

Mitzvot
and Selected Letters

Mitzvot
and Selected Letters
Post-Self book IV

Madison Scott-Clary

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Mitzvot

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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, however many little nothings felt appropriate for the day, for the month since they’d last seen each other, before settling back down on the L-shaped couch, each to work on their own projects.

Then, as ever, one or the other of them would call an end to the meeting, if meeting it was, and they’d stand once more, bow as always, and each would step back home.

Or, at least, ey would always step back home, where May would — as she always did — congratulate him on not dying.

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 ‘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 outsized 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 in control.”

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, if anything, 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 plagued with a deep-seated desire to help. Somehow. 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 heaping on em 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? When had it started? Launch? Convergence? 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 lilting voice floating above the question, and ey’d find emself dropping contractions and leaning on the anaphora that all 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 chuckled. "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. Limiting sensorium messages into or out of them by individual or clade is also quite nice for guaranteeing information security. Your interlocutor cannot be used to spy on you, yes? 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.” 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 and not some shady villain, 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 for just how tense it was. "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, the relief in her expression as plain as the exhaustion that came with it. "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 on the beanbag. “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?”

“Worse, maybe. 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, but it looked like it took a lot of effort.”

“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, though, and I am sorry that she still feels she must engage with him. He was a piece of 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 piece of 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 profanity 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 in life 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 that catches yours 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 had been sitting on a barstool, hunched over a pint and slurring half to the glass, half to some absent bar-

tender. She 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 stool. “Ow! Fuck. Yeah, I deserved that one, I think.”

She moved to finish her pint, 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, no, but I think I will keep it.”

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. May squinted her eyes shut and then scrubbed a paw over her muzzle. “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’.”

“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. Predictably, 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, indignant. “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. “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, though I declined the merges out of privacy. 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. It 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 the other you 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 well, 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 be 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 before 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, yes?"

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."

"Any particular reason why?"

"I just am. I am trying to build trust, but..." She shrugged.

"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 could just—"

"I am trying to tell you to get out of here, Ioan," she said, grinning in earnest. "Do not mind a little bit of anxiety. I will think on it and we will talk later. 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 herself.

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, usually 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 after a small 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. End of the year 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 given its context of being purpose-built, 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 again, then 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 *On the Perils of Memory* 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.”

“What, *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, especially on the therapeutic side.”

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 Hammered Silver 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 System, 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 and Jonas did with the *History*.”

There was the briefest flicker of a wince on the skunk's face at the mention of Jonas, quickly mastered. She replaced it with a smile 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 Odis 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 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 soft 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 drink 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 tocană and mămăligă that had become tradition for em and May 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 when ey'd gone out for coffee a few days prior 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 and look out the picture windows, 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 laps of coffee.

"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 a little too 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.”

“Eugh. 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 tails 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,” she said, poking at her own belly. “It is just that these are all things that are disarming to a great many people. Even skunks, despite their reputation for smelling bad, are more often 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 wider 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 furries 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 furries, 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 tasks: 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 exactly 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 both enjoyed wasn’t large, given the more than a century’s age difference, 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 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 yet still do not talk constantly of each other to that 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. I am not normally in the habit of sharing the tools of my trade, such as they are, but while sharing with you in particular is uncomfortable, you, of all people, deserve to have the chance to read it, and it may do well to explain where we have found ourselves. 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 breakup. 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 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

sysime 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 on her thoughts about me with Ms. Genet, 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 11:00 amenable? It can be a small celebration of our own.

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

sysime 225+359

END IOAN BĂLAN INDIVIDUAL-EYES-ONLY MATERIAL

Ey read the letter through a few more 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. "You're right, I don't. 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 that 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 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 and even colder up-slope from whence the snow-melt came. 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 smile 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. Fine fucking new year's present."

"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 sandy clay from the pile they'd brought up from the pond's shore the previous day, mixed in deer's blood as a binder before stacking it in a frame, and pounding it with logs sanded smooth and cut down to a width that 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 sticky earth 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 so they'd stay dry, 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.

"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 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.?"

"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 extrasystem A/V and a few other things."

"I will not use it, if so."

"I don't know if I will, either. No clue who I'd talk to. 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 like 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 indica-

tion, 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 silence 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 his 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 started, 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 hell out of me, sneaking up like that.”

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

“Can you imagine a disease 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 other half.”

“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 late last year 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, eyes wide.

“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, conspicuously 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.”

He and End Waking both tilted their heads.

“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. 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, which would just leave you to stew, knowing how you work. The Bălans are perhaps a little awkward at times, but they do not lack all social graces."

May Then My Name sighed and rubbed her paws over her face. "I knooow," 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, too, 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. Her apologies are rote."

"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 about how others are reacting.”

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 capability 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."

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Through some stroke of luck or perhaps some forgetful nature, it was perpetually early summer at Arrowhead Lake, that abandoned mountain lake since Ioan and May had long ago adopted. Whether or not winter had sacked in their home, they could at least take a summer walk somewhere.

“Winter has its place,” ey’d explained to May when she’d gotten particularly whiny about the snow. “I like the snow so long as I’m inside.”

“Did you ever even see snow, my dear?”

Ey’d shrugged. “Sure. We’d get dumped on once or twice a year.”

“And was that pleasant?”

“Well, no, but—”

She’d laughed at em, then, shaking her head. “I like our porch swing. I like our lilacs and dandelions. Sometimes, I just want to lay in the grass and overheat. I have been betrayed by our weather.”

So it was a good escape when it got cold. They could duck off, alone or together, to the lake and head for a walk.

May had chosen the name Arrowhead Lake over Ioan’s protests that it looked nothing like an arrowhead, being more kidney shaped. The sim itself was tagged Peak Lake#587a9383. Maybe it was just Peak lake? This seemed to have only emboldened her when ey brought it up, and ey was firmly overruled.

Whenever ey walked out there without her, as ey did today, ey'd ruminate on this. Maybe it had little to do with the lake itself. Maybe it had to do with the silhouettes of the pines? Or something to do with way the snow lingered on pointed peaks?

"Or maybe she's just a brat," ey mumbled, smiling to emself as ey walked slowly along the deer trail. "No reasoning with an Odist."

Ey'd never been able to pick apart whether or not they were just normal people. Perhaps Michelle had been — ey'd not spent enough time around her to know, and what time ey had managed had been mostly silence. Toward the end, her conversations were more interruptions than not, although the impression ey'd gotten was that she'd been kind, gentle, while still being the type to care passionately about things — or, more often, people. The impression just hadn't been a strong one. Not enough time to for it to solidify.

Ey'd long ago come to the conclusion, confirmed through discussions with several of the clade, that each of them was more a distillation of a singular aspect of Michelle than the whole of her. That wasn't to say that they weren't complete in their own right. What was it Codrin and Dear had said? Even True Name was a fully realized person.

Normal, though? Could one be both a singular facet and normal?

And maybe it goes beyond them. Maybe it's a dispersionista thing. E could see such a habit building even without Michelle's experiences.

When the trail dipped down out of the trees toward the shore, ey stooped to pick up a handful of pebbles, enough to toss into the water once ey reached the boulder at the lake's outlet. Codrin had eir cairns, ey supposed, and ey had a heap of pebbles at the bottom of the lake, tossed in one by one over the decades.

I still don't know what I'm supposed to be doing, ey thought, rattling the rocks around in eir hand as ey continued walking. *I don't know if I'm supposed to help either of them, bring them together*

again, or what.

It was still a week out from eir next meeting with True Name and while May's anxiety hadn't ticked back up, eir own had lingered. There was an unsettled feeling within em that made itself known whenever ey thought about heading to the coffee shop.

"Maybe I'm not supposed to do anything," ey muttered, climbing up the boulder. "Maybe I'm just supposed to be a friend, like she says."

Ey tossed a stone into the water with a small plunk and splash. That gulf remained between the two skunks, and no one seemed happy with it.

Plunk, splash.

"I don't know why it feels like I'm supposed to be the one to do something about it. Friends are supposed to help, right?"

Plunk, splash.

"There's nothing for me to fix, really. They've each made their own decisions, and seem at peace with those, even if they're not happy with whatever's left."

Plunk, splash.

"And they'd probably both resent me if I *were* to do anything." Ey tossed a few pebbles in at once, splashing in a brief, watery static. "Whatever that'd even be."

Ey stood at the peak of that boulder, tossing pebbles into water and thinking, mumbling to emself about May and True Name. When ey ran out of pebbles, ey sat cross-legged and looked out over the lake, unseeing.

"I should just pinch myself whenever I start thinking that there's something I need to do," ey said to the water. "Pretty sure May doesn't want it, she's happy working on her emotions without me meddling, and I'm pretty sure True Name doesn't want it, since she seems content...what was it, maintaining that level of connection after so long a time of disconnect?"

The lake didn't answer, not in anything other than water lapping at the shore and the chatter of the creek.

"This is stupid."

Ey sat for another hour, just watching the lake, the clouds, the trees, trying not to think about how complicated it was for one person to be so split among instances.

The walk back was spent unwinding the thought process that led em here in the first place. Unwinding and re-coiling into a careful skein, now with fewer knots than it had had in it before, though still remained tangled.

“Good walk, my dear?” May said when ey returned and plopped down onto the couch.

“Very. It’s nice out there.”

“It always is,” the skunk said, walking over from where she’d been poking around in the kitchen to dot her nose atop eir head. “It could be here too, you know.”

Ey laughed and waved a hand toward the picture windows facing out the balcony, out to the drifting snow. “It’s pretty, May. It makes being all warm inside nicer.”

She leaned down to rest her elbows on the back of the couch beside em. “I am not immune to the beauty, my dear. I am just a wuss when it comes to the cold.”

“Well, if you ever wore shoes...”

She swatted at the back of eir head and laughed. “Jerk.”

“Ow!” Ey laughed as well, rubbing at eir head. “Domestic abuse, I say. Want to go out for dinner?”

At that, May perked up, grinning. “I take back the slap. Yes please! Can we get sushi?”

“Sure, J2?”

She bounced on the balls of her feet and nodded. “Yes! You, my dear, know just how to treat a girl.”

“Skunk girl.”

“Well, yes, but still.” Still bouncing, she twirled around behind the couch, tail trailing along behind her. “I will get ready. I am hungry now, so too bad if you are not.”

One of the things that Ioan appreciated most about J2 over all of the other sushi places May had dragged em to is that it was the most amenable to em eating with eir hands. May was

quite nimble with chopsticks — no mean feat with paws, that — but ey'd never quite picked it up, so being able to eat those little bullets of rice and fish with eir hands suited em quite well.

It also had a channel of water floating along between the booths, small dishes drifting by lazily for the diners to pluck from the water. It obviated the need for any staff, real or constructed, as each dish would be replaced from behind a bend in the river. With no need to pay beyond a token amount of reputation, it simply became a pleasant evening out, plates stacking up at the edge of their table, a tacit contest with other diners.

“Did you get what you needed out of your walk earlier, my dear?” May asked before popping a bit of yellowtail into her muzzle.

Ey shrugged, finished chewing, and said, “I guess. Was doing some thinking into that feeling that I have to fix every problem when it comes to relationships.”

“I have noticed that in you, yes,” she said. “Beyond when we specifically talk about it, I mean.”

“You have?”

“You are not a sneaky person, my dear. When it comes up, it is there for me to see.”

“Oh, uh,” ey stammered, setting eir plate to the side. “Sorry, May.”

“No, no, you are fine! I accept it in the spirit in which it is given. You want to do right by me and your friends, even when ‘doing right’ is not your responsibility. So long as you do not overstep boundaries, I can at least understand it.”

“Well, all the same, it’s not like it’s comfortable, either way. I don’t think anyone likes feeling helpless, but I just wish I didn’t get hung up on finding solutions to everything.”

“You know, it is weird,” she said, jabbing a shrimp at em. “For someone who spent so long purely observing, a busybody tendency feels out of place.”

Ey shook eir head. “Observing is situational, I guess. If there’s something happening that has a start and end, or which I

can come home from, then I can just observe it. If it's something that's ongoing or integral to a person, especially a meaningful person, then I feel like I really want to help."

She had taken the opportunity of em talking to eat the bit of shrimp she'd used as a pointer, and when she finished, she asked, "Is this a new thing?"

"How do you mean?"

"Were you always like this? Did you always want to help when it was something integral to people you care about?"

Ey frowned.

"Do not get me wrong, my dear, I am not suggesting one way or another. We have only known each other for a small portion of our lives. Just that Codrin and Sorina both decided to specifically focus on that only recently."

Ey nodded thoughtfully. "Right. I don't know, honestly. Maybe? Maybe it's you, and—"

She rolled her eyes.

"No, I mean, maybe it's you in that you're the first person I've gotten close enough to to wind up feeling like that, at least since I uploaded."

The skunk paused in the act of picking another plate from the river, letting it drift on. "Did you feel that way about your brother? Was you uploading your fix?"

Ey felt eir muscles go rigid, eir jaw clench, eir hands start to shake. "Uh...well, huh."

Ears splayed and eyes wide with alarm, the skunk reached out to take one of eir hands in her own. "I am sorry, my dear. If I overstepped, I apologize."

Letting the skunk lace her fingers with eirs, ey shook eir head as though to dislodge the slight dizziness that had come with the realization. "Maybe?" Ey forced a smile. "I mean, maybe uploading was my fix for that situation? I don't know."

She nodded, gave eir hand a gentle squeeze.

"I think you're the only person I've really loved other than him," ey said, nudging the conversation back on track to avoid

settling into that particular rumination. “That’s what I meant. I want to make things good for you, whether it’s you overflowing, stuff with True Name, or any other number of things that aren’t my responsibility or even under my control.”

May smiled, the expression veering perilously close to a smirk. “You have said that you want to fix things for True Name at times, too, my dear. Are you sure you are not in love?”

“I’ve also talked about how often I’ll wind up getting caught off guard by how much you two still look and sound alike,” ey said, smirking right back. “She’s nice and I do want to help her, but I think I’m a ways off from that.”

She laughed. “I know, I know. You just leave yourself so open, sometimes, a girl cannot help herself. You are also allowed to want to help friends and acquaintances as well as me.”

“Skunks, I swear...” He laughed when she pinched at eir fingers, tugging eir hand back so ey could grab another plate of yellowtail. “That’s kind of what I was thinking about on the walk, though. I feel weirdly obligated to fix things. It’s not my place to, I don’t think either of you would be comfortable with that, and that’s not even counting whether or not it’s something either of you want.”

“I do not know,” she said, shrugging. “I spoke about that with End Waking and Debarre recently, and am no closer to an answer. We did all agree, however, that you doing what you are is a good thing, in that it at least sets up an avenue for change, even if True Name or I do not decide to take that step.”

Ey nodded. “I just want things to remain smooth between everyone, is all. Maybe it’s a little...I don’t know, overly conciliatory of me?”

“Perhaps, but that does not mean it does not have its own utility.”

They ate in silence for a moment, then, Ioan eventually giving up after finishing eir plate. It was no less easy to eat too much, even in an embedded world.

“Are you okay with it?”

“Hmm?”

“Being between us. Interacting with the both of us even though I still resent her and she is still pleased with the work that she does. Are you okay being in the middle of that?”

Ey slouched back against the booth and watched the plates drift lazily by on the current, thinking. “I don’t know.”

“That is a perfectly valid answer, my dear.”

“I don’t really like the feeling. I feel weird about it every time it comes up, much as we need to talk about it.” Ey smiled, taking one of her paws in eir hand again. “I agree that it has its uses. It’s uncomfortable, but I don’t think I’d be any more comfortable dropping out of the role.”

The skunk brushed her thumb over eir fingers, saying, “I understand, Ioan. It is complex. If it needs to change, it can, and until then, even if I still harbor equally complex thoughts on True Name, I appreciate your position in our dynamic.”

The conversation drifted away from the subject after that, and the two wound up back at home to poke through their own projects even as the night fell early.

It wasn’t until they’d made it back to bed and curled up together that ey was finally able to truly let go of the topic, though. Even throughout eir writing, a small portion of eir mind had been dedicated to the question of what eir role was between the two skunks and why it both rankled and felt necessary.

Ioan was surprised by just how wrung out True Name looked during their coffee date. The skunk’s blouse was wrinkled, her normally orderly fur mussed atop her head, and her whiskers all abristle. She looked as though she’d not slept for a few days and certainly not changed outfits in at least as long.

All the same, her arrival was much the same as all the others had been, with her smiling to em, ordering her coffee, and joining em on the couch in order to set up a cone of silence.

“Good morning, Mx. Bălan. I trust you are well?”

“Uh, I’m fine, I guess.” Ey frowned, continuing carefully, “What about you, though? You look...well, terrible.”

The skunk’s smile faltered, betraying the exhaustion that plainly lay beneath. With another blink, the cone’s ACLs changed to opaque it from the outside. “I came in a rush, my dear, I apologize for my appearance.”

“You don’t need to apologize, True Name. I’m just worried. Lots of Secession Day preparations?”

“Of a sort, yes. Things have been rather stressful the last few days.” She laughed, shook her head, and added, “Well, more than a little. I have been stretched very thin and am...struggling.”

“Struggling?”

The skunk’s eyes darted around the coffee shop, scanning each face within at least twice. “I am not comfortable expanding on that at the moment.”

Ey held up eir hands disarmingly. “Of course. Are you at least excited about the day?”

“When I have the chance to slow down, I can feel some of that excitement. This provides me a good chance to do so. Twenty-five years since Launch and both LVs are continuing on in their journey with very few problems. Two and a quarter centuries since Secession and life continues smoothly here.”

“That seems to fit with your goals pretty well.”

She gave a slight bow of acknowledgement, though she remained distracted. “That it does, my dear.”

“You and Jonas planning anything for yourselves, at least?”

“There will be a gathering, yes,” she said. “Today at noon.”

“‘A gathering’? Not a party?”

She shrugged. “His words, not mine. I do not know what he is planning.”

“Well, hopefully a good one.”

“Agreed. This will limit my time here, of course, I hope that you understand, and I may be distracted as several of my forks merge down to limit conflicts while there.”

Ey nodded. “That’s alright. I’ve got stuff to work on, too.”

Lapping at the whipped cream atop her drink, she once again scanned the crowd, which, as far as ey could tell, had not changed since she’d gotten in. Something about her posture suggested that the topic of what was happening seemed closed, however, so ey made note to ask about it later instead.

They fell into work after that, silence falling while True Name focused on her messages or dealt with merges while ey dedicated a token amount of effort to eir writing. The rest of em observed the skunk out of the corner of eir eye and thought about just how much must be happening for her to admit that she was struggling. 225 years since the System seceded from the rest of Earth’s governments doubtless came with a lot of celebrations and announcements to make, speeches to write, hands to shake, or whatever it was that the non-leaders of Lagrange did in such an event.

Add in the twenty-fifth anniversary since Launch and certainly there would be an added note of joy for many across all three Systems. Ioan was particularly looking forward to the letters from Castor and Pollux in a week and change to hear how things had gone on each of the LVs. Perhaps ey’d even hear from Sorina from Artemis.

Still, True Name’s mussed look and anxious expression seemed to go beyond that. Ey couldn’t think of a reason related to the day that would have her in such a state. Things would be intense, but no so much so as to force her to drop her carefully constructed veneer of confidence.

Ah well, at least she got some time off, ey thought. This was followed by a gentle chiding which ey heard in May’s voice. *And you’re not supposed to be fixing things, remember?*

Right.

Forcing emself to concentrate on eir writing at least bought em ten minutes of work, or at least more than ey’d been getting done up until that point.

“Huh,” True Name mumbled, frowning.

“Mm?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, I suppose. Just got a merge from an instance, and it sounds like Jonas is looking for me. He knows that I am—”

Ey jolted back as the skunk leapt to her feet, gaze whipping about the room, then out through the windows to see what was on the street. Her tail was bristled out, ears pinned flat, and paws clenched tight, something ey’d only seen in May, and then only a handful of times.

“True Name?”

She held up a paw, beckoning em to silence, and, despite the way she kept searching face after face, ey could picture dozens of sensorium messages flying back and forth from her. Her frown only deepened.

Ey closed eir notebook, figuring ey was pretty well ruined for work at this point, and watched the skunk carefully.

When nothing of interest appeared on the street, the skunk slowly turned back to the room. Her eyes shot wide open, and ey followed her gaze out into the scant crowd of patrons. Everything was much as it had been: folks sitting and chatting, drinking their coffee, reading or doing work. She, however, seemed to be focused in particular on an Asian gentleman walking from the back of the shop, though, where a door opened onto patio seating.

“Fuck,” she said, then shouted, “*Fuck!*”

True Name darted around the coffee table, knocking against it hard enough to send both of their drinks spilling across its surface, and grabbed eir hand. “Go, Ioan! Go, go!”

“What?!” Ey scrambled to eir feet, eyes darting between True Name and that oddly familiar man walking towards them. “Where?”

“Home! Anywhere!”

It didn’t seem open to discussion, and enough of her panic had built up in em by now that ey quickly stepped from the sim to home.

To home and chaos.

There was a flurry of activity down the hall from the entryway, several instances of May blinking into and out of existence, along with several more of the same man they'd seen at the shop. She was forking close enough each instance of him to exercise the collision algorithms of the sim, knocking him this way and that to keep him away from her. She was screaming, "Get the fuck out! I am not her! Get out!"

"May!"

A few of the skunks looked over to the door, and then suddenly another was beside em, quickly grabbing eir free hand. With a wrenching sensation, a sudden change in light and sound and gravity, the three of them stumbled into Arrowhead Lake's default entry point.

May pulled eir paw roughly free of eir hand and whirled to face them, shouting, "What the fuck did you do?!"

Tugging her own paw free, True Name darted away, looking around wild-eyed. "How secure is this place?"

"I think May and I are the only ones who even know it—"

She quickly ran a few paces into the woods, peering between the trees.

"Ioan," May growled. "What the fuck just happened? Why the fuck was he in our house?"

Ey shook eir head, trying to dislodge the dazed confusion. "I don't know. He was at the coffee shop, too. Who even—"

"Guōwēi," she snapped, then shouted up to True Name, "Why the fuck was he in our house? What did you do?"

The other skunk had shifted from her near feral crouch to standing, rigid and staring up into the branches, a look of dire concentration on her face.

When she didn't answer, May began pacing and muttering — whether to herself or through some sensorium message, ey couldn't tell.

Guōwēi.

The assassin. The one who had killed Qoheleth in the middle

of his speech. A quick prowling through eir memories lined up face with name.

Eventually, True Name's shoulders sagged and she stumbled down from the trees, Ioan and May both watching her, wide-eyed. She kept walking past the trail, down onto muddy beech, then out into the water. The short waves lapped up against her legs, soaking her slacks, and still she kept walking until it had made its way nearly up to her thighs.

And then she screamed.

It wasn't a shout, no words were behind it. It was a scream of pure, unrestrained emotion, though whether anger, fear, frustration, or something else, ey could not guess.

Then she turned around and waded back toward the shore, stumbling once or twice, until she gave up and fell to her knees, water up to her waist once more. She beat at the surface of the lake with balled-up fists for a few seconds, growling and crying, before she finally stopped, slouching over until she had to catch herself on her hands.

May's fury, which until that point had been burning hot in her expression, was replaced by something more complicated. Anger, yes, but anxiety and fear as well. "True Name," she said, voice more under control than it had been. "What happened?"

"Someone is trying to take me out," she said between heaving breaths. "Trying to get rid of me."

"What? Why?" ey said.

There was no answer from the skunk.

"Who, then?"

She shook her head numbly. "I do not know. There is a small list that we have been keeping our eye on. There are some reactionary elements that have been growing louder. I need to think. I need to...but..."

They waited, tense.

"But all of my instances are gone. Two merged back, one sent a message that she would be late, and then nothing."

"All of them?" May asked. "How many?"

“One hundred and eight.”

At that eir partner let out a startled laugh. “Jesus Christ, True Name.”

Again, no answer.

“Well, who would even know where your root instance was? Or all of your other instances, for that matter?”

“My root—” She tried to stand so quickly that she stumbled again and had to catch herself. “You have to be fucking kidding me.”

Her eyes went blank, and she frowned out toward nothing, though tears left tracks down her cheeks.

May looked to Ioan. “What does she mean?”

Ey couldn’t tear her eyes off the other skunk, and it took em a few seconds to even work up the concentration to reply. “Shortly before we left, one of her two merges said that Jonas was looking for her.”

Part II

Conflict

Ioan Bălan — 2350

True Name, having gathered her wits about her at least enough to trudge out of the lake and fork herself dry, requested directions to somewhere she could think alone. Ioan directed her down the path toward the rock, explaining that it'd be far enough away that they wouldn't hear each other if she didn't want a cone of silence, but that she'd still be able to see them at the entry point if anything happened.

"I need to think. No one from the stanza is replying, and I do not want to speak to Jonas," she explained, then rubbed her paws over her face. "Or perhaps I just need to sulk. I will return in an hour."

She bowed to em and May then trudged off down the path, head bowed.

May glared after her down-tree instance with her paws bunched into fists and ears splayed, then whirled on Ioan, waving a cone of silence into being.

"Ioan, I am not at all happy," she said, voice frigid. "I know that none of this is your fault except inasmuch as you have been meeting her for coffee, but I am having a hard time keeping my anger to myself."

Ey took a long breath, scrubbed eir hands over eir face, and paced in an abbreviated line before her. "I know, May, I don't blame you. I'm completely baffled. Go ahead."

"I spend two hundred fucking years trying to get away

from that life, from all of her fucking schemes,” she said, voice quickly rising in volume. “And then I spend the last three trying to calm down so that I quit burning up whenever I so much as think about her, and now this. Look at us! Hiding in the woods from assassins. *Assassins!*”

Ey averted eir gaze from her. Nothing ey could say would help, and ey knew ey knew some remote part of emself was feeling much of what she was, too.

“Her and fucking Jonas are still doing whatever the fuck it is that they do, and now they are doing it to each other. Every time I think I can just settle down with you and get away from that, it just seeps right back in. I know that you were trying to do right by us, meeting up with her, but I really, *really* wish you had not.”

“May, I—”

“At least tell me what happened there.”

“Right. We met up as usual. She was looking pretty terrible, and when pressed on it, she said she was struggling and wasn’t comfortable elaborating. When asked about Secession day, she said she and Jonas were going to have, in his words, a gathering. She said her instances were going to merge down for this and that one of them said he was looking for her. She kept getting anxious and looking around at everyone there, and then jumped up, I guess when merges stopped coming. Guōwēi came in from the back and walked right toward us, then we stepped home and grabbed you.”

May crossed her arms and watched em pace and talk, her expression softening, though the frown remained. “And that is it? No talk of these...what, reactionary groups?”

Ey shook eir head. “None today, none in the past. It seems like something she’d keep close to the chest.”

“And it was in a cone with visual ACLs on secure?”

“Yeah.”

“But Guōwēi was still walking right for you?”

Ey nodded.

The skunk looked down to the ground, brow furrowed. "I suppose if he knew she was there, that would be proof enough. I imagine a place like there chooses to display it as blurred out rather than completely hidden."

"I guess," ey said, though the words lacked conviction to eir ears. "Then she grabbed my hand and told me to go."

"She grabbed—" She hesitated, mastered a sudden swell of anger, then shrugged. "It makes sense, I suppose. The chance that you would head some place she and Jonas could not guess is greater than if she had chosen. Ioan, my dear, you are pacing a hole in the path."

"Sorry, May," ey said, trying to stand still. "It's just a little nuts."

The skunk sighed, held out her paw to em, and gave her best smile. "I know, my dear. I am really fucking confused and really fucking pissed, I do not imagine you are feeling much better. Would walking help?"

Ey took her paw in his hand and nodded. "Please."

Remembering their promise to stay in sight, they walked slowly back and forth along the short stretch of beach near the entry point, still within sight of True Name, kneeling on the rock by the outlet of the lake.

"I am sorry that overflowed onto you for a moment, my dear. I did not mean to yell at you."

"You're fine, May, you just had some guy chasing you around our house trying to kill you or whatever, you're allowed to be pissed."

She snorted and shook her head. "He had only just arrived less than a minute before you. I imagine True Name's fork said something about being with you but not where, so they came to our place and saw someone that looked vaguely like her. I am surprised they did not just wait for her. How eager they must be."

"Makes about as much sense as any of this." Ey looked out across the lake at where the other skunk sat, head bowed. "What

do we do now?”

