

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 conflicting 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 focus 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.”