

## Debarre — 2350

When Debarre received the ping from End Waking, he quickly excused himself from dinner and dashed out into the back yard to respond. The last time he'd received a ping in the middle of a period of overflowing, it had been when the skunk's leg had been impaled on a branch, so he hoped against hope that it wasn't the entire tent washing away in a flood, this time. It was getting on into spring — still a bit early for floods, but one never knew...

"E.W.?" ey mumbled. "What's up? You okay? Is the tent?"

"The tent is fine, my dear," he replied. "I apologize if I interrupted, but I have some news regarding May Then My Name, Ioan, and True Name, and I need to speak about it with someone other than them. Someone not an Odist."

He frowned down to the lawn, kicking at a tuft of crabgrass. "Well, if you're getting in touch, I'm assuming it's urgent."

There was a sense of a sigh from the other end. "I am sorry, my love."

"Fuck, I'm sorry, E.W. That came out way snarkier than intended. I understand. I only meant to ask if it was the type of thing where I should fork and come by right away."

"Please," End Waking said, sounding relieved. "There is nothing to be done, but I am very impatient to speak with someone."

"You? Impatient?" Debarre laughed. "I'll be right over."

He forked off Debarre#RelEW and watched him step from the

sim, then spent another few seconds looking out into the yard, trying to remember the last time anything had been so important that it had required him leaving immediately.

Something other than a tree falling on End Waking, that was.

“Well, shit,” he mumbled turning to head back inside. “This is gonna be a mess.”

---

Debarre#RelEW was greeted by the sight of End Waking sitting cross-legged in the clearing across from May Then My Name.

“Oh, company,” he said, frowning. “Wasn’t expecting two of you.”

“You messaged...wait, does that mean you are a fork?” May Then My Name said, frowning at End Waking.

“It does, yes.”

“I never knew you had it in you,” she said, sounding proud. To Debarre, she said, “Did this asshole tell you why I am here?”

He gave her a hug before sitting down with them. “He said it had something to do with you, Ioan, and True Name, and that he needed to talk to a non-Odist. That’s why I was surprised.”

She grinned. “You will have your chance, my dear. I will not be here long. I needed to step out for a moment, and figured I would catch End Waking up. I am happy to see you, too, though.”

“Happy to see you too. You’re always welcome over to my place, too.”

“Of course, yes. This did involve End Waking, though, so alas, I could not go make you uncomfortable with my flirting.”

He shoved at the skunk, who giggled.

“Well, okay. What’s up? You finally merge down?”

She blinked, looking startled. “Yes, actually. How did you guess?”

“Ioan mentioned it when we talked last. How’d it go? Did she explode?”

“Not at all, no.” She shrugged, poking at the dirt with a twig. “Actually, I am finding myself rather fond of her, now.”

“Bullshit,” he growled.

“Debarre,” End Waking murmured.

May Then My Name waved a paw. “It is okay. You do not have to like her. You do not have to interact with her. End Waking wanted you to know about some of the practical considerations, but neither of us are planning on swaying your opinion of her.”

He frowned and leaned back on his palms. “Sorry. I guess I’m just worried about you. She’s not exactly known for her openness and honesty without ulterior motives, so.”

She smiled wanly. “No, she is not. A fact I have not forgotten. Needless to say, I merged down, and she is making plans to meet up with Jonas, now.”

“That falls more in line with practical concerns,” he conceded. “And Jonas still wants both of you there?”

“As far as I know, yes,” End Waking said. “I have spoken with True Name several times over the last few weeks and she has a plan of sorts. I do not know how successful it will be, but it is better than nothing.”

“Wait, you’ve been talking with her, too?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head. He could already feel his hackles up, and this wasn’t helping. “Can’t fucking believe it.”

May Then My Name frowned, leaned over to hug him around the shoulders, and whispered, “I am going to leave you to it, but first, remember who you were, who you are, and imagine who you will become, but above all, remember that you love him and that he loves you. Let go, and have fun. Those are the rules of engagement.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he returned the hug. Had she said it in anything less than her most earnest voice, he might have scoffed, and as it was, he could see himself falling for the gentle manipulation as though from a meter above. He could resent her, but she had said exactly what it was that he needed to

hear.