“I do not know, my dear. I have had precisely as many assassins after me as you, now, and I do not know what to do about True Name. I guess just stay here for a bit and gather our wits.”

Ey sighed, bent down, and plucked at a pebble on the bank until it came free of the sand, tossing it into the water. Anything to keep from spiraling back into anxiety. “I’ll have to go back and clear the house at some point. I’ll lock down the ACLs to us and any immediate guests.”

“I do not imagine you will find much there, now that we are gone, but I appreciate you doing a sweep all the same. I have some concerns about our privacy.”

Ey frowned.

She waved the idea away with a paw. “If it is an issue, we will discuss it. If it is not, then I do not want to think about it any further.”

“Well, if you say so.”

She leaned against eir side, resting her head against eir shoulder. “I am sorry, my dear. It is one of those things that is not a concern until it suddenly very fucking is.”

Ey ruffled a paw between the skunk’s ears, the settled it around her shoulders. “I’ll tell you what all I find there, and we can both hope it’s nothing. What will you do, meanwhile?”

“I am not sure. I do not particularly want to come with if they are looking for someone who looks like me. I will stay here and I guess keep an eye on our...ah, guest.”

“You sure you’ll be okay with that?”

There was a long pause before the skunk gave in and slipped both of her arms around eir middle, burying her face against eir shoulder. “I do not know,” she said, voice muffled. “I thought that I would be, was going to say that I would be, but I really do not know.”

Ey rested eir chin atop her head. “Well, I don’t think I’ll be gone all that long, five minutes, tops, but if you need, just send a ping and I’ll be right back.”

“I am not expecting anything so dramatic, my dear. I will stay here and try to de-stress. True Name still has about half an hour left of...well, whatever it is that she is doing.”

Ey tightened eir arms around the skunk for a squeeze, kissed her atop the head, then stepped back. “All the same, just stay safe, alright?”

She sniffled and nodded. “You too, my dear. Good luck, and do not die.”

Ioan wasn't sure what ey was expecting, stepping back home. Certainly all of the instances of May had quit as soon as they left, and hopefully that meant that there wouldn't be any more reputation-analyst-cum-assassins lingering around. All ey could hope is that ey wouldn't find any core dumps, just in case one of them had somehow killed one of her forks. It was vanishingly unlikely, given that the virus embedded in those symbolic objects — the syringes and knives and who knows what else — had to be tailored to whoever the target was.

Unless they're after the whole stanza or the whole clade, ey thought, lingering in the entryway, ears strained to listen for sounds coming from deeper within the house. The entryway took the form of a short hallway that led into a large, rectangular room comprising a den, dining room, and kitchen, and at least the space directly ahead of em was clear.

This is stupid, ey thought. *I should just clear the whole place of everyone and completely reset the ACLs.*

Curiosity won out, though, and ey set up a cone of silence above emself, set the visual ACLs secure, and then crept into the den. Ey'd be utterly silent and, as far as ey could tell, simply a blurry shape within a blurry patch of the room, though ey'd never tried the new features here at home.

Ey just had to hope that was enough.

Peeking around the corner revealed an empty den, though the clear evidence of a struggle remained: pillows and couch

cushions were tossed about, a glass of juice had been knocked over on the table, and most of May's notes had been scattered in a crazed ring around her desk.

The kitchen and dining area were also empty. Other than the chairs around the dining table knocked askew, there was no damage.

The bedroom was similarly empty, bed still neatly made and a few of May's better origami creations untouched on the windowsill.

It wasn't until ey made eir way out onto the balcony to check the back yard that ey found anyone.

A tall, blond man sat in one of eir Adirondack chairs, cheek rested on eir fist as he stared dozily out into the yard. It had been nearly twenty-five years since ey'd interviewed Jonas, and ey hadn't seen him at all in the interim, but nothing seemed to have changed about him. He was still, as both May and True name had described him, perilously handsome, still polished to a gleam, every aspect of him still oozing confidence.

"Long time no see, Ioan." He grinned, nodding out to the yard. "Lovely place you've got. So few people keep those good, full-bore winters anymore, you know?"

Ioan lifted eir hand to bounce him from the sim.

Jonas lifted his hands, palms up. "Hey, it's okay. I'm just here to talk. Mr. Qián left after you and your partner did. Some dramatic stuff all went down all at once."

"I'll say," ey said, standing well back from him. "What are you doing here, Jonas?"

"Just waiting on you, mostly. I wanted to check and make sure you and May Then My Name were alright."

"Check..." Ey shook eir head. "Why would you care about our well-being? You just sent an assassin to our house."

"Only to tidy up loose ends," he said, leaning back in the chair again and using the well-shined toe of his shoe to knock a bit of snow off the railing of the balcony. "I trust you've stashed your skunks away somewhere safe?"

“My skunks?” All of the stress of the last forty-five minutes that ey’d been holding back around May, all that had been obscured by eir need to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible, all of it came crashing down on em at once. “My skunks?” ey shouted. “Jonas, what the hell? You sent a fucking assassin after True Name, sent them over to our house so they could hound May. What the hell are you even talking about? Of course I’m going to keep my fucking partner and friend safe if you’re going to try killing them! Fucking...*my skunks*. Good Lord.”

Once ey’d finished and was left panting again, Jonas sat up in the chair and grinned widely, clapping his hands. “Mx. Ioan Bălan! Such language! I didn’t know you had it in you! Bravo.”

“Fuck you too.”

That grin lingered as Jonas gave a hint of a bow. “Very well, Ioan. To your concerns, the bit with May Then My Name was unintentional. One of True Name said that she was with you, and while I was pretty sure that meant your little coffee shop, I figured I’d stop by just to make sure. Guōwēi got a little excited when he saw her, thinking it might be his target. She’s quite good at fighting, your girl. You have my most abject apologies. We should’ve just waited.”

“And True Name?”

“Ah yes your...ah, friend, was it? Your friend and I had a meeting this afternoon where I was hoping to deal with all of that quietly and efficiently. Ah well, can’t win ’em all, can you?” He picked at his fingernails, looking the very picture of boredom. “106 out of 109 isn’t too bad, is it? Two merged down before I could get to them, so I guess that leaves just the one. Changes things a bit, doesn’t it? On to plan B.”

“Plan A being to kill one of the most well-known members of one of the most well-known clades on all three Systems?”

“Yep!”

Ioan gaped at him. “‘Yep’? Just...yep?”

Jonas laughed. “That was the easiest one out of the bunch,

I'll admit. I've got all the way through plan M, though, so don't worry, I've got it covered."

"Fine. Enlighten me. What's plan B?"

"Well, it starts here," he said, nodding toward em. "Where I bring you on as an amanuensis one last time while True Name and I hash things out. Now that she knows, I can't exactly do away with her. She's almost certainly told some of her friends by now, so that changes the game."

"And you need me to sit and listen to you prattle on at her?"

"Yep, basically. I need you to witness and write about what happens and leave the rest of it to the grown-ups."

Ey scoffed.

"Sometimes mommies and daddies fight, Ioan," Jonas said, then winked. "So. You're on as amanuensis. Go and tell True Name to ping when she's ready and we'll have our meeting. Oh! And bring May Then My Name and End Waking with, if you can, yeah? The whole stanza will be there."

"Why on Earth would I—"

"And no assassins, promise. I only mixed up a batch for True Name, no one else. No one's going to die, we're just going to have a talk and hash out some new boundaries, and you're going to watch and write it up at the end."

"And why should I believe you on that?"

He shrugged. "You don't have to, but I am telling the truth, Ioan. If you and True Name don't show at the very least, you'd better plan on not leaving home or wherever you're staying again. Just because I *didn't* mix up some syringes for you doesn't mean I *can't*."

"That's pretty dramatic."

"I don't have the training your pretty little skunks have," he shot back. "Just try and get everyone together and we can get this over with. There's no huge rush. Sometime within the year, okay?"

"Why?" Ey shook eir head. "Like, why do you need to talk with her and why do you need an amanuensis? You have to give

me something, here.”

“No, Ioan, I don’t,” he said. “Just tell True Name that I’m waiting. You can ask her all the questions you want.”

“Alright, fine,” ey growled. “Anything else?”

“Nope! That’s it for me. You can go back to your hidey-hole and get all smoochy with—”

Ioan completed the gesture ey’d held back since the beginning, bouncing Jonas from the sim completely. Ey held back the urge to scream out into the yard just as True Name had done earlier at the lake.

Ey sent May a quick I’m-okay ping, then started riffling through the perisystem architecture for information on how to completely sweep a sim. There was nothing in there ey could find about checking who was swept, but it was still possible to sweep everyone who didn’t currently have their home set to the current sim, and to receive explicit confirmation that this had been completed and how many instances it affected.

Focusing on the set of steps required, ey triggered the sweep, then checked the log that it had left, eyes-only, for em in the architecture.

Seventeen swept.

“Holy shit,” ey mumbled. Ey’d checked the whole of the inside of the house, and could see no footsteps out in the snow, so unless everyone was hiding under the balcony or up on the roof, ey’d clearly missed at least some of them inside.

Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about it, though.

Ey spent the next five minutes locking down and fine-tuning the ACLs for the house. By the time it was done, the house would only let em and May in as owners and anyone they brought with them by hand. It was also now marked as invisible to all but a short list of allowed individuals. Debarre, End Waking, True Name, A Finger Pointing, Douglas, and a dozen or so others ey could think of who might conceivably want to know when they were home.

At last, ey stepped away from home and back to Arrowhead Lake.

May was sitting on the shore of the lake, knees up to her chest with her arms hugged around them and chin rested atop. Ey rarely saw her sit that way with the pressure it put on the base of her tail, but when the skunk got truly lost in thought — or truly upset — she'd fall back on old habits at the expense of her body.

Ey walked over to sit down beside her, sliding an arm around her waist. "That's all done."

The skunk nodded. "Thank you, my dear."

She'd clearly been crying, given the tear-streaks on her cheeks and the hoarseness in her voice. Ey tightened eir arm around her and kissed at the side of her muzzle. "I'm sorry, May."

"It is not on you, Ioan," she said, voice suddenly tight. "All three of us can be sorry about the situation, but you are the least to blame of all of us."

Ey couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't just make her feel worse, so ey just helped her scoot closer and lean more heavily against em to take the pressure off her tail.

"True Name just got up," ey said after a few minutes. "I'll have some stuff to say when she's back. Jonas was at the house."

May winced and nodded, scrubbing her paws at her face to wipe away a few fresh tears. "Okay."

"And I'm sorry to add on more stress, but I told you I'd tell you if I swept anyone while I was there, and the report says I swept seventeen instances."

"Seventeen?!" The skunk groaned into her paws as she rubbed at her face again. "They have been busy."

"Who was it? The report didn't tell me."

"Bugs," she said sourly. "Little spies. People who fork to be small enough to hide on top of cabinets or behind pillows."

Ey blanched. "From Jonas?"

“Yes, and probably some from the clade. Some from the first stanza hired by him or True name however long ago.”

“And they just listen and watch?”

“Creepy, is it not? I probably should have been more proactive about when I first moved in, but I did not think either of us interesting enough.”

“Very creepy,” ey muttered. All of their talks, all of their discussions and jokes and arguments, all of their pleasant silences and moments of intimacy, all being watched. “What a nightmare.”

She nodded. “I am sorry, my dear. If it is of any consolation, I assure you that we really are quite boring. We have only had a few conversations of note over the last twenty-seven years, and the rest must have been excruciating to sit through.”

“Or incredibly awkward.”

The skunk gave em a quizzical look, then laughed. “Gross, Ioan.”

“Not me! Them!”

“Yes, yes. I agree, awkward. But here comes True Name, no need to be more awkward than we already are.”

They stood up and brushed off their pants as the skunk came padding around the last bend in the trail, looking utterly exhausted.

“Thank you for giving me the space,” she said, bowing. “And my apologies for the trouble of today.”

“It’s not—” Ey caught emself up short and shook eir head. “Well, are you okay?”

The skunk shook her head. “I am not, no. I am very nearly on the edge of collapse. I feel like I could either sleep or cry for three days straight. Or both if it were possible.”

May took a deep breath, held it for a slow count of three, and very carefully let it out. “I am sorry, True Name.”

She stood rigid, jaw working as she clenched her teeth in an effort to maintain control. After several long seconds, she sniffled, opened her mouth to say something, then shook her

head and bowed deeply.

Watching nervously, Ioan fiddled with the hem of eir vest. So much had happened in the last hour and a half, and now this exchange between eir partner and her cocladist was enough to start that anxiety rising within em again. True Name trying her best not to cry openly and May clutching tightly at eir arm, both of them interacting with each other was a different sort of stress than the assassination attempt, but no less intense.

“True Name,” ey said carefully. “There’s no rush, but Jonas was there at the house. We can talk about it later, but I figured I’d give you a heads up.”

The skunk gave up on maintaining her expression and hid her face in her paws, nodding. “Thank you,” she croaked.

Once she’d washed her face and calmed down enough to speak, the three of them set to work deciding what the next steps were. May suggested they stay at the lake for the night, explaining that they’d need time to sort out a living situation for True Name and that she wanted to go over their place with a fine-toothed comb before spending the night there again, anyway. After hearing about the spies, she was quick to agree.

True Name merely nodded. “Is there a place here that I can stay?” she asked.

May winced and shook her head. “It would be camping. We can make that work for tonight if we can scrounge up some gear, but a long-term solution is not feasible. This is not our sim and we do not have ACLs to build here.”

She nodded. “I understand. I will dig—”

“You will stay with us,” May said quickly, as though rushing to get it out before second-guessing herself, a sentiment echoed in her expression.

Both True Name and Ioan stared at her until she wilted. “I am sorry. I know that things have been difficult between us and that a large part of that is on me, but that does not mean that I do not want you safe. If we have a place that we have complete control over from ACLs to building, that is safer than this

security-through-obscurity abandoned sim, and our proximity will discourage further attempts on your life.”

“I can mirror the house, I think,” Ioan said, once the shock had worn off. “That’ll get you a bedroom and furnishings.”

The skunk looked as though she was fighting off another wave of tears, but she nodded. “Thank you both. I do not wish to impose, but I greatly appreciate your help in the interim.”

May nodded in turn. After a moment’s silence, she turned to Ioan and said, “My dear, can you see if End Waking can help us out with some camping supplies? I do not trust our place enough to go back and create obvious camping goods.”

“Me?”

“Please.” She sighed. “I do not think I have the wherewithal to do so, myself. I do not want to go and cry in front of someone else. I do not want to feel like I am begging, even if help comes willingly.”

Ey hesitated, nodded, and sent End Waking a sensorium ping, requesting a meeting, which was quickly acknowledged. “Alright,” ey said, forking off a new instance. “Back in a few.”

The skunk and his partner were waiting for em at the new entry point to his sim.

“Hey, sorry for the short notice.”

End Waking bowed. “It is no trouble, Ioan.”

“You taking up camping?” Debarre asked, grinning and leaning in to shake eir hand.

“Uh, no, not quite,” ey said. “There’s been...well. Our sim isn’t guaranteed safe at the moment.”

They both perked up at this.

“Not safe? What does that mean?” Debarre asked.

“I don’t want to get too much into it,” ey said, thoughts racing. “But needless to say, May and I aren’t safe there. Some really dramatic stuff happened and literally no one is happy.”

End Waking rested a paw on Debarre’s shoulder before the weasel could speak again. “Perhaps you can expand on this soon, but for now, what do you need?”

“I will, I promise.” *And apparently I need to*, ey added mentally. “We need stuff to camp for the night at Arrowhead. We can’t make anything there, and May’s worried about us going back home to procure anything that might tip folks off.”

The skunk nodded, looked thoughtful for a few seconds, and then waved his paw, bringing into being between them two folding camp cots, two bedrolls, a tent, two bundles of firewood, and some simple food — bread, salami, and cheese.

“I will come help you set up,” he said. “It is all fairly straightforward, but tents are fiddly.”

Ioan sighed, nodded. “Thank you, End Waking. We’ll, uh...we’ll need three sets, though.”

He paused in the act of bending down to lift one of the cot-and-bedroll combos. “You will need three?”

Apparently unable to hold back anymore, Debarre spoke up. “Ioan, I’m going to go crazy if you don’t give me at least something, here.”

“As am I,” End Waking said.

“Right. Well, sorry in advance for the stress.” Ey paused to collect eir thoughts. Adrenaline seemed to have burned through much of eir energy reserves. Not yet two and ey was feeling exhausted. “Jonas tried to assassinate True Name and made her think it was about some ‘reactionary elements’ or something. He got all but her root instance, and that only because we were out for coffee at the time. He and his assassin also paid our home a visit and they were going after May in the confusion, so we’re hiding at Arrowhead for the night.”

Silence. Silence but for the sound of a near-by waterfall and a few far-off birds.

“Well, fuck me,” Debarre said at last, rubbing at his temples. “May Then My Name and True Name are stuck together?”

Ey laughed, surprising even emself. “Yeah. Assassins and politicians and whatever, and the weirdest thing about it is seeing them talking.”

End Waking stood a while in thought, then waved his paw

again to create another cot, bedroll, and tent. “I will help you set these up, but I will not speak with her.”

“Are you sure, E.W.?” The weasel frowned down at the gear. “I mean, I guess it’s fine giving them stuff, but I’m not exactly comfortable with you being anywhere near her.”

The skunk nodded. “I need to, my dear. I need to be better to her than she might be to me in this situation.”

Ioan frowned. Ey wasn’t so sure that the True Name of 2350 would be so callous, but now didn’t seem like the right time to argue the point.

“If you say so,” Debarre said sourly. “But I’m staying here.”

After a moment’s concentration, a second End Waking stood behind the first. “I will stay with you, my dear, do not worry. No need to risk more than a fork.”

Ey bent down to pick up the two bundles of firewood, while the new instance of End Waking picked up one of the sets of gear and held out his paw. Ioan took it in eir hand and stepped back to Arrowhead Lake. They dropped off their loads, then returned to pick up the second two bundles and the tents.

The skunk set to work immediately, picking out a flat spot in the trees to set up both tents. Ioan was pleasantly surprised when they turned out to be fairly modern — at least, modern to the 2100s — gear: thin nylon with carbon fiber spars and a seal-strip entrance kept sheltered by a fold in the fabric. The camp beds were of a strong fabric lashed to carbon fiber frames by some lightly springy cord, providing a reasonable amount of give. The bedrolls turned out to be sleeping bags with foam pillow that expanded quickly when the seal-strip was undone.

Throughout the whole process, eir fork, May, and True Name sat by the edge of the lake, far off to the side. Ey couldn’t tell if they were simply being silent or if they were talking in a cone of silence, but, other than a brief nod to End Waking from May, they seemed keen on taking the space for themselves.

Once the tents and camp beds were set up and Ioan had been shown where and how to start the fire, End Waking bowed po-

lately and said. “We will talk soon, Ioan, I am sure. Until then, please keep you and yours safe.”

Ey nodded and returned the bow. “Thanks again, End Waking. You’ve been a huge help today, and yes, we’ll be in touch.”

When the skunk had left, ey quit and merged back down to eir root instance.

“Well, that’s us settled for the night, I guess,” ey said. “We’ve got stuff for sandwiches, if you’re hungry.”

Both skunks shook their heads.

“Alright,” ey said. Ey wasn’t hungry either, ey realized. The tail end of eir anxiety just had em jittery. Once ey set that aside, ey realized just how exhausted ey was.

They sat in quiet well into the evening, instead, each of them trying to digest the day in their own way.

“This has been far and away the worst Secession day I have had,” True Name said.

Ioan and May both snorted, then worked to finish their bites so that they could apologize.

“Sorry, True Name,” Ioan said. “I don’t know if you had a lot planned, but I’m glad you at least made it through.”

“It is okay to laugh. There is little else to do in the face of it.” The skunk smiled weakly. “I am sorry that you two have been dragged into it along with me.”

“It’s alright.”

“Well, not alright, necessarily,” May added. “But I am glad that you are not dead.”

“Thank you, May Then My Name. I appreciate it.”

They fell back to silence, then, Ioan and May self-consciously finishing their sandwiches while True Name simply stared into the fire. She had made herself half a sandwich, explaining that she wasn’t terribly hungry, and had yet to touch it.

Once they had finished, the skunk sat up straighter and said, “I think that I have had sufficient space from it, now. Can you tell me what Jonas said?”

Ey shrugged. “Not a whole lot, all told. He said that he wants to meet up with you to discuss next steps and that he wants me there as an amanuensis so that I can write another book.”

She tilted her head. “You?”

“Yeah. He said...well, let me start from the top. He said he was waiting there for me to make sure that May and I were alright, that he was there to tidy up loose ends, and that, uh...” Ey hesitated, unsure of how well Jonas’s next comment would go over with either of the Odists. “And that he trusted that I’d, and I’m quoting here, ‘stashed my skunks away somewhere safe’.”

Both May and True Name bridled at this, likely for similar reasons.

“Sorry. I kind of blew up at him for that.”

“‘Blew up’?”

“Yeah, just yelled at him for sending assassins after you two — he confirmed that Guōwēi mistook you for her, May — and told him to fuck himself.” Ey shrugged helplessly. “I was pretty upset, I guess.”

“I am surprised that you stuck around long enough to listen to him, my dear,” May said. “He sounds like he was in rare form.”

“I mean, I don’t know what he’s like the rest of the time, but he was doing a really good job of being as insulting as possible. The ‘my skunks’ part.” I don’t have the training your pretty little skunks have”, he said, and “sometimes mommies and daddies fight, Ioan”.”

True Name ground the heels of her palms against her eyes. “I am sorry that you had to go through that, Mx. Bălan. It does indeed sound like he was in fine form. Did he explain his reasons for having you along as amanuensis at all?”

“Just that he needed me to witness and write about what happens and leave the rest to the grown-ups.” Ey thought back

and shrugged. “That was most of what he said. He wanted to talk with you, wanted me to witness, and wanted the whole stanza there.”

May frowned. “Including me?”

“Specifically you and End Waking, yeah.”

“Why would I trust him on that?”

“I mean, I don’t,” ey said, tossing a pebble at the fire. “He said no assassins, but who knows what else he has planned. And it does sound like he has it planned, by the way, that plan A didn’t pan out, so he moved on to plan B, that he had up through plan M.”

“And nothing else?” True Name asked.

“That’s about it. I swept him after that. Swept the whole place.”

The skunk’s ears splayed to the sides. “A preemptive apology is likely in order.”

“Yes, it probably is,” May said, voice low and flat. “Loss For Images?”

“Yes. Her and Even While Awake.” She bowed formally. “I apologize, you two. It was decided prior to Launch to observe those involved with the project and not aligned with us.”

“Those were *your* spies?” ey asked, some part of em unwilling to believe, rebelling against the rest of em, which was thinking *of course they were*.

“Yes. I Am At A Loss For Images In This End Of Days and And I Still Dream Even While Awake rode shotgun in May Then My Name’s fur and have been living there since, swapping out forks as needed. Again my sincerest apologies.”

“How many?”

“Instances?”

Ey nodded.

“Twelve. Two per room, two extra in the kitchen, two on the balcony, two in the yard.”

“Who were the other five, then?”

She tilted her head quizzically. "You swept seventeen? Those were likely Jonas's, I imagine."

May's voice was steeped in sarcasm as she spoke. "Find out any juicy details?"

Her cocladist held up her paws. "There is no excusing my actions. I know that there is little that I can do to earn your trust, May Then My Name, and at this point, even I suspect that I do not deserve it. There were few details of note enough to report back to me. We knew of your career changes. We knew of your...your feelings towards me. We...well, they learned about the Artemisians early on when you got your letter from Castor, though in the last decade, the reports that I have received have decreased in number, which I attributed to a lack of interesting goings on. That they did not report on your letter from Artemis is a red flag I should have paid attention to sooner."

Ey shot May a questioning glance, but she shook her head. *Perhaps she really doesn't know about the Name*, ey thought.

"And why did you not?" May asked instead.

"Pay attention to the red flags?" True Name stared at the fire for a long few seconds, then shrugged. "I was overworked and being fed bad information."

"You overworked yourself, you mean. 108 forks! Did you synchronize daily?"

"Of course. Why would I not?"

"How are you even still sane?" Ioan asked. "I'm surprised you aren't jumping at shadows, at this point."

"She is not sane at all, my dear," May said.

"I am sure I will be now," True Name said at the same time. They frowned at each other.

I'm glad End Waking gave us two tents, Ioan thought. *It's been civil so far, but...*

Out loud, ey asked, "So, what's next? We head back tomorrow and build you a room, but then what?"

"What is next is that I try to salvage what I can from this. I imagine that my options will be severely limited if I am to con-

tinue existing as I am and still meet Jonas's demands, but that does not mean that I will set my goals aside."

"'Continue as you are'?" May growled. "I cannot believe...well."

There was a moment of tense silence, eir partner's jaw working as though straining to hold back some larger outburst.

Once she'd mastered it, she said in a tightly controlled voice, "I am going to stretch my legs."

"Be safe, May," ey said quietly, watching the skunk stand and stomp off toward the lake.

True Name watched her estranged up-tree instance with nothing but exhaustion in her expression.

"I'm sorry, True—"

She waved a paw at em. "Please, Ioan, this is not your fault. It is not your battle," she said curtly.

They sat in silence then, each of them looking into the fire, neither making eye contact with the other. For eir part, ey spent the time doing eir best not to kick emself for jumping right in to fix things. Ey knew perfectly well not to apologize for May, and yet there ey'd gone and done it.

Ey couldn't guess what the skunk was thinking.

Eventually, she stood from her log and bowed to em. "I am sorry, my dear. I did not mean to get short with you. It has been a terrible day."

"Oh, uh," ey stammered, flicking eir gaze her way. "It's alright. I think we're all pretty messed up right now."

"Well put," she said. "I am going to try and sleep. Which one is mine?"

Ey gestured her toward the tent with one cot in it and watched her slip inside, then sat and waited for May to come back, staring at the fire and trying not to feel bad enough for the three of them.

Everyone was off in the morning. Tired, grumpy, sore.

The narrowness of the cots had frustrated Ioan and May throughout the night. They *could* both fit on one, but only if they straightened out rather than their usual tight curl. At one point, they tried dragging the cots to be side by side, but the frames against each other made a hard ridge that was impossible to rest on comfortably. In the end, they'd fallen asleep on their on cots, facing each other, arms tangled enough to get at least some contact through the night.

Whether or not True Name had actually slept seemed up in the air. She had shrugged noncommittally when asked, but it certainly didn't look like she had.

Conversation was equally awkward. May apologized stiffly to her down-tree instance over breakfast of further sandwiches and True Name accepted graciously enough, but then they fell into silence again.

After breakfast, there was little else to do but head back home. The camp remained set up. Ioan couldn't begin to guess how to take down the tents, given how distracted ey'd been while End Waking had been setting them up. *Besides*, ey reasoned. *Best to keep them around just in case things go sideways.*

They decided to leave forks behind in case anything went wrong, then Ioan took each of the skunks' paws and stepped back home.

True Name immediately wrinkled her nose at the sight out the picture windows into the back yard. "Snow?"

"Ey is some sort of masochist," May said in a stage whisper. "You will have to forgive em. Ey is working on it with Sarah."

So out of place was the humor that it took em a moment to catch up. Ey laughed tiredly and shook eir head. "For theatre nerds, you guys have no imagination. Coffee?"

May leaned up and dotted her nose against eir cheek. "You, my dear, are an utter delight."

True Name followed them into the den. "Please. I am going to fall over if I do not have something."

May flopped down onto her usual beanbag and rubbed her

paws over her face while True Name sat at the dining table and Ioan made coffee. “If it is alright by you two, I am going to take a shower after coffee, as hot as I can stand, and then we can work on the addition.”

“Sure. I can start by mirroring our room and then stripping personal items while you’re getting cleaned up.”

“Thank you both,” True Name said, tracing a claw along the wood grain on the table, an incredibly familiar gesture from years of living with May. “Again, I mean. I really do appreciate all that you are doing. Perhaps we can discuss boundaries and expectations later, but I am also looking forward to a shower.”

Ioan nodded, finishing up the coffee prep — eirs black and both of the skunks’ sweet and creamy — and carrying the mugs to each of them. “I guessed,” ey said, setting one down in front of True Name. “Let me know if you need anything different.”

Ey sat down carefully by May and held both of their coffees while the skunk scooted in close against em as usual before handing hers over. It felt good to be back in a more comfortable setting, back where em and May could at least get close, even if everything still felt nerve-wracking.

