

Preview

Motes Played

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A Post-Self story

A LITTLE BOOK FOR LITTLE SKUNKS

Madison Rye Progress
and Samantha Yule Fireheart

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Motes Played

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Note: this book relies on the plots of The Post-Self Cycle, particularly *Mitzvot*. It is strongly recommended that you read those works first. They may all be found post-self.ink/cycle as paperbacks, ebooks, and free to read in the browser. If you would prefer to jump right in, spoilers be damned, you can find a primer in the appendices on page 209 to get you started.

The tilde (~) is the punctuation mark of whimsy and on this I will not be swayed.

Content notes: Contains mentions of rough, but consensual sex with one vague description; blood; adult characters engaging with the world as children, unrelated to sex; themes of familial abuse.

To The Lament, who offered me reclamation.

—Madison Rye Progress

Motes Played

Preview

She died at play,
Gamboled away
Her lease of spotted hours,
Then sank as gaily as a Turk
Upon a Couch of flowers.

Her ghost strolled softly o'er the hill
Yesterday, and Today,
Her vestments as the silver fleece —
Her countenance as spray.

— *Emily Dickinson*

Motes — 2362

1

Motes played.

She played in color. She played in paint. She painted the backdrops for the productions. She painted the props that sat on the stage or rested in the actors' hands. She painted the stage itself, the matte black of so many past productions long abandoned. She painted her nails, her claws, herself. She got it on her fur. She got it on her clothes. She got stripes over her ears and polka-dots on her nose. She painted her dreams, those serene and idyllic landscapes interrupted by hyperblack squares, unexpected and unexplained holes in the world that depicted a nothing-ness, a missing-ness, a not-there-ness that slid easily between the border of absurd and unnerving. She painted the holes in the world that she dreamed about but was afraid to touch and yet which would not stop touching her mind in turn.

She played in her free time, such as it was—after all, her work, such as it was, was a joy beyond joys, but everything is a sometimes food. She played hide-and-seek in the auditorium. She played tag with the performers and techs. She played pretend. She played horses and kitties and mousies. She played with Warmth In Fire, endless forks dotting countless landscapes, leapfrogging over each other across fields and between trees,

bouncing off the walls of canyons and cities, colliding with force enough to knock them spinning and send them dizzy. She hunted down her friends and played hide-and-seek, yes, and tag and horses and kitties and mousies. She hunted down her friends and played puzzle games and rhythm games and stealth games and real life platformers and turn-based sims that locked her in place when it was not her turn.

She played with her form. She played with her fur. She played with her mane. She played with her claws and with her tail. She played with her size. She played with her age. She played when she presented as twenty. She played when she presented as twelve. She played when she presented as five. She played always, even when she was as old as the rest of her clade—what was it, now? 275? 276?

She played with life, enjoying and enjoying and enjoying.

She played with death. She had died countless times, on-stage and off—to knives, to falls, to drowning, to games, to those who said they loved her, to those who said they hated her.

She played with identity. She played with fire.

Motes played because she was a kid and she was a kid because she played. She was a kid because kids are resilient. She was a kid because kids bounced, because they fell, cried, and then picked themselves up once more and went back to playing. She was a kid because she liked being small. She was a kid because she liked it when others played, too. She liked when others fell into enjoyment and laughter along with her. She liked the way that it brought out the best in those in her life. She was a kid because a life would not truly be complete without kids, and she believed with all of her heart that life should be complete.

She played because she was play. Play incarnate.

And so Motes played.

She sat atop her stool, one of her feet perched up there with her so that she could rest her chin somewhere while she painted. A palette sat on an infinitely positionable nothing beside her. A canvas sat on an easel, rickety and well-loved, before her. A brush sat in her paw, and paint sat on the brush. A thin, black rectangle sat on that canvas, as did a mountainous landscape. Music sat in her ears, chirpy and glitchy to offset the serenity of the scene in a new way.



She hummed. She sang. Her tail fwipped this way, flopped that in time with the music. She painted and painted and painted until the painting was finished—there was no guarantee of when that would be: the painting would be done when it was done, as it now was—and when it was finished, she stopped.

Slipping off her stool, she stumbled clumsily to the side, laughing at the sudden rush of pins-and-needles to her backside and the base of her tail. She inserted a step in her list of things to do before cleaning and plopped down onto her belly, using the remainder of the ochre paint in the brush to doodle the face of a fennec fox on the hardboard floor of her studio. It was one of thousands by now, and they had long since started to overlap.

Once feeling returned to her rump, she pushed herself back to sit cross-legged and started the process of actually cleaning up.

She used to just wave away her supplies, either letting them dissipate back into her memories or float back to their proper locations in her studio, but some decades prior, she had started using the process of putting things away by hand to unwind from the context of painting.

She split the difference today and forked quickly into four Moteses: one hauled the stool up above her head and trundled over to plop it down in the corner by the workbench; one ran off with the brush and palette to wash them off in the sink; one brought the easel, painting still clamped to it, over to the corner to dry; one tried to do a handstand in the middle of the room while Moteses#Root watched. Eventually, she managed for a few seconds before collapsing into a giggling heap.

One by one, the various Moteses quit until #Root was the

only one remaining. She pushed herself to her feet, stretched, and padded out of the pleasantly cluttered studio.

“Lights, Dot.”

Motes jumped at the sound of A Finger Pointing’s voice from the couch beside the door. “Oh! Yeah!” she said, forking off one more ephemeral instance to go flip the switch in the studio, make some spooky noises, then quit, all while #Root climbed up to join her down-tree instance on the couch, slouching against her side.

“All done painting?” Beholden asked, the other, larger skunk not yet looking up from where she was slicing a lime into wedges at the bar.

“Mmhm.”

A Finger Pointing ruffled a hand lazily through the skunk’s mane. “What were you working on, my dear?”

“Same sort of thing,” she said, squinting her eyes shut lest they be poked by errant strands of that longer fur. “The shapes in my dreams are getting narrower and flatter, now.”

“Are you going to wind up painting thin black lines in another hundred years?” Beholden asked from the bar, a grin audible in her voice. “Just a beautiful landscape cut in half by a hair?”

Motes giggled. “I do not know. Probably. Are you making drinks, Bee?”

The other skunk scoffed, tossing her head back, adopting a scolding tone. “Am I making drinks? Am *I* making drinks? And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights, what happened to your brain?” She laughed, adding, “Why? Want one too?”

Motes blew a raspberry in response. “Yes please!”

“Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps of the Ode clade, you had best not be feeding the child gin,” A Finger Pointing scolded in turn, leaning hard into that full name. Her scowl was nevertheless patently overwrought.

“Right, virgin gin fizz it is.”

“Maaa~” Motes whined. “I am a grown up!”

“You are seven, my dear,” A Finger Pointing retorted.

Another raspberry.

Beholden poured a tall gin fizz to share with herself and her partner-*cum*-cocladist, lime muddled with sugar and cardamom bitters, gin and soda water. Then she made a second glass sans alcohol and turned to lean back against the edge of the bar, drink in one paw and bottle of gin in the other, finally facing the two cuddled up on the couch. She ‘absentmindedly’ started to top up the glass from the bottle. “Oh, *right!* You said virgin,” she said, mock surprise in her voice. Alcohol continued to pour. She winked to the skunklet. “Oh no. *Oh no!* That is way too much! Motes! You had better not drink this!”

They all laughed.

Beholden padded over to join them on the couch. She took a long sip from one of the glasses before passing it over to A Finger Pointing, handing the other over to Motes. “We are headed out to a pub tonight with a few others, kiddo. Jazz and burgers and too much whiskey.”

“Is that why you are all dressed up?” Motes asked, her paint-spattered overalls contrasting with both of their all-black ensembles.

They both nodded.

“Who will be there?”

“Ioan, May Then My Name, Unbidden, Ray and Loam...” Beholden said, ticking off names on her fingers. “The usual crowd.”

“Can I come?”

A Finger Pointing shrugged. “I do not see why not. Do you want to?”

Motes grinned. “Not really. I just wanted to see if I could.”

Her down-tree pinched her ear between her fingers. “Very well. Will you be staying here by yourself, then?”

She laughed, tilting her head and taking a lapping sip of her drink. “Maybe. Maybe I will find someone to flop with.”

“Cuddly Dot?” Beholden asked, leaning closer to sandwich her between her two guardians, between Ma and Bee.

Motes wriggled right in between them. “Mhmm. Not tired, just lazy.”

“Flop away,” A Finger Pointing said fondly. “Who do you think you will ask?”

She shrugged. “Beckoning and Muse? Slow Hours, maybe? Dry Grass? I think Warmth is feeling a bit fussy.”

“Two peas in a pod,” Beholden said. “Two little fusspots.”

“Am not!”

“No, no. Beholden is right. You are absolutely a fusspot,” A Finger Pointing said. “Why is Warmth In Fire feeling fussy?”

“I do not know. Usually that happens when ey gets a letter from one of the Dear-cules.”

“Mm, usually Pollux, yes.” She sighed, passing the drink back to Beholden and resting her head against the back of the couch. “It has been a while since you bothered Dry Grass, then. You flopped on Slow Hours earlier today and pestered your aunts

earlier this week. You tracked soil all over the floor, remember?”

“Alright, I will ping her soon, then.”

“Good girl.”

“Going to make her cook you something ridiculous?”

Beholden asked. “Nuggets and fries and mac and cheese?”

“Of course,” Motes said, nose poking haughtily up into the air. “Not a single green thing on the plate.”

“Right.” The other skunk laughed. “You know, I am always surprised by how much our tastes have diverged since we were forked. Here I am, the bitter housewife to boss’s sourness—”

“Not your boss,” A Finger Pointing said lazily.

“Fine, to *Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself’s* sourness.”

This netted her a tug on the ear, which earned a laugh in turn.

She poked Motes in the belly. “Here you are, fat little skunk—”

Motes snorted. “You are also a fat skunk, though.”

“Complaining? I thought not. You have fallen asleep on my belly more than once this week. Here you are talking about a plate of salt and carbs while I am looking forward to a salad the size of my head and a burger that is also mostly salad.”

“I *also* like those things, though,” Motes countered. “Like, I would eat the heck out of a salad right about now.”

“You just have a bit to commit to,” A Finger Pointing said, nodding. “And we are nothing if not ourselves when it comes to committing to a bit.”

“Exactly! We are the same age, right? We were the same person until we were 41, right? I have just had, like...two hundred years to pick my own bit to commit to. I am the kid, you are the weirdo who makes really crazy music, Ma is the one who does

all the schmoozing and stuff.”

“*Schmoozing*, huh?” A Finger Pointing laughed. “I suppose that is as good a way to put it as any. Someone has to keep this band of layabouts moving. Someone has to grease all the squeaky wheels in the clade.”

“There are more than a few of those,” Beholden said from behind her drink.

“We are all allowed to be squeaky wheels now and then, and that includes you, my muse.”

“I would trust no one else to get me all greased up,” the skunk said, leering.

“You think you are so slick, Beholden, but you *had* to have gotten that from somewhere.”

The playful banter continued, and while she would occasionally poke her snout in to make a quip of her own, Motes largely just savored her drink, bitter and sour and sweet, and the comfort of being nestled in between her two cocladists, thinking.

She thought about the more than two centuries that had passed since A Finger Pointing had forked into the other nine instances of her stanza, that point when Motes had become Motes. She thought about the time that had followed when she remained essentially the version of A Finger Pointing who had taken up responsibility for sets and props, about those slow years of individuation and differentiation. She thought about the way she had started to toy with her appearance, her actions, her approach to life, and how she had steered herself into this focus on play to reclaim a childhood that had, yes, been pleasant enough, and yet which could have been so much *more*, now that she had all the time in the world. Something to live intention-

ally. Something to savor.

It had not always been smooth, to be sure. The compromises she made early on far outnumbered the ways in which she was earnest to herself.

She did not blame A Finger Pointing for suggesting such compromises, never once. She, of all those in her life, was trustworthy. Motes had once *been* her, after all, yes? They had had their spats—more than a few—as would be the case between any parent and child—as would be the case between any two individuals. She had had spats with more than just Ma. She and Beholden had fought, and at times bitterly, and it was at those times that Bee’s guardianship had felt most precarious. It had never disappeared, but it had verged well into the realm of sister—the realm of Slow Hours—or bestest friend — that of Warmth In Fire—and away from guardian, away from that parental love.

She did not remember what the spats were about. She could, yes, her memory was as imperfectible as anyone else’s on the three Systems. But she would not, because that was not the point. The point was that she was Motes. She was their Dot, their *dóttir*. She was the kid, and they were the grown-ups who loved her.

And so their protectiveness made sense, yes? They wanted to keep her safe, yes? They just could not help but keep *themselves* safe as well, yes?

And that is where the friction came from. It came from others fussing about Motes-as-kid.

She was not always. Often, she was in her early twenties. Certainly a far cry from the 41 she had been when she had been

forked, or the 31 she had been when Michelle Hadje had first uploaded, but still, far more acceptable in the eyes of many on the System, far more acceptable in the eyes of the rest of the Ode clade.

It was them, through A Finger Pointing and, on a few occasions, through Slow Hours and Time Rushes, who suggested that she should not do this thing. It was too close, they said, to unwelcome paraphilias, here on the System where one had to be at least eighteen to upload. It was too close, they said, to coming off as someone seeking unwanted attention, affection, sexuality. "I understand that you wish to reclaim childhood," they told her through her ma or siblings. "But you must understand the optics." Never mind that she had long since set aside sexuality while in this form, that she harbored her own fears of those offering unwanted attention, affection, sex. No, it was the *optics* that needed minding.

And so she kept it under wraps for years and decades.

First it was the feelings she kept to herself. She alone knew them, and then her stanza alone knew them, but no one else.

