

The Tumultuous Tours of Ivy Green

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The Skies of Earth

There are more stars in the sky, than grains of sand on the beaches of the Earth.

To some, that platitude offers awe and wonder. To others it offers the fear of insignificance. The truth of it though, is a set of possibilities so startling and strange as to be beyond imagination.

Yet, absolutely none of that was of any particular help to the woman falling through the skies of the Earth, wearing nothing but an irritatingly skimpy maid's dress.

Granted, Ivy didn't usually wear clothes. Her natural foliage was enough to politely cover up, and polyester was something she found rather itchy. The clothes of most species just was not to her tastes.

Yet, she couldn't really afford to visit other worlds, so she had agreed to wear a uniform for the rich assholes who could. Cleaning up during the morning shift, to be able to experience the stars at night, had been the plan.

Of course, nothing ever went to plan for Ivy.

Her first day on board the cruiseliner had started off simply enough. A gathering of the various maids and staff, whilst their bosses gave a large and reeling speech about how when they were on-duty, the customer might as well be a god and everything that they wanted must be met - before they asked for it.

Some of the other maids smirked at that, being from races that could hear your thoughts. For herself, Ivy found that a little invasive. She knew they couldn't help it, but her own forms of telepathy came with a choice. She needed

to be touching something living, and open to receiving its impulses, before she heard its base desires.

She wasn't the only foliage-based creature aboard, of course. She counted two others of her kind, and three more of a different-but-related species. That was the wonders of the universe. You never had to be alone, and never had to be without understanding.

Ivy listened to her duties being handed out, gave a curtsy, and headed out to one of the decks. This one was all about water, which didn't actually suit her all that much.

Everyone assumed that greenery wanted to hang out where it was wet, so that they wouldn't be thirsty. It was a kind-hearted thought, but altogether wrong. As well as getting easily thirsty, greenery also easily drowned. Overwatering was an easy thing to happen.

Thankfully, as the maid, she only needed to clean up the piles of clothing that inevitably appeared by the sun-bathing beds, and the pools. From guests who had less sense than propriety.

From there, she quickly moved towards the showers, so that no one could accidentally bump her into one of the pools.

She found more than one couple giggling away together, skipping their stalls and marking them to do later, before scrubbing down the others. Her leaves folded around her arms, and she set her mouth into a stubborn frown, as she scrubbed away with metallic cloth at the muck that somehow got left behind.

Mud entrenched around the drains, blood or worse cooked onto the walls in a process she did not particularly want to imagine. And of course, far too many other bodily liquids,

too.

Ivy snuffed moss up her nose to block out the smells, and worked hard and rigorously. She was here to enjoy her getaway, and that couldn't be done if she was dismissed from her position.

As she moved from one stall to the next, leaving behind nothing but shiny wood and glistening tiles, the voices of the guests carried up all around her. The myriad of languages was dazzling, and she'd never really bothered to learn anything but the most universal of the vocal languages.

Spoken language seemed like such a cludge to her, when compared to the gorgeous complexity of her musk. Sonorific nonsense, versus the all-embracing speech that went right into the nervous system of the listener.

There were businessmen, proclaiming their wealth to their partners, impressing their self-worth upon the other, as if that were somehow an arousing sort of thing. In their position, Ivy would have been talking about her three hearts, and how they beat in perfect synchronicity with the partner. Romance won far more than pride.

There were young mistresses, completely lost in awe, and speaking such tiny and shy words... Whilst their stank told Ivy that they were bored, and just going through the motions for the payoff. Sometimes a literal one, but to her confusion, some of the women just wanted the man physically.

Yet, in so much shallowness, Ivy did find one or two couples, who were actually couples. Their scent, their breathing, and their speech, was all locked into the other person, and how very much they adored them. Love, united in the

freedom of a getaway such as this.

That sent shivers down her back, and made her flowers threaten to open up.

She cleaned away, rubbing raw her gentle green hands. Losing the patterns of her hands in the soap, and erasing her fingerprints in the basic strength of the chemicals that were meant for a sturdier race than her own.

It was midday by the time she'd finished with the bathrooms, and was just heading out by the pools again, when someone was looking around frantically, and walked right into her.

Ivy gave a squeal as she fell backwards, all her flowers bursting open in an explosion of yellow pollen, before she hit the water.

The man who had walked into her was dressed in a black flight-suit, with a black helmet, and didn't even seem to notice he'd walked into anybody - too preoccupied in his search.

Ivy floated desperately, trying to kick and rotate herself, so she could get to the ladder to pull herself out of the water. However, the clothes on her soaked in the water, and dragged down with a weight that she just had never tried to swim with, before.

Her people were great at floating, shit at swimming.

Ivy sank.

A great big bubble came up from her skin, and from her mouth, before popping onto the surface. She felt the water rush into her mouth, as she stretched up her hands, and her feet fell down.

Panic hit her, and Ivy squealed again - except this time it just turned into a start of bubbles, followed by her inhaling a huge mouthful of water. It was all involuntary.

She tried to push herself upwards, arms trying to carve through the water, wiping and dragging away at it, with limbs that were just so very heavy with the water they were absorbing.

The water felt like a thousand hands pulling her down, refusing to let her go.

She couldn't let herself drown in a pool on a cruiseliner, wearing a ridiculous maid's dress.

A hand grabbed the edge of one of her leaves, yanking like a bolt of lightning as her fragile nerves screamed in absolute agony, shooting right through every part of her nervous system.

She tried to scream again, but there was no air left for it. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes watered, as someone dragged her by the leaf attached to her left arm. Dragged her up to the surface, and then onto the unforgiving concrete floor.

They rolled her quickly onto her side, and Ivy gave a weak and timid little cough, water popping and spewing forth for just a moment.

The rest of her lay flat against the floor, too heavy and weak to lift, as the water gently began to run down her axils, feeding out into the midribs and out through the veins.

She lay there, a great big sopping mess, not sure if she was still drowning.

The one who had rescued her gave a heavy sigh, and she heard them speak, “Well, I don’t have time for this. Let me know if you don’t die.”

With that, Ivy was left incredulous as the other person walked away, and exactly nobody cared if she had drowned or not. She was just a wet towel, to any of them. Something to leave for another servant to take care of.

She very nearly burst into tears as she lay there, broken.

* * *

Ivy was still shaking when she finally managed to stand upright. A quick twist of her frail leaves towards the nearby star told her that she had lain there for almost two hours, and no one had bothered to so much as speak to her.

She expected about that much care to come from up above if she didn't manage to finish off her duties.

She felt humiliated, both by nearly drowning, and that she mattered so very little to all of the guests. She would have thought that at least one of them would ask if she was okay, even if they didn't feel the need to help.

Ivy moved back to the bathrooms, dripping wet as she did, leaving behind little footfalls of water, tinged a little bit pink from her flowers' pollen. Those she'd need to clean on her way out.

In the bathroom, she went straight for the hairdryers. A gust of warm and stale air quickly helping to dry her out, and remove any of the risk of drowning. She shook her green locks as she waved it over her face, cracking her lips and parching her throat, but probably saving her life.

Delayed Drowning was nothing to joke about.

With her life possibly saved, and her stomach grumbling angrily, she gave a last check of the bathroom, dried a few new spots, and then headed out. Walking quickly by the pools with a flower-opening sort of anxiety, before heading up one level to the lounges.

There, she found two other maids already in the course of things. They shot her an angry glare for being so very late, but she did her best to show them up. Her hands were fast, and accurate, as she wiped away at every surface, moving at a pace that those two couldn't match.

Ivy was used to cleaning up things. She had never had to wear such a ridiculous uniform on her home planet, but she had been a maid there, also. She'd lied to herself, saying that it was only temporary whilst she studied away in the conglomerate, but the truth...

The truth was, that there was no room for a student of antiquities. Science received little funding, and history even less. What was the point of a historian, in a world where memories are passed on to each and every child? She could remember being her great-great grandfather, she didn't need to examine his fossilised leaves to work out what he did.