They drank in silence for a while, minus a thank you from each of the skunks, each of them doing their best to un-tinge from last day’s worth of anxiety.

It worked a little too well, perhaps, as ey had to nudge May awake to finish her coffee and shower, and the prospect of levering emself out of the beanbag felt out of reach to em. All the same, ey needed to at least get the other room created, then perhaps the three of them could nap.

Once May was on her way to the shower, ey stood, finished eir coffee, and began to work. Ey dumped a series of intents into the sim. A doorway cut itself out of the wall opposite the doorway to eir own bedroom. A room extruded itself beyond the doorway, filling itself with all of the very same stuff that eirs and May’s contained. The sim’s boundaries whined in protest at not having enough for the windows to look out on and, too

tired to think of any other options, ey mirrored the yard as well so that True Name's room looked out over the same grass and dandelions.

If she stays for any real length of time, maybe I can just mirror the rest of the house and she can have a full setup.

That was enough for now, though. Ey got started going through the room from top to bottom, wiping it of eirs and May's presence. Anything that wasn't the bed, the nightstands, and any other furniture was either evaluated and either left for its decorative value or swiped away to nothingness. A damp May joined em partway through the exercise, and by the time they were done, the room was left clean and neat, sparsely decorated without being oppressively empty.

"Hopefully it's not too bleak," ey said once May had fetched True Name. "I gave you some ACLs over the space if you need to make or recycle anything. Just let me know if the room itself needs changing."

The skunk stood, silent and still, for nearly a minute, leaving em to fidget while May looked on, frowning.

Finally, she cleared her throat and said hoarsely. "This is more than enough, my dear. I do not know why you two...but, well, perhaps I should get cleaned up and then we can talk proper. I am perhaps a little too emotional for that at the moment."

May sighed, nodded. "At your own pace."

They both bowed and backed out of the room to let True Name shut the door behind her so that she could shower. May took eir hand in her paw and led em over to the bean bag to get comfortable once again.

"You okay?" ey murmured, once she was properly nestled against em, head tucked up under eir chin.

"I am tired, my dear. I am tired and I am stressed and I am...I do not know. Conflicted, perhaps."

"How do you mean?"

She shrugged. “It is much easier to hate from a distance. Especially when one is built as I am.”

“To love?”

She nodded.

Ey wanted to ask her how well that fit her monologue, that idea that to be built to love is to be built to hate yourself. Ey wanted to go back sixteen hours or however long it had been and kick Jonas’s ass. Ey wanted to go back twenty-four hours and warn True Name, to go back three and a half years and warn the True Name ey’d first gotten coffee with.

Instead, ey said, “You’re a good person, May.”

She tightened her grip around em. “Thank you, my dear.”

When True Name finished her shower and grooming, looking far more herself than she had since the year before, they sat around the dining table to hash out boundaries.

“I do not want to impose on you more than I already have,” the skunk began. “I will certainly stay out of your private space, and I figure a closed door is a plain enough signal to be left alone. Should I stick to my room for the most part?”

May let out a snort of laughter. “I am sorry, True Name. I do not mean to laugh, but I have never heard you so deferential in my life.”

The skunk canted her ears back. “I am in shock, May Then My Name. My coworker of two centuries just tried to kill me. My life’s work has been cut off from me. I have been invited to stay with one of the two up-tree instances of mine who dislike me the most, and I have never had to live with anyone before, not since before we uploaded. The offer remains for me to dig my own sim.”

Eir partner bowed apologetically.

“I’d feel better if you stayed,” Ioan admitted. “It’d be too easy for you to either disappear into your new sim forever or wind up with another attempt on your life whenever you left.”

May nodded readily. “You are safer here where no one can act openly against you. It may not be the most comfortable of

situations, but I would also prefer that you not die.”

“Good points. Both of you. I would prefer not to die as well.” She straightened up in her chair and smiled, a hint of that confidence showing through. “So, to my question. Do you have any thoughts?”

“Closed doors means don’t bother, stay out of each others rooms. Cones of silence and secure visual ACLs to be respected,” ey said, then shrugged. “But I think that’s all obvious stuff. I don’t see any reason for you to stay out of common areas, I guess, and I’m fine with you eating with us, too, but I also freely acknowledge that that’s me speaking. I don’t want you two, uh...”

“Fighting and arguing should be avoided, yes,” True Name said with a slight bow of acknowledgement. “It is your house, though, and I know that our relationship is fraught. I will defer to May Then My Name, given the power dynamic and social restrict-”

“I promise that I will not try to pull out all of your fur or bounce you so long as you give us space when either of us ask, okay?”

The skunk blinked a few times, then smiled cautiously. “Understood.”

“Wait, that easy?” Ioan said.

“Not everything need be complicated, my dear. Boundaries are most often found by crossing them. We will have negotiation ahead of us as well, I am sure.” May shrugged, adding, “This does not make our relationship any less complicated, but endlessly refining rules ahead of time will only stress all of us out.”

“I guess,” ey mumbled. “I just don’t want you at each others’ throats.”

“If we fight, we fight,” she said. “But if we are to be stuck together, then we will fucking get over it and have a civil house, at the very least. I will do all of the exercises Sarah has given me at once if that is what is needed to keep home from becoming unbearable.”

True Name nodded in agreement. “I will do what I can to keep things comfortable. We will work it out if one of us gets upset. That includes you, Mx. Bălan. Please voice your concerns when they arise.”

Ey shook eir head. “Alright, alright. Only concerns I have right now are taking a shower and a nap, then. I’ll trust you two to make things work and will try not to mediate every single little disagreement.”

“Excellent. About fucking time,” May said, patting eir hand. “I will join you for the nap and try to be up for lunch.”

“Naps all around,” True Name added. “Again, thank you two.”

The next few days felt careful. They weren’t walking on eggshells around each other, but they all seemed to be hyper-aware of each others’ presence in the house.

Ioan and May called out from their performances and, when A Finger Pointing asked why, May had spent half an hour locked in the bedroom on a silenced sensorium conversation. Ioan received a very sincere note soon after wishing both em and True Name well. While she’d never spent much time worrying about the things True Name did, A Finger Pointing’s ceaseless desire to be friends with everyone did not exclude her cross-tree instance.

For her part, True Name spent much of the first day silent in her room, though whether that was to sleep or salvage the situation, ey couldn’t tell. She poked her head out around dinner and said that she was too tired to join and that she would see them in the morning.

Ey couldn’t blame her. Even with the two hour nap before lunch, Ioan felt groggy and disoriented for the remainder of the day. *I’m becoming like May*, ey thought. *I don’t sleep well alone, or even separated by camp bed frames.*

All three of them slept in late the next morning, only rising at nine or so when Ioan received the gentlest possible sensorium ping from True Name.

Ey found her in the kitchen, standing in front of the coffee machine, looking baffled.

"I am sorry if I woke you, my dear. There are more buttons on this than I know what to do with."

"It's alright. I went through a coffee phase years ago and wound up with this. I usually just tap here...then here...and then this last one for three cups."

She bowed. "Thank you. I would complain, but it does make good coffee."

The skunk looked so much like eir partner that ey had to stop emself from reaching out to ruffle her ears. Ey disguised the motion as leaning back against the counter and rubbing the sleep from eir eyes. "Good coffee's a necessity. Sleep alright?"

"Well enough, yes. It has been a few days since this instance has had the chance, so it was starting to build up."

"Days? Good Lord. I don't know how you can do that."

"Anxiety, coffee, and 263 years of practice."

Ey laughed. "I don't know, I think it might be a you thing. May seems pretty fond of it."

"An improvement, then," she said, grinning. "Mugs?"

Ey showed her where they kept the mugs, then the cream and sugar for doctoring coffee and spoons for stirring. Once the pot finished brewing and all three cups had been poured, ey excused emself back to the bedroom with eirs and May's coffee to finish waking up with eir partner.

And so it continued. They would speak in the morning and over dinner, perhaps a few times throughout the day, but otherwise, they worked on their own projects. They'd say good morning to each other, say good night to each other, say polite things in passing. Little of it felt like it was done out of kindness, but rather out of a need to remain cognizant of each others' presence.

The snow first melted and then was replaced when a new storm lay down a delicate few inches; even the weather felt careful.

It wasn't until the third full day since their return that the spell was broken, when, shortly after lunch, True Name stepped into her field of view, bowed, and politely requested a conversation with May.

The skunk frowned and beckoned her over to the couch.

True Name apologized to Ioan, then set up a cone of silence with secure visual ACLs.

Three days was just long enough to start building up habits, such that Ioan was left anxious and jittery when they were broken. Seeing it from the outside for the first time, ey was left with a slight sense of disorientation from the way the cone blurred both the occupants and the background, the edges of its boundaries unnervingly sharp.

There was nothing to be gained from watching the indistinct shapes within. A quiet conversation had them simply looking like two black forms against the relative brightness of the balcony. Ey couldn't see expressions, couldn't see but the most grandiose of body language.

And yet ey watched, slipping over to the kitchen to clean, or at least dream up some chore that needed doing there, just so that ey could keep an eye on the cone.

It was boring, and that it was boring only drove eir anxiety higher.

The conversation lasted nearly an hour, and when the cone dropped, ey was greeted once again by the sight of the two skunks. To say that neither looked happy missed the mark: True Name had a dullness to her expression, something between resignation and hopelessness, while May looked apoplectic. She'd clearly been crying quite hard at one point.

Ey ducked around the kitchen counter as quickly as ey could. "May? True Name? Are you—"

May waved a hand dismissively and blipped out of the sim.

There was a sensorium ping a moment later, a view of Arrow-head Lake.

“What just happened?”

True Name shrugged, the movement looking as though she was struggling against dozens of gravities rather than just one. “I explained what has been happening.”

Ey frowned, feeling eir own anger rise out of anxiety. “Well? What’s been happening? I don’t exactly like seeing her that upset.”

“No, I suppose not.” She sighed and slouched against the back of the couch, rubbing at her forehead. “I explained the shift between Jonas and I over the last twenty-five years. I explained the last few weeks.”

“And pissed her off.”

She rolled her head to the side, enough get a sidelong glance at em. “I am sorry, Ioan. I cannot be the only one to know these things. I have had all of my existing support removed. All of my forks, all of my cocladists, most of my friends. It is small consolation, I am sure, but I have left May Then My Name angrier at Jonas than I think she ever was at me.”

Ey blinked and straightened up. “At Jonas?”

She let her head slip back down off the back of the couch, looking down at her paws. “I cannot tell you, Ioan. Not yet.”

“Nothing?” Ey shook eir head. “Sorry, True Name, I’m not asking you to betray a secret or anything. I’m just worried.”

“I understand, my dear.” There seemed to be more coming, but she sat for another minute or so, just staring down at her paws on her lap.

“I’m sorry, True N–”

“What was it that he said to you? ‘Sometimes mommies and daddies fight’?”

“Wait, but...what?”

She shrugged again, slowly rolled up off the couch to her feet, swayed for a moment, then walked off to her room, the door snicking shut behind her.

Debarre — 2350

The next few days after Ioan's visit and brief explanation about what had happened with True Name were full of long walks and longer silences, and End Waking politely requested that Debarre remain behind for the majority of the walks.

There was a sense in the air that the skunk wanted to ask him to leave again, to fall back into solitude and, though he'd never use the word around him, moping. He'd still talk, still hold up his end of the conversations, but always there would be a slight pause before speaking, always a bit more distance than usual, always something out in the forest that called to him just that much more strongly than the weasel before him.

It was never comfortable to be asked to leave one's partner. He knew the reasons, could understand the drive, but to build a relationship up over however many decades it was now, and yet still need to put it on hold for months or, on one occasion, years at a time.

He knew he had a temper, too. He'd spent the last centuries going all the way back to Cicero's death working on setting that aside when he could feel it getting to be too hot within him. He always worked his hardest at that around End Waking. He loved the skunk, wanted nothing but the best for him, and although he knew that End Waking was one of the more resilient of the Odists, he had also known Michelle far longer than...well, just about anyone possibly could, now. Two and a half centuries

was a long time to understand just how the other person processes pain and trauma, and he didn't want to add to any of the Odists' burden, having spent so long with them from the beginning. From before the beginning, in some senses.

Well, except perhaps True Name.

There were few enough people he hated in the world, though certainly a great many who grated on his nerves. True Name and her ilk, though, were universally among that number. He knew he could never hurt anyone, but he had his fantasies. He knew he should never wish harm befall anyone, but some people...

This latest development was putting this to the test.

He'd continue work on the cabin while End Waking went for his walks — they'd gotten the floor and stove in place, as well as the A-frame, but the canvas of the tent still needed to be strung, and he had a few ideas for improvements — and all the while, he'd swing steadily between the poles of feeling nauseous at the thought of one less fraction of his friend in the world, one more death of one of the lost, and wild fantasies of popping champagne upon hearing that her final instance had been destroyed.

Part of him wondered if End Waking was going through the same. He wanted to ask, but didn't want to risk that pushing the skunk over into requesting that he leave with the tent not yet complete.

So, Debarre just kept working, kept fantasizing. He'd gotten the last of the canvas lashed down over the sides of the frame and was working on the front wall of the tent. At least there was productivity to lean on, even if he couldn't lean on his partner at the moment.

He jumped, startled out of work and reverie, when two sensorium pings in short order. The first came from End Waking, the word 'company' muttered quietly, and the second was a ping of arrival from the sim itself.

With the new tent, End Waking had made the default entry point around a small rise from home, leaving it a short walk

around or a shorter but much steeper dash up and over the ridge.

Debarre opted for the latter, nearly tumbling down the other side of the hill to where the form knelt in the clearing. His boyfriend was just making his way through the trees on the opposite side, so they converged on the visitor at the same time.

May Then My Name was sobbing. It looked as though she had been for a bit, too, judging by the tear-tracks in the fur of her cheeks.

There wasn't much that he could think of to say, so he awkwardly shifted from a crouch to a kneeling position beside her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and gently tugging her to slouch against him. Although he rarely had reason to be comforting to May Then My Name in particular, it was familiar enough from all the way back at the Crown Pub when Sasha'd come back from some break-up or another.

"I will get water," End Waking murmured, leaving the physical comfort to someone better built for such.

Her cry must have been nearing its end before she arrived, as she'd settled down to sniffles by the time her cocladist arrived with an enamel mug of water and a damp rag.

"Can you drink, my dear?" he said gently.

She nodded and accepted the mug with both paws to hold it steady, taking a few unsteady laps of the water before simply clutching it to her chest. "Thank you," she croaked, freeing up a paw to accept the damp rag to wipe her face. "I am sorry for so dramatic an entrance."

"You are fine, May Then My Name," her cocladist said. "Everything sounded quite dramatic. Please take your time, and we can discuss it later."

She nodded, slouched a little further against Debarre, and sighed shakily.

He shot a quizzical look over to End Waking, who sent a brief sensorium ping in return. She must have explained a good bit more before arriving, then.

They sat like that for another five minutes or so, another few bouts of tears hitting the skunk while he tried to be as steady as he could for her, petting over her ears and murmuring reassurances. She'd leaned on AwDae more often than she had on him, all those years ago, but a friend's shoulder was a friend's shoulder, and he'd always offered when he could. This was, he supposed, no different.

When she was finally able to pull herself together enough to walk, Debarre helped her to stand and the three of them made their way back to the tent. He sat her down on one of the two fallen tree trunks that had been set before the tent to either side of the fire pit, then took her mug to refill it while End Waking started a small fire in the pit. It wasn't that cold out, but warmth was warmth, comfort was comfort.

With the cup safely back in her paws, Debarre sat beside May Then My Name once more, arm around her shoulder. "Feel up to talking about it?"

"Um, a little, maybe," the skunk said, voice raw. "Just in general."

He nodded.

"True Name has been staying with us the last few days."

"Sounds miserable."

She smiled halfheartedly. "Ioan expanded the house out to the other side with a separate bedroom. She has been spending most of her time in there, doing whatever it is that she does. Perhaps she is still pulling strings somewhere, I do not know. I do not particularly care."

"Probably," he said sourly. "I'm surprised you let her move in there."

After a long pause, the skunk mumbled, "It was my idea. I insisted, Ioan agreed."

"Why?" End Waking asked from where he crouched beside the fire.

"I have incomplete thoughts. In terms of logistics, it made sense to have her where Jonas could not act against her."

End Waking nodded. "Yes, but why? Why did you not just let her build herself a new home? Leave her to her own devices until time, Jonas, or madness took her?"

May Then My Name splayed her ears. "I do not want her to die. I do not want her gone."

The other skunk went silent, holding her gaze for a long moment before getting back to building the fire up to a comfortable level.

"I'm guessing it's the non-logistical side of things that's complicated," Debarre said.

"Yes. After everything, I do not know why it is that I care about her." She sniffled and scrubbed her face with the rag as though to preemptively snap herself out of an oncoming wave of emotion. "It has not been all that bad, really. Awkward, yes, but she spends most of her time in her room except at breakfast and dinner. Today, though, she requested to talk with me, and...I cannot even begin to comprehend the specifics, but Jonas has...has been..."

Debarre rubbed at May Then My Name's back when that wave of emotion finally washed over her.

"I am sorry, my dear. It was a lot," she mumbled. "Jonas has been playing her for centuries, now. He has been structuring her life for her in such subtle ways that even she was not able to see it. She...well, something happened a few years after launch. A trap of sorts. Jonas's plans hit all at once and she has been working under his thumb since then."

They sat in silence for a bit, Debarre racing through various questions, rejecting each as too personal, too mean, too off-topic. Finally, he asked, "So, why are you so upset?"

"That is where the specifics I cannot mention lay. Beyond that, though, I am just...torn. I am torn. I want to kick her out. I want to invite Jonas over and have him bring his pet assassin. I want her to disappear into ignominy." She took a deep breath, continued, "But I also want her to get out of this mess. I may not want her around, but I want her to find something — anything

— else to do with her life and to not have to deal with that living, breathing sack of shit anymore. No one should have to deal with that.”

“E.W. said he needed to be better than her. Sort of like that?”

She shrugged. “I do not know. It does not feel accurate for me to say that, but I cannot explain why.”

“Well,” he said, waving the point away. “I’m with you on the feeling torn bit, at least. Was just thinking about that when you showed up. Like, would I celebrate if she died? Or would I feel like there was just that much less of you around?”

“You think about it from the outside, my dear,” End waking said. “You think about who we were. You have the capacity to do so. May Then My Name and I have diverged so far from True Name that she has become a new entity, and I do not think that we can so easily see Sasha in her.”

May Then My Name was nodding. “And that is the source of at least some of my resentment towards her. I cannot see Sasha in her, and yet I was created from her. I see that of Sasha in myself, the caring side of her who got lost looking for her lost friends, and while I can *remember* those few years that I was True Name, I am not that person. I do not feel like I ever was that person. Becoming me was waking up from a dream.”

“A nightmare, perhaps,” the other skunk murmured.

“You and I have different resentments. I would say an unnerving dream that makes me all the happier to be what I am now.”

“You are a better person than I.”

Debarre threw a twig at his boyfriend. “No moping. You’re both good people. Jury’s out on True Name, but given that you two get so fucking upset whenever she’s around, I’m leaning towards not so good.”

End Waking smiled. It was slight, but he was pleased to see it all the same.

“Qoheleth, poor, stupid man that he was, had much that he was correct about, but one thing that he completely failed to

understand was growth," May Then My Name mused. "There is plenty of growth, here. That is perhaps the one thing we have more than memory, the one thing that protects us from too much memory. All that time may still drive us mad, but at least we have the ability to grow to the point where we are no longer True Name."

"A-fucking-men."

She laughed. "Right? Thank you two for talking, though. I know it is not really a pleasant topic, but it has helped me immensely."

Debarre squeezed her around the shoulders. "Of course, skunk."

"You feel so much more than I do," End Waking said. "So I cannot understand the ways in which you are torn. There is also much more than I think you are saying--"

"There is, yes. Sorry."

"--and so I cannot offer much in the way of advice, but I can welcome you to my forest and offer you company and a meal. Will you be staying for dinner?"

"Of course, my dear." She hesitated, then added, "True Name has joined us for dinner these last few days, and I would like a break."

"Are you opposed to an early dinner, Debarre?"

"'Course not. If you cook, May Then My Name and I can get the cot in the tent."

They broke from there. May Then My Name forking several times over to help him in repopulating the inside of the tent with the necessities while End Waking made venison cutlets and savory corn griddle cakes.

"There's still a lot we need to do in here, so we can't drag everything in yet," the weasel explained as they returned to where his boyfriend's goods were stored under a canvas tarp. "But getting a few essentials in here will help in meantime. Hopefully just a few more days and we'll be all set again. I think E.W. may kick me out at that point."

“So soon?”

“He called me back in the middle of a solitary spell, remember?”

She nodded. “Well, yes, but I had hoped that...well, I am sorry, Debarre. I imagine it must be difficult.”

“A little. I miss him when I’m gone, but I usually merge back down and get to focusing on whatever #Tracker is up to, then re-fork when he’s up to having me around again.”

“We are different in that respect, I guess. If Ioan requested six months of time away from me I think I would have a pretty rough time of it.”

He laughed and ruffled a paw over her ears. “I think you’d fucking explode. Thankfully, ey doesn’t seem like the type.”

She nodded gratefully. “Ey does not, no. I am just sorry that I was too heated to stick around and talk with em about this. Thank you again, Debarre. I needed to talk about it, just with someone who has an appropriate distance from the topic. I cannot overstate how terrifying what she said was.”

“Uh, of course, May Then My Name. Can you tell me any more about it?”

“Perhaps over dinner, my dear. I need food, and I need to talk to your boyfriend.”

Dinner, it turned out, was not long in coming. Well-seasoned deer and griddle cakes cooked in in the grease. “I have made them with too much salt just for you, May Then My Name,” he said with a polite bow.

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Much appreciated, my dear. It tastes almost like normal food.”

He made a rude gesture at her, but grinned all the same.

“So,” Debarre said between bites. “Anything else you can tell us about what True Name said?”

The other skunk stacked a bite of griddle cake on top of a bite of venison and chewed thoughtfully. At last, she sighed, saying, “I do not want to talk about too much of it. It is too close to the surface as yet and I will turn into a sobbing mess. Again, I mean.”

“Of course, no rush.”

“Right. Well, Jonas got her involved with something in the late 2130s. It was sort of a side...thing, very hush-hush but it still has taken up at least a small part of her attention ever since. It was all very low-level stuff — low enough that it flew beneath even her radar — and I guess after Launch, he dropped it all on her in a meeting similar to what he had promised for Secession day. All that time had turned into a lever to use against her, and I think that, whether she realizes it or not, relatively little has been done of her own accord since then.”

Debarre nodded, waiting for her to say more, to which she eventually shook her head. “I am sorry. I need at least a few days to be able to process it. I cannot even think about it without wanting to...I do not know. I want to quit and force a merge on her. I want you to force a merge on her,” she said, nodding to End Waking. “I want her to know something other than herself.”

The skunk sat up straighter. “So you hinted, yes. Why, though? Why would you want her to feel that resentment? Why do you think she would be able to internalize my penance? Why the fuck do you—”

“E.W.,” Debarre murmured. “Cool it.”

He tugged his hood down lower over his head and stayed silent for several minutes. “I am sorry, my dear. I did not mean to yell. It is just that I worked hard at getting where I am now, and if she is to feel any — *any* — remorse about what she has done with her life, I would like for her to come by it honestly, and if she does not, then I would like her to face the consequences of her actions.”

“I do at least understand that,” May Then My Name murmured. She had shied away from her cocladist at the force of his words, but the apology and explanation drew her back. “You do not need to answer now, or ever for that matter, but is it something you would at least consider?”

“Perhaps. I do not feel the need to engage with her as you seem to, but there is little enough engagement in merging

down. If I had not made my rejection of what she is a part of my identity, if I could let that go, then I would rescind my membership from the clade just to sever what ties of association remain.”

“Would you just be End Waking of no clade, then?”

“Perhaps I would just call myself E.W., my dear.”

Debarre grinned. “Excellent.”

“You two are disgusting,” May Then My Name said. “Please keep up the good work.”

“You’re one to talk, smartass. You and Ioan could make my teeth rot.”

“I have em well trained, do I not? Perhaps I will make em an honorary member of the clade in your stead.”

End Waking smirked. “Would he take my name, then?”

“No, we would have to give him a similarly Odist name. Some shitty line of poetry, a few nonsense words smashed together. Gentle Confusion or something.”

They laughed.

“Where I Am Overcome By Gentle Confusion of the Ode-Bălan clade,” Debarre said. “And I’d be something like Even Real Shitheads Know Their Dreams.”

May Then My Name flicked a crumb of griddle cake at him. “Good job on the first name, not so much on the second. I do not think it fits the tone very well, even if you are a bit of a shithead.”

“Confirmation at last,” End Waking said dreamily.

Having sent May Then My Name home with a few extra griddle cakes and run out of daylight, Debarre and End Waking gave up on any additional work for the day. The tent was livable, if incomplete, and a bit of a break felt nice, anyway. They sat beside each other before the fire and watched the flames, not speaking, simply enjoying the warmth and each others’ company.

At least, Debarre enjoyed the warmth and the feeling of his boyfriend beside him. He couldn't tell what End Waking was thinking or feeling. He'd not said a word since wishing his co-cladist goodbye and good luck.

"Thanks for letting me stay, E.W."

"Mm? Of course, my dear. I am glad for your help and your company."

He nodded. Silence fell again. End Waking put another log on the fire.

"I know that I am a less-than-ideal partner, Debarre. I do love you, I promise."

Here it comes. "Love you too, E.W. Want some space after we're done with the camp."

"Please," the skunk said after a long pause. "I do not like sending you away, but so much has happened this last week, these last few months..."

He scooted closer to End Waking and slipped an arm around his waist. It was probably more affection than the skunk would have preferred at the moment, but he needed at least something to go with that statement. End Waking seemed to realize this, as well, and although he didn't reciprocate the affection, he did at least relax against his side.

"What do you suppose they are doing on Artemis?" End Waking asked, staring at the fire rather than up to the stars.

"Hmm? My guess is that everyone's getting settled in by now. All those who went along with have probably dug homes or whatever they call it in the fifth race area, and some are probably getting pretty good at...uh, Nanon, was it?"

"Did Debarre#Castor go with?"

"No, actually. He still hasn't told me why, either. He's at least spent quite a bit of time in Convergence. Lots of visiting with Codrin and Dear. Have you heard from them?"

"Only when Dear writes clade-wide. It and I were never as close as we could have been, perhaps. It sounds happy, at least, and passes on good stories."

He laughed. “I can’t imagine anything but, honestly. Any news of the others?”

“Codrin sounds unhappy, and I cannot quite piece together why.”

“Really? Like, with eir new job?”

“Oh, no, ey still seems quite pleased with that from the text, but the subtext is that ey is displeased in some other, more fundamental way. I always get that sense when news includes the topic of Artemis.”

“What about Sorina, though? Doesn’t ey have connections through her.”

The skunk shrugged. “I do not know. These communications are simple family letters or those little quippy snippets that Dear is so fond of. Nothing in depth.”

Debarre hesitated, unsure of how to broach the question. *No way out but through*, ey thought, saying, “What about True Name#Castor? Anything from her?”

“Not you, too,” he said with a groan. “I cannot seem to escape her today, can I?”

“Sorry, E.W.”

He sighed. “No, it is okay. If that is what is happening, then that is what is happening, and we are bound to talk about it. One moment, then.”

There was a long silence from End Waking, then. Debarre imagined him trudging through exos, reading back through clade communiqués that his down-tree instance over on the LV had sent back.

“She remains herself,” he said at last. “I mean truly herself, not the bent and twisted True Name of Lagrange. Competent, confident, in complete control. She strives behind the scenes in both Convergence and the rest of Castor as she always has.”

“‘Bent and twisted’? I mean, she sounds like she’s having a rough time of late.”

“This is also subtext, my dear. The True Name of Lagrange no longer writes the same way as the True Name of the LVs.

True Name#Castor is as True Name was back before Launch, and True Name#Pollux has settled down with this Zacharias and sits on the Guiding Council, whatever that is. The one here is..." He frowned, visibly hunting for words. "She is no longer what she was. She is middle-management. She is overworked and under-appreciated. She continues on with her plans, to which I assume she still clings tight, but that comes with a sense of desperation that I cannot otherwise place. She is bent and twisted nearly to the point of fatigue, as when one bends a paperclip until it snaps."

