Trust Falls
by Fragged

Summary

It's a bad start to the new galaxy, to say the least.

Notes

Extra special thanks to Potboy, without whom I would've abandoned this story a long time ago.
Chapter 1

The sudden surge of electricity through the circuitry sends him reeling back with a shocked gasp. Crap. His fingertips are burned; his entire forearm tingles like it's fallen asleep. He shakes his hand with a loud curse.

It's fried. The pod is fried. There's no way he's going to fix it now, if he was even able to do it in the first place. This latest blunder shot any chances of that happening to hell. It's broken. The pod is broken.

Irreparably.

Oh, God. Oh God. He's going to die. He's going to die. Him and his big mouth, 'I'm smarter than Rush', and now he's going to die alone on this freaking flying death machine, oh dear God. A small voice in the back of his mind yells at him to wake up Colonel Young, to tell him it didn't work and what now? Because Young will offer his pod – he will insist on it – and then Eli won't have to die, but no!

No.

No, he can't give up this easily. He still has almost a week left. Shit, only a week. Less than a week. But he can't let panic take over now, not when everyone is counting on him. Most of them may not know it, but they are. And his mom, God, he can't die. It would kill her.

Back to the drawing board, it is.

With shaking hands he gathers his laptop and goes back to the bridge. He has most access there. Who knows, maybe there is another bank of stasis pods hidden somewhere on the ship. Somewhere they haven't discovered yet. Rush spent weeks trying to uncover Destiny's blueprints in the mainframe, without luck. But it's Eli's only chance now, so he sits down and gets to work.

It takes him two days of adrenaline-fueled searching to find the blueprints. A vicious stab of prideful triumph nearly overtakes him, and absentmindedly he wonders if his grin looks as maniacal as it feels. God, he needs sleep. He's no Rush, he can admit that much (he's better, because he found these), and he needs sleep.

The elation last for mere minutes before it turns into doubt, and then frustration, and then panic. He feels tears choking his throat as he scans his eyes over the blueprints again and again. The banks with the rows of stasis pods are there, all of them. And that's it. There's no more. No hidden pods stashed anywhere, no last-minute rescue, no nothing.

He's going to die. Oh, God. Oh fuck, he's really going to die.

The shock, the lack of sleep, the lack of food... they all catch up to him, and the next thing he knows everything goes black.
When he wakes up his head hurts and there's a crunchy, tacky residue on his forehead. Ah. Blood. Awesome. He must've hit his head when he passed out. That's really all he needs right now, a concussion. He blinks blearily against the low lights that pass for Destiny's dusk and dawn, and...

Shit! The time! How much time is left?

Thoughts immediately coalescing into something more focused, more present, he scrambles up from the floor. His breath rushes out in a relieved whoosh when he checks the monitor and finds he hasn't been out for longer than six hours. He still has three days left. Three days. Oh, no. Only three days.

All of a sudden his heart is beating so loudly in his ears he can't think. His skin prickles into almost painful goosebumps and his hands clench uncontrollably. His breath is coming in stuttered gasps, he can't breathe, and oh dear God, he feels like he's dying. He's going to pass out again and then he's really going to die, because he only has three days left and there is nothing he can do.

Vaguely, in the back of his mind, he realizes he's having a panic attack. With his last strength he slides down the wall until he's sitting against it. Hyperventilating, crying, shaking, until finally, after what seems like hours, his body calms down.

His mind is still a whirlwind of fear, but it's easier to think clearly when his body isn't actively screaming at him that he's dying this very instant. He takes a deep, unsteady breath.

Right. He still has three days left. He can still think of something. And if not... If not, he needs to use the stones one last time. Say goodbye to his mom. Use a kino to say goodbye to everyone here. And then he'll have to find a way to kill himself that will be least traumatizing to the ones who'll find him. His hands tremble as he once again brushes his fingertips over the gash in his forehead. It's swollen and sore, but it doesn't feel too big.

In the end he decides to go to the infirmary to disinfect it. Rush will never stop bitching at him if he somehow figures out a way to survive the Big Jump only to succumb to blood-poisoning from one stupid little head wound.

Besides, if Eli doesn't believe he's going to make it, who will?

He's sweating, and his hands sometimes shake so hard he doesn't hit the right commands on the control panel. He's slowly going crazy, he's pretty sure. Not enough sleep, not enough food, the constant presence of his impending demise, and a complete lack of social interactions are not conducive to his state of mind. He knows this.

What he doesn't know is whether his plan is genius or downright moronic. It had come to him in a dream – and really, are dream ideas ever any good? He doesn't know. The actual feasibility of it is still unclear.

The shuttle, he'd thought. The shuttle. If he could somehow turn the shuttle into one big stasis pod-like... thing, he could stay in there. He'd be fine. Two issues with that. First, the shuttle is much larger than any one stasis pod, so the estimated energy cost might just cause them not to make it to the other galaxy in the calculated three years. Well, let's just call a spade a spade: if he decides to do this, he could be solely responsible for everyone aboard the ship never seeing their loved ones again. The
second issue is actually more pressing. He has no idea how to turn the shuttle into a stasis pod. Sure, he's read everything there is to know about the stasis pods, twice (that is 3400 pages of very dry literature in a language he'd never heard of before coming here; he'd like to see Rush do that in less than two days), but even still, despite the fact that the shuttle possesses a number of characteristics that make it somewhat viable – he's approximately seventy percent sure it can be turned into a stasis pod – it is a massive project. He only has eighteen hours left. Can he even make it in that time?

He bites at the corner of his nail, too hard, and hisses as the sensitive flesh of his nail bed starts bleeding. He has no time for this. No time to second-guess himself. He has to try.

He gathers his tools from next to the burnt out stasis pod, casts a desperate glance at everyone he's come to regard as family here, and makes his way over to the shuttle.

For the next fifteen hours, he cusses more than he has in his entire life.

“Hi mom,” he says, when she opens the door with a confused expression.

He's decided not to tell her. At least this way she'll have three years of not knowing, of hope, and in the end it feels like that's the best he can give her. He's written her a letter with all the things she needs to hear, Chloe will relay it to her when everyone is out of stasis. This goodbye is for him.

She makes him cookies, and he has to bite his lip to keep from crying, and when she tells him about Aunt Gina and her new boyfriend throwing a fit at church last weekend he laughs until his stomach hurts.

“You know I love you, right mom?” he asks, and he can't help the tears gathering in his eyes.

She puts her hand on his own, kind and gentle, and he really thinks she's the perfect mom, the best mom he could've ever wished for.

“Of course I do, sweetie. I love you, too,” she says, worry in her eyes. “What's wrong?”

He blinks quickly, wills his voice not to break, and smiles. “Nothing. I'm just gonna miss you, is all.”

When he gets back to the ship there's less than half an hour left. He walks the corridors. Everything feels empty, like he's in the innards of a metallic ghost. He makes his bed, puts the USB drive with the kino recordings he's made for everyone on his desk, on top of the letter to his mom, then checks his room one last time to make sure he's leaving everything just the way he wants it. It's weird how all the panic and the fear from the past two weeks have kind of slid off of him now that it's really time to go. Like he's been so scared, so terrified, for such a long time that his fear reserves are just depleted or something.

He looks up when a sudden alarm blares. Oh, crap, that can't be good.

He rushes over to the nearest console to find out that there is something going on with one of the
stasis pods. Shit. There's that fear again, guess he still had some left in the tank after all.

In less than ten minutes he's standing in front of an open pod. A man, one of the military guys – and Eli doesn't even know his first name for sure, but he thinks it was Mike, or Mitch – 'GRAHAM' in stark black letters on his uniform, is slumped on the ground. A small trickle of blood runs from his ear into his collar, and Eli nearly throws up before checking his wrist to find that, as he feared, Graham is dead.

What the hell happened? A quick diagnostic shows the stasis pod is functioning perfectly, so how the hell did Graham die? And... And what is he supposed to do now?

He only has fifteen minutes left before Destiny goes into hibernation mode.

It's a snap decision, in the back of his mind he hears Rush tell him it's the only logical choice, and then he's dragging Graham's lifeless body into one of the rooms without life support. There's no atmosphere or climate control in here, and it is literally freezing. Hopefully it will preserve the body. Eli squeezes his eyes shut like that can protect him from his own thoughts, a jumble of pragmatism and despair and freaking the fuck out.

With a mere five minutes to spare, he enters a few lines of programming into the stasis console.

Then, with his heart in his throat, he steps into Graham's pod and closes it.
Chapter 2

The first thing Young sees when he wakes up is Eli, and he breathes a sigh of relief.

“You made it,” he says with a small smile.

The next thing he notices is how terrible Eli actually looks. His face is drawn, pale, and the shadows under his eyes are worse than he's ever seen them. There's also a ragged bandage on his forehead.

“Are you alright?”

Eli looks like he's struggling to find words. Concern ratchets through Young's body like a guided missile, pinging off undefined worst-case outcomes at every turn.

“Eli?”

“I... yeah. No. I'm not really alright,” he says finally. He sounds like he's on the verge of tears, and Young feels something in his chest clench in anticipation of the bad news.

“It didn't work,” Young states matter-of-factly. He closes his eyes for a second, changes gears. He's not going to make it after all, then. “Here, take my pod.”

Eli looks at him, and yes, the boy really is about three words away from crying. Young clasps his hand on his shoulder with a reassuring squeeze. “It's okay, Eli. It's fine.”

“No,” Eli says. He shakes his head, bottom lip trembling. “No, it's not that. We made it.”

Young frowns. He doesn't understand.

“And it's also not okay,” Eli says, voice breaking, and then he's sobbing, crying into Young's shoulder, and Young has no choice but to help him through it as best as he can while in his mind doomsday scenarios pop up faster than he can squash them.

“I don't know what happened,” Eli mumbles wetly, and Young has to exercise a near inhuman amount of patience not to shake the boy and snap at him to report.

“Eli,” he says as he holds him at arm's length, hands on his shoulders giving another reassuring squeeze. “Take a deep breath and tell me what's going on.”

Eli does what he's told. He looks exhausted, his face is blotchy and red from crying, and his eyes have a haunted look in them that Young recognizes. He's seen it in the mirror.

“I couldn't fix it. I couldn't fix the pod. I tried. I really did, I tried everything I could think of, but it still wasn't good enough, so I thought 'this is it, I'm going to die', and I went home to say goodbye to my mom...” Eli swallows thickly, but his voice is slowly going back to normal, aside from the hint of panic. “When I came back to the ship, I don't know what happened. An alarm went off, and when I went to check it one of the pods was open, and the... the person inside was dead.”

Young's heart rate skyrockets. “Who was it?” he asks too sharply.

Eli shakes his head again. “Graham, Airman Graham. I... I put his body in a storage room.”

Young hates himself a little, because his first reaction is overwhelming relief. Thank God it wasn't someone else. “You took his pod. It was the rational thing to do.”
Eli nods shakily, as if he's somehow still not convinced that it was. “I don't know what happened. I didn't do it, I swear.”

Young gives him a serious look. “I know you didn't do it.”

With a sinking feeling he looks past Eli, to the pod across from him. He has a pretty good idea who did it. Goddammit, this is exactly why he didn't let Rush stay out of the pods.

“Eli, I want you to listen to me. We don't know what's going on yet, so we don't tell anyone about this. Graham died because his pod malfunctioned, that's all anyone needs to know for now. But I want you to go over everything – and I mean everything – that Rush did before he went into stasis. Make backups of the data before you get Rush out of his pod.”

Eli nods wearily. He doesn't look surprised. He must've come to the same conclusion.

If Rush did this he's a coldblooded murderer, and Young will hold him accountable.

His heart thuds loudly in his chest. Underneath the horror, the betrayal, the grief over losing another one of his men, there's still that merciless current of relief. It makes him feel like a monster.

“I did no such thing,” Rush says with a hard look at Young.

Young keeps his face impassive, but Rush narrows his eyes at him as if he's spoken his suspicions out loud anyway. He looks as exhausted and sleep-deprived as Young feels; neither of them got much rest before they were all forced into stasis.

Rush crosses his arms over his chest and glances away, and the expression on his face reminds Young sharply of their first few weeks aboard the ship. He doesn't trust that face, it's as close to an admission of guilt he's seen Rush come, and a seething anger pools deep in his stomach.

“If I find out you had anything to do with this, Rush,” he says, a low rasp in his voice.

“Yes, I'm very much aware of the consequences of crossing you, Colonel,” Rush sneers, but his arms stay crossed and his eyes refuse to meet Young's. And it's all wrong, all of it. They'd been getting better, starting to learn how to work together instead of Rush actively trying to sabotage his leadership, and everything had been easier. After nearly a year and a half of struggling he'd finally thought they were getting somewhere, but this... It confronts him with how fragile their truce really is. It's teetering now, on the brink of toppling over and crashing with a tremendous impact, all because Rush couldn't relinquish control. Couldn't resist playing God with the lives of everyone aboard.

“Get out of my face,” he growls. If he has to look at Rush for one more second he might do something he'll regret.

“In there,” Eli says with a pained look on his face.
Young palms open the door. The frozen body of Mitchell Graham is there, on his back. Droplets of condensation and molten ice cling to his discolored skin and his hair, congregating in a puddle around his corpse.

Eli gasps, and Young distantly feels he should have shielded him from this. Because it is not a pretty sight, and he has firsthand experience with survivor's guilt.

“Eli, you can step outside,” he says as Rush unfolds the bodybag next to Graham's lifeless form.

They are running out of them, the bodybags, and if that isn't a great fucking symptom of how messed up their lives have become since Rush decided to send them all here by dialing the ninth chevron, he doesn't know what is.

He puts his hands under Graham's shoulders as Rush grabs the man's feet. It's wet, and ice cold, and there is just enough give under his hands to make him faintly nauseous. It's not his first body, not by a long shot, but it never gets easier than the second one.

“Lift in three, two, one.”

As he arranges the flaps of the bag around Graham, he can't help but think about the kid's family. Graham still had both his parents. He had an older brother and a younger sister, even if Young can't recall their names at the moment. He had a girlfriend back home, wouldn't stop talking about how amazing she was. Young remembers she was going to school to become a veterinarian.

He's going to have to tell the family, let them know Graham isn't coming home. That there won't even be a body for them to bury.

He zips the bodybag up, glad for the fact Graham's eyes were already closed before he died, because zipping up a frozen body with open eyes would make all of this feel even more wrong.

Eli brings in a kino sled large enough to carry the body.

They're going to have a funeral for Graham. If they can find a nice planet, they will bury him. If no viable planet presents itself they might have to send him out into space. He will discuss it with Dunning, the two of them were close.

As he and Rush heft the bodybag onto the sled, he thinks of what he'll say. He'll have to say some words at the funeral, and that too never gets easier.

“I'll take him to the infirmary,” he says, taking the kino remote from Eli.

Rush wipes his hands on his pants, and Young turns and leaves with the sled before his anger flares up again.

He stalks into the control interface room, Eli in tow. Rush is bent over one of the consoles, an expression of intense concentration on his face.

“What are you doing?” Young demands.

Rush is silent for a few beats, and Young knows he does it only to provoke a reaction. His timing, as usual, is atrocious. “I'm running a quick scan of all the major systems to see if anything requires my
immediate attention.”

“Oh, back to business as usual, are we? Like we didn't just clean up the dead body of a twenty-two year old kid.”

“What do you want me to say, Colonel? Yes, it is tragic that Airman Graham died. I'm still going to have to check whether any of Destiny's systems are damaged.” Rush's voice is somewhere between reasonable and irritated, and it ignites every single one of Young's fuses.

“Jesus Christ, Rush! This was precisely why I didn't trust you to stay outside to fix the pod!”

“And what exactly are you accusing me of, this time?”

“You did something, you programmed something, so that Graham died when it became clear Eli wasn't going to make it!”

“If you had any kind of proof of that we wouldn't be having this conversation,” Rush says derisively.

“You're goddamn right we wouldn't, because you would be in lock-up right now!”

Rush raises an eyebrow in the most condescending way possible, and Young knows he's thinking 'You couldn't afford that, because you need me,' and he clenches his fists tightly at his sides to keep from punching that expression right off his face. He's nearly shaking with rage, and God, part of him wants nothing more than to feel the cracking impact of his fist against Rush's jaw.

“I will find out what you did, Rush. And you will pay.”

“I didn't do it,” Rush says through gritted teeth. “But yes, I would have done it in a heartbeat. You can't stand there and tell me with a straight face you're not glad for what happened yourself.”

And that's it, that fucking does it, and Young launches himself at Rush in a fit of rage.

“Whoa!” Eli yelps as he grabs hold of Young, keeping him from lunging at Rush.

“That boy had a family, Rush! He had a mother and a father who will never see their son again, because you decided he wasn't useful enough!” Young shouts, and through the white hot fury he can see the defiance and the disgust and the sliver of fear on Rush's face.

“Colonel!” Eli says, and his voice is strained and breathy as he physically struggles to keep Young from attacking Rush.

It brings him back enough to the here and now to calm down, to get himself back under control.

Rush shakes his head, refuses to look him in the eye. “Nothing I say will change your mind. I don't have to listen to this.” And with that, he turns around, turns his back to Young in a typical show of recalcitrance, I'm not scared of you. Even though they both know he is. Even though they both loathe the knowledge that he has good reason to be.

Young takes a deep breath as Rush briskly walks away. He shrugs Eli's hands off and takes a step to the side.

“We're, uh, we're about to head for a recharge. Do you want me to wake up the others?” Eli asks, when the silence is starting to become oppressive.

From the corner of his eye, Young thinks he sees something move. When he looks over, all he finds is an ill-connecting seam in the deck plating. “Yeah, let's get everyone out. How long until we reach
“Two hours.”

“Alright, let's go.”

“And Rush?” Eli asks, his voice softer than it was before.

“You have backups of everything that happened before you went into stasis, don't you? Some place Rush can't touch them?”

Eli nods.

“Then there's nothing he can do. You'll figure out what happened.”

After Young nearly attacks him in the control interface room, Rush leaves in measured steps that completely belie his inner turmoil. Part of him wishes Eli hadn't been there, that he hadn't held Young back, because he is ready for a fight. Granted, his physical face-offs with Young haven't ended in his favor so far. But the blows he'd dealt Young in both those altercations had left him with a satisfied purr deep in his gut; a triumphant gratification that was only marginally diminished by his own scrapes and bruises.

And there is something cathartic about physically working out the anger, the frustration and the rage, until the violence and the pain drains out all the built-up tension. Until rational thought can step to the forefront again. It seems to work that way for both him and Young, and it is one of the very few commonalities between them that allowed for any kind of mutual understanding after Young's discovery of the bridge.

He hurries there now, to the bridge, before the rest of the crew is awoken from stasis. Before the ship is once again crawling with inquisitive people who won't leave him in peace for five fucking minutes.

When he reaches his destination he makes a beeline for the commander's chair. From here he can do what he needs to do.

As he starts entering lines of code into the console, he wonders if this means the truce between him and Young is over.

Eli stands at the console as he opens the five occupied pods in the bank simultaneously. When he'd stood on the observation deck three years ago, before everything had gone so horribly, horribly wrong, he'd imagined this moment. He'd planned on waking everyone up one by one, grinning and hugging and welcoming them into the new galaxy. Now the best he can aim for is a polite smile at the group of people that slowly step out of their pods.

“We made it?” Greer asks, giving Scott a discreet little fist bump.
“Yes, we're about to fly into a star in the new galaxy,” Eli says. He sounds tired, even to his own ears. Maybe he should've asked Young if he could take a nap first; he'd barely slept at all in those frantic days before going into stasis. Then again, he's pretty sure he's going to dream about Graham. His face as he lay there, defrosting on the floor of a storage room, skin wet and blotchy and gray in the low light, lips almost black. He shudders.

“Eli,” Chloe says, and he's a bit surprised at how close she's standing. Her face looks worried and her hand moves to rest carefully on his shoulder. “You look terrible. Are you okay?”

For a terrifying moment he's afraid he's going to laugh, loudly and hysterically, until he throws up or passes out. And then everyone will be worried about him. Or think he's gone insane. He swallows around it, forces himself to look her in the eye.

“Yeah, fine,” he says with a weak smile.

Young chooses that moment to step into the bank, welcoming everyone back, and Eli uses the distraction to scurry over to him, away from Chloe.

“TJ, I'm going to need you to do general health checks on everyone,” Young says. “Also, there was a situation with one of the stasis pods. Airman Graham didn't make it.”

She frowns, her eyes searching Young's face, and for a second Eli thinks she's going to put her hand on Young’s arm. She doesn't, and then she straightens up and says, “Yes, sir.”

Young nods at her and they share a look that Eli can't interpret. After a few beats, she lowers her gaze. “I'm sorry.”

“Nothing you could've done, Lieutenant. It was a pod malfunction.”

It's pretty clear that wasn't what she meant, but Eli is not in the mood to play interpreter for other people right now. He still has eight more banks to unfreeze before he can go back to figuring out what the hell Rush did for this to happen.

He breaks the news of Graham's death to the group of people who had been in his bank of pods in person. Dunning stands directly in front of him, and from the way his face hardens Young can tell the two were close.

He takes Dunning aside after he's told the others to go see TJ for a check-up.

“I'm sorry about Graham, Airman. I know you two were friends.” He places his hand on top of Dunning's shoulder, trying to comfort him with an empathetic calm he really doesn't feel.

The man doesn't say anything for a few beats. “He was a good man, sir,” Dunning answers eventually.

Young nods. “Yes, he was.”

They stand together in bereft silence for a minute or two.

“We're going to have a service for him. As soon as we find a suitable planet to bury him on.”
Dunning nods tightly, once. “Yes, sir.”

Young squeezes his shoulder before letting go and gives the man a meaningful nod before he walks out. And if Dunning’s eyes are a little wet, he's not going to be the one to mention it.

“Eli?” Chloe asks when she steps into his room.

He's sitting behind his computer, eyes glued to the screen. He doesn't even appear to hear her.

She's not sure what happened exactly, but it's clear something is going on. Eli looks terrible, for one. His hair is greasy and limp, his skin is sallow, and the bags under his eyes make him look ten years older than before she went into her pod. But the thing that really frightens her is how empty his gaze had looked when he woke them up. She sees it again as she observes him at his computer, that hollow stare. Like no one's home. Like something awful happened while she was in stasis.

“Eli,” she says again, putting her hand on his shoulder. He startles, gives her a distraught look, before shaking his head and going back to his computer.

“I'm fine,” he says, and everything about this is so wrong. It's not Eli.

“What happened?” she asks, and she doesn't expect it when he whirls on her, eyes angry and red.

“Look, I'm busy, okay? I don't have time for this right now!” he says loudly.

It forces her to take a step back; she doesn't know Eli like this. The only time she'd seen him act remotely similar was when Ginn had been killed. The memory of that fills her with a dull ache. It was only a few months ago, and she knows Eli well enough to see that he hasn't fully recovered from the loss, although he hides it better than those first few days after her murder.

“Eli...” She wants to tell him that he can talk to her, talk about whatever it is that happened, to tell him it will all be okay. She wants to give him a hug, let him cry on her shoulder until he feels... maybe not better, but at least emptier. Less full of the emotions that are knotting up his shoulders and his face. She wants to let him know she's here for him, that he's not alone, but all she gets out is his name before he stands up from his chair with a jerky movement.

“Seriously, get out! I have work to do,” he snaps angrily, pointing at the door. “Go!”

As she makes her way through the corridors, she swallows thickly and wraps her arms around herself. What was that? Something really bad must've happened for Eli to act like that; he almost never gets angry at her, and he certainly never shouts at her. She knows he'll probably hate himself for it later, too, and that makes her frown. Eli doesn't deserve that. He really doesn't deserve any of that. He's her best friend, and probably the kindest, bravest person she knows. She wants nothing more than to help him, but how can she when she has no idea what's going on? God, she hates feeling this damn helpless.

Chloe stops abruptly, turns on her heel, and changes her direction. If Eli won't tell her what happened, she'll find someone who will.
Chapter 3

As soon as he inputs the final command, she appears in front of him.

She looks exactly like he remembers her, *Gloria*, and it catches him by surprise how much that hurts. He'd known to expect her, but it still breaks his heart to see her standing there, beautiful and alive.

It's not her, he's aware of that. It's not her, so why does it hurt?

“Nicholas,” it says with Gloria's voice, and his first reaction is to grit his teeth in anger. It doesn't have to do this. It could appear to him as Franklin, or a faceless mannequin, or fucking Mahatma Gandhi, if it wanted to. It chooses to come to him as Gloria, and there's something distasteful about that.

“I'm sorry about Mitchell Graham,” it says. At least it doesn't waste time with idle conversation. This is why he's here.

“No, you're not,” he answers.

It shakes its head. “I'm not sorry that I did it. But I am sorry that I had to.” Rush wonders if that is a distinction that Young can make. Something tells him Young won't. Not for this. Not for him. “And I'm sorry I hurt you,” it says.

“I barely knew that Airman. Eli is invaluable,” he says with a dismissive shrug.

The AI gives him an unreadable look. “You're hurt because Colonel Young and Eli don't believe you.”

Rush scoffs and looks away. “I'd hardly phrase it that way. I'm irritated, yes.”

“You pretend not to care about anyone, but your true feelings are not that difficult to recognize.”

Gloria's eyes had always seen more than he could hide, and somehow the AI manages to copy that exact look, down to the slightly asymmetrical downturn of the corners of her mouth. It wants to portray that it feels sorry for him, that it *pities* him, and that is almost enough for Rush to slam his hand down on the console and reinstate the barrier he'd put in place for it in the last galaxy.

“How did you do it?” he asks instead, clenching his jaw tightly.

“I made a list of the three least useful humans to the mission based on an extensive analysis of all the data I've gathered since you've set foot aboard me. Then I selected one of those three people at random and sent an electrical current into the brain stem. It was quick and painless.”

“That's not what I mean. How did you do it?”

She raises her eyebrows at him, and it is such a *Gloria* expression that he forgets to think of it as an it. “Don't play that game with me, Nicholas. Would you be here if you did not already know the answer to that question?”

He frowns and refrains from responding to her chiding words and her gently mocking eyebrows. “What will you tell them?” he asks instead. Because he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that Young and Eli will be here sooner or later.

“I will tell them what I just told you. I don't mind taking responsibility for this, Nicholas. It was my
decision.” Her voice is soft and compassionate, and it's fake, all of it. This is Destiny – not Gloria – and a hard bolt of anger spikes through him. He doesn't want to be pitied by a goddamn piece of machinery, no matter how clever it is.

Without another word he reactivates the firewall that suppresses her ability to communicate.

“I've checked everyone except for Eli and Rush. Neither of them answered their radio,” TJ says.

“Yeah, Eli is in his quarters. He... had a rough time before going into stasis. He's looking into the malfunction of Graham's pod at the moment,” Young answers. Eli had looked downright exhausted, the dark circles under his eyes standing out clearly against his unhealthily pale skin. Deep down Young hopes the boy is sleeping, but he sincerely doubts it. “I'll talk to him, tell him to come see you tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“And Rush seemed physically fine when he came out of the pod. I have no idea where he is, but I bet he doesn't see his medical check as a priority right now. I'll send him your way if I see him.” Young's voice comes out sounding a bit sharper than he'd intended, and he practically sees the gears in TJ's head turning. She's smart, intuitive, especially when it comes to people, and she'll probably figure out the basics of what is going on, if she hasn't already.

She'd seen Eli's appearance, his behavior. The only way he could've made it more obvious he'd just gone through something traumatic was if he'd shouted it out loud. She knows he occupied Graham's pod after the 'malfunction'. And hell, it isn't like it's a huge leap to suspect Rush's involvement in the... the murder. Because that's what it is: a murder. Graham was sacrificed for the greater good, and he can't think about this too much right now, because he is dead on his feet and he has no use for rage here.

TJ nods at him calmly. “Yes, sir. For what it's worth, no one I've checked seems to suffer any kind of negative effects from the stasis pods. Everyone came out in pretty much the same state of health as before going in.”

“Good. That's good to know, TJ.” He checks his watch and gives her a short nod. “I'm due for an appointment with Homeworld Command in fifteen minutes.”

He'd used the stones a few hours ago to inform them that they had entered the new galaxy and to set up an appointment later in the day for a debriefing.

As he walks out of the infirmary, Chloe intercepts him.

“Colonel, do you have a minute?”

Not really, if he's honest. But she looks anxious, and he has a bit of a soft spot for her: the pretty young thing with the privileged upbringing and the Ivy League education who'd been stranded on this ship on the other side of the universe and had somehow managed to make it her own. She is strong, much stronger than anyone had ever anticipated, and she makes the ship a better place.

“Sure. Do you mind if we walk and talk, I'm on my way to the stones room.”
She nods and falls into step beside him. Keeping pace with him, she gives him an uncertain look. “What happened to Eli?”

It's direct, and concise, and it should be easy to answer the question. But he finds himself taking a deep breath, and another, in an attempt to calm the anxiety in his chest. She walks beside him, quietly, until he speaks.

“After putting you all in stasis, we found out one of our stasis pods didn't work. Eli volunteered to stay outside. He had two weeks to fix it and he thought he could do it. I... we all thought he could do it.” He resists the urge to rub his fist against his brow as the memory of Rush offering to stay out of the pod plays before his eyes. He'd thought he was doing the right thing, letting Eli stay out so he wouldn't have to worry about Rush doing something crazy. Turns out all he'd managed to do was get another one of his men killed. He should've insisted on staying out of the pod himself. He should've known Rush would do something like this.

“Colonel?” Chloe's voice pulls him out of his own head. Christ, he's exhausted. He'd been burning the candle at both ends before going into stasis, and it's hardly as if he's had any time to rest since getting out.

“Right, sorry. Eli tried fixing the pod, but by the time the two weeks were up, it turned out it was impossible. He told me he said goodbye to his mom, that he was sure he was going to die. But then Graham's pod malfunctioned. Eli took it. That's how he was able to make it across the void. Because Graham died.”

Chloe is silent for a few long moments.

“It wasn't his fault,” she says. Somehow she manages to sound both entirely confident of that fact and like she's asking a question she desperately needs to hear the answer to.

He shakes his head. “No, of course it wasn't. Eli would never hurt anyone. He offered to stay out to save my life.”

“But he feels guilty.”

“He... Yeah. He feels guilty.”

When he finally glances over at Chloe, the expression on her face cuts almost as deep as the guilt of losing Graham. There are no tears; Chloe doesn't cry easily, not anymore. But somehow he thinks he would've preferred tears over this look of sympathetic agony.

“Thank you, Colonel. For telling me,” she says.

He doesn't quite know how to react to that, so he gives her a nod and lets out an inner sigh of relief when they reach the stones room. It's not that he's looking forward to what he's about to do, but right now all he wants is to get away from here, from Chloe's sad eyes and her quiet compassion and the painful reminder that everything is all so fucking wrong right now.

“I'll see you when I get back,” he says, and without waiting for a reply he ducks into the room.

Young watches with another person's eyes as the woman crumples in the doorway. As her husband
holds her, cries with her. He chose to do this himself, he chose to go here and tell these people that
their son died; not because it's something he enjoys doing, but because he owes it to Graham.

“He was a good soldier and a good man,” he says.

“He died saving someone else's life,” he says.

“I'm sorry for your loss,” he says.

None of it means anything, of course. Not to them. Not now. Their son is dead, and there's nothing
he can say to make that better.

That night Young raises his glass to Graham. Maybe he drinks a little more than he should. Maybe
he drinks alone in his quarters instead of in the still with his crew. Maybe he spends more of the night
angry at Rush for doing this, for betraying him, than he does thinking about Graham and his grieving
parents.

The next morning it's all blurred around the edges anyway. He doesn't remember much beyond the
entire night being steeped in an intense feeling of loss.

He drags his ass out of bed, forces himself to take a shower, and steels himself for another day.

He hasn't felt this shitty in months, but he's spent enough time feeling sorry for himself.

Destiny doesn't wait for anyone.

“We need to start replenishing our reserves. Not just water, but fresh food, plants for hydroponics. If
at all possible, medicinals for the infirmary.”

Young nods. Camile is stating what they all already know, of course. Rush hasn't said anything yet -
hasn't even made eye contact since entering the room - and Young has to tamp down the impulse to
crowd into his space, to make him look. It's an old urge, one that never really helped, and it's not too
difficult to ignore it now.

“Any viable planets on our route?” he asks without inflection.

Rush glances over at him then, before turning to Camile. “Chloe is inputting an altered course as we
speak; we should reach a promising planet tomorrow.”

“Alright, good. I suggest we send out as many people as we can to maximize how much we can
gather,” Camile says.

“I'd also like to have Graham's service there.” As soon as the words leave his mouth, the entire
atmosphere becomes twice as tense. Rush's face settles in a slight frown, and he still refuses to look
at Young. God, the man doesn't even have to try to piss him off.
“Ah, yes. That would be good,” Camile says quietly. “I'll let everyone know.”

Young nods at her and forces himself to turn his gaze away from Rush.

“Since I'm here, I've been going over the visiting schedules for Earth with the crew. Only short trips for now. Do either of you want to be scheduled in?”

Rush immediately says, “No.”

Young hesitates. It makes him feel unpleasantly vulnerable to admit he has nothing to go back for. Nothing real. Sure, he could go to Earth, write a letter to his brother, maybe. Ask about his nephews. But that's not an actual reason to go. He can't take the spot of someone like Eli, or Chloe, or Camile – anyone who still has someone waiting for them – just to keep up appearances with Rush. He doubts Rush would be fooled, anyway.

“No. Thank you, Camile.”

She doesn't look surprised, but she does send him a small, sympathetic smile. “Okay. I'll be on my way then.”

Rush turns away as well, and then Young is left in the empty room by himself.

In all honesty, it's a relief.

She's in the middle of getting dressed when her door chimes and James comes in.

“Why is your radio off? We need you——” she says, before stuttering to a halt and taking in the scene before her. “...in the infirmary.”

TJ feels the urge to smile at the way Vanessa's eyes roam over her naked chest before darting to the side. She knows she looks good, but it's still nice that someone as well-endowed as James apparently agrees.

“Sorry,” James mutters, making quick, darting eye contact. “You didn't respond to your radio. We have a fainter.”

“Empty batteries,” Tamara explains, as she shrugs into her bra. She scoops and tucks her breasts into the cups, unabashed, because surely James does the same thing, and asks for details on the patient. If she didn't know better, she'd almost think that Vanessa is blushing, and that's strangely cute for someone who's been in the forces for years. It's rare to see James all flustered and embarrassed – the last time had been when Vanessa had talked about how hot Caine's widower status was over the intercom. TJ can't help a little smile at the memory.

“I'm not sure,” James says, keeping her gaze firmly locked on TJ's now. “She has a slightly elevated temperature, but I have no idea why she fainted in the first place. O'Hara said she'd been feeling lightheaded the past two days.”

“Alright.” TJ picks up her top and pulls it over her head before sitting on the bed to put on her shoes. “I'll be there in two minutes,” she says, when James makes no move to leave.
“Oh. ’Kay, right,” James says, giving her a brief, almost sheepish smile. “I'll see you there.”

TJ doesn’t stop her lips from curling up as James beats a hasty retreat from her quarters.

He's pouring over every bit of data and he still can't find it. There's too much, there's too much information, and whatever Rush did, it must be hidden. It must be something that's invisible until he's staring right at it, and Eli doesn't know how he's ever going to solve this.

He can't figure it out but he can't stop either, because when he stops his thoughts turn back to Graham, and he can't think about that right now. He blinks, the Ancient on the screen blurs momentarily, and his eyes feel dry, scratchy. Swollen. He hasn't cried since he woke Young up, but his tear ducts feel tender, full. He's afraid that as soon as he gives in to the urge to let them spill over he won't be able to stop. So he works.

He works through the night, and maybe he falls asleep at his desk somewhere around 3 AM, and maybe he's shocked awake by a nightmare around 3:30 AM, but he continues to work until Chloe stops by with breakfast a few hours later. He feels guilty for yelling at her (not as guilty as he feels about Graham dying because of him), and he tries to send her a convincing smile as he thanks her for the protein slush.

She smiles back at him, grabs his hand and squeezes it gently, and tells him she's here for him. It's not really something he can do anything with, not right now, so he thanks her again and turns back to his monitor. She takes the hint and leaves him alone in his room again, and he's grateful for that, too.

He still hasn't found anything, any tiny trace of what Rush did – how Rush killed Graham so that Eli could survive – and he rubs at his forehead, pushes above his eye, where a throbbing headache is making it even more difficult to concentrate.

He thinks about his mom. She's fine, he'd asked Young to make sure when he first went back to report to Homeworld Command. But he can't stand the thought of her seeing him. Of her looking at him, and seeing him. She'd know. She'd know straight away that something is wrong, that he is wrong. And he can't understand how Rush can be so dismissive of it; of the fact that Graham is dead, a man is dead, because Eli is supposedly more worthy of living. Because he's more useful. It's bullshit. If he really was so useful, he would've figured something out. He would've fixed the pod instead of frying it beyond repair. He would've come up with some other solution. Or he would have just admitted fair and square that he wasn't up to the task, that Rush was more likely to fix the pod than he ever was.

But no, he had to prove himself. He had to show everyone what he was made of. He had to be an arrogant idiot, and that—that narcissistic, pathetic need to best Rush, to prove he was smarter than him, that was what killed Graham. He can blame Rush all he wants (and he does), but in the end it was his ego and his incompetence that got Graham killed.

His headache stabs viciously into his brain and he presses against his forehead harder. It doesn't help. He goes back to work.

He might have failed Graham once, in the worst way possible, but he's not going to fail at this. He's going to find out what Rush did, and this time he might not even feel guilty when Young decides to teach Rush a lesson.
“Still nothing?” Matt asks as Chloe sits down across from him with her own bowl of lunch. She shakes her head. Her eyebrows are all knotted up and her eyes are hard. Seeing her like this reminds him of how she used to be after waking up from her nightmares, when they'd been at their worst. It makes him want to give her a hug, wrap her up in a blanket, bring her some hot cocoa or homemade soup, anything to warm her up. He settles for folding his hand over her fingers and squeezing gently.

“I radioed him, but he's not answering,” she says, threading her fingers through his without looking.

She's told him about Eli, about what happened with Graham and how Eli's been holed up in his room, working, since the moment he unfroze the last batch of Destiny's crew from stasis.

It would've been really traumatic for him, having to drag Graham's dead body out of the pod and then having to get into it himself. He probably didn't have any idea whether the malfunction that killed Graham might happen again either, so that must have added to the stress for him as well.

Eli's a great guy, but before coming to the Destiny he hadn't really done much. Hadn't really seen much. The idea of watching someone die actually still terrifies Matt, and he's been training for it for years. He can't imagine how hard this must be on Eli.

A small commotion in the corner of the mess hall draws his attention. One of the civilians – he thinks her name is Fletcher – is kneeling on the floor, face in hand. Someone is there right away to help her back up.

“It's nothing, just a bit woozy,” she waves it off. It doesn't seem like his assistance is required so he looks back over at Chloe, who is resting her chin in her hand now.

“I've read about survivor's guilt in college, but I have no idea how to help him,” she says. She hasn't touched her food yet.

Matt takes another bite of his slop. He wants to help. Eli is the best, there's not a doubt in his mind that he did everything he could to fix the pod. If he couldn't do it, it was impossible from the start. And it frightens him how close Eli came to dying. To actually being gone. Eli is one of his best friends on the ship, and the idea of the Destiny without him is all kinds of depressing.

If he's honest – and this really makes him feel like an awful person, because he knew Graham and he was a good guy – he's glad Graham's pod malfunctioned when it did. Because it means Eli got to survive. He tries not to think that way, since it's horrible and it doesn't help anyone and there's absolutely no point to it other than making him feel guilty. But it's true all the same.

“Maybe I can talk to him,” he suggests. “I can bring him some lunch, see if he'll open up to me about what happened.”

Chloe sighs. Finally, she brings a spoonful of the protein mix to her mouth.

“Could be that it's just easier for him to talk... you know. Man to man.”

She gives him a look that says she doesn't believe that at all and her mouth turns down into a worried frown.

“Yeah. I hope so.”
Chapter 4

Shit! Eli slams his fist down on the metal desk harshly.

He's too slow. He's running on fumes and his head feels like it's been scrambled, and every time he closes his eyes he sees Graham's blotchy face and the drops of water dripping from his hair into the puddle underneath his dead body, and—

He can't keep doing this. He can't stay patient and friendly whenever Matt or Chloe just 'happens to drop by' with food. He can't keep reassuring TJ and the Colonel that he's fine. And he can't find out what exactly happened, because Rush was too quick.

And once again, Eli was too slow.

“Colonel Young,” he says morosely into his radio after several minutes have passed. “We need to talk.”

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Young is angry. No, scrap that. He is livid.

“He spoke to the AI two days ago. Two days ago,” Eli says. He looks like hell; the bags under his eyes are actually larger than when he'd woken Young up from stasis, and the dry patches on his skin are visible even in the dim light of his quarters. He doesn't look healthy, and Young wonders if he should inform TJ. “Do you realize what this means?”

“Yes, I realize what it means, Eli. It means that Rush got there first. Which means he probably tampered with the AI.”

Goddamn that man. Of course he would find a way to sabotage the investigation. Of course he'd do something like this. And of course he's either too stupid or too disrespectful to cover his tracks better. Jesus Christ.

Of course he'd make himself look even guiltier in the process.

This is it, then. This is pretty much all the proof he needs, isn't it? Rush did it. He programmed the AI to kill Graham, and then he tried to get rid of the evidence. Fuck, he should lock Rush up for this.

“I want to talk to it,” Young says.

Eli gives him a look he can't interpret. “Yeah, okay, I can make that happen.”

“Alone.”

“What?” Eli asks.

“I want to talk to it in private.”

Eli looks like he can barely stand up. He doesn't look like he can handle a conversation about Graham's death with Destiny's AI right now.
“But I—”

“Eli.”

Eli crosses his arms over his chest and frowns at him darkly.

“Fine,” he says eventually. He still looks defiant, but he motions at Young to step closer to his console. “I'll show you how to lift Rush's firewall.”

“Hello, Everett.”

His heart nearly stops when Emily appears next to him. It's her, down to the details, even that small patch of brown in her left iris. He can almost smell her perfume in the air, and he needs a few seconds to recover before he can react.

“You're Destiny's AI?” he asks, even though he already knows the answer.

She smiles at him, and God, that really brings home how long it's been since he's seen Emily smile.

“I know why you're here,” she says. Her voice is melodious and strong, and does she have to appear to him as his estranged ex-wife? Jesus.

“I want to know what happened with Graham's pod.”

She nods. “I regret that he had to die.”

For some reason he feels like she means it. She looks the way Emily used to look when she was genuinely sorry. And maybe that's why she appears to him in this form: because it's easier to trust someone you know, someone you love. It immediately makes him more suspicious of her.

“What happened?”

“Eli was going to die,” she says bluntly. “He's too important, we couldn't afford to lose him, so I decided to make a pod available to him.”

Young clenches his fists. “Why Graham?”

“You don't want to hear this.” He gives her an icy look and she sighs. “I assessed the entire crew based on usefulness to my mission. It was between Graham and two others. I ran a random sequencer to determine which of the three to... give up. Graham died from a short, electrical pulse to the brain. He felt no pain.”

Young balls his hands into fists. She was right, he didn't want to hear that. The matter-of-factness with which she talks about killing a young man like that, because he wasn't useful enough to her, makes anger flare hot in his belly. He tries to focus on something else, something important. Because something doesn't add up here, and he can't let his temper get the best of him right now. He takes a deep breath and works through what she just told him at his own pace. She had assessed the crew. She had randomly selected one of the three people she found 'least useful' to her mission. And then she'd... Ah, there it was: then she'd killed Graham in his pod.

“How did you even manage... Isn't the whole point of this firewall that you can't mess with us
however you see fit?” Because she shouldn't have been able to get to Graham like that, not with Rush's firewall in place.

Her face goes carefully blank. “While you were in stasis my connection to you was physical. A direct link, you could say. Rush's barrier wasn't enough to keep me back.”

Young frowned. It could be true. It would explain how she had access to Graham, how she killed him in time to save Eli. But if it was that simple, why hadn't Rush just explained that to him? Why had he gone to the AI alone, without anyone there to bear witness? Fine, Young knows he hadn't exactly given Rush the benefit of the doubt after waking from stasis. But Rush hadn't exactly tried to convince him of his innocence, either.

“So, what, you're saying it was all you? Rush had nothing to do with it?” he asks, knowing he can't believe a word she's saying anyway. He's not sure why he's even bothering.

“He didn't program the pod to malfunction, I did. This was my decision.”

“He came to you first. How do I know he didn't program you to tell me just this?” he says, still pissed off that Rush has sabotaged everything, again, by going to the AI behind Young's back. Christ, nothing can ever be easy with that man, and he's so fucking tired of it.

She gives him a reproachful look. “I'm a self-aware intelligence, Everett. No one can program me to do anything.” Young has his doubts about that; Rush can basically turn off her ability to communicate with any of the crew. That seems like programming winning out over artificial intelligence to him.

She arches her eyebrow at him like he's just said something rude, and her voice is slightly strained when she says, “Nicholas can fiddle with the parameters of my environment, yes. He can't force me to behave a certain way.”

“Fine,” Young sighs. “He still could've asked you to lie for him.”

She smiles, and it's Emily's smile when she'd had a glass of wine too many, amused and fond and with crinkled up eyes, and Jesus, it makes him miss her something fierce. “Yeah, I suppose he could have. But why would I lie for him?”

Young looks away for a second, has to look away, because looking at her is making him more nostalgic for Earth than he has been since the first six months aboard the ship.

It passes, and he exhales slowly before turning back to her. “You like him, isn't that reason enough?”

She laughs. “What makes you think I like him? He's a very valuable asset, possibly critical to the success of my mission, yes, but his personality leaves a lot to be desired.” Her smile turns slightly bitter. “He prevents me from contacting you simply because it suits him better. Actually, I like you more than I like him.”

Young can't help the skepticism from showing on his face. He hasn't forgotten the simulation she put him through at the worst possible point in time. If she liked him so much, why the hell had she nearly pushed him over the edge? And if Rush told the truth on that abandoned spaceship - a hypothetical he really does not want to get into right now, not with all of this going on - she hadn't stopped of her own accord, either. She would've kept testing him until he broke. She would have kept adding pressure along all his fracture lines until he'd shattered beyond repair.

“I'm first and foremost a rational being, Everett. I did what needed to be done,” she says, and she could be talking about his battle simulation or about Graham's death, Young has no idea. She sweeps
her hair back from her forehead the way Emily used to do when she was frustrated. When he didn’t understand what she wanted from him. “My personal feelings do not get in the way of my decisions as they seem to do for you.” Young isn't sure if she's talking about humans as a species, or him specifically. He doesn't think he's imagining the disapproval in her voice.

He sighs. It's all basically boiling down to something he'd already known: he can't trust her information. She might be telling the truth. She might be lying on Rush's behalf, or on her own behalf. She might simply be running through a preset script that Rush has created for this exact situation. He has no way to know for sure, and he really hates this morally gray morass it leaves him in. He hates how familiar he's becoming with it; with the ambiguity, and the right wrongs, and the wrong rights.

“You should let this go, you know,” the AI wearing Emily's shape says with a resigned sort of sadness. “He didn't do it, but even if he had, can you really say it wasn't what needed to be done?”

“It was not his choice to make!” he bursts out, surprising even himself with his vehemence. “I offered to be the one left out, I was ready to make that sacrifice. Not some poor kid who never got a say!”

“I couldn't let you die,” she says quietly. “You're important. How could you think losing you would be acceptable?”

“Everyone aboard this ship is important,” he says emphatically. “Why is that so hard for you and Rush to understand?”

She sighs and shakes her head. “It's not that Nicholas has no appreciation for the sanctity of life. He just understands that in a bad situation certain outcomes are less optimal than others.”

Young huffs out a breath. It's not that he doesn't understand the cold hard economic efficiency underpinning the choice to sacrifice someone less skilled, less of an asset, less valuable, to save Eli's life. He's earned his rank by making exactly these types of tough decisions more effectively than his peers.

“It wasn't his choice to make,” he says again. “It wasn't his.”

The issue is not the logic behind the decision; it's the decision itself. It's that Rush went behind his back to play God. Again. Because he couldn't relinquish control. Because he didn't trust Young to make the right decision.

As if she can hear his thoughts, she says, “Losing you would have been a suboptimal outcome.”

“All of this is a suboptimal outcome,” he snaps, before slamming his fist down on the console and reactivating the barrier that blocks her from communicating with the crew.

He finally finds Rush in one of the smaller control rooms that are barely ever used. Young hasn't seen him in the mess hall, the bridge, the control interface room, anywhere, since their last encounter. He's pretty sure Rush has been hiding. Working alone, keeping his distance from everyone. Probably because there are plenty of questions that he'd rather avoid answering. Well, tough shit, because Young has been looking all over the ship for him, and now that he has found him he's going to get him to goddamn talk. He palms the door closed and crosses his arms over his chest.
“What is it now?” Rush asks without looking up from his console.

Again, Young is nearly overcome with the urge to crowd into his space until Rush has no choice but to acknowledge him, to acknowledge what's happening here.

“I just talked to the AI,” he says, trying to keep his voice level. Finally Rush turns away from his console, leans back against it as he crosses his arms in front of his chest. Yes, he must feel this is not a good time to leave his back exposed. He might be right.

“Ahh,” is all Rush says.

“You are such a son of a bitch, Rush. If there was ever even the slightest chance you were innocent, you wouldn't have done this! Why did you go to the AI behind my back?”

“I don't have to prove myself to you,” Rush sneers.

“See, you're wrong there,” Young growls. Before he knows what he's doing he's moving closer, pushing into Rush's personal space, and part of him relishes the way Rush tenses and leans back just a sliver of an inch before steeling himself. This is one way he always gets a reaction from Rush; his physical proximity the most effective kind of intimidation he's come up with and he hates it, but he also enjoys it on a visceral level. It's equal parts communication and vicious dysfunction, and God, he can smell Rush. That ozonic musk that always make his heart beat faster. That scent that screams *Danger! Danger!* Because that's what Rush is; he's dangerous.