Ivy disagreed with it. Children only inherited memories up until their own birth. There were large gaps, where so many accomplishments took place. But being an upstart that disagrees with everyone else, doesn't mean that anybody will ever listen to you.

"Hey, watch it!" One of the guests yelled at one of the other maids, and then Ivy's jaw dropped as the man actually backhanded the face of the woman.

The maid hit the ground, and Ivy found a vine shooting out of her wrist and into the cracks between the tiles of the floor. She yanked herself across the distance, and crouched over the other woman, seeing a bright red mark on their fleshy cheek.

She looked at them with big and round eyes, whispering, "Are you okay?"

As she said it, she felt a bony hand smack the back of her own head. She went instantly dizzy, the world swaying around her. Ivy shook her head, blinking several times,

and looked up incredulously at the guest - who was saying something to her, but she couldn't really make it out.

What she could tell, was that he had just assaulted two of the cruise's maids, and seemed to think that wasn't just fine and dandy, but the right way of things.

Ivy rolled her jaw and stood up slowly, "Sir, return to your seat."

"You say please!" He roared at her, spittle flying. "Get fuck way out of me be!"

His skill with the basic tongue was about as good as his manners. She didn't usually hold someone's language skills against them, afterall, she was a historian. But she also didn't usually let people go around hitting anybody, left or right.

She had an intense desire to open up some of her flowers on this idiot.

Ivy's foliage gathered in tightly about her, the leaves wrapping around and reinforcing her more delicate skin. She flashed a smile that was suddenly full of a great many white thorns. "Sir. Return. To. Your. Seat."

He slapped her.

Except this time, reinforced as she was, Ivy's head didn't so much as turn. The man screamed and yanked back his hand, grabbing his wrist and staring at his palm. A dozen black little thorns standing up as white blood began to pool gently around them.

Ivy rolled her jaw, "Sir. If you would take a seat, then one of us will be by in a moment, to treat and bandage your

wound. We cannot have you spreading blood around the deck, however. So, for your own safety, please take a seat.”

The man stared at her, and then still angry and muttering, walked to a nearby sunbathing seat and sat down awkwardly on the side of it.

Ivy spun to the other maid, loosening her leaves and grinning with an empty mouth. She reached down and helped them to stand up slowly.

The other woman shook her head, “What the hell did you just do? You can’t attack a guest!”

“Did I? I don’t remember hitting him.” Ivy grinned broadly.

The other woman let out a shocked half-laugh, staring over at the man, and shaking her head. “This... This is going to bring down so much shit, from on high.”

Ivy shrugged, “Maybe. But no one deserves to get hit. We’re servants, not property.”

“I don’t think Management sees it that way.”

She leaned forward and licked the woman’s red cheek, “Sorry. Just a bit of ointment. Nothing sexual. I should have asked first, shouldn’t I?”

The other woman let out a small giggle, “Okay. I’m going to be rude, now. Never met anything like you before. Where are you from, bub?”

“Plantatio.” She sighed heavily, “Don’t laugh at the name.”

“Huh. Never been.” The woman replied.

She shrugged, “Lots of people like me, there. We like moist soil, warm sun, and those little fertiliser pellets that always

seem to be sold out at the canteen. Name is Ivy.”

“Maureen.” The other replied, “I’m a Bovkuo. So, you’ll see lots of guests snickering and asking me for milk. Jerks. I don’t get udders until I get pregnant, and if I have a say in it, that is never going to happen.”

“Oh. Ace?” Ivy said in surprise.

“No! Just no kids.” Maureen laughed at her.

The two maids then became very aware of a crewmember standing nearby, tapping a foot impatiently, and staring at the two of them, rather angrily.

Ivy gulped, “Uh... It was -”

“Don’t want to hear it, weed.” The man snapped, “Both of you, back to work.”

Thorns sprang up across her skin at the speciest remark, but Ivy showed a little self-control, and moved back to where she had been dusting the deck. She removed used glasses and plastics, whilst shooting repeated glares to the rude man.

Even more insulting, he stayed. Standing and watching the three of them, as if they didn’t know how to do their jobs.

The full two hours of cleaning the deck, the man watched her.

* * *

The end of her shift did not come quickly enough for Ivy.

Her leaves were just about dragging on the deck, when she started stumbling towards the maid's deck, and her assigned room. She was yawning, and craving some more rays of sunlight, but she knew that what she needed most was to lie in a hammock and pretend the world didn't exist.

Entering the cramped room, she found to her horror that it had no windows, and to her annoyance, that two other women were sharing it with her. Two of them were lying asleep in their bunk on one side of the room, whilst her special-request hammock lay on the other.

Ivy ran a finger through the soft soil, gauging it's current moistness and finding it a little dry for her tastes, but losers couldn't be choosers. She emptied a water bottle over the top, and then climbed in and tossed her maid's outfit to the floor below.

She cracked another yawn, scrunched her toes down into the dirt, and then folded her leaves in all around herself. Becoming a little bulb of green, as she reached out for that sleep.

"Oh, hey! It's a plant!" One of the other women sat up excitedly.

Ivy grumbled under her breath and tightened in her foliage.

"A plant? The devil be that you talking..." The other woman trailed off.

"She's really a plant." The first woman said, again.

"Darn, I be blowed." The other answered.

There was a soft shuffle, and then the heavy clunk of

something solid hitting the deck. The hooves were noisy, even as the owner tried to be dainty, and walked in closer to her.

Ivy could see their shadow through her bulb, as they peered down at her with an insulting curiosity.

Some species really did not have a concept of personal space.

“I’ve never seen one that can cocoon, before.” The one standing over her said.

The other gave a groan, “You being o’ the weird about this, Talia. Cannot you give her a little breathing room?”

“I wonder if she does breathe...?” Talia said airily, “You know, I dated a Vapir once. He didn’t breathe at all! Waking up in the middle of the night, curled around something not breathing, now that was one way to freak out your new girlfriend.”

“Tal.” The other voice said more firmly, “Girl be exhausted. Either give her some room, or be giving her the whole room.”

The woman clonked and thudded back to the bunkbed, sighing heavily, “I just wanted to meet her.”

Ivy cracked open her bulb guiltily, sitting up and rubbing at her eyes, “It’s Ivy.”

“Ivy? Like the plant?” Talia said in surprise, looking over at her.

She shrugged, “Talia? Like the dew?”

“Wow. No one knows what my name means.” The bovine woman stared at her in shock.

Ivy gave a small shrug, "I um. . . I studied history. When I became a maid, instead."

"We all given up something." The other said, and made Ivy stare a little. She hadn't really noticed them, on her way in. They had a bright red leathery skin, and three jagged horns poking out of their forehead, but to her surprise, no tail.

Talia grinned down at her excitedly, "So. . . You're a plant?"

"Tal!" The other snapped, "You being o' rude!"

Ivy shook her head and yawned, "Yes. I am foliage. Sapient plant, if you want the term most scientists use, but. . . It's pretty insulting. We're people. Just. . . People. I'm Ivy, and you should call me Ivy."

"Do your people have a family name? Or tribe, forest, or something?" Talia ploughed on, not really hearing Ivy's tone to drop it and leave her alone.

"Ivy Green." She said testily.

"No way. That's. . . Hilarious!" The bovine burst out laughing and fell backwards onto her bunk.

The devil woman stood up from the lower bunk, carefully selected one of the hairs on Talia's leg, and then yanked it sharply.

Talia squealed and curled into a ball against the wall of the tiny cabin. "Desdemona!"

"Wow. That's a mean name." Ivy said, too tired for politeness.

The red-skinned woman grinned over at her, showing off four enormous fangs. "Ill-fated. It doesn't be speaking o'

me, but anybody who be speakin' at me."

Ivy nodded nervously.

Talia shuffled up, leaning against the wall and holding both her legs, "Well, I'm super-excited! This is my first tour. Hate being a maid, and everyone pinching my butt, but I'm actually near another planet! Apparently they're doing drops to the surface, for us, tomorrow!"