"Is that why you think May Then My Name wants you to merge down?"

"To break her, you mean?"

Debarre nodded.

"Perhaps, yes. What that actually means to May Then My Name, I am not sure. Does she want to shock True Name into becoming whatever she considers a real person? Does she want to break her out of rigidity and make her more complete? Does she want her to move beyond whatever this unspeakable atrocity is through force alone? I do not know."

"Maybe just hurt her without killing her," he mumbled.

End Waking looked at him sharply, then subsided. "Also a possibility. Had you suggested that a decade ago, I would have been quite upset, because I do not think that who May Then My Name used to be could possibly have been so vengeful, but I am not sure that that is the case anymore."

"Is that such a bad thing, though?" Debarre frowned, hunting for his own words. "I mean, I love her, I think she's one of the best people I've ever met, but she was almost a caricature with how sweet she was. If she can be anything other than head-over-heels in love with everyone she meets, wouldn't that mean that she's more a more complete person, too?"

The skunk tensed and carefully scooted an inch or two away from Debarre, gently nudging the weasel's arm from around his waist.

“Shit, I’m sorry, E.W. I didn’t mean to offend.”

He laughed. A short, sharp bark of a laugh that was more bitter than amused. “Fuck you, Debarre. Fuck you and how right you are.”

Debarre blinked, nonplussed.

“You are right. It is terrible that she has to hate someone to be more complete, but you are right. However, my love,” he said, grinning humorlessly. “That means — that *must* mean — that the same holds true for me, caricature of penance that I am.”

He laid his ears flat, nodding. “Sorry, E.W.”

“I do not know what a more complete version of myself looks like. I do not know how to attain that. I have no up-tree instances who have lead earnestly happy lives to merge down and complement my fundamentally unhappy one. Perhaps that is why May Then My Name’s idea rankles. Should I merge down and True Name learn to repent, learn to become more whole, then she will have done so without the work of actually having done so. Should I become happier, then I must work further years.”

“I don’t know, is that true? I mean, yeah, she in her current form won’t have done the work of repenting. Her body won’t have been the one living out here in the middle of nowhere, but she’ll have...when did you last merge down?”

“I do not remember.”

Debarre squinted. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“I do not remember, Debarre,” End Waking said tiredly. “Sometime before the first centennial.”

He held up his paws. “Then she’ll have more than a century’s worth of work dumped on her, and she’ll be the one who has to process that and try to integrate it. Can you imagine how fucked that’d feel? Can you imagine what she’d become?”

“Do you think I should merge down?” End Waking growled.

“I don’t know, E.W. I really don’t. Let’s drop it, though, okay? I’m just gonna keep on hurting you if we keep this up, and I *really*

don't want that. I'm sorry."

The skunk sighed, nodded, and, after a moment, reached out and took Debarre's paw in his own. "I am sorry I got so worked up. I do need a break from the topic, though. Thank you, my love."

He smiled cautiously and gave that paw a little squeeze.

They sat in silence for the rest of the night, then, watching the fire burn low until the skunk put it out. They stripped down for bed and, for the first time in months, climbed into their cot within their tent — theirs at least until the need for solitude struck full force again. They shared their wordless intimacies and then curled together for sleep.

"You know that she will have memories of this, too, my love," End Waking murmured.

"Let her," he said, yawning. "You're more complete than you give yourself credit for. If the goal is for her to have some semblance of that, let her have them."

Ioan Bălan — 2350

With May out of the house and True Name doing...well, whatever it was that she did in her room by herself, Ioan was left emotionally and intellectually stalled out, stuck by emself in an empty den. Ey sat for a while on the couch, staring out into the slowly melting snow on the deck and ruminating. Then, giving in to the urge to pace, ey slipped on the boots ey kept for just such situations and slowly tramped a ring around the outer edge of the yard, first reveling in the crunch of the icy top layer of the snow, then the sweat ey worked up when, on the third lap, the snow began to drag at eir feet, and then finally the solidity of the uneven path ey'd worn down into the snow, a marker of energy spent.

The pacing gave em time and space. It let eir emotions spool out into nothingness while eir thoughts were left crunched beneath the treads of eir boots. Ey didn't know what ey thought about. Ey didn't know what ey felt. Ey just walked.

Ey knew that, at one point, ey wondered if eir command to mirror the back yard for True Name's room meant that it made a new back yard or whether it just mirrored the view out the window. If it were the latter, would she be watching em? Would she be wondering why ey walked? Would she scoff? Would she wish for a way to crush her own worries down into the ice?

And then the train of thought was gone, lost amid some whorl in the steam of eir breath.

An hour's walking gained em sore hips, a sweat-soaked shirt, and a well-trod trail around the outside of the yard.

"Fucking cold," ey grumbled, stomping the lingering snow off eir boots and the hems of eir slacks on the way up the stairs to the balcony. The boots were kicked off outside the door for the snow left on them while ey completed the journey inside. Ey could fork emself warm and dry, sure, but why do that when there was a perfectly good shower right there?

So, ey lingered under the hot water for fifteen minutes, and instead of whorls of breath, the crunch of ice, the nothingness of slate-gray skies, eir thoughts and emotions dribbled down eir face in rivulets of water, swirled once, twice, disappeared down the drain.

Dissociating, ey thought, laughed to no one.

Brushed eir hair. Stared, unseeing, at emself in the mirror for a bit. Dressed in clean clothes — sweater vest? Sweater vest — and wound up sitting on the couch again.

True Name peeked out of eir room and bowed to em from just outside her door. The sound of the door and the movement out of the corner of eir eye startled em awake. "Sorry, True Name. Everything okay?"

"Yes, thank you, Mx. Bălan." She smiled apologetically, such a strange look on her. "I am not the greatest of cooks, but would you like me to make dinner tonight? I do not believe May Then My Name will be joining us, and it is getting dark."

"Huh?" Ey whirled back around toward the picture windows and frowned. Sure enough, it was dimming into evening already. "Oh, well, sure, I guess. I'm sure whatever you make will be fine. Sorry I'm so spacey."

The skunk padded into the kitchen and waved the apology away with a paw. "You are fine, my dear. You are allowed to space out. It has been a dramatic few days, so I do not blame you. Can you please grant me ACLs enough to create ingredients?"

After a pause to will it so, ey nodded. "Sure, should be good now."

“Thank you.”

Ey felt strange staring out into the yard, the opposite direction of the kitchen, while True Name cooked, so ey grabbed a notebook moved to the dining table where, should ey be able to pull eir thoughts together, ey could write, and should ey not, ey could at least talk with True Name without twisting around in eir seat.

Ey could not, it turned out. Ey flopped the notebook shut again and rubbed at eir face. “What’re you cooking?”

“Chicken...rice...stuff. It is college food.”

Ey laughed. “Right, I’m familiar. Sounds good. Certainly cold enough out there for it.”

“Of course, yes. May Then My Name would have the same recipe, would she not?” The skunk clattered about for a few more minutes, and then, apparently satisfied, leaned back on the counter behind the stove. “I do not understand your affection for the weather, but I am happy to make warm things while it is about.”

“Hopeless romanticism, I guess,” ey mumbled. “But whatever. Are you feeling better?”

True Name shrugged, eyes locked in a glassy stare out the windows. “I do not know if better is the correct word. I feel lighter, perhaps, having said what I did to May Then My Name. Conflicted, as well, that I feel lighter and yet she feel the burden of knowledge heavy enough to need to step away. For that, I apologize.”

Ey nodded. “She sent me a few brief pings. She’s with End Waking and Debarre at the moment. No clue when she’ll be back.”

“I am pleased to hear that she is safe.”

“Now that you’ve had some space from it, can you tell me any more about what you told her that set her off?”

“I am not ready to get deep into it, Ioan, I hope you understand.”

“Of course. I’m just worried. I guess. Did it have to do with her specifically?”

She didn’t respond. The skunk’s gaze never wavered. Her posture remained relaxed and comfortable, and for that, ey felt all the more anxious.

“Well, maybe you can tell me what spurred the conversation?”

“Right, yes,” she said, deflating somewhat with a sigh. “What do you believe, Ioan?”

“Excuse me?”

“What do you believe? You strike me as irreligious, but surely you believe in something. The sanctity of life? Love? Art?”

Ey sat up straighter, frowning at the skunk. “That’s a surprisingly difficult question to answer.”

“It is not at all surprising. It is easy to provide a noun and say that one believes in that. The irreversibility of time, perhaps? Your cocladist and Dear spoke to that in the *History*.”

The conversation was taking a decidedly Odist turn. Coming at the topic sideways, grand statements that came tinged with a sense of awe. They all seemed prone to falling into the style of speaking, and ey fell for it every time. “Mmhm. Several times.”

“But what does it mean to believe in something like that? Or the sanctity of life or love or art? Or God, for that matter? ‘Belief’ as a word is a stand-in for a concept so broad as to be to be intimidating. One may say as Blake did, “For everything that lives is holy”, but encompassing that within one’s mind is truly terrifying.” She finally broke her thousand-yard stare out the window and smiled faintly to em. “Still, I believe in what I did, Ioan. Really, *truly* believe. I feel called. I feel led. I am good at it. I wake up thinking about it, spend my day working with it, and fall asleep thinking about it yet more. We have an existence which is fundamentally different from that of phys-side, and I cannot put into words how much I love that. It is more than a want, I have a need so integral to my being for it to continue

that I would not be True Name without it, and I love being True Name.”

“But now...”

“Yes, ‘but now’. But now I am stuck in an impossible limbo built by Jonas. My entire existence these last two hundred years has been defined by a belief that I thought Jonas and I shared, and in a few minutes, he tore it to the ground, burnt the pieces to ash, and then ground the ash beneath his heel.” She laughed and shook her head. “So melodramatic, is it not? But that is how it feels to have one’s belief turned hollow and stale.”

“Do you overflow?”

The skunk had lifted the lid of the pot of rice to stir. If it was anything at all how May cooked it, it was a stiff rice porridge made with chicken stock and cheese stirred in at the last minute — ‘poor skunk’s risotto’, she called it. She seemed keen to use her time cooking to think, so ey waited in silence.

“I do. More frequently and in much shorter bursts,” she said, finally. “Every few days, I will walk sims and I will get lost. Well and truly lost. Dear loses control of its tightly directed energy, May Then My Name loses control of that wellspring of love within her, and I lose control of my sense of control.”

“Every few days? Is that because you’re stretched so thin with all your forks?”

She shook her head and, deeming the rice to be done, slid it off the heat. “I started walking in 2124, my dear. A few years before May Then My Name was forked, back when it cost too much to be so cavalier with forking.”

Ey nodded. “Were you overflowing earlier today?”

She chopped the sauteed chicken breasts she’d made into strips, focusing on the task, then on plating up the food, before responding. “Perhaps, Ioan. Perhaps.”

They ate in silence, then. It was interesting picking apart the way the two skunks’ recipes had diverged over the years. True Name’s was spicier, May’s more savory and with more vegetables.

They made it most of the way through the meal before they were alerted to May's arrival by the sim's sensorium ping.

Ioan set down eir fork and slid out of eir chair to greet her as she stepped out of the entryway. Ey was pleased to see her face washed of tears and expression washed of distress. She looked tired, to be sure, but no longer ready to murder someone.

"I brought gifts, my dear. I do not know if—" She paused as she caught sight of True Name.

The other skunk had also stood and was bowing deeply to her up-tree instance. "May Then My Name, I apolog-*hrk!*"

May had shoved the waxed cotton-wrapped parcel into Ioan's hands and bounded over to True Name, shoving her out of her bow in order to get her arms around her for an awkward hug. "That is for what happened," she said, then socked her in the shoulder. "And that is for how you told me."

True Name stumbled back from the greeting, blinking rapidly and rubbing at her arm. She looked as baffled as ey felt. Watching May interact with True Name these last few days had been something of a roller coaster, whether it was to the abject fury ey saw within her whenever the topic of her goals came up or the strange protectiveness that had led her to offer their home to her cocladist. Those were stressful enough; this was overwhelming.

Ey made eir way back to the table slid the packet onto it, and fell heavily into eir chair. "What just happened?"

Eir partner laughed and dotted her nose against eir cheek before settling down into her usual chair. "I am sorry that that was weird, and I am sorry that I ran away earlier. I was able to get a lot off my chest, and I feel much better for it. Oh, you did eat. That is okay, I did too, but I think these will make good dessert."

Something about May's nearly manic voice and the tension in her cheeks showed something deeper going on beneath the surface, but given her chatter and the still-shocked look on True Name's face, this didn't seem to be the time.

“May Then My Name, I know that I–”

“If you talk about earlier, I will hire Guōwēi myself,” May interrupted mildly. “I promise that there will be time to talk about it soon, my dear, but for now, I need something else, alright?”

“Of course,” True Name said, frowning. “In that case, what is in the package?”

“End Waking made these...corn...pancake things. Fritter cakes? Something like that. They were savory, but they might go well with honey as a sort of dessert. There are only two, but we can split them.”

Ioan and True Name exchanged a glance, then watched as May unwrapped the griddle cakes and swiped a pot of honey into being beside them. She broke off a piece, drizzled honey on it, and ate it.

“Well?” ey asked.

“It is fine. I do not know that it is a dessert. Have you ever had chicken and waffles, my dear?”

Ey shook eir head, reaching for a piece of the (slightly soggy) cake and the pot of honey.

“It is not that, but it reminds me of it. Savory and meaty but also sweet and bready.”

Ey frowned as ey chewed on the morsel. Ey could see it being truly delicious if it had not been cooked in venison grease specifically. The gaminess made it a strange mix.

“Good, but not great,” was True Name’s assessment, to which May nodded vigorously.

They finished the griddle cakes all the same, keeping up the banal chatter. It felt good, ey realized, to talk about nothing. Day after day of serious talks had worn on em more than ey realized, and ey made a silent note to thank May later for forcing them into something more pleasant. The greeting she’d given True Name was weird, but it definitely broke the suspense that had dogged them all week.

After dinner, ey cleaned up the dishes while True Name went back to her room and May settled onto her beanbag, get-

ting a thoughtful look on her face that usually meant she was working mentally.

Once ey was finished, ey settled down beside the skunk, letting her squirm in next to em and get an arm around eir middle. Ey blinked a cone of silence into being over them. "It's good to have you back," ey said, hugging an arm around her shoulders. "What was that all about?"

She snagged eir free hand and put it atop her head. A clearer demand for pets there was not. "Mm? You mean me being a chipper ditz?"

Ey laughed, stroking over her ears. "Well, I was going to ask about the hug, mostly. My guess about you being chipper was to get us to finally talk about something light rather than yet more intense or depressing stuff."

"You are right on that one, yes," she mumbled. "We doubtless have more heavy shit to talk about, but I spent hours crying today, and if we did not break out of that cycle, I would have spent yet more in tears."

"I won't bring it up, then."

"Good." She poked em in the belly, then went back to her hug. "Though as to the greeting, I mean it when I said I got a lot off of my chest. I spent a lot of time thinking and a lot of time talking to End Waking and Debarre, and I have some ideas for moving forward."

"Oh?"

She shook her head beneath eir hand and tightened her grip around em. "I do not want to discuss them now, my dear. I am tired and cried out and you are comfortable and good to me."

"That's my job, yeah," ey said, combing fingers through fur. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, then."

"Mmhm. Dote on skunks time."

The next few days passed in relative peace. There were no fights between the two skunks, and while, at least once a day,

they set up a cone of silence to talk about whatever it was that True Name had discussed that first time, there were no more instances of May falling apart or True Name wearing herself out quite so bad. The discussions sounded serious, and never quite friendly, but ey was at least somewhat happy to see the two co-cladists talking without quite so much ire between them.

May wasn't the only one, either. At one point, Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself and one of her up-tree instances, Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress visited to talk with the skunk. Both were far more earnest in their affection to her, which ey supposed made sense, given A Finger Pointing's habit of making friends with everyone she could.

Ey'd only met Slow Hours once prior and, while she was just as friendly as her down-tree instance, she also seemed somewhat removed from the world as a whole, as though seeing just a little more than everyone around her. "Clairvoyance," A Finger Pointing had whispered to em after that meeting. "She has the outline of the world."

They'd talked for nearly three hours that afternoon, breaking only to get more water part way through. When they were finished, True Name looked wrung out, though not unhappy. A Finger Pointing mostly looked confused and concerned while Slow Hours kept that faraway, nearly manic air about her.

Curiouser and curiouser. Ey'd always pictured A Finger Pointing's stanza as one of the more liberal ones, and had early on noticed that the liberal Odists had largely distanced themselves from the more conservative ones.

To have two of them specifically drop by to visit True Name was quite unnerving.

The most curious thing, though, had to be May.

It wasn't just that all the work she'd put into her feelings about her cocladist had seemingly paid off — other than a few tense moments, mostly silent, she was at worst quiet and at best willing to hold conversations with True Name about a limited set of topics — but that even in those tensest moments, she

seemed to at least want to do something. Whether it was out of an earnest desire to improve the skunk's life or to simply get this situation over with seemed to vary depending on her mood.

It was her discussion with End Waking that really knocked em off-kilter, though.

"Are you sure that's even a good idea?" ey asked when she explained the idea. "I mean, won't that just make her feel worse if she also has to deal with all of that regret?"

May fiddled with the corner of the top sheet. They'd sat up in bed, the topic not feeling quite right for pillow-talk. "Possibly, yes. I do not think that it would be permanently detrimental. If she has a fuller view of the world, perhaps she will be better able to engage with it with empathy."

"Right, I can see that. I'm pretty sure I agree, too, so long as it's consensual between the two of them. I just worry that now's not a good time for it. If she's distracted processing all that when she's supposed to be thinking about what to do about Jonas, won't that put her at a disadvantage?"

"I suppose," she mumbled, then smiled lopsidedly to em. "But we have time, yes? Jonas said within the year, and I imagine it will take us at least a month to convince End Waking to join as requested."

Ey sighed. "I don't know if that's necessarily reason to do it so soon, though. You're right that we should take our time with the meeting and plan as best we can. I just worry about her going in there already something of a mess when she needs to be in the best shape she can be."

"You are right, as always," she grumbled, slumping forward to use eir thigh as a pillow. "Thank you, my dear, for keeping me grounded."

Ey stroked over the skunk's head, toying with one of her ears until she batted at eir hand. "I know I say it a lot, but you're a good person, May. So is End Waking, too. I think True Name having some of that will only help."

"Do you think she is a good person?"

“Mmhm.”

“You answer so quickly, my dear. Is it that uncomplicated for you?”

Ey thought for a moment, still combing fingers through the longer fur on top of the skunk’s head. “I suppose. I’m not sure why, though. She’s complicated, and I disagree with her reasoning for a lot of what she’s done, but I don’t think that makes her a bad person.”

May nodded.

They stayed quiet until they worked their way under the covers again, cozying up for sleep, when May murmured, “I have to believe that she is a good person, or at least capable of being one. For my sake, I have to at least try to believe that.”

Ey kissed the back of her ears and shushed her to sleep.

What kept coming back again and again was the feeling of just how small this project — if ey’d been assigned to it as amanuensis, might as well call it what it was — felt. There were so few people involved. True Name and Jonas, then em and May on the periphery. Four people, three clades. It was intimate, in that way. True Name and Jonas were larger-than-life people most of the time, but, having been forced into sharing space with her, ey was far more willing to see her as a person in over her head and Jonas as a power-hungry asshole, and emself as caught in the middle as Codrin#Castor had felt almost four years back.

The next morning saw both of the skunks more relaxed than ey’d seen them yet. They talked pleasantly over coffee, and True Name even stuck around, sitting on the couch and watching the snow melt off the balcony while May and Ioan worked, her on her monologue and em reading back through the volume of *An Expanded History of Our World* that focused on the Council of Eight and the Odist and Jonas clades in the centuries after their dissolution.

After lunch, True Name returned to the couch with a glass of water and, after a moment’s hesitation, May had joined her.

“Why are you spending today out here?” the skunk asked, finally voicing a question ey’d kept to emself until now.

“Honest answer or pithy one?”

“Both?”

True Name laughed. “The pithy one is that I am bored and lonely, and this seems to be my best bet at solving either. The honest answer is that I am bored and lonely and, even if the circumstances are not ideal, I want to at least try not to mope in my room all day.”

“You’ve said you spend most of your time working interacting with your instances, yeah,” Ioan said. “I imagine it’s been pretty quiet.”

“Yes. My instances, some up-tree cocladists, instances of Jonas, those of my...friends.” The last word sounded almost bashful for reasons ey couldn’t place. She shrugged and continued, “And now I am without all of those. No instances, none of my up-tree cocladists are responding, I do not want to speak with Jonas for obvious reasons, and the relationships I have with my friends are all bound up in that.”

May nodded. “I do not know if we are the ideal company for you, given our interests, but at least we can try, I suppose.”

“For which I am endlessly appreciative,” True Name nodded. “Though I do still miss routine. Good company and productive company do not necessarily overlap.”

“‘Productive company’?” May frowned.

“You are very nice to be around. Both of you. It is productive for my mental health, perhaps, and nice to be able to rest, but it is not what I do, May Then My Name. This is not who I am. I am not one to crash at her friends’ place, however pleasant they may be.”

Ioan could feel an argument brewing. What True Name was saying very likely was true: this wasn’t who she was as a person, and now she had been knocked into some new setting. Ey suspected May knew that, even, as ey could see the skunk working on keeping an open expression, despite her cocladist’s indeli-

cate wording. Still, there was a thin line to be crossed, and they were edging closer.

“Well, it’s better than being assassinated, right?” ey said, trying to lighten the mood.

May grinned. True Name did not.

“Sorry, probably still a bit too soon.”

“Perhaps. I would rather be alive here than not alive at all, but it is not an ideal situation for any of us, I think, yes?”

May averted her gaze, but nodded all the same.

“My apologies, you two,” True Name said with a hint of a bow. As she continued, though her words came faster, hotter, more frustrated. “I am restless and anxious. I do not want to meet with Jonas. I do not want to stay in hiding. I do not want to go back to being overworked, but I am unhappy having no work. Call it addiction, if you will, but I am nothing if I am not True Name. And why should I not be? I have worked hard to become myself. That I am what I am and unrepentant of that is perhaps a disappointment to many, but it means more to me to stick to what I believe to be true than to—”

“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 high priority merge at bay without either remembering or forgetting it, True Name gasped. “May... May Then... Why...”

Eir partner's expression softened, heading towards earnest, pleading. "Please, my dear. I think you need this. I think we *all* need this, if we are to move forward, if you are to be able to move past what Jonas wants of you. Please accept. Please."

The skunk nodded shakily, attempted a dry swallow, and then let 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, 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 down at her.

"Fuck," eir partner murmured.

"What just happened?"

"One moment," 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. She lingered, then, whispering a few questions ey could not hear to the skunk, though there was still no response.

After lingering a moment longer, she stood shakily, 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. We have been discussing it for days, now. 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. “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’ve 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 can resent others.”

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. “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, wiping at her face, though it did little to help her disheveled look. “Let us get back in and check on her, then. We may want to get her into bed. Being comfortable can make it easier.”

“True Name?” ey murmured once ey’d beside the skunk. “Can you make it to your room?”

Her eyes remained closed, flicking about beneath her eyelids. There was the tiniest shake of her head.

Ey looked to May, who only watched anxiously, wringing her paws.

Oh well, ey’d lifted eir partner on more than one occasion, ey supposed this wouldn’t be too different. Ey slipped eir arms beneath the skunk, though she remained limp. Through a bit of shifting, ey was eventually able to get her leaned against eir chest, head on eir shoulder rather than lolling back, with enough leverage to be able to lift her. She was lighter, but when ey lifted May, she usually got her arms around eir shoulders, too.

Ey was able to get her into bed easily enough, May holding the covers back while ey did so and then draping them back over her after.

It was eir turn to stand awkwardly by while May sat beside True Name and brushed a paw over her head. “I am sorry, my dear, I thought...” she started, then sighed. “I will sit with you. I am sorry.”

Ioan backed slowly out of the room, sliding the door shut

quietly behind em. May had sounded on the verge of tears once more, but, of all the things ey was not supposed to fix, perhaps least able to fix, this certainly felt like the top of the list.

Part III

Apprehension

Ioan Bălan — 2350

It took about six hours for True Name to recover from the merge to where she could stand up and walk well enough to get a glass of water, though her expression remained shell-shocked and she was unable to speak. It wasn't until the next morning that the skunk was able to hold a conversation, though she remained quiet and largely confined to her room, refusing the offer of coffee.

May spent nearly half of that time by her side. Ey wasn't sure what it was that the two did while in her room, if it was just May sitting by the skunk's side, if she was just being present, if the two were having their own quiet conversations, or sharing what affection she was comfortable sharing with a down-tree instance she resented enough to shock.

All three, ey suspected. Ey checked in on them a few times, knocking and listening for permission to enter. Each time, True Name remained curled in bed with May sat nearby, whether on a chair beside it or sitting up on the bed itself. Ey'd ask if they needed anything, they'd both decline, and then ey'd go back to pacing holes in the rug or the yard or around Arrowhead Lake.

The rest of the time, May was out with em, almost always as close as she could be, whether that was tucked in against eir side, hugging around eir middle from behind while ey cooked, or, at one point, requesting em to sit on the floor outside the bathroom while she showered, just so that she could talk and,

in her words, feel eir presence.

The mood throughout remained somewhere between anxiety and regret.

The next evening, True Name requested that they eat dinner out at the lake rather than at home, saying, “I am feeling too cooped up by walls and yet more walls.”

Ey supposed it made sense, if she now had the competing memories of End Waking and however many personality traits that came with. He had only visited Ioan and May a scant handful of times, seeming uncomfortable whenever they remained indoors.

So, they packed up a simple dinner of sausages, zucchini, and potatoes to cook and stepped out to the lake.

The tents were still set up and the second bundle of firewood remained untouched, leaning against one of them, so Ioan and May watched as True Name tiredly built and lit the fire. She left May and Ioan sitting on one of the logs before it, watching the flames go from fast and loud to something quieter and hotter, while she disappeared up the hill into the forest. She returned some time later with a bundle of arm-length sticks, all nearly as straight as dowels, which she built into a spit on which they could roast the sausages while the potatoes baked near the coals of the fire. It was all done with a practiced ease from hundreds of years of memory.

The food was pleasantly smokey and well cooked, though otherwise unseasoned. True Name remarked on this part way through the meal, saying, “If you call the food bland again, May Then My Name, I will call you lame again.”

The humor felt out of place, and certainly went over Ioan’s head, but at least it got May smiling again, something she’d not done in more than a day.

“I am pleased that you made it through, my dear,” May said. “I will not apologize again, I have done so enough already, but I am pleased all the same.”

“I have grown weary of being apologized to, yes,” she

replied. "And my feelings on the events remain complicated, but I thank you for thinking of me."

"I am, too," Ioan added, unwilling to let the dinner once more fall into silence. "How are you feeling otherwise?"

She shrugged. "Uncomfortable. Fractured. I have spoken to End Waking only a few times since he requested revocation of his access to our secure materials. I knew that he was upset, but not just how, and not to what extent." She sighed, then added, "And now I am left with that."

"Thus 'fractured'?"

"Yes. I must admit that much of my time spent while down and out was spent struggling to maintain a sense of myself as True Name. Had I simply accepted everything at face value and incautiously, I think I would have gone mad. As it is, I feel perilously close."

May sniffled and looked off toward the lake in the deepening evening.

"I understand what you were trying to do, May Then My Name. I understand why you planned that, how you managed to talk us both into it, and what you hoped to get out of it, but you must understand that what you two did was set two existences within me. One was set on goals that I believed in — *still* believe in — while the other regrets everything that made me me." The skunk's voice sounded far more tired than angry, enough to keep May from winding up in tears again, though she did set her food aside. "I do not think that End Waking believed in anything. His life was spent un-believing that which he was, which we were."

"What does that leave you, now?"

"I do not know yet, Ioan. It makes me too full of being, of time to be just one thing. It will likely take me several days to settle into...something. To settle into myself, whatever that means."

They fell into silence again while Ioan and True Name finished their food and May looked down at her paws or into the

fire.

“Thank you for joining me out here. I am both glad to be outdoors and intensely uncomfortable sitting on a fucking log,” she said, smiling tiredly. “I do not think that I will stay out here, though. The greater part of me demands a comfortable bed.”

