



SOME STARS LAST
forever

DREAMING *of the* STARS

STARLIGHT DREAMERS COLLECTION # 1

LILY LANCASTER

DREAMING OF THE STARS

Starlight Dreamers Collection #1

Includes Parts 01-06

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Starlight Dreamers is an exclusive series I write for my \$5 tier patrons. This is the first big collection of parts, and comprises a complete story by itself, but obviously also leaves a bunch of plot threads open for the parts that follow. If you enjoy it, you can access the next 5 big collections (totalling more than eight full novels in length... and counting) by [becoming a patron at that tier](#).

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy!

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Part 01: Points of Departure

Returning home to Mars after a six month visit to Earth, Isla Ainsworth still has no idea what she wants to do with her life. She enjoys tennis but failed to find a university or sports school on Earth to pursue this passion, and now needs to find something else to invest her energies into.

Her best friend, idol-loving Anise Kendall, might have just the thing for her, however, and suggests that they try out for planet Aida's prestigious Dreamstar Academy for idols...

Chapter 1: A World Like No Other – April 2176

A quarter of a million miles from Earth, a patch of space rippled for a moment and glowed purple, then flashed brightly. A sleek ship, styled similarly to a manta ray with its wings clipped, exited the hyperspace rift and accelerated towards the planet.

In orbit around the bright blue bauble of humanity's origin, the vast citadel known as Orion Station awaited the small vessel, its smooth upper surfaces glinting in the warmth of Sol's rays. The lower sections of the station, thrown into stark relief by hundreds of enormous floodlights dotting its surface, contained dozens of docks for ships of all sizes. It was one of these that the vessel now approached.

Matching velocity and rotation with the station, the ship entered its docking bay, slowing to a relative stop. Enormous docking clamps attached to the hull, holding the vessel in place, and an airlock umbilical extended out to it. With a soundless '*clunk!*', felt rather than heard, the umbilical was connected to the ship's airlock, allowing the crew to disembark.

Striding out and into the brightly lit halls of a proper space station—a true godsend after months cooped up in a tiny science ship since their last brief holdover at Earth—one Antimoni Simmons led his crew to the debriefing rooms, eager to give his initial report.

The airy conference room was already packed with officials and officers from Earth and the major colony worlds, so Antimoni headed straight to the front of the room and had his first officer place a small case on a convenient table.

Antimoni opened the case and extracted several data crystals, one of which he plugged into a holographical projection device on the table. A display appeared in the air over the device, flickering a few times as the holo-projectors synched up.

He turned to the room at large. "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present to you the findings of Explorer Mission Gamma 7. As our preliminary scans of

the candidate worlds indicated, the planets in question are largely habitable, each with Earth-like conditions.”

The holographic display showed a world similar to Earth, but covered in substantially more water. He pointed at it. “This is the world we’ve designated GC-001, a planet with approximately 25% more water than Earth and roughly the same diameter. My science officer has suggested that this would make an excellent satellite operation for purifying and supplying water to our other planned outposts and colonies in the region.”

Another planet was now displayed, this time considerably less hospitable-looking, with super volcanoes and a great deal of particulate matter floating in the atmosphere. Antimoni again pointed at it. “Designation GC-002, this world is inhospitable and not a good candidate for settling. However, it is rich in resources, especially minerals and gases we require for our hyperdrive and shipbuilding technologies. We’ve designated this planet as high priority.”

He went on to talk briefly about several planetoids and moons, each rich in rare metals and materials useful for shipbuilding and other technologies in regular use, before finally switching the holographical display over to the last of their discoveries.

“And here,” he said, pointing again, “we have the crown jewel of planets. A so-called Gaia World, designation GC-007-Prime. Minimal tectonic activity, an atmosphere breathable by effectively anyone under any conditions, few truly deadly species of plant or animal life. By all accounts, this is a perfect world. As such, we’ve classified this planet as Priority-One, and my recommendation is that the Explorer Fleet be assembled and readied for departure.”

After the usual months of political wrangling, he added in the privacy of his own head.

Deactivating the projector, he bowed to the room. “That concludes my initial report. Thank you for your time.”

The assembled guests stood and milled about, leaving Antimoni to collar his crew and exit the room through a side door before they could be accosted by any reporters.



Antimoni made a beeline for the nearest bar, where he ordered the largest cocktail he could find for every member of the crew, and sat with them at one of the many tables.

A gentle blue atmosphere filled the classy yet functional space. Space stations often had to make concessions simply due to a general lack of room, but Orion Station was one of those marvels of modern life built in an era of effective post-scarcity. As such, it was big, roomy, and generally a pleasant place to live. Especially after a few years on the periphery of known space.

Antimoni raised his glass. “A toast. To us!”

The others cheered.

His science officer, a young woman with royal purple hair—a relatively inexpensive nanotech follicle modification she’d had installed when she decided she wanted to be an idol, shortly before being picked for this mission and having to put those aspirations on hold—tilted her head with a questioning look. “I expected that conference to be a bit more... in-depth?”

Ah yes, his science officer, the energetic and bright-eyed Melandra, was a newbie, of course, unused to the showier parts of their profession. Antimoni winked at her. “The *real* debriefing begins tomorrow.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Today’s was just a show conference for the people?”

“You’re getting the hang of it,” Antimoni said with a nod. “People down there”—he pointed out through one of the bar’s enormous windows to the visible Earth—“don’t care a huge amount for details. They just want to know that everything went well and we’re moving forward.”

“I think discovering a Gaia World, something we weren’t even sure existed, seems like a fair approximation of ‘*everything going well*,’” Melandra said with a low chuckle.

“It’ll be at least a half-year of political wrangling before we even decide who gets to colonise it,” Antimoni said, rolling his eyes. “No matter how far we come, politics is always politics.”

“That’s why I love science,” said Melandra, raising her drink in a private toast to all things factual. “Harder to politicise.”

“But not impossible,” Antimoni said. He shrugged. “My guess is they’ll do the same as they did with Aida a century ago. Everyone will get a shot at it.”

“Speaking of Aida, I vote we take a vacation there to celebrate our discoveries. I’ve always wanted to visit Meadowstone,” Melandra said, going misty-eyed.

“You just want to visit because you’re annoyed at not getting to be an idol,” said Dio, their tech-engineer, a middle-aged man with biceps like an elephant. Not an elephant’s biceps. An *elephant*. This man gave new meaning to the term *ripped*.

“Not *just*!” Melandra snapped at him, crossing her arms in a huff. “Though you’re also partially right.” She emitted a vague laugh, downed the rest of her cocktail, and placed the glass on the table. “Maybe I’ll go back to my old plans once we’re done with the rest of the conferences. Wouldn’t mind being an idol, especially the idol who discovered a Gaia World.”

“Friend of mine became an idol,” Dio said, nodding a few times. “She always said that idols have to stand out. Reckon you’d do well, Mel.”

“Aww, you’re too kind,” Melandra said with a happy grin.

“Should I file your paperwork, then?” Antimoni said, head cocked and a half-smile on his lips.

“Don’t you dare,” Melandra growled.

With a round of laughter, they refilled their drinks, enjoyed a little more time to themselves, then headed to their rooms for the night. They would have a busy day tomorrow.

Chapter 2: Reunited

High above Mars, another vessel had just exited hyperspace, its sleek lines reminiscent of the old 20th century Concord, but designed for both interstellar transit and high-speed atmospheric flight, a passenger vessel for the modern age.

The starliner descended through the thin atmosphere, speeding several hundred people to the surface and Syria Planum Spaceport. Coming in to land, it touched down and taxied to the spaceport's enormous terminal building, a domed structure in creamy white and dazzling silver. Radiating off the circular structure were a dozen covered terminal hangars for incoming starliners, providing protection from Mars' strong winds and dusty atmosphere.

Inside the cavernous terminal itself, a blonde-haired young woman called Anise Kendall stood at one of the reinforced windows, keeping her eyes peeled for the starliner carrying her long-absent best friend.

She checked her ultra slim phone—a thin device similar to a smartphone, but with holographic display technologies and other advancements—for the time, nodded as she saw an incoming starliner, and made her way to the exit gate.

After a few minutes the light above the gate flicked from red to green to show that the airlocks had cycled, and out rushed the passengers, flooding the halls in their haste to be anywhere but here.

Among the throng was one Isla Ainsworth, a milk coffee-haired girl with faint bags under her eyes, tired after a ten hour flight on Earth followed by fifteen minutes in hyperspace for the hop to Mars.

Travel between worlds in different solar systems could take many hours—days, in some cases—making Isla happy that she lived, as it were, just next door. The real irony was that it took less time to jump between these two planets than it took to travel from America to Britain.

Pushing through the crowd of people, Isla came face to face with her best friend for the first time in six months. She waved. “Anise!”

Anise's face lit up as she took in the features of her friend. "Welcome back," she said, giving her a tight hug. "How was Earth?"

"Great," Isla said, taking Anise's hand and leading her towards the exit out to the central dome structure, tugging a bulging suitcase along in the other hand. "Amazing how different it is to here, though."

"You can tell me all about it when we get home," Anise said.

"You're not even going to let me unpack, are you?" Isla said with a sigh. It was hardly surprising. They had been attached at the hip since they were five years old, and this was the first time Isla had ever been away from her best friend for anything longer than a day or two. Her six months on Earth had zoomed past as if it had really been six minutes, but for Anise it had probably felt more like six years.

"Damn right, I'm not," Anise said. "I'll have you tell me every single detail of your trip, possibly involving a few bottles of delicious Immersion."

Isla knew she had already lost. When her best friend got it into her head that they were going to stay up all night talking and having a few drinks, that was almost always what they did. No matter how much Isla might want to sleep.

"Where's Innes?" Anise asked as they walked.

"Mum?" Isla said. "She stayed on Earth for another week, had to sort some things out. You know, the kind of thing that needs to happen in person."

"Bet she was pleased," Anise laughed.

"Eh, it's for her autobiography, can't be helped," Isla said with a lazy shrug.

They descended an escalator, stepping off and into a circular shopping mall for travellers to spend all their money in. Grabbing some bottles of Immersion, a brand of fruit-flavoured alcopop popular among young people, they headed for the hypertube station below-ground.

Here, they jumped into a waiting car and punched in their destination: the Sinai Colony Dome. The bullet car vanished into a circular tunnel and whisked them away.

The subterranean hypertube system had gone live nearly two full decades after the first settlers arrived on Mars, finally linking the various colony domes together without the need for expensive flights across the hostile surface. Tunnels just beneath Mars' surface carried tubular bullet cars back and forth, while providing their passengers protection from the sun's harsh rays and the surface's regular meteorite impacts and dust storms.

