward her usual spot on the couch. “No, no. Sorry, I was a bit stuck up in my head. Could probably stand with getting out more often.”

The skunk nodded and sat, blinking a cone of silence into being. She lapped at a bit of the whipped cream atop her mocha to get down to the drink. “I quite understand. Bit too cooped up of late?”

“A little, I guess. Heads down, maybe. Performances, helping May write a monologue, working on my own next project.”

She grinned. “Plenty on your plate, then. May I ask how May Then My Name is doing?”

“Oh, she’s alright.”

Ey must have hesitated before responding, or not kept eir own anxiety out of eir voice, as True Name’s expression fell briefly, though it was quickly replaced. “Say hi for me?”

Ey nodded. “Of course.”

“I am also curious to hear about her monologue. It is something I remember thinking about occasionally and yet never getting around to doing. I am pleased that one of us is.”

That also felt like a closed topic, so ey shook eir head. “I’m not comfortable talking about that without her permission. Sorry, True Name.”

She smiled disarmingly and held up her free paw. “Of course, Ioan, no trouble. Can you tell me about your own project, perhaps?”

Ey opened eir mouth, closed it, and laughed. “I feel like I laid a bunch of landmines around me. Hopefully it’s not awkward,

but with all that went down on Castor, I've been toying with rewriting *Perils* as a play."

The skunk got a strange look on her face, then laughed. "Oh really? Cheeky! I do not know if I will be able to make it to a performance, but I will be delighted to read the script, if you wind up publishing it."

Ey laughed as well, more relieved than anything. "I'll make sure you get a copy, then. Was worried you'd be upset by it."

She waved her paw dismissively. "Of course not, my dear. That whole kerfuffle was, what, forty-four years ago? It has been comfortably relegated to memory and is thus fair game for artists."

Nodding, ey finished eir coffee and set the cup down on the table so ey could pull out eir notebook and get to writing.

Ey worked for a few minutes. They both did, if True Name's thoughtful gaze up into nothing was anything to go by. Ey'd wound eir way past all those conversational mines — May, her monologue, the play about Qoheleth — and now felt free to relax into the afternoon.

"You know," the skunk said thoughtfully, bringing em out of eir writing. "I was quite pleased when that book came out."

"*Perils*?"

She nodded. "It was something of a relief in a strange, roundabout way. While I would have preferred that it had not ended the way it did, it wound up being a pretty efficient way to bring all of that to the surface. A lot of very smart people have been thinking about it over the last few decades, and I am pleased to see some progress being made."

Ioan tilted eir head thoughtfully. "Sounds like, yeah. At least, from what I hear from May and Codrin. A Finger Pointing has been pretty tight-lipped about her own therapy and I don't think End Waking went along with it."

"He does not seem the type, no."

"Is it working out well for you, too?"

“Well enough,” she said. “Though I am not comfortable discussing beyond that.”

Ey nodded. “Right, sorry.”

“It is alright. Thank you for understanding.” She raised her cup towards em in a small toast. “As to your book, however, I found it most interesting in that I was able to learn much about the assessment and impact of the events on the...ah, liberal side of the clade.”

Ioan had to focus on keeping eir expression neutral. True Name hadn’t had the kindest of words for the self-proclaimed liberal Odists. “I’ll admit, I was worried as to how the book would go over with the conservatives.”

“There were no assassins in the night, I trust?” she asked, grinning.

“Uh...well, no,” ey stammered, caught off guard by the humor. “Actually, no contact at all. I don’t think I’ve even talked about what happened with the other side of the clade until now.”

“‘The other side of the clade’ is a more appropriate phrase, is it not? We are spread along a spectrum. Those like Dear, May Then My Name, and A Finger Pointing at one end, those such as Praiseworthy, Those Who Forge, and Teeth Of Death somewhere in the middle, and then me and my ilk on the other.” The skunk finished her coffee and leaned forward to set her cup down before continuing. “To soothe any fears you may have, it was not me who hired Guōwēi, nor am I pleased with what happened and how.”

“Who did? Do you know?”

She smiled pityingly at em. “Ioan, please.”

“Right, of course you do. I don’t imagine you feel comfortable telling me who, though.”

“It is not a matter of comfort, my dear, it is one of information hygiene. The fewer people who know, the less of a chance there is of plans going awry. Besides,” she nodded toward em. “We considered the impact that *Perils* would have on the Sys-

tem, and leaving that element of mystery in it accomplished our goals.”

“Goals?” Ey shook eir head. “How do you mean?”

The skunk folded her paws in her lap, leaning back against the couch. “What would you say the current public opinion is of the book?”

“I...well, hmm. If you’d asked me that a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have been able to say, but I’ve been digging back into it for this project. I guess most seem to see it as a sort of cautionary tale. I didn’t publish the internal report, so I think the fact that it read like investigative journalism made people treat it almost like a work of fiction.”

“Yes, and mystery plays a role in that. This is why we suggested you not publish the clade-side report. There is an appropriate level of mystery in what you did publish that aligned with our goals.”

“So, similar to what you did with the *History*.”

She smiled and gave a hint of a bow. “Yes. In a relatively short time, both have started to fade into a near mythical status. A credit to your skills as a writer, Mx. Bălan.”

Ey smiled faintly. “Thanks, I guess. Why, though?”

“Why are they becoming myths?” She shrugged. “Life on the System is shaped by the modes of our existence. Creativity has assumed a level of primacy that was not feasible phys-side, and so successful creative works accelerate more quickly toward myth, here.”

Ey nodded. “And you? What do you think of it?”

“Of *Perils*?”

“That, the possible play, the events as a whole.”