“Those fucking cots are the worst,” May grumbled, sounding forced in her casualness. “Like a hammock, but bad.”

“I do not think that even End Waking enjoys them, so it is easy enough for the True Name part of me to win out on that subject.”

“What did he- what do you remember enjoying?” Ioan asked. “I want to hear the good things you have, now, too. I feel like we’re all tiptoeing around all the bad memories and conflicting feelings. Tell me something good.”

True Name raised her eyebrows, then let her gaze drift up to the stars. “I remember teaching myself to hunt, promising myself that I would start small with snares and then work up from there, thinking that I would not let myself eat until I could eat food that I had caught myself. I remember getting so hungry and weak by the third day that I pinged Serene to see if she could help. She laughed and ruffled my fur and called me a dumbass, saying that she had not included fauna because I had not requested it, so of course I did not catch anything. She brought me a hamburger and I ate it so fast I got sick.”

Ioan and May laughed.

“I remember each time I decided to cave and bring into the sim something new. I remember deciding that I needed a more efficient way to heat my tent than just relying on my fur and camp blankets, and then creating the stove. I remember getting so sick of just meat and what few vegetables I could grow at the time and deciding that I would need something like bread or tack. I remember learning about how hard it was to actually carve a bow and work with metal to create knives and axes, and I remember how it felt to bring each one into existence, a little bit of failure that was also a little bit of triumph.

“I remember the eighth or ninth winter out there, when the cold started to feel less terrifying because I knew what to do. I remember waking up one morning fucking freezing, building the fire back up, and shivering in front of it, then laughing for the sheer joy of it. The joy of bundling up, the joy of the air burning inside my nostrils, the joy of discomfort.”

Ioan listened, entranced. The cadence of her speech had changed slightly. It still had that well-spoken and dramatic air to it, still held the lack of contractions and all the doublings-back and anaphora that seemed to come with being an Odist, but it was also more austere than it had been. Less purely functional and more cerebral, perhaps.

“I remember the first time I went a year without seeing anyone, then the first time I went five years without seeing anyone. That was terrifying. I was sure that I was losing my grip on reality. I decided to make sure that I talked to someone at least once every six months after that to keep myself grounded. I remember when the Artemisians arrived and you two brought your play over, and being utterly delighted at all of the subtle ways you found to insult each other.”

May grinned and elbowed em in the side. “That one was Ioan’s fault.”

True Name smiled and nodded. “You should be pleased with it, my dear. Oh, and I remember tasting whiskey for the first time in years and being surprised at how much it burned. A Finger Pointing’s offer to bring a case over was quite tempting. It reminded me that I love the surprise that comes with forgetting things, or at least as close as we can get. The taste of liquor had fallen way back in my mind, and the feeling of the burn of whiskey sent it rocketing right back up to the top.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Ioan said, smiling.

“It is not all unpleasant, not by a long shot. As much as I worked to keep my sense of self while integrating, I was also struck by wonder, and for that, I am grateful.”

“Was the merge a net-positive thing?”

She laughed. "I cannot possibly know that, Ioan. I suspect there is no net value, or indeed any value, to be placed on simply having those memories. It will make my life harder or it will not, but I do not think it will make it better or worse. I will be what I am to become."

Ey nodded.

"But, May Then My Name?"

The skunk looked nervously at her cocladist, as though worried of some reprisal. "Yes?"

"Thank you for thinking of me."

May only nodded, swallowing back tears.

"I remember a few days ago, too. I remember when you came to the forest, remember watching, awkwardly, while you cried on Debarre's shoulder after I told you about...well, after we spoke. I remember hearing about all of your hatred over the years, about the resentment that you still have for me. I remember all of it."

There was no more holding back the tears, at that, though she did her best to cry silently.

True Name smiled more kindly than she had yet that night. "But you still thought of me." "I do not want her to die," you said. You said that you do not know why you still care about me, and you said so to your cocladist perhaps not yet knowing that I would have that memory as well. You two are both meddlesome brats, but thank you for thinking of me."

May tucked closer against Ioan's side and buried her face in eir shirt to cry, making a rude gesture at her down-tree instance before hugging her arms around eir waist.

"I think that means 'no problem'," ey said. "But I don't speak skunk all that- ow! She bit me!"

The other skunk laughed. "It is no less than you deserve, I am sure. But come, once you are able to, let us walk to the rock at the end of the lake. I want to see the stars before we head back."

What levity the night had gained slowly faded when they returned home. True Name explained that she had barely slept the night previous and needed to do so urgently, and as soon as the door shut behind her, May's shoulders sagged and she dragged em off to the bedroom. It was still early for them to be going to sleep, but ey realized ey was plenty tired enough.

They settled into bed, not talking, just resting forehead-to-forehead while Ioan pet through May's soft fur. There didn't seem to be anything that either of them needed to say, or if there was, not yet something they could.

Eventually, though, they shifted to their usual spots, May tucked back against Ioan's front, and slept straight through until morning.

Ey woke to the quiet sounds of True Name rustling around in the kitchen, mugs being pulled down from the shelves. Ey grumbled, wondering why she hadn't thought to set up a cone of silence, then realized she'd almost certainly left it off intentionally as a subtle way to let them know that she was up. With her memories from End Waking, she almost certainly could be quieter than she was.

Ey carefully slid out of bed, tucking the covers back over May to let her continue to doze.

"Good morning," True Name said quietly, bowing to em and holding out a mug of coffee. "Black, yes?"

"Morning," ey said, accepting the coffee with a nod of thanks. "Caught up on sleep?"

She shrugged. "A little, perhaps. Unnerving dreams, unnerving memories coming to the fore."

"Hopefully that lessens over time."

"It should, yes. It is already less overwhelming than it was yesterday afternoon." She shook her head. "But I am sure you are tired of that topic after the last few days. How about you, my dear? Did you sleep well?"

“Well enough, I guess. I certainly needed it.”

“Coffee,” May mumbled, stumbling out of the bedroom, looking disheveled. “You did not bring me coffee.”

Ioan snorted and shook his head. “I just got up, too, May. I’ve barely had a sip, myself.”

“No excuses, only coffee.”

“It is on the counter, May. Then My Name. I promise I did not leave you out.”

The skunk mumbled her thanks and retrieved her mug, lapping groggily.

As if on some hidden signal, they moved to the dining table to drink their coffees, all apparently too tired to do much else.

It was True Name who finally broke the silence, speaking quietly, more down to her coffee than anything. “I find myself caught off-guard by the sudden ending of the merge. I have never experienced that with any other merger. Perhaps it is down to individuation.”

“How do you mean?”

“I remember going to sleep, here, but I also remember going to sleep with Debarre in my arms. I remember waking up with him, working with him through the day, even while I remember us talking to each other, and then I remember your message, May, and then everything stops.”

May’s ears flicked back and she ducked her snout, looking abashed. “I did not think of that. I am sorry. I will apologize to them as well.”

True Name lifted her gaze and smiled faintly to May. “I do not think you need to worry too much, my dear. We— they discussed it a few nights ago. It was something as a shock to be used to sleeping alone and also to not have someone in bed with me.

“I think May would explode without someone in bed with her,” Ioan said, hoping to keep the mood light.

“It is not *not* true. I do not sleep well alone.”

“I have not experienced a relationship as True Name in...some years. Even then we slept in separate beds.”

May's grip on her coffee mug tightened and she slouched down further in her seat.

"I didn't know you were in a relationship," Ioan said. "Did you, uh...well, I mean, is that what you two talked about a few days back?"

Both skunks nodded.

"I don't mean to pry," ey added. "Sorry if it's too personal."

After a long silence, True Name sighed. "No, I think you will eventually learn about it anyway." When May's ears flattened, she hastened to add, "At least in part."

Ey stayed quiet. Ey wasn't sure how much to push or back off, whether or not there was some boundary ey should be aware of. It seemed more complex than simply keeping the relationship secret.

"I met a young fox some centuries back." The skunk spoke slowly and carefully. "Red fox, that is, rather than a fennec like Dear. Furries tend to clump together, and I suppose I am no exception. We quickly became friends, then trusted confidants, and then occasional lovers. I did not let us become more than that. There was romance between us, but I was not comfortable becoming romantically entangled in my position."

"That makes sense, I suppose. I don't know why I thought that wouldn't be case, actually."

"I have said in the past that you — that all of those in the clade who have formed lasting romantic relationships — have done something I was never able to," she said. "That remains true. Zacharias and I never quite rose to the level of relationship. Lovers, yes, and perhaps even in love, but never partners. It was always in private, always alone. I had an image to maintain, and that did not include having a boyfriend."

"Did you want one?"

"Pardon?"

Realizing the sensitive nature of the question, ey held up eir hands. "Sorry, I asked that without thinking. I was wondering if you wanted a partner, even if you felt your image wouldn't

allow that.”

Another long silence followed before she spoke again. “Had you asked me that prior to the merge, I do not think I would have been comfortable answering, but in the context of the memories I now share of Debarre, I think that has changed into a solid ‘I do not know’. I do not know if I wanted a partner, because it was more important for me to think about maintaining my image than it was for me to think about love, on some subconscious level.”

Ey finished eir coffee and toyed with the empty mug, rotating it first this way and then that on the table while ey thought. Eventually, the two skunks fell into quiet, polite conversation, talking about something ey was too distracted to care about.

They both agreed to more coffee, so ey tasked emself with making another pot, hoping that breaking out of the context would give em more room to think.

That True Name felt such a strong need to maintain her image was more than a little alien to em. However, when it came to her not knowing whether or not she wanted a partner, ey felt an almost unnerving level of concordance with eir own life prior to meeting the Odists, and perhaps even prior to meeting May. Ey did not have an image to maintain, simply a lack of social awareness that kept em from remembering that having a partner was even a thing that ey could do. Ey and True Name always seemed to have something that kept them from thinking about love until something — May for em and this merge (or perhaps even this conversation) for True Name — suddenly forced the issue.

Ey didn’t know what part of em was in charge of making such predictions, but the thought that May might try to merge down with True Name forced itself into eir mind and wedged firmly in place. Ey couldn’t think of why, what reason eir partner might even have to do so. A need to force her to experience her own resentment? Or to feel that desire? A desire to help her become a better person? A fit of pique?

It made no sense, and yet this sudden image of True Name as the type of person who might have a relationship, who now had decades of memories of dating Debarre in the form of End Waking seemed to have set off a runaway train of thought.

“Ioan?”

Ey started out of eir rumination. “Mm? Sorry. Was I mumbling?”

May grinned. “A little, but also you have been standing there for quite a while and you promised us coffee.”

“Oh! Shit, I’m sorry.” Ey laughed as best ey could to banish any look of the panic ey felt from eir face. Ey brought the pot of coffee over to the table along with the cream and sugar for May and True Name so that they could top up their mugs accordingly.

Ey drifted in and out of the present moment after that, surfacing now and then to do a bit of work or, at one point, to run another sweep of the house at the behest of True Name, in case she’d brought any hitchhikers with her. She hadn’t, but it was probably a good idea all the same.

The relatively pleasant morning fell again into a vague sense of tension within the house. Ey was sure that ey was the cause of at least a part of it, what with the way May kept checking in on em.

The rest seemed to fall back to True Name, though, who, after coffee, had sagged in her chair and mentioned that she’d been holding some demanding memories at bay. “I need to deal deal with these or I am sure I will unwind like Michelle,” she had mumbled on the way to her room, leading May to put down her work and curl up on the beanbag.

Ey joined her, despite all of the distractions whirling around in eir head. Ey couldn’t sort any of them out now, but the least ey could do was comfort eir partner.

All that crying these last few days, I wouldn’t be surprised if she overflows soon, ey thought while petting over her ears. And who knows how that’ll work with True Name.

A simple dinner of pasta was shared with more polite conversation, and then they broke off to their own spaces again, True Name requesting the location tag for Arrowhead Lake so that she could go for a walk “somewhere with fewer right-angles”.

It wasn't until they were getting ready for bed that ey pulled eir thoughts together into a coherent enough form to ask May the question that had been nagging at em all day.

“Do you think you'll merge down, May?”

The skunk paused in the middle of tugging off her shirt, leaving just her snout-tip and midriff exposed. “Let me think on that for a moment, please.”

They both finished undressing and climbed into bed, em settling back and her with her head on eir chest.

“Okay. Now. Why do you ask, my dear?”

“I'm not actually sure. Maybe a little because you had a hand in End Waking merging down, but I think mostly the talk this morning about Debarre and, uh...Zacharias, was it?”

She nodded.

“I think that made me think of it because until this point, it's all been happening at one layer of remove for me. She's my friend and I like her as such, but she's not my cocladist or coworker. I'm not in a relationship with her. None of this has been happening with her as someone I'm super close to.”

“But if I merge down, she will remember having been in a relationship with you.”

“Yeah.”

They lay in silence for a bit. Ey didn't know what May was thinking about, but ey kept cycling over just how much ey and eir partner had shared over the last few months alone, all those little bits of affection and physicality when True Name had expressed on more than one occasion that such simply wasn't for her, all the private conversations they'd shared with the understanding that they'd remain such.

“I will admit that I have been thinking about it,” she said,

then lifted her snout to dot her nose on the underside eir chin. “But after the last few days and coming to terms with what that would actually mean for her, I am feeling much more cautious about the prospect.”

“Okay,” ey said carefully, not wanting to jostle her snout too much. “Can we make sure to talk about it more if you do decide to?”

“Of course, my dear. You and I never shut up.”

“Mmhm, best that way,” ey murmured, then added more seriously, “I mean the three of us, though.”

“We will, Ioan. It would be unfair to all of us not to.” May lowered her snout again and tightened her grip around eir middle. “Do you want me not to? You are allowed to say yes.”

Ey sighed and placed a kiss atop her head. “I don’t know, May. I need way more time to think on it.”

She nodded. “I will give you all the time in the world.”

“Thanks, May.”

They settled in for sleep, letting the topic drop and trusting that there would be time enough to discuss it, just focusing on closeness and comfort.

“Ioan?”

“Mm?” Ey’d nearly dozed off, and sleep was still tugging at em.

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“Course I do. I love you too, May.”

That, at least, was a pleasant note to fall asleep to, one made for pleasant dreams.

While True Name continued to integrate the merge more and more fully — or, as she put it, became more whatever her new self was meant to be — and she spent less time taken by long silences or the need to go lay down in the quiet for some lingering conflict, her mood nonetheless continued to decline. Those moments of easy conversation came further and further

apart, and while the skunk remained as polite as could be, she also bowed out of nearly every topic other than the food, the weather, only the most surface-level details of how she was feeling. *I am not comfortable talking about that*, now became her constant refrain.

While neither Ioan nor May were necessarily happy for this change, the fact that it meant that they *had* to stop talking about all these dire topics. It forced them to take a step back, as well, and at least try to get some work done. Given all that had happened, no one was comfortable with them continuing to perform, least of all A Finger Pointing, so they were removed from the bill for the time being, with either their roles replaced or their shows canceled.

There was still work to be done, of course. May still had her monologue, which she tried taking in a few different directions, some of which worked well and some less so. Ioan coached her in writing as best ey could, talking her down from perfectionism fits that left her threatening to tear the whole thing up.

For eir part, ey still had a few projects on eir plate, not least of which was the upcoming book project that had been requested by Jonas. Ey poked at this every now and then, outlining the events to date and throwing a few thousand words at it here and there.

Mostly, though, ey dealt in letters to and from the other members of eir clade. Vast, dramatic events were happening elsewhere — as they always seemed to when an Odist was involved — and ey couldn't simply put them away to deal with all that was going on at home. The break from dealing with the affairs of True Name and Jonas was a welcome one.

The one conversation of note came on the fourth day after the merge, when the skunk asked, “How did you two get together?”

Both Ioan and May had stared at her until she held up her hands.

“Other than the forces behind the scenes. I mean.”

“From my point of view,” Ioan said, guessing at the meaning behind her question. “It just kind of happened over the course of a few years. May was her usual affectionate self, and we just wound up building patterns around that turned us from coworkers to friends to partners.”

“There was no culmination? No decision?”

“Not really. I just realized one day that we were probably together and asked if we were.”

“It was the day ey interviewed you,” May said, trying to hide a smile. “I told em it was the dumbest fucking question of the entire project. We agreed we had probably been in a relationship for months before that.”

True Name nodded, expression more thoughtful than amused. “Is that how you move in the world, May Then My Name?”

The skunk hesitated, gaze drifting away from her cocladist. “Ask another question, my dear,” she said eventually.

“Of course.” True Name gave a hint of a bow. “You changed in order to accommodate being in a relationship, Ioan. How?”

“Are you asking what about me changed, or what I did to change?” ey asked, frowning. “Because I don’t think I had any conscious control over it.”

“What you changed, yes. May Then My Name could answer the other question, perhaps uniquely so among all those who we know.”

The skunk only shrugged.

“Well, I think the events with Qoheleth got me thinking about existence here on the System. My own, sure, but in general. Prior to that, I think I lived my life solely as an observer of others. I’d watch people and write what they did and turn it into a story, and I was just kind of...I don’t know. Transparent?” Ey shrugged. “I was just a pair of glasses to be used by others. I relied really heavily on memory to do my job, though, and it wasn’t until that was specifically called out and brought into question that I started thinking of myself as a full person, which

then got me thinking about how I interact with those around me. That's where Codrin came from, I think"

May chimed in. "Ey was the version of you who learned that most strongly, perhaps. You were left with the memories of it to work with, without the context of the experience."

"Right. It was nice watching em grow closer to others and open up to a relationship."

"'Nice'?"

Ey shrugged. "I don't know how else to put it. I felt compersion for them, like the opposite of jealousy. I was happy for them, and it felt good to know that those things were possible."

True Name nodded. "That is the word I would use to describe my feelings towards May Then My Name, if it is not too forward of me to say."

Eir partner smiled and reached out across the dining table to pat at True Name's paw.

"It is what I feel for End Waking and Debarre, too, though in a far more round-about way. I have memories of the ways in which End Waking changed in order to let Debarre into his life, but I cannot place them in context. I do not have what is required to understand them, I may watch them, I may understand one at a time, but integration of all of them eludes me. Those experiences which are left to integrate are the ones clashing the most." She gave a frustrated sigh and shook her head. "I can remember what it feels like to fall in love but not what to do then. I can remember what it feels like to be in love but not how I got there."

Ioan and May glanced at each other briefly, but both nodded.

"It has not been a priority for you," May said. "If it has not been important, if it has felt like a distraction, then there is no reason to simply know how to do all of that. I do wish you the best, though."

"Didn't you say you'd felt love for Zacharias, though?"

True Name shrugged noncommittally. "I am not comfortable talking about that, now."

Ey tried to keep eir expression from falling, but apparently did not succeed.

"I am sorry, Ioan. Not everything is for sharing, not right now."

"It's just the amanuensis in me." Ey tried to laugh it away. "Why'd you ask about this, anyway?"

She smirked. "You mean beyond the fact that I just told you I am having trouble integrating the memories?"

"Yeah, actually. Why those memories? I would have thought his repentance would have caused more clashes."

"It is," she replied slowly. "But these are more comforting to work with. They had their fights, as I am sure all couples do, but even those are full of love. I do not—" She sniffled, shook her head firmly, then stood and bowed. "I need to go for a walk. Thank you both."

And with that, she stepped from the sim.

May groaned and crossed her arms on the table, resting her head on them. "I do not know what to think about her. I do not know what to think about any of this."

Ey echoed her movement, resting eir head on one of eir arms while the other petted over her ears a few times. "Me either. I don't know where that conversation came from, and...well, it went alright, but I have no idea what she was asking about, so I kept feeling like I was about to fall in some conversational pit."

She lifted her snout enough to bump her nose against eir wrist, then nodded. "It is things like this — the conversation and the thoughts that come with it — that keep me hesitant about any decision to merge down. I do not know if it would help her or kill her."

"No killing skunks," ey mumbled, then stood and stretched. "Bit miffed she's out at the lake, since now I feel like walking, too."

"If you were a normal person, we could enjoy perpetual springtime in the yard."

Ey looked outside, at the scant inch of snow left after the last storm. “It’s not that bad.”

“Still cold.”

“Mmhm, still cold. Still, it might be worth making a coffee and bringing it out there to keep the hands warm, if only so I can pace.”

“Go, my dear. Go and pace. I will teach myself how to do a handstand or something equally silly. Anything other than dwelling on more of this.”

“No more monologue?”

“I am so sick of looking at it that I think I might scream if I even catch a glance.”

Ey laughed and leaned down to kiss the side of the skunk’s muzzle. “Well, alright. Don’t fall over onto the table or anything.”

The rest of the afternoon passed easily enough. It was slow and boring, perhaps, but they did what they could to keep themselves entertained. Ioan walked. May did not manage a handstand, but she did wind up laying half off the couch, head nearly to the floor, for half an hour. They made lunch. They read.

But always, there was an air of waiting. They were waiting for True Name to return, yes, but ey felt like they were also waiting for the other shoe to drop. They were waiting for her to feel whole again. They were waiting for everything to fall into place (or at least close enough) so that they could do this meeting with Jonas and get it over with.

“Do you think she’s just out there walking?” ey asked at one point.

May shrugged. “If she is anything like True Name, yes. If she is anything like End Waking, then she is exploring. Climbing trees and walking along ravines.”

“And if she’s both?”

She sighed. “If she is both, then I do not know. If she is both, perhaps she is finding some new way to let loose all of those emotions she could not speak before.

The skunk returned shortly before dinner. Both Ioan and May stood to greet her. The skunk looked dirty and scuffed up, and while her expression wasn't grim, it came close. There was frustration there, perhaps anger as well.

Overflowing, ey thought, then tamped it down.

She bowed to them from the entryway and said, "Ioan, May Then My Name, thank you for hosting me and for all of your kindness."

Ey frowned. "But...?"

"Yes. But I need out. I need to be elsewhere. I walked as far as I could into the hills from the lake and, while I found the boundary of the sim, it is far enough away that I do not think I will feel cramped."

"Wait, what? You're moving to Arrowhead Lake?"

"If you decide to keep my room here, I will come back, but, my dear, I am going to lose my fucking mind if I simply stay in—" She sighed, took a deep breath, recomposed herself. "I am going to spend a few days out at the lake. I need...away. I need away from walls. I need away from you two, nice as you are, away from all of your happiness and comfort. I need away from speaking, from dwelling on the last few weeks. I need solitude."

May had shied away from her down-tree instance the instant her temper started to rise, clutching tightly at eir hand, but Ioan stood eir ground as best ey could.

"Well, alright. It's no trouble keeping your room, of course, and I guess there's tents already out there."

She nodded, subsiding at the reasonable tone in eir voice. "Yes. Thank you for understanding."

"Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Can you grant me ACLs to create supplies? There is nothing to hunt."

"Hunt?" Ey frowned, then shook eir head. "Right, sorry. End Waking always did. You should...you should have them now."

She nodded. Much of her time out there must have been spent cataloguing what she'd need in order to survive, going off

of memories that were now hers, as it took her less than ten seconds and a wave of the paw to create an axe, a knife, and two canvas bags ey assumed were full of reasonably stable food and other such tools. This was followed by her forking a few times over, shifting her outfit one article of clothing at a time. It struck a middle-ground between her ordinary conservative dress and End Waking's ranger garb, one with canvas leggings and a sturdy shirt, over which she wore a leather jerkin with what looked to be a detachable hood. It usually wasn't worth it to fork just to re-clothe oneself, but she seemed antsy to be away and on her own, not to mention that lingering air of frustration about her.

"Thank you both," she said, more quietly this time. "Earnestly. It does mean a lot that you have both thought to help so much. I will be in touch."

With that, she bowed, lifted her bags and axe, then stepped from the sim once more.

"What the hell..."

May took a solid minute to un-cringe from the whole experience, slowly relaxing her grip on eir hand. "I think perhaps she—"

"Is overflowing?"

The skunk nodded.

Ey sighed, nodded. "That was my guess, too. I was going to say it came on pretty quick, but the last few days make a lot more sense with that as context."

With a sigh, May leaned forward and rested her forehead against eir upper arm. Her tail hung limp and her ears were splayed out to the sides.

Ey extricated eir hand from her paws so that ey could turn and get eir arms around her, careful not to jostle too much. Ey leaned down to kiss between her ears, murmuring, "How about you, May?"

"Mm?"

“You’ve seemed on the edge of overflowing for a few days now.”

It took her a long time to respond. At last, she hugged her arms around eir middle and lifted her head to look at him. “You will not be upset with me if I say yes?”

“What?” Ey blinked, shaking eir head. “Of course not. I apologize if it’s seemed that way in the past.”

She rested her head against eir shoulder. “No, but...I do not know, my dear. Everything is so much more complicated this time. It is bad enough when you have one skunk in your life, but now you have two at the same time. Two and a half, perhaps.”

“It’s okay, May. It’s complicated, but we’ve done it before, so we’ll make it work this time.”

She nodded.

“Can I stay for tonight? I’ll help get some food prepped and some of my stuff in order. It’ll give me a chance to contact Douglas, too.”

“Of course, my dear. I am not...there yet, but I am close.”

“Well, come on, then. Let’s get some food in you and we can take it easy for the night and finish the preparations in the morning.”

Ioan awoke, arms empty, asleep on eir front. Ey was not a front-sleeper, so this came with a stiff neck that ey knew would dog em throughout the rest of the day.

At some point during the night, May had apparently slid as carefully as she could from eir arms, bundled herself up in a second set of covers, and curled up at the far edge of the mattress.

“You okay, May?” ey asked, sitting up beside her.

She shook her head.

“Alright. Can I hug?”

A pause, and then another shake of the head.

“That’s okay,” ey said, doing eir best to keep disappointment out of eir voice. “I’ll go get some stuff pulled together for while I’m out. Want a cup of coffee?”

She nodded her head before pulling the covers up and over it.

That was probably a good enough sign for em to get up. If the skunk was already to the point of being nonverbal, it wouldn’t do either of them any good to try and keep talking, regardless of how much ey wanted to address her every need.

Coffee was a good first priority, though, and easily sorted. It was something ey could start and finish with little thought and which had a tangible outcome, a little bit of success rather than some ill-defined end-state.

While waiting, ey pinged Douglas to let him know what was going on and to request a spot to sleep. After a moment’s hesitation, ey sent End Waking a quick message, as well. Ey received simple acknowledgements from both.

Ey doctored the skunk’s coffee to her liking and returned to the room to set it down on the bedside table closest to her, taking a cue from True Name and moving noisily enough that she’d know ey was there without being obnoxiously loud.

A moment’s thought was spent on shifting the weather in the sim to something warmer, more springlike. Ey’d heard enough kvetching about the snow the last few days to figure that might help as well.

From there, ey spent an hour queuing up some meals for her, working in a cone of silence. Things that she’d mentioned as comfort foods in the past, all things that ey could cook emself or create in-sim through something acquired on the exchange. Chicken soup, mashed potatoes, more poor-skunk’s-risotto.

While ey was prepping an stocking the food, another thought occurred to em. It was unlikely, but True Name might need to come back to the house, either to create more goods or to sleep or just to get out of the elements. To keep this from bothering May while she took the time she needed, ey shifted

the ACLs of the house to be owner-only, so that those trying to enter would have to specifically request access, then stepped just inside the other bedroom's door and dug a new entry-point for True Name so that she could go just to the bedroom without entering the rest of the house.

True Name sent a curt ping of acknowledgement when ey sent the information over via sensorium message.

Ey tried not to let it rankle. Everything felt so confined and restricted. So much of eir circle of friends was out in the world and so few of them came over with any frequency that to suddenly have even those ey was closest too — romantically in the case of May, and by sheer proximity in the case of True Name — requesting eir absence felt like ey was being cut off from everyone.

"Which isn't true," ey mumbled to emself while packing up eir notes. "Security's one thing, but it's not like everyone's inaccessible. Keeping everyone safe doesn't mean cutting off contact for yourself, Ioan."

Ey looked down to eir small stack of notebooks and the three-pen case resting atop it and sighed. "And talking to yourself doesn't count."

With that, ey peeked in the bedroom one last time. May had sat up and was staring dully down into her mug of coffee, blanket worn like a hooded robe. Her cheek-fur already streaked with tears.

"I'm going to head out, May. Douglas's, as usual. Be safe, okay?"

Okay, she signed.

"Need anything else before I go?"