Because of course she had.

“You’re such an asshole,” he whispered back, then kissed her cheek to take the sting out of the words. “I’ll do my best. Now, shoo.”

She laughed and licked at one of his whiskerpads. “Yes, yes.”

After she leaned over to pat End Waking on the knee, she stood up and stepped out of the sim.

Debarre rubbed his paws over his face. “Where’s your root instance? Within an hour’s walk?”

End Waking nodded. “Up-river, yes. Would you like me to walk you there?”

He shook his head. “Give me some time to think. There’s still some of me that’s stuck on dinner parties, then another chunk on this whole thing, and another still on May telling me about these rules of engagement or whatever.”

The skunk smiled faintly. “Twenty minutes’ walk up-river, then. He will know that you are coming.”

After End Waking quit, Debarre started to trudge up the faint trail that they’d worn heading up along the river.

He knew that May Then My Name was right, that he probably needed to at least take into account that if Sasha and Michelle could change enough to make the Odists, that surely True Name could change enough to become someone that even her up-tree instances could like, just as he knew that he probably shouldn’t take that out on End Waking, frustrated as he was.

Still, it was hard to square the image of his boyfriend and True Name meeting up voluntarily. What was it that he’d said when Ioan had come by asking after camping supplies? *“I will help but I will not speak with her”?*

*Remember that you love him*, he thought, even as he trudged up the path. *Even if you’re working to undermine all that shit that she’s done with Jonas, at least you still love E.W.*

The skunk was crouching at the edge of the stream, washing his paws after having apparently just finished gutting a trio of

large trout.

"I understand if you are upset, Debarre," he said, not looking up. He kept looking down at his paws as he scrubbed.

"No," Debarre said, sitting down next to him. "Or, well, I am, but it's whatever. I just don't see how something as stupid as May Then My Name merging down solves anything about this. Suddenly, you two are all buddy-buddy?"

End Waking shook his paws free of most of the water before drying them on the hem of his cloak. "We are not. I am pleased that she is no longer who she was, but she is not a friend. She is not me."

"But you're visiting her!"

"May Then My Name has asked me over a few times." The skunk finally looked at him, gaze level and expression flat. "Did you not say that you would rather she not die?"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean that you need to interact with her. I don't want her to get offed by some asshole politician, but I also don't particularly want her in my life."

End Waking shifted from his crouch to sitting cross-legged on the bank of the river. "I do understand that, yes. I do not particularly want her in mine, either, but I am now a part of hers, whether she likes it or not. I have been able to help her process some aspects of the merge and also tell her more of how I feel to her face. Once this is over, she will not need to be a part of my life any more, and I can move on to defining myself through something other than penance."

Debarre scratched a claw through the dirt of the bank, worrying a pebble free so that he could throw it into the river while he thought. Finally, he nodded, saying, "Okay, I get that. What will you define yourself as, then? Like, don't get me wrong, I'm happy you aren't her, and in part specifically *because* you aren't her, but that's not the only reason I love you."

"I do not know, my love," he said after a long silence. "If I am defined by not being her, by not being what I was, then what is left? I cannot say my love for you, because all of the clade has

that to some extent. I cannot even say that I have being an Odist, because, after all these years and with all of her changes over the last few months, I am not even sure that I am that.”

“You can be just End Waking,” Debarre said gently. “Like, you can just drop the clade and be that nerd who lives in the woods.”

The skunk laughed and elbowed him in the side. “We have rather turned our clade identity into idolatry of a sort, have we not?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I like where you came from! But I won’t be pissed if you drop your clade identifier. Hell, maybe you can even start saying things like ‘don’t’ and ‘isn’t’.”

“Do not push your luck.”

They laughed.

“You don’t have to have this sorted out, though.” He shrugged, adding, “You don’t even have to stop seeing True Name. I’m sorry I got angry there. I think I just got upset because any chance that you might start liking her felt like something of a betrayal.”