There was a moment of silence as the skunk thought, brushing a paw over one of her knees to smooth out her slacks. “With the understanding that there is much that I cannot tell you about my feelings on the proceedings, I found it all frustrating and unnerving. I worked with Qoheleth on several occasions throughout the years, and watching his...I will not say decline,

as I think the metaphor fails, but his metamorphosis from Odist to Qoheleth touched on some primal distress. As I have said, I am not pleased with what happened or how. I liked Qoheleth quite a bit.”

This seemed to deserve another moment of silence, one of acknowledgement rather than thoughtfulness, and so ey let it play out, the muffled clatter of the rest of the cafe coming through the cone of silence suddenly much more present.

“What news from Castor had you thinking about *Perils*?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, I do not associate aliens or time modification or the...ah, struggles that Answers Will Not Help experienced with what happened with Qoheleth.” She hesitated, added, “Or Michelle’s struggles.”

Eir mind raced. How could ey possibly bring up the Name? That Codrin now knew it and that knowledge — at least at one layer of remove — had propagated through the clade? Surely she knew that, at least, but how could ey say that out loud to her?

“Mx. Bălan?” True Name was frowning, whether at eir silence or expression ey couldn’t guess. “I am guessing that the answer is complicated.”

“It...uh, yeah. What Codrin heard on Artemis...I mean...”

The skunk tilted her head, gestured for em to continue.

Doesn’t she know? ey thought. *She has to.*

“Well,” ey stammered, hastily backtracking through eir train of thought. Perhaps ey should stick with ignorance as well. “All that about getting lost, and how fourthrace experienced similar and also dealt with long-term effects.”

Still frowning, she nodded.

“It was all bound up in some clade-eyes only thoughts,” ey hastened to add, hoping that the slight untruth would be enough. “Eir worries about Dear...but I don’t want to say anymore.”

That seemed to have been enough, as the tenseness that had

been building in her shoulders relaxed, though her frown remained. “Of course, yes, I did not mean to press. My apologies.”

Ey shook eir head and waved a hand. “It’s okay, promise, I just had to disentangle all those thoughts really quickly.”

“You are a very thoughtful person,” she said, a hint of a smile creeping back onto her muzzle. “In the common sense as well as in the sense that you seem to be at all times full of thoughts.”

“I lost track of the number of times May’s accused me of living up in my head a long time ago, yeah.”

“There is no harm in it, my dear. It serves you well.” She settled back against the couch once more and sighed. “Pleasant as it has been, I have spent more time talking than intended. I would like to get a bit of work done before I lose track of the threads, if that is alright.”

Ey smiled and nodded. “Of course, True Name.”

As the skunk’s focus drifted away, ey opened eir notebook again and stared at what ey’d written already. The words were marks on the page, ey could tell, but eir mind was so wrapped up in the conversation that ey wasn’t able to make sense of them. Too much had gone on in too short a timespan. All that talk of Qoheleth, of the conservatives’ opinions of the events, or at least of True Name’s.

She’d been so candid about it all, just as she’d been growing more candid with em in general over the last few years. She had all the reason in the world to use her centuries of skills to use that intentionally, though. Ey’d never met anyone so tightly in control of themselves as her. Perhaps even now, dozens, hundreds of sensorium messages were flying across her stanza preparing a oft landing for eir play in light of the fact that others now knew the Name.

And yet...

And yet ey couldn’t stop emself from thinking, *Holy shit, I don’t think she knows.*

Ioan half lay, half slouched against the headboard, May draped bonelessly up along eir front. She'd gotten up to make them both coffee to sip in bed while they woke up, then proceed to doze off again, using eir chest as a pillow and the rest of em as mattress.

Ey, meanwhile, had made it through most of eir coffee, resting the cup between the skunk's shoulder blades between sips. It was technically Christmas, ey knew, though neither of them cared much for the holiday. The only reason it stuck in eir mind was eir plans for making the traditional tocană and mămăligă that afternoon. Ey hadn't learned to cook much prior to uploading — just a few simple dishes for a poor student — and it wasn't until ey had wound up on the System in eir current sim that ey'd gone back to teach emself all the things ey'd loved growing up.

It promised to be a lazy sort of day otherwise, which felt necessary. May's spike of anxiety a few days prior when ey'd gone out for coffee had quickly tapered off, but it had not simply gone away. The days that followed had included a lot of asking em if ey was okay and taking breaks to sit on the balcony doing breathing exercises.

Still, last night had been delightful, with the skunk far more relaxed while they cooked — or tried to cook — shitty fast food for each other. After dinner, they moved to the couch with Ioan resting eir head in May's lap so that she could tease her fingers through eir thick hair while they hummed silly little songs to each other.

Today promised to be equally comfortable.

Ey frowned when ey lifted eir mug, only to find it empty. Equally comfortable but for that, ey supposed.

"I'm going to drink your coffee, May."

"If you do, I will pin you down and pluck your eyebrows bald," she mumbled, slowly lifting her head and reaching out toward her mug on the nightstand.

“Sounds painful,” ey said, laughing. “That’s a new one.”

“Add it to the list,” she said after she was able to get at least a few lapping sips of her voice so soon after.

“One day, they’re going to find my dead body, clearly smothered to death, my eyebrows fully plucked, sand in my shoes, cracker crumbs in my bed, all of my pens un-capped, all of my book pages dog-eared, with skunk fur in all the food,” ey said, laughing. “I’m pretty sure they’ll know it was you.”

She lifted her chin to park it on eir shoulder. “Mm, well, it is a risk I am willing to take.”

Ey tilted eir head to give the top of her own a kiss. An awkward affair, but worth it. “You stay up too late again?”

She shrugged noncommittally.

“Well, you’re a pretty cozy blanket, if warm, so I guess I’ll allow it.”

Lifting her snout, she licked at eir shoulder, getting a laugh out of em. “Whereas you, my dear, are not a very good pillow. Just full to the brim with bones.”

“I need those to live.”

“Lame,” she drawled. After a moment, she added thoughtfully, “I am glad that you have skin, though. It would be quite disgusting without.”