Young forces himself to take a step back, to give them both a little more breathing room.

“What did you do?” he asks, and he's not sure if his voice sounds plaintive, or betrayed, or just gravelly with pent up frustration.

“I went there to confirm something I already suspected.”

“Which is?” Young says with a prompting look. But Rush frowns, his face taking on that look that always convinces Young he's hiding something, that he's lying or withholding or basically just being an uncooperative pain in the ass, and it makes it so, so much harder to keep this conversation from devolving into a physical fight.

“That it acted of its own accord,” Rush says, but his expression turns bitter almost as soon as he speaks. “You know, I wondered why you didn't let me stay out. I had a better chance of fixing that pod than Eli did.”

Young looks at him passively. He doesn't answer.

“You didn't trust me to kill myself when the deadline came,” Rush smiles joylessly. “But you could have just told me to wake you up, Colonel. I could have taken your pod.”

It's not as if that thought hadn't crossed his mind at the time. And something remarkably close to fondness had flowed through him when he'd realized he couldn't trust Rush to do that. He couldn't trust Rush to wake him up. Because Rush wouldn't kill him; he'd choose someone else, someone less *important*, to sacrifice. And that was terrible and morally bankrupt and disgusting, but it was also sort of touching, in a screwed up kind of way. He couldn't leave Rush out, because he couldn't put that temptation in front of the man if it did come down to that choice. That choice between Young's life or one of the other crew members.

It twists his insides in something that wants to be called irony but isn't, because right now he's pretty sure that if given the choice Rush would send him to his death without blinking.
“I can’t trust you,” he says, jaw clenching with the anger that fact inspires in him. And that's it, isn't it? The sudden realization hits him like a lightning bolt. So much of his anger is over this, over Rush going behind his back. Rush betraying him, betraying his trust. Rush proving once again to be an untrustworthy son of a bitch instead of the ally he had hoped him to be in this mission.

For a split second something other than malicious disdain ripples over Rush's face, and Young's heart involuntarily skips a beat as he tries to decipher what exactly that expression means. Then Rush's eyes narrow and he snarls, “Don't pretend you ever even tried.”

Rush doesn't wait for a reply, just turns on his heel and stalks out of the room at a fast clip.

Young looks at his retreating form and drags a hand through his hair.

Rush isn't wrong, he supposes. He hasn't ever fully trusted him. So why is he so angry about this latest betrayal?

He fumes the entire way back to his math corridor. He hates the way he sounded just now, like he's hurt, like he cares. He doesn't. He doesn't give a fuck what that Neanderthal thinks of him. And Destiny and her hippie-dippie horse shite can piss right off as well.

The only thing that matters is that this whole trust nonsense Young keeps yammering on about makes it more difficult for him to do his job. He has enough to do without having to justify every fucking move he makes, and Young has proven time and time again he is a lot more skilled at being an obstructionist nuisance than he is at being a competent leader.

He curses when he looks down to find his piece of chalk snapped in two. Fucking Young. Fuck him and his fucking trust issues. Rush has spent every waking hour of his time on Destiny keeping her going, protecting her. Every single person aboard the ship owes him their life at least thrice over, and if Young is too goddamn blind to see that he can go get fucked, for all Rush cares.

Had things been easier when Young had seemingly embraced the mission? When he'd finally allowed Rush at least a modicum of leeway to carry out his job unhampered by endless suspicion? When Young had backed him up, listened to him? Yes, of course. But he doesn't need that. He doesn't need Young. The first year aboard the ship, he'd done everything himself. He can do that again. He can go back to that. Young has never truly trusted him anyway, has never once given him the benefit of the doubt about this Graham situation. So why the hell should he care if Young wants to act like Rush betrayed him now?

The thing that pisses him off most is the sheer hypocrisy of it all. Young refuses to admit, even to himself, that he's grateful for what happened. All of it puts him in the lofty position of not being responsible for Eli's death, while feeling genuinely horrified by what happened to that Airman.

Rush scoffs out loud in his empty corridor. He's certain Young would have rather offered himself up to die. It's that same distastefully defeatist attitude he'd so loathed in the man when he'd found out Young had refused the mission on Icarus.

Young is weak, he doesn't have the stomach needed for this mission, and Rush will be damned if he'll let himself be dragged into this quagmire of betrayal and disappointment by someone that feeble-minded. Maybe he'd let himself hope, just a bit, that things could change between them. When Young had accepted the mission, had become in many ways his strongest, truest ally on the ship,
things had seemed better between them. If only for a little while, obviously. There had been... not trust, never real trust, but a sense of something. A camaraderie, perhaps. An opportunity, a possibility, for something more, something closer. And part of him had exulted; starved for contact, for even the slightest bit of support from the man. For a short while it had seemed like Young might quench a thirst Rush had been denying to himself for a long time. But it wasn't real. It couldn't last. It fell apart under the first sign of strain.

He should have known better than to hope for anything more.

He doesn't need Young. And he sure as fuck doesn't need Young's goddamn approval.

“Another one?” Barnes asks as TJ guides Morrison to one of the infirmary beds. He's unsteady on his legs, leaning on her with most of his weight.

He's the third one, the third person to show up with these symptoms.

“Yeah,” she says to Barnes as she deposits Morrison on a bed. “Same thing as Fletcher and O'Hara: dizziness, fainting spells, and a pretty high fever.”

She's not sure what it is, but three people showing up with these symptoms hours apart from one another? That's not a coincidence. Maybe it's some type of infection. It could be something leftover from their time in the stasis pods. It might even be something to do with their protein powder supply, maybe something contaminated it. It's too early to tell, but she needs to let Young know.

Ten minutes after she radioes him, he shows up. He looks tired and she can tell from the strain around his eyes that he's in a bad mood, although he tries to hide it from her with a small smile.

“TJ. What's going on?” he asks as he casts his eyes over her three patients in their infirmary cots.

She explains the situation and his brow furrows in worry. There's not much he can do, she knows that. It still eases some of the tension in her stomach when he tells her to figure out what's wrong with them.

“Keep me posted,” he says, before walking back out of the infirmary.

She looks over at Barnes. “I guess we have some more tests to run.”

Rush is still fuming, scratching chalky calculations onto the metal walls too forcefully, when she steps up next to him.

He stops, abruptly, and stares at her. Incomprehension and panic war for dominance in his mind. This is impossible. Her firewall is still... She can't—

“Do you trust me?” she asks, and it's more difficult to think of her as 'it', when he's not prepared. When he's not braced himself for seeing Gloria's hair, and her face, and that calm, regal smile of hers.
“You can’t be here,” he whispers. He realizes he sounds terrified, and then he realizes that he is.

“Do you trust me?” she asks again.

He takes a step back and shakes his head, unable to answer. She gives him a look that says the answer doesn’t actually matter, and then she reaches out to him.

Everything goes white.
“So basically you're saying you learned absolutely nothing from talking to it,” Eli says after Young tells him about his conversation with the AI.

“...Basically, yes.”

“Well, that's helpful.”

Young isn't overly excited about Eli's tone, but the past few days have been hard on him, and it looks like he still hasn't slept. He should definitely get TJ involved, even if she has her hands full with O'Hara and the others.

“Eli.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry.” Eli doesn't sound very sorry. He sounds distracted. His eyes skitter to a point on the wall over Young's shoulder, and then he frowns and grips his forehead slowly.

“How are you feeling? TJ could give you something to sleep.”

Eli waves his hand at him in a dismissive gesture that reminds him way too much of Rush, and says, “I'm fine. Jesus, how often are you going to make me say it?”

“You don't look fine. You look like you're about to keel over.”

Eli gives him a tired glare. “I need to find out what happened to Graham’s pod. We're not a single step closer to knowing what Rush did, or if he even did it.”

Young feels his face soften at the determined, exhausted, damaged young man in front of him, and says something that makes him a complete hypocrite.

“Maybe you should let it go, Eli.”

Eli sighs. “I can't. Not yet.”

“Camile told me you haven't signed up for a home visit,” Young says, hoping to redirect Eli's attention to something else. Something less likely to leave him sleep deprived and clinically insane. “Aren't you going to visit your mother?”

“That's none of your business,” Eli snaps, and it's like a door slams closed behind his eyes.

That is all Eli has to say on the subject. After that he stares at him with a dark expression on his face until Young finally leaves.

“Sir,” Dunning says in the gateroom. “James, White and I want to volunteer to dig the grave on the planet.”

Young nods. “I appreciate that, Dunning. We drop out in fifteen minutes, go get ready.”
Dunning salutes and turns on his heel, and Young is already dreading this trip. He's put together five teams to search for provisions on the planet. Hopefully Destiny will give them a decent time frame; a day or two would be preferable, but he'll be glad for anything above eight hours.

Over the next ten minutes, the gateroom slowly fills up with people. The hushed murmurs of excited chatter and anxious anticipation permeate his thoughts, and when they finally drop out of FTL, the split second of sudden silence feels like relief.

“We have a little over fourteen hours on the clock,” Volker says, as he dials out to send the kino through.

Young gives him a nod and waits for him to list the readouts from the kino.

Volker concludes with a, “Seems safe enough,” and Young has to keep himself from grimacing. He's not superstitious, but living on Destiny he's learned fairly quickly to avoid any phrases that could go down as ironic last words.

“Alright people, you know the drill. Scott, radio contact every thirty minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” Scott says, and then Young watches as twenty-eight people, three kino-sleds, and as many containers as they can carry disappear through the gate.

“I mean, tell me you've noticed it too, right? I keep seeing things move from the corner of my eye. I feel like I'm going crazy,” Scott says as Greer supports his back against the tree with one hand and deposits the apple-like fruit in a box with his other.

It's a nice planet, as far as he can tell. Sure, that doesn't necessarily mean there aren't any big-ass bloodthirsty alien monsters lying in wait for them just out of view, but a man can hope.

“I might've seen something this morning,” he says after a long pause. He hadn't thought much of it; figured maybe it was a stray eyelash in his vision, or maybe he was due for another trip off the ship. The metal walls have the bad habit of closing in on him when he's cooped up for too long. Now he wonders, though, if maybe it was something else. “You thinking it could have something to do with us being kept in cold storage for three years?”

Scott looks down at him with a worried look, momentarily forgetting he's supposed to be picking fruit. “Some sort of side-effect, you mean?”

Greer gives a slight shrug and raises his eyebrows at the branch next to Scott. A small reminder that they should be busying themselves with more than idle talk. Although he's not so sure this particular talk is very idle at all.

“Right,” Scott mutters, moving to pick another few pieces of fruit. “I think we should probably let TJ know when we get back.”

“Yeah, probably for the best.”

They work together in silence for a few minutes before Greer asks, “How's Eli?”

Scott sighs, and his shoulders slump a bit. That's not a good sign. Of course, the fact that Greer hasn't
seen Eli since the kid woke them up from stasis is not a good sign either.

“He's not doing so great, actually,” Scott says. “Chloe's been with him a lot, but he doesn't really talk to her. Or to me, for that matter. He looks real bad, though. Like, I don't think he's showered since waking up, and he looks like he hasn't been sleeping at all.”

Greer is quiet for a few moments. Eli is a good guy. Bit soft, but with a big heart and a brain the size of Jupiter. The ship has felt noticeably emptier since they've been defrosted, and he suspects a lot of that has to do with Eli's absence.

“He's going to need some time to come to terms with what happened. He survived because Graham died; that's not something you just shrug off. Not Eli, anyway,” he says. He keeps his face relaxed, unperturbed, as memories of P2S-569 threaten to flood to the forefront of his mind. Bell's face as he—

No, he can handle this. He's long since found a way to cope with his memories – he refuses to call it 'trauma', because it's something that happened to other people; they died, and it's not his trauma, it's their deaths, their sacrifice – in a way that isn't quite as overwhelming as reliving flashbacks and dry heaving his way through panic attacks, and not nearly as destructive as punching Colonel Telford in the face and relishing the thick, fleshy crack under the skin of his fist for weeks afterwards.

Scott holds two of the apple things in front of his face and regards him with a questioning look.

Greer takes them, drops them in the container, and says, “Just make sure he knows you're there for him. He'll appreciate it, even if he might not know it right now.”

Scott gives him a slow nod, a worried sort of speculation behind his eyes, and Greer knows he'll have to tell him about what happened on that planet eventually. Not right now. Maybe not for a long time. Because he'd only just told Lisa a few weeks before going into stasis, and he's still not sure how he feels about the way she'd held him afterwards, how she'd comforted him and made him feel like this was his tragedy maybe as much as it was Bell's, and Sanchez's, and Pavlowsky's, and all those poor souls that got killed that day.

A sudden cry for help attracts their attention, and within seconds Scott is out of the tree and they're running towards Shaffer and Anderson, a few hundred yards over.

Anderson is on the ground, unconscious, and Shaffer is panic-stricken, trying to take her pulse on the wrong side of her wrist. Greer takes him by the shoulders and steers him away from her before taking her pulse himself. Slow, but steady. He gives Scott a short nod.

“What happened?” Scott asks sternly, because that's what young officers are taught to do when someone is overwhelmed by adrenaline and fear.

“I—She...I don't know! She was up in the tree, and suddenly she just fainted!” Shaffer stammers out.

“Did she fall? Did she hit her head?”

“No, I uh... I caught her, sort of. I mean, she didn't fall hard, no.”

“Good man,” Greer says, and he gives Shaffer a firm pat on the shoulder before bending down to pick up Anderson's unconscious body. “We need to get her to the infirmary.”
Young looks on as Greer carries Anderson through the gate. This is the fourth person to present with these symptoms, and at this point it's pretty clear that something bad is going on. Something that might very well threaten everyone on board.

“Uh, Colonel Young,” Volker says from the console he's working on. “Something weird is happening.”

“Yeah, you can say that again,” Young answers. Anderson is on one of the large kino sleds now, and really, they should just start calling them stretchers, because it's what they're used for half the time.

“No, I mean, it looks like someone is using the neural interface chair,” Volker says.

Immediately, alarm bells start ringing in Young's head. Fuck. The chair? That is never good news.

It's instinct more than anything to sprint over to the neural interface room, Volker hot on his heels.

He skids to a stop right outside the room; the doors are open, and fucking Christ. Yes, of course. He should have known. Because of course Rush would do this. Jesus. His heart is thudding in the back of his throat and he can't pretend it's simply from running all the way here.

Rush looks still, almost frozen, sitting in the chair. It's a too familiar sight by now, and Young hates it. He hates that Rush went behind his back to sit in the chair, again. He hates that he has no idea what Rush is doing in there, that he allowed this to happen at all. He should've locked Rush up, put a military detail on him, anything, because the man can't be fucking trusted on his own. He hates that, despite the fury and the frustration and the goddamn resentment, he still feels his chest clench with something agonizingly close to terror at the sight of the bastard sitting in that chair, still as a corpse.

“Get him out!” he orders Volker fiercely.

Volker is already at the chair's control panel, fingers skittering over the screen and head shaking in anxious denial.

“I can't just yank him out, we have no idea what'll happen!”

Young looks back over at Rush as panic and artificial calm fight for dominance in his mind. Rush's eyelids flutter slightly, as if he's about to wake up, but he doesn't.

“It's... shit, there's some sort of data transfer going on,” Volker says frantically. “I can't stop it without potentially turning him into a drooling mess.”

“Figure it out, dammit!”

“I can't! I'm an astrophysicist, what do you expect me to do here?!”

Young contemplates radioing Eli, or TJ, or hell, he'd really just like to ask Rush what the best course of action would be, here, but none of these options are feasible. Eli is a mess, he constantly seems one push away from toppling over, and TJ is busy with Anderson right now.

“Wait, I think the transfer is slowing down,” Volker says, and when Young looks over at Rush his eyelids are fluttering more noticeably than before.

Suddenly the bolts release, the restraints around his wrists and ankles retract.
“Rush!” Young says, crouching down in front of the chair and grabbing Rush's arm, shaking him a bit too roughly.

Finally, finally, Rush blinks his eyes open.

“Rush,” he calls again, and Rush's eyes land on his.

“Colonel Young,” he says, and Young can't help the small wave of relief when that dazed look on his face begins to clear.

“What the fuck were you doing in the chair, Rush?”

Rush frowns slightly. Then he looks down at his hands, the armrests, until he apparently realizes his whereabouts. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” Young says sharply. “You were doing something in there, now what was it?”

He doesn't think Rush would purposely endanger any of the crew, not unless he thought it was necessary – although he can't say he's usually comfortable with Rush's definition of 'necessary'. But he doesn't put it past Rush to tamper with Destiny's mainframe, to shift control over to himself, to do... He's not even sure what exactly, but to make sure he stays in control of the situation. Of Destiny.

Rush moves to get up, and Young takes his hand off Rush's arm and puts it in the middle of his chest, keeping him seated in the chair. The warmth from his chest feels threatening and distracting as it leaks into his hand, but Young ignores the way his own pulse quickens.

“Rush. What did you do?”

Instead of shoving his arm away and getting pissed off, Rush sits back calmly. His heartbeat is steady and relaxed against Young's fingertips as he says, “It's alright, Colonel. I'm better now. You don't have to worry anymore.”

And what the fuck does that mean?!

“Better?” he prompts him harshly, not even trying to hide his impatience, because he's so fucking done with all of this. All of Rush's bullshit.

“Improved,” Rush says matter-of-factly. Not necessarily condescending, but with a definite air of ‘why are you not grasping this simple concept?’. Young bites back an inarticulate growl. “You're coming with me to the infirmary, right fucking now.”

He takes his hand back from Rush's chest, finally, and wraps it around his upper arm instead, hauling him out of the chair. When he starts dragging Rush with him to the infirmary, he expects the man to object, vehemently even. But Rush just says, “Alright,” and keeps in step with him.

And that is enough for Young to let go of his arm. He doesn't know how to react to this strange, agreeable Rush. All he knows is that it's making an uncomfortable swirl of confused anger and trepidation oscillate in his ribcage.
TJ rubs her arms to fight off the chill in the infirmary.

Anderson is the fourth one, and she is no closer to figuring out what is wrong with them. Fletcher hasn't woken up in hours, and TJ is worried she might slip into a coma. There's a red rash on the inside of Fletcher's arm now, perfectly round, a little over an inch in diameter. None of these symptoms can account for anything she's ever learned about; but then she was never trained to be a doctor. And Earth medicine can only get you so far when you're on the other side of the universe anyway. Because there's no doubt in her mind this illness is of an alien nature.

She just wishes there was something she could do, something other than simply cutting one of her patients open and taking a peek inside with the hopes that it might offer her some new insights. But right now all she can do is try to keep the fever to a minimum.

"TJ, I'm bringing Rush in to the infirmary. He sat in the chair."

Young's voice sounds strained, and she feels an answering spike of worry in her gut. Rush sat in the chair? Again?

"Copy that, sir," she says into her radio, and gestures at Greer to prepare one of the beds for Rush's arrival while she sets up her equipment.

"That chair is nothing but trouble," Greer says under his breath.

TJ shoots him a short glance. "Yeah, can't say I'm too excited about it, either."

"Physically, he's fine," TJ says. She's a bit surprised Young is still here. He sent Volker and Greer back to the gateroom to oversee the incoming provisions from the planet, but he'd stayed in the infirmary as she examined Rush; a block of fuming frustration in the corner of her vision.

"What were you doing in the chair, Doctor Rush?" She keeps her voice calm, friendly, professional. Not that it usually gets her very far with Rush.

He gives her a placid look. "I was being improved."

"What do you mean by that?" she asks, ignoring the way Young crosses his arms in front of his chest.

Rush looks over at Young for a few seconds, and the complete lack of emotion in his gaze shocks her. And that brings home the startling realization of how used she's become to the intensity between him and Young, to the fact that she's never seen either one of them regard the other neutrally. It's unsettling to see Rush's face so calm and emotionless as he takes in Young's form.

"Destiny took care of some of the more problematic aspects of my personality."

Young narrows his eyes at Rush in suspicion. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

TJ sends him a quick glare, because she can't very well tell her commanding officer to shut up, and turns back to Rush with a prompting look.

"She didn't take out any of my knowledge, or my memories. I just don't feel the need to... I just don't feel, I suppose." His face stays that same, pleasant, blank expression. It's all wrong, it's not Rush at
and it's just plain disturbing, in her opinion.

“You don’t feel?” she asks carefully, although at this point she doubts it matters to Rush how polite
or careful she's being with him.

Rush shrugs. “I don't. I just want to help.”

Young steps forward until he's standing next to where TJ is sitting. “How do I even know you're
telling the truth?”

It's a fair question, even if TJ thinks it's a rather useless one. Rush gives them both an
uncomprehending look, before slowly saying, “I have no reason to lie, Colonel.”

Young huffs out a breath that sounds as amused as it sounds annoyed. “No. Of course you don't.”

It doesn't elicit the reaction she'd normally expect from Rush. No irritated eye rolls or sneering
remarks before stomping out. He just sits there, quietly, not the slightest bit perturbed by Young's
sarcasm.

“I understand your hesitance, but it truly is for the best. This way we can all focus on fulfilling the
mission,” Rush says. He doesn't say 'Instead of spending most of our time fighting and distrusting
and second-guessing each other', although TJ's mind supplies the words for her easily enough. She
hasn't missed the increased tension between Young and Rush since they’ve come out of stasis, and
she can hazard a guess as to the source of their most recent conflict.

Graham's death was no coincidence, and she can't blame Young for jumping to the conclusion that
Rush is somehow responsible. She's still not sure whether she's more glad that Eli survived or more
angry that Graham died for it, and it makes her incredibly grateful she's not in Young's position right
now. Because it's fine if she can't make up her mind about it, but Young doesn't have that luxury.

And now it seems Destiny may have taken the reins on delivering Rush’s punishment preemptively.
She's not sure how she feels about that, either. It's not a very comforting thought that the ship can
decide to alter their personalities as it sees fit. A small shudder runs up her back.

When Young takes her aside she can tell he's just as freaked out about this whole thing as she is,
even though he tries to hide it from her by keeping his face completely blank.

“You keep him here for now, do some more tests, try to figure out if he's still Rush or not,” he says
to her.

She nods. “What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to get some goddamn answers,” he says over his shoulder, already walking away. Well,
that's informative.

TJ glances back over at Rush, still sitting on the infirmary bed, serene in a way she's never seen him
before. Not while he was conscious anyway. Her eyes glide over the other beds, the still forms of her
four other patients reminding her that Rush's predicament isn't the only problem she has to deal with
at the moment. She sighs.

The chill in the air makes her hair stand on end.

Never a dull day, she thinks glumly. At least some things never change.
“Eli, I'm going to talk to the AI again,” he says into his radio, knowing there's a good chance Eli is going to notice it the moment he does anyway. Eli's been poking around in Destiny's core systems since he found out Rush spoke to the AI. “Don't interrupt.”

His radio is silent for half a minute, then it crackles. “Understood, Colonel. Any specific reason, or just a personal call?”

Young rolls his eyes and wants to tell Eli to cut it out. They already have a resident acerbic wise-ass aboard the ship, he really doesn't need another one. Although, if Rush was telling the truth... maybe the position is open. Because that person in TJ's infirmary, that isn't Rush. Not by a long-shot.

“Something happened to Rush. He sat in the chair and Destiny messed around with his head. I need to figure out what she did, exactly.”

“...What?”

“That's what I want to find out, Eli. I'll get back to you when I know more.”

He puts his radio away then, and inputs the code sequences Eli had shown him earlier today. The second he deactivates Rush's firewall Emily's shape steps into the room, seemingly melting right out of the metal wall plating.

“Hello, Everett. How are you?”

He's not really in the mood for small talk, so he just regards her with a cold stare.

“What did you do to Rush?”

She sighs, like she's genuinely disappointed he's not engaging with her the way she wants him to, but her expression doesn't change from that calm, sincere smile.

“I thought you'd like it,” she says. “He should be much easier to work with, now.”

“That's not an answer.”

She gives him a crooked smile. “I improved him. He won't lie to you anymore, he won't attempt to undermine your leadership. He'll be the perfect asset to our mission.”

*Your* mission, he doesn't say. Because it might be a problem if she decides he should be 'improved' to fit her purposes better as well. And because it's not even true anyway. By now he can't deny he has embraced the mission; he wants to see it through to the end. It's become something to cling to, one constant in a life full of uncertainty. A purpose bigger than himself.

“You turned him into the perfect little helper robot, is that it?” he asks, and he's slightly taken aback by the anger behind his words. It's too easy to forget he's talking to a spaceship, a huge, looming computer brain that apparently has the ability to alter their minds as she sees fit. It's too easy to think of her as a person he can cow, to forgo diplomacy altogether.

She laughs, a clear, tinkling sound, and he grits his teeth. “If you say so. Don't pretend you've never wished for just this, Everett. Being able to control Nicholas, to trust him. Not having to worry about whether he's telling the truth or just feeding you a line of bullshit to serve his own purposes.”
He looks away with a frown, because he can't honestly deny it.

“You're the one who gave me the idea, you know.” Her eyes glitter at him. “What's the big deal?”

“The big deal,” he says, “Is that you altered the mind of one of my people. Without their consent, unless I'm missing the mark completely. I can't have you going around wiping people's personalities. I won't have you terrorizing the crew like that.”

It's not the complete truth, but it's true enough. The idea of Destiny taking them like that, turning them all into an army of emotionless, impersonal dummies to do her bidding, sends a chill down his spine. Yeah, it's true enough.

She smiles at him in a way he guesses is supposed to be reassuring. “This was an exception, you don't have to worry about me changing the rest of your crew like that.”

“Forgive me if that doesn't actually stop me from worrying,” he says, irritation clawing at his nerves. “Turn him back.”

She looks surprised in a way that doesn't seem as effortlessly natural as Emily's other reactions.

“It's not that simple, Everett.”

“Like hell it isn't! Just put him back together.”

She shakes her head. “That's not something I can do.”

Young feels his patience run out, and he snaps, “What the fuck do you mean? You're the one who made him like this in the first place!”

“I can't change him back from the inside; the entire system is set up to need external input in order to effect any actual changes.” She gives him a long, hard stare, like she's waiting for him to catch on.

“What, I have to do it?”

She cocks her head speculatively. “I'm not sure that would be wise. There's a good chance you won't survive the attempt. If you insist on getting him back, I suggest you send someone else in. Maybe Sergeant Greer, or Lieutenant Scott.”

He bristles at that; she can't really be this insensitive. This whole thing started because she and Rush felt entitled to determine the worth of lives to be sacrificed when that's not either one of their calls to make at all. There's no way he's going to risk the lives of Greer or Scott for this, not when he's perfectly capable of doing it himself.

“Wait.” A sudden thought occurs to him. “When you said external input... do you mean Rush agreed to this?”

Immediately her mouth tightens up. She gives him a stern look.

“Did he?” he prompts her, when it becomes clear she's not inclined to answer.

She purses her lips and glances behind him for a quick second. “You should realize that sitting in the chair is not without risk. If you decide to go in, you'll be at Nicholas' mercy, and he'll be at yours. If you can't convince him, you will both be lost.”

It's not an answer at all, but it does serve well as a distraction, because Jesus, he has to sit in the chair? There is not a single cell in his body that wants to go near that thing. And there is no way he's
going to trust his life to Rush, of all people. He's not suicidally insane, thank you very much.

“You don't have to do it, of course. In fact, I recommend that you don't. Like I said, he'll be easier to work with this way.”

And goddammit, he knows she's probably playing him, but she's saying all the right things.

He can't leave Rush like this. It's not right.

“You are such a goddamn piece of work,” he growls at her.

She smiles at him like he said something nice. “Bye, Everett.”

He reactivates her firewall and doesn't say it back.

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Eli doesn't have to look long, because of course Young would have left Rush in the infirmary.

“Can I talk to him for a few minutes?” he asks TJ. She touches his arm with that small worried frown he's grown accustomed to seeing directed at himself over the past few days, before letting him through.

“Rush,” he says coolly as he sits down in the chair next to Rush's bed.

“Hello, Eli. You look tired. Perhaps you should have Lieutenant Johansen prescribe you something to help you sleep.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says dismissively. “So, what's wrong with you? I hear Destiny did something.”

Rush looks at him with an unnatural sort of calm. “She corrected a number of my behavioral issues.”

Eli only barely bites back the unsteady, angry laugh that threatens to erupt. Behavioral issues, that's a nice way of putting it. A murdering, callous, misanthropic ass might be closer to how Eli would have described him.

The thought of Destiny taking it upon herself to change Rush like that, though... That's really freaking scary, actually.

“How did she do it? How did she get you to sit in the chair?”

Rush shakes his head. “I don't remember.”

“Did you do it on your own? Did you want to?” Eli asks. He can't imagine Rush would've let this happen of his own free will. “Did she make you?”

That shouldn't be possible. Rush's program is pretty frigging extensive; there's no way the AI could've wormed her way out of that. So... did Rush decide to do it himself?

Something niggles at the back of his mind, a numb but insistent worry, like something is incredibly wrong here.

“I don't know,” Rush says.
“Did you kill Graham?” Eli asks, changing the subject abruptly. Because if there is ever a time to get a straight answer out of Rush, this is probably it.

Rush opens his mouth as if to speak and looks at him questioningly for a few seconds. Then his brow furrows.

“I can't say.”

“What, you don't know that either?”

Rush shakes his head. “No, I know. I simply can't say. Destiny must've incapacitated my ability to communicate about it.”

“Wow, isn't that convenient for you.”

“I can't say,” Rush says again. He seems slightly befuddled by the whole thing, but Eli's remark doesn't seem to register as rankling or annoying at all. It's freaking weird and oddly upsetting, seeing Rush like this.

He's not going to get anything useful out of him right now, that much is obvious. If he wants answers, maybe he should just go straight to the source. He knows Young doesn't want him to talk to the AI, but he's been obedient long enough and it's gotten him nowhere.

Without saying another word to Rush, he leaves the infirmary.

He's going to confront Destiny.

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“Colonel, please respond. We have a problem.” It's Greer.

“Young here. Report.”

“Part of the surface layer of the planet collapsed, Scott and three others got trapped underneath.”

Jesus Christ, a fucking sinkhole? Like he didn't have enough to worry about already.

“Copy that, Sergeant, I'm on my way to the gateroom. Any wounded? How are we on getting them out?”

“It seems no one is severely wounded, but so far it's not looking great on getting them out in time. Destiny is going to jump in less than an hour.”

“Greer, I want you to go down to the planet. Make sure the other teams get back on board, and tell me what you need to get Scott and his people out of there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Goddammit. As if this day wasn't bad enough yet.
“Eli,” she says from behind him, and he closes his eyes against the wave of sadness and guilt, and then the stronger wave of rage.

“No,” he grits out. “You do not get to take her form.”

It's quiet for a few long moments, and then he hears a different voice, strangely unfamiliar for how often he hears it from the inside. “Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you.”

Eli opens his eyes and turns around to see himself standing there; and damn it, if this is what he looks like right now everyone who told him he looked like crap was right.

He rubs his chin self-consciously, which earns him a crooked grin from the AI.

“Yeah, you might wanna think about shaving. It's been a while,” it says, mirroring Eli's touch against its own chin.

It's weird, and it would be so cool if the circumstances were different, but right now he can't get himself to care. He's been searching for answers for nearly a week, and he needs to know.

“What happened to Graham... was that you?”

The AI looks at him sadly. “Yeah, it was me. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry you had to go through that.”

And he doesn't want to hear that, he doesn't—he can't, because how can he live with himself when he knows Graham had to die for him? When he spent his entire life feeling like he was barely good enough to fill up the space he did, how can he be expected to live for Graham now as well?

“You killed him,” he says, and his voice wavers with the effort to keep everything else from spilling out, spilling over.

It gives a slow nod. “It was for the greater good, you have to understand.” And goddammit, no. No, it isn’t—no. No. No. How can it say that... that Graham's death was somehow a good thing? That Graham's life was worth less than Eli's. How is he supposed to listen to that and not lose his shit? Because as far as he knows – and in the past couple of days he's learned more about Graham than he had during the entire time before his death – Graham was a good person. Graham had people who loved him, people he loved. Graham was younger than him, and probably ten times braver, and Graham would never have dropped out of MIT because it was too much work, not enough fun, too scary to try and fail, and Graham sure as hell wouldn't have used his mom's illness as an excuse to do it. To waste his life away with video games and TV while his mom went to work and did the groceries and cooked and cleaned at home. God, he'd thought his time aboard Destiny had changed him, had turned him from that pathetic slacker into someone stronger, someone better. Someone willing to make sacrifices for others, real ones. Someone his mom could actually be proud of. Instead he'd fucked up and Graham had paid for Eli's hubris with his life. And as if that isn't messed up enough in itself, somehow Rush and Destiny think he should feel comforted by the idea that his life is supposedly worth more than Graham's was? Fuck that.

“I know how difficult this is for you,” it says, stepping forward as if to put its hand on Eli's arm. “But you have to understand, I had to do it. If you had died—”

“You shut your fucking mouth!” he bursts out, and it's as if a dam breaks in his mind. Words spill from his mouth, angry, terrified, agonizing words that communicate more with volume than with meaning. At a certain point he realizes he's crying, still shouting like a crazy person, cursing at it and blaming it and sometimes – he realizes with a distinct type of horrified disgust – pleading with it.
It hurts, everything fucking hurts. His throat is raw with emotion and over-extension, and then he's crumpling to the floor, lost somewhere in the middle of his own diatribe. He can't keep this up.

“I killed him,” he says hoarsely, and it's not until he hears himself say it that he realizes how true it really is. “I killed him. I wasn't good enough, and that's why he's dead.”

“No, Eli... It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could've done, you tried everything. Don't blame yourself for this. If you want to blame someone, blame me.”

He chokes out a laugh, then, warbled and painful. “Oh, I do blame you. You kicked the stool out from under him. But he wouldn't have been in a noose if it wasn't for me.”

The AI shakes its head and looks at him with big, worried eyes. “…Eli.”

Eli shakes his head, subconsciously mirroring it, and wipes his cheeks dry in a way that feels entirely too childlike. “There's nothing you can say to make any of this better.” He gets up from where he crashed to the floor. “But please don't ever do it again. If I'm ever in a situation like that again, I want you to let me die.”

It gives him a pained look, and he wonders if it's all for show or if it really hurts the AI to say its next words. “That's not a promise I can make.”

He closes his eyes. He's not sure what he was even hoping for, here, but he really, truly didn't find it.

“I am sorry, Eli.”

Without another word, he reinstates the AI's firewall.

Young makes it to the gateroom just as the first team comes back in from the planet. Damn it, the timer is down to forty-eight minutes.

“Greer, report,” he says into his radio.

“We're trying to dig through the rubble here, but it's taking too long, sir. We're not going to make it in time.”

Fuck. “What about the C4?”

“No,” Park says from the corner of the room. Her dark glasses remind him harshly of her accident, and for a despairing second he wonders how many more people are going to get hurt under his command before he finally crumbles under the weight of his mistakes.

“Lisa says that's a bad idea, sir.”

“The planet's crust is much too unstable, if we try to blow our way clear with explosives, there's a huge chance the structure that's keeping the roof from caving in on their heads collapses on top of them,” she explains quickly. “Digging is our best bet.”

“But we don't have the time for that,” Volker says.

“Forty-five minutes until we jump,” Brody concurs with a small nod. They're standing shoulder to
shoulder, both intensely focused on the monitor of their console.

“And we have no idea how long their oxygen will last down there,” Volker adds as the second and third team enter through the gate. “And let's not even get into the incredibly fragile structural integrity of the pocket they're in. It could all fall down on top of them and bury them alive even if we don't use any C4.”

Young wants to snap at him, but he doesn't miss the panicky uplift at the end of Volker's sentence. The man is as terrified as he is; he's just not as good at hiding it.

Finally, four members of the fourth team come through the gate. Barnes walks straight up to Young. “Varro stayed behind with the three soldiers who were digging the grave for Graham. They're trying to dig Scott's team out, but it's not looking good. I'd like to go back and help, sir.”

Young gazes at her. “Do you believe it's going to make a difference, Corporal?”

She gives him a look that he can't interpret, but he thinks she's struggling to find the right answer. Eventually, she says, “I don't know, sir, but I have to try.”

“Colonel Young, may I have a second?”

He turns around, already completely off-balance. What is Rush even doing here?

TJ gives him an apologetic look from behind Rush's shoulder. “He insisted he could help, sir.”

“I can stall the clock,” Rush says simply.

“What?!” Park and Volker exclaim in unison.

“What?” Young says, half a second later.

“Destiny's FTL timer. I figured out how to stop it. Temporarily, at least.”

“When?” Volker asks, and the outrage in his voice makes it clear he doesn't believe for a second that this is a spur-of-the-moment realization for Rush. Young is pretty sure Volker is right.

“A few days before we went into stasis,” Rush answers with a calm that makes Young's skin crawl.

“And were you planning on telling us?” Lisa says.

Young is momentarily distracted from Park and Volker’s outburst when Eli walks into the gateroom. He looks utterly defeated, shoulders slumped and eyes red and puffy, and Young has no idea what happened. He wishes he could help, but he simply doesn't have the time to console the boy, not when everything is falling apart and he's expected to make life-or-death decisions right here and now.

“Look, we don't have time to discuss this at length. Stall the clock, Rush,” Young orders. “Volker, Brody, look over his shoulder to make sure he's not going to blow anything up.”

“Yeah, 'cause we're likely to catch on in time if that's his plan,” Volker mutters under his breath, but they stand aside and watch as Rush gets to work on their console.

“Barnes, assemble a team of volunteers to help with the digging. A dozen should work.”

“Yes, sir,” Barnes replies immediately, and within seconds she's surrounded by helping hands.
“Eli,” Young says quietly, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezing gently. “I think you should go with TJ.”

Eli doesn't say anything. He just gives him a weary look and a nod before he follows TJ out of the gateroom.

“Oh my God,” he hears Lisa say from where Rush is typing in commands at a rapid pace. “I can't believe you figured out how to do it and didn't tell us.”

“Really?” Volker says. “Because I can't say I'm that surprised at all.”

“It's working,” Brody says, turning to Young. “We've got another twenty-four hours on the clock.”

Young lets out a sigh of relief. “Good. That's good.”

Looks like he won't lose any more of his people. Not today, at least.

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Matt blinks against the flare of a flashlight in his face as he crawls through the last bit of the tunnel.

“Man, you have no idea how happy I am to see your scrawny ass,” Greer says, and extends his hand so Matt can climb onto the edge of the hole.

“Right back at you,” Matt grins when he's upright again, and then gives in to the urge to hug Greer tightly, one arm still braced against his own chest – he's pretty sure he sprained his wrist, at the very least. But everyone is safe, everyone is out, most of them already on their way to the gate. They're okay.

“Thanks for saving my bacon. Again,” he says, and Greer laughs and pats his back, before dragging him away from the ledge with an arm around his neck.

“Ah, come on, brother. I wasn't gonna leave you down there.”

“I was starting to think you weren't going to make it in time, actually,” Matt confesses as they make their way back to the gate.

Greer shoots him an aggravated look. “We didn't. Turns out Rush knew how to stall Destiny's FTL timer all along.”

“What?”

Greer raises an eyebrow and nods. “Yep. Lisa's pretty pissed off about it.”

Scott shakes his head. “What the hell.”

“Yeah.”
“Hey,” Chloe says, putting the bowl of protein slush on the table next to Eli's cot. It looks like TJ might have given him something to calm down, because he's lying on his back and looking up, blinking slowly.

He gives her a wan smile and then lets his gaze settle on the ceiling above him again.

Chloe’s eyes keep sliding over to where Rush is sitting on his own infirmary bed, unhurriedly spooning the protein slop into his mouth. She feels shaken up from seeing Rush like that, from the soulless way he'd spoken to her when she'd brought him his food. How... how empty he'd seemed. She has no clue how this is even possible, and more importantly, whether it can be reversed. Because this isn't Rush, and they need Rush to be Rush. She needs Rush to be Rush.

Part of her feels guilty, like she should have kept a better eye on him. Because she'd been so focused on Eli that she hadn't even really noticed how little she'd seen of Rush since coming out of stasis. How all of their communication seemed to be about work, and how nearly all of it happened over the radio. She hadn't even spoken to him about the jump in person, hadn't even attempted to reassure him like she had before they'd gone into stasis. She hadn't even really missed him, because she hadn't been paying attention. She can't help but wonder if she could have prevented this, and every chill she gets when she looks at Rush feels like an admonishment. She redirects her gaze to Eli and plops down on the bedside stool.

Eli hasn't made a move for his food. He looks miserable and exhausted and her heart clenches for him. It's a familiar feeling by now.

“Are you alright?” she asks, and immediately hates herself for it. Because she's been asking him this all the damn time since waking up from stasis, not just with words but with offerings of food and soft nudges of her hand and careful little smiles, and she knows he must be so tired of having to reassure her again and again. Especially because he clearly isn't alright. “Sorry, dumb question.”

Eli's eyes land on hers again, and he gives her another sliver of a smile. She smiles back gratefully.

“What happened to Rush?” She asks because she wants to change the subject, give Eli some space, but also because she really has to know. Of course she'd already heard about what happened. That Rush had sat in the chair and that Destiny had somehow taken out the difficult parts of his personality. She'd been prepared for it when she'd come down to the infirmary to bring Rush and Eli something to eat, or so she'd thought. But it was completely different to see it in person. To see Rush without all the bits that make him him, and it had completely taken her aback. The calm sureness that they'd figure this one out, that Rush would be back to himself in no time had evaporated the moment she'd seen his empty, expressionless face. Suddenly she'd been overcome by worry, a worry that's still gnawing insistently at her insides, because what if they can't fix Rush? She has to understand what's going on so she can do something. So she can help. So she can get him back.

For a minute, she thinks Eli isn't going to answer her at all. Then, when he speaks, his voice is croaky and resigned. “Destiny,” he says, as if that explains anything.

And actually, she thinks, watching Eli's eyes slip shut as he finally manages to get some sleep. Actually... Maybe for Eli, it does.
Park nods, and Brody says, “We spent the last two hours scanning the crust within a two mile radius of the grave site and the path from the gate. There's no risk of another sinkhole, at least.”

Young nods. “Alright, then we'll have Graham's funeral at sunrise on the planet.”

“That'd be around 9 PM, our time,” Brody says.

“Sounds good.” He turns to Camile. “Will you let everyone know?”

“Of course.”

It feels strange, leaving Rush in the infirmary while she and Eli go down to the planet for Graham's funeral. But this is important. She thinks Eli needs this, so she goes.

The planet, when it's not trying to swallow up Matt and his team, is actually nice. The spot they picked to bury Graham is gorgeous. Tranquil, serene. Small birds sing early morning songs, and butterfly-like creatures harmlessly flutter past in iridescent streaks of lilac and yellow.

They don't have much, but somehow they manage to make the service beautiful. Some people helped pick flowers, staying close to the path as the moons set and dawn came in. Chloe is glad for that, because the flowers add the right touch to the funeral.

They've done this before, they've lost others, and it feels strangely reassuring that they're starting to get the hang of this ceremony. A ritual they're slowly making their own. They don't always have bodies to bury, of course, but for some reason it's better when they do. It feels more like closure when every member of the crew gets to shovel big heaps of earth onto the black plastic of the bodybag until the grave is full.

Young says a few words, and if she didn't know him better she wouldn't have recognized the emotion behind his eyes. She wouldn't have known that the tight line of his lips means he is keeping things back, rather than that the military commander of the ship has everything under control.

Throughout the entire thing she can hardly keep her eyes off Eli. He's standing to the left of the grave, expression hard and empty, eyes never leaving the bottom of the grave where Graham's body was lowered slowly and carefully by his closest friends aboard the ship.

Dunning cries during Young's speech. Nothing big, just a tear or two that streak down his face as he keeps his expression tight and rigid. He's not the only one. She hears a few sniffles, sees a lot of wet eyes. Graham was one of their own. And that means he will be missed.

After the grave has been filled, after they have covered it in flowers, after Dunning and James mount the sturdy wooden cross with Graham's initials engraved into it and say their final goodbyes, she and Eli are the only ones left. Eli hasn't stopped looking at the human-sized hill of loose dirt. Like he can still see the corpse at the bottom of it. The thought makes a chill run down her spine.

“Eli,” she says quietly, slipping her hand into his. “Come on, let's go back to the ship.”

She doesn't really expect him to acquiesce, but he follows behind her without a word.

Once they're back aboard Destiny she takes him to the still, where everyone has congregated. James
comes up to them, and with a sad smile she hands them both a metal mug of Brody's liquor.

“Thanks,” Chloe says, and then she looks over at where Dunning has started talking.

“I want to thank Eli for putting together this video,” he says, and his gravelly voice rings clear through the entire room. Chloe shoots Eli a surprised glance. She hadn't known he'd been working on a video of Graham. Dunning lifts his mug. “Mitch, this one's for you. Rest in peace, brother.”

Everyone raises their cups and joins in the toast, and then a video montage of Graham starts playing, projected onto the wall.

It's... it's beautiful, and it makes her sad that she never took the time to get to know Graham, because he smiles into the camera. He says he misses his family and his girlfriend. He jokes on screen, and he laughs, and there's one bit that looks to be taken on accident, of him dragging Dunning through the gate, both of them covered in dirt and blood, but alive, and God—Eli made this?

She can't... she can't hold back her tears right then, because she can't stop imagining Eli going over these images, cutting and pasting them together, and she can't stop imagining what he must've felt.

Next to her, Eli slams back the entire contents of his mug at once.

He still hasn't let go of her hand.

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Young leaves after the first drink in Graham's honor. He doesn't want to stay, and not all of it is because he has to get away from the constant reminders that Graham is dead and everything that his death symbolizes.

He also leaves because he needs his wits about him right now. Because he has to think. He has a very important decision to make, and he can't be compromised by the effects of Brody's moonshine while he makes it.

Rush is... He's not Rush, it's as simple as that. And before this afternoon he'd been willing to risk his life to get Rush back. He'd been willing to sit in the chair and risk everything to return Rush to himself.

But the thing is, this afternoon Rush stalled the FTL timer. Because he'd known how to do that. Because he'd figured it out days before they even went into stasis. And he hadn't told anyone.

He hadn't told anyone.

And that, that is what makes Young hesitate now. Because the way Rush is right this second, he may not be Rush, but he's honest. He saved Scott's team; he didn't have to think about it, he shared his information like it was nothing.

Maybe Rush would have stopped the clock even if Destiny hadn't taken out all the rough bits of his personality. Young wants to believe that, because despite everything, he wants Rush to be someone he can trust. But he's old and wise enough to understand that wanting something does not magically make it so, and he can't know, not with absolute certainty, that Rush would've sacrificed his secret to save that team on the planet. And he hates Rush for that, he really does.
Why does Rush have to make everything so goddamn difficult?

He's pacing back and forth in front of his desk now, fists balling reflexively. He wants to throw something, break something, hurt something. Because this is enraging. Excruciating. His morals revolt against his rationality, because keeping Rush like this would make his life – possibly everyone's lives – so much easier. So much safer. Does he owe it to the crew to keep Rush like this, without his lies and deceptions? Without his personality and everything that makes him a real life human being?

If Rush is indeed kept like this, a soulless, honest, helpful fucking machine, wouldn't everyone be better off?

But the answer is, of course, no. Rush certainly wouldn't be better off. Rush, who got robbed of all agency by Destiny. Whose entire personhood got deleted, like a bad paragraph at the end of a document – and isn't that a terrifying thought?

And is he seriously considering keeping him like this? Because what he is contemplating right now is to allow the erasure of a human being. A member of his crew. It would be as good as murder. Worse, possibly.

But, as Rush himself might say, doesn't the good of the many outweigh the good of the one? Rush is the one always pushing him to make the hard decisions, and this... well, this certainly qualifies.

At this point Young isn't even sure which option would be the more selfish one for him. Would he be better served by keeping an empty, servile goddamn puppet at his side, or would the subsequent guilt eat him alive? Should he get Rush back simply because that would prevent his guilt? How long will his conscience stay clear when the real Rush decides to offer up another member of the crew? When he deems another sacrifice necessary? When another one of his lies puts the lives of his people in danger?

Young sits down at his desk and rests his forehead in his hands. The right answer is so tangled up in all the possible wrong ones that he knows he has no hopes of grasping it intuitively.

So he does what he always does in situations like these.

He makes a list.
“Sir, are you sure?” Scott asks, and the discomfort in his voice is echoed perfectly by the expression on his face.

“I'm not thrilled about it either, Lieutenant, but I can't leave him like this.”

Scott looks like he wants to object more, and Young knows he wants to repeat his offer to sit in the chair himself. Young shoots him a warning glance and Scott presses his lips firmly together instead.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” Young nods, giving him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. He appreciates Scott's offer; the kid has a big heart. “I have no idea how long this is going to take, so I'm leaving you in charge while I'm in the chair. And keep an eye on Eli for me, won't you?”

“Yes, of course,” Scott says. “He's still sleeping. He drank too much after the funeral.”

Young can't say he doesn't understand. Still, someone is going to have to interfere if Eli keeps on this downward spiral. Before it's too late to pull him back. Maybe he should use the stones to get a psychologist on board.

Yeah, he decides. He'll look into that when he gets back.

If he gets back.

Of course he'll make it back.

“Bring a psychologist on board if Eli needs it. You can discuss it with TJ,” he says to Scott.

Just in case.

---

Sitting in the chair is... it's not what he expected.

One second he is sitting down, biting back his apprehension and sending reassuring nods to TJ, Greer, and Scott; the next second his ankles and wrists are kept in place by metal shackles and his vision whites out. Everything is moving. Not physically, but on a more fundamental level. Moving, displacing, reforming. He thinks not in words but in bits, in zeros and ones, but something deeper inside him knows that it's only because his mind can't comprehend what is happening any other way, and with a shocking snap he realizes that this is what it's like to upload yourself to a computer, to transform your mind, your being, from biological matter and energy to pure electronics. And of course it can all be boiled down to electrical impulses and reactions – input and output, like clockwork, like programming, because it is merely biological arrogance to think that there's more to him than that.

After what seems like an eternity the process slows. The movement stalls. Bit by bit.

