

# **BEYOND THE PAST**

NEW BEGINNINGS I

Lena Tauchner

*My cat Wolkenstern*

*for motivating me to get out of bed each day*

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**Publisher:** Lena Tauchner  
First edition, published in 2024

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CHAPTER A

## AUTHORS NOTES

Dearest reader!

Thank you. For deciding this might be worthwhile a read. I'm certain it will be.

### A.1 ON THIS NOVELLA

Inspired by a daydream and playing in the Stargate universe, this novella is a fanfiction. I have thought long and hard what to do with this story. On the one hand, I'm obviously interested in Stargate, but I feel a story about people is more interesting. That's why I started writing this - a story about interpersonal relationships. Not as much about stargate, but it appears.

### A.2 CONTENT WARNINGS

There are traumatic experiences. If you don't want to read about trauma, trauma responses, or therapy related to trauma, you might want to skip this one.

**There are NSFW parts in the story**, which are marked with content warnings (CWs). These parts are designed so that you, the reader, can skip them if you'd prefer. This was never intended to be smut, but... It kind of... Ended up there... The story contains very graphic depictions of punishment like it could be seen in a M/s dynamic. There are unclear boundaries and consent. The story also contains descriptions of alcoholism and both sexual and physical assault, outside the aforementioned dynamic. And just to make it clear: if you see a CW before a chapter, feel free to skip it. I'll try to keep these content warnings up to date, but I can't promise I'll catch everything. I'm still new to this.

## CHAPTER A – AUTHORS NOTES



## CHAPTER A – AUTHORS NOTES

In Space we find ourselves  
In Space we find each other  
In Space, we're alone but never lonely

## CHAPTER A – AUTHORS NOTES

## THE AWAKENING (LITERALLY)

Diary: November 16th, 2023

When I went to bed last night, it was pouring cats and dogs. You could practically smell the rain in the air. Today... It's 5:56 in the morning, according to the clock on the wall, and I can't smell *anything*. I just wanted to get up to do some more job hunting, as one does, but...

I didn't wake up where I lay down. Now, diary, before you get too judgy (again), I wanna say I wasn't getting wasted yesterday.

Well, I wasn't getting wasted a lot.

But like, actually. I'm in another room. It's a small room with metal walls and a bed and a typewriter I'm writing on right now, and a clock. I'm sure there's a reason for the typewriter but you know, I would prefer having my diary?

Diary: November 16th, 2023, supplemental

Dear diary! I decided to call this collection of papers my diary now. I'm in space! Can you believe it? I can't!

So the mystery is solved, I was transported to a spaceship while sleeping, which is fine I guess? I think it's kinda cool.

But lemme just start at the beginning. So after I wrote the previous paragraphs, someone knocked on my door. I went to open it but I was angrily beeped at by the switch next to the door. Turns out I had to say ``Come in''. Because my door is locked. Epic amirite?

So this person waltzes in like they own the place, and like look at me, and are like ``Get dressed'' and leave the room.

Turns out I was still in my PJs. But they're adorable! They're little sharkie PJs with sharks that try to eat fish and it's so cute, also they're violet which objectively is the best color so they are just the best anyways where was I?

Ah right. So this person, Ash, comes back in after I changed, and they're like, really nice to me at first, greet me and explain that I've been selected by a top secret program and I was transported to a spaceship.

I shouldn't've said ``at first'', they're actually pretty nice still. So anyways, they explain the story, I'm selected from a pot of potentials, and we're gonna fly on this spaceship built by the Europeans to another galaxy.

We're gonna be leaving in two days, so I still got time to go back to my flat and get things in order, which I'm supposed to do now so I'll finish this later!

Lucy found herself standing in her room for the last time. She had packed everything she cared for and had it transported up. The rest would be cleared by military officials later that week, and then put in storage indefinitely. She looked at her checklist of things she had to do. Everything on the short list, that she compiled with Ash to avoid her doing something she wasn't allowed to do while on the planet, was checked off. *'On the planet'*, she thought, *'what a wild thing to say.'* She shook her head and slapped the desk one last time. She shouldered her backpack with the last things and went to collect her cat. He unhappily went into the carrying case and she did one last check before pressing the communicator twice. "Goodbye flat" she said as the world dissolved around her.

The world returned but this time, a now familiar face was smiling at her. "Welcome back aboard, Lucy!" Ash trilled in their usual overly optimistic way. Lucy attempted a smile as an officer came to take her rucksack to have it screened. *'Because of course it'd be screened'* Lucy thought, as she walked off the transportation area to follow Ash back to her room.

"We had them bring everything you'll need for your cat to your room already, so you should be good letting him out. I'm sure he is quite excited!" Ash suggested. Lucy barely paid attention and only shrugged. "Is something up?"

Lucy despised that question. "I am up, apparently. Quite far up."

Undeterred and apparently unaware of the sarcasm in Lucy's voice, Ash replied "Well, we're currently in orbit at around 800 kilometers, so being up is quite an apt description of our current position!"

Lucy only huffed.

Ash thankfully didn't try any more conversation, so when they finally reached the quarters, Lucy sat down on the bed and looked at Ash standing in the doorway.

"Are you always like this?" Lucy asked.

"Like what?"

"An insufferably happy person with no sense of humor."

Ash only raised their eyebrows, turned around to leave the room and said "Go let your cat out, and try to keep him alive, will you?"

## RUNNING OFF

Diary: November 17th, 2023

Dear Diary! I got my boxes today! Two nice people brought them in, after they got screened. I can't keep my Laptop or my phone, I'll get standard issued ones once we arrived. So we'll keep with typewriter action. I frankly enjoy it so it's fine.

My plushies have besieged my bed. The sharks have been looking for snacks but failed to find any, so they're now salty. Sam is well, he decided to shit on the floor so I had to get someone to get me cleaning supplies, but now he seems to have adjusted to his new home.

I got to keep my camera gear! I'm not allowed to film or photograph on the ship, but once we arrived, I'll go nuts. I'll be the first person to take pictures of plushies on another planet!

We're leaving tomorrow, and we've got about two weeks of travel, so I'll have plenty of time to catch up. I haven't gotten too much information yet but I'm supposed to get some today. There's apparently educational videos about this by a guy called Daniel Jackson? They're a bit old by now but still relevant I'm told

Also there's a guard outside my room at all times, so if I need something I can knock on the door and they'll open it. Maybe I can get them to find me some clothes later, the ones I packed are in storage until we arrive.

Well, breakfast now

---

You could tell it was Ash at the door. The rhythmic knocking, the short pause, the second round of obnoxiously rhythmic knocking. Lucy didn't feel like inviting them in, but she knew she didn't really have a choice, so when the third knocking started, she yelled "Yes yes come in!"

Ash entered, dressed in an unmarked uniform. Lucy had to admit, it looked good on them, it really did give them a more serious vibe.

"Ready for breakfast?" Ash chirped. Lucy stared at them for second, turned around and finished the last line of her diary. As she got up, Ash was patting Lucy's cat Sam, who apparently already took a liking to them. *'Good for him'*, Lucy thought, as she went to the door. As Ash unlocked it, Lucy once again wondered why she wasn't allowed to open the door herself, but the thought was interrupted by Sam running outside. The guard, a young man, yelled in surprise and started chasing down Sam, closely followed by Lucy, who just barely heard Ash yell "Lucy! Come back" A split second later, she lay on the floor, tackled by two people. She panted as the guard came back carrying Sam carefully and trying to calm him down, and only when Ash caught up with them did she feel the pressure on her back releasing.

"Rule number one", Ash proclaimed cheerily, "you don't go running off alone."

## CHAPTER 2 – RUNNING OFF

Lucy remained silent as she slowly got up and watched the guard put Sam in the room and close the door. She looked around at the two people who threw her to the floor. One was a woman with blonde hair and a ponytail, and one was a young man. They were standing ready as if she was going to run again, and only relaxed when Lucy's guard came back. They waited for a second, gave a nod to the guard, and went on their way. Before Lucy knew what she was doing, she called after them: "Hey, uh, sorry about that!"

Ash, seemingly unfazed by the event, tapped on Lucy's shoulder. "You were running in the wrong direction, breakfast is back there."

Lucy turned around and looked at Ash in disbelief. "There is humor in you! I wouldn't have thought!"

Ash smirked as they turned around and said "There's much you'll get to know about me still."

## HUMAN MISTAKES

Diary: November 17th, 2023, supplemental

Sam ran out of the room and I made the mistake of running after him. Ouchie. I'm not supposed to run around apparently.

We had breakfast and I had to watch through three hours of informational videos which was b o r i n g and then I was ushered back to my room. I think I've fallen out of grace with my transgression today.

---

Lucy was sitting on her bed, looking at the still packed boxes she brought back, as the door rang. She was informed that there is a door bell that had to be activated from the inside, which, they could have told her earlier she thought.

With no intention of inviting the visitor in, she got up and ushered Sam into the bathroom. The doorbell rang again as she closed the bathroom door and sat back on the bed. She knew ignoring it would be of no use, whoever decided to pay her a visit probably had access to the room regardless, but she didn't feel like reinforcing that idea.

The doorbell rang a third time, and finally, Ash opened the door carefully, peering in.

"Sam is in the bathroom", Lucy exclaimed, "and I'm asleep."

Ash opened the door fully and entered the room. They looked more tired than usual, and Lucy kind of felt sorry for them. But not too sorry.

"Hey"

Lucy, surprised at the short quip, responded with the same.

"How are you"

Something had happened, Lucy thought. She got kind of worried at the sudden lacklustre attempts at conversation from the typically talkative enby. She pondered the question for a few seconds and simply replied "Pissed."

That seemed to have worked as Ash proceeded through the room, sitting down at the desk and turning towards the pile of paper on its right side.

In a panic, Lucy squealed and jumped up to stop Ash from reading her diary. Ash turned around and looked at her tiredly. "Personal?"

"Yes!" Lucy exclaimed with an err of annoyance.

"Ah, I was hoping for some fun descriptions of me." Ash sighed and leaned back in the chair. "How was your day"

Lucy slowly lowered herself back to the bed and squinted at Ash. "It is far from over I presume by your visit"

Ash looked at her for a second and got up without saying a word. In a few strides, they reached the bathroom. “You don’t mind do you”

“I do” Lucy said, more out of defiance than an actual care for what Ash did. “But I presume you are more interested in my cat than what I have to think.”

Ash looked at her with an expression that was best described as a half smile and proceeded to open the door. Sam sprinted out, but quickly got caught by Ash. They sat down on the floor and started patting him. “I do indeed care more for your cat. I had to file a report about you running off today”

“Is that why you’re as enthusiastic as a soggy sponge?”

“I- I don’t think I’m as enthusiastic as a soggy sponge! I’m enthused and happy and motivated and very... Enthusiastic as a soggy sponge.”

Lucy chuckled. She slid off the bed to sit next to Ash. They sat next to each other for a minute until Lucy started feeling uncomfortable and went to the desk. “I presume you’re not going to be leaving? Mind if I finish my diary for today?”

“Not at all, feel free” Ash apparently took the first question for granted, Lucy thought, before proceeding to type.

**Diary: November 17th, 2023, supplemental**

The excitement about space really wore off now. Exploring space is way more boring when you're stuck on a ship and there's nothing interesting to do, and you're alone and all there is is watching stupid videos. It feels useless... I feel useless.

It seems I haven't been the only one who's had a rough day. Ash is just sitting in my room now, they're apparently as tired as me. They also stole my cat.

They seem down, I'm not sure what to do with that. Aren't they supposed to be the counsellor?

They do seem much more human now though. They were really obnoxious with the infinite energy and trill in their voice.fdxgst4x

Lucy face planted into the keyboard and sighed. “Did you just come for my cat or what was your ulterior motive?”

“Cat” said Ash from behind her. Lucy jerked up and nearly hit Ash who just barely avoided the fist.

“Don’t scare me like that!” Now Lucy was pissed again. “Don’t sneak up on me while I’m writing! This is personal shit!”

Ash looked at her with a sorrow expression and let Sam to the floor. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have. I thought you heard me.”

“I clearly didn’t! Did you read what I wrote?!”

“Yes”



### CHAPTER 3 – HUMAN MISTAKES

“Well fuck you!” Lucy would have stormed out of the room if she could’ve, but short on that option, she walked to the bathroom. “I’m taking a shower, go fuck off. Please.”

Lucy slammed the door shut and sat down in the shower. She only barely heard the room’s door shut before she started crying.

**WORRIED FOR HER**

When Lucy finally left the bathroom a few minutes later, she hadn't showered. She hadn't even taken her clothes off. She opened the bathroom door and was greeted by Ash sitting at her desk, dozing off while patting Sam.

"I thought you left" she said.

"I thought about it" Ash replied, "I couldn't leave your poor cat alone. Did you calm down a little?"

Lucy lay down on her bed. "I heard you close the door."

"I was just telling your guard that everything was fine. Half the ship must have heard you shouting."

"Great, now my guard is worried for me too."

"Actually, she was worried about me. I don't think she gives two shits of a fuck about you."

Lucy sharply turned her head towards Ash. She had never heard them swear. "Well that's great to know." While she tried to keep up the anger in her voice, she could barely manage. She was just too tired.

"Why did you cry?"

"Why do you think I cried?" Lucy spat back. "You violated what little trust remained and then you decided to not even fuck of like I told you to."

Ash seemed to ponder that for a second, but simply replied "I'm sorry." They got up, carried Sam to the bathroom, and went to leave the room. "If you need something, you can ask the guard. Have a nice day."

And with that they were gone. Lucy sighed, both out of relieve and out of frustration. She went to get a plush from the pile, and sat down at her desk to write something on her typewriter, but she just couldn't think of anything. She looked at the clock, it was quarter past three. She pondered where the time went and went through her things again. She had some decorative items she placed on the shelf next to her desk, and started sorting her drawing utensils. She was horrible at drawing she felt, but it calmed her down so she decided to try and draw her Sam.

CHAPTER 5

## WALK'N'TALK

By the time she was done drawing Sam, a spotted black and orange cat, the hour had turned and she decided that she didn't want to sit anymore. She went pacing around her room, trying to think through the information she got earlier that day, but quickly got bored and tried knocking on the door. The guard, a young man with a buzz cut, opened and greeted her with a short nod.

"Hi, uhm, sorry", Lucy said, "my room isn't really equipped for sports, can we take a run? Well a run I'll be running you'll be walking but I really just need to get out a little you know and..." Lucy realized way too late that she was talking too much, as the guard looked at her in amusement.

"Yes, we can take a walk" He replied. He gestured her out and started jogging, quickly followed by Lucy trying to keep pace. He often looked around to see whether she was still following, but she had no intentions at all of chilling on the floor again. "I'm Lieutenant Harris", the guard said.

"I'm Lucy. Lucy Meier."

They spent the rest of the walk quiet, only interrupted by Lucy's panting. When they reached the cafeteria, he gestured her in. "You need water." he posed in a matter of fact way and handed her a cup of water.

She didn't complain, and after her third glass of water, she sat down at the nearest table. Harris did the same, looking at her with a certain curiosity. "What brings you here?" He asked.

"The transporter."

The Lieutenant didn't like that, no sense of humor Lucy thought, and he raised an eyebrow.

Lucy sighed. "I was apparently picked out of a pool and I frankly don't know why. All I do is sit at home and program useless shit all day so I don't know what they want with me. But it's not like I have a choice, nor am I gonna complain."

Harris looked at her, apparently completely disinterested in that story, and simply continued "Well I think it's a great honor to serve here. We're always advancing humanity and ..." He droned on about honor and what great feats they made, but Lucy couldn't care less.

When he was finally done, she just said "I don't serve anyone. I didn't decide to do this and I didn't yet decide whether I will do this and assist you in your great, honourous mission." Harris looked at her questioningly. "I'm not like I got chosen to be a god" she said as she got up "I would like to walk back to my room now, if that's okay with you."

"Sure", he replied. As they walked, he said "So that counsellor, they really take their job seriously, they even stayed in with you when you yelled at them."

"I yelled at them to leave my room, that's not taking your job seriously, that's being an asshole." Lucy could feel anger quipping up about the situation earlier.

"I don't think they were being an asshole, I think they were trying to help you get over anger issues. They're a well trained and experienced counselor, you should take them seriously."

## CHAPTER 5 – WALK’N’TALK

“They weren’t trying to help my ‘anger issues’, they just don’t want to be alone and think I want them to be around. I got news for you, I’d rather talk to a rattlesnake than them”

“I don’t think so, I think they were staying in your room to protect you from yourself.”

They reached the room, and when Lucy went in, grabbing Sam so he doesn’t go running off, she said “I am the person who needs the least protection from myself” and closed the door.

## THE DINNER AND THE BEAST

Lucy woke up to a wild barrage of the door bell. She sprung up and called “Come in!”

Ash peaked in just as Sam attempted to run out, but Lucy was quicker and grabbed him. Ash took that as an invitation and proceeded into the room, closing the door behind them.

“It’s dinner time” they said. “Did you just sleep?”

Lucy nodded, trying to fix the buttons on her jacket. Ash looked amused, and after a few seconds of struggling, they went to help Lucy. In a few well-practised movements, they closed the jacket with the correct button order and stepped back. They were looking much better than earlier, they seem to have gotten some sleep, and they had what seemed to be a sincere smile.

“Today’s grilled chicken day! Come on I’m hungry!” They grabbed Lucy’s hand and practically dragged her out of the room. As they walked to the cafeteria, Ash babbled along with sincere excitement. “They’re doing grilled chicken with broccoli and quinoa, this is like, the best day of the month, we’re gonna be eating like monarchs!”

Lucy rolled her eyes. *‘Eating like monarchs, right, broccoli and grilled chicken. Pff, military types.’* As if Ash heard her thoughts, they looked at her and went “Look, grilled chicken is a seldom occurrence, especially on a space ship, at least it’s not MREs today.”

Lucy chuckled involuntarily, and as they reached the cafeteria, she could tell that Ash wasn’t the only person excited for today’s special. The cafeteria was packed to the brim, and Ash walked Lucy to a table with two free chairs. “Are these available?” They asked the two people sitting there, who nodded and continued their conversation.

Ash practically pushed Lucy into the chair and went off to get food, only turning around quickly when Lucy called “I’m vegetarian by the way!”

Lucy turned to the two people sitting next to her, and as she pondered whether there even was a vegetarian menu, one of them said to her “Hey, I’m sorry for tackling you earlier.” Taken aback, Lucy stared at the woman, and it only slowly dawned that she was sitting with the blond woman that earlier today had jumped at her when she ran after Sam. “My name’s Charlotte, what’s yours?”

“Uh” Lucy stammered and didn’t know how to deal with the revelation. She was slightly uncomfortable now, shifting in her seat. “I’m Lucy. Lucy Meier. I uh, am like, uh-”

“You’re a recruit, aren’t you?” asked the other person on the table, an older man Lucy didn’t recognize. “You seem way too young to be an officer”

“She’s a newbie from the Preston program” Charlotte replied. Lucy took a mental note to ask Ash about the Preston program, as the woman continued, “She was running after her cat earlier today, John and I tackled her.” The older man nodded knowingly, and adjusted in his seat.

“Enjoying the journey?” He asked.

“I was really excited but I realized being trapped in a tin can gets exhausting.” Lucy shrugged just as Ash arrived back with two trays.

“You could have helped me carry” Ash said in a mocking tone, and Lucy was unsure whether they were joking. “Had a nice conversation?”

“Yeah” Lucy said, “we were reminiscing about the time I got yeeted to the floor because no one told me I couldn’t go running on my own.”

Ash looked at her with confusion. “Yeeted? How old are you, twelve?”

Charlotte chimed in “For anyone who isn’t under 25, what does ‘yeeted’ mean?”

The older officer also looked confused, so Lucy explained: “Yeeted. Like throwing carelessly.”

Charlotte now seemed insulted and started a retort, but Ash cut them off. “If you were ‘yeeted’, you wouldn’t be sitting here right now. Regardless, go finish your broccoli we’ve got work to do”

**Diary: November 17th, 2023, supplemental**

I'm royally pissed at Ash. I hate them. They just fuck up my day every time. I hate hate hate them!

We just got done eating, when they essentially dragged me to the stupid info room where I watched an hour of boring military videos about honor and whatnot before just bringing me to my room. They didn't even talk to me!

CHAPTER 7

## DELAY

Diary: November 18th, 2023

Morning Diary! I think I was a bit too angry at Ash yesterday. They probably just had a bad day.

I dreamed of them tonight, the ship was in some sort of battle and I had to fix something and I had no idea how to do it and they guided me through that over the radio. I failed so the ship exploded so that's great. Superb start to the day

Just as Lucy put down her pen drawing an outline of her cat who was sleeping on the bed, the door rang. Lucy had been waiting for this, and she hated to admit it but she was kind of excited to see Ash again. So she was surprised when instead, her guard opened and told her that Ash was in a meeting and they were going to be late for breakfast. He asked whether she wanted to go now or later, to which she replied the latter, and sat back down at her desk. Seems it will take a while, she thought.

It in fact did take two hours before the door rang again and Ash brushed in, visibly agitated. "We're stuck her in Orbit another day" they said, "Something wrong with the reactor coolant. I hate it on this ship I just want to piss off and be on Atlantis again!"

Lucy looked at her with wide eyes, as Ash sat down on her bed and started patting Sam. "I'm just. So sick of these weeks on this ship. This is my third time now, we just can't get the gate to hold a connection anymore. They think the rogue Asgard did a small scale disruption in the gate network, but they're not sure." They sighed, while Lucy just stared at them. They paused for a second and asked "You haven't gotten to that part yet, have you?"

Lucy shook her head, eyes still wide open. "What is a gate?"

Ash sighed again. "It's a means of transport. I'm not the best person to explain it, you're probably better off continuing to watch the tapes"

Lucy shook her head and got up in defeat, offering Ash a hand, and said "You wanna get breakfast?"

Ash gladly took her up on that offer and they went to the cafeteria. Lucy actually enjoyed the breakfast hours there, as most officers were already at their stations, so only a small amount of people were still around. When they finished breakfast, Lucy asked "So what do you wanna do today? I kinda wanna do something fun."

Ash pondered the question for a moment. "I think we can take a day off, seeing as our journey just got a day longer. I'll show you around the ship a bit, okay?"