It was fast, efficient, and almost always on time, but it wasn't what one might call *romantic*, not like those Ferris Wheel things Anise had seen pictures of while trawling the stellarnet. Still, she took what she could get, and an enclosed space with just the two of them and no interruptions for half an hour was never unwelcome.

Sitting back in the comfy seat and staring at the curved wall and tunnel lights flashing past outside, Anise poked her friend in the side. "So, my dear, your first time on Earth. You realise I'll need to hate you for a while, right?"

Isla tugged her hair down from the ponytail she normally wore and massaged her scalp, then tied it back up and gave her friend a glare. "You could've come along."

"Did you forget I'm saving so I can become an idol?" Anise replied, sticking her tongue out.

"Still want to be an idol, huh?" Isla said.

"Of course! Idols are power, idols are life," Anise said, thrusting a fist into the air.

"Stupid question, I know," Isla laughed. Her best friend had been enjoying idols from all over known space since they were both six years old, and had decided not long afterwards that she wanted to *be* one.

"How'd the uni hunt go?" Anise asked. "Found anywhere?"

A vague sigh escaped Isla's lips. "Total bust. Trying to find somewhere I can play tennis and get sponsored at this late stage is... basically impossible."

"You should've decided faster. Innes told you you'd be out of luck if you left it too long."

"Mum always knows best," Isla muttered. "Shame I never listen, hah."

“Six months on Earth hasn’t helped with that indecisive streak, then?”

Anise said, stifling a loud giggle.

Isla made a V-sign. “Honestly, I think it might be worse than ever.”

“Clearly you need a lovely wife to look after you and keep you on the right track,” Anise said.

“I don’t know about a wife, but I’ll settle for a best friend.” Isla leaned her head onto said friend’s shoulder and closed her eyes, valiantly doing her best to stay awake. It was a losing battle.

Letting her friend sleep, Anise spent the next twenty minutes of the trip splitting her time between idly browsing the stellarnet and studying Isla’s features, while fiddling with strands of her own vivid blonde hair; she had been lucky enough to inherit the vibrant golden locks of her mother rather than the deep chestnut of her father.

As much as she loved her hair, Anise was less enamoured with her skin, which leaned towards ivory white. Living in great domed cities where sunlight was a premium resource made natural tans close to impossible to achieve, unless she fancied an unhealthy dose of solar radiation with a side order of asphyxiation.

By contrast, Isla was as bronzed as a Greek Goddess. Originally Earth-born, her hair ran to a delectable coffee brown shade that Anise had always loved, straight and held in a neat ponytail reaching to between shoulder blades. Leaf green eyes gave her a piercing gaze compared to her otherwise soft features.

Having recently spent six months on Earth with her mother, staying partly at her British country home and enjoyed largely outdoors taking walks or playing sports, Isla’s skin was currently an almost terracotta tone. Anise was presently closer to *green*, however. The tan had faded a little now, but Isla still looked distinctly un-Martian.

Before long, they pulled into the station at the other end of the tube, so Anise poked her friend in the shoulder. “We’re here.”

Sitting up and enjoying a stretch, Isla looked out at the familiar station. “Earth’s great and all, but it’s good to be home.”

An airy structure greeted them, silvery-white and glimmering under the warm yellow lights of the station. Despite the station being underground, it didn't feel clinical or cold, at least not to Martian natives like them. Visitors from Earth or other colony worlds rarely felt so comfortable, however.

A brief trip in a lift deposited them up on the surface level of the dome.



Utilitarian was the word most people, especially visitors from outside, used to describe Mars. There were by now a dozen enormous colony domes dotted across the planet's surface, each housing a combined population of several million people, operating effectively as self-contained city-states.

Each dome comprised eight Wards, separated according to role and purpose, creating a pizza-like system of *slices*, and Martian colony domes had the thickest crust of them all; several metres of ultraminium—an incredibly strong alloy of carbon, cobalt, and zemozium, chiefly prized for its radiation resistance—shielding their inhabitants from solar radiation, intense storms, and various planetary impacts.

Linking each Ward together was a sophisticated system of transportation even the Japanese were envious of. Magnetic monorails, subterranean metro systems, transport tubes, and conveyer belt-like pedestrian paths had all been trialled and perfected over the many decades since Mars was first settled.

Utilitarian was often the first word anyone speaking of Mars used to describe it, but the second most popular was *efficient*. A space roughly similar in size to Manhattan Island and a hostile environment outside *required* an efficiency most cities could barely hope to muster on their very best days, let alone their worst.

It was this efficiency that Anise had fallen in love with as she grew into adulthood. She had inherited her mother's organised nature along with the golden hair, and generally disliked anything being untidy or out of place. Mars was the perfect world for her. *Almost* perfect. If it hadn't been for the lack of a

high-level idol academy here, she might have spent her entire life on Mars, never feeling a need to move away.



Emerging from the metro system into Ward 7's residential district, Isla tugged her friend along the pristine walkway towards her home. With space at a premium, roads were a luxury only afforded to a select few areas. People largely used the metro system or the above-ground transport network of monorails and conveyors.

Isla raised this with her friend as they walked. "It's funny, after spending a while on Earth it feels a lot more empty here now. No cars."

"Aren't cars kind of inconvenient anyway?" Anise said, turning a corner down another street of blocky and, yes, *utilitarian* buildings. Even their upmarket area of the dome suffered the same basic lack of architectural inspiration.

"If you're used to Mars, they might seem like it. But actually they're really fun, we hired one while we were staying around Canterbury," Isla said, stopping for a moment. Above them, a giant screen attached to the front of a building showed an interesting scene involving a small vessel docking at Orion Station. "Isn't that one of the explorer scouts?"

Anise nodded. "I'd heard they were about to return. Apparently discovered something amazing, too."

"Guess it's nearly time for the next Explorer Mission, then," Isla added, continuing on to her house. Her hands were already tired from lugging her luggage, and she wanted a cup of tea. She had moved to Mars with her British-descended mother more than a decade ago, but one of the primary things they had brought along with them was the love of a good cup of tea.

"Some reports are saying it could be as early as spring next year," Anise said, looking up any news she could find on her phone.

"Must be a crazy experience," Isla said as they reached a particular housing unit, one with a few extra bells and whistles such as a nice hedge along the front

and some plants to the sides of the sliding door. “Imagine being stuck in a new part of the galaxy for five years like that. Not sure I could cope.”

“You were just on Earth for six months,” Anise said. “Though I suppose that’s different to spending half a decade in the middle of nowhere.”

Isla hesitated at her front door. “Well, yeah. You’re never all that far from civilisation on Earth. An Explorer Fleet is completely on its own, though.”

“No one said it wasn’t risky.”

Unlocking the door using a little retinal scanner beside it, Isla shrugged. “I guess. It takes a special kind of person to want to do that sort of thing.”

“Yeah...” Anise said, and glanced at the artificial sky projected onto the dome’s hexagonal ceiling panels. One of them flickered on and off, alternately showing a lovely summer’s sky and the murky red atmosphere of the real Mars outside. “One of the panels has gone wrong again.”

“Nice to see that hasn’t changed in the time I’ve been away,” Isla laughed.

It was a running joke on Mars that it was impossible to go more than a full standard week without one of the dome’s holo display panels breaking down. For all that the domes themselves were efficient and rarely suffered malfunctions, beyond the most basic of lightbulb-changing varieties, the holo panels seemed to be the one exception to this rule, and no one understood why. It was just one of those things.

Chapter 3: A New Direction

Inside, the housing unit was anything but utilitarian. When the colonies had first been established on Mars in the middle of the 21st Century, the primary concern had been how to efficiently transport everything they would need across such a vast distance in order to actually start *building*.

The planned domes were too massive to transport through hyperspace with the relatively crude automated vessels in use at the time, so the idea had been devised to construct a modular housing system which was compact and could be easily stowed on a spaceship, then dumped on the surface for an instant dwelling. The domes could then be constructed around them.

Recent—for the time—advancements in both energy shielding and artificial magnetosphere generation on a local level allowed colonists to survive comfortably enough on the surface without the sun's rays boiling them in their own skin. But those early units hadn't exactly been the height of luxury.

Fast forward more than a century, and the modular and utilitarian designs in newer domes were still a feature, but were rather more homely and full-featured than their predecessors had been.

Isla's home, belonging to a wealthy mother who had made her fortune as a professional tennis star, looked like the sort of luxurious apartments she had seen on Earth.

Open plan living and kitchen areas flowed into a large rear area with a pool table, bar, and several comfy chairs of the bendy wood variety. A number of large plexiglass panels at the rear allowed plentiful light in from the dome's artificial sunlight high above, giving the area a roomy and spacious feel despite the residence's external appearance.

In the rear corner of this area, a spiral staircase whose frame was made from metal, but with real maple steps transported all the way from Earth, led upstairs to a landing area above the bar. Isla dashed up these with all the practised ease of someone who had lived there for thirteen years.

From the landing, another sliding door deposited them both in a small hallway with three doors along the right-hand wall. One of these was the upstairs bathroom, one was the parents' bedroom, and the door furthest down opened into Isla's room.

A largely frill-free space, her room was clean and tidy except for a few sporting-related items left here and there; a pair of well-worn running shoes lounging at the end of her bed; several tennis rackets in one corner of the room; and a desk below her window, looking out over the front street, which had a number of basic exercise devices strewn across it including hand pumps and a couple of small dumbbells.

Isla dumped her luggage by the built-in wardrobe and flaked out face down on her bed. "Feels good to be back in my own bed."

Anise sat on the edge of the mattress and prodded her friend in the leg. "So... would now be a good time to mention something serious?"

"Depends what it is," Isla said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

"I've been thinking a lot since you left. About what I want to do with my life. You know I was considering attending the Royal Academy for Idols in Canterbury?"

Isla rolled over and, with great effort, levered herself up on her elbows. "Are we seriously talking about idols right now? I just got home, Anise, come on..." she muttered, collapsing back down with her eyes closed.

"It's also my first time seeing you in six months, indulge me," Anise countered, again poking her.

With a theatrical sigh indicating that it wasn't the first time they'd had exchanges like this, Isla sat up and nodded. "You've got half an hour. Then I'm going to bed, whether you're still here or not." She produced two of the bottles they had bought at the spaceport—the cup of tea would have to wait for the morning—handed one to Anise and opened her own, then shared a brief welcome home toast.

"I don't get why you're so tired, it's only fifteen minutes from Earth, plus half hour in the tube," Anise said, her expression a little sceptical as she took a swig of her drink.