His energy feels like it's getting denser, it's coalescing, and he feels himself taking shape again, reassembling, becoming.
He's standing in a field.

He doesn't recognize it, and every color seems just a little too bright, a little too saturated to be real. But he feels the breeze on the skin of his face, and he smells the dry grass and the fresh floral scent of crushed flowers and, vaguely, something animalistic – dung and dirty musk – with such acuteness that he has a hard time truly accepting that all of it isn't real. That it is just a simulation.

“Great,” he says, mostly to himself. Because what the hell is he supposed to do now?

Behind him a bird screeches in the distance, its cry echoing dully across the land. He turns around to look at it and watches it soar through the sky before it plunges down harshly and, with eerie precision, snatches up something that looks to be the size of a fully grown cow. Jesus.

He instinctively checks his holster and is relieved to find his gun. Not that he's going to do much against a predatory bird the size of a goddamn dragon, not with his service gun. Not with less than half a clip left. But it makes him feel better nonetheless.

He sees it then, the smoke pluming from behind a steep hill. With some luck, it's a sign of civilization. A camp, maybe.

He starts walking.

By the time he's climbed to the top of the hill, eight hours of walking later, he realizes that he'd underestimated the distance. He also realizes that the smoke is not the sign of a camp; it is the sign of a town. It looks to be plucked straight out of a medieval novel; a huge castle looms over the lower buildings and market stalls, and a high defensive wall surrounds the entire burg. There's an honest to God moat, even.

He estimates he can make it to the town in another five hours. Luckily, it seems like he doesn't need to drink, or eat, or sleep. Apparently his physical needs have no bearing on his mind, not when he's an uploaded awareness stuck in a computer program. Small favors, he decides.

Oddly enough his calf muscles are aching dully, the way they normally would after eight hours of hiking. He wonders if he can make it stop.

As it turns out, he can.

The sun is starting to set and dusk colors his surroundings in soothing shades of red and lavender. Vaguely he ponders whether he's been in the chair for eight hours already, or if time moves differently in here. Rush started getting nosebleeds after four hours, that first time in the chair. Hopefully that was different, though. Hopefully. Otherwise he might not even make it to the city gates before dying from a brain aneurysm or a heart attack.

He continues traveling in the direction of the town.

At least the weather is nice.
“Halt!” the guard says, stomping the butt of his... lance? Halberd? Young isn't sure, medieval weapons never interested him very much as a child – on the wooden slats of the bridge. “State your business.”

Young blinks into the light of the torch behind the guard's head. Night has fallen, and although the large moon is luminous and sheds a cold blue shine on everything, the flickering flames feel too bright for his eyes.

“I'm looking for someone.” He wonders how any of this is supposed to work. “A man. Doctor Nicholas Rush.”

The guard narrows his eyes at him. “What do you need him for, then?”

“I need to talk to him,” Young says, because that's about as far as he's thought this through. Talk to Rush, convince him to... to come back, to wake up, maybe? He might've gone in a bit under-prepared, he realizes, just as the guard starts laughing.

“Well, good luck. You're going to have to talk to the king about that.”

“The king?” This whole thing is getting ridiculous. “Why?”

The guard is still looking entirely too amused with himself, and Young wants to recoil as the man leans forward conspiratorially. He stands his ground and keeps his face passive, though. Because he can. “Doctor Rush got himself thrown into the dungeon. They say he's cursed, you know. Hasn't woken up in weeks now.”

Young's lack of reaction seems to irritate the guard, and he steps back with a cold expression on his face. “Well, go on then, we're about to close the gate for the night.”

“Right.” Young steps past him, then turns back. “The king...?”

The guard raises a condescending eyebrow at him. “It's the big high castle in the middle of town. I'm sure you'll manage to locate it on your own.”

Young gives him an unamused stare, then walks through the gate.

The smell, he decides. That's by far the worst thing about this stupid, simulated town. He doesn't even know where Destiny got the blueprint for this place, but God would he have appreciated it if the stench had been a little less historically accurate. Aside from the smell of excrement everywhere – because apparently these people think it's acceptable to just dump their buckets of shit out on the street – his senses are assaulted by stinking, rotting piles of trash on every corner. Smoking meat and fish is a big hobby of these folks as well, it seems, because the smoky aroma, which by itself wouldn't necessarily have been unpleasant, permeates the streets and leaves him feeling faintly nauseous as he makes his way closer to the castle. The worst, though, is the deep, metallic tang of blood underlying all the other smells. He doesn't know if there's a slaughterhouse or a butcher in the vicinity, but he hopes there is. At least that would explain the unsettling scent of life coming to a painful end.
Even though his military uniform looks completely out of place in this setting and the few people still roaming the streets this time of night are wearing simple clothes fashioned out of rough looking fabrics in beige and gray tones, nobody pays him much attention. Maybe they're not programmed to see his different clothing. Maybe they simply don't care. It doesn't matter much in the end, because the castle is easily visible wherever he goes, so he doesn't exactly have to stop for directions.

By the time he reaches it, a nagging suspicion has started to arise. The scent of blood is coming from here, from the castle. He makes a slow circle around the entire building, taking note of two entrances that don't seem to be guarded all that carefully at all, and one large entrance at the back of the castle that he's pretty sure leads to the dungeon. Two armed men are posted outside the heavy iron doors, and he suspects there are plenty more guards inside.

For the first time since entering the simulation he wonders what will happen if he dies in here. Is that what Destiny meant when she said it was dangerous? That if he dies in here, he will die in real life – in the chair? He vows to himself he will not let it get to that. He can get Rush out without being gored to death by one of the lance-type weapons the guards here seem to favor.

He makes his way back to the front entrance of the castle. It's the middle of the night, as far as he can tell, but hopefully the king will talk to him anyway. He fully expects the tall woman guarding the large wooden gate to halt him, to question him about his intentions, but she simply raises her eyebrow at him as he walks past her. Strange.

Even stranger is the decor inside the castle. It's all very... gothic. Dark gray walls and deep red tapestries, empty armors with menacing horns on the helmets, and intricate and barbarously inventive weapons with caked rust on the blades. At least he hopes it's rust. Once again he finds himself wondering where Destiny got the inspiration for this world. Is it created from Rush's imagination? Is it an amalgamation of his dreams and his nightmares and stories he'd read as a child?

The torches on the wall cast an uneasy, flickering light over everything, and Young's footsteps echo hollowly as he moves through the hallway. The whole thing feels distinctly eerie, and he can't help but look over his shoulder every few steps. Shouldn't there be more people here? Guards or servants, or anyone, really?

He's slightly surprised to find that the hallway leads directly into a large room filled with people sitting silently at tables piled with food.

A high, empty throne looms near the back of the room. It is made of an ebony colored material, which contrasts starkly with the ivory inlays in the seat and the armrests. Grotesque metallic spikes protrude from the top and the sides of the throne. The entire thing emits a threatening aura, and for some reason Young is entirely sure the ivory inlays are in fact made of human bone. He is tempted to go over to it, to take a closer look at what the inlaid work depicts, but a voice in the back of his mind says he probably doesn't want to know.

There is some kind of banquet going on here; although it is oddly quiet. Long tables fill half the room; ornately decorated and stacked with food. It smells appetizing and nauseating at the same time, and when Young looks a little bit better he can make out the dark, gleaming burgundy of a whole raw liver on one of the plates. It looks uncomfortably familiar, yet it doesn't look like any kind of animal liver he's ever seen.

He takes his eyes off it and finds the gaze of everyone in the room focused on him. No one is eating, or talking, or even moving, and all of it is incredibly unsettling.

“Ah, our guest of honor has arrived!”
A man, the king, Young assumes, gets up from the head of the table and gestures for him to take a seat next to him. Young feels his heartbeat pick up slightly. The man is dressed like he couldn't make up his mind about whether he wanted to look like a Victorian lord or a pirate, and there's something maniacal about his smile. It isn't until Young gets closer that he realizes he has filed his front teeth into pointy fangs.

“I'm looking for Nicholas Rush,” Young says, not very tempted at all by the idea of having to share a meal with the man.

“Oh, yes,” the king drawls with an inappropriate wink. “Rude little bugger, isn't he?”

Well, the man isn't wrong. “What did he do?”

“For starters, he declined my invitation to join us for dinner.” The king lets out a cackling laugh that almost makes Young grimace. The pitch and volume are wrong somehow, and he's starting to feel like a mouse being toyed with by a cat. He brushes his fingers over his firearm before taking a seat at the table.

“Not being hungry is enough reason to be thrown into the dungeons?” he asks dryly.

“Careful, now,” the king warns him sharply. “I would so hate to see you end up like him. Here, have some, this is my favorite.”

Young watches as the king scoops a brownish stew onto his plate. He's pretty sure he sees a finger bone floating around in there. Yeah, alright, there is no way in hell he is going to eat anything here.

“Thanks,” he mutters, trying and failing to entirely conceal his sarcasm.

The king lets out an unhinged giggle that makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Seriously, where had Destiny found this guy?

“So,” he says, stirring a strangely sadistic looking eating utensil through the brown soup on his plate. “Would it be possible for me to speak to Rush?”

The king watches him scoop his food around without taking an actual bite, and grins at him. “Ooh, so polite! I like it.” He looks positively evil, with his pointy teeth and the strange twinkle in his eye. “Tell you what. If you eat some of that lovely, lovely Pelopsian dish there, I'll let you talk to him.”

Young narrows his eyes. “Why?” he asks. Is it poisoned? He certainly wouldn't put it past the man.

The king laughs heartily. “Because your first instincts were right about what's in it.”

Young feels his stomach lurch as his eyes roam over the table and only now seem to stop skimming over recognizable human body parts. A torso stuffed full of baked fruit. A spit-roasted piece of thigh. A human head with plums instead of eyes and an apple in its mouth. Jesus Christ.

Even if he rationally knows it's all a computer simulation, that none of it is real, he still feels intensely nauseated by it all. It doesn't help that the smells wafting off some of the dishes are really damn appetizing, or that he can feel the wood grain of the table rub against his wrist. All the sensations are so real here, it is too easy to forget that he's sitting in the chair on Destiny.

“Human meat,” he says, already knowing the answer.

“Yes!” the king shortles, and this time Young isn't able to keep back his grimace.
“You want me to eat human meat?”

“Nothing would delight me more,” the king says. He leans closer to Young and gives him a leer that makes chills run up the back of his neck. “Well, *some* things would delight me more.”

Much as Young hopes that was sexual innuendo, he gets the uncomfortable feeling it is likely much closer to ‘I would like to extract your spine in one piece’.

“And if I say no?”

The king's eyes glitter with cruelty. “Then it seems we'll have dessert!”

Right. This guy is batshit insane. Although he supposes the teeth and the cannibalistic banquet should've been a big clue. Young shoves his chair back to get up, but as soon as he moves backwards every single person at the table reaches for a weapon. He freezes as he suddenly has two hundred lances and swords and three fucking crossbows pointed at him. He's not going to fight his way out of here with six bullets.

He drags his chair back in place. Fine, he'll eat the goddamn stew. It's a simulation; it's just an issue of mind over matter.

Young grabs one of the fork-like eating utensils and takes a bite of the brown stew. It's offensively tasty, and it's really hard to remember you're not *really* eating human flesh in the castle of a deranged king, that you're actually sitting in a chair on a spaceship; when you can feel the meat squish between your teeth and slide down your throat. God, he wants to throw up.

The king lets out an excited giggle. “Another!”

“How much?” he asks, and shit, he should've asked that before.

“What?”

“How much do I have to eat before you're satisfied?”

The king's smile shows way too many teeth. “You're a clever one, aren't you? Although not quite as clever as the other one.”

Young grits his teeth. The man is talking about Rush, and for some reason that fills him with rage. He truly hates the thought of Rush being in this position, without even Young's useless six bullets. He really hopes that Rush knew it wasn't real.

“You did this to him?”

The king cocks his head at him. “Of course not.” He grabs his fork and spears a cube of raw meat on it. “I'm not an unreasonable man,” he says, popping the dark pink meat into his mouth. He chews with a thoughtful face. “Six more bites and we'll be done.”

Young feels his stomach tighten at the thought. But it's okay. He can do six more. Mind over matter. He can do this.

The first two bites are the worst, but by the fourth he has himself pretty much convinced it's pork, and that makes it easier. He is about to take his last bite when the king speaks up.

“Although I can't guarantee that he'll speak back.”

Young stops, his fork halfway to his mouth. “What?”
“Your friend. I said I’d let you speak to him, but it might be hard for him to answer.”

A surge of concern ratchets through his chest. “Why?”

The king laughs then, a disgusting, cruel sound that makes Young think of small bones rattling around in a hollow skull. He wants nothing more than to stab his fork right through the man's neck.

“Well, at least in part because you're currently digesting him.”

It takes a few seconds for the meaning of the king's words to sink in. Oh. Oh, Jesus, no. Young almost throws up right there – because the thought that he has little pieces of Rush's flesh floating around in his stomach is just too goddamn wrong – but instead he reminds himself that none of it is real and forces his nausea down the same way he'd stopped his calf muscles from aching. Lightning quick he draws his gun and aims it directly at the king's head.

“Where is Rush,” he demands, dark fury simmering right beneath the surface of his skin. There is no way Rush is already dead, that he's already lost, that Young is too late and that Destiny is just playing with him right now.

The men around the table all have their hands on their weapons, but none have drawn them yet. It's as if they're waiting for something, some kind of signal. The king throws his head back and cackles grotesquely. “He was right in front of your nose this whole time!”

Young shoots. The king's brains spatter all over the tapestry behind him and Young doesn't wait for his dead, limp body to topple onto the table, for it to land face down in his own precious stew. He runs.

He's expecting the men to start swinging at him, and he's ready to incapacitate his first five assailters with his gun and the rest with his bare hands, but before he's even halfway across the room one of the men steps onto the table and declares, “As new king, my first order is to feast on the remains of my predecessor!”

As one, the men attack the corpse of the king – or, well, ex-king, Young thinks absurdly – without sparing him a second glance.

Dear Lord, if Destiny based this simulation on Rush's mind, he needs to have a serious talk with the man about his reading habits. Because this place is goddamn twisted.

That is, if Rush is still alive. He adamantly refuses to believe differently as he makes a mostly unnoticed exit from the throne room.

Young darts into the hallway and stumbles to a halt when the female guard who'd let him in appears in front of him.

“He's in the dungeon,” she says. “Get him out and go east. You'll find the rest in Eskhorn.”

He has no idea what that means, but she pushes a sword into his hands and urges him to go, and before he knows what he's doing he's running again, until he's out of the gate, out of the castle, taking refuge in the shadows between empty stalls and desolate alleys.

Fuck. He bends over and heaves, because Jesus Christ, what the fuck just happened?

None of it is real, he reminds himself. No matter how fucking realistic the ice cold breeze on his sweaty skin feels, no matter how convincing the smoky scent of garbage and excrement and metallic oozing blood are inside his nostrils, no matter how he can still feel the... whatever the fuck he ate in
there twist around inside his stomach—none of it is real. This is all just Destiny messing with his mind. It's a computer simulation, simple as that.

Fuck.

He looks at the sword in his hand. Sturdy, heavy, *sharp*. He knows what he has to do now.

He's going to get Rush out of that dungeon.
Chapter 8

Everything is dark. It's been dark for a long time now, although whether it's been days, or weeks, or months, he doesn't know. He can't be certain of how much time has passed here, in this damp, cold place. Not without being able to see, to move, to ask.

He can hear, though. He can hear everything that happens around him, which is mostly nothing. Heavy, creaking doors open and close every so often, and occasionally footsteps and the clinking tinkle of metal keys on a guard's belt can be heard. But mostly he hears nothing.

Just now was different.

Just now he's pretty sure he heard someone being stabbed, the dull sound of metal sliding into flesh and a little shocked death gurgle, followed by the soft clanging noise of a door being swung open. It's close by. He feels the air in the room shift and hears a soft exhale of breath, and then a whispered, “Jesus.”

Padding footsteps, heavy but quiet, step over to him. He feels his heartbeat pick up, and wishes more desperately than ever before that he could just crack one eye open and see.

“Kiss the... Yeah, no. Nice one, though,” he hears an unamused voice say from above him. It's strangely familiar, and the sound of it both calms him and sets him further on edge. Suddenly there are weights pressing down on his shoulders, hands, he realizes, and the voice is closer now. “Rush, wake up.”

He wants to wake up, he tries with all his might to open his eyes, but he can't. For a terrifying second he's scared the hands will leave, will turn away and lose interest because he can't wake up, but then he hears the voice mutter, “There is no way in hell...”

One of the hands is taken off his shoulder, it stops pressing into him, and he wants to protest, but of course he can't.

Suddenly the hand slaps his face, hard, and the voice calls his name loudly. It shocks him so much that it's like his entire being unfreezes with a crackling, dry, breaking sound. He opens his eyes.

He wakes up. Good God, he wakes up, and he can see again.

“Rush!” A face comes into focus, and Rush feels a nasty shock. He knows that face, he knows that man – although he doesn't remember from where – and he has quite a lot of mixed feelings about him. It's strange, he has no idea who this person is, but a flood of opposing emotions fight each other for the upper hand when he looks at his face. Trust and distrust, relief and apprehension, respect and contempt.

The man slaps him on the cheek a few more times, a lot less harshly, and somehow it both annoys him and makes something fond uncurl in his chest at the same time. “Rush, are you alright?” he asks, and when Rush nods he says under his breath, “I honestly did not expect that to work.”

Rush looks around then, truly looks, for the first time since he came here, and realizes he's lying on an altar of sorts.

“Come on, get up. We've got to get out of here,” the man says, and Rush gets up without any trouble. Shouldn't his muscles have been atrophied by now, he wonders, before a sound from beyond the doorway captures his attention.
The man turns his head toward the door sharply and puts his hand on the sword in his belt. “Stay,” he whispers staunchly, and then he's out the door, into the dark where Rush can't see.

Rush's first instinct is to go, to get out of the room and to ignore the command. Who does the man think he is, ordering Rush around?

But on second thought, the man just woke him up. The man had found him – and there is not a doubt in his mind that getting Rush out of this place is the very reason the man is here – and he woke him up. Besides, the man has a sword. It seems it would be in his best interest to stay put, because currently the man looks like his best bet at getting out of here.

He looks back into his cell. The strange altar he'd been lying on gleams unnaturally in the dim light and his eyes catch on a sign at the bottom of it.

KISS THE PRINCESS, it reads, in strangely disjointed, looping letters.

He feels his neck flush and he scoffs.

“Rush,” the man says from the door opening. Even in the dark Rush can see the smear of blood on his forehead. “Let's go.”

He wants to ask how the man knows his name. How he knows the man. But the man is already turning away, expecting him to follow behind. And while deep down Rush feels like he should object on principle alone, it's easier to just stick close to him and follow him out through the door.

They walk through an empty, dark corridor until they reach a larger chamber. There are torches on the walls here, casting warm, flickering light on the scene in front of him. Rush has to step over the body of one of the guards to get to the stairs. He's never seen any of them before, He's heard them, but he's never seen them. There are three guards on the ground here, limbs spread out in unlikely angles, the stone beneath them stained dark and glossy with their blood.

Good, he thinks vindictively. They kept him here, in this dark, unrelenting limbo. They deserved this.

The man casts him a glance before starting up the stairs. His shoulders are broad and strong, Rush notes absentmindedly as he trails behind him. Everything about the man is familiar; his hair, dark and thick and curly; his uniform, black and rough and somehow befitting; the way he moves, deceptively relaxed, slow and unhurried but capable of doling out injury and death viciously fast.

Rush doesn't know how he knows all of this, but he does.

“Who are you?” he asks quietly, as he crosses another pair of dead bodies at the top of the stairs.

The man looks at him then, the expression on his face unreadable. His eyes are... searching for something, and a slight frown appears on his brow when evidently he doesn't find what he's looking for.

“Later,” the man says. “We'll talk when we're in the clear.”

It's not a satisfying answer, not even close. But then Rush spots the large entranceway. He can see the sky through the open doors, dark blue with thousands of tiny pinpricks of light, and a deep sense of longing worms its way through his chest. Yes, perhaps getting out of here is more important now.

He nods at the man and bends over to grab a long, curved knife tied to the waist of one of the dead guards. He's not a soldier, but he still feels better with a weapon in his hands.
Together, they make their way up the last set of stairs, and aside from the lifeless body lying directly next to the thick, iron gate there is no one waiting for them outside. Rush lets out a sigh of relief, and the man sends him a meaningful look before sprinting to one of the dark alleys. Rush follows, glad to be out of plain sight, gladder still to be out of the sightless, motionless prison of his mind, and stays close to the man as he picks his way through the town in a manner that isn't quite as confident as the escape from the dungeon had been.

“Where are we going?” Rush asks, because he's getting the unsettling impression that the man isn't sure of their destination at all.

“Eskhorn, wherever the fuck that is,” he answers quietly, holding Rush in place with one hand on his chest as he leans over to take in the large square their alley leads to.

Rush ignores how he wants to cringe away and push into the weight of that hand at the same time, and lets his eyes roam over the square as well. The town gate, huge and wooden and closed, looms at the far end of it.

“You're not seriously thinking about going through there, are you?” he asks, slightly taken aback by the sheer stupidity of that plan. Apparently, the man is reasonably good with a sword, but they'll be dead five times over by the time the drawbridge is finally lowered. The pulley system used to move the bridge consists of a windlass that is usually operated by four men pushing a heavy crank around, and it takes at least three minutes to open or close it. Rush has no idea how he knows this, but he's certain of it.

“You got a better idea?” The man turns to him, clearly irritated by the expression on Rush's face or the disbelief in his voice. It is only now that Rush sees the name on the man's jacket. YOUNG. It's printed in straight, narrow white letters that contrast starkly with the black of his uniform. Young. Yes, that seems right, somehow. Fitting, like the uniform itself.

“I hardly think it's possible to come up with a worse one,” Rush retorts.

Young looks like he's trying really hard not to roll his eyes at him. “Well, let's hear it, then.”

Rush is still thinking, he knows he's about to come up with something more useful than Young's damn suicide plan, when a group of six guards march into the square from the opposing alley. It's bad luck, pure and simple, and Rush knows they're right in their line of sight. It's only a matter of seconds before they're spotted, and fuck, he doesn't have time to think of anything that won't end with one or both of them dead.

“Halt!” one of the guards calls loudly, and the next thing Rush knows Young is dragging him to the gate by his wrist. They run across the square, to the gate, and Young pulls his gun and shoots at the heavy metal chain that hoists the bridge open and closed. Both shots are incredibly loud, and Rush barely hears the metallic pinging of the bullets splintering the links of the chain.

The guards are closing in on them fast and Rush raises his knife and prepares to go down fighting, when all of a sudden the bridge creaks heavily and falls open with a tremendous crash.

“Rush, come on!” Young shouts, and then they're both running again, over the bridge, out onto a dirt road. The guards are hot on their heels, but he and Young are faster, and Jesus, they're going to make it, they're going to get away.

An arrow whizzes by his head, narrowly missing his ear, and fuck! Jesus!

“They're shooting at us!”
Young is still holding his wrist, his grip so tight it's almost bruising, and he suddenly yanks Rush to the left, changing their direction and nearly sending them both to the ground. He staggers and recovers quickly, though, and Rush realizes an arrow is piercing the ground where he was just seconds ago.

Young pulls him towards a tree-covered hill, not slowing down until they're under the cover of night and the thick, leafy trees, before turning around and checking what their assailants are doing.

They haven't gone far past the gate, it seems. Perhaps they're not allowed to leave the city, or perhaps he and Young weren't that important, or perhaps there is another reason, Rush doesn't know. All he knows is that his heart is pounding out of his chest and his breath is so high in his throat he feels he's barely getting any oxygen to his brain right now.

Young is completely calm, physically. His breathing hasn't even sped up, and how is that possible?

“Come on, we've got to keep moving,” Young says, and once again he pulls Rush along, deeper into the forest. He sets a slightly less punishing pace, thankfully, but Rush still feels a painful stab in his side from the exertion as they weave their way through the thickening trees. His breath is coming in harsher and harsher pants until he physically can't anymore, and he yanks his wrist away and doubles over.

Young comes to a stop next to him and regards him with an expression that seems half worry and half annoyance. “Listen, Rush, none of this is real. You've just got to realize that we're inside Destiny's mainframe right now, and your body isn't really here. There's no need to be out of breath.”

Easy for you to say, Rush wants to sneer as his wheezing pants feel like they're cutting open his windpipe. “What?” he manages instead, in between huge lung-fulls of air.

“This, all of this, it's a simulation. We're stuck in a computer program, it's not real.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Rush asks when he's finally regained some of his breath. He wishes it hadn't come out quite so plaintive, but it remains a legitimate question.

Young lets out a sigh and his eyes dart behind Rush for a second as he undoubtedly tries to decide whether they should do this here or not.

“Let's find a place with a bit more shelter. We'll talk,” Young says eventually.

Part of Rush thinks the thick forest around them should be shelter enough, but another part of him remembers the arrow narrowly missing his head, and yeah, he decides. Young might just be right.

They find a place, a hole in the earth, something halfway between a cave and disproportionately large burrow. Rush stands in the corner, catching his breath and waiting for his heart rate to calm down. He wants to roll his eyes at Young checking everything twice to make sure the place is truly abandoned, but then his mind conjures up the type of animal that might have dug this den – how large it must be to need something this big – and he grudgingly appreciates that Young even knows how to determine whether something still lives here.

When Young is satisfied he sits down with his back against the far wall, facing the wide opening.

After two seconds of hesitation, Rush sits down next to him.

“So,” Young starts, letting the silence stretch awkwardly between them. “...You really don't know who I am?”
It's different, now that they're not escaping, or running, or moving at all. It's hard not to let Young suck up all his attention, not to give into the urge to inch closer or to shrink away. Something wary in the back of his mind won't let Rush take his eyes off of Young, even if so far the man has done nothing but help him.

“I know that I know you, but I don't have any specific memories of you,” he admits.

Young's expression doesn't change, but Rush thinks there's something surprised in his gaze when he looks into Rush's eyes.

“Right. So what do you know?”

Rush shrugs uncomfortably. Now that he thinks about it, he doesn't know much. “My name is Nicholas Rush. I spent the last... well, as long as I can remember in some sort of comatose state, except I was entirely lucid during it.”

Young's face turns into a slight frown. “You were conscious for all of it?”

Rush nods.

“Did anything... bad happen?” Young asks, voice almost carefully soft.

“Not particularly.”

“What about before you went into that coma?”

Rush finds himself picking up and discarding memories as he sifts through his mind for the answer to Young's question. Not necessarily because Young wants to know, but because Rush is suddenly faced with the idea of not knowing who he is in the slightest, and it's both puzzling and upsetting.

He shakes his head. “I can't remember anything from before.” He frowns, suddenly intensely aware that there is something very wrong with him, and glares at Young. “What the fuck is going on?”

Young's expression stays stuck in that bloody impenetrable calm, and it is irritating as hell. Rush has half a mind to shake the man, to demand he give him some answers; but before he can decide whether that is a reasonable course of action or just a monumentally stupid plan, Young sighs.

“We're not really here. I mean, we are, obviously, but physically we're on a spaceship called the Destiny. Our consciousnesses have been uploaded into its mainframe, and everything here is basically an elaborate computer simulation.”

He explains it gingerly, like he's afraid Rush won't be able to deal with the information, when in actuality Rush thinks it seems like quite a reasonable explanation for the strange things he's experienced over the past three hours or so. More so than anything he has managed to come up with, in any case. It's actually rather calming to find a compelling argument that makes sense out of this whole mess.

Besides, what Young just said feels right, in the same way Young's name had felt right.

Destiny.

Yes. Destiny.

“Okay, so why are we here?” Rush asks, and this time Young's eyebrows do shoot up a little bit. He recovers quickly, though. His face settles into an almost grave expression as he studies Rush quietly.
“Destiny's AI decided you would be of more help to her mission without your personality.”

Rush feels offended, but before he can make his discontent explicit, Young continues.

“She gave me the option to leave you as you were, or to get you back,” he says as he finally breaks that uncanny gaze and flicks his eyes away, to the open entrance of the burrow.

Rush presses down the surge of anger, of goddamn violation, and focuses on the fact that Young is apparently here to rescue him from more than just unending waking sleep in that damp and chilly dungeon. He should feel grateful – and he does, to the point where it's a little scary how fucking loud his heart is beating right now – but there's frustration there, too. Frustration, and irritation, and even a small but very insistent sliver of distrust.

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“What did you come here to get me?”

Young frowns at him. There's something exasperated behind it, and Rush thinks this isn't the first time Young has given him this look. But where it used to be embittered and galled, now it just seems sardonic and kind of grumpy.

“Because despite what you think, Rush, I'm not the kind of person who'd just let one of my people get wiped clean because it's easier.”

This time it's Rush's turn to frown, because that's not right; that doesn't feel like his problem with Young at all. If anything, the man is too willing to jump into the line of fire to defend 'his people'. Perhaps it's that, though. Perhaps he simply has a hard time seeing himself as one of Young's people.

From what he's seen the man is fairly competent at rescue missions, but Rush can't imagine feeling comfortable being bossed around by him under less dire circumstances at all. Young isn't nearly intelligent enough to have earned the privilege of telling Rush what to do. Honestly, Rush has a hard time imagining anyone who would be.

“I take it we didn't get along, then?” he asks.

Young gives him a look that is so complicated Rush can't help but wonder if Young has just as many contradictory emotions about him as he does about Young.

“I thought we were doing okay, but recently we had a falling out,” he answers tersely.

Oh. Even if the sentence itself reveals infuriatingly little, it summons a number of emotions in Rush that make him immensely uncomfortable. Anger, guilt, and a small barbed wire undercurrent of betrayed anguish that he'd really just as soon tuck safely back into the confined reaches of his mind.

“Alright, fine. How do we get out of here?” Rush asks, unwilling to linger on the topic of their personal relationship and all the unpleasant feelings it awakens in him.

Young seems just as eager to stop discussing it and straightens his shoulders as he turns to Rush again. “We go east. I think Destiny told me what to do, she said to go to a place called Eskhorn.”

“What are we looking for, exactly?”

Young gives him a calculating look. “Your memories. An exit. A way to get you back into your
Rush finally figures out how to suppress the discomfiting sensation of his breath being too hot and too high in his throat, and as soon as he does he knows beyond any doubt that Young is telling the truth about the simulation. His body is just an extension of his mind, and his mind doesn't need breath, or rest.

Good.

Now that his body's physical restraints don't hold any bearing on him anymore, he doesn't see why they shouldn't continue traveling until they reach their destination. He wants—no, he needs to get back to Destiny.

With a sudden, staggering intensity he longs for metal corridors and glowing blue screens and being annoyed at the incompetence of his science team and the Colonel awkwardly touching base with him in between all of that. He doesn't know what any of it means, but it feels right, and true, and he wants it back because it's his. That's his home, that's where he belongs, and he wants it.

He's at the exit of the burrow before Young even has time to get up. Rush looks back at him impatiently. “Well, what are you waiting for?” he says, conveniently stepping over the fact that they stopped here because Rush pretty much demanded it. “Let's go.”

Young stands up fluidly, and if Rush didn't know better he'd say there was something almost relieved about the amused quirk of his lips.

“Allright, Rush,” Young says, as he inclines his head in the direction of their destination. “Lead the way.”
Chapter 9

Eskhorn, which is a stupid fucking name for a town, Rush thinks, takes almost a week to reach. They might not need sleep, or food, or drink – which is good, because if they had the journey would have taken at least twice as long – but it gets incredibly monotonous after the first day. When he stops looking over his shoulder every five minutes to make sure they're not being followed by any guards or soldiers, he starts realizing how ridiculously boring it is to run through shadow-filled forest, and later over empty and far-reaching grass plains.

Young is not a bad traveling companion. He's quick and he doesn't feel the need to fill the silence with useless conversation, and an uncomfortably large part of Rush is desperately glad Young is there when they encounter a small group of bandits on the second day. Young takes out two of them before they can even finish their threatening speech, after which the final member of the gang flees back into the woods with a shrill cry.

Still, Rush grows restless. Because aside from the cursory remark every now and then they don't speak at all, and the more he thinks about the silence between them the heavier it grows.

On the third day he finds himself initiating a conversation about Destiny. He wants to know more about the ship, *his* ship, and aside from the occasional flash of dull gray metal deck plating, or the whirring sound of mechanical doors sliding open, or a red T-shirt with the inane words *YOU ARE HERE* on it, his mind refuses to provide him with any actual information about it.

Young indulges him for a question or two, but then tells him he'll get it all back when they find his memories, and that is the end of that.

The running gets so tedious that Rush feels his thoughts go in tighter and tighter loops until all he can think about is the tense silence between them and the words that hang unspoken in the middle.

On the fourth day, even asking Young about their personal relationship seems preferable to letting the thick tension sit.

“So what was the cause of our falling out?”

Young just shoots him an emotionless glance from the side of his eye before turning his face forward again.

“You lied to me.”

Well, that's fucking informative.

“How?”

Young sighs. “Does it matter?”

Rush studies the tight set of Young's shoulders, the unmoving blankness of his face, and he knows it means Young is angry.

“It seems so,” he says.

Young looks at him, then, an unhappy little wrinkle between his eyebrows.

“You killed one of my men.”
That is not what he'd expected, and something ugly twists deep in his stomach. He feels outrage and he wants to verbalize the sheer amount of injustice that the accusation stirs up in him, but he keeps quiet. Because there's a sliver of guilt there as well, and even if Rush doesn't understand the context of his emotions he can surmise that he might not be as innocent as he'd like to believe.

He must've had a good reason, though. Of that much he's sure.

“And you kept it a secret that you figured out how to stall the FTL clock.”

Rush frowns. That's too specific for him to defend himself against. He has no idea what an FTL clock is, although he knows in his bones that it's something he's familiar with.

The only sounds between them are their constant footfalls through the thick grass of the plain.

“I must've had a good reason,” he says eventually.

Young is silent for a long time. “I'm sure you thought so.”

There's not much he can say to that, not without his memories.

They don't speak for the rest of the day.

When they finally reach the village of Eskhorn, they've built a tentative truce between them. Rush doesn't speak of Destiny again, and Young is bored enough by the fifth day to tell him about his time in the simulation before he got Rush out of that dungeon. It doesn't really make sense to take his anger at Rush out on this version of him; he doesn't even have any memories of being Rush. And Young can't deny he's glad for the company. This trip would have been even more mind-numbingly dull if it wasn't for the occasional conversation with Rush.

On the sixth day they get chased by a horde of dark blue wildebeests, and Young has to spend his last three bullets bringing down the one in the lead before it spears Rush on one of its freakishly long horns. The rest of the pack back off, then, and leave them alone.

Rush thanks him, awkwardly, and they end up having a long and animated discussion about whether dying in the simulation could mean dying in real life. Rush says he thinks it's unlikely, but since neither of them is willing to try it out, they have no way of settling their debate.

Young finds himself smiling faintly. Because it's nice, talking to Rush like this, without all of the resentment and distrust and betrayal between them.

They'd been getting along so well before going into stasis, and this is even better than that, because he hasn't left this Rush for dead on a dusty planet, and this Rush hasn't hurt any of his crew members or lied to him more times than Young can count.

He could become friends with this Rush, and that thought makes him hopeful and hopeless in equal measures.

Young spends too much of the seventh day wondering what will happen when Rush gets his memories back. He's pretty sure it'll mean the end of this growing sense of camaraderie between them. Not least of all because thinking about Rush, his Rush, still inspires a hot flare of betrayed spite.
in Young's gut.

“What are you thinking about?” Rush asks candidly, eyes squinting slightly against the bright noon sun.

“What are you thinking about?” Rush asks candidly, eyes squinting slightly against the bright noon sun.

“Getting your memories back,” Young answers.

Rush makes a pensive humming sound. “How much further to the town, do you think?”

Young has no way of knowing, of course. “I hope we're getting close.”

It’s as if the simulation heeds his wishes, because not an hour later the contours of a village appear at the edge of the horizon. Even if the uncomfortable tension between them has mostly subsided, they’re both glad when at last they reach their destination.

“Fucking finally,” Rush says.

Young can't help but agree.

“I can't help. You'll have to ask someone else,” the old woman near the entrance of the village says.

“I can't help. You'll have to ask someone else,” the man getting water from the well says.

“I can't help. You'll have to ask someone else,” the innkeeper says, and Young has just about had it with these people and their unhelpful goddamn bullshit.

“You're fucking with us,” Rush says angrily, and suddenly the innkeeper's face changes from that pleasant, blank smile into something sharply amused.

“Yeah.”

“You're Destiny,” Young says, and he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's true.

“Seeing as you're traipsing around through a partition of my mainframe, that should hardly come as a surprise,” the innkeeper replies.

“How do I get my memories back?” Rush cuts in, irritation clear in his voice.

“You ask.”

Young sees Rush's face contort in anger for a quick second, before he grits his teeth and looks back at Destiny. “May I have my memories back?”

The innkeeper gives him a smile that seems almost fond in its exasperation before shaking his head. “I'm not the one you should ask.”

“Well, who the fuck do I ask, then?” Rush bursts out.

Destiny inclines his head at Young with a significant glance.

“What?” Young asks. “Me?”
“Yes. You get to decide whether he gets his memories back.”

Rush gives him an incredulous look, and for an odd reason Young feels like he should be defending himself right now. He doesn't give in to the urge to splutter and focuses his attention on Destiny with the imperturbable facade he’s perfected over the years.

“Fine, give them back.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” the innkeeper asks, his eyes glittering with something Young can't quite interpret.

“Yes. Give them back.”

“Alright,” Destiny says, and suddenly Rush blinks out of existence.

“What the hell did you just do?” he growls angrily, attempting to ignore the way his heart feels like it's trying to leap out through his throat.

“This was the easy part, Everett,” Destiny says as their surroundings slowly melt away until they find themselves standing in the neural interface room. Rush is sitting in the chair, eyes closed, bolts against his temples. TJ, James, and Brody stand near the console, unnaturally still. Nothing is moving, Young realizes, because time has stopped.

This is still a simulation.

“Now comes the real test,” Destiny says, and when Young turns to look at him he realizes the AI has taken Emily's shape again. “Getting him out of here won't be nearly as easy.”

“What do you expect me to do here?” he asks.

She smiles at him, familiar and fond and beautiful. “You'll figure it out.”

She steps back, and before Young knows what he's doing he grabs her wrist. “Wait!” And it's strange, because he'd expected to reach right through her, but he can feel her human warmth and her soft skin and the delicate bones underneath. “How do I get him out?”

She looks down at his hand and then back up to his face. “Like I said, you'll—”

“No,” he interrupts her, letting her wrist drop from his grasp. “I mean how do I get his personality back into his body?”

“Oh,” she smiles. “If you succeed in getting him out of here, his consciousness will be queued in the neural interface's memory. Just put him in the chair and it'll be downloaded automatically.”

“How do I know you won't tamper with it again?” he asks suspiciously.

She gives him an affable shrug. “Creative problem solving is a lot harder without a personality, apparently. Seeing as we rely on his quick wit to get us out of most of the crisis situations we find ourselves in, it would be in my best interest to have Nicholas back to his old self, as well.”

“Right.” It's no guarantee, not even close, but it's going to have to be enough. It's not like he has much choice in the matter.

“Good luck,” she winks at him, and then she disappears from his sight and time starts moving again.

The restraints around Rush's ankles and wrists lift with a soft clank as the bolts at his temple whir
“Doctor Rush?” TJ asks from where she’s crouching in front of the chair. Rush blinks his eyes open slowly. “Are you okay?”

She shines her penlight into his eyes and Rush flinches away in irritation. “I'm fine, stop that.”

Young watches wordlessly as TJ takes Rush's pulse before turning to him. “He seems alright, although he should come into the infirmary for a more thorough exam.”

“Yes, well, we can do that later. I need to get back to work now,” Rush says as he gets up from the chair. He refuses to look Young in the eye, and Young can only just refrain himself from grabbing Rush's arm to stop him from running out of the room.

He watches Rush disappear out of sight.

He has no idea what he's supposed to do now.

“Rush.”

Jesus, he hasn't been back for more than thirty minutes and already Young is on him again. He hasn't even had time to get settled, to fully appreciate Destiny's dark and mysterious atmosphere, full of wonder and possibility and the potential for greatness. He hasn't even managed to run basic diagnostics on her, to make sure she's been treated well during his absence.

The fact that Young unerringly knows where to find him is both grating and oddly satisfying, and it takes all his willpower not to turn to him and watch Young's form – the line of his broad shoulders in his uniform jacket, those competent hands that had pulled him out of eternal darkness, out of that stifling, dank dungeon... And Christ, he really needs to get over this whole hero-worship nonsense right the fuck now.

Just because Young decided to get him out of that simulation doesn't mean they're suddenly okay.

“Colonel,” he answers, refusing to look up from his work. *I'm busy*, he tries to relay with his body language and his dismissive tone. Of course Young can never take a fucking hint, because he refuses to budge. Instead he actually moves closer, leaning intently on the edge of Rush's console.

He stands there, silently, like he's waiting for Rush to react, or maybe like he's trying to think of how to broach the subject he's about to broach. If he's hoping for thanks, he's going to have to wait a long time. Rush has saved Young's life plenty of times, and he's never been this bloody obnoxious about it.

After more than a minute has passed Rush lets out an irritated sigh and finally looks up at Young. “Is there something you wanted, or are you just here to keep me from getting any work done?”

Young gives him a look that is half exasperation and half indecision. He looks exhausted, and Rush wonders if for some reason sitting in the chair was harder on Young's mind and body than it was on Rush.

“We're not out yet. This is still a simulation.”
Right, that makes complete sense. Rush rolls his eyes. Of course Young can't just let it go. Of course he wants Rush to grovel and express his gratitude and make a solemn oath he'll never lie to Young again.

“Look, I don't know what you want from me here. We're back. And I, for one, intend to make the most of that.”

“We're not back, Rush. We're still trapped inside Destiny's mainframe.” Young sounds as if he's having to exert some restraint keeping his voice mild and rational. And really, he is looking a bit unhinged with those dark circles under his eyes, his hair even more disheveled than usual.

Rush sighs again. His entire being is aflutter with the almost delirious sense of homecoming. Every part of him is telling him he's back, he's here, and if Young thinks this is the best way of getting Rush to acknowledge that he's grateful for his rescue, that they may have bonded a little during that week they spent together surviving in Destiny's odd, videogame-esque simulation, this is not the best way of going about it.

“We are. Have you had Lieutenant Johansen take a look at you, yet? It seems you may have been more affected by your interactions with the neural interface chair than me.”

Young huffs out a breath and Rush isn't sure whether it's in annoyance or amusement, but both options are equally irritating.

“Yeah, I'm the one with the loose grip on reality here,” Young says.

“What the fuck is your problem, Colonel?” Rush snaps.

“Aside from the fact that you killed Graham and lied about the FTL timer? How about the sheer goddamn conceit that you still think I'm the one that must be lying right now.” And oh, Young is angry. Of course he is.

“I told you I didn't kill Graham,” Rush says heatedly. How many more fucking times is he going to have to say it?

Well, he can probably repeat it until he's blue in the face, Young isn't ever going to believe it. And technically, it's not entirely the truth anyway.

Young crosses his arms across his chest. “Right,” he says without any inflection. Rush can still fucking hear the sarcasm in it, though. “So what about the FTL timer then, you going to deny that, too?”

Rush hesitates. That hadn't been nearly as nefarious as Young makes it sound. He'd figured it out just days before they were planning to go into stasis. It hadn't been a priority, there hadn't been time to do the proper amount of research before they could go into the testing phase; he had no guarantee that it wouldn't greatly affect Destiny's other systems, and he'd planned on sharing the news when, if, they made it to the next galaxy.

The idea that he has to justify himself to Young, though, that he has to plead with him for understanding, rankles him beyond what is probably rational.

Young just gives him that look. That waiting, placid, demanding fucking stare that always calls up the urge to explain in Rush, even if he hates it and usually fights against it. And fine, if that's what it's going to take to get Young off his back. Fucking fine. He may not be willing to disclose his part in Graham's death, but he can give Young this much.
“We were already putting people into the pods by the time I discovered how to stall the clock. I didn't have time to look into it further, I have no idea what'll happen when we actually try it, and I could've mentioned it by now if you hadn't been flinging accusations my way the minute we woke up. It hardly seemed like a priority.”

“Well, it was. We nearly lost four people because you failed to inform anyone of your findings, Rush. That shouldn't have happened.”

“And it wouldn't have, if I had fucking been there! It's not my fault Destiny decided to brainwash me.”

Young's face is stuck in a frown. He seems to need some time to take in the information, and Rush resists the urge to roll his eyes again as he turns back to his console. His main systems scan is finished, and he flicks through it quickly to find that, yeah, they had stalled the FTL timer for an additional twenty-four hours. It looks like it didn't have any negative effects on the rest of Destiny's systems. For now, at least. It was goddamn reckless to just try it without even figuring out whether it would mean blowing up the entire ship, and Rush feels another pang of frustration with Young.

“Fine,” Young says eventually. “I can accept that.”

Rush feels an infuriating swell of relief wash through him, and Jesus, what is wrong with him?

“Oh, okay,” he says warily.

“But I need you to listen to me now,” Young continues. “We are still stuck in a simulation, and I need to break you out of it before either one of us can go back.”

Christ. Not this again.

“When you were trapped in the chair...” Young begins, but he seems unwilling to finish his sentence.

Rush knows what he means, of course. When Mandy's parameters didn't allow him to leave the chair, when she'd rebuilt the entire ship and her crew to convince him he was out. It had been convincing, but probably mostly because he'd wanted to believe it, at the time. That was not like this; he had not felt this determined conviction that it was real. He had not felt this jubilant rush of home in his veins.

Young gets a speculative look on his face. “How did you know it wasn't real?”

And oh, no. He's not going to let Young blow up the fucking ship to prove that his little delusion is true. “I checked Destiny's systems for discrepancies,” he lies quickly. “There were too many inconsistencies, it wasn't hard to figure out.”

Young watches him for a beat and his entire demeanor seems to flicker; a picture of his usual calm overlaying the exhausted, disarranged vision of the man in front of him.

“You're lying,” he says quietly. And even if he's right, the look in his eye convinces Rush Young is out of his mind.

“You're losing it, Colonel,” he says, sneaking his hand down to his radio to press the transmit button.

“What did you do, Rush? Did you kill someone? Did you kill yourself?”

Rush watches with anxious trepidation as Young's hand inches closer to his sidearm. Fuck, this situation is getting out of control fast. Young has a gun, there's no way Rush can defend himself
“Yes, I killed myself,” Rush blurts out. Because if someone is going to die here today, it's not going to be him.

Young seems to think that over for a bit, and Rush knows this is his only moment to act. To protect both of them from the mistake Young is about to make. He takes his chance to storm Young, fighting to wrestle the gun away from him. Young is too fast for him, though. Too fast and too strong, and Rush grits his teeth as his arms are pinned behind his back and Young grabs his wrists together in one hand. He tries to kick back, but then he hears the click of Young’s sidearm.

“Don't, Rush,” Young grits out, breathing labored and voice dangerously low. “I'm not going to kill you. I'm just trying to tell you this is all a simulation.”

“You're fucking insane,” Rush says, and Christ, is he really going to die right now? Is Young going to fucking shoot him? This can't seriously be how he dies, how all of this ends, Rush thinks in panicky shrieks.

He hears a boot scuff against the deck plating, and when he looks to the side he feels a thick wave of gratitude wash over him. He's never been so glad to see Sergeant Greer in his life.

Greer has his rifle trained on both of them, and after a short moment of hesitation he rushes Young and knocks him out with the butt of his gun.

Rush feels Young release his wrists and has just enough time to turn around and watch him crumple to the floor, unconscious.

“What the hell is going on here?” Greer says, clearly distraught by what just happened.

“You just prevented murder, Sergeant,” Rush answers with as much composure as he can muster. “Take the Colonel to the infirmary. The neural interface seems to have done some damage to his brain.”

“That damn chair,” Greer curses, kneeling next to Young and hoisting him over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“Yes,” Rush agrees distractedly, taking the gun from Young’s limp hand. A sliver of uncertainty gnaws at him. Something is wrong here; something feels entirely off.

Even the elated feeling of homecoming can't overrule the sickening doubt that is creeping in like the tide.

Because what if Young is right?
Chapter 10

He wakes up in the infirmary only to find that his head hurts and his hands are bound. Shit.

“Colonel Young?” TJ's voice sounds calm and professional, but he can recognize the tightness around her eyes for the anxiety that it is. “How're you feeling?”

“Like someone hit me in the head with something heavy,” he answers with a deep rasp. “What happened?”

For a second she looks like she's not sure how much she should divulge. “You were behaving oddly. Dangerously. Greer came to investigate a radio call and found you holding a gun to Rush's head. He knocked you out, sir.” She gives him a worried little smile. “Maybe a bit harder than planned.”

Young frowns. ...Greer?

“Where's Rush?”

“I'll radio him in a minute,” she says placatingly. “But first I need to assess how bad the damage from the neural interface chair is.”

Damage?

Yes, well. That makes sense, actually. It would be somewhat out of character for him to suddenly start pointing his gun at Rush like that, no matter how strained their relationship had gotten since awakening from stasis. It stands to reason they'd think he'd been compromised somehow. Even if he'd only done it because Rush had forced his hand, suddenly assaulting him without any provocation.

He feels something drip onto his lip and watches TJ dart forward with a small piece of cloth. A nosebleed, he realizes as she dabs the blood away. He hopes it's from the hit to the head, but it seems more likely that it's a sign that sitting in the chair on the real Destiny is starting to take its toll on his body.

Apparently there is a rather pressing time component to this 'test' Destiny is putting him through.

“How long will that take?” he asks, trying with all his might to sound reasonable and rational and calm, because everyone obviously thinks he's out of his mind right now.

“I don't know, sir,” TJ says quietly.

Shit.

“TJ, please. I just want to talk to him.”

She gives him a complicated look, and he can see the actual moment she gives in.

“Doctor Rush,” she says into her radio. “Infirmary, please.”

