

The Tumultuous Tours of Ivy Green

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The Skies of Earth

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, nothing ever went to plan for Ivy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

freedom of a getaway such as this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her people were great at floating, shit at swimming.

Ivy sank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Delayed Drowning was nothing to joke about.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He slapped her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Huh. Never been.” The woman replied.

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

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

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

“Oh. Ace?” Ivy said in surprise.

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

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

Ivy gulped, “Uh... It was -”

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ivy grumbled under her breath and tightened in her foliage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She shrugged, “Talia? Like the dew?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ivy Green." She said testily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ivy nodded nervously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's gross."

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

Both women looked at the woman in shock and confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

TODO

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 adamantine, 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.

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