“Because we flew back to Canterbury International Airport from Utah first. I’m jetlagged from that, mostly. If Mum hadn’t needed to sort that stuff out, we’d have flown home straight from Utah, and I didn’t feel like going it alone.” Isla spread her arms wide, as if to say, *‘nothing I can do about it’*. “Anyway, what were you on about? Something to do with idols, as usual?”

“As usual? I know I get a bit too into idols sometimes, but...” Anise muttered with a mild pout on her lips.

Isla rubbed her friend’s arm. “I’m just messing with you. I love how into idols you are.”

“Well... okay. Anyway, as I was saying, I was thinking of the Royal Academy originally, right? It’s on Earth, so I’d be able to visit home really easily. And it’s one of the Tri-Star idol academies, so it doesn’t get any better than that.”

“But...?”

With a vague laugh, Anise pulled her phone out and navigated to a webpage on the stellarnet. “I... think I’ve changed my mind. Here.”

Grabbing the phone, Isla took in the picture of an island campus of some sort, with five brilliant white domes arranged in a star shape and a number of other structures dotting the island. The caption read: *‘Planet Aida’s premiere idol institution, Dreamstar Academy. Entrance auditions taking place late May. Inquire at your local idol house for details.’*

She handed the phone back. “You never do things by halves, do you?”

Anise beamed. “Nope! It’s true that I’ve never even left Mars before, and Aida’s nearly two full days away through hyperspace, something I’ve never experienced before either. But—”

“If you’re going to do it, you might as well do it properly?” Isla suggested.

“Exactly. So... I reckon I’ve made my decision, Isla. I’m going to audition for Dreamstar Academy,” Anise stated, clenching both fists with a determined expression, almost to the point of breaking her bottle.

Isla leaned forward to give her passionate and excitable friend a tight hug. “I’ll be rooting for you! Even if it’ll be super lonely without you.”

Enjoying her friend’s warmth for a moment, Anise pulled away and looked her in the eyes. “Who said I was taking the audition by myself?”

“Eh?” Isla said, and pointed at herself. “You don’t mean...?”

“Why not? You didn’t find anything on Earth, right? So come with me to Aida. Let’s become idols. Together!” Anise said, sitting back and holding her free hand out.

“I...” Isla began, her brows knitting as she considered her friend’s offer. She had just got back from Earth, had barely settled in, and now had something like this to think about. Something that could easily change the entire direction of her life *forever*.

The whole point of her trip to Earth, other than to enjoy a holiday with her mother, was to check out some universities and sports clubs and the like, maybe find sponsorship or a tennis-related course or... something. It occurred to Isla that she had never been especially good at planning her life. Anise had always been the organised one of the two of them.

Anise. Her wonderful best friend who had stuck by her through thick and thin for the last thirteen years. A girl who had been obsessed with idols for nearly as long. And the girl who often acted as Isla’s external calendar and to-do list rolled into one beautiful package.

The trip to Earth *had* been fun, regardless of the fact she hadn’t found anything useful. Her own fault, that. Left it too long. Didn’t take her mother’s advice when she should’ve done a year or more ago, and missed out on all the opportunities she would otherwise have had.

And here, right now, her best friend was giving her another opportunity, the chance to do something meaningful. To become an idol, a girl whose mission in life was generally to be inspiring to others and make people happy, though there was *so much more* to idols than just that, at least according to the self-titled Idol Professor Anise. Idols were athletic girls, too, and Isla *did* love running...

With a deep breath, she grasped Anise’s hand and nodded. “I’ll give it a try.”

“That’s my girl,” Anise said, her eyes a little moist with happy tears. “I hope you’re prepared. Because my Hell Training is about to begin.”

“Not before I’ve slept, it’s not,” Isla said, laughing and downing the last of her bottle. With that, she kicked her best friend out as politely as she could manage and got an early night.



Meanwhile, Anise strolled through the darkening streets, around a corner, and over to her own house. Similar to Isla’s place, this house was roughly of a size, but less open-plan, featuring instead a number of ground floor rooms including Anise’s own bedroom at the rear.

Entering the house, Anise wandered through a couple of short halls to the dining room. On the walls to either side there hung a number of framed photos of a dashing young man in a flight suit. In one photo he stood before the fuselage of a sleek fighter-type aircraft. Another had him in a shot with several other pilots and an enormous transport vessel of some sort. On the other wall a photo taken in black and white showed him in front of a jet black craft in what appeared to be a space station’s hangar bay.

Anise flipped her father a lazy salute on the way past the photographs, an old habit from when she was a child, and would always give him a stiff salute when he left on one of his big missions to test some crazy new experimental craft.

These days he was normally behind a desk on the technologically advanced colony world of Med Karash, leaving Anise at home with her mother, a famous romance author who spent most of her time locked in a room writing her latest novel.

Upon reaching the dining room, Anise called through, “I’m back! Isla’s agreed to try out for Dreamstar Academy with me, can’t wait to get started...” She trailed off as she realised they had a guest.

Seated at a large mahogany table in the centre of the spacious room, her mother smiled and waved her across. Her golden hair glowed under the ceiling light’s dim radiance, currently set to a low level because she had been watching a movie on her phone’s holo-display. “Welcome back.”

Sitting around the table from Anise's mother, a young brunette woman, her hair worn in a single braided ponytail, stared at Anise with a mild frown. "Are you still chasing that flight of fancy?"

Anise rolled her eyes and pulled a chair out to sit opposite her mother. "What's Annelise doing here?" she asked, taking in the features of her older sister for the first time in several months.

"Visiting my family?" Annelise said with a shrug. "Assuming my little sister even considers me family any more?"

"Don't try turning it around so you're the victim, Lise," Anise said, narrowing her eyes this time.

"Is it wrong for me to worry that you're setting yourself up for failure?" Annelise said. "You know very few idols make it!"

"Yeah, I know that better than most, sis," Anise said, shaking her head. "Not least because you keep telling me about your friend who failed to make it. I know, all right? I know!"

Their mother slapped her hand down on the table, just loud enough to break her daughters out it before the argument escalated, as it always tended to. "All right, that's enough, both of you. Annelise, I'm sure Anise appreciates you worrying over her, but she's an eighteen year old now, quite capable of making her own decisions and mistakes. As for you, Anise, you're certain this is what you want, yes?"

Anise nodded. "Absolutely. I've wanted to be an idol since I was six, I'd never forgive myself if I didn't even try."

"That's all I need, then," her mother said. "Do your best so you have no regrets, one way or the other."

Anise's face lit up.

With another shrug, Annelise got to her feet. "Well, don't come crying to me when you end up like Misha. It took her months to get over the shock of her failure." She made for the hall out to the front door.

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, sis," Anise muttered, looking away and folding her arms.

“She does have a point,” her mother said, once Annelise had left. “You’re attempting to get into the most prestigious idol academy in existence. Be prepared.”

“I inherited my organisation skills from you, I’m as prepared as anyone can be,” Anise laughed.

“Yes, but you also inherited your father’s passion and straightforwardness,” her mother said with a smile. “Fearlessly walking into danger is why he makes such a good test pilot, but it can also be a weakness if not tempered appropriately with wisdom and the ability to think ahead. These are not traits that tend to be common among young adults.”

Getting up, Anise walked around the table and gave her mother a tight hug. “I’ll do my best not to get too carried away.”

“Of course you will,” said her mother, her tone clearly sceptical.

With that, Anise gave her a kiss on the cheek and headed through to her bedroom to crash.

Chapter 4: Planning for Success

The next morning Isla was watching some Me2B—the known galaxy’s biggest video sharing platform, pronounced *MeTube*—videos talking about the discovery of the Gaia World. She felt like she was in the presence of history being made. Apparently one of the explorer scouts had found a world that was all but *perfect* while charting a new star system.

To be fair, she would have felt like that anyway, with or without the epic news regarding the next Explorer Mission. Idols had been the favourite form of entertainment for more than a century at this point, and any single idol had the potential to become the sort of star who would shake up an entire generation and go down in the history books.

Isla finished her full English breakfast, something she had become accustomed to during her stay in Canterbury, and slid her plate to one side. If the two of them could pass the entrance audition and become idols at Dreamstar Academy, would Isla eventually end up becoming one of those galactic starlets? It was possible. She certainly had the heritage for that sort of fame, given her own mother’s star status, though all this really did was dump a ton of expectations on her shoulders.

One of her mother’s earliest pieces of advice was to only glance at the horizon every so often. She would reach her goal eventually, but the destination, while important, could only be arrived at through a thousand little steps. It was unfortunate, then, that Isla had a bad habit of forgetting her mother’s advice.

A bright and cheery ding-ding-ding alerted her to Anise’s arrival, so she wandered through to the entrance hall and let her in, then resumed her position at the kitchen table.

Anise sat opposite and placed a flexible tablet device, colloquially known as a flexitab, on the shiny metal surface of the table. “You see the debriefing?”

“Watched some highlights just now. Pretty amazing stuff,” Isla said, sipping at her morning tea.

“Can’t imagine how crazy it must on Earth right now,” Anise said. “You know they have a bunch of idols along for the ride on the Explorer Missions?”

Isla stared at the ceiling high above. “Mm, I think I heard something about that once?”

“They could have twenty thousand people cooped up in those enormous ships for a few weeks, then they’re all stuck together for months or years after that while they set up a new colony. Idols help break things up and boost morale.”

“Are you suggesting we should go along?” Isla asked, narrowing her eyes in the theatrical way she always did when her best friend was about to say or do something questionable.

“God, no,” Anise said, cracking up. “Moving to Aida is more than enough adventure for now. I’m just saying that idols can do pretty much anything they want.”

“Honestly, I’ve not even thought about what type of idol I want to be. Didn’t know I wanted to *be* one until last night, hah.” Isla glanced at her friend. “So... you okay?”

“Hmm? Why wouldn’t I be?” Anise said, turning the flexitab around and pushing it across the table.

Grasping the device in both hands, Isla stared at her for a moment. “Annelise sent me a message this morning. She wanted me to say good luck and that she’s sorry for last night. As usual.”

“Ugh, I really hate her sometimes,” Anise mumbled.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” Anise said, throwing her hands up. “It’s always the same. She goes on about me being stupid for trying to become an idol, then apologies the next day. Why not just say nothing and skip the apology in the first place? That’d save everyone some annoyance, including you!”

“I don’t mind,” Isla said, shrugging.

“Well, you should!”

“Don’t get snippy with me, my dear,” Isla said with a half-smile.

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Anise opened them again and smiled. "Sorry. It just gets really tedious sometimes."

"You don't need to explain," Isla said. She pointed at the device she now held. "Anyway, what's this all about?"

Anise's smile changed to a worrying grin. "Our training menu for the next few weeks."