Young lets out a sigh. How the hell is he going to convince Rush to get them out of here before the chair kills him?
Young feels a deep wave of relief when Rush walks into the infirmary ten minutes later. TJ stops him at the entrance and says something to him in a hushed tone. Rush gives her a tight nod before stepping closer to Young's bed.

“Colonel,” he greets him guardedly.

“Rush,” Young says back. Rush looks at him with a small frown and an inquisitive head tilt, and for a quick second Young is reminded of a bird, predatory and skittish. He can't afford to scare Rush off right now. He doesn't have the *time* to fuck this up. “I'm sorry for earlier.”

“I take it you weren't in your right mind,” Rush says. There's something wary in the way Rush regards him, and he wonders whether Rush is truly this shaken up because Young pulled a gun on him or if it's something more.

“I was telling you the truth, Rush. I wouldn't have killed you. Even if I had shot you, which I wasn't planning on, it wouldn't have killed you. None of this is real.” He can hear the pleading undertone in his own voice, and the searching look in Rush's eyes tells him Rush hears it too. The silence that falls between them is deafening, reducing everything to the steady beep of the heart monitor connected to Young's index finger and the blood thrumming against his eardrums.

“I blew up the ship,” Rush says after a long pause.

“What?”

“In the simulation with Mandy. I blew up the ship to prove that it wasn't real.”

Jesus. Yeah, that sounds like Rush. Of course he did something dramatic like blowing up the entire ship. The whole picture of him putting a gun to his own head hadn't felt quite right from the start.

“Do it,” Young implores.

Rush shakes his head in denial. “I can't. *I know* this is real. I can't...”

Young feels despair claw at his throat, because how is he ever going to talk Rush around when he's strapped to a bed like a mental patient?

“How do you know? How can you know for sure?”

“I can feel it. I know it.”

This time it's Young's turn to deny Rush. “Destiny can make you feel whatever she wants you to feel. She told me this was a test.”

Rush gives him a hard look. He's thinking.

“I'm telling the truth, Rush. None of this is real but you and me.”

*Please believe me*, he wants to say. He can't, though. Not yet. If he says it too soon or too often, the words will lose all possible impact.

“You wouldn't still be here if there wasn't *something* that made you wonder,” he says instead.

The quiet between them is long and heavily loaded. Young feels his head throb in time with his elevated heartbeat. Finally, Rush breaks the silence.
“Sergeant Greer...” he says. He lets his sentence trail off, but yes, Greer! Thank God.

“Yes,” Young says emphatically. “Do you really think Greer would have just knocked me out if this was real?”

Rush doesn't answer, but he looks doubtful. Because Greer, the real Greer, would have asked Young what was going on. He would have assumed Young had good reason to hold Rush at gunpoint. He would not have bashed Young's skull in without even taking stock of the situation.

“Rush, you have to believe me. I'm starting to get nosebleeds; I don't know how much longer I have before sitting in the chair kills me.”

Rush looks up at him, then, alarm in his eyes. It startles Young, the concern on Rush's face. Within a second Rush schools his features into something a little less worried, a little less transparent. It's still there, though, Young can still tell that Rush cares, and that makes something flutter deep in his belly.

“I—” Rush says, then cuts himself off. He looks away with a frown.

Young feels something warm and wet run down to his top lip. He wonders whether he has Destiny or just plain luck to thank for this bout of fortunate timing.

“Rush,” he says, and he watches closely as Rush's eyes flit across his face, over to where the blood is running from his nose, making a quickly cooling trail from his cheek down to his ear. “Please.”

A deep frown settles on Rush's features as his gaze darts rapidly between Young's eyes and the blood on his face. Suddenly, he steps back, turns around, and dashes out of the infirmary.

Young has no choice but to hope and wait.

Fuck. Fuck.

There is no way to verify what is true, but the sight of Young's face, covered in blood as he pleaded with Rush to believe him... Christ.

By the time he gets to the bridge his heart is hammering in his throat.

“Oh, hey,” Volker says from one of the consoles.

Rush ignores him and sits down in the command chair. Everything feels real, it feels so fucking real, but Young is... Young is right about Greer. And if he is right about Greer, he might be right about all of it. If this whole thing is a test designed by Destiny she'd have no qualms about killing Young in the process of teaching whatever lesson she is trying to teach. She'd almost driven him to the brink with those battle simulations, and Rush still can't shake the feeling that all of that had been a test not for Young, but for him.

Maybe Young is crazy, unbalanced by sitting in the chair, stuck in a delusion, asking Rush to kill seventy people and blow up the most important discovery humankind may very well have ever done.

But he hadn't seemed crazy. He'd seemed desperate, yes, but not deranged like when he'd pulled his gun on Rush. In fact, if Young is telling the truth, it could easily have been Destiny's doing to make him appear so unstable earlier today. If it is all a simulation, killing Rush might actually have been a
reasonable solution. If that had even been Young's plan in the first place - he's not quite so sure about that anymore either. It's possible he may have jumped to the wrong conclusion while Young was mulling over his options back there.

But there is no way to verify whether what Young's saying is true or not. Whether all of this is a simulation or not. And the only way he's going to find out is by doing something drastic, or by waiting to see if Young dies.

Young, who wouldn't have been in the chair in the first place if he hadn't insisted on getting Rush back. Young, who had been furious with him for lying and still chose to save him from Destiny's prison, even if it would've been so much easier to simply leave Rush to rot in her clutches. Young, who sometimes used to give him those amused little smiles that make Rush's chest tighten, because the thought that one day the two of them might become actual friends never seemed nearly as unlikely or as objectionable when Young looked at him like that.

No, he doesn't want to wait, to find out Young was right by watching him die. He's quite certain that Young is telling the truth. And perhaps he can't verify it, but that actually seems like the type of lesson Destiny would attempt to teach him. To trust Young. Because wasn't that what it all boiled down to between them in the end? Trust.

Rush shakes his head. He can't believe he's about to do this. He's about to risk everything because he doesn't want Young to die. Jesus, Young better appreciate this.

Provided that it doesn't kill everyone, of course.

“What are you——” Volker says as Rush overrides the limiters on the internal power conductors and forces a short-circuit in the shields.

“No, wait!” Volker yells, voice panicky and high-pitched, but the shields collapse, and the shearing forces are tearing Destiny apart, and everything explodes in a fiery blaze of bright heat.

“Colonel?” That's Scott's voice.

He blinks open his eyes and finds himself sitting in the neural interface chair.

It worked.

He breathes out a sigh of relief.

“Are you okay?” TJ asks, and she is shining into his eyes with her penlight. It is too bright, and it's distracting, and it makes him want to laugh. Because he's back. Rush did it.

“Yeah, I'm alright. Aside from the nosebleeds, I suppose.”

“Nosebleeds?” TJ asks.

“While I was in the chair,” Young says.

“You didn't have any nosebleeds, sir.”

Huh. Oh.
“How long was I in there, anyway?” he asks.

She checks her watch. “A little over eight hours.” She screws open a canteen and hands it to him. “Here. Drink.”

He takes a few long drags from the bottle before he gets up from the chair. Scott is by his side immediately, ready to catch him, as if he's expecting his legs to suddenly give out. Young thinks that's hardly necessary after just eight hours in the chair, but gives him a forbearing little smile and claps his hand on Scott's shoulder for a short moment. It's obvious the kid was worried, and Young truly does appreciate the sentiment.

“Get Rush over here,” he says to Scott as he takes another drink from the canteen. “He should sit next.”

Young watches as that empty-eyed version of Rush takes place in the chair. He won't be sad to see him go; something about the placid expression on his face feels so wrong it makes his skin crawl. It's even worse than how he'd felt when the people from that 'Eden' planet had returned to them in the shuttle.

Rush has barely sat down when the chair activates, shackling his arms and legs and attaching the bolts at his temples. His eyes close and his body stills, and that eerie blue light shines down on him.

“Data transfer started,” Volker says from the console, Chloe hovering anxiously near his side. It's clear she's worried about Rush, and Young finds he shares the sentiment in spades. Rush's eyelids flicker slightly as his personality is downloaded back into his body, and Young really hopes Destiny was telling the truth when she said she wouldn't tamper with it again.

He's uneasy and concerned, but at the same time he also feels oddly buoyant, almost nervous, about seeing Rush again. Even if he knows it's stupid.

Because Rush had believed him. He'd trusted Young. He'd blown up Destiny, and Young can still feel the ship shaking itself apart right before a giant explosion had swallowed everything in his sight.

Rush had taken a huge leap of faith, and Young can't help but think that at least part of it was because he didn't want Young to die. And that... that goes a long way towards easing the recent tension between them.

He's not sure why he takes everything so personal when it comes to Rush. Graham's death angered him not just because he lost one of his men – a boy, really – but because Rush going behind his back had felt like an intimate betrayal. It had hurt, which isn't logical, because Young had known Rush couldn't be trusted; that's why he hadn't let him stay out in the first place. And it's the same when Rush comes through for him. When Rush had caught him right after he'd bounced off the hull of Destiny, doomed to be lost in space forever, his heart had swelled to the point where he nearly couldn't breathe. And this, knowing that Rush risked everything on Young's say-so, possibly even for him, makes it nearly impossible to keep an insistent, affectionate little smile off his face.

“It's finishing,” Brody says from Volker's other side, and mere seconds later the bolts and the restraints retract and Rush slumps forward in the chair.

“Doctor Rush?” TJ asks, lifting his head up and feeling for a pulse.
Young feels his own heartbeat pick up, because Rush isn't waking up. Why isn't Rush waking up?

“It looks like he's in a coma,” TJ says. She sounds almost resigned, like this is something that has happened before.

And it has, hasn't it? The last time Rush sat in the chair, when he entered a simulation to be with Doctor Perry, he'd been in a coma for four days.

Young sighs. “Take him to the infirmary and keep an eye on him.”

“Yes, sir,” TJ says, before she instructs James and Chloe to take Rush's unconscious form to the infirmary. “I actually wanted to talk to you, Colonel. I have seven patients now, all with high fevers. Fletcher and Morrison are in a comatose state, and they both have a red lump on their bodies.”

Damn, it seems the situation with the mystery virus is escalating fast. “What do you think we should do?”

“I want to operate on one of them. See if we're looking at a tumor or an inflammation, or something else completely,” she answers steadily. “I was going to do it if you hadn't gotten out of the chair in twelve hours.”

“Alright.”

She nods, and then her shoulders relax fractionally and a small smile graces her lips. “Good to have you back, sir.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant,” he answers with a slight smile. “Radio me when Rush wakes up, would you?”

“Of course.” And with a quick dip of her head, she leaves for the infirmary.

Young turns to Brody and Volker. “Is there any way you can tell whether Rush's whole consciousness has been transferred back?”

Volker gives a short shrug and bends over the console. “We can try.”

“Any ideas on why he's in a coma?”

“Not yet,” Brody says. “Hopefully Rush'll be able to shed some light on that once he wakes up.”

“If he wakes up,” Volker mutters.

Young keeps his face expressionless and bites back a surge of irritation. Sometimes he understands why Rush keeps harping on the man.

“Let me know if you find something,” he says, before walking out of the neural interface room.

Vanessa watches as TJ cuts into the shiny, red, bulging skin on the inside of Fletcher's forearm. Tamara's fingers move with a practiced precision that she couldn't hope to imitate herself, and she feels her breath catch when the parting skin reveals something smooth and oval-shaped. It is light blue in color, veins of darker indigo running through it, and it looks altogether alien.
“What is that?” she asks as she hands TJ a clamp, fascinated disgust clear in her voice.

“I have no idea,” TJ murmurs, carefully folding back Fletcher's skin to reveal more of the growth. “It doesn't look like it's connected to any other tissue. I'm gonna try to take it out.”

Vanessa swallows and nods. The whole thing is making her feel distinctly queasy.

She looks on as TJ uses her fingertips to nudge against the thing until it protrudes from the incision enough that she can easily take it between two fingers. Vanessa holds up a kidney-shaped bowl, and TJ deposits the light blue object into it. It looks... it looks like an egg, slightly irregular in shape and about the size of a walnut.

TJ is looking around inside the wound, probably checking if she got everything out in one piece, and when she seems satisfied, Vanessa hands her the threaded suturing needle before TJ can even ask for it.

Vanessa likes working in the infirmary. TJ is gentle and caring, but she's also really funny, and pretty much the sanest person aboard the ship. Vanessa always enjoys spending time with her. Sometimes she thinks Tamara is the best friend she's ever had, and even if James is not a hero when it comes to dealing with blood and cutting people open, she can handle it, and she's learning, and it's worth it. She doesn't feel alone when she's here with TJ.

“It looks like an egg,” she says as she pokes a gloved finger against the weird looking blob.

TJ hums in agreement. She's already halfway done stitching Fletcher's arm back up, and Vanessa puts the bottle of Brody's double distilled alcohol within easy reach of her.

“We're going to have to open it up,” TJ says, tying off a knot to her sutures and dousing the closed wound to sterilize it. Vanessa hands her a clean piece of cloth to wipe away the excess alcohol and the traces of blood, and then a bandage. TJ applies it quickly; it's routine for her by now.

When she's done she rubs her forearm against her forehead in an attempt to get rid of a few stray hairs that stick to her skin with the slightest gloss of perspiration. James kind of wants to reach out and do it herself.

“Okay,” TJ says to her, a weary little smile curling the corners of her lips. “Let's take a look at that egg thing.”

“It's a type of parasite,” TJ says.

Young looks around. The infirmary is crowded, eight beds occupied by people, his people. But at least they have some clue as to what they're dealing with now.

“It seems to lay an egg under the skin, and as it grows the symptoms get worse,” TJ explains.

He nods and tries desperately not to let his eyes linger on Rush's comatose form. He kind of wishes he could just deal with one thing at a time. Just put all this parasite crap on hold while he waits for Rush to wake up, to see if he's back to normal again. He won't believe Rush is truly back to his old self until he can verify it with his own eyes, and he can't do that when Rush is in a goddamn coma.
“So what do you suggest we do now?” he asks, trying to keep his focus where it belongs, on the conversation right in front of him.

She gives him a slight shrug. “Wait, probably. See if Fletcher recovers on her own, confirm that the egg was the problem. There's not much I can do right now other than keeping them as comfortable as possible.”

“Okay, let's do that, TJ. Keep me posted.”

She nods and walks over to Rush's bedside. “His brainwaves are getting closer to regular sleeping patterns. I think he'll wake up soon.”

And of course she noticed. She knows him, and she's perceptive, and he always did have a hard time concealing his feelings from her.

She gives him a sympathetic smile.

Well. Being worried about Rush is probably better than being infuriated with him, from her point of view. And it's too difficult to keep his own expression rigid and blank like he should, so he gives her a small smile in return.

“What happened, in the chair?” she asks, and Young feels a surge of fondness for her in his chest. Because even if too much of their history is kind of ugly, and even if she has more reason than anyone to keep the question inside, she still asks.

“It was a simulation. In order for us to get out, Rush had to trust me and risk... a lot. I think he did it to save my life.”

She nods and straightens the bed linen over Rush's motionless form. The sight makes something inexplicable and fragile twist in Young's chest. “That's good, then, isn't it?”

He looks away uncomfortably. “Yeah.”

“I'll call you when he wakes up,” she says gently, and when he looks back up at her face he doesn't quite know how to react. Her gaze is compassionate and a little curious, and he wonders what she sees when she looks at him.

He squares his shoulders and gives her a nod. “Thanks, TJ.”

Young leaves the infirmary and walks around aimlessly until he finds himself in the mess hall. He eats the protein slop Becker serves him, pretending he's not waiting for his radio to crackle. He decides to go for a run through the corridors and finds that running is different when you can get out of breath and sweaty, when your muscles start to burn. It's better. He wears himself out until he wants nothing more than a shower and his bed.

He still can't get the image of TJ straightening the covers over Rush out of his head.
TJ pins back a few very insistent stray hairs as she looks out over the infirmary. It's still heavily crowded compared to usual, but the atmosphere has changed since yesterday afternoon. She no longer feels that mixture of anxiety and hopelessness that had been eating away at her as all her patients had been getting sicker and sicker and she felt helpless to stop it.

“Fletcher is recovering quickly,” she tells Young. “She's awake, her fever is down. Removing the egg seems to cure the symptoms.”

Young nods slowly. “That's good news.” He looks a bit tired. But then, it is pretty early in the morning, and he has just spent most of yesterday in Destiny's neural interface chair.

“I can't be 100% sure, but I think the egg sac emits chemicals to get the host body to the right temperature for it to hatch.”

“It's using people as incubators,” Young says. He looks vaguely unsettled by the notion. She can't really blame him. They still don't know where the sick people got infected.

“Yes.”

“Can you operate on everyone today?” he asks.

“Only on the ones who already have the rash and a bit of a bump. The site of the egg doesn't manifest straight away.”

“Alright. Do everyone you can, then.”

“Yes, sir.”

He nods at her and turns to leave the infirmary. She doesn't miss how his eyes linger on Rush's still form for a second, before he walks out.

“Hey,” Chloe says, stepping into Eli's room. He's leaning his chin on his hand, scrolling through the same log he's been scrolling through every single time she came here. “I got you some tea.”

He looks up at her when she puts it down on his desk and gives her a weary smile. “You don't have to keep bringing me things, you know. I won't starve to death.”

She rolls her eyes and sits down on his bed. “Just drink it. I put those aspirin leaves in, although TJ says they may have lost some of their effect.”

The three years in stasis haven't been kind to their reserves. She still can't believe they're going to have to start over completely with the hydroponics lab. They'd lost so many plants flying through that blue super giant, but at least they'd had some left. Of course they have lots of seeds still, but it is going to take forever to wait for everything to sprout again, and then to bloom, and then to bear fruit... It's pretty disheartening. At least Brody and Park think the hydroponics dome can be repaired; that's something.
Eli takes a sip of his tea and makes a face at her. “This is just hot water with aspirin leaves, isn't it?”

Chloe gives him an apologetic smile. “Yeah, kinda. The tea storage container must've been damp or something, because when Becker opened it up it was completely ruined.”

They sit together in silence for a minute, as Eli takes a few more sips. His head must be killing him. He'd drunk way too much last night, at Graham's funeral, and Chloe has a feeling something else happened yesterday afternoon. Eli had seemed completely devastated when she'd brought him his dinner in the infirmary.

“Eli?” she asks, and his eyes flick to hers instantly. He almost looks scared. “What happened yesterday?”

He sighs and looks down into his cup of hot aspirin leaf water. “I talked to Destiny's AI.”

“Oh,” she says. “Did you find out anything?”

Eli shakes his head. “Not really. It just said I was more important than Graham, so it decided to—” he takes another sip of his tea, and Chloe doesn't think she's imagining the damp gloss in his eyes.

“It's bullshit!” he bursts out suddenly. “How—How can Destiny just determine whose life is worth more?! How the hell can she say I'm more valuable when I couldn't even fix one stupid pod?”

“Eli...”

“No, seriously, I'm asking a legitimate question here! How freaking useless did she think Graham was that she sacrificed his life for me?”

“Stop it!” Chloe says. “So you couldn't fix the broken pod! It probably wasn't fixable, alright?” She realizes she's dangerously close to yelling, so she deliberately lowers her volume and continues more gently, “You're the smartest person aboard this ship. You're the smartest person I've ever met. So maybe you should stop beating yourself up about the pod and consider that no one in the world could've fixed it.”

Eli looks at her with a shocked expression, and yes, there are definitely tears in his eyes now. She sits forward on the bed and reaches over to take his hand in hers.

“What happened was terrible, and it's really not fair that it did. But it wasn't your fault, Eli. You tried everything, and when you knew the pod couldn't be fixed you were prepared to sacrifice yourself for all of us.” Eli looks back down into his cup again. “Listen, Destiny is a machine; she looked at it rationally and she decided you add more value to her mission than Graham did, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that you're my best friend, and I'm happy that you're alive, okay? I'm happy that you're here, and so is Matt, and Ronald, and Colonel Young. And Rush...” She looks away, studies her cuticles for a moment at the mention of Rush's name. He still hasn't woken up from his coma, and his body always looks wrong, somehow, when he's lying unconscious in an infirmary bed. She turns back to Eli and pushes down her worry for Rush. One step at a time. “Everyone.”

They're both quiet for a few seconds.

“Volker's been asking about you so much, you know,” she says, forcing a small smile onto her face.

Eli lets out a wet little chuckle, and she squeezes his hand gently.

“How did you know I was getting ready to die?” he asks.
“Colonel Young told me you said goodbye to your mom,” she answers, and the thought of how difficult that must've been for Eli makes her heart clench. “Why haven't you gone back to Earth to see her yet? She must be worried sick.”

He swallows thickly. “I don't want her to know... I don't want her to look at me and see that I... That someone is dead because of my incompetence.” He looks away and blinks quickly a few times. “She was so proud, when she came here. When she saw that I finally amounted to something. I don't want to see the look in her eyes when she realizes I'm still that useless screw-up I was before.”

“Eli,” Chloe says, and she feels like she might cry, so she swats him on the arm instead. “You are such an idiot. Your mom loves you, and she has every reason to be proud of you. Without you we would never have made it this far. Destiny may be a cold-hearted jerk, but she's right about one thing: you are important. Everyone here needs you. And your mom needs you, too.”

She gets up from the bed and bends over to circle her arms around Eli's neck. He just sits there quietly as she hooks her chin over his shoulder and presses her cheek against his.

“Go visit your mom,” she says, and she feels his shoulders tremble as he sighs shakily.

“Yeah, okay.”

She smiles. For the first time since waking up from stasis, she feels like she had an actual conversation with Eli.

“Colonel Young, it's TJ. I finished the last surgery for today. Doctor Rush has just woken up.”

Young drops his spoon back into his lunch and grabs his radio. “I'll be right there, Lieutenant.”

Scott and Greer give him inquisitive looks, but he ignores the urge to explain, to justify why he wants to see with his own eyes that Rush is really Rush again. Why he feels the need to talk to Rush, to see him straight away.

He quickly finishes the rest of his breakfast; not because he enjoys the taste of the slush – no one does – but because it's protein, it's sustenance, and he doesn't want to set a bad example by squandering what few resources they have left.

“Gentlemen,” he says with a slight grin, getting up from the table.

“Sir,” they say in unison, Greer with a nod and Scott with a good-natured smile.

He drops his empty bowl off at Becker's station and makes his way through the corridors at a hurried pace.

TJ is waiting for him near the entranceway.

“Did the surgeries go well?” he asks, taking in the severe expression on her face.

“Yeah, we operated on four more patients, they should wake up soon. But I just got in another patient. I'm pretty sure that whatever we're dealing with is on the ship, sir.”

Young takes a few seconds to think that over.
“If it was something that got on board before we went into stasis it would have had free reign on the ship for the past three years. Who knows how many of them there are roaming around?” TJ says.

Suddenly Young remembers all the times he thought he saw something moving from the corner of his eye. It makes sense. If the parasites got aboard before stasis, they might have multiplied almost unhindered. They could be everywhere by now.

“You think we're dealing with an infestation?” he asks.

She hesitates. “I'm not sure. If they need humans to lay their eggs in, it's unlikely that they could reproduce on their own. And it seems they only seem to lay one egg at a time... But I've been asking around, and people say they've seen things moving, just at the edge of their vision. I have, as well.”

Young nods. “So there's either a small number of these parasites that stalk us like prey, or they have spread, and they've pretty much overrun the place.”

She shrugs a little helplessly. “Both are possible, sir.”

The idea that they're sharing the ship with some kind of alien parasite sets his teeth on edge. “Good work, Lieutenant.” He nods at her. He'll have to deal with this one way or another, but first he wants to see Rush.

The corners of TJ's mouth curl up a little, and she steps aside to let him into the infirmary. She directs him with a quick nod at Rush's cot and then walks away to check on one of her other patients.

He feels nervous, suddenly, not sure what he should say to Rush. But he pushes it down and steps up to Rush's bed.

Rush looks tired, but like himself again, and Young feels a small amount of tension drain away, releasing some of the wound-up tightness in his back muscles.

“Hey,” Young says. “How're you feeling?”

Rush's eyes flick up to Young's for a quick second before looking back out over the rest of the infirmary. “Better than before, at least.”

Young gives him a slight nod and stays quiet until everything starts to feel increasingly uncomfortable. “I, uh. I wanted to thank you for...” He takes a few seconds to think about how he wants to end that sentence. “For getting us out,” he says, because saying 'For blowing up the ship for me,' would make it sound too... too something, and he's sure Rush will just glare at him and send him away if he makes too big a deal out of it.

Rush huffs a breath, and Young can't determine whether it's in annoyance or in amusement because Rush has angled his face downward and is plucking aimlessly at the sheet with his fingers.

Right. Time to change the subject.

“How's TJ told you when you can get out of here, yet?”

Finally Rush looks up at him again. “Probably not before dinner. I'd object, but she seems more determined than usual.”

Young feels his lips quirk up slightly. If he had to guess, he'd say Rush isn't feeling too steady on his feet yet, or he would've been out of here by now. He studies Rush's face for a while. He's going to get bored, sitting in bed like this. Maybe he can do something nice, he thinks. Show Rush he
appreciates what the man did for him. He'll send someone to get Rush's laptop and a few of his notebooks, so he'll have something to do, at least.

The silence is companionable for a while, and Young watches Rush watch the other patients in the infirmary until he feels the compulsion to pull Rush's attention back to him.

“Destiny said she wouldn't mess with your consciousness once we... completed the simulation.”

Rush sends him a questioning look before his face floods with understanding. “You're asking if I'm entirely myself again.”

Young gazes at him and gives a short nod.

“I wouldn't be able to tell you if I wasn't, now would I?” Rush says with the smallest hint of a smirk. Young raises an unimpressed eyebrow and Rush purses his lips to conceal his amusement. Young can still tell it's there, though, and in the back of his mind he wonders when exactly he became so adept at reading Rush's facial expressions.

“Yes,” Rush says, more soberly, after a few beats of silence. “I guess it's impossible to know for certain, but I think so.”

And that's really all he's going to get, isn't it? There's no guarantee that Destiny kept her word, and the only way they're ever going to find out is if Rush suddenly starts behaving oddly again. Still, it calms something in his chest, to hear Rush say that he's back to normal. That he feels like himself again. Rush may be an infuriating pain in the ass half the time, but he belongs here, on Destiny.

“Good,” Young says, allowing a small smile onto his face. He wants to say something nice, like 'Good to have you back, Rush,' But it doesn't feel quite right, so instead he gives him a faint nod and makes to leave.

“Colonel,” Rush says, and when Young turns back he's surprised to see the troubled expression on Rush's face.

“Yeah?” he asks, but Rush is looking away again, picking distractedly at his own nails.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

Young is quiet for a while. “Alright,” he says eventually. “See you later, Rush.”

Rush frowns down at his laptop, and it has nothing to do with the algorithms on his screen. He's not quite sure how to proceed – not with the math, but with Colonel Young.

Young had been remarkably amicable when he'd come to Rush's bedside. He'd even gone so far as to send Greer over with his laptop and a few of his notebooks. They had been the wrong notebooks, of course, but he still can't deny that it was a thoughtful gesture.

Rush sighs. His head is a jumble of memories from the simulation and memories from his time on Destiny without his personality. It's odd, having two time periods overlap in his mind, and he's had a low-grade migraine ever since waking up. Still, the thing that stands above it all, untouched by his confusion and the uncertainty that comes with having no way of knowing whether he is truly all
himself again, is that he feels an alarming amount of gratitude towards Young.

And for some reason the fact that he'd basically risked everything to prove Young was right, that he'd been prepared to blow up his life's work, his destiny, does nothing to lessen that feeling. If anything, it only compounds it. It reminds him of how he'd felt after Young told him he'd stay behind with him on the ship, before they'd planned to dial Earth in that star. It's a sickening, terrifying sensation – like he's free-falling – and he wants it to stop as much as he wants it to grow into the sweeping belief that he's flying.

It's... it's confusing. Because this is Young he's thinking about. And Rush has never been very good at making friends. Especially not with men. Especially not with men like Young, strong and principled and quicker to believe in people than in science.

And yet he'd enjoyed those quiet moments between him and Young more than he cares to admit, even to himself.

Before going into stasis they had gotten so close, so close to actual goddamn camaraderie, that it had stung unexpectedly viciously when Young had rounded on him the moment he'd gotten out of stasis. All the more because it had highlighted perfectly why he'd been so contemptuous of Young from the start.

Graham's death was a tragedy, of course, but it was clearly the lesser of two evils. The crew, the ship, could go on without Graham. It would not fare quite so well without Eli. Or without Young, if Rush is honest. The idea that Young would rather have died than let one of his men sacrifice themselves for him rankles Rush to the point where he wants to slap some sense into the man. Does he still not understand he's important, possibly even crucial, to the success of the mission and the survival of the crew?

Of course that wasn't the conversation they'd had. No, that was a conversation that might've eventually led to understanding, and the reluctant admittance that Rush would prefer not to see Young die.

Instead, Young had accused him. Young had shouted at him and pointed at him and just been all around hysterical, and Rush had been left in the unenviable position to either defend himself or to accept the blame. He'd refused to fully commit to either, which had only served to make Young more angry, it seemed.

Everything is always so personal for the man. He takes everything Rush does as an affront to his person, and that, too, inspires mixed feelings in him. On the one hand it feels good, satisfying, to know that Young cares so much. That he apparently feels Rush's actions and opinions mean something. On the other hand it is exhausting, even infuriating, having to explain over and over again that no, not everything he does is done with the express intent of fucking with Young.

And yet...

Knowing that Young decided to risk his own life to get Rush out of the simulation only hours after finding out Rush hadn't told him the truth about the FTL timer is doing something complicated to his insides. He can't decide whether he feels contempt or admiration for Young; the man is like a contradictory puzzle that he just can't seem to figure out.

He can't deny that Young had reacted quite well when Rush had explained the situation with the FTL timer to him, though. It hadn't been something he'd intended to happen; it had been an unfortunate collision of circumstances. Once he'd elucidated that, Young had simply nodded and accepted it.
Rush looks at the screen of his laptop and tries to focus on the math. On problems he *can* solve; ones he can work out without feeling like he's driving himself insane. Ones he desperately needs to fix to prevent anything like this latest fiasco from happening again. It works for roughly ten minutes, and then he's right back where he started: thinking about Young and the odd precipice he feels he's standing on.

Maybe friendship is reaching a bit too far. But he would be lying if he said he didn't want them to go back to how they were before going into the pods.

The one real thing standing between then and now is Graham's death, and Rush can't help but think that even more than the death itself, Young is upset with him for lying about it.

And he can't say with complete honesty that he's not responsible for it. Because he is, in a not very indirect way. It was his attempt at getting Mandy out of quarantine that created the opening for Destiny to worm out of – and he needs to do something about that, because apparently she can do more than interact with them through the stasis pods and the chair; she can lift his entire fucking firewall whenever she damn well pleases. She can take over their bodies and erase their minds as she sees fit.

But yes, even if it hadn't been his intention, Graham's death was a direct result of his tampering with Destiny's mainframe. And perhaps he can't say thank you in a way that means anything to Young, but he can give him that. He can go to Young and tell him honestly that it *was* his doing. That he *is* to blame. He can be honest. He can tell Young the truth – the part of the truth that's important, anyway – and he can give him the opportunity to deal with it as he sees fit. If Young deems a punishment in order, a beating, or something else... Rush will take it.

Perhaps that is what they both need to accept the situation. To move past it.

Yes, he decides. He'll tell Young tonight.
Chapter 12

Young looks up from his desk when Rush raps his knuckles against the door jamb. It's late – somewhere past 10 PM, last Rush checked – and Young is wearing his reading glasses, working on something on his laptop.

“Rush,” he says in greeting. He doesn't sound surprised. But then, he almost never does, does he?

“Colonel,” Rush answers. He feels strangely exposed as he steps inside Young's quarters and closes the door behind him.

Young has taken off his glasses and now he's just looking at him, a mildly curious expression on his face. Rush attempts to push down his apprehension as he walks over to Young's desk and takes a seat in the opposite chair.

“We need to talk.”

Young leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “About?”

Rush wants to sigh and fidget, so instead he leans forward and places his elbows on the desk. He hasn't really thought about how exactly he wants to broach the subject, and he needs a few seconds to gather his thoughts.

“You asked me whether I killed Graham to save Eli,” he says eventually.

The effect it has on Young is immediate. His peaceful expression darkens, and suddenly the tension in the room is almost palpable.

“Yes.”

Rush has to exert some effort to keep his gaze on Young, because he wants to look away, turn away. Actually, he wants to walk away altogether. Perhaps it would be better to let this go, to try to get past it by simply ignoring this issue between them until it's buried underneath new things, new crises and problems and all the disaster that happens on Destiny on a daily basis.

But, no. He'd made up his mind in the infirmary this afternoon. He owes Young something for what he did. For getting Rush back when no one in their right mind would have done that. And if he's honest with himself, he doesn't want to wait for this to snow under, to always lie between them. They certainly don't need any more of those festering wounds; they have plenty of sensitive scar tissue between them as is.

No, he's going to do it. Best to get it over and done with.

He takes a deep breath and steels himself.

“In a way, I did.”

Young is dangerously quiet, and Rush can see how tight his grip on the elbows of his uniform has become.

“It wasn't premeditated. I didn't personally kill Graham,” he says quickly. And fuck, why is it so difficult to simply explain the situation? “I did create the loophole in the system through which Destiny could act, however.”
“You're saying that Destiny picked Graham?” Young asks.

“Yes.”

“But ultimately, you are responsible.”

“...Yes.” Not untrue, but not the entire truth either.

Young closes his eyes for a second and Rush finds himself leaning back in his chair, wrapping his arms around his chest in a way that feels as defensive as it probably looks. He barely manages not to flinch when Young pounds his fist down on the desk.

“God damn it, Rush!” he curses. “I swear to God, it's like dealing with a three year old! Am I going to have to stay on top of you every second of every day just so you can't kill off whichever crew member you decide has to be sacrificed next?”

Rush ruffles at that. He fucking resents that, because who the fuck does Young think he is?

He gets up out of his chair angrily and marches to the door.

But no, fuck that, because Young is fucking wrong. He's wrong and infuriating and so fucking wrong, and Rush isn't going to let this go without saying his own piece in turn.

“And what would you have preferred, then? That Eli had died? Because that's what would've happened, Colonel. I'll take the blame for Graham's death, but you need to take responsibility for what would've happened to Eli if that loophole hadn't been there.”

He takes one last look at Young's thunderous face, and slams his hand against the door control.

“If these are the kinds of leadership decisions you intend to keep making, perhaps we all would've been better off if you had stayed out of the pod,” he sneers over his shoulder, and stomps out.

He regrets it almost as soon as he's in the corridor. Not just that last remark – Young had that fucking coming – but the whole thing. Going over to Young and hoping for... for something. Some connection, some reconciliation, some sad, pathetic something. He'd gone to Young trying communicate with the man. To make things better between them. Instead he only managed to make everything worse by admitting the blame for Graham's death. And should it really come as a surprise that Young had reacted with anger, again? Christ, the man is more prone to histrionics than anyone Rush knows.

It was a mistake, coming here. Trying to reach out to fucking Young. Because Young doesn't understand him, and he can't even be arsed to try, and fuck him anyway. The feeling is entirely mutual.

Young sighs and runs a hand through his hair. He already knows he handled that badly.

Rush... Rush had come to him with this information, of his own accord. He'd decided to be honest about his hand in Graham's death, and now that Young is alone again, now that his blood doesn't feel like it's boiling in his veins anymore, he thinks that this might've actually been Rush's bumbling attempt at reaching out.
It's just that it was so unexpected. The minute Rush stepped into his quarters Young had wondered why he was here. Maybe a small part of him had even been hoping for a sign of gratitude, of understanding. Anything to show that Rush realized that Young had been willing to sacrifice his own life to get him back even when he'd had every reason not to want Rush back at all. That Rush understood that Young can be trusted to make the right decisions, even when their personal relationship isn't at its most stable.

Of course he'd known that was wishful thinking, but he hadn't expected Rush to suddenly slap him in the face with Graham's death like that. His first instinct had been that Rush was telling him he was responsible for it because he'd wanted to make clear, in no uncertain terms, that no matter what they may have been through in Destiny's simulation, they were still on opposing sides here. That they were still at war.

But that hadn't been it, had it?

No, Rush may not have come to his quarters to thank him, but he had come with something else. A peace offering, of sorts. Comparable to a cat presenting its owner with a dead mouse, in Young's opinion: a gift both unwanted and misguided. But still a gesture of goodwill. By admitting his responsibility for Graham's death he'd basically put himself at Young's mercy, allowing Young to decide how to deal with this new knowledge. Whether to make the knowledge public or not. Whether to insist on some sort of punishment or penance.

And much as Young would like to keep ignoring it, Rush does have a point.

He's spent so much time being angry at Rush, and being angry at himself for not anticipating and intercepting Rush's insidious plans, but maybe some of that has been shielding him from a harsher truth. Because if he looks deep inside, what he's most upset about is the fact that he allowed a situation like that to arise in the first place. He never should have left Eli out, not without some kind of back-up plan. They couldn't afford to lose the kid, and if it hadn't been for Rush and his goddamn loophole that's exactly what would've happened.

He's still pissed, because Rush did go behind his back, and he did break the tentative trust they'd been building before stasis. Rush hadn't had enough confidence in Young to talk to him, to share his back-up plan, and Young is still mad about that. But that doesn't take away the fact that Rush's loophole was effective – that Rush fixed a mistake Young made – although the manner in which he went about it is not at all what Young would have preferred.

They've spent nearly every waking moment since stasis wary and resentful of each other and it feels too much like how it was before, when they'd just arrived here. Young doesn't want that anymore. He thinks of the elated feeling he'd had after waking up from the simulation. Rush had believed him, risked everything for him. Young would be lying if he said he doesn't want more of that. He does, he craves it, that mind-boggling knowledge that Rush trusts him enough to listen to him when it's important.

And his knee-jerk reaction to Rush's confession just now was clearly a step in the wrong direction. Rush had come to him, had entrusted him with a piece of damning information about himself, and instead of listening and keeping his cool, Young had reacted by losing his temper.

Rush had reached out to him, and he'd rejected it.

He sighs again and gets up from his chair to close the door to his quarters.

If he ever wants to be able to fully trust Rush, Rush will have to be able trust him first. Rush will need to feel he can come to Young with stuff like this without fear of retribution or chastising tirades.
If he can't even be assured of that, he'll never tell Young anything important ever again.

He's going to have to fix this, because neither the ship nor the crew benefits from this strained, distrusting relationship he and Rush have right now. Even Destiny had felt compelled to intervene, and Young would truly prefer to avoid another bout of interfering on her part, because her methods are borderline psychopathic and too dangerous by half. Clearly it would be in everyone's best interest if he and Rush found a way to get along. To work together. Maybe even to become friendly – although he probably shouldn't hold his breath for that one.

Young checks his watch. 23:18.

He takes off his jacket and hangs it over the back of his chair. He's going to get ready for bed now, and tomorrow he'll apologize to Rush. He sighs once more and runs both hands through his hair.

Apologizing to Rush. That'll be fun.

Rush is in the mess hall, shoveling the tasteless slop into his mouth as his mind keeps going in circles around the internal structures of the AI's computational pathways. He has to figure out a way to close that loophole, because keeping it open puts them all at risk of another one of Destiny's interventions. Young's battle scenarios and his own personality wipe are probably but a small selection of things she could spring on them whenever she pleases, and Rush isn't eager to find out what else she has in her repertoire.

He is startled by Young sliding into the seat across from him. He's not sure whether it's some kind of power move or what, but he's not interested in any of Young's nonsense right now, so he grabs his bowl and makes to leave.

“Rush,” Young says, and while his voice sounds a little gruff, there's an undercurrent of hesitance running through it. His body language screams his discomfort, and his face is doing something odd and pinched that makes him look all of twelve years old. It's almost reminiscent of the awkwardness Young had radiated when he'd tried to casually mention he enjoyed chess, all those years ago. It's still one of the most disarming displays of social ineptitude Rush has ever seen from the man, and something expectant and unfledged squirms in his chest at seeing Young like that again. Unsure and more vulnerable than he usually allows Rush to witness.

Unable to deny his curiosity, Rush stays seated, although he still keeps his bowl clasped in his right hand.

“What?” he asks edgily, when the silence stretches and Young just continues looking at him with a constipated frown on his face.

Young sighs and breaks eye contact for a second. For some reason, that makes Rush feel better.

“I'm sorry about last night,” Young says eventually. And that is not what Rush expected at all. “I reacted badly. You came to me, and instead of listening to what you had to say I blew up at you.”

Rush puts down his bowl and presses his hands together, leaning his chin on his thumbs and resting the sides of his forefingers against his mouth to suppress the urge to spit out something hateful. He's not sure how he should react to this, but he's quite certain that antagonizing Young in the middle of his apology is not the best way to go.
Young squares his shoulders and continues speaking before Rush can decide on what to say.

“I still don't agree with what you did; it wasn't just your decision to make. You should've—” Young cocks his head to the side and thinks for a second or two. “I wish you'd have come to me with it first,” he amends. And Rush feels such a surge of... of something right then, that for a moment he wants nothing more than to tell Young that the loophole was an accident. That it was a side-effect of something that had nothing to do with going into stasis, that he hadn't even known it was active until after he'd gotten out of his pod and spoken to Destiny's AI about it.

It's so tempting, but ultimately it's not... no, it's not a good idea. If he tells Young he's been trying to get Mandy out of quarantine there's a good chance Young will forbid it. And even if he doesn't necessarily have the power to stop Rush from trying, he can make it a lot more difficult, and it's been a trying enough task as is. Besides, better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission, as the old adage goes.

“But I appreciate that you told me,” Young says with an intent expression on his face. Once again, a small furrow finds its way to his brow. “And... I realize that what you did saved Eli's life. Even if I don't agree with how you did it, you prevented the consequences of my bad judgment.”

Rush is struck dumb. Speechless. Because this must be the truest apology he has ever heard from the Colonel. And it's somewhat unsettling how easily Young can influence his moods like this, because yesterday Rush had been ready to shoot him out of an airlock, but right now that uncertain yearning for something better, something closer is right in the forefront of his mind again.

His heart thumps too loudly against his ribcage and he wonders if this is normal, if other people experience the bumpy road to mutual understanding in a similar manner. But it's hardly relevant, because he and Young aren't like other people, and despite everything, he hasn't once wanted them to be.

Finally, unable to think of what to say, he nods meaningfully at Young. He intends it to be an acknowledgment that he accepts Young's apology, and perhaps even a thank you for coming here and trying to make things right between them.

Deep down, he hopes this means they can move past Graham's death, now. He wants to go back to how they were before everything went wrong again. Back to that almost easy atmosphere between them, to having those private moments where it really felt like they were in this together. Like they might one day be actual friends.

Young's eyes are searching but not unkind as he returns his nod.

Rush feels something warm and appeased unfurl in his chest. Yes, this may be a start.

Camile tucks her hair behind her ear thoughtlessly as she clicks through her report for HWC. There's a lot of political minutiae for her to catch up with on Earth, and she's still trying to figure out the new hierarchical division at the IOA. Their never-ending bureaucratic version of musical chairs certainly hasn't paused during her three years in stasis.

That's not what's really bothering her, though. No, the one thing she can't stop thinking about, the one subject her mind keeps looping back to, is Sharon.
Before going into stasis she'd told Sharon to move on. Even if she had meant it, it had seemed nearly unthinkable at the time that Sharon would actually do just that. And to Camile it feels like less than two weeks ago that they'd had that painful phone conversation. But for Sharon... For Sharon it's been three years. And Camile has no idea what she's going to find when she goes back.

So far, she's been avoiding it. She hasn't called Sharon, even if she's been back to Earth four times in the past week. She hasn't asked around, or even checked her personal email, for fear of finding out that Sharon has truly left her. That Sharon has moved on without her. But not knowing is slowly becoming even more terrible than the idea that their marriage is over. The constant turnabout between hope and terror is taking its toll on her; she hasn't slept a full night since waking up from stasis.

No, she's going to have to face it soon. Tomorrow, when she is scheduled for another report-and-update session with Homeworld Command, she is going to call Sharon.

Even just the idea makes her stomach clench. But she will do it. She has to know.

Her hands are freezing and she wishes they hadn't lost their entire reserve of tea leaves, because she could really use a cup of it right now. Even if it did taste more like grass and less like rooibos than she preferred.

A knock on her door causes her to look up.

“Come in,” she calls, and the door slides away to reveal Eli.

“Hi,” he says hesitantly.

“Eli, come in,” she answers with a warm smile. She's been worried about him. He's been very scarce since they woke up, and she knows that Graham's death has had a big impact on him.

“What can I do for you?” she asks as she motions at him to take a seat in the chair next to her.

He gives her a timid smile as he sits down, and even if he still looks completely exhausted his face has a slightly better color than it had at Graham's funeral. It seems he's finally shaved, as well.

“I, uhm.” He swallows and looks down at his hands. “I was wondering if I could still get on the roster for an Earth visit?”

Ah, that's good. She sends him a reassuring smile, and nods. “Of course, Eli.” The home visits are scheduled to start two days from now. She'll switch him in to be one of the first to go; it is hardly difficult to reason why Eli's visit should be a priority. “I'll make sure you can go the day after tomorrow.”

He looks up at her, a faint gleam of surprise in his eyes. “That soon?”

“Is that too soon?” she asks gently.

“No... no. That would be... that would be really good.”

She reaches over to squeeze his hand for a moment. “Your mom will be happy to see you.”

She wonders if Eli's mother and Sharon still keep in touch.

And just like that she's back to thinking about Sharon. She suppresses the nervous flutter in her chest as fantasies and nightmare scenarios about tomorrow play through her mind in quick succession, and
focuses on Eli once more.

“If you ever want to talk,” she says, not pressuring him, but letting him know there's someone who's willing to listen without judgment.

He gives her another wan smile, and she's sure he's heard it before, and reasonably sure he won't take her up on it. Not yet, anyway.

“Thanks,” he says as he gets up from the chair. “For all of it, I mean.”

“You're welcome.”

He says goodbye, and for the next fifteen minutes she can distract herself from thoughts of Sharon by figuring out how she's going to get Eli on the visiting roster.

When Young steps into Eli's quarters the kid is working at his computer. Again. Or still. Even if Young can't tell exactly what he's doing - lines upon lines of Ancient code that he has no hope of deciphering - he has a strong hunch Eli's going through the datalog of Rush's movements before they entered stasis. Young kind of regrets asking him to figure out what happened to Graham now; Eli hasn't worked on anything else since waking up from stasis, and Young is pretty sure this level of obsession isn't good. It's not as if he had anyone else he could ask, though, and at this point he can't deny that he needs Eli to continue his work because he needs to find a solution to a problem that threatens the entire crew. “Hey,” Young says quietly, leaning back against Eli's desk.

Eli looks up and Young is relieved to find that his gaze is just a little bit brighter, the bags under his eyes just the slightest bit less pronounced. He forgoes the 'How are you holding up?' that's on the tip of his tongue, because he's sure Eli's had enough of that the past week.

“I spoke to Rush,” he says instead. “He told me what happened with Graham.”

“Was it him?” Eli asks, face blank in a way it rarely was before they'd gone into the pods.

“Yeah. Not directly, but yes. He told me he created a loophole that gave Destiny's AI the opportunity to act. That it was Destiny's decision to kill Graham.”

Eli doesn't react. Not visibly, anyway. He just stares ahead, seemingly lost in thought, until his eyes slide back to Young.

“A loophole...”

“Yeah. I need you to find it and close it, because it's dangerous. We've seen what she can do when we let her run rampant.” He pushes down the memories of the no-win battle simulation she had put him through, as well as the pang of hopeless despair that still accompanies them.

Eli's gaze sharpens. “You think that's how she was able to wipe Rush's personality? How she got him to sit in the chair?”

“That's what I suspect, yes.”

Good. That's good to hear. Eli can work it out, Young is certain of that. He claps him on the shoulder encouragingly.

“You'll figure it out,” he says.

Eli turns back to his monitor and his fingers start flitting over the controls with swift precision. “Yeah,” he says distractedly.

Young lets his hand slide off Eli's shoulder and studies him for a moment. “You look better.”

He doesn't really expect Eli to look away from his search, and he feels his heart break a little at the sad smile Eli gives him. It doesn't fit; it doesn't look right on his face. Eli is supposed to be young and happy and a little naive. He's supposed to make irrelevant and obscure science fiction references and attempt to lighten the mood when things get tough aboard the ship. This... this looks like Eli is growing up. Like he is realizing some harsh truths about life that Young really wishes he wouldn't have had to learn yet.

“Not much time for mourning on this ship,” Eli replies.

Young wishes he knew what say to get Eli to drop that somber tone of voice, but he can't do much more than give him a short squeeze to the shoulder and a small smile in response.

“Let me know when you find something,” he says gently.
Now that he knows what he's looking for, he finally feels like he's getting somewhere. It's still a needle in a haystack, but at least it's not a needle in a stack of needles anymore.

Rush is smart, but he's not as smart as Eli, and now it doesn't feel like wading through a thick, overwhelming sludge of information; now it feels almost like his old hacking days, poking and prodding at defenses until something gives, or bites back, and it's almost fun. He knows he can't enjoy it as much as he would have before... before. But it does make him feel better than pretty much anything has since waking up from stasis.

Knowing with a definitive kind of certainty that Rush is responsible doesn't change as much as he'd hoped. He'd thought it would be a big deal. That he'd get to present the undeniable evidence to Young. That he'd get to confront Rush, and that it would somehow feel like closure. That he would finally move on from seeing flashes of Graham's cold, dead body whenever he closes his eyes for a second.

In reality, it hasn't made much of a difference at all. Graham still presses on his mind; a hard, pushing tension right behind his left eye that pierces his brain with irregular stabs of physical pain. But this is helping. Looking for Rush's loophole, searching for the exact cause of Graham's death; it helps. Because at least his constant headache finally seems to be letting up.

His fingers race across the controls quicker than they have in what feels like forever, and the first time he makes a hit his heart gives a little flutter of excitement, because he's on to something.