Lucy agreed and they showed her around. There was a recreational room with a multi game table where they played ping pong for a minute, then they converted it to a pool table and played three rounds. After that, Lucy was mentally exhausted so they walked around a bit more as Ash showed her the infirmary and an empty crew quarter with a window. This was the first time Lucy saw out of the ship, but she couldn't see much as Ash quickly dragged her along, saying they wanted to show her something really cool.

They ended their tour at the observation lounge. When they entered, the room was dark with no lights and Lucy could barely see anything. Ash guided her to a row of chairs where they sat next to each other. When Ash ushered a voice command at the ship, a small slit of light appeared at the far side of the room. Lucy soon realized that those were blinds, opening up to expose the view through the large windows. At first it was blindingly bright, causing Lucy to cover her eyes, but Ash took her hand and whispered “Don’t ruin your first time”

What Lucy saw was incomparable to anything she’d seen before. She got up from her seat to walk to the now open Windows and stared down at a planet. A planet she called home for all her life. A planet she thought she could never leave.

They were currently over north east Asia, which was in bright sunlight. Lucy awed at what she saw and could barely turn her head far enough to see all of the planet. She suddenly realized Ash was standing next to her, thinking *‘How can they move so quietly?’*, before turning her attention back to the planet below them.

She wondered how much she could actually see. She turned to Ash and asked “How high up are we?”

Ash replied “Around 800km. We’re in a circular orbit roughly at double the height of the ISS.”

Lucy stared at the planet below them for a few minutes, watching it move as they traveled at high velocities over it. It took her a few minutes to get her thoughts together again, and when she turned to Ash, they were also looking down at the ocean they were traversing. Without thinking about it, Lucy hugged Ash tightly and whispered “Thank you”

Ash seemed shocked at first, but then embraced Lucy and patted her back. “It is one hell of a sight, I cried the first time.”

They stood like that for what felt like years as tears rolled over Lucy’s face. “You know, I once heard someone say, people hug to hide their face.” She freed herself from the embrace. “I don’t think I have to hide my face. This was the nicest thing you’ve done for me, thank you.”

Ash smiled and responded with a quick ‘You’re welcome’, before sitting down in one of the chairs. They seemed ponderous and Lucy wondered what they were thinking about as she looked out the window and started seeing North America come into view. It felt so small down there, and Lucy was in awe at the moment when the door opened and someone poked their head in.

“I thought I would find you here. First time?” Lucy nodded. “We’re gonna be leaving orbit shortly, we need you in your quarters please” Lucy turned to look at Earth one last time, as the newcomer ordered the blinds closed. Ash took Lucy by the hand and slowly pulled her back.

When they arrived back at Lucy’s quarter, she fell to the bed and stared at the ceiling. She was still in awe from the experience, and when she looked at the clock, she realized it was already late in the evening. They had completely forgotten lunch, so it was no surprise when her stomach rumbled. “Hungry?” Ash asked, who was once again patting Sam. Lucy didn’t reply, just getting up and waited at the door while Ash put down Sam. “You’ll have to stay in sadly, most people get a little sick the first time in hyperspace, but I’ll get you something. Vegetarian?” Lucy just nodded, sitting down in defeat. As Ash left the room, and Lucy went to ponder whether



## CHAPTER 7 – DELAY

she'll ever see this little planet floating in space again. As she turned around to finish her drawing, she suddenly felt tired and laid her head on the desk. Just a little nap...

CHAPTER 8

## THE CONCORDIA

Diary: November 18th, 2023, supplemental

Ash brought me food, they woke me up after half an hour. They were suddenly so... Different. As if the jump to hyperspace changed them. I didn't feel anything, but maybe that was because I was asleep.

They were again overly happy and motivated, and it feels like they are closing off towards me. I don't know what I said or what I did, but they're just so... reserved now. Nothing they say has any meaning anymore.

I like the other Ash better. The Ash that joked, that laughed with me, and that hugged me. It feels like that Ash is gone and I miss them. I think I'll have to try and figure out where I went wrong and fix it.

---

Lucy woke up to the doorbell ringing. She had been drawing late into last night, and felt no need to get up, so she just turned over and tried to fall asleep again.

The doorbell didn't care for her need to sleep.

Lucy sighed and got up to invite her guest in, and as she called the visitor in with anticipation, Ash looked at her with that insincere grin they had on the first time they met. Lucy's heart fell. Maybe she was right about them changing...

"Rise and shine! It's a wonderful new morning on the UESF Concordia!"

Lucy just stared at them. What the hell got into them? Instead of questioning it however, she decided to reply "Ah, so this ship is called the UESF Concordia, good to know. I think half the ship has just had a depressive episode at your quip" She simply couldn't hold back, she sincerely hoped Ash was just playing a character right now.

"Well, after me sunshine, it's breakfast time! You've also got a two hour lecture on Stargate mechanics coming up, how exciting, and you have a talk with the second officer later at 11. Ready for today?"

"What, you turned into my fucking secretary? Gawd" Lucy rolled her eyes. Seems she'd have to live with that for a while now. She hushed by Ash and turned towards the cafeteria, only looking back to check that Ash was following her.

They were jogging right behind her and proclaimed "After lunch, we have another meeting with Sergeant Greene, and then you're free to do whatever you want! Isn't that nice?"

Lucy only huffed as they entered the cafeteria and she got herself a coffee. She wasn't hungry today.

As she found a table in the corner in the hope Ash would not find her, she started sipping her coffee. Sadly, her ruse didn't work and Ash soon appeared with two trays, one nearly empty

and one packed with food. Before Lucy could wonder about it, she got served the full tray while Ash took their small bowl of cereal and slowly ate it, watching Lucy who just sat in front of the tray.

“You forgot to get food so I got some for you!” Ash chirped, mouth still half full with cereal. “I hope you like bread and cheese, chocolate cereal and mashed potato!”

Lucy stared at the tray, speechless. She barely had appetite and this was a lot, even for her standards. “You won’t let me go until I’ve eaten, will you?” she asked tentatively.

“Correct!” Ash said in a happy, matter of fact way that made Lucy want to throw the tray in their face. She hated when she was forced to eat. But instead, she decided to start putting butter on her bread, followed by the cheese. She then nearly dunked the bread in the cereal before starting to scoop up the mashed potatoes. While she was chewing, Ash said “Potatoes are rich in nutrients, and yesterdays meal was rather lacking, so make sure to eat up!”

The urge to hit them over the head with the tray was only getting larger. When Lucy finished swallowing, she angrily said “If you don’t shut up the next bite will land in your face”

Ash had nothing to say to that, so they continued eating in silence. Lucy felt like Ash was suddenly trying to evade her, so when she was done eating and so full she felt like throwing up, she looked at Ash who wore a pensive expression for a split second, slowly mixing her still half full bowl of cereal, but quickly changed to be their happy version again. “Alright, let’s get going!” they said, but Lucy crossed her arms and leaned back.

“You haven’t finished your laughable amount of cereal yet, Ash” she said, spitting the name like it was an insult. Ash just smiled at her, nodded and quickly finished their cereal. “See? It’s not that fun. I didn’t wanna eat. You didn’t wanna eat. Why not just leave it at that from now on and stop behaving like school children”

Lucy got up before Ash could retort, and walked her tray to the return station. Ash trotted along behind her, a stark contrast to the emotions they’d been fronting, and dropped their tray off after Lucy.

Ash led Lucy to the now very familiar lecture room in quiet, where they started a video about Stargate mechanics and left. Lucy leaned back, once again alone in the room, and watched as a new person walked onto the screen. A woman, in her late 40s maybe, with blond hair tied to a pony tail. She was standing in front of a whiteboard. *‘I’d be into her if she was 20 years younger’*, Lucy thought as the woman started introducing herself as Brigadier General Doctor Samantha Carter.

After a two hour lecture on wormholes and quantum mechanics, Lucy leaned back. She thought that this hadn’t explained anything, but was interesting nonetheless, and just as she thought that, the door opened and the living embodiment of dread walked in. As they turned off the projector, Ash turned to Lucy with a smile. “You got about half an hour now before we’re meeting Senior Lieutenant Stenvik, so I’d suggest you go get a new jacket, you look like you slept in it.”

Lucy sighed. She did sleep in the jacket. On the way to her room, she asked “Why am I meeting the third in command?”

Ash chirped something about being allowed to move through the ship more freely, but Lucy was only half listening. She was wondering what she was doing wrong to make Ash so antagonistic towards her.

As they reached the room, Ash opened the door and let Lucy inside. When they didn't follow, Lucy quipped "Better come on in, I might be struggling to put the jacket on"

To her surprise, Ash obliged and while she was taking off her jacket, got a new one from the closet. When they handed it to Lucy, she wondered whether she could lighten the quite tense mood by purposefully buttoning it up wrong, but Ash made no comment. When she turned towards the door, Ash said quietly "Oh god." And spun Lucy around on the spot. After undoing ever button and buttoning it up again while saying nothing, they said "You're doing this on purpose to embarrass me"

Lucy frowned. "To be frank, I didn't intend to go out like that, I just wanted to lighten the mood."

"It doesn't seem lightened" Ash spat before leaving the room, having Lucy rush after her.

"Ash seriously now, what's up? You're acting like a Targh stepped on your toes."

This seemed to have a positive effect on them, as they turned with a smirk and asked "What in Gods name is a Targh."

"A klingon pig", Lucy replied with a chuckle. "From Star Trek, you know?"

"I have enough Space travel in my life, I don't need to watch more of it on TV."

## CONSEQUENCES

They went up an elevator to the second deck and walked to an office saying “Sen Lt Karl Stenvik”. When Ash knocked, a smoky, dark voice called them in. The door opened and they were greeted by a dimly lit room reeking of perfume. The voice said “Ah Ash, come in” with a thick, Nordic accent. “Have you brought your friend?”

As Lucy stepped through the door after Ash, she was greeted with a well decorate office with folders in the back and a white haired man sitting at a lavish desk. “We’re not friends”, Lucy muttered as she entered.

“Ah you must be Miss Meier” he continued, seemingly not having heard Lucy’s comment, “I’ve been dying to meet you. It is a pleasure, and I’m sorry for only meeting you now, we had quite much to do before departure”

Lucy slightly bowed her head, while he proceeded, “I am Karl Stenvik, the Personell supervisor on this vessel, and I will be responsible for your well being. If there are any issues, please come to me or Ash. Now, we have the issue of your access to the ship. I can see on your record that you had a transgression already, so that restricts how much access you can get. You can not leave your room without a companion and you cannot access level three or higher areas. Any questions?”

Lucy thought about it for a second, and asked “Are there going to be any other consequences? I don’t think it’s fair as-”

Stenvik interrupted her “No, as it’s your first transgression, there will not be any other consequences. Do not worry, access to level three areas isn’t particularly exciting regardless. Now I don’t want to hear any arguments, you ran off without even a warning, we can’t have that happen again. Now, any more questions?” Lucy shook her head. “Good. You won’t get an access card yet as you’ll be accompanied regardless. You will however receive the ability to lock and unlock your door from the inside. There will be a guard posted outside at all times.”

Lucy clenched her fist. It felt like she was a prisoner rather than a member of the team, but she said nothing. She looked over at Ash, who’d been oddly quiet, but they just stood still.

Stenvik looked down at his desk, squinted up and said “That’s all for now, you’re dismissed.”

Ash turned to the door and walked out, closely followed by Lucy. She was boiling over and as soon as they entered the elevator, she burst out her frustrations. “This is unfair! I didn’t know I wasn’t supposed to run after my cat, this is stupid!”

Ash stayed quiet with a stone cold face. That only frustrated Lucy even more. “You don’t care at all do you. You just do your job now. What the hell happened, I felt like we were friends and you fucking dropped me like a doll you didn’t like anymore. Fuck you, asshole!”

“I’m not dropping you, I’m protecting you.”

“Protecting me by treating me like a child? Well, if you treat me like a child, I’ll act like a child. I’m going to my room now, and I don’t want anything to do with you so fuck off.” She stomped off to her room, while Ash looked at her in disbelief before quickly following her.

“What did we say about leaving alone?” they called.

## CHAPTER 9 – CONSEQUENCES

Lucy stopped abruptly, causing Ash to run into her. “You were following me. I wasn’t going alone, I was just ahead.”

“Stop acting like a child god damn it!” Ash yelled. They were visibly getting agitated.

“Well don’t treat me like one” Lucy hissed. She went to her door and tried to open it. She leaned her head against the door and sighed.

“Well, the child can’t open her door?” Ash laughed and opened the door. “Good day, *sunshine*” they said as Lucy walked in and shut the door.

CHAPTER 10

## THE END

Diary: November 19th, 2023

Fuck Ash. Fuck Ash. Fuck Ash fuck ash fuck ash fuck ash

Lucy lay on the bed when the door rang once again. She didn't move. The door rang again. "Lucy, we have to meet the Sergeant!"

Lucy ignored it. The door rang once more, and Lucy decided to do something against it. She went to the door and turned the bell off. *'They shouldn't've told me I can do that'* she laughed to herself, and lied back down.

Shortly after, someone started knocking at the door. "Lucy, if you don't open the door now I'll have it opened"

"Fuck off!" Lucy shouted "I will not go outside!"

"Alright, you explain this to the Sergeant then"

And that was it. Ash had left. Lucy started crying again, and she didn't stop until she fell asleep from exhaustion.

She woke up with Ash standing above her, feeling her pulse. "Lucy! Lucy wake up!"

Lucy sharply turned around and hit away Ash's hand. "Why are you in here?" she bellowed, and moved away from them.

"Because I thought you died on me. You didn't respond for the past 6 hours."

"I was asleep, for good reason. I'm sick. Sick of you. So leave me alone!"

Ash looked at them pensively. Only now, Lucy noticed a band-aid on their face and a blue ring around their eye.

"What the hell happened to you?!" Lucy asked in disbelief.

"Sparring lesson. I got too distracted and got my ass kicked. Really my fault." They suddenly changed their mood to the fake happy one "It's good that you're awake now, the Sergeant said it's fine to do it tomorrow, you had a rough day!"

"Spare me the bullshit" Lucy said and turned back around.

Ash sighed. "All right, I'll be honest with you. I'm responsible for you, and I'm your counselor. I can't go have a friendship with you. You became way too attached to me and it just doesn't work like that."

"If you didn't want that to happen you could have just not interacted with me like that!" Lucy didn't have the energy to yell anymore, she just wanted this over with. Ash was bouncing between being a friend and being an asshole and it was exhausting.

"That was a lapse on my part. We need clear rules here. You're my client. I'm your counselor. Nothing more. Okay?"

## CHAPTER 10 – THE END

“No.” Lucy responded “It’s not okay. You allowed me to get close enough to you to make you hurt me, I can’t just deal with that. You fucked up that chance and you can’t just have taksies backsies”

Ash sighed again. “Look, I’m sorry but we can’t continue on like this. You’ll either have to deal with it or shut me out entirely.”

“What an idea” Lucy said, and she got up. “I’ll officially have said now, I’ll shut you out entirely. I don’t want to see you again. You’re gonna find me an alternative counsellor or whatever and you’ll leave me alone.”

Ash looked at her, mouth wide agape. Lucy turned away, sat at her Desk and suppressed the tears. She just couldn’t deal with this any longer.

Ash huffed and left the room. They slammed the door harder than necessary.

Lucy lied back down with a pensive expression. Maybe she went too hard on Ash.



## REASSIGNMENT

Ash was fuming. They were trying to make it right with Lucy, but she was stubborn like a child. *Just accept that we can't be friends and in a professional relationship at the same time!* Their inner monologue always was a little angrier than them and they hushed it down. No time for rushed decisions. They looked at their watch – 1956 – and decided to leave this up to tomorrow.

When they reached their quarter, the warm glow of their lava lamp invited them in. They sat at their desk and looked out the window, watching the strings float by. They loved flying through hyperspace, it had a calming effect on them.

Ash sat up when their communicator chimed. They had just gotten a message. Eagerly they opened their Laptop, hoping for some message from their brother on earth, but it was just a report by the guard who rotated out. They sighed and pulled up their E-Mail. There obviously wasn't internet in hyperspace, but they were allotted an email a day back to earth. Text only to save space on the subspace link, but it was enough for them.

Dear John!

I had a hellowa day. You'd think being a 'helpful eye' for a new recruit would be easy but nah... These were the worst few days of my life.

Lucy -- the new recruit from the Preston Program I told you about -- and I had a blowout today. I tried keeping things professional, but it only made everything worse, and it ended in a shouting match. I just. Said things I maybe didn't really mean but I know I needed to say. She can't go around thinking we're besties when we're just counsellor and client, right?

And now she's mad and I can't blame her you know? I did this to myself and to her. I should have noticed that she was coming closer earlier, and maybe I did, but I didn't want to admit that I kinda needed a friend on this tin can. It gets lonely up here when you're not military.

Aside from that, my day has been going swimmingly. I asked Charlotte for a sparring match to blow off some steam (She told me to say hi to you btw) and got my ass handed to me. She didn't even try, I was just so. Distracted. Gonna have a black eye for a week.

I should stop ranting about my failure to build a professional relationship with my client. How's it at the SGC? Did you hear anything from Walter? I think he retired, didn't he? Any news on long distance gate travel? I could really use some right now...

Wish I had anything better to tell you... Next letter goes to mom and dad, let's see where that leads... They're still trying

## CHAPTER 11 – REASSIGNMENT

to get me back in the military, last I heard they were trying to get me a spot in the marines. If only they knew man...

Well, I hope your day is going better than mine lol

Love and hugs,

Ash

Digitally signed by: Ashley Houston, 2023-11-19T20:36:39Z

Ash sent the e-mail to the outgoing mail sorter and leaned back. While they were pondering, their door rang. “Come in” they called immediately. Sergeant Greene opened and peered in. “Good evening, Houston”

Ash was surprised to see the Sergeant, they didn’t expect that. “Please, come in!” they said. “I’ll get you the chair.”

They got up and pushed the chair towards the middle of the room, and sat down on the bed. “What can I do for you today, Sergeant?”

“I’ve not come for business.”, she replied, “Well, not for my own. I read the report, it seems your altercation with Miss Meier was quite an event. I heard you even slammed the door?”

Ash sighed. They wanted to have a night to sleep over it, but apparently that was not a luxury they were going to get. “Yes, I slammed the door. It was a... heated discussion. Lucy - Miss Meier I mean, has built a strong emotional attachment to me, not at her own fault I might add, and it’s been difficult for her. I wanted to talk to you about it anyways, I would like to ask for reassignment. This situation has gotten out of control.”

The Sergeant look at them with slight worry. “Ash, we don’t have anyone to replace you. You know we’re running a tight crew and no one on board is as qualified as you. With her past history... We need someone who can deal with that, her whole identity and such. And that is you, and only you.”

Ash took a deep breath and replied “It’s not just me asking for reassignment. Miss Meier stated unequivocally that she does not want to see me again. I can’t go against her wishes in that regard.”

The Sergeants worry only increased at that point. She was clearly uncomfortable when she said “I understand that that is your code of ethic, but you are aboard a space ship that is not equipped to deal with a sudden roster change. We can’t swap our pilot on a whim, and we can’t swap our counselor.” She sighed and relaxed a little. “We can give you a schedule. You’ll see Lucy twice a day in your office, fixed sessions at your discretion, and the rest of the time she will be with her guards. You’ll have to convince the guards to do that though, I think they have gotten used to handing her over to you.” Ash attempted to interject but the Sergeant rose her hand. “Ashley, as your friend, please take this offer. I don’t know how much more I can do for you.”

Ash blurted out “I don’t have an office.”

Sergeant Greene raised an eyebrow. “You do now. You might have to take other clients as well, with the free time you will be gaining. I’ll notify you when I found a room.” She got up

## CHAPTER 11 – REASSIGNMENT

and walked to the door but stopped just before it, turning around. She asked “Houston, there is one thing I do not understand. We’re friends, why is it so different with Meier?”

As she left, Ash pondered that question. *‘It just... is. It’s different.’*

## AND SO, THEY ASKED

Ash was sitting in their new office the next day, a barely decorated room with a desk and two chairs. At the back, there were folders lying on the floor. They had not yet gotten a shelf for them. They were sorting their documents when they heard a knock on the door. Before they could answer, the door opened and Sergeant Greene entered. "Houston, welcome to your new office! I got your sessions for the week, we moved two people from Doctor Johnston to you to free up his schedule." She handed a list to them and left the room without another word. Ash shook their head. Somehow everyone seemed angry at them today. As they checked their schedule, they went grim. Four fifty minute sessions today, three with Lucy. "I thought she wanted two times a day", they mumbled aloud.

Half an hour later, which felt like an eternity, the door opened without anyone knocking. Lucy waltzed in without a word and sat down. She didn't look at Ash, staring at the wall behind them instead.

"Good Morning, Miss Meier." Ash said, cringing internally at the use of the last name. They had been thinking about whether or not they should address her on a first name basis, but decided to keep it formal until offered otherwise. "As this is your first counselling session with me, we have to go through some formalities." They took a short breath, and continued "First of all, I want you to know that whatever happens in this room stays in this room, unless you choose to share it. Your privacy is important to me." They waited for a second, looking at Lucy who nodded slightly. "I will be writing notes for your progress, but they will not leave the room, neither physically or verbally, and will not be accessible to anyone but us."

They adjusted in their seat, and with a softer tone, they said "One more thing, I do ask that you knock before entering, as there might be another session going on, and I want to ensure everyone has the same privacy." They leaned forward "Do you have any questions?"

Ash hated the preamble, monologues weren't their thing, and they knew right away Lucy would not ask any questions. They leaned back in their chair and waited patiently for Lucy to start, and after about three minutes, Lucy sighed and said "You're more stubborn than me."

Ash raised an eyebrow but stayed silent, resisting the urge to respond to the comment. They were hoping Lucy would open up on her own.

She continued staring at the wall for another minute before going "I don't get why we have to do this."

Ash leaned forward. "You think these sessions will be useless?"

"I'll be sitting here three hours a day! What am I gonna talk about, the asshole that ruined the past three days for me?"

Ash remained neutral and nodded slightly. "You could start there if you wanted, yes."

Lucy looked at them in disbelief. "Can I leave?"

Ash nodded. "You're always free to leave, you are not a prisoner."

"Tell that to my guard. Or that Stenvik person."

Ash tilted their head. “The restrictions placed on you are a lot, I agree. It may seem tough, especially as you couldn’t even leave the ship if you wanted to during our travel. But in here...” they gestured around the room “... you can do, say whatever and leave whenever you want.” Lucy looked at them in silence. After a few seconds, Ash continued “You can also just say what really bothers you.”