Hug.

Ey nodded and stepped further into the room, leaning in to get eir arms around the skunk. She didn't return the gesture, but did at least push her snout up under eir chin momentarily before leaning away. Given the tightness in her face, ey suspected an onslaught of emotion was only just being held at bay.

“Love you, May. Lots and lots.”

She managed to sign an I-love-you before pulling the ‘hood’ of blankets down enough to hide her face.

Knowing she’d only resent em if ey lingered or touched her again, ey clutched eir notebooks to eir chest, waved, and quickly stepped out to the field of dandelions and grass. The light and heat was a shock, and ey stood, swaying, for a moment, simply squinting out to the horizon.

Ey queued up a message to Douglas and murmured, “I’m here, but going for a walk, first,” before heading away from the house.

There was nothing out there. No destination. No variance in the rolling hills of well-tended grass and the yellow suns of dandelions. The only break at all in the landscape was Douglas’s house, and ey kept that at eir back.

As ey walked, ey considered what it meant to overflow. Was it just an Odist thing? Certainly some aspects of it were. The way that Codrin described Dear’s manic forking, each instance left with simply a shard of its personality, felt very Dear. May, End Waking, and True Name’s overflowing all sounded uniquely them, as well, and A Finger Pointing mentioned that hers was different still, though had declined to expand on it.

But here ey was, feeling like all of the stress of the last day, of the last few weeks had filled em up to overflowing. Presented with the sudden silence and stillness of the field, ey realized just how much ey’d been running on desperation and borrowed time.

With the slightest break in the pressure, that loan was called due.

Realizing that ey couldn’t see the subtle rises in the land for the tears in eir eyes, ey simply sat down in the grass and cried. *If I am overflowing, some remote part of em thought. Then I can certainly see the appeal to it. Catharsis indeed.*

Though there was certainly nothing ey could have done to stop it, ey owned it, simply letting it take its course, holler-

ing curses into the cone of silence ey had the presence of mind to set up, clutching at the grass to keep emself at least somewhat grounded. Ey'd watched a friend (for that's what True Name was, wasn't she?) nearly get assassinated in front of em, had dealt with eir partner's lingering resentment towards her down-tree instance come into conflict with her constant presence, had watched May push True Name to near catatonia after encouraging her to accept a two-centuries-long merge from End Waking. Ey had watched both overflow in the span of a few hours.

And when ey stopped cycling over the last two weeks ((check timeline)), ey simply cried for the sheer relief it provided.

When ey'd cried emself out and cleaned emself up, ey finally levered emself up off the ground and trudged back toward the house. The least ey could do was say hi and get another cup of coffee.

Douglas Hadje was sitting on the stoop of his house, waiting for em.

"Hey, Douglas. Sorry about that."

He stood and offered em a hug, which ey accepted gratefully.

"No worries, walks are good too. How's May?"

"She's...well, she'll get by. I just hope it doesn't last too long. Thanks for letting me stay."

Debarre — 2350

Neither Debarre nor End Waking had visited Michelle's field in decades, and certainly not since it became Douglas's. End Waking had last seen it on the day that she had quit in 2306, and had had little reason to return since.

It had been much longer for Debarre, going clear back into the 2200s, back when Michelle and Sasha were still alive and coherent enough to speak to without getting overwhelmed into silence every few minutes. The memories of her were painful enough as it was, that last visit with her in End Waking's forest especially, that he'd never had the courage to come back.

Given how much the clade that she'd left behind was struggling, though, it felt fitting to accept when Douglas invited him and End Waking over to talk with Ioan.

"Ey's in a funk, and from what ey says, I think you two are the only others that know why," he had said, paused, then added, "Except maybe those I don't think any of us want to see."

Both of them stood still after arriving, just bathing in — or struggling against — the waves of memory that came with the sudden onslaught of warmth and sun and the baked goods scent of dandelions thick in the air.

Ioan greeted them at the door. Ey seemed happy enough, if tired. Still smiling and bowing to them as ey usually did.

As soon as they'd finished their greetings and settled on the grass in front of the house (End Waking having refused to go

inside) along with Douglas, though, ey had mostly stared down into eir glass of lemonade and spoke little.

Finally, Debarre nudged em gently with an elbow. “Alright, Ioan, you’re gonna need to spill it at some point, here. What’s going on? All we were told is that you were feeling rough about the last few days.

Ey sighed and plucked at a dandelion. “Right, sorry, you two. Or three, I guess. I know I’ve been a bit of a mope of late. You alright to talk about True Name?”

“Ioan, I appreciate you asking, but please do not worry about us,” End Waking chided. “If we have come to help you, you need not spare our feelings. We can pretty well guess who would be at the center of this.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s me, actually,” ey said, laughing tiredly. “I’ve been stuck between May and True Name for days now, or years if you count the time since the convergence and I started trying to smooth things out with the coffee dates.

“I’ve just been struggling with it all. It’s been too much from the moment everything with True Name happened. The last few days were the worst, though. True Name didn’t really handle the merge all that well. She collapsed and was nearly unresponsive for several hours, and since then, she’s been struggling to integrate various chunks of memories.”

“My feelings towards her work? That I built my identity around not being her?”

“That and your relationship with Debarre.”

The weasel and skunk both looked at each other, ears splayed.

“I’d thought of that, but, uh...” Debarre cleared his through. “Well, actually hearing it put like that casts it in a bit of a different light.”

“I hope that she does not mind the memories of sex to go along with the resentment,” End Waking said, then laughed when Debarre poked him in the side. “We are all adults here, my dear.”

"I'm the baby, I think," Douglas said. "I'm seventy-two."

The skunk grinned. "So young! Debarre and I are both over two-hundred sixty. Still, I am pretty sure that we can acknowledge that we can acknowledge the existence of sex, is what I mean."

"And it doesn't exactly sound like she's a stranger to that, herself, anyway."

End Waking blinked, taken aback. "She actually told you about Zacharias?"

"Who?"

"An...erstwhile lover, as she put it," Ioan said carefully. "I probably shouldn't go too much into that, though."

"Agreed," Debarre said. "But as you were saying, she was having trouble?"

"Yeah. I wasn't expecting her to get completely taken out, but May did kind of force it on her all in one go. She lasted a few days, but I think she was maybe pushing herself pretty hard to appear strong. She crashed really hard yesterday and, despite a pretty pleasant morning, had to step out to Arrowhead Lake, and when she came back, she looked like she was about ready to start yelling at us. May was also trying to stick around as long as she could, I think, since she crashed almost immediately. We made it through the night, but she couldn't even speak this morning."

"That's a shitload to have to deal with, yeah."

Ey nodded. "Friend almost gets assassinated, almost goes crazy from a merge, and disappears. Partner freaks out after a conversation, then freaks out when the merge goes sideways and mentions she was thinking of merging down, herself, then requests that I disappear. It's just...a lot."

"Wait, May wanted to merge down?" Douglas said. "Wasn't expecting that."

"Well, I don't know quite how much 'wanted' fits, but I asked if she was thinking about it and she said yes. I couldn't quite piece together why, though. After End Waking merged down,

she mentioned that there was at least a part of her that was feeling vengeful, so I think I was worried that maybe she was considering piling on her own vengeance, or that maybe she would be trying to help make her a better person.” Ey shrugged and added, “Or both. She did seem to have True Name’s best interests at heart when she forced the merge. At least mostly.”

End Waking nodded. “She did mention being torn, yes. She wanted to kick her out but also wanted to help her get away from Jonas.”

“She’s certainly softening on her.”

“And how’re you taking it?” Debarre asked. Something about Ioan — eir posture, eir face, something — made it seem like this was the question ey was dreading the most.

There was a long silence before Ioan answered. “It’s really grating on me. I don’t even know why, either. I think it honestly would help True Name in the end if it were just May merging down, but having that be the case with her memories of us together feels like...well, it kind of makes me jealous. Those are our memories that we made together. Our fights and good times, our affection—”

“Probably most of the memories, there,” End Waking stage-whispered, getting a smirk out of Ioan.

“Yeah. Our affection and our sex, too, for that matter. Suddenly, True Name has all that. I think it also started grating on me because of how real End Waking’s was. It wouldn’t just be a library for her perusal, but she will have actually lived them. She will have actually—” Ey frowned, as though digging for the words.

“She’ll have actually loved you, maybe?” Debarre guessed.

Eir features fell and ey sighed. “Yeah. That. Putting it that way makes it feel terrible, but it’s exactly that.”

“I was pulling back when she and Zacharias were getting close,” End Waking said, sounding thoughtful. “And I have been her. We were both Michelle. I know that she is capable of experiencing romantic feelings. They will not be alien to her.”

“And now she’s been you,” Debarre added. “And you’ve got romantic feelings, too. At least, I hope so.”

End Waking pushed him over onto the ground. “If you imply that I do not have romantic feelings for you again, I will make you hunt our meals for a week.”

He laughed. “Love you too, E.W.”

“What I am saying, though, is that it will not be alien to her. She will have experienced love for others, and the loss of that love. She will have experienced love for others through another’s memories and experiences, even. You can trust her to integrate that, I believe.”

“Even though she was struggling with integrating those memories of yours?”

“Perhaps especially so. I think that she is struggling because it clashes with her personality, not that she feels that she might love Debarre. Though, my dear,” he said, nodding to Debarre. “I can guarantee that just about every Odist is at least a little in love with you.”

He shook his head and waved the comment away. “Yeah, yeah.”

More than one of them had confessed such to him over the centuries, and it wasn’t until he’d actually conceded that something about End Waking landed in that sweet spot of attraction and personality match enough to at least try dating that they’d stopped. He was thankful that they seemed happy enough to live vicariously through him. He had liked Sasha and Michelle, loved her in that sympatico that true friends can share, friends who had shared trauma, but any more felt pretty far out of his league as a gay man.

Instead, he nudged Ioan with his elbow again. “So if you don’t need to worry about it from True Name’s side, and you know you’re worrying about it from your own side, how do you feel about it from May’s point of view?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, do you have any worries about her? Do you think she does? Has she talked about it at all?”

“Not much. She said she’d been considering it, but that seeing how the current merge was making her struggle had her in doubt. I told her I want to make sure it’d be consensual on everyone’s behalf, this time. I guess—”

“Whoa, wait,” Douglas interrupted, frowning. “She didn’t even talk with True Name about this merge?”

“They talked a few times in a cone of silence, so maybe then, but otherwise not that I saw. She just stopped True Name in the middle of ranting and sent End Waking a message to merge, far as I could tell.”

“That’s kind of shitty.”

Ey shrugged. “I suppose, but no need to pile on her or anything, I think she’s beating herself up over it worse than any of us could do.”

Douglas nodded. “Well, that bit I believe. Think that contributed to her overflowing?”

“Almost certainly, yeah. Correct me if I’m wrong, End Waking, but while I don’t think it’s solely tied to external events, they can have an effect on it.”

The skunk nodded. He’d started panting in the heat of the sun, so it took him a moment to reply. “It just comes over us like a wave. Some of us more quickly than others. It is slower for me than for either of them, I believe.”

Debarre chimed in. “I usually have a few days warning. I’ve gotten mine already and was planning on heading out today, but we both wanted to come, anyway.”

“Is it hard for you?”

End Waking held up a paw. “I want to respect Debarre’s decision to share or not, but I would prefer not to be here for this conversation.”

“Sorry, End Waking. You don’t need to answer, Debarre.”

The weasel shrugged. “No, it’s fine. E.W. and I have talked about it, and I get where he’s coming from. It can wait.”

“Yes. You are not disallowed. We simply have our own, separate conversations about that, and it is important to me that Debarre feel comfortable talking about me with his friends, too. I cannot be the only one in his life.”

“Alright, makes sense. May’s said similar, for that matter.” Ey toyed with the flower ey’d plucked before, saying, “We actually talked about other relationships shortly before this all went down, about how she’d act if she started to fall for someone else and how she’d feel if I did. One thing we didn’t talk about was someone else having feelings for either of us, whether or not they’d come about them on their own or through a merger.”

“I’m sure there’s shitloads of people in love with May Then My Name,” Debarre said, laughing. “But she’s good at having that conversation, and you’re both good at talking, so.”

“Too good, perhaps.” End Waking stood. “I am overheating and feeling restless, so I am going to return to the forest. Ioan, I do wish you the best, and I would like you to keep in touch as you are able. I am concerned about your partner and for True Name, in my own way. Please keep yourself safe so that you can keep the both of them safe in turn.”

Ioan nodded and stood as well to bow to the skunk. “Thanks. It really does mean a lot. I’ll keep you in the loop, if nothing else.”

After returning the bow, End Waking held out a paw to Debarre. “Can you return with me? Just for a few minutes.”

He nodded and accepted that paw. He had a feeling he knew what was coming, so even just the touch as they stepped away from the sim was worth it.

Sure enough, once they made it back to the forest, End Waking leaned over to nose at Debarre’s cheek, pulled his paw away, and looked off into the woods. Whenever it was time for him to ask Debarre to leave, he’d go through a little swell of anxiety.

“I am sorry, my love. I know that it is not the easiest on you that I always do this.”

“Hey, I said I was leaving today,” he said as reassuringly as he could. “It’s not coming out of the blue.”

End Waking nodded. “You are always allowed to keep in touch.”

“Mmhm.”

“And you can drop by as long as you give me some notice, preferably a day.”

“I will.”

“And if you hear from May Then My Name or Ioan, please let me know.”

“E.W., shut up,” Debarre said fondly. “See you soon, okay?”

The skunk wilted, a look somewhere between relieved and resigned coming over his face. “Yes. Soon. Thank you, my dear.”

“Of course. Love you, E.W.”

“Love you too.”

There was nothing else for it, then. With one last wave to the skunk (already heading off into the woods, of course), he stepped back to the Hadjes’ field.

Ioan and Douglas were still standing where he’d left them, so he waved again. “Sorry, back for a little bit.”

“On your own again?” Ioan asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. It’s been building up for a long time. We agreed I’d head off when the tent was done, and we just got the nets all hung yesterday. Hey, can we go inside, though? He was right, it’s pretty fucking hot out here with fur.”

Douglas laughed. “I’ll never get you guys, him all in black fur and you wearing black clothes over yours. Yeah, come on. There’s more lemonade.”

Ioan held back enough to let Douglas take the lead, falling in step with Debarre, instead. “Does it bother you?”

“Hmm? E.W. asking me to leave?”

“Yeah.”

He thought for a bit, then shrugged. “Bothers, yes, but that’s

really about it. Helps that I usually just quit and merge down with #Tracker, so it's not like I've got *just* the relationship to worry about. I've got my own stuff going on besides him, and other relationships that merge in every now and then."

"That sounds handy, at least."

"His overflowing is also way less dramatic than May's, which sounds pretty painful to watch."

Ioan nodded.

"Sorry, Ioan. Don't mean to keep it all on the surface for you."

Ey shrugged. "I asked, it's alright."

Once they were all inside and Debarre had cooled off, Douglas asked, "So what do you think of all this?"

"All this?" He laughed. "Way too fucking much to say one way or another. Narrow it down."

"Oh, I meant the stuff with End Waking merging down. I'm still stuck on May asking him to do that without talking it through with True Name, first."

"Well, like I said, she was conflicted about it when she brought it up. Said she wanted her to disappear into ignominy..."

"Ignominy?" Ioan offered.

"Right, yeah. But she also said that she wanted her to get out of this mess and away from Jonas, 'that living, breathing sack of shit', in her words."

They laughed.

"But I'd been thinking much the same, I guess. If she does disappear, I'd probably feel at least a little bit of vindication for the way she jerked us all around without us realising it and all that shit she did with the Council. I'd also feel like there was a fraction less of my friend around, though, too. I love E.W., I'm happy he's in my life, we get along well for the most part, but there's also this layer of, like...well, he was part of Sasha and Michelle, and they and I went through a lot together."

"You talk about those two facets like different people," Ioan

said. “Sorry, not to derail. Just that I noticed that. None of the Odists do.”

“Most, maybe. I picked it up from Hammered Silver, who spent probably more time with them than anyone. All her instances feel singular, I imagine, but they were two instances in one. Sasha was this really emotional, really caring person. It wasn’t that Michelle wasn’t, just that when she was at the fore, she was much more...I don’t know. Logical? Rational?”

“And when it was both? When she was in flux, or whatever?”

“Then she was just tired,” he said, grinning at memories. “But right, before I totally lose track, you asked how I feel. Uh, I guess I feel scared.”

Ioan furrowed eir brow. “Really?”

“Yeah. That she collapsed made me confront the fact that, no, I don’t really want her dead or anything, that I really would hate to lose her. Even if she’s not the part of my friend I like the most, not a part that I even remember seeing before, she’s still a part of them.” He hesitated, then added, “And it changed E.W. Not the forking and merging itself, but that he even did that. It sounds like May Then My Name used the fact that True Name was all worked up to force her to accept the whole merge all at once. She kind of did the same with E.W. I don’t know what her message, was, but it looked like it scared the shit out of him, so he kind of did it without really thinking. He’s been a bit different since.”

“Different how?” Douglas asked.

“Like...still all worried, and still a little in shock, but also like a little bit of a load was taken off. I can’t explain it, and we never really talked it through. It’s not bad, but I can still tell.”

Ioan nodded and rubbed eir palms against the legs of eir slacks as ey always seemed to do during stressful conversations. “He did seem a bit freer of speech today,” ey mused. “But that makes sense. He finally got to tell her how he feels, and they didn’t even have to talk to each other.”

“Has May Then My Name changed, too?”

"I can't tell. She's been so wrapped up in trying to live around someone she doesn't really like, and then with all of the fallout from the merge. Maybe she has? She's at least been able to talk with True Name without blowing up at her, and they've even had some conversations that seemed enjoyable at times, so, maybe?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Really? The way she talked about True Name for a while there...whew."

"That bad?"

"Did she not talk about her to you?"

Ey shrugged. "Every now and then, and sometimes she'd get pretty pissed, but it was only once a year or so."

"Mm, about the same amount, but maybe she kept it a bit...I don't know, gentler for you, since she has to live with you. She'd come over once a year or so and just go off for a while. It kind of became routine. She'd vent, then we'd have a good day."

Ioan switched to rubbing eir hands over her face. "I don't even know what to do about her."

"Nothing," Douglas said. "Nothing but love her and keep talking, I mean. She's a grown woman, she can work out her feelings well enough. Hell, she's already seeing a therapist."

Ey slumped back dramatically against the couch cushions. "Why does *everyone* tell me to stop fixing others' problems for them? Even the intellectual side of me is in on the game."

They laughed.

"It's so hard to actually internalize. I'll catch myself trying to mend May and True Name's relationship or make May feel better or whatever, and I'll have to force myself to relax."

"It's not a bad thing," Debarre said. "I mean, you still shouldn't do that, but it's at least a sign that you're just a good person who wants to do right by eir friends."

Ey smiled gratefully. "I'm at least trying. One more question, then I think I need to table the topic for a bit."

"Sure."

"Do you think it was the right thing to do?"

“Yeah,” he said, surprising himself with how readily the answer came to him. “I don’t think it would have worked if E.W. had just merged down without all the other dramatic shit. I think she would’ve just rejected it, or if she did accept the merge, just cherry-picked parts of it. As it is, though, with Jonas after her neck and May using all her whiles to convince both her and E.W., I think so. I don’t honestly see her coming out of this still in power or whatever, but if she *does* make it out, I think it’ll help her move on.”

Ioan stared up at the ceiling thoughtfully, occasionally mumbling to emself.

He shrugged to Douglas and asked, “Well, I skipped breakfast and am not ready to merge back down yet. Want some food? That’ll at least be more pleasant.”

After another hour’s conversation over lunch — much happier conversation, thankfully — Debarre stepped back to his home sim and quit to let #Tracker catch up on the current happenings.

Debarre#Tracker conducted a thorough security sweep and, finding no bugs, those little hidden instances he’d grown so paranoid of, he sighed and slouched back in his desk chair, rubbing paws over his face. “Well, shit. This complicates things, doesn’t it?”

He queued up a sensorium message to Yared, user11827, and a few other friends he’d kept in touch with while following along with (and occasionally meddling in) the political affairs of the system. ‘Reactionary elements’ indeed.

Ioan Bălan — 2350

Once they were fed and Debarre was safely on his way home — or at least merged down-tree — Ioan begged off from talking any further with Douglas and trudged down the hall to the spare room he borrowed whenever May needed space. Ey claimed to need a nap and, while ey was certainly tired enough, sleep seemed unlikely

The walk and cry in the field before ey'd joined Douglas at his house had been necessary, but also had only served to highlight just how woefully out of eir depth ey truly was.

“Hi Sarah,” ey said, starting a simplex sensorium message. “Sorry to bother you, and sorry we haven’t spoken in a few weeks. I know I was vague when I canceled our last appointment, but things have gone completely sideways. I’m not totally sure how open you’d be to this, but can we meet and talk? Even if I’m restricted to talking in very general terms about what’s going on? I need to talk to someone who can help me sort through my thoughts around it, I just can’t share details yet. It has to do with True Name, so I’m sure you can appreciate just how complicated it is. Let me know if that’s alright. I’m...I’m at Douglas’s for a few days. Thanks.”

Then, ey lay down on the bed, still dressed and over the covers, and stared at the ceiling, trying to think about as little as possible.

Ey was startled awake by a sensorium message. Grunting

and wiping eir hands over eir face to try and bring reality back into focus through the nearly drunken haze of waking up from an ill-advised nap, ey set the message to running.

“Good to hear from you, Ioan. I’ll admit that I was pretty concerned when you canceled. I don’t usually worry about you, but that’s also the first time you’ve had to do so in nearly four years. I can be free whenever you need, and am happy to meet you either there or here. I don’t have any problems holding off on details until a later date. Just let me know.”

Ey groaned and ground the heels of eir palms against eir closed eyes, trying to will away the grogginess that clung to em, somehow managing to feel both sticky and slippery.

A quick shower had em feeling well enough to respond, and by the time she arrived, ey had a pot of coffee brewed and met her, mug in hand, at the door.

Ey bowed. “Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

She offered em a hug. “It’s alright. I figure if whatever is happening has you both canceling appointments and requesting short-notice ones, it’s probably important.”

“Sorry, just woke up, feeling rough,” ey said, declining the hug. “But yeah. Important, overwhelming, dramatic. Would you be alright talking outside? That nap destroyed me and I’m still feeling disconnected from everything.”

“Works for me.”

“So, uh...well, where to start.” Ey spoke haltingly, once she’d turned down the offer of coffee and they’d made their way out into the grass and light and blue skies. “Right. As of a few weeks ago, for reasons I can’t get into just yet, True Name has been staying in an extra room we dug at the house. A few days ago—”

“Whoa, wait. I know you said no specifics, but can you tell me a little more about that? I can’t picture that working at *all*”

Ey sighed. “Yeah, well, that’s part of why I’m here and not at home, I guess.”

She nodded, gestured for em to continue.

“Well, she...hmm. She ran into some interpersonal trouble

that was dramatic enough to require staying around people well enough known on the System that she'd be safe." Ey winced, adding, "I know that's not much to go by. Either way, she's staying in our place. She's been fairly self-contained, but not totally so, so there's been some interaction between the three of us. Before you ask, it was May's idea in the first place, and while there have been a few rough spots, it's gone far smoother than I would have thought."

"Still, I imagine that just having the anxiety of it potentially going rough doesn't feel good."

"Not at all, no. I feel like I'm constantly on guard, always ready to jump in and smooth things out, even if I haven't really had to do so. I'm trying to let them both just do their own thing, though, and every time I catch myself feeling that way, I try to change contexts."

"That's good," she said. "Has it been helping, at least?"

"If you'd asked me that a few days ago, I would have said yes, but now that I'm here and struggling to hold it together, I'm not so sure. I think I was just pushing it down without, I don't know, redirecting it or dealing with it."

She nodded. "Alright. I want to come back to that, but I interrupted your overview. Can you tell me what else happened?"

"Right. So, through some strange turn of events, both True Name and May wound up overflowing at the same time. True Name is staying at another private sim we know and May's at home while I'm here. All of this hit a few days back when May and True Name had a conversation that left both of them drained, and then True Name had to deal with a merge large enough that she collapsed."

"Not May Then My Name..." Sarah murmured, frowning.

"No. Another cocladist, though."

Ey saw comprehension dawn in her features, and that frown only deepened. She gestured for em to continue.

"But...well. So there's two things that I think fall out of this that I'd get the most out of talking about. The first is that I'm

having a lot of complicated feelings surrounding True Name throughout this, and the second is that May did mention that she'd been considering merging down with her until the previous merge went so sideways."

She looked down to the grass thoughtfully as they walked. "Can you tell me about how you feel about the merge, first?"

"I didn't really get the chance to ask her about why it was that she was considering merging. We promised to talk about it more, but after that, things happened pretty quickly. There's a weird sort of jealousy that goes along with it. May and I have built our own life completely independent of True Name. We bowed out of politics and writing these grand, System-spanning tales and focused on just being together. That's why I got into writing plays, I think: it was a way for me to do the things that felt comfortable with me in a way that didn't involve being involved in all these crazy goings-on.

"So we built our life together. True Name respected that, too. She would ask about May and I, and seemed earnestly happy that we'd gone and done something so...normal."

"Do you think she's envious of that?"

Ey frowned and scuffed a heel through the grass. "I don't know, honestly. Again, if you'd asked me a few weeks ago, I would have said probably not, that she's got her own things that make her happy which don't involve putting on plays or poking fun at each other. Now, though I'm not so sure. This whole thing about the merge adds another layer onto that, because suddenly, True Name would have all of those memories."

"Does it bother you that she would have the memories, or are you worried about her having those emotions? Do you worry she'd start feeling about you the way that May Then My Name does?"

"Well, shit," ey groaned. "I didn't even think about that. Like, we've talked about what her having memories of loving me would mean, but always past-tense. I didn't think about if she herself, she as True Name I mean, would pick those up as

well. I have no clue. Maybe on some level I do, though. I like the way May feels about me. We've talked about jealousy a few times, and it often comes up that she feels devotion towards me, and I'm really not sure how I'd feel having that come from another, never mind one that I have as complicated a relationship with as I do with True Name."

"Does this tie in with the complicated feelings you mentioned, then?"

Ey bought emself some time to think about an answer by bending down to pluck a dandelion, twirling it between eir fingers. "I guess I have to share one detail, which is that there was an attempt on her life back on Secession day."

Sarah blinked and stopped up short. "One moment," she said, then closed her eyes, her lips moving faintly in a non-vocalized sensorium message. Ey politely turned away. Finally, she caught eir attention once more. "I checked in with the instance that's been meeting with True Name and she said that she received a message from her back on Secession day that sounded really panicked."

"What was it about?" ey asked. "If you can share, that is."

"Not the specifics, but she mentioned that True Name did cancel appointments for the foreseeable future with the promise to come back as soon as she could."

Ey nodded. "Well, then yes, that'd be why. She's safe, at least. Staying with us means that no one can come after her without exposing themselves," ey said as reassuringly as ey could. Ey felt bad leaving out the fact that True Name wasn't in contact at all with either of them, but that felt like it was on the list of things ey couldn't share.

"Has this changed how you feel about her, then?"

"I don't know if it's changed things, necessarily, so much as made me more cognizant of how I felt about her before. I think I mentioned around the time that it came up that we had a conversation about how she said that it was nice to just have a friend, and how I translated that as a friendly acquaintance that

wasn't just another coworker."

"And I called you out on the fact that you later said you thought of her more like a friendly coworker than anything."

Ey laughed. "Right. Well, with all that's gone down, with how it felt to see her in danger and then to see her struggling with the ramifications of being cut off and the effects of the merge, I think I'm a lot more comfortable just calling her a friend. I don't think I'd feel like this if she were a 'friendly coworker'."

"You have a far more complex relationship than what is implied by 'coworker'. It could just be a language thing, that 'friend' implies a greater level of shared happiness than you have, but, confronted by how much you care about her in the context of what happened, you're bumping up against the broader definition of friend of someone you *can* feel that much care for."

Ey nodded. They fell into silence as they walked while Ioan took the time to process.

It certainly tallied, too. Even though May's overflowing had overshadowed it — reasonably so, given the importance of their relationship — ey'd been hit hard by True Name overflowing, as well. Seeing her struggling, upset and overwhelmed, having to claim that same solitude that End Waking did, touched on that care. The need to fix things was a symptom of that confusing sense of care, ey suspected, rather than just something isolated.