Isla read the document, her features variously going through phases of surprise, shock, terror, and amusement. "I'm not sure I'll survive long enough to *reach* the audition, Anise..."

"No being indecisive allowed," Anise said, wagging a finger. "You've made a decision, now we're going to see it through, right? Right."

Isla waved her hands back and forth. "I'm not getting cold feet or anything. But I've also been seriously out of practice running for the last six months, it'll take a while before my stamina's back up to snuff."

"We'll start with the basics, no worries," Anise said, retrieving the device and slipping it into her little backpack.

"Sure," Isla said, and drained her tea. "Back to what you were just talking about..."

Anise paused in the process of zipping her bag. "Mm?"

"I was just thinking about what you said, about idols going with the fleets."

"It's considered good luck to have some idols along on important missions like these."

"You reckon this new Gaia World will be another Aida, then?"

"How so?"

"You've mentioned before that Aida was a special world where basically everyone wanted a piece of the action. And that's a normal world, similar to Earth. This new one is apparently pure perfection, right? Wouldn't that mean everyone wants a slice of the pie?"

"Ah, I get you," Anise said. "Finding something like Aida or this new planet is a once-in-a-lifetime thing. The other colony worlds all have their issues, like being too hot or too cold or filled with tropical diseases or whatever. But Aida

was a really nice balance, so it was a perfect candidate as an all-comers welcome kind of place.”

“Looks like the near future is going to be an interesting place, too, huh?”

“Lots of cross-colony political wrangling, yeah,” Anise laughed. “Anyway, stop stalling, we need to be running already. Chop-chop!”

Isla agreed that if they were going to do this, they might as well get started, so she dashed upstairs to change, and the two of them headed out.



A week later Isla finally felt like she was beginning to get back into a shape becoming of an idol hopeful. Anise had mentioned that these would be their first steps towards becoming idols, which Isla had figured meant first steps like registering for the entrance audition or something. She hadn’t realised Anise meant *literally* first steps; hundreds of them, as they ran and ran and ran some more.

It was said that stamina is king when it comes to idols, because they need to be fit enough and have sufficient energy to dance and sing on a stage while being baked under bright lights, and with the roar of a crowd draining not only their physical stamina, but mental energy, too.

Anise had taken this wisdom to heart years ago, running every morning without fail, even on the rare days when the dome’s climate control systems were out of whack; taking a jog around the streets when the air conditioning was stuck on the *arctic frost* setting was bracing, to say the least.

On this particular morning, however, the air conditioning was set *just so*, not too hot, not too cold, perfect for a ten mile run. Picking Isla up at her house, Anise led them on their merry journey at a solid pace, running side by side as they navigated around other people, through hedge-lined passages, and towards a particular location she had in mind for today’s *real* training.

In Fifth Ward, generally known as the pleasure district, as this was where most of the dome’s entertainment and training facilities were housed, they arrived at one of the few areas in the colony with an unusually large amount of

space: a wide park featuring copious greenery plus a number of staircases leading to higher or lower levels, with seating and recreation areas.

At this time in the morning most people were either still in bed or already at work, so the two of them had the park to themselves, barring one or two other joggers.

Anise therefore manoeuvred them over to a set of stairs leading up to a paved seating area with benches and tables. "Okay, this'll do," she said. "We've got a bit over two weeks left until the audition, so we need to start working on more than just stamina."

Isla was doing some stretches, bending down to touch her toes, but paused at this. "Hell Training is a go?"

"You bet. First, the Stairway to Hell," Anise said, pointing at the dozen steps before them.

"Shouldn't it be paved with good intentions?"

Anise grinned. "Possibly! Anyway, running is great, but going up and down stairs exercises different muscles. We'll start with a set of one hundred."

"A hundred!?" Isla gasped. She stared at the stairs. "So... fifty up, fifty down? Or...?"

"Nope. One hundred up. One hundred down."

"My legs already hate you," Isla said. Well, nothing for it but to get started. She sprinted up, turned at the top, and dashed back down. Easy enough. After another forty-nine reps the novelty had worn off, however, and they were only halfway. Standing at the bottom of the flight of steps she'd come to despise over the last hour, Isla panted, bending over to grasp her aching knees. "I can see... why you called it... Hell Training... now..."

Anise was equally worn out, so at least Isla wasn't suffering alone. "Yeah... reckon I might've... overdone the numbers... a bit..."

"Shall we call it a day, then?" Isla asked, shuddering at the very thought of another set of fifty.

"Probably a good idea," Anise agreed, managing to bring her breathing back under control. "Tomorrow, we can start practising choreography."

"Hah, if my legs are working again by then," Isla muttered.



Isla's legs were not, in fact, working again by the next morning, and neither were Anise's. So instead they spent the day practising the song they would be singing at the audition, a slightly cheesy J-Pop style track, the type of sickly sweet song idols had been associated with since the late 20th Century.

After ruining their vocal chords for the whole day, the next morning again saw them at the Fifth Ward park, but this time for dance practice. Anise had brought along a small set of speakers which she had wirelessly connected to her phone.

She cued the song up on her music app and stood. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Isla said. She had been practising her dance moves all week, perfecting the tricky choreography to the best of her ability. It was surprising that such a catchy and simple pop song could have such complex moves associated with it. "Still can't believe how hard the dance is for this song."

"This is a special case," Anise said, practising a few steps and a twirl before she started the song playing. "It's a piece of choreography designed to test if you're actually good enough to get into a top level idol academy."

"Oh... that would explain it, then, yes," Isla laughed. She lined herself up with Anise and they began their routine, dancing in almost perfect sync to the music and each other, their breathing measured and under control after a week of intense training.

The moment it finished, Anise cued the track up a second time and they went straight into the same routine again for the next two hours until they were both thoroughly worn out and ready for a shower and something to eat.

Chapter 5: Audition – May 2176

The next day, they did it again. And again, and again for the following two weeks, when the auditions for Dreamstar Academy were due to begin. In Fifth Ward, the audition hall was already abuzz with activity. Several hundred young ladies, all around the ages of eighteen to twenty, milled about in the entrance foyer, each awaiting their shot at stardom.

The airy space was filled with the sweet scents of Martian roses, a particular variety imported from Earth decades ago and grown in specific conditions to produce a dusty orange-red tone with a strong scent. They had been associated with Martian idols for nearly as long, representing the ability to thrive under harsh conditions.

Loitering on the periphery, Isla talked to Anise as they kept their eyes on the holographical displays above the reception desk, where the names of all the idols attending today were displayed in order. Another ten to go and it would be their turn.

Eventually deciding that relaxing would be a good idea, Isla sat on a red-cushioned seat along the wall and did her best to steady her nerves. “Now we’re here, I’m feeling a bit...”

“Nerve-wracking, isn’t it?” Anise said, sitting next to Isla and holding her hand. “Now imagine performing on-stage for a crowd of thousands.”

“... thanks, my beloved best friend, I feel so much better now,” Isla muttered.

“Any time,” Anise grinned.

“Hey,” Isla said, bringing their clasped hands up and pointing with her index finger. “Isn’t that Jenna, from our old school?”

Anise glanced over the other side of the room to where a girl of their own age, with nicely styled shoulder length hair in a carbon black shade, was practising her moves one last time. “Never figured her for the idol type.”

“I thought she wanted to work with animals?” Isla said.

“Still plenty of new species being discovered on the colony worlds, she’d have a pretty solid career. But... I can understand the allure of wanting to become an idol,” Anise replied with a vague chuckle.

“Well, you *are* the Idol Master, no surprises there,” Isla said, poking her in the ribs.

“I hope she gets in, it’d be nice to have someone else we know there.”

“Assuming *we* get in.”

Anise shrugged. “I have faith we will.”

“More than I have in myself,” Isla mumbled.

“Faith is something you place in others, right? Like a god or whatever. So have faith in me and my belief that you’ll be fine.”

This made Isla giggle, despite the nerves. “Did you seriously just put yourself on the same level as a god?”

“Hey, I intend to be a star one day, and where do stars live? In the heavens!” Anise said, pointing at the ceiling with her free hand and resulting in Isla cracking up.

“I suppose there are worse deities to worship,” Isla said, once she had finished laughing herself silly.

“Feeling better?”

“Much. Thanks, Anise.”

“Any time,” Anise said, at which point she was called. “Looks like I’m up.” She headed for one of the two doors, one to either side of the reception desk, leading through to the audition rooms.

Leaving Isla hanging around outside the door, she entered and walked down the hall to Audition Room 3. In this large space, with its polished wooden flooring and airy atmosphere, a single chair had been placed in the centre of the room facing a desk with three people seated at it, a man and two ladies.

The lady in the middle nodded at Anise once she had seated herself. “Welcome. We still have a lot of candidates to see today, so let’s begin. First, please tell us a bit about yourself and why you’re here.”

“Anise Kendall, entry number 156,” Anise said. “I’ve lived on Mars my whole life, but ever since I was little I’ve wanted to be an idol, to see other

worlds and spread my love of idols to everyone I meet. Mars has never had many idols, so I want to change that and show that even the Red Planet can produce stellar level idols.”

The examiner nodded, a smile on her face. “Very good. Now, a few general knowledge questions.” She went on to rapid fire a dozen questions, all relating to either the world of Aida and its history, or specifically Dreamstar Academy; who founded Aida; what year was Aida discovered; who was the first ever headmistress of Dreamstar Academy; what was the name of the first frontier town settled on Aida; who was the most well-known and popular idol in all of idol history.

Anise answered every single question instantly and correctly.

Nodding again, the examiner consulted her flexitab and poked the screen a few times, her expression indicating pleasure at such a professional and knowledgeable candidate. She looked back up and locked eyes with Anise. “Now... it’s onto the physical portion of the audition.” She held a hand out towards a small stage along the side of the room. “If you would?”

Moving across to the stage, Anise bounded up the stairs, enthusiasm showing in her every movement. She stood in the centre of the stage and assumed her initial pose for the song she would be singing. “Anise Kendall, here I go!”

The examiners watched, transfixed, as the music started and Anise got into her rhythm. She had been quite correct when she said Mars rarely produced significant numbers of idols, good or bad. Something about the utilitarian nature of the colony domes put a damper on creativity, and while there were a few hundred girls here today, the entrance auditions on Earth for top level academies attracted *thousands* of applicants and took days to complete.

Those few idols—and other creative people—the Red Planet *did* produce almost invariably left for Earth or Aida or any one of the other half-dozen colony worlds humanity had settled in the last century and a half.

But there were those rare occasions when even Mars produced an idol of such high calibre that she went on to stellar level, the pinnacle of ideldom.

Someone known not just on a global scale, but on an *interstellar* level, loved and adored across worlds.