Lucy huffed and stood up. “I’m bothered by being forced to do whatever some stupid counselor thinks I need, that’s what’s bothering me.”

They paced around the room, and Ash considered opening the door for her, but instead they replied “I understand these sessions feel like they’re being forced on you. That is not our intention. You’re in control here.”

Lucy considered that, and after a few seconds, sat back down, crossing her arms in front of her. “So I can just sit here staring at the wall.”

“If that is what you want to do, you can, yes.”

Lucy leaned back and remained silent. Ash did the same and looked Lucy in the eyes. She held eye contact for a few seconds, but looked away from them again.

When Lucy started speaking again, Ash was surprised to hear her whisper. They however realized that Lucy wasn’t talking to them, but rather a plush they had put in the jacket pocket. They couldn’t understand what she was saying over the hum of the engines, but when Lucy looked up again, a tear rolled over her stern expression. She wiped it away as if nothing had happened.

“Is everything alright?” Ash asked. Lucy didn’t reply, instead choosing to look at the metal panels behind Ash. She started patting the plush, and Ash wondered what kind of animal it was. They knew Lucy had brought a lot of plushies, but they hadn’t seen that one yet.

They remained this way for multiple minutes, when Lucy finally said “I feel like everyone is treating me like a puzzle. Like I’m broken and they’re looking for the pieces to fix me. You’re looking to fix my anger issues. Stenvik is trying to fix my attitude. And whoever is in charge of my studies is trying to fix me to make me a worker drone for their little project. You’re all looking for something to fix but never talked to me about it.”

“That sounds exhausting, like everyone is trying to have you fit their ideal without even knowing who you are.”

Lucy relaxed a bit. “Yeah...”

Lucy looked at Ash in anticipation and after a few seconds, Ash decided to continue: “I don’t intend on fixing anything. I can’t fix anything. Only you can do that. All we can do is help you find the way you need to go, and only if you want our help. You can talk to Sergeant Greene if you want about your study plan. I’m sure there will be something they can do for you.”

Lucy once again fell quiet. Ash wondered what was going through her head, what could possibly fly around in there, when Lucy finally made eye contact. She practically stared at Ash.

“I think it’s just unfair that I don’t get a say in it” Lucy said.

“That is understandable, having your freedom taken away is frustrating. What do you think you can do to change that?”

Lucy laughed. “As if I can change anything about my situation. If I refuse to do what they want they can just as easily lock me in my room. I can’t do jack shit to change this.”

“Is that the impression you got?” Ash cursed at themselves just as they asked the question. Bad question.

To their surprise, Lucy replied “No. But Stenvik shut me off when I tried to argue for myself, you completely ignore my emotions, and I don’t even know who that Sergeant is I was supposed to talk to, I heard nothing of them since. I feel like everyone is just ignoring me and following their own agenda. I just want to fucking sit in my room and be left alone!”

Lucy had raised her voice, and Ash hesitated for a second, feeling the weight of Lucy’s words. “I’m sorry you feel like you’ve been ignored,” they began, a bit cautiously “You’re right, your feelings matter, and I should have acknowledged them more. That’s on me.” They shifted in their seat, their voice softening. “But you deserve to be heard, Miss Meier. Even if you feel powerless in this situation, your emotions are real, and they’re important.”

They paused, choosing their next words carefully. “I can’t promise I can change everything, but I can promise that here, in this room, you won’t be ignored. I want to understand how all of this is making you feel; how it’s affecting you. You don’t have to fight that battle alone.”

Ash leaned forward just slightly, their expression sincere. “I know it might not feel like it right now, but you do have a voice. Let’s figure out how we can use it.”

Lucy looked at them with defeat written on her face. “You acknowledged my feelings plenty. This is how you got us in this situation in the first place.” She stood up. “I can use my voice all I want, if everyone around me is deaf, it doesn’t matter.”

“Am I deaf to you?” Ash replied cautiously.

Lucy looked her in the eyes. “You seem to have gone deaf a while ago.” She left the room, quickly talking to her guard. Ash leaned back and looked at their watch. They had talked for 40 minutes which, given the debacle they were in, was longer than they expected.

Ash sighed and leaned back to take a deep breath. “Remind me to never offer to be a counsellor ever again”, they muttered to the now empty chair.

**RECAP**

Ash still thought about the session with Lucy long after it ended. It just didn't let them go for the next few hours. The next session they had was with a Corporal who was stressed about the fuel injectors breaking as they had just had a cadet fix them. *'Good to come to me for questions about fuel injectors'*, Ash thought, but nonetheless talked it through with them. They seemed much more relaxed after that, and Ash decided to take early lunch, in the hopes of avoiding Lucy.

When they arrived, the cafeteria was nearly empty so they decided to take a seat at the far side where the coffee dispensers were. It had been a year since they actively practiced, and the sudden start threw them off. As they drank their coffee, they pondered whether maybe Lucy was right in her assessments, they could have communicated better from the beginning. The thought that they hurt Lucy pained them even though they tried to distance themselves. *'I should never have gotten this close'* they thought, cursing at themselves. But they had to be honest, at least with themselves: They cared for Lucy. A lot. But that couldn't change their relationship with her, and the relationship was professional and would have to remain that way. There was no way around it.

They looked at the clock and decided to leave at 1155 hours. That gave them ten minutes to finish their food. They pushed through it almost mechanically, barely tasting the food. Their mind was swirling around Lucy, and they were struggling with conflicting feelings. They barely managed to finish in time, and decided to take the exit furthest away from the theatre where Lucy would be. To be safe.

When they arrived at their office, they began writing down notes. First about the fuel injectors, noting that the Corporal might benefit from anxiety prevention therapy, and then about Lucy.

Ash's hand hovered over their notepad. The session was still clearly in their mind, and they were suddenly very cognisant of Lucy's parting words. *'You seem to have gone deaf a while ago.'* It hurt them to admit, but she was right. In trying to be professional, they had become distant. Maybe these sessions would help, maybe Lucy would realize they did care, and they hadn't gone deaf. But maybe...

It was difficult for them, recapping the situation, and they took care to note down how they asked the wrong question and what they should have done instead. They promised themselves to do better next session.

But what if that wasn't enough?

## FRATERNIZING

As she sat at lunch, looking over today's plan the guard had printed for her, Lucy wondered whether Ash actually felt that way about her problems or whether it was just them being a therapist. *'I always hated therapists'* she thought. As she was stabbing her peas, imagining that every time she got one she was stabbing at Ash, someone came to her table.

"Hi! Can I sit here?" Charlotte sat down without waiting for an answer, and Lucy silently appreciated the assumed response. "How are you doing?" She asked, making Lucy look at her questioningly.

"Why do you care?" Lucy spat, shaking her head, and after a deep breath said "I'm sorry. I'm a little bit on the edge right now. I'm doing fine, my guard at least decided to let me eat alone. Which I greatly appreciated."

Lucy almost instantly regretted the slight jab at Charlotte, but they took it with humour and responded "I'm sorry for intruding. I wanted to talk to you. I'm on the roster tomorrow 0600 to 1400, so I wanted to ask whether there's anything I can do to make your time here easier."

"Don't yeet me to the floor." Lucy replied jokingly.

Charlotte only raised one eyebrow. "Well, if you want to learn how to not be 'yeeted' to the floor, you might want to do sparring lessons. I can have a look at your schedule tomorrow, I'm sure we could find some time for that"

Lucy thought about it for a second, and the thought of getting some of the anger out of her system was appealing. "That would be nice, yeah. As long as I don't end up looking like Ash"

That visibly took Charlotte aback, but they quickly recovered and replied "Oh, is that what happened to Counselor Houston? A sparring accident? Well, that's what happens when you decide to train with military types"

Lucy chuckled. She began to like Charlotte. "May I remind you that you yourself are such a military type?" She jabbed.

Charlotte responded with sarcastic outrage. "Me?! How did you get that idea?"

Lucy couldn't hold back a laugh. "Well, maybe because when you yeeted me to the floor, I could still feel my body for the rest of the day"

They chuckled together, and Lucy finally felt happy with her situation. She almost forgot that she had a session with Ash when her guard came to interrupt their subtle jabbing at each other. "Sorry to interrupt", he said, "you've got an appointment soon."

Lucy took on a stern expression. "Enjoyed our conversation", she said to Charlotte, "I'll see ya tomorrow."

"See you!" Charlotte said. Her plan had worked.



## BUT WHY?

The next session with Ash was far less eventful than the first. Ash said they wanted to know more about Lucy's past, so Lucy spun a story about living a happy life and having a happy family. She didn't even think about it, she just lied her ass off like she always did when someone wanted to know something about her past. 'Happy parents' and 'supportive surroundings' had become her favorite lie.

As she was leaving at the end of the session, Ash asked one last question. "Miss Meier, I wondered. Who's your friend in your pocket?"

Lucy took a second to snap out of her confusion. She didn't realize, but she had been petting Fred for the whole time. "It's my emotional support orca." She simply said when she left the room.

She came outside just as two of her guards were talking quietly. They turned when she came out, and she was glad to see Harris was on rotation now.

Harris turned to the other guard and said "Have a good night, John." John, who had never told Lucy his name, left with a quick stride in the direction of the cafeteria.

"Hey Harris", Lucy said. "AV training room I presume?" Harris nodded and they went to walk to the room she only recently learned was supposed to be a recreational room, remodeled to show videos to new recruits. She entered and the guard fumbled around, before a video started playing. Once again, Samantha Carter appeared on the screen, standing in front of a window with a metal shield lowered over it.

"Alright, recruits, we've now covered the fundamentals of wormhole physics, quantum effects during gate travel, and radio signal transmission through an active wormhole..." Carter listed off in her usual crisp, efficient manner. As she finished, she gave a slight smile. "But this isn't just theory. To give you a broader perspective, I'm turning things over to Doctor Daniel Jackson."

"Thanks, Sam," Daniel said as the camera panned to him, his easygoing demeanor a stark contrast to Sam's precision. Lucy chuckled at the informal exchange.

"Let's start at the beginning," Daniel continued, his excitement unmistakable. "In 1928, a team of archaeologists discovered a strange artifact buried in the sands of Giza. Little did they know, it would be the key to unlocking interstellar travel..."

Lucy leaned back, immediately drawn to Daniel's infectious enthusiasm. His passion for history was obvious, and she found herself smiling along as he delved into the ancient discovery.

After nearly half an hour of rich historical details, Samantha reappeared on screen.

"The artifact that Doctor Jackson has been describing in such detail," Sam said, with a hint of amusement, "is known as a Stargate. Sergeant?"

The camera zoomed out as the metal shield behind her began to rise, revealing a massive circular structure.

“This is the Stargate,” Sam continued, her voice returning to its steady, technical tone. “A device capable of near-instantaneous travel between itself and another gate across the galaxy. It works by creating a stable wormhole, as explained in earlier lectures.”

Lucy slowly lost interest as Daniel started explaining the goal of the organization called the Stargate Command. *‘Military types’*, she thought, and when the video finally ended, Lucy left the room to be greeted by Harris.

“Interesting evening?” he asked.

“For once, it was quite educational” Lucy replied. “I learned about the Stargate today, very interesting discovery!”

“I was more shocked at the revelation, but I’m glad you enjoyed it.” Harris replied with a raised eyebrow.

Lucy only laughed. “I woke up on a spaceship one day, and I’m travelling to another galaxy. And you think wormholes shock me after this?”

Harris nodded. “I was at RAF for three years, never really happy but content, and then got recruited to the Stargate program as a pilot, so I had a different first interstellar travel experience. I flew a fighter for a year, and got moved to be a secondary pilot on the bridge. And right now, I’m doing guard duty as they rarely need me on the bridge.”

Lucy nodded too. “Sounds much more interesting than my story. I got into computers at like, 15, learned to program at 17, and been writing Open Source for like, three years now. Have a few projects, loads of contribs, and a halfway steady stream of donations, god bless them. Got me through without work, and no one really wanted me anyways. The job landscape in programming is shit. I didn’t think anyone would take notice of me but apparently they did... And I don’t know for what.”

“Well I’m sure you can assist in something,” Harris replied, “and if you’re used to programming, you’ll probably rise in rank relatively quickly. They’re always looking for people who can maintain the systems.”

Lucy nodded, however it explained nothing. “What I don’t get is... Why me? I bring barely anything to the table.”

Harris shrugged. “They normally look for people who are likely to agree and who have an easy time going off world for a few years. That’s the thing with Preston, they can’t really recruit publicly. So they recruit people who are useful but not too tied to the planet. Everything’s harder when you’re not military. I suspect you don’t have a partner?”

Lucy laughed. “Unless you count that delusional arse that thinks we’re still together, or ever were, no.” She nodded. “So, no strong ties to the planet, no”

CHAPTER 16

## BREAKDOWN

As they reached Ash's Office, Lucy was deep in thought. She knocked, but it remained quiet. When she went to knock again, she heard quick steps behind her. "Lucy! You're early"

Lucy turned around. Ash was jogging towards her, came to a halt and panted.

"I'm not early, you're late" She replied.

Ash chuckled "I'm never late, I always arrive exactly when I intend to."

They unlocked the door and entered. As Lucy entered, she noticed a sudden shift in Ash's emotions. "I'm sorry, I got carried away. Please, have a seat Miss Meier."

Lucy sighed. She had hoped that Ash had come to their senses, but seemingly they didn't. She took a seat and grumbled "Lucy was fine."

Ash looked up. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you."

"Nothing" said Lucy. "I was talking to myself."

"I see. Well, Miss Meier, how are you today?"

"You asked me two times already. But since you care so much, I'm good. I just had an interesting two hours of informational videos."

Lucy fell silent, thinking about the earlier session. She had lied about her upbringing and it seemingly worked, so she wondered how much she would have to lie to make Ash leave her alone.

"Last time you talked about your family upbringings." Ash said after a second. "It sounds like things were pretty good for you growing up."

Lucy felt a little knot in her stomach. *'They know'*, they thought, and responded simply with "I guess so."

"How do you feel now about it?"

Lucy was confused. What was she supposed to answer to that?

"I don't feel about it at all, I barely think about it. It's just a thing that happened I suppose"

Ash nodded. "Understandable. We often think only of the significant, the insignificant and normal is more in the background. Are there things from your childhood that are significant to you?"

Lucy was getting irritated. She never had to lie this much about her childhood. She tried to think of something, but completely blanked. What would be significant to a normal person?

She shook her head. "Nothing I can say was extraordinary".

Ash nodded. "How do you feel now? When you compare it to your past, do you feel different?"

Lucy blinked. "Yes, I feel different now. I'm in space and learning about interstellar travel. How would I not feel different now?"

“Understandably, it is a pretty big shift. How do you feel?”

“I think we talked about this before. I feel like I’m trapped in someone’s ideals and there is a single person who seems even barely interested in how I feel. And no, it’s not you.”

Ash nodded. “Who is that person, if I may ask?”

“You may. Charlotte, the woman who tackled me. They have guard duty with me tomorrow, and I’ll enjoy having someone to talk to who actually cares and laughs with me” She crossed her arms.

For a second, Ash seemed worried, but that passed quickly, and they said “That’s good. Getting to know people on the ship might help you. What did you two talk about?”

Lucy spent the next ten minutes reminiscing about today’s talk they had with Charlotte. They made a point of how much fun they had together.

As she finished, Ash nodded. “That seems like it could be a good basis for a friendship.”

“It is”, Lucy responded. They sat silently for a minute and then Lucy mumbled “I feel tired.”

Ash tilted their head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that?”

“Sorry, I said I feel tired.” Lucy said. “I don’t know what else to say anymore, you know pretty much everything about me now.”

“Well,” Ash said, “I still don’t know how you feel about your current situation. How is this experience affecting you?”

“I don’t know... I guess I’m more tired. I feel like my emotional landscape is completely messed up. I can’t deal with the littlest things anymore. One minute I’m angry at everything, the next I’m crying my fucking eyes out. I just feel so disconnected from myself...”

Ash nodded. “Have you felt like this in the past?”

Lucy shifted uncomfortably. She knew she couldn’t fully lie her way out of that, but she didn’t want to admit the truth. The house of cards was falling apart around her.

Before she could reply, Ash said “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. You can take this at your own pace.”

Lucy felt the jab at her lies. Her throat was suddenly dry and she started to cry as memories flushed over her.

CHAPTER 17

## DINNER

Lucy was standing in her room, trying to figure out what to wear. She was supposed to go on a date tonight, but she just felt numb.

The guy she was meeting, Jonathan, was the kid of a wealthy family friend. They knew each others since they were kids but hadn't talked for years since. Their parents had set up a date between them.

Lucy felt an anger build in her. "I'm gonna date who I'm gonna date!" she had yelled at her parents before storming off. Her mother came to her room to calm her down and had convinced her to just try.

She threw the dress she just tried on to the floor and decided that she at least wanted to be comfortable, so she grabbed a band tee and ripped jeans. She put her hair in a ponytail and thought *'Fuck expectations'* as she walked down the stairs to the living room.

Her father looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "You're going to the first date with this?" He asked with an air of disdain. His thick, German accent only added to it.

Lucy just shrugged. "I'm not faking who I am to appeal to a man."

Her mother huffed in disagreement, as Lucy went to the kitchen to get water. Soon after the doorbell rang, and she walked over to invite the guest in, closely followed by her parents. As she opened the door, she was shocked to see Jonathan in a suit, with his hair to one side using excessive amounts of Gel. Lucy had never seen something so unattractive.

"Evening!" he chirped, "Good evening Mister and Miss Meier! Hope your day is going well?"

"As good as can be expected", Lucy's father answered, and Lucy cringed at the pop culture reference. She squeezed through the door, mumbling something about fresh air, and sat down on the boardwalk while Jonathan held small talk with her parents.

When they finally finished, she got in her car and looked at Jonathan who was visibly confused. "Well I'm not drinking tonight so you can blast your head away and I'll drive you home." She said through the open window. She was thankful when he got in and they drove to the restaurant her parents chose for them. She knew she was going to look out of place, but whatever she could do to keep this from going any further, she was happy to do.

He tried to start some conversation during the short drive but thankfully they arrived without Lucy having time to reply, and they went in. It was one of those fancy expensive restaurants where everyone there felt they were above everyone else, so when they were lead to the table, Lucy could feel the disapproving stares. She didn't care.

During dinner, they had shallow conversations about what they were doing with their life, and Lucy grew more and more bored of this guy. *'How could a human being be so boring?'* she wondered as he told her about his latest holiday in Spain. When the desert came, he was visibly trying to soften up and attempted a flirt, which Lucy replied to with biting sarcasm. She didn't feel like flirting, especially not with this man.

She already didn't enjoy the evening, but when he took her hand, she truly started despising it. "Please don't touch me." she said.

He ignored her and said "It's really quite funny, we've known each other for forever, that this could work out like it is."

"You're delusional" She mumbled as she tried to pull her hand back, but he held her with an iron grip. "Let go of me" she said, raising her voice a little.

When he didn't, she stood up, practically yanking him forward. "I'm going home. Go get a cab with your parents money I think that's better for both of us." He was speechless and looking at her as she walked to the bar to pay. She didn't want to sit there any longer.

When she arrived, he was following her, and as she tried to get anyone's attention, he said "Lucy, I'm sorry if I insulted you, can we try to not make a scene?"

Lucy spun around. "Not make a scene? We already made a scene. Shut up and be happy I didn't slap you" She had raised her voice involuntarily and as a waiter came, she said "I wanna pay for myself please." Jonathan tried to argue but she gleamed at him angrily, which shut him up. When she was done paying, she walked to the car, got in and started the motor and only stopped when he opened the passenger door. "Look, I'm sorry if I said something wrong, I'll call you later, you didn't have to make such a scene-"

She cut him off. "You said nothing wrong, you're just an insufferably boring person with no personality other than what your parents made you be. Look at you, you look like a posh dickhead. Fuck off and close the door."

He looked insulted, and as as soon as he closed the door, she drove off. She wouldn't go home tonight, she decided.

## GETTING TO KNOW HER

Ash woke up at 0520, and they decided to go to an early breakfast. They were still worried about Lucy - Miss Meier, they reminded themselves - after the breakdown she had the last session. She didn't talk about it much, and Ash left it at that, but they were worried nonetheless.

At this time of day, the cafeteria was chocked full as the officers and enlisted personnel soon started their shift. Ash barely managed to find a spot, when they saw Sergeant Greene walking towards them. She hushed away a specialist, who took his tray to another table, and sat down.

"Good morning Counselor Houston!" She said cheerily.

They said tiredly. "Morning Sergeant"

"Long night? You look tired."

"Bad sleep" they replied simply. They weren't really up for conversation, especially not in this way. "Yourself, *Ma'am*" they asked, putting emphasis on the title. They were tired of holding conversations this way.

"Quite well! I missed morning shifts, I rarely have a reason to get up nowadays."

Ash nodded. So did they.

As the bell chimed, indicating it was 10 minutes to the start of the first shift, Greene rose to carry away her tray. She looked at Ash, still sitting and asked "Mind to join me? I've got a boring start ahead."

Ash sighed and got up. They really wanted to sit in the soon to be empty cafeteria but alas, they decided the Sergeant might need someone to talk to.

As they walked down the corridors, Ash asked "How long will we keep up this facade?"

The Sergeant blinked. "What facade?"

"The whole 'We're not friends' thing. I'm sick of it. Why won't you just admit it?" Ash was getting agitated.

"No, Counselor, we can't. We were and are in a professional relationship, and I really can't have my peers know what we are."

"What we are?" Ash hissed "We're friends. Nothing more. That ended months ago!"

"It's still bad image, having had an affair with ones counselor."

Ash huffed as they reached their destination. The Sergeant quickly talked to the guard and took his place. Ash rolled their eyes. "So much to no personal relationship to inferiors."

"I need to get to know her." Greene said simply.

"Like you got to know me? That's why you assigned yourself guard duty, isn't it? She doesn't even know who you are." Ash hissed the last words.

## CHAPTER 18 – GETTING TO KNOW HER

Greene looked pensively at her. “I’m sorry you’re still hurt. I never meant to hurt you, but you said we couldn’t have gone on and I agreed. It was a mistake of our youth, and I won’t let it repeat aga-”

Ash could suddenly feel something was wrong. They raised their hand, indicating to Greene to stay quiet, and listened carefully. They could hear incoherent mumbling, getting louder with every word. Then they heard a sudden thump from inside and stormed inside.