Then, it was the appearance that she kept to herself. While, shortly after happening on these feelings, she had built herself into an image of youth parked squarely in her early twenties, a human who dressed in flower-embroidered jeans and blouses, who so often wore a flower crown in her hair, who embodied flower-child, she now spent weeks and months tuning various aspects of her shape, of her sensorium. A skunk like so many of her cocladists, rather than a human. Shorter, yes, but that is not all that makes a child. Shorter, proportionately different, clum-

sier, less developed in all ways aside from mental acuity. Just a kid.

She alone knew this shape, alone in her room, alone in her apartment, alone in her studio with the doors securely shut and the premises swept. She alone knew what she looked like, and then her stanza knew, but precious few others.

When first she began to explore outside the sphere of her stanza, when she first began to be perceived by the world around her, she lasted perhaps a week before the first gentle suggestions began to arrive. Perhaps this was just an 'us' thing, yes? A thing for playing with just Au Lieu Du Rêve, our little theatre troupe? We can play with these feelings somewhere safe.

The discussion of optics did not show up for another few years as she tested the limits of this admonition. More people had uploaded, after all. More furies, yes, and more people with similar interests. There were more friends to be made.

And yet she was of the Ode, was she not? There was an image to maintain that extended beyond the individual.

The feelings, the appearance, rinse and repeat with this and that, with moving in together, with the familial language of 'Ma' and 'Sis', with sharing a bed when she had a nightmare, as any Odist might. Again and again pushing gently at limitations to search for a slow form of change.

Still, she did as she was told and kept this particular sense of family to herself and those she loved. She was a good girl, of course, always tried to be, but she was also as much an Odist as those who spoke so often of optics. She saw the trends, the prickly taboo against intraclade relationships like that of A Finger Pointing and Beholden, how the subversiveness of found

family might rub up against that. She had her guesses, but—

“Motes? Did you hear what I said?” Beholden asked, ruffling her mane all up.

“Nope~” Motes said, smiling primly. “I have been ignoring you both.”

Beholden rolled her eyes. “Brat. Lost in thought?”

She shrugged, sipping her drink yet more. “I guess. Was thinking of fussy spots and all the trouble calling Ma ‘Ma’ caused. Glad it is not a thing anymore.”

“Less of a thing,” A Finger Pointing corrected. “It is not *not* a thing. What Beholden was saying, though, is that we were going to head off. The offer stands for you to join us, Dot.”

Motes let the thought go as the topic was deftly changed. “Nah, it is okay, I will stay here and see if Dry Grass wants to flop.”

“Flop and draw?”

“Or paint nails or chat or whatever. There is lots we can do.”

With their final goodbyes and myriad kisses, Motes was left alone once more.

She cued up more music, quieter this time, then padded to the kitchen and started a sensorium message.

“Dry Grass Dry Grass Dry Grass!”

There was a moment’s silence, a sense of laughter, and then, *“Motes Motes Motes! How are you, skunklet?”*

“Booored. Ma and Bee left to go to a pub or something with May and Ioan, and I felt like flopping instead,” she sent as she dug through the fridge—more a front-end to the exchange than anything. *“They suggested I see if you were free if I got lonely.”*

“And here you are, pinging me, yes.”

“Mmhm. Was going to make a food or two. Do you want some?”

There was a sensation of a haughty frown from Dry Grass.

“Are you allowed to be using the stove, young miss?”

Motes sighed dramatically. *“Fiiine, I will fork older.”*

“Good girl,” came the response. *“I have seen you catch yourself on fire before, and am not keen on a repeat of that.”*

“That was one time!”

“I am told you are into a double digit number of times, Motes.”

Motes snorted, pulled out frozen fries and nuggets from the exchange, as well as some macaroni and cheese—the good kind, baked in a casserole with crispy panko on top; she still had taste, after all. *“I am making fries and nuggets and maccy-chee,”* she sent. On a whim, she also pulled out lettuce, cherry tomatoes, and radishes. *“And a salad the size of my head.”*

Dry Grass laughed. *“You had me at maccy-chee. Shall I come over now?”*

“Yes, please!”

No sooner had the message completed than Dry Grass blinked into being on the default arrival point over by the front door.

Motes finished shoving the tray of salad ingredients up onto the counter and zipped over to her cross-tree cocladist, all but launching herself into her arms. Dry Grass caught her, letting her momentum swing both human and skunk around in a circle. *“Hey, little one! Way to go almost knocking me over.”*

“I am not sorry!” Motes said and just as quickly dashed away and back to the kitchen. *“Help me cut up everything. I am going to nick a claw, I know it.”*

Dry Grass followed after more sedately. “Of course. Would not want you losing a finger.”

“I have *never* done that one,” Motes said, dragging a chair over to the counter to stand on. “I mostly just need help with the tomatoes. They always go flying. Oh! And can you turn on the oven?”

By their powers combined, the two Odists managed to pull together a meal, exactly as Motes had described it. The salad turned out to be the breakaway winner of the bunch. Fries and nuggets are known quantities, but where the macaroni and cheese bake was good, something about the refreshing salad, the tang of the dressing, the satisfying pop of the tomatoes (many of which they wound up leaving whole) managed to hit the spot in a way none of the other dishes did.

Once the dishes had been waved away and drinks had been made—sweeter cocktails that once more got her a good-natured ribbing—Motes summoned up some simple tatami mats for them to lay on on the floor, side cozied up against side, while she painted her claws and Dry Grass’s nails with a fine-tipped brush, little spirals and curlicues in pink and yellow.

“What is on your mind, kiddo?” Dry Grass asked. “Usually you do not want to just flop unless you are already worn out or something got you all thinky.”

“I dunno,” she said. The use of a contraction itched, brushing against the linguistic idiosyncrasies that plagued all of the Odists, even these many years later, but she had practiced for certain occasions. She shrugged, careful not to mess up the current shape. “I spent the day with Slow Hours and Sasha, and they got to talking about the past because Sasha had a question for

Slowers. Just thinking about being me.”

“ ‘Being you’?”

“Uh huh, like the whole kidcore thing. I was thinking about how upset it made people for a long time. Even me. I would hear a thing and get all huffy for a while and go Big Motes for a month or two.” She giggled, shrugged. “It all seems really silly now, but it stuck with me.”

Dry Grass hummed thoughtfully. “Well, I am glad that it has gotten to the point of being silly. Are you thinking about the clade stuff?”

“A little, yeah,” she hazarded, finishing up the last of Dry Grass’s nails. “I was thinking about the whole optics thing, which I thought was all the eighth stanza at first, but I guess it came from all over.”

“It did, yes. Most of it came from my stanza, actually.”

Motes tilted her head, squinting at her.

Holding up her hands disarmingly, Dry Grass added quickly, “Not from me, my dear. Never from me. Most all of it came from Hammered Silver. A lot of her up-trees did not particularly care, and you know I actively like it.”

The skunk’s smile returned. “I know. You are nice to me. I had figured if not the eighth, then In Dreams would have been the one.”

“Oh, she was definitely another one of the big culprits, at least early on. Do not get me wrong, I like the seventh stanza alright, but In Dreams can be a stickler over...well, most anything, really.”

“Yeah, she pulled me aside once and started talking about there being a time and a place and blah blah blah.”

“There is something to be said for curating one’s experiences, but anyone who says the words ‘there is a time and a place for everything’ is just being a bitch. Pardon my language.”

“What was Hammered Silver’s problem, then?”

Dry Grass frowned, looking down at her spread out fingers, watching the polish dry. “It is hard to put succinctly into words that make sense because then it just comes off as a series of tautologies. She thinks that there are children and there are adults. She thinks this because that is what makes a mother a mother to someone. The child is the child and the adult is the adult in contrast. They are complements. It is all very prescriptive.”

Motes frowned and pulled apart the logic, doodling pink spirals onto her fingerpads. “So she thinks kids have to be actually kids? *Actual* children, even if there are none here? You still have to be over eighteen to upload.”

“I think so, yes, though it does not help that you are a co-cladist of hers.”

“Is this that stupid optics thing again?”

“I do not know. Certainly in part, though it is also in part because, if you are her, then you could not be her child. It is another form of an intraclade relationship.” She hesitated, then added, “It means that she has the capability to become like you, yes? That all of us have that within us, yes?”

“Oh god,” Motes said, laughing. “I cannot imagine Hammered Silver as a kid. She would be one of those prissy, stuck up girls who is the daughter of the PTA president or something.”

Dry Grass laughed as well. “She is already essentially the prissy HOA president. I respect her as a person, but I do not like her, and I *certainly* do not respect her authority.”

“Right, because she wants you to not talk to *any* of us.”

She nodded. “She cut off the first, eighth, and part of the ninth stanzas, but also the entire fifth stanza since you still talked with Sasha.”

Motes groaned and rolled onto her back, holding her paws up in the air to inspect her claws. “Which is stupid, because Sasha is nice.”

“She really is, though I have not had as much a chance to speak with her as I might like. She was the last straw in a whole series of events. She does not like Sasha, does not like you, she *really* does not like the family dynamic you have set up.”

Bristling, Motes glared down at the polish and brush. “It is all well and good that she not like me, but to not like my family is bullcrap.”

Dry Grass nodded, expression serious. “It absolutely is. She has gotten quite upset about it a few times, but I just smile and nod and tune her out when she goes into her self-righteous spirals. I am not the type to cut anyone out of my life, for better or worse, but I will absolutely ignore people.”

Motes huffed, nodded. “Good. If you stop talking to me, I *will* cry.”

“Perish the thought!” Dry Grass laughed and leaned over to hug her cocladist, careful of her nails. “I will not. Do not worry, my dear, you are stuck with me for a good while yet. I would rather tell Hammered Silver to go fuck herself.”

2

Motes played.

Tonight, she played hard. It was a Big Motes night. It was a human night. It was a grown up night. It was a night for hovering somewhere between twenty and twenty-five. It was a night for standing as tall as Beholden, as tall as so many of the other Odists, yet far more lithe. Tonight, she dressed up in her finest crepe-cotton blouse and gauzy skirt, and she braided for herself a fresh crown of flowers—marigolds, this time—grown by Beckoning and Muse, A Finger Pointing and Beholden’s long-lived up-tree instances A Finger Curled and Beholden To The Music Of The Spheres.

Tonight, Motes played in hedonism. A night at a restaurant out on the town, where she stuffed herself with two Chicago-style hot dogs. “Drag them through the garden!” She laughed—and she was always laughing. “Everything but the ketchup!” A night when she ate all of her fries, and even mopped up the last of the fry sauce with a fingertip.

Tonight, she played drunk: a beer with the dogs, drinks made fizzy with champagne and sweet with floral liqueurs at a pop-up bar, then fruity drinks served in tall glasses with taller straws at the venue before the headliner started, the thump of the bass

from the opener echoing up through her feet, pressing at her chest, leaving a warmth in her belly that verged on sensual. Tonight, between sets or whenever she felt like she needed a break, she would waft back to the bar and order a vodka soda or some other ridiculous drink meant more to hydrate than taste good.



Tonight, Motes played as hard as ever, letting that warmth that was building low in her belly be her guide as she latched onto a dancing partner, a solidly built mustelid of some sort—an otter? A mink?—who wound his way through the crowd in a fluid motion that was dancelike even when the music had stopped.

It was a night for letting him dance closer and closer as the sets progressed, a night for letting him press a pill to her lips and beneath her tongue. It was a night for letting him push his whiskery muzzle up beneath her chin, letting him show her just how sharp his teeth were against her throat, for pressing close enough to feel just how thoroughly he shared in her excitement.

Tonight, she let him take her home. Tonight she let him pin her to the bed, paw on her shoulder and teeth on her throat. Tonight, she let him draw blood.

And then it was a night for sitting on his balcony and talking while the waves of whatever drug he'd given her continued to roll through her in languid pulses. "It is like someone is brushing the underside of my skin with satin in the best possible way," she said, and he laughed.

They sat and talked, legs dangling through the bars of the balcony's railing over an impossibly high drop, her ears filled with the chatter of an impossible myriad of monkeys some balconies over, startled from slumber by their arrival, her eyes filled with the black and gold of an impossible city built into a cylinder. He pointed to a building in the distance down the length of the cylinder, told her how that one was filled all with gardens, all flowers like those in her hair, now crushed lopsidedly from her forgetting to remove the crown when they fucked. He pointed up to the gentle glow in the sky, golden stars made of lights from so many buildings just like this one, told her that the sun here was in a long, thin line, that it turned on slowly from one end to the other so that one could see dawn coming from down the tube, could hear birdsong come on like a wave, and then turned off in the same direction in a linear sunset. He

pointed from one end of the cylinder to another, the bounding walls marked by arcane symbols in neon, and explained that nearly a quarter of a billion people called this home, then laughed as she asked, “How many do you think are fucking right now?”

They added one more to that number before they slept.

And in the morning, she woke pressed against him, limbs all wrapped together and the satiny subdermal waves of sensation still lingering. She dismissed it easily and slowly disentangled herself from the still sleeping otter-or-mink—fisher?—and started to pull stuff from the exchange for breakfast. Cold, cured meats and fish. Cold cheeses. Cold vegetables, fresh and pickled. Dense, nutty bread. Small pastries.

They sat on the balcony once more, out in the bright sun, and ate their breakfast together, talking of only the small things.

“Is this the type of thing where I get to know your name?” he asked at one point.

She leaned over to kiss his cheek and smiled dreamily. “Nope.”

After breakfast: a shared shower, a few minutes of comfortable silence, a promise to never see each other again, a kiss, and one last piercing bite to the shoulder “for luck”, leaving fresh stains of red on her blouse to join the ones from the night before.

With that, she stepped back to the theatre. It was early yet and there were no performances, but she hoped that there would be someone there to greet her, someone there to witness her coming home, disheveled and bloodied, rumped with bent crown, looking pleased and sated. Play is magnified by be-

ing shared, yes, and witnessed. She wanted to be seen, marveled over or doted upon. She wanted her joy to be acknowledged.