“Ew. As am I.” Ey leaned over to grab her coffee cup and steal a sip, threats be damned. “I’m still surprised you didn’t wind up with another furry, though. Figured that would be more your style.”

“I wind up with people that I like, whether they have fur or not.” She shrugged. “Which is not to say that I have not wound up with other furries.”

“I’m not complaining. You’re soft.”

“To be fair, that is what I like about you having skin, too, my dear. Skin is soft, as well. Were you a furry, though, what species would you be?”

Ey pet along her back, thinking. “I don’t know. I’ve only really had extensive interactions with skunks, foxes, and weasels.

Maybe a squirrel?"

She rolled off eir front and sat up eagerly. "A squirrel? Really? Would you be one of those fancy red ones with the ear tufts and outrageous tales or one of the gray ones that were all over where I grew up?"

A quick query of the perisystem archive gave em a good idea of what each might look like. "The red ones sound really ostentatious. I don't know if I could pull that off."

She retrieved her coffee mug from em and settled in beside em instead. "Yes, but the tail," she whined. "Come on, my dear. You would simply *have* to be a red squirrel. You dress all fancy, still, even."

"Are they bigger than skunk tails?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged. "Solid competition."

"I can't picture anything having a bigger tail than you, May. Definitely outrageous."

"I thought you liked my tail."

"I do!"

She laughed and dotted her nose against eir cheek. "Excellent."

"You know, I've always wondered," ey said, getting an arm around her. "Why did the most political stanza of the clade stay skunks? Wouldn't it be more effective to be humans? It's not like the majority of folks on the Systems are furies."

"Only three of the ten are skunks anymore, and you have met all three. Besides, I think End Waking is the only one of the three of us who has not spent time in human form. Some of me in other relationships were — or perhaps are — humans. I spent six months with you in that form, even. Remember?"

Ey nodded. "It was pretty weird."

"For both of us, yes. I like being what I am! Short, chubby, soft, furry...it is just that these are all things that are disarming to a great many people," she said, poking at her own belly. "Even skunks, despite their reputation for smelling bad, are more of-

ten seen as bumbling, stupid creatures.”

“I wouldn’t call you stupid, May. Bumbling, though...”

She rolled her eyes. “Thank you, I think? But yes, even bumbling is a calculated gesture to be inoffensive.”

“End Waking said similar.” Ey dug through eir exocortices until ey came up with the line, ““Were you amused by the absent minded way that I made tea? The way I just puttered around, doing this, then that, as though I kept remembering that I needed first wood, then water, then mugs?” He said it was a matter of intent.”

“It is, yes. I am sure that some of the clade who remain skunks are so without a second thought, but that is not how True Name worked, and so it is not how we work.”

“And she did that for the same reasons? To be inoffensive?”

She nodded. “In a way. At first, she could not be anything but, as that is how she was forked, but she kept it because of the way the Council worked. She was a skunk, Debarre was a weasel, Zeke– Ezekiel spent half the time looking like a shambling pile of dirty rags and the other half like an unhoused man, and user11824 looked like the least remarkable person possible, as though your eyes simply slid right off of him. The ethos of the Council was to be just ordinary people who were weird before uploading and remained weird after.”

“Jonas wasn’t that weird when I met him.”

She made a sour face. “But everything that he did was intentional. Every aspect of his appearance and personality.”

Ey nodded. It certainly tallied from eir memories.

“But I think True Name kept it after the Council disbanded for much the same reasons. She is a furry because there are plenty of furies on the System. She remains in her early thirties because that is what one expects out of those on the System. She is not unattractive among furies, maintaining that soft figure and well kept appearance without heading towards sex-symbol because that is what many on the System wind up doing for one reason or another. She is normal, I am cute, Why Ask Questions

is that shithead at the bar that everyone loves, and so on.”

“Right, that makes sense.” Ey hesitated, composing eir next words carefully. “You talk about her quite a bit. I know that—”

“You asked, Ioan,” she said, frowning.

“I know, May, I just mean in general. I know you’re consciously working on how you feel about her, and I keep bringing her up besides. Just an observation.”

The moment of tenseness lingered, then passed as she wilted against em, sighing. “I know, my dear. I did not mean to get snippy. You are right, and I am not sure how I feel about that fact, that she is so often on my mind. My feelings remain complex.”

“Oh, I definitely get that.”

“You seem to enjoy her company more.”

Ey shrugged. “I guess. It started out as a way to keep things smooth between us, but now it’s just a thing to do outside the house.”

“Coffee dates are good,” she said, nodding.

“I don’t know if I’d call them dates. No romance, there.”

The skunk laughed and shook her head. “Just an expression.”

“Oh, right.” Ey shrugged. “She’s just like...a coworker one is friends with. There are contexts that I enjoy her company in, but it’s not like I’m inviting her over for the holidays.”

“Which is good,” she said, grinning. “I am sure that I will get to the point where she and I can coexist in the same space without either of us feeling bad, but sharing Christmas dinner with her would be far too much.”

Ey nodded and tightened eir arm around her, kissing between her ears. “Same, I think. Thanks for reminding me, though. I should probably get up and get that started.

They both slid out of the bed to complete their morning routines: Ioan to make another pot of coffee and prepare breakfast while May went through her grooming routine, then eating, a shower for em while she worked on her monologue.

The dinner itself wasn't onerous, a stew of pork — ey'd been raised on a version with lamb, which May hadn't liked — tomatoes, and mushrooms in a garlicky, paprika-filled gravy. Still, it benefited from a longer cooking time, so ey began that after eir shower and set it to simmering.

After that, they set some music to playing — the overlap of what they enjoyed wasn't large, but piano jazz seemed to work for both of them — and set to work on whatever it was that was occupying their minds.

Or tried to, at least.