## SPEECHLESS

They found Lucy lying on the floor, clutching a plush. Her eyes were wide agape, and she was murmuring something Ash couldn't make out.

"Lucy? Are you alright?" Ash said quietly. Lucy didn't respond or show that she heard them, she just continued throbbing. Ash knelt down beside her, keeping a safe distance. "Lucy, you're safe. It's ok, everything is ok. It's me, Ash"

Lucy suddenly stared at them but didn't reply. Ash looked at Charlotte with a worried expression and gestured her outside. She obliged.

Turning back to Lucy, they said "Lucy can you hear my voice?" Still no response from Lucy, but her breathing had slowed. *'Good sign, she's coming back'* Ash thought to themselves. "Lucy, feel the floor under you. Is it cold or warm?" Lucy continued staring and slowly shook her head.

Ash got worried. "Do you feel cold?" they asked, and Lucy nodded. They took a blanket from the bed and carefully covered her. "Can you feel the blanket, Lucy?" She nodded again but remained far away. Ash waited for a minute next to her, trying to figure out what to do. *'Get Johnston'* they finally thought, and they got up to talk to Charlotte. They opened the door and said "Charlotte, Johnston asap" and went back in. They were still unreasonably shaken, and still sorting the turmoil in their head. They started talking to Lucy again "I'm going to stay with you for a minute, so I can help you when you ask. Do you need something? Water?" Lucy nodded and they went to the bathroom. When they returned with a glass of water, Lucy was sitting somewhat upright, leaning against the wall.

Ash offered her the glass of water, but she only stared blankly at the wall. After a few seconds, she raised her hand to grab it but she was shaking too much and nearly dropped it.

"It's okay Lucy. Do you want me to help you with the water?" Ash asked carefully. Lucy nodded. "I'll carefully hold it for you, shake your head when you're done." Ash held the glass to Lucy's lips and slowly tilted it. She drank about half of it before spitting out a mouthful. Ash withdrew the glass without a comment and set it down on the bedside table.

Lucy started to focus at Ash and shook her head. Ash interpreted that as a prompt to move away but Lucy started shaking her head more violently when they did so they stayed. Lucy seemed to be slowly coming back, and she pointed at the glass of water. Ash took it and again said "Do you want me to help you with the water?" Lucy nodded again. "I'm carefully going to hold it for you, you can shake your head when you're done." She again drank, this time more carefully, and when the glass was emptied they pointed at the bathroom. "Do you want another glass of water?" Lucy shook her head. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?" Lucy nodded.

She tried to stand up but only fell over, caught by Ash. "Do you want me to help you up?" Ash asked, and when she nodded, Ash helped her up, trying to steady her as she nearly fell right away. They lead her to the bathroom and Lucy tried to go in but almost fell if Ash hadn't caught her. So Ash lead her to the toilet carefully, sitting her down. Ash left and waited outside the half open door, when they heard another thump. They entered and carefully helped Lucy up, who was struggling to get up after falling to the floor.

“Everything’s all right.” Ash said at a lack of other things to say. They helped Lucy getting dressed again and half carried her outside. They sat her on the bed and leaned against the cupboard behind them. They waited like this for a few minutes, and asked carefully “Can you talk?” Lucy opened her mouth, but only managed a slight squeal before shaking her head. “That’s okay.” Ash said. “You don’t need to talk. Do you want me to get Charlotte from outside?” Ash thought it would be a good idea to have another familiar face and Lucy nodded, so they said “I’ll be right back” and went outside.

Closing the door behind them, they said “Where the fuck is Johnston?”

Greene looked at them worryingly. “I don’t know, I tried contacting him but haven’t gotten a reply. Is she alright?”

Ash shook their head. “She’s non-verbal right now. She wants you to come inside. Tread carefully, speak quietly and calmly. Don’t touch her unless she asks you to. Ask yes or no questions and don’t ask about anything that happened. Try to ground her in reality rather than throwing her back. Understood?”

Greene nodded. “Got it.” She went in quietly and Ash followed her, standing at the door.

## THOUGHTLESS

Lucy was still dizzy. She was drained from what happened just now, still shaking and cold from the sweat. She was talking to her plushies, who told her that everything was fine and no one was going to hurt her. She saw movement in the corners of her eyes and jumped.

“Shh, Lucy, it’s fine, it’s just me, Charlotte.”

Lucy realized she was lying again, clenching a shark plush and staring at Charlotte.

“How are you doing, Lucy?”

Lucy shook her head. Ash was standing in the doorway, which was both comforting and scary. Ash had lead her out of the trap in her head, and she was thankful, but she couldn’t shake the feeling Ash was just doing it as her therapist.

Charlotte talked again, and Lucy took a second to process the words. “Lucy? Can you hear me? Do you need something?”

Lucy was shaking again. She didn’t understand, why, she had calmed down. She tried to sit up again to show that she was doing well, but her body resisted. She gave up and tried to relax, when Charlotte said “Lucy? Can you hear me?” She sounded worried, and Lucy tried to nod but couldn’t.

Ash tapped Charlotte on the shoulder and walked slowly towards Lucy. “Lucy, it’s okay. You don’t need to answer. Breath slowly, with me. In” - Ash breathed in - “And out” - they breathed out. They repeated that a few times, and the third time, Lucy managed to follow Ash’s breathing. “You’re doing good, Lucy. Can you feel the blanket on you?” Lucy nodded, which felt painfully slow. “Good. Is the blanket cold?” Lucy shook her head. The blanket wasn’t cold. She was.

As if Ash knew what she was thinking, they said “Are you cold?” Lucy nodded. Ash stood up and Lucy winced. “I’ll be right back, I’m getting you some water. Is that okay?” Lucy nodded. Her throat was completely dried out. Ash took the glass from the bedside table and soon returned with water. Lucy tried to grab the glass, but Ash said “You have to sit up, Lucy. Can you do that alone?” Lucy tried. She nearly fell down trying but managed. Ash helped her move to the head of the bed so she could lean against the wall. Lucy was exhausted, and when Ash asked her something, she just shook her head. She could barely focus, and Ash moved the glass to her mouth. They slowly tilted it, giving Lucy the water slower than she wanted, but after a short drink, the glass was empty.

“Do you need something?” Ash asked softly. Lucy shook her head. “Do you want to talk to Charlotte now?” Lucy nodded.

Ash stood up and whispered something in Charlotte’s ear, who nodded and slowly walked over to Lucy. “Hello Lucy.” She paused for a second and then asked “Is there something I can do for you?” Lucy shook her head. She was suddenly uncomfortable with how close Charlotte had come. She started violently shaking her head, not minding Charlotte who looked at her with confusion, until Ash pulled Charlotte away. They whispered between each other, and Charlotte walked over again, kneeling half a meter from the bed. “I will go outside now, is that okay?” Lucy nodded. She wanted to be alone. “I’ll be outside for you.”

Charlotte stood up, looked at her for a second, and then left. Ash came closer but stayed at a distance. “Do you want to be alone now?” Lucy nodded. “That’s okay. I’ll come checking in with you every ten minutes, so you’re safe. Or do you want someone else to check in with you?” Lucy shook her head violently. She was scared of seeing anyone but Ash. They nodded knowingly and said “Okay. I’ll be back in ten minutes, okay?” Lucy nodded slowly. She really needed some alone time.

When Ash next came inside, they had a tray with food with them. “Hello Lucy. Charlotte thought of bringing you food” They sounded unhappy, but put the food on the bedside table. “You don’t have to eat if you don’t want to, I fully understand if that is something you don’t want to do right now. We just wanted to give you that option, okay?” Lucy nodded. She wasn’t hungry.

She opened her mouth and said “Thank you”, but she only heard a squeal. ‘*No talking*’ She thought, and she felt her leg starting to vibrate.

She wanted to sit upright, so she pointed at the chair. Ash nodded and said “Do you want to sit on the chair?” Lucy nodded and Ash went to get the chair. They put it next to the bed and asked “Do you want help?” Lucy shook her head, she didn’t want to seem weak to Ash, closed her eyes and pushed herself up. She stood up but for some reason, she couldn’t feel the floor. She opened her eyes and saw that she hadn’t moved. Ash looked at her and Lucy started nodding. “Do you want me to help you up?” Ash asked. Lucy continued nodding and Ash helped her up. “There you go, slow and steady.”

Lucy sat down on the chair, facing the entrance, and her leg started shaking. She often had that but never this extremely, so she tried to force her leg still, which only made it worse. “It’s alright, Lucy” Ash said “you’re fine. Your leg is just trying to calm you, let it help you.” Lucy wondered how Ash knew, but she tried to relax, which calmed her leg. Her breathing slowed and she started feeling more relaxed. Ash knelt in front of her and watched her calmly.

When Lucy felt like she had collected herself, she tried to say “Thank you” again, and this time it came out as a croak.

Ash smiled and nodded. “You’re welcome.” They clearly had something on their mind, so Lucy and Ash sat still for a few minutes. Lucy jumped when she heard a knocking and Ash said “I’ll get this. It’s alright, I’ll soon be back.” They went to the door and opened it slightly, blocking Lucy’s view. They talked quickly and quietly, and soon closed the door and came back to Lucy. “Lucy, there’s a Doctor outside - his name is Doctor Johnston. He’s a trauma specialist, he works with people who have been through experiences like yours. I know, it can be scary, but he is someone who can help you if you want.” They paused for a few seconds, and continued “If you don’t want him to come in I can send him away again. Take your time to decide.” Lucy’s leg was shaking harder again. Ash knelt down before them and waited.

Lucy watched her leg shaking, trying to slow her breathing but it only got quicker. “Lucy, it’s okay. Breathe with me. In-” They once again did breathing, and slowly Lucy calmed down. “You’re doing good, Lucy, I’m proud. You can take your time.”

Lucy concentrated on her breathing, and when she felt ready, she said “Doctor is okay”. Again, only a croaking, and she shook her head in frustration.

Ash looked at her. “Lucy, it’s okay. You don’t need to talk. Do you need something?” Lucy shook her head. “Okay. Do you want me to get Doctor Johnston?” Lucy nodded. Ash stood up. “I’ll get him.” They went to the door and quickly spoke to who was outside. Lucy felt her heart racing, and heard Ash talking to her. “Breathe slowly, Honey. With me. In- and out” Lucy breathed slowly, and her eyes focused on Ash who was still talking at the door. She realized she hadn’t heard them talking and started panicking. *‘Am I going crazy?’* Ash looked around and quickly walked over. “Lucy, you’re okay. Slowly now. Breathe in- and out.” Lucy managed her breathing quickly, and Ash said “The doctor is now ready, should I bring him in?” Lucy nodded. Ash went to the door and Lucy focused on her breathing. Maybe he could help.

## BACKGROUND

Diary: November 21th, 2023

I had another breakdown today. I dreamed of... The event. Doctor Johnston said I experienced 'traumatic mutism'. He said it's common and nothing to worry about, but said he would like me to go on anxiety medication. I'm still split on that.

I think it all started when I had the first flashback with Ash. Or counselor Houston. Or whatever I should call them. Fuck that person.

But I had that flashback and it's only been downhill from there and then... I was so scared, it felt so... It was like it was happening again. I...

I have another two sessions with Ash today and one with Johnston. I am not looking forward to either, they're probably gonna grill me about my experience, but at least with Ash it feels like they listen to me, Johnston seemed to not care about my feelings at all.

I just want to be held by someone.. This is exhausting.

Lucy sat in Ash's office. They had said they'd be right back, but had been a good five minutes since they left. Lucy pulled Fred out of her pocket and tried to calm herself with conversation. When Ash finally returned, they said "I'm sorry Miss Meier, there was a critical situation I had to care for. Now, how are you feeling?"

Lucy didn't feel like talking, she had talked to Doctor Johnston for what felt like hours and she was exhausted. She shrugged and looked back down at Fred. At least someone who got her.

They sat like that for a few minutes, and she had an enlightening conversation with Fred, when Lucy felt like an answer would be necessary, and she barely managed to say the word "Shit." before going back to her internal conversation with Fred.

Ash replied "That's understandable, you must be exhausted. What would you like to talk about today?"

Lucy huffed. Could they not leave her alone? "I don't know, what do you want to talk about" She said with an air of annoyance.

"It's not about what I want to talk about, Miss Meier. These are your sessions and I'm not in control of them." Ash replied simply.

Lucy sighed. She had hated the formal address before, but she hated it even more after today's experience. "Why do you call me Miss Meier?" she snapped "You had no problem calling my by my name earlier, why do you insist on calling me that when I'm not currently dying?"

Ash tilted their head slightly. "I'm calling you Miss Meier because many clients of mine prefer the formal address. Do you want me to address you differently?"

“Yes!” Lucy said, louder than she intended, and she jumped at her own voice. She proceeded more quietly, “Yes, I would prefer you call me Lucy. If it isn’t a bother to you.”

“Not at all” Ash replied. “So, Lucy, what did you want to talk about today?”

Lucy leaned back in defeat. “Well, I don’t want to talk about anything but you probably want me to talk about my experiences this morning.”

Ash shook their head. “I don’t want you talking about anything you don’t want to talk about. I understand that it’s very difficult to talk about a situation like that, and it takes time to recover.”

Lucy sat up “Oh, recovery? I need recovery? What got that idea in your head?” Ash blinked, but Lucy continued “I don’t need recovery, and I don’t need to be fixed. I don’t need help and I don’t need you telling me how I feel. I don’t need a counselor. I need someone who understands me.”

Ash nodded. “That is valid. Your emotions and feelings are all yours, and it feels horrible getting told otherwise. But I must admit, this is not my specialty, and I don’t know how I can help you with that.”

Lucy slumped back in her seat. “So what is your specialty?”

Ash didn’t move, and replied “I’m specialized in conflict resolution and LGBTQ+ counseling. Before joining the military for conflict resolution specifically, I practiced as a mediator for LGBTQ+ couples and occasional did single sessions for trans affirming healthcare.”

Lucy stared at them. Was that why she was sent to her? “So... You don’t specialize in anger issues?”

“Not at all”, Ash replied with a slight smile. “I have never had a patient specifically for anger issues.”

Lucy leaned back. She had completely misinterpreted... Everything. “So your goal wasn’t to make me stop yelling at people?”

“I had no goal in mind at all, other than helping you figure out what you wanted help with.”

Lucy barely listened. She cursed at herself. Of course Ash would specialize in queer therapy. Why didn’t she think of that? “So, why do I have these sessions with you? And not Johnston?”

Ash shrugged. “Johnston has barely any free slots and is specialized on traumatic experiences. We felt that it would only make sense to pair you up with someone who had experience with dealing with identity.”

Lucy stared. “You think I’m trans?”

Ash was clearly taken aback by that. “Not at all, Lucy. It frankly hadn’t occurred to me. I meant your romantic and sexual orientation, I should have phrased that better, I am sorry.”

Lucy relaxed a little. At least they weren’t complete idiots. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. I just- Wait. How do you know about my sexual orientation?”

Ash thought about it. “I frankly don’t know exactly, but I suspect the extensive background checks turned something up. Were you not out? I should have asked.”

Lucy's head was starting to spin. If they could figure it out... Her parents could too. She would be disowned. "I... Wasn't out to anyone except maybe the girl I flirted with in senior high" She pondered for a second, wondering what could have possibly turned up in a background check. "I flew under the radar most of my life. The only real connection I had to the community was on the internet, always under a pseud. And even that I kept to a minimum, I was scared my parents would figure it out..." Just as Ash nodded and wrote something down, she realized she'd fucked up. This wasn't part of her hunky dory family history. *'Fuck'* she thought. *'fuck fuck fuck'*

"Well, it's entirely possible the UESF tracked your internet. It's not the first time I heard stories like that, and it likely won't be the last time. Regardless, did anything come to mind you wanted to talk about?" They looked at her over their glasses.

Lucy nodded. Now it didn't matter anymore. She wanted to just rip the band aid off. "Yeah, maybe. So... I was kinda... struggling with my identity, you know? When I was like, 16, I had... Few friends and never had a romantic partner. Not for a lack of trying, both by me and by others, but either I wasn't interested in them or they weren't interested in me. Or noticed me. No one ever noticed me to be honest it's been... A thing. Yeah... And... So... You know what, forget it." She decided to not continue that train of thought, but fully expected Ash to keep digging.

Instead they replied "Okay, you don't have to talk about it. Anything else you want to talk about?"

Lucy shook her head. She felt tears creeping up and was scared of another flashback, but she held them back.

"Lucy? Listen to my voice, can you hear me?"

She suddenly snapped out of it. "Yes, I can hear you, sorry, I was thinking. So that background check.. Do you know what it dug up?" She frantically tried to change the subject, and to her surprise, Ash nodded and grabbed a blue folder from behind them.

"I can look it up." They looked through the pages until they found something of interest and said "This here says you wrote stories on a site called 'Archive of our own'. Apparently there were 'heavy indications' about your identity on there."

Lucy looked at ash in disbelief and they tilted their head. *'The surreality'* she thought, as she suddenly started laughing, which visibly surprised Ash. "'Heavy indications' is a way to describe it. Someone had to read that stuff?" Lucy couldn't stop from laughing as Ash looked at them questioningly. When she had calmed down, she said "I wrote smut. Lesbian smut of course. I thought no one would ever read it, let alone the military that was trying to -" She burst out laughing again, making Ash join in with a chuckle. She couldn't believe someone actually read her shit for work.

"Well, that could indeed explain it." They closed the folder and put it back. "Any more... hobbies of yours I should know about?" They joked, then took on their sterner expression. "If you want to tell me, of course."

Lucy was once again taken aback by the sudden shift in Ash's emotions. Her body stiffened. "See, that's what I meant. You go into being emotionally available and suddenly you decide that



it was too much and you go cold as a rock. I much prefer the other Ash.” She didn’t realize she had spoken it aloud at first, and instantly cringed. This was not how you were supposed to talk to your counselor, she thought.

But Ash sighed. They went limp in their chair and replied “I know you much prefer this ‘other Ash’. But that’s not the Ash you can have. I’m your counselor, not your friend, and pretending otherwise would not be healthy. Trust me, I know.”

Lucy was taken aback. There was a sadness in Ash’s voice that she couldn’t quite pin down. “I don’t know whether I need a counselor.” She said tentatively. Thinking about it, she probably did, but she didn’t want to admit that. “I’d be much better off with a friend”

Ash nodded, expression once again neutral, voice more steady. “You do have Charlotte though.”

“We barely know each other. Well, I barely know her.”

Ash thought about it for a second. “Well, she is still on guard duty for you until 1400 hours. I’m tired, I’m going to bed, you can go meet Charlotte outside, I’m sure you have plans. Hush now, I’ve got to write a report.”

Lucy was confused but accepted the chance to flee the suddenly awkward conversation and left the room, pondering what had just happened.

**FREEFALL**

Lucy nearly ran into Charlotte who was outside, talking to another man. “Ah, Lucy, glad to see you! I’ll just wrap this up real quick and I’ll be right with you.” She turned to the man. “Thank you Corporal, I’ll take this into account. Please do come to me with any concerns.”

“Aye Serge!” The Corporal left Lucy and Charlotte alone.

“You’re early Lucy!” Charlotte said as she turned towards Lucy. “Did your session go well?”

“Yes, thank you” Lucy said. “We talked about you, actually, Ash said I needed a friend.”

Charlotte laughed. “I’m honored to have come up! Come on, I still got to show you the sparring room!”

Lucy practically got dragged through half the ship while Charlotte made quick conversation, before reaching a room with padding on the floor and walls. “No one here at this hour of the day!” she said excitedly. Lucy barely managed a thought before lying on the floor. Charlotte had spun her around and pulled her legs away from under her. Lucy was in a state of shock when Charlotte landed next to her gracefully. “So what do you wanna do?” She asked likely.

Lucy realized she was panting. The fall had completely taken her breath away. “I don’t know” she replied “some basics maybe so you can’t just throw me like that?”

Charlotte chuckled. “It’s not yeeting now, is it?”

“Not quite yet no.” Lucy replied.

“Well, the first thing you should learn is how to fall, we’ll do that today.”

And that they did. Lucy fell for over an hour, falling, getting up, falling again. At one point, Charlotte took her in a grip from behind and threw both of them on the floor. Towards midday when lunch would start, Lucy was getting tired and asked for a break, but Charlotte said “Well, before we go you should show me what you can do.”

Without a warning, she tackled Lucy and threw her a good meter. Lucy’s reflexes kicked in and she tried to roll it off, hitting her head on the flooring in the process. “Ouch” she said, as she rubbed her neck. “I think we’ll have to do another lesson in falling.”

Charlotte laughed and helped her up, and they went to get lunch. Lucy sat down at a table mindlessly and didn’t realize the tray on the table until Ash sat down next to her with a cup of coffee in their hands. “Hello, Lucy” they said.

“Oh” Lucy said, looking up. “I hadn’t realized you sat here.”

She went to get up but Ash said “It’s okay. I was almost finished regardless.”

They continued eating, when Charlotte arrived with both their trays. “Oh” She said when she saw Ash at their table.

“This seems to be a common slang among you two.” Ash stated.

Charlotte chuckled while Lucy sat still. They started eating, and Ash soon left without saying another word.

“Talkative today, aren’t they?” Charlotte noted.

Lucy just replied with a short “Mhm” and continued eating. She was sure it had something to do with her, but she felt no need talking about it.

When they finished eating their comparatively short meal, Charlotte took Lucy to Doctor Johnston. Lucy dreaded the conversation to be had, and she was not wrong. It was a slow talk with many breaks, as the doctor noted down things. She started realizing how much she appreciated the more talkative counselor. At least they had conversations and not monologues, she thought. Johnston noted at the end that he could only fit at most two sessions at week into his schedule, and went to open the door for her, but she was quicker. “I’m able to open doors myself, thank you.” she said with an air of annoyance. She hated people being courteous for the sake of it. When she came outside, Charlotte was just passed off by another guard Lucy didn’t know yet. They were not particularly talkative either, and at Lucy’s request they went to the sparring room. They said it would be best to practice her falling, so she did that. The new guard was a much better guide than Charlotte, and when she requested they throw her across the room, they hesitantly did so. Lucy landed well and caught her head in time, hitting the floor with her lower arms first.

“Alright, now with a little less preparation” she said, at which the guard threw themselves at her, launching her halfway across the room. Instinct took over and Lucy landed on her hands. “Darn it!” she yelled, the guard visibly worried. “It’s fine, I’ll have to do this a few times. We’ll do this again un-” she was cut off by the guard once again throwing her to the floor. She reacted in time and rolled off the momentum.