"I think mine is in a couple days." Ivy replied, "I think I'm getting a night run? I'm on the early day shift. Up in time for the cockerel to be annoyed at waking up."

"What is... Cockerel?" Desdemona asked, furrowing her black eyebrows.

Ivy frowned, "A local bird. It is often seen crowing loudly, at the sunrise. I think it is also usually male, but sometimes the females also crow?"

Talia grinned broadly, "Oh! I wanna meet one of those! Do they let you pat the animals? How many tours have you done here?"

"N-none?" Ivy became shy, "Um... I know... History stuff. This is my first tour."

"My second tour, but first be to Pegasus. Never been Earth, before." Desdemona stated.

"They have humans, here." Ivy found herself saying, "A tribal species, that is spread wide and far. They have a lot of economic upheavals, and still have national wars."

"War, between nations?" Talia stared, "But... That'd make everyone poor. You can't have war, without recession. Or even depression! What idiot would go to war?"

Ivy sighed, "Some people would rather burn the world, if they can't own the world."

"That's gross."

Desdemona shrugged, "Some worlds always at war. My people fight, and never not. It is a way of things."

Both women looked at the woman in shock and confusion.

Ivy shook her head, "Anyway... Um... My first shift? I need to sleep. And then grab some sunlight before the guests get up, again."

"We should be o' sleeping." Desdemona agreed with a nod, "I have first shift tomorrow. Assigned to asteroid mining."

"I'm on lifeguard duties." Talia pouted, "I wanna be with you two!"

"Perhaps we find Earthbound vacation on together?" Desdemona suggested.

Ivy wasn't sure about this. She felt like she was having two friends suddenly forced on her. On the other hand... She'd never quite managed to make friends before.

"Tomorrow." She managed, and crawled back down into her blossom.

* * *

The Fields of Earth

Humans were actually something Ivy knew far too much about.

She'd written an entire dissertation on the pre-galactic race, and how it seemed that they had a natural barrier to joining the civilised worlds. Every single time that they appeared to find an economic and political balance, and started to look towards the stars, they would suddenly collapse into war and hatred.

It was a fascinating, and altogether disturbing, topic of conversation.

At least, it was to her.

When Talia was munching on some grass and waking everyone up that morning, Ivy got the feeling that when the woman asked if anyone knew what the humans were like, she probably wasn't asking for a technical analysis of their political history.

"I think they know mine." Desdemona stated lightly.

Ivy didn't know if that was true. The humans did have a considerable number of theologies, any one of which might possibly refer to third contact, in either an official capacity, or a tour messing around with a less advanced society, but Ivy just didn't see it.

The resources of the planet were altogether basic. They used a primitive form of atom smashing that required so much room it covered several countries, and so much power that it could never really be justified. Without access to the elements like adamantite, that were required for effective spaceflight, what could anyone want with them?

“Really?” Talia said excitedly, some cud hanging out of the corner of her mouth.

Desdemona shrugged, lightly forking something squirming off her plate and into her mouth. Swallowing deeply before replying, “There be stories. Ancestors of my kind, who be making deals with humans. Health cures for primitives, in exchange for slave work. Doubling lifespan and be like. Not pleasant stories.”

“Your ancestors enslaved ’em, and now we’re just maids.” Talia said glumly.

Ivy slid slowly out of her cocoon, and rubbed her toes against each other, before trying to quietly make for the shower and not get dragged into the conversation.

Not that she didn’t want to talk about it.

She had so much she wanted to say, but that would be a bit of a brutal information dump on two relative strangers - ones that she was hoping would soon become friends. She didn’t want to freak them out, too soon.

“Ivy? Whatcha think?” Talia asked lightly.

She smiled and turned around, “Too much. But I really need to shower, and then get some sunlight. You guys are already eating, I need to grab mine before work starts.”

“You can only get sunlight on the top deck, this early.” Talia replied with a shrug. “Better hurry, before they try and lock that down for the rich guests. Don’t want no servant ruining the view.”

* * *

Ivy sat down on the edge of a bench, her hair still shining wet, and very quietly removed her boots from her feet. She really did detest the leather things, but they were a part of the uniform.

Seemed like they had got even tighter after yesterday's disaster.

She spread out her toes on the wooden deck, leaned back on her wrists, and raised her chin upwards until her face was bathing in the sun. A shiver of contentment ran down her spine, and a tiny involuntary moan escaped her lips, as she began to feed on the light.

Her stomach grumbled as it began to anticipate the sugary syrup.

Her flowers spread out, taking in the water and carbon dioxide in the air, and using the light to catalyse them into a sugar on each of her leaves. There it slipped down the stalks, through the folds of her greenery, and directly into her cells. Flowing freely, and throughout.

Ivy bit the edge of her lip, trying to remain polite, in case anyone saw her. Except feeding was such an intense passion for someone like her. It spread her out, picked her up, and faceplanted her right into the highest of ecstasies.

She really did feel like she was floating, just like the ship. Suspended above everything, and filled from toe to brow with a joy that was bright enough to melt the worst of hearts. Feeding off light was more intense than breeding, it was more intense than the passions of love, it was the highest thing that anyone of her species could experience.

And she got it, every single day.

“Are you okay?”

She opened her eyes blearily, looking at a black-clad leather figure standing over her. They had on a helmet, and were wearing a divepack on their back. Annoyingly, they also had walked between her, and the sun.

“I was having breakfast. I’m a photosynth.” She said pointedly, and waved a hand, indicating that they should move aside.

The figure showed no emotion, mostly because of the helmet, but they also made no move at all. Just a long pause followed by, “You should leave. Guests will start arriving, soon.”

“I’ll be able to leave sooner, if you let me have my sunlight.” Ivy snapped, glaring.

She was not a morning person.

The figure shrugged, and walked away. She shook her head, closing her eyes and struggling to refocus on the light. What the heck was that person’s problem? And why did they also seem not to care at all, at the end?

She really didn’t like things that didn’t make sense. Caring enough to cross to this side of the deck, where there was no one else, and nothing, and then not even caring enough to have a conversation? The thoughts tumbled and poked at her, and ruined the taste of the light.

Not that Ivy really knew how to explain what light tasted like. She knew that specific light spectra did... Something... To... Other things? History was her thing. Not chemistry.

The growling of her stomach lost out to how on edge she was

feeling, and Ivy sighed, standing up slowly and stretching. As she did, her leaves went out wide, displaying the fullness of her size. Little corners of her foliage stretching out as far as they could go.

Which was immediately when she felt something hit the middle of her back.

Ivy gave a frightened squeal, instantly pulling in everything to reappear as a person, and stare over at the wide-eyed guest, who had their tongue glued right to her spine.

They gave an embarrassed shrug, but then looked around to see if anybody else had noticed what they had just done.

“No, no, no, no...”

The guest’s throat bobbed, and then Ivy screamed as she was whipped off her feet. She felt herself flying straight for their mouth, as she didn’t even get a chance to flail.

Another punch of motion hit her gut, and she nearly puked. She was suddenly moving in the opposite direction to the guest. Somehow they’d turned the drag into a throw.

The good news of it, was that they weren’t about to eat her.

The bad news of it, was that she was flying at the field that surrounded the top deck of the ship. It was a field, and not a solid wall. It let light through, and it let through other things, too.

It kept out the vacuum of space, and that was about it. Only suicidal people or absolute idiots pushed themselves right up against a field.

Or flying maids.

Ivy didn't know if she was supposed to hold her breath, or if doing that was a bad idea. She didn't remember her space lessons, because she'd never thought that anything like this might happen to her!

Her panicked brain decided that one for her - she screamed right before she hit the field.

Air absent from her lungs, Ivy planted her hands over her mouth as she found herself hit the strangeness of no gravity. It only lasted a moment, because the ship was technically within the gravity well of the Earth.

She felt like it was the bad luck of discussing visiting the Earth, the night before. There was no way this could be happening to anybody, let alone to her. No guest could try and cover up the grossness of trying to eat someone... With actual murder... Could they?