Empty foyer.

Empty ticket booths.

Empty auditorium.

Empty stage, but for one skunk, kneeling in the center with a clipboard and script laid out before her in a neat arc, a bank of three different colored highlighters resting in her lap.

Where so many of the skunks of the clade had the stark contrast of black and white fur, hers was the warm brown of cinnamon with the pale cream of white chocolate. Where so many of the other skunks had black noses, black fur fading seamlessly before them, hers was far more pink, more easily seen twitching this way or that at some scent or another. Where so many of her family had long, poetic names, hers remained simple, a remnant of some more complicated past.

Motes traipsed down the long, shallow steps of the auditorium aisles, all but skipping in that long-running afterglow. “Sasha!”

Sasha lifted her head and squinted out into the relative darkness of the rows of seats, grinned, then sat up straighter, brow furrowing. “Motes, Jesus. What the hell happened to you?”

Hiking herself up onto the stage, undignified, she plopped down into a cross-legged sit before Sasha. “A fun night out is what. There was an otter.”

“An otter did that?” Sasha asked, raising a brow.

“Sharp!” she explained, miming fangs with two fingers.

She laughed. “Right, right. I did not know you were into the slinky types,” she said, leaning forward to gently probe at

the side of Motes's neck and shoulder, investigating the shallow puncture wounds that had been left behind. "One of those 'looks worse than it is' things, seems like."

Motes sighed dreamily. "Yeah~"

Sasha snorted. "We are of a type, are we not, dear?"

"Mm? How do you mean?"

"A little bit of pain to spice things up."

"Or a lot."

"Yes. I believe that might well run in the clade, even if it was not exactly Michelle's thing."

Motes nodded. "I do not remember that from phys-side, no." She paused, head tilted and grin slowly growing on her face as she leaned closer. "Does that mean that you like that too?"

Sasha looked back down to her papers, picking up an already neat stack and racking it against the stage, a transparent attempt to hide a blush or hint of a smile. "It has come up once or twice, yes."

"Oooh, Sashaaaa~" Motes said, laughing. "But wait, does that come from May, True Name, or E.W.?"

She looked up once more, rolled her eyes. "Can you really picture May being into such pain?"

"Not at all. What about E.W., though?"

"Perhaps," she replied, thoughtful expression on her face. "There were some times in the past."

"True Name, then?" Motes said, sounding skeptical.

An eloquent shrug was the reply.

"Well, *huh*," she said, grinning still. She could feel the limerence for her form starting to fade, could feel the humanity begin to itch, so she waved the topic away. She had been seen, had been

witnessed; that was all she had needed. “But we can talk about that later. I need to re-skunk. I want to keep this shirt, though.”

“Alright, dear. I shall look away.”

Motes shimmied out of the blouse and folded it neatly on the stage before forking into her usual, smaller, soft-furred self once more. Once more, she was clothed in familiar corduroys and a bright blue t-shirt, leaving behind so flower-child a vibe. Younger, as well, back to that comfortable, comforting expression of youth. “Okay,” she said once she was done, rolling around to lay on her belly and poke her snout at one of the piles of paper. “What are you working on, anyway?”

Sasha smiled, tipped her clipboard forward to let the skunk see the stage diagram. “Blocking. Planning. Memorization.”

“Scheming!”

She laughed. “Well, perhaps that as well. Scheming about dinner. Scheming about coming home to Aurel. Scheming and dreaming.”

Motes nodded, carefully turning one of the piles around to read a few lines from the script before setting it back in place. She kicked her legs lazily in the air above her, feeling her tail brush against them. She hummed a tuneless song. It was all part of the ritual of settling back into being a skunk—this engagement with fur, these childlike acts—in leaning intentionally back into her presented age—somewhere around twelve, today.

She was startled back to awareness by Sasha’s voice. “What are you thinking about, little skunk?”

“Mm?”

“You seemed deep in thought.” She smiled affectionately. “Or perhaps blissfully without.”

Motes stuck her tongue out at her. “I was thinking about how I was talking with Dry Grass yester- the day before yesterday. She was telling me about Hammered Silver being a b-word.”

Unexpectedly, Sasha winced, carefully setting down her clipboard with exaggerated care. “Yes. I am sorry, And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights,” she said, voice and movements stiff, contrite. “It was never my intent to create such a schism in the clade.”

Pushing herself to hands and knees, she crawled around the piles of script to kneel beside the other skunk and hug around her shoulders. “It is okay. I do not think it is on you,” she said hastily. “Dry Grass said that that was just a...um, a last straw, not even the biggest thing.”

“What did she say was?” Sasha asked quietly, shifting an arm around to hug Motes in turn.

“Me,” she said, shrugging. “Or, well, she also hates me, but the biggest bit was that I call A Finger Pointing ‘Ma’, and that she is with Beholden.”

After nearly a minute of silence, Sasha said, “Years back, centuries ago, Jonas started a project of making intraclade relationships taboo. It was a measured process intended to keep *something* taboo while the rest of the System settled into a comfortable non-normativity—or even queer-normativity—on most other relationship and identity fronts. It was a bit of discomfort to strive against.” Another pause, and then, “Well, and because he was setting me up with May in the form of Zacharias to gain leverage.”

“Gross.”

“Very gross. I am glad to be quit of him, even if there are

times that I miss the work. All of that to say that Hammered Silver bought into that hook, line, and sinker. She truly believed that it is some horrible taboo to get in a relationship—romantic or familial—within one’s own clade.”

“But *she* is,” Motes protested. “She is in a relationship with Waking World!”

Sasha snorted. “Do not let her hear you say that. She would say that she is not, that it is a partnership, it is two actors playing their parts: she, the mother; him, the father—dad jokes and all. They are roles in a long-running production.” She winked conspiratorially, adding, “Though I am not sure that Waking World would agree with her. I think he very much thinks of himself as her husband, of the both of them as very much in love with each other.”

Motes furrowed her brow in consternation. “She does not make any sense,” she said. “She hates Ma and Bee for dating and hates me for being their daughter and all the others for being my siblings or whatever, and then she marries Waking World?”

“Perhaps her performance is so convincing that she is fooling us all. Perhaps she is simply fooling herself.”

She scoffed. “Probably the second.”

“Almost certainly,” Sasha said, ruffling Motes’s mane affectionately. “But it is fine. I have not spoken with her in more than a decade.”

“I have not in more than a century,” Motes said proudly. “So I win.”

Sasha laughed and turned the ruffling into a noogie. “This is not a competition, Motes,” she chided. “But if it were, then yes, you would win. She has cut off even A Finger Pointing.”

Squeaking and laughing, the skunk sat up, pulling herself away from the knuckles grinding against her scalp. “I thought they were on better terms, though. Ma met with her once in a while, even.”

“When she found out what I had done, Hammered silver cut all contact with the fifth, yes?”

“Mmhm. Did that include Pointillist?”

“Ohhh yes. I think Hammered Silver is more mad with her than any of the rest of the stanza.”

“God,” Motes muttered. “She really does sound like a total b-word.”

“She is a lovely person, in her own way,” Sasha said gently, then added, “Which is a bitch, yes.”

The smaller skunk giggled helplessly, slouching down until she was able to use Sasha’s thigh as a pillow. “Okay, but why does she hate Ma, though? She is, like...the nicest person in the whole world.”

“She really is, at least to us, but she is also uncompromising to her very core. She stood up for herself and Beholden as a couple, she stood up for you as you are, she stood up for your dynamic as a family—” Sasha took a deep breath through gritted teeth. “And she stood up for me—she always has—for which I am endlessly appreciative, and endlessly frustrated that she should have cause to.”

“So Hammered Silver is upset that Ma has principles,” Motes said flatly. “Okay. Got it. Good good, good good good good. Wonderful.”

She laughed. “Yes, apparently. A Finger Pointing had some tense meetings with her early on when it became clear—at least

within the clade—that she and Beholden were in a relationship, but that tension became the norm when you started to poke your little snout—” She tapped at Motes’s nose-tip, getting a smile and a chirp. “—out into the world, which led to a tacit agreement that they were essentially just meeting up to collect data on their respective stanzas, and then only when A Finger Pointing agreed not to talk about you.”

Motes fell silent for a long minute, then two, and eventually rolled onto the other side so that she could bury her face against Sasha’s side. “Well, that makes me feel like garbage,” she mumbled.

“Hush, little skunk,” Sasha said gently. “That is between A Finger Pointing and Hammered Silver. A Finger Pointing had to make a tactical decision: maintain contact with the clade, be the glue that binds so many of us together, keep tabs on Hammered Silver and her ilk; or tell Hammered Silver to kick rocks, she was going to talk about her Dot as much as she damn well pleased. Tactically, she chose to agree to not pass on information about you. Strategically, this gained her a better sense of the sixth stanza—and, to a lesser extent, the seventh later on.”

She nodded, pressing her face all the firmer against the stage manager’s belly.

“A Finger Pointing loves you, Motes, deeply and truly. Do not ever forget that. Hammered Silver can absolutely go kick rocks and go suck an egg and go eat coke and any number of other antiquated idioms. Your ma believed that even then, and when Hammered Silver requested that she not speak of you, in that moment, they ceased being friends and became instead polite adversaries.”

“No, I believe that,” Motes said, voice muffled against Sasha’s blouse. “I do not blame her. Hammered Silver put her in a stupid position, so she did what she had to because *she* has principles.”

“Right, and those principles go beyond just the three of you. She was thinking of Dry Grass, too, yes? And of Waking World and of Fogs The View and of Time Makes Prey, and of all of the other, nicer folks she has spoken to in the sixth stanza on the sly. Many have continued to shun me, which is fine, so be it, they value their relationship with Hammered Silver more than Dry Grass does, but at least they are still talking with A Finger Pointing.”

“Yeah, true. And at least Dry Grass is still here.”

“That she is.” Sasha smiled, nudging Motes on the shoulder. “Now, come. Let us get you home, yes? Get you some food and let you crow about your exploits to anyone who will listen, yes? Show off your blouse, yes?”

“Okaaay~” She sighed dramatically and pushed herself up to her feet. “I had breakfast a bit ago, but I want pizza or a burger or something greasy.”

Sasha laughed, forking another instance to take Motes by the paw, letting her down-tree continue working. “I am sorry that this topic has been nipping at your heels these last few days, little skunk. I have probably shared more than A Finger Pointing may have wished, but she and I will talk, and you will get your pizza or burger or pizza-burger and talk about things at your own pace, dear.”

3

Motes played.

Today, she played prey. Today, she was a mouse to some fox, some owl, some cunning predator. She crept and crawled at first, prowling through the brush and between the trunks of trees. She stuck to where the pine needles made a thick carpet on the floor of this forest or, failing that, the hard domes of granite that interrupted it. Anything she could do to stay away from the scree or gravel, the occasional stands of deciduous trees with their noisier fallen leaves, the stands of blackberry canes that she knew would tug at her clothes and fur, leaving a wake of whimpers and vines whipping backward.

Today, she sought out all of the best ways to move. There were times when all fours was called for—when she climbed a slope, perhaps, or when she needed to force herself through some keyhole in the brush, or when she needed to be quiet. Those digger claws of hers helped at times and hindered others, and if the ones on her toes would clack against rock, she would crawl on her knuckles and knees.

Today, she listened hard, head constantly turning to build a better view of the sonic landscape of the world around her. She

hunted for the rustle of branches, of footsteps, of breath. Today, her eyes were keen, her gaze sharp, flitting about to hunt for the slightest movement or out-of-place shadow.

And then there it was: the shadow. The one she knew had been tracking her. The one she had felt but not seen. The one whose footsteps were too quiet to be heard and yet which nonetheless trod the ground behind her.

Instinct took over, and Motes ran.

She ran straight forward, at first, for there was a clearing ahead of her and relatively little brush between it and her and although there was a tree smack in the middle of her path, there was space enough to either side of it to slip by without having to turn too sharply, without having to slow her headlong dash.

She ran straight forward and then, just before she actually reached the clearing, juked suddenly to the right.

It had to be a trap. It *had* to be a trap. She knew her pursuer. She knew it well. She knew they would have planned for this vision of a clearing. She knew—and she kicked herself for knowing too late—that she had been subtly guided this way, toward this clearing, toward this meadow of deceptively open space, of shin-high yellow-green grass and bobbing columbines.

Behind her, a growl, sharp and clear in the overbright air, confirmed her guess.

Her hunter was quick. Motes was not: she had stubby legs; she was soft; she was chubby.

Her hunter was nimble. Motes was not: it was hard to maintain a tight turning radius with all of the above working against her.

Her hunter was smart, but then, so was she. That was her

strength. That was how she would win. That was how she would *survive*.

Rebounding off a tree and wincing at a sudden spike of pain in her shoulder, she made a hard turn to the right once more and darted toward her hunter rather than away, pressing the attack—or at least aiming for surprise—rather than simply running and running.

There, a flash of fur amid the trees. A flash of fur and sudden, wild laughter.

She picked up the speed into an all out sprint. Her pursuer darted off at sharp angle and, as it did so, a brick wall spiraled into being before her, only a few feet on a side, and yet directly in her path, a few paces away. She had just enough time to fork mid-stride and let the new instance continue in her sprint while the old crashed into the wall with a thud and yelp, then quit.

“*Attaaaaack!*” she hollered.

“Oh! Oh oh oh!” came a voice from out the trees and her prey skidded to a halt, quickly reversing direction and racing toward her instead.

A game of chicken, then, she thought, grinning fiercely.

The two ran directly at each other, weaving slightly to make their way around the occasional tree.

It was Motes who caved first, ducking down onto paws and knees at the last second before the critter, who deftly leapfrogged over her with a Dopplered giggle.

“Gotcha!” ey cried, scampering off to the forest.