“Wow!” the guard said in amused amazement. “That went better than I thought it would, you’re not quite the lost cause I thought at first.”

Lucy panted as she got up, had barely found her balance before the guard once again pulled her legs from under her. She caught herself on the arms instead of the hands this time, when something in the guard’s pocket sounded a short chirp. They pulled out a phone and went grim. “We’re late to your appointment with Houston, let’s go.”

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK

Ash sat in their office when they heard a knocking on the door. They were not mentally prepared yet to meet with Lucy again, so they called “I need a minute!”

They rummaged around audibly, hoping it would distract Lucy. When they had collected themselves, they decided to go open the door themselves.

“Hello, sorry Miss Meier - I mean, Lucy. Come in, come in.”

Lucy walked in with a spring in her step, which gave Ash confidence for a good session. They sat down and asked “Lucy, I think we’ve had enough sessions for me to ask. Do you prefer me sitting on this side of the desk or on yours?”

Lucy shrugged. “I really don’t care.” She said, but when Ash made themselves comfortable in the chair, she continued “Maybe on my side would be good. Trying it out. You know?”

Ash nodded and pushed their chair around the desk. “I like to do this when I get to know my clients better, as it feels less formal. How are you doing?”

Lucy thought about it. “Why the sudden shift to less formality? I thought it was really important to you?”

Ash nodded. “There’s a difference between formalities and professional distance. Professional distance might be a formality, but it goes deeper than that. Formalities can be dropped with time, professional distance cannot.”

Lucy nodded. She thought about bringing up the friends thing again, but decided against it. *‘I’ll bring it up another time’* she thought.

“What are you thinking about now, Lucy?” Ash asked.

“Just... Things. And stuff.” she panicked internally a little bit but calmed down quickly after when she realized what she would say. “My back is sore. I did falling training with my guard and with Charlotte earlier and it kind of still hurts. I’m getting better at it though.”

Ash nodded, jotting something down in their notebook.

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‘Physical interaction’, they wrote down next to the list of things they knew about Lucy and Charlotte. It was becoming quite the interesting list they thought.

When they finished their thought and Lucy hadn’t said anything yet, they asked “How do you feel about it? Gaining control over your body?”

“Good” Lucy replied cheerily. “The guard, I didn’t catch their name, threw me about half the length of the sparring room and I didn’t even get hurt. It’s great!”

Ash nodded. “And do you intend to continue your sparring training?” they asked cautiously.

Lucy nodded. “I want to be able to defend myself a little bit. I always wanted that but never had the time. Or money.” She started shifting in her chair, Ash noticed, so they nodded and

waited for Lucy to continue. *'I would have thought her family could have paid'* they pondered, when Lucy continued "I... I don't really talk about this often... Or ever... But... I had a friend. As a kid. Our families knew each other, but around 12 years old we started drifting apart." She paused for a second and continued "I wasn't interested in him. But he was in me. And my parents decided to arrange a date for me with him to. I don't know, get me out of the room for once. We went on that date, it went horribly, I left him standing outside when I had said I would drive him home. He's an asshole anyways." Lucy shook her head.

Ash paused for a few seconds, giving Lucy space, and then asked "How do you feel about this now?"

"Awful. But not because of the date per se, more of the aftermath. I didn't come home for a few nights. I stayed in my car, lived off of whatever money I had with me, begged a bit. When I came home, my parent's were pissed. In their eyes, I had just destroyed a perfect relationship. They made me call him to apologize. I made up some bullshit story, I don't remember, but..."

Ash suppressed their surprise. They hadn't thought about it much, but they hadn't thought their parents were that kind of people.

Lucy trailed off but quickly caught herself again. "I... Had a flashback of that story. That one session. Before I had my traumatic mutism episode." Ash nodded and Lucy continued "But that wasn't the trigger. Of the episode that is. I..." Lucy sighed. "Something more happened between us. After the date. I didn't like it but I felt obligated to. Until some day I slapped him and he became really aggressive and..." She went silent.

Ash sat still. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I want to talk about it!" Lucy cried out, tears starting to form. "I want to get this shit out and you're... You're the first person I can trust with this."

# THE EVENT

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***CWs: Graphic description of sexual assault.***

***Non-Consensual Breath Control***

***Alcohol abuse***

***Reader beware! You can skip this chapter without missing anything!***

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Lucy was sitting on her bed, with a glass of gin in her hand. She had started with mostly tonic but today, she left that out. ‘*Better effect*’ she had been telling herself, when Jonathan entered the room. She shuddered but gulped down another sip of the gin.

“Good evening sweetheart! How was your day?” Jonathan chirped. She hated it when people seemed so... Happy.

“Dreadful. Like every day.”

“Oh” Jonathan frowned at her, then at the glass in her hand. By now it was nearly empty.

Lucy looked at it as well. “Yeah, if you don’t mind, I’ll fetch me another”

Jonathan did not mind. He knew it was easier to get to her when she was drunk.

Lucy went to the desk, where her growing alcohol collection was stored, and poured herself another glass of gin. “Want sum well?” She asked, already feeling slightly drunk now that she was standing. Jonathan only shook his head and sat on the bed. Lucy elected to sit in the chair this time. “So how your day?” She said as she took another sip of Gin. It had stopped burning several glasses ago. ‘*Several glasses ago?*’ She thought grimly, but ignored the thought. ‘*Stupid thoughts*’ she thought, but realized she said it out loud when Jonathan looked at her. He was getting ready for bed, apparently having not heard her earlier question. He put on his pajamas and laid down on the bed.

Before they got ‘together’ there was only a single bed there, Lucy reminisced. Her parents bought her a larger bed, when Jonathan decided to move in. He called it a ‘change of scenery’, but Lucy knew it was just so he could be closer to her.

She had tried running away, but ended up being scooped up by police and brought home. She had given up on the idea of ever getting rid of this guy.

He gestured her to the bed, and she rose the glass, trying to indicate she was still drinking. But when she looked at it, it was already empty. She poured herself another without thinking about it. Maybe it would delay the inevitable.

When she had finished that glass too, she could barely stand up. She walked over to the bed and lied down, murmuring something about sleep and tried to doze off, but Jonathan had other ideas. He spun her around and kissed her. She could taste the cigarette he must have had before coming home. ‘*Home*’ Lucy thought with disdain. She had grown to hate that word.

When Lucy tried to retreat from the kiss that went on longer than it had to, Jonathan pat her but didn't stop. When she tried to pull away, he grabbed her hair, making her squeal. "You like that?" He asked in what should have been a seductive tone but came out anything but.

Lucy gave up, and let the scene continue. It went on for what felt like half an hour, though from Lucy's experience, it was probably just a minute, when he withdrew. She caught for air but found nothing but staleness. He pressed his hand against her mouth, the other unzipping his pants. "You need air little one?" He pressed her nose closed.

She was used to it. 'Breath Play' was his idea of sexy. She tried to grasp for air but couldn't, only feeling her lungs aching. He held her like that for a few seconds, before releasing her, grasping for air. Jonathan's hand slipped under her shirt and Lucy started feeling distant to her body.

She woke up hours later, barely remembering anything from that night, only feeling the aches everywhere.

## RUNNING OFF AGAIN

“He never really accepted it when I said no” Lucy continued after retelling one of the events. “He was sure I liked it when I explicitly told him I didn’t. I tried running away, that didn’t work. So I did the last thing I could think of to make that shit bearable. I drank. Every evening, I started with something, most often gin with a varying amount of tonic. Sometimes more sometimes less, but I regretted the ‘too much tonic’ evenings. I was still at school, failed a year, decided to fuck it and got into heaps of trouble.” Lucy paused. She wasn’t very coherent. “I’m sorry, brain is difficult right now. I just. Well, my parents, you know the supportive parents story? Yeah that was bullshit, they would hate me if they knew I wasn’t their perfectly cishet girl. It’s just. Fuck.”

Ash looked at her. When Lucy didn’t continue for a while, they asked “Do you need something? Do you want to stop talking? We can continue another-”

Lucy shook her head “No! I just, I’m sorry. I need to get my thoughts in order. Although if you have some Whiskey I would greatly appreciate it. That was a joke.” She added when Ash looked at her with a worried expression.

“I just... Okay, so my family doesn’t know I’m lesbian. My then boyfriend didn’t know it and just took whatever he wanted, and I escaped from it with alcohol. So far so good.” She sighed. “But one day, I just. I had enough. When he tried to get me to bed one night, I went into panic mode and hit him. He didn’t like that and he was stronger than me. So that night ended in me crying and shit. That was the first night for a while that I didn’t fuck my head with gin. And I regret that to this day.” Lucy shook her head. “I just shouldn’t have fought it. It was dumb, it was obvious. That it would end like that. Ugh.”

She paused again, and after a while Ash said “This wasn’t your fault. You were trying to protect yourself. From what you said, this sounded like rape. And you are fully in your right to defend yourself from rape.”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah, I thought about that too. I don’t know, I guess I was too complicit for it to be rape, you know?”

Ash leaned forward slightly, keeping their tone gentle but firm. “Lucy, I’m hearing how much you’ve blamed yourself for all of this. But from what you’re telling me, it wasn’t about what you did or didn’t do - it was about him ignoring your boundaries. That’s not something you control.” They paused before adding, “You were scared, you fought back - that’s a natural reaction. It doesn’t make what he did your fault.”

Lucy looked away, her expression conflicted. “I don’t know. I keep thinking, maybe if I’d just stayed quiet, it wouldn’t have gotten so bad.”

Ash shook their head slowly. “You don’t have to rationalise his actions. You didn’t owe him compliance, and you didn’t deserve what he did. This is on him, not you.”

Lucy thought about it. When Ash waited for her to continue, she decided to continue with the story. “So yeah, that was probably the trauma Johnston keeps talking about. And after that... I ran away. Again. I was 18 at that point and no one could stop me, so...”



Ash listened as Lucy recounted the story. They seldom interjected, letting Lucy talk ahead.

The telling of the story took another one and a half hours. They had been jumping around in the timeline, and Ash was exhausted from trying to commit it all to memory.

“So yeah... That’s where I stand. I’m sorry for lying to you, I... Don’t talk about this often. Or ever.”

Ash nodded. “I’m proud of you for telling me this. I know it’s hard, but talking about it is a good first step.” Ash paused, thinking about what to say next. “You don’t have to be sorry for not telling the whole truth. You don’t owe me the truth, you can decide on what to talk about during these sessions.” Lucy nodded and stared blankly at the wall behind Ash. “Do you have anything else on your mind, Lucy?” Ash asked when they noticed Lucy’s leg was bouncing up and down.

Lucy just shrugged. “I have a lot on my mind, I suppose. But nothing I think I want to talk about right now.”

Ash nodded. They looked at their watch, it was almost 1800 hours, which was confirmed by a grumble in their stomach. “Well, I think we talked about enough today. I would like you to talk about this with Johnston too. You don’t have to tell him all of it but some parts, he can surely help you with.” They paused. “If you don’t have anything you want to talk about still, I propose we get dinner.” Lucy nodded, and she went to meet her guard outside, who made a remark about an extended session. They left and Ash sat in their office quietly. They had notes to write, and plenty of them at that.

## DISTRACTIONS

Lucy sat down at the table that had become her usual, when Charlotte appeared. She smiled at Lucy and quickly filled her tray, waddling over. “Hey Lucy! How’re you doing?” She said in a happy mood. Lucy wondered what could have possibly made her so happy, when she said “I got to do some sparring training, which was pretty much just beating up a Chief, so I’m in a splendid mood!”

Lucy shook her head. ‘*Sadist*’ she thought, adding it to the mental list of things she knew about Charlotte. “I’m doing good, thank you. Had a long talk with Ash, and a lot of fall training. I’m getting passable at it now.”

Charlotte put on a joking hurt expression. “You cheated on me beating you up?? How dare you!”

Lucy laughed. “Just with my guard, don’t worry.” She nodded towards her guard, who was watching them from a table away. “Want to see what I can do?”

“Sure, after I filled the pothole in my stomach. I’m exhausted!” They ate and talked small talk, and suddenly Charlotte took Lucy’s hand and looked at the taken aback woman and quickly pulled her hand back. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have. I...” Charlotte started stammering.

Lucy looked at her. Charlotte was flustering and Lucy thought ‘*Am I being flirted with?*’ before realizing she was flustering too. ‘*I could be into that*’ she thought, taking Charlottes hand gingerly. “It’s okay, I was just surprised” she said.

They were chatting until a wave of people entered the room, seemingly a shift had just ended, and they got up and returned their trays. “Now, about that offer to let me beat you up...” Charlotte said, smiling.

Lucy laughed. “I think I’ll let you watch, I am more used to their tackling.” She nodded at the guard, who was following them at a respectful distance.

When they reached the sparring room, there were two people inside, a middle aged man with long hair and a similar aged woman. They were going at each other with what looked like training swords, but when they entered and the man got distracted, the woman took the chance and sliced at him. Lucy saw blood, and he yelped. “Come on!” He yelled. “Why do you always get to slice me??”

The woman laughed as she cleaned her blade. “I don’t get distracted like you. It is my duty to teach you to concentrate.” He pouted, they bowed at each other, and continued their training. Lucy was fascinated by it as she watched, realizing too late that she, too, had dropped her focus as she yelped, flying through the room.

Her guard had tackled her from the side, and she instinctively turned to face the floor. Just before she hit it, she curled her head to her chest and prepared for the worst, but she managed to roll off the momentum, barely stopping before reaching the wall.

She got up as she saw the guard running toward her. She dropped to the floor, rolling over her shoulder as they reached her. She had no intention of flying against the wall today.

The guard seemed undeterred and when she got back up, they were beside her, pulling her legs away from under her. She yelped, only barely managing to land on her arms instead of hands, and she grappled to move away a few steps before getting up, letting her instinct take up a defensive position. The guard looked at her and said “Break”. She nodded, and tried to catch her breath, which she didn’t realize was quick and shallow until now. She looked around the room. Charlotte was leaning against a wall, nodding at her approvingly, while the two who had been fighting before were looking at her, apparently having paused their training.

The woman walked over to Lucy after handing the sword to the man and nodded. “That was an impressive reaction. How long have you been training?” She asked.

“Since today” Lucy responded, holding out her hand tentatively. “Lucy. Meier. Uh, I’m a new recruit.”

The woman just looked at her and nodded. “Cadet?” she asked simply. Lucy looked at her confused. She hadn’t thought of what her rank would be yet.

Charlotte chimed in. “Consultant Meier is non-military. She was selected as part of the Preston program.”

Lucy was surprised at that title. She hadn’t felt like she was helping, let alone consulting, at all.

“Well, Consultant Meier” The woman raised her hand. “I think you’ll make a good addition to the team.”

“Thank you”, Lucy replied, shaking the woman’s hand. “I’m sorry, Ma’am, I didn’t catch your name?”

She laughed. “Tayla.” She said. “And do not call me ma’am, I’m not that old.” Lucy nodded respectfully. “We shall meet again some day, and I will teach you some more techniques, you seem to be a quick study.” She turned around, took the sword from the mans hand, and they started training again.

Lucy talked to Charlotte for a second, asking for feedback on her falling, to which Charlotte said “The grace isn’t there yet. But you land well. Next time you run off, I don’t have to be that careful anymore”. She was clearly joking but held a stern expression for a second, which made Lucy worry. Then she burst out laughing. “Don’t worry, I won’t ‘yeet’ you across the room. Unless you want me to, of course.” She smirked, and Lucy felt relaxed.

## MORE THAN FRATERNIZING

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***CWs: Emotional manipulation***

***Internalized pressure and confusion around consent***

***Reader beware! You can skip this chapter without missing anything!***

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*‘This could work out’* She thought, as Charlotte walked back to her quarters with her. She didn’t feel a strong connection with Charlotte like she had expected from a relationship, but having one at all appealed to her. “Well, wanna come in?” She asked, when they reached her quarters.

Charlotte shrugged, but followed her in, sitting down on the bed. “Wow this really is bare bones.” she commented.

Lucy chuckled. “You’ve been here before, remember? And it’s fine, I brought some decoration.” She pointed at the shelves next to her desk.

Charlotte nodded thoughtfully. “I have been, true. But that was when you were lying on the floor crying, I think I had other priorities than looking at your room.”

She got up and walked to the shelf, where she looked at a wax figurine of Geordi La Forge. “Star Trek fan?” she asked.

“Evidently”, Lucy answered while sorting her diary. She realized she hadn’t written much today and started recounting the stories. Starting at the counseling session and the throwing lesson by Charlotte, when she heard Charlotte moving over and stopped.

“Diary?” Lucy nodded. She surprisingly didn’t care whether Charlotte read it, and Charlotte seemingly thought so too, as she read the first paragraph of the entry. “The event?” She asked curiously.

Lucy sighed. “I recounted it today already, I don’t feel like doing it again.”

She felt Charlotte leaning her head against Lucy’s, which she took as a sign of understanding. Charlotte continued reading, and when she was done she embraced Lucy. “You can always get a hug from me” she said softly.

Lucy snuggled into the embrace. She suddenly felt safe, more than she had during the whole journey. They stayed like that for a while, until Charlotte said “I... Have been meaning to ask you. Are you... single?” She clearly wasn’t comfortable asking this.

Lucy thought to herself *‘This is real’* and she said “Yeah”

Charlotte nodded. “Do you... mind...” Lucy shook her head. Charlotte pulled her up carefully and embraced her again. “What do you want to do? I don’t want to rush you.”

Lucy felt an uncomfortable knot form in her chest. *‘Probably just anxiety’* she thought, discarding the feeling. This was fine, it would be fun. “Cuddle maybe?”

Charlotte nodded and they lied down to cuddle. Charlotte put her hand around Lucy and they lay like that for several minutes, before Lucy felt Charlotte stir. She adjusted, half asleep already, when she felt Charlotte's hand stroking her hair. "You're beautiful" she said, giving Lucy a careful kiss on the nose. Lucy felt herself flushing, and suddenly the knot was back. Or just got tighter. She didn't get why, but she suddenly felt uncomfortable. *'First time'* she thought, and she replied with a kiss. *'First time first time first time I'm fine just nervous'*. Her head was going wild, when Charlotte made the first move.

## WHAT DO I WANT...

Diary: November 21th, 2023, supplemental

I had a counseling session today. Again. Like every day. But it's getting better. With them I mean. I think we calmed down now, a bit. We had a talk about my history, and they seemed surprised that I lied but they might have just been playing a character, and it was very subtle anyways.

I also did training with the guard, they threw me across the room, and I got really good at ca

Diary: November 22nd, 2023

Hey diary, sorry for the abrupt ending, Charlotte had distracted me. We had a thing tonight. Quite a thing.

And I don't know how to feel about it yk because, on the one hand, it was nice, having something with someone that I actually don't detest but... It's weird, yk, I thought it would be... Nicer? I don't know

I guess writing my stories, I always imagined it as a really good thing, but I kind of drifted away, I think just out of anxiety for the first time...

---

Lucy sat in Ash's office while they were getting her some water. She pondered last night, when Ash came in. They handed her a glass of water and put their own on the table. "I will ask for a small side table for my clients" they said, seemingly deep in thought. Suddenly, they were back, focusing at Lucy again. "Lucy, hello. How are you?"

Lucy pondered. She couldn't verbalize the feeling, so she said "Good. I think? I... How much do you want to know about my personal life?"

Ash smiled. "As much as you want to tell me."

Lucy nodded. "I had a... Thing with Charlotte. Yesterday night. We talked, and then we kinda... I don't know, agreed to lie in bed together? And do... Activities."

Ash nodded, waiting for Lucy to continue. When she didn't, they asked "How do you feel about that now?"

"I feel... Good? Better than the last time I did something. But that was with a guy..." She shook her head, trying to get the images out of her head. "I just... Don't know if that's what I want, you know? I don't know, maybe I'm asexual. It's... It's weird to me, like I should have enjoyed myself but... I mean I did but... It wasn't really what I expected you know?"

Ash leaned back. "That is valid. Not everyone feels the same way about sexuality. Have you felt this way before?" Lucy shook her head. "You talked yesterday about your prior experiences, and the issues you had sorting them in your mind. Do you want to talk about how last night felt different?"

Lucy pondered this for a second. She didn't want to think about how it felt, but she also knew it might help her understand herself. "Well, it honestly... I don't know, it was just... I felt less uncomfortable. Most of the time with... *him*... I was wasted anyways so... I was... Hm."

She tried to collect her thoughts. Form a coherent sentence. "I don't know, it really wasn't that... different? I just... Charlotte was more keen on making me happy instead of just herself, but other than that... I still felt... Like I wasn't really there? I just... I think I just don't enjoy it. With others I mean." She shook her head. *'That wasn't more coherent'*

Ash nodded, jotting something down. They looked back up and said "Do you feel like you could have enjoyed it more with someone else?"

Lucy shook her head, then paused. *'I don't know, I've never had anyone else'* she thought.

She cursed at herself when Ash answered "That's understandable. You're not obligated to know these things, they are part of your journey."

Lucy was still cursing at herself for saying thoughts out loud when Ash looked at her. "What are you thinking about? You look troubled."

Lucy shook her head. "Nothing, just. I think things and they come out as words, I almost never had that before yesterday, except when drinking, and it really really sucks."

Ash tilted their head. "Did you not want to say something you said?"

Lucy shook her head again. "That whole 'I don't have experience' thing was meant for my brain, not for you."

Ash nodded. "I already forgot you said that. So, how do you feel about your experience?"

"I don't know... I... You know it's hard to believe you forget anything, I don't think that'll work on me."

Ash shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about, thus I can't talk about it, whatever that would be."

It seemed almost like they were joking, but Lucy believed they meant well so continued. "I feel like... I might have gotten this wrong my whole life, you know? I always knew I didn't want men" she almost spat the last word "but I never... I didn't consider that... You know... I might not want either?"

Ash nodded. "That's understandable. Our identity - orientation that is, is very complex and might even be fluid. There is no right or wrong answer, there is only how you feel about it."

Lucy thought about it. How *did* she feel? She shook her head. "So what am I gonna do? I... I don't know, I don't want to destroy my relationship with Charlotte, I like her, but..." Lucy trailed off again, and it took a few seconds for her to catch herself again. "I don't know. I feel more like she's a friend than a partner, but... Friends don't do this with each other, do they?"

"That is entirely up to them" Ash replied. "If there is a mutual understanding between friends, it's entirely reasonable to draw the boundaries somewhere else than others might."