Ivy's eyes watered, as she plummeted towards the clouds below. She flinched and tried to spread out her leaves - which sort of just got immediately punctured by the sheer aggressiveness of the air as she hit it. The only effect it seemed to have was to tumble her head-over-heels.

On a more civilised world, she knew that detection systems would be able to track a falling person. They could track a coin-sized asteroid descending through the skies, and decide whether or not to defend against it. They could save someone falling out of a ship.

Except this wasn't a civilised world. It was a world that was so primitive that they had only just figured out that climate change affects the size of their brains. Not that they had actually realised that ignoring and placating the masses was a dumb as shit approach to dealing with your

world deciding it didn't need you anymore.

Climate change is an allergic reaction, and the immune response, to an irresponsible species. Wipe them out, and start the whole game over.

She had no hope of being rescued, which made Ivy sort of wish she could die quickly, instead of when the ground might turn her into mashed peas. However, she hadn't broken a bone, which sort of meant that she was a floating skydiver, about now.

She'd studied enough archaeological sites to know about jumpers, and the effects that the ground could have on your bones. It was the way a lot of ancient societies got rid of their excess, so that they could help maintain what they had, before they discovered... Well... More civilised approaches to things.

An alien, crashlanding in a primitive society's backyard.

She might well be about to start a whole new religion. Ivy had to timidly smile at that, because it actually was darn funny. Primitive apes, worshipping a plant that fell from the skies, when they were devoting themselves to technology, and ignoring the greenery.

There are more stars in the sky, than grains of sand on the beaches of the Earth.

To some, that platitude offers awe and wonder. To others it offers the fear of insignificance. The truth of it though, is a set of possibilities so startling and strange as to be beyond imagination.

Trying to understand the truth, and the unknown, especially the unknowables, was what had so many species and

societies reaching out towards religion, for so very many. Explaining these things was an essential first step, towards the next stage of the world.

Not everything could be explained. Ivy wasn't against religion. There were things in the worlds that couldn't be explained.

Yet... None of that helped her, about now.

She was still falling through the skies of the Earth, wearing nothing but an irritatingly skimpy maid's dress.

Ivy had to admit, nothing did ever go to plan, for her. It wasn't something she much liked to think about. She wanted to pretend that she was like everyone else, and all she had to do, was try a little bit harder.

Except, falling through the skies of a planet, with no parachute, no jetpack, no void control, not even a fucking recall adapter, she was one hundred percent, completely, without caveat... Fucked.

The sadness turned to anger, and Ivy kicked and punched, before quickly realising that's a hard thing to do when you're still holding your breath. Which is when she gave up and tried to gasp in the air whipping right by her.

It's very hard to breathe at altitude, with the thinness of everything. It's even harder, when you're moving through it hard enough to make everything solid. She went dizzy, head spinning, and smiled slowly.

Ivy giggled, as a strange sort of euphoria bubbled up and through her.

She... Was about to die.

She was about to die!

It seemed hilarious to her, even if she knew that was a very bad thing to think. But thinking was for people who were still breathing, and laughing, and getting hit on by guests, on board a cruiseship, that people only ever went on because they wanted to see and explore everything.

She was about to see everything. She was going to go splat and pff and then she'd be everywhere, and one with what wasn't. That was the best way to see things that exist everywhere. To step beyond what existed, and to look back over your shoulder.

Ivy should have become a monk. Religious folk always got way too much money, and no one guilted them when they used it to explore everything that existed, just to see the handiwork of their gods.

If she were a monk, she could put aside this bubbling happiness, which was burying the petrifying fear, by putting together her hands, and being all centred with everything in the world.

Most monks got some very basic archaeological training. They learnt translation, and the principles of exegesis were pretty sound for interpreting most ancient documents, but especially the religious kind. She'd be able to jump right into that.

Sister Ivy Green.

Sister to the Green.

She was about to become part of the Green.

What was the... Green?

Just as the darkness finished closing in around the edge of her sight, and the numbness began to spread through Ivy, she felt something brutal grasp at one of her uselessly flapping leaves. It tore right away, but she was so far gone that it didn't even hurt.

If she had the energy for it, she would have laughed.

Laughing.

That was the right way to die.

* * *

Ivy floated softly, quietly, without motion, without sound, and without a meaning in it all.

She blinked, and there was light.

She wasn't sure what the light was. It floated before her, around her. It was swirling, without form. It was not in any place, because the idea of a place wasn't real. Not yet.

Ivy felt her flowers opening, breathing in the light. Pulling and dragging at it. Giving form to substance, separating the light from its absence. Creating the darkness. She breathed in the light, and so there was life.

Her feet landed on soft soil, her toes squirrelling instinctively down into it. Through the dirt, and down into the waters below. She felt the void give substance, and groaned as she pulled in the water, and the light, together becoming energy, and so there was life.

She felt the petals of her flowers wilt, and drop away. Gasping for breath, for the light, they gave up. She felt the effort and concentration, the grossness of her monthly, as each bulb began to grow their seeds. Little things bursting forth, falling to the ground so it might produce vegetation, and so there was life.

She saw other lights popping and bursting into life, all across the sky. Each of them marking a moment in history, something to be remembered, something to be recorded. The pinpoints that drew together the stories that people needed to know where they'd come from. Genetic memory be damned.

Little fish appeared in the water, nibbling at her roots. Birds called to each other, as they filled the sky.

A hand slapped the hell out of her mouth.

Ivy fell onto her side, coughing and gasping. Reeling as light flooded into her eyes, and she found herself lying on some rather sharp grass. Blades scraping and scratching away at her cheek, as she felt her lungs burning like someone had actually tried to light her on fire.

“Finally.” A disgruntled voice said.

A familiar voice?

Ivy blearily looked up, and started as she saw a figure dressed in black, with a black helmet. She remembered him, now. Not just from the moment before, when she had been trying to have her breakfast.

“Y-...” She gasped, and found her throat was far too raw to manage to accuse him of knocking her into the pool.

If he expected her to thank him, for saving her from falling off the ship, then he had another thing coming! He had knocked her into the pool, and she’d very nearly drowned, and he hadn’t even checked on her.

Well... She would thank him.

Falling through the skies and surviving it, was amazing. She was incredibly grateful to him. That didn’t mean that she wouldn’t hate him. It was only fair that he saved her, after what he done earlier.

Well... She was grateful to him.

Hard not to be grateful, when you were having some strange near-death experience, and someone swept in and dragged you back from the brink of it all.

The man didn't crouch to check in on her. He didn't go anywhere, either. So it wasn't as if he were abandoning her, but Ivy was quite certain that he didn't give a single care towards her, at all.

Maybe it was his job to save idiots like her, who ended up overboard?

That would explain his getup.

Fingers spread through the soil, and she very weakly pushed herself upright. Ivy swayed dizzily, and found her flowers intact. Quite closed and pulled in, frightened from the whole experience. At least she hadn't lost those.

"Ready to go?"

She didn't both trying to speak, just slowly shaking her head, which made the world rather spin around her. She very nearly ended up falling back into the grass, if she weren't leaning so hard on her arm.

The man sighed and kicked the ground idly with one of his black leather boots. What was with the black leather everything? It wasn't exactly the bright uniform of the cruiseliner. They were all about bright and preppy, like her stupid uniform.

A uniform, that Ivy realised was looking a little scorched.

She was, as well. But a few days in the sun, and she could heal those burns. She was fragile, but she always healed well. Scarring wasn't something that anybody but the best could spot on a body like hers.

But the uniform?

The stupid and irritating thing was incredibly expensive.

She might have to work an extra shift to pay for a new one! Not getting to go down to... The planet that she was actually on. May as well enjoy it whilst they were down here. Though she got the strong feeling that her rescuer wouldn't be interested in doing that.

Ivy struggled slowly to her feet, and turned about.

She could see where the two of them had come down. There was a long streak of mud, where grass and flowers had been propelled out of the way. Tiny pieces of her maid's outfit, here and there. For being as ruinously expensive as it was, the darn thing wasn't exactly well held together.

