

The Tumultuous Tours of Ivy Green

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2023-11-22

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An intergalactic cruiseship cleaner discovers fun, terror,
and relationship, as she tries to step out and explore the
galaxy.

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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 at all. 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.

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 the customer 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 prompt 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.

She moved from one stall to the next, leaving behind nothing but shiny wood and glistening tiles, as 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 often 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.

Despite 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, terrible 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 a toothless 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 the other 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 watched. Standing and watching the two 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 usually 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. No chance to even 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 mushed peas. However, she hadn't broken a bone yet, 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 offered awe and wonder. To others

it offered 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 damned 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'd assume it was 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 expected 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.

Ivy 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 field! 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 to use the other term, 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 one 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 squicked 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 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." The 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. "Talia and Desdemona."

"The two crewmembers you were previously berthed with, is that correct?"

Ivy nodded, "Yup."

"Desdemona and Talia 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, confusing Ivy who had noted the absence of one earlier, "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. Poisoned roots! 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 Duffle & 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 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 stop and put on 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.”

No 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 authors 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.

* * *

The Book of the Professor

Ivy winced at the bright lights, pulling back, and instantly hissed in pain as her leaves crinkled at the motion.

She moaned, bottom lip trembling, and looked around herself in confusion. The overhead light had all but burnt her, saturating her with far too much ultraviolet light. She tried to roll, to stand up, but a strong hand shoved her back onto the bed.

“Easy now, darling, easy.”

She glared at the blurry figure, “Need... Water!”

“You’re half-drowned, gal. You had more water than ya could darn handle.” They replied gently, and brushed her cheek affectionately. “Probably a might uncomfortable, right about now. But you hooked up to a drip, to keep you sipping.”

Ivy turned her head, following a small green vine that had grown out of her chest and up into a clear bag. She relaxed a little, recognising the medical set-up. “Med bay?”

“You are in the medical care unit aboard a Duffle & Hurley cruiseliner.” The nurse confirmed, “You were brought in by an ASWU. Stuffy fellow with the black helmet.”

She sat up and put both her hands to her chest in a panic, “The-the frog! He wants me dead! Wants to fuckin’ eat me! Where’s bloody Mr. No!? Why did he abandon me!?”

“Easy, gal. Easy.” The nurse shook their head, “The guest has been remanded into secure custody. Eating a guest, twice, is not something to be overlooked. You have nothing to fear. Just lie back, relax, and take some time.”

Ivy tried to slow her breathing, but the twisted memories that were beginning to surface... They told her that things might have been close.

She curled up inside her leaves, wished for some nice soil, and collapsed with a terrified exhaustion.

* * *

“Roar, roar! Bang, scream, and roar!”

“Roar, roar! Bang, scream, and roar!”

“Roar, roar! Bang, scream, and roar!”

“Oh, such a pretty thing.”

“Roar, roar! Bang, scream, and roar!”

“We love you girl -”

“Roar, roar! Bang, scream, and roar!”

“Hope you love us, too.”

Ivy cracked open one eye, glaring at the red-skinned woman, “Are you trying to kill me with your singing?”

Desdemona howled in laughter and slapped her knee, her giant tail visible and standing on end. “I tell you, she be fine!”

“She looks more like she hates us.” Talia said, “And... I wouldn’t blame her, waking up with that racket.”

“You guys never let me sleep!” Ivy complained, rolling over - and off the tiny hospital bed.

Sitting up, with frazzled hair, she glared at her two roommates, but didn’t for a moment think of sending them back to the maid quarters. Even though she barely knew them, had hardly spoken to them, they already felt like her best friends.

It was a plant sort of thing. Fast to get attached.

Talia nodded and shrugged, “Well, you could just sleep off whatever the stars aligned to grant you, which no one will tell us about, or... You could um... Help me out?”

“Tal assigned to pools.” Desdemona said gravely, “I will assist. In return, she will help me purchase Earth thing, on trip below.”

“Below!” Ivy said excitedly, standing up and stretching. “So far, I do have to say, everything sucks. I had a guest try and eat me. Twice! But... I think they’re locked in their room. Autumn blooms, I hope they’re locked in their room. But! I did get to see the planet.”

Talia grinned, “You did think that was awesome, before.”

“So much better than I thought it would be! I thought it was going to be all pollution, cars and stinking air. But it wasn’t. The grass was stretching up, singing so cutely.” Ivy gave a soft sigh.

“How is guard?” Desdemona said with a little half smile.

Ivy rolled her eyes, “Him? He left even before I woke up. Didn’t stop me getting half-eaten, either. Also... What absolute idiot takes a plant-based lifeform into a freaking oxygen factory!?”

Talia blinked, “He did what now?”

“He took me to the ship’s forest.”

Desdemona’s jaw dropped, “Was he planning to attempt bedding?”

Ivy shuddered, “Hadn’t considered that.”

“So gross!” Talia said, sounding absolutely, entirely, insulted.

Ivy shivered and shook her head, “Anyway... I’m going to forget the weird stoic freak. And everything that has gone

wrong. Give me some nice hard work, to block my head out of things.”

“The pools are certainly hard work.” Talia’s face dropped, “I found a freaking pair of board shorts stuffed into one of the grates. Someone had gone splooge in them.”

“Ew!” Ivy yelled.

* * *

Ivy stopped by her room to get into proper maid gear. Not because she particularly wanted to, but because she was not sticking her bare roots into an emptied pool that had just had the 'verse's most entitled guests in it.

The first few hours were painstaking - scrubbing the tiles, cleaning the grates, and refilling the pool with fresh water. But as she worked, Ivy started to find a rhythm, a sort of meditative state that let her forget all the troubles she'd been through.

Nearby, Talia was as bright as ever. She hummed along as she rubbed and squelched her cloths into all the tight spaces, the lines and mortar binding each tile together.

There was a skip to her movements, and Ivy struggled not to giggle at the way her friend's rear bounced back and forth in time to her music.

It wasn't a song that Ivy knew. Something from Talia's homeworld, probably. That was something that seemed so very universal. Music of some kind or another always seemed to spread from one world, to another. No matter how unique and strange a place was, they had music.

Even the Earth had music.

Desdemona's claws clacked lightly, as she struggled not to scratch away at the weaker stone, doing her best to mop and shift the unmentionable ick that covered the surface. She went ahead, and everyone else came after her.

The red-skinned demon-inspiration worked diligently. Her tail swayed back and forth in time to Talia's humming, whilst her face was altogether focused and determined. She was showing some dedication to not just doing this task, but doing it right.

The nearby star poured its light through the protective shield surrounding the cruiseliner. It cast a warm glow over Ivy, and she could feel her stiff and burnt leaves beginning to uncurl just a little. The sound of scrubbing filled the air, followed by the gentle hum of sunbathing guests nearby, murmuring boredly to each other.

Ivy lost herself to the calming resonance, to the repetitive motions of scrubbing away, her mind completely emptying itself out. She was just another note, dancing away in the song.

There was a solace to be found here, in the predictable work of cleaning. It wasn't altogether easy. Her back was strained, and her fingers were chaffed, but her mind was lost into the embrace of the same thing. Over and over.

The hours ticked by, the ship drifting across the surface of the rotating planet. Different primitive nations passing by, underneath. So very innocent, lost to their little tribal concerns, as so many worlds sat just beyond their reach.

The tiles of the pool began to sparkle and glisten, as the maids pushed it through the depths of filth, to clean, and then to purified. Ivy exchanged smiles with the others, feeling a gentle camaraderie about what they had accomplished with it.

The smile dipped for a moment, as she knew it would be the same all again tomorrow. But she was still proud of what they had done.

They were from different worlds, from different backgrounds, but they were the servants who cleaned up all the entitled guests who would pay their way instead of working it. The ones who had money that most could never dream of

possessing.

When the water began to pour into the pool, Talia immediately splashed at the others. A full blown water fight erupted, with everyone laughing and running - right up until the levels reached around Ivy's waist.

Then she was reminded that she'd almost drowned a couple times recently, and she felt rather sick.

She dragged her soaked roots behind her, pulling up and sitting onto the side of the pool as it continued to fill. Smiling and leaning on her wrists as she watched the other two maids continue to fool around.

Desdemona's strength really was terrifying. She could have emptied the entire pool if she wanted, but she held back. Swishing and dunking on her friend in a lighthearted attitude.

Talia also knew she was completely outmatched, and she didn't seem to care at all. She wasn't in it, to win it. She was fooling around because she wanted to smile and laugh with a friend.

"Terribly sorry. I truly do not wish to interrupt, but..."

She looked up at the guest, blinking, "Oh. I guess I'm technically on duty? Sort of. Not really. Um... What seems to be the problem, sir?"

He was a skinny and blue-skinned creature. She wasn't at all certain of his species, but the way he spoke the common tongue came with an aristocratic sort of air. He was an upright and lordly sort of figure - but was treating her with reluctant kindness.

The man tucked a strand of something that looked more

like seaweed than hair behind one ear. An ear that had at least three channels, instead of the usual one. "I'm afraid I lost a book I was reading. It was beside me, and then I was so overwhelmed with the lovely services provided, I am quite embarrassed that I fell asleep."

So much for wanting to help him.

Ivy pushed herself to her feet, "Certainly, sir. Where were you, when you lost this book?"

He guided her to a sunlounge, which had a bit of stubborn green staining to it. On one of the arms was a tall drink, filled with a rather salty water, from the scent. There was also a square absence of staining, where the book had presumably lain.

What kind of grossness did this guy ooze, when he slept?

The man rubbed one of his blue cheeks, smiling guiltily, "I wouldn't mind, wouldn't make a fuss at least, but you see, the book is entirely rare. It was the only copy at my work, and I should not really have checked it out."

"You... Work at a library, sir?" Ivy said, with a mild curiosity.

"I'm a cataloguer at the Noesis Scholarship of Erudition." He said with a certain amount of pride.

An emotion that Ivy instantly considered to be well worth it. She didn't care what level of employment he had. Not at that organisation. Her jealousy was immense, and it also twisted a slight warmth in her cheeks, and somewhere else.

"You brought a manuscript from the NSE?" She said and looked around frantically, trying to see if she could spot

footsteps or anything else. Not that a regular sort of person would know to try and steal a boring old manuscript.

“Afraid it was the only copy?” He said in embarrassment.

Ivy frowned, not seeing any hints to what had taken the book. On the other hand though, she did see a nearby bed of flowers. She shuffled over and undid one of her knee-high boots carefully, before lifting out her foot and sticking a bare toe into the soil.

“May I ask, what it is, that you are doing, miss?”

She shook her head, closing her eyes, “Sorry. Concentrating.”

Flowers were absolute gossips, it was true. Unfortunately, they weren’t exactly sapient. They didn’t speak like trees, they just sort of shouted and splatted out the various things of their day. They weren’t even ordered or chronological about it.

She shuffled and sorted the vague images and scents of things drifting by, until one hit her and she pulled back in surprise and confusion. “The river?”

“Do you perhaps mean the pool, miss?”

She shook her head, dusted her foot and put it back into the ridiculous boot. Kneeling to do up the lengthy laces. “Sorry sir, no. That was an expression of confusion. I think I know who it was that came by and moved your manuscript, but I cannot for the life of me work out why he would do it.”

The man frowned, “You think you know it was a person? I thought I might have knocked it or something.”

“No came by.” She frowned deeply, “Mr. No. There’s no reason for him to do it. And he seems to need a real reason for absolute everything.”

“Ah. Someone you have had difficulties with, I take it?”

She smiled at the guest and stood up, “I’m afraid so, sir. If you would like to retake your seat, I will see about the return of your manuscript. Duffle & Hurley is always about service.”

“I confess that it would be tempting, but I am quite worried. The return of the book is something that could determine my future work.” The man smiled at her weakly, “Would it be altogether terrible if I were still to accompany you?”

“Not at all.” She smiled brightly, and offered her arm to him.

The two walked to the nearby elevator, as Ivy followed the stank of leather. It wasn’t something she talked about a lot, but a focused leaf or two could be every bit as good a sniffer as one attached to a mutt. Not something she was about to admit, so that Talia could tease her.

“You know something of the NSE, then?” He asked her as they slowly began to descend.

She gave a small nod, “I’ve requested their aid, once or twice, in identifying some manuscript fragments. Back home, I worked with the conglomerate on historical recovery. It... It isn’t a well-thought of thing, there.”

“Ah, of course. You’re a species of inheritance, aren’t you? Few decide to write the history books, when everyone has the memories of the previous generation.” He nodded, “Though... And it is taboo to admit it... I find that our

memories are always a little distorted.”

“Don’t say that on the homeworld.” Ivy gave a small laugh.

He shrugged with a little embarrassment.

“If you’re a cataloguer, then you must get to see a lot of history. Deciding where to put it, means more than just knowing the name and the author of the piece.”

He gave a small nod, “Yes, I suppose so. I try and identify the underlying themes, the generational threads it falls into, and so on. Everything that a search engine might want for, when it comes to tagging and acknowledgements.”

They stepped off the elevator, and Ivy took a brief moment to locate the trail of leather. There were a lot more people here, walking back and forth and confusing it all.

She twitched her nose back and forth a little in annoyance, and bent over to consult with a nearby set of flowers, who were mostly starving but set up to look pretty for the guests. A couple drops of water as a bribe, and they had her pointed in the right direction.

“Cataloguing scripts isn’t the most rewarding thing, but it’s absolutely essential.” Ivy offered the guest, trying to prompt him to continue.

He gave a nod, and a smile, “Oh, I wouldn’t change it for the world. I am quite content in my position, I assure you. Promotion isn’t something I need seek, born into my family. I do it, because I see it as something the worlds need. Something I can do, to enhance everything.”

“That’s... A beautiful sentiment.” Ivy said, becoming momentarily distracted from the trail she was following.

Now, she wanted the man's name. She sort of hoped this wouldn't be their last interaction. He was... Fascinating.

"I do hope it is something more than merely sentiment." He said gently, "I know that fewer and fewer people find books to be interesting, but I find that I could not be, without them. History, fiction, all of it. It is an expression of the world, and a diversion from the chaos that collapses in on us."

Ivy nodded, "My favourite book, I first read when I was just a sapling. Probably too early, to be honest. But 'A Sunflower's Delight' was so beautiful, it lit up my roots in ways I had never known was even possible. I have a copy, in my cabin, even."

"I don't think I've read that one."

"It's a longform poem." She smiled brightly, "Greenery surrounds me in the garden of delight. All my worries and sorrows vanish at first sight. Rows and rows of yellow sunflowers tall and bright. Dirty hands, tired feet, but the reward is just right."

"An intriguing patternation, a voice that -" The guest cut himself off, "I say, is that him? Mr. No?"

Ivy's eyes narrowed and she stomped up to the leather-bound moron, grabbing and spinning him by the shoulder and glaring into that ever-present helmet. "Did you take this guest's book?"

The guard turned his head to the staffmember he had been speaking to, "One moment. This appears to be a matter of priority. Do not go anywhere."

Ivy crossed her arms and tapped her foot, "Well? We don't

take things from guests! Or do you need Amir to re-educate that thick skull of yours?"

"It is good that you are up and about, but it could not be recommended that you have returned to work. You should be resting at least until tomorrow." He replied emotionlessly.

The guest coughed nervously, "About my... Book? I am afraid that it is... Of some importance? I should not let it out of my reach. Apologies for the interruption."

"A guest is a priority, of course." Mr. No nodded, and then produced a silver-wrapped rectangular box from... Somewhere. He passed it to the guest and gave a small nod. "I was simply transporting it to the ship secure facilities, as it was left unoccupied, and is rated to be quite valuable."

"Without asking him?" Ivy sneered.

"Duffle & Hurley policy is that a guest should never be awakened. I observed some other guests viewing the document in question with envy, and so felt it necessary to move the item. It is now returned, and the subject closed."

Ivy's jaw dropped as the guard turned and resumed his conversation with the other staffmember.

She shook her head and turned, smiling sheepishly, "Well, on behalf of Duffle & Hurley, I apologise for Mr. No's arrogant little... Words. Words I shouldn't say to a guest. I hope this is what was missing?"

"Oh, quite." The guest smiled brightly, "And he wrapped it in a protective casing. I really should have, myself. Quite wonderful, and not a problem at all. Shall I walk you back to the pool?"

Ivy smiled brightly and took the proffered arm, "Certainly."

The two of them turned around and began to walk slowly. Ivy could feel her three hearts beating in unison, but she still couldn't think of a subtle way that she could ask his name.

Stumbling into someone who not only respected history, but studied it, and loved books, was not something she had really expected on this trip. Mostly she'd expected to be on her own, just to enjoy foreign stars. Resting on foreign fields and staring at the sunsets.