Lucy nodded. “I think... What’s lacking here is the mutual understanding, you know? I don’t... I don’t know, I feel like I’m not really the right person for... Her.”

Ash nodded. “Then you should talk to her about that.”

It felt almost automatic, like they had been waiting to say that for the past fifteen minutes. Lucy nodded, going stiff. “You planned this, didn’t you?” Ash tilted their head. “You knew I wouldn’t feel comfortable with her. You think it’s just about her. That I just don’t like her in particular.”

Ash shook their head. “I knew you were uncomfortable with it because you’ve been saying as much. But I never questioned your assertion about your sexuality. You can talk to them regardless.”

Lucy relaxed a little. “You’re probably right. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have lashed out at you. What would I even say?”

“Tell her the truth. What do you want from Charlotte?”

Lucy thought about it for a second. *‘Friendship? A shoulder to cry on? Safety?’* She wondered if she had said it out loud again, but based on the lack of reaction from Ash, she didn’t think so. “I don’t know” She said. “A friend. Someone I can talk to. But...” She thought about it. *‘Don’t I want a relationship? Maybe Ash is right...’* She continued. “I guess I just, I don’t know what I really want. Not only from her, but generally.” She shrugged. “I guess I’ll have to talk to her about what she wants as well?”

Ash nodded. “That would be a good way to get on the same page about your feelings. Maybe if she lays out what she wants from you, you can better decide on whether your feelings align.”

Lucy nodded. “Thank you, I’ll talk to her right away. Can I leave please?”

Ash nodded. “You don’t have to ask for permission to leave early. Go ahead, have a nice rest of the day.”

Lucy mumbled a thanks as she left the room, only barely hearing Ash call “See you at 1600 hours!”



CHAPTER 29

## I DIDN'T -

Lucy had her guard ask Charlotte for lunch. They met at the cafeteria, Charlotte looking excited, as they went to take a table in a quieter spot. Lucy shifted as they sat down. She was way too nervous what was going to happen now.

"What's up? How'd you enjoy last night?" Lucy started shifting again but Charlotte just continued. "I'm sorry that I left so early." She paused. "What's on your mind?"

Lucy's leg started bouncing. She thought she was prepared... "I..."

Lucy sat silent for a few seconds, expecting a wait until she had collected her thoughts, but Charlotte interrupted her thinking. "You know, I rarely had someone who I had this kind of connection with. You're beautiful and so nice always and just... So special." She said softly.

Lucy's world started spinning. She wanted to collect her thoughts, so she stalled. "Special?"

Charlotte nodded. "I just feel like. You get me and I rarely have that. I never have it that it just... Clicks."

Lucy started breathing heavily. "I don't think... I like you like... Uhh..."

"Like that?" Charlotte asked after a short break, her voice calm and steady.

"Yes." Lucy replied, slightly shaking. "I'm not even sure I can like anyone like that..."

Charlotte stared at Lucy in disbelief as she continued. "I've been... I've been trying to figure... It's not you! It's just... I'm not wired like that I think, I just, I don't know, it's not you it's just the way I feel I don't think I can't I you know -" Lucy choked on her words and stopped. She had said too much again.

"Care about other people?" Charlotte continued. "Because it really feels like you don't. You did *that* with me and then you decide you're not into it? That's not okay Lucy."

"I- I- I didn't-" Lucy stammered, trying to collect her thoughts. "I didn't mean to it was just, I thought I wanted it but I-" She broke off again.

Charlotte nodded. "I'm sorry. You kind of... Ruined this now." She got up and left. Lucy was staring at the void she had left. *'What the fuck just happened'*

# THOUGHTS

Lucy still sat at the table half an hour later, blankly staring in front of her when someone tapped her on her shoulder. “Miss Meier, I’m leaving now, do you need anything?” Lucy shook her head, barely having the realization that it was her guard. She frankly didn’t care when they switched. It really didn’t matter to her.

The new guard set down next to her, barely inside her field of vision. They said something to her, but she didn’t understand. *‘What’s up?’* she thought. *‘What’s up? What a weird thought, what do you think is up?’* Lucy was mostly confused now. *‘Miss Meier, are you okay?’* Lucy felt a flicker of annoyance, but it felt far away. *‘What the hell I never had my thoughts address me as Miss Meier. Shush. I don’t want to think about it.’* The thoughts stopped for a second before they returned, with a slightly different quality. *‘Lucy? Can you hear me?’* Lucy was now irritated and snapped at her thoughts. *‘For gods sake you’re my thoughts I can’t not hear you shut up and get out of here!’* But her thoughts wouldn’t stop. *‘Lucy, feel what’s under your fingers’* *‘What’s under my fingers? It’s...’* Lucy was confused. There was nothing under her fingers. *‘There’s nothing there, I’m probably just letting my hands dangle’* Her thoughts were panicking. *‘Lucy, listen to my voice, okay? Focus on me. What does my voice sound like?’* Lucy huffed. *‘Stupid question, it...’* Lucy was confused. *‘... sounds like...’* When she didn’t continue, the voice in her head, which she decided weren’t her thoughts, said *‘Lucy, it’s Ash. Lucy, feel for your fingers. What do you feel?’* Lucy laughed. *‘Ah right, Ash. We had this conversation before, brain, you’re not gonna trick me again’* *‘Get Doctor Johnston I don’t know what to do anymore.’* her thoughts said. Weird. *‘Why would I think that?’* *‘You aren’t thinking this Lucy.’*

## PUNISHMENT

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***CWs: Stark physical violence***

***Physical punishment***

***Emotional manipulation***

***Intense power dynamics***

***Reader beware! You can skip this chapter without missing anything!***

---

Ash was panicking when Doctor Johnston came. They had a quick walk through of what happened, and the Doctor nodded. He pointed at the guard. “We’re helping her to the Infirmary. You take her left, I take her right, when I tell you.”

He approached Lucy and talked to her. Ash was feeling dizzy so they sat down. They looked around and saw quite the commotion. Some people looked at the scene, while officers wisely tried to disperse the crowd. Ash got up. She had to do something.

---

She found the guard quickly. “What the hell happened?”

He looked at her with bleary eyes. “It... Miss Meier and Sergeant Greene had an argument. The sergeant left and Lucy stayed, I thought nothing of it. I’m... I’m sorry I didn’t know this would happen”

“It’s okay, I’m not blaming you. I’m sorry, I’m just extremely worried for her. Did you hear what they were talking about?”

The guard shook his head at first, then tilted it and said “I heard some pieces. Just, Miss Meier said something about not wanting this and the sergeant said something like ‘You ruined this’ ”

Ash shook their head. She really fucked that one up, didn’t she. They thanked the guard and left to find Charlotte, but she wasn’t in her quarters, or the rec room. She looked around the ship, and after a while found her in the sparring room. She was fighting against three younger soldiers, hitting hard but taking blows as well. They were swarming around her, each a stick, while she held two. Ash could see a tired Cadet leaning against the wall, seemingly bruised.

They didn’t stop when Ash entered, or when they quietly said her name. Ash was angry but she didn’t want to let it out. Yet.

Charlotte didn’t respond, even when Ash loudly called her name. They decided it was time for more drastic measures and grabbed a stick from the rack and approached her. Charlotte didn’t pay her any mind as Ash joined the fight. They weren’t as well trained, but they were angry. Charlotte, suddenly having four opponents again, yelped and jumped at one of the officers, who evaded her and only barely missed her back with the stick. Charlotte rolled off momentum,

suddenly not being trapped anymore, and looked at Ash. A split second later, she was back to fighting, this time seeming more relaxed, until Ash yelled “Back! All of you”

The three others retreated, leaving only Ash and Charlotte circling each other. “You have no chance” Charlotte said calmly.

Ash laughed dryly “I’m angry. That’s enough for me.”

Charlotte looked at them grimly. “I’m not going easy on you this time, Ashley.”

Ash looked at her suspiciously. They knew she was trying to distract her when she jumped at them. Ash simply stepped out of the way and let the stick drop to Charlotte’s Ankle. She fell on the floor with a thump. “You seem to be out of shape, Charlotte”, they commented as they kicked away one of the sticks. “For an even playing field. Get up Sergeant.”

She got up, and they once again circled each other. There were a few mild attacks here or there, and Ash knew they were to tire them out. But they did the same. A quick stab, parrying the following attack. A swing, a counter, and a parry. A ruse, a preemptive parry and Ash saw an opportunity, stabbing at Charlotte. They hit her chest, drawing out the air.

“You’re going easy on me” they said. Charlotte used that as a prompt to launch a full out attack, targeting Ash’s arms. They deflected instinctively, and countered, hitting Charlottes secondary shoulder. Charlotte yelped and jumped back. Back to circling.

Ash barely saw the next attack coming, only barely moving out of the way as the swing grazed their arm. There was force there, they decided, and moved back to the fencing strategies from before. They had barely taken position when another swing came. They deflected it with ease, feeling their muscle memory jump back into action as the familiar slashes and stabs came. Charlotte seemingly also thought of fencing, and they traded attack with attack, until one hit.

Ash stumbled back, nearly dropping their stick as the attack found it’s target right in Ash’s abdomen. ‘*Bastard*’ they thought, and soon after, they were circling each other again. Ash attacked, Charlotte defended. Charlotte attacked, Ash defended. Occasionally there was the odd counter attack, but it was rare and never reached it’s target.

At one point Ash had enough. They would be full out attacking after the next attack by Charlotte, and they prepared for their hopefully last counter. The attack came, and Ash countered. Charlotte got ready to circle again, and Ash took that short period to attack. Charlotte parried too slowly and got hit in her side by Ash. Charlotte tried to attack back, but Ash was faster. They kicked at Charlotte’s knee, which yielded a scream, and then hit at her hand at which point she dropped the stick. Ash spun Charlotte around, pushed her to her knees and held the stick against her throat. Charlotte tried to push it away, but Ash was stronger, probably due to the adrenaline in their body.

“Happy now? Hope you’re enjoying yourself, honey” they said mockingly.

Charlotte started an answer but Ash pressed harder against her throat. “You’re not talking, I am. I’ll let you go when you’re done. And I decide when you are, understood?” Charlotte nodded, still stiff. They leaned closer “I think you need this. Do you?” Charlotte nodded again, choking and coughing. Ash moved further away, taking up a more advantaged stance again, but released the grip slightly. “Lucy is not good because of what you’ve done. You’re a bad girl” Charlotte squirmed, but Ash stepped on her foot. “You will nod when I call you a bad girl.

You deserve your punishment. Understood?” Charlotte calmed down a little bit and nodded. Ash continued “Your actions deeply affected her. First you abused your position, and then you decided to drop her when she didn’t give you what you wanted. You’re a bad girl.” Charlotte choked, seemingly trying to get a word out, but failed. She nodded. “You have to learn that your actions have consequences. I thought I taught you that, but apparently I failed. You’re a bad girl” Charlotte nodded again, more calmly now. Her body was relaxing slightly, and Ash continued. “You forced Lucy into a trauma response. She dissociated and I could not get her back. You’re a bad girl.” Charlotte once again nodded, visibly relaxed now. *‘Catharsis works time and time again’* Ash thought to themselves, before continuing “You should be ashamed of yourself. You use people for your own gain, and don’t consider how they might feel. You’re a bad girl.” Charlotte nodded. Tears were starting to run down her cheeks. Ash leaned down closer and whispered “If we were still together, your punishment would have been worse. Be glad we aren’t, but I cannot guarantee that I won’t go back to old habits if you hurt. Her. Ever. Again.” The last three words, she pulled the stick tighter and tighter, until Charlotte shook her head violently.

Ash recognized that as the end, and dropped the stick. They stayed near her for a few seconds before whispering “You took this well. You’re a good girl. Clean yourself up and get the fuck out of my sight.” They left Charlotte alone, spinning around to leave and saw the audience. They had completely forgotten about the four people fighting with Charlotte earlier and walked over. “None of you will drop a word about this. Not to your superior, not to your friends, not to me and especially not to Greene or Meier. You would not like the consequences. I do not have a problem punishing people when they do me wrong.” They pointed at Charlotte, who was still kneeling catching her breath, and paused, letting the words sink in before asking “Understood? Dismissed.” The four nodded and left the room in unison. When they had left, Ash sighed and moved over to Charlotte. “You were taking it well. I am proud of you for that. Did it help you?” Charlotte nodded, tried to say something, but Ash continued over her. “Me too. Go to your room, think about what you’ve done, and then meet me here at 1800 hours. Now hush.” They pat her lightly on the head, and Charlotte was off. They sighed again. They despised disciplinary actions, but sometimes... It was necessary.

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOHN

They met again at 1800 exactly. Ash was waiting inside the sparring room, having just told everyone to leave or get beaten to death. They were joking, but apparently the news of them beating up a Sergeant had spread around, and everyone left. They hadn't heard anything yet, so it was likely the four had held their word. *'Good, less catharsis for me'* They thought.

They stood still in the middle of the room, and as the minute turned, Charlotte walked in. They were wearing a jacket and a high collard shirt. Ash got worried. Had they gone too far? "Let me see that" they said, taking off the jacket and pulling down the collar. There was a clear mark and bruises everywhere.

"Just a fight I got in. Two angry people, you know how it goes." She clearly wasn't angry with Ash, as she whispered "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt Lucy. I felt she had hurt me but I understand now. That... This wasn't about just not liking me. This was about more. I... We should have had better consent, I realize now. She maybe wouldn't have agreed."

Ash nodded. "You seem to have had a change of mind to before getting the shit beaten out of you."

Charlotte grinned and said "Don't pretend you didn't take a beating too."

Ash reacted fast and spun her around, grabbing her from behind and holding a hand at their throat. "You know I don't like my girls mouthing me off"

Charlotte nodded, and Ash released her. "I am sorry too. I didn't realize we had an audience. I would have been more careful if I had, and I certainly wouldn't have done this." They pointed at Charlotte's neck, which she was carefully massaging. Ash sighed. They needed new ground rules. "Charlotte, I've been thinking. I know we've come to the mutual understanding that we had to end. But... I don't think that's good. For either of us. Do you want to come back to me?"

Charlotte stared at them in disbelief, before throwing herself at them. "Yes, I would like that" she said with slight throbbing in her voice. They embraced each other and only let go when an unwitting Cadet entered the room.

They stood in the door for a second, and Ash called "Come in, we're done here." The cadet nodded and entered. "Do you want some training stick practice, cadet?"

Ash and Charlotte both laughed. They were finally reunited.

---

Dear John!

Happy birthday! I hope you're doing well, and I hope this letter still reaches you on the 22nd! Please tell Sarah to bake you cookies from me, she can find the recipe in the yellow folder.

It's been a wild few days. Lucy started regular sessions with me. She was really unhappy at first but I think she got used to it. She started really opening up yesterday.

## CHAPTER 32 – HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOHN

Also, you won't be happy about it but... Well, I'll tell the whole story. Charlotte did Lucy bad, and I got really angry. As much as I don't want to admit it, I really care for her still... And I found Charlotte in the sparring room, fighting three Cadets with training sticks, seemingly really angry. I joined and had the others leave. And we fought for a while like that. And in the end, I had Charlotte in a grip with the stick at her throat and automation kicked in.

We're together again. Don't say ``You were the one who ended it!'' yes. I know. We haven't had a session in months, we're mainly now colleagues and not even in a direct hierarchy. She just...

Yeah that's about it. Thanks again for your letter, and don't forget your cookies!

Best,

Ashley

Digitally signed by: Ashley Houston, 2023-11-22T20:17:55Z

## TESTS

Lucy sat in the infirmary on an uncomfortable bed. She had been in here since Doctor Johnston carried her in after lunch. *'Why the actual fuck do I have to still be in here?'* she thought.

Doctor Johnston had said only a few more tests when she had returned from her blackout, but it had been more than a few. She lay under scanners, had her reflexes tested, had two ECGs, multiple checkups by Johnston and countless more she forgot. It all felt pointless.

Johnston had left for a session, and as he returned, quickly talked to Lucy about the options for medication. They decided on an SNRI and a low dose of Anticonvulsants. Lucy took the medication and met her guard outside, who was talking curiously to another military. "... And then they completely kicked her ass. And they had four people just watching this. Absolutely wild"

The guard, Harris, nodded just as he saw Lucy and she asked "Who beat up whom? Must have been quite the event for the audience."

She didn't really care much, but while they were walking, Harris explained. "After Doctor Johnston came to pick up where counselor Houston left you, they found Greene in the sparing room." Lucy wondered for a second who Greene was. The name seemed familiar but she couldn't pin it down. "They tried to have a discussion but apparently Greene ignored them so they joined in an ongoing fight, three to one, when they joined they told everyone else to leave, and then beat up Greene like she was a trainee. They were apparently very angry at her."

Lucy nodded, still in confusion about the name, so she asked "Who was Greene again?"

Harris looked at her questioningly. "Sergeant Charlotte Greene, our and your supervisor."

Lucy took a second before feeling the revelation. Charlotte. She was Sergeant Greene. With a suddenly dry throat she asked "Ash beat up Charlotte? Why did they do that?"

"They were angry at what had happened between you two" Harris replied. "As far as I can tell, Greene and you have had a falling out"

Lucy laughed. "Falling out? We had sex once, and never again, that's about as far as our relationship went."

They reached her room and she said "Harris, would you mind taking me on a walk later? I would like to find Ash." Harris nodded and she closed the door.

---

They found Ash a little later than Lucy wanted. They looked in every public room Lucy was allowed in, and then she asked whether they could go to their quarters. Harris asked them via their internal communication, and they replied with a quick "Sure".

When they reached their quarters, Lucy rang the bell and Ash called "Come in!". Lucy heard the door unlocking as they said that, and entered.

She was surprised at how different their room was to her own. She had expected they would have a window, but she hadn't expected how they had decorated it.



The bed had purple bedding, and above it hang a Non-Binary flag. The closet had posters all over it, held up with tape. Lucy only recognised one of the posters of an emo band she heard of before, all others looked like metal bands. To the left of the entrance, there was a shelf with a lava lamp glowing dimly, the orange light throwing calm shadows across the room. The shelf was filled with folders of different colours, seemingly unsorted. Some had a symbol on them that Lucy couldn't recognise, some had one that looked like Greek writing. Lucy realised she'd been staring and looked at Ash, who in turn looked at her with amusement.

"Please, come in Lucy. I'll get you the chair." Ash stood and pushed the chair to the middle of the room, sitting on the bed themselves. "What brings you here today?"

Lucy sat down tentatively and replied "I don't... I don't know. It's just... I felt like talking to someone..."

Ash nodded. "I understand. How do you want to treat this? Since this isn't an official session."

Lucy shrugged. "Pretend we're friends?"

"I can do that." Ash smiled.

"I mainly wanted to talk about... What the hell happened between Charlotte and me? I can only remember her saying something like 'You ruined this' and that's about it..."

Lucy was shifting uncomfortably, but Ash replied "Yeah, that was a thing. Apparently Charlotte was unhappy with you not liking her back. She took it personally and lashed out at you. What else do you remember?"

"You're speaking like a counsellor" Lucy nodded, not entirely seriously, and continued "I remember sitting in the infirmary and Johnston looking at my eyes, shining a flashlight in them. He said he'd been trying to get me back for nearly half an hour but... I don't remember that."

Ash sighed. "Yep, you were pretty far gone. You completely dissociated, and I was called and tried to help you, but you... Do you really want to talk about this?" Lucy nodded. "Okay. You dissociated and I couldn't get you back, you thought I was a voice in your head and didn't realise you were talking. You argued with yourself in a way. Have you heard others voices before?"

Lucy blushed. "Yeah I... I heard you telling me to breath slowly once... Why?"

"You told me that you wouldn't fall for my tricks again, and it's just a voice in your head like last time or something along those lines. It was... Odd." Lucy nodded and let them continue. "So when Johnston came and took you to the infirmary, I went to find Charlotte. I found her in the sparring room, and she was fighting three Cadettes with training sticks. Wooden sticks, about one and a half meters long" They explained at Lucy's questioning gaze. "So I went in, with a training stick and beat Charlotte's ass. Well, we beat each others, but I came out ahead in the end."

They took a short break, drinking from a glass of water. "What do you know about Charlotte and me anyways?" They asked.

Lucy thought about it. "Not much actually. You always seemed very professional."

Ash nodded and got up. “Well, Charlotte and I go back about one and a half years. She was starting to struggle with her identity as a bisexual, and visited me for counselling. She was the one who convinced me to go back to the military.” They noted, looking at the posters on her cupboard. “When she decided she didn’t need sessions anymore, she sent me her number and only said ‘Call me cutie’. I naturally did.”

Lucy’s throat once again started going dry. Did she hurt Ash as well?

Ash continued after a few seconds. “We got together, and we kinda... Hit it off. Without going into specifics we had a great time. But then, I got recruited for the Stargate program. My brother already worked there and they often try to get family together so they can have an easier time talking about things.” Ash nodded as if in agreement with themselves. “That made things complicated though. Charlotte was already a Corporal on the UESF Concordia, and shortly after I requested a position on this ship, she got promoted to Sergeant and she took responsibility of the mental health staff. And that included me. She wanted to continue our relationship but... I just couldn’t deal with that.” Ash paused again to have a sip of water, and got up when the glass was empty. “Want some too?” they said, raising the cup. Lucy nodded, still trying to get her thoughts together about this.

As Ash returned and handed her a glass, she drank it in one large gulp. Ash sat down and continued. “We avoided each other for the whole next trip to Atlantis. It was my first time, and I got really depressed, with barely anyone to talk to. When we arrived, Charlotte approached me...” They trailed off, seemingly thinking about something, when they startled as someone knocked on the door. “Come in!” they called.

Harris opened the door and said “I’m sorry to disturb, I just wanted to say my shift ended. I’ll be off duty tomorrow, I’ll see you in two days.”

Lucy nodded. “Cya!”

Harris closed the door and Ash continued. “So Charlotte showed me around the city. You’ll see. And asked ‘So... I thought about this. If we can’t be together, can we be friends at least?’ I told her the next day that I would like that and we have been friends ever since, but nothing more. Today... We decided to try again.”

Lucy looked at them with conflicting emotions she didn’t quite understand.

Ash let themselves drop onto the bed. “You know, maybe you’re not the only one who needs a counsellor.” they sighed.

“Or a friend” Lucy proposed.

“Or a friend...” Ash nodded and suddenly sat up again. “You know we can’t do that.”

Lucy frowned and started “I ha-” But Ash raised their hand.