"I don't know if you were necessarily talking to me, but just in case you were, I'd agree with your assessment."

Ey jumped at the sudden realization that ey'd said at least part of that out loud, then laughed. "Sorry, I was mumbling, wasn't I? I was trying to keep that dialogue internal, but I appreciate the confirmation."

She smiled. "I suspected so. I'm used to it, now. So, before I continue, are you looking to work on disentangling this, some ideas for where to go next, or just talking?"

"I wouldn't turn down an idea or two, but I've already gotten a lot out of having the chance to talk through the emotional side.

There are a few others in the loop that I've been able to talk with, but that's all been about logistics, or about May and True Name rather than myself." Ey sighed, adding, "I was a mess when I first got here. Doesn't feel great to say, but I spent so much energy on them I kind of forgot to take care of myself."

"That it doesn't feel great to say is a sign that you care deeply, so it's not a bad thing, but you do need to take care of yourself, yes." She looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Alright. I know you said they're both currently overflowing, but what do you think about talking with each of them about how you're feeling about this when you can?"

"Uh, well, I mean" ey stammered. "I guess I should, yeah."

"Should?"

"Right. Should statement. I'd like to, but they both feel kind of fraught. Talking with May about being friends with True Name feels fraught with how they feel about each other, or at least felt about each other. Hell, I don't know how I'd tell True Name I care about her, either. And I don't particularly want to be the one to broach May merging down with True Name, either. That feels like a conversation they should start as cocladists."

"They're complicated topics, and I'm not saying you *must* talk about them, but it'll only help for the three of you to all be on the same page. It'd be a good exercise for you being more active, as well."

Ey nodded.

"You look like you're fading. Want to call it for now and then we can get in touch soon?"

"Uh, yeah, probably," ey said. It was only just settling into evening, but the nap still had em out of sorts. "Thank you, though. This was immensely helpful. I don't think any of us are in a position to hold to a schedule at the moment, given further complicated stuff going on behind the scenes, but I'll definitely be in touch when I can, and will nudge both of them to do the same."

"Ioan."

Ey stopped up short, winced. “Right, sorry. Not my job.”

“Thank you,” she said, grinning. “I’ll touch base with each of them, don’t worry. One more tip before I go: take care of yourself. That whole golden rule thing applies to you, too, you know. Treat others well, but remember you still need to be treated well.”

“I’ll certainly try.”

May arrived without any warning. She would usually ping either em or Douglas, giving them a few minutes to get out into the field and prepare for a pouncing.

This time, however, Ioan awoke before dawn to a small, furry form crawling into bed with em, whispering for em to scoot over. Some sleepy part of em remembered that Douglas had locked down the ACLs to all unannounced visitors shortly after ey’d arrived with the news.

All except May, apparently.

Ey held up the covers for her to squirm beneath them and fit herself comfortably against eir front, draping them back over them both as ey got eir arms around her comfortably. Ey was too tired to do anything other than mumble a quiet greeting, and she didn’t seem all that keen on talking either, so they simply dozed with each other for another few hours.

With the sun warming the far wall of the room, they woke slowly, May squirming around enough to face em so that she could press her nose to eirs.

“Good morning, my dear.”

“Morning, May. Surprised to see you here.”

She shrugged, nosed her way down beneath eir chin. “I woke up early feeling well enough to come by, but did not want to wake you.”

“Or wait?”

“I missed you, Ioan, why would I wait?”

Ey nudged at her snout with eir chin. "Well, I missed you too, so it works out. Just surprised to see you here so soon."

"I am not feeling spectacular, but I am feeling well enough to not be alone. Now does not feel like a good time to be alone." She leaned back enough to smile at em, and though it was a little shaky and her face was still a mess, ey was pleased to see that it was earnest. "Are you okay, my dear? I do not imagine it was the best of times for this to happen."

Remembering eir conversation with Sarah only two days back, ey checked the urge to refocus on the topic on her, instead saying, "It was a little rough, yeah. I got in touch with Sarah and set up an emergency thing a few hours after I got here."

"I am sorry, Ioan."

"Hush, it's not on you. Plus, I canceled the last one, so it was good to catch up with her about what's going on, if only in very general terms. I guess I just kind of overflowed a little, myself. Everything's been so stressful the last few weeks and I didn't feel like I could do anything about it."

"And did you come to any conclusions?"

"Not particularly, but you know how it goes," ey said. "Talked a bit about next steps, at least, about how I should probably make sure that I take care of myself, too."

She laughed. "Yes, you should."

They lay in silence for a few minutes, May simply relaxing in eir arms while ey tried to decide how much else to share from the impromptu appointment.

She's here and we have time, might as well, ey thought

"We also talked about your thoughts on merging down. Don't want to overwhelm you, though, if you're not up for talking about that."

"I was going to bring it up later, myself. I have had further thoughts."

"Shall you go first, or I?"

"You, please."

Ey nodded. "Alright. It wound up being more about jealousy

than anything, and what it was that I was actually feeling protective of when it came to the idea. Some of it is the fact that we've built a pretty good life together, and it took a lot of work. I'm not sure how I feel about her having the memories of that."

"End Waking said much the same, that he had put all his effort into his penance and that he would like her to come by that through her own work."

"Pretty similar, yeah. I'd be really happy for her if she built a life that included happiness and comfort outside of work, but a large part of me wants her to come by that honestly. The other bit that Sarah brought up was whether or not I was worried that her incorporating your memories of us together would lead to her feeling about me the way you do."

There was a long silence after that. Ey did eir best to quell eir impatience. With how much the topic had been weighing on em over the last few days, ey desperately wanted to hear her side of it, as well.

Finally, she said, "I have been thinking about that quite a bit since the topic came up, but only from my point of view. I did not think about how it might feel for you, for which I apologize."

Ey shook eir head. "You've had a lot going on. What thoughts did you have on it, though?"

"I have also been trying to pick apart my jealousy. I have said in the past that I am not opposed to you finding companionship with others, whether romantic or sexual or whatever. I am starting to think, though, that that would only apply to a type of companionship that does not overlap with what you and I have. I want nothing more than for you to feel fulfilled, my dear, and if that means finding fulfillment for the areas that I do not cover, I would only ever be pleased." She sighed, thought for a moment longer, and then continued more quietly, "For someone to feel about you precisely what I do, even if it is tempered by other memories, is too close to the devotion that I am most protective of."

"Have you changed your mind on merging?"

"I do not know, Ioan. I go back and forth on the issue and at the moment, rather more back than forth." She giggled, licked at eir chin, adding, "Or forth than back. The metaphor fails."

"You took that one a bit far, yeah," ey said, laughing. "But I think I'm too tired to talk about this much more. Did you have coffee before coming over?"

"I did not. If you make me a cup, I will love you forever."

Ey nudged her out of bed so that ey could get up as well, saying, "I thought you were going to do that anyway, but I guess a cup of coffee is a small price to pay."

Douglas had beaten them to the coffee pot, which made the process all the easier.

"Hey, May," he said, kissing her cheek and returning the offered hug. "Figured that was you this morning. Feeling better?"

She nodded and slumped down into a chair, cradling her coffee in both paws. "Mostly, yes. I am still below baseline, but it was more important that I see you two than to return all the way."

"Well, glad to see you made it through."

"You will not quit me so easily, Douglas. How are you, though? Has Ioan caught you up on everything?"

"I think so, yeah. Em, Debarre, and End Waking did. Assassins, mergers, Jonas being terrible, Zacharias. Did I miss anything?"

She shook her head. "That is the whole of it, I think. We continue to be dramatic about everything we do."

He laughed. "I mean, not going to deny that, but I'm also going to put a large part of this on Jonas, rather than you all."

"Do you have any thoughts on it?"

"Besides the fact that you're all nuts?"

"Yes, well, that is indisputable. I would merge down with you if I could to give you a taste of it, but alas, it does not work that way."

Douglas lifted his cup in a toast. "For which I'm grateful. It sounds like a nightmare."

“Yes, yes. Such is the life of an Odist.”

“Beyond that, though, I don’t know, I don’t want to lose any of you. I don’t have the history with True Name that you guys do, so all I’ve just been thinking of her in terms of Michelle and Sasha.”

“You’ve been talking to Debarre too much,” Ioan said.

“‘Michelle and Sasha’, I mean.”

Douglas’s face fell. “I never got to meet her, but from what everyone’s said, it sounds like the split was pretty evident.”

“It was,” May said. “While I do not speak of her that way, Debarre is not wrong to do so.”

“Why not?”

The skunk shrugged and lapped at her coffee. “Back when I was her, I did not think of myself that way. True Name did not think of her that way. I know Hammered Silver does, and I am sure that others do as well. It is accurate, enough. Both can be true at once.”

“I wonder what would happen if all of you were able to merge back down into one instance again,” he mused. “Would that get close to being her?”

May fell silent, looking out the window at the fields over the rim of her mug.

“I do not know,” she said eventually. Her voice sounded far away, older than Ioan had ever heard it sound before. “I wish I did, but I do not know.”

“She’s still not back?”

May shook her head, tugging Ioan by the hand over to their beanbag. “Not yet. I would like another day before we go seeking her out, though, okay?”

Ey nodded as ey let emself be tugged along. Relaxing for even just a few minutes with eir partner certainly sounded better than tramping out into the woods around the lake, and some part of em marveled at just how much ey felt like ey needed it.

Some day, ey thought. I'll stop being surprised at what May's made out of me.

It wasn't so bad being hooked on touch and affection, though. Ey'd grown to cherish all of those little loving gestures, and flopping down on the beanbag to let May curl up on eir front and just do nothing sounded like an ideal way to spend a day if True Name was comfortable where she was out at Arrowhead Lake.

With neither of them feeling all that keen on talking further, they simply lounged on the beanbag together, reveling in the spring-tinted sunlight. A little napping, a little petting on skunks, but mostly just calm and quiet.

It wasn't until nearly dinner that they stirred again, Ioan squirming until ey could sit up on the beanbag cross-legged, letting May lounge in eir lap.

"I have been thinking," May began, sounding more dozy than anything. "But I would like to ensure you are willing to talk about this whole merger business before I shove us into a conversation."

"I can do that, sure."

"Would it be unfair of me to merge down?"

"Unfair how?"

She shrugged. "There are three of us in the equation, are there not? For me to merge down takes the uniqueness of our relationship away from the two of us and turns it into a burden for her."

Ey nodded and teased a few fingers through her fur. "I can see that, I guess. Even if it's not something that she acts on, or if she even does anything with the memories, whatever you feel about us becomes something she can feel too."

"Yes. As I mentioned, I am perhaps jealous of that. I would like what we have to be our own."

"I think we agree on that. How do you mean 'unfair', though?"

She twisted around until she could poke her nose at em. "Be-

cause it would be an act that I would take. Even if we all were to agree, it is me that is changing our relationships. I would be the one taking away that uniqueness and turning it into a burden.”

Ioan tugged the skunk up a little further until ey could get eir arms around her. Something about her words didn’t sit right with em, and ey needed at least a little bit of time to think it out.

Perhaps she was still overflowing, in a way. At the tail end of it, sure, but every time in the past, she had waited until she was mostly feeling better before fetching em back from Douglas’s, whereas this morning, she seemed to have forced herself out of that state, rightfully or otherwise, to at least not be alone.

There was some slight distortion, here, though, a way of thinking that didn’t quite mesh with her personality. Ey agreed, yes, but it was her framing that was bothering em most.

“So,” ey began, choosing eir words carefully. “I did say that I’m really starting to not feel so great about the idea, but I’m not totally sure I agree with how much of that you’re putting on yourself. You sound preemptively guilty.”

May squirmed out of eir grasp to sit on the beanbag alongside em, elbows on knees and face in paws.

“I’m sorry, May. Maybe this isn’t—”

“No, you are right,” she mumbled, sounding miserable. It tugged at eir emotions to the point where ey had to restrain emself from tugging her back in for a hug, though her posture kept em at bay. “I am not at baseline yet, my dear. Nothing makes sense. It is like having my emotions refracted through a glass of water. I probably should not even be talking about it.”

“It’s important, I just don’t want you to push yourself if you’re not out of the rough patch yet.”

“Right, yes.” She sighed, pushing herself wearily off the pouf. “Everything feels so urgent, though. I feel like we must have this conversation now if we are to have it, or else the opportunity will evaporate. I know that it does not work that way, that this is not logical of me, but this is not a logical time.”

Scooting to the edge of the beanbag, Ioan stood as well. “I

know. We have months before we run up against Jonas's deadline, but if he's sending assassins after True Name, it sure does make it feel urgent."

The skunk padded over to the kitchen, swiping a few of the dishes that Ioan had left prepared into being, lining them up in a row. "Yes, and I cannot easily let that go. I want her to be other than she is to not be so under his thumb. I want her to be better than she is to be less of what she has become, and yet even those thoughts feel like distortions. Choose your plate, my dear."

Ey picked one mostly at random, winding up with a grilled cheese sandwich and some soup. "I had been wondering as to your reasons. I felt like the idea just kind of popped into my mind based on what she was talking about at the time, what with Zacharias and all, but it came at such an inopportune time for me to actually ask why."

She picked up a plate of mashed potatoes and asparagus, shooing em back to the dining room table. "I think that she has become so singular a person that she cannot but be controlled by Jonas. Her role in guiding the System is no less real; she did the work that she does and she did it both well and proudly. But she built herself into a tool without realizing it, and over the centuries, Jonas has been teaching himself to use that to his advantage."

"And rounding her out more with merges would help make her more of a generalist?"

Laughing, she set her plate down, tugged out her chair, and fell heavily into it. "Generalist is a very utilitarian way to put it. You are not wrong in that it would allow her to be more than a unitasker, but it would also make her more of a person. Someone as focused as her is easy to pin down."

"I would've thought she'd see that coming, though."

"Well, you have heard what she has said. She has been fed bad information by her spies--"

"And the other True Names. At least #Castor."

She frowned, finished chewing on her asparagus. "There is

also that, yes. It is a guess, but I think you are right. How and why he managed to work them into this plan to only subvert this instance of her is another question that I think we would all like an answer to. All the same, she has been fed bad information and had aspects of her life leveraged against her, and now, for whatever reason, Jonas is making his power-grab.”

“Aspects of her life meaning Zacharias?”

“Yes,” she said. “I will not call it a weakness, even as awful as he sounds. To have a relationship is not a weakness.”

Ey chuckled, dipping the corner of eir sandwich into the soup. “That’s a very May statement.”

“Of course it is,” she said primly, stabbing another spear of asparagus before biting off the top. “But this is yet more guesswork. I cannot say for sure that Zacharias is purely working in the hands of Jonas, but from all that she has said to me, I do not think I am too far off the mark.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes.

While ey didn’t mind May’s ideas of comfort food, they were not especially well spiced. This was mostly by design, ey suspected, as eating spicy or sour foods when one has been (or still is) crying sounded unpleasant. Still, there was much to be said about the comfort of a good grilled cheese dipped in soup.

“But yes,” the skunk continued once she’d cleaned her plate. “There was some aspect of vengeance to my and End Waking’s plan, but now I just want her away from Jonas. I do not know yet whether or not I like her or want her to stay in our lives in any way, shape, or form, but I do know that I want her away from him. I want her to live and to—”

Both Ioan and May jolted in their seats as a flash of adrenaline ran through them. A view of a forest, a lake shore, pile of wood not yet lit, and, sitting on a log across from that another furry. His facial structure was very similar to Dear’s but where the fennec had wound up with that pristine white fur, he had ruddy orange except for the white on the underside of his chin and a dark apostrophe of fur on either side of his snout.

Where Dear had wound up with almost absurdly large ears, his felt far more in proportion, along the lines of May's and True Names, though far pointier.

One thing Dear and this new fox did share in common was the snappy dress. Where Dear had wound up in a comfortable androgyny, though, the red fox had turned it into a prim masculinity that was, ey had to admit, quite effective. Black trousers, a white shirt and charcoal waistcoat, and a suit jacket. It was topped off with a simple tie and affected cane, currently being twirled lazily between black-furred paws.

It was just a glimpse, less than a second's worth of sensorium input, but enough for em to make a guess.

"Is that Zacharias? Wait! May! Oh, God damnit."

The skunk had already stepped away

"We have guests!" Zacharias said, standing up and dusting off his trousers. "I was not expecting guests. How cheeky."

True Name was still kneeling before the pile of wood in what had clearly become her firepit. "I am trying to imagine a world in which I should trust you enough to be alone with you," she growled. "And failing."

"Spicy, tonight, are we not?" He grinned, turning to bow extravagantly to Ioan and May. "Mx. and Mrs. Bălan, I presume?"

"We are not married," May said, growling nearly as well as True Name. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Oh, just popping in to say hi, is all," he said cheerily. "Zacharias, by the way. Nice to meet you, Ioan. My dear May. Then My Name, it has been nearly two centuries!"

"Well, hi," she said. "Now get out."

"Oh, I just got here, though!" He pouted, looking between the three of them. Then the smirk returned, along with a wicked glint to his eye. "Besides, what are you going to do about it, my dear? Bounce me?"

May frowned, but remained silent, arms crossed over her chest. None of them had the ACLs for such

“Right, I thought not. Well! Have a seat, I was just saying hi to True Name, but what’s another two sets of eyes?”

Neither Ioan nor May moved.

“Well, fuck you, too, then,” he said, laughing, and sat back down. “So, True Name, my little stink bug, how are you? Roughing it out here?”

The skunk glowered down to the striker and knife, quickly sparking up a coal in the leaf-litter tinder she’d gathered. She blew on it a few times before setting it in a pile of larger kindling. “I am on vacation. What the fuck does it look like?”

“Like you are roughing it.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Look, why are you really out here?” Ioan asked. “Clearly it isn’t just to say hi, and clearly you got access somehow. Got news from Jonas or something?”

“Very preceptive!” Zacharias said, grinning happily. “Just out here checking up on True Name to see if she has any further thoughts on our little gathering.”

“Checking up on someone you tried to assassinate?”

“Oh goodness, not me! You can place the blame for that squarely on Jonas.”

May laughed humorlessly. “Right, and poor Zack just had to sit by and—”

The fox was up in a flash and, with a back-handed swipe, slapped the skunk across the muzzle, getting a yelp out of her and a shout out of Ioan. “You do not have permission to use that name,” he growled.

It took Ioan a few seconds to process what had just happened, but then fury welled up within em faster than any other emotion ey’d felt before. Had ey ever even felt fury before? A small part of em marveled at the unfamiliar emotion.

The rest was already swinging.

The blow never landed. Ioan found emself stumbling backwards several paces. Zacharias stumbled back in the opposite direction. Both of them shouted and worked to regain their foot-

ing.

The two new instances of May that had appeared, partially overlapping with where they had once stood, winked out of existence. “Yes, yes,” she drawled, taking Ioan’s hand in one paw to hold em back while the other rubbed at her muzzle. “We all know you are good at what you do. Get to the point.”

With a huff, the fox stood up straighter, smoothing out his rumpled clothing. “Right. True Name. Are you coming tonight? If not, when shall we expect you?”

The skunk shook her head, still glowering. “I am not coming tonight, no. If I have been given the luxury of a year to meet,” she said, tone dripping with sarcasm. “Then we will meet when I say we meet.”

“If you say so.” Zacharias was back to smirking. That hatred still bubbling within Ioan urged em to consider just how delightfully punchable that expression was. “Well, we will look forward to it, then, I suppose! And you two will be there as well, yes?”

“Your piece of shit boss hired me, didn’t he?”

“That he did, Mx. Bălan! That he did.” He turned to May, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“Yes, I will be there,” she said. Her hackles were still up, free paw still bunched into a fist.

“And End Waking? Would not want the stanza to be incomplete, would we?” He grinned broadly to True Name, “And no, my little stink bug, you do not count.”

“He has not answered yet,” she said. She’d regained her composure, staring at Zacharias steadily. “We will speak with him. Tell Jonas message received and leave me the fuck alone.”

He once more bowed with a flourish. “I live to serve,” he said, sing-song. “Any other messages for me to relay?”

“Yes, tell Jonas to quit sending his most foppish lackeys,” she shot back.

“But my dear! I am here specifically to drive the point home! You are in so far over your head that even ‘little loverfox’ is a part of your fate.” He laughed gleefully. “Oh, it sounds so evil,

does it not? Cartoonishly so! There is no way that I can even begin to talk about this without sounding like a mustache-twirling villain. You have done so well, True Name. It is simply time to step aside. We will see you soon, yes?”

True Name nodded. “Yes. Now, fuck off.”

“Righto!” He turned and winked to May, adding, “So wonderful to see you again. Cannot say I share your taste in partners, but times change, I suppose. Mx. Bălan, I look forward to speaking soon.”

And with that, he stepped out of the sim.

May’s shoulders slumped. She let go of eir hand, moved over to kneel beside True Name, and hugged around her shoulders. “I am sorry, my dear.”

True Name did not return the gesture. No surprise, perhaps; neither she nor End Waking were all that big on touch. Instead she said, “I am sorry, you two. I do not know how they got the coordinates.”

Ioan cursed. “Guess that does mean it’s compromised.”

She nodded.

May leaned away from the hug, but took one of True Name’s paws in her own. “Come home,” she said, voice and expression earnestly worried. “Please. I know it is uncomfortable, but I do not want you out here alone.”

The skunk stared into the fire for almost a full minute, the looked off to the lake and nodded. “Yes, I suppose you are right.” She smiled faintly and added, “I could also use a shower and a night’s sleep on a real mattress. Perhaps we can discuss expanding an outdoor portion of your sim tomorrow, Ioan? I do not want to impose too much, but, well...” She waved her paw at where Zacharias had stood.

“Of course,” ey said, still doing eir best to tamp down eir anger. “I can find something simple on the market for the time being.”

True Name knelt by the fire for another minute before dousing the flames with a collapsible pail of water.

Once they made it back to the house and True Name had showered, they sat around the dining table, each with a glass of wine from a bottle ey'd received years back. They'd wordlessly agreed that a drink was necessary.

Ioan couldn't guess why the two skunks had felt it was necessary, but ey needed something to blunt the edges of that anger that still spun within em. Ey wasn't sure ey'd ever truly felt fury before, but it turned out that watching eir partner get struck across the face was a really, really good way to bring out the emotion.

Ey didn't like it at all.

Once ey'd reached the bottom of eir glass, ey sighed and said, "Alright. What the fuck was that about?"

"Jonas felt the need to show a bit of muscle," True Name said, voice flat. "He wanted to rub it in my face that he still has Zacharias in his pocket, that he knows where I am. I do not think he actually cared about asking me when we would meet, he is just making his leverage known. I suspect he was planning on you two showing up, as well, now that I think about it."

"Why?"

"To ensure that you also saw that power. If you two are to come to the meeting — as I think you must — then he wants you both to know that he will be there with a stacked deck." She rubbed a paw up over her snout, adding, "I am sorry that you had to meet him."

Ioan shook eir head. "Was he always such an asshole?"

After a tense pause, the skunk shook her head. "He was not, no. Witty, smart, sharp-tongued, yes. An asshole, no."

"Well, not looking forward to seeing him again, either way." Ey felt that anger turn within em again, felt the heat of the wine only add to it. "I don't know who he thinks he is, coming after you like that, May."

The silence that followed was even more tense than the one before, both skunks looking down at the table, both tracing the grain of the wood with a claw-tip.

“What?”

May sniffled, shrugged, then smiled tiredly to em. “I am pretty sure he thinks he is me, Ioan.”

Ey blinked, then slouched back in eir seat. It felt like the breath had been knocked out of em. “Wait, really?”

“You see now why I was so upset?”

The thoughts wouldn’t quite fit together in eir mind. Two puzzle pieces with no matching edges. “I’m sorry, I’m, uh...” Ey cleared eir throat, suddenly parched. “He’s one of your old relationship forks? With True Name?”

She shrugged again, sniffled again, looked back down to the table.

“It is at least partly my fault,” True Name said quietly. “One of the earliest individuals I pointed May Then My Name towards was, without either of us realizing, one of Jonas’s instances. He looked and spoke nothing like Jonas Prime, but was starting to get loud on the feeds. May Then My Name forked into a human form and became quite good friends with him, but I lost track of them both for several years. He stopped posting so much on the feeds, so I had little reason to worry about him, I thought.”

“You must understand, I was a very different person back then,” May mumbled. “This was systime 5. Back before I was...me.”

Ey frowned, but nodded for them to continue.

“So, a few decades later, Secession is done, the council is heading towards dissolution, and I am starting to relax. More friends from phys-side uploaded, more furries figured out how to exist within the System as they would like, and I started to meet more people outside work. One of them just happened to be this fantastically well-dressed fox who was just as witty as I felt. We became friends, then we became a bit more.” She shrugged. “That instance of Jonas had...well...”

“Twisted. He twisted my fork into something that neither the me of today nor the me back then would have agreed to.” May sniffled and wiped at her face. “He turned that version of

me into a way of influencing True Name.”

“Yes. It was a long game. He drifted in and out of my life, over the centuries, and then, shortly before Launch, he showed up again and we began to get close. A few years after Launch, they took me out to dinner and dropped the whole thing on me all at once. I am told they did the same on each of the LVs as well, just with different framing.”

Eir head was swimming at the flood of information, and when rubbing eir face didn’t work to clear it, ey waved a glass of ice water into being and sipped. “Which I don’t get. Why are you so overwhelmed here and not on the LVs?”

The skunk twisted her wine glass between her fingers for a few quiet moments. “I was focused on continuity and stability. I think that Jonas was as well, enough to go along with the launch project, but once it was done and that continuity was assured, he let them go their own ways — the Guiding Council on Pollux and the previous status quo on Castor — while he focused on cementing his power here on Lagrange. They were safely away with minimal influence here.”

“Is that what this is all about?”

She nodded. “We were in a steady state for many years after they explained everything. I was not happy, but I still liked the work that I had chosen and I did not know how to do anything else. It was the new tech from the Artemisians that pushed things over the edge. AEC — Audiovisual Extrasystem Communication — rather changes things and even though we agreed on what was to be done about it in a general sense, I think he does not want to risk his own specific vision not coming to fruition.”

They sat in silence, then, while Ioan tried to digest this. Ey was still furious at Zacharias, but now that fury had gained a layer of what almost felt like despair, that someone such as that might have their roots in eir May.

At least it had all gone a long way towards explaining the dynamic on the three Systems. Who knew why the other True Names had decided to treat this one like they had, withholding

valuable information, all but cutting her out of their plans. Perhaps those few years between launch and Jonas and Zacharias's announcement had included additional shaping, or perhaps that other framing True Name had mentioned.

"Fuck."

May kicked eir shin lightly beneath the table. "Language, Mx. Bălan."

True Name looked between them, then grinned. "No, May Then My Name, Ioan is correct. Fuck."

"The Only Time I Know My True Name Is When I Dream of the Ode clade, you watch your mouth," May growled.

They all laughed. Ey couldn't help but. It was all too much, and the humor so perfectly timed to defuse eir anger that it had to be intentional. Some of that anger must have showed on eir face.

Ah well, trust an Odist, ey mused.

Aloud, ey said, "You guys continue to be completely nuts. Thanks for explaining, though. I'm not going to figure it out tonight, so I'm going to have another glass of wine and space out on the couch."

"Fantastic idea, my dear," May said. "If I have to think about it anymore, I am going to start shedding and not stop until I am bald."

Still grinning, True Name nodded. "That is quite enough of the topic, yes. I am going to go outside for a bit and then I am going to go to bed."

Ioan could have sworn that ey and May had gotten enough sleep the night before. Even with her waking em up before dawn, they'd then gone on to sleep until nearly nine. Rather late for them.

Still, that night, they slept for more than ten hours. It had taken May a while to calm down by the time they did make it into bed, the skunk tossing and turning, first leaning in against

em, then shifting away, as though the last bits of her overflowing spell kept her oscillating between wanting to be touched and not. Ey stayed quiet and still throughout, letting her decide what it was that she needed; ey was just happy to be back home.

Eventually, though, they settled down into their usual spots and made it to sleep.

It was almost certainly the stress from the day before, ey reasoned. So much had happened in so short a time. Even the time spent relaxing on the beanbag with May felt at least productive, if still restful. So much had been packed into those last few hours, though, and so much emotion overall through the day, that the sleep felt necessary.