"What brings a historian this far from home? Just an escape from it all?"

He shrugged lightly, "Oh, the family insisted. They don't like how I can get my nose stuck in a book. I was studying this one, and in the middle of cataloguing its themes."

"Working on vacation?" Ivy said with a grin.

He glanced nervously down at the ground, "I am afraid so. Though, I have never fallen asleep in a seat, before. That was quite the new experience. Your employers have done much to make a wonderfully relaxing atmosphere."

A brief thought of the guest who had tried to eat her, crossed Ivy's mind, and she seriously disagreed with him. But he was a guest. "Everyone does their best."

They went up the elevator, and Ivy noticed that it was taking them a lot less time to return, than it had to track the moron through the crowds. She smiled as sweetly as she could, tempted to puff one or two of her flowers, and spoke nervously, "Is there a particular part of the cruise that you look forward to?"

“Oh, yes. The meteroid is something I simply must see!” He said excitedly, “A few days off, yet. But I believe it will be visible from all decks.”

Ivy nodded, “The best view, as I understand it, will be from the top deck. You should be able to see it well, from where you found me.”

The two stepped off and onto the top deck, and she waved a hand off to the side of the deck, where a few viewing contraptions could be found.

He shook his head, “I think I will prefer to use my own eyes. I’m no technophobe, certainly, but to see it for yourself always somehow feels to be something more special. . . I. . . Would not mind some company, of course.”

Ivy flushed and her flowers popped open with an involuntary spray of nectar. She looked away quickly, “I. . . Will see if my work schedule allows it, sir.”

With that he gave a squeeze to her arm, and then walked off with his book, as Ivy tried to come to terms with what had just happened.

Had she just agreed to go on a date, with a guest?

The captain would kill her, if he found out.

* * *

The Cleaning of the Cabins

Ivy scrounged her toes down into her pot, into the cool and soothing dirt. She looked over with a grin at the other two women settling into their new cabin, at the end of the workday.

Talia immediately dumped her uniform to the floor, and stomped off into the nearby shower. Desdemona smiling as the other went, before lying back on the floor, still muddy and greasy.

“Good evening, Mistress Green.” Sudais stated, as a handful of small robots rolled out across the floor to begin cleaning up after them.

Ivy gave a strong yawn, “No chance at a little sun for supper, is there? Can’t turn the ship. Can you get something for the other two, Sudais?”

“A request to turn the ship has been issued, Mistress Green.” Sudais said lightly, as if that was nothing, “The chef has been instructed to provide two delightful meals, from Mistress Desdemona's homeland, and Mistress Talia's indicated tastes.”

Desdemona let out a small cackle, “Darned be. This thing is fire.”

Ivy leaned one elbow onto her knee, and dropped her head into her hand. Yawning and opening her flowers up. Smiling in an exhausted disbelief as the sun edged into view of the giant window, lighting her up as she chewed into its rays. “Luckiest... Girl... In the world...”

“Ya cute when you tired.” Desdemona gave another laugh.

“I can hear you flirting out there!” Talia shouted from the shower.

Ivy didn’t really take any notice of it. She was starting to feel like she’d found something like a family, here. People who didn’t care that she was different, and were just happy to be around.

Even as her flowers went wide, her eyes fluttered shut.

* * *

“Good morning, Mistress Green.”

Ivy groaned weakly, fluttering open one eye and looking around in a little confusion. The cabin was huge, unfamiliar, and it took her a moment to place where she was.

A grin split her face before she yawned tiredly.

Watching as Talia flumped through her nostrils, before falling sideways and onto the floor.

The largest of the three women wasn’t even stirring. Just curled into a ball like a dragon from Ivy’s childhood tales.

She stretched and turned around, looking at her huge window, as Sudais seemed to anticipate her and rolled some of the shielding up, to let the rays of sunshine through.

Ivy let out a contented sound as she drank in the light, shuffling her toes down into the dirt. She hadn’t been able to eat like this, since... Too long. Even back home, she didn’t have the time to just sit in the moment. She had to scoff her face, whilst scribbling out into a thesis or something.

The doorbell pinged lightly, in the background. “Breakfast for Miss Talia, and Miss Desdemona, has arrived.”

“I got it.” Talia groaned, and the sound of the door sliding open came through. Followed by thanks, and soon after there was a crunch to her right.

Ivy glanced over to see the woman with crossed trotters, smiling as she looked out at the sun, moon, and Earth below them. Talia’s nose scrunched up as she grinned, and chowed down, mouth rolling left-to-right.

The peace was split by a whip crack, and both looked over in surprise, before rolling their eyes as Desdemona uncurred. Her tail had cracked the air. A tail, that Ivy noted she could still see. Why the heck did it sometimes disappear? And... How...?

The other woman yawned, and then fell onto a bowl of roasted meats. She didn't even glance towards them.

Ivy turned back to the window, and smiled, "I don't think... I ever thought I'd get to see something as... Peaceful... As this. I love it."

"Mistress Green, you have been assigned to this evening's visit to the planet below. Shall I inform you of some of the treats you may be able to experience?"

She shook her head slowly, "No... I think I want to see it all, for the first time. Second time? I just want to enjoy it, as it comes."

"As you wish, Mistress." Sudais replied, before continuing, "You have also been assigned to work on cleaning cabins in the forward section of the deck, this morning. Miss Talia has also been assigned there."

Talia groaned, "Cabins? We're going to see all their... Personal yuck."

"Confidentiality agreements prevent you from discussing any items or scenes that you may witness, in the duty of your work, Miss Talia."

Ivy frowned, "Talia? Do you have a family name? I'm Mistress Green. But you two, aren't."

“It is a designation of respect. I am assigned to work for Mistress Green. These others, whilst assigned a level of privacy, and respect, are not whom I have been assigned to work for.” Sudais stated, without emotion... But Ivy almost felt like there might be some resentment there. Not that AI were allowed to feel resentment.

Talia shrugged, and spoke around her cud, “Bovina-grego. Most people hate it. Hyphenated names are very hard to scream at you, when you screw something up.”

“Kralicata.” Desdemona growled from behind them, before slurping at her breakfast. “It not name that I say much. No one call me by, or they get thumped.”

“I don’t wanna get thumped.” Ivy gave a small and nervous laugh, assuming it was something cultural that she didn’t quite understand.

“I do not wish to hurry you, Mistress, but your assigned work begins in eighteen minutes, and based on average travel time, it will take you fifteen minutes to walk the distance to your assigned location.”

Ivy groaned and stepped out of her pot, “Two minute shower. That leave enough time for you, Talia?”

“Mmm.” Her friend waved, not much caring, and back to staring at the scene from space.

* * *

Talia was late, of course. Ivy was only very nearly late to arrive. Their uniformed boss assigned each of the maids to a certain section of cabins, in pairs, and then reformed them about the knocking procedure.

If a guest was present, move on. . . And on your way back, check again. Considering the hundred or so cabins assigned to each of them, there was a fair bit of back-and-forth that would make sure that the most cabins would end up cleared.

It did not take long for Ivy to decide that most cruise guests were gross. If it had just been clothes on the floor, she wouldn't have cared at all. If there was a bit of dirty dishes, she wouldn't have remarked. If there were a handful of pets who hadn't learnt how to go in a tray, she would barely have lifted her nose.

Talia held out a black bag at full arms length as Ivy scraped in what she was sure had come from the owners, and not from the tiny mutt in the corner. They didn't say anything of course, but you can't keep every expression from your face.

After the peace of the morning, it was right back into the work. Clothes quickly washed, ironed and folded onto the bed. Dirt and worse scraped away into bags, the floors were washed of all grime, before being polished into an immaculate state.

"So, you really have no plans for Earth?" Talia made idle conversation.

Ivy shrugged, feeling her muscles rolling uncomfortably. "Not really? It was a beautiful place, really. Grass and flowers. Trees, just reaching up to the skies."

“I’ve heard their cities have a thing... Smog? It sounds awful.”

She nodded slowly, “Technologically dependent species, the humans, from what I remember. They only invented the internal combustion chamber a bit over a thousand years ago? Something like that.”

“Wow. Primitives.” Talia said in surprise, “Any idea how far off from solar, they are?”

“Oh, they have solar. Just weak solar.” Ivy scrunched her nose, “Like... Ten percent conversion rate? Instead of our three hundred.”

“Weird. Why even bother?”

Ivy smiled over at her friend, “But... You’re just indulging me. ’Cause I know about people. What are you most looking forward to, about the planet?”

“The food!” Talia said excitedly, “I’ve heard that they mash together grains and nuts and things, into these... Edible bars? They feed them to their young!”

“And chocolate!” Ivy burst into a huge grin, “The cocoa plant lets them make this crazy thing, called chocolate. Our Earth studies professor used to bring some back from his trips. It is... Amazing.”

“Chocolate is... Dairy, isn’t it?” Talia asked, “That gives me gas, now I’m an adult. But I totally want to try it.”

“Worth it.” Ivy agreed, “It’s creamy, and melts on the tongue, it’s... Oh, I don’t know how to describe it. I’m not a chef. Hints of different things.”

Talia leaned momentarily on the doorway, wiping sweat

from her brow, “Definitely on my list. . . How do you think Desdemona will go?”

“I was barely on the planet. I’ve got no idea how anyone is going to react to her. But Duffle & Hurley don’t care, so I don’t.”

The other maid gave a small laugh and shook her head, “No, not that. We’re the visitors, we’re not working planetside. No need to care. Leave that to the AI and guards and whatever. But. . . Desdemona is sort of a carnivore. She going to get as many treats as us?”

“Oh. Right.” Ivy blinked, frowning as she tried to remember her lessons. Earth was a nowhere. It didn’t take up a lot of her studies, and she’d mostly been in it for the chocolate. “Um. . . They’ve got a thing called. . . Jerky? Dried and salted meats.”

“Whoa. Primitive!”

Ivy rolled her eyes, “Also, calling people primitive is pretty insulting. I wouldn’t, when we’re planetside.”

Talia shrugged, and then went back to mopping the floor, “It’s my first time on any other planet. It’s just so crazy expensive to explore the ’verse, you know?”

“Same reason, here. I’ve never been anywhere.” Ivy admitted.

Her friend hesitated, “I don’t want to be rude. . . Or insensitive. . . But don’t people like you have. . . Um. . . Memories? Of going other places. Your ancestors and stuff?”

“We do!” Ivy said and gave a small laugh, “Out of the last two hundred generations, want to guess how many of my

ancestors cared about going to another world?”

“Two hundred generations? Um... Thirty or forty? I got no idea.”

Ivy stuck her chin forward, deeply disappointed with her bloodline. “Three. Just three people ever wanted to leave the planet, before me.”

“Whoa. Plants are kinda fixed, are they?” Talia stared.

She looked up at her friend in surprise, and then nodded slowly, “I suppose... We are. We’re planted.”

Both the women burst out laughing, and then went back to work. Sheets covered in a liquid that Ivy didn’t want to identify went into the portable washer, as Talia climbed a ladder and mopped a similar something off the roof and lights.

They moved on to the next cabin, where they quietly left after discovering the guests too occupied to notice that they had been knocking. The cabin after that one was just about immaculate.

Ivy felt the need to double check that the room was in use, because the floor was still shining. Her boots felt like they were dirtying it. Talia quickly discovered why there was so little mess - it was all confined to the bathroom.

The walls were painted in mud, from a species that shook itself off to clean up.

It wasn’t long before Talia started humming along to herself. Ivy was totally content with the silence between friends, but she got that her friend was someone who didn’t do as well with the quiet.

Ivy didn't recognise the song at all. It was more complex than a childhood tune. Probably some sort of contemporary thing. The beat was fast, and twisted here and there. Not quite rock, but not all the way to metal. Something mainstream, all the same.

A few more cabins on, Talia asked casually, "You haven't met one of Desdemona's species before, have you?"

"Nope. Seen a couple around on deck, but they tend to keep to themselves." Ivy answered as she scrubbed the black gunk in the corners of the enormous window.

Talia was quiet for a few minutes, before saying, "So you've never met one, before?"

"Nope." Ivy said distractedly, glaring at the very stubborn stain that seemed to be ripping her cloth, rather than going away.

Talia took another long time to think, "What do you think of her?"

"She's fun?" Ivy glanced over, "What is this about, Talia?"

"You really can't take a hint." The bovine rolled her eyes, "Desdemona wants you to go with her, when we go to the planet this afternoon."

"I figured all three of us would. It'd be fun." Ivy shrugged.

Talia snorted and shook her head, "Seriously? How do I... You're a gendered species, aren't you?"

Ivy nodded slowly, "Yes? I'm a woman, if that's what you're asking."

"A woman, interested in men? Or a little bit more flexible?" Talia said pointedly.

Ivy scratched her head, and regretted it when she felt the mold sticking behind. She rubbed at the patch with her cloth, and got nowhere. "Ew. Um... I'm not sure what-"

"Pity the stars!" Talia exploded, "The moon would hit your face. Desdemona wants to ask you out on a date. She wants the two of you to take Earth as a romantic thing. I'd get in the way. She wants you to see her as a romance."

Ivy went very still, and felt herself drain into her roots. "Come again?"

"Desdemona likes you." Talia rolled her eyes.

The cloth was instantly scrubbing away very hard at the window, as Ivy's mind raced to try and figure out what to think about it all. She tried to ignore Talia staring at her, as every muscle and fibre in her arms rubbed back and forth at high speed.

Technically speaking, homosexuality wasn't a thing that happened much on Ivy's planet. Mostly because one or the other of the couple would end up going through an overnight sexchange. They were plants, they were flexible.

It did happen just sometimes, though. That tended to happen with the rare cross-species romances. That wasn't something that happened much. Hard to date someone with three hundred other lives of memories in their head - they always came off as seeming arrogant and all-knowing, in the end.

Not all species were sexually compatible, anyways. It was hard to have a romance which was relegated to only part of the instinctual things. Most cross-species things fell apart, and became a heavy regret.

One that was passed on to every following generation.

Ivy could remember just one, but it was a painful memory. The two had tried so very hard to make their relationship work, but it just couldn't. One burnt the skin of the other, and the temperature of their abode became fight after fight. It was a heavy regret.

Ivy was all about practicalities first, and it wasn't something that was.

If, though, she gave it just a little bit of thought... Desdemona was fun. She was loud and rumbling, but caring and like a giant hug. Everything she did was for the people around her, a volcano of caring thoughts.

Ivy could see Desdemona being way too self-conscious to propose a date, without first asking for Talia to suss things out. Though, if she was to be really honest with herself, Ivy would have expected Talia to be the one to ask her out.

The big friendly giant just seemed too much like a friend, to be looking for anything more intimate.

"You didn't see it coming, then?" Talia asked gently, as Ivy scrubbed away at the window.

"Nope."

"Is this... You're sending bad signals, here. I can let her down gently."

Ivy hesitated, and looked over at the other maid, "No... Maybe? No. I'm not against a thing like that. I'm just... Confused? Did not see it coming. Not even a little."

Talia nodded, "I can see that. Good thing you got the heads-up, then. Just give it a bit of thought... Also, I

think that mould ain't coming off."

Unfortunately, having a deadline for that evening, on the planet, made any thinking through of this a bit more frantic. She didn't want to hurt her friend, but she'd simply never thought of them romantically.

* * *

Ivy had not managed to find an answer, by the time work ended. She and Talia had talked about other things, and had been grossed out more by their work, and were just about racing each other to the shower, by the end of day.

They had about ten minutes to slink off the gunk, before it would be time to head planetside.

The two of them came to a skidding stop, as they found an unreadable metallic helmet on leather shoulders, standing out the front of the room. The man turned to face Ivy, "You are joining the excursion this evening."

She struggled not to scratch at the ick in her hair, "Yes? If I get a shower. So, if you don't mind... Move it."

"We need to discuss, first." He said impassively, but stepped and waved at the door, "The other woman is not required."

Talia gave an apologetic smile, "Sorry, I get first shower."

Ivy rolled her eyes, and shrugged as her friend went ahead. "So, Mr. No, what is so important that you tracked down a maid?"

"It is a matter of little concern. The guest who allegedly attacked you is still in restricted movement."

She stared at him, hands tingling as epinephrine flooded through her. "That... Was not reassuring! I hadn't thought about that. I don't want to think about that possibility. I just want to go and buy some chocolate."

"Chocolate is not advisable for a plant-based lifeform to consume. The dietary ramifications--"

"Shut. Up." Ivy glared at him.

The helmet nodded unemotionally, "I will cease advising on that matter. It is, however, a matter of some advice that brings me here. It would be preferable if you were to visit the planet in company."

"I am." Ivy stated angrily.

