Each and every day on *Destiny*, someone asks him to do six impossible things before breakfast. This day, Rush realises early on, is not going to be an exception.

He's on his way to the control interface room, following his routine more for the sake of order than with any real enthusiasm, when he comes across Colonel Young, thumping his fist impatiently against the control panel of a closed door. He turns at the sound of Rush's footsteps, as if he was waiting for them.

"Ah. Rush. Just the man I wanted to see."

"You'll forgive me for treating that with a healthy dose of scepticism."

"Damned door," Young says with a final thump, for good measure. "Can't seem to get it open."

"Some doors on this ship are closed for a reason," Rush reminds him.

"But you could open it, if you wanted to."
Rush appraises the door with a tilt of his head.

"Perhaps," he agrees, voice carefully noncommittal. He ignores whatever Young mutters under his breath and keeps walking, the repeated clang of metal ringing out like a gong behind him.

--

He's had a headache since the day began, and it's getting steadily worse with every second that passes. Brody, Volker and Park jostle around him, talking over each other in their excitement. He might have woken with his head pounding, but his team arrived with theirs full of ideas: thrilling new theories about Destiny's course, and defence systems, and the master code they're nowhere nearer deciphering now than when they first set foot on board.

Rush listens without really hearing and offers nothing in return, save a nod here and there and the illusion of a compliment.

"Tell us what you think," Park – ever the optimist, he's noticed – demands eventually.

Three eager pairs of eyes fix upon him. He's used to more, be it a room full of students or more recently soldiers, one decidedly more likely to hang on his every word than the other. But his skull seems about to splinter from within, and it feels too crowded to think, let alone speak.

"Maybe later," he says, and departs before anyone can try to stop him.

--

Rush is heading towards the mess when he's waylaid by Lieutenant Johansen, who appears from the shadows and swoops on him like a bird of prey, noting the way he's squinting against the light, eyes crinkled up like dried out apple cores. She promptly diagnoses a migraine, and entices him to the infirmary with the promise of a cure.

A token protest passes his lips as she sits him on a bed and places a palm against his forehead. Her skin is cool, her touch tender, and though he knows it's merely professional concern, as much a gesture to put him at ease as a diagnostic tool, his eyes fall shut, and he drinks it in like a man who hadn't realised he was thirsty.

He's a scientist, wed now only to logic and the pursuit of truth, and he can't ignore cold hard facts. Humans are primates. Men aren't islands. They need connections, and contact, even if just to remind them they're still alive. It's been a long time since anyone has touched him except to shake his hand, or more likely of late, knock him flat on his back. It's been longer still since he's felt like letting them.

TJ moves her hand, and seconds later it's resting on one of his, making his eyes fly open in surprise.

"I'm worried about you," she says.

Rush snatches his hand out of her reach. "I'm perfectly fine, Lieutenant."

"I'll be the judge of that, if you don't mind." She crosses around the bed, prodding at his neck with practised fingers. "It's no wonder you've got a headache. Do you realise how much tension you're carrying?"

"A billion light years' worth?"

"Which is why I'm prescribing some R and R. Go sit down for five minutes. Read a book. Take a long hot shower."
"I'm clean enough, thank you."

"Anything," TJ says pointedly, "that isn't work."

"I have far too much to do to skip off and visit the pleasure deck Eli is convinced is here somewhere."

She shifts her hands to his shoulders, tutting at what she finds. "It must be pretty important if it can't wait a while."

"Oh, it is. Quite possibly a matter of life and death."

"Yours, if you carry on like this," TJ says, and there is care in her voice that seems sincere, more kindness than time and workload should allow her to spare. Her knuckles knead methodically along a knotted muscle. He feels months of built-up tension beginning to dissolve; the wall he's built to keep out the world buckling, under something so small, so simple, as the expression of someone else's concern.

"So...what is it you're working on right now?"

"Nothing you need be concerned about," Rush assures her, snapping back to reality. He slips off the bed and walks out of the room, a safe distance away from her grasp.

--

Everyone on *Destiny* wants something from him. It's not unexpected, since Rush is the one with the most extensive knowledge of the ship and its systems, and it's at his discretion – when Young is not interfering, or Eli providing dazzling proof of untapped genius – that that knowledge is doled out. He guards *Destiny*’s secrets every bit as zealously as it does.