Eir conversation this morning as well as eir meeting with True Name a few days prior left Ioan in the mind of skunks and the Ode clade, and even though those both featured quite heavily in the stage adaptation of *On the Perils of Memory*, nothing ey tried seemed quite in the right vein.

Instead, ey flipped to a blank sheet of paper and began a letter, instead.

True Name,

I hope all is well.

After our conversation a few days ago, as well as another that I had with May this morning, I got to thinking about a pattern I've noticed, and wanted to ask you about it. I hope it's not too impertinent of me. If it's too sensitive, I understand.

I've noticed that you and May have a tendency to talk about each other quite a bit. I know that there are a lot of factors that go into this such as my relationships with each of you, your shared history, and even the fact that I have a habit of asking each of you about the other in turn.

All the same, I was wondering if you had any thoughts on the matter. I don't want to sound meddling (indeed, I don't think I'd even be capable of

meddling with either of you), I just want to better understand each of you in turn, given the dynamics between us.

I know that's not a huge deal for either of our clades, but all the same, Merry Christmas. Wishing you the best,

Ioan

Ey read through the letter top to bottom three times, then, with a brush of the hand and a bit of intent, sent it on its way.

Doing eir best to forget about it until the other skunk responded, ey pattered around the house, checking on the stew, trying out a new ink in one of eir pens, and rehearsing some lines in a cone of silence.

A bit more than two hours after ey'd sent the message, a reply spooled itself out of eir desk and into eir field of view.

IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Mx. Bălan,

Thank you for your letter. Had we discussed this in person or over sensorium messages, I think that my responses would be quite different, but the intentionality that is required when engaging with writing forced me to think this through more clearly.

You are correct in assuming that it is you being our shared connection rather than any direct link between the two of us that leads to each of us discussing the other with you frequently. I do not think that this is worth discounting, however, as many know of each other only through one mutual acquaintance and do not talk of each other to that one one person between them. It is still notable that we discuss each other as much as we do.

I have spent the last hour in discussion with myself while writing this, and would like this reply kept in confidence.

Years ago, when the Artemisians first arrived, May Then My Name mentioned a letter that I had sent her regarding you. Here is that letter in full:

May Then My Name Die With Me,
I hope that you are doing well. I understand that there remains some concern about the outcome of your previous relationship, and I would like you to know that I am not so far diverged from our common ancestor that I do not share in some of those feelings. I remember how often I would come crying into the Crown, leaning on this shoulder or that as I tried to deal with yet another break up. I know that I have not always been the kindest or most empathetic down-tree instance, for which I truly am sorry. You are, in many ways, a better version of me, and the completeness that you bring to our stanza ensures that, even if I am not a fully realized person, as you have suggested in the past, we - whether that is you and I, our stanza, or the Odists as a whole — still do add up to something that is greater than the sum of its parts. You may not believe me, and for that I do not blame you, but I really do love you in my own way, May Then My Name.

I do not know if you have been keeping up with many other stanzas after Qoheleth passed, but it appears that Dear,

Also, The Tree That Was Felled has welcomed a new member to its relationship structure, one Codrin Bălan. I am sure that you recognize the clade name from *On The Perils of Memory*. Codrin's down-tree instance, Ioan Bălan, was the amanuensis that Dear had chosen during that spate of trouble, and the series of events that followed led to a process of individuation. It is always exciting to see that happen, is it not?

The reason that I bring this up is that Ioan has picked up as eir next project an investigative piece surrounding the launch project. Given your role as sys-side launch director, I thought that I would put you two in touch. Eir project would benefit greatly from your position as well as your history, both with the project and with our combined history. I have had the chance to meet both Ioan and Codrin in the past, and they are some of the most delightful, insightful people that I have met. Please look them up on clade.id in the perisystem architecture when you get a chance.

All my best,

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

sys-time 197+3

That night, when she brought up this message, she mentioned that she believed me when I said that I love her in my own way.

I understand the root of her feelings towards me and, as I also mentioned on that night, I do not begrudge her that. I will ever be what I am, and what that is does not mesh well with her view of the world, even as it is integral to my existence.

Just as she said that she still believes me, it is also true that I still love her in my own way. Were you to ask me at the time, or even just a year ago, I do not think that I would have admitted such, but even as I suspect that she is working with Ms. Genet on her thoughts about me, I have been working with Ms. Genet on my ability to be truly earnest with those I respect, which includes you.

I do not hold regrets for the path that has led us to this point, as I have accomplished much that I set out to do, and, while the cost has been great when it comes to my interpersonal relationships (and, as you mentioned, my stress levels), it all very much still feels worth it.

Consciously or not, I make it a point to ask you how she is doing and to engage with her at one degree of remove because this is still a way to maintain that level of connection after so long a time of disconnect.

Writing this has been both stressful and cathartic, so I appreciate having the chance to do so. While communications with my counterparts on Castor and Pollux have been somewhat scant of late, both of them have mentioned that they are striving to find situations in which they can be vulnerable and earnest. As I am sure you understand, this is still quite difficult for us.

Let us meet up on Secession day for our next coffee date. Is 10:00 amenable?

I wish you and her both a delightful holiday. If you are comfortable bringing up the topic of me with her today and would like to get a laugh out of her, please say simply, “Jingle Bells stage blocking.”

Sincerely,

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

system 225+359

END IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Ey read the letter through two or three times, trying to digest all that it contained, trying to square this with what May had said of True Name steering her subtly into eir life, trying once again not to read too deep and guess that True Name#Castor simply hadn't told her about Codrin learning the Name.

Finally, acknowledging that ey wouldn't be able to digest it all in one go, ey dashed off a quick reply thanking True Name for the letter and confirming the time of the next meeting. Then, ey committed the letter to a new exo ey tagged “True Name–May 225” and destroyed the physical copy.

“May?” ey said, dropping eir cone of silence.

“Mm?”