Motes galloped after her, laughing giddily.

A few more rounds of leapfrog—repeated a dozen times over with a dozen different instances—and both Motes and Warmth

collapsed in the clearing in the woods, panting and laughing. They shoved at each other for a few seconds, rolling about in the grass and wildflowers before sprawling out on their backs, looking up into the cloud-dotted sky.

“You know,” Warmth said reaching over to poke Motes in the belly. “If you were not such a fatty, you could probably outrun me.”

“But I like being a fatty,” Motes countered. “If you were not such a string bean, you...you would...uh...”

“Uh huh?” the other skunk prompted, grinning. “What would I do, my dear? Pray tell~”

Motes laughed and tore up a pawful of grass, tossing it ineffectually at her cocladist, who merely returned the gesture.

Which Offers Heat And Warmth In Fire was a skunk like her, small like her, but had wound up wiry and lithe, perpetually untameable fur stained here and there with green or yellow as if ey had been caught rolling in the grass and dandelions and run off before bothering to wash. A being of indeterminate gender and unsettled pronouns, it was her friend of friends, a superlative acquaintance that had led to a bond unbreakable.

They elbow-crawled over to drape unceremoniously over Motes’s front, sighing now that it had caught eir breath. “You are a nerd,” they said. “But I guess I like you all the same.”

“Pff, call me a nerd,” Motes scoffed, petting Warmth’s fur up backwards to muss it all the more. “At least I am a cute nerd.”

“You are that,” the other skunk admitted. “So am I, mind. Probably cuter than you.”

“Mmhm mmhm mmhm.” She grinned down at Warmth. “Whatcha doin’, anyway?”

It giggled and pushed its paws up over her face. “Motes Motes Motes! Look at you, all growed up, using contractions.”

“Mmnf! Is ‘whatcha’ a contraction?”

“I do not know. Did you have to focus to say it?”

“A little,” she admitted. “Sort of like ‘kinda’ or ‘gonna’.”

“Weirdo,” ey stated plainly. “Do you mean what am I doing right now? Because I am using your fat belly as *literally* the worst pillow.”

“You could get off of me at *literally* any time.”

“Absolutely not.”

Motes smirked. “No, I was asking what you are doing in general. What are you working on these days?”

“Oh!” They sat up cross-legged, letting Motes do the same. “I got a letter from both of the LVs, and-”

“Is that why you were mopey? You got one from Pollux?”

Its expression soured. “That was part of it. I do not want to talk about that, though. The day is sunny and bright and you are fun to be around and I also heard from Castor.”

Motes nodded. “Tell me about that, then. I do not want mopey Warmth.”

“Good,” they said primly. “Because Codrin#Convergence got my last letter and started asking all the Artemisians ey could for foods that they liked to start sending me all sorts of different flavors. Ey is *such* a nerd. Ey practically sent me a tome describing all of the different ingredients they showed em and what they looked and tasted like on their own, and then how they were put together into different dishes and what *those* looked and tasted like.”

“All of the Bălans are nerds,” Motes said. “Did you write back to tell em that?”

“Mmhm, I accused em of going back to being a weirdo historian.”

“Good!”

Ey laughed. “But! Do you want to taste a *frahabrodât*?”

“What the frick is a *frahabrodât*?”

As it spoke, ey dreamed up a shallow bowl. “No fucking clue! It apparently means ‘fluffy tower’.” This began to take shape. It seemed to be a lattice of fine bubbles in pale, sea-foam green. “I have only tried a few of the recipes ey sent, but this one at least gave me some good ideas.” The foam began to congeal into a firmer structure that looked to have been shaped by some sort of fork into a square-ish tower. “I do not know if I would call it *good*, but I am guessing by a text description of something an alien showed a non-chef on a System that is not theirs.” At last, the tower seemed to be complete, though over the next few seconds it was pocked with a few pips of what seemed to be some similarly pale-green fruit. “Here.”

Motes leaned forward and squinted at the dish, sniffing. It smelled like precious little.

“I have not gotten around to adding the scent yet,” Warmth explained. “That is one area where Codrin did not give much detail. I replied asking ██████████ to help with things like that.”

“Well, okay,” she said, doubtful. She dreamed up a spoon and poked at the...foam? Froth? It was surprisingly sturdy, and although it wobbled, it did not fall over under the touch.

A grin was growing on the other skunk’s face.

Bad sign.



Figuring there was nothing for it, she gathered up a spoonful of the fluff, complete with a few pips, said, “Onetwothreego!” and stuffed it into her mouth...then immediately raced to swallow it. “Mmnglhfnf!”

Warmth bust into a fit of giggles and forked several times in quick succession, the crowd of em breaking into a wild applause, complete with standing ovation and shouts of ‘Bravo! Brava! Bravissimo!’, before quitting.

“It tastes like passion fruit and licking battery terminals at the same time,” Motes cried, bringing into being a glass of water to rinse out her muzzle.

“I know, right?” ey said dreamily. “I hate it.”

“So do I!” At least the water seemed to wash the taste away quickly. “Are the other ones better?”

“Oh, totally.”

Motes dipped her fingers into the glass and flicked some of the water at Warmth. “Then why the fuc- why the frick did you give me *this* one?”

“Because you are a fatty and because it would be fun and because I knew you would be honest in your reaction,” it said, preening.

“Yeah, well, I honestly hate it.”

“Mmhm! But you saying ‘passion fruit’ was new. Rye just said it was “sour and sweet and unpleasant” and Praiseworthy would not try it at all. Now I can compare it to passion fruit and try new things.”

“Rye is always too polite,” Motes said, grinning. “But I like her.”

It nodded. “She really is, and I love her. She is...mm,” ey squinted up at the trees, hunting for words. “We are kind of like an extended family, yes? Like, you have your ma and Bee, and big sister Slow Hours, and so on, all super close, but my stanza is like a bunch of piblings and niblings. We all like each other, and we love family get-togethers, and Rye is the best at making them happen. She wants us all to be happy.”

She waved away the utensil and glass of water, flopping back onto the grass once more. “That is why I like her, yeah,” she said, folding her paws over her belly, pensive.

Warmth dismissed the *frahabrodât* and stretched out on their front. “Now why did you get all mopey all of the sudden?”

She shrugged, peeking over at the other skunk through the blades of grass and drooping columbines. “Just family stuff on the brain.”

“Precious little of that, my dear,” ey said, gently rapping her atop the head while making a hollow clicking noise with its tongue. When Motes merely stuck out her tongue, their expression softened. “Sorry, Mote. Why family stuff? Why is that mope-inducing? Usually you love that. Sometimes you go on about ‘Ma and Bee this’ and ‘Sis Hours that’ and it is lovely.”

“Slow Hours used to hate it when I called her that,” Motes said, smirking, then returned her gaze to the sky. “Just been lots of thinking and talk lately about how much trouble me being small causes.”

“But I am small.”

“I know, but like the smallest. Like, the youngest.”

Warmth huffed, indignant. “But *I* am the youngest! I am the babiest. That is my whole thing, yes? I am the most recently forked, the most recently-claimed line!”

Rolling over onto her side, Motes smiled apologetically at her friend. “I know, I am sorry. We are the little ones, right? Dry Grass even calls us that. Her little ones.”

The other skunk subsided. “I know. And I think I know what you mean, too: there is a difference between ‘the babiest Odist’ and ‘Actual Kid: Motes In The Stage-Lights’, yes? Between looking small and living in little-space?”

“Mhm. I knew it was weird and all, and a lot of people did not like it, but I am surprised to learn just how much some people hate it.”

Ey furrowed their brow. “You are?” they asked dubiously. “I though you knew that, too.”

She laughed, rolling onto her back again. “I know there are lots of people who hate the whole bit. I meant more like Hammered Silver cutting off our whole stanza.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Motes said. “Like, Sasha was the last straw, sure, but it was also because of all of that.”

Warmth sighed, stretching their arms in front of em. “I know she has not *actually* cut me off, but she might as well have. Her and In Dreams both, with their stanzas.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, they cut off Dear, right?” it said. “And I am rather a lot of Dear. I am Dear and Rye and Praiseworthy. I am all of my down-trees. I *like* being all of my down-trees. I am proud of it.” She grinned. “I think of all of those, they might like Rye okay, but they hate Dear, and I cannot imagine them being too into Praiseworthy after the *History* named her as the propagandist during Secession.”

Motes frowned. “Wait, really?”

“I mean, I have not actually talked to them, but they cut off Dear for less.” Ey laughed bitterly. “But again, I am also a little one, right? Even if not in the same way as you. My stanza also has our family dynamic, yes? I have dated a cocladist before, have I not? And My and I have been getting close again, too.”

Motes laughed and clapped her paws.

Grinning, it continued, “Hell, Rye and Pointillist are *plenty* chummy, if you know what I mean.”

She scoffed. “They just write each other letters.”

“Yeah. *Sexy* letters.”

“Well, okay,” Motes said, still giggling. “Do you really think they have cut you off? Effectively if not actually, I mean.”

“I have not talked with them, but neither have they talked with me,” they said. “I think that I am one step away from being in their cross-hairs. I am over here doing my weird stuff, making things and food and such. I am not really political, I am not being sneaky or dating a Bălan or whatever, and My is off doing her own thing for now. I *am* part Dear, though, and I *am* small like you.”

“Which do you think would piss them off more?”

“Fuck if I know,” Warmth said cheerily.

Motes snorted. “You do not sound like you would mind too much.”

Ey shrugged. “It would suck, but yeah.” It thought for a moment, then shrugged again. “I will amend that somewhat. Even if it would not be any big loss for me, I do not think it would make any of us feel good. No one wants to be an outcast.”

“Yeah...”

“Sorry, Mote.” Warmth scooted closer and draped an arm over her front. “I did not mean to rub it in any.”

She nodded and tugged Warmth’s arm up to hug it to her front. “It is okay, just had not heard it put like that before.”

“Dear got its fair share of getting cast out as it became more and more of a snotty little shit, and some of that rubbed off onto us. I have a fair few people who dislike me because of that.”

“People just looking up Dear in the directory, seeing you, and then hating you for no reason?”

It grinned, nodded.

“Weeeird,” Motes said, frowning.

“It is whatever. It stings sometimes, but what is there to do about it?”

“Mmhm.” She sighed, finally rolling to face her cocladist. “I wonder if that is why they are so mean about all of this. The *History* came out and they felt that and realized how much it stung, so they started lashing out. I know they got mad at me before then, too, but it got way worse after that and after True Name became Sasha.”

Warmth bumped eir nose against hers. “Maybe. I do not know, Mote. Even if the timing does not work, you are probably right that they feel hurt by all that. I am sorry you were also one of their targets.”

She wilted, nodded. “Thanks.”

“Mmhm. Now, come on, kiddo. Let us lick a battery terminal and eat a passion fruit and see how it stacks up against *frahbrodåt*, and then get some *actual* food.”

4

Motes played.

She played on precipices. She played along the knife's edge. She played at the point of a sword, at the barrel of a gun. She played with death. She-

No.

Motes was played *with*.

She was toyed with. She was dangled by the scruff over the ledge. She was held at the point of the knife. She was backed against the wall with the barrel of a gun to her forehead. She was given a sword and told to fall on it.

Motes was played with. She was laughed at. She was belittled and torn down.

The things she loved were turned astringent and bitter. All of the play she had at the point of a knife was turned fraught with peril. All of the play with death became a threat.

All of her play, all of that work she had put into reclaiming all that had been done to her in so many lives, to turning it into a joy or a kink or simple boredom was destroyed. It was the taking of good things and turning them not into something bad, for that was simple guilt, but it was the taking of good things and turning them into something she hated, she resented, she was terrified

of. All of the times that she had laughed with joy as she fell to the strike of a sword or the bullet from a gun or the point of a knife in some game or at the hands of some lover were turned to wrongnesses.

It was annihilation. It was the opposite of play—of Motes’s kind of play, this reclamation of childhood. It was a negating of that play. It was a turning of joy into shame, a turning of fun into fear, a turning of laughter to ash before it leaves the mouth.

In her dream, she played a game.

She played one of those games where she forked and was rendered bodiless and immobile, while her up-tree fork was sent along a series of platforms, leaping from one to another and swiping out at skeletons and liches with a long spear. The version of her doing the attacking had an incomplete view of the world, while the disembodied Motes watched from some distance away, treating the game like a literal platformer, sending instructions to her ‘character’ via sensorium messages.

She knew this game. Not from having actually played it in the waking world—who knew how real it was?—but she knew this game in her dream. She breezed through levels, one after the other. Enemies fell to her spear, bosses toppled easily, and when they hit the ground, vines would sprout up and flower with a luscious scent.

She could beat this game. She knew this game. She was speed-running it. Little tricks that the game’s designer had built in allowed her to skip out of the bounds of the world if she jumped at just the right point, or perhaps she would use a damage glitch to end a fight almost before it began.

She could beat the final boss, who was a mirror of herself.

She knew that there was a strike—despite the boss knowing all that she did, being her—that would take her down in an instant.

But when she got to the boss arena, no one was there. Not the crouching version of herself, purple-auraed and glowing-eyed. Just her, suddenly in one, suddenly unified instead of spread across two forks.

And then something behind her snagged her by the nape of the neck, bundling up her scruff in unseen fingers and hauling her off the ground. She cried out and kicked as she dangled, swinging blindly with her spear.

This was not supposed to happen.

Whatever it was that held her turned her slowly to face the way that she had come, and she came face to face with herself at last. Not herself as a little skunk, some ten years old, but her as she was when she uploaded. Her as Michelle Hadje/her as Sasha/her as that version of herself that flowed between the two forms, visions of skunk fur washing over skin/visions of fur falling away to reveal the human beneath. There was the exhaustion in her face/the agony in her face. There was the hoarseness of her voice/the hoarseness of her voice.