Oblong yellow lights are jewelled at head height along the ship's darkened passages. They normally put him in mind of road markings, but today they feel more like daggers, stabbing at his head as he walks along and curtly dismisses the attentions of Caine, Scott and Riley; the latter dispatched from the communications room with a demand from Colonel Telford, that he stone to Earth and explain – in as much detail as possible – just how he saved the ship from SGC's team of cretins, and their doomed attempt to dial home.

There's a famous quotation: hell is other people. He'd begun to grasp it back at Icarus Base, but it's only on *Destiny* that he's come to truly understand.

He knows he's brought the constant intrusions into his time and space on himself. He's become the centre of their attention and their endless, obtuse questions, mostly by being who he is, and partly by design. It's a position of strength, and power, offering as much control over his work as events and Young will grant him. Anyone who claimed not to gain even the smallest puff of pleasure from that – from being the best, being needed so badly – would be lying.

But he can barely tolerate their company on the best of days, and today is as far a distance from that as the crew has come from the place they call home.

No one on *Destiny* ever seeks him out because they actually want to see him. They always want something: an answer, an argument, someone to blame. He retreats to his quarters, minded to avoid them and read away his headache both, but he's barely prised apart the pages of his book before he's cornered by Camile Wray, seeking some specification or other for a report that has less to do with human resources than the IOA’s insatiable appetite for meddling.
Rush makes an excuse and leaves her behind, knowing just where to go to get some much-needed peace and quiet.

--

Officially, the observation deck is exactly what it claims to be. Unofficially, it's where people go when they want to be alone. They find a sort of comfort in the stars, the way they're swept by unfathomable speed into the shimmering cloak of FTL; striving for serenity in the midst of chaos.

But when Rush steps inside, he finds he's not alone after all. Perhaps, in his heart of hearts, he doesn't really want to be. He joins Chloe Armstrong at the railing, where she's gazing out in wide-eyed wonder, captivated by the colours that shift in otherworldly waves before them. Seen from satisfactory distance it's like a watercolour painting; the gun metal struts that surround the glass there not for support, but to make up a frame.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Chloe says quietly.

He could spoil the magic with science: provide a thorough explanation of how, and why. But it's not that kind of question, and he opts to give a different kind of answer.

"Have you ever seen the aurora borealis? The northern lights?"

"Have you?"

"Several times. The view from where we're standing isn't entirely dissimilar."

"Were you studying them," she asks, "or admiring them?"

It's as soothing as the view, to be the object of interest instead of ill-disguised contempt. Rush ponders it for a moment as Chloe waits for him to gather his thoughts, listening to his silence as patiently as his words. And then there's a shift of violet, the creak of metal, and the painting is gone, replaced by star-studded black canvas. He puts a hand to his radio to turn it off, just as it crackles with someone's all-too predictable attempt to reach him.

"You're not going to see where we've stopped?"

"Maybe later."

"You're hiding," she says, sounding tickled.

He opens his mouth to deny it. But while he's not averse to bending the truth, lying to himself is a different matter. He stares out at the stars, feeling older than his years and weary to the bone: of everything he's gone through because of this ship, everything that seems certain to come. The moment calls for the kind of brutal honesty he dispenses so readily to others, and turned inwards, he finds he wants to disappear to somewhere that is safe from prying eyes and questions, and stay there. For want of a better word: hide.

"Well, you're perfectly safe here," Chloe tells him. "It's not as if anyone's about to come looking for me."

"Unless they need an advocate."

"Or a yoga lesson..."

Rush is aware she feels inadequate. Yet he can't remember the last time he had a real conversation
with her: surely a side-effect of his headache, since he remembers everything else, even the things he’d rather forget. He knows more about Ancient technology than anyone else on board; more about *Destiny* than anyone on the same plane of existence, yet he has no idea, even now, if this one young woman still blames him for the death of her father.

Her eyes are blue as the sea, reflected by the light of alien suns. The sight sends his thoughts back to Senator Armstrong's sacrifice, and her broken sobs after. It's the kind of agony he hopes never to have to see or hear her in again, even if experience reminds him it's only ever a heartbeat away.

"What makes you think your worth on this ship is judged by the letters after your name?"

She need only look at him for an answer to that, and does. And then there's the inevitable riposte, that he was quite content to grade skills and credentials in the search for a sacrifice. A jackhammer is ringing in his skull, leaving him unequal to the task of expressing what he really thinks: that he believes her stronger and more capable than she does; that Young turning to her for help – a rare example of good judgement – should have proved the kind of esteem in which she's held; that he's surprised beyond belief that she can have two men besotted with her, and neither one seems ever to have bothered to tell her she's special.