Anise's routine came to an end and she bowed, her face locked into the perfect smile idols train hard to activate on demand. "Thank you very much!"

Their mouths hanging open in surprise, the examiners thanked her for the wonderful performance and gave her the all-clear to leave. The woman who had asked the previous questions informed her that the results would be out by the end of the day.

Back in the foyer, Anise did a little jig. "Aaah, that felt amazing!"

Isla took a deep breath and steeled herself. It was her turn next. "Wish me luck."

"You honestly don't need it, Isla," Anise said, stroking her friend's arm. "I wouldn't have suggested you try out with me if I didn't think you could handle it. Just remember our training, and try not to mess up too many of the questions. And if you're struggling, think of it like this: you're good enough to play tennis at international level. You're used to pressure, right?"

"Yeah... yeah, I guess that's true," Isla laughed.

The speakers came to life once more, this time calling for Isla.

Saluting, Isla said, "Here I go!" and made her way to the audition room. The same sequence greeted her as had greeted Anise, kicking off with telling them about herself. "Isla Ainsworth, entry number 157. My best friend has been into idols for years. You just saw her, actually. If I'm honest, I've never thought much about idols myself, I was too busy playing tennis."

A pause to think.

"But the one thing I always noticed was that Anise was smiling like mad whenever she talked about or watched idols. I've not had much direction in my life until now, but thanks to her I've decided I want to be an idol and make people smile the way they make my best friend smile."

The examiner herself smiled again, apparently pleased with this answer. "Now, the quick fire question section," she said, and went through the same questions as before.

Unlike Anise, Isla didn't have much in the way of idol knowledge yet. Most of what she knew had been imparted in a hurry between training sessions over the last couple of weeks. She therefore did her best, messed up a couple of names, and got one question wrong, but otherwise managed.

It was now time for her performance. If anything, she put on an even better show than Anise. More than a decade of almost daily practice with not only her racket but running and stamina training, too, had left Isla with a healthy and toned physique, and an athletic ability and level of coordination that could put most other girls her age—even idols—to shame.

Even after half a year of slacking off while she was on Earth, her performance stunned the examination board a second time. She wasn't quite as crisp and precise in some of her movements, but it was clear she had a talent worth cultivating. The examiner thanked Isla for the wonderful show, and had her leave.

With their respective auditions completed, Isla hooked up with Anise and they headed out for a few hours while the rest of the entrants were seen. They grabbed a bite to eat at a local café, talked about what they might do first on arriving at Aida—if they got in, naturally—and generally just enjoyed each other's company until six o'clock rolled around.

Arriving back at the idol house, they made a beeline for the reception desk where the results were displayed on the screen. Of the four-hundred entrants, only four had made it in, their names displayed for all to see: Carla Brunell, Mandy Milano, Isla Ainsworth, and Anise Kendall.

"We did it!" Anise exclaimed, hugging her friend for all she was worth.

"I... almost don't believe it," Isla muttered, staring at the screen and her name emblazoned thereon. No sign of Jenna's name, however. "Looks like Jen didn't make it."

"That's a shame, but we need to think of our own future now, right?" Anise said, pulling away from the hug, beaming all over her face. "Aaah, this is just the best feeling. Knowing all my hard work has paid off and I'll actually be going to Aida...!"

“What happens next?” Isla asked. In all the excitement to prepare for the audition, she hadn’t thought much about what would happen in the event she got in.

“We should receive a bunch of e-pamphlets and things to tell us all about the academy, then we’ll have to pack a load of bags and send them on ahead to be ready when we arrive... oh, and a ton of documents to sign.”

“Oh. Yay, paperwork,” Isla said with an inaudible sigh. She’d never been fond of digital paperwork and bureaucracy. Fortunately, Mars was an efficient place and abhorred that kind of thing. Huge worlds with billions of people like Earth couldn’t get away with such luxuries quite as easily, however.

Anise grabbed her best friend’s hand and led her out of the building, heading home. Today marked their first day as real, honest-to-goodness idols, and she intended to make the most of the time they had left on Mars, to ensure their transition to Aida went as smoothly as possible.

And Isla... well, she went along for the ride, as she always did. She had a goal to work towards now, something she had lacked for most of her life, and she was finally going to make something of herself. Just as soon as she could figure out her new direction as an idol.

With any luck, it wouldn’t take her *another* eighteen years.

Part 02: Our Journey Begins

Having passed the entrance audition for Dreamstar Academy, Isla and Anise transfer from their home on Mars to planet Aida, the entertainment capital of the stars. Here, they meet mentors (and potential rivals) Lisa and Mira and begin their new lives in earnest.

However, Anise has certain interests beyond simply becoming an idol, and feels that the time is right to pursue one interest in particular...

Chapter 6: New Arrivals – June 2176

High in orbit above Mars, the Martian Space Industries-owned Solus Planum Shipyards churned out another MSI1077R starliner from its heavily automated assembly lines. Far, *far* below, a near-identical starliner taxied to its assigned runway at the Syria Planum Spaceport, primary launching point for all commercial traffic into and out of the Red Planet. The starliner accelerated and lifted off, ascending towards the dusty heavens.

Exiting the atmosphere and opening a hyperspace window, the vessel began its thirty lightyear journey, speeding two young idol hopefuls to their new lives...



The starliner exited hyperspace with a thunderclap, the sound immediately swallowed by the vast emptiness of space, and approached its destination, a shining jewel of a planet called Aida, entertainment capital of the stars. On-board, the passengers collectively exhaled, happy their forty-hour journey finally neared its end.

Reclining in her window seat, Isla yawned a yawn so big it threatened to swallow the starliner whole. In the next seat over, Anise snoozed peacefully against her shoulder, face locked into a perpetual smile even while asleep.

As starliners and other large interstellar vessels were prohibited from exiting hyperspace too close to a planet, Isla passed the time with some music and a novel she was reading on her sleek white phone, waiting patiently for atmospheric entry.

Soon, a degree of reflected light made its way through the windows from the planet they now closed in on. On the other side of the aisle, a baby cried. A couple further up argued in a good-natured sort of way. One of the stewardesses wandered up and down the aisles, assuring everyone that the

journey was nearly finished. And a certain hint in the recycled air indicated a general need for shower cubicles on these long-distance starliner trips.

Pressing her face to the reinforced plastiglass window, Isla saw that they weren't far off. She poked her best friend in the shoulder. "Wakey-wakey!"

Anise opened her eyes and sat up. "Mm? Oh, morning." She stretched and glanced out of the window. "Nearly there?"

Isla laughed at her friend's glowing, if a little dozy, features. "Not long now."

Anise played with her loosely bunched twin ponytails, the glorious golden locks held in place by cobalt blue scrunchies and currently swept forward over her shoulders to rest on her chest; she normally wore it loose, but had decided that as a brand new idol, she needed a brand new hair style to match.

An announcement came over the speakers that they were preparing for atmospheric entry, and would all passengers kindly fasten their seatbelts. Anise leaned across Isla, straining against the belt so she could gaze out of the window as they descended. Her own sapphire blue eyes watched with interest as the intense heat faded out to reveal the azure skies of Aida's capital city, Apollotia, the place they would call home for potentially the next four or more years.

"What's that?" Isla asked. She pointed out at a tower rising high into the sky, reminiscent of the Space Needle on Earth.

"Let's see..." Anise followed her friend's digit. "That's the Tower of Babel."

"... seriously?" Isla said, incredulous.

"It's actually called The Babylonian, but everyone calls it the Tower of Babel as kind of a joke. It's because people mostly speak Universal Basic here. Lots of different cultures on Aida, so having a single language everyone understands is super helpful."

"Good thing we learned UB in school, huh?"

Anise sat back. "It's a derivative of English, so you'd probably be able to get by without learning it. But yeah, we'll have no problems."

"I bet that place looks amazing at night. We should visit."

"Maybe we can take a wander into the city tonight?"

“Mm, best to wait a day or two? Hyperlag isn’t fun,” Isla said, shuddering at the thought.

The hyperspace equivalent of jetlag, hyperlag tended to be considerably worse, thanks to time zones being measured across lightyears of space rather than regions of a relatively small planet. It was quite possible to end up in an entirely different month of the year, or even a whole other *season* while travelling between worlds.

An understated groan escaped Anise’s lips. “I’d forgotten about that. We can try and make time on the weekend? Gives us a few days to settle in, then.”

Isla indicated with a wave of her hand that this was fine. “Probably best to learn our way around the academy first, anyway.”

They could make out the ground in some detail now, the enormous metropolis of Aida’s capital region situated on the coast, skirted by a sizeable mountain range on one side and vast open plains on the other two coming into view.

Golden beaches stretched around a large bay on the city’s northern side, some several dozen miles across, and all around the outskirts stood giant hangars and industrial areas, housing not only much of the city’s production capability, but movie sound stages, studios, and lots.

The starliner gradually descended towards a spaceport on the edge of the city furthest from the bay, landing and taxiing over to one of the vast terminal buildings. Upon exiting into the cavernous structure, they retrieved their luggage and made their way outside to be greeted by a bright and sunny Aidan midday afternoon.

Anise took a deep breath of genuine air and had a stretch. “Smell that? That’s *real* air! Not the recycled stuff we grew up with.” She puffed her cheeks out a few more times, taking in huge gulps of the sweet scent of a true atmosphere.

“I just got back from half a year on Earth...” Isla said.

“Had to burst my bubble, didn’t you?”

“Ah...”

Her best friend's downcast face resulted in a laughing Anise. "It's okay. I always wondered what it must've been like. Seems I've been missing out."

While the Martian colony domes used a combination of living plants and trees judiciously placed in every possible location to create a breathable atmosphere, plus a manmade system of filtration and recycling for simple efficiency and reliability, it was no substitute for a planetary atmosphere, as Anise was now discovering.

"I hope you'll be okay, now we're here." Isla's voice was filled with concern.

"Okay how?"

"Allergies and things?"

"Oh. It's possible I might have some issues, but I had myself checked for all the common stuff we're likely to find here, no problem. Thanks for worrying, though. Now, shall we take a walk?"

Isla hefted her suitcase. "Aren't we meant to be checking in at the academy first?"

"Sometime today, sure, doesn't have to be right now. We've only just arrived, we'll never experience this first day again. We should enjoy it!" Anise added in a vehement *'I'm not taking no for an answer'* tone.

"Mm... okay, sure," Isla said. "Which way's the academy? Might as well walk in that general direction."

Anise had a brief consultation with her phone, revealing that the academy was to the north, nestled in the bay they had seen on approach. "Looks like it's straight this way, directly north." She pointed along the street.

"That way's north? So if we kept walking we'd eventually reach the top of the world? Top idols!" Isla said, pointing a finger skyward.