“To think that I had *this* in me,” she croaked/she croaked, “To think that I could be *this* disgusting.”

Motes dropped her spear. Her muscles went slack. Her voice was stolen. Her breath was robbed from her.

This was not supposed to happen.

“Who are you?” The apparition furrowed her brow/bared her teeth. “You cannot be me. You cannot be us. Who are you? Who is this pretender? Who is this nobody? Who is this nothing?”

Motes cried. She hung limply and cried before that long-dead version of herself.

This was not supposed to happen.

Michelle/Sasha sneered through that omnipresent exhaustion. “Some mote who styles herself Motes. Some grasper-after-fame. Some fetishist who wishes only to taint the Ode with lurid visions of youth.”

Motes cried. She could do nothing but hang from Sasha’s paw/Michelle’s hand and cry, could do nothing but dangle in the grasp of this person who had always been so, so fond of her and cry.

In her free hand/paw, this ghost brought into being a dagger, silver-bladed, wood-hilted, ruby-pommeled. She reached out and slowly, almost tenderly, pressed it into Motes’s paw. Holding her wrist, she brought that paw up so that the tip of the blade was pressed against the skunk’s neck, pricking at the skin over her carotid. When she let go, Motes found her paw remained there, immobile, unresponsive to her efforts to pull it away.

“This is your kink, is it not ‘Motes’? Your fetish, ‘Speck’? ‘Skunklet’?” Sasha/Michelle leaned forward, nearly nose to nose, whispered, “‘*Dóttir*’?”

Motes sobbed. “Please...” she managed at last.

None of this was supposed to happen. None of this was right.

Michelle/Sasha straightened up and said, almost bored, “Well? Indulge, my dear.”

With no recourse, Motes drove the blade into her own neck, an agonizing slowness that played itself out in a death she had experienced before, she had surely suffered in its own, consen-



sual way.

She died then, whimpering ever more weakly, blood staining her paw and arm and front in an outsized torrent, and as her panicked eyes drifted shut one last time, she awoke with a start, already sobbing.

The house was quiet, as it so often was at this time of the night, when Beholden and A Finger Pointing were either asleep or out at one of their jazzy nightclubs. All the same, she sent a gentle sensorium ping to A Finger Pointing, figuring it best to make sure that they were actually asleep rather than simply under a cone of silence in their room.

“Dot?” came the sleepy reply.

She carefully poked her nose into the room, turning the handle to the door as quietly as she could. “Ma?”

“Is everything alright, Motes?”

“Nightmare,” she mumbled, still sniffing. “Can I sleep with you for a bit?”

“Of course, my dear,” A Finger Pointing said, stifling a yawn. “I am busy hogging all the bed, anyway, so there is plenty of room.”

Sighing in relief, the skunk nodded and padded into the room, closing the door behind her. She had to feel her way to the bed in the dark. The dark, which seemed to press in against her, bearing rapidly distorting memories of the dream. *To think that I could be this disgusting*, echoed in her head. *...lurid visions of youth...*

There was a part of her that strove to convince the rest that the voice in the dark was not that of A Finger Pointing—despite the lilting, everlasting humor that showed even in sleepiness—but that of Michelle/Sasha, her root instance who had ever loved her, now more than fifty years dead. *It is her waiting with a dagger*, that fraction of her promised. *It is her waiting with yet more cruel words.*

But then there was the bed, and then there was the hand holding up the covers to welcome her in, and then there were the arms envelop her, and then there was the feeling of a face—a human face—an unshifting face—her cocladist-cum-mother’s face—pressed against the back of her neck, and then there was the clumsy addition of Beholden’s paw draping over her side,

her other cocladist-cum-mother clearly still more asleep than awake.

And then she finally was able to relax.

None of them spoke, once she was settled. Both A Finger Pointing and Beholden quickly drifted back to sleep, and although there were the occasional flashes of skunk/human face, exhausted and sneering, behind her closed eyelids, Motes soon followed.

It was not until morning came, when Beholden had slipped away for a few minutes and returned with three mugs of coffee on a tray, when all three of them sat up in bed, leaning against the headrest, tray set before them, that she told them of the dream.

“I do not remember it all that well, now,” she said holding the oversized mug carefully in comparatively small paws. “But Michelle was there, and she was really upset with me. She kept saying that I was gross and a fetishist and stuff, and that she could not believe that she had this in her, and then she made me kill myself.”

“Jesus, Dot,” Beholden said, frowning over the rim of her mug. She reached her free arm around the skunk’s shoulders and tugged her close against her side in a hug. “I am sorry to hear that. That sounds awful.”

“It really does, my dear.” A Finger Pointing leaned over to kiss at the tips of her ears. “And I think that it is demonstrably untrue that she did not have this in her. You exist, Motes. You are absolutely my up-tree, and I know where you got it from.” She smiled. “And I am absolutely her up-tree, am I not?”

Doing her best to hold still despite the ticklishness of the

kisses, Motes nodded. “I know. It was just a dream. Dreams are not real.”

“Not unless you are Slow Hours,” A Finger Pointing said, nodding. “And even then, there is no guarantee. But come, the details of the dream aside, how are you feeling now?”

“I guess I am feeling okay. It feels like any old nightmare.” She furrowed her brow, picking words carefully. “It feels like it is something sticky that has gotten stuck in my fur and I have to carefully remove it. It sucks, and it is a lot of work, but it is just a silly thing that happens sometimes, right? Every time I remember driving the knife home, I just remind myself it was fake.”

“Good,” Beholden said, letting the smaller skunk slouch against her. “That is a good way to think of it.”

A Finger Pointing leaned against Motes in turn—over her, in fact, to the point of resting her head on Beholden’s shoulder. “I know that you will not be able to forget about it, not completely, but processing it for what it is—a dream—may well help it be less of a burden,” she said. “I have gained comfort in that at times for my own dreams, waking and sleeping.”

Motes huddled comfortably between the two. “But what does processing even mean? I feel like even my brain is yelling at me about all of this now,” she asked, doing her best to keep a whine out of her voice. “I do not even know why it is all coming up so much lately.”

Beholden laughed. “It is all your fault, my dear. The dream probably showed up *because* you have been thinking about it. Others have been talking with you about it *because* you keep bringing it up. Probably best to ask yourself what got you think-

ing about it in the first place, right?”

“I guess,” she grumbled. “I will try and remember. It felt like it just kind of floated up into my mind a few weeks ago from out of nowhere.”

“Remember, yes,” A Finger Pointing said, yawning dramatically and leaning harder until she was able to push both of the skunks over onto their sides. She held up a hand as though inviting them to picture a tableau. “I remember the maps of the Holy Land,” she lamented, quoting from some old production, some old classic. “Colored, they were. Very pretty! The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty.”

Both of the skunks fell into laughter, sprawled awkwardly beneath their down-tree instance on the bed. “That is where we will go, you used to say,” Beholden said, keeping up the act. “That is where we will go for our honeymoon.”

“We will swim! We will be happy!” Motes chimed in.

Sighing fondly, A Finger Pointing nodded. “We should have been poets.”

Motes could tell what they were doing. She was as adept at this as they were. The job of an actor is to trick the audience—just for a moment!—that the story playing out before them is more real than the rest of the world, that it is the rest of their lives that is merely a play. A Finger Pointing and Beholden, Ma and Bee, were nudging her to set aside for now this dream-rotted headspace, this mopery.

She saw their gentle manipulation and loved them all the harder for it.

The rest of the morning passed in comfort and lazy chatter, but throughout, some portion of Motes was dedicated to think-

ing back, to remembering. Comfort and lazy chatter and remembering, then, before the three decided to split off to their own tasks—Beholden into two instances, one to work on music, one to the theatre; A Finger Pointing to some planned brunch; Motes to go for a walk, to go and talk.

The fifth stanza had begun its life in an apartment building in a cozy, artsy town. As many studios and penthouses as were required for one mind split ten ways. Life on Lagrange had progressed as ever, though, and soon the sense and sensation of being a part of the fifth had changed. It began to encompass relationships fleeting and lasting. It housed devotion, invited in friendship. It grew beyond the bounds of just this tenth of a clade to include all of Au Lieu Du Rêve, and some few decades on, the whole of the project decamped from their city-block sized apartment building.

Now, the fifth stanza—along with however many other lovers and friends, coworkers and groupies, up-trees and tracking instances—occupied a sprawling neighborhood of houses and townhomes, yards and copses of trees, and yes, even a playground. The whole neighborhood crowded against an untamed field, a prairie, a meadow laced up with deer trails and footpaths, dotted with yet more copses of trees lining a creek.

For each of those who lived there, the neighborhood was theirs in some specific way, and for Motes, it was hers to paint.

Motes had painted it all hundreds of times, of course.

She had painted the prairie, painted the neighborhood, painted those who lived there. She had chosen the colors of many of the houses—had even helped paint some by hand until it had gotten too boring. She had chalked up all of the

sidewalks—Warmth had conspired with A Finger Pointing and Serene, the sim’s designers, so that colored chalk lines flowered behind her automatically as she walked when she so desired—and she so desired—only to fade some hours later. One could always tell where Motes had come and gone.

Thus, when, still sleepy, she trudged out of the ranch-style home she shared with A Finger Pointing and Beholden, colored lines of flowering vines trailed after her bare paws. She guided those vines with her steps or, relishing in a secret pleasure, pretended like they were propelling her forward, pretending that she was a being of growth—that she was a seed, a being of potential—that she was a giant at the head of some toppled beanstalk.

The vines or her feet carried her down through the neighborhood at a contemplative pace, giving her time to think of the conversation she wanted to have before she actually had it. She spoke so often without thinking, letting that be a part of her nature rather than some simple flaw, that to approach something so deliberately as this set her mood from the beginning, and by the time she drifted up the set of steps to a duplex near the far end of the neighborhood, many of her doubts had been set atop well-lit pedestals, and placards beneath each labeled their names, their creators, their provenance.

No one answered the door when she knocked, so she hesitantly pressed the doorbell. This, she knew—for it was the same throughout the neighborhood—was created to send a sensorium ping to the inhabitant.

Why am I so nervous? one part of her wondered, and then another answered, *Perhaps because you are worried she will tell you the*

truth. Another chimed in, *Is that not the goal? Perhaps—*

She was startled out of her anxious spiral by a gentle ping in return. “*Speck? What is up? I am at the ALDR library. Would you like me to cycle the door?*”

Motes nodded. “*Hi Slow Hours. Yes please.*”

There was a quiet chime from the door and the letters on the nameplate faded from ‘Slow Hours’ to ‘Au Lieu Du Rêve Library’. This done, there was a quiet click and the door swung lazily open.

Beyond, rather than the comfortable and comfortably her home that Slow Hours kept, there was a well-lit reading room, a solarium of sorts with glass that looked out over some far distant part of the selfsame prairie that the neighborhood abutted. A table, several chairs, and a small collection of far more comfortable recliners huddled in the middle, while beyond, a room of shelving stretched into dimness.

And there, already levering herself out of her chair, was Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress. Sis Hours, her big sister. Slowers. Slow, if she was feeling particularly cheeky. Had Beholden been human or Slow Hours a skunk, they could easily have been mistaken for twins, so similar were their builds—short, soft, round of face with curly black hair framing that pale skin versus short, soft, round of face with thick white mane framing that black fur—and yet as soon as they spoke, the differences were immediately evident. Where Beholden was brash and snarky, Slow Hours was quiet and thoughtful. Where Beholden leaned into music as the lead sound tech, Slow Hours leaned into books as the lead script manager. Where Beholden was fun—really, truly, earnestly fun and a joy to be around—Slow

Hours was nice. She was the one with which one spoke about feelings. She was the one who cried with you.

Behind her, scattered among the shelves, several more instances of her cocladist were at work, peeking over whenever they thought she was not looking as though ready to do just that.

“Hi Speck,” she said, smiling. “If you are calling me ‘Slow Hours’ then something must be up.”

Motes huffed.

“You are transparent, my dear. It is a strength of yours.” Slow Hours rested her hand atop the skunk’s head. “Now, come. Do you want to go sit outside?”

“Yes please,” she said, feeling suddenly smaller still.

She was a long time in opening up, which seemed to suit her cocladist just fine. Slow Hours summoned up a blanket and, disregarding the patio furniture that littered the concrete that ringed the solarium as well as the hard-packed dirt trail, picked her way out into the prairie. Holding two of the corners, she threw the blanket out to spread it over the shin-high grass. It seemed to float there, and for a long moment, neither of them moved. Skunk and woman observed this magic carpet in gingham hovering inches above the ground, bending blades and heads of stiff-stalked grass.

When Motes lingered on the trail, pensive, Slow Hours stepped onto the blanket and tramped dutifully around the rim of it, tamping down the grass so that they would not sink so deep. That done, she lowered herself to sit cross-legged near the center and patted her lap.

At last, the skunk sighed and stepped onto the blanket, lowering herself to all fours and crawling forward to flop down be-

side her cocladist, resting her head on her thigh.

“Now,” Slow Hours began. “Tell me what is on your mind. Tell me your second greatest joy and your third greatest fear.”

Unable to hide a smile, she replied, “You cannot just steal my weirdo questions like that, Slowers.”

“Can and will.”

She giggled faintly. “Well, okay. My second greatest joy is that you brought a fricking picnic blanket out here because you knew I would just get all frumpy in one of those stupid chairs, and my third greatest fear iiiis...” She trailed off for a moment, thinking. “I am afraid you are going to just tell me this is nothing.”

“When have I ever been able to stop myself at “it is nothing”, Speck?” Slow Hours tweaked one of the skunk’s ears gently. “And if I do say that it is nothing, would that be so bad? You may have spent some time worrying, but is that not also time spent thinking through your emotions? We will still have spoken about *why* it is nothing.”

Motes pawed up at her cocladist’s hand on her ear. “Well, okay. That is fair. None of us ever seem to be able to shut up.”