True Name had spent most of the rest of the evening outside, dragging one of eir chairs down from the balcony to park herself in the yard. Despite the lingering vestiges of snow and the chill of the evening, she spent hours out there, either staring up into the sky or grooming bits of forest litter out of her fur.

Ey imagined that she must have made it into bed at some point, though she still woke well before them, as when they finally managed to pry themselves out of bed, there were two steaming coffee mugs sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter, one black and one sweet and creamy, and the skunk was once more sitting outside on the chair, her own coffee held against her chest.

Ioan sent her a gentle sensorium ping, just to let her know that they were awake, then sat at eir desk. Ey had no clue what to even do, there, but if nothing else, ey had to have something comforting in front of em, something known.

“Well, nothing for it,” ey mumbled, swiped a new notebook into being, and began to compile notes of the last few weeks. If ey was to write a book of this whole crazy affair, might as well keep eir thoughts organized.

Ey began with a timeline, starting all the way back at the arrival of the Artemisians and that first meeting with True Name. Then followed the list of the times they’d met for coffee through

the years. Ey dug through eir memories for any that stood out as particularly interesting. Primarily early on, ey found, when they were still feeling out each others' boundaries, though the last few before the assassination attempt held some fascinating insights in the context of all that had happened since, as well.

Finally, the last almost three weeks were laid out in much finer detail. The assassination, the clearing of the house, the meeting with End Waking, all the way up through the meeting with Zacharias the night before.

"Ioaaan," May whined, pawing feebly at eir arm. "Hungryyy."

"Hmm? You're a big skunk, you can make breakfast."

She stood up from where she'd been crouched beside em, laughing. "It is well on lunchtime, my dear. Come up for air."

"Wait, really?" Ey frowned when ey checked the time. "Great. Sorry about that, May."

They pulled together the remaining few dishes of comfort food and called out to True Name to invite her in for a meal. Ey chose the last of the poor skunk's risotto, added a healthy dusting of paprika, and got another cup of coffee to go with it.

"Thank you for lunch," True Name said, once she'd eaten most of her pasta. "When you have a moment, Ioan, I would like to see about expanding the sim as we discussed."

"Right, yeah. Sorry I got so distracted this morning." Ey browsed the markets for appropriate wide open spaces ey could tack onto one of the borders of eir sim. Perhaps right beneath the skunk's window would be best. Ey could even extend the balcony and provide her with a set of stairs down into it. "Alright. What sort of environment? There's some pretty good plains and parks, an okay forest, hmm...this mountain one isn't bad, but the trees are kind of planted in a grid."

She grinned. "That sounds cheesy. However, let us go with a plain of some sort. I do not want to go back to a forest unless it is the one I remember, and a park would be too sterile. Is there nothing like Arrowhead Lake?"

Ey dug a little further, an act that was more akin to remembering than any actual physical browsing. It let em finish eir lunch, at least.

“Alright, here’s one that’s a plain with a river and an oxbow lake. The landscape is just mirrored at the boundaries though, so it looks a little funny at the edges.”

The skunk had perked up at the mention of the river and was already nodding. “That will do quite nicely, my dear. Are you able to scale it so that it will be a good size, at least?”

“Sure. Do you want to set it up now?”

She shrugged. “If you are willing, yes.”

“Can I modify your room to give you an entryway to the area?”

“Please,” she said gratefully.

The three of them stood and walked into the skunk’s room. Ey was somewhat crestfallen to see that ey really had just mirrored the view out of her window, as there was the chair she had been sitting in before lunch. That would mean ey’d have to place the new plot of land first, then modify the house again.

Ah well, easy enough.

Ey dumped a chunk of reputation into the purchase of the sim. Ey wasn’t poor, and it wasn’t a very pricey one, but it was still a noticeable ding, and ey was sure that Jonas would be keeping tabs on eir acquisitions. There was nothing to be done about it, though.

The sim landed on eir mind much as a pending merge might, demanding to be placed somewhere. Ey instructed the sim to put it in the corner formed by the fence of their yard and True Name’s bedroom, expanded to be a mile on a side.

Once the pressure of the environment left eir mind, ey was free to instruct the sim to let the window view the new land, and from there to add an extension of the balcony, a second stairway down, and a door leading out from her room to the balcony.

Ey stepped over and slid the door open, beckoning to the two skunks. “Alright, let’s head out and check on it.”

As promised, they were greeted with what looked to be an endless series of perfectly parallel rivers fading into the distance with the way the boundaries simply mirrored the empty plain on the sides. The fact that the oxbow lakes were also repeated set up a grid effect that was slightly unnerving. Thankfully, the effect lessened when they went down the steps and into the grass itself. They found the grass to be fairly well made and the ground to be delightfully uneven; no small feat when it was so easy to make a perfectly flat plain.

"I can maybe have the boundaries look like fog, if that helps. You'll have fog all the way around you, but at least no repeating rivers."

Both skunks stiffened, then shook their heads as one.

"Please do not, Mx. Bălan. This will be fine as is."

The formality in her voice and the stiffness of her tone did not invite em to continue the topic, so ey did eir best to drop it. "Alright. Well, I guess we can give this a go for a bit and make changes if we need. The weather and sun are synced across the whole sim, so if you need it warmer or drier, just let me know."

True Name bowed. "Thank you, my dear. This will suit me quite well. It is a bit strange seeing a fence and part of a house, but at least that means I will be able to find my way back. May I have ACLs here?"

Ey nodded and made the grant.

"Thank you once more." She smiled faintly and gave a hint of another bow. "If you will excuse me, I would like to explore on my own. Perhaps we can catch up over dinner."

"Sure thing."

May, who had been quiet up until then, said, "Thank you for coming back."

True Name tilted her head. "It was not safe there, May Then My Name. This will be better."

"Yes, but thank you all the same." She laughed and waved a hand. "I am sorry, disregard me. I am still not yet at baseline, and it has me feeling emotional."

The other skunk's expression softened and she leaned forward to give one of her paws a squeeze. It looked stiff and formal, but it was at least an attempt at a gesture that was more in line with May's mode of interacting.

"I understand. I do not think I am there, yet, myself. I will see you at dinner, yes?"

Ioan and May both nodded and made their goodbyes. As a last concession to giving the skunk privacy, ey made a small gate in the fence leading into their yard so that they'd not have to go through her room if they needed to go out into her plain for any reason. It meant pushing through lilac bushes, but ey figured it'd be rarely used.

"Can you work on the beanbag, Ioan?" May asked once they were back inside.

"Sure. Need some pets?"

She nodded.

Asking how she was feeling felt counter to simply providing what she'd asked for — something ey enjoyed plenty, as well — so they made themselves comfortable on the amorphous cushion. It didn't seem to be time for talking at all, so they settled on soft music instead.

Ey wasn't sure what May was doing, whether it was simply soaking up the affection and close proximity or some more thoughtful task. For eir part, though, ey went back to work on organizing events as they'd happened. Who knew what would come next.

The next few days passed in relative peace, with both Odists slowly leveling back out to their baseline moods.

Or, at least, May leveled out to her baseline mood. There still seemed to be some internal struggle within True Name. It wasn't that she was having to step away to sulk or caught in anger as she had been when she had begun to overflow, but that the conflicts were still showing in long silences that would sometimes take her in the middle of conversations, especially when the topic of meeting with Jonas came up.

“I am not even sure if it is conflicts at this point,” she admitted when ey brought it up. “Or, well, I do not think it is conflict-ing memories any longer. Those have been integrated, by this point. I am experiencing conflicts in expectations. I feel doubled, as though there are two of me watching the same conversation and each would like to act in a different way.”

“Are they not working together?” May asked.

True Name leaned back against the couch and stared out the picture windows into the yard for a few minutes as she thought. “Perhaps not, no,” she said at last. “It is difficult to reconcile those two parts of me. They are arguing, in a way. Each is strident in their belief, and some higher part of me will occasionally get stuck trying to get them to just settle down and fucking agree on a course of action or the next sentence or whatever it may be.”

Ioan nodded, saying, “Sort of like Michelle and Sasha?”

She laughed. “No, not quite like that, thankfully. There are some similarities — the sense of there being two parts of me, the internal split — but it is lacking the dire nature, whatever it was that made her completely helpless before the duality of her self. It is still something that I can override. I can respond as True Name would or as End Waking would, but I am still just me, and I am learning to unify those natures. I am becoming a synthesis.”

May fiddled with eir sweater vest from where she lay against em. “I will admit that, for a while there, I was considering merging down with you before I saw how poorly End Waking’s merge went.” After the silence stretched out, she laughed nervously, adding, “Sorry, I suppose that is a pretty awkward thing to say.”

“It is okay, May Then My Name,” True Name said, smiling reassuringly. “A large part of me wishes that you had rather than End Waking, if I am totally honest. I understand why you did what you did, and I think I agree with it, but on a personal level, I would much rather be integrating your memories than his.”

She winced. “That bad?”

“Uncomfortable,” the other skunk corrected. “But if I wanted to remain comfortable, I would have pushed back harder when you urged me to accept.”

“What about May’s merge would’ve been easier?” Ioan asked.

“Easier does not feel like the correct word. It would have been more comfortable. I would have understood the resentment that others feel for me, but it would not be the defining factor of the merge.”

“End Waking mentioned that he defined himself by not being you, yeah.”

She nodded. “So I have noticed. Perhaps that is why it is proving to be such a project to settle into a singular nature again. I imagine that, given that May Then My Name has defined herself through something unique to her rather than some aspect of her relation to me, it would feel strange, but not so uncomfortable. Do correct me if I am wrong, though, my dear.”

She shook her head.

“Well, besides,” Ioan added. “She’s certainly merged down way more recently than End Waking did.”

True Name tilted her head.

“Ioan,” May said quietly. “Do you remember when you were working on the *History* and I said that I was worried that you would be upset with me?”

Ey frowned, nodded.

“And do you remember how Dear told Codrin that the temptation to lie would be great?”

“What did you say to em, May Then My Name?”

May sighed and brushed her paws up over her head. “I said that I was working as launch coordinator to remain more in line with your expectations so that I could merge back down after the project was over, that we tried to do so every few decades.”

A silence stretched out once more.

Eventually, Ioan leaned over to put a kiss between May’s ears. “Skunks are so complicated.”

She let out a pent up breath as a laugh. “I know, my dear. I am sorry. I am sorry to both of you. I believed it to be a small untruth. I wanted my relationship with True Name to seem simpler than it was to keep you feeling comfortable. I hoped that that would keep you from digging into my past. Fat load of good that did.”

“When was the last time you merged down, then?”

“2155,” True Name said. “Longer ago than the last time End Waking merged down. It was not acrimonious, she simply declined my next request for a merger and the conversation never came up again.”

Ey laughed. “Really, *really* complicated.”

“I am glad you are not angry, my dear,” May said, leaning up to dot her nose against eir cheek.

“It seems more silly than anything, but I can see your reasons for doing so, in retrospect. Certainly silly in comparison to the last few weeks.”

“Very.” May turned her gaze back to True Name and said, “I have my apprehensions about merging, though. *We* have our apprehensions, I mean. After watching what happened with End Waking’s merge, it all felt so much more complicated.”

“I do not know,” she said, voice distant. “I said that I understand your reasons for what you did. You wanted me to change. You want me to be able to approach Jonas in some new way that will hopefully allow me to come out the other side with fewer assassins on my tail, yes?”

May nodded.

“And I also think I understand your reasons for wanting to merge down. It would make me understand your compunctions about me in a very real way, and would make me all the more complete of a person, yes?”

Another nod.

“I am amenable to both of those, then. But, May Then My Name, coming at this with both full knowledge and as an open conversation has me feeling more positive than perhaps you

do,” she said, voice having lost its thoughtful edge. “You are a fundamentally good person, my dear, and that is not something that I take lightly. You work on such a small scale and I have spoken against that in the past, but, well, a threat on one’s life is a pretty good way to make one realize that the small scale is still important.”

“But Ioan and I—”

“I would have full knowledge of your apprehensions as well, would I not?” She held up her hands, smiling. “I am not trying to talk you into it right now, my dear, and I would still like to hear those apprehensions regardless of the decision, I am simply explaining that, given this shitty fucking month, you merging down does not at all sound bad.”

Ioan realized ey’d settled back into observing mode, simply watching silently. Not what ey was supposed to be working on. Ey shook emself back to the present and said, “My apprehensions mostly boil down to the fact that the merge would include May and I’s entire relationship. The memories are one thing, and there are some that are pretty intensely personal, but you’d also wind up with the feelings that resulted from the formation of those memories.”

True Name nodded.

Ey took a deep breath, trying to bolster eir courage with it. “This last month has made me realize how much I care about you and your well-being. I like you, True Name, but I’m really hesitant about you having memories of loving me, if that makes sense.”

“And you, May Then My Name? We do not need to go too far into them, but if it is to be a discussion, I would like to at least have these thoughts laid out for perusal.”

Eir partner was a long time in responding. “I am with Ioan on this, in that I am protective of my devotion to em. It...is difficult to say this so openly, but I am also realizing how much I still care about you after the events of the last month, and the root of resentment that led to me urging End Waking’s merge on you

is no longer there, or at least no longer quite so strong, and I am uncomfortable pushing yet more resentment and difficulties on you. I do not want to hurt you.”

The longer May spoke, the more thoughtful True Name’s expression became. She slouched down on the couch, until her head was resting against the back cushions. “I am not sure what to say to this just yet.”

“We’ve been thinking about it for weeks. You’ve had, what, twenty minutes?”

She laughed and nodded to em. “Yes, of course. There is much to think about.”

After True Name returned to her room — or, more likely, out to her field to camp — May said, “If I may say, that was really fucking weird, and I do not want to talk about it at all.”

Ey laughed. “You certainly may. Weird as hell and I need a break from the topic.”

That last part wasn’t strictly true, ey knew. Ey’d be ruminating over it until they went to sleep, and likely well into tomorrow. Still, ey agreed that it wasn’t a topic for talking about at the moment. The chances they’d just windup talking in circles, rehashing the same topics over and over again, was too high, and ey could do that mentally just as well.

So, instead, they relaxed together on the couch, May with her head in eir lap while ey read and she worked on this or that, or whatever it was that she did when her eyes lost focused and she hummed quietly to herself. She’d once called it ‘going into screen-saver mode’, which didn’t sound totally accurate to what ey knew of her when ey’d looked up the reference, but ey still teased her about it every now and then.

Quiet nights were good, though, and ey was pleased to just spend the rest of this one in comfort.

Sleep, however, brought restless dreams. Not nightmares, certainly; they weren’t even bad dreams in any common sense

of the term. They were, to the last, plagued with a sense of waiting and unease. Ey dreamt of waiting for unspecified news, sitting on uncomfortable benches in weirdly crowded lobbies. Ey dreamt of May being out of the house on some errand longer than she had said she would be. Ey dreamt of not having enough information.

All the same, ey woke well rested and made it to the coffee pot before either of the skunks, so ey was able to claim ten minutes of solitude standing before the picture windows and looking out into the slowly lightening yard and the field beside it. Ey could see True Name poke her snout out from her tent, disappear, and then, a few minutes later, start trudging her way back toward the house.

“Good morning, Ioan. Oh good, thank you,” she mumbled, making a bee-line for one of the mugs of coffee that sat, steaming, before the coffee machine.

“Morning. Sleep well?”

She shrugged noncommittally. “I slept, I am well-rested enough.”

They watched the morning head toward full brightness in silence after that, em still standing before the windows and her sitting on the couch, more focused on her coffee than anything.

“You have once again failed to bring me my coffee,” May grumbled from the bedroom door. “I am going to file a petition with the leadership of the System.”

“Ey did not bring me my coffee, either, my dear,” True Name said mildly. “And until recently, I was in such a position.”

May mumbled an apology and padded to the kitchen to grab her own mug before taking Ioan by the hand and dragging em over to the beanbag so that she could lay down with em.

“Are you two up to talking about meeting with Jonas?” True Name asked. “I will pay in another pot of coffee and breakfast.”

Ioan shrugged. “Sure.”

“After that second coffee, yes,” May said.

Breakfast, it turned out, was a Scandinavian affair, or so

ey imagined. Dense, dark bread, a tray of cheeses and meats, and a separate tray of vegetables both pickled and fresh. It was strange to call a meal such as breakfast ‘refreshing’, but the word fit quite well. Quite good, and both of the skunks certainly seemed to appreciate it, eating the lion’s share of the food, though May also swiped up side plate of bacon to go with it.

May nodded towards True Name, grinning. “Alright. Payment accepted. You may begin.”

True Name nodded. “I had an idea as I was walking last night. Or perhaps it is only a sliver of an idea. I suspect that it will not even get me out of whatever it is that he has planned, but if might soften the blow.”

They both nodded.

“My guess is that, if he wants me to ‘step aside’, as Zacharias said, then he would like me to truly disappear. He would like me to essentially never be seen again.”

“Thus the assassination attempt,” Ioan said.

“Yes. He wanted me to disappear and build up a little bit of mystery because then he would be able to be publicly seen mourning, *et cetera, et cetera ad nauseam*,” she continued, rolling her eyes. “The usual nonsense, I mean. I do not think his plans B through M will be any different. They will all involve me no longer being a part of this and in such a way as to make him come out feeling the victor.”

“And I’m assuming you’d like to avoid that if possible.”

“Him feeling like the victor? Yes. I really do mean that I would need to disappear in his definition of victory. I would be effectively dead, not actually. I would be restricted in who I would be able to speak to, I would have to remain out of public sims, and so on. He would not ask me to retire. Disappear.” She hesitated, swirled the last of her coffee in the bottom of her mug, and added, “At least, that is what I would do. It would mean less attack surface for the reactive elements we have been tracking.”

“And your plan would, what, subvert that?” May asked. “I have a suspicion I know what it is, but I would like to be sure.”

“I suspect you do, yes. I will offer him the option of me changing from what I was to such an extent that I will not be the True Name that either he or the System expects.”

“Is this about me merging down, then?”

She shrugged. “I do not think that that is a requirement, though that question was on my docket for the day. I suspect that I have already changed enough with End Waking’s merger. I would just need to prove it to him somehow. That is where my plan ends, however.”

Ioan sat back in eir chair, arms crossed as ey mulled it over. If she was right — and ey suspected that she was — then there would likely need to be a change in form and a change in name to go along with the change in attitude. After all, that’s how Zacharias had gotten as far as he had, right?

Ey couldn’t picture her as anything other than a skunk or perhaps whatever version of Michelle she remembered, though, and certainly couldn’t picture her as anything other than True Name. Would she also have to change her speech patterns? They weren’t totally identifiable, but now that ey thought about it, even Zacharias had shared many of them. She was an Odist through and through, and all of the forking and reinforcing that May had done to grow her sense of empathy didn’t seem like something that she’d willingly undergo, either.

But perhaps that’s what she’d meant by a sliver of a plan. They still had plenty of time to sort that out, at least, and perhaps she’d come up with a way that would actually work without changing herself so much that she’d cease being herself.

All the same, ey wasn’t sure that her simply incorporating End Waking was quite the type of change that Jonas would appreciate. She acted different, spoke different, and ey was sure she felt different about her work than she had, but eir suspicion was Jonas didn’t want anything left of her that could possibly be of any threat to his power. Her incorporating End Waking’s

extreme distaste for the politics of the System might be enough, it might not be, but that was a big risk to take.

Ey'd apparently been silent long enough that the two skunks had drifted off into their own conversation. At least ey'd not been mumbling.

"Welcome back, my dear," May said when ey leaned forward again to grab eir coffee.

Ey grinned. "Thanks. Was a nice trip. Don't mean to interrupt or anything, though."

She shook her head. "We were talking of changes."

"Any conclusions?"

"Not particularly, no," True Name said. "There are certain levels of change that I find unacceptable, is all."

"Right. I was thinking similar. It needs some work, but I can at least see where you're coming from with it."

She nodded. "I will continue to explore. When the time comes, I may ask for your help workshopping some ideas."

The conversation wound down from there, with True Name heading out to walk her prairie or poke around in the water or whatever it was that she was doing.

As though inspired, May and Ioan both moved outside as well, claiming the bench swing on the balcony, sitting on it sideways and facing each other, legs all tangled up. The warmer spring weather ey'd brought about for May while she was overflowing had seemed appropriate once they'd returned, so ey'd left it for the time being. Perhaps ey'd get one more big snow in before letting spring proper settle in.

"What were things like back in 2155?" ey asked.

May tilted her head, blinking a cone of silence into place. "When I merged last?"

Ey nodded.

"I had just forked the third time. There had been more relationships, of course, ones that ended before I had the chance, but this was the third time that I had settled into something comfortable enough to let it last. I was not particularly excited

about merging down, but I had not diverged quite as much by then.”

“Not as much empathy?”

She laughed. “Too much, perhaps. It took a while for me to settle on a comfortable amount.”

“Too *much*? How on Earth did that work?”

“I was a fucking mess at all times. I cried at the drop of a hat.”

“You still cry a lot,” ey observed, then laughed when she poked at air knee.

“Yes, well. I had attributed it at the time to simply being torn up over no longer being in a relationship. My fork was happy, I was heartbroken. In the end, though, I think that my goals were starting to drift from hers. I was diverging in more fundamental ways than either of us had expected.”

“And the next time she asked, you just said ‘no’?”

She nodded. “She asked me to consider it, and then the topic simply never came up again. I think that she was already expecting to write me off after the merge in 2155.”

“Did she wind up picking up more of your empathy from that merge?”

She opened her mouth as if to reply, then closed it again, frowning. “I was going to snap at you,” she admitted. “But you bring up a good point. She did not. What emotions she expressed, real or not, came more earnestly to her. She was more able to express empathy, even if it was in a very True Name fashion. She did not accept my merges — or any of those from others in her stanza — as blithely as she did End Waking’s.”

“I imagine the circumstances were a bit different,” ey said, grinning. “Why were you going to snap at me?”

“I thought you were going to ask me to merge down.”

Ey shrugged. “I hadn’t gotten that far in the thought process. Is it something you’re still uncomfortable with?”

“I do not know, my dear. If you had asked me just then, I would have said no. If you had asked me five minutes before

then, I would have said yes.” She patted eir knee, smiling. “But I will endeavor not to snap at you either way. How about you, though?”

“Much the same, I think. Your answer has me wondering, though, if she was more intentional about a merge like that, it could work. She could have some of your memories of being a loving and emotional person while still respecting your privacy.”

“And that is why I did not snap at you. It is a good point, my dear. She would not have my memories wholesale, and with what memories and personality traits and whatever else goes along with a merge, she would wind up with a synthesis, rather than a replacement. She would still have all 226 years of being True Name, and all those years of being End Waking, just that she would also have some of me in there.”

“Is that something you could talk her through?”

She looked thoughtfully out into the yard, at the faint greenening of the lilac branches. “Perhaps, yes. We would have to be very deliberate about it, but it should be possible.”

Ey nodded, watching the skunk’s gaze drift in and out of focus, the way she would occasionally chew on her lip when thinking. Watched, and thought about what such a synthesis would look like. There wouldn’t be any concrete changes in eir partner, but what would this new restless, unsettled True Name look like with yet more memory heaped onto her? Ey knew ey could never know the whole of May and that ey was biased besides, but she seemed so much more happy and comfortable than her down-tree instance, even before End Waking’s merger. More comfortable, feeling less of a need to dump all of her energy into forward motion. What would that look like with True Name?

“Do you want to?”

May started from her own reverie. “Hmm?”

“Regardless of the mechanics or how comfortable you are with it, is this something you’d even want to do?”

She nodded readily. “Yes. That is the source of all this stress

for me over the last few days. I want to, it is just the reality that is working against me.”

“Why?”

“Why do I want to?” She laughed. “Because I like who I am and I do not like who she is, but that does not mean I do not like what she can become. I want her to be happy and to feel love and to slow the fuck down for five minutes. I do not know for sure, but I strongly suspect that these will only ever be good for her.”

Ey leaned forward enough to snag one of her paws and give it a squeeze. “Guess we’re of one mind on that, then. Or at least mostly so; you have a better sense as to what goes into the emotional side.”

She smiled gratefully and gave eir hand a squeeze. “Well, when she returns, we can expand on our thoughts.”

They didn’t have to wait long.

Shortly after they went back inside to pull together a snacky sort of lunch, True Name returned from her trip out in the prairie and bowed to them, saying, “I have had some thoughts that I would like to run past you.”

“As have we,” Ioan said, gesturing her to a chair. “Good timing. What were you thinking?”

“It is perhaps more for May Then My Name to answer, though I will appreciate both of your input.”

The skunk nodded for her to continue.

“You have mentioned in the past that you forked to cement emotional patterns that led to your divergence. I think that I have wound up doing that to some extent, but only ever sub-consciously. With how much specificity were you able to pick what it was that you were modifying?”

May glanced to Ioan, then shrugged. “I worked in very small steps. I forked dozens of times to change very small things. Being deliberate about it made it essentially as fine-grained as I needed.”

“Alright. That helps quite a lot, actually. I was considering

how much I might be able to change without losing who and what I am. If I can change some of my own habits, maybe the end result will still be something that I am happy with, but with enough difference to get Jonas off my back. I am not yet sure what those habits might be, but it is an option, at least. I have been trying to catalogue what it is about myself that can go, as it were.” She smiled wryly, “But yes, doing so deliberately is probably for the best.”

“That’s actually what we had been talking about,” Ioan said, looking to May for confirmation that it was alright to continue.

“A deliberate merge,” she said, picking up from where ey’d left off. “One that will keep us comfortable in our privacy while also giving you the opportunity to build up from where you are.”

“Really? That is not what I was expecting to hear.”

They both nodded.

There was a long silence, then. Both May and Ioan watched True Name as she traced the wood-grain on the table with a claw-tip.

“And you are okay with that, Ioan?”

Ey nodded. “I think so. I don’t wholly understand the mechanics of it, but you’re the dispersionistas. I trust you two to have that covered.”

She nodded and looked to May.

“If you are alright working with me through the process, then I am okay with it.”

“Are you?” Ioan asked.

True Name smiled lopsidedly. “So long as I can fork beforehand just in case, why the fuck not? I am already not what I was.”

May scoffed and shook her head. “‘So long as you can fork?’ Jesus, True Name. Of course you can fucking fork. 108 instances with daily reconciliation, and she asks if she can fork.”

They laughed.

“Well,” True Name said, shrugging. “Fuck it.”

Part IV

Reconcilliation

Ioan Bălan — 2350

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

((Maybe a bit more))

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

Ey poured emself a cup of coffee before joining them. “Appreciate it. Hope I’m not interrupting.”

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

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

“May Then My Name think so, but we were also waiting for you to join us to make sure.”

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

“Well,” True Name began, a fork appearing next to her. “First I fork.”

The new instance of True Name bowed. “And I will return to my tent in the interim,” she said before waving goodbye and padding back out through her room.

“And then we will set up a space for me to rest in the meanwhile, and then I suppose that is all there is to it. May will fork and quit and I will process the merge.”

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

“Or if the result is not acceptable.”

Ey frowned. “‘Not acceptable’?”

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

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

Ioan leaned over and ruffled a hand over the skunk’s ears. “Yeah, you definitely do.”

“Yes, yes, and you love me for it.” She laughed and pushed

eir hand away, straightening the mussed up fur. “Breakfast first, though, and then we can work from there.”

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

“Are you sure you don’t want to set up something out in the prairie?”

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

They also supplied her with ready water, coffee, and a few comforting snacks on one of the bedside tables so that she wouldn’t have to get up just to go to the kitchen.

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

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

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

“I don’t even know why I’m fretting so much, I’m not even the one merging.”

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

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

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

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

"Stay?"

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

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

May forked and the new instance climbed up onto the bed with True Name, the two skunks kneeling, facing each other, amid all the blankets and pillows.

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

"Go ahead."

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

Ioan stuffed eir hands in eir pockets and did eir best to feel rooted to where ey stood, hoping against hope that ey could keep from pacing. Both em and May watched True Name carefully, though she seemed almost frozen, breathing shallowly despite the relaxed set of her features.

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

“Oh, May,” she whispered, and started to sag over to one side.

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

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

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

“Why, do you think?” ey asked.

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

...

Selected Letters

Ioan Bălan

Exocortex#99732a6

Selected correspondences of the Bălan clade
systime 222-232

Note: With the events of the last ten years, there's been a lot changes shaking out in the clade when it comes to relationships. Collecting all of these here so that I can keep them handy for when things doubtless need further shaking out in the future.

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.

www.makyo.ink