"You're as valuable in your own right as any other member of the crew," he says instead.

"But I'd be more useful if I was an astrophysicist, or an engineer."

He doesn't deny it, but observes, "We have both of those already."

"Whatever their speciality," Chloe says, "you can never have too many people who know as much about the *Destiny* as possible."

Rush gives a wry chuckle. "In case I should be stranded on a planet and left for dead."

"Exactly." She takes a step closer, still a careful distance outside of his personal space. "So maybe you should teach me something. We can start off slow – just the basics – work up to the bigger stuff later. What do you think?"

He looks over at her, feeling a smile flicker and fade on his lips. She anticipates the rejection before it arrives, looking almost as disappointed as he allows himself to feel.

"I was very much hoping you weren't going to ask me that," he says.

--

Hours pass in a flash, his only memory of them a blur of pain and the blackness of a dreamless sleep. It feels as if only seconds have gone by when he wakes in his room, roused by the sound of an urgent radio call from Eli. It sends him hurrying to the control room, where he finds screens flashing warnings in red, Brody running a nervous hand through his hair and TJ and Chloe pacing in unison. He can feel the shrill pinch of panic in the air, closing around him like nerve gas, as soon as he sets foot inside.

"Thank God you're here," Eli babbles, running to his side. "We've got, like, sixty seconds. If we don't do something soon, Colonel Young and Lieutenant Scott are going to die—"

Rush looks down at his console, assessing the situation in an instant. "What are they doing out in the shuttle when we're about to jump back to FTL?"

Chloe leaps in, her pretty face stricken. "You've got to help them. You're the only one who can save
"They were gathering samples of space dust," Eli explains, hands flailing about uselessly. "And then the shield went all bizarro world, and dialled itself all the way up, and I-I can't get it down again. And now the ship won't let them dock, and the shuttle's pretty good, but it's not like it's a baby Destiny. If we jump, they're never going to catch up with us."

"It's only the gate that puts us in range of a solar system," TJ adds, "never mind a habitable planet. If we leave them here, there's nowhere else to go." She rests a hand on his arm and leans in, lowering her voice. "Sooner or later they'll end up drifting in space, running out of oxygen. They'll die, Rush."

He glances at the ashen faces around him, taking in the eyes that are trained on his, pleading for an answer.

"Then they shouldn't have gone out there in the first place," he says.

TJ drops her hand and puts a comforting arm around Chloe, who dissolves into tears. It touches something deep inside him, and he feels his gut twist, his resolve start to slip. He can't face trying to explain how he's not at fault for another death that's blown her world apart, the memory of the last still fresh in his mind. He really can't bear to see her cry.

"We've got to find a way past the automated defence systems," Eli says.

"I thought the shield wasn't responding to commands."

"Not from here – from the shuttle. If they could bypass it remotely, they could slip right through."

He picks up his pencil and taps it against the screen, trying to think.

"For God's sakes, Rush!" Eli yells, teetering on the brink of hysteria.

"Yes, yes. You're right. There might be a way. If we just—" He lifts his hands over the console, poised to enter a set of instructions. Time seems to stand still for a second, everyone in the room taking an audible gulp of breath. Even Chloe's tears are palpably on pause.

"No," he says, abruptly pulling back, cursing himself for coming so close to losing his focus: the one thing he has left to rely on.

"Help them." TJ says sternly. He belatedly remembers she's in charge, with Young and Scott missing in action. "That's an order, Doctor Rush."

"I'm not one of your soldiers, Lieutenant."

"Please," Chloe begs. She reaches for him in desperation, but he steps aside, and her hands pass through empty space.

"Sorry, Miss Armstrong," he says, hardening his heart against her sobs as he walks away. "Not today."

--

Young isn't in the shuttle. He's resurrected himself in time to be back at the door, grunting with the exertion of failed attempts to prise it apart, still thumping ineffectually at the control panel. Rush leans a shoulder against a nearby bulkhead and crosses his arms, watching him.

"Tell me," he says finally. "Are you there when I'm not, or are you too busy pretending to be
someone else?"

Young stops in his tracks. His head swivels slowly towards Rush.

"Oh, I know you're not Colonel Young. Not the real one, anyway. He wouldn't waste time trying to perform such a menial task himself. He'd order someone else to get it done, even if it were patently impossible. The faithful Sergeant Greer, for instance."

Young growls at him. He kicks at the door, pummelling his fists against it in fury.