Anise giggled at this. "It'll take us a bit more work than that to reach top idol status."

Isla whistled. "More work than walking thousands of miles to the north pole? Being an idol is harsh."

"I'm glad you're finally starting to understand," Anise said as Isla's expression turned terrified. "Becoming an idol feels like the easiest thing ever,

doesn't it? And in a way, it is. But you'll learn soon enough how much hard work goes into becoming a *successful* idol."

"I'm looking forward to it. Sort of." Isla grasped her friend's free hand and they wandered up the street, taking in their new surroundings. The structures all around them seemed to have been built with some sort of unifying theme, one Isla couldn't quite put her finger on. "Don't the buildings here all look really familiar?"

Anise gave her friend an abridged history lesson. "You're probably thinking of the Art Deco period? We learned about it in school."

"Maybe..."

"When Aida was originally settled, Earth was in kind of a renaissance period after the Resource Wars. People were looking for ways to modernise old styles, and those aesthetics bled through into some of the new colonies."

"So these buildings are, uh, Arteko?"

"Art Deco, Isla, try to keep up," Anise said with a theatrical sigh. "A lot of the architecture here has an Art Deco-inspired style. Curved surfaces, gold, silver, bronze, lots of angles, geometric shapes, gorgeous windows, you name it. I always loved this style, especially compared to home."

Isla had a lopsided smile on her face. "When did you become an expert on this?"

Anise graced her with a smug grin. "When I learned everything I could about Aida, when else?"

Isla gave a low laugh and changed subject. "Our things should already be at the academy, right?"

"Yeah, everything will have been delivered by now."

Isla stopped and stared at a nearby taxi stand. Parked there were several dozen yellow taxis, hovering vehicles with enormous brass grills at the front and vertical fins at the back. The already familiar Art Deco motif extended not only to architecture, but infrastructure and transport, too.

Anise appraised the sleek vehicles hovering a few inches above the ground, blending high tech and traditional design aesthetics into something for the

modern age. “Amazing, isn’t it? It’s 2176 and Earth *still* uses wheels. They really do live in the past.”

“They’re not *that* bad, though some places outside the big cities do still use wheeled vehicles,” Isla laughed. Her best friend tended to think of Earth in roughly the same terms someone from a big city might think of people in the sticks; that they all used ox and cart and had no concept of modern technology.

The taxis were just the start of this technological wonderland. All around them people hustled and bustled, holographic signs painted a thousand pictures, hovering cars zoomed through the streets, and efficient magnetic monorails effortlessly slid along overhead.

And that was to say nothing of the multitude of interesting scents enveloping them; fast foods, perfumes, a hint of greenery, and water from the nearby Capp River. Even Isla, who had at least spent half a year on Earth, was overwhelmed by the veritable plethora of smells assaulting her nasal apparatus.

Stopping at the entrance to a side street paved in a satin-finish red stone, she cupped a hand up to her ear, straining to hear over the sounds of the city. “Is that music?”

“By the sounds of the song and her voice, I’d say it’s Hot Stuff,” Anise said, eyes closed.

“You think all cute girls are hot stuff,” Isla muttered.

Anise emitted a loud snort at this. “I mean that’s the idol’s stage name.”

“O-Oh.” Isla coughed. “Anyway, let’s go check it out, I haven’t seen a live performance by an idol before.” She trotted up the side street, her cheeks flushed, partly embarrassed at being tripped up, partly at the simple idea that she was transferring into a prestigious idol academy, yet had never seen an idol perform in person.

Anise followed, walking past shop fronts filled with fancy fashions and stylish shoes. “We might have to come back here one day soon. Some nice stuff I’d like to check out,” she muttered, receiving a vague affirmation from her friend.

At the end of the street, they appeared on a wide road running beside Capp River, the largest tributary on this landmass, which wound through the city like

an inebriated snake. Here, they took a jaunt over the nearest footbridge they could find, a black metal affair with the already familiar Art Deco style again rearing its stylish head.

Down another side street they emerged in a park approximately the size of a football pitch, with trees and bushes dotted all about, and a network of gravel paths edged in a variety of Aidan and Earth-based plants and flowers, all manicured to perfection.

To their right, nestled in a thicket of trees, stood a stage, a hemispherical amphitheatre with rigging around the top of the structure allowing for lighting and sound to be adjusted during live performances. Before the raised concrete foundation upon which the dome stood, concentric stone seats graced a grassy incline, virtually every one equally graced by a human posterior, along with several dozen people standing around the periphery.

Running up to the rear of the seats, Isla stared at the stage and its current occupant. "She has green hair!" she yelled over the noise of the performance.

Anise followed her friend's pointing finger to the young woman dancing onstage, who did indeed have vivid lime green hair, falling to the small of her back. "She does, you're right," she yelled back.

"But it looks really natural," Isla added.

Unlike dyed hair, which generally looked fake, this girl could have been *born* with green hair. The flame orange outfit she wore accentuated it further, making her seem summery and vivacious.

"It's simple nanotech, just fiddles a bit with your follicles so they produce amazing colours by tweaking the melanin. Totally safe," Anise explained during a lull in the sickly sweet pop music.

Isla held a hand up to her temple. "I always get sudden headaches when you start talking science."

Puffing her chest out, Anise beamed. "And that was the cliff notes version."

"How much of this stuff do you actually *understand*?" Isla yelled back as Hot Stuff launched into yet another catchy pop tune, having the time of her life on the stage.

“I get the theory behind most of it, but the actual technical stuff? Very little, I’m not so good at maths and equations and things,” Anise shouted back, pointing to her head.

Isla shrugged. “Better than me, at least.”

“That’s not hard. Oh, while I remember, have you decided what sort of idol you want to be?” Anise asked, unconsciously tapping a foot in time to the beat.

A minor furrowing of her brows gave Isla’s answer more eloquently than words. “Not yet. I’m a bit confused by it all, to be honest.”

“That’s why the academy exists, nothing to worry about. You can spend a little while figuring out what you want to do.” Anise pointed at Hot Stuff, currently involved in an acrobatic routine, dancing back and forth, doing flips and handstands, and receiving much applause. “Something like her, maybe?”

“I feel dizzy just watching her!”

Anise laughed. “You don’t have to worry about that, most idols use dance routines while they perform, but Hot Stuff really goes the extra mile. She was originally an athletic gymnast hopeful.”

“She gave that up to be an idol?” Isla asked, aghast.

“That’s right. Check out her face.”

Isla did so, noting the perpetual smile was both genuine and pleasure-filled, albeit also sweat-streaked. “She looks so happy!”

“That could be you, Isla,” Anise said, rubbing her friend’s arm. “Come on, we should get moving.”

Strolling back to where they originally turned down the small shopping street, they got back to their jaunt towards the academy, the sounds of Hot Stuff’s live fading into the distance as they walked.

Anise pointed up to one of the many holographical billboards dotting the buildings. “See up there?”

Her friend zeroed in on the displayed image.

“Pretty, isn’t she?” Anise continued. “She’s what’s known as a pure idol. Or sometimes *Personadols*, because of the masks idols wear in public. She focused on the most basic and arguably most *important* aspects of being an idol: personality and a wide range of interests.”

Isla was transfixed. The young woman on the billboard was advertising some new lipstick or other, but that wasn't important. No, Isla was fixated on the girl *herself*. Her hair was midnight blue with a hint of deep purple, reminiscent of a night sky. Long, wavy, and reaching to her waist, it appeared to sparkle as she moved, like a miniature galaxy of stars. And her eyes? Bright blue with a hint of pure white, almost moon-like. But not the milky white of blindness, more of a pearl sapphire complimenting her hair.

Since Isla had shut down, Anise filled her in on the details. "She's called Cassiopeia Luna, though that's just her stage name. Never found out her real name, it's not exactly widely advertised. Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Amazingly beautiful," Isla breathed. She did a double take as something registered. "Hang on, you mean even *you* don't know her real name? You're slipping, Anise."

As an avid fan of all things idol-related, Anise prided herself on her knowledge and became mildly irritated when some juicy piece of information eluded her. She let out a gentle sigh. "Believe me, I want nothing more than to know her real name. It's like an itch I can't seem to reach, it kind of gets under my skin and..." She paused to theatrically scratch her arms a few times, hoping to get the point across. "Gah... yeah, super annoying."

"I've never seen you this defeated before," Isla observed.

"I love idols, and that means knowing everything it's possible to know about them. It's no different to a starship lover wanting to catalogue every ship in existence. All the specifications and how they were used, whether they're still in active service, special models and limited manufactures, everything. Or a stamp collector, or antique coins... everyone has their quirks. This is mine." Anise gave an indifferent shrug.

"So finding out Luna's real name is the challenge you're setting yourself while we're here?"

Anise grinned. "You bet. Anyway, Luna made her way by focusing almost exclusively on being a pure idol, a Personadol. I reckon you'd do well going that route, too. Maybe add in your love of racket sports as a side interest."

"I'd like to include sports in some way, that's for sure," Isla said.

Anise's grin widened further. "You could be a tennis idol."

"I wish."

"I'm not joking. Idols can be pretty much whatever you want. There are quite a few who play tennis at pro level."

Isla tilted her head. "Really?"

"Luna, for one. She plays tennis and badminton, though not professionally."

"I'd love to play her," Isla said, hobbling a bit because her feet were complaining at all the walking after an extended period seated on the starliner. She considered herself to be reasonably proficient at racket sports, most-especially tennis, but had no illusions as to the level of players she might face here on Aida.

"The academy is pretty flexible, it's not like a school, despite being called an academy. We're free to focus on whatever we like for the most part. The academy is simply there to facilitate that."

Isla came to an abrupt halt. "Well, I'll think about it some more when we get there. For now, finding a taxi is higher priority, my feet are killing me."

"I was just thinking the same." Anise again consulted her Phone of Many Things and located a nearby taxi stand, where she hustled her friend into one of the waiting vehicles and asked the driver to take them to the academy monorail.

Chapter 7: Academic Accession

The taxi dropped them off at a monorail station built into and jutting out over a sheer cliff face, dropping down to the beach far below. The entire area—several hundred feet square—was paved in marble and surrounded by sleek metal railings. The building itself was a vision in black and red, the now-familiar Art Deco theme again making an appearance, with several shallow staircases and ramps leading up into the structure.

Inside, benches lined the outer edges of the area, and in the centre stood several automated ticket machines; the academy island was a popular destination for a variety of people on a variety of errands, and the small charge to use the monorail brought in some additional revenue. As new students at the academy, Isla and Anise had both received student passes, neatly sidestepping the issue.

They swiped their phones over the reader on one of the metal turnstiles leading to the monorail, boarded the first of the two carriages, and settled down for a brief trip across the bay towards the distant campus island.