“I am a ways off yet from liking her, Debarre. I will not say never, but I may yet get to the point where I tolerate her. I will not betray you, though. You or your reactionary friends or whatever she called them.”

Debarre scrambled to his feet, eyes darting around through the trees. “What the fuck?”

“The sim is empty, my dear,” the skunk said mildly. “I empty it every time someone enters.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I think about you a lot, Debarre. Certainly more than anyone else I think about. I have pieced together enough.”

He growled. “Well, shit. I mean, I guess I’m an obvious enough choice for it.”

“You are, yes, and doubtless the powers that be have been keeping their eye on you since Secession. I do not know the specifics, nor do I want to. As I said, I will not betray you.” End Waking smiled wryly, adding, “And I do not think I am of much

interest to any of them, anyway. I rarely leave, and I never enter a building when I do. I am more focused on my next meal than anything else.”

“Skunks just wanna get fat.”

End Waking grinned toothily. “It is not *not* true.”

“Well, anyway. Fair enough. I don’t imagine you’ll be ratting us out, and you’re right that they probably already know. I’m just glad that you’ve been sweeping the place.”

“I have never caught anyone hitchhiking on you, though I have on May Then My Name and Ioan.” He shrugged, gathered up the line of fish. “But speaking of fat, can we go back to cook these? I am not ready for you to stay over, but I would like to eat dinner with you, if you are up for it.”

---

Debarre was still mostly full from dinner at home, but he had a few bites of fish forked from End Waking’s plate. Tasty, but, as always, lacking in salt.

After they ate, End Waking tasked Debarre with washing off the plate while he tucked another small log into the stove and started the kettle for tea, which they shared while sitting on the step at the entrance to the tent, keeping the last of the spring chill away.

“So, my political junkie friends aside, do you have a better idea of what’s going on with Jonas and company?”

End Waking shrugged. “A little, perhaps. I think it is this upcoming audio-video tech. I do not think he wanted—”

“Moment,” Debarre said, holding up a paw while he sent a hasty message back home. “Sorry. We’d been guessing at that, just sent a confirmation. Done now.”

“Please do not act on it yet, my dear.”

So serious was the skunk’s tone that Debarre set down his mug of tea and turned to face him. “I won’t, but you gotta tell me why.”

“I am going to be at this meeting. I should probably not even know about their AVEC, but I do because of True Name.”

“And given you and I, there’s probably only one place I’d get it,” he guessed and, when the skunk nodded, sent another message back home. “You sure this place is secure, then? And you’re sending a fork, right?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Good.”

End Waking smiled. “I know that you do, but it is always pleasing to have confirmation that you think so much of me, Debarre.”

“Of course I do,” he scoffed. “But I interrupted, sorry. You were saying?”

“Right. With this AVEC technology, I think that Jonas sees an opening to edge True Name out. I do not know why, but she mentioned something about a diversity of governance across Systems. I do not agree with him on this. I think he is playing a dangerous game by treating each of the Systems so differently. Each System treating itself as a separate country is one thing, but potentially destabilizing them by giving each a different form of governance feels like him treating politics as his plaything. I do not like it.”

The longer End Waking spoke, the deeper Debarre’s frown got. “Yeah, ever since they set up that Guiding Council thing over on Pollux, we’ve been wondering about that. It sounds innocuous enough. Reasonably close to the Council of Ten over on Artemis, I guess, just folks you can go talk to about disagreements and mediation, at least on the surface. That part was inoffensive, but that they would even do such a thing in the face of the *History* is just wild.”

End Waking shrugged. “You know more than I on that end. I do not keep up with either LV beyond what you and Ioan care to pass on. There are messages from the clade, but you know my feelings on them.”

“Mmhm.” Debarre hesitated, then added, “Though if you do



wind up going through them and come across any juicy details about those politics you don't care about, you could always share them with me."

He laughed and shook his head. "Should my life become so boring, you will have more to worry about, my love. I am better at being a pest than you give me credit for."

"Fine, fine. I'll just get them from May Then My Name."