What was it about this particular guard that he was always turning up, in her way? She got assigned to all different decks, to the front and rear of the ship. There was no way that she accidentally ran into him all of the time.

"Whilst the company of other lower deck staff might perform some entertainment, it is not of the advice I speak." He said stiffly.

Ivy rolled her eyes, "You speak too much."

He jerked, and Ivy was sure she'd just seen him surprised for the very first time. Probably not something he'd heard often.

Mr. No recovered, "I am totally capable of remaining silent, if that would permit you to allow me to accompany you, below."

Ivy rubbed her face tiredly, "You really can't take a hint, can you? I don't want you to accompany me. After taking me into the bloody oxygen factory? You're lucky I talk to you, at all!"

"Oxygen... This is the grudge that you hold against me?"

She glared at him, "One of them. The other is that you cannot take a hint! I hate you. Go away."

"That is... Regrettable." He said very slowly, and then strode by her, but not with his usual fast pace.

Ivy focused her glare on his back, and then slowly felt her stomach flip. He had sounded professional, but he always did. If it had been professional, he might not have dismissed Talia, though.

If it were professional, he probably wouldn't have offered silence. He would have told her to suck it up, and take the bodyguard. Like he had when she'd crashed onto the planet.

Ivy swallowed in disbelief.

Had... Someone else just tried to ask her out on a date?

* * *

The Chocolate of Earth

Ivy's head was still spinning at the mere possibility that Mr. No might actually have emotion, and that emotion was somehow fixed on her, when she stumbled out of the shower.

She was feeling a little drunk, from too much water, having spent too long in trying to think, leaving her tripping over her own feet.

The man had thrown himself off the side of an orbiting spacecraft, to make sure that she survived.

She was just a maid. It wasn't like Duffle & Hurley gave a flying damn about any of their lower deck staff.

On the other hand, she was getting special treatment. She didn't sleep on the lower deck, anymore. He could just be protecting against bad PR.

Except. . . Ivy couldn't see that infuriating man giving a damn about public relations. He kicked her into a pool.

Except he said he didn't notice he had.

Ivy gave a puff of irritation and kicked the side of her pot. She was frustrated, and thinking about it all had only made things worse.

Nearby, someone cleared their throat.

She looked up to see the other two women, waiting for her. Talia was making urgent pleasant faces, whilst the larger woman looked extremely uncomfortable and nervous.

Ivy had just shown that she was pissed off, in front of someone terrified to ask her out on a date. Not the best way to start things out, and if this didn't happen then. . .

Her thought cut off.

If it did happen, then she had a perfect excuse to tell the confusing Mr. No to keep his distance. Not the kindest reason to say yes to Desdemona, but it wasn't like Ivy wasn't going to give it her best shot.

Ivy did really want to discover what a romantic embrace from the intimidating sized woman felt like.

She gave a tired sort of smile to the other two, "Don't mind me. Just... Mr. No. Again. Can you believe that guy?"

"He dare do all." Desdemona chuckled, but not without showing some hesitance.

Talia jumped into the gap quickly, "We should go. You were telling me about... Chocolate? Earlier."

"What be chocolate?" Desdemona asked curiously, as the three women quickly fell into step with each other. With the largest woman in the middle of the three of them.

Ivy grinned, "Oh, it's amazing. Also going to clog our toilet, I'm afraid. I am really not meant to eat... But I am buying a whole... Brick? I can't remember what they call it. It's like this rectangle thing. So delicious. My professor used to bribe us with it. Anyone who aced the exams, got half a brick of chocolate."

"I not meant eat either." Desdemona chuckled, hesitated, and then put an arm around the smaller woman and squeezed her quickly. "But I be wanting this chocolate."

It didn't take long for the three of them to get to the landing craft. Security staff were scattered all about, pushing them into lines. Most of the other staff were still in uniform, still slightly dirty from the day's efforts.

Which was when Ivy finally noticed how the other two had dressed up. Ivy had just put on a light dress, with her usual knee-high boots. Something practical for romping around, but not all the way to the uniform she would wear on a dig site.

Talia was. . . Glamorous was the easiest way to put it. The bovine woman was wearing a dress that clung to her every curve, highlighting how shapely she really was. It also caught the light, sparkling with every moving breath of the woman.

On the other hand, Desdemona felt like she might be more at home on a pirate vessel, than a tourist one. Her outfit was made of leather, technically, but it felt more like various skins stitched together. It had steel clips that hung empty, but were clearly meant for some kind of weaponry.

To her irritation, Ivy noticed that it also had no space for a tail. Just straight pants of a warrior. She looked away quickly, so the other woman didn't notice her staring at their bottom. That would go down badly. Probably.

They stepped onto the visiting craft, and held onto one of the handle bars. The ship was just one large platform, dotted with U-shaped bars, out of which they could see the planet below. The Earth's halo almost seemed to glow as the ship jerked into motion.

Talia stared wide-eyed, and whispered, "I've never been to another planet."

"Only this one." Ivy grinned.

"I confess. . . I may have lied about never being another world." Desdemona said sheepishly.

Talia's eyes were fixed on the planet, but Ivy turned, "Really? You've been to another planet, before? You're our expert! You have to help us see everything."

"Never Earth. They not space species." Desdemona shook her head, "Mostly been trade hubs. Places family has business. It little fun. Never been to see things."

"Earth has something they call... Moving pictures." Ivy said, "They record themselves, acting out real or imagined stories, and then display them for the local populace. I think they last a couple hours? So a bit too long for one of our trips. But we might be able to buy one? I think."

Desdemona grinned, "Movies. This a thing I heard of. We have similar thing at home. Recordings of the heroes. Wars. I took first date at one. He tried to kiss me."

"My first kiss was in a field of flowers." Talia added, "His breath stunk like root rot."

Ivy hesitated, and the other two stared at her.

She sighed heavily, and scratched the back of her neck, "My first kiss...? Uh... You can't tell anyone."

The other two women were instantly of rapt attention. Ivy gave another glance around, but the rest of the staff were too excited or too tired to be paying any attention.

She swallowed nervously, "My... Professor? It was after class, and I asked him for some help with something and..."

"You kissed a teacher." Desdemona stared incredulously.

Talia shook her head, "Someone needs to fire that guy. That's a sacred bond. No teacher should ever touch one of their students."

Ivy shrugged, "It isn't like we weren't adults. There was consent."

"Teacher." Talia repeated with a scowl.

Desdemona frowned, "You not be liking this man, still?"

"I... Don't know." Ivy hesitated, "If I'd never been his student? Then... I might be trying to ask him out. The man is incredible. Not just smart, but kind, as well. Those two things never go together."

"You smart and kind." Desdemona blinked.

Talia sighed heavily, "So... Skipping by the hopefully illegal thing you're never going to repeat... Ivy, I reckon you and Desdemona have something to talk about."

The two both went to protest, but Talia had already quickly clod over to another bar, and was introducing herself to the two surprised men there. Introducing, and flirting. Girl never missed an opportunity.

Ivy stared at the ground, blinking as she saw a shadow of Desdemona's tail flicking back and forth nervously. There had been no hole in those pants. What in the blazes...?

"Talia has as much subtlety as a goat screaming." Ivy said at length, realising that the other woman was too nervous to start the conversation.

"She... Be that."

Ivy shrugged, "I kinda already told Mr. No that we were going on a date. I... I don't want to get your hopes up. But we can... Do something."

"What?"

She looked up, and saw Desdemona staring at her in fear. The red-skinned woman's eyes were as wide as saucers, not daring to believe what it was that Ivy had just told her.

She smiled and gave a small shrug, "What's one date between friends? Even if it doesn't work... We'll get a chocolate brick."

"You're more understanding than be fair." Desdemona cracked a smile, and rubbed her face in her hands. "I... I be hoping to showing you things. Other worlds always be amazing."

* * *

The light was just about blinding as Ivy filed off the spaceship along with everyone else. She could smell the flowers, as she blinked her eyes and found herself in a green field, along with everyone else.

A few of the staff were calling people over, proudly proclaiming to give the best tours of the small town that was nearby. The guards were milling about, looking grumpier than ever.

Most of the exhausted tourists, though, were breaking off into their own groups. Excited to go off and explore the strangeness of humans and their Earth, all by themselves.

Ivy hooked an arm through the much taller woman's, and smiled up at her, "Tour? Or on our own?"

"I not be knowing Earth well." Desdemona cautioned.

"Our own, it is." Ivy grinned, and then turned her head and nodded, "Looks like Talia isn't on her own. Three men, all intent to please. That's something."

"Talia be lesbian. They not be making of worthy efforts." Desdemona gave a laugh, and began to walk.

The red-skinned woman was in total awe of the flowers, the grass, and the trees. As they walked across the park, she explained how her homeworld was nothing but rocks and dust. Boiling gasses and volcanic ash, in every single direction.

On the few times her family had sent her out, she'd been to industrial parts of the foreign worlds. Desdemona had seen mines, blacksmiths, manufacturing plants and vehicle assembly lines. Nothing of the natural beauties of worlds so different to her own.

Ivy didn't know a lot about the next planet over. She hadn't known a lot about the Earth - just a primitive backwater, too obsessed with technology. The sister planet, though, was even less.

She knew it was inhabited. There were three dominant and intelligent species, but they all kept to themselves. They did partake in trade, but they didn't intermingle. Marriages were all but unheard of.

The planet had a yearlong day. The surface was hot enough to melt most metals. It was an inhospitable wasteland... That had access to a lot of very rare materials, that were in huge demand for intergalactic ships.

The construction company that Duffle & Hurley were partnered with, had very close ties to the government of Venus.

Ivy frowned, "Probably insensitive... But I only know the human name for your planet."

"Lots of names. Different people call different." Desdemona shrugged, "My family be calling it Infero."

"Does your name sound any different, in your tongue? You speak Universal pretty well, but I don't know your language." Ivy prodded lightly.

Desdemona scowled, "I not be liking language. I... It be sensitive thing. I not liking the family, the planet, the language. I want be like everyone else. Just maid."

Ivy was not sure she fully understood, but it seemed her date was trying to run away from home. Which as an adult, she was absolutely allowed to do.

She squeezed the woman's arm, "Well, my legal name isn't

actually spoken. It's stupid, because we've got voiceboxes and things, but all the formal things on my planet are done with pheromones, which are so very easy to misread."

"What your name smell like?" Desdemona asked curiously.

Ivy scratched the back of her head, "I don't really know how to describe it? What does your name sound like?"

"Ah."

She took a deep breath, and pulled them to a stop. Turning to face Desdemona, and pulling her head down just a little. She closed her eyes and opened up all of her flowers.

There was a small puff of pollen, carrying her unique signature into the air. A screaming broadcast that said where she was born, where she'd studied. Counting the days off until her highest fertility. How nervous she was.

All of it was part of her name. It described the whole of her, in the current moment. There was a reason that legal names were so very rarely touched on, used. They were inherently unique, inherently private.

It spoke of how nervous she was to be standing this close to Desdemona. She was intimidated by the height of the woman, by their muscle, and by how they never really seemed to be scared of the world.

There were hints, small and fragile scents, that spoke of the possibility between the two of them. Delicate, confused, and so very fragile.

Ivy opened her eyes, and closed her flowers, taking a half-step backwards. She took a deep breath, and smiled nervously, "It's a name."

Desdemona didn't answer her, staring and breathing hard. Her leathers creaking as her chest moved up and down, as her red eyes just spoke of shock and awe.

Ivy winced, "Too much?"

"Intimate." Desdemona blinked and shook her head, taking a deeper breath. "I be thinking we needing that brick now."

She nodded, and fell into step beside the other woman. She didn't hold onto their arm, this time. She'd pushed too far.

It wasn't as intimate, among her own kind. Secretive, and official, but it just meant trust. It didn't mean a single thing romantic, and would probably actually kill any affectionate feelings on a date.

Ivy had stepped into a cultural thing, and kicked herself.

* * *

Finding a store that sold chocolate, did not take them long at all. What surprised them though, was that almost every store they went into, sold some sort of chocolate or another.

There were bars with peanuts, nougat, caramel, fudge. There were some with coconut, biscuit pieces, marshmallow. There were bars with sultanas, cranberries, acai berries and goji berries.

There were two women, sitting on a park bench, holding their equally bloated stomachs and groaning quietly.

They both had bags of shopping by their feet. Ivy hadn't really noticed everything that Desdemona had bought, but her own had several blocks more of chocolate. Even though she was pretty sure it wouldn't be safe for her to touch them until after her tour on the ship was over.

She hadn't only bought chocolate. She had bought other foods and snacks, which would probably be worse for her stomach. Things like gummy worms, and popcorn. She had also got some potato things, because those seemed popular.

The chips didn't really appeal. She had mostly got them to give them to Talia, as a present.

"Date not go well." Desdemona groaned.

Ivy couldn't disagree. "But... Fun."

The red head bobbed a little, and then went pale as Desdemona regretted making the motion. Strong hands cracked the wood of the seat as the fingers dug in, trying not to vomit.

"It is not fair, that we're not omnivores." Ivy complained.

Desdemona groaned weakly, “Not be fair. It be so long since we join universe. We still not omnivore, like the rest? Even human get be omni! Eat and eat, whatever make them fat!”

“Why are my people still phototrophs!? We have mouths and stomachs! Why can’t they actually digest any-”

Ivy cut off and bolted to the nearby portable toilet. Which might have been part of why the two of them had chosen this particular part of the park to collapse at.

As she tried not to hear herself, she could hear Desdemona groaning quietly in the park, but she could also hear something else. A sound that did not really fit in with what she knew of Earth.

They had landed their tourist ship quietly, and out of the town, to make sure they didn’t cause too much concern. They passed as a strange convention of people wearing costumes, instead of the people who were alien to the planet, like they were.

Yet, Ivy could hear the distant rumble of an engine. The flashing intermittent engagement of a solar boosted craft. She knew next to nothing about ships. Even the simple ones were rare on her homeworld, people opting to walk or dimensionally shift instead. More environmentally friendly.

Ivy focused in on the sound, ignoring the painful complaints of her stomach. It was moving away from her, getting quieter, instead of closer.

There was a frantic knock at the bathroom door, “You be done, Ivy?”

“N-nearly.” She stammered.

“You needing done.” Desdemona said hurriedly.

* * *

The Date with the Actress

The rest of their date was just as awkward.

Ivy had assumed that Desdemona was in a hurry to get her own turn at the bathroom. Instead as soon as Ivy was done, the taller woman dragged the two of them back to the ship.

When they got back to their cabin, that was when the woman ran to the bathroom.

“You appear to have food poisoning, Mistress.”

Ivy put a hand to her mouth, swallowing back bile, “... Yup.”

“A doctor has been requested.”

She raised an eyebrow as she sat down on the edge of her pot, both hands moving down to her stomach and feeling the uncomfortable and rumbling bloat there. “Can a doctor even help? I just have to moan my way through it, don’t I?”

“It is important to replace the lost fluids. This is especially important in one of your species, Mistress. A home remedy would be to suck on ice chips. However, the cruiseliners of Duffle & Hurley have more advanced treatments available, for the care of their most honoured passengers.”

Ivy gave that a bit of thought, “So... Like... Fluids by an IV drip? I don’t think I’m that bad.”

“The comforts of guests is one of the highest priorities for Duffle & Hurley.”

She gave a small laugh to that, “Only one? What are the other priorities? Making a shitload of money?”

“Whilst providing the utmost care and service to our guests is a fundamental part of the business model of Duffle & Hurley, as it benefits both the company and guests in equal measure, the financial success of the company is more reliant upon interworld politics and the extraction of vital ores.”

Ivy went still, stomach still grumbling. She really hadn’t expected that sort of honest answer. Even if the AI was treating her as one of their honoured guests... That kind of answer could publicly sink a company. It was a PR disaster, just waiting to happen.

“Earth is a backwards hole. S’pose they’ve got a lot of vital ores.” Ivy floundered, feeling the need to reply.

Sudais answered clinically, “The Earth possesses many of the simpler ores, that are vital in manufacturing, such as iron, aluminium, gold, silver and platinum. However, these are left to the general populace. The extraction of lathanides is the purpose of such visits as this one, as it is a vital component in supercapacitor construction.”

Ivy felt distinctly uncomfortable at that thought. She could see the business sense in turning cruiseliners into miners. Travelling space wasn’t exactly the cheapest thing in the universe. She still didn’t like the idea of extracting anything from another world, though. Especially a primitive one.

She turned her thoughts instead to the guttural groaning

of her date. “Desdemona is from a fiery place? Does that mean she needs more hydration, or less?”

“The employee in question is perfectly capable of enduring any form of dehydration.” Sudais sounded out stiffly.