Brilliant white posts, each several metres across, studded the ocean at regular intervals, buried deep into the submarine floor. Suspended between each post, the monorail's magnetic line swept passengers from one shore to the other some thirty feet above the water's surface. As the train sped along, the backwash from its passing kicked up a white spray.

Isla gazed down at the frothy foam and balmy waters. "I've never been this close to an ocean before. It's actually pretty scary."

Anise rubbed her friend's back. "I'm terrified, if I'm honest."

Isla gave her a hug. "And yet we're both fine spending forty hours in hyperspace."

"Funny how that works," Anise said, relaxing a little. "I'm sure I'll get used to it soon enough, it's just... this is so different to Mars. I've never even *seen* a real ocean before now."

“I suppose it’s not much different to the pool at our old school? Just... you know, on a massively bigger scale?”

“I guess. I’ve heard the campus has pretty regular storms because of its location. Not sure how I’ll cope with that.” A brief laugh escaped Anise’s lips, containing precisely no humour at all.

“There were a few storms while I was in Britain. I almost wet myself the first time!” Isla laughed, her cheeks glowing red. “The noise is incredible, but there’s a physical force there, too.”

“Physical force?” Anise said. She played with her lightweight hooded top’s pull cords, twiddling them in her fingers in hopes of occupying her mind a little. Mars was well-known for its intense mega storms, but inside the domes they were barely audible.

“You know the feeling you get when a starliner takes off nearby? A sort of rumbling in your chest from how loud the engines are? It’s like that.”

“Damn, that’s awful... not sure I like the sound of that.”

Isla saw a perfect opportunity for an equally awful noise-related pun, but resisted the urge. “Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I just figured knowing in advance the sort of thing to expect might prepare you a bit.”

The monorail pulled into the station on the island, so Anise took a deep breath to settle her heart. “I can always jump into your bed if it’s too much to handle, right?”

Isla blushed. “What are we, five?”

Narrowing her eyes, Anise’s lips curled up into an amused smile. “Don’t deny you like the idea, I can see it in your face as plain as day.”

“Well... I suppose it might be nice snuggling under the covers and talking right into the early hours. Rain and wind hammering on the windows outside...” Isla trailed off into silence, her eyes misting up.

“See? You *do* like the idea!”

“Oh all right, jeez. Come on, let’s go,” Isla said, exiting the carriage.

They stepped out into an identical station built into a large outcropping of rock on the southern, city-facing edge of the island. Making their way outside

the building, a salty sea scent greeted them as the Aidan equivalent of seagulls squawked overhead, searching for their next meal.

“How do you even get here if you don’t use the monorail?” Isla asked.

“See there?” Anise pointed down towards what appeared to be a tunnel exit at the foot of the hill. “That’s an underwater tunnel for hovercars, comes out on the mainland near the station. There’s also skybuses in the event of emergency or whatever.”

Picking up her suitcase and slinging a small rucksack over her shoulder, Isla stared at the sea. “You’d think cars that hover could fly over the water.”

Anise gave a brief tut-tut, tugging her own luggage along in tired hands. “Hovercars don’t work over water, Isla. If you’d paid attention in science classes, you’d know that.”

“You’re just full of knowledge, aren’t you?”

“Kinda.” Anise puffed her chest out for the second time that day.

“Well... full of *something*, knowledge is probably the most polite option,” Isla added, receiving a playful thump for her troubles. Massaging her arm back to life, she shrugged. “Personally, I’d rather spend my time playing tennis or taking a walk.”

“Always preferred exercising the muscles outside your head, didn’t you?” Anise said, happy to get some immediate revenge in. Isla dinged her in return.

A shocking pink academy hoverbus waited nearby, similar in general style to old twentieth-century minibuses. The two of them lugged their suitcases on-board and the driver set off down a winding road leading to the foot of the gently sloped hill. The whole island was covered in a veritable sea of green in the form of trees, bushes, and hedges, giving the landscape a lush and vivid appearance, interspersed with interesting-looking buildings and facilities.

The vehicle exited the path from the hilltop monorail station, turning onto a road paved in a salmon pink stone named after the fish in question, called samonite; quarried in a neighbouring region, it was prized for the way it sparkled when polished to a pristine finish, and was used for all of the campus roads. It gave the impression of a network of sparkling pink veins crisscrossing the island.

Driving under a dense canopy of trees lining the road to either side, the vehicle exited back into the light and they received their first real look at the academy, situated on the northernmost side of the island furthest away from the city and looking out over the ocean.

The academy itself comprised five enormous domes in a star shape, blinding in their brilliance, ivory white with black metal structural detailing. Each dome—similar to the domes on Mars, making both girls feel rather more at home after their brief existential crisis on the monorail—had a line of windows around the full circumference at both ground and first floor level. These were built into the superstructure a little way to provide shade, with balconies circling the upper floor.

Connecting the five buildings were covered paths leading between each dome and meeting at a large central fountain crafted from white marble. Each path was open to the sides with pointed metal roofs, but included shutters in case of severe weather, a relatively common occurrence on an island situated in the centre of a bay. Surrounding the fountain, a low circular white brick wall and five wooden benches stood, and the rest of the expanse between buildings and paths had a covering of soft grass.

Stopping outside the closest dome, the driver informed them he would take their luggage over to the dormitory, and that they should go and speak to the headmistress. They okayed him and jumped out.

“Shall we? Don’t want to keep the headmistress waiting,” Anise said.

“And who was it that suggested taking a walk when we arrived?” Isla asked, eyes narrowed.

“Aha, you’ve got me there.”

“How did they know we’d be arriving?” Isla wondered, staring at the sky. “That hoverbus can’t have been waiting there on the off-chance we’d turn up, right?”

Anise pulled her phone out and waggled it. “We used the monorail, remember? The moment we swiped our phones, they’d have known we were on our way.”

“Oh, okay, that makes sense,” Isla said with a nod.

They walked up the path—again pink and sparkly—to the front entrance of the dome. Inside they were greeted by a spacious foyer, in the centre of which stood a kiosk.

Anise wandered up to the young lady currently occupying it. “Hi! We’ve just transferred in and are looking for the headmistress.”

The lady at the information kiosk gave them a pristine smile that would have looked perfectly at home in a toothpaste commercial, and directed them up to the second floor. Two staircases wound up, one either side, to a viewing platform above the kiosk. They made their way up one of these, and from there directly ahead to a double door. A hallway beyond this took them through the centre of the structure towards the rear.

“It’s a big building, isn’t it? I wouldn’t have thought idols were this popular,” Isla said as they came to a halt outside a set of two heavy mahogany-like doors.

“Earth’s still stuck in the dark ages of the twenty-first century, so I guess that’s a reasonable assumption if you don’t know any better,” Anise said. “Idols are super popular pretty much everywhere, though.”

“Aren’t there idol academies on Earth?” Isla said. “You mentioned the Royal Academy before.”

“There are. Some really good ones, actually, including two of the three Tri-Star Academies. Doesn’t change the fact that most idols trained there end up heading to other planets or space stations and things. There’s... something restrictive about Earth.”

“Feels like there’s a lot I still need to learn,” Isla murmured, giving a resigned shrug.

“Don’t we all? Anyway, ready to meet the headmistress?”

“I think so.”

“Okay!” Anise raised her hand and knocked.

Upon entering the airy room, the first thing they noticed wasn’t the headmistress. Instead, their eyes were drawn to two other young ladies standing before the headmistress’s desk.

The girl on the left had sandy blonde hair worn loose, wild, and falling to the small of her back, shimmering silver with subtle hints of gold. Her skin leaned towards tawny, making for a truly stunning compliment to her hair. Anise stared intently into the lime green eyes of this vision of perfection, breaking away before she gave her currently less-than-pure thoughts away.

Isla was more interested in the other girl, who had onyx hair, arrow straight and falling to her posterior, highlighting in gentle grey hues whenever she moved. Her sepia skin had warm orange undertones and her dark hazel eyes appraised Isla in turn, a pleasant expression occupying her features.

To either side of the room, rows of real paperback and hardback books were collected in shelves reaching to the ceiling, and a marble tiled floor reflected the sunlight from a large bay window overlooking a lush garden area between the rearmost two domes, the centre of which was occupied by a stone-built gazebo.

And walking around from behind her desk, the headmistress, her black suit giving her a refined air and elegance that made her both sexy and imposing. She wore her hair in a long, curled ponytail, jet black and silky, which was swept forward over her right shoulder to put the finishing touch on an incredibly beautiful woman.

“We’ll continue this momentarily,” the headmistress said with a wave of her hand. As the other two girls left, each of them giving the new arrivals a warm smile and wave on the way past, she turned her attention to her latest students.

“They were gorgeous...” Anise murmured.

“I’m sure both my daughter and her best friend will be pleased to know they left such a positive first impression,” said the headmistress, a touch of amusement showing in one or two wrinkles in her forehead.

Anise stiffened. One of those girls was the headmistress’s *daughter*? Oh boy...

The headmistress gave a discrete cough. “Welcome to Aida’s premiere idol academy, Dreamstar Academy, the place where dreams are made and stars are born. I am the headmistress, Amanda Lawson, it’s a pleasure to meet you both.” Her voice and speech were perfectly enunciated and measured. Soft, calming, bordering on hypnotic.

The new entrants introduced themselves.

Amanda then proceeded to give a few words of encouragement and advice, walking back and forth. “Feel free to take things at your own pace. It is for you to decide what sort of idol you wish to be. We are merely here to facilitate this and provide the requisite avenues for you to walk.”

She stopped pacing and faced them. “Rushing headlong into things will likely trip you up, but equally, so will being too cautious. Strive for a balance of the two and never be afraid to ask for advice. Every teacher, producer, and coach here is happy to help.”

Next, she had them sign some digital documents on a flexitab, clearing up a few remaining points of an administrative nature, including details of their dormitory rooms. Walking around to her chair, she placed the device safely in a drawer, and sat.

“Very good,” Amanda said, nodding at them. “That will be all for now. Go and get settled in at the dormitory, I’m sure you must be tired after your flight. You will have a mentor each for your first week here, they will be along to see you shortly.” She returned to her work, indicating their meeting was over.

Isla and Anise thanked her and exited out. Appearing back in the spacious hall, they were immediately collared by the two girls they had seen initially.

The sandy blonde girl moved forward and beamed, extending a hand. “Hey! Great to meet you, I’m Lisa, this is Mira.”

The black-haired girl addressed as Mira shook their hands in turn. “Charmed.”