"You will have to put up with her ceaseless flirting."

Debarre grinned. "I'm pretty well used to it by now. You're really going to go to this thing, though?"

End Waking nodded, chewing on a mouthful of tisane-bits. "Yes."

"Why, though? Isn't that going to be dangerous? Never mind totally outside your interest. It'll all be politics."

The skunk was a long time in answering, staring out into the forest and listening to the far-away rush of the waterfall. "There is what Jonas hopes to accomplish and what I hope to learn. Jonas, I think, would like to gloat. He would like it known that he can loop even me into his plans. He would like even me, even the recluse scared, to use as a lever over True Name if she is to come out of this alive."

"And me."

"And you, yes. I do not doubt that even he knows what you are up to these days, though I do not know to what extent." He poked around in his mug to hunt down the last of the gooseberries. "I am pleased that you are so careful. I worry about you."

Debarre sat, silent. The comment all but demanded silence from him, so rare was any expression of worry from his boyfriend.

"I will be going because if this is to be the end of True Name or whatever she is becoming, then it will be a step towards letting go. It will be an in for me to become independent. If I am to move beyond that which defines me, I would like to know how."

"Still thinking of cutting your ties? Dropping the clade name?"

End Waking shrugged. “Would that be so bad? May Then My Name would become simply a friend, rather than a friend and cocladist. True Name would become someone I know. I do not speak with the others. Serene, perhaps? But even then, it has been many years. It would not change my relationship with you. The forest will not care if I am an Odist or if I am not. To it, I am called Nobody, and when I die and moulder beneath the roots, then it will say that it feasts on Nobody.”

Debarre sighed. Hearing End Waking talk so much was a rarity, but that the death-thoughts were still there, meant it’d be a while yet before he’d be allowed back to stay.

“And AwDae? The Name?” he asked. As he always did when Debarre said their friends name, the skunk stiffened, hunched his shoulders, and drew his hood up over his head. All the same, he’d made it a point to say it at least once per visit. There had been a row the first few times, but he’d won on point that AwDae had been his friend, too.

“I do not know, Debarre. That is, I think, the one thing that I will ever defer to True Name on.”

He snorted. “Really?”

“If she, of all of us, were ever to feel comfortable speaking it, to talking about em, then I will know that this embargo will have been lifted.”

“Well, fair,” the weasel said, finishing his tea before handing the mug back to End Waking to let the skunk snack on the remnants. He’d never really enjoyed them enough to do so himself. “I’m happy for you, you know that?”

He laughed, swallowing the spent lemon balm and mint he’d been chewing. “Happy?”

“Yeah. Like...” Debarre trailed off, hunting for words. “I’ve never seen you move forward so much all at once. Or at all, really. Like, it’s not a bad thing to have a life that you’re happy with, but watching you work on the things you *weren’t* happy with is nice to see. Kinda glad May Then My Name talked you into the merge, honestly.”

“It has brought me a lightness, yes. She is meddlesome, but kind-hearted.”

“You’re telling me. She gave me rules of engagement when I first showed up. Thought she was being weird, but they worked pretty well.”

“She is a brat.”

Debarre laughed. “You all are. But hey, I should get going.”

The slight sag in End Waking’s shoulders spoke of relief. He nodded, saying, “Of course. Thank you for the chance to talk.”

“You’ll let me know when you’re going out to this meeting, right?”

“Of course.”

“And you promise you’ll send a fork?”

“I will.”

“And call if you need?”

“Debarre, shut up,” End Waking said, patting his knee. “Go. I will keep you up to date.”

“Fine, fine.” He gave the skunk’s paw a squeeze and grinned. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Debarre quit, rather than bothering with stepping back home. The pile of memories caught his down-tree instance in the middle of a sentence — thankfully something unimportant — and he had to spend a minute reconciling the memories with the ones he’d made since.

“Well, that was interesting.”

“Fuck,” user11824 said. “I was worried you’d say something like that.”

He laughed. “You’re right to worry. Shit’s going to get really weird here. Life’ll get both more and less simple in the next little bit.”