Ivy shrugged and curled up into a tighter ball, her leaves obscuring the cabin as she sank down into herself. She gave a twinge of her cheeks at another lancing pain through her stomach. She really shouldn’t have touched the chocolate.

Especially not on an awkward date.

She could not decide if she actually liked Desdemona, or not. As friends, they were great. She couldn’t see herself ever wanting to let go of that relationship. It’s just... Had they meshed? Did she want to intertwine her roots into that woman’s feet?

Ivy hadn’t a clue.

The doorbell sounded, and Ivy glared out through a crack at it. “Who is it, Sudais?”

“The doctor. May I let him in, Mistress?”

She nodded, “Yup. I’m not getting up.”

The doctor in question turned out to have more hands than they had eyes, and that was no small feat. They were incredibly polite and soft-spoken, which made Ivy feel a little speciest for finding the hands so uncomfortable.

They had just handed her two strangely luminescent tablets, and she was swallowing them, when the bathroom door opened and Desdemona emerged. The gigantic woman was more ashen than red-skinned, and didn’t even give a glance

towards the doctor, before collapsing into a heap beside the bed.

The doctor coughed politely, "Would you terribly mind if—"

Ivy quickly shook her head. Before regretting the motion.

The man spun and knelt down beside Desdemona. His hands flying here and there all over the giantess, checking the plasticity of her skin, her eyes, and her hair. He made a brief and uncomfortable face, before rolling her onto her side and putting one hand to her neck.

He counted off silently, as his other hands grabbed a fluid pack from his bag, and unfolded a portable stand for it. He had it all fixed together and puncturing the soft skin on the opposite side to her elbow, even before he'd finished counting off.

The doctor smoothed back Desdemona's head, between her horns, causing her to mutter and groan. He nodded and stood up slowly, turning back to Ivy. "I am afraid I'll need to take your guest to the medical centre."

"It's serious...?" Ivy's eyes shot open wide, and she went to stand up.

One of the doctor's hands caught her knee, and eased her back gently into her pot. He smiled politely, and shook his head, "It is not something for you to be concerned about, Mistress Green. Your friend appears to have eaten something that she rather should not have."

"Chocolate. Me too."

He sighed, "Ah, but Mistress Green, your friend's digestive system is rather complex. I am afraid she's... Well...

Clogged it. The treatment is not altogether polite, but she'll need to take a couple days to recover."

"It's my fault." Ivy went ashen.

The doctor smiled and shook his head, "Not at all. She took her own action. But she'll be fine, in a couple days. Sudais? Might you call a stretcher, to help transfer the miss."

"I have already placed the notification."

Ivy sat back into her pot slowly, feeling almost as guilty as she felt nauseous.

* * *

Ivy woke up to the sound of a jangling bell.

She glared up, to find a face shoved through her leaves. Talia grinned at her, scrunching up her nose, "You're awake!"

Ivy shoved the other woman back, and curled into a tighter ball. "Just wanna sleep..."

"Aw." Talia sounded genuinely disappointed, "I get it if you're tired after your date... But... I was kinda hoping you'd do something with me."

Ivy sat bolt upright. "Date! Shit. Uh... Desdemona is in the clinic. She got sick after eating chocolate, and it worried the doctor and-"

Talia raised an eyebrow, "Blaming yourself?"

"... Maybe."

The bovine woman shrugged, and then flicked a bell now hanging from a necklace of leather around her neck. "Do you like it? Desdemona got it for me. Apparently she got you a present, too. But she wants to wait to give it to you."

"How the...?" Ivy blinked, "I was right with her. When did she manage to get secret presents for anybody?"

Talia shrugged and grinned, "She's fine, Ivy. And she doesn't regret anything. Apparently you're a much better friend than date. Sorry if that's a heartbreaker. You're just not her type."

"Thank the stars." Ivy breathed out, touching her chest.

"She a bad date?"

Ivy quickly shook her head, "No! She was wonderful. It's

just... Well, I haven't even dated a woman, before. It felt more like... Best friends."

"You better not be a better friend with her, than me."

She cocked her head, "You're... Jealous? None of us have known each other that long, Talia."

"Nope." The woman nodded, "Which is why I let Desdemona burn out on the first awkward date."

The implication was not lost on Ivy. She blanched.

The other woman laughed, "Oh, don't freak out. All I'm wanting is a dinner date. I got us a seat at the restaurant at the bow of the ship. Place has a captain's table, and everything. What do you say? Wanna chew some cud with me?"

"Better than vomiting chocolate." Ivy gave a small laugh, and then shrugged in resignation, "Sure. May as well. Don't expect anything."

Talia bounced from one hoof to the other, grinning. "'Course not. I'm springing it on you, after all."

Ivy eased up slowly, holding her stomach. It felt uncomfortable, but not painful. Whatever medicine the doctor had given her was doing something. Not fixing it, but something.

Talia hooked their arms together, grinning as the two headed out the door of the cabin, and into the nightmode of the cruise ship. The lights were dimmer, to let the stars overhead shine through brightly. Little speckles danced around the bottom edges of all the walls, as well.

"Is there any reason you wanted a date? I'm not exactly

the world's best romance option. I'm a... Maid. From an isolationist planet." Ivy prompted.

The bovine woman laughed, "Are you kidding me? You're wonderful! So frenetic when someone gets you going. You're fun, Ivy. That's exactly all that matters to me. You're fun."

"I've fallen off the spaceship, been chased and nearly eaten by a guest, and now I have food poisoning. I think I'd say I have the worst luck in the galaxy." Ivy disagreed.

Talia laughed and squeezed her arm, "Like I said, you're fun."

Conversation stopped as they stepped into the elevator. There were a half-dozen other guests, all of them dressed to the nines. Gorgeous dresses that screamed of efforts to break the colour spectrum as they shone and sparkled.

Many-armed suits that spoke of a regal and gentle upbringing. The hands of wearers would never have known the efforts that might bring a single callus. Whilst both Talia and herself were still dressed casually from their trip to the planet below.

Talia however, didn't seem the least bit self-conscious. Her eyes were sparkling, and the grin she'd had since waking up Ivy was still there. They were genuinely excited to bring her to the restaurant.

Which... Ivy should be excited for. She hadn't thought she'd be able to afford going to any restaurant aboard the ship. Having Sudais serve them in the cabin was higher quality food than Ivy had hoped for.

Unfortunately, she was nervous about breaking the heart

of her friend, along with the nervousness of not belonging here. Dating her friends twice in a row was a truly stupid idea. Though, with her luck... Mr. No would suddenly proclaim his love, and ask her out on a date, and expect her just to go along with him.

Ridiculous jerk.

They stepped off the elevator, and Talia quickly dragged her forward, pointing out the curious bits of art on their way. One of the other servants was offering cubic modelling, and so Talia insisted they stopped and got a sculpture to remember the evening.

The man was good, Ivy had to admit. He absolutely captured her nervous and uncomfortable smile.

Talia was holding the little object and grinning at it, when the two of them reached the front restaurant. The man in the suit who greeted them blinked and nearly, but not quite, lost his smile.

“And how may I help you, this evening?”

“Table for Talia Bovina-grego.” The woman answered with a pretty smile and an innocent blinking of her eyes.

The servant’s smile vanished completely, and he swallowed nervously, “But of course. If the Enchantress would like to come this way.”

He clicked his fingers, and a maid ran up to them. The three headed into the restaurant, and Ivy forgot what she was about to ask Talia when she was blinded by the richest thing she’d ever seen.

Overhead hung several chandeliers, decorated with crystals, diamonds, and constructed from a carbon fibre hybrid of

some sort. The floors were made of a polished marble, speckled with gemstones of blue benitoite. Even the servant's outfits were more expensive than anything that Ivy would ever be able to afford.

The place was even more extravagant than some of the palaces that she had dug up on her home planet. More luxurious than anywhere that her ancestors had been.

They were led down several staircases, made of black opal of all things, and to a table set for four people. It was in front of an enormous transparent shielding that looked out at the planet below.

The maid helped both of them sit, and curtsied, "Commander Amir wishes to send his apologies, Enchantress. He is caught up in the unrelenting rigours of bureaucracy. He asks that you begin without him."

"Sure." Talia shrugged, "Can I get a banana daiquiri to get things started? That's an Earth thing."

"Of course, Enchantress." The maid curtsied, "And for yourself?"

Ivy blinked, "Uh. . ."

"How about a champagne?" Talia supplied.

The maid headed off, and Ivy turned to stare at her.

Talia blinked innocently.

"Ex. Plain."

The bovine laughed nervously and twirled a finger around an ear. "Okay. So. . . You know how Desdemona is from a trading family? But she's like. . . Hiding from them? Doesn't want anyone to say her name."

“Not really. But I guess she dropped some hints.” Ivy admitted.

Talia shrugged, “I got the rotten luck of being born to a half important family, too. Not especially important, mind you. Otherwise you might have heard of me. I’m part of a performing family. We make plays and recordings that get thrown around our galaxy a bit.”

Ivy shook her head in amazement. “Wow. So I’m the only unimportant one in the cabin. Bloody heck.”

“You are important!” Talia instantly insisted, reaching over and squeezing one of her hands. “You’re... An amazing person, Ivy. Apparently your research is a thing. I didn’t understand half of it, when I listened in, but some of the guests are talking about you. These ridiculous people, living way above my level of living, know who you are. You’re important.”

“They know you, too.” Ivy replied, not quite believing that the guests were talking about herself.

Talia sighed, and shrugged, still squeezing Ivy’s hand, “A bit. Everyone likes watching a play. That Enchantress title? Not a real one. It’s from their favourite role for me. I’ve made other things since, but no one cares. I’m the Enchantress.”

“How come a famous actress is acting a maid, on a gigantic cruise ship?” Ivy asked uncertainly.

The woman blushed, and then shrugged sheepishly, “Okay. You got me. I probably could afford a cabin. Um... Would you believe it was research for a role?”

“Nope.”

Talia looked down, pulling back her hands, and her cheeks getting even redder, “Why do you have to be so good at that? Anybody else would believe it.”

“If you don’t want to say... That’s fine.” Ivy said with concern.

As Talia looked up nervously, and went to speak, their drinks arrived. The woman’s mouth snapped shut, as the maid laid out both drinks with a reverence and respect that they didn’t deserve.

Ivy sipped at the yellow-ish liquid in hers, blinking at how pleasant and soft it felt. She also felt it instantly saturate her nervous system with alcohol. Her people were not good drinkers.

Talia took another few minutes to get up the courage, but when she did, she looked out the window in front of them. “What... Do you see?”

“Another world. It’s... Amazing. Worth everything, to be here.”

The bovine nodded slowly, “It’s... What I see. I wasn’t lying before, when I said I’d never been to another planet. People come to see the Enchantress, she doesn’t go to them. Not allowed to go to them.”

“Not... Allowed? You’re an adult.”

She nodded, “Exactly. Rules of my world? If you’re of age, then you’re not allowed off-world until you have a kid. Everything for the empire. Except... Whether or not I even want a kid, I can’t have one.”

“Oh.” Ivy said sympathetically.

Talia snorted and shook her head, "Nah. I can. Not being able to have one is... It's more the people I'm interested in, have wombs, too."

"But... You went out with men on the planet..."

Talia grinned, "And who got treated for it? Never said I wasn't shallow. It's just... We're second-class citizens, on my world. Women. So I ran away."

"A famous star, is a second class citizen." Ivy winced.

The bovine nodded, "Yeah, yeah. I really am. It's horrible. I came out when I was still a kid. I was famous then, too. The Emperor sent me to five years of re-education camp. I learnt to keep it to myself."

Ivy was silenced, staring in both horror and amazement.

All Talia could do was give another small shrug, and look off awkwardly at the window out to another world. One where she was free to be who she was, instead of the lie she had to live by on her own world.

Ivy was still flabbergasted, when a suited man approached the table, "Presenting his honour, the Commander Amir."

She jerked to her feet instinctively, knocking over her chair and then falling over it. Her head sprung up in time to see a gigantic claw descending towards her.

Ivy let out a frightened squeak, before it gently closed around her wrist and effortlessly lifted her into the air. Her boots softly touched down onto the decking, and the suited crab gave an extravagant bow.

"My apologies for frightening you, Mistress Green."

She put her hands behind her back, and quickly rubbed at her wrist. Claws are not soft. "Entirely my fault, Commander Amir."

"Not at all. Please, be seated." He waved a hand, and a nearby servant raced to help Ivy into her seat, and another hovered beside Talia, looking like they wished they could help.

The Commander sat down, owning his own chair without asking. It was his ship, after all. The man turned away from Ivy, and smiled pleasantly, "I was much surprised to hear that the famous actress was among the staff. I was entirely convinced that Sudais had finally got something wrong. Is this research for a part, m'lady?"

Talia shrugged and sipped at her drink, "Non-disclosure agreements cover much of my work, Commander Amir. I am afraid I will not be available for a signing, if that is the thought."

"Not at all. The staff of Duffle & Hurley would never presume to ask someone into such an official and uncomfortable capacity." He replied smoothly, "However, for your own comfort, you may ask for a cabin. Free of charge."

The woman smiled over at Ivy, and sipped her drink, "I'm already in a lovely cabin, thankyou. Quite comfortable."

Ivy felt the conversation was more politeness than anything, and the political back-and-forth wasn't about to go anywhere comfortable. She also felt the alcohol in her system might have been weakening her usual inhibitions.

"Sudais seems fairly open with me, Commander. Is the AI really treating me as just a guest?"

“Commander Amir.” He corrected her absent-mindedly, and then frowned, “Sudais. . . Is a curious one. Technically speaking, within the structures of Duffle & Hurley, she outranks me. Not in every duty, mind. I am the commander of the ship. All the same, I do not know everything.”

Talia’s nose crinkled, “An AI outranking a commander? That’s. . . Kinda gross.”

“It took quite some getting used to, for myself.” Amir agreed, “AI were banned, on my planet, during our industrial revolution. They put too many artists out of work, whilst simultaneously ruining the art.”

Ivy rubbed her chin, “I’m not sure my people ever actually invented AI. I think they arrived with galactic trade? There might be something in that. When you can remember your ancestors, you’re not looking for more people to tell you what to do.”

“The employees of Duffle & Hurley are extremely grateful for the guidance of the software identities developed by our research departments.” Amir said stiffly.

Talia snorted and her bell jingled, “AI is a pain in the butt. I know, I know. Violating my contract or whatever. I read it. But I don’t care. AI always finds a way to stick their nose way inside your ass, just to shake out an extra coin or two.”

Ivy’s stomach twisted, and she felt like her earlier nausea was back in full force. The entire room seemed to sway, and her mind yelled out that it wanted to empty whatever traces of chocolate might still be left behind.

Except, as Ivy’s head hit the table, she saw Talia toppling back in her chair, and Amir scrambling to his feet.

She rolled her head sideways, and saw the chandelier swinging dangerously, creaking at the base connections.

The room was actually swaying.

* * *

The Fall of the Cruiseline

“Sudais, report!” Commander Amir barked, as he skitted back and forth, struggling to stay upright as the dining room tipped further and further to one side.

Ivy crawled over to where her date had fallen, and squeezed a hand. “You okay, Talia?”

“Nope.” The woman snorted, eyes flicking around, but mostly towards the barrier between the restaurant and the planet below.

Ivy couldn’t blame her. There was no Mr. No to dive after them and help them into some kind of ridiculous landing. The man who always seemed to turn up randomly, wasn’t around now that they needed him.

The maids and waiters of the room were in a huge panic, as well. Most of them weren’t helping the guests, they were scrambling towards all of the emergency exits.

“The alarms aren’t going off.” Ivy realised grimly.

Talia stared at her, wide-eyed, “You’re freaking analysing this? I’m just trying to work out how to get to a door!”

Ivy shrugged, “What’s the point of a door? So we can fall off the deck? Been there, done that. Safer inside a room.”

“She’s not wrong. Stay put!” Amir yelled at them absently, before going back to whatever he was doing. Hopefully something that would actually save them. That was the captain’s job. Save the ship.

Talia grunted grimly, “Hadn’t thought of that.”

Ivy squeezed her hand, “Hey, at least the tilt isn’t that bad. We’re not slipping anywhere. It’s just a really awkward

angle. Like climbing mountains, back home.”

“I . . . Have never climbed a mountain.” Talia admitted.

“The last time I went mountain climbing, was because ash from a volcano made flying suck. No spaceships.” Ivy tried to distract her friend, “Actually . . . Earth has a crazy word for people who die in ash clouds. That was what I was looking at. Ancient society, beneath a volcano. They got buried thousands of years ago.”

Talia glared at her, “Aha.”

“Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis. Crazy word, right?”