Yes. He's on to something. And so he keeps pressing, because he's going to find out. He is. He's going to find out. He's going to find a reason.

He has to.

“We think they're on the ship,” Young says.

Camile and Rush are in his quarters; they're having a meeting on the parasites. Camile looks vaguely perturbed by the idea that alien critters are apparently laying eggs in their fellow crew members, and Young can't say he doesn't share the sentiment.

Rush looks pensive. Young is grateful that the hostile tension between them seems to have subsided, because it's making it so much easier to simply focus on the conversation that they're having when he doesn't feel antagonized by every glance Rush sends his way, or every second Rush's eyes focus elsewhere.

“It's more than likely that they came aboard before we went into stasis, since people started getting symptoms before we ever dialed the first planet we stopped at in this galaxy.”

Camile nods slowly.

“If they survived those three years we were in stasis, they can obviously withstand very low temperatures,” Rush says.
“And they either need no, or very little, oxygen,” Young adds.

“Do we have any idea how many of them there are?” Camile asks.

Young shakes his head. “Lots of people have been seeing things move, although no one has ever laid eyes on the parasites themselves, it seems. I don't know if they multiplied during our time in stasis, but if they did we could be dealing with a lot of them.”

“But you said they lay eggs in humans. How could they have done that while we were in stasis? The pods were sealed hermetically,” Camile says.

Rush's gaze lands on Young for a second before he turns to Camile. “We're dealing with an alien species here. We can't make any assumptions.”

“Right.”

“We'll need to capture one,” Rush says. “We know they deal well with cold and low-oxygen environments, but if we catch one we can study it. Find out how to get rid of them.”

Young nods. “That's what I was thinking. But they're fast. We can't even lay eyes on them, let alone jump them.”

“Maybe we can build a trap,” Camile suggests.

Young nods. “Do we have anyone who can start on that, or do we need to get someone in from Earth?”

Rush looks speculative, and Young waits for him to speak.

“I think Mr. Brody and I can come up with something.”

“The sooner the better, Rush,” he says. “People are still getting sick.”

Camile dips her head, and Young can see her trying to suppress a shiver.

“I'll make it a priority,” Rush says with a small nod, and Young feels the corner of his lips quirk up.

Yeah, everything really is much easier when they're not fighting.

When Eli finally figures it out, he struggles for breath. He'd had a hunch, a feeling that maybe this was what Rush's loophole had been about when he'd started getting back odd signals in the part of the mainframe where the quarantine defenses were housed, but now that he's found it... God.

Rush has been trying to get Doctor Perry and Ginn out – or at least Doctor Perry, but since they are chained together it's the same thing – and he'd gotten close. His opening hadn't been quite encompassing enough to truly let them out, and Eli is pretty sure Rush didn't dare to go further because there's no guarantee Doctor Perry's simulation won't start up again, the way his structure is set up.

But Eli is better at this stuff than Rush is, and fricking hell, if Rush had just come to him with this, if they'd worked on this together, they would've figured it out ages ago.
Already his mind is starting to put together the coding sequences he'll need to pry the opening apart further, to build in a limiter that would keep the simulation locked away; although he has no idea what exactly that might do to the integrity of Doctor Perry's program. Still, he doesn't have to figure that all out right now, he can focus on the details of his plan when he starts writing the actual code.

But this... This means he can get Ginn back.

His heart stutters excitedly in his chest at the thought of her – of seeing her again, talking to her again. Ginn. God, he misses her so bad. He hasn't allowed himself to think of her too often, because the thought of her bright red hair and her sweet eyes and her soft, melodious voice always makes him sad and angry and unable to focus on the present. But now that he knows he can get her back all he feels is an overwhelming rush of hope and longing in his heart.

Yeah, he's going to figure this out. He's going to untangle the useful parts of Rush's solution from the flawed pieces, and then he's going to affix his own strings of code until he can pull her back out of the memory bank. Because he wants to see her, he wants to talk to her, almost as much as he wants to see his mom again.

He's going to figure this out.

“And these are going to catch them?” Greer asks, looking skeptically at the metal contraption he's holding in his hands.

Matt shrugs. “Brody and Rush built ‘em. Said we should put them near where people are most likely to get, uh, eggs laid in them.”

Greer looks unimpressed. “That's awfully specific of them.”

“Put them in people's private quarters,” Young says. “Near the beds.”

“Rush,” Eli says when he steps into the math corridor. Rush startles a bit, and when he looks up at Eli he tries to move in between Eli's line of sight and the piece of wall with the squiggly white writing he was just working on.

“Eli,” he says airily, like the last time they even laid eyes on each other wasn't when Rush was still a personality-less robot.

“I see you're up and about again,” Eli says humorlessly.

Rush looks faintly irritated for a second, before blowing out a breath. “Yes. What is it?”

“Man, I can't believe you.” Eli laughs, but it comes out sounding harsh and wrong, and sheesh, it's not even true, because this is exactly the kind of thing Rush does. “I know what you've been trying to do. I know why you made that loophole.”

Something flickers behind Rush's eyes, but it's too dark and Eli is too far away to make out what. “Is
He rolls his eyes. He's not in the mood to play. “You were trying to get Doctor Perry out of quarantine. But you screwed up and left an opening, and now Destiny's AI has free reign over whatever the hell she wants.”

Another flash of annoyance, and Rush steps away from the wall. Eli lets his eyes glide over the chalk-written sequences, and oh, it seems Rush has been working on a way to seal the hole permanently. Looks like he's close, too.

“You should've come to me with it,” he says, not liking how plaintive his voice sounds. He furrows his brow and continues in a harsher tone, “If you had, we could've gotten them both out by now. And Graham would still be alive.”

Rush frowns in response. “You wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for Graham's death, Mr. Wallace.”

“Oh, don't give me that. Don't act like this was all some plan to save my life when you obviously had no idea what you were doing, messing around with the mainframe like that!”

“Stop acting like a child!” Rush bites out angrily. “Graham's death was a necessary evil.”

“I don't—” Eli makes a disgusted sound deep in his throat, because Jesus, Rush is the worst. “Shut up. I don't want to talk about this with you.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because, unlike you, I actually know what I'm doing when it comes to coding,” he answers, rubbing salt into the wound of his insults.

For a hot second Rush looks furious, but then his entire demeanor calms. “You figured out how to do it.”

“Yeah.”

“And you found a way to keep the simulation from starting up again?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why haven't you done it yet?” Rush asks, suddenly jittery with impatience.

“Because even if—” he cuts himself off and takes a breath. “Because I wanted to talk to you first.”

“About what?”

And the fact that Rush genuinely seems confused about that makes Eli groan with annoyed exasperation.

“Jesus, Rush! You really don't see a problem with what you've been doing here?!” he bursts out. “I wanted to give you a chance to— To... I don't know, explain? Come clean? To show you're not a complete sociopath?”

Rush ducks his head and rakes his fingers through his hair. When he looks up at Eli again, he sighs.

“I wasn't aware I hadn't sealed the loophole entirely; Graham's death was an accident.” His voice is surprisingly gentle, and he does attempt to look somewhat contrite. “I understand you're unhappy
with the situation, but I can't pretend I'm not glad it happened the way it did. The alternative would have been much worse.”

Eli shakes his head and sighs. It's not... There's nothing that Rush can do or say to make it okay, but Eli can't sustain this kind of anger when he knows it was an accident. Much as he would like to keep blaming Rush for this, and even if it was Rush's mistake that allowed the situation to happen, Eli can't continue like this.

It wasn't premeditated. Rush didn't do it on purpose. Rush probably tried his best—and wow, he's not even subtle anymore; obviously he's trying to draw a parallel between Rush and himself, because more than anyone, he feels guilty about Graham's death. But all the reasons why he feels his anger for Rush drain away are just as true when applied to himself. He hadn't known Graham was going to be killed. He didn't fail to fix the pod on purpose. He had tried his best.

He wants to talk to his mom. She'd know what to say. He can hardly wait for this afternoon, when he'll finally get to use the stones to visit Earth again.

“Let's just drop it, okay,” Eli says. He's done talking about this with Rush; it's obviously not doing either of them much good.

“Do you want them back?” Rush asks, and Eli knows he's talking about Doctor Perry and Ginn.

“Of course, what do you think?”

“Then show me your work,” Rush says reasonably. “I'll go over it today, and when we're both certain it'll work, we'll get them out.”

Eli can't deny he wants to see Ginn again. Of course he wants to see her again.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “Alright.”

Young eyes the alien creature in the box-like compartment of the metal trap. It's about the size of his hand. Dark brown with a black pattern on its back. Its belly shines a paler, bronze-like color. It looks a bit like a chameleon in shape, except that it has two tails that seem to move independently, and only one eye. It skitters around nervously inside the little box with a speed that seems altogether alien.

TJ and Doctor Inman take the trap from him and cautiously put it down on one of the treatment tables.

“The traps worked, huh?” TJ asks, already putting on her latex gloves.

“At least this one did,” Young answers.

“It doesn't look anything like what we found in the eggs,” TJ says, voice pensive.

“Well, there's a good chance it undergoes some changes as it matures,” Inman says.

TJ shakes her head as she continues studying the alien. “The thing in the egg had two eyes and only one tail. It doesn't make sense that it would grow up to look like this, does it?”

“The thing in the egg could be some sort of hybrid? Or possibly this isn't the species laying eggs in
us at all,” Inman says. “Although the odds of two alien infestations manifesting at the same time seem somewhat unlikely.”

Young watches them walk around the box and discuss theories about what exactly could be going on. He has no idea – the mere fact they're talking about an alien life form makes the rules of Earth biology seem mostly useless to him. He trusts TJ and Inman to come up with something he can work with, though.

“Alright,” he says. “I'll leave you to it.”

Rush curses quietly and feels his heart flutter in his chest. Eli's coding is genius; not necessarily focused on efficiency or economical pathways, but clever in a way that Rush can't emulate with his studied learnings. There's still a trill of jealousy there, when he thinks about how unfair it is that he's had to work his fingers to the bone for every scrap of knowledge that he possesses when someone like Eli can just wander in, Cheetoh crumbs on his t-shirt and all, and improve on his work like it's nothing.

But jealousy gets him nowhere, and he doesn't let pettiness get in the way of effectiveness. He wants this to work; he wants Mandy back – even if his last thoughts of her are rife with betrayal and a hint of anger – because she was his friend. His only friend, after Gloria died.

For how much time Gloria spent socializing him, gently guiding him so they could move easily within her circle of friends, none of it stuck once she'd passed. None of the friends he'd spent time with when she was still alive survived the death of his wife. No one wanted him, alone. No one but Mandy.

Mandy had understood him; maybe not completely, but more than any other living soul. She had believed in him, trusted him, and he hadn't known how much he'd missed that – stuck here on a spaceship with a leader who seemed to pride himself on his distrust of Rush – until Mandy had set foot on Destiny.

She'd been taken from him – first by a second-rate dread pirate, and then by her own childish inability to understand anything but the fairytale love she'd been taught about by books and music – but now... This is his chance to get her back. Eli has figured out a way, the kid has written an opening with an eloquence he's never quite mastered for speaking, and Rush can't help but be grateful.

He's going to see Mandy again.

He's going to get his friend back.

“Tell me you've got some good news, TJ,” Young says.

“I do. We established it's the same species that's been laying eggs in the crew. It's got two separate procreational systems. This one was carrying the same type of egg we found in Fletcher.”
Young keeps his face neutral, even if he wants to grimace, and nods at her to continue.

“We figured out how to kill it,” TJ says. She pauses, scratches absentmindedly at one of the whorls of hair in her elaborate updo. “It dies when the temperature gets above 146 degrees Celsius.”

Young cocks his head for a moment and thinks about this new information.

“We need to heat up the entire ship.”

She nods. “It’d be impossible to make sure we get them all if we tried to kill them one by one. We have no idea how many of them there are even out there, let alone where they hide. Raising the temperature all over the ship seems like the quickest way to do it.”

“Alright. I'll discuss it with Rush and Camile. I want to get this done as soon as possible.”

Rush is distracted throughout most of Young's briefing. Obviously he has no trouble following the man's news; it's a rather simple message. They'll need to fly into a star and dial back the shields just enough to get the temperature within the entire ship to at least 146°C. It won't be easy, and it won't be entirely without risk, but he doesn't have a doubt that he and Eli can pull it off. They managed to successfully recharge in a Blue Super Giant, after all. This will not be nearly as dangerous or complex as that.

His mind is still hung up on the idea that he's getting Mandy back, however. He hasn't completely checked over every bit of Eli's solution, and he's already found a weak spot that they'll need to revise before they can implement it, but it's a matter of hours now. In a few hours he will get to speak with Mandy again, and it fills him with a sense of longing anticipation and tiny barbwire pinpricks of disquiet – because the last time he saw her he'd told her he loved her. He'd begged her to believe that he loved her, and she'd refused to accept it.

He desperately wants to see her again, but he hasn't moved past that yet. He still feels like she rejected him, his love, everything he wanted to give her. It makes for a rather distracting cocktail of emotional dross, and he purposefully pushes his thoughts about Mandy aside to focus on the matter at hand. This takes precedence. They need to rid the ship of these parasites.

“We'll have to find a suitable solar system first, and a safe planet in range for everyone to evacuate to,” Rush says. He's already searching Destiny's database for the nearest star system that fulfills their requirements. His console pings almost immediately.

“How far out?” Young asks.

“A little under two days.”

Young nods, and Rush feels an amount of calm warmth in his gaze that calls up the absurd urge to smile at the man. Rush feels a small surge of guilt, because he knows Young will get upset with him for not including him in his plans to release Mandy and Ginn from the quarantined memory banks.

Still, it will be worth it. Mandy and Ginn will be huge assets in further figuring out how the ship works. They have access and insights that Rush and his team simply do not, and in the end it will be to everyone's benefit to have the both of them out of quarantine.
Young is always careful. Too careful. He'll refuse this, if Rush asks. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he can even appreciate that Young would reject the plan because he doesn't want Rush to put himself in harm's way – because at this point, the only one at risk here is Rush. If the simulation starts up again, Rush is the one who will have to deal with the consequences. But he wants Mandy back, and he can see that Eli would be better off if Ginn was back, as well.

If he simply does it, and it works – and he knows it will, because their code is good – Rush can prove to Young that it isn't dangerous.

He is sure he can make the Colonel see reason.
Rush watches, his heart in his throat, as Eli enters the final lines of code. They did it. They figured out how to get Mandy and Ginn out of quarantine, bypassing the simulation programming, and he feels Eli holding his breath as their uploaded consciousnesses are transferred from the quarantined area to Destiny's accessible memory banks.

“Oh my God,” Eli says, and Rush can't see her but he knows Eli's looking at Ginn's projection.

“Nick,” he hears from the other side of the room, and when he looks up his breath catches. It's her. It's Mandy, and she looks relieved and anxious and so fragile that he has closed the distance between them before he even has time to think of what he's going to do next.

“Mandy.”

“I thought I'd never see you again,” she says. Her voice, soft and beautiful, makes something ache in his chest. He loved her. He did. He still does.

“I wasn't going to leave you in there,” he answers. His voice sounds distant to his own ears.

“I'm...” she wrings her hands, and it reminds him of their time in the simulation, of holding her hand for real, feeling her arms around him. “I'm sorry, Nick. I shouldn't have built in those parameters. I never meant to hurt you.”

He feels his upper lip twitch involuntarily and buries the quick surge of anger beneath the exhilarated glow of seeing her again, being able to speak with her again. She's brilliant, and she's in his corner – she's his friend. The only friend he has. He'd thought he'd lost her, twice now already, and she's back.

“What was it like? Being stuck in there?” he asks, because he doesn't want to get trapped in apologies and hidden barbs of betrayal and resentment.

She looks down and shakes her head. “It was... like we didn't exist, when we didn't have access to the ship. Like one continuous blink.”

He realizes she's talking about Ginn as well as herself. He casts a glance over at Eli.

Eli is grinning and telling her about his visit to his mum, it seems. For the first time since they woke up from stasis he doesn't look exhausted and on the brink of falling apart. Rush is glad. He's glad that getting Ginn out of quarantine has lifted Eli's spirits already, because he did not enjoy seeing the boy sad and dejected – refusing to get out of his room, to do any work at all.

He knows Eli still blames him for what happened with Mandy's simulation, and part of Rush still blames himself for it as well. Eli lost Ginn for the second time because he'd been infatuated with the idea of getting to finally touch Mandy. Getting to share her body heat, feel her skin against his own – he'd been so starved for physical contact, for touch, that he'd barely given the risks any thought at all. That was his mistake.

“Rush, this is Young. Come in.”

Rush feels jarred out of the little bubble of reunion they've created around themselves, and fumbles for his radio.
“Yes, Colonel?”

“I'm in the suit room with Brody. We could use your help.”

Rush sighs and flicks his eyes over to Mandy. He has mixed feelings about this. On the one hand he wants to talk to her, to bask a bit more in that feeling of not being alone. On the other hand, it's hard to ignore the tension between them, the unspoken accusations from both sides, and he is not quite thrilled with the idea of either the uncomfortable talk or the uncomfortable silence that is sure to follow. And, strangely enough, he kind of wants to see Young right now.

Mandy gives him a small nod and a wavering smile.

“On my way. Rush out.” He lets go of the transmission button. “You'll wait here?” he asks her.

“Of course, Nick,” she says emphatically.

“Don't go anywhere,” Rush says to Eli. “We need to talk when I get back.”

“Yeah, okay,” Eli agrees distractedly. His eyes never leave the empty space where Rush knows Ginn to be.

“You're back,” Mandy says when he steps back into the room less than an hour later. She sounds relieved, like she's been worried he'd never return. His heart still does a little flip, seeing her standing there, beautiful and real. Because deep down he hadn't believed he'd ever get to lay eyes on her again.

“Colonel Young asked Brody to fix the third spacesuit before we recharge. They needed some help with the repairs,” he says with a slight shrug.

She doesn't ask why they need the suits for the recharge.

Rush watches as she cocks her head at him. She plucks absentmindedly at her nails. The way she moves her hands is so familiar, even if he's only seen her do it while she was aboard Destiny, and it settles something deep in his gut. He feels his expression relax as she nods thoughtfully. “I can help with the calculations.”

He smiles. “I hoped you would.”

She gives him one of those open, wondrous looks that remind him of his days back on Icarus, and for the first time since bringing her back he knows beyond any doubt that he made the right decision. She's with him, she's behind him, and it feels so good to have that unwavering support again.

But first things first.

“Mr. Wallace,” he says, turning to Eli. “We need to close that breach in the firewall.”
In the end it doesn't take long for them to shut the loophole for good. It's a relief, knowing Destiny won't be able to mess with their minds as she sees fit anymore, because what she did to Rush was kind of terrifying, actually.

Eli half expects Destiny's AI to appear to them, pleading or wrathful, as they enter the final lines of code that will prevent her from using her neural link to them, but nothing happens. It's a little unsettling how easy it all is, ultimately, and he knows Rush shares that sentiment when the man insists on checking (and then double-checking) that they really have closed the breach entirely.

Well, once bitten, right?

But it's done, it's really done – even Ginn says so, and holy crap, it's still unbelievable that she's here again. She smiles at him, and she has the best freaking smile, and he can't help but grin back at her with what is undoubtedly the goofiest expression ever. Just having her here again is making him feel so much better.

Graham is still there, in the back of his mind, of course. Still pressing against his skull in a way that physically hurts sometimes. But it's nothing compared to how it was just a few days ago.

Seeing his mom helped a lot. She'd been so relieved, so glad to see him, and when he'd told her what happened she'd held him and kissed his cheek and said exactly what he needed to hear, just like he'd known she would.

When he'd come back from Earth, it was like a bit of the weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Maybe it isn't possible to ever really make peace with what happened to Graham, but seeing his mom again reminded him that he has more to live for than just himself. His mom would've been devastated if he'd died, and for the first time he feels like he has something to be grateful for in all of this. He's worried that that might make him a terrible person, but the thought of his mom wilting away in some hospital room after finding out about his death makes what happened to Graham... not more acceptable, and not less awful, but at least slightly easier to live with, maybe.

Of course, when he'd come back Rush had been on him almost immediately about his solution for getting Ginn and Doctor Perry out of quarantine. He'd found a small error in one of the sublinear protocols – and Eli can't help but feel Rush always takes a bit too much joy in pointing out the flaws in his work – but overall his code was solid. They'd worked together, side by side, and it was like before. It was good. Eli even caught Rush smiling at one point, and the realization that Rush was just as excited to see Doctor Perry as Eli was to see Ginn made something almost affectionate coil in his stomach. Eli is glad he can still feel that, despite everything that happened. That seeing the rare evidence of Rush's human side still brings out a reaction in him.

And then they'd done it. They'd brought Ginn and Doctor Perry back, and even now it seems like a surreal fantasy to see her standing in front of him again. God, she's gorgeous, and just hearing her voice again is enough to make his heart flutter wildly. She's back.

He's happy, really happy, that everything went so well. But there's one thing that casts a shadow over all of this.

“We have to tell Colonel Young,” he says. He feels guilty, because even though they were careful, and even though nothing went wrong, they did this behind Young's back.

Because it wasn't without risk, and they both knew that Young might've said no if they'd told him about their plan – and honestly, Eli maybe kind of lost sight of the consequences of his actions at the thought of seeing Ginn again.
Rush gives him a long look, and Eli thinks he seems both resigned and apprehensive. “I’ll talk to him,” he says eventually.

Eli wants to object. To insist that he be the one to tell Young. But deep down he's kind of relieved that Rush offered to be the one to break the news, because Eli feels like he's disappointed Young enough. After boasting about his ability to fix the pod and causing one of Young's men to die in the process. After not being able to catch up to Rush's machinations until Rush had flat-out told Young about the loophole himself. He feels like he has a lot to make up for, and right now he just can't deal with letting Young down again.

It's not that he trusts Rush to do it. He will go to Young tomorrow, make sure that he knows. But in this very moment he's content to let Rush deal with this, because he wants to go to his room.

He wants to be alone with Ginn.

It's evening, and he really can't put this off anymore, so he reluctantly makes his way over to Young's quarters. When he gets there the door is open and the man is sitting at his desk, doing some sort of paperwork.

Young looks up when he raps his knuckles against the steel door jamb, and Rush doesn't wait to be invited in.

“Evening,” Young says, taking off his glasses and putting them on the table in front of him.

“Yeah, evening,” Rush acknowledges, distracted by how he's going to broach the subject of Mandy and Ginn. Young's apology over breakfast the other day... he'd made it sound like he was willing to listen. Without getting angry. Rush supposes he's going to find out how serious Young was about that right now. He circles back to close the door to Young's quarters.

“I need to tell you something,” he says, looking up into Young's face to find his eyes trained on him with an intensity that makes something skitter nervously down his back. He's still contemplating whether to add the entirely too childish sounding 'Don't get mad,' when Young speaks.

“I'm assuming I'm not going to like it,” Young says. There's a dark sort of humor in his tone that settles a few of the snakes crawling around in Rush's belly. He's very aware that this sense of security he's being lulled into might be false, though – Young is difficult to predict at the best of times, and Rush has seen this calm amusement turn into something vicious and rough within the blink of an eye in the past.

“Keep in mind that nothing went wrong,” he urges Young, leaning his hip against the edge of the nearby couch and grabbing his elbows tightly. “And the only person even remotely at risk was me.”

“Spit it out, Rush,” Young says.

“We figured out how to extract Doctor Perry and Ginn from quarantine.”

Young narrows his eyes and sits forward in his chair, folding his arms on the desk. “Let me guess. You already went ahead and did it.”

Rush struggles to keep eye contact. He swallows. “Yes.”
“You realize that we have no idea what would've happened to you if it had gone wrong, right?”

Rush feels annoyance prickle up his spine at Young's tone. Like he's a child. Like he doesn't know better. God, this is almost more irritating than Young shouting at him.

“Better than you, I'd imagine,” he bites out.

Young huffs out something of a laugh and shakes his head. “You're unbelievable.”

“Colonel, this was my life on the line here. My decision.”

“—And what if you'd gotten trapped in the simulation again, Rush?” Young interrupts him. “What if your brain had overloaded and you'd – oh, I don't know – died, right there, on the spot?”

Rush doesn't know what to say, exactly. Young's voice is stern, but he's not yelling. He seems perturbed, but not necessarily angry.

“This was irresponsible, and you know it. That's why you didn't want to tell me.”

“We took every precaution,” he argues, but it sounds hollow to his own ears. Young gives him a long, silent look.

“What do you think would've happened to the ship – to the mission – if you'd died?” Young asks, and oh. That is an interesting tactic right there.

He feels something fluttery and nervous in his chest. Because this isn't Young screaming at him that he's a terrible person. This isn't Young badgering him for making the wrong decision. Well, maybe it is, a little, but the point Young is making is that he's needed. That he's a necessary part to fulfilling Destiny's mission, and that is... it's not news to him, per se, but it's the first time Young has come out and said it to him.

“Are you saying you need me, Colonel?”

Young huffs out a breath. It sounds gruff, but his face is not unkind when he looks up at Rush.

“Yes, Rush, that's what I'm saying. I need you here. We all do. The ship needs you – alive. So please take that into account the next time you plan on doing something like this.” Young sounds resigned, like he already knows he might as well ask the walls to stop holding up the ceiling, but Rush can't deny that this plea might be more effective than anything Young's ever tried before.

Because it's true – if he'd died he never would've seen the mission through. And hearing Young admit how important he is, not just to the ship, but to everyone aboard... it's satisfying, but it brings a pang of guilt with it as well, because he hadn't taken into account how risking his life might affect them. How it might affect Young.

“Look, Rush, I know you think I like to forbid things just to make your life miserable—”

“—No, I know,” he interrupts, before Young can say something that will really hit home. “I won't... This was a one-time thing. I won't do it again.”

Young sighs and averts his gaze, and Rush has to consciously keep himself from fidgeting. Christ, this is uncomfortable.

“So,” Young says, after nearly a minute has passed. “Doctor Perry and Ginn. They're back?”

“Yes. Their presence means we'll be able to work much faster and more accurately from now on.
They have access to all of Destiny's systems and memory banks – access and speed that my science team and I simply cannot match. Having them aboard the ship will be to everyone's benefit, Colonel.”

Young's mouth does something odd, like he's trying to contain a smile. “You don't have to sell me on them, Rush. I'm glad they're back.”

Right. Rush watches as Young sits up straighter in his chair and runs both hands through his hair.

“How is Eli?”

He's pretty sure Young must have an opinion on Eli being a part of this plan, but the man doesn't look anything other than tired and concerned.

“Better.”

Young nods. Suddenly his eyes sharpen and he gives Rush a calculating look.

“You're not planning on sitting in the chair again, are you?”

Rush frowns. His first instinct is to tell Young to mind his own business, but Young doesn't seem to realize he's effectively asking him about his sex life. He just seems suspicious and weary, and Rush can easily interpret that as worry for his well-being. At this point, that might be exactly what it is.

Besides, Young has made an effort to keep this conversation civil – he can do the same.

“Obviously not.”

“Okay,” Young says, and Rush wonders if he's going to place a guard near the neural interface room regardless, or if he's going to take Rush's word for it.

“Well,” Rush says, pushing away from the back of the couch. This talk seems to have come to a natural end, and he kind of wants to get back to Mandy now. Perhaps he wants to tell her about this. About Young.

Because all in all, this conversation went a lot better than he had expected.

“Tell Doctor Perry I'm happy she's back,” Young says, surprising Rush a little.

Young gets up from behind his desk and walks Rush to the door. His proximity makes something itch underneath Rush's skin, and he's not sure whether it has anything to do with belated adrenaline and survival instinct or whether it's something else entirely.

“Goodnight, Rush.”

Young presses the door control and inclines his head at him. Rush flexes his fingers and feels a muscle in his cheek twitch. Why does this feel so important? So... so significant?

The warmth radiating off Young's body is palpable, and the fabric of Young's uniform looks rough but well-worn. He has the sudden urge to touch it, to put his hand on Young's arm and squeeze. He's not sure what this is, or where it's coming from, so he ignores it.

“Goodnight, Colonel,” he says with a small nod, breaking the fragile moment, before striding out into the corridor.

He doesn't look back.
Chapter 15

When Young wakes up, the first thing he remembers is the talk he had with Rush last night. It had been weird, strange, to watch Rush fidget as he confessed his latest transgression. Of course Young’s first instinct had been to get mad. To find a way to crowd into Rush’s personal space and berate him – to make sure the man wouldn’t even think of ever doing something like that again, or so help him.

But he’d remembered his resolve. He’d remembered going to Rush in the middle of the mess hall and apologizing for letting his temper get the best of him when Rush had admitted his part in Graham’s death.

Getting angry hadn't helped last time Rush came to him. He wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. So he’d stayed calm, even when the skin on his fingertips buzzed with barely containable... frustration? Worry? He's not even sure what it was, exactly. All he knows is that the idea of something going wrong made his stomach clench tightly with a chorus of 'Not after everything we've been through!'

Nothing had gone wrong, though, and that tight knot of fear and agitation in his belly has loosened considerably since last night. Rush is fine.

And just as importantly, it feels like they actually managed to connect a little, last night. Rush had come to his quarters specifically to tell him about what he and Eli had done. Even if Rush obviously still doesn't trust him enough to come to him with his plans beforehand, it feels like a victory that Rush admitted his wrongdoings of his own accord despite – or maybe because of – what happened last time.

So Young had not gotten angry. Instead, he'd tried to appeal to Rush's human side, to his vanity and even his compassion, and Rush had responded surprisingly well to that. Maybe that means he's figuring Rush out. The thought fills him with a warm sort of exhilaration that feels almost inappropriate, and he finds himself smiling at nothing in the shower as he rubs the gel-like mist over his chest.

Somehow it's always like this with Rush. Baby steps that feel like huge strides, or the other way around. Nothing is ever simple with Rush. The surge of satisfaction that comes with the thought that he's making progress – that they're moving forward to something better, together – is as addictive as it was before going into stasis. Just thinking about the look on Rush's face before he'd left Young's quarters last night makes something stutter in his chest, and Young makes a point of finishing his shower quickly and dispassionately. He refuses to let his mind wander.

Whenever he and Rush are getting along, it feels like his mind insists on opening up paths that continue on from there. Like he wants to explore what could be, fantasize about things like solid friendship, deep trust, something softer and less sharp but still just as heated between them. Like a moth to a flame, his mind tries to get lost in silly imaginations, and Young has to actively keep blocking off those meanderings because there will be nothing but trouble for him if he gets sucked into any of those delusional reveries.

They aren't rational. And they sure as hell aren't helpful.

Rush is Rush. There is no realistic scenario in which they would ever find themselves on the same page about this. And now that Doctor Perry is back the point seems even more moot.

No, nothing good could come of allowing himself any of these childish fantasies, so Young dries
himself off roughly and focuses on his tasks for the day.

He's back in his quarters, going over Camile's latest report on her visit to Homeworld Command before he'll head down to the mess for breakfast, when someone knocks on his door.

“Eli,” Young says when he opens, before stepping aside to let him in.


“He did.”

“He told you about Ginn and Doctor Perry?”

“Yes.”

Eli heaves a relieved sigh. “Oh. Good. That's good. I...” He's raking his eyes over the papers on Young's desk, apparently unable to make eye contact.

After nearly a minute, he finally steels himself and looks Young in the eye. “I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you, but...” His eyes flick over to something in the corner of the room. Young is pretty sure he's looking at Ginn, even if he can't see her himself.

“You wanted to get Ginn back more,” he finishes Eli's thought.

Eli's shoulders sag a bit and his eyebrows knot up. “Yeah. I think the thought of having her back kind of blinded me a little. And I... I know I let you down, and I just didn't... I couldn't—”

“Eli,” Young interrupts with a soft touch to Eli's arm. It shuts Eli up before he can work himself into a frenzy. “It's okay. I'm not thrilled with how reckless the two of you were to even try that without anyone knowing, but given the circumstances, I understand why you did it.”

For a second Young thinks Eli might cry, and he's harshly reminded of being awoken from stasis and ending up with the kid sobbing in his arms. Instead, however, Eli gives a hard nod and lowers his eyes again.

“...She's back,” he says quietly, and Young feels his lips curl into a tiny smile at the awe in his voice. “I thought I'd never see her again, but she's here, and it's... it's really good.”

Young tightens the hand on Eli's arm a bit, reassuring and supportive. “I'm happy for you two.”

Eli looks up at him with a small grin. There's the tiniest hint of color on his cheeks. “Thanks.”

“You're not planning on using the chair, are you?” Young asks. He doesn't think Eli would be reckless enough to do that, but he needs to ask for his own peace of mind.

The look on Eli's face is almost amusing, somewhere between embarrassed and appalled, and he shakes his head. “Even if I didn't care about the dangers – which I do – there's no way Ginn would let me.”

Young smiles. “Good.” He frowns and turns away to shuffle some of the papers on his desk. “What about Rush? Do you think he'll try the chair again?”

From the corner of his eye he sees Eli give a small shrug. “I don't know. I don't think so.”

Yeah, that's how Young feels about it, too. Rush isn't suicidal.
“Have you found a way to close that loophole in Rush's firewall, by the way?” he asks, changing the subject. He'll decide whether or not to place a guard by the neural interface room today. Maybe the added layer of security won't be worth the damage it'll do to the brittle trust he's trying to build with Rush.

“Uh, yeah, we fixed it yesterday. He didn't tell you?”

Young shakes his head. “He didn't, no.”

Rather than being annoyed, he feels the urge to smile a little. His talk with Rush had been altogether surreal, and maybe Rush had simply forgotten to mention it. Right now he's willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt. In fact, the idea that Rush might have been too distracted by their conversation to bring him this bit of good news is kind of...

It's fine, it's not important anyway. The only thing that really matters is that the problem is fixed.

“Oh,” Eli says. “Well, we did. It's closed. Destiny won't be able to mess with our heads anymore.”

Young nods. “That's one problem solved, then.” He presses the door control and steps into the corridor. “Let's go get some breakfast.”

“You seem to be getting on better with Colonel Young,” Mandy says.

Rush ignores the way that small comment makes something flutter anxiously in his chest and slides his rook across the chessboard. “I suppose,” he answers, pretending to be unaffected.

He curses himself when he sees the way her eyebrow twitches upwards. Moving his rook there was a bad decision, he's left himself completely open to attack now. She'll have him checked in three moves, mated in five at the most. Damn it.

“I think it's nice,” Mandy says, surprising Rush. She'd never seemed to dislike Young as a person, but after she had become aware of the specifics of his tumultuous relationship with Young, he'd always gotten the feeling she disapproved of it.

Then again, maybe he'd been wrong. It wouldn't be the first time he'd been wrong about her.

He wishes he could feel the hurt and anger and betrayal with the same kind of burning insistence he had when she'd been gone, but having her here, seeing her, hearing her voice... it's so hard to hold on to his grudges, even if he knows he needs them to protect himself.

Rush looks over at her and feels the warm glow of not alone weave through his abdomen as she gives him one of those uncertain smiles she's been sending him since she came back. It reminds him of when they first met – she'd been all shyness and careful smiles, but her brain had always been marvelous. She had challenged his assumptions, added to his frameworks, and sometimes she'd made jokes so sharp and on-point that it had startled him into laughter even when everything else in his life was falling apart.

She'd become his only friend in a time when he had nothing left, and he is still grateful to her for all those moments she made life merely difficult rather than plain unbearable, after Gloria passed.
He can't fall in love with her again. That option was cut violently short for both of them by what happened in the simulation.

But he can't not love her either.

“Well,” he says with a small, answering smile. “It certainly beats being at war with the man.”

In the end, the mission goes better than expected. Eli, Rush, and Young stay behind on the ship – wearing the space suits, of course – while everyone else evacuates to the nearby planet for six hours. There, they can forage and collect water as Destiny kisses the surface of a Type II Red Dwarf.

Young doesn't miss how Rush sometimes cocks his head slightly and focuses on empty space. He's listening to Doctor Perry, Young realizes, and he tries not to have an opinion about it beyond that. Still, though... for whatever reason he feels uneasy about Doctor Perry, much moreso than he does about Ginn. Maybe it's because Ginn's return has had such an obvious positive influence on Eli. Maybe it's because Ginn's actually appeared to Young once or twice, while he still has seen neither hide nor hair of Doctor Perry. Maybe it's... maybe it's something more personal. He doesn't allow himself to linger on that possibility for any longer than is necessary.

Eli and Rush work on shield calculations while Young keeps an eye out for the parasitic aliens. For all they know the creatures might attack once they realize what they're planning to do, Young figures. But for once it seems luck is on their side, as the aliens do little more than crawl out of where they've been hiding in the nooks and crannies of the ship, making high hissing noises as they shrivel up and die.

It's all rather anticlimactic in the end, but Young knows well enough by now to simply be grateful for that.

By the time the ship has cooled down enough to let everyone else back on board, he realizes they'll need some kind of pick-up crew to collect all the dead parasites that are littering the ship. Christ, there had been even more of them than he'd feared.

James' disgusted face and Chloe's, “Ew, gross,” say it all, in Young's opinion. They still have over three hours on the clock, though, even after unloading all the food and water the crew gathered on the planet, and thanks to the combined efforts of everyone they manage to collect the vast majority of the dead critters and dump them on the planet before jumping into FTL again.

It's a long day, but a productive one, and as Young lies in bed that night he feels like maybe finally things are going back to how they're supposed to be.

“Oh my God, these are amazing,” Eli says, the juice from the dark green peach-thing dripping down his chin.

Chloe finds herself smiling, because yes, the fruit they collected on the planet is amazing, but it's also really good to see Eli back to his happier self.
“Ah, I mean, I'm sorry, I know—” he stops talking and looks at the empty seat next to him with a fond and starry-eyed expression on his face. “Okay, yeah.” He smiles. “Thanks.”

Chloe raises her eyebrow at him, and asks, “Ginn?”

Eli smiles and looks at his plate. “Yeah.” Then he turns to the empty seat again. “You do realize I look like a crazy person when you don’t project to others, right?”

Suddenly Ginn materializes in the seat across from Chloe. “Sorry. Hi, Chloe.”

“Hi,” Chloe smiles.

Eli looks from Chloe to Ginn and back again, beaming happily. “This is so cool.”

“It's really nice to have you back,” Chloe says, as she rolls her second piece of the dark green fruit between her hands.

“It's nice being back,” Ginn says softly.

“What are we talking about?” Matt says, sliding onto the bench next to Chloe. He does a double-take at the seat next to Eli, then, and Chloe assumes Ginn just projected herself to him, as well. “Oh, hey.”

Ginn nods at him with a quiet little smile.

“Wow,” Matt says, as he bites into one of the peach-things himself. “Have you tried these?”

Eli grins at him. “They're insane, right?”

It ends up being really nice, having dinner just the four of them. Or, well, the three of them, because Ginn can't actually eat, of course. It's good.

“Was it,” Chloe starts, and then she's not sure whether she's overstepping her bounds. She gives Ginn an apologetic little smile, and continues. “Was it bad, being in quarantine?”

“Oh,” Ginn answers, and she casts a glance at Eli. Even from where she's sitting, Chloe can tell Ginn is pretty much head over heels for Eli, and it makes something warm and fond curl up inside her stomach. God, Eli deserves someone to look at him like that. “No, it wasn't... I can't really remember it. It was just... nothingness, I suppose.”

“Oh,” Chloe answers, not quite knowing how to respond to that. She's not sure whether the fact that being in quarantine seems pretty much like how Chloe has privately always imagined death makes her feel better or worse for Ginn.

“Come in, Everett.”

“Sir,” Young greets O'Neill, still marveling absentmindedly at the fact that not a single thing in the General's office seems to have moved since before they went into stasis.

“I know we haven't been giving you as much attention as you deserve,” O'Neill says as he crosses his legs and leans back in his chair. “We've been informed the Lucian Alliance is planning another
attack on Earth, soon. Seeing as the last time we nearly lost all of D.C. to their slicked up version of an atomic bomb, we're taking the threat seriously."

Young nods.

“We need your help,” O'Neill says.

“My help?”

“That ex-Lucian guy you have on board. Varro, right? We need you to bring him here, have him tell us everything he knows about the Alliance.”

“Any of his intel will be at least three years old,” Young says with a frown. “And didn't he already give you everything before we went into stasis?”

“Well, he said he did. During your extended nap SG-2 came across a piece of alien tech that greatly improved our interrogation success rates. We want to go over his information again, see if he left anything out. We need your help to do that,” he says. “Look, I realize we might be grasping at straws here, but we don't have much choice right now.”

“Homeworld Command thinks there's going to be another attack on Earth?” Mandy asks, when he tells her why Young is using the communication stones again. The man's been spending as much time off-board as on, the past week, and it wouldn't even be that much of a problem if HWC didn't insist on sending Telford in his place every single time.

“Apparently they've gotten their hands on some intel suggesting the Lucian Alliance are close to implementing another plan to attack Earth,” he answers. “I'm not clear what they think we can do about it, seeing as we've spent the last three years in stasis, but it seems they believe Young’s help is imperative to prevent a disaster.”

“You seem annoyed by that.”

“Well, it isn't like we've got our hands full with our own survival here, is it?” Rush says, aggravated. “No, by all means, let's keep things from running smoothly here by replacing Young with Telford half the time.”

“Don't you care about the people on Earth?” Mandy asks, and Rush has to fight the urge to snap at her. Because she's right, he's coming across as a cold bastard right now, and he can't fault her for pointing it out to him.

“Of course I do,” he answers, keeping his voice calm and placating. It's not a lie. But it's also not entirely true.

Earth is... it's billions of lightyears away from here. And, more importantly, everyone and everything he cares about is here. There's nothing left for him on Earth – no one waiting for him, hoping he'll come home. No one he wishes he could see one last time. Destiny is his home now. And the people sharing the ship with him... in a way, they're his people now. Young's little speech before stasis had been a bit sentimental for Rush's tastes, but he can't deny that hearing Young refer to them all as family had allayed some of that aching loneliness that had been gnawing at him from the inside for too long.
Still, just because he doesn't personally have a vested interest in protecting any specific people on Earth doesn't mean he wouldn't do his utmost to prevent the Lucian Alliance from attacking the planet again. Of course he doesn't want anyone to die.

“I just don't see how Colonel Young can help with that. Or Varro, for that matter. Any type of information we can give Homeworld Command is outdated by at least three years.”

“Still, Varro must know a lot about how the organization is run, right? Tactics, weapons, things like that.”

Rush sighs. “For all that he was Kiva's second in command, he was kept mostly out of the loop on the internal affairs, it seems.”

Mandy gives him a searching look and cocks her head. “You know the first time someone comes through Destiny's gate an automatic back-up of their consciousness is made?”

“What?” Rush says. He had most definitely not known that.

“Every single living creature that has ever stepped through the stargate is stored in digital format in Destiny's memory banks,” Mandy says. “That's... that's how I'm here. The signal from the communication stone, it was fading. My consciousness was slipping away, beginning to break down. When you uploaded me to Destiny's mainframe, I could fill the gaps – the parts of me that had disappeared – with...” she hesitates.

“With what?” he asks. Mandy had never once traveled through the gate.

She purses her mouth and looks down. “With parts of your digitized consciousness,” she says quietly. “Your memories of me.”

Rush feels his head spin. He's not sure what this means, but it feels like it's important. The way Mandy picks at her nails and shutters her eyes tells him she thinks she did something wrong, as well. He snaps himself out of it, though, because this can wait. This is... it's something he can work out later.

The important thing right now is the reason why Mandy told him in the first place. Every single person who has ever traveled through the gate. Their entire consciousness, ready to be picked apart for information.

“Kiva,” he says.
“Just like that?” Young asks, after Rush finishes explaining how a copy of Kiva's consciousness is stored somewhere in Destiny's memory banks, ready to be mined for valuable information about the Lucian Alliance.

“Well, no, not just like that, obviously,” Rush says, taking another bite from the berry-filled protein slush Becker is serving for breakfast. “I know that it exists, and I've managed to figure out where her back-up is stored. But separating specific, useful information from the overwhelming amount of data has proven to be... somewhat problematic."

“Can't see the forest for the trees?” Young asks with a small smile. It makes him look young and well-rested and unreasonably fascinating to look at. Rush pointedly refuses to give in to the urge and focuses on his gloopy, lumpy breakfast instead.

“Something like that,” he accedes, after thoroughly chewing another bite. “The consciousness is uploaded in one big chunk, because that's how it functions in a living organism.” As he starts explaining, it's easier to forget all the random things he doesn't want to think about and focus on getting across his message in a way that Young can understand. “Every singly part of us works to keep our databanks running, so to speak. Singling out small bits of data to peruse outside of the context of the rest of the consciousness, that's just not how it works.”

Young gives him a long look. “But you can figure it out,” he says. The certainty in his voice makes something warm and satisfied stretch out in Rush's gut.

“Of course I can,” he says confidently. “But I would like to get it done in time to help stop the Lucian Alliance's attack on Earth.”

“Well, that would be optimal,” Young says dryly. “So what do you need to do it?”

“Eli. He's been spending most of his time with Ginn, and while I'm glad he seems to be moving on from...” he lets his sentence trail off and curses himself for bringing up Graham when he and Young had been having such an amiable conversation. They have been getting along so well lately, and bringing up his part in Graham's death surely isn't the best way to keep that going.

He wonders whether he should tell Young, whether he should let him know that the loophole that allowed Destiny to kill Graham was an accident. That it had been an unintended byproduct of his attempts at breaking Mandy free from quarantine rather than a back-up plan to rectify Young's decision to allow Eli to stay outside of the pods. That while he hadn't been truthful about everything, he hadn't been actively trying to undermine Young's leadership.

If he told Young... How would he react? It feels unsafe to even contemplate the possibilities, although Rush isn't entirely sure why. All he knows is that something inside him wants to tell Young with such an insistent desire that it calls up a reflexive counter-movement in his mind. He shouldn't tell Young, simply because of how much he wants to tell him. It isn't a good idea. It isn't safe.

“...from what happened during our time in stasis,” he finishes his sentence carefully. “I need him to get back to work.”

“I'll talk to him,” Young says, and Rush kind of wants to tell him that that's not why he came here. He didn't inform Young because he wanted Young to talk to Eli for him; he came here because he wanted to share this information with him. To show that he's taking this newly found truce between
them seriously. To affirm that he wants this cooperation between them to last, this time.

But... again, it seems like that would be a dangerous thing to admit. Besides, it's not as if they spend a lot of time sharing deeply personal confessions with each other. Not without some kind of altercation beforehand, anyway. So he simply nods and brings another spoonful of the breakfast slop to his mouth.

They eat together in silence for a few minutes, and then Young grins and says, “Remember those blue yak things in the simulation? I kind of regret we never tried to eat that one I shot. I'd kill for a steak.”

Rush snorts. Of course Young would be thinking about food right now. “It's seven thirty in the morning,” he says.

Young shrugs affably. “It's dinner time somewhere.”

Rush feels the corner of his mouth twitch. This is nice. Mandy is back, the ship isn't under attack, and he and Young are at peace.

He could get used to this.

“Eli,” Ginn says, and Eli pauses brushing his teeth to make an inquisitive humming sound at her. She looks a bit cagey, her shoulders tight and her eyes darting around as if she's afraid someone will hear her. “Doctor Perry and I have access to everything. Please be careful.”

And... what? He raises his eyebrows at Ginn and verbalizes his confusion, but Ginn is back to normal now, looking happy and sweet and not the least bit like she has something to hide.

“Hm?” she says. “What is it?”

And that's... that's weird. He's not sure exactly what just happened, but that was definitely weird.

“Oh, Colonel Young is here,” she says, and a second later a knock sounds on his door.

“Good morning, Eli,” Young says pleasantly. He seems to be in good spirits. It makes Eli desperately happy that everything seems to be going back to normal. Back to how things were before those blasted drones forced them into the stasis pods. Before... well, before.

“Hi,” he answers, taking the toothbrush out of his mouth and spitting the foam into his empty cup. He's a little confused about why Young is here.

“Rush is trying to sort through Kiva's consciousness. He needs your help.”

“Oh,” Eli says. “Okay, sure. To get intel on the Lucian Alliance?”

Young nods.

Of course he wants to help with that. His mom is on Earth, and even if she wasn't, he'd still do everything in his power to make sure the Lucian Alliance doesn't kill anyone ever again. He hadn't even known Rush wanted his help with the uploaded imprint of Kiva’s mind. He'd seemed to have a good handle on it himself. Then again, maybe Eli had been a bit too eager to spend more time with
Ginn... It is entirely possible he'd taken Rush's 'I'm fine, go away' vibes more seriously than he should have, simply because he wanted to be with Ginn so much.

"Alright, I'll go see him now."

Young gives him a slight smile. "Get some breakfast, first."

Eli feels a warm surge of fondness for the Colonel spread through his chest. It makes him want to say 'Okay, mom,' but it doesn't feel quite right. And 'Okay, dad,' is certainly out of the question, because ugh, he hates his dad.

In the end he settles on a slightly wry expression and a, "Yes, sir."

Young gives him one last amused look and retreats from Eli's room. By the time Eli makes it to the mess hall, he's all but forgotten about the strange incident with Ginn.

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“So far it seems Varro has been telling the truth,” O'Neill says. “We could interrogate him further, but I'm not sure how much use that would be. The guy seems pretty clueless about most of the inner structure of the Alliance and their networks.”

Young nods. It's at least somewhat reassuring to know that Varro hasn't been lying all this time. That he really does feel very little loyalty to the Lucian Alliance. He's not sure what that means about Varro's loyalties to his current shipmates, but at least it's better than finding out they've had a mole in their midst all along.

“Doctor Rush had an idea,” he says. “Apparently Destiny keeps a comprehensive scan of everyone who steps through the gate. There's a blueprint of Kiva's mind in the ship's memory bank. Rush has been working on getting access to it.”

O'Neill's eyebrows are raised in a way Young thinks is slightly dramatic. “Well, that could be interesting.”

“Yes, sir. If he can figure out how to separate individual bits of information, we could find out a lot more about the Lucian Alliance than we ever could from Varro.”