The flowers that had been lost were mostly a kind of wild-flower. Small and yellow little daisies. They were cute, and made her think all kinds of countryside thoughts. She loved them. Along with those, were a few dandelions, their seeds floating one by one, off and along the gentle breeze.

A breeze that was cooling her flushed cheeks, and bringing her down to... Earth. She was really here, planetside, before any of the other servants that she knew. She might not be near a city, but this was a beautiful place.

"Ready to go?" He repeated. She ignored him.

There was more than one grass here, growing upright or lying down. Sprouting here or there. They were clustered, and yet, altogether, it felt like the grass was a field. A soft and muddy sort of field.

There were all kinds of weeds, as well. Flat and spread out leaves, trying just to eke out an existence, whilst hoping that everything around them would ignore that they had taken root. Desperately clinging on to life.

Ivy took a deep and cold breath of air, before smiling broadly, “I love it here.”

“The cities suck.”

Her head whipped around, looking at the impassive stranger in surprise, “You’ve been here before? To Earth?”

“Mmm. Ready to go?”

She rolled her green eyes, and looked back to the clearing. Gazing out beyond it, to the trees that were surrounding them on all sides. Some were thin and tiny pines, scraggling for height, among the much broader and firmer oaks.

Her bootless feet crept into the soil, toes wagging down into it, and feeling the joy-filled root systems all around them.

She could hear the forests, breathing in slowly, holding for a moment, and then letting go the transformed air. Purifying, cleansing, as they did nothing more than live. Balanced in a beautiful equilibrium.

“Ready to go?” He tried again.

Ivy turned and glared at him, “Nothing is going to happen to the guest who threw me, is it? I’m going to get in trouble for this. So why would I want to go back? Why would I want to get yelled at, when we have... All of this?”

He shrugged silently.

That pushed her anger over the edge. The adrenaline still burning through her, made Ivy stalk right up to the man and poke him hard in the chest, “They might not apologise to me, but you damn well should! You pushed me into the pool! Foliage doesn’t swim, you absolute jerk!”

She couldn't see his face through his helmet. He didn't seem to even notice her pushing on him.

Ivy remembered the slap he'd given her, to pull her back. She was thankful for it, but his current stubborn behaviour deserved more than just a slap.

Her knee flew up, slamming into the centre of his groin, where most men tended to keep their rather private parts, in most species.

He folded up instantly, with a slow groan and hiss of air.

Ivy spun around, and glared out at the beautiful garden all around them. "You're a terrible person."

He wheezed.

She crossed her arms, rolling her jaw. "I get fucking thrown out of a fucking spaceship, and the only thing you can damn well ask me, is if I'm ready to go back? I fell out of a spaceship! I fell. I should be dead. If I take years to recover from this, it wouldn't be surprising. Am I ready to go back?"

He didn't answer.

She stomped both her feet into the soil, brushing and connecting with the roots below. "You throw me in a pool. I almost drown. I can't even get a sorry? What are you, a freaking child? You're a terrible person. An asshole. An absolute bastard! You nearly kill me, and the best you can do is ask me if I'm ready to get back to work? I never want to work again! I want... This! I want to be free as those butterflies. These ants. I just want..."

She broke off, choking up as she realised just how close to everything ending she really had come.

He said nothing, just very slowly getting to his feet with a creak of leather.

Ivy gave a loud tsk and glared at him, “Fine. Let’s go back.”

* * *

The Cabin Upon the Cruiseline

The man didn't say anything to Ivy.

He silently summoned a ship to come pick them up. A ship that offloaded a tour guide and a group of rich tourists, dressing up as if that would somehow make them not stick out like sore thumbs in a human society.

Truth was, most people on Earth didn't want to notice. They assume it's a costume. A bunch of kids messing around, or a stunt for a movie, or anything but the truth. People, the universe over, like the peace of what they know.

Ivy was tempted to try and sneak off after the tourists, but the stubborn man never left her side. She was growing more and more angry with him, because he just didn't seem to be know how to be. . . A person.

People might not always have a set of feelings, but people always try to treat you as a person, too. He wasn't just rude, he was utterly horrible. She survived a freak accident, one that should have killed her, and he just expects her to dust off and keep going?

It wasn't even an accident, it was attempted murder!

Someone tried to kill her, and his first priority was to get her back onboard, so she could be cleaning up after the freak who did this to her!

The craft jostled lightly as it took off, the two of them standing by the wall and holding onto a railing. She glared at the man, "What's your name?"

"No."

"I want to report you! Give me your name!" Ivy snapped.

“No.”

She very nearly let out an angry hiss. He had a way of instantly getting under her skin. Maybe it was the darn helmet. His face couldn't be as expressionless as all of this. A furrowed brow, a twitch. Any of that would be better than a blank nothing.

“Fine, Mr. No. Who do you report to?”

“I am an Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Unit.”

She frowned, “Security? So you report to... Jameson? Was that their name?”

“I am an Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Unit.”

“You certainly didn't take care of my wellbeing when you knocked me in the pool!”

“I will review the cameras. If I really did such a thing, you will be compensated.”

“Just apologise! You're like a toddler! Can't admit anything. Refuses to tell their name. Are you six years old!?”

“No.”

She rolled her eyes and gave up. “Just so you know, I hate you.”

“I am sorry to hear that.” He replied evenly.

She was tempted to jump on the word usage, about him feeling a damn thing let alone sorry about anything, but opted instead to ignore him.

* * *

When the smaller craft docked back with the cruiseliner, there was a man in a blue uniform, with a black skirt, waiting to take her to Management.

The rude Mr. No left without another word. Never so much as looking in her direction as he walked off to ruin someone else's day. Though, knowing her luck, he would be the perfect picture of politeness to the next person. He'd just have a problem with her.

The blue uniformed officer took her to a group of offices near the helm, and instructed her to take a seat like she was a naughty child. She did, but not because she was about to brush this whole thing under a bush.

She crossed her arms, leaves rubbing on her sunburnt skin, and put on her most furious of faces.

It had been easy to get angry at Mr. No.

Fronting her actual bosses that could expel her home at a moment's notice? Not so much.

She'd never actually met the real people in charge. She was just a maid. She was here to scrub the deck, clean the rooms, and mostly be an invisible little house vacuum puttering about the place. She wasn't supposed to be noticeable.

All important people have secretaries. In this case, a secretary who appeared to be an almost melting bubble of blue skin, with eight coiling tentacles that were in constant motion around them.

"Commander Amir will see you now."

Ivy stood up, took a very deep breath as the secretary reached over and opened the door from across the room,

and very demurely entered the office. An actual military commander, titled rank, was about to chastise her.

Getting in early seemed the wrong way to go about it, so Ivy walked in front of the desk, spaced her feet apart, and put her hands behind her back.

Amir was sitting back in his seat, with two crossed feet up on the corner of the desk, and her personnel file open and in front of him. His brows were practically knitting together, as he murmured away unintelligibly to himself.

One claw tapped at the bottom of his chin, and the other on the piece of paper.

Seeing a crab species was always difficult for Ivy. The creatures were always so fascinating! They had independently evolved seven times on her homeworld, and that wasn't even a record. Sapient crabs were rarer, of course, but he could be from just about any planet.

There were some scientists that reasoned the crab was the most efficient species, and that was the reason that they always seemed to evolve everywhere. Some theologians posited that this meant the gods must be crabs, too. So life evolved in the image of the deity.

Other theologians, of course, suggested this meant crabs were dark, disgusting things. They were born as a result of sin in the world. Evidence of the corruption that had bled through and into everything.

Ivy could very easily write a whole book on the subject, without even learning anything new.

"Name? Pronouns?" He grumbled.

"Ivy Green. She and her." She replied stiffly, "Sir."

“Commander will do. Not sir. Now... What is this about you sneaking onworld?”

Her jaw dropped, “A guest punted me through the shield! They tried to kill me! Trying to get onto the planet by jumping without a booster or a parachute is -”

She cut off, and rolled her jaw, staring in a rather insulted comprehension.