The bovine rolled her eyes, “Remind me to stuff a pneumo . . . Volcano . . . Isis, up your butt.”

“Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis.” Ivy playfully corrected her.

Talia was so impressed, she punched Ivy in the gut. Which instantly reminded the both of them, that Ivy had been having stomach problems, as she ejected her champagne all over the actress.

The woman let out a shaking and lowing moan, staring in horror at herself. Ivy made a weak and sympathetic smile, but she didn’t think that Talia was really noticing it, right now.

There was a loud blare of an alarm, and then Commander Amir’s voice echoed through an overhead system. “All guests are to be returned to their quarters. Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Units have been deployed to assist. Please cooperate, this is for your safety. Other staff are to return to their quarters.”

As if on cue, Mr. No landed beside the two of them. He was standing up, and seemed entirely oblivious to the tipping of the ship. Ivy considered not taking his hand, when he offered it.

She still did, but gave it a thought.

He helped up Talia as well, and laced an arm around the both of them, and without so much as a word, started walking them back towards the stairs. Ivy struggled not to feel mad at how easy he found it, and how presumptuous he was.

When they got to the deck, they found similarly dressed guards all around. More than Ivy had realised were onboard. All the guests seemed quite frantic, and arguing with the guards. Who paid as little mind as Mr. No. Maybe it was their training?

What really made Ivy's stomach twist, was when she noticed how many children were on board the cruiseliner. She hadn't seen most of them when she was cleaning. One here or there.

If this really was a crash, then how were they going to save them all? Wasn't like the Earth could deploy rescue ships.

Maybe Desdemona's planet could help? They were supposedly advanced enough.

"Oh! It is you! Could you possibly, help me?"

Ivy looked over as Mr. No went to dash on by, and slammed her booted feet onto the deck. Which had about as much impact as a gnat attempting to bite through the skin of a honey badger.

"Stop!" She yelled, "Help him."

Mr. No came to a skidding halt, and turned the two women to look back at where the blue-skinned man, who looked rather weak and pathetic, and entirely as if he couldn't cope with the steep incline of the deck.

"Terrible apologies, but I would rather like to get back to the cabins." The professor said weakly.

Mr. No adjusted his stance firmly, "I do not have a third arm with which to assist. The individual must remain put. I will return to assist, if another Autonomous Security and Wellbeing Unit has not done so, by the time I have returned."

With that said, without waiting for a reply, No turned back, and propelled both Ivy and Talia onwards. For her own part, Ivy was attempting to push her feet into the ground, but it really was pointless.

They moved along the deck, by the lights which were dimming and lighting, unsure whether they should be set for night or for day. Past the restaurants that were all shuttering down and slamming shutters that looked more like those used in meteorite storms than just closed up shop.

The three of them didn't go by the elevator, instead Mr. No went for the steep and rough stairs. Not that he seemed to need a bannister to hold onto, the man was as steady as a healthy heartbeat.

Talia hadn't said a thing, and she still wasn't. The woman's face was one of fright, and she really hadn't been reassured by Ivy trying to play around with her earlier. There was something there, beyond just the fright of a disaster.

Eking out her date's personal story probably wasn't the best thing to do, at the moment, though.

“Desdemona is in sick bay. She be okay?” Ivy demanded from the faceless man.

Mr. No hesitated, nearly missing a step, before resuming their rapid climb. He didn’t offer any answer at all. Not just an empty platitude, like most of the staff opted for when they shouldn’t answer.

Ivy was getting sick of that.

The three of them arrived on the top deck, and Talia seemed to find her feet. Mr. No also seemed to grip them less tightly, at least so he wasn’t hurting Ivy’s wrist, as he directed them across the tipped floor towards their room.

Ivy looked back over her shoulder, and her jaw dropped. “There’s a freaking landing craft! Who is getting evacuated?”

“Ignore the spacecraft.” Mr. No barked and yanked harshly on her arm - enough that he very nearly popped it out of the socket.

Ivy let out a surprised squeal of pain, and stumbled, falling backwards away from him.

Mr. No released her, allowing her to topple to the ground. He looked down at the fallen woman, and she swore she could feel the disdain burning through his sightless helmet. “Stand.”

She rubbed her shoulder, and glared at him, “No! I know it’s bad timing, but you’re such a bastard! I don’t exactly have a prejudice against being born out of wedlock, but if I did, you’re the absolute picture perfect justification!”

“Stand.” Every syllable of his response was exactly the same as before.

“What the...?” Talia clapped both hands over her mouth, staring over the top of Ivy.

She looked over her shoulder, and then scrambled to her feet, “Desdemona!”

“I must escort you to the cabin.” Mr. No ignored what was happening and grabbed her tightly by the wrist, grinding her fragile bones together.

Ivy stomped a foot, driving her boot down with the force of every ancestor in her tree-like family. She planted it firmly enough that his helmet managed to show the smallest of responses, and he stopped pulling.

She glared at him, “Save. Her.”

“Mission accepted.” He replied without any emotion, and walked by her to the edge of the stairs, before making both Ivy and Talia gasp in shock as the man leapt effortlessly down and across the entire staircase.

He landed not in a crouch, but in a run. The leather-bound freak almost a blur as he moved across the deck.

“Hot damn. Is he like... Flying?” Talia whispered.

Ivy reached over and squeezed her friend’s hand, “For Desdemona, I pray that he is.”

The hovering ship by the first aid station wasn’t of a design that Ivy recognised. It embraced sharp and angular shapes that were entirely impractical, suggesting a violent sort of culture.

It was just a landing craft, big enough to support a half dozen passengers, but no more than that. Tiny, compared to the cruiseliner. All the same, flying it through the air

shield and onto the ship, especially with the deck tilting, would take stupidity, not courage.

Below it, Desdemona was rolling back and forth. She was clearly doing her best to resist, but was still sick. The woman managed to throw one or two of the soldiers, but a punch to her stomach ended that.

They were like her, or a similar species. Dressed in barely processed leather, and carrying spear-shaped guns. A warrior caste, probably.

Ivy was tempted to reach out to Sudais, and demand some answers about who they were, but the AI was probably fully occupied with the strangeness of the crash. One that they weren't able to prevent, without the assistance of the commander.

Could these freaks have managed to hack Sudais...?

Ivy hadn't heard much about managing to hack a modern AI. However, AI weren't exactly popular back in on her planet. They preferred to grow things for the task, not force a bunch of mechanics to whirl and grind out an answer.

Talia clenched her fists, her bell trembling as the woman struggled to stay upright on the tilted deck. "Come on, come on... Come on! Save her already, you bastard!"

The invaders opened fire as she finished yelling, a blinding hail of whites and purples. The flashes left scores of black across the deck and walls, where Mr. No had been just a moment before.

His speed seemed to flicker between fast, and impossible. Ivy stared, hoping against hope. It didn't make sense that anyone could dodge a rifle, but he seemed to be doing -

A charred leather body fell to the ground.

Ivy's eyes burst forth and she clapped her hands to her mouth in disbelief. Beside her, Talia let out a frightened wail and fell to her knees - which led to her falling over altogether on the tipping floor.

Smoke drifted up lazily from where Mr. No had fallen, and the invaders finished loading their giant red friend into the ship. There was barely a pause before it started lifting off into the air.

The liquid rolled down both of Ivy's cheeks, and she could feel her flowers twisting and turning towards the tears. Suckling as they always did when grief came crashing down.

No was dead.

"Sudais. Kill them." Ivy tried pointlessly.

There was no reply as the ship lifted up and through the top of the shield, and out into space. It rolled slowly, aligning, before there was a glow of engine and the craft was gone.

Ivy shrank down onto the deck, her vines circling around her. Intertwining and twirling around her in frightened instinct. Shielding her from the horrors of the outside world.

* * *

The Chase of Ivy Green

Ivy retreated inside herself.

She had seen death before. Every lifetime, she remembered those who went before. She could remember dying. Most of the time she was terrified when the end came.

There was no comfort in knowing that you would pass into the Green, to join with everyone else. Not that she would, if she died here. She wasn't on her planet, no forest to join with, and pass on who she was. . . But she wasn't the one who had died.

Not this time.

Some of her lives had faced their own deaths happily enough. They had no fear in becoming part of something new. They felt like their lives had been worth living.

She wasn't the one who had died, though. It had been a faceless man. She had never seen who he was, not really. She hadn't understood him. Ivy still couldn't say that she understood what motivated No. . . But he was gone.

No was gone, because she had asked him to help.

Demanded it.

She hadn't pulled the trigger, but he would have been nowhere near any of them, if she hadn't. . .

Tears ran down Ivy's face, as she hid inside her cocoon. She had no idea if she would ever bloom again. She didn't think she would feel any more guilty if she gunned him down, herself.

The ship was probably still unstable, maybe even crashing. Had Sudais gone quiet because the pirates had shut her

down? Everyone on board was at risk, which Ivy should have cared about... But... She didn't.

The only thing she could think about, was the horror of what she had seen. What she had done.

The triple beat of her hearts thudded away in her ears. A drumbeat that measured the passage of time, reminding her that no matter how much she wanted to run away from the world, she was still in it.

As much as Ivy wanted to disappear and ignore everything, she couldn't. Maybe the commander would stabilise the cruiseliner. Maybe they would need to find a landing craft.

Either way... She knew the right thing to do, was to poke her head out, and be prepared to do something.

It wasn't like the pain was all hers, either. The blame probably was, but not the pain. Talia had just had a friend kidnapped in front of her, as well. Then been left all on her own, as she stumbled around on a falling ship.

Ivy bit her lip, she didn't want to come out.

The green leaves pulled back slowly, and the woman inside sat up even slower. Her hands were shaking as she blinked at a darkness she had absolutely not been expecting. The sun, that was what she expected.

Was she looking off into deep space?

Ivy reached out tentatively and had to bury a squeal in her throat as her fingers were bent backwards by solid metal, right in front of her. She rubbed at her hand and twisted her head back and forth, trying to get a fix on things.

She felt around herself slowly, using her sensitive fingertips

to trace the edges.

She had to control her breathing as she found herself to be in a box. She was in a box that was barely taller than her crouching, and only just wide enough to fit her legs in a cross-legged fashion.

It was made of a metal, but she couldn't see enough to tell what kind. She also wasn't about to taste it, which was a way that she'd guessed some things in the field as an archaeologist. The metal was cold to the touch, so she wasn't anywhere particularly warm.

So at least she wasn't about to cook.

The box was made of slats, the edges of which had been fused together. Finer than most welding, so probably something chemical, then. She also caused herself to whimper when she failed to find any kind of hinge or latch. The box felt like it had been built around her, even though she knew that wouldn't be possible - the fine joins told her that.

Ivy took several deep breaths, and tried to reassess.

She was in a box.

She might be on a crashing cruiseliner, she might not.

She wasn't strong enough to break a metal box, not like this one. She didn't have any tools on her, so she couldn't chip away at it or anything.

There was no reason for anyone on board the cruiseliner to capture her like this. It wasn't Desdemona's kidnappers coming back for a friend. They had no reason for that. Nor did Sudais have any reason to treat Ivy like this.

The only thing she could come up with was. . . The crashing

of cruiseliner would have released all the door locks. No reason to kill any passenger, no matter how terrible a person they were. It wouldn't look good.

So Duffle & Hurley would have released the guest who had attacked Ivy, and sworn his revenge.

He might have found her on deck, throwing a wobbly, and he might have... He might have hurt Talia. He could have done a lot of things, whilst Ivy was throwing a tantrum, instead of being an adult and putting her emotions behind her until she wasn't at risk of dying.

He'd been more than happy to throw her off a ship. If he was keeping her, Ivy was absolutely determined not to discover what it might be.

"Sudais?" She whispered, not really hoping for much.

Her own breathing was the only answer.

Ivy rolled her jaw, trying to bury her fear in anger and determination. She hadn't managed to find a weak point in the box, but she knew that physics wasn't as nice.

She shrank down as much as she could, pressing her roots to the floor of the thing, and mentally preparing herself for the pain.

She sprang upwards, snapping both head and shoulder into the far corner. A curseword fell out of her mouth, right before her entire world tumbled for a moment.

She had no idea where she was, as the floor of the box rose up, and then the world thunked upwards into her. She was lying on the side of the box, and she kicked down into the floor as hard as she could.

Brilliant white light flooded over her.

Ivy scrambled out, expecting someone to have noticed, and blinked around in the bright lights.

Before she could even orient herself to make a run for it, something solid slammed into the side of her head, and the floor slammed into the other side as she tumbled.

Ivy groaned, grabbing at her poor skull, and looking up at the blurred image of the guest who had once tried to eat her. He crossed his arms, and his giant tongue slid out of one corner of his mouth, tracing his lips before popping back inside with a smacking noise.

Ivy flashed her weak knowledge of anatomy through her head, and then punched the man in front of her, as hard as she could, in the lower abdomen. Frogs kept their testicles there, and he was amphibious. Worth a shot.

The man blinked at her, making her think she'd failed, before he started letting out a slow and quiet groan.

Ivy launched herself to her feet, and sprinted. She ran for the door, and the hallway. She screamed in pain as she felt something grab onto one of her leaves, which tore free as she kept going.

She felt the cells open up, a dew-like coral bleeding out into the wound, and trying to seal it.

Her roots slapped against the metal floor as Ivy found herself somewhere below deck. These were access corridors, for the various machinery of the cruise ship.

She could feel a thudding through the deck - she must have been close to either the engine, or the heating system. Ivy

ran away from that feeling. She needed to get up top, out and into the open.

The back of her shirt caught on something, jerking her to an instant halt. She pressed forward against the feeling as she looked over her shoulder to see the flexing tongue that had caught a hold of her.

Ivy's fingers scrambled, undoing the buttons, and then she sprinted forwards, free of her shirt.

She took the next door opening, trying to add some twists and turns and get the hell away from the man. Finding herself in some kind of cafeteria, one she hadn't even known existed, she took no time to take in that there was no one else there - heading for a door on the far side.

As she moved through the door, she heard the crash of a thrown table behind her, and the croaking roar of the man pursuing her.

Ivy found herself in an access corridor. No doors, and only one direction to head. She had probably just taken the wrong turning that would end her.

She bit her lip, refusing to cry, as she ran down it as fast as she could. Burning her lungs and xylem as she pushed her body to its absolute limits. She hadn't been unfit, but she was no athlete. Adrenaline could only do so much. Transpiration wasn't supposed to take energy.

A flight of stairs, leading further downwards, appeared in front of her. Ivy had no choice. As she skipped down them, taking three or four at a time, she heard the thud of something against a wall behind her.

"I eating you!" He roared.

Ivy put up her arms to burst through a pair of doors, before stumbling as she emerged into a space completely flooded with light. She found herself in a grassy area, surrounded by plants 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.

She gave a stunned laugh as she stood where the guest had caught her last time.

No had been there to save her.

Now he was dead.

Ivy dove into the undergrowth, listening to the Green. She let go of herself, breathing in all the signals of the plants, crying out to them of the coming danger, and begging.

They spoke to her, even as the euphoria began to cloud her mind. They sang to her, leading her along a road of golden leaves, deeper and deeper into a wonderland she was willing to spend the rest of her life in.

Her confusion and disorientation increased with every single step, but it was replaced with a bizarre sense of excitement. This was an enchanting place. It was swallowing her right up, and she was okay with that.

The grass swirled around her ankles, blurring and rising up. Turning into questing reeds rising above a slush of living water. Filled with buzzing insects and floating algae, all of them joining her into their little colonies.

The trees overhead bent down towards her, bowing in the wake of her passing. Acknowledging her as more than an honoured guest, but as the queen of the forest. Every

whispering leaf sang her praises, of her bravery and wisdom.

“Arrogant. Foolish.”

The haunting words of No sang from the breezes, his ghost rising up to remind her of her utter failure. She was the reason he was dead, no other. She may as well have killed him, herself.

“You’re not even fighting. You think this makes you strong?”

She ran from his voice, his accusations that tore through the veil between life and death. Ivy fled before the judgement of the afterlife, knowing that she never deserved to rejoin the Green.

Of all the accolades and vestiges of her family line, it was only right that it stopped with her. Others could carry on, lifting the inheritance out of the mud she had sucked them down into.

She hadn’t saved Desdemona.

She’d killed No.

She was a nothing, a half-naked maid running around in the air factory of a tourist ship, about to die by either wild guest or impending disaster. She wouldn’t even be a footnote in the journals who might write of this moment.

It wasn’t like her family would much miss her.

She was nothing more than the weird child who devoted their whole life to an unimportant artform, that she could barely defend for still existed. She was a relic of the past, dragging down everyone simply for knowing her.