“I was confirming a date with True Name and she said I should ask you about something called ‘Jingle Bells stage blocking’. Do you know–”

The skunk let out a melodramatic groan and slid off her stool to the floor, landing on her hands and knees, laughing. “What a fucking brat.”

Ey stared at her, nonplussed.

“Oh God, Ioan, you do not know pain until you work with choir kids.”

Ey laughed and shook eir head, standing to go stir the stew by way of ruffling over her ears. “Skunks are so weird. I’ll just have to trust you on that.”

Debarre — 2350

Debarre and Do I Know God After The End Waking stood, naked and frowning, on the granite hung, cantilevered, above the calm pond that had dug itself into the forest floor beneath the falls. It wasn't a high drop, not enough to turn the stomach, but enough to keep them from simply jumping in.

"And you're sure it's deep enough?"

"I am not, no," End Waking said and then let out a shout and leapt off the overhang out over the water

The weasel's frowned deepened. No sounds of screaming below, at least.

"Fuck it," he muttered, and stepped off the edge of the rock, arms folded over his chest, and plunged, feet first, into the water.

The cold was shocking, enough to drive his breath from him. Even though there wasn't any snow this low down on the hillside, it was still cold out. He realized, too late, that another possibility that there wasn't any screaming from his boyfriend below was due to that same frigid water.

All the same, there was nothing beneath his feet for at least another meter as he sank beneath the water.

Thankful for small victories, he swam shakily for the surface, breaching the water with a shallow gasp and teeth already chattering.

End Waking floated closer, treading water. The skunk's grin

was wide, but his teeth were clenched shut in a clear attempt to slow the shivering. “Pleasant day out, is it not?”

“F-fuck you,” Debarre said, laughing breathlessly. “I’m getting up to the fire ASAP.”

The skunk nodded, shoved at him weakly, and then swam for the shore, weasel in tow.

They slicked the water off themselves as best they could while walking. Fluffy as he was, End Waking had the larger job of it, having to spend most of the rest of the short trek back up the hill to the fire he’d built squeezing water out of his tail fur.

Once there, they parked a few feet before the fire and huddled beneath his woolen cloak, held open toward the flames, and soaked up as much warmth as they could.

“That was fucking cold,” Debarre said once he was able to speak without stammering. “You’re such an asshole, I can’t believe I ever listen to you.”

“Yes, well, I love you to,” End Waking said, grinning. “Thank you for joining me, and for your help today.”

They’d spent the afternoon building up a rammed earth wall for the skunk’s new house, pulling earth mixed with deer’s blood from the pile they’d brought up from the pond’s shore the previous day, stacking it in a frame, and pounding it with logs sanded smooth and cut down to a width they could fit comfortably in their paws.

Part of the ramming process had involved carefully setting the chimney pipe for the wood stove between the layers of earth as they built up, something which had seemed an unnecessarily fiddly process, despite the admonitions that, if the pipe crumpled beneath the sand, clay, and blood while they pounded it, the wall wouldn’t be sturdy and there might be gaps. As it was, after they built up the rest of the tent, they’d have to seal it with more bloody earth and a layer of pitch.

It had left them both feeling worn out and dirty, and when Debarre said he was going to wash the bloody mud from his paws and fur, End Waking had suggested turning that into the

icy plunge.

The skunk then built up the fire higher than usual, told Debarre that they'd need to do so nude as he shed his clothes by the fire, and then pulled him along to the rock overhang.

Once their fronts were mostly dry, they turned out to face the waterfall and ravine, draping the cloak over their fronts with their backs exposed to the fire, sitting in silence and leaning against each other, sharing warmth as well as gaining it.

"Why don't you build your camp here?"

"The river may overflow, and come spring, the fall will be quite loud."

Debarre grinned, "Don't need the white noise?"

"Not particularly, though I am more concerned about flooding. I already had a tree fall on me while I slept two months ago, you will surely remember, and I do not feel the need to be carried away on dirty waters so soon after."

"Thanks for letting me back after that happened," he said, more quietly. "And thanks for forking to fix your leg."

"Of course, my dear. I do not know who else I would have called. And thank you for your patience during my solitude."

Debarre nodded and slid an arm around the skunk's waist. "I'm used to it by now. Besides, #Tracker had a larger merge than usual to deal with."

"That is what happens when I steal a version of you away and then aliens visit one of the LVs. I will accept half of the blame." He smiled, adding, "Well, perhaps less than half. You had your own stuff going on."

"Well, #Tracker did." He snorted, shook his head. "It's what I get for only part of me hanging around interesting people."

"Am I so boring, my dear?"

He shook his head. "No, just plain. Your life is pretty simple out here. #Tracker is still all caught up on all the political stuff with user11824 and Yared."

End Waking made a face. "Gross."

"They aren't *that* bad," he said, laughing.

“They are fine, I am sure,” the skunk said. “You may keep the political stuff, though.”

“I mean, that’s why I’m out here. It’s good to get away from all that bullshit.”

“Oh, so you are using me for a vacation, yes?”

Debarre laughed and poked at End Waking’s thigh. “Where’d this sense of humor come from?”

“The audacity of weasels never ceases to amaze,” he said. “I have a sense of humor. The squirrels and I share our private jokes. I practice them before the fire.”

“Fucking lame,” Debarre said, rolling his eyes. He tucked closer to the skunk all the same.

That End Waking was so open to touch over the last few weeks was something he was keen to take advantage of. He knew that neither of them were necessarily the cuddly type, and most of the time, he was happy with the level of physical contact he got from the skunk, just as he was with the partners his other forks had settled down with. Still, it was nice every once and a while. A bit of touch to keep him grounded. It tended to happen when their relationship picked up again, after both of them had spent months or years apart, each living their separate, more cerebral lives.

Before long, however, they set the cloak aside to get dressed, and Debarre watched as End Waking prepped a sizeable hare and pushed it onto a cast-iron spit and set it over the fire, a tilted pan beneath it catching the drippings.