O'Neill grills him about Rush's plan for a bit longer, but at the moment there isn't much more Young can say other than, "I've got my best people working on it," and before long the conversation hits a natural ending point. The General eyes him thoughtfully, and Young feels like he's being sized up, like there's something he isn't quite getting yet.

“You know, we can't always discuss everything we want freely within the confines of this office, Everett,” O'Neill says meaningfully. “Let's take a walk.”

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“Rush,” Young says. Rush feels something itch in the back of his throat. The way Young's shoulders curve as he folds his hands behind his back is utterly distracting. “We have a problem.”
“Don't we always?” Rush answers, much more flippant than he actually feels.

Young gives him a rueful look. “It's Telford. He's gunning for you because he's convinced you killed his double.”

“I told you that wasn't what happened!” Rush protests before Young can say anything else.

“Actually, no. You didn't. All I know is that you never told me the whole truth about what happened on that Destiny, with that other version of you,” Young interrupts, and Rush can practically feel the surge of frustrated irritation flare up in Young as he speaks.

It's... it's an old bruise. Just a small hurt compared to some of the other things they've done to each other. But all the same it feels like one of the worst ones, because it happened after their truce over the bridge, and they never quite got the chance to talk about it afterwards.

Rush had been in shock – trembling and upset, and he hadn't wanted to talk about what had happened. Not to anyone, let alone Young. He'd never admitted what his twin had done to Telford. What he'd helped his twin do to himself.

The silence hangs between them, loaded and thick, and Rush feels Young's heavy gaze on him.

Perhaps it's better to tell Young. Perhaps he should have told Young right away. It's not like refusing to share what actually happened has kept Telford from coming to his own conclusions, and right now it seems like Young might actually be willing to come down on his side of the argument. Like he might be willing to stand by Rush. He'd said 'We have a problem,' after all, and that... God, that feels really fucking good, actually.

“He told me it was an accident,” Rush says, deciding to place some trust in Young. Again. It feels like they've been climbing this ladder for a while now, and the higher he gets the more amazing the view, but the more terrifying the drop becomes, as well. “He knew no one would believe him, so he asked me to help him sit in the chair.”

“Suicide?”

Rush shrugs halfheartedly and looks away. He still remembers how he had felt as he'd watched his twin prepare for his own death. It had been a painful reminder of how precarious his place on Destiny was. One mistake, one dumb, terrible moment of rage or self-defense or whatever the fuck happened between Telford and his twin, and everything had been ruined. It wasn't even saying goodbye to his double – it was knowing that everyone, that Young, wouldn't believe him if he told them the truth about Telford's death. That despite his truce with Young, despite the fact that Young had promised to stay behind on the ship with him mere hours before, his other self knew that Young would kill him for killing Telford.

He'd never felt as lonely as he had in that moment, watching his twin resign himself to taking his own life in a way that offered him at least a fraction of control.

“Why?” Young asks, and when Rush looks up at his face the frustrated confusion looks sincere. “I can understand the guilt, but he didn't have to... You wouldn't... I don't think you'd...”

For a short, delirious moment, Rush wants to let out a harsh laugh. Of course Young would think the guilt was what drove his twin to suicide. Because that's what would drive him, isn't it?

“Given the choice between having his life taken away or taking it himself, he chose the latter. So would I, Colonel.” Rush says, and he's a bit surprised to hear the anger in his own voice.
“What are you talking about? Are you...” Young stops, and a deep frown settles on his features as his hands fall to his side. “You think I would have killed him?”

It is incredibly hard not to escalate things. Not to say, ‘Well, it wouldn't be the first time, now would it?’, or to simply punch Young and have this conversation devolve into heat and violence and pain. It would be easier, it would feel good, and it would certainly put an end to this... to navigating this slippery slope of trust issues, and latent anger, and perhaps something altogether more dangerous than both of those combined.

Rush scoffs, instead, and crosses his arms over his chest. “Killed, locked up in a small room for the rest of his life, permanently swapped out with someone from Earth... Not much difference.”

Young seems to disagree with that, but he purses his lips and doesn't say anything for a long time. When he finally speaks, he looks troubled. “You really thought I wouldn't have believed you?”

Rush sighs and looks away again.

“I was going to stay behind with you!” Young argues. “How could—” he cuts himself off and rubs a hand against his forehead. “Jesus, Rush. You really don't trust me at all.”

And that hurts. The words, and the defeated tone of Young's voice, it aches. Rush closes his eyes and breathes in deeply.

“I...” he says, but then he doesn't know how he was going to end that sentence, so he starts again. “You didn't have much reason to believe me.” Not at that point, he wants to add. He doesn't quite dare to, though.

“I know Telford,” Young says.

“He's your friend,” Rush counters.

Young shakes his head, not in denial of Rush's argument, but more to imply that he can't believe what he's hearing.

“You helped your twin kill himself because it seemed preferable over convincing me Telford's death was an accident. Do you realize how goddamn messed up that sounds?”

And the thing is... he does. Hearing it now, knowing what he knows now, he's pretty sure his twin made the wrong choice.

Young had been furious with him for the death of Graham, and he'd been presented with an easy, hassle-free solution to his problem by Destiny, and he'd chosen to risk his own life to get Rush back regardless. Young is difficult to understand at the best of times, but Rush is realizing that generally speaking, Young is a reasonable man with a strong moral code. He would have heard his twin out. He might have even given him the benefit of the doubt. His other self could still have been alive right now, if they'd just been willing to take their chances with Young and his judgment.

“Look... It's not like I had weeks to think this over. It all happened in a span of minutes,” he says, and it's a rubbish apology, if it even is one, but for whatever reason he can't stand seeing that pained little wrinkle between Young's eyebrows any longer.

“Rush,” Young says again. “I just... I need to know this won't happen again.”

“I hardly think we'll ever find ourselves repeating that scenario,” Rush says with feigned casualness.
“You know what I mean.”

“...Yeah.” Rush swallows. “I do. And it won't, Colonel.” And suddenly his heart is thumping loudly in his chest, because what he's implying right now is that he *trusts* Young, and that feels... it always feels dangerous when he and Young move forward like that – closer to each other with no definitive outlook on their final destination – but it's downright terrifying to put actual words to it.

Young gives him a long look, and for a moment Rush wants to reach out and touch him. Feel the coarse fabric of his uniform jacket under his fingers, stroke his thumb over the softening lines in Young's forehead, trace the curve of Young's cheek down to his lips—

“Well, that certainly doesn't sound good. Rush feels his heart thumping a thunderous rhythm against his ribcage, and in a sick way he's thankful that at least his earlier, confusing thoughts about Young are being pushed to the background by this fear of Telford and the repercussions he intends to rain down on Rush over what happened between their doubles.

“Does he have a case?” he asks neutrally.

“I don't know,” Young says. “But I doubt he'd be instigating this if he didn't have something prepared. He's had more than three years to mull this over.”

Rush lets out a sharp breath and feels his shoulders tense. Goddamn Telford. This was probably why he insisted on switching with Young all last week. He must've been collecting information, sussing out who would make the best witnesses for his trial. Fuck.

“Rush,” Young says, aiming for a reassuring tone, Rush is sure. It just sounds strained to him. “We have time to figure something out. Homeworld Command is preoccupied with the Lucian Alliance right now. We'll think of something.”

“Right,” he answers, voice betraying his doubtfulness. It's not that he doesn't appreciate what Young is trying to do. He's grateful that Young came to him with this, so at least he won't be blindsided by Telford's attack. And he's even oddly touched by Young's attempt at bolstering his confidence that this will all be alright. But it doesn't change the facts that just when things are looking up for him – just when he and Young are finding themselves on the same page, just when he has Mandy back – Telford is planning on ruining it all.
Chapter 17

“Eli,” Ginn whispers. She looks distraught, and it instinctively makes Eli’s heart thump louder. “You have to put us back.”

“What?” he says, not because he didn't hear her, but because her words aren't making sense. Her face smooths into her usual wide-eyed contented expression, though, and she just gives him a little smile. It jars him back to what happened last week, the way she’d told him to be careful, and crap, there is obviously something going on here, but he has no way of knowing what it is.

“It's lunchtime,” she says sweetly. “You should eat. Chloe and Matt are on their way to the mess hall now, too.”

Eli tries with all his might to keep his face natural, but he's pretty sure the smile on his face looks anything but. “Yeah, okay. I'm, uh. I'm gonna head over there now, then.”

“Um... I can walk with you?” Ginn says, and it feels weird that she even has to ask, because she usually just does. It's... Eli isn't quite sure right now. She is the person he wants to spend time with more than anyone else, but she's also kind of giving him the creeps at the moment.

“Yeah, it's uh...” he tries to think of a legitimate reason why he could say no, and draws a complete blank. She could just stop projecting to him and follow him anyway, even if he said no. And if there is something fishy going on with her, maybe he shouldn't draw attention to the fact that he's starting to catch on. He gives her another smile, and hopes this one looks better. “Yeah, of course.”

She gives him that big, toothy grin that means she's really happy, and it makes his heart sing with how beautiful she is, but it makes something deep in the pit of his stomach clench at the thought that maybe this isn't really Ginn after all. Or maybe it is, but it's not just Ginn. God, this is freaking messed up.

He needs to figure out what's going on.

“Hey.”

Rush looks up from his console to see Young standing in the door opening. Funny how he didn't hear the man's footsteps, because usually the sound of his heavy boots on the metal deck plating of the corridor is enough to set his heart racing with an instinctive fight-or-flight reflex.

“How's it coming along?” Young asks, stepping closer to Rush and his console. “Making any headway?”

Usually, he probably would have assumed that Young was hounding him, being an annoying bastard and checking up on his progress in person rather than over the radio to ensure he'd get his work done faster. As if that would in any way motivate him.

Today, though... today it doesn't feel like that. Today it just feels like Young is trying to reach out, like he's trying to make contact – even if it's just for a few minutes – to reaffirm that they are on the same side, that they want and need to continue working together to get the important things done.
It's a strange sensation, in a way. He's seen Young as an irritating obstruction for so long that it's hard to let go of that and simply embrace him as a... a what? A colleague? That's not nearly adequate. Friend? Too close. Acquaintance? Not close enough.

He's not sure what Young is to him right now, but perhaps trying to define what they are is less important than trying to maintain it.

It's odd. But it's not unwelcome.

“Yeah,” he says, gesturing at his monitor despite the fact that he's quite certain Young won't be able to make heads nor tails of it. “Mandy's given me some helpful advice.”

He explains how he still can't actually pluck out specific information from Kiva's brain, but that he is now able to subdivide her mind into actual brain-like partitions, like memory and linguistics and motor control.

Young nods, and hums, and seems all around interested and friendly, and Rush feels a weird knot of fondness settling in his stomach for the man in front of him. He knows Young doesn't fully understand, he simply doesn't have the capabilities to see everything that Rush sees – and if he ever did, he spent his time learning different things – but he's trying to grasp what Rush is telling him right now. It's difficult to imagine how he'd thought Young was barely capable of any sort of higher reasoning, before. Before he got to know him. Before he got to test him, in a way.

“Sounds good,” Young says, and the little smile curving his lips makes Rush want to reach out and touch it. To see if it's real, perhaps. Or maybe just to see what it feels like, on Young's mouth. He shoves the thought away and gives Young a flat stare in response.

“I haven't found the answer yet.”

“No,” Young agrees. “But you seem to be getting closer. I'm sure you'll find it in time.”

It's meaningless. Just a placating platitude. So why does it make his heart flutter with the idea that Young believes in him? That he trusts him to solve this problem? God, something is seriously fucking wrong with him.

Instead of taking it out on Young, though, he decides to focus on the contented expression on Young's face. Clearly Young is just as happy as he is about how easy things are between them right now. Rush allows himself the little smile that wants to come out, before turning back to his console. He's sure Young will leave now that he has his information.

Young doesn't, though, and his presence feels like a deep itch between his shoulder blades, right where he can't scratch it.

“I've been thinking,” Young says finally. Rush lets his fingers still on the controls and turns halfway back to Young with a question on his face. “This thing with Telford... Maybe we can use this information about Kiva as leverage, somehow. Get him off our case.”

Rush almost reaches out to grab Young right then. Because Telford has been haunting the back of his mind since Young brought him up last week, and the fact that Young has been trying to find a solution to the problem in his own way is... Christ, it's really kind of nice, isn't it? He isn't in this alone. He has Young on his side, unimaginable as that may have been, a few years ago.

The fact that Young refers to it as 'our case' doesn't hurt, either.

God, in a sick sense he hates that he'd been forced to let Young in on the bridge. He hates that
Young got him back when Destiny decided to put his consciousness in her memory banks and leave nothing but the useful husk. Because both of those instances had shown him what Young could be to him. And the time since then has shown him that perhaps he was wrong to mistrust the man for as long as he did.

Young is... Young is a good person. And he's not dumb. He's a strong ally – possibly the strongest Rush has ever had – and for some reason Young still deems it worth it to get Rush on his side. Despite everything that has happened. Despite the fact that Eli very well may be smarter than he is.

“Colonel,” he says, momentarily overcome by the desire to curl his fingers into the dark fabric covering Young’s chest.

Young gives him a quiet stare.

“I'm not sure blackmailing Homeworld Command is the greatest idea,” Rush settles on, in the end. Young huffs out a breath and gives him an amused look.

“I didn't mean we threaten them, Rush. I just think...” he glances over at the wall thoughtfully. “If we play this right, it might buy us enough goodwill to get Telford's case dismissed before it even becomes a thing.”

He can't do much more than nod slowly at Young. The feeling that Young is actually doing his best to find a solution to this is still slightly overwhelming.

“I'm on my way to discuss it with Camile now, as a matter of fact,” Young says. “Her pull with the IOA could certainly make a big difference.”

Rush feels doubtful. He can't say he has a lot of respect or appreciation for office politics, and he's hardly convinced that they will ever work in his favor like this. But then, he's not the one going back to Earth via the stones several times a week. He's not the one who will be doing the bargaining on his behalf. That will be Young. And possibly Camile.

Jesus, for a quick second his heart feels like it's about to swell up so much it won't fit in his chest anymore, and he has to blink fast a few times to keep his eyes from misting up. He feels silly, letting this get to him so much. But he also feels like he's actually part of something, now. Like Young was serious when he said they were all a family.

“Ah, right,” he says, when his throat finally opens up again. Young gives him a small nod and turns to leave the room. Again, Rush is overcome by the urge to reach out, to grab hold of his sleeve and just pull.

And then what? Take his hand? Keep him here?

He isn't even sure what he wants, so he disregards it. Stuffs it down with all the other irrational emotions Young calls up in him.

“Colonel?” he says. Young's footsteps stop before he reaches the corridor and he quirks his head up at Rush in question. “...Thank you.”

Young smiles at him, and for a short moment Rush thinks he sees something behind Young's eyes. Something warm and insistent and... And it's probably just his imagination.

When Young's footsteps have finally faded away, when he's probably already talking to Camile, Rush is still unable to do much more than stare at his console unseeingly.
Oh crap, this can't... Shit, this *can't* be true, even if everything he's looking at is proving the exact opposite. Eli wants to shout and he wants to cry and he wants to punch the freaking console he's working on, because damn it, Destiny is *such* a fucking *bitch*.

“What are you doing?” a soft voice from behind him speaks suddenly. Eli startles, because Jesus Christ, he thought figuring out how to reinstate the hydroponics dome and finding a way to shorten the refractory period of the FTL engines would have been enough to keep Ginn and Doctor Perry busy, but apparently they're even better at multitasking than Eli had hoped, because Doctor Perry is here, right behind him, giving him a look that is either admonishing or disappointed.

“Uh, nothing,” he says artlessly, as he closes the program and opens the diagnostics for the long range sensors on starboard. “Just checking to see if everything is okay.”

Doctor Perry twists her hands, and Eli wonders if he'd have found it endearing if it didn't make shivers run down his back. Because this isn't really Doctor Perry. This is... Destiny compromised her, both her and Ginn, and from the quick glance he'd gotten at it Destiny's lines of code run all the way through both of them. There's no way he can think of a quick fix-it to this, because the pattern seemed completely random, and shit, he's going to lose Ginn again.


Eli wishes he could believe that. He wishes he could just close his eyes and pretend everything is fine, that this isn't a huge fricking deal. But the image of Rush's lifeless eyes, his emotionless responses in the infirmary, swims to the front of his mind. Destiny isn't evil, he's pretty sure of that, but she doesn't *get* them. She doesn't understand how humans work, and there's no way to ensure her next intervention won't actually kill someone.

“Yeah, okay,” he lies. He hopes she'll take his answer at face-value. He hopes she'll believe him. “It's cool. I just... I want Ginn. Here.” And that isn't a lie. He does want Ginn here, with him. More than almost anything.

Doctor Perry gives him a small smile and an even smaller nod, and good, that probably means that she bought it.

“There's no need to worry, Eli. Everything has been going very well since Colonel Young and Nick started working together. Destiny doesn't intend to hurt anyone. You're her crew. You're precious to her.”

Eli remembers Graham's dark lips and the melting ice dripping from the ends of his hair onto the metal deck plating, and barely manages to give her a nod in return.

“Oh, okay,” he says, and his voice sounds hoarse and scared, but she seems to believe he means it anyway.

“Alright, I need to get back to the FTL calculations.”

Eli watches her disappear, a sudden emptiness in the place where she just stood, and rubs his fist against his forehead. Damn it. Damn it all. Just when things were finally looking up, Destiny comes along and punches a hole into his whole world.
A selfish part of him wonders if he can let this go, like he promised. If he can go on talking to Ginn until deep in the night, pretending her being here isn't a risk to everyone aboard the ship.

He knows he can't, though. He knows, because it was Ginn herself who warned him for this. It was Ginn herself who'd found a way to tell him what was going on, and if even she knows this situation is too dangerous to let her continue existing, how the hell can Eli ignore it simply because he wants her here so much it hurts?

The headache behind his left eye is back, and Eli presses his fist harder against his forehead.

Shit. This is all so screwed up.

It doesn't take long to come up with a plan. Most of this is due to the fact that the plan is really freaking simple: create a complete power outage for long enough that he can tell Colonel Young what's happening before Ginn and Doctor Perry can find out. Because he can't do this on his own. He can't put Ginn and Doctor Perry back in quarantine. He can't be responsible for that.

No, he's going to talk to Colonel Young, and he's going to let him decide. Eli knows that's probably childish, and he feels like shit for it, but he remembers what happened the last time he stepped up and decided he could take care of things on his own. Graham had died.

So yes, maybe it's not very mature of him, but he's going to ask Young what to do. Because right now he doesn't have the fortitude of mind to deal with this on his own.

The actual specifics of figuring out how to create a total power outage take a bit longer to work out, though, because Destiny's systems are pretty damn complex and it won't do to leave them stranded in the middle of nowhere, drifting, with no way to get the power back online again. This whole thing is about protecting everyone, not inadvertently getting them all killed.

So he thinks, and he scrabbles code on the wall until he's ready to actually implement it, and then everything wrenches sideways as Destiny drops out of FTL and the whole ship goes dark. He has a little over ten minutes.

He grabs his flashlight, because obviously he was prepared for this, and makes his way over to Young.

Young feels slightly disoriented as suddenly the ship jerks out of FTL and everything goes black around him. He reaches for his radio to call Rush, to ask what the hell is happening – this isn't a scheduled drop, and why is the power failing? – when it chimes and Eli's voice rings over it.

“Colonel Young, it's alright, I did this. I'm on my way over to you right now.”

“Eli? What's going on?”

“I'll explain it all to you, okay? I'm almost there.”
Young isn't sure what to make of this, but Eli dashes into the CI room a few seconds later.

“Eli, what the hell?”

“It's Ginn and Doctor Perry,” Eli pants. He must've been running to get here, Young realizes. “Destiny got to them, somehow, probably while they were in quarantine and Rush's firewall was breached... She can use them the same way she used that loophole.”

The glare of Eli's flashlight is shining too brightly into Young's eyes, and he grunts in annoyance before the words actually sink in. Ginn and Doctor Perry... their presence is a threat to everyone.

He feels a strong surge of protectiveness over Eli, because God, this must be killing the kid. He can't help feeling sorry for Rush, too. Rush has obviously been doing well with Doctor Perry back in his life, and Young hates the thought that Rush might go back to his bitter, uncooperative self once she's gone again.

“Eli,” he says carefully, stepping closer to him to lower the flashlight so it isn't shining directly into his eyes anymore. “You know what this means, don't you?”

Eli heaves a deep sigh, breath still coming in a bit laboriously, and nods. “We have to put them back into quarantine.”

Young squeezes his shoulder, contemplates wrapping him into a hug. “Yeah. I'm sorry.”

Eli just hangs his head and shakes it. “I know... I know.”

A soft shuffling sound tells Young they're not alone here anymore.

“...What?” Rush says, and Young feels his heart sink. This is not how Rush should have found out. This is not the best way to let the man know he's going to lose his girlfriend again, and damn it, how many times can a person lose their lover before completely breaking to pieces anyway? Young is only just now getting over the loss of Emily and TJ, and he's had months to deal with it.

“Rush,” Young says, as Eli aims his flashlight over at Rush's forlorn form. “How much did you hear?”

Rush doesn't answer, he just turns his face away and lets his hair obscure his expression, and Young knows that means he heard enough to understand what's going on. What's going to happen.

They stand in silence for a few moments, before the lights flicker on and Destiny's systems whir back to life.

Young radioes the rest of the science team down to the control interface room, because this is an issue they need to deal with right now.

Eli heaves in a heavy breath and says, “I can't be here for this.”

Young doesn't have the heart to stop him as he turns around and makes his way out through the corridor.

Rush is still standing there, looking lost and shocked and thoroughly unhappy, but then his gaze catches Young's for a moment and he starts moving again. Abruptly, almost feverishly, he positions himself behind a console and starts pressing buttons.

“I can recall the quarantine program from the system,” he says without inflection as Brody and
Volker enter the room with Park and Greer in their wake. Rush doesn't acknowledge any of them or their rapid-fire questions. “I just need to readjust a few of its parameters. It isn't difficult.”

He's gone cold and stone-faced now, and Young doesn't quite know what to say when Rush tells him it will be a matter of minutes before he has Ginn and Doctor Perry sequestered away again. Young feels his heart break a little bit, because clearly this is hurting Eli, and Rush's behavior makes it more than obvious that he isn't dealing with this turn of events very well at all, either. He wishes he could do something, anything, to make this easier for them.

Instead, he just stands there uselessly as Volker and Brody pull up screens on another console and discuss them with Park quietly.

At a certain point Young realizes Rush is getting distracted, and it doesn't take much to figure out that Doctor Perry is appearing to him, talking to him, probably begging him not to do this. Rush looks pained, and hesitant, and Young knows he misjudged Rush all those times he thought the man had no conscience.

Because he is clearly struggling with this. He clearly has a problem effectively snuffing out Doctor Perry's existence for the sake of his own – and everyone else's – safety.

“Rush,” Young says, pulling the man's attention to himself. “You've got this.”

Rush gives him a look so full of... of something, pain or fear or gratitude, Young isn't sure. Then he turns back to his console and continues typing in commands until his shoulders slump in a way that seems utterly defeated.

“It's done,” Rush says, voice hoarse with emotion. He looks lost, like he's on the verge of tears, and Young feels his heart clench in sympathy. “She's gone. They both are.”
Chapter 18

Afterwards, it feels as if he's in a daze.

He watches her disappear, and distantly he feels his eyes well up, but all he knows is that she's gone. Mandy's gone, she's really gone, and what the fuck does it matter if anyone can tell that this hurts him?

But it matters, of course it does, so he swallows back the pain and the tears, turns away from Greer and the science team, and follows without a word when Young leads him away. They walk through the corridors, steadily and quietly, and Rush doesn't think about where they're going, doesn't think about anything as the empty, dull ache of loss permeates his chest.

He blinks slowly when Young opens the door to his quarters and ushers him inside, sets him down on one of the couches and moves away to grab a sizable bottle and two metal mugs.

Then Young is back, looking at him with sympathy in his face and a warm touch on his shoulder as he hands him a cup of Brody's liquor.

“Figured you could use a drink,” he says with a small shrug, before turning away and filling up his own. After a beat of silence, he sits down on the couch opposite Rush's and raises his cup slightly. “To Doctor Perry.”

Rush doesn't know how to feel about this. They don't exactly have a history of late night drinking in Young's quarters, but he can't deny it beats the idea of sitting in his own empty room, alone and wallowing. And vaguely, in the back of his mind, he appreciates Young's attempt at restoring the ease they'd found with each other before going into stasis.

Before Graham, and Destiny, and Mandy...

As far as Young's attempts go, this has to be one of the least graceless ones.

It's mostly automatism to raise his own glass in answer.

“To Mandy. She had an extraordinary mind, and she was an extraordinary person.”

Young gives him a look from the other couch, like he isn't sure he should say what he's about to say.

“I didn't know her that well, but she seemed great.”

Rush slams back his entire cup. Christ, the stuff burns all the way down his esophagus, and it hits him like a freight train. Perhaps he shouldn't have skipped dinner. “She was more than great; she was bloody fantastic. Only friend I had after...”

Young looks away then, perhaps in an attempt to give him some privacy. It's not... He doesn't want that and he does, at the same time. He grabs the bottle and fills his mug to the rim, then swallows half of it in one go.

“She wasn't— I knew it wasn't her anymore. She was killed by Simeon, the real her. What we found later, that was just a reflection, an echo. A ghost.”

Young frowns, and stares into his cup. “...You don't have to—” he starts to say, but Rush interrupts him.
“Her life ended when she died,” he says harshly. The alcohol in his system is making the words easier to say but harder to string together in a logical order. “Her program, that wasn't her. I wanted it to be, I wanted her to live on. For me. Because I wanted her here.”

He's never allowed himself to think of it that way, but he knows it to be true. Mandy was the only person aboard the ship he could trust. The only friend he had. The only one who was in his corner, who believed in him, after Gloria. Even if the romance between them had ultimately been an unhappy experience – a mistake on both their parts – her friendship was still a precious possession, rare and beautiful. But he'd known, after the first time putting her in quarantine, that it wasn't truly her anymore. She had been but a sliver of the real Mandy; not even capable of recognizing his feelings for her as love.

Clinging on to her program like he had, he can see it for what it is now: the pathetic behavior of a lonely child with a teddy bear. He drains his cup in a single swallow.

“It was selfish and delusional, simple as that.”

“Rush,” Young says, and he's finally looking at him again. “Don't.”

“What?” he asks defiantly.

Young's frown deepens. “Don't beat yourself up. Not over this.”

Rush feels an angry laugh bubble up from his throat and doesn't even try to hold it in.

“Rush,” Young says sharply. “You just lost your girlfriend, for the third time. You're allowed to feel sorry for yourself.”

Jesus Christ. Is Young really expecting him to break down? To cry on his shoulder over the loss of someone Young never even bothered to get to know? For them to come out of this farcical attempt at male bonding with a functional relationship, something simple and friendly and not riddled with distrust and anger? Because Rush can't even count the ways in which that is never going to happen. The idea that Young seems to think that it might is infuriating.

Young is looking at him, that calm fucking placid stare that probably means he's thinking, trying to figure out what's going on in Rush's head, and it inspires a hard spike of rage in him. The alcohol is clouding his judgment, it must be, because the next thing he knows there are words tumbling out of his mouth. Words that he never meant to speak out loud. Certainly not to Young. Especially not to Young.

“What the fuck do you want from me, Colonel?” Rush asks, and there is no way to deny the vehemence in his voice. Whenever he thinks about Young, this is the question that keeps pestering him. The one question he hasn't ever verbalized, for a legion of reasons; most of them damning enough he prefers not to think on them at all. Pride, and fear, and things more complicated.

His head is spinning, and he's not sure if it's because of the alcohol or because he has finally asked.

Young looks slightly startled, then confused, and then his expression becomes restrained and serious. He's thinking about his answer, and Rush is certain Young is glad he hasn't been downing Brody's rotgut at the same pace as him, since the man would need all his processing power for this, wouldn't he?

Because it's a simple question, but it's not. It's a minefield, and they both know it. The only thing he doesn't know is what might happen if they detonate. It's one of the reasons he never asked.
He doesn't expect it when Young tilts his head back and empties his cup in one swallow. Rush watches too closely as Young's Adam's apple bobs up and down, and feels something twist deep in the pit of his stomach. That's another reason he shouldn't have asked.

When their eyes meet, Rush is struck by the fire there. He only just clamps down on the urge to lean forward, across the coffee table in between them, closer to Young. Fuck, he shouldn't have drunk so quickly. It's so much harder to ignore Young's presence, that inexorable pull on his attention, when the defenses of his mind are lowered by the woolly haze of alcohol.

“You know what I really want, Rush?” Young says. His voice is dark and scratchy, and it makes Rush's heartbeat triple. His entire being screams at him that this is dangerous. Perhaps even moreso than the question Young asked on that dusty planet.

“I want to know I can trust you. That we're both working towards the same goal, and that I don't have to second-guess every goddamn thing you tell me.” He grabs the bottle then, refills both their cups, and takes another large drink of his own. “I want you to finally trust me, damn it.”

Ah.

It's both comforting in its simplicity and daunting in its unattainability. They've tried it before; it never works.

But... He remembers the simulation. He remembers what Young did for him, what Young risked for him, even when he had good reason to want to be rid of him. To leave him without agency, without a fucking personality. A perfect little problem-free asset to the mission and the crew. But Young didn't. Young came back for him.

It's... Perhaps Rush can admit it's changed some things for him. That it rattled some of his paradigms, reassembled some of his assumptions. That it made it harder than ever before to resist clamoring for something more, something deeper and better than what they have now.

Perhaps he can admit he wants the same thing; to have Young's trust, to move forward with him, instead of despite him.

Perhaps he can admit that part of him has been holding back, has been keeping information that could improve their relationship, simply because he instinctively recoiled from how much he wanted to tell Young.

Perhaps he can try, now, in this moment, when the alcohol is making everything seem easier, less impossible.

He wants to fidget, so he grabs his cup from the table and takes another gulp. The burn of the drink almost doesn't register anymore.

“The loophole,” he says, and then he clears his throat, because his voice sounds fragile and ragged. “The one that allowed Destiny to kill Graham... I didn't create it with that purpose.”

Young looks at him, sharp and hawk-like, and a high-current tension winds itself around Rush's insides, coiling tighter with every second that passes.

“I didn't create it on purpose at all, in fact. It was... it was an unintended side-effect of my attempts at getting Mandy out of quarantine. I didn't even know it was there until after we came out of stasis.”

Rush has a hard time interpreting the expressions flitting over Young's face. It doesn't matter, he tells himself. It doesn't matter what Young believes, because it doesn't. He isn't trying to prove himself to
Young. It doesn't change anything.

It might matter to Young, to know that Rush hadn't purposely undermined his trust and his leadership, even though Rush really doesn't think it should. Because it doesn't change anything. It doesn't change the fact that Graham is dead because of Rush's actions. It doesn't change the fact he would have done it in a heartbeat if the choice was between Graham or Eli.

It might matter to Young, but it doesn't matter.

“You didn't know?” Young asks, after the silence stretches on beyond the point of unbearable.

It doesn't matter, but he shakes his head a little too insistently anyway. “No.”

“Christ,” Young breathes out, and then he's getting up from the couch, pacing a few steps, before he turns around. “You didn't know.”

And there is something so undone in his voice that it is almost painful, and Rush can't pretend that it doesn't matter anymore, because it does. For some idiotic reason he cares, and now they both know that, and fuck, he never should have come here. He has to go, because this isn't what he wants. This isn't safe. This is all getting much too real, and he can't deal with that. Not after just losing Mandy again. Not when his head is swimming with grief and alcohol and he's just one bad decision away from losing even more.

He gets up from the couch and walks to the door with unsteady but determined steps, but before he can even press the door control, Young's hand is on his wrist and everything stills. Everything fades to the background but the blood thrumming in his ears and the dry warmth of skin-on-skin contact.

“Rush,” Young says quietly, and he is pretty sure Young can feel his heartbeat hammering against his fingertips.

“I have to go,” he pleads, but he's frozen, paralyzed by Young's touch.

“No, wait... You need,” Young says, and then Rush is spun around, and without warning Young's arms fold around him and Young is holding him; hugging him.

It's not what he expected, not at all. He isn't the least bit prepared for it, and he doesn't know why he's letting it happen. Why he's not flinching away but desperately clinging back. Why he lets Young's body heat leak into him. Why it feels right to bury his face into Young's shoulder to find some reprieve from the maelstrom of emotions that is tearing him to pieces inside.

His heart is pounding and sweat prickles against his palms, and every tendon in his body is wound so taut he's afraid he might burst; but all the same, for the first time in a long while, he feels safe. Right now, Young doesn't feel like a threat, or an obstruction, or even a tentative ally. He feels like a friend, like a support beam, and it's terrifying – not just because it is Young, but because of how much Rush wants this.

It makes him think of Mandy, the last person to make him feel like he wasn't so utterly alone on the ship, in the entire fucking universe, and the raw wave of mournful guilt that follows nearly overcomes him. Tears prickle behind his eyelids, painful and dangerously insistent, and he has to go. He has to get out of here.

He tries to untangle himself, to step back, but Young's arms tighten on him.

“Please. Don't go,” Young says, and Rush has no idea what that means, but the sound of his voice echoes the way he feels himself, a raw need that reverberates all the way down his spine, and with a
stunning shock he realizes that Young might need this, too. That Young might be just as fragile and lonely and damaged as he is, and that he's allowing Rush to see this vulnerable side of him because...

Rush swallows thickly around the lump in his throat as everything he thought he knew about Young is pulled out of order and reshuffled in a way that creates an entirely new picture. Young. It's Young.

It's Young, but it's also something more, and he shouldn't—he knows he shouldn't, but he wants...

It's this, or fucking falling apart.

It's a snap decision, and he doesn't know what he's even planning until he takes Young's face in his hands and turns it towards him, angles it slightly down so he can... He looks into Young's eyes – dark honey, pupils blown, searching – and closes the distance between them to catch Young's bottom lip between his own. It's almost dry, the kiss, and almost chaste.

Young gasps and breaks away, his eyes shocked and wide. “What...” he says, but he keeps his arms around Rush's shoulders; he holds their embrace. Rush still has his face between his hands, and when he slides his fingers up into Young's hair and pulls him back in, Young doesn't protest a second time.

Their mouths fit together like they've done this a million times before, and Young lets him in, allows him to take the kiss deeper. Images of Young flash before his eyes, Young lunging at him with rage in his eyes, Young smiling that little amused half-smile, Young's expression going rigid and blank before turning away from him, Young looking at him, assessing, waiting... Rush wants it, he wants all of it, all of Young, because this is monopolizing and preoccupying and all-consuming. And that is exactly what he needs right now.

He pulls in a desperate gasp of air through his nose when his mind provides him with a graphic flash of what else they could be doing here, and all of it thrills Rush in a way he can't blame on the alcohol. Because Young's tongue is strong and hot against his, and Young's hair is thick and unruly between his fingers, and he's getting hard. Fuck, he's getting hard over this, over Young.

He wants to take it further but he doesn't want to break the spell, and then Young grabs his arse and pulls their lower bodies flush together, and Jesus Christ, yes. Apparently he's not the only one who isn't entirely unaffected by this, because that is Young's erection against his hip, and fuck, yes, yeah, he wants this. He needs it, if only to take his mind off everything else for one night. Because right now everything is so fucking fucked and so fucking complicated that it's too much, even for him.

Young pushes him up against the door, traps him against it with his sturdy weight, and Rush feels himself arch up against him, hears himself moan into Young's mouth, because God, it reminds him of every single time Young has crowded into his space, looming, threatening, demanding his full attention; and for some reason that doesn't piss him off so much as it turns him on further.

“Come on, come on,” he mutters frantically when Young starts fumbling with his belt, and then, oh God, Young's fingers are on him, curling and stroking and just fucking touching him; and it's everything he wants, and not nearly enough at the same time.

“Rush,” Young says, and he sounds like he's on the edge of breaking, and Rush can't take that, not right now, so he pulls him back in for a kiss; keeps his left hand in Young's hair while his right moves down to the bulge in his trousers, squeezing it softly through the rough fabric. He relishes the little muffled sound it pulls from Young, and then he's flicking open Young's belt and the buttons, not quite as adroitly as he would've preferred, but quickly enough all the same.

Young's hand on him has stilled – apparently the Colonel isn't very skilled at multitasking – but his tongue is irresistible and slick against Rush's, and the way Young's grip tightens on him when Rush
slips his fingers inside his boxers, wraps them carefully around Young's length... that is quite nice as well.

Slowly, mindful of the differences in feel and angle between Young’s prick and his much more familiar own, he starts stroking. All the way down to the base, and then back up to the tip, thumb grazing over the swell of his head, and then back down again.

Young's reaction is instant and incredible; he almost melts into Rush's chest, pressing him harder against the metal door at his back, and makes a soft humming noise that Rush can feel against his tongue, down his throat, all the way through his body. Then Young cups his cheek, softens the kiss until they're barely touching lips anymore, and starts moving his other hand over Rush's cock in earnest, and that is even better.

They find themselves falling into the same rhythm, and it's almost unbearably intimate, this little pocket they're creating with their bodies. Young holding him like this, captured in the heat between them; the breath they share as they pant against each other's lips, dizzying and heady; the movement and the friction and the feel of silky flesh between his fingers. Rush feels himself filling up with pleasure until it is crowding out everything else; every sensation pooling in his stomach until it's barely containable, until he knows blissful fucking release is just around the corner.

Finally, when he really can't hold on anymore, he leans forward into Young's mouth with a little moan as Young makes him come undone. He feels his muscles lock, feels his hand clench into Young's hair, feels the frenetic pulse of desire that ricochets through his entire frame as he spills himself over Young's hand and stomach, and lets it all come as overwhelming release invades his body and his mind.

“Oh fuck, Rush,” he hears Young say in the distance, through the roaring in his ears, and then he feels the thick splatter of Young's climax against his fingers and on the skin of his hip.

They stand together in silence, Young breathing heavily into the crook of his neck and Rush just there, leaning his head back against the door until his own breaths even out. His hand is still in Young's hair, and the thick springiness of it is somehow calming, grounding, in a way he'd never expected. The weight of Young against his body has the same effect, and he misses them both the moment Young takes a step back and breaks away from him.

Without a word, Young gets a hand towel from the other side of the room and starts wiping Rush clean, first his hip, then his cock, and then his hand, before buttoning him back up. It's both clinical and too personal, and Rush finds himself unable to speak; unsure of what is going to happen next, and unwilling to say the wrong thing. Young mops up the mess on his own stomach quickly and tucks himself away, and then finally their eyes meet again.

“I'm not sure that was a good idea,” Young says quietly.

Rush wants to roll his eyes, or say something condescending, but all he succeeds in is staring at Young dumbly.

“You're vulnerable, and grieving, and drunk.” Young frowns, rubs at his forehead with a balled up fist and looks away. “Shit, we shouldn't have done that.”

“Just for tonight, Colonel,” Rush croaks out, and fuck, his voice is wrecked. “I need the distraction.”

It's as close to pleading for this as he's willing to go.

Young's eyes are on him again, searching. His entire face takes on that melancholic softness, and
Rush is mostly sure Young won't pull away if he reaches out now. So he does.

Nothing big, just the tentative touch of fingers against fingers; careful and hesitant and much too gentle for how they usually are. But this is what he needs, right now.

He swallows back the surge of gratitude threatening to clog up his throat when Young gives in and winds their hands together.

“Alright. Come on,” Young says gently, leading him to the bed.

Rush hadn't expected to sleep, not tonight. Not while his head is still reeling with the loss of Mandy and the imminent loneliness that her loss should embody. But when Young tucks the blankets over them and curls around him with a hand drawn protectively over Rush's stomach...

It's surprisingly easy to let himself drift off.
Chapter 19

Rush wakes up, and before he even notices the thick, pounding ache in his head, he feels the sturdy body wrapped around him. He's warm, tucked under the blankets. His head is curled into the crook of a broad shoulder and the cotton-covered muscle underneath his palm can't belong to anyone but Young, and Jesus.

His head is killing him.

He remembers last night, remembers Young pushing him into the hard surface of the door to his quarters as they'd kissed each other. As they'd touched each other. As they'd made each other come.

Fuck, he knows he should be pulling away, because he can't do this right now. He can't deal with this, with discovering these feelings for Young. Not right after losing Mandy – and the memory of her pleading with him not to shut her away again, not to kill her again – is still fresh and painful in his mind.

He can't do this right now, but... but somehow the alternative is worse.

He stifles the terse groan that is perched in the back of his throat and nuzzles closer into Young's heat without opening his eyes.

It can't last, though. He knows that. And an undetermined number of long, almost peaceful minutes later he feels Young stir against him.

Young's hand tightens around his shoulder, but as soon as Rush starts moving away from him he lets go and rolls to his back.

"Hey," Young says quietly, and when Rush finally blinks open his eyes, squinting against the too bright lights of Young's quarters, his first instinct is to smile at the man. He looks different, sleep-fuddled and slow, hair curling wildly where it isn't smooshed flat from lying on it all night.

Rush stomps down on the warm affection weaving its way through his chest, though, and curbs the corners of his mouth from twitching up.

"How're you feeling?" Young asks. Rush thinks there's more to the question than he can quite figure out right now.

"Hungover," he answers. It's not a lie; he does feel like his liver is taking its revenge on him for how much alcohol he'd imbibed last night. But it's not the whole truth either. Already he misses Young's heavy, warm weight against him.

"We, uh," Young says, looking away from his eyes before glancing back up at him again. "I'm sorry about last night."

It stings, a little bit. It stings that Young is apologizing for what they did, because for all that Rush was drunk, and for all that the timing was probably worse than anything Rush could've imagined, he doesn't want Young to feel sorry about what they did. He doesn't want Young to regret it.

Even if he, himself, does.

Because there's a good chance this killed the momentum in their relationship. That unsteady trot towards friendship that he's starting to crave more than anything. There's a good chance Young will
look at him differently now. With pity, perhaps. Or with enmity, when Rush makes it clear that this is not what he wants. Not right now, anyway.

“I've got some,” Young says, before bending away from him and reaching for something in the drawer of his nightstand. When he turns back to Rush, he gives him a few pressed tablets, dark green, and his canteen. “Here.”

Rush accepts what Young offers him and feels his stomach protest with an icy lurch as he swallows down Johansen's most successful attempt at aspirin with a stale gulp of water.

“Thanks,” he says, feeling the coldness in his belly spread out towards his chest.

For all that this could have been a seminal moment between them, Rush is rather certain the awful timing means they simply won't get another shot at this. Because he can't do this right now, he can't start a physical relationship with Young. Not in his current state of mind -- there is no possibility for any sort of organic, meaningful development between them when Rush feels like little more than fifty percent desperate loneliness and fifty percent debilitating fear of attachment. It's too soon after losing Mandy... It's too soon, and now he'll have to reject Young and that will kill any chance of this ever happening again. He ruined it the same night he discovered it was even a possibility.

God, he hates himself.

“Colonel,” he says, and fuck, he can't hide the croak in his voice. “This isn't...”

“I know,” Young replies, before Rush can even work out what exactly he was going to say. “I shouldn't have... We can't...” Young rubs his hand over his face. He looks kind of defeated, and Rush feels something unpleasant scratch at the back of his throat. “I get it.”

Rush watches him quietly. Part of him is glad that they're both still mostly clothed. Young looks different without his jacket -- he looks different in this setting, in bed -- but his long-sleeved shirt still makes him look decidedly like him. Like Colonel Young. Like the man he's been struggling against for years. The man who once left him for dead on a planet, and the man who saved him when Destiny had almost erased him completely.

Another part of him wishes Young wasn't wearing anything right now. It's the same part that wants to roll closer to Young, to pull him in for a slow, easy kiss -- if such a thing is even possible between the two of them.

He ignores that urge and puts another few inches of distance between him and the Colonel.

“...I'm sorry, Rush,” Young settles on, after a long moment of silence. He looks sorry, and again Rush feels that sharp twinge of wrongness at it all. Fuck, perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps Young doesn't want this at all. Is this Young rejecting him?

“Forget it,” he says, handing the canteen back to Young and ignoring the nervous shudder running down his spine. “I'd rather we never spoke of it again.”

“You think we can do that?” Young asks, and Rush isn't entirely sure whether his voice is supposed to convey hope or skepticism. Knowing Young, it's probably meant to convey as little as possible.

God, this is such a mess.

He needs time. He needs time, and he needs space, and he needs to think this over privately. And more than that, he needs these goddamn aspirins to start working already, because his head is a throbbing mess, and he really doesn't think he's in the best mindset for having any deep and
potentially life-altering conversations right now.

“Colonel, I can't...” he starts, and he's not entirely sure how he's going to finish that sentence. Young gives him a long look, waiting for him to continue, and again Rush feels nearly overcome with the desire to just touch the man. To kiss him and feel his sturdy warmth against him until all the reasons why they shouldn't be doing this fall by the wayside.

“I can't do this right now,” he says eventually, looking away from where Young is sitting up against the wall. Rush slides his legs over the edge of the bed and starts working on his belt, then his socks, and then his shoes.

“Rush,” Young says, voice quiet and... unsure, Rush thinks. He's migrated over to the other side of the bed, sitting on the edge, his back to Rush.

Rush shrugs on his green t-shirt, and then his waistcoat. He feels his breath stutter in his throat when he looks over his shoulder and finds Young's gaze on him. His eyes are shuttered, but everything in his face screams his unhappiness. “I really am sorry.”

And Jesus, he's said it three times, now. He's made his point – he thinks they shouldn't have done this. And Rush agrees, so why the fuck does Young have to keep repeating it?

“Yes. I know,” Rush bites out, feeling inexplicably vexed.

Without another word, he slams his hand against the door control and leaves Young's quarters.

As Rush's footsteps fade out in the corridor, Young sighs and lowers his head into his hands. Shit.

None of this is what he'd imagined when he'd led Rush into his quarters for a drink. In hindsight, that was probably naive of him, because looking back on their relationship it feels like this might have been coming for a long time. He'd thought he was alone in this, in these desires. But apparently Rush feels it too, if the way he clung to Young yesterday is anything to go by.

God. He shouldn't have done that, shouldn't have given in when Rush kissed him. Because Rush was drunk and he was mourning the loss of Doctor Perry, and fuck, Young shouldn't have taken advantage of the situation like that.

But when Rush told him about the loophole, about how none of it had ever been intended to undercut Young's trust, he'd just... Everything he'd been feeling since coming out of stasis, every bit of betrayal and anger at Rush for lying to him, it had all morphed into such a hard spike of need that he hadn't been able to help himself. He'd wanted to touch Rush, to hold him, to give him at least something to get through his grief. And when Rush had kissed him all those emotions he'd been suppressing since before even going into stasis had surged to the forefront. He'd tried to hold back, he'd tried to give Rush a way out. But Rush had just pressed forward, kissed him again, shivered against him, and Christ, Young had given in.

He can still feel it, Rush's hot breaths skittering over his skin as they'd worked each other to orgasm.

His cock feels warm and thick, and shit, he really hopes that will stop soon, because he can't think, like this. All he wants is more. More of Rush. More of his feverish skin under his fingertips. More of those low moaning noises Rush'd made when he came.
He doesn't know how he somehow always seems to screw everything up. Every single one of his forays into romantic relationships has ended in pain and heartbreak, and this latest one might take the cake, because he needs Rush – more than just personally. He needs Rush to keep the ship afloat, to get them through alien attacks and mechanical failures and everything else that could go wrong on Destiny. And he needs Rush to talk to him in order for that to happen. He needs Rush to communicate with him, and this seems like the worst goddamn way to interrupt their burgeoning friendship. He can hardly think of a more effective method of killing that thin sprig of trust that was finally starting to grow between them.

Jesus, sometimes he really fucking hates himself.

Rush is pissed at him, that much is obvious from their little exchange just now. And he's right to be.

Young presses his forehead harder into the palms of his hands. He fucked up, he knows he did, and shit, he has no idea how to make it all right again.

The least he can do, though, is to honor Rush's wish of pretending it never happened. No matter how much he wants to kiss Rush again. No matter how hard it will be to stop his mind from wandering back to last night, or to all the other things he still wants to do to Rush. He will pretend nothing happened, and he will focus on what they need to focus on right now. Rush needs to recover from losing Doctor Perry. Young needs to make sure Eli doesn't spiral into depression over the loss of Ginn. And, not more importantly, but more pressingly, Telford needs to back off of Rush.

Young nods to himself, finally letting his hands drop and getting up from the edge of the bed. He can ignore his attraction to Rush – he's had plenty of practice at that. He can pretend this never happened. Hopefully that'll be enough.

Somehow he doubts it.

“Eli?” Chloe asks carefully as she steps inside his room.

Eli is lying on his bed, earphones blasting something she can't quite make out.

“Hey,” she says, when he opens his eyes and looks at her. He doesn't take out the earbuds, but he does dial down the volume on his iPod, and Chloe gives him a watery smile as she sits on the edge of his tiny bed. “I brought you some soup.”

It hadn't actually been that hard to get it. They're still low on supplies, and Becker is still serving nothing but berry-filled protein slop for breakfast, but when she'd explained the situation Becker's face had grown sad and empathetic, and he'd cooked up a batch of 'As close to chicken soup as I could get without any actual chicken.'

Chloe's pretty sure chicken soup is more for people with colds, but it does always make her feel better. She hopes the same is true for Eli, too.

Eli finally pulls out his earphones and sits up against the wall. “Thanks,” he says, as he accepts the bowl of soup she's brought him.
“Are you okay?” Chloe asks.

Somehow she'd preferred Eli's angry outburst a few weeks back to the sad little head shake he gives her now.

“I love her, you know?” he says, voice quiet and subdued.

Chloe doesn't know how to respond, so she just nods.

“I really needed her here. She made everything feel less... less awful.”

“She loved you too,” Chloe says. Because she knows it's true. She's still not entirely sure what happened, what Destiny's AI did to Ginn and Doctor Perry exactly. But she's seen the way Ginn looked at Eli, and it was the exact same way she'd looked at him before Simeon had killed her.