The sky overhead crackled with electricity, followed by a boom of thunder that swept through the trees and caught

her up in it. She flew through the air, struck in the chest by the explosive judgement of nature itself.

The stones either side of her rose up, giant golems bellowing as they grabbed her by the shoulders and thrust her into the ground. The stone creatures pushing her down with enough force that the dirt turned into sea and swallowed her into it.

She sank down into the dark and sludge, unable to breathe, unable to scream.

* * *

Her chest lay still, as Ivy found an unsettling peace forcing itself down on her.

As she slipped into it, smiling quietly, she found that she wasn't alone in the dirt. The dark was slowly lighting up, like stars appearing at the end of the day. Bright lights in the sky.

Each one winked into existence, like a beacon of hope. An ancestor looking down on her proudly, and urging her not to give up. To keep up the good fight. To take hold of the life she had been blessed with, and to speak out into the night.

She didn't know what she was meant to say, only that she had to say it. There was a word somewhere, something instinctual, deep inside her. Something that went beyond all the science she knew, reaching down into what it truly meant to be sapient.

She needed a reason to live, a purpose in it all.

Her friends needed her. Desdemona needed her. The professor had asked for help. The ship was falling. Talia was alone, and might be injured. Probably, considering the asshole who had kidnapped her.

The alien bastard needed to be taught a lesson in manners, and that you can't just go around eating other people, servant or not.

Mr. No had fought for truth and justice, with a resolute and unchanging sense of right and wrong. He had done everything he could for the rules, until the very end.

He had lived for what was right.

Purpose itself was the point of it all. You live for purpose,

you don't drive a purpose to live your life. She might not know what her purpose was. She didn't know how she fit in it all, or if she even did.

None of that mattered a damn.

What mattered, was that she live.

* * *

Her triple heartbeat thundered out a cacophony, crashing into her mind and shattering any of the clarity she had just found. Ivy gritted her teeth, crushing them together hard enough that they might well be cracking.

Her fingers became as claws, scratching at the metal floor, trying to find purchase to lift herself up. Ivy forced her muscles to flex, demanded her body bent to her will. Pushing out leaves and vines to lift up her brokenness.

The trees around her swayed in a non-existent breeze, as she picked herself up off the artificial floor.

She found the guest sitting in front of her, grinning. In his mouth was the remnants of her shirt, pushed into a corner as he sucked on it. Biding his time and enjoying all the strength he had over her.

Except her mind was free of the environment, for now.

Ivy didn't understand how or why, but she wasn't high anymore. Her mind was clear, and wasn't seeing strange cats grinning in the air. So she put her analytic skills to use.

He was amphibious, with an overly large mouth - but his eyes were also large. Easy targets, but put her in range of that ridiculously strong tongue. Kicking in the balls probably wouldn't work as well, the second time around. That really took surprise to make it effective.

The bones of his hands were probably hollow, weak. Which is why he hadn't used them to try and grab her. She might be able to tempt him into using them to stroke her face or something - giving her an opportunity to bite one, or maybe break a finger or two.

He was probably just as susceptible to the environment as she was. The heat and humidity might be making him slower. Not much, but something. He wouldn't be thinking as clearly.

His skin would be breathing in the water in the air. Which also meant he would breathe in anything in the air.

Ivy staggered upright slowly, and smiled, "Guess you caught me."

"Guess I be eating." He smirked back at her.

There was an immediate puff of yellow, blinding him. He gagged as her pollen coated his giant tongue, forcing him to taste her. As he tried to breathe through it, her knee landed in his testicles, again.

He dropped to the ground, but Ivy had already spun and headed towards the entrance that Mr. No had brought her into this place by.

* * *

The Mind of No

Ivy's feet slapped against the deck, her bare feet. The thing had stolen her boots. She did not want to know why he had taken her boots.

She knew she wasn't out of danger yet, and she knew her head was still spinning a little bit from all the oxygen. Her first priority was getting the hell away from wherever the guest might think she was, and her second was getting off the ship.

Whilst she was out, the tilt of the deck had got so much worse. There wasn't a doubt in her mind about the cruise-liner crashing anymore. The ship was going down which meant she needed to find a landing craft.

She did give a thought to Talia, and to Desdemona, and even to the professor she had seen earlier. She couldn't help any of them, right now. She could barely help herself, and panicking had caused her to nearly get eaten.

She needed to help herself.

The landing craft were near the front of the ship, and launched from either side. However, Ivy was pretty sure she was still getting hunted. So she headed for the access corridors right down the middle.

She slid down stairs, trying not to picture Talia's frightened face.

She jumped off the end, trying not to wonder where all the other people were.

She ducked under a couple of hanging signs, all askew and falling with the change in the gravity. Passing by one of

the snack stores and trying not to remember Desdemona being dragged off.

She burst out into the open of the front of the ship, and skidded to a stop as she found all the missing people. Guests yelling loudly and pointing fingers, shaking fists.

The landing craft seemed... Locked.

Ivy shook her head and shoved her way through, ignoring the responding elbows and protests, until she got to the side of the ship. To her surprise, she found the captain there, arguing with an access panel.

Commander Amir hit the screen in frustration, "Open this acursed doors! The ship be crashing, I tell you!"

Ivy put a hand to her chest, trying to catch her breath, "Is Sudais talking to you? She went silent on me. Nearly got eaten."

"Who are... Oh. You." The man said with annoyance, and went back to arguing with the silent panel. Completely silent.

Ivy rolled her jaw, "Commander Amir, if Sudais has... Been shut down? What then? How do you reactivate her?"

He hesitated, as if feeling stupid for not thinking of it, "Why would she be offline?"

"You had a princess kidnapped."

Amir's eyes went wide, "One of the guests was kidnapped? Blazes. To reactivate her, I would need to go back to the top deck. It requires a key, you see. Just in case she goes bad or something, you know how people are with AI. Never trust it."

“A... Key?” Ivy said in surprise.

He pulled a silver, metal and physical, key from around his neck. “It has some encrypted thingy inside of it. I don’t get it... But I can’t leave. The people here are panicked enough without -”

“Fuck off.” Ivy shook her head quickly, “I just had someone try to motherfucking eat me. I am not running off on my own to reactivate a pissy AI. You have to have a bypass to get inside the ships.”

Amir stared at her for a moment, entirely surprised that she could stand up for herself. She was just a maid. Then his mouth fell into a frown, “I can’t go. And we die, if no one helps.”

Ivy shivered, feeling her mortality. Again.

“You die, too.” She retorted.

Not all the guests would die, of course. Ivy knew she could survive a crashlanding through the atmosphere. No had probably slowed their descent, and... Losing him hurt... But some of the others would be far tougher than she was.

Not everyone. The Commander was probably done for, and would turn into something nice and fried. Most of the guests would be the same. If Desdemona had still been there, Ivy would wonder if the woman could drop without injury. Especially considering their home planet.

Except she was gone.

Ivy jumped up on top of the misbehaving computer console, so that she could look out across the crowd. She ignored the commander yelling at her, as she focused on the faces.

She couldn't really see anyone she knew.

There was no annoying professor looking for a book he knew damn well he should not have brought on an expensive cruise. There was no bell-toting bovine laughing or crying, either.

Her selfish collapse might not just have got herself kidnapped. It might have got her friend killed.

Sudais would be able to find Talia in an instant. Get them both safely down to the ground. Might even be able to fix the ship, from whatever evil instructions the raiders had left behind.

Ivy jumped down and blew at her fringe in irritation, "Fine. What do I do with the key?"

* * *

Halfway up to the main office, or whatever it was called, Ivy had to take a double take. The entire ship was creepy and empty, so when she stumbled on the professor, she stared.

He smiled nervously over at her, his blue skin so pale that it was almost white. "I... I cou-ldn't ge-et so-ome help, cou-ld I?"

Ivy darted over as she heard the strain, and stared as she found the man hadn't tripped. His foot had gone into some kind of maintenance hatch that had been left open, twisted and then... There was a lot of red.

She went down on her knees, and her eyes focused. Her species main sense was that of smell, and right now... Everything was screaming that this man was about to die.

Unfortunately, those senses didn't come with magic powers. Instead Ivy had to work out how to get his limb out with minimum damage, and then... Then her shirt might become a tourniquet. Wasn't like she wanted to wear it.

Ivy looked up to the professor, and smiled nervously, "I'm afraid I never got your name, sir. Remembering you as 'the book guy' isn't the friendliest of terms."

"I... What are you doing?"

She sighed, withdrawing her hands, "Mostly trying to distract you."

"Why would you -"

He screamed as she took her chance. The wail warbled and sang so loudly within her ears that it seemed to echo.

Uniform hit the ground, and Ivy tied it around his ankle as

tightly as she could. She didn't know if he even had veins or arteries, but she was guessing he had the usual blood system. One that she didn't have.

Maybe her studies were actually useful, on board this death trap of a crashing ship.

Ivy felt her flowers open and puff with relief, as she fell backwards into a sitting position. She smiled nervously at him, "Well, now that the first death-defying thing is done. . . We can't actually leave. If I could help you hobble to the landing craft, it wouldn't help."

He nodded slowly, "Oh. Shit."

She shrugged, "I've got a key? Commander Amir wants me to reboot Sudais. She should be able to unlock everything. . . But she might be able to stop the crash, too."

"He asked. . . You?" The professor said with surprise.

"I know. Just a maid. But everyone seems to have really lost their shit." She said with annoyance.

The professor shook his head, "Sorry, no. That wasn't my consideration."

The man had to stop, breathing hard. He took a couple moments, and then smiled weakly, "Your people. . . Don't deal with. . . AI. . . Do they?"

"Yeah. Not really." She gave a small laugh, and then tried a little sweetness, "There's no chance you could hobble up with me and help, is there? She can probably get you back down safely, once she gets control of everything again."

He shrugged, "It seems the wisest choice."

Dying man helps woman command computer. Not what Ivy thought would sell a plan to anybody, but she wasn't about to argue.

* * *

Back when she was a student, Ivy had always wondered why so many people died on a sinking ship. The things took forever to go down, usually. Hours. All the same, people never managed to make it free.

Helping the professor through the ship, up the stairs... She figured younger her was an idiot.

The density of the air was changing, quicker than Ivy thought it should be. She could feel it in her leaves, as she stumbled her way along with the half-dead weight on her shoulder. All three of her hearts were working overtime.

The tilt was beyond noticeable. Her feet hung between the steps. She stepped onto the edge, not onto the flat. They both had to use the handrails, as they moved further up the death trap.

A flying city sounds great, right up until the giant thing comes crashing down.

The silence got to her. With everything going as bad as it was... There should be screaming. People panicking and running. Idiots who had stayed behind in their cabins, disbelieving that things were falling apart, should now be desperately trying to make their way.

Finally they hit the deck, and moved quickly towards the administration offices. There was no room overlooking the whole ship. Captaining felt more paperwork than endeavour, these days.

Ivy almost wished for the receptionist as they moved in. Wishing they had her tentacles to pick them up and move them through the damned place.

"It's locked." The professor said, trying the handle on the

door.

Ivy tried the key, and stared when it didn't even fit inside the lock. "You have got to be shitting me."

"You swore." He stared at her.

She ignored him. Of course she did. The entire ship was crashing, the floor was nearly vertical, and they were in the wrong damned place if they were hoping to survive. They needed the AI to stabilise things, or they weren't getting back safely.

"Sudais, open this door right now, or I'm gonna do something I regret!" Ivy yelled, without actually having a hope.

The door clicked.

"What in the...?"

The professor stared, "I thought the AI was... Offline?"

"Yeah..." Ivy opened the door slowly, and stepped onto the skirting where the wall met the floor.

The room was pretty much as she remembered it. A lot of the captain's books and things were on the floor. Lots of pens and not many knick-knacks. No bones for dogs.

She climbed up to the desk, which was bolted to the floor or something. The professor climbed into the room behind her, as she did. Ivy looked around it carefully, and did find a sequence of hidden buttons that seemed very official.

It seemed almost universal in her studies. If the society had a need for a very dangerous thing, they made it a singularly bright button, and made damn certain there were no words or instructions near the thing.

“Bright blue, red, and deep orange.” Ivy said and looked up at the professor, “Any ideas what they do?”

He frowned, “I am afraid not. I think I recall a certain warning about aurora or rust coloured switches and buttons. To never touch them, under the worst of circumstances. But I confess, I have not a clue why.”

The blue button in front of her pulsed, softly lighting up the area before going dark again. Ivy shivered, “Creepy... But... We’re falling out of the sky. Can’t get much worse.”

She pushed the button. It was solid, and required an actual amount of force to shift, before it thunked down and stayed down, sticking in place.

The professor coughed nervously, “Did you really just do that? You are a good sight braver than I.”

“Call me Dr. Happy Hat.” She said callously, “Or have you not noticed we’re falling out of the actual sky!?”

“Attempting to stabilise the ship is not possible, Mistress Green.” A disembodied voice filled the room.

She grabbed her chest as all three of her hearts jumped. “By manchineel trees! Far out. You’re actually around, Sudais?”

“The button you just returned to active position, is the control on my volume. I was muted by Commander Amir. You may mute me, if you so desire, Mistress Green.”

“Mistress Green. I thought you were a maid? Just an employee.” The professor looked over at her curiously.

She shrugged, “Not arguing, not right now. So... Um... If

you can't stabilise the ship... Can you release the controls on the landing craft? So we can get the hell off?"

"That is not possible, Mistress Green."

She winced, "Why?"

"Instructions from Duffle & Hurley, with the highest of priorities, were transmitted to Commander Amir." The AI was emotionless.

Ivy scratched the side of her head, "Duffle & Hurley want us all dead?"

"Witnesses of the kidnapping of Princess Desdemona are not allowed to survive. As such, I was instructed to weaken defenses and destroy the ship within the atmosphere of the primitive planet below."

The professor stared at her, as both of them realised the implications of what the AI had just said.

"Did the captain know?" Ivy asked quietly.

"He is the one who muted my communications platform, following the orders."

The professor grimaced, "He sent you here... Why? What does he get out of that, our Mistress Green?"

"I'm here to distract the AI. Because the damn things get very obsessive." Ivy winced.

"Commander Amir's attempts to hack my security protocols are currently failing." There was a hint of arrogance to Sudais' voice. If that were possible.

“AI has been known to become hyper focused on individual things, especially that which it cannot predict.” The professor shifted uncomfortably against the wall, lifting his leg and letting it dangle. “There has to be a hint though, if Amir is risking his ass on it.”

Ivy nodded, “Yup. I got a staff room, after some jerk tried to freaking eat me. Sudais started treating me like staff, after. Which might just be poor database crap, or I might have been interested. But I really, really, don’t like or know AI stuff. My planet grows stuff. We don’t do computers.”

“No.”

“Eh... Yeah we do.” Ivy said more firmly.

“That is not the intent of that word.”

The professor raised an eyebrow, “What?”

Her face dropped, “Oh. He died.”

“He was an expression of my own affections.” The AI filled a giant hole, “Whilst he was semi-autonomous, he was still an expression of my own existence.”

“We very much need to ban AIs from replicating emotions.” The professor sighed.

“If you care about me...” Ivy ignored him, “Then why are you about to kill me?”

“Such has always been the way of things.”

Her memory of all of her ancestors could not exactly disagree with that. Never done it herself, but there was always some king or emperor who thought that way. They also somehow managed popularity with the populace.

Thankfully, she knew that AIs were a things of rules, and were things that abided by them as closely as possible. She was not improving her opinion of smart tech, though.

It was going to need careful consideration... But she could do this. Considering that she had to.

“So... Ignoring that we’re all going to die... Can you tell me where Talia is? Is she okay?”

“I am afraid that Talia Bovina-grego is contained below decks, within a certain type of container.”

Ivy felt her stomach do a backflip, “No way. Not him.”

“You were located close by, when you were contained in a similar manner. However, as I am now in a more active state, I should be able to aide you actively in releasing her from such a difficult position.”

The professor winced, “Talia is in trouble, I guess? And you want to trust this thing to help you?”

“Yes.” Ivy stated strongly, eyeing him and wishing he could understand pheromones so she could at least get something across.

He shrugged, “Fine. I’m afraid I will be quite unable to aide you against... Whatever difficult position it is, that you are speaking of. My injury, considered. Might I help another way?”

Ivy shook her head, not really knowing. “No idea. To be frank, we are about to die. You in possession of any amazing skills I’ve got no idea about?”

“Professor Fahim is a verified pilot.” Sudais

offered innocently. "He could await you within Commander Amir's private craft, accessible from a hidden door within this very office. It would be a more comfortable place of final decline."