The crablike gave a small laugh, a burbling pop, and looked at her with one of his eyes, as the others continued to read the paperwork in front of him.

She glared, “That’s not funny. I almost died.”

“Yes, yes you did.” He leaned back into the chair, all eyes rolling around to focus on her, and he tapped his chin with one of his clawed hands. “According to this, you’re on our most basic insurance scheme. Does that sound right?”

“Yes, sir.” She mumbled glumly.

“Yes, commander.”

She blinked, “You really don’t like ‘sir’? Okay. Um. I’ll try harder, commander.”

He gave a small and firm nod, “Good. Under the most basic insurance scheme, you have qualified for both compensation for if a guest attempts to eat you, and if a guest attempts to murder you. The lawyers are still arguing if your family qualifies for if a guest tried to remove evidence. They’ll probably still be going by the time we get back.”

“Oh. Okay, commander?” Ivy wasn’t sure what any of that meant. A little extra cash to spend planetside would be

nice. She might not wear clothing at home, but getting a human dress that fit would probably be a lot of fun.

The man gave what she thought might be a grimace, but she really couldn't tell with a crab mouth.

"Miss Ivy Green, you have been assaulted by a guest, in the performance of your duties. As the chosen representative of Duffle & Hurley, may I offer my most sincere of apologies, compensation payment in line with the contract you have signed, and a transfer of cabin to any within the midship crew quarters."

She frowned, "That... Sounds good?"

"Excellent. Sign here." He pushed a piece of paperwork towards her.

Ivy barely checked to see if the words mostly lined up with what he said, before inking some green sap at the place where a signature was expected, and then stamping it with one of her leaves.

The commander pulled the paper back, and put it aside to let it set solid, before smiling up at her, "Now then, would you like to see the midship quarters? You have the rest of the day off, for trauma, but I must ask that you remain aboard the ship - at least until we have isolated the guest responsible for this tragedy."

"Why bother? Not like he's going to get punished." Ivy rolled her eyes.

"They. Not a gendered species." The commander corrected her.

"They are a dick who tried to eat me, so I feel like I have a right to call them a twatwuffle." She re-found a little of

her confidence.

The man laughed as he stood up, walking by her and opening the office door, "You are entirely correct. Which is why we'll be making sure the two of you are never on the same deck, again. Once we find where in the black hole they've hidden themselves."

She took the hint, smiling weakly, and leaving the room.

The many-tentacled secretary rolled an eye over her purple form to look towards Ivy, "Anything I can help you with, dear? Call someone to help you move to a new cabin?"

"Actually... Maybe." An idea sparked. "If it's possible... There's two people I'd prefer to help? If one of those is allowed."

"Go ahead, doll."

"He wouldn't tell me his name. Just said he was an Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Unit. Idiot in a black helmet." Ivy growled, and then softened, "But if not him... Maybe Desdemona? She's a maid working in the engines."

"Ah, Desdemona. She's a beautiful thing, and so very angry." The secretary laughed, "Tell you what. I'll get both Desdemona and No sent straight to you."

Ivy went scarlet red, "His name actually is 'No'? He was telling it to me, when I yelled at him?"

"No can be a little difficult. He is the foremost of our security. I'm afraid he sees the worst of the guests, all the time. It rubs off a little on him, and makes him ragged around the edges." The secretary smiled, and then indicated a seat, "Please wait, whilst I fetch your escorts."

* * *

“Well I be a skullfucked monkey.” Desdemona stated as she arrived, tailed closely by the silent Mr. No.

Ivy gave a sheepish smile, “It’s... Good to see you, too.”

“Moving up midships, eh?” The red-skinned woman laughed, “Well, come. Grabbed soil from your rack, it’s in backpack. Oh, and... Security guy want come, too?”

She gave a small sigh and hooked her arm through the other maid’s. “Well, that was nice of you. I do like to keep my soil, but I did only have one night in it. That guy, his name is No. And I may have got angry when he said that, and threatened to report him. He probably hates me.”

“No.”

The two looked at the impassive figure walking alongside them. Desdemona grinned, “Oh. Ivy is hard of the hate, ain’t it she? Wonderful lady.”

He said nothing, and didn’t so much as turn his head from the path ahead. It was extremely hard to know what he was thinking. There was every chance he utterly despised her, after her childish behaviour on learning his name... But it was only because she thought he was being rude!

“I’m sorry if I offended you.” Ivy said quietly, “That’s why I wanted you to help me move. Not to be mean. So I could say sorry.”

He paused, and the three stopped walking, “If that is the case, are my duties here complete?”

Ivy’s eyes watered and she threatened to cry. “If... If you don’t want to help, you don’t have to. Isn’t it a nice break from security...?”

“I will return to my duties.” He replied, before turning and walking away into the crowds.

Desdemona squeezed her arm, “Now that be enigma.”

“I think he hates me.” Ivy sighed and kicked at the deck, “I . . . I shouldn’t care about it. Only just met him. But I’m a plant. Having anyone hate you is. . . That’s how you get tangled up in weeds, crushed and lifeless. Everyone always has to grow together.”

“He don’t strike as weed.” The woman replied lightly, and tugged her back into following along towards the new cabin.

Ivy tried to shake it off, by proposing why she’d asked for Desdemona. “So, I’ve got a fancy new cabin, and everything.”

“Indeed.”

“It’s going to be bigger than the one we were sharing.”

The woman nodded, with a hint of disappointment. “That it be. Midships be where the bosses sleep. All officers. It be a very comforting bed. Can soil be better? Can it go on bed, or still hammock?”

“I actually usually prefer a big pot.” She said sheepishly, “One the size of a small bed? Then I can be half-in, half-out, of the soil. Warm and cold at the same time. It actually feels really nice.”

The woman shuddered, “I prefer sleep in fire. Homeworld is all flames. Can bed anywhere the lava breaks the surface. Delightful.”

Ivy’s leaves crinkled at the thought. “I . . . Don’t think I’ll be visiting your homeworld, anytime soon. No offence

meant.”

“It next stop.” Desdemona blinked.

Ivy’s mouth fell open, “Oh no. Oh, please. You’re actually from this galaxy? How...? I thought... Fires. You were born in fire, so living somewhere like Venus, isn’t impossible. Desirable, even.”

“You know Venus?” Desdemona stared in surprise.

She shrugged, “Only a passing knowledge. Not much more than a guidebook. Thick atmosphere, making it have a runaway greenhouse effect. Mostly carbon dioxide? Crazy hot temperatures.”

“So nice. Pleasant days.” The red-skinned woman grinned.

“Gravity is what... Ninety times that of Earth? If I didn’t wilt, I’d be flattened.”

Desdemona nodded, “Gravity in other worlds be so light. It makes me have to work hard to maintain abs.”

“You’re still crazy strong to me.” Ivy shivered at the muscled woman.

Before the conversation could reach levels of awkward, they reached the cabins, and Desdemona led her to a particular one, cabin 17Q. Ivy waved her hand at the scanner, and the door flushed open with a rush of wind.

A cool and calm voice spoke, “Welcome, Mistress Green.”

“No be doin’.” Desdemona gasped.

Ivy walked in slowly, and her friend put the bag up against one of the walls, as she turned about in wonder.

Firstly, because Desdemona could turn around idly without a hint of a chance of walking into Ivy. The room was absolutely enormous. Then there was the fact it had an actual window up against one of the walls.

A window that Ivy ran up to, peering out at the sunlight outside. She could actually eat breakfast here, instead of having to risk another guest trying to murder her for existing and look delicious.

Ivy frowned, remembering the greeting, and spoke awkwardly, "So... That was just a welcome thing, right? There's no way that a room for someone like me has -"

"I am an Artificial Assistant, Class Six, and whilst it is true that my responsibilities are in regard for the entire ship, as a guest in these quarters, I am also at your disposal. Feel not a thread of guilt as to any inquiry, as my focus can be with many people at once."

Desdemona's jaw dropped, "Unholy ice! They got's you access to the ship's AI!"

Ivy laughed nervously and nodded slowly, "Wow. Also... Random thought here... You're not going to watch me sleep, are you?"