They dined on the split hare and squash roasted in the drippings, both pungent with thyme. They stayed up until it was well and truly dark, talking about this or that, though never politics.

Worn out as they were, though, they didn’t last much longer, eventually retreating to the makeshift tent that End Waking had set up with the fabric that had been his previous shelter, strung over a rope and draped over his recovered cot. Narrow as it was, they had to huddle close — the only time the skunk was consistently okay with close physical contact and intimacy — sharing

each others' warmth beneath the cloak and a few blankets besides.

"E.W.?"

"Mm? I like it when you call me that."

"I'm a sucker for nicknames," he said, tucking himself back against the skunk.

"That you are." He tucked his snout over Debarre's shoulder. "What were you going to ask, my dear?"

"I...well, some changes are coming to the System. Sounds like we're getting A/V and a few other things."

"I will not use it, if so."

"I don't know if I will, either. I'm just worried about changes."

"How so?"

"I don't know," Debarre mumbled. "I just think there's a lot of subtle things — more than just the little stuff May Then My Name talks about — and I'm worried those will go away or change."

End Waking hummed thoughtfully. "Things have survived Secession and Launch."

"Yeah, but those were political things, right? Not technological things."

"You are worried external engineers will tamper?"

He nodded.

"I do not know that they have a good enough understanding of the subtleties to do so. One does not understand forking or memory or sensoria until after uploading."

"Well, maybe not intentionally changing things. Just knock on effects, maybe." *Or maybe internal politics encouraging changes,* he added, mentally.

"I imagine they will be careful, even around the subtle things."

They lay, silent, for a while, Debarre thinking and, if the slow slackening of his arm around the weasel's chest was any indication, End Waking slowly falling asleep.

“E.W.?” he whispered.

“Mm?” A sleepy reply.

“Do you still feel em? Like, at night sometimes. Like a dream or something.”

There was a long, long pause before the skunk replied. “Sleep, my love. There is work to do in the morning. Sleep, and dream beautiful dreams.”

As usual, Debarre woke alone.

End Waking would doubtless be somewhere in the woods, walking or checking snare traps or simply sitting on a rock thinking, having slipped away at first light quietly and carefully enough not to wake him. Still, they’d gone to bed early enough that the horizon down the hill had only just let go of the sun.

He slipped out of bed and into eir pants — black denim traded in for a dirty green canvas — splashed some water on his face from the barrel nearby, and started the trek back out to the rock where they’d set the fire before, figuring that’d be the most likely place to find his boyfriend.

End Waking was indeed there, crouching before a low fire with a pot for coffee already set above it, but another skunk knelt across from him as well, chatting quietly.

“Hey May Then My Name,” he said, settling down beside her. “What’re you doing here?”

The skunk jolted up, grinned wide, and leaned in to hug around his shoulders dotting her nose on each of his cheeks. “Holy shit, Debarre, you taking lessons from End Waking? Scared the crap out of me.”

He laughed and returned the hug before reaching for the coffee pot. “Maybe it’s contagious.”

“Can you imagine anything so miserable?” the other skunk said, waving the weasel back from the coffee pot. “Our guest here finished what was left. You will have to wait, my dear.”

“Sorry,” she said, holding her battered enamel mug out to Debarre. “You can have the last third.”

“Nah, go ahead. I’ll wait. You never told me what you’re doing here, though.”

She stuck out her tongue at him. “Am I not allowed to be a pest? That is my role in life.”

“Course you are, just that usually you’re a pest with news.”

“Fine, fine, yes,” she said. “It can wait until after coffee, though. How are you, my dear? I was not expecting you to be back just yet.”

“It is my fault,” her cocladist said. “A tree fell on me back around—”

“What?!”

He shrugged. “There was a wind storm and a tree fell across my tent. It crushed the frame and floor, knocked over the back wall, and impaled my thigh on a splinter.”

She brought her paws up to cover her muzzle.

“I am okay,” he said, smiling disarmingly. “But I asked Debarre to return to help me rebuild.”

“He didn’t want to fork to fix his leg,” the weasel said, rolling his eyes.

“I do not fork often, you know that.”

“There was a plank through your leg, E.W.,” he retorted. “That wasn’t just going to heal okay on its own”

It was the skunk’s turn to roll his eyes. “You are no fun, my dear.”

May Then My Name, having finally calmed down enough to speak, said, “Well, thank you, Debarre. I am glad you are okay, skunk. I would be lost without you.”

Debarre nodded.

“The trees do not know how to kill me, My Then My Name,” End Waking said, frowning. “There is no virus within them. Debarre was right to get me to fork to fix, I will admit, but I would have done anyway had it landed more fully on me.”

When all that greeted this was silence, the skunk sighed and

let his shoulders slump. “I am sorry, you two. I have set up the new camp in a location with sturdier trees. I will endeavor to remain cautious.”

May Then My Name crawled around the fire to dot her nose against the skunk’s cheek. He looked uncomfortable, but tolerated the touch.

“Thank you, my dear,” she said. “I do not mean to lecture. I am just...well, if the coffee is ready, please pour yourself a cup, Debarre, and we will talk.”

Once they’d settled back down, each with their coffee and the kettle replaced with a pot to cook oatmeal, she began, “To preface, this is nothing serious, I just need to talk with someone who is not Ioan.”

“Why?” End Waking asked.

“You will see. That is also part of it.”

He nodded.

“I am not even sure that it is actionable.” She sighed, shrugged. “I have just been thinking about True Name a lot of late.”

End Waking sat, impassive, while Debarre shook his head. “Why? I thought you’d basically agreed to never talk again.”

“We have not talked. At least, not more than a few cordial words in passing. However, Ioan has been meeting up with her for coffee once a month since the first news of the Artemisians.”

Both of the others looked nonplussed.