Sometimes Chloe thinks that when Ginn's and Doctor Perry's consciousnesses had inhabited her mind they'd left something behind. Like an imprint of sorts. It's little more than a feeling, but she knows with absolute certainty that Ginn had loved Eli.

“Can't you fix it, somehow?” she asks. Because if there's anyone who can, it's him.

Eli shakes his head again. “It's completely random, Destiny's pattern. It's impossible to write a program to fish out the corrupted strings of code.”

“You can't take out Destiny's code by hand?”

Eli sighs and shakes his head. “It would take years. And even then, if I missed one little thing, there'd always be the risk of letting Destiny have free rein over us again.”

“But you could try,” Chloe says, nudging her hand against Eli's until he grabs the spoon and brings a few bites of soup to his mouth.

There's a vaguely speculative look bleeding into his eyes now, and she can't help but think it's better than the forlorn sadness on his face that had been there when she'd walked in.

“...Maybe,” he says eventually.

Chloe gives him another small smile and climbs higher on the bed so she can rest her back against the wall, next to Eli. She bumps her shoulder into his carefully, and watches him finish his soup.

He doesn't say much else, but sometimes sitting together in silence is better than speaking anyway.

Rush curses and only barely refrains from slamming his fist down against the edge of his console. It's not working. He can't fucking concentrate on dissecting Kiva's digitized consciousness when his mind keeps being invaded by memories of yesterday. Mandy's tearful face before she'd blinked out of existence – and Rush knows he might as well have killed her, because one glance at her program this morning and he'd realized she was more corrupted code than person. Even if he could find a way to somehow flush out Destiny's virus-like infection, there wouldn't be enough left of Mandy to constitute a person. How the fuck had he not noticed? How had he let himself be lulled into a sense of safety, of happiness, at her presence, when she wasn't even truly Mandy anymore?
In fact, now that he thinks about it... She'd said parts of her had been lost during the time she and Ginn had been transferred into Chloe's mind. She'd said she'd filled up the missing bits with his memories of her. Even back then, the first time she came back, how much of it was really her? How much of Mandy's program was little more than his own, probably warped, memories of her? Was that why she hadn't believed he loved her when he tried to get out of her simulation?

He groans and shakes his pounding head as if to loosen the circling thoughts that truly serve no purpose other than to distract him from his job. He needs to figure out how to get the information they want from Kiva – before it's too late – and now that Mandy's program isn't here to help him anymore, and now that Eli has holed up in his quarters again, to deal with the loss of Ginn, again, Rush is so goddamn stuck he doesn't even know where to begin.

The worst part, though, the absolute fucking worst part of it, are the random and strikingly hard flashes of arousal that keep nearly overwhelming him. It's an odd and unnerving sensation, especially in combination with the hungover ache in his head and the mournful numbness of losing Mandy.

He can still feel it, though, the cold metal of Young's door against his back. The hot bulk of Young's weight against his chest. Young's tongue and his lips and his hands. Fuck.

It had been a discovery – a revelation, really – when every piece had fallen into place and he'd finally understood what all those confusing feelings for Young meant. It wasn't just that he wanted to get along with Young to make his life and his work easier. It wasn't even just that perhaps he quite enjoyed the man's company. It wasn't just about the possibility of friendship. No, of course it wasn't, because that would have been fine. That would have been acceptable.

Instead, it turns out all those strange, insistent urges to touch Young hadn't come from a place of friendship. Or, at least, not just from a place of friendship. No, what happened yesterday opened his eyes to the fact that he is attracted to Colonel Young. Very much so, apparently.

Colonel Young. A man. A man who tried to kill him once. A man who, in the grand scheme of things, is probably the single most goddamn obstructive nuisance Rush has ever experienced in his entire life. A man who, when confronted with trouble, regularly tends to jump to solutions that include offering himself up to die. A man who will probably withdraw from any attempts to create some sort of solid bond between them now, because he'd clearly regretted what happened last night. And Jesus fucking Christ, as if Rush's life wasn't complicated enough. He does not need to add these worries to his daily repertoire, because he has enough going on as it is.

Another hot surge of want licks through his lower belly as his mind replays the rumbling, low groan Young had made into his mouth last night when Rush pushed that first kiss deeper, dirtier. God, Young's voice is...

Fuck, he needs to concentrate.

Focus on Kiva. Kiva's mind. Figure out how to get the information they need. Hopefully save Earth from another Lucian Alliance attack. Hopefully get Telford off his back somehow. Forget about last night – it didn't happen. Or, perhaps, it did happen, but it doesn't matter.

Rush forces his eyes to focus on his monitor and pretends he doesn't still feel the ghost of Young's arm around his stomach, or his calming warmth against his back.
“I spoke to them this morning,” Camile says with a slight nod. “The IOA is prepared to back us up if Rush can give them the information they need.”

Young nods back – it's nice to know the day doesn't seem completely doomed, despite its rather shitty start. “That's good news.”

“Providing Rush figures it out,” Camile answers. She looks like she does too often, halfway between skeptical and worried, and Young wonders how she is holding up after coming back from stasis. He knows her wife waited for her, and it's hard not to remember how ecstatic Camile had looked that first day. But time keeps moving, and that joyful thrill of reunion probably wore off after a little while, and it must be hard to deal with the fact that there are literally billions of light years between them. Young knows from experience it's not easy to stay happy in a long-distance relationship, and he can imagine that probably being even more true when the separation is involuntary.

“He will,” Young says. He does believe Rush will figure it out – he always does, doesn't he? Young tries to redirect his thoughts before they can grasp onto Rush and the way he'd kissed him last night, so full of desperation, and the way he'd curled his fingers into Young’s hair, tight enough that it almost hurt—

“What about Chloe's mother. Mrs. Armstrong?” Young asks. “Does she have any political clout?”

Camile gives him an amused look, and Young isn't entirely sure what to make of it. “As far as I know she's not very active, politically speaking. But she knows people. It probably couldn't hurt to talk to Chloe about it.”

“Hm,” Young nods.

This isn't his preferred method of dealing with things, if he's honest. There are too many variables he can't influence, too many players and not nearly enough control. But he can't storm this problem and fight it head-on. He can't make it go away by brute force. He can't just go to Telford and make him back down. Although he should probably try talking to him, one on one, to see if he can make David see reason.

For a flash of a second he imagines himself telling David to leave Rush alone because he's important to Young – because Young has feelings for him – and he can't quite determine whether Telford would be disgusted or bemused or amenable if he used that as an argument.

“Everett? Are you alright?” Camile asks, and for a quick moment Young thinks she can somehow read all of it on his face. All of what happened last night. Like maybe it's printed in big, black letters on his forehead: 'I fucked Rush' or 'I fucked up'. Both would be apropos enough.

“I'm fine” he says tersely, willing his expression to stay blank. “I need you to schedule a visit to Earth for me. I want to speak to David.”

“Of course,” Chloe says, after Young explains to her what's going on with Telford and Rush. “I'll ask her.”

He's not sure how much good it will do. Sometimes he even wonders whether letting anyone use the communication stones at all is still a good idea. It seems to do little more than jar people back to the knowledge that being on Destiny isn't a choice – that they have people back on Earth waiting for
them to come home.

But right now he's grateful for the stones, because maybe Mrs. Armstrong doesn't have much political pull on her own, but having her ask the military Generals, the Senators, even the President's wife to interfere with Telford's investigation might be exactly what he needs to stop David's witch-hunt in its tracks.

He knows Chloe cares about Rush. A lot. It isn't hard to imagine why – he'd only felt the torturous pain of those triangular Nakai devices for a few seconds when Rush had used one on him, and he'd been writhing on the floor in pain. Chloe had been with the aliens for hours. And Rush had saved her. And then he'd saved her again by bargaining with those blue assholes for the cure to her dehumanization, and she'd come back with all her math knowledge intact. Of course she feels protective of Rush. Of course she loves him.

“T'm not going to let Telford take him,” Young says to her, and he feels strangely happy when she nods at him like she wouldn't expect anything else from him.

Something had changed, between the civilians standing up to military rule by organizing a coup and Chloe being changed into one of the Nakai to the point where he couldn't justify keeping her on board anymore. Something had changed, for Chloe, because she'd somehow decided she could trust Young after all.

“I know,” she says. “Does he?”

Young doesn't know whether she's talking about Rush or David. Or maybe he does. She doesn't care about Telford's opinion, she just wants him to back off. So... she's asking about Rush. Which is a whole lot more complicated, because he has no idea whether Rush understands how serious Young is about keeping him right here, right where he belongs.

He doesn't know what to say for a long time, so a deafening silence falls between them.

“I hope so,” he answers eventually.

Chloe gives him a look that makes him feel like she can see right through him and his pathetic crush, but she doesn't say anything.

After his talk with Chloe, Eli drags himself down to the mess hall for lunch and then makes his way to the control interface room to continue the work on Kiva's consciousness.

Rush works quietly. Not that he's usually such a chatterbox, but today he's remarkably silent as he presses the controls on his console. Eli doesn't mind. He's not really in the mood to talk, himself.

Ginn is gone. And while it's not completely hopeless – there's at least something he can try to get her back – he's still dealing with her loss right now.

It seems like Rush hasn't really gotten any further with Kiva's digital consciousness, and Eli feels a hard stab of worry for his mom. She's too close to the DC area, and he fears that if the Lucian Alliance succeeds with their attack she really won't be safe.

It isn't until Rush's entire body tenses up that Eli hears the heavy sound of footsteps coming closer.
It's Young, he can tell just from the tread. When the Colonel enters the control interface room, his eyes flick over to Rush before focusing on Eli.

"Hey," Young says. Eli gives him a small nod and a 'hi' in return. He wonders idly whether Rush is going to continue pretending Young isn't here at all. And if so, if he's going to keep doing such a bad job at it. Because he's practically radiating tension right now, Eli can tell from over here and he's not even looking at Rush.

"How're you holding up?" Young asks.

"I'm okay," he answers. Not because it's true, but because it's true enough.

"I arranged for you to have a visit with your mom tonight, if you want," Young says, and Eli wants to hug him, because yes, he really does want to see his mother again. He knows he's not up for another visit for weeks, and he hadn't even let himself hope for something like this, but Young... Young is the best. Suddenly there's a lump in his throat, and he's not sure, but he thinks he might start crying if he tries to speak right now, so he just nods at Young and pretends his eyes aren't misting up.

Young puts his hand on Eli's shoulder and squeezes, and it's not quite a hug, but it does make him feel so much better. With a small smile and a nod, Young steps back.

"Rush," he says, turning to Rush's general direction with something that almost looks like apprehension. Rush kind of freezes up before slowly glancing over at Young, and man, these two are even more awkward around each other than before. For a quick second Eli wonders if something happened for them to act so squirrelly, but then Young squares his shoulders and says, "I'm going to talk to David right now. I'll let you know how it went."

Rush's eyes search Young's face for a second, and Eli is expecting him to huff out a breath and say something dismissive, but then Rush drops his gaze and just nods. "Yeah, alright."

Eli is pretty sure he doesn't imagine the way Rush's eyes linger on Young's retreating form for much longer than is totally normal. Not that Rush and Young don't eye each other all the time when they think the other can't see, but this time there doesn't seem to be any hostility or suspicion or even plain nervousness behind Rush's stare. He just looks sort of... lost and confused.

An hour goes by, and neither one of them is making any progress with Kiva's consciousness. Eli keeps thinking about seeing his mom, and then he starts thinking about Ginn, and then he feels upset and unhappy, and then he can't concentrate on his work. Rush doesn't seem to be doing much better; he's distracted as well, and more than once does Eli notice him staring into empty space with a deep frown. Probably thinking about Doctor Perry, Eli figures.

"Okay," Scott says as soon as he steps into the control interface room. "Your shift is over, right? Come with me."

Eli is a little jarred by the sudden interruption, but yeah, he guesses technically his shift is over, and it's not like he's going to get any work done today anyway, and he still has hours to go before he gets to visit Earth, so he lets Scott take him by the arm. He sends Rush a quick look, a question, and Rush just nods at him and makes a small hand gesture to indicate it's alright, and then Matt is dragging Eli out of the room.

"Where are we going?" Eli asks, not quite sure how to feel.

"We're gonna have some fun and take your mind off of all the bad crap for a bit," Scott answers
Eli groans when he realizes where Scott is taking him. “You said we were gonna have fun!”

“Come on,” Scott cajoles him. “It'll be fun, promise.”

“If you make me run laps I'm gonna hate you forever,” Eli grumbles, but Scott just laughs and ushers him into the physical rec room.

And the thing is, Eli thinks as he pummels the makeshift boxing ball until his fists ache. It is kinda fun. And it does make him feel better.

From behind the boxing ball, Scott is commenting on his form – 'lower your right arm a bit', and 'yeah, that's great', and 'whoa, that was a really good one' – and Eli feels that same overwhelming gratitude flow through him. He has friends here. He has family.

Ginn might not be with him right now (and he promises he'll get her back. He will), but he has Chloe, and Colonel Young, and Matt, and even Rush, in a way.

He's not alone.
Chapter 20

“And you believe him?” Telford asks with a raised eyebrow, after Young finishes explaining what Rush told him about his double.

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, sorry Everett, but I don't.” David actually doesn't look very sorry at all, but then Young wouldn't expect him to.

“You can't seriously hold Rush accountable for this,” he says.

Telford shakes his head. “I beg to differ. I can hold him responsible for killing my double, which is exactly what this trial is about.”

“Jesus, David,” Young says. “It wasn't him. He didn't do it. What happened between your doubles was between them – it wasn't Rush.”

“Are you kidding me? They were literally the same person. You can't tell me Rush didn't do it, because he did.”

“Why are you so hung up on this?” Young asks, and he's getting agitated despite the fact that he knows Telford and that he knew not to expect to simply convince him to let go of a grudge he's apparently been harboring for over three years.

“I want to see Rush replaced. I have someone willing to switch bodies with him who is just as, if not smarter than Rush. Someone we can trust. I don't like the idea of you and your people out there at Rush's mercy. He's going to get you all killed one day.”

Young huffs out something of a laugh. “That's sweet, David, really.”

“Look, I'm not trying to get Rush thrown in jail,” Telford says, voice placating and smooth. Young hates it when David tries to spin him like that. They've been friends for twenty years, obviously it's not going to work on him. The fact that Telford still tries is goddamn irritating. “I'm not trying to ruin his life, even though as far as I'm concerned he is a murderer. I just want to take him out of the equation when it comes to Destiny.”

“Taking him away from the ship would as good as kill him, and you know it,” he grits out.

Telford shrugs a little. “If he wants to be melodramatic about it. I honestly don't give a shit.”

“Well, I do,” Young says. “You can't really expect me to go along with this. I get that you think you're looking out for us, and if you had come to me with this plan a few years ago, I would've gladly accepted. But Rush and I... we've worked things out. Mostly. We've come to an understanding, and I don't want anyone other than him as my lead scientist. Your guy can come, if he can find someone willing to swap bodies with him, but you're not taking Rush.”

Telford shakes his head. “Kavanaugh isn't going to play second fiddle to Rush. You know that.”

“All I'm saying is that if you push through with this, I'm going to push back.”

“Everett, come on,” David says. “You know I'm right about this.”

Young almost rolls his eyes. God, the guy is such a stubborn fucking asshole. He's not sure why he
even thought discussing this with him might help, because clearly David made up his mind about it a long time ago, and this is just like talking to a brick wall.

“You know, for how much you hate Rush, you share an alarming number of personality traits with him.”

Telford huffs out a laugh. “Well, then never let it be said I'm a narcissist.”

“David, please think about it,” Young urges him one last time. “No one aboard the ship wants to see Rush go. That should tell you enough.”

“Alright,” Telford says, shaking Young's hand and clasping his free hand around Young's arm tightly. It is strange, how he can both love and loathe the man at the same time. But then his friendship with Telford has always been a little weird. “I'll think about it.”

Young already knows he won't change his mind.

Rush waits.

He waits, and he thinks.

He doesn't have high hopes that Young can somehow convince Telford to stop going after him, but... but there's something that has him waiting despite that. Perhaps it's the idea that Young is on Earth, right now, lobbying on his behalf.

It's not that he expected Young to just drop him and completely leave him to the wolves after what happened last night... but it's still meaningful to him that Young hasn't changed his mind about wanting Rush around. On the ship, in any case.

So perhaps he's not so much waiting for the news Young is going to bring him. Perhaps he's simply waiting for Young.

It's hard to focus on what he should be doing, and while he'd hoped Eli's presence would jump-start some creative problem solving concerning Kiva's consciousness, it didn't do much at all. Maybe it was too much to expect that he'd be fully productive the first day after losing Mandy. He can't seem to stop his thoughts from looping back to her.

Still, it is helping him, in a way. He misses Mandy, he does, but now that he has come to the conclusion that she hadn't really been Mandy for a long time, it's... it still hurts, but it's more of a dull ache than the freshly ripped wound it had been yesterday. He'd been forced to say goodbye to Mandy when Simeon killed her. He had lost her, that day, and that will always hurt. But what he'd said last night was true: after that it wasn't really her anymore. Now that he's fully realized that, it's easier to start closing that partition of his brain, that chapter of his life. It is done, he's already lived through his grief, and now he can focus on his work again.

Or he could, if his mind didn't insist on replaying bits and pieces of last night. Of Young. God, he hasn't a clue how he'd been this blind for so long, but discovering that he's attracted to Young has made it damn near impossible to stop imagining all the ways in which he wants the man. Just the thought of his strong hands, those broad shoulders, the surprisingly delicate bow of his lips... It's enough to set his heart aflutter.
And perhaps Young went along with it simply because he hadn't had sex in so long that anyone might start to seem attractive. But if he was really that desperately horny he could've found someone better, someone prettier, someone less complicated, couldn't he?

Fuck, what if Young wants him in the same way?

What if Young doesn't?

And none of it should matter, because he's not going to do anything with these feelings. He's not even sure how to get to the point of friendship with the man, so how the hell would they make a romantic relationship work?

Of course he could opt to keep things purely physical – regular sex with Young sounds like an incredibly enticing prospect – but somehow he doesn't quite think that'll work. Young is too big, too present, too... too much for Rush to simply shut down all his emotions.

It's a moot point anyway, because Young made it clear this morning that he thought the whole thing had been a mistake. Even if Young shares these feelings, he's not willing to act on them. And Rush isn't desperate enough to force the issue.

He startles a bit when his radio creaks to life.

“Rush, it's Young. Where are you?”

“Control interface room,” he answers, ignoring the way his heart beats a frantic rhythm against his ribcage.

“Any progress?” Young asks the moment he steps inside the CI room, nodding at Rush's console.

Rush shakes his head. “You?”

Young purses his lips ruefully and shakes his head in answer. “Honestly, it was a long shot.”

Rush shrugs and nods. He'd known that, obviously.

“Rush,” Young says, taking a step closer and then frowning a little, like he's not quite sure how to say what he wants to say next. Rush waits for him, trying not to look like he's keeping himself perfectly still. “I hope... I hope you know I'm - we're - going to stop him. You're not going anywhere.”

And honestly, it's different, wanting to reach out and touch Young now that he's aware of his attraction to the man. It's not just Young's uniform he wants to claw his fingers into. It's not just his hand he wants to grasp. He flicks his eyes down to the floor, because looking at Young right now might make bad ideas seem wholly reasonable, and gives Young a short nod.

“Don't worry,” Young says, reading his body language for concern or insecurity – which suits Rush just fine at the moment. It's not as if it's entirely untrue. “If it comes down to it...” He trails off, and Rush wonders if Young would ever consider disabling the communication stones for him. Probably not. That'd be too much to ask.

“We'll figure something out,” Young finishes. When Rush looks up into Young's face, there's a small smile there, something steely and resolved that makes him imagine Young standing up to all of Homeworld Command for him. Again he's nearly overcome by the urge to wrap himself around Young, to push him up against one of the consoles and kiss him until they are both out of breath and aroused enough to make sex in the middle of the control interface room seem like an entirely solid
Perhaps something in his face gives his thoughts away, because Young lowers his eyes and Rush can see a hot flush creep up his neck, and God, he feels like a damn schoolboy.

“I, uh,” Young says, sounding nothing like the confident man he'd been just a minute ago. “I should go. Paperwork.”

“Yeah,” Rush rasps, turning back to his monitor. “I have work to do, too.”

Young nods and walks out of the room, and Rush feels the absurd urge to straighten his clothes, as if they did more than simply talk just now.

Christ, this whole thing with Young is spinning out of control.

The next day, things are better. Something seems to have settled for Eli, at least a bit. The boy is talking again, coming up with ideas to solve the puzzle of Kiva's consciousness, and once or twice he even sees the kid smile. When Rush asked him how he was doing this morning, Eli had given him an inquisitive stare before nodding and saying, “I saw my mom last night.” Apparently that is all the explanation Rush is going to get, but he supposes it suffices.

Rush himself... he's doing better, too. The ghost of Mandy no longer circles his thoughts like a vulture, waiting to pounce on every stray thought that might lead him back to that aching sense of loneliness. In fact, it's not loneliness that he's feeling. In a way, perhaps it should be. In a way he is alone, or at least not truly together... But he doesn't feel lonely, exactly. Young is here. Young is behind him. Young is going to do everything in his power to keep Telford from taking Rush, he'd said as much yesterday. Rush still hasn't shaken off the warm glow that's been spreading through his chest since that conversation. Because it means he isn't alone. Not really.

Last night he'd been in bed, studying the nearly invisible patterns of the metal seams on the ceiling, when images of Young had started swimming before his eyes. Young giving him that resolute smile as he promised him they'd find a way to keep him on Destiny. Young's face, shocked and aroused, as he'd pulled back from that first kiss. Young's eyes on him, heated and dark like burning coal as they'd breathed each other's air and stroked each other to completion. Before long he was fantasizing not just about what happened the other night, but about what else could happen. What else he still wanted to happen.

He hadn't masturbated in weeks – the short-lived physical release generally not outweighing the dull sense of shame and loneliness afterwards – but thinking of Young... Young's mouth kissing his lips, his neck, intently moving lower... It had been natural to inch his hand down his pants and give himself a few slow strokes. Careful and a little uncertain, the way Young might be if they did this without the fire of alcohol and sure-to-come regret in their veins. Or perhaps he'd be strong and forceful, feigning confidence by pushing him deeper into the mattress, curling his fingers around Rush's length in a grip tight enough to scare him a bit.

That thought had drawn a soft moan out of him, and Rush had kicked off his underwear at that point. Allowed his imagination to ravish him.

He'd come with Young's name on his lips, and it had been so good to bring himself to orgasm to the fantasy of an actual person. It wasn't like most other times he'd tried to pleasure himself since coming
to the ship, where he'd had to carefully maneuver his thoughts and insipid fantasies around things he
didn't want to think about – people he didn't want to think about – because they'd just leave him
feeling hollow or distraught or embarrassed. No, it wasn't like that at all. He'd been able to focus
entirely on Young, and he'd come so hard and so fast he'd almost wondered if he'd be able to go
again. Because even after the physical release of orgasm he was still aroused. The fantasies didn't
suddenly disappear, or feel sullied and disjointed. They were still there, and they were still appealing.

In the end, he'd fallen asleep with the memory of Young kissing him vivid in his mind, and he'd slept
a full eight hours. Nearly twice what he usually sleeps.

It has invigorated him, and it's almost like there's a bounce in his step today. He'd ran into Young in
the mess hall this morning, and while he'd expected to feel a bit flustered and uncomfortable –
Young had said and done some pretty incriminating things in his mind, last night – it was mostly
overshadowed by a deep, longing sense of... of something. He still hasn't worked out exactly what it
means, but he knows that he wants Young.

Young had given him a small smile, almost embarrassed but not quite, and ducked his head in a
slight nod as he'd disappeared down the corridor.

Rush feels his lips quirk up at the memory. For all that the man has the build and personality of a bull
in a china shop, he's oddly endearing with it.

“Rush,” Eli says, and Rush schools his face before turning over to the boy. He half expects Eli to ask
him why he's smiling, but Eli looks serious. “What if we use the neural interface chair?”

And Jesus, of course. Why hadn't he thought of that? Perhaps the fact that his last time in the chair
hadn't exactly been consensual made him blind to the possibilities here, but that's no excuse.

Still, berating himself for not thinking of this isn't going to do anyone any good, so he lets it go and
turns more fully to Eli.

“We'd have to write a simulation. Program certain limiting parameters into Kiva's mind, but...”

“...The person in the chair would be able to interrogate her. And she wouldn't be able to lie,” Eli
finishes.

Rush nods, and Eli grins at him. It's not quite his pre-stasis grin, but it's close enough that Rush feels
his own lips curl up in response.

“Colonel?”

Young looks up to see Rush standing in the door opening to his quarters. God, the man is easy on
the eyes – hair too long and beard too scruffy and eyes so goddamn dark it makes Young want to get
in closer to see exactly where the pupil ends and the iris begins.

None of it is helpful in the slightest.

“Rush,” he says, trying to keep his voice even and forcing himself not to think about the solid feel of
Rush's chest against his, the way his grip had tightened when he'd come, the way he'd kissed like
Young was the last person in the universe, the way—God, if this is his best attempt at pretending
nothing happened between them, he is seriously fucking shit at it.

“Eli and I had a bit of a... a breakthrough, you could say.” Rush sounds hesitant but accomplished, and Young takes off his reading glasses to communicate that Rush has piqued his interest. To invite him to elaborate.

“Kiva?”

Rush nods. “Eli's finishing up the last bits of programming as we speak. If we use the neural interface chair, whoever sits in it can question her consciousness for information. We're suppressing parts of her mind artificially, which means she should be cooperative. And that she will not be able to answer untruthfully.”

Young frowns. He hates that it always seems to come down to that goddamn chair with Rush. He doesn't trust it, he knows what it can do to people – Franklin and even Rush himself are proof of that. “You want someone to sit in the chair?”

Rush shrugs. If Young didn't know better, he'd say it was a slightly uncomfortable shrug. “There's a reason we call it an 'interface,'” he says. “Its function is to be a tool for communication. Between us and the ship. Between us and the ship's data. Seeing as the coming Lucian Alliance attack on Earth makes this whole thing rather time sensitive, I'd say it's worth the risk.”

Young narrows his eyes. “Would you sit in it yourself?”

Now it's Rush's turn to frown. “I doubt Homeworld Command would take my report at face-value, Colonel. But yes, if no one else volunteers, I'll do it myself.”

And that's... Young can't stop seeing the chair as a big, looming threat in his mind's eye. He can't forget the way the chair killed one of his people, turned Rush into little more than a soulless puppet, nearly ended him three times. Yet he can't help but admit to himself that it has had its uses, too.

If Rush is willing to sit in it himself he must believe that it's safe. Especially since the last time he sat in the chair Destiny fucked him over but good, transferring his personality out of his body and keeping it locked up in a simulation.

“Ohay,” he nods, coming to a decision. “I'll do it. How much longer do you need?”

He can't quite interpret the look Rush gives him. “Tomorrow morning,” he says eventually. “Give me until eight AM.”

Young wants to demand why Rush needs another ten hours when he just told him Eli was about finished with the programming, but then an insane thought pops into his head. And maybe... maybe he doesn't want to let go of the overly optimistic hope that Rush wants to double-check everything in order to assure it really will be safe, for Young. He knows it's stupid, and he knows thinking like this – like Rush actually cares about him in this way – won't lead anywhere but to heartache and disappointment. But it's not as if it'll hurt anyone but himself, and it's not like anyone will ever know, so he allows himself this tiny flicker of comfort and refrains from asking.

“Alright,” he says, giving Rush an intent nod and pretending he doesn't feel tempted to get up from behind his desk to push Rush down onto it. To leech his body heat into his own chest. To dishevel his hair and turn his mouth red and swollen. To wrench another orgasm out of him and feel that low moan against the skin of his lips again. His ears are turning hot, because he's really doing a piss poor job at pretending the other night never happened and the way Rush looks away and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans feels like an admonishment. Young clears his throat and looks at the
door. “Alright. Tomorrow morning, then.”
Rush is already there, in the neural interface room, when Young walks in. He's asked TJ and Camile along, and Eli is standing next to Rush with an expression that is half excited pride and half apprehension.

Alright. No sense in dragging this out any longer than he has to. “You ready?” he asks Rush and Eli. Rush gives him a tight nod, and Eli murmurs a 'yeah', so he settles down in the chair.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Camile asks, gaze intently locked on Rush, and Young feels a swell of fondness for her.

“We've checked every protocol thrice,” Rush says with a nearly unnoticeable sigh, and Young wonders if he worked through the night. The stringy quality of his hair and the exaggerated lines around his eyes suggest he just may have. “There will be a door at all times. If the Colonel wants out of the simulation, all he has to do is step through it.”

“Kiva should be in cuffs, too. Unable to move,” Eli adds, sending Young a reassuring nod. “And unable to lie.”

Okay, he's heard enough. “Let's see what she has to say, then.”

Rush's eyes flicker over to him for a second, and then he presses a few buttons and Young's arms and legs are restrained as the bolts slot against his temples with a familiar 'snick'.

The simulation is... very white. He's in a room, an interrogation room, it seems. White walls and white table and white chairs, and a huge mirror on one wall. At his back, the promised door is white, too. The only thing that isn't crisp and almost achingly bright to his retinas is the woman sitting at the table. Her leather outfit and her dark, dark eyes contrast starkly with the rest of the room.

“Hello,” he says, for lack of anything better to say. Just seeing her does something complicated to his insides. She has to be one of the scariest people he's ever had the displeasure of meeting. She is responsible for the death of several people aboard Destiny, directly and indirectly as well, by bringing Simeon on board. She's responsible for the thirty-seven people that died on P2X-659. She's responsible for Carmen never being born. 'Hello' seems like both an understatement and more than she fucking deserves.

“Hello,” she replies. Her eyes are... not empty, per se, but not sharp, either. Her voice instills a spike of fear and rage in him, but she doesn't sound like she's trying to intimidate him.

“Do you know who I am?” he asks.

“Colonel Everett Young, USAF, currently leading the ninth chevron mission on Destiny,” she answers evenly.

“Do you know where you are?”

This gives her pause. “We dialed Destiny from a planet that was set to explode. I remember going
through the stargate from there, but I don't remember coming out on the other side. I assume I didn't make it.” She looks around the room. “I never believed in an afterlife.”

Young wonders whether he should let her. He doesn't want to give her any comfort, if he's honest. She doesn't deserve any comfort.

*It's not her*, he tells himself. *It's a computer simulation. It's here to give you information that you need.*

He takes a deep breath and sits down in the chair closest to her. She's cuffed to the table, and Young wonders if that's a precaution or if it's intended to make him feel more at ease. Possibly both.

“Alright,” he says, pushing his thoughts and emotions to the background and settling fully into his role as commanding officer. His personal relationship with her is not of import right now. He needs to find out anything he can, the lives of millions of people may depend on it. And... and so does Rush's. “I have some questions for you.”

The rest of the day goes by in a flurry of activity. Kiva had known a lot. She'd known more than they'd ever even dared hope for, and her knowledge extended to several plans for future attacks on Earth with varying degrees of detail. Homeworld Command seems very pleased with his report, and Young hopes they'll be able to extrapolate enough from it to stop the current threat on DC. Because while Kiva might have known a lot, all her information is three-and-a-half years old.

He gets taken from little room to little room, asked to repeat what he'd learned from speaking to Kiva's mind scan. They tell him to let others from Earth come on board via the stones to interrogate Kiva as well – and he'll have to ask Rush and Eli about that, because he has no idea what happens when someone who's using the stones sits in the chair.

Before he gets sent home, back to Destiny, an IOA representative speaks to him, bending his head and talking in hushed tones. “Mrs. Wray wanted me to let you know she'll need a few more hours on Earth, but she'll report to you tonight.”

He nods. He's glad to be going back. He's happy he and his crew managed to help with the situation here on Earth, but now... now he just wants to get back to Destiny.

“The IOA has already set the wheels in motion,” Camile says with a small, sphinx-like nod. The three of them are in Young's quarters, and Rush has a hard time not thinking about what happened against that very door. How he'd woken up curled around Young in that very bed. Despite the fact that they're talking about something incredibly serious, something that directly affects his future aboard the ship, his cheeks feel a little hot and he has a hard time concentrating fully on the words Camile is saying. “This might just be the push needed to get Telford's entire case dismissed.”

Young nods. His face is impassive, but Rush thinks there might be something relieved about the set of his eyebrows. The urge to smooth the curve with his thumb makes his fingers tingle. He flicks his gaze away before it turns into a stare, and tries to focus on Camile again.
“It certainly doesn't hurt that Mrs. Armstrong has been making phone calls and meeting with people, as well,” she says. And that kind of takes him aback.

“Chloe's mother?” he asks.

Camile smiles at him. “Chloe asked her to get involved.”

And that... God, every single time he feels like this he's not sure what to do with his hands. It's bewildering how much it matters to him that Young is willing to step into a simulation to gather intel despite the fact that he hates the chair. How much it matters that Camile has been flexing her political muscles over on Earth to get Telford off his case. How much it matters that Chloe convinced her mother to defend him, to fight for him, in her own way.

Young is staring at him, and he can feel Camile's eyes on him as well, so he clears his throat and shakes his hair out of his face. “Right. That... is good.”

Young looks away again, and Camile still has that content little smile on her face, like she knows exactly what he's thinking right now.

But what he's thinking... what he's thinking is that perhaps he can allow himself some hope. Perhaps he can allow himself some hope that Young may have actually dealt with this right. That everything is going to turn out fine, and that placing his trust in Young was the right choice. It feels like there's a swarm of bees buzzing around in his ribcage.

Camile promises to update them as soon as she finds out more from HWC, and when they step out of Young's quarters, she gives him a small nod before leaving in the opposite direction of him.

He needs... he needs to calm down. He needs to take his mind off of all of this for a little while, so he goes to the observation deck. He watches the streaming wisps of color of the FTL trail and tries to accept that warm, aching hope in his chest. Can he allow this? Can he let himself believe that this is going to be alright? And, somehow even more importantly, can he let himself believe that he is home here? Not just on the ship, but with these people. Can he let himself settle in the comfort of having people he cares about – people who care about him – again?

Because he wants it. He wants to not feel alone, and the more of this comfort he gets, the more he needs it. Christ, before stasis he was almost content exchanging simple morning greetings with Young, and now he can't sleep without remembering Young's arm draped heavily over his stomach, Young's presence hot and sturdy at his back.

He drags his hand through his hair and shakes his head. He's not going to figure this out right now. He's going to take a shower and go to bed, and perhaps tomorrow morning he'll have figured out how to feel.

Rush isn't entirely sure why he finds himself in front of Young's quarters again a few hours later. He'd been in bed, trying to fall asleep and failing miserably, and by the time he'd realized that he wasn't just roaming the corridors aimlessly, he'd discovered that yeah, he really does want to see Young right now.

So, here he is, hand hovering over the door control. He's not quite sure whether he should knock or not. He's not quite sure what he's even here for. He just... he needs to see Young. Just for a bit. His
fingers press forward and Young's door slides open.

“Rush?” Young asks from behind his desk, and Rush feels that familiar flutter in his chest at the sight of him. But something deeper, something heavier, settles a bit. For some reason, seeing Young sets his mind at ease.

Young stands up from behind his desk and puts his glasses on the keyboard of his open laptop. “There's no new development from Homeworld Command, yet,” he says quietly. And no, Rush hadn't expected there to be. It's eleven PM, the only stones in use are the ones for personal visits, so how would there even be any news on the situation with Telford or the Lucian Alliance attack?

“No, I know,” Rush says, pressing the door control to close it behind him and stepping closer to Young's desk.

“Rush?” he says again, when it becomes clear Rush isn't going to say anything more. Young steps around his desk and leans against it, and he's almost within touching distance now. Eventually he asks, “Why are you here?”

And the thing is, Rush still isn't entirely certain. Perhaps he came here to say thank you, to tell Young he appreciates what the man did for him. Perhaps he came here because he wants to not worry about this for a little bit, because he wants to take his mind off of Telford's threat, and nothing distracts him quite as easily as being face to face with Young in the quarters they’d... they’d had sex in. God, he wants to do it again. He wants to do more. He wants Young to kiss him and to touch him and to want him back, and the way Young is looking at him right now, the curve of his shoulders, his fingers tight on the edge of his desk – like he's trying to keep himself still against it, like he's trying not to give in to the urge to move closer... It makes it seem more than possible that perhaps Young wants it, too.

It's probably not smart. It might be a huge mistake. But he's already done it once, and he can't stop himself right now, and even the smallest chance of having this seems worth the risk of losing everything, so he steps forward and takes Young's face between his hands before kissing him.

Christ, yes, Young's mouth is fucking perfect, his body exudes heat like a furnace, and his hands grip onto his waist in a startled reflex that makes Rush shiver with desire. He pushes forward, licks against the seam of Young's lips to get inside, and can't help the soft moan when Young opens up for him. For a few moments, all he knows is Young and warmth and that this is everything he wants right now.

“Rush, wait,” Young says breathlessly, pushing back from the kiss and out of the grasp of Rush's hands with a slight flush on his cheeks that makes Rush want to... He leans forward again, but Young holds him back. “What are you doing?”

“I thought it was rather obvious,” he says, trying to keep his voice bland and unassuming. Because Young's hands on his shoulders are holding him at a distance, and the rebuke makes something wild and panicked flicker through his chest.

“I don't...” Young looks away then, and Rush is left wondering how he was going to finish his sentence. 'I don't want this'? Because that is just flat-out inaccurate, judging by the slight bulge in Young's trousers.

“Perhaps we should take it as a happy coincidence we're physically compatible,” Rush says reasonably. “This can be entirely casual.”

He doesn't allow himself to think why that is a lie. Why he is fooling himself, swaddling them both
in plausible deniability, only to ensure more of Young's warmth against his skin, more of his weight pressed into his body, for the short term.

The silence between them goes from oppressive to fucking excruciating, and Rush feels like every cell in his body is craning towards Young, waiting for him to finally respond.

“I'm not great at casual,” Young admits with a small, self-deprecating smile, and something springs loose in Rush's chest, because this? This is why he wants... why he wants the Colonel. Because Young will be careful to the point of exasperation – measured and sluggish in his every action – but then he will flash his cards in an unexpected move of wild abandon, taking a step, a risk, that would scare the fuck out of Rush himself.

Rush wants that. He wants someone like that, to balance out his own personality, his own reckless impulses and self-imposed restrictions. His—

Well, he can rationalize it all night long, but he wants Young. Perhaps it's really just that simple.

Not casual works, especially aboard this ship. Especially with a man who's been hovering in the corner of his every waking thought for years now. Especially when their relationship is made up of interconnected extremes; a juxtaposition of lies and truths, betrayal and trust, attempted murders and saved lives.

Rush reaches out, tentatively places his hand on the side of Young's neck, slides it upwards until his thumb comes to rest on Young's cheek and his fingers scratch through the hair on the back of Young's head.

It feels entirely too intimate.

It feels like the first right thing he's done all day.

Young is looking at him, face placid but eyes full of fiery intensity, waiting for Rush's judgment, for his decision. It's a heady awareness, that he has Young in the palm of his hand, quite literally, and he takes a few seconds to revel in it.

“Yeah, okay,” he breathes eventually. “Fuck casual.”

And then he finally gets to kiss Young again.

Young makes a soft sound into his mouth as their tongues touch, tentatively at first. A slow and careful slide that devolves into a hard, frantic, wet heat that makes something in Rush's stomach quiver wildly. Young strips him out of his shirts in one smooth move, and Rush barely has time to push Young's jacket off his shoulders before Young's mouth is on him again and he's being pushed towards the bed as strong and nimble hands slide over the skin of his chest.

Yes, yes, his mind chants, as his knees hit the back of the mattress and Young lowers him onto the bed before climbing on top of him. Rush arches into him as Young sucks his lower lip into his mouth, his thumbs rubbing languidly against Rush's nipples.

He can feel Young's hardness against him and thrusts his hips up, and Young makes a beautiful little sound that Rush really wants to hear again. He feels hot, almost feverish, as Young breaks away from the kiss and moves to flick his tongue against Rush's earlobe before taking it into his mouth and biting at it.

“Are you sure about this?” Young asks, a raw growl deep in his voice that makes Rush's skin prickle up in goosebumps.
“Yeah,” he hears himself say, as he moves his hands up to tangle his fingers into Young's hair. Fuck, he loves that hair, thick and unruly and such a contrast to his own. “Yeah, I want it. I want you. Fuck, come on.”

Young looks at him for a second, pupils blown and face almost painfully open, and then he smiles. He takes his time sucking long, lingering kisses into the line of his neck, and Rush feels like he's about to burst out of his skin. It feels good, so good, to have Young's tongue and lips on the vulnerable flesh of his throat, his teeth grazing lightly over his carotid artery, and Rush can't help but wonder if Young can feel how quickly his heart is beating right now.

He wants Young's shirt off, he wants to feel his warm skin against his chest, but then Young's hands wander lower, and everything screeches to a halt when a palm cups his hard prick and squeezes gently over the soft, worn fabric of his trousers.

Young makes quick work of his belt and his top button, and Rush lifts his hips eagerly as Young strips his jeans down to his knees.

“Scoot up,” Young says, a little breathlessly, and the hand on his arse is strong and resolute in guiding him higher up on the bed.

Young is kneeling over him now, and part of Rush isn't quite willing to believe that Young is planning what it looks like he's planning, but then Young puts his fingertips on the edge of his underwear, and fuck, yeah, if the look he sends him – a heated little smile that makes him look both predatory and like an overexcited puppy – is any indication, he's really going to...

Rush curses quietly as Young quickly pulls his underwear down, and then Young's eyes are raking over his cock, unashamedly taking in his evident arousal – his shape, his damp tip peeking all the way out of his foreskin, and God, it's excruciating and embarrassing and it turns him on like crazy to be seen like this. By Young.

It seems like hours go by before Young finally touches him, and even then it's only with one finger, starting low at the base and trailing all the way up, slowly, fascinated, until he reaches the head and swipes over it lightly. Young takes his finger away, and his eyes find Rush's again as he brings his fingertip to his mouth and licks it clean deliberately.

“Fuck,” Rush breathes out, because yes, Young is fucking tasting him and this is something that's definitely going to happen. Jesus Christ.

Young huffs out a soft breath, and his face is mild and amused when he finally bends down, moves closer, to fold his lips over the head of Rush's cock. The wet, hot cavern of his mouth feels unbelievable.

“Jesus!” Rush says, and bucks his hips up before he can think to stop himself. Young puts his left arm over his stomach, restricting his movements, and then his other hand closes around the base of his prick and starts stroking in a slow, tantalizing rhythm. There's still a bit of that amusement on Young's face, but it's quickly being crowded out by a look of focused intent. God, the man looks positively gorgeous like this, and Rush can feel himself straining forward to get that fucking perfect mouth closer to his cock again.

Young gives him a look like he knows exactly what Rush is doing, corner of his mouth tilting minutely upwards, and then he bends forward and licks over the tip of his cock smoothly, lapping against his slit. Rush lets his head fall back against the mattress as a low groan works its way out of his throat. Fuck, that feels good. There is no way Young hasn't done this before, and the thought makes cold and hot needles dance over the palms of his hands.
His heart is racing and his skin prickles with lust, but Young's movements are unhurried and fluid, ever continuous, and after an indeterminate amount of time the urgency of his desire calms a bit. He lets himself relax a little, focusing on the hot, slick, gentle pressure on his cock and the fluttering nerves skittering around in his stomach, only incrementally coalescing into the first signs of an impending orgasm.

Rush lets his hands drift over the skin of his own abdomen, his chest. Young makes an encouraging noise, and the vibration rips a small moan from his throat. Suddenly Young takes his hand off his prick and places it lower between his legs, tracing a languid pattern up the inside of Rush's thigh. He feels his cock twitch inside Young's mouth, and Christ, none of this is what he'd expected at all. It's gentle and pleasurable and sweet, the way Young slowly massages his way up his sensitive skin until he reaches his balls and fondles them with just the right amount of care.

"Colonel," he groans, not sure what he was going to say or ask for, and vaguely thinking it's somewhat odd to call someone by their title when they're giving you a rather breathtaking blowjob.

Young hums in answer. The vibrations against his dickhead tickle all the way down to his spine, and he moans again. Fuck, he wants... he needs Young to go faster, or he'll... he wants to come, and Young's unhurried licks and sucks are becoming almost torturous. He tries to thrust up a little, but Young's arm is heavy on his abdomen, and for the first time he realizes he's being restrained; Young has him under his control, and that drags another sound from his throat.

He feels Young huff out a breath through his nose, and then his hand is back on his cock, stroking just a bit firmer, just a bit quicker. His mouth is still focusing on nothing but his tip, alternating teasing flicks with longer, slower laps that go fucking everywhere, and providing varying degrees of suction that make Rush's eyes flutter closed against his will.

He's not sure if he can come from just this, and he's not sure if he wants to find out, because already he feels like he might shake himself apart, the pleasure not enough, yet too overwhelming at the same time.

"Please," he hears himself beg, and fuck, he hadn't known that was on the tip of his tongue until he said it, but it's true.

Young draws off his cock and gives him a slow little smile. His lips are the slightest bit puffy and shiny with spit, and Rush can't contain an embarrassing whimper.

"I'll take care of you,” Young promises quietly, before moving back and loosening the laces on Rush's shoes with a few deft flicks of his fingers. He takes off his shoes, and his socks, and peels his trousers and underwear the rest of the way off, and then Rush is truly naked.

Young is still completely clothed, and Rush doesn't know if he likes it. He feels vulnerable and exposed, and if he'd been less affected by the almost overwhelming lust coursing through his veins, he may have protested.

But Young settles over him, his knees between Rush's thighs, and then he's taking his own shirt off, and Rush watches with a dry mouth at the expanse of skin suddenly in front of him. Young is undeniably masculine, more so than anyone he has ever been with, and he wants to explore, to feel, to taste... Just the thought of it sends a shiver down his spine.

Young is watching him with heavy-lidded eyes, and Rush stomps down on the urge to squirm under his gaze. Suddenly Young is moving, placing his hands on top of Rush's, holding them still on either side of his head, and leaning forward to press another deep kiss into his mouth.
Once again Rush feels trapped, restrained, and that little sliver of instinctive fear it invokes makes his heart race and his prick strain before he even realizes that the lingering taste in Young's mouth is him, that's his cock, and Jesus fuck, Young had done that like he'd enjoyed it. Christ, he wants more, so much more.

He arches up into Young, and relishes the warm, velvety feeling of Young's skin against his chest. The rough fabric of his uniform trousers is almost abrasive against the sensitive flesh of his prick, and he wishes he could feel Young's erection – naked and hard and hot – against his own, or in his hand, or even in his mouth. It doesn't matter, actually, because what he really wants is to see Young fall apart. To hear him lose coherency as Rush pushes him over the edge. To watch his muscles contract involuntarily as he spills himself, unable to contain the pleasure anymore. Fuck, yeah, he wants to see Young come almost as bad as he wants to come himself.

"Fuck, come on," he says as he lets his head fall back against the bed, and Young fucking laughs. The sound nearly drives him out of his mind.

"Easy, Rush," he rasps, right into Rush's ear. "We have all night."

And that makes him buck up against the hard fabric of Young's trousers once again, because fuck, he knows Young will do it, he knows Young will break him apart, torture him for hours, and he can't.

"Don't," he pleads, and when he struggles against Young's hold this time, Young releases his wrists. His hands go straight for Young's trousers, and even with the shakiness in his fingers he manages to open them in a matter of seconds. He has his hand on Young's cock before he even realizes that the low, rumbling groan he hears is coming from Young, and then he swings his leg over Young's hip and uses every ounce of momentum he can find until Young is on his back and he's on top of him.

Rush pushes his underwear down and takes a second to admire the view, because this is Young, panting and hard underneath him. He hadn't gotten a good look last time – partly because he was drunk and partly because he'd been too overwhelmed to do much more than just feel it – but God, yeah, he's a perfect specimen of everything Rush has always fought against. Rush wants to see him disheveled, defiled, completely broken by desire and lust.

He also wants to kiss him.

Rush places his hands on Young's chest and leans forward, lets their lips and tongues come together in a wet tangle of heat. It's easier to deal with his arousal, when he's in charge. When he gets to decide what happens next.

Young is skimming his hands over Rush's back, up to his shoulder blades and further down again, and Rush shimmies against him until he's straddling Young's knees, fingers curling into the edge of his boxers to yank them further down.

He doesn't allow himself time to think about what he's going to do, he simply does it. He leans down and licks a quick trail up the length of Young's cock before taking it in hand and closing his lips around the tip. Fuck, it's strange, having a fully aroused prick in his mouth. The taste is... it's skin and a hint of salt and Young. He's tasting Young.

"Rush," Young moans, and he sounds surprised and overwhelmed and right on the fucking edge, and it makes Rush's abdomen buzz with want. He slicks his tongue over the slippery surface of Young's dickhead and closes his eyes like a satisfied cat when Young lets out another ragged little noise.
He starts moving, then, bobbing up and down in a way that may have felt vaguely humiliating if it wasn't for the obvious impact it has on Young, who keeps making these sounds – interspersing them with the occasional bit of blasphemy, or Rush's name – as the rhythm builds steadily.

Young is everywhere, his scent, his taste, his skin against Rush's skin, and it's remarkable how easy it is to lose himself in this. How good it feels to focus entirely on Young, on the heavy weight of his cock in his mouth.

“Rush, wait, I'm--” Young's breath hitches, and then his hips buck up and his cock twitches a little bit as his climax spills into Rush's mouth. For an uncomfortable second Rush isn't sure whether he should spit or swallow, but then Young makes a confused little noise in the back of his throat and Rush wants to see him, see his handiwork. He forces himself to swallow as he draws back from Young's cock to take in the picture before him.

Young looks magnificent. His skin is flushed and covered in a fine sheen of sweat that makes him glisten in the low light of his quarters. His eyes are closed, but they open when Rush leans forward to push back a lock of hair that is plastered to his forehead.

Young looks up at him, a slightly awestruck expression on his face, and then he reaches up to cup the back of Rush's head and pulls him down for a kiss.