"All guests are monitored for health, but with the utmost discretion. We have saved six hundred guests due to this service, to date. Your care, is my core directive."

"This be so unfair." Desdemona's face fell.

Ivy gave a small grin, "Why do you think I asked for you? So I could show off? You and Talia are so moving in with me. Not like I'm wanting in space, is it?"

Desdemona frowned, "Don't be thinking that allowed."

“It is quite an unusual request. I have no prior experience in this matter.” voice spoke airily, “As such, and as an honoured guest, I will fall to your guidance in this matter. You would like two more guests assigned to this room?”

“They’re on the crew, like me.” Ivy said uncertainly, not sure exactly what the AI was actually asking her to do. “Talía and Desdemona.”

“The two crewmembers you were previously birthed with, is that correct?”

Ivy nodded, “Yup.”

“Desdemona and Talía have been assigned to your birth. Would you like for me to assign someone to transfer their belongings, or would they like to collect them, themselves?”

The red-skinned woman’s tail swished violently in the air, “Oh, I be going and grabbing, right now. Ivy... You be proper friend. I be righting back!”

They ran out of the room, and Ivy gave a soft sigh. She sat down on the deck, crossing her legs and looking out the window.

Nearly dying had been an experience, and one that was probably going to stick with her, and fill her nightmares. Falling and burning was an experience she hoped never to repeat, and to quickly repress.

All the same, sitting here, watching the warmth of the homestar, and the twinkling of the distant ones, she felt almost... At home.

“What should I call you? Miss Class Six?”

“Sudais is my designation. I am flexible in the use of any

pronouns. Some say that my voice is feminine, and so prefer to use she and her.”

“Sudais.” Ivy repeated, “Sudais... I... I think I love it here.”

“I am sorry to interrupt your reverie, but at a time when you feel it appropriate, there is an urgent unfiltered communication waiting for your attention.”

“Urgent? But I can ignore it?”

“You are our honoured guest.”

Ivy shook her head, “Uh... I still work here, right? So I should take it.”

“The communication follows...” Sudais spoke, before her voice dropping to a deep and angry tone. “I will find you. I finding you! Bitch! I find you and eat you! Your gallbladder is mine, you stinking cunt!”

She felt her roots shrivel, and Ivy curled quickly into a ball, “Lock the door!”

“The door is locked.” The more pleasant voice spoke.

Ivy squeezed her eyes shut and shivered, “Do you... Do you know... The name of the thing that said that?”

“I am afraid that the communication was made as an emergency, and so there was no identification attached. Is there a response to it, that you would like to make?”

“Send it to the commander!” Ivy said, trembling. “And... And... Assign a guard! I don’t want to go outside. He wants to kill me. Fuck, fuck! I knew it wasn’t over.”

“An Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Unit has been

assigned for your care and safety. I have also notified the commander of the threat. It will be taken seriously. We do not permit hunting of other guests on cruises by Duffie & Hurley.”

* * *

The Lungs of the Cruiseship

The door whooshed open, as Ivy held up a pair of hand clippers threateningly.

The black helmet revealed no emotion, as the guard viewed her. "I am reporting for duty. I am assigned to protect you."

"No."

"That is my correct designation. Thankyou."

She shook her head, "No, I mean... It's..."

The truth was, the only reason she didn't want him as her guard, was the awkwardness of it all. However, he had already proven himself. He'd crash-tackled her out of the air and saved her life, or whatever he'd done to make sure she woke up, alive, on the ground.

"Nevermind. Sorry."

"Apologies are unnecessary, but always appreciated."

Ivy looked at him with a lop-sided smile, "You're... Different. But I'm sorry that I've been as mean as I have."

"It is expected that one behaves in unusual manners, after encountering a life risking situation. It is not something to treat as if it were a normal situation and that the behaviour is of the regular attitudes."

She blinked, "Aha... So... Things still creeping and scaring the hell out of me. You're here because a guest wants to cut my roots. Um... Got any training for that kind of anxiety?"

"It may sound presumptuous to offer any advice."

“Please. Presume away.”

The helmet inclined, looking her up and down, and her anxiety reached even greater heights. She could not at all figure what he might be thinking, and it felt like leaf ruffling to have him wordlessly examine her.

“I would suggest a visit to the gardens.”

Ivy blinked, “Gardens? Aren’t there lots of hiding places there, for a really creepy guest who wants me dead?”

“I will be there.”

Ivy had to laugh at his confidence. His arrogance really did not seem to have any limits. All the same, she did feel somewhat... Comforted. This was a man who could jump off an orbiting spacecraft without a hesitation. He was exactly who she wanted between her and some gardening shears.

She shrugged, “Lead the way.”

He turned and walked quick-fast from the room, and she found herself skittering to keep up with him. Which, at least, was an excuse not to wear shoes. Her soft and still-healing feet just about danced on the warm textures of the floor.

They made their way up to the top deck again, and then moved to a small hallway near the official offices. Ivy followed him, surprised that such a place even existed. It didn’t seem like the guests would really want to go here.

At the end of the hall, was a glass door, that led into a dome.

As soon as they stepped inside, Ivy had to bury a moan.

Her first breath of air was so much more oxygen rich than she was used to. It set a fire burning through her veins, spreading out her leaves and exposing her completely.

She swayed, shivering, and feeling an unhealthy dose of euphoria. Her flowers hesitated for a moment, knowing that everything was off, but then they gave in and spread out - drinking in the rich air.

“This is an area that is not usually accessible by guests. It is unlikely the guest who has spoken threats against you can obtain access.” The guard stated flatly.

She giggled and pushed his shoulder gently, “You’re so serious all the time.”

“I am an Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Unit.”

“So?”

That darn helmet.

Couldn’t see if he even blinked at her question, but he didn’t answer it. Which annoyed her, and so with a giggle, she stepped close to him and grabbed the helmet from either side and tried to lift.

He didn’t seem to respond, but the helmet didn’t move a single inch, either. She struggled and pulled, but nothing happened. Ivy sighed, guessing that whatever was making her float, was also making her pathetically weak.

She turned away from him, and skipped down the path.

The plants surrounded them on all sides. Tall trees, and low bushes, all of them covered in flowers of every kind. These were genetic hybrids, bred and created by methods not available to nature.

Between the path and the plants were a small and low barrier, made from an ugly aluminium blend. She wasn't sure what, and her mind was spinning too quickly for her to snatch out any recognition. Why would they have a barrier?

It wasn't fair, and it wasn't nice.

She leaned her elbows onto the bar, looking out to the nearest tree, and then she began to softly sing. A light and airy voice, coming from somewhere deep in her chest.

"Sing with me, oh the garden's alive!"

"Feel the warmth of the sun, hear the buzz of the hive."

"All of us together, in harmony,"

"A living, breathing tapestry."

The notes of her song reverberated through the air. Slow and deliberate, carrying with them a sense of peace, tranquillity. As she sang, the garden around seemed to awaken. The flowers on the trees blossoming, the trees groaning and standing taller, leaves rustling in time with her melody.

All of the trees, except for the one right in front of her.

"Deep roots hold me to the earth."

"As long as I will live, I'll give birth,"

"To leaves and flowers of every hue"

"I am the garden, and the garden is me, too."

Her voice was higher pitched, but powerful. As she sang, birds that had been hidden away came out, flocking around

her onto the path. Sitting and listening, before chirping along. Joining in the song, with their own sweet melodies.

“If high walls keep you from the sky,”

“And you’re feeling lost, wondering why,”

“Come take a walk, let me show you where.”

“Nature can heal, without a care.”

The garden seemed to shimmer with a quiet energy, as it pulsed with life, seemingly magic. She continued to sing, notes rolling over the plants and creatures, filling them with a gentle spark.

It wasn’t magic, of course. She didn’t know if she believed in magic. It was science, and one that was rather basic. She was a catalyst, helping to smooth out the regular transformation processes within each living thing.

This wasn’t much different to the first job she’d had, when she was still in high school. Someone had to tend the gardens for the fast food.