“Ey has been ensuring that things remain polite and smooth between us.” She held up a paw to forestall any comments, adding quickly, “I trust em in this. Ey’s simply meeting her at a coffee shop where they each work on their own projects. They chat a little, and then do their own things. Ey describes it as ‘friendly coworkers’ more than anything, which I believe.”

“Is that a thing that even needs to be done?” Debarre said. “Wasn’t she just leaving you alone before?”

“Yes, thankfully. It is just...” She frowned, poking at the packed earth with a claw. “That has been necessary to prevent

anger, but it has still not been comfortable. There are plenty of people who I no longer see and do not miss, or do miss and think about with some frequency. However, it was such an uneasy silence."

"And you think Ioan's doing the right thing?"

"Ey is," End Waking said. "Ey is ensuring that there remains a distance between you two without it being an unbridged distance. The Bălans are perhaps a little awkward at times, but they do not lack social graces."

May Then My Name sighed and rubbed her paws over her face. "I know," she whined. "And I love em for thinking of that."

"You just still resent her," the other skunk said.

"Yes."

"I know you said it probably isn't actionable," Debarre said, poking at the fire with a stick. "But what would you change about the situation?"

"As in 'in a perfect world'?"

"Right, yeah. Perfect world, what would you like?"

She frowned, watching End Waking dote over the oatmeal, dumping a pawful of dried fruit into it. Eventually, she said, "I do not know. She has apologized and done what I have requested. She has changed, from what Ioan has said. She is trying to be more earnest and willing to engage emotionally. She has been seeing Sarah as well."

Debarre nodded. "But it sounds like that's not it."

"No. I think what is missing is contrition. She has apologized for what she has done and has begun to make changes. I do not know how to put it, but it feels like she is being earnest without being sincere. She is sorry, but not contrite. She does not feel bad for what she has done."

"There is no penance," End Waking said plainly, dishing out the oatmeal into the mugs they'd been using for coffee. "True penance is borne out of feeling bad about what one has done, not merely a desire to do better."

May Then My Name toyed with her oatmeal. "Yes. Maybe

she does and just does not know how to show it. I just do not know how to truly believe that.”

“Worried she’s just acting?” Debarred said, blowing on a still vigorously steaming spoonful of oats.

“Yes. I had to teach myself contrition, relearn it from when I was Michelle.”

“It takes practice, my dear,” End Waking added. “At least when one does not necessarily have that built in. If I could teach her, if either of us could teach her, I think we would, but I do not know that one can learn penance from anyone but oneself.”

She nodded, looking distracted and thoughtful. “If it were as simple as merging down...”

End Waking frowned around his bite of breakfast.

She smiled to him apologetically. “Sorry, my dear. Thank you both for listening to me bitch.”

“It’s fine, skunk,” Debarre said. “I think E.W. is right that Ioan’s doing the right thing. It takes some pressure off of you and lets it...I dunno, be a process or something. You don’t have to do anything now ’cause you’ve got a way to deal with it.”

“Yes, well put. Thank you, my dear,” she said. “I will process as best I can. I do not suppose either of you have talked to her recently?”

They both shook their heads.

“Right, I thought not. That’s enough of the topic for now, anyway.” She waved a paw and took a bite of oatmeal, then pulled a face. “We need to get you some sugar or something, my dear.”

Debarre laughed. “She’s right, E.W. I’ve gotten used to it, but only just barely.”

“Fucking lame,” the skunk said mildly. “My sim, my rules. You must suffer without.”

May Then My Name flicked some oatmeal from her spoon at him. “Call me lame, will you.”

He grinned toothily, picking the bit of oatmeal off his shirt sleeve and adding it to his mug.

“Either way, my root instance is back at home, so I can stay as long as I like. Would you like some help, at least?”

“If you can swing a hammer, then yes, that would be wonderful.”

Part II

Conflict

Part III

Apprehension

Part IV

Reconcilliation

Snippets

“True Name,” May said, interrupting the other skunk’s tirade. “Wait.”

Wrong footed, True Name frowned. “What? Why? I do not—”

May held up her paw, a brief glance at the ceiling hinting at a sensorium message elsewhere.

Ioan frowned as well. Intuition told him the discussion they’d had earlier had gone beyond the hypothetical. “May, are you sure—”

True Name jolted upright in her seat on the couch. “What the fuck is—”

“Accept it,” May said, and ey could see the force of her gaze boring into her cocladist. “You must do this. You have to.”

Her face contorting with the strain of holding what must be a very large impending merge at bay without either remembering or forgetting it, True Name gasped. “May... May Then... Why...”

Eir partner’s expression softened. “Please, my dear. I think you need this. I think we all need this, if we are to move forward.”

The skunk nodded shakily, attempted a dry swallow, and then let the merge of End Waking’s centuries of memories crash into her.

The change was immediate and more dramatic than ey’d expected. Ey had been expecting a shell-shocked look and maybe a few minutes of silence, but instead True Name’s expression

melted into a glazed, nearly stroke-like stupor. The glass of water she'd been clutching at but had yet to drink tumbled to the floor and, as all her muscles gave out at once, she began to slide off the couch.

"Shit. Shit! Ioan!" May shouted.

Ey was already on eir feet and halfway around the table, thankfully in time to catch the skunk before she slid down into the pool of water on the floor. Ey managed to get eir arms under hers enough to hoist her up into the couch again while May ducked around to lift her feet so that they could lay her out on her back.

They both stared at the limp True Name.

"Fuck," eir partner murmured.

"What just happened?"

"One second," she said, waving away the spilled water so that she could kneel by her down-tree instance. There was a moment's hesitation before she brushed some of the skunk's longer head fur away from her face. "Can you close your eyes?"

When True Name didn't respond, didn't move, May gently brushed her paw down to close them for her.

After lingering another moment, she stood slowly, took Ioan's hand in her paw and led em to the balcony. As soon as the door shut behind them, she burst into tears.