With that bomb shell dropped, the wall slid open, and a million hopes and dreams were born for Ivy. She wasn't a pilot. She wouldn't have been able to do anything, even if she knew this miracle existed.

A man she met, because he brought an expensive book on board a tourist ship, and was only with because he got hurt, had lucked out into the skills she needed to survive.

Maybe the entire universe didn't hate her existence.

"I'd rather you didn't watch my friend lying down and waiting to die, on board. Cut off your access to the ship." Ivy instructed.

"Certainly, Mistress Green."

She looked over at the stranger, "You're going to wait for me and Talia, right?"

"I would not be so terrible. But... If things become too terrible..."

She nodded, "I can do this."

* * *

The Pride of the Green

Ivy fell and screamed when she left the office.

A railing hit her stomach and knocked the air out of her, putting an end to the noise. The ship was completely tilted. She couldn't imagine the chaos near the landing craft.

She couldn't save everyone. She didn't even know if she could save herself.

So far, all she'd done is get No killed.

Ivy braced her knees against the wall that had saved her, and turned it into a floor. She proceeded with a grim face as she tried to pretend she could face her fears.

The thing had tried to eat her. Then, it had tried to punish her for having the gall to both escape and be upset that it had treated a servant as nothing more than food.

If they weren't in the middle of a disaster, the world would have come crashing down on the bastard. Talia wasn't a nobody, like Ivy. She was a minor celebrity, and the captain knew her name.

Except the captain knew they were all screwed, and was busy trying to run away.

Ivy hoped the man could. If anyone could release a dropship, it would probably be him. No one deserved any of this.

She jumped from her wall and caught a balustrade. Climbing hand-over-hand downwards. She needed to get to the lower areas. She needed to go back into the dark.

Talia's smiling face kept her moving.

The woman who gave a new friend a chance at what she

wanted. Happily giving Desdemona a chance at the love she wanted for herself.

The woman who laughed as she cleaned up vomit and other bodily fluids. Seeing herself not as a celebrity over everybody - but seeing everybody as deserving of a piece of happiness.

Down, down, down, she went.

Ivy's vines started to respond instinctively. Tightening her grip on things. Reaching out because she really wasn't sure if her jump could make it. This ship was going down, and it was going to start burning soon.

She knew she'd managed to fall through the atmosphere on her own. She didn't know if that had been because of Mr. No. He might have had a personal shield or some nonsense that made sense for a guard and not a freaking maid.

If the cruiseliner really went down, there was every chance she could survive it. That didn't mean that everyone else would. It also really didn't mean that Sudais would go offline. She might feel the need to slaughter everyone somehow else.

Like pumping the air out before the crash.

Or detonating the engines.

Rejecting AI really did seem to be how her planet had avoided some truly catastrophic consequences. This was just a cruise ship. Nothing huge or important. The darned thing was still a tool from some really corrupt assholes, and had every power to outsmart and outperform every single person on board.

If Sudais hadn't fallen for Ivy, she hadn't a doubt that she'd be dead. Or still in the freak's torture box below deck. How any planet still allowed AI to exist and touch on the economy or any kind of decision making was absolutely beyond her comprehension.

Ivy knew her planet was unusual for banning AI. They were weird, but they also grew things, rather than constructing them artificially. Finding out how ridiculously easy it was for the AI to act out... She was left wondering how her people were the weird ones.

Her ability to distract herself ended, as she found herself at the doors into the oxygen factory.

"There are no lions, no tigers, and no bears, located within the space ahead."

Ivy gave a terrified and tiny laugh, whispering under her breath, "Please tell me that you're not developing a sense of humour."

The doors in front of her slid open.

"The crate containing Miss Talia Bovina-grego is located two decks down. The most efficient path lies through the forest, to an access panel. I will guide you, Mistress Green."

"He was in here, last time." Her face tightened.

"The individual in question is currently located within the ducts above the factory. I will alert you, if he is to make his physical presence known."

She shivered. She did not find that remotely reassuring. Damn thing always keeping secrets... And not actually

having a real way to save her if the bastard tried to eat Ivy. She took another deep breath and stepped into the location of her first date with Mr. No.

The sound of the place got to her. It wasn't beautiful to hear the twittering of insects, and the buzzing of bee clouds and the like. Not this time. There was a silence behind it all. A waiting anger.

Ivy couldn't smell him, she couldn't hear him. There was every chance that Sudais was wrong. AI were always so very confident that they knew how things were, and got things wrong, so very often. All the same... He might be watching her.

With the ship just about sideways, why hadn't he just run away?

Ivy was using her roots, digging down into the dirt and grass instinctively. She was fine to walk here, but she expected someone like Talia would be on their face and pawing at the ground.

"Take the next left."

She was trusting her life to an AI that had already told her that it wanted to kill her, and was under orders to kill her. There was no part of this that Ivy would be able to explain to Desdemona.

They'd stare at her, cock their head, and then burst out laughing.

Kidnapping at least meant that someone wasn't looking to kill Desdemona. At least not right away.

Ivy blinked back tears. She had no idea why they were

finally coming, but she was right on the edge of her breakdown. Ship crashing. Mr. No dead. Both the friends she'd made kidnapped, and the almost stranger was probably bleeding out on a spaceship whilst an AI watched to make sure he didn't run.

She sniffled as she dug down into the dirt, using it to move her along, step by step. Touching the other roots, feeling the fears of the rest of the forest. The living, breathing, mess of them all. Small and large, trees and flowers and buzzing little insects.

The thoughts pulsed through them, of the change in gravity, of the angry beast ploughing through them. They couldn't understand it all. Didn't have the mind for it. Most weren't sapient. They could feel fear in sentience, but not comprehend it.

"Straight ahead, behind the tree in front of yourself, Mistress Green."

Ivy picked her way along, and found the wall. There wasn't a doorway there. It was a stupid little grate.

She swallowed, "I'm... Scared of small spaces."

"The doorway to the section beyond is being watched by the one who would find you appetising. I selected this alternative as the most compatible with any possible time constraint you may be facing."

Ivy winced, "Fair enough."

* * *

After the forest, oxygen and dirt, Ivy did not find the metal so pleasant. She could feel her head drifting and falling, after shadows of the oxygen. She hadn't drank enough to make her completely off world, but her head had been messed around a lot, lately.

She inched her way through the ducting, cursing silently at how bloody loud every movement was. Her tiny knee shifts sounded like the discordant scream of a child on a harp. Her breathing might as well have been a cyclone by the way it echoed.

She was too scared to speak up and ask, but she wasn't sure that Sudais was still worth her. Why would anyone put speakers for the ship AI into places people aren't actually meant to go?

At least she'd hear if the bastard was coming to eat her.

She shivered, thumping a shoulder loudly into the side of the metal. The woman took a second to hold her breath and centre herself, before climbing onwards.

The top thumped into Ivy's head.

She squealed as up, down, left and right turned into a hailstorm of sensations. The sides of the duct hit her on all sides and she really couldn't tell if she was falling downwards, or upwards.

Every impact jarred her, leaving her in a swirling chaos of sensations. Overwhelmed, she tumbled and twirled without any chance at finding a handhold or anything at all.

Just as Ivy was on the verge of giving up, and giving into the sickening twist inside her stomach, she hit the absolute flatness of the floor. Then she threw up.

Green bile and yellow dust pasted itself to the floor in front of her with a disturbing luminescence. She peered around in the weak darkness, groggy and feeling like her eyes might still be dancing, when she saw a large metallic box.

Ivy cringed, moving weakly to a crouch, before somehow finding herself upright. She staggered over to the container, not really remembering how she managed to get out of it. She moved her hands around, feeling for switches, buttons, or anything mechanical.

Something sharp touched the base of her spine, and an angry and husky voice spoke in her ear, "What do you think you're doing?"

Ivy squeaked, and then coughed and tried again. "Trying... To save you?"

She was spun around, and two warm arms immediately wrapped around her. Talia's bell pressed painfully into Ivy's chest as the bovine gave her the tightest hug of her life, whilst letting out a deep and long lowing.

Ivy gave her a quick squeeze, "I am so happy to see you. But... Things are kinda..."

"Shit messed up?" The other woman gave a small laugh and let go, "Noticed the world is actually sideways. Not just the fucked up crate."

"AI crashing the ship. After Desdemona's kidnapping. We're both screwed, because I cried instead of helping."

Talia snorted, "You collapsed. Big deal. We're maids, Ivy. Not heroes. Screw acting like a legend. That would be messed up."

Ivy shook her head, "Well... I disagree. But we can argue

later, if we can make sure we survive. Speaking of... Frog jerk is waiting for us. No idea how to safely get back to the captain's cabin."

"Why the captain's cabin?"

"Way too long to explain." Ivy shook her head, "Also, the AI might be listening? She's trying to help... But she's also trying to crash. Like I said, complicated."

Talia blinked twice, "Right. Can you remind me never to take another cruise with you, if we make it out of this?"

* * *

“Still don’t get the boxes.” Talia whispered to Ivy as the two of them circled the edge of the ship’s forest. The damn forest, that lifted her head and always seemed to lead towards something terrible happening to Ivy.

She was confident in controlling her voice, so she didn’t answer the prompt.

Talia continued, all the same. “I mean, I got out so easy. Just had to put my shoulder into the side of it. Then wait around, thinking the freak would come back for me.”

Ivy gave a small nod, regretting it as the entire world became a series of brightly coloured afterimages.

“Pulled my ankle knife, expecting to gut him. Bastard. But he didn’t even really care about me? He took you. Was he waiting around for you to break out of the box?”

Ivy winced, and tried to speak as quietly as possible, “Later.”

“He’s not some supervillain out of an opera.” Talia gave a gentle giggle. “Not even waiting -”

“The hunt.” Ivy winced, “He wants. . . The hunt.”

“Oh.”

The metallic sheen of the floor glistened and twisted. A blur of pink and purple, that seemed to be humming with the magnetic energy of the material. Each of her footsteps seemed to make it puff and twist, no matter how gentle she made them.

The air felt solid, like Ivy was biting off chunks. She could almost chew before swallowing each piece of the beautifully oxygen-rich gaseous material. She could feel it slicking her

throat, bursting with little pops of energy as it travelled down and into her complex digestion system.

Her leaves spread out, and her flowers opened. Her own thoughts on the matter had nothing to say to them. Ivy could almost feel taller, as if she were being picked up and floated above the ground, feet dangling above that beautiful swirl of metal.

“Doubt that the stars are aflame.”

Ivy wasn't even sure if that was Sudais speaking. She couldn't trust her senses. The AI wasn't likely to be all feeling, were they? AI didn't feel, they could just talk like they did. Was a ship's AI allowed to talk like they had emotions?

**“Doubt that the planet below orbits
the sun.”**

Nothing more meaningful than a planet's lazy walk around a star. An orbit was meaningful in all kinds of evolutionary and vital ways for life, but it meant nothing in the moment for each person. A day was a day, whether or not the sun rose or set.

Ivy almost lost her step at the thought, thrust violently into her unsteady state of things. She felt Talia catch her by the elbow, but she could no longer see her friend. They were nothing but a humming glow of bright butterflies, swirling in the midst of everything.

**“Doubt the truth, that what you hear
be a lie.”**

The bright blue and dark blacks of their fluttering wings suited Talia. She was a playful woman, but with some

hidden history that probably meant she had been right ready to kill the man who had kidnapped her.

**"All these doubts.. But never doubt
that I love."**

The kaleidoscope of butterflies beside her exploded before swarming up together with a screech and battering of wings. Dirt hit Ivy's face as she stared at the swirl of rage battering against a black-eyed monster.

It reared up, made of black mud, melting even as it struggled across the ground. Roaring and beating fists against the butterflies. Turning beautiful and shimmering blues into deep and weeping reds.

**"Love looks not with the eyes, but
with the mind."**

Ivy staggered upright, fighting back the fears that were wrapping around her mind. She couldn't shake this image from her mind. Blinking made the figure taller and more ominous.

She took all the strength that she had, delivering it through shoulder, elbow and then straightened wrist. Her fist striking home into the midsection of the creature.

**"Love is painted blind by Cupid's
wings."**

Her fist travelled inwards, stolen by the slickened structure of the beast. She felt her wrist protest as she was suddenly pulled forwards - sucked off her feet.

Ivy found herself flying towards the edge of the glowing black hole. The screaming light swirling and lighting up everything around her.

“Love has no mind for judgement. It
has wings and unheedy haste.”

Gravity stretched out, pulling apart thread by thread until there was nothing but an assortment of dancing dots in a void from before time scratched his dirty name into the passage of existence.

The last flecks of light squealed as they died, leaving behind nothing but vestal cries of a life once lived, a life once forgotten.

The shadow of life became nought but a dream of the unreachable.

“And therefore is love said to be a
child, Because in choice she is so oft
beguiled.”

Ivy's eyes hardened, lighting up.

She still reached, for pride's cause, and glory's calling. She reached out beyond the stretch of sapient nature.

Her hands wrapped around something like a tree trunk, yet slick with the sins of the creature now surrounding her. She tightened her fingers down, clawing them deeply into the organic mess.

It flailed and beat against her, trying to throw her free. Her roots plunged down into it effortlessly. The greatest rivers of her home meant nothing against her stride, and this thing was nothing but a nightmare. It had no strength against her.

She tore the thing free.

The world burst into light, fireworks exploding across her

vision in every piece of the spectrum from ultra violet and into the infrared. The unforgiving cruelty of metal struck against the side of her head.

She looked up weakly at the shadows wavering and falling away, screeching in a bubbling warble as they ended.

* * *

The Way Home

Ivy was jostled awake, and found herself slamming into a metal wall. It was also carpeted, but her face didn't find that much compensation.

She reared around, and planted her roots rudely into the ground. Ivy stood up instantly, looking around a ship that was far too luxurious for her own tastes.

She spotted the professor sitting in a chair with three screens, focusing and tapping away at the controls quickly. His injured leg was encased in a bright orange tape, so at least there was that.

Talia was on the other side of the room, clinging to a chair and. . . Ivy wasn't sure if she was laughing, or crying. Probably a little bit of both.

The answer to the obvious question of what the heck was happening was answered by a gigantic mining shunt flashing by the viewing screen. Sudais was living up to her word and trying to kill them.

"Head for the planet!" Ivy said quickly, using her questing roots to ignore the gravity and walk across the floor.

The professor glanced at her, "Are you insane? Such a thing would -"

"Sudais is forbidden from interfering in the development of a lesser species." Ivy said testily, "Head for the planet. She'll stop shooting."

He growled and tapped his hands away on the interfaces, "You had better be damned well right about this."

Considering she had just pulled that out of thin air, she

agreed with him. She had absolutely no idea what safeguards had been put into the AI, and even less of an idea if it had worked around them.

Her stomachs did not feel as secure as her roots. The professor's sudden change in direction had all kinds of vertigo and gut-punching nausea flooding her senses.

A flood of heat hit them as the cockpit pierced the upper atmosphere, a bright yellow mist-like set of flames flashing over the viewscreen. Streaks of violet, scarlet and mauve pierce through - speaking to the lands below.

"Well, they stopped firing! That at least is a thing!" The professor yelled, sweating nervously.

Ivy winced. She didn't even bother asking what had gone wrong.

The lakes on the surface below shimmered like molten glass, reflecting the sun's brilliance. Silver rivers meandered across a landscape that Ivy would soon be joining. They wove a beauty of life into the terrain... A beauty she wished she could appreciate a second time.

Behind her, Talia was still laughing. Tears running down both her cheeks, down her chin and falling off into the air. Those tears knew exactly what was happening, again.

Ivy had to admit that it felt like she might have cheated her death, last time she fell out of the sky. So now it was happening again.

No No to save her.

"Is that smoke?" Ivy spotted a trail of black clouds ahead of them.

“Would you shut up and let me drive!?”

To her disbelief, Ivy saw a trail of debris from a small crashed ship. One that was etched into her memories.

“Desdemona!”

“Shut the fuck up, or so help me!”

Talia stumbled up and clung to the driver’s seat, “No freaking way.”

“Would you please return to your seats, as we depart from the relative safety of the sky and into the rather uncomfortable firmness of the ground!?” The professor exploded, eyes fixed on his screens.

Ivy and Talia exchanged a look.

They weren’t losing her a second time.

“Save Desdemona.” They said as one.

The professor gave a sound of irritation and tapped away on the keyboard, “I do not know if I could even put down safely. But if you insist on this? Fine! Let’s go down!”

Ivy quickly grabbed Talia, twisting a vine around her to keep the woman standing as the entire world leaned up into the viewscreen. Her own stomach was somewhere about her throat as the ship dropped, but she still felt it was the right choice to make.

The ship descended rapidly downwards. Ivy tightened her grip on Talia. The pressure was building, and Ivy could feel her hearts pounding with anticipation.