“You see? You do understand. Now. Tell me what is on your little skunk mind.”

“I had a dream last night,” she said, beginning slowly. “And I already talked about it with Ma and Bee, and I think I sort of understand the ways in which it is wrong. Like, we talked about the fact that it was just a dream, and that it was probably spurred by how much I have been thinking about that sort of thing anyway, and that, since I cannot tell why I started thinking about all of this stuff, what I need to do is to start thinking back and remem-

bering what might have happened that started the thoughts before.”

Slow Hours nodded quietly. “Start at the dream, then, and we will talk from there. I am sure that I will infer what you mean by ‘this stuff’.”

And so she did.

She delved deep into her memories and pulled out as many details as she could. The System would help her remember anything that would pass before her sensorium, that which she heard or saw, touched or tasted or said aloud, but not any of her thoughts or feelings.

Dreams, however, sat in some liminal space. They were built up of images, yes, and sounds, perhaps even pleasurable or painful touches, but the System did not quite know what to do with this onslaught of imagined input. It allowed her to remember distorted flashes of images with startling perfection, to remember the garbled words overheard without fault, and yet the distortion and garbled nature of each remained.

So vivid had her nightmare been, though, that Motes had no trouble recalling the emotions and thoughts that had pinned themselves so firmly to the dream.

She had often wondered if dreams took any time at all, if perhaps there was nothing while she slept and it was instead the act of waking up when the chaotic firings of her non-neurons from all that time she slept crashed and tumbled into some sense made by her newly-waking mind. Perhaps nothing happened while she slept but crude and natural processes, and it was hypnopompia where a cloud became a duck or a bunny.

She was not so sure now. The immediacy of the dream felt

too bound to time. Sure, the time spent playing the game was a haze of knowing how games work, of knowing what a speed-run was. That was non-time. That was all bunched up in impressions built from however many hundreds of such games she had played in her long, long life. She could not express whether or not the combat was good because it was neither good combat nor bad, it was just Combat™. It was just an idea.

She was not so sure that dreams were meaningless firings of neurons composed into some semblance of order in the process of waking as she recalled tearfully the way that Michelle had caught her up by the scruff and told her horrible things—such horrible, horrible things—and then bade her drive home the blade to end her own life.

All throughout, Slow Hours listened in silence, letting her talk while brushing her fingers slowly through the thick fur of her mane. Even after she finished speaking, while she lingered a while in tears, her cocladist simply sat with her in silence, stroking through her fur and sharing in those tears. It was a comforting silence. Thoughtful. Patient, with no need of filling.

Once her tears began to slow and she wiped at her nose with a tissue, Slow Hours leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I am sorry, Motes. You deserve better than what your sleeping mind has told you,” she said gently. “It sounds as though this false vision of your past self was upset with two things: your explorations around age and your explorations around death, yes?”

Stifling some snuffles, aftershocks of the cry just ended, Motes nodded. “Yeah, though I think more the first,” she said, wincing at the muffled sound of her voice through her congestion. It sounded round, somehow, wrong. “That is what I have

been thinking about most, anyway, that would have led to a dream like that. The death was just the punishment.”

“And you are not sure where these anxieties came from?”

She shook her head. “Nothing has really changed. I have been seeing friends the same amount, I had therapy with Miss Genet, I have not heard from anyone who got upset at me, nothing like that. It feels like it just popped into my head and now I have to live with it.”

Slow Hours smiled down to her. “You know, A Finger Pointing mentioned to me that you had brought this up, actually. She says that you have been talking about it lately. Far more than usual.”

“She did? Why?”

“Because she loves you and because I love you. Because we want to see you happy and we notice when you are not.”

Motes pushed herself halfway up to sitting so that she could hug around Slow Hours’s middle. “Love you too, Slowers,” she said, then sat up the rest of the way, wiping yet more tears away. “I have been talking about it a lot, though, yeah. I talked about it with Ma and Bee, and I talked about it with Dry Grass, and also with Sasha and Warmth. Everyone talked about how some people in the clade got all upset about it.”

She nodded. “I have heard mention of the sixth and seventh stanzas, yes, and I thought for some time that the eighth was also quite unhappy, but I believe Sasha when she says that they never really engaged with it specifically.”

“Yeah. Dry Grass said that Hammered Silver was all sorts of upset about it, and I know In Dreams was pretty unhappy early on.”

“Have you heard from any of them lately?”

Motes shook her head. “I never really talked to them, even going way back—I did not really need to—and they never talked to me either.”

“Much of that was because A Finger Pointing fielded most of their interactions,” Slow Hours said. “She is quite protective of you—of all of us—and if she can do something to protect us, she will.”

“Sasha said something like that,” she said, brow furrowed. “She said that Ma had been working behind the scenes to deal with Hammered Silver getting angry over just about everything.”

“A Finger Pointing worked behind the scenes to deal with most things, Speck,” Slow Hours said, voice fond. “*Still* works. Au Lieu Du Rêve is self-sustaining, so she is doing what she does best: caring for her stanza and for the clade as a whole, even the parts of it that dislike her. But come, this is not a conversation about her. This is about your dream. This is about how you feel.”

“Right,” Motes said, pushing that miserable sensation in her chest down once more. “I feel...I do not know. Usually, it feels like I am just living like myself, if it feels like anything at all. Sometimes it feels transgressive in a fun way, like when I get booted from a sim for being weird or I get strange looks on the street or whatever.”

“And sometimes it feels transgressive in a bad way?” Slow Hours asked when Motes drifted to silence.

“Yeah. It feels like I am doing something wrong. That is what I got out of the dream. It was not just that I was doing a bad thing, but a *wrong* thing. A bad thing might be naughty, but a wrong

thing is me fuc- messing up. It is me making a mistake. *Being* a mistake.”

Her cocladist smiled sadly and reached out to take her paws in her hands. “I could tell you a million, billion, trillion times that you are doing as you say and just living like yourself, that you are not doing a wrong thing, that you are not a wrong person, but I do not think that is what you need to hear, is it, Speck?”

After a moment’s hesitation, she shook her head. “That is something I know intellectually already.”

“Do you want to hear my thoughts on the clade, then?”

Motes shrugged. “I guess.”

Slow Hours nodded, letting her paws go. “I will not say “fuck ’em”, much as either of us might want. You must not hyperfixate on them, but neither must you disregard them.”

“Why? Do you have a prophecy for me?” Motes asked, smiling faintly. “The last time you gave me a prophecy, it was about whether I should stay friends with Alexei.”

She laughed. “I remember that, yes. You were bound to run into someone who was also into kidcore stuff as Big Motes, and we were stifling you.” The mirth faded to something more thoughtful. “But, yes, I have a prediction for you: the clade is not done with you, *And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights*. Even those who have cut you off have not forgotten you, and it is best that you not forget them.”

The skunk frowned, rubbing her paws over her knees and toying with a rip in the denim of her overalls. “Okay,” she mumbled. “Where do you get all of this, anyway?”

Slow Hours smirked, tapped at her temple with two fingers. “I have the outline of the world, do I not?”

Motes stuck out her tongue. “That is not an answer.”

“Yes, my dear, it is,” her cocladist said haughtily, then the smile returned. “But in reality, most of these prophecies or omens or forecasts that I am apparently known for are simply reads on the situation based on the stories that I have read—and I have read a *lot* of stories. The clade is not done with you because that is not how people work. They do not cut contact with an erstwhile friend and then never think of them again. They think of them *constantly*. The stories wherein ‘no contact’ holds without further enmity are vanishingly few.”

She wilted, shoulders slumping. “So I might be hearing more of this, then? From Hammered Silver and so on?”

“You might. You might not.” chuckling at the exasperated look on the skunk’s face, Slow Hours leaned forward to brush some of her longer headfur from her face. “The key takeaway here, Speck, is not that you need fret about this constantly, but that you should not ignore these feelings. You should not simply dismiss those within the clade that cut contact as irrelevant. Even if they forever live only in some dusty closet in your mind, they will still live there.”

“Yes, but what am I supposed to *do*?”

“Live, my dear. Grow.” She laughed, adding quickly, “Not up, not if you do not want, but take that knowledge, take strength in the fact that you are living intentionally as you are in spite of them, and make yourself better for it. Live fiercely and let it inform your growth, just do not let it define you.”

Motes nodded sullenly.

“I know that you said that you do not need to hear that you are not wrong or doing wrong things,” Slow Hours said, drawing

the skunk up into her lap. “But I will tell you all the same: you are not in any way a mistake. You are approaching this cognizant of the implications. You are being safe. You are leaning on support and protection. You are holding in your mind both the truth that this is you and that an expression of identity like this coming from an adult is fraught.”

“I know,” she mumbled, burying her face against her co-cladist’s shoulder. “Thank you, Slowers.”

“Of course, my dear. I am afraid that I did not do quite the job of comforting you that I might, but I do hope that you take that to heart. Live intentionally, and remember that we love you.”

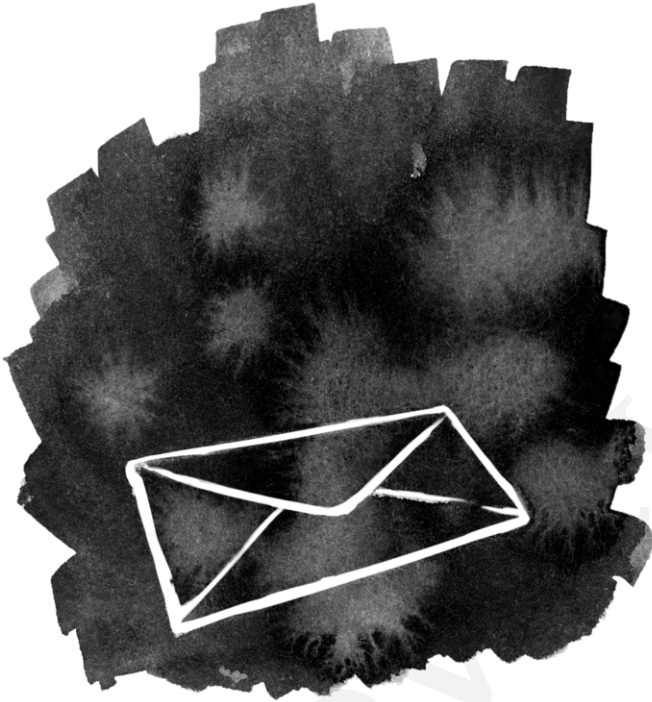
Preview

5

Motes stopped playing.

She stopped playing because, some weeks later, she was out with some friends, some of the others who had decided to give up on grown-up life now that they were here, now that they were decades old or centuries, now that they were functionally immortal. She stopped playing because, as she sprinted full-tilt after a handful of friends, dodging around benches and trees, seesaws and swings, a bolt of panic struck down her spine with an electric intensity and made her tumble into the gravel, made her skid through the pebbles until she crunched up against a jungle gym, left her nose, paws, and elbows bloodied. She stopped playing because for a long minute, she could not breathe, though whether from the adrenaline pulling her nerves taut or the pain in her snout or from the air being knocked out of her, she could not tell.

She stopped playing because, as she slowly pushed herself upright to a sitting position, tears already springing from her eyes, an envelope slid nonsensically from the air and fluttered to the ground before her. She stopped playing because her name—her full name, *And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights of the Ode clade*—was printed on the front of the envelope in a hand-



writing that was painfully familiar because it was her own. It was her own and it was A Finger Pointing's and it was Beholden's, it was Slow Hours's and Warmth's and Dry Grass's, and it was the handwriting that flowed from the hand of every Odist even after hundreds of years.

She stopped playing because she had a guess as to who this was from, and that only led to a second spike in anxiety, for while the first had been from a top-priority sensorium ping, this came from fear, from terror. She stopped playing as Alexei hollered, "Motes!" and started to run back to her. She stopped playing as she rolled to the side out of the sim and into her studio.

She stopped playing and, with a shaky paw still seeping blood from skinned pads, she opened the envelope.

She stopped playing and read:

To: And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights of the Ode clade **(EYES-ONLY)**

From: Memory Is A Mirror Of Hammered Silver of the Ode clade

On: systime 238+291

And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights,

I am breaking my communication embargo to write you regarding some concerns that I have on the current state of the clade, the fifth stanza, and you in particular.

As you know, the sixth and seventh stanzas, those of me and If I Am To Bathe In Dreams, have formally instituted a no-contact order with the first, eighth, and part of the ninth stanzas, as well as the entirety of the fifth stanza due to the ongoing association with the one who has named herself Sasha.

I do absolutely mean it when I say all of the fifth stanza. That is, we have not cut *just* Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself out of our lives for her distasteful friendship, but her and all of her up-trees to however many degrees. That includes you, And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights.

It came to my attention some years back that I Remember The Rattle Of Dry Grass had nevertheless

continued in her association with the fifth, particularly with you and with Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself, given your unfortunate predilection. When first I noticed this, I discussed with her my feelings on the matter and made clear my request that she live up to the original agreement that there remain no contact between our stanza and yours. She, at the time, reminded me that this decision had been made unilaterally without input from the rest of the stanza, and yet agreed to uphold my request.

It has once again come to my attention that I Remember The Rattle Of Dry Grass is spending time with you and those you have styled your 'family'. She has the most infuriating habit of going on autopilot when I talk to her, simply nodding and saying 'mmhm' or 'yes, I see' throughout, and, with regards to this topic in particular, this has proven untenable. It is with great regret that she has been added to the no-contact list.

There is a very important set of reasons for this:

1. Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself and Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps's ongoing romantic relationship remains a thorn in the side of the Ode clade. Even as the taboo seems to be loosening—a thing that I attribute to the one who has named herself Sasha's ongoing existence—there remains the issue of the im-

age that this presents of the remaining Odists as a clade of some import.