Ey guided her carefully to the bench swing to sit her down, letting her cry herself out against eir shoulder.

"I am sorry, my dear," she said when she could speak again at last. "Really, truly sorry."

Ey shook eir head, kissing her between the ears. "You don't need to apologize to me. I'm more confused than anything. Was that your and End Waking's plan?"

She pressed closer to em. "That was him merging back down, yes. I did not expect that, though," she said, and ey could hear that she was on the verge of crying once more. "I never intended to hurt her."

"Can you explain what happened, at least?"

She nodded, swallowing down that wave of tears as best she could. "We are good at forking and merging. Very, very good at it. I am pretty sure you know that, though."

"Did something go wrong, then?"

"End Waking has not merged down in nearly two centuries. He has diverged quite far in that time, as is to be expected, which means the potential for conflicts."

Eir frown deepened. Ey thought ey could tell where this was going. "Aren't those usually just when memories don't line up, though?"

May gave the barest hint of a shrug against em. "You have met her, and you have met him. Their viewpoints are almost diametrically opposed, yes?"

Ey nodded.

"Viewpoints are built atop a collection of memories. That they can share so many memories and yet have such different outlooks on the world and their actions is a subtler, but trickier sort of merge conflict." She paused, took a deep breath, then continued slowly. "I pressed her to accept because I knew that she would accept the merge as smoothly as she always does if there was external pressure. She merged blithely and took on two hundred years of End Waking all at once. All of his memories. All of his penitence. All of his loathing for what he did, what she was so proud of."

"And it was too much?" ey asked.

Her face screwed up again as she nodded. "I nuh-never wanted t-to hur-hurt her," May stammered as the tears started to flow once more.

Ey got eir arms around her again and held her close. A quick glance through the windows showed that True Name still lay on the couch, breathing shallowly.

"May, I want to ask you something," ey said, once she had calmed down some. "And...well, I think it'll probably make you cry again, but I want to make sure we stay open about this. I'm really not asking this to take a jab at you. Is that okay?"

She whined quietly, but nodded all the same.

Ey took a deep breath, keeping eir voice as gentle as ey could. “I’m not upset with you, but I need to know since this is just getting weirder and weirder. Are you sure you didn’t want to hurt her?”

There was a long silence before she replied, and ey could tell she spent much of it counting her breaths, one of the exercises that had worked best to ground her. At least she counted as best she could between sniffles.

“I think,” she started, then cleared her throat. “I know a part of me was acting out of vengeance.”

Ey nodded. “We talked about that, yeah.”

“Right. I think that part was hoping that it would be a rough merge to knock her down a peg, yes,” she said, then let out a shaky sigh. “I did not think it would be this bad, though. I am really sorry, Ioan. I want to be a good person.”

Hugging her tightly to em, ey said, “It’s okay, May. You *are* a good person, promise. Just that even good people feel resentment.”

She nodded, fell back into breathing exercises.

“And I believe you when you say you didn’t want to hurt her. Both those—”

She elbowed em in the side. “Right, yes, yes. Both can be true at once. You know we have the same therapist, right? She says the same things to me.”

Ey smiled, pleased to hear the humor in her voice. “Sorry, May.”

She wormed her arms around em to give a tight squeeze. “It is alright. You are just a nerd. Both of those things can be true, too.” After a moment’s hesitation, she asked more quietly, “Can you see her? Is she okay?”

“She’s rolled onto her side. Still breathing pretty quick.”

May nodded. “Let us get back in and check on her, then. We may want to get her into bed. Being comfortable can make it easier.”

(They do, ey carries her, May stays by her side, Ioan leaves so she can apologize in private)

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 trousers of the type ey had always associated with southeast Asian fishers.

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 pan-demonium 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.”

“*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 her 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, her 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?” she 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 Se-
cession,” 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 be-
fore 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 it. 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 all are 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 be-
fore the clade began, I mean. Is that even possible?”

“It is not a statement of reality, my dear. I cannot reinte-
grate 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 Lagrange,” she said, that slight smile growing. “It is a state-
ment of hope, perhaps, or a desire for completion. It is an under-
standing 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 Then My Name 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 dear," 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, resting 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 End Waking in you, you mean."

She nodded.

"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))

Selected Letters

Exocortex#99732a6
Selected correspondences of the
Bălan clade
system 222-232

Sorina Bălan — 2349

Artemis-Lagrange transmission delay: 8 days, 22 hours, 24 minutes

IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Ioan,

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

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

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

In our sessions, we came up with a very specific way to deal with this decision that I've made. In order to ensure that I can learn to cherish who I was and who was in my life, I need to reinforce the positive memories of what I had. I need to make

sure that those are stronger than the negative ones. I don't want that final, terrible morning to weigh on me more strongly than all of the good times that we had together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clearly, I'm not.

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

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

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

When we first embarked on this adventure, I think we all thought that that feeling would be the one that wore on me the

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

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

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

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

Forgetting! How novel, right?

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

And the food! God, I remember the food. If there's one thing I miss, it's all the wonderful food. A bunch of fifthracers here are starting to set up restaurants, and some of fourthrace's food is pretty good, but it's not food from home, you know?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sorina Bălan

13 er-ularaeäl, 4778 Artemis Reckoning

END IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

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Note

Verse numbering differs between the Hebrew and Christian bibles; the epigraph uses the numbering from the Hebrew bible, but in the Christian bible, it is Deuteronomy 23:21–23.

About the author



Madison Scott-Clary is a transgender writer, editor, and software engineer. She focuses on furry fiction and non-fiction, using that as a framework for interrogating the concept of self and exploring across genres. A graduate of the Regional Anthropomorphic Writers Workshop in 2021, hosted by Kyell Gold and Dayna Smith, she is studying creative writing at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, IA. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her cat and two dogs, as well as her husband, who is also a dog.

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