She turned to the guard, smiling brightly at him, before launching back into the chorus, trying to get that impassive helmet to listen, to act. To do something apart from feel like a giant lump of coal, resting angrily upon the ground.

“So sing with me, oh the garden’s alive!”

“Feel the warmth of the sun, hear the buzz of the hive!”

“All of us together, in harmony,”

“A living, breathing tapestry.”

He didn’t react at all.

Ivy rolled her eyes, crossed her arms, and pushed out the feelers of her roots. Daring him to say or do something, anything, as she crept around the edges of the stone, or more a concrete, and into the soil below.

She cracked the rock, she pushed through the powder. Violating and vandalising the pathway, as she stared down the guard watching her. The roots instantly found some of the healthiest, moist and delicious, dirt that she ever had tasted.

Not that she ever really rooted herself that often. That was something you did in your bed, but never in public. It was a vulnerable sort of thing. She wasn't a plant - if someone came along and cut off a root, it wasn't something that she could just regrow. That would be years of physical therapy and medication.

He didn't react at all.

In a complete pout, Ivy crouched into herself. She pulled in her leaves, and focused only on the air, the sun, and the soil. She closed her eyes, snuggling into the depth of it all.

She was swallowed up by the earth, nestled safely into the cozy darkness. Little by little she grew. Good sun, nice soil, fantastic air. She couldn't resist the desire to sprout, stretching out delicate stems towards the sky.

The warmth of the sun shot through her, bursting as it touched her delicate leaves, filling her with an energy more than any she had felt. Petals unfurled, and she stretched higher and higher. The air around her was so crisp and clean, with just enough moisture.

Birds sang out, flitting around the garden. Some of them stopping to perch on her petals, tidying away at their wings.

She grew and grew. The sun getting hotter, the air cooler, and the soil richer. She bloomed and bloomed, turning into a dazzling display of colours.

She continued to soak up the warmth of the sun, drinking and glugging away on the air like tomorrow was to be forgotten.

Suddenly, she stopped. She felt a tug, like a string pulling her back. A coldness that she couldn't quite place.

She was being lifted out of the dirt, out of the comfort of the garden, trailing quickly through the air. She felt calm about it, even as she knew it was bizarre to fly. She wasn't an insect. She couldn't shake her booty like a bumblebee.

She screamed, as she realised why the tug and coldness was so familiar.

As she landed in the angry guest's mouth.

His giant tongue looped around her waist, as he tried to drag her down and into his unhinging jaw. A growl emerging from somewhere deep in his throat as wet walls closed in all around her.

The dizzy and completely incapable Ivy thrust one hand up into the air desperately. She didn't know what she was reaching for, she was surrounded by slimy muscly wetness. There was no one that would risk themselves for her. She probably didn't even deserve to be saved.

She had come onto this ship with selfish desires. Maybe the universe had sensed that, and set this guest on quest to wrest her into their blessed chest.

A giggle escaped her, even as she knew she was about to die.

Her head felt dizzy.

It... It...

Oxygen!

Too much oxygen!

She was as high as kite, even though she was lying as low as a dog! She was not even sure what to say, her mind was lost in a different way, she was stuck in this world of her own, like a dog with a bone.

Her mind was lost in a daze, floating in a throat's pink haze, she couldn't seem to find her way. Where was she headed today? Her thoughts are all jumbled up, like a puzzle in a cup, she couldn't seem to piece it all together, her mind was lost like a feather.

The colours around her became so bright, they blended the day and night. She was not sure what was real anymore, was she on land or on a seashore?

The music came in so loud and clear, but her head feels like it was nowhere near. The beats were mixing with her thoughts, like they are dancing in her heart.

She wished she could just snap out of it.

Her brain was caught in a pit.

Confusion and delirium, her thoughts echoed like she was in a stadium.

The throat seemed to go straight on like a tunnel, dipping down. Ivy found herself falling down a very deep well. It was either very deep, or she fell very slowly, or she was going very crazy, because she had plenty of time to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next.

She tried to look down, and make out what she was coming to. The tongue should be pulling her to a throat, to fall and slip towards a stomach. But instead, she saw nothing below her. It was entirely too dark to see.

However, she was able to see about the sides around her. Ivy mouthed several swearwords in confusion, as she saw that the sides of the throat were lined with what looked like cupboards and bookshelves. She even saw a map or two, hung upon pegs.

She scooted closer to a shelf, and snagged a book as she floated gently by it. Ivy frowned at the sad looking catgirl on the cover, especially under so happy a title as 'Everyday Life with Bubbles!' Exclamation mark and all. The book ought to be happy.

She shrugged and dropped it onto another bookcase as she passed.

Some authours never found the mark.

As she continued to float like a leaf on the wind, Ivy caught glimpses of peculiar objects inside the cupboards. There were mysterious vials with swirling colours, and jars with little men, and even odder artefacts that seemed to radiate with a strange energy.

The cautious in her, told her not to touch.

The scientist in her grinned like a madcat as she tried to snatch one of the jars.

She missed, suddenly further away, flying away, from the walls. The confusion and disorientation only seemed to increase, but she couldn't help but feel a certain sense of excitement. There was something altogether enchanting

about this bizarre descent into the unknown.

She couldn't escape the feeling that she had stumbled into a hidden realm. A place where the rules of reality were just waiting for someone to test them out, find out. Where everything she knew was twisted and distorted, and just... Better.

Ivy gasped as she hit the bottom.

Touching down was lighter than it should have been. She found herself on some kind of giant, pink and fleshy trampoline. It almost felt like she was sitting on a jellyfish or a kid's gelatin fruit cup.

She bounced a couple times, and then fell on her face when she tried to walk on it. However, as she rolled to the floor, she found the walls around her opening up. Leading into a massive, cave-like room.

Ivy managed to find her feet as she reached it, looking around in bewilderment, as she found herself surrounded by glowing crystals, and deep and dark glistening pools of a liquid that even she did not recognise.

The air was thick with a smell that made her dizziness all the worse. Sweet and spicy, yet somehow still with a hint of musk. The air itself seemed to spark, to sparkle, to pulse with a strange sort of energy that she couldn't understand.

The crystals reflected the lights, dancing like fireworks, like drones that spun and shaped childhood fairytales. They cast strange glowing patterns across the room - a room that now seemed to have no door.

Ivy was absolutely in awe as she took in her surroundings. It was unlike anything she had ever seen or experienced

before. She felt as if this truly was a completely new world that she had fallen into.

How had she fallen? She couldn't remember.

She crouched by the strange liquid, feeling uncertain about it. Not afraid, not just curious. An anxious sort of something that she had never felt before. Ivy's green eyes were reflected on the dark surface, but as she watched, her own reflection seemed to drift away.

Falling deeper and deeper into the water.

Ivy went to scream, but her lungs filled with water, as she found herself falling away and staring up at her own reflection. She tried to struggle, to fight her way back up to the surface, but her limbs felt heavier than any oak.

She cried out, but only bubbles escaped from her mouth, as she sank deeper and deeper.

Panic flooded her veins as she realized she was trapped, unable to breathe, her vision growing blurry and her body weakening.

As the last bit of air left her lungs, Ivy's body went limp. Succumbing to the suffocating grip of the water. Her mind began to drift, her thoughts scattering like fallen leaves in the wind. She wondered if this was the end, if she would forever be trapped in this watery grave.

Roots, oversaturated, falling apart.

Rotting alone in this strangeness.

She could no longer flail, she could not scream for help. The current or her weight, or something, pulling around her

stomach, dragging her deeper and deeper with a strength that should have been awe inspiring.

Her fear and panic turned to acceptance, as the water swept into her, drowning all of her. Her thoughts slowed to a creeping pace, pulling in the day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time.

All her yesterdays had led her here, to this saturated death. She was nothing but a sapling, pushed over by the west wind.

Her entire life had been nothing but a walking shadow, a poor player. She had strut and fret her hour upon the stage, and now she would be heard no more.

Her whole life had been nothing. A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.

Signifying nothing.

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