Anise found herself staring once more, not least because Lisa’s mischievous expression seemed to indicate an identical level of interest to her own. She also had severe difficulties *not* staring directly at the beautifully rounded chest facing her. “I’m Anise, nice to meet you.”

Isla nodded. “I’m Isla. How’s it going?”

Anise immediately interrupted proceedings with a comment. “Uh, I hope you don’t mind me saying, but I don’t recognise either of you. I thought I’d learned about most of the idols here...”

“We only transferred in a month ago. We’ve been floating about the colonies for the last few years,” Lisa said, waving a hand.

Mira shifted position, her every movement watched hawkishly by Isla. “Lisa’s father moves about a lot, so we decided it might be fun to go along for the ride.”

This made Anise metaphorically punch herself several times. “How did I miss two cuties like you? Aaah, I really am slipping, Isla was right!” Throwing her arms up theatrically, as though asking Fate why he hated her, she lamented to the universe at large.

“You ain’t living this one down for a while,” Isla said, hinting that this might be held over her friend’s head at some unspecified point in the future.

Their new friends understandably looked confused, but Lisa had learned long ago to take life as it came and not worry much beyond that. She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “Anyway, we need to head back in. We’ll see you girls around.” Waving, she entered Amanda’s office, followed by Mira.

“Jeez, Lisa is incredible ...” Anise muttered, thinking this must have been how Isla felt earlier when she saw Cassiopeia Luna. Shaking her head, as if to remove these thoughts, she grasped her friend’s hand. “Let’s go check out our rooms.”

Isla pointed along the hallway. “Lead on, O’ Failed One!”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you,” Anise muttered.

Chapter 8: Settling In

Back down the stairs to the foyer, then outside and onto the road network connecting the various areas of the island together, they took a casual saunter. Heading over to the left-most western side of the island where the dormitory building was located, Anise could finally take in their surroundings. Most-especially, *all the idols*.

“Aaah, so many cute girls... idols on all sides, I’m surrounded by beautiful girls...!”

Isla managed to contain her laughter for long enough to comment. “You really do love your idols, don’t you?”

“It’s not like we have many at home, so mostly I’ve been restricted to looking at them on the stellarnet. But being right here among hundreds of adorable idols... ah, this is the best thing ever...!” Anise spun around a few times. “We’re really here, Isla, on Aida!”

“We’re also in the middle of a road, so unless we want this to be a really *short* trip, we should probably get to the pavement,” Isla, the slightly more sensible of the two when Anise was gasping over idols, said.

As they approached the western end of the campus island, Isla spied something interesting; four squat buildings in a square arrangement, with pink stone paving in a cross-shape running between them. They were built from brilliant white stone to match the academy’s domes, and shiny black and silver metals were much in evidence.

Isla fidgeted. “Isn’t this a shopping centre? So we don’t have to travel all the way to the mainland to get snacks?”

A gentle sigh indicated that Anise probably needed to educate her friend again. “Yes, there are shops, among other amenities.”

“What sort of amenities?” Isla asked, her gaze zipping left and right and up and down, like a kitten after a double helping of catnip.

“There’s a salon, a swimming pool, a café and bar over the other end of the campus, all sorts. Didn’t you read the e-pamphlet we received? It was all in there.”

“I skimmed it...”

“Never one for study, were you? Well, now you know.”

A little beyond the shopping district, the sea calmly washed in and out of a small bay, with three enormous black metal landing pads built out over the water in a triangle shape. Each was octagonal, some two-dozen metres across, and connected to the island via a series of walkways and staircases.

They made their way up and around the bay, ignoring the empty landing pads for now. Then up from there to stand before the imposing dormitory building itself, situated near the northern edge of the island, far enough from the landing pads and well soundproofed enough for the resident idols not to be bothered by noise as flying vehicles came and went.

“Is it just me, or does it feel like this should be the main academy building?” Isla said.

Anise glanced up and shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun. “It’s pretty impressive, isn’t it?”

Round like a doughnut—including the hole in the middle—the dormitory featured three storeys, constructed from sandy white bricks unique to this region of Aida, similar in size and shape to the red bricks used on Earth. Before them stood a wooden porch through which they could reach the entrance doors, and immediately ahead in the foyer, two elevators. A staircase in the far left corner led to the second floor.

“Guess we go up?” Isla said.

“Headmistress Lawson said we’re on the second floor, rooms B34 and 36.” Anise led the way, taking the stairs for sheer novelty; steep stairs existed on Mars, but elevators took less room and were therefore the preferred choice wherever possible.

They reached the top and Anise moved with purpose along a gently curved hallway with rooms to either side, scanning the number plates. She stopped at a door. “Here we are.”

“I’m at the next one down?” Isla said.

“That’s right.” Anise opened the glossy, jet black door and stepped inside.

“Wow...”

Isla peered around her. “This is really nice, I’m gonna go check mine out!”

She moved down to the next door, unlocked it, and entered.

Directly ahead, a wide window had been opened to let in some of the gentle early summer breeze. In the left corner, a wide single bed with crimson sheets. Under the window, a desk. And embedded in the right wall, an airtight and soundproofed sliding door. Isla pressed the small touch pad next to the door and beamed as it whooshed open to reveal an area between their two rooms.

To the left of this little anteroom area, a door split down the centre to slide to either side, opening into a surprisingly spacious bathroom fitted with bath, toilet, and basin, nestled between their rooms. And to the right, an area with shelves and cupboards for shared toiletries, towels, and other essentials, plus a small and efficient hot water dispenser for drinks above an equally small sink.

Anise opened the sliding door on her side and stared at her friend. “Shared bathroom, it seems.” Her own room, visible behind her, was a mirror image of Isla’s, bed against the right wall rather than left.

Isla entered the bathroom. “This is pretty posh for the size.”

A frosted glass window occupied the centre of the wall above the bath, looking out over the central area and bathing the room in afternoon sunlight, highlighting a few dust motes.

Entering behind her friend, Anise had a quick look around. Toilet to the left on entering, basin to the right of it, and bath directly ahead, plus a handy shower attachment on the wall at the tap end of the bath.

“Yeah, this is really nice, I thought we’d have communal bathrooms,” she said.

“Maybe it’s to promote the idea of sharing and helping each other out?” Isla suggested.

“Could be.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t already know.”

Anise shrugged and leaned against the door frame. “It’s not the sort of thing an academy for idols advertises in their publicity materials.” She switched to a TV announcer voice. “*Come to Dreamstar Academy and experience real en-suite bathroom facilities!*’ Doesn’t really work, does it?”

This made Isla giggle. “Probably not, though personally I think having an en-suite is a huge selling point. Better than communal.”

“Anyway, let’s get unpacked, I’m desperate to sit down already.” Anise wandered back through to her own room.

Isla moved to her room’s window. “Hey, Anise, check out the view!” she called through.

Anise did so. Their rooms looked out over the central doughnut hole, green and lush, with a well-tended lawn mown in concentric rings by a gardener who was as skilled as he was anal about his patterns. In the centre stood a sizeable—and circular, of course—gazebo, wooden with a set of steps leading up on each of the four cardinal directions.

Inside, they could just make out a number of benches and tables, again arranged in a circular shape. Surrounding this structure, a circle of eight tall trees, a form of Aidan maple-equivalent with thinner foliage than Earth varieties, provided a degree of privacy for the girls in the rooms facing into this area.

“We’ll have to have lunch out there one day soon, Anise,” Isla yelled.

“Sure!” Anise called back, resuming her unpacking. “And maybe some other things of an enjoyable nature...” she murmured in a suggestive tone, giggling to herself.

Their other packages and suitcases had all arrived safely and were stored in the centre of each room, ready for unpacking, so the next hour was spent industriously settling in.

Anise finished first, always the more efficient and pragmatic of the two—at least when she wasn’t lost in idol-related reveries—and sauntered through to the other room.

“I wonder why this planet’s named Aida?” Isla said, neatly folding some cute underwear items she really should have grown out of several years ago. “I

mean, I know it was named after *someone*, but I never paid much attention beyond that.”

Anise sat on Isla’s bed and watched her friend folding cute panties, though it was debatable which she was more interested in; her friend, or her friend’s panties. “I guess you didn’t read Catherine Wong’s autobiography?”

“No...”

“You should, it’s a great book.”

“So you could say it’s... Wong of me not to read it?” Isla suggested, placing another item on her expanding pile.

Anise sighed. “Not the puns, Isla...”

“Sorry, I’ll behave, carry on,” Isla said, chuckling at her best friend’s mildly annoyed features. “And make it the abridged version, please.”

Sometimes Isla’s puns really wore Anise down. She shrugged and leaned back, staring at the ceiling. “Basically... it all boils down to love.”

“Love?”

“Yeah. Catherine was a Chinese woman, one of the first people to use hyperspace to explore the new frontier. She went into space in one of the new scout ships we’d been cranking out for the last couple of decades after discovering hyperspace, and spent nearly ten years charting nearby star systems.”

“That’s some dedication!”

“Especially so when you consider that she left her own girlfriend back on Earth.”

“Wait... girlfriend?”

Anise grinned at her friend’s flushed cheeks. “Girlfriend. One of the first and most prominent explorers of probably the most important period in human history was a lesbian.”

Isla took a brief break from folding underwear and sat on the bed. “Wasn’t that something like a hundred years ago now? How the hell did Earth manage to remain so... backward?”

“No idea. Inertia, maybe. The longer something exists, the more resistant it becomes to change? I guess Earth was still steeped in the old world, all those

old beliefs and superstitions and things. Or maybe they just didn't *want* to change, we'll probably never know. History isn't really the most reliable thing."

"I get the feeling the colonies happened as quickly as they did because people wanted out," Isla said darkly.

"Probably. Anyway, back to your question. Catherine's girlfriend was a Japanese woman called Misaki Aida, and if you take the Japanese words '*Ai da*' literally, it means '*It's love*'. Catherine fell in love with the new world she had just discovered, her girlfriend's name popped into mind... and the rest is history."

"So she named it after her girlfriend, the rest was a happy coincidence? That's really sweet."

"Take a guess what Misaki's profession was."

"Mm..."

"Here's a hint: we probably wouldn't be here without her."

"An idol?" Isla hazarded.

"One of the most popular and successful idols ever, yeah, she was the first ever stellar level idol. She was a large part of why the second idol boom happened. So we owe both of them a lot, their legacy lives on in everything we're going to do here."

"Wow." Isla finished folding her clothes and stowed them in the top drawer of a dresser at the foot of the bed. A spacious built-in wardrobe occupied the space next to this, so she unpacked her remaining clothes and put them away in there.

"Some of their descendants are here on Aida as well," Anise added.

Isla's expression morphed into one of surprise. "How's that even possible? Or did they adopt?"

"*Isla*