2. Your insistence on both appearing as and acting like a child on a System where such remains transgressive both by its very nature and relation to paraphilia as well as by the fact that there simply are no children sys-side.
3. The 'family' dynamic that you live within inside the fifth stanza. Treating *Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself* and *Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps* as your 'mothers', as well as your other cocladists as your siblings, is beyond a mere dalliance, but a tainting of reputations outside merely your own; it is a way of dragging others into a behavior that has a very real impact on how they—and, by extension, the rest of the clade—are perceived.
4. The friendship between *Time Is A Finger Pointing At Itself* and the one who has named herself Sasha and her inclusion in not just the daily workings of *Au Lieu Du Rêve* but the social dealings of the fifth stanza. If *I Am To Bathe In Dreams* and I hold no jurisdiction over the fifth stanza, but we do hold control over our interactions with each other, and we have made our stance abundantly clear on the one who has named herself Sasha and how she has affected the reputation of the Ode clade.
5. The involvement of *I Remember The Rattle Of*

Dry Grass counter to my requests laid out for the entirety of my stanza. This goes beyond her disregard of the no-contact order and into her willing participation in the actions of the fifth stanza in general and engagement with you specifically: these no-contact orders are expected to be upheld by *both* parties. Yes, this is complicated by the individual nature of a cladist, and yet the request has been made, and plainly. For a member of a stanza to so flagrantly disregard a request and for that to be enabled by the other party leaves me feeling personally slighted.

Therefore, I am writing to reinforce the current status:

1. There is to be no contact between the fifth stanza and either the sixth or seventh stanzas.
2. There is to be no contact between the one who has named herself Sasha and either the sixth or seventh stanzas.
3. There is to be no contact between I Remember The Rattle Of Dry Grass and the rest of the sixth stanza until further notice.

You are not just playing a dangerous game, And We Are The Motes In The Stage-Lights; you are losing it. We *all* are losing it with you, too, with the risk that it places on the entirety of the Ode clade, even those

with whom you no longer speak. I will not say that this is all on your head, but consider that three of the five points above relate directly to you.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a
child. When I became an adult, *I put an end
to childish ways.*

— Memory Is A Mirror Of Hammered Silver of the
Ode clade

When Motes overflowed, she cut herself off from play. She froze where she was. She went nonverbal, became all but catatonic. It would last days. She would disappear from the world and she would stop playing, and if she stopped playing, she would no longer be herself.

So, when Motes stopped playing that day, she promised herself that she would *not* do that. She promised herself that, as best she could, she would do anything *but* that. She promised herself that she would keep going because she did not want to be seen like this. She did not want to be caught like this, with a letter in her hand, with shame on her face, with guilt all matted in her fur.

Instead, she stood up, committed the contents of the letter to an exocortex, a hidden and compartmentalized part of her memory that rendered it inaccessible until she went looking, and then destroyed the original. There was a part of her that wanted to rip it up, to rip it into confetti and stomp on the shredded paper, to burn those shreds in a small pyre, to put the fire

out with her crying, to grind ash and tears together until she had a paint with which to spell out her anger and despair.

But no, she should not do that, either. She should not do anything so childish. She should not do childish things. When she was a child, yes, she spoke like a child and thought like a child and reasoned like a child. She acted like a child when she was a child. *Was*. She was not, was she? She was an adult, and when she had become an adult, it had come time to put an end to childish ways. She was no longer a child, she should not aim to remain or become a child, she was no longer a child, she was an adult, she should put away childish things, she was an adult, she no longer thought or reasoned like a child, she was an adult...

Her mind became a mire, a marsh, a crowded bog full of unpleasant smells and tangled reeds and matted rushes and wilting flowers and sickeningly green ferns and twisting roots and...

Her muscles clenched and bunched and tensed and pulled her down into a ball so that her feet were flat on the ground and her butt hovered some inches above and her face was buried in her arms where they crossed over her knees and in her ears was the rushing of so much blood and her vision was black and red and full of phosphores and all she felt was the pain of her skinned paws and bloodied nose echoed in repeating waves radiating throughout her body.

“Oh, Dot,” she heard above the din, Beholden’s anxious and aching voice barely audible. “How long have you been here, my dear? You never came to dinner and- oh shit, are you okay, Motes?”

She felt, muffled by those waves of stinging and soreness, the pair of paws that had helped to gently unfold her now touching

gingerly around her snout, blood all dried. She saw Beholden's face as though it was one she herself might bear in some thirty years, and that anxiety ratcheted up several notches. Any hope she had of staving off that overflow was now long, long gone. *I am an adult, I should put away childish things, I am an adult...*

"Whoa, whoa! Hey, come here," Beholden murmured, and Motes realized from some few feet above herself that she had started to thrash and wail. She looked down with distant concern.

She should stop that.

She watched her body slowly relax, watched her face screw up and the tears once more start to flow.

Interesting, she thought dispassionately. Yet I acted like a child when I was a child. I am an adult...

Her sense of self lagged behind—a hint of a mote of a Motes tethered to her body like a helium balloon on a string—as Beholden carefully lifted her unsouled-yet-still-living body and hoisted her up to carry her from her studio—the lights, she left the lights on—to her bedroom. A place of soft things. A soft mattress, a too-thick duvet, stuffed animals and yet more stuffed animals. *I should put away childish things, I am...*

Beholden set her on her feet and carefully lifted her muzzle to face her. "Motes, I know that you are overflowing, but can you fork for me, kiddo? Your nose is swollen and your paws look awful."

I should fork away the childish things, the her that lingered above thought. I am an adult and the time has come to put away the childish things.

“Do you think you can do that, Dot? You can fork into your PJs even, and we can get you into bed.”

She saw a new instance come into being beside the first. Still a skunk. Still a kid. Still not putting away those childish things! Look! The cartoon dogs floating in space, glass helmets over their heads! Space puppies! She was an adult, it was time to put away...

The other, still-bloodied instance quit and Beholden smiled, carefully guiding the pajama-ed Motes up into bed. “Do you need anything, my dear?” she asked, signing the question in tandem.

Hug, Motes’s body signed. Hug. Alone. Dark.

And the toys? this other her thought. Tell her to get rid of the toys!

But no, Beholden only hugged her, kissed her on top of the head, and tucked her in before turning out the light, telling her along each step of the way that she loved her.

I am an adult...

And then it was dark and she was alone, her body and this mere mote of a Motes who lingered up above.

Days passed out of time and time passed out of mind and mind drifted only in darkness where darkness gave no count of days. Delineations came only ever from within. She knew, for instance, that she got hungry at one point and quickly turned the sensation off. She knew that at one point she got too warm and so she commanded the room to be colder so that she could bundle up.

The only interruption of note that came from the outside was the door at one point creaking open. Motes did not know how long had passed—this life without play admitted no hours—

but she did know that it must have been night, for precious little light came in, and what light did make it into the room was Moon silver. She knew also that she was far closer to her body now, perhaps halfway there.

Even with so little light, it was plain to see A Finger Pointing's silhouette, tall and slender, and so she remained where she was.

Her down-tree instance did not wait by the door but instead crept in and closed it behind her, and Motes had to track her progress by the whisper of her slacks, the soft sound of her feet on the carpet. And then there was the shifting of the bed and the feeling of a weight settling down behind her, laying over the covers.

"I love you, Dot," she said, arm tucking up and around her.

Motes watched dispassionately as her body started to relax at the gesture, the words.

"I am sorry," A Finger Pointing continued in a whisper.

There was confusion, then, and a spike of anxiety—had she found out about the letter? Was Motes in trouble? Was there a 'but' coming, and A Finger Pointing was about to ask her to change?—but when only silence followed, Motes relaxed the rest of the way and nestled back into her cocladist's arms. She was not yet able to speak, was still without her beloved play, but comfort was comfort and love was love and here is where it was to be found.

Finally she slept, finally she dreamed.

6

Motes had, at one point, started to play.

That is how time's inevitable arrow works, after all, is it not? There was a time when Motes was not, when she had not yet existed, and then there was a point at which she began, and from then on, she existed. Her presence was in the world, and it was undeniable. There were witnesses. There were knock-on effects. She inescapably was.

And so, there was a time at which she did not play, did not surround herself with play, did not define herself by it, and then there was a point at which she began to play. It was a starting point. It was an inflection point, at which she collided with the idea of play and her trajectory was changed.

And yet, even before that, before Motes, before the System, before getting lost, Michelle had played, had she not? She had been a kid, yes? Michelle, even before getting her implants and becoming Sasha, had been five, had been six and seven and eight.



Michelle played as well. She painted, too, back then.

Roly-poly Michelle Hadje, 263 years ago, sitting in kindergarten, shitty paintbrush in her hand, shitty tempera paint in a dish set before a shitty piece of off-white construction paper. She sat there in her silly little corduroy pants and silly little flower-print blouse, a silly little smile on her face, painting a robin in primary red and deep-dark black.

Silly, roly-poly Michelle Hadje in her dirt-brown corduroys splotted with a patch of red from having sat down directly in a puddle of paint. It was not a drip so easily wiped away but well and truly ground into the ridged fabric of her trousers.

“Oh! Miss Hadje! Michelle, Michelle, Michelle!” her teacher tutted. Miss Willard always looked as though she regretted that she was not able to scruff children, to lift them off the ground and give them a good shake, or perhaps to rub their noses in the messes they made like some naughty pooch. “Your mother will be so upset, won’t she?”

And Michelle cried. She cried because—people-pleaser her—she wanted nothing other than to be a good girl. She wanted her teacher to like her. She wanted her mother to love her. She wanted to be good and to never risk that love, and here she was, being told that she had done wrong, that her mother would be upset!

It was all so silly! She was a kid! She was five and a half! Of course she was going to get messy. Of course there would be paint on her hands, and so why should there not also be paint on her pants? She was a kid and she was clumsy, and a mess like that was just a part of her life.

Her mother picked her sobbing daughter up from school,

and after much cajoling, much reassuring her that she would not abandon her, would not leave her by the side of the road to be picked up by...who exactly? She reassured her that the paint stain was fine, and that she would have a chat with Miss Willard. When your daughter's neurodivergence presents itself in anxiety, perhaps you get used to reassuring her that you love her, and when you are a mother, perhaps you never tire of doing so.



A Motes who looks like she has stepped straight out of a kindergarten classroom and into the world—a world with a lower age limit, a world where one cannot upload before one turns eighteen—is a Motes who is going to draw attention. A Motes who acts five, or seven, or twelve is a Motes who is going to inspire big feelings. She is going to inspire feelings of confusion, of alarm, of anger.

She is going to be a Motes who gets kicked from sims, who gets barred from entry. She is going to be a Motes who gets her tail stepped on, she is going to get hip-bumped out of the way, and ever they will promise it is an accident, and many times they will even be telling the truth.

She will be a Motes who gets sneered at. She will be scolded for some vague infraction, impropriety, some sin against God, against man, against the sanctity of the System. Or perhaps she will be a Motes who is studiously ignored. She will be the one others cross the street to avoid, the one others stay away from lest they be tainted with transgression by association.

She is also going to be a Motes who inspires feelings of protection, of care, of *joie de vivre*. She is going to be one who shows

the hedonism in play, one whose *raison d'être* is to have fun, and inspire in others a sense of compersion for that fun. She is going to be a Motes who makes one want to play in turn. She is going to be the one you want to hold in your lap, the one you want to call adorable, the one you want to hold close and protect from pain.



The inflection point came when she, the Motes who had been forked not three years prior, the Motes who was still a human who looked much like A Finger Pointing, her immediate down-tree, sat in a paint tray while painting a stage-wide sunset on a scrim.

There she was, kneeling carefully on the stage and twisting around to see the red splotch ground into the seat of her sturdy work overalls, and laughing. She laughed as she recognized the mess she had made—one big butt-print on the matte black of the stage—and she laughed at the way the paint had very clearly started to seep into the denim of her overalls. She laughed as memories flooded into her mind, of red paint on corduroy, of Miss Willard's snippy admonition, of her mother's patient reassurances. She laughed and, rather than wave away the mess that she had made on her overalls, she lay down on her front and summoned up a smaller paintbrush instead of the roller she had been using, loaded it up with paint, and started filling in the awkward splotch on the stage into the body of some critter, round and soft. She took a break from her sunset and instead painted a fat, cartoonish skunk all in red.

By the time *That It Might Give The World Orders*, the play's director, found her, she had added an idealized field of grass and dandelions, had painted in a frolicking fennec fox in blue, and still lay on her front, the seat of her pants colored in red from the paint she had sat in.

Rather than admonish her like Miss Willard of the past, *That It Might Give* had stood in silence for a long minute, looking down at her cocladist laying down on her belly and painting with a sheepish grin on her face, and then laughed. She laughed, leaned down, and ruffled Motes's hair and then sat with her, doodling bumblebees on the stage's surface, floating up above skunk and fennec, above grass and dandelions, and sharing in memories.



The process of making friends when one is a kid on a System where everyone is old and getting older is, it turns out, not the same as making friends when one is *just* old and getting older. It is an act of making two sets of friends in two different ways.

Adults feel around the edges of friendship carefully. They ask questions, they get to know each other first. They talk. They chat. They watch and observe before they decide—even if subconsciously—that they might want to be friends with their interlocutor.

Kids fall into friendship easily. They need one thing to connect on, and then they simply become friends.

They are two different ways of moving in the world, and yet they end in the same goal: friendship. A friend is a friend is a friend.

Motes fell into friendship as a kid. She fell into friendship with Alexei. She fell into friendship with Who Walks The Path. She fell into friendship with so many other kids she met at this playground or at that game sim.