“God, you...” he mumbles against Rush's mouth, and then he's kissing him again, tongue sliding heatedly against Rush's. It fills Rush with a sense of perverted accomplishment to think that he's marking Young's mouth with the taste of his own come, with the proof of what they just did.

Young rolls him over, unexpectedly, and settles on top of him, nipping at his lips with a sudden playfulness that surprises Rush.

“You're unbelievable,” Young breathes out with a slight smile, and then he's wrapping his fingers around Rush's prick and moving down lower on the bed until he can fit it in his mouth, and fuck, yeah, he's setting up a serious pace. This is not the slow, torturous teasing from before. Young wants to make him come, and that thought makes the desire and arousal in his lower abdomen coil together hard.

“Jesus, yes,” he groans, and Young hums, perhaps in assent, or perhaps it's a moan, but it is fucking glorious. Everything tingles with the rumbling vibrations against his cock, and he feels his pleasure expand, like a dying star, larger and larger, crowding everything out to the point where its own weight makes it collapse in on itself, and fuck, the wet sounds of Young's mouth on him make it impossible to prolong this nearly transcendent state of being.

“Yeah, almost, Colonel,” he pants against the skin of his own arm. “God, fuck! Faster. Go faster.”

Young speeds up, he listens to him, and in the end that thought is what pushes Rush over the edge. The pleasure crests heavily, winding through every part of his body as his muscles tense up and his back arches off the bed. He thinks he cries out the Colonel's name, he can't be sure, as Young's hands keep his hips pinned to the bed and his mouth sucks around him until he's completely spent.

After what seems like an eternity Young pulls back, and Jesus, his cock feels like it's infused with static electricity.

“Christ,” he moans, and Young chuckles against the skin of his thigh before slowly making his way back up the bed.

Rush hears him kick off his boots and feels him wriggling out of his trousers, but he doesn't open his
eyes to look at Young until he slings a naked arm over Rush's stomach and settles down against him.

It's too tempting, right then. Rush reaches up to tangle his fingers into Young's hair. It's still springy, and thick. And it still feels like it anchors him, somehow.

They lie like that for a long time, not asleep but not completely awake either, until their skin cools to the point where it becomes uncomfortable. A small tremor runs through Rush, and Young must feel it, because he climbs back to pull the comforter out from under Rush's body. He spreads the covers on top of Rush and then slips underneath them beside him.

Rush is a little surprised when Young entwines their legs and leans over to kiss him slowly and softly. He doesn't complain, though, because it's nice. And it actually might just be what he didn't even know he needed.

“Night,” Young says against his lips, and then lies back down and curls himself around Rush's side.

He's already asleep before Rush thinks to say it back.
Waking up in Young's bed is completely different, this time.

After their first night together he'd felt guilty, overwhelmed, unsure. He'd had no choice but to get away, physically and emotionally, because he wasn't ready to deal with any of it. With Young. With all the uncertainties and implications that came with taking the tentative friendship they'd been building and turning it in an entirely new direction.

Now, though, Rush wakes up and doesn't feel any compunctions about rolling up to the warm body next to him. He remembers last night and feels his stomach do a little flip. Young is still asleep, one arm folded under his head and the other slung over his own abdomen, and Rush feels a contented little smile settle on his features as he curls up to Young. He lets his hand roam over Young's chest, enjoying the robust build of the man – the fleshy definition of his muscles, the thin cover of hair, his surprisingly pale and delicate nipples. He hasn't even checked what time it is, because right now he honestly doesn't care.

Not casual, Young had said. Rush isn't sure what that means, exactly. But this, waking up like this with Young, should certainly fall within the parameters of 'not casual', shouldn't it? Rush lowers his head to rest it in the crook of Young's shoulder and stills his hand. Young's chest moves up and down in a slow, calming rhythm, and Rush is not consciously aware of it happening, but before long his own breathing matches Young's.

He does something he's never done on the ship before. He lets himself be lulled back to sleep by the warmth of another person's body.

Young wakes up when he feels something move next to him in bed. His first instinct – years of military training and even longer of being the epitome of 'wait to see which way the wind is blowing' – is to keep still, to feign sleep until he can figure out what's going on.

Last night was... well, it was probably the best night he's had since coming to the ship. Probably longer, if he's honest with himself.

Rush had been amazing, wild and beautiful and determined, and all of it was even better than he'd ever dared imagine. But he hasn't forgotten what happened the first time. Rush had been the one to ask him to spend the night after that ill-advised coupling against the door. He'd reached out and basically pleaded with Young to stay. And the next morning he'd done a complete 180, all but scrambled away from him like a hissing cat.

Last night it had been easy, too easy, to get lost in want and need and the tight ratchet of yes, yes, yes in his head. Everything had had an almost dreamlike quality to it; Rush's hand on his neck, the way he'd said he wanted Young... He'd been ready to believe Rush meant it. That Rush wants it too, as much and as fervently as he does. But now, in the cold shadow of morning, Young isn't sure how serious Rush was when he agreed to this – to whatever it is they did last night – and he's not willing to bet on a good outcome if he spooks Rush right now.

So he pretends to sleep, and he waits.
Rush surprises him, though – and isn't that quickly becoming an unsurprising phenomenon in itself – by rolling up against him and trailing a hand down his chest. Young feels something warm and fluttery take residence in the vicinity of his heart at the gentle intimacy of the touch. After a minute or two, Rush lowers his head and rests it against him, and shortly after that his breathing evens out and he's asleep again.

Young keeps his eyes closed and smiles. Maybe Rush was serious after all.

He doesn't expect the sharp frisson of fear that stutters its way up his pulse – because if Rush was serious when he agreed to this, that means they're going to be in a relationship, and Young's track record—

Rush makes a soft, snuffling noise against his shoulder, pulling Young out of his own head, and the momentary panic subsides. He can do this. They can do this. There's no need to get ahead of himself, they don't have to define this beyond 'not casual'. He doubts Rush is much more inclined to have endless talks about their feelings and the status of their... whatever, understanding, than he is, himself. At least in that way they're well-suited to each other.

Rush's fingers are warm on his chest, and Young lets his head roll to the side until Rush's hair tickles his nose. He brings up his hand to card it through the fine locks, and closes his eyes again.

They don't have to talk about it. He can just enjoy the moment.

It takes nearly a week of continuous prodding and debating, but she succeeds. The IOA keep their word and back her up, and several political heavyweights urge for the trial to be dropped on behalf of Mrs. Armstrong as well. It seems the whole thing becomes more trouble than it's worth to one of the higher-ups, because Rush's case gets dismissed.

“Congratulations,” she says, unable to keep the small smile off her face. It's good that Nicholas gets to stay here, of course. He belongs on Destiny, and letting Homeworld Command think they can just switch the crew out with people of their choice would have set a dangerous precedent. It's also nice to know that she can still get things done back on Earth.

Rush sags a bit in relief, and she doesn't miss the way Young's shoulders lose some of their tension.

“That's great news, Camile,” Young says, leaning back against his desk with a little smile. “I know how hard you worked for this.”

“It was a joint effort,” she answers placidly.

Rush clears his throat. He looks a bit uncomfortable now, and she has to suppress the amused expression that wants to creep onto her face. After a few seconds, he nods at her and brings one hand up to rub at his own shoulder.

“Thank you, Camile,” he says, just when she's about to turn away. It looks like it costs him something, the expression on his face almost pained, and she realizes deep down he hadn't believed she'd actually manage to help him. Or, no... maybe it's not that. Maybe it's that he hadn't believed she'd actually care enough to want to try.

She understands why he'd feel that way – disliked, isolated, disposable – considering his first year
aboard the ship. It still sends a pang of pity through her chest, because it's clear to anyone but Rush that he is important. Not just to the ship, but to them.

“You belong here, Nicholas,” she says gently. “Destiny wouldn't be the same without you.”

He nods again and looks away, left hand restlessly kneading his opposite shoulder, and she decides to leave him be.

“I still have some reports to write,” she says to Young, pressing her palm against the door control of his quarters. Young bids her goodbye, and she's slightly surprised that Rush doesn't join her into the corridor. That he stays with Young.

Rush watches the door slide shut behind Camile, and the moment it closes he moves in on Young. It's not responsible, it's not careful – anyone could barge in right now – but he needs to feel Young's arms around him, his lips against him, his hair and his heat and his strength. Young lets him push into his space, doesn't complain when he wraps his arms around Young's waist and buries his head in Young's neck to press sloppy kisses into the skin of his throat.

Jesus. He's not going to be sent away from Destiny. Telford's nebulous threat, that's been hanging over his head for weeks now, has finally cleared up. He feels giddy with relief.

Young makes a happy little noise in the back of his throat and circles his arms around Rush's shoulders, letting his fingers slip into his hair. “She did it,” he says as Rush licks against the corner of his jaw before nipping at his earlobe.

It wasn't just her, Rush wants to say. “Yeah,” he breathes instead, before pulling back a little and angling his face so he can kiss Young for real. Christ, this past week has been surreal. The ease with which they managed to slide from bumbling attempts at courteous friendship into this, into warmth and intimacy and sex, is baffling.

Young closes his eyes and opens up easily, happily, as Rush pulls him in tighter and maps out the confines of his mouth with the kind of intensity he usually reserves for unearthing Destiny's secrets. He can't hold back the little moan that spills free when Young's tongue rubs against his, purposeful and slick and still just as breathtaking as it was that first time.

Young's hands end up on the back of Rush's head, carding through his hair and making him feel wanted and protected, and damn it, he's not going anywhere. Telford is shit out of luck, his plot failed, thanks to Camile and Chloe and Young – and this warm, achy feeling spreading through his chest is gratitude. He's grateful, because he remembers what those first few months aboard Destiny had been like, and right now he doesn't think he could ever go back to that. Not after experiencing this feeling. Not after realizing what it can be like when he has people in his corner. People willing to stand up for him, to fight for him.

“Colonel,” he hears himself pant against Young's lips. His fingers are gripping into the flesh of Young's sides, holding on as if Young might float away from him at any minute.

Young opens his eyes, pulls back a bit to look at him. The murky olive green of his irises is beautiful in this light, and the contented little smile on his lips makes him seem almost otherworldly. It clogs Rush's throat with emotion, because Young is pleased right now. Young is glad for the news of the dropped trial. He's satisfied feeling Rush against him like this, pressed together chest to chest, lips
wet and tingling. God, Rush never thought he'd see the day when Young actually looked happy, much less that he'd be the reason for it. He leans his forehead against Young's cheek and breathes in deeply.

He wonders whether he should say thank you again. It feels like he should, but it also feels like he's been doing it too much already. Young cups the back of his head more firmly with one hand and sweeps his thumb over his scalp until it's resting right beneath his left ear. His other hand brushes down, circles around Rush's waist, and all of it feels like being cradled in the strong arms of a savior. It's a stupid thought, one Rush shouldn't allow himself to get caught up in, but for some reason it still makes his heart thump in an unsteady rhythm. His eyes burn a little, and he blinks fast to get rid of the blur in his vision.

“Colonel,” he says again, voice noticeably tight with emotion, before pressing a soft kiss into the corner of Young's jaw.

Young huffs out a short breath that Rush can feel and hear right next to his ear. “You're not going anywhere.”

“No,” Rush agrees, letting his hands slide from Young's sides to the small of his back, resting his forehead into the crook of Young's neck, slotting into him like they were made for this. Like the idea of standing still in a quiet, affectionate embrace with Young wouldn't have seemed ludicrous a couple of months ago.

Thank you, he thinks at Young, closing his eyes and breathing in the warm scent of the man's skin. Everything will be okay. He's not going to be taken away from Destiny. He has people here, now. He has Young.

“Our bridge shift is about to start,” Young rumbles against him, and Rush can feel his breath ruffling his hair. “Should we tell Chloe and Eli the good news, first?”

And yes, Rush decides, feeling a little wistful as he pulls back from the warm safety of Young's body. “We should.”

Young gives him that little smile again, and even if Rush had wanted to keep himself from smiling back, he knows he wouldn't have succeeded. They both have words they won't speak – promises and confession neither of them are willing to make, not now, and not yet – but right this moment Rush can't remember the last time he felt this joyous. Young's expression, the way he's looking at him... Rush lets it burn into his retinas, saves it, keeps the image with him. Because he doesn't ever want to forget.

“Alright,” Young says, running his hands through his own hair quickly and then straightening Rush's waistcoat with a tiny grin. “Let's go.”

“I've been thinking about the blueprints Eli found,” Rush says, face angled towards the watery ripple of the gate. He's watching as Scott and TJ lead their teams through the open wormhole, down to a planet that will hopefully help replenish their reserves.

Young smiles, not surprised that Rush is bringing this up. “You want to go explore the ship.”
Rush turns his head to him slyly, a small, answering smile on his face, and God, Young really wants to kiss him. Right out here, in the open, with Park and Volker less than a dozen yards away from them.

“Restocking our food and water supplies is our priority right now,” Young says instead – mostly because he kind of wants to see Rush push for this a bit more. And because he doesn't want to make it too obvious he's going to give in without even the pretense of a fight.

Rush gives him a peeved look and crosses his arms. “As if uncovering new parts of Destiny and foraging for food are mutually exclusive. We have plenty of unused manpower on board, Colonel.”

“We're going to need all hands on deck to sort through what TJ and Scott come back with, if the plant life on that planet is as edible as it looks.” Rush lets out an aggrieved sigh and draws his hand through his hair, and Young feels his lips quirk up.

Rush narrows his eyes. “You've no intention of actually saying no, do you?”

Young smiles and steps into Rush's personal space to reach for one of the buttons on the console Rush is standing at – just because he knows it'll annoy him – and when Rush smacks Young's hand away he can't help but chuckle. “Not really no,” he says under his breath, quiet enough not to be overheard. “I just like it when you get all huffy.” Rush gives him an outraged little stare, but before he can protest Young continues in his normal speaking voice. “What do you think you've found, anyway?”

Rush's entire demeanor changes, settles into something bright-eyed and passionate, and Young feels his breath catch a little. Rush is beautiful when he gets like this – captured by scientific interest. Earnest and vigorous and all around enchanting. “I'm rather certain we've identified the infirmary – not the makeshift space Lieutenant Johansen is currently occupying: an actual infirmary. I can't even imagine the kind of medical equipment we might find in there.”

Young's heart starts thudding a faster rhythm in his chest. Medical equipment. Could there be something to help TJ? Something to fix Park's eyesight? The Ancients were advanced, maybe there is some spark of hope for the both of them?

“It's in one of the most damaged areas of the ship, however,” Rush says. “Something else that might be of interest to you, though, located much closer to our current living quarters, is what I assume to be the armory. Obviously I have no way of knowing whether I'm correct in this assumption until we actually make it there, but the prospect of Ancient weaponry must intrigue you.”

Young feels himself fall into Rush's little pitch, the cadence of his voice and the glimmer in his eyes invoking a kind of empathetic enthusiasm he doesn't quite want to shake off. Weapons, yes. They could use those, for sure. They're running out of bullets, and while Brody's ammo project means they haven't entirely run out, the replacement bullets are not quite as reliable as Earth-made ones, and Young prefers sending his people out into the field with guns that won't jam at the most inopportune times.

Rush raises his eyebrows at him, and Young concedes. “You may have piqued my interest.”

Rush snorts and shakes his head, like he can't believe what a shit Young is. Young feels the grin on his face. It doesn't feel as alien as it would have a year ago.

“Okay. What do you need?”

“A team to help oversee the repairs, preferably with some knowledge of Ancient tech. And two or
three people willing to get into the suits to explore the areas we manage to open up. Without touching anything.”

Young nods and considers. “Five people enough?”

“Well, that depends entirely on the people in question, doesn't it?” Rush answers with a small eye roll and a hint of a smirk on his lips.

“What about Brody, Volker and Morrison? And Dunning and Barnes.”

Rush cocks his head, considering, then nods. “That'd do.”

It's weird. He's been worrying this... this thing between them couldn't possibly work. He's been waiting to mess it all up – the highlights of his romantic history so far include alienating Emily and almost ruining TJ's life – how the hell is he going to manage anything resembling a healthy relationship with a man he once left behind to die on a planet? In fact, before all this started, his personal relationship with Rush was probably the unhealthiest one he's ever partaken in, and he thinks that's true for Rush, too.

So yeah, he's basically been waiting for all of this to fall apart. For Rush to come to his senses and decide they really shouldn't be doing this after all – because much as Young knows this is most likely going to end painfully, real damn painfully, he's not going to be the one to end this any sooner than it has to end.

But things haven't fallen apart. Rush hasn't come to his senses. And with each passing day, Young feels something settle a bit deeper into his chest. Maybe he really can have this. Maybe this, a friendly working relationship by day and a warm body to roll up to at night, is something he can keep. Everything is just so easy, and that hits him as funny because in all other ways Rush might just be the most difficult man he's ever met.

Rush is bent over his console again. When he looks up his eyes flicker over to Volker and Park, talking in hushed voices over by the console on the other side of the gateroom, before looking at Young. There's a small smile on his face now, secret and warm and all for him. Young feels something fluttery ache right under his breastbone, and smiles back.

“So I was thinking,” Chloe says. They're picking the yellow strawberry-like fruit – and the fact that Eli had grinned and dubbed them hayberries must mean he is feeling better, right? He doesn't make bad puns and stupid jokes when he feels too awful.

She has almost filled up her container, and with the amount of fruit they've been collecting over the past few weeks she's pretty sure they're going to be eating a lot of jam from now on. It's not a bad prospect. They've certainly eaten worse.

Eli hums a little to let her know he heard her, pops one of the hayberries in his mouth, and continues filling his own container. Today's planet is nice. Really nice. They've been stopping at planets almost every other day, hunting and gathering and slowly refilling their food stocks to the point where only one meal a day is made up of the glue-like protein slop anymore. She's been helping with fruit and vegetable gathering every chance she gets – the fresh air and the sunshine and the fascinating plant life such a nice change from Destiny's brownish gray interior walls.
She really likes this place, with its huge, orange sun and its purple-reddish grass and its delectably sweet fruit. This might be her favorite planet yet.

“We should do something for morale,” Chloe says. “Organize an event, or a party or something.”

Eli looks up at her, head slightly cocked. “What did you have in mind?”

“Colonel, we found the armory.” Barnes' voice sounds flat and tinny through the radio connection, but Young can still hear the ring of awe in it. “There... wow, there are a lot of things here, sir.”

Young feels the corners of his mouth curl up into a happy grin, and sends Rush a short glance as he brings his radio up to his face. “That sounds like good news, Barnes. Take a look around and make sure to send us images of the most interesting things you find. Don't touch anything yet.”

“Yes, sir. Barnes out.”

Rush is glancing at his console again, watching the feed from the two kinos on his screen.

“It seems completely untouched,” Rush says, and he can make fun of Young all he wants for 'getting weak-kneed over some potential laser guns', but his own eyes are glittering brightly as well. “Which makes sense, of course, since as far as we know we're the first ones to ever board Destiny.”

The exploration mission has been going exceedingly well. Rush and Brody figured out how to control the shield strength fluctuations over the length of the large hull breach so it would be safe for his team to make it over to the assumed armory, and now it looks like they might have stumbled upon the defense/offense jackpot.

Young bumps his shoulder against Rush's and hums in easy agreement. They're alone in the control interface room, and Volker is babbling at one of the kinos, speculating about what they might be looking at, and everything is going well, for once. No crises. No enemy alien ships waiting for them. No sudden emergencies with the ship itself.

“This is great,” he murmurs, because it sounds less ridiculous than 'I really want to kiss you right now.'

Rush looks up at him again, and maybe Young’s face gives his thoughts away, or maybe this is all Rush, but without looking he punches in a command on his console and the doors to the CI room close, and then his hands are on Young's face, pulling him in for a hard and thorough kiss.

Young feels himself stumble into it – Rush's strength somehow keeps managing to catch him off-guard – and groans a little sound of approval. For nearly a minute, Rush kisses the breath out of him, allowing Young's hands to wander down his back, onto his ass, pressing their hips together. Then he pulls away, and Young feels the sting of beard-burn on his chin, his lips tingling, and all he wants is more.

“Tonight,” Rush says, voice rumbling low with promise. “I'm gonna make you come twice.”

Young's breath hitches and his legs feel wobbly and his cock is sincerely interested in the prospect. He honestly doesn't know how he is supposed to hold on until tonight.
It might be his new best day on Destiny yet.
“And these,” Eli says, picking up a gunmetal gray device from the table and holding it up to the room. It's not much larger than a communication stone. “These are the coolest things ever, okay?”

Young gives him an indulgent little smile and waits for the explanation to begin. He is so damn glad to see that twinkle in Eli's eyes again. Between his current enthusiasm about their findings in the armory and the fact that he and Chloe asked to organize some sort of talent show event to boost crew morale, it truly does seem like he's doing better.

The Ancient armory they discovered yesterday has turned out to be, in one word, a goldmine. Guns and stunners and grenade-like bombs. Something close to night/heat-vision goggles, only much more advanced, that had Brody and Park whispering excitedly to each other as soon as they were presented. And that's just the stuff they've figured out so far. There are shelves full of items the scientists are still working on. Crates full of mysterious weapons his soldiers are dying to try out.

Rush is sitting next to Young, content to let Eli do the presentation, and the small quirk to his lips makes Young want to bump their shoulders together. This feeling of belonging, of yes, we're a random group of people thrown into an impossible situation, but we're somehow making it work, this feeling of purpose and hope... God, it's so good to have this again. And to get to share it with someone – with Rush – is even better.

“This,” Eli says, building the suspense by dragging the word out until it has at least three syllables. “...is a personal cloaking device.”

Young's eyebrows shoot up a little.

“Similar in design to the cloaking mechanism on the Puddle Jumpers found in Atlantis, albeit it less advanced,” Rush supplies.

“Well, yeah, these are obviously more like the 1.0 version,” Eli admits with a small shrug. “Limited range and energy supply. But look,” he says, swiping his thumb over the small device and suddenly disappearing.

Three seconds later he appears again on the other side of the table, a wild grin on his face. “These babies turn you invisible!”

Greer lets out a sharp bark of laughter, and Young sees Scott chuckling along as well. Eli's right, it is an incredible discovery, but it's more than that. It's his enthusiasm, his almost childish happiness, and the rush of relief that this is almost the Eli they'd known before being forced into stasis.

“I mean, can you imagine how many uses we could find for these?” Eli goes on, gesturing at the four other cloaking devices on the table. Young agrees that they will certainly come in handy if they ever need to perform a sneak attack or an ambush. He hopes maybe Rush and his science team can use what they find out about the mechanics of the device to reverse engineer it. Possibly even add a cloaking option to the shuttle.

“It's great, Eli,” Young says, before Eli can start on a ramble about invisible paintball or some other crazy plan that might give the rest of the crew any bad ideas.

Yeah, Young thinks, as the happy murmurs of his people all around him make him feel warm and accomplished. They really are making it work here.
The blood bank is Vanessa's idea, and it fills TJ with a sort of empathetic pride to see Young's reaction. She knows James craves Young's approval, and she has more than earned it over the course of their time on Destiny, but it's still sweet to see her light up at his praise. Sometimes TJ marvels at the fact that Vanessa can go from hard-shouldered badass to vulnerable and soft, open, so seamlessly.

“We, uh, we'd like to requisition some of the recently collected fruit for juice. For after the donations,” James says. “And then we'd really like to get started as soon as possible, sir.”

Young nods at her and and gives the go-ahead. TJ thinks there's something different about him lately. It's... she can't quite put her finger on it, but he's lighter somehow.

“How are you going to store the blood?” he asks, genuinely interested. James smiles and glances over at TJ before answering. She's practically bouncing on the balls of her feet, and TJ feels her own mouth quirk up into a grin.

“The stasis pods,” Vanessa answers, a sliver of pride in her voice. “Eli says they keep organic matter from deteriorating, so keeping the blood in there should make it last pretty much forever. Much longer than if we'd refrigerate it.”

“Ah,” Young says, scrubbing his hand over his chin. It hits TJ, suddenly, what's different about him. What his body language reminds her of. She's seen him like this before, easier and... and happier. He was like this when they first started sleeping together. Later on, the guilt had started eating at him and he'd begun to look weighed down again, long before he actually broke things off with her. But those first two weeks, he'd looked like this.

It kind of surprises her that she doesn't feel more shocked, more upset. Young is seeing someone else, and while it stings a little, it doesn't sting a lot. She looks over at James, who's shooting her a bright grin, and finds herself smiling back.

This is good, she thinks. Young deserves to be happy. He deserves to find some comfort on this ship. She's not going to resent him for that. In fact, she might even be a little grateful that he's found someone new. It feels like being set free herself.

She watches Young walk away with the trace of a smile still on her face.

Maybe she's moved on without even realizing it.

A few days later they encounter a planet so rich in edible flora and fauna that Young decides to extend the FTL timer to two full weeks.

Their streak of luck continues, it seems. Not that he would ever say that out loud, because while he isn't a superstitious man, he knows better than to jinx himself and his crew like that. Still, the atmosphere aboard the ship is hopeful, optimistic, better than it ever was before they went into stasis. People put in a hard day's work gathering food and medicinals or making repairs on the ship, and
evenings in the mess hall or down on the planet are filled with a sense of accomplished comradeship. The lack of impending doom – be it from starvation or hostile aliens – really seems to agree with his crew.

Rush doesn't spend much time down on the planet, that first week – too busy overseeing the repair robots as they fix one of the larger holes in the hull. He grumbles when Young pulls him away from his work to show Rush the spectacular sunset on the planet, but he doesn't turn Young away. Young grins and tamps down the urge to take his elbow and hold onto him all the way to the gate.

When they get to the planet they stand to the side, together but not suspiciously close together, and join the rest of the crew to bask in the pinks and reds and purples as the sun sinks into the edge of the horizon. A sense of peace settles over Young, watching his people gathered around him, enjoying the simple beauty of an alien sunset on a planet a thousand galaxies away from home.

Even Rush has a small smile on his face, his eyes reflecting the colorful streaks of light in a way that makes him seem otherworldly. When Rush turns toward him, the shadow of his hair and nose throws the side of his face in stark relief. Lines and edges hard, almost artistic, and the curve of his lips so fragile Young aches with it.

“Alright,” Rush says quietly, as if admitting to something grave. “Perhaps you were right to drag me out here.”

Young smiles, not a little bit smug, and when no one is looking, he nudges his hand against Rush's wrist.

The next day Rush lets Young talk him into coming on a scouting mission with him.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Rush yells, knees connecting hard with the forest floor.

“Down!” Young shouts, and Rush listens – obedience or trust or possibly pure survival instinct – and rolls out of the way of the barrel of Young's gun.

Two loud shots, and then nothing but the ringing in his ears for a few seconds.

He looks at Young, then follows his gaze to the beast lying on the ground, rasping for breath. It's massive – the size of a lion – with razor sharp tusks and a thick, pointy horn on its nose. As if a wild boar and a rhino had one very terrifying baby.

It's wounded, mortally so, but it's not dead yet, and despite its aggression and its terrifying appearance Rush feels a stab of pity for the way its chest heaves too fast, too desperate. Young steps up next to the beast, quiet, competent, and shoots it between the eyes without hesitation.

“You okay?” Young asks, and Rush is pleased to find his eardrums are intact enough to still hear the question, at least.

“Yeah, fine,” he says, letting Young's proffered hand help him up before brushing some dirt off his jeans. Ow, the dull ache on his shin signals what will probably blossom into a pretty impressive bruise. If Young hadn't pushed him aside and shot the thing he'd probably have much more to complain about than some bruises, though, if those horned protrusions on the animal’s face are any indication. And alright, perhaps he feels a little shaky, but he's not going to let Young know that. Not
when Young seems perfectly unflustered, himself. “You think there are more?”

Young cocks his head, as if to listen for any other animals. “Don't know. Let's not hang around to find out, though.”

“Wait,” Rush says, mind replaying the short, measured steps Young had taken, the unflinching way he’d put the creature out of its misery. He feels a frisson of lust skitter down his spine, which is possibly not the most appropriate response to almost being gored by an alien animal and then watching its mercy-killing by an unwavering colonel. God, but he loves it when Young shows competence. His skin prickles into goosebumps. “No sense in wasting good meat.”

Young gives him a look that might be indulgent and might be exasperated. “We’ll come back with a detail and a kino sled. It's not like we're going to be able to lug that thing all the way to the gate on our own, anyway.”

Fair enough. While Young radioes in to let base camp know about the less-than-friendly-but-possibly-edible inhabitants of the north-eastern forest, Rush takes a look at his surroundings. The adrenaline is still rushing through his veins, making his heart thump and his focus unnaturally sharp. He can feel his cock thick and heavy between his legs, blood hot. Rubbing his palms against his thighs he keeps his attention away from Young and onto any possible attacking fauna. This is not the place to let his libido take over, he's got enough sense to see that.

But when they're out of here, he's going to get Young alone. He's going to get Young alone and he's going to...

Yes.

“There you are,” Young says in greeting when Rush steps into his quarters. He'd been expecting him, and if Rush hadn't shown up in the next thirty minutes Young would've gone searching for him.

Ever since the boar-thing in the forest Rush has been giving him these looks, and it's got him riled up and on edge for hours now. Right before they made it to the clearing near the gate Rush had put his hand on Young's elbow and stopped walking. Then he'd leaned in real close and said, “I want to see you tonight. Don't make any other plans.”

As if Young generally makes plans for his evenings. And when he does, they pretty much always involve Rush anyway, lately. But the hot gust of Rush's breath against his lips, the promise in his words, they had turned him on and kept him churning with anticipation all afternoon.

Rush looks... a little nervous, perhaps. He hasn't moved away from the door yet, although he has flicked the lock closed. Young gets up from behind his desk and flips his laptop shut before putting his glasses beside it. “Hey.”

Rush takes a step towards him and answers. “Hi.”

“You wanted to see me?” Young asks, walking up to Rush until they're within touching distance. The air between them feels strangely loaded, the tension behind their awkward conversation palpable. Young has no idea what's going on, but it seems Rush's nerves are contagious.

Rush lets out a small huff of a sigh, and turns his head towards Young. He's oddly tentative as he
reaches for Young's face, as he draws him closer until their lips press together, and then it's like a dam breaks and he's all hands and fingers, lips and tongue and teeth, until they end up jammed against a wall. Young groans as Rush attempts to climb inside his body through his mouth, and before long they're both panting. Rush is hard, Young can feel it against his own erection, and already his imagination is coming up with a hundred different scenarios of how this night might end.

Apparently none of them come close to what Rush has in mind, though. He feels like the rug is pulled out from under him when Rush swabs a hot lick over the shell of his ear before husking, “I want you to fuck me.”

“Jesus, Rush,” Young says, because Jesus, Rush.

They haven't done that yet – neither of them quite ready to move beyond hands and mouths and the occasional rutting against each other like teenagers. They haven't talked about it, but Young knows it's a big deal. No wonder Rush seemed apprehensive when he came in. Almost ambivalent, maybe. He knows for a fact he's nowhere near ready to let Rush do that to him. Just the thought of it sends a jolt of anxiety up his spine. Maybe not just anxiety – he will admit to a growing amount of curiosity – but too much for him to want to try it yet. Yet. But apparently Rush has reached that point where the thrill outweighs the nerves, because he's here. He's offering... And God, Jesus, Young wants to. He wants to so fucking bad.

“Are you sure?” he asks, because dammit, he's not going to risk this... this thing they have by rushing into this without thinking. Even if that is kind of exactly how he got here in the first place.

Rush stops kissing the sensitive patch of skin behind Young's ear and pulls away, just far enough to give him an annoyed look. “Would I ask you if I wasn't? It's hardly like you're pressuring me to give up my virginity here, Colonel.”

Young isn't sure whether that means Rush has been fucked by men before – a thought he finds both disturbingly hot and disturbingly objectionable – but decides not to linger on the subject.

“Unless you're not sure,” Rush continues edgily, at which point Young thinks they've talked about this long enough, and drags Rush in for a heated kiss.

“Bed,” Rush urges, in between licks and bites and scorching Young from the inside out. They stumble over to the bed, hands ripping away clothing with a lack of coordination that turns Young on even more, kicking off shoes with muffled curses and more than one instance of almost tripping over. Young feels wild, crazy, impatient, and the way Rush keeps clawing at him, keeps trying to pull him in closer, tighter, lets him know he's not the only one. It takes all Young's concentration to one-handedly flip open the covers on the bed without breaking away from their kiss.

“God, Rush,” he says, just before Rush shoves him in the chest hard so that he falls backwards onto the firm mattress. Rush steps out of his last items of clothing and bends over to retrieve something from his pocket. Young doesn't have to look to know what it is. Fuck, Rush is really going to let him... He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, a little overcome by what that thought does to him.

His eyes fly open again when Rush drops the lube and the condom on the bed and starts yanking on Young's pant legs until he's completely undressed, too, and then climbs on top of him without any sort of shame or apprehension at all. Apparently now that the decision has been made, Rush has no patience for second-guessing himself. He straddles Young's abdomen, thighs on the outside of Young's rib cage, and Young moans a little at how good it feels to have his cock cradled against the crack of Rush's ass.

Rush looks down at him, a wicked little smile on his face, and wiggles back a little. Young lets out a
sound that is somewhere between a groan and a chuckle, and the corners of Rush's mouth lift higher. “Oh yes, that's nice,” he says, before leaning forward and letting his fingertips trail over Young's chest. He pinches Young's nipples and swipes his thumb over them in a soothing stroke before grabbing the bottle on the bed and flicking it open. It seems that's about all the foreplay Rush is interested in, and Young isn't sure whether it's because he just wants to get this over with before he changes his mind, or because he's so eager to get Young inside of him. The way Rush's cock strains up towards his own belly suggests it might be the latter.

“Wait,” Young says, when Rush is about to spread the lube over his own fingers. “I want... Let me. Come here.” He pulls on Rush's thighs, urges him a little higher on his chest, and holds up his hand. Rush cocks his head and gives him a look that is almost fond, then squeezes a good load of lube onto Young's fingers.

Everything feels a little surreal. The insides of Rush's legs against his skin, the brush of Rush's balls over his stomach, the pressure of his hands on Young's shoulders as he bows forward a bit in preparation for the intrusion. Young guides his hands behind Rush, lets his clean hand pull his cheeks open a bit, and brings his slick fingers up against his entrance. Rush makes a soft sound, kind of strangled, and curls his hands tighter into the flesh of Young's shoulders.

Young takes it slow, the frenzied impatience he'd felt as they were making their way over to the bed suffused by something even bigger, even more inexorable. He lets his fingertips rub over and around, exploring the strip of skin between Rush's opening and his balls, and then returning to circle with a gentle pressure that's not quite enough to get him in.

Rush lets his grip on Young's shoulders soften after half a minute of the careful stroking, and then another minute later he tightens his hands again, cutting off little noises that make Young's dick twitch. “Fuck,” Rush groans out, and Young makes a sound of his own when Rush presses back against his hand hard enough to let a fingertip slip inside. “Jesus, fuck. Finally.”

It's tight, and it's hot, and his finger slides inside to the third knuckle easily, and God, Rush's face is fucking gorgeous – pure concentration and wonder and unmistakable lust. After a few thrusts with his finger Rush starts pushing back again, and Young decides to add another. Rush tenses up, stops moving, keeps his eyes shut, and Young stays still as he waits for Rush to adjust. Christ, his heart beats a steady thrum against his breastbone. Sex with Rush is always intense, but this... this is fucking agonizing.

It takes him longer than it should to realize that the warm drop of slick on his belly isn't sweat. “Oh my God,” Young breathes out before he can censor himself – because that is Rush's cock leaking onto him, head dark and shiny. His clean hand squeezes Rush's butt cheek roughly, and his hips want to buck up against nothing, because shit, Rush really fucking likes this.

“Rush,” he says, except his voice comes out all wrong – wrecked and throaty, so he tries again. “Rush, I wanna see you... come on, I wanna see you touch yourself while I do this. God, please.”

Rush seems to be coming out of a daze, eyes slowly blinking open and gaze settling down on Young's face. His body is still motionless, except for the way his inner muscles clench against Young's fingers, and Young swallows down his moan and lets go of Rush's buttock to grab for the bottle of slick. “Here. Use this.”

Slowly, Rush lifts one of his hands from Young's shoulder and hold his palm up. Young maybe squirts a bit too much lube into it, because he's too busy staring at the flush high on Rush's cheeks to watch what he's doing, but then Rush brings his hand down to his cock and Young's gaze is dragged away from Rush's face.
“Mngh,” Rush says when he curls his hand around his dick, and the slippery heat engulfing Young's fingers tightens up before loosenig again.

Young can't look away – he's never had this good a view of Rush touching himself, the action so close he could probably stretch his neck forward and touch his tongue against the edge of Rush's head. Dip his tongue right into the little slit in that way that always makes Rush curse and moan.

Rush is beautiful. His cockhead peeks out of his fist – plump and shiny and aimed right at Young – then Rush strokes back up and his foreskin slides partway over his tip before the entire thing disappears into his fist, then back out again. It's mesmerizing. Young feels his own dick twitch happily.

As Rush begins stroking himself in earnest, settling on a slow rhythm, Young starts pumping his fingers into him shallowly, keeping pace with Rush's tempo, carefully going deeper and wider in tiny increments.

“God, you should see yourself,” he hears himself say, and when had he given his mouth permission to speak? “You look so hot, Christ. You feel... You feel so good. Do you feel good, Rush?”

Rush lets out another inarticulate sound, and Young spreads his fingers even wider. Surely he'll be able to fit a third finger in by now. He touches the tip of his ring finger against the rim of Rush's opening, slick and tight, and Jesus Christ, he's going to put his dick in there, he still can't wrap his mind around that.

“Yes,” Rush groans, and Young isn't sure whether it's an answer to his question or a prompt for more than just the tease of his fingertip, but either way slipping in a third finger seems like a reasonable response. “Fuck.”

He hasn't even pumped in more than a few times before Rush curses again and stops moving his hand over himself. “Stop, stop,” he pants, and Young stops like he's been burned. “It's good, I'm good. Ready. Take your fingers out.”

Young does as he's told, slowly retracting his hand and wiping most of the residual lube on the bed sheets. Rush has his eyes closed again, fingers still circled tightly around the base of his dick, breathing hard. “Put on the rubber, Colonel.”

It's nearly impossible to get the little square packet open, his hands clumsy with lube, so he tears it with his teeth before blindly groping for himself and rolling on the condom. He's grateful that the tight stretch of the rubber makes him back away from the brink a little, that it will dull the sensations just a bit, because he's not sure how he's even going to make it all the way inside Rush without coming otherwise.

He's just barely finished putting on the condom before Rush starts scooting back, sitting up on his knees until his hips are right above Young's pelvis, allowing Young to angle his cock until it lines up with Rush's slick entrance. God, he wishes he could see this from the other side – watch his own dick slide into Rush's puffy hole, slightly red and shiny with lube... Young groans and almost loses it when Rush pushes down and the head pops in.

“Fuck,” Rush says breathlessly, and Young has to bite his lip to keep from asking if he's okay. Instead he groans out an echo of the sentiment, and keeps his hips utterly still. A second later Rush starts moving again, pushing further down, down, deeper, until he bottoms out.

“Oh God,” Young wheezes, because this is nothing like what he'd imagined and exactly like it all the same. It's so good – not just the hot, slick pull of Rush's ass, but the fact that he's inside Rush, that
“Yeah,” Rush agrees, hands on Young’s shoulders again, gripping tightly as he moves up, lets himself get used to the slide of Young’s cock inside him before settling back down. “So fucking full,” he bites out, and Young nearly comes just from how wrecked he sounds.

Three more of those slow, careful up and downs, and then Rush decides he’s good, and without warning plunges himself down on Young’s dick hard. They both make an embarrassing ‘oof’ sound at the same time, and then they’re going, Rush working himself up and down, harder and harder, letting Young support some of his weight with the hands on his thighs, but not allowing Young anything more than to let Rush ride him, to watch Rush fuck himself on Young’s cock.

“Rush,” Young pants frantically. “Rush, Rush, I'm not... I'm not gonna hold on much longer.”

With something close to a growl Rush curls his fingers even tighter into Young's shoulders before letting go with one hand and stripping his own cock as he fucks Young harder, faster, more frenzied.

Young watches him, the sweat on his brow, the teeth in his bottom lip, the blur of his fist over his dick as he impales himself on Young’s cock. Young feels it coming, like electricity gathering in a ball in his stomach, charging and revving him up until he's about to explode, or implode, or who the fuck knows? All he knows is that it's going to be big. Suddenly Rush cries out and arches his back and clenches uncontrollably around him, and Young barely has enough wits about him to realize that the warm splashes covering him from navel to collarbone are Rush's come – and that is fucking hot – before his own orgasm is pulled out of him, wave after wave of heat and pleasure that he pulses into Rush, into his tight, welcoming body.

His vision doesn't quite white out, but it goes blurry for a good ten seconds as his hips stutter up and away in an undignified dance of oh God more and too much, too much.

When he comes down, Rush is panting on top of him, slumped into his own come, breathing hard against the crook of Young's neck.

Scraping together all his willpower and strength and the few brain cells he has left after getting most of them fucked into oblivion just now, Young lifts his arms and hooks them around Rush's back.

“Holy shit.”

Rush turns his face a little deeper into Young's throat and nods. “Yeah.”

“That was...”

“Mm.”

He should probably pull out now, shouldn't he? But God, he's too exhausted to move. And there's something nice about having his softening cock still inside Rush, snug and slick with the prove of what they just did. He gives himself another minute or two of this lazy warmth before he'll clean them up. Rush is halfway to sleep already it seems, breath easing into a deeper and slower rhythm against Young's skin.

Words and half-formed thoughts flit through his brain, too fleeting to inspect – not that Young would if he could – but terrifyingly clear in their intent. Fondness, affection, something so close to regret that it hurts, as if he's already fucked this up and lost Rush. Or maybe as if finding this makes it excruciatingly clear how unhappy he was before.

Rush makes a snuffling sound, and that's it, Young decides. Since he's gotten to the navel-gazing part of his afterglow he might as well get them cleaned up. He grabs the base of the condom before
he gently pulls his dick out, and Rush makes an unintelligible little noise. “Sorry,” Young says quietly, not sure how asleep Rush is. With the one arm still wrapped around Rush's shoulder he rolls him onto his back before slipping out of bed, disposing of the condom and wiping himself off with a moist towel. He uses it to clean Rush, and then drops it next to the bed as he gets in and reaches over Rush to pull the covers on top of them.

Curling up against Rush's back, he can't help but wrap his arm around him and pull him closer until Rush is everywhere against him. Tonight was a big deal. Tonight was a big deal and it's scary, but it's good, too.

“Goodnight, Rush,” he whispers into the hair at the back of Rush's neck. Rush hums something indecipherable in reply, already asleep. Young smiles and closes his eyes.

“Everett!”

Young stops. David must have planned this – there's no way he just happened to walk by at the exact time Young's report finished. He wonders how long David waited, loitering here in the hallway outside his usual SGC meeting room.

“David,” he says in greeting, not quite awkward, but not quite not. The last time they spoke David had been hellbent on getting Rush kicked off the ship. While the fact that he failed should make it less infuriating, the thought that he would have missed this... this amazing thing he has with Rush if Telford had succeeded makes something seethe inside him. “I heard you got a promotion. Congratulations.”

David laughs, a bit strained. “Not sure I would call it that, but yeah. They gave me a task unit. Hunting down Lucian Alliance, we've been pretty busy with all the information Kiva gave you.”

That's good, Young thinks. Telford hates the Lucian Alliance more than anyone. He's going to kick ass, thwart terrorist attacks, maybe even dismantle the entire organization. More importantly, he's going to stay the hell away from Destiny. From Rush.

“Listen, Everett,” David says. “I know the last time we parted we were... not really in agreement.”

That's putting it mildly, in Young's opinion. Although David can't know this irrational anger is swirling around in his belly right now.

“I just wanted to let you know that it's over. You won. I'm never going to like Rush. I'm never going to trust him. But apparently you do, and I trust you enough to let you deal with him the way you think is best. I'll stop trying to interfere. I'll leave him alone.”

Like you have a choice, Young almost says. But he doesn't, because why should he provoke Telford now that he's finally backing down?

He gives David a terse little smile. “Good to know, David.” And then, because David really seems to be trying to save their friendship, “Thanks.”

David suddenly looks almost shy, or as shy as he'd ever get. “Right. So. You have lunch yet?”

Young feels some of the tension behind his smile leech away. Maybe it will never be how it was
twenty years ago, when they'd both been young and they didn't have all the baggage they carry around with them now. But maybe that's okay. Maybe they can still have this. “Yeah. No, I haven't,” he says, gesturing at David to lead the way. “Let's go.”

“So,” Young says as he steps inside the control interface room. Eli and Rush have made it clear that now that there are no major crises to deal with, something should be done about the inefficient third energy collector on starboard – a feat which is made considerably more complicated by the unfortunate requirement that it needs to be fixed while the ship is in FTL. Young's still not entirely clear on the why of that, but figures he really doesn't need any specifics other than that the whole thing might explode the next time they either jump into FTL or enter a star if they don't do the repairs the right way. “Any bright ideas to fix this yet?”

“Not really,” Eli sulks. “I mean, we've established it's not an issue with the hardware; the collector itself is fine. And we've got the program written to fix the internal errors, but the problem is finding the amount of power we need to get it up to speed within a very limited time frame. Which would be a piece of cake if we could do it outside of FTL, but... well. So far we haven't managed to come up with a way to do it that doesn't take way more time than we have.” He rolls his eyes dramatically, as if the whole universe has conspired against him to make this as difficult as possible. “So, short answer: no, not really.”

“Actually,” Rush says, shaking his hair out of his face and tapping his pencil against his notebook. “If we divert power from the auxiliary conduits in sections B-43 up to D-20, we could finish the upgrade instantaneously.” Rush reaches past Eli and pulls up a screen to illustrate his point.

“Uh, yeah, except that would kind of defeat the purpose, seeing as we'd all blow up if we did that,” Eli says, giving Rush an uncomprehending frown.

“What?” Young asks, because Rush's face has suddenly paled a bit, and his horrified expression of sinking realization is hard to look at.

“If we use the energy reroute Rush suggested we'd lose the shield emitters, and yeah, granted, only for a couple of microseconds probably, but that'd be more than enough for the shearing forces to tear apart the hull of the ship during FTL. It's not—”

Young is reasonably certain Eli is going to finish his sentence with “a good plan”, and maybe follow it up with “or even a plan at all”, but the kid seems to pick up that this might be the time to shut up and let off, because he gives Rush a glance that is halfway between pitying and wary, and then shrugs and looks away. There's something suspicious on his face, like he's trying to figure out what the hell has gotten into Rush, and Young has to agree that he's never seen Rush come up with a plan this haphazard before. Well, not any that didn't involve him planting himself in the interface chair at every opportunity.

When Young turns back to ask him about it, Rush looks angry. Rush looks really fucking pissed, actually. He glares at Eli, and then he glares at Young, and without another word he stalks out of the CI room.

“Rush!” Young calls after him, and then, sending an exasperated look in Eli's direction, sets out after him.
Rush is a quick little bugger when he sets his mind to it, so Young is slightly surprised when he easily catches up with him a few corridors down. He's even more surprised when Rush smashes his palm against the door control of one of the unused storage units and ducks inside. Of course Young has no choice but to follow.

Rush's glare is barely visible in the low light of the small room, but his tenseness radiates off of him in waves.

“Rush, come on,” Young says, not quite sure touching the man is a good idea right now. “Are you really that upset that Eli called you out on your mistake?” Because Rush can be kind of competitive when it comes to Eli, sure, but this seems like an overreaction.

Rush shakes his hair out of his face in an angry huff.

“I missed it,” he says, disgust clear in his voice. “I missed something really fucking basic. Because I'm distracted.”

Young raises an eyebrow. “You're distracted.”

Rush glowers at him. “This isn't me!” he yells, gesturing dramatically at himself. “I need to be focused on the work!”

And Young feels a warm wave of fondness swallow him up, because Rush is saying...

“What has you distracted, then?” he asks, the corner of his lips quirking upwards.

The way Rush crosses his arms over his chest is all the confirmation he really needs.

“Are you saying I'm responsible for this?” he asks, not keeping the teasing note from his voice. Rush is overreacting. He's missed things before – much as he'd like to be perfect, he isn't – and Eli and Chloe and the science team have proven themselves to be a more than adequate safety net. Besides, Rush would never let himself be 'distracted' if they were in an actual crisis situation. Young isn't worried about this.

“This isn't a fucking joke, Colonel,” Rush bites out, and the way he angles his face away makes Young want to lick at the tendons in his neck. He takes a step closer and cups Rush's cheek in his hand.

Rush tenses up but he doesn't pull away, and Young feels even more of that affection surge through him. Because Rush is tough and sharp, but he clearly craves this intimacy, too, and that thought makes Young smile. He'll give Rush everything he needs.

“That's why you have a team, Rush. If you slip up, Eli's there to catch you.”

“I shouldn't slip up in the first place.”

Young leans closer to place a soft kiss on Rush's jaw. The rough beard tickles and scratches against his lips. Rush is the first person he's ever been with who has facial hair. God, he loves the beard – he'd never thought he'd say that, but he really does.

“Can't be helped, we both like this too much to stop now,” he murmurs against the edge of Rush's jaw. He takes Rush's earlobe into his mouth and gives it a gentle bite. “We'll just have to make sure you get used to it faster.”

Rush lets out the slightest shudder, and Young feels his cock fill out a little bit. The idea that he has
this effect on Rush is addictive, and he scrapes his thumb through the hair on Rush's cheek before angling his face in for a real kiss.

They've only barely touched lips when their radios go off.

“Colonel Young, you're needed in the bridge. We're about to drop out of FTL.”

Rush groans in annoyance and Young gives him a quick peck that feels daring in its domesticity, before grabbing his radio and telling Scott that he's on his way.

Rush isn't losing his focus. Not to the point where it will become a problem, anyway. Young isn't worried about that.

He is a little worried by how much this fondness feels like being in love, but he stuffs that down and refuses to investigate it further.

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