“We can’t do that right now. As it stands we’re not going to be friends.” Lucy tried to interject again, but Ash continued “But I have a proposal for you. You think about this - How this made you feel today. I will think about it too. We’ll sleep over it and we’ll meet at 0800 hours at the office.” They saw Lucy trying to interject again, and said “Okay, 0900 hours. We’ll both write short hand notes that we’ll show each other. And then we’ll decide on what to do next. After a good night sleep. Is this a amicable agreement?”

## CHAPTER 33 – TESTS

Lucy didn't know what to say. She nodded, tried to get a word out, decided against it and stood up. "All right. 0900 hours tomorrow, at your office. I'll see you then." She left the room quickly, thinking through what Ash had just said. She needed to get a run in so she started jogging next to her guard, only holding light conversation.

## BOUNDARIES

Diary: 23rd of November, 2023

I'm so nervous. Ash and I are gonna have a talk about being friends. And I wrote so many notes I'm so nervous...

I'm scared that I will overwhelm them... It's a lot of things, I doubt they have many notes, what are they gonna say?

I'm just so... I think I'm overwhelmed by the idea. I had given up on ever having a friendship with Ash again and I feel like I'll be saying too much and I don't want to say too much but I want to say what's on my mind and I want to let them know I care for them but that I need help to trust them again and time to trust them again and aaaaaaaa

It's gonna go well, I should trust in that

---

Ash arrived at their office the next day at 0830 hours and put their notes down. It turned out to be four pages, two a letter to Lucy and two notes for themselves, and they were very nervous to see what Lucy would have written. They hadn't seen Lucy since yesterday, and they were even more nervous about meeting her.

They paced around the room when they heard a light knock on the door at 0850. "Come in!" they called, and Lucy stepped in. "I thought you'd be early too." They said, pushing their chair to the other side of the desk and sitting down.

Lucy also had multiple sheets of paper with them. "Not all of this is notes" She said as she noticed Ash's gaze and sat down.

They sat there for a few dozen seconds before Ash said "I think we should start by talking about how we feel. Do you want to start?"

Lucy seemed to bubble over and instantly started shuffling her pieces of paper. "I... Okay. Sorry I'm... Nervous I wrote myself notes so I don't... don't lose track... So, yeah, uhm, I feel bad. I thought about it, and I'm really happy you made the offer, but I still feel bad about it." Ash breathed in sharply. That was what they were expecting, but they hadn't hoped for it.

Lucy continued, "I figure I have abandonment issues. And you abandoned me before. And that makes me feel bad." Ash nodded. "I don't blame you, and thinking about it I understand why you did it but still... Didn't like that." She paused, reviewing her notes. "And then Charlotte did the same and I feel even worse about that. I do not want to be abandoned again."

Ash started an answer but thought better of it and stayed quiet. "However, I understand your concerns and I accept that we can avoid them in the future. I want a promise that you'll never do this to me again. I want a promise that you'll tell me when something is wrong. I want a promise that you tell me when I did something wrong." Ash nodded again. They could do that, they thought. "I also want to keep something from this." She pointed vaguely at the room. "When I tell you something, I want it to stay in between us unless stated otherwise. I

want you to keep my secrets. However...” she paused for a second “However, I will be promising the same. I hadn’t promised to keep your secrets, and keep you safe. I want you to understand that, whatever we ultimately decide on, this should be mutual.”

Ash waited shortly before Lucy handed them two pages from the stack. “I want you to read them now. It sounds more like a contract than notes, but I think you’ll get it”

Ash took the pages, written on a typewriter, and read.

1. I don't hate you anymore.
2. I don't hate you anymore.
3. I don't hate you anymore.
4. I still feel bad about how you treated me. You promise to not do that again.
5. I still don't trust you fully. I want you to accept that, and only agree if you can accept that.
6. I don't want to hear nothing about Charlotte until I say so.
7. I don't want to see Charlotte until I say so.
8. I realise now you can't prevent that but typewriters are unforgiving. I don't want to see Charlotte when we meet.
9. I want you to promise you'll keep me safe
10. I want you to promise me that you'll never abandon me like a pet project
11. I want you to promise me that you'll tell me when something is wrong
12. I want you to promise me that you'll tell me when I do something wrong or inappropriate
13. I want a promise that if we are to go different ways, we'll split up amicably.
14. I want you to not treat me like a client to the best of your ability
15. I want you to not hide from anyone that we're friends.
16. I want to not have sessions with you anymore. \*Regular sessions
17. I want to be able to ask you for your time, and that you set aside time from your day if you think I could need a talk.
18. I want you to tell Charlotte that she was rude
19. I want to be able to feel like I'm myself when around you, without feeling judged or afraid.
20. I want you to see me as who I am.

21. I would like you to try, at your own discretion, to talk to Stenvik about my guard.
22. I would appreciate it if you could help me integrate into the ship.

Thank you for actually considering all of this. Honestly, I didn't think you'd take it seriously, and the fact that you're sitting here, reading this, kind of blows my mind. I've been thinking about us for a long time, and I was really unsure if you'd even want to work on it.

Some of this might seem like a lot, but it's what I need to feel like we can move forward. It's important to me that you took the time to think about it, even if some things are hard to hear. I wasn't sure if we could get here, but the fact that you're here right now makes me feel like maybe we can fix things.

I didn't expect to feel this way, but it actually makes me happy – like, really happy – that you're trying. I don't want to keep looking back and worrying about what went wrong. I just want to see if we can make this right.

I'm probably crying now, just like as I am writing this, so please let me have a breather and let me know you're done.

---

Lucy had indeed started crying. Ash quietly said “I’m done” and Lucy nodded. She needed a minute.

When she had calmed down enough, Ash said “I agree to your terms and conditions. I find them amicable. Please do review mine before deciding however.” They smiled, and Lucy laughed, still slightly raw from the crying.

“Gimme” she just said, trying to take Ash’s pieces of paper, but Ash pulled them back

“No no no, you have to listen to my monologue, I prepared one as well.” Lucy leaned back to listen. Ash quickly looked at their notes and started “I am sorry for doing this to you. I was scared we were getting too close, too friendly, and I was angry. At everything. The situation, the delay in our departure, it all added up and overwhelmed me. I never intended to hurt you, I thought I was protecting you. I see now that I was, and am, wrong in that assessment. I also didn’t keep to my promise of just writing notes, and I hate monologues. Please read this.”

They handed Lucy the pages, written in cursive in purple pen.

Hello Lucy!

I am sorry for hurting you. I felt scared and I didn't want to hurt you more than I had to, and I thought what I did... I thought it would be the lesser evil.

It pained me to see you like this, but I am nonetheless very proud of you. You managed to defy my expectations. Your time here has been exceedingly difficult and you've handled it incredibly

## CHAPTER 34 – BOUNDARIES

well. I hope you will continue to see Doctor Johnston, even if you don't like him.

I will always be available to you if you need something. But I also have some requests.

First of all, I would like us to set some ground rules. For the first week, I need some time to get used to this. That also means I need some time without a few things you might take for granted or even need. Among them are:

Talking about your trauma. I don't yet know how I will be able to separate our past professional life with our friendship. I will, in turn not talk about it and I will be mindful about it. I will do my best to keep you comfortable with what I know about your past, but I cannot promise anything. I don't want to be in a counsellors mindset when we're friends, and that may include things that make you uncomfortable.

I also need you to respect my boundaries. I consciously did not set boundaries when we were in a professional relationship, but that won't work now. I have a few direct requests:

- No touching for a while. I will tell you when I'm ready.
- Taking space when I need it is important to me. I will tell you when I need a break and I want you to respect that
- Please announce your visits. Partly because of my relationship with Charlotte, partly because I need privacy.

I also want you to tell me when I make you uncomfortable. I don't need to know why, but I need to know if. This friendship will have to build on trust, and it is paramount to our trust that you trust me when you feel uncomfortable. I cannot stand to hurt you, and I could not live with myself if I hurt you multiple times.

We need to also come to the agreement that, should either of us need space, the other will give it to them. Both our mental health is strained enough, we need to be able to take our space without gaining emotional baggage. This applies to me the same as it does to you.

Lastly, I want to make sure you understand that I am a very easily annoyed person. You will know if you annoy me and after you read this letter, we will have to come to an agreement on how we are going to deal with that.

I'm looking forward to getting to know you in this new way, without the barriers we had before. I'm hopeful that we can find a better, healthier way to be in each other's lives. It's not going to be easy, but I believe we can rebuild this. Do you agree with this?

Ash

## CHAPTER 34 – BOUNDARIES

P.S.: I would like you to continue your training with Charlotte, if that is fine with you. I think it would help you bring your mind in a state of rest.

When Lucy finished, she looked at Ash with a tear in her eyes. "I think I... What did you say? Agree with your terms and conditions?" Ash smiled at that. "I will not continue my training with Charlotte. I cannot do that. Not yet at least. I will however continue training with my guards."

Ash nodded and said "I would have mentioned that regardless. It was a soft point for me."

"And I respect your boundaries." Lucy continued "And I understand and feel the same. I hope we can find... How did you call it, an amicable agreement?" Lucy chuckled.

Ash nodded. "As to dealing with you annoying me... With Charlotte it was relatively easy, but with you..."

Lucy nodded. "It's harder. I don't know what happens between you two but I suspect it's nothing that could be applied to a friendship. I would prefer talking about it. Have a tea and a talk." Lucy paused for a second. "I will also always tell you when I'm uncomfortable. No more hiding from my feelings, that's not what friends do."

She stopped and looked at Ash. Ash seemed to think about what was just said, and nodded. "And I in turn will always be honest to you about mine."



CHAPTER 35

## ACCESS

For the rest of the day, Lucy had what she affectionately called school. She had missed the previous day so it was decided that she'd fully concentrate on that today.

"At least it got more interesting" she mumbled as she was sitting in the AV training room, listening to someone talk about how the gate is operated. She actually learned a lot today, from a history lesson on the gate builders by Daniel Jackson to more Stargate mechanics - the last lesson, Carter had said - and she was enjoying herself plenty. When the guard came in for dinner however, she was tired and ready for bed.

"Could you ask Ash - Counsellor Houston whether they want to come to the cafeteria?"

They soon agreed to meet

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"I can't do that, Houston." Stenvik shook his head. Ash had been trying to get to him for what felt like an hour.

"I'm speaking both as a friend of hers and her prior counsellor, sir, I think she needs it. At least let me take over the watching duty."

"Again, the rules are clear, a transgression by a recruit are not to be taken lightly. She broke the rules and she'll have to deal with it."

"Sir, this was almost a week ago. There has been no issues with her since, she'd been well behaved. I vouch for her that she wouldn't bring the ship in danger, even if she could." Ash started losing their patience. As much as she respected Stenvik, she couldn't believe how stubborn he sometimes was.

"Access to level three areas is not permitted to people with an unclean record" he repeated, also tiring of the argument.

Ash had an idea. "How about we restrict her to level two, but give her an access card. Then she can freely move around, get her life in order, but won't do whatever you don't want her to do in level three."

Stenvik nodded slightly. "That is an idea. But I would still want someone to be with her most of the time."

Ash quickly responded "I volunteer. I did this before, I can do it again. I'll talk to Sergeant Greene about moving my schedule to fit with her lesson plan."

Stenvik slapped on the desk, making Ash jump. "So be it. You are more stubborn than me, Counsellor, and I respect that and your friendship to Miss Meier, but I sincerely hope this is the last time I'll have to have such a conversation with you. Get the card for her and bring her here tomorrow. I want to have a talk myself. Let's say 1400 hours?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir" Ash didn't realise they were so relieved at that until they noticed the double 'sir', which they never did.

"You're welcome. You're dismissed"

Ash left the room happy, and went to the administration area to get Lucy a card. When they reached the cafeteria, Lucy was waiting for them at the entrance.

“You’re late” she said.

“Had to suffer through Stenvik. Let’s get food.” They brushed by her, smiling when she couldn’t see it, and got themselves a tray of food, today was chicken wings with fries. Lucy grabbed the fries and the fried mushrooms and they sat down. Ash once again had their stern expression on, but decided a sad one would be more entertaining. “Stenvik want’s to talk to you.” they said. “Tomorrow at 1400 hours.”

Lucy started looking worried. “What the hell would he want from me?”

“I don’t know. Don’t shoot the messenger.” Ash shrugged, but was laughing inside. This was hilarious, but they knew Lucy would be so mad.

They ate, talking about the latest gossip on the ship - which for once didn’t involve either of them - and after they brought their trays to the return station, Ash quietly spoke with the guard. “Has Stenvik contacted you yet?” The guard nodded. “Do you mind following us for now? I didn’t tell her yet.”

“Not at all”, the guard replied. The three went to Lucy’s room, and just before she could disappear, Ash said “Lucy, I nearly forgot, I have to give you something.” They rummaged through their pockets longer than they had to, and handed Lucy an envelope. “Stenvik asked me to give this to you.”

They could see Lucy’s heart sink and when Lucy opened the envelope and pulled out an access card, they smiled. “Stenvik granted you free roaming in level one and two areas. So essentially everywhere you’ve already been. You also don’t need a guard everywhere anymore, but he’d like me to stay with you a lot to be ready to assist you if you need anything.”

Lucy stared at them in disbelief. “Th- Thank you” she stammered, looking at the card, then at the guard.

“I’ve been dismissed, I wish you a happy journey as we’ll likely not see each other. Good night, Miss Meier.” They left, leaving Ash and Lucy alone.

Lucy nearly jumped at Ash, only barely stopping herself. Ash moved back in surprise, but smiled. “Thank you Lucy. For remembering.”

Lucy nodded, still shaken. “Do you wanna come in?” she asked, opening the door. Ash followed her, as she pushed open the door, entering the now lightly decorated room. “I did some decorating, whatcha think?”

Ash looked around. The room had indeed changed since they’d been here last time. The bed was made, with neon orange bedding, the plush toys neatly placed on top. The desk however was pure chaos. Drawings everywhere, including on the wall, and a large stack of papers, probably Lucy’s diary. The shelf was filled with random bits from figurines to DVD boxes. It gave an orderly chaos vibe to Ash.

“It’s... different” they said, unsure of what to answer. “More lived in I suppose”

Lucy nodded. “I’m still sad I don’t have a window, that’d have been nice, but it’s fine.” She jumped on the bed and started patting a large shark. “May I ask you about your past? You know about mine now, but I know nothing about yours.”

Ash sighed. They didn’t know if they wanted to take that step yet, but it only felt fair. “Well, I... Hm.”

They thought about it for a second, but Lucy interjected. “You don’t owe me talking about it if that makes you uncomfortable, we can talk about something else.”

Ash nodded. They’d prefer that. “And what?”

CHAPTER 36

## FRIENDS?

Diary: 24th of November, 2023

Ash and I met for dinner yesterday and then we talked in my room for like, four hours or smtg, maybe longer, and I showed them all of my plushies and they really tried to remember their names and it's just like, so nice I love it and I'm so happy they really seem like they're enjoying my company now and I'm so happy!!!

They didn't leave until two am, and we talked. They don't like Emma Watson which is like, heresy, but they said they never found actors attractive. We also talked a bit about my A03 but honestly I don't think they want to know about the smut I've been writing there xD

We gonna meet for breakfast at the cafeteria today, and then they invited me to watch a movie they like in the AV training room, I didn't know you could book it for casual watching!

OH AND ALSO I got an access card!!! I'm free to move through the ship now that's so epic I love it I'm so fuck yeah like you know it's like fuck yeah!

---

Lucy arrived at the cafeteria 10 minutes early. She had slept well but too short, and didn't find much to do in her room. Being allowed to move more freely through the ship meant she could occupy her time, and she quickly found her way to the sparring room where a Corporal helped her do fall training. They both enjoyed throwing and being thrown across the room way too much, and Lucy had become really good at it. They decided on a time, every day at 0700 for 45 minutes, and the Corporal said they would happily help her after their night shift.

Lucy sat down at a free table with a coffee and cereal, and soon after Ash arrived. She instinctively got up, and Ash sat down with their own coffee and cereal. When Lucy didn't sit down immediately, they smiled and said "Sit." Lucy sat.

"How was your night?" She asked after a spoon of cereal.

"Wonderful!" Ash replied. "I and Ch-" They stopped, frowning.

Lucy nodded. "Thank you for remembering. Let's skip to after the night."

Ash nodded as well. "Well, I have more clients, now that we're not working together anymore. I had an early bird at 0700, and I'll have two more today, at 1400 and 1800. Cursed be the shifts on this ship." They shook their head lightly. "So yeah, that was my morning, at this ungodly time. How was yours?"

"Well..." Lucy said, thinking. "I woke up at like, six, did some writing, went to the sparring room at around 7 and met a Corporal who offered to help me train. I tried to get my old guard to but they're busy with other things now. So yeah, I got throwing lessons every day at seven."

Ash looked at her in surprise. “You got up at 0600?? We talked til like, two!” They shook their head. “Anyways, nice that you found someone to train with. Feels like it’d be a good outlet for you.”

Lucy smiled. “Is that the counsellor or the friend talking?”

Ash frowned. “Well, I can’t not have my training. But friend. I think you sometimes bottle up your emotions to much, you know?”

Lucy nodded, still smiling. “No worries, I was joking. I got a lesson from 12 to 5 today, except for an half hour with Stenvik. Have you chosen a movie already for later?”

Ash nodded. “I have. You’ll love it.” Lucy waited for a second, looking at them questioningly. “Well I’m not gonna spoil anything!” Ash said, shaking their head.

They finished up, having light conversation. Lucy laughed at a joke by Ash, who in turn smiled at Lucy’s recollection of her sparring lesson. “At one point he essentially slid across the room and kicked my legs away from under me, it was wild.”

When they left the cafeteria, Ash told Lucy the newest gossip - Lucy called it the hottest tea - and they laughed until they reached the AV training room. “Come on, you’ll be blown away.”

Ash entered and selected a movie, sitting down. Lucy sat next to them and leaned back. Hopefully Ash chose something exciting...

They didn’t. Ash chose a documentary about penguins. Lucy was bored to death while Ash was fixated on the screen. They sometimes told Lucy fun facts about penguins, and talked about how excited they were to find this in the ships library. Lucy could not share that excitement, but suffered through it all regardless. When the three hours of penguin lore were over, they left for an early Lunch.

Ash continued talking about penguins the whole way to the cafeteria, which greatly amused Lucy. When they sat down at a table with their lunch in hand, Lucy put on an earnest expression and asked “Ash, are you autistic and is your special interest penguins?”

Ash looked at her for a second, before frowning. “I forgot not everyone enjoys three hours of penguin documentaries...”

Lucy burst out laughing, and Ash looked visibly surprised. “I may not enjoy penguin lore as much as you do but I can enjoy your enjoyment. Don’t worry about it, it was entertaining!” She smiled at Ash, feeling the deep gratitude that this was something she could say. “I never had a friend so interested by a topic, and I honestly can’t imagine having a friend who isn’t fascinated by penguins now. I love you Ash. Platonically” she quickly added.

Ash smiled. “I love you too. Platonically.” They chuckled, and continued their food. Lucy’s gaze lingered a little longer, but unable to define her feelings, she too continued eating.

## INTENTIONS

Lucy stood in front of Stenvik's office at exactly two pm, staring at the door. She hadn't been nervous all day, but a sinking feeling started to creep in that this was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

She had knocked but no one answered, and after a minute or two, she leaned against the wall. "Darn it" she whispered, rubbing her right shoulder. He was doing this on purpose to show his position.

The elevator door opened and Stenvik entered the corridor, a legal pad in hand. He didn't look up as he approached the office, only noticing Lucy when he went to open the door. "Ah, Miss Meier, you're early! I appreciate punctuality. Please come in." He opened the door and she followed him in.

Stenvik put the legal pad down and sat at his Desk, leaving Lucy standing at the opposite side. He continued writing for a short while, checking through the page, before ripping it off and attaching it to a clipboard. He looked at Lucy with anticipation, who in turn stood as still as she could, which wasn't particularly still. She started drumming with her toes inside the shoe to calm down, which only had a minor effect.

He continued staring, seemingly expecting Lucy to say something, so she said "Sir, I -" she cut herself off. She was way too nervous. He tilted his head, looking questioningly at her, when she finally continued "I'm sorry. Sir, thank you for allowing me free access through the ship I-I greatly appreciate that." She was getting even more nervous at his silence, thinking through all the things she watched on TV, trying to figure out what to say.

Him replying didn't help. "Don't thank me, Miss Meier, I was strongly opposed. Thank Houston for convincing me." Lucy nodded. Of course Ash was involved. "This is an extraordinary circumstance. You accessed a restricted area without authorisation, and that has to have consequences." Lucy started replying but thought better of it and stayed quiet. "You have been given many opportunities to show that you can follow rules, and as Houston made the case very well, you have been on the best behaviour. I expect nothing but the same for the rest of this mission. Understood?"

Lucy nodded. "I'm sorry sir I- I didn't mean to cause any trouble, I just didn't know that."

Stenvik cut her off. "Intentions do not change consequences. I think you have now understood the rules. But be warned, if anything comes to my attention that only slightly indicates you broke any of them, I will not go as lightly on you. I do not want to have a conversation with Houston about your continued access to this ship. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir" Lucy felt uneasy but she couldn't tell why.

"There is also the issue of your personal relationship with Greene. She is your direct superior, and from what I heard, you've been avoiding each other. I told you before and I will not tell you again, if there are issues with assignments I want you to come to me. Understood?" Lucy nodded, suddenly knowing why she felt uneasy. "Good. Care to explain what happened?"

"I- Yes sir. Charlotte had befriended me without telling me that they were my direct superior. Until two days ago, I didn't know that they were the same person. I-" Lucy's throat

suddenly felt dry again. “I’m sorry, sir. Charlotte and I had a sexual interaction, I told them I didn’t think I was interested, and that was the end of it. I haven’t heard of her since.” Lucy was deeply uncomfortable telling anyone about their relationship, but Stenvik seemed to appreciate that.

“I see” he answered “I will make arrangements to move you to someone else. A interpersonal relationship is always difficult. I will have a talk with Greene as well, I want to hear both your stories, this sounds like inappropriate behaviour. And we cannot have that. And that goes for you too.” He squinted at Lucy, who nodded. “Well, Miss Meier, you’re dismissed. I hope to never have to have a conversation about any rule breaking with you again.” He looked back down at the legal pad and Lucy left without another word.