"Taking the form of the crew...trying to coax me into giving you everything you haven't been able to take. A very creative approach to the problem. Your choice of setting was particularly inspired. My mind, represented by Destiny. Vast. Coveted. And however hard you try, impregnable."

He walks over to Young, drifting a hand across the metal of the door. It feels as real as if he's actually standing there, instead of trapped inside his own head, a prisoner on a vessel that's every bit as alien as the word implies. It might even be comforting, if every glance didn't taunt him with the impossibility of its being.

"There are other doors that are locked, even to me; I've checked. What's inside them? Suppressed memories? Feelings? Things I know and don't yet realise?"

Young halts his assault on the door long enough for Rush to hear something floating in the air beyond: the faint, bell-like tinkle of music, rising and falling from afar.

"That," he says softly. "You'd take that from me too?"

Young – the alien pulling Young's strings, he amends for the sake of accuracy – is looking over at him, eyes narrowed. It seems curious. Somehow he knows, through whatever telepathic connection they've established, that he's considered an especially interesting, and unusually resistant, specimen. His knowledge of the Destiny makes it all the more vital that they break down his defences.

"It's the details," Rush tells it. "Lieutenant Johansen doesn't promise what she's unable to deliver. Chloe doesn't cry when she can't get what she wants. Space dust, when we struggle every day to find enough food and water to survive the next? And then there's the book I lent from Doctor Park – stole, actually, but she's busy reading something else and hasn't noticed it's gone – forty-four pages of text, and the rest all blank. Because I haven't finished it yet."

The alien, wearing its human disguise, has the grace to look thoroughly ashamed of its sloppiness. Rush entertains the thought of seeing the same expression on the real Colonel Young's face, should he somehow get back to Destiny, and not spend the rest of his days as a lab rat.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice? Did you think I knew so little about the people I spend each and every day with – that I wouldn't recognise figments of a telepathically-induced fantasy for what they really were?"

For all his bravado, his heart gives an involuntary thud of fear. He's not sure which concerns him more: the alien, or his would-be murderer, whose face it's borrowed.

"Let me tell you what I've observed about you. You're highly intelligent, and equally as persistent. You've been probing my mind for so long it's given me a headache, and probably caused irreparable damage to my brain. You're mentally strong, but physically somewhat weak. Perhaps because you originate from a planet of low gravity – but more likely because you're an aquatic species who, by a random quirk of evolution, crawled out of the sea and took to the stars...looking for things to steal."
The alien twitches, affronted by the suggestion.

"I'm tired of this charade," Rush says, lip curled in loathing. "I played along for a while. You almost had me going, a few times. But I know the only thing that's real in here is me. It doesn't matter how you phrase the question, how many different approaches you try – I'll never tell you. Never."

He wonders if the aliens can feel his resolve; if it's as tangible to them as their frustration is to him. It screams loud and clear in his head: all they want is Destiny.

Unfortunately for them, Destiny is taken – and he doesn't feel like sharing.

Thwarted, the alien vanishes with a snarl, giving him his answer. Rush finds himself alone in the steel trap façade of the ship, lights shutting out all around him as this pretence of a day finally ends, and he's swallowed whole into the belly of night.

--

They don't give up easily. They don't give up at all, in fact, displaying a single-mindedness Rush might admire if it wasn't being employed in such sickening fashion. He flits in and out of consciousness, vaguely aware of them searching through his secrets, desecrating his most sacred memories, hollowing him out in tireless pursuit of the one thing they have in common.

When he next comes to, it's in a room he doesn't recognise. His skin is slick with fluid, his thoughts so confused it takes him longer than it should to realise he's stripped to the waist, strapped to a table, and unable to move. Spindly blue figures hover around him, each indistinguishable from the next. He's frozen so fully he can't open his mouth: can't try to reason with them, beg for mercy, or even scream.

Pale discs of eyes loom over his, metal clinking as they chitter and trill to each other, no interest in him but as a means to an end.

It's almost like being on Destiny. A hysterical part of his brain appreciates the symmetry; the rest of him longing just to be back there, doing impossible things, answering incessant questions, surrounded by the people he's grown considerably less indifferent to than he pretends. Hell isn't other people after all – it's what he's living through now, in their absence.

He makes one last, futile attempt to struggle free, kicking and shouting inside a head that's empty of everyone but him, at the one time he wants it not to be.

And then, as terror and the searing pain in his chest finally overwhelm him, he's swept back to oblivion, and the blissful ignorance it brings.

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