The professor, focused on controlling the ship, muttering impolite curses under his breath. Adjust the course of the

craft and trying to slow down. At least Ivy hoped that was what he was doing.

The tension in the air was palpable as they hurtled towards the surface.

The ship thundered through a thick layer of clouds, and towards a lush and vibrant landscape stretching out as far as the eye could see. Ivy's breath caught in her throat as she took in the breathtaking view. It was everything she hoped of the Earth.

The ship jolted violently, and then the entire world dropped away, along with her stomach.

The craft touched down with a heaviness that Ivy could... Just about ignore.

Talia gave a laugh and tried to untwist herself from Ivy's vines. "Well, you weren't kidding that you knew how to fly. Just... Next time... Can we spare the death threatening fall?"

"I... Could not find the brakes." The professor said with no more of the strong and forward attitude, but a lot of embarrassment.

Ivy leaned over to him and kissed his cheek, "Thankyou. You saved us."

"Oi! Where's my kiss? I'm the one who took you out to dinner!" Talia complained.

Ivy shrugged and turned, heading to the boarding ramp and lowering it. She braced herself, wondering if she was about to get fired at. If she was going to die, just like No had.

No didn't deserve to be forgotten.

The smell of burning metal instantly hit her nostrils, and Ivy's flowers actually wilted as the wisps of smoke came in.

"Bloody hell." Talia gagged, stepping up beside her, "Reminds me of the blitz drills back home."

"Blitz?"

Talia shrugged, "Getting blasted from some space navy is a good way to scar a planet's memory. Dunno much of why - I'm just an actress."

The two of them headed down the ramp, towards the grass. As they got there, and Ivy spied several grass wildfires dancing away, she was surprised by the professor joining them.

The three picked their way silently across the blackened landscape, looking towards the distant ship and trying to guess if there were any survivors. And if said survivors might kill them for their own ship.

The smoke made her eyes water, and the smell of burning metal made her teeth ache. Every time she breathed in she could feel her lungs complain. Every system in her body was right on edge.

The anxiety wasn't helped by finding perfectly rounded scorch marks as they got closer to the ship. No one said anything. They all knew it was gunfire, and they also knew the only other choice they had was to run back to their own ship.

Just sit there and wait for Sudais to finish crashing the cruiseliner, and then head for the nearest outpost. Feel stressed out, tired, but safe.

Instead she was shuffling along foreign soil, towards what felt less and less likely a ship crash, and more and more like a battle.

“Hathor.” Talia swore hoarsely, spotting it before Ivy did.

The professor stopped, leaned over, and threw up.

Ivy wrinkled her nose, and wanted to do exactly the same. She kept it down, as she nervously approached the body on the ground.

Less of a body, more of a chaotic scene of blood, guts, and ripped up body parts. The person had been torn completely to shreds, as if some wild animal had got them.

“Earth’s not this dangerous, is it?” Ivy asked nervously.

Talia shrugged, looking around wide-eyed.

“What be o’ the devil!”

All three jumped, and then stared in astonishment at the ash-stained and red-skinned woman walking over the chaos towards them. A huge grin split Desdemona’s face from left to right, her white teeth shining through the grim smoke.

Ivy stared, “You’re... Okay?”

“Oh, I be hurting here and be there.” Desdemona shrugged, tapping a few scrapes that were bleeding, “But no complaining.”

“No complaining!?” Talia exploded, “Someone just tried to kidnap and kill you! What in the fuck, Des!?”

The red-skinned woman shrugged, grinning at them, “Mmm. My sister. She a right lil bitch. I being sure to tell her to her face, soon enough. But you being fine?”

“Nearly got eaten. Again. And again after that.” Ivy shivered, “But... Yeah. We have a ship. This man is... A professor of history. He can fly.”

“Oh, he the one you be crushing!” Desdemona laughed and hugged Ivy sideways, lifting her off the ground.

The professor looked at her weakly, “Were you... Head of security upon the ship?”

“I be maid.”

He laughed in disbelief, and then stared when no one else did.

Talia elbowed Desdemona, “She’s also in some royal family on a nearby planet. She was hiding by pretending to be one of us. Not that it stayed secret for very long.”

“I be one of you.” Desdemona said with a hint of insult.

“Can we get out of the smoke?” Ivy asked.

Desdemona picked her up, and started walking. “I... I do be sorry. This is... My sister’s fault. I be happy to let each of you put a stone by her head.”

“Your sister?” The professor asked in confusion.

“Mmm. She be thinkin’ crown be heavy, and I existing mean I be taking.” Desdemona nodded, not explaining why the heck she was carrying Ivy. “So she hack ship to crash, and send those be morons to try and take me home.”

Talia winced, “Does that mean that more will be coming?”

“Might it be.”

Ivy frowned, “So we get on our ship, and make for the nearest station. Don’t tell anyone who we are, and sign on

as a casual for whatever cruiseliner is still operating, and get the fuck out of here.”

“No need to work.” The professor said, shaking his head, “Whilst I cannot say I appreciate the situation, it is still true that my survival was by your hand. I have the resources to safely extract us to a kinder planet than this one.”

“Your sister is going to hunt you across the ‘verse though, isn’t she?” Ivy tried and failed to squirm out of the red woman’s grip.

Desdemona’s tail flicked through the air fast enough to make a cracking noise, “My sister be bitching. I need be making a point of it, tell her to the face that she bitching, and I leaving.”

“So we’ll be splitting up, I guess.” Talia sighed, “Too bad. I actually do like you, Des.”

“Desdemona.” The other woman growled back.

The professor shivered, “Oh. That Desdemona.”

Talia shrugged, “I can get by, fine. An acting scene here and there, and every rich boy will want me on their ship. But I . . . I don’t actually want to split up. Haven’t known you two that long . . . But you’re great.”

“I beat my sister face, and then want see Talia upon the stage.” Desdemona grinned.

“So no one is entirely interested in my offering of a safe refuge?” The professor said with surprise.

Ivy finally managed to squirm free and land on the ground. She stretched and started walking, “I am absolutely interested in it. I have been in someone’s mouth - twice! Today!

Fuck that noise. I wanna disappear.”

Desdemona gave a small sigh, “That be making sense.”

“I do like you. As a friend.” Ivy tried to reassure her, “But. . . Kind of sick of the nearly dying? Sorry.”

The woman laughed, “I be getting date out of you again. Soon.”

“I made our date awful. Eating chocolate with you was a terrible idea.” Ivy flushed.

The professor stumbled, “You two went on a date?”

“She went on one with me, too.” Talia grinned at the hapless man.

Ivy rubbed her face tiredly, “I’m straight. It’s these two who aren’t. And they’re wonderful. . . But I’m still straight.”

The four arrived at the ship, and stood around awkwardly for a moment. Desdemona saved everyone the trouble, hugging Talia, and then hugging Ivy even tighter.

She gave an idle wave to the sky, “My people be coming. Someone need clean up mess. I be okay.”

“They managed to kidnap you.” Ivy pointed out.

Desdemona grinned, “Did they survive kidnapping?”

“Call me. When you’re finished this yuck, and still alive.” Ivy instructed, and then gave her a willing hug. “I mean that.”

* * *

Ivy looked up through the viewscreen, as the ship rose slowly towards the sky.

She gave a small sigh, her tumbling thoughts finally managing to settle down. The woman gave a yawn and stretch, and then curled in on herself.

Her leaves wrapped around her slowly, and she fell asleep.

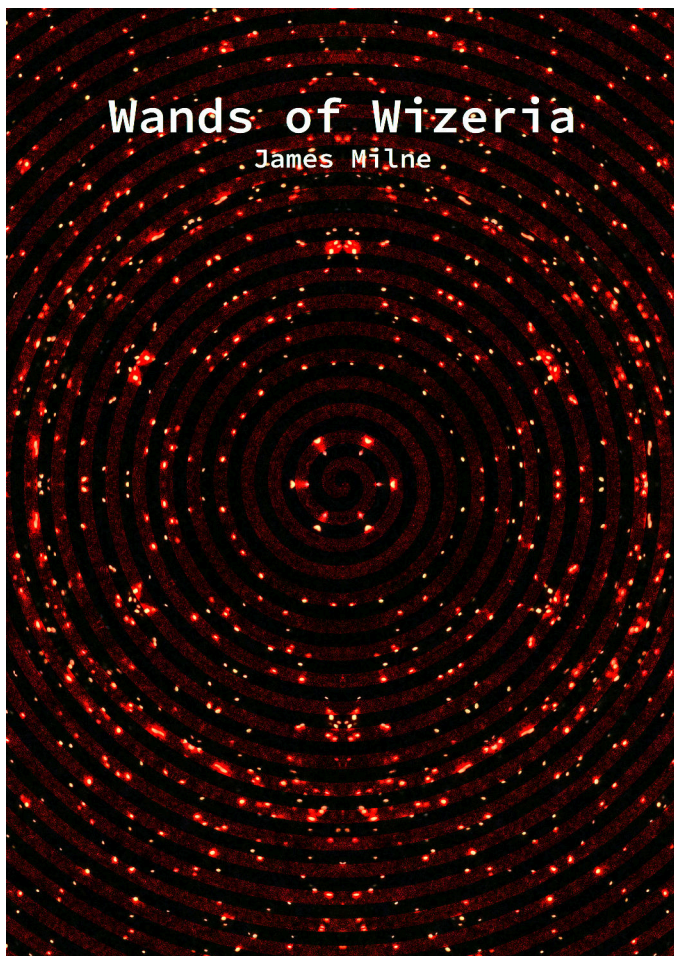
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Preview: Wands of Wizeria



* * *

A small figure stands by a large black cauldron, stirring. On her head is an overly large brimmed hat, made of stretched and cracked leather straps. She wears a rough dress, stained by grass and roots, and tough leather boots up to her knees. Leaning against the boots is a large white cat, yowling loudly.

She stands in the middle of a desert, a dead place. In the far distance, there is a small town, but she wouldn't be in sight to anybody there. It was too far. There was her, the cauldron, and sand. Nothing else.

She pushed the cat aside, "No, you can't have any. Seriously. What is it with you thinking things that aren't food, are, lately?"

She frowned, turning to a book, and muttering under her breath. As she was distracted, the cat launched up the edge of the pot, only to be knocked backwards as a symbol appeared in the air. The cat had struck it as if it were solid. It glared up with insult as the symbol faded.

The young hedgewitch turned back, "Phantasmia organia!"

The pot instantly began boiling, and the clear liquid turned black and obviously quite thick. The witch grinned, and then stared in horror as the large spoon she had left in the pot vanished as it got pulled under.

"Crap." The witch winced, "Mothers are going to be mad with me. I don't have the pocket money to replace that."

The cat glared at her, still angry that she had prevented it from accessing the potion. Despite the fact it clearly would have dissolved him as well. Which would have been irritating to fix.

The witch muttered, raising hands over the pot, and stared as a tiny black dot pulled away from the rest and floated up between her hands. She grinned, and turned slowly, leaning out over the sand.

She dropped the gob of black liquid and grabbed the cat as it attempted to jump and claw at it. There was a fizzing sound as it hit the sand, and then a gentle fog began to emerge.

She dropped the cat, and frowned, "You smell that, Snowball?"

The cat hissed at her, and then rose up into a sitting form, and meowed out a complex set of syllables. The witch shrugged, "What do I care if you were a lord? I resurrected you. Now, you're a cat."

It attacked her boots uselessly, revealing why such a country girl wore knee high boots that belonged on someone with far superior fashion sense. She knocked him aside with irritation, and crouched, "It smells like rain. Does that mean it is working?"

Snowball sat and licked on his front paws, ignoring her.

The ground suddenly rumbled, shaking violently. The girl grabbed her hat as the wind whipped up and she giggled, stamping her feet in excitement, "It's happening! It is really happening!"

The mist was beginning to fade in some areas, revealing thick green grass, dotted with bright yellow sunflowers.

The witch danced over picking one of the flowers and grinning at it, "I did it, Snowball! I made a flower and absolutely nobody died because I did!"

“It was you!” A voice erupted accusingly, and the girl hunched up biting her fingernails. Snowball shot her a pointed look.

She turned around slowly, pulling her hat off and looking over the brim sheepishly, “Oh, hey, Kim. Fancy seeing you here. In the desert. As far from Wizz as I could get.”

The witch dropped from her broom, a strange metallic contraption with handles and exhausts. Kim glared at her, “Do you know what you just did?”

The hedgewitch held out a flower. Kim looked at it blankly and then back to the witch. “Hells bells, Sin. You just blew up one of the leylines. To make flowers.”

“I did what?” She asked in surprise wide eyes staring over the brim of her hat.

Kim smiled and nodded, “Yeah. You did it this time. You’re a necromancer, Sin. You can’t make flowers. I’m going to have to call Dan to come fix this one.”

Sin launched herself forward onto her knees, grabbing Kim’s overalls, “Oh, please don’t. Dan is always so condescending.”

“She’s also an animancy. Life us her domain.” Kim replied, “I can’t exactly operate a magic workshop in a town that doesn’t have a leyline going through it. I’m a tekmaner. I can’t fix this, just like you can’t.”

Sin nodded weakly, tears forming in her eyes, “Okay. I get it. I’m useless.”

Kim sat down in front of her and spread her arms, “You’re not useless, sweetie. Who else can raise an undead army

on demand to clean my shop? It's just... You're never going to be able to do the cute magic."

Sin burst into tears, hugging the other witch back. She knew she was a constant problem. She didn't mean to be. She thought that she was being helpful, undoing a desert.

"Got to say though, Sin, your godmothers will be proud. Blowing up an actual leyline? You've got some talent for destruction there, kiddo."

She sat back, looking at the green she knew would have to go away, all the life she'd yanked out of the magical pipelines on the world. "Yeah. Probably. If I hadn't completely skipped out on chores to do this."

Kim laughed, "Yep! I can imagine them now. Brooding faces, warped and stretched shadows."

Sin spoke in a nasally high pitch voice, "I told you not to use magic, little brat!"

Kim sighed, "You ready for Dan?"

Sin yanked her hat over her head and down passed her ears. "Is anyone?"

Kim pulled a thin metallic object from her front chest pocket and waved it in the air lazily, "Emeragus Dan!"

Red sparks shot forth, and then disappeared as the world swirled around them. An emergency signal sent on its way to the best of the apprentice witches in all the tribes. And she knew it.

Dan appeared in a rainbow of glittering sparks, hands already on her masculine hips, glaring, "What did you do this time, Sin!?"

The hedgewitch went into hiding behind Kim and her hat. She swallowed, and waved a hand, "I tried to make a flower."

Dan glared around rubbing at her day-old fuzz on her chin. "Wow. You actually used a terraforming spell, you utter idiot. They kill entire worlds to remake them, you know. If the leyline hadn't packed up and died, then you would have killed the world. Impressively stupid, even for you."

"Says the girl in a man's body!" Sin snapped, instantly regretting it. She knew that Dan had done it on purpose. That Dan failed to find a way to turn herself back on purpose. That this was the only way she could be herself without being disowned by her own godmothers.

Dan didn't cry, or get angry. She just looked over at Sin with disgust. "Kim... Get that corpsehumper out of here."

Sin bowed her head and stood up slowly. "I'm sorry."

She pulled out the gnarled branch that served as her wand and tapped her thigh with it gently. "Creepius summonae."

There was a brief screaming and howling as skeletal hands burst out of the soil and dragged her down into the ground.

She emerged, coughing up grave soil, and fell onto her back in front of the cabin in the woods. She should head inside. Hiding in her bedroom and crying felt like a nice idea.

But her godmothers were inside, and a real necromancer never cries. They let cry with curses. She didn't want to curse Dan or anyone else. She just wanted to create a pretty flower.

"Sin!" One of the crones screeched, "Where have you been? I asked you to scrap a cauldron, not fly halfway across the world!"

She pulled her hat down over her face. The old crone snatched it away, grinning at her. It was the tall one, "I got a letter from the uptight witch. You used the cauldron."

Sin blew out her cheeks, keeping herself from getting into another screaming match. She never won those. Not with the tall godmother, nor the fat or kind ones. She always regretted opening her mouth.

The crone smiled at her, "I wanted to toss it because the safety limiter had worn out. And then you go and blow out a leyline with it?"

Sin struggled to contain her anger. The old bat could have told her it was unstable garbage. She had a feeling that this had been a test and she had just failed it. They always did things like this to her.

"Nice work." The crone nodded curtly, "Especially forcing a life caster to clean up after you."

They dropped the hat, and Sin felt worse than ever.

She heard a soft meow and sat up. Snowball was in her lap. The cat gestured towards its mouth.

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