---

Going around the ship unsupervised was weird to Lucy. After her talk with Stenvik, she went to the AV training room again and watched a history lesson on the Asgard, a now extinct, highly advanced species from another galaxy. She was interested but grew slightly bored towards the end of it. Ash had a session until seven, and Lucy was walking around the ship, watching people in the sparring room, talking to people in the rec room. She started to recognise faces, but barely managed to put names to them yet.

When she arrived at the cafeteria shortly past seven, Ash was waiting for her at a table. They looked grumpy, so when Lucy sat down with her tray in hand, she asked “You look annoyed. What’s up?”

Ash shrugged. “The sessions I had today weren’t really up my alley. Can’t talk about it, you know, but I think you and I had a much better understanding on what you needed.”

Lucy nodded. “For example?”

Ash tilted their head. “I don’t know, it was clear to both of us that you have questions you were never able to ask. Things to tell you never told anyone. But today...” They trailed off.

Lucy shrugged. “I don’t think I had questions I was never able to ask. I barely asked any questions.”

Ash looked at them. They were seemingly very ponderous, slowly eating their rice, and said “Yeah, true. I feel like you still have questions though. Like, about your sexual identity.” Lucy thought about it but before she could reply, Ash said “Obviously you don’t need to ask them. No one’s obligated to ask questions they don’t want to ask.”

Lucy shrugged. “Well, now that we’re here and talking, I do have questions I guess. I... I just, I don’t know what I want you know? I want a relationship and happiness and fun and stuff and things and-” She stopped herself abruptly, causing Ash to raise an eyebrow. “No talking about trauma” She said, mostly reminding herself, and continued “I just kind of want a relationship like in the stories I read and wrote. Did you read any of them?” Ash shook their head. “Ah. Can you get them? I am... Curious what you think”

Ash looked at her in surprise. “As far as I understood, you wrote porn. You really want me to read that?”

Lucy laughed. “Smut, not porn” she corrected. “And yeah, if you want to read it, I’m kind of curious.”

Ash shrugged. “I can ask Stenvik whether they saved the stories. What exactly did you write about?”

Lucy flushed. She didn’t want to talk about it in public, even though she knew no one would be listening. “I... Things. And stuff. I can tell you about it later.” Ash nodded. “Also, it’s lesbian, I don’t know if you... I don’t... Actually I know nearly nothing about your gender identity...” she thought out loud.

Ash smiled. “Well, you know my pronouns, and you’ve been very good at using them. I’m trying to be a somewhat butch presenting non binary hottie turning everyone gay regardless of their gender identity. I’m bisexual and -romantic, though heavily lean towards AFAB people cause I feel uncomfortable with the alternative. Wanna know more or is that enough?”

Lucy looked at them curiously. “There’s more?”

Ash laughed. “Well, yes, but honestly, I also kinda don’t wanna talk about it here. Let’s go to one of our rooms after and we can talk?” Lucy nodded. She was very curious, even though she was entirely uninterested in Ash. Something about talking about kink peaked her interest, given what kind of stories she had written. Curious now, they quickly finished and decided to go to Ash room - for the ambience.



## PUNISHMENT IS NOT FUN

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*CWs: Discussion of sexuality.*

*Discussion of sexual content*

*Reader beware! You can skip this chapter without missing anything!*

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They entered Ash's room and Lucy sat down on the bed. Ash thought about sitting next to her for a second, but decided against it and sat on the chair. "Who's gonna start?" Lucy only shrugged, looking at the lava lamp. Ash waited for a few second, and when she didn't reply, they began.

"Well, I will start." They thought for a second. "It's weird, talking about it to someone else, but... I really like control over people. When they consent of course. I... Like going to the edge of where someone can go. Yes, I'm a sadist." they said at Lucy's amused look. "A bad case at that. I also like giving commands, those are always fun. You?"

Lucy looked at them in surprise. She didn't seem like she expected the question, so Ash elaborated. "I noticed that, when we went to the cafeteria and you stood behind your chair, I could just order you to sit and you immediately did it. Like it was automatic, following commands. I might have expected that from a military, but you're civilian. So, wanna talk about that?"

Lucy nodded. "I... Where do I start... Especially without you know, all that baggage... I do enjoy doing what people tell me to do. It's easier like that. I just... Never had the pleasure to really be in that dynamic. At least not where I felt comfortable." She shook her head. "You know, I wrote a lot of smut over the years. I did a story once about a couple that had a relationship like that and it was enjoyable but I struggled to write it. I mostly wrote bondage stories."

Ash nodded. "What kind of bondage?"

Lucy shrugged. "Well, I guess you could call it vanilla bondage? Like, tying someone up, a little bit of smacking, but nothing too extreme. Always felt that was the easiest to write. How about you, did you ever write anything?"

Ash shook their head. "I never really got into it. I couldn't imagine writing without bringing in my personal experiences, and then... It'd be very heavy porn. Don't know if I want my name associated with that."

"I get that. That's partly why I wrote under a pseud. The other part was, you know, closet."

"Know the feeling. Only got out five years ago, I was really scared to have anyone catch on. I was 19 when I came out and it was such a relieve, not gonna lie."

Lucy nodded ponderously. "I wonder what would happen if I came out now. Like, on this ship. Would anyone care?"

"No." Ash answered immediately. "If someone cared they would get what I did to Charlotte."

Lucy looked at them questioningly. “What did you do to Charlotte?”

Only then did Ash realise they mentioned her. They were just so used to it by now, thinking about Charlotte in the context. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned her. We can move on. I-”

Lucy shook her head. “Now I wanna know.”

Ash sighed. “Fine. So, you know how after I left you at the cafeteria with Johnston, I went to find Charlotte?” Lucy nodded. “Well, we fought. You probably know that part. One to one, stick fight, and I won. Not without casualty I might add” They looked down at their side, where a large mark was still lingering under their shirt. “So when I was done with fighting, I pushed her down. She knelt before me, the stick pressing against her neck. By the way, those four cadets were still watching. So I went into autopilot, not noticing the audience, and I punished her, like I might have when we were still together. Well, not exactly, but close enough.” Lucy looked at them, seemingly with more questions than answers. “Well, normally it would be more regulated. A fixed point, where she gets the beating and it’s over after that. But I couldn’t just have her go to my room with a cane, we weren’t together at that point. Though it would have been far more effective that way” They wondered whether it would have helped her more, but decided she had had plenty of help. Next time. “I was essentially telling her what she did, and she accepted that dynamic. That made me want to be together with her again. I missed that. Well, not the punishment, that is never fun for either, but the silent promise to be good next time. And she’s been good until now, so it seemingly worked.”

Lucy only stared at them. She was seemingly conflicted, and Ash asked. “What are you thinking right now? If it’s whether I went too hard on Charlotte, there was consent. Kinda. It should have been clearer but I was too angry to ask her about it in detail. It wouldn’t have mattered anyways, she would have gotten what she deserved eventually.”

Lucy nodded. “I don’t... Entirely understand your dynamic. It seems... interesting though. I just... I never thought about punishment.”

Ash frowned. “Punishment is shit. It’s telling someone you like or even love that they’ve been so bad, they deserve a beating. It’s nothing to do with play at that point, it’s pure catharsis. And it’s not pleasant. The dynamic is different. In contrast to when you play, punishment is emotional. It’s essentially emotional manipulation, associating events and actions with punishment. That’s why it works. But if it doesn’t come with a mutual understanding, then it’s physical violence. It’s a fine line to walk.” They paused, looking at Lucy. “You seem disapproving.”

Lucy nodded. “It feels like you two are a good match but... It’s hard to imagine you lashing out at someone else like that.”

Ash laughed. “That’s why I don’t do it with someone else. Charlotte and I have come to the agreement that there will be punishment if both of us deem it necessary. We’re actually pretty tame in that regard, I let her decide as well. If she says she doesn’t need punishment, then she doesn’t need punishment. Though she usually thinks she does, she’s very guilt ridden and it helps her get rid of guilt.” Ash shrugged. “Fine line to walk. And don’t worry, I won’t go punish you. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think it would help you at all.”

Lucy nodded, seemingly deep in thought. “That’s... An interesting perspective. I honestly never thought about punishment in a consensual relationship, it never occurred to me.” She shook her head. “Anyways, other question, do you wanna tell me a story? Fictional or real, I don’t care, but it’d be nice to learn something about you.”

Ash pondered for a second and nodded. They knew what to tell Lucy, and they decided to sit on the bed next to her.

“Once upon a time, in a distant kingdom named... Oregon. There lived a family with three children. They were a well respected family, the parents serving the military well. They always wanted their children to do the same, so they taught them all they could. When it was time to decide, two took the chance for glory, and joined the ranks. Their names... John and Ashley.” Lucy stirred next to them, seemingly content to learn.

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Ash talked for a good hour. Lucy stirred occasionally but remained still otherwise. They told her about their family, their upbringings and the time they spent at the military - the first time. Then the decision to get the bachelors in psychology and masters in psychotherapy and start counselling at a local community centre. They ended the story at the part before they met Charlotte, and looked at Lucy, asking whether she would like to hear more.

Lucy was lying in their bed, fast asleep. Ash smiled. *‘Silly girl’* they thought, and tucked her under the blanket carefully. They brushed their teeth, took a quick shower, and checked on Lucy. She was still asleep, and they decided to let her, lying on the other side of the bed, careful to not touch her. They were cognisant of their closeness but didn’t mind, soon falling asleep too.

## WE NEED A TALK

When Lucy woke up, she was confused at first. She felt like someone was hugging her, but it was probably the sharks she sometimes made to hug her from behind. She grabbed for Sammi, her plush dog, who normally lay in front of her, but her grab went into nothing. Carefully, she opened her eyes.

She was lying in Ash's room, in Ash's bed, being spooned by them. She panicked and tried to wriggle out, but Ash only pressed her closer. *'They said no touching they said no touching they said no touching'* her thoughts screamed, but as she struggled, Ash woke up.

"Morning sweethea-" Ash began, interrupted by a yawn. Lucy froze. She panicked. Ash thought she was Charlotte. Ash thought she was Charlotte. Ash - Fuck.

"Oh" she only heard. "Morning Lucy." The grip lightened but didn't fully withdraw. "I hope you had a good night, you fell asleep while I told you about my childhood, apparently it was really boring." Ash withdrew a hand and patted Lucy's head. "Up up, we don't want anyone noticing that I spooned you in my sleep now, do we."

Lucy jumped up and spun around, eyes wide agape. "Ash..."

Ash was visibly worried now. "Oh fuck. Lucy, I'm sorry, I shouldn't I -"

"What the hell happened -"

"- really fucking should not have fallen asleep next to you." Ash finished. They were breathing heavily. "I'm sorry Lucy, I wasn't I -"

"It's okay but you -"

"No no it's fine, Lucy wait" they said as Lucy turned towards the door. She didn't want to make Ash uncomfortable, and that included being cuddled by them. "Lucy, sit down." Lucy turned around. Ash was standing and pointing at the chair. They were dressed in a blue pyjama, but they looked worried. Lucy sat down.

"We said we would talk if one of us was uncomfortable. That was a ground rule, and I want us both to keep them." Their voice got softer. "I also want to run away right now, I get it, but that's hardly a solution. Lucy, I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable. I really should not have let you sleep, that was stupid. I should've known this could happen, but I didn't think about it, I am sorry Lucy." They paused. "Your turn."

Lucy's head was still spinning, she couldn't get her thoughts in order. She noticed she was breathing quickly, closed her eyes and calmed her breath. "Boxes. Happy boxes to the right. Sad boxes left. Boxes. Happy boxes right. Sad boxes left." She murmured it to herself, fully aware Ash could probably hear it.

When she opened her eyes, Ash was sitting on the bed, looking at her with a smile. "Good idea, sorting thoughts." They said, and waited.

When Lucy had calmed enough, she said "I'm sorry Ash, I fell asleep in your bed and I woke up and you were there and hugging me and I tried to get out but you were holding on and then

I woke you and I really didn't want to touch you I swear but I-" She realised she hadn't taken a breath and breathed in sharply. Ash raised their hand.

"Lucy, there was nothing you could have done. You were asleep. It's not your fault, it's mine. You didn't break any rules, you didn't break my trust or anything you didn't hug me, I hugged you. And I didn't realise that you would be so frightened, if I had I would not have left you sleeping here. Are you okay Lucy?" Lucy nodded, feeling tears starting to well up. "Okay. I'm not angry at you, nor am I disappointed. I didn't mean to cuddle with you, but it happened. I'm not uncomfortable with it. Are you?"

Lucy shook her head. She was overwhelmed and lacked the words. "Good. We're both fine, aren't we?" Lucy nodded. "Okay. Come here."

Lucy got up and walked to Ash. Ash opened their arms and Lucy let herself sink into Ash's embrace. "It's all fine now, Lucy, isn't it?" Lucy nodded, crying. "I think we can talk about the no touching rule, it seems superfluous now." Lucy nodded again. Ash let themselves fall on the bed, pulling Lucy with them. They stayed like that for a minute before Lucy rolled off and lied on the bed next to Ash.

"Is this what... Friends do?" Lucy asked.

"Comfort each other? Physical closeness? What exactly?"

"A- All of the above" Lucy was still raw from crying, and she looked at Ash, who was in turn looking at her.

"Comfort I feel should be part of every friendship. Physical contact possibly. Depending on the friends, they might have come to an agreement that this is indeed what they do."

Lucy nodded. "Can we come to an agreement? That this is what we do?"

Ash smiled. "I would never say no to that."

CHAPTER 40

## FRIENDS!

Ash sat as they watched Lucy in the Sparring room as she and the Corporal talked. They seemed to be having a fun conversation, when suddenly the corporal pulled away Lucy's leg, throwing her to the floor. She caught herself in time and landed relatively gracefully. Then they talked again. The Corporal nodded at a request from Lucy and went to the rack, grabbing two short sticks. He showed Lucy how to parry attacks and they started training.

At 0800, they had a quick talk, laughed and the Corporal went his way as Lucy approached Ash. "We did some sword training!" she said excitedly to Ash.

"I noticed" Ash replied with a smile. "I hope you had fun!"

Lucy nodded and they decided to go to the rec room, where they played pool. Lucy obliterated Ash, who constantly missed what they aimed for, and they had a blast. When the hour was nearing its end, they went to the cafeteria. It was towards the end of breakfast time, and Ash was hungry enough to immediately get themselves food when they entered the nearly empty cafeteria. Lucy lingered a bit before following without a word.

When they had filled their trays, Lucy pointed Ash to a table. Without looking they nodded, following Lucy. When she sat down they realized that Charlotte was sitting at the table with a grin.

"Good morning sweetheart, good morning Lucy!" she said happily.

"Good morning sweetheart", Ash replied, slightly worried. Why had Lucy chosen this table?

Lucy cleared her throat, visibly nervous. "Hey. Uhh..." She paused, looking at Ash who looked at her questioningly. "I... Charlotte, I'm sorry for hurting you. I didn't... I just..."

Charlotte shook her head. "Lucy, honey, you didn't hurt me, you told me you don't like me. That's a totally normal thing, and I'm not hurt because of it." Ash nodded. That's why Lucy wanted to sit here. Charlotte continued "On the contrary, I hurt you. You're a wonderful human being and I just, told you you ruined what you perceived as a friendship. That's not what friends do, and I see that now. Please accept that this is on me, not on you."

Lucy nodded. "Okay."

She waited for a few seconds before continuing "But... I'm still sorry. I should never have... You know, agreed, and then break your heart." She shook her head. "Anyways, Charlotte, I wanted to confess something else. Ash and I talked yesterday, and I fell asleep in their bed and I got spooned while we both slept. I thought you should know, given... You know."

Charlotte looked at her, then at Ash, with a confused smile. "Ashley, honey, did you really spoon your friend of a few days?"

Ash nodded but they couldn't get a sound out. They forgot to- "Well, Lucy, please don't worry about it. We're in an open relationship, I wouldn't care if you two had fucked, and the way you look at each other you might just have. Seriously, I don't mind, okay?"

Lucy nodded. "Okay."

She paused for a few seconds, before continuing “We didn’t fuck. I’m a lesbian.”

Charlotte pondered that for a second. “I see. Well, I’m bi so I cannot relate. But that’s fair.” She looked at Lucy with a smile and took a sip of her coffee.

Ash meanwhile was shifting in their seat. “Well, I don’t know whether I would have confronted you that way with it but I’m glad we got it behind us.”

Lucy and Charlotte looked at them, seemingly expecting more, so they said “I’ll go get more coffee.” and left.

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“So, Lucy” Charlotte started, and took another sip of her own coffee “No hard feelings?”

Lucy shrugged. “Only if you don’t have any. I didn’t... I didn’t know you two had... You know.”

Charlotte laughed. “An open relationship? Yeah, it doesn’t work any other way. I’m a switch and Ash is pure top so I sometimes just need to get my top energy out on someone else. We’re fine, don’t worry. And as to cuddling, I don’t think that counts as more as platonic. As long as they didn’t beat the living shit out of you, I think we’re good.”

Lucy raised her eyebrows just as Ash returned. “I only heard something about being good? I’m glad. How are you doing, Lucy?”

Lucy was taken aback by that. She was blanking out, going through her thoughts, and just replied “Good.” out of habit. Realizing that’s not the truth, she continued “Well... Since we’re all friends here, I shouldn’t... I guess... Lie? I’m... Still processing tonight, and I don’t... I don’t know, I just...” She looked at Ash. “Are you attracted to me?”

Ash smiled pensively. “Yes, Lucy. But I never wanted to press you and our friendship is more important to me than that.”

Lucy nodded. “Yeah I guess I’m just... Not? Attracted to you I mean. I don’t know I enjoy your company and such, but that’s friends things, I just... I guess I never really understood the attraction part either...” She paused. “I’m sorry, I am ranting about myself again.”

Charlotte shrugged and Ash said “Hey, we’re friends, you can rant as much as you want.”

Lucy nodded and took a sip of her coffee. “I guess I just... I don’t know, maybe I really am Asexual.” She shrugged and gulped down her coffee. “I wanna go do my diary for today, I’ll see you guys around? Dinner at 6 again?”

The two nodded and Lucy left, slightly uncomfortable about the conversation. *‘Why do I always make everything about me...’* she thought as she entered her room.

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Diary: 25th of November, 2023

I keep thinking about what Charlotte said. About how Ash and I look at each other. Like... there's something more. I don't know. I've always known who I am, or at least, I thought I did. I'm a lesbian, right? And Ash... well, they're not a woman.

## CHAPTER 40 – FRIENDS!

But then why do I feel so... confused?

It's like there's this part of me I haven't figured out yet.  
The way I feel around them, the way they make me feel seen...  
It's different. I'm not sure what that means, and I'm not sure  
I want to know.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe I'm just overthinking it.

But I can't stop wondering.



## ADDENDUM

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported me during this journey. Your encouragement and patience have meant the world to me.

Special thanks to my grandparents, who provided not only their unwavering support but also the inspiration that kept me going, even when I felt stuck. Your belief in me made this project feel possible.

To my friends and family, thank you for listening patiently as I rambled about plot points, character arcs, and alien worlds. Whether you understood it or not, your willingness to hear me out kept me grounded and enthusiastic about bringing this story to life.

A heartfelt thanks to my test readers, whose feedback was invaluable. You didn't just help shape the story—you kept me motivated through each draft, chapter, and edit. Your insights and encouragement reminded me that this story was worth telling.

And finally, to everyone who believed in me, even when I doubted myself—thank you. This story exists because of you.

### GLOSSARY

- **Stargate:** An ancient device that allows near-instantaneous travel between different points in the galaxy by creating a stable wormhole.
- **UESF Concordia:** The spaceship Lucy gets teleported to and spends most of her time throughout. Built by the United European Space Force, it was primarily run by the Europeans, but also staff from the SGC.
- **Preston Program:** A selection program that Lucy was chosen for. Originating from a group of recruiters for the Stargate program at the University of Lancashire, it chooses the best and brightest from a pool of unknowing participants.
- **Hyperspace:** A faster-than-light travel method used in the story for traversing between planets and galaxies.
- **SGC (Stargate Command):** The organization responsible for managing and overseeing the Stargate program, including Earth's off-world exploration and defense efforts.
- **Atlantis:** A mythical city that is central to the *Stargate: Atlantis* series. In the story, it represents a destination of significance for the characters.
- **Stargate Program:** A top-secret initiative aimed at exploring other planets through the use of Stargates. It involves various military, scientific, and diplomatic missions.
- **MRE (Meals Ready-to-Eat):** Pre-packaged military meals used during missions, often referenced as a contrast to the more desirable meals on the ship.

- **Hyperspace Jump:** A method of travel where a spaceship enters a dimension of space that allows it to cover vast distances faster than light. In the story, this is how the UESF Concordia travels between galaxies.
- **Rogue Asgard:** A reference to a group of Asgard who may have disrupted the Stargate network, causing technical issues with intergalactic travel.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

This story started as a vivid mix of dreams and daydreams that played out in my mind for about a week. The longer I spent thinking about it, the deeper I found myself getting pulled into this world, imagining every detail of the story unfolding.

I decided to put it all into words when I hit a tipping point in my thoughts: The main characters—at the time, essentially myself and Ashley—had just had a falling out. That moment felt like it could be a turning point, the kind that changes everything. It was then that I thought, *this should be a story*. It felt like the beginning of something more, something worth sharing.

So, I started writing, and the story quickly took on a life of its own. I couldn't (and still can't, as I write this) stop thinking about what would happen to Lucy and Ash. It's like my whole world has started revolving around their story, and I find myself constantly wondering about their next steps, their struggles, and the choices they'll make.

By the time I reached around chapter 25, I realized that if I ever wanted to finish this project, I needed to break it up into parts. That's how this became the first part of a series I'm calling New Beginnings. It's been a wild journey, and I hope it's just as engaging for you as it has been for me.

Thank you for sticking with me until the end of this part. If you're reading this as a book, you're probably someone very dear to me. In that case, I love you, and I hope that this story brought you some enjoyment, maybe even a glimpse into my mind and heart. Writing this has taught me a lot about myself, and I hope reading it gives you a little insight into me as well.

**UwU**

UwU

## **Beyond the Past**

On the way to Atlantis, Lucy, a young computer scientist, finds herself struggling with more than just the challenges of a new galaxy. Ash, a counselor with their own complicated past, is determined to help her—but both of them are holding secrets. As the journey unfolds, their growing connection will test the boundaries between friendship and duty, all while mysterious forces threaten the mission.