Fell into and fell out of, yes? For kids fall out of friendship just as easily. They find a similarity and become the bestest of friends with each other and then that turns out to not be enough to maintain a friendship or it turns out that the other kid has another, bestester friend or it turns out that the other kid is actually kind of a b-word. And so Motes fell into friendship with Jonie who was a dog and then fell out of that friendship some few

weeks later when Jonie who was a dog called Motes stinky one too many times and she was *not* stinky. She fell into friendship with Khadijah when she went through a rope skipping phase and then fell out of it when the phase ended and Khadijah cried and cried and cried and when Motes tried to rekindle the friendship the bond had already been broken. She fell out of relationships but never as many as she fell into and relationships lasted years or decades.

She fell into and out of friendships and forgot, perhaps, how to form adult friendships, and so many people she met as Big Motes only passed through her life for a week or so.



Motes leaned hard into that memory. She leaned into the laughter and joy of painting with her fingers and, apparently, her pants, as well as the tears of fear of being abandoned for having messed up so badly.

It was not always a kid thing. She aged down her appearance, sure, falling into a comfortable vision of a twenty-something, but it was also not just an appearance thing. It was the way she acted. It was owning of playfulness as a form of hedonism, much as the rest of the fifth stanza owned hedonism as a core part of their identity.

She owned playfulness because life is play. She owned it because it was so easy to forget the role that play plays in one's life, with its carefully delineated fun times that one fits in around work and sleep and obligations. Life is play, and over time, Motes *became* play.

It changed the way that her cocladists and friends treated her. They started ruffling her hair as That It Might Give had, trying to get her excited. They started playing with her in the auditorium, hiding to jump out and startle her or running up to tap her on the shoulder and shout “You are it!” before running off to the dressing rooms to change for their role. They started doing all of the good things that one does with kids and none of the bad things. After all, if they needed Serious Motes, they could still talk to her like the fifty year old woman that she was, right?

She liked that.



Slow Hours, Motes’s big sister, had once had it said about her by Deny All Beginnings, town crier to her town scryer, “It seems so often to me that you have the criss-cross pattern of a schoolyard tool imprinted on your face, no doubt hurled at at you by a god.” She explained this to Motes that there was some contemporary interpretation of the Greek god Apollo hurling a dodgeball at the unwitting to bless them with the gift of prophecy.

And she had indeed become the prophet of the clade, the one checkered with predictions and who bore the heady scent of omens. She was the Delphic oracle to so many other prognosticators. She would get this dreamy, distant smile on her face and then she would speak. She would say, “I will tell you two truths and one lie about the future” and then she would say unnerving things that would almost certainly come to pass. Yes, they might take years to do so, but she was uncanny in her accuracy.

So Motes came to her, to the crowd of other crew, who always seemed to tolerate Slow Hours better than the cast, came to her and threw herself dramatically across her cocladist's lap, requesting some brushings to get the paint flecks out of her tail while she thought about how to say what she needed to say.

"Slow Hours, I made a friend," she said, relying on the comparatively formal name as opposed to Slow—and she was the only one from whom Slow Hours would accept that name—or Slowers to convey a bit of the gravity of the question.

"Tell me of your friend, my dear," Slow Hours replied, setting up a cone of silence.

"I met them at a dance," she said, looking down to her claws as they doodled on the stage. "I went out with Beholden and Unbidden to some crazy biker bar that was also having a mathcore band performing, and I met them in the pit."

"You were your big self, yes?"

She nodded. "We danced for a bit in the pit and then got some drinks and talked outside, then danced some more." When Slow Hours remained attentively silent, she continued. "And that was it. That is all I ever do, right? Go to a show, get wasted, maybe get laid, and then I go back to the stuff I really enjoy. I have my friends here. I have my work. I have you and Beholden and A Finger Pointing—" This was before she had openly started referring to them by familial terms. "—and Beckoning and Muse and that is all I need. I do not need much else to continue to from one day to the next. I do not *do* love or deep friendships. Not like that."

Slow Hours nodded. "I sense a 'but', Speck."

"Welllll..." Motes said, pushing herself back up to sitting. "I

do not do love, but a lot of people do, including a lot of the people I wind up spending the night with in Big Motes mode. I am honest and up front, duh, and most understand that this is just for the fun of it. I am a healthy woman, right? I am, like, a century and a half old, but I am still thirty, right? I like sex as much as any hundred and fifty year old woman in her thirties.”

She nodded, laughing.

“One or two have gotten big feelings for me, but most get it. We negotiate boundaries and move on with our lives. There are so many people here! It is not a big deal if someone says no that early on.” Motes laughed, adding, “Once, one of them showed up here looking for me, and A Finger Pointing just about tore them in half.”

Slow Hours smiled, but said gently, “You are stalling, my dear.”

She groaned and buried her face against her cocladist’s shoulder. “I knooow. Anyway, this person and I got started talking about what we like in lasting friendships that we do not really care about in one-night stands and...and they just seem like a really good person.”

“And you think you might like to follow up on that?”

“They are just into all sorts of things I am. They paint—people, mostly, and some animals—and like a lot of the same music, and also...also are into the whole little thing. They suggested we forget the sex part and maybe do a regular sort of get-together.” She hesitated before adding, far more bashfully, “You know. As kids.”

“Have you told A Finger Pointing about them?”

She shook her head. “That was part of what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Slow Hours asked her several questions. She asked about the person. She asked about the day before. She asked about the morning after. She asked about Beholden and Unbidden and the crowd around her. She asked about how drunk she had been, how high. She asked like there was some thread being tugged, whether by her fingers or by Motes’s or by Apollo himself. No one ever asked how this worked, not even Slow Hours—*especially* not Slow Hours—lest the whole thing come tumbling down.

“Speck,” she said, interrupting Motes at one point. “Here are two truths and a lie.”

Motes frowned.

“One: they are a fucking creep.”

There was a moment’s silence before she giggled nervously, a fawning laugh. The flow of prophecy had a rhythm, though, and so she remained silent to let Slow Hours continue.

“Two: you are lonely. You have us, yes. You have your stanza and the rest of the troupe. You have your family and your work, but what you do not have are the types of friends you describe. You are friendly with everyone here, everyone is your friend, but you do not *have* many friends in this way.”

Still wrong-footed, Motes leaned away from her cocladist. “And the third?”

“Three: much of this is our fault.”

“‘Yours’ as in the clade’s?”

After a moment, Slow Hours spoke again, the knife-edge of prophecy letting off of her throat. “There are as many reasons to keep someone for yourself as there are ways to do so. The

whole of the fifth stanza—and, to a lesser extent, the whole of *Au Lieu de Rêve*—has closed around you. Not tight, of course, we are not keeping you trapped and hidden away, but we are all intensely, intensely protective of you. We have all endeavored to make your life here the best that it can be, as you have invited us to do. This was part of our conversations going all the way back, was it not? That you enjoyed leaning into being cared for, and we enjoyed having someone to collectively care for? We do not like creeps around our Motes, and so we see creeps everywhere.”

Once Motes saw what she was saying, saw through the everblue tint of prophecy and her own little game of two truths and a lie, the skunk’s shoulders relaxed and she slumped against her cocladist, sniffing.

“We all love you, Speck. That is all.”

Motes understood after some days of consideration that it was not her prophecy. It was theirs. It was *Slow Hours’s* and *A Finger Pointing’s* and *Beholden’s* and *Unbidden’s* and the whole rest of *Au Lieu Du Rêve’s*.

She was still good friends with Alexei, that kid who was not a creep, never had been a creep, years later. Him and so many more.



Motes should not, she is told, do many things.

She should not look too much like a child. She should not look like a kid because there are those with paraphilias surrounding children, and this would be both potentially harmful to her, as well as to the optics of the Ode clade as a whole.

She should not act too much like a child. She should not act like a kid because, while a focus on play is all well and good, a sense of maturity would keep her grounded in the world around her while leaning into childhood would not, and would potentially be harmful to the optics of the Ode clade as a whole.

She should not treat her stanza as family. She should not treat her down-tree as her mother, nor A Finger Pointing's partner, Beholden, as a parent, nor Slow Hours and Time Rushes as her sisters, the rest of the fifth stanza as siblings throughout, because family dynamics within one extended definition of a singular person create more room for potentially unhealthy modes of interaction, just as might intraclade romantic relationships, and this might also potentially be harmful to the optics of the Ode clade as a whole.

Motes should not, she is told, do many things, and yet she does them anyway. She is careful. She is gradual. She has allies.

She is told these things via hints and intimations. She is told these things through A Finger Pointing and Slow Hours and countless others.

She is told gently. She is told to be careful. She is told out of a sense of protectiveness. She is told because, regardless of the implications of these warnings, the fifth stanza really does love her—they tell her and she believes them—and she is told because even she can see many ways that there are plenty and sufficient reasons that someone looking young in a world with a lower bound on age would be viewed with disdain, and yet she may not see *all* of those ways.

Above all else, Motes enjoyed piggyback rides.



Whenever Motes would visit Michelle/Sasha, or she would visit Le Rêve, their neighborhood sim, Motes would slow down. She would not tame her joy, nor tamp down her ebullience, but she would gentle the way she moved, the way she acted, the way she touched. The hugs that she gave Sasha/Michelle were soft and comfortable and unhurried. They were the hugs one gave an elder, perhaps, but they were no less full of love for it. They were not hugs of obligation, but of care.

After all, some secret part of her reasoned, even little skunks need a grandma, though this was a term she never spoke aloud.

Their relationship was as friends, as companions or comrades. They shared a childhood together. They had the same parents and teachers. They remembered so many of the same things from youth. They remembered so many of the same people. They remembered Miss Willard together, red paint ground into corduroy.

Their relationship was as friends, and as Motes grew into who she became, the ways in which this presented shifted to accommodate such.

It was Michelle/Sasha who pulled forth the memories of flower crowns from within Motes and set them so brightly before her. It was her that was the reason they so often adorned Motes's head, both Big and Little. Dandelion crown upon dandelion crown graced her hair or mane after Sasha/Michelle first made her one some two centuries back.

It was after that that Motes made a promise to herself that she would visit her root instance—or invite her to visit in turn—at least once a year.

Michelle/Sasha very rarely wore claw or nail polish, thanks to the shifting of her form, but when she did, it was Motes who applied it to nails or claws, the two of them laying beside each other on a picnic blanket in the warm sunlight, sharing in quiet and comfort and conversation of only the small things. What had Motes been painting? When had Debarre last visited Sasha/Michelle in the field? Who among the clade do you suppose was most likely to dye their hair or fur some wild color?

They would talk of the small things and, when all claws or nails had been colored pink or blue or ever-shifting waves of green, they would roll onto their backs and pick out shapes in the clouds and Michelle/Sasha would tell Motes all of the things she would have done with her kids, had she had any. Flower crowns: a must. Story time: most definitely. Sleepovers and pillow-forts: a thousand times yes.

All of these and more Motes provided for her in spades as chances, occasions, opportunities.

Motes would explain all of the ways she would get in trouble—lying? Check. Punching a boy for calling her stinky? Check. Drawing on the walls? Check, in bold-face and italics—and for each one of them, Sasha/Michelle would counter with the most poetic of punishments: when Motes lied, she would make her live within a cone of silence for a whole day, so that no untruths could be heard. When Motes punched a boy for calling her stinky, Michelle/Sasha would take her with when she went shopping for perfumes and make her smell each and every one

of them. When Motes drew on the walls, why, all other projects would need to be put on hold and she would simply have to keep going until every inch of the room was covered with the most beautiful art she had ever seen.

And while none of these ever came to pass, Motes loved her all the more for it.

After Sasha/Michelle had quit, Motes slept with Beholden and A Finger Pointing every night for nearly three months and talked only ever of such love that was now gone from the world.



But always, Motes played.

She played because play was transgressive for one such as her, was it not? Oh, there were games sys-side. Within her own clade was a game designer and curator, What Gifts—and she often leaned on Motes for input and play-testing—and so of course play was okay, but as soon as one presents oneself as she did, as a child, then suddenly that play becomes something that works to define that very part of her and thus vice versa, her childishness casts that play in a childish light. It was transgressive because when Motes played, it cast the play that every adult around her engaged with as either defined by or contrasted against her very presence.

But she played in that transgression. She used it to push and press against those definitions and boundaries. She played as a twenty-something, letting her cocladists and coworkers ruffle her hair to rile her up or jump from behind a curtain to scare her.

She played as a child—even if, at first, it was only within the confines of home, and then within the stanza’s neighborhood, and then within the troupe, before she ever did so in public.

She played in that familial identity, of *A Finger Pointing* as ‘Ma’ and *Beholden* as ‘Bee’ and *Slow Hours* as *Sis Hours*—even if, at first, it was only within the confines of home; even if, at first, it engendered awkward and cautious feelings.

Life is but a walking shadow, a player poor that struts and frets upon the stage, yes? All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players, yes?

Motes played because life was a play.

But even as she tested those boundaries and always respected them when they were set, she would ever negotiate a way forward such that she could live this life that she had set for herself.

It was a bit, and she was committed to it. She was an actress, yes? She had a part to play, yes? The kid? The child? The daughter and sister, yes? It was method acting over the course of a lifetime. She committed to the bit and convinced herself as best she could to forget how to uncommit, and that, in itself was lovely.



Motes dreamed.

She dreamed and dreamed and dreamed, her mind wandering over her past, there in the dark, there alone, after *A Finger Pointing* left, there in her extra soft bed with her overstuffed duvet and all of her stuffed animals.

At some point, hours or days or perhaps mere minutes later, she slept and dreamed true. She dreamed that she was sitting in

a field of well-tended grass that was nonetheless dotted liberally with dandelions, speckled with bumblebees. She dreamed that she had all the wonder of a child and that the day was sunny and lovely and the grass was inviting her to roll around in it, and just above, just in the distance, a hyperblack rectangle, a hole in the world that hungrily devoured all of the light that it could, lingered, and it was neither good nor bad, and even with its insatiable hunger, the day was sunny and lovely and the grass was inviting her to roll around in it.

And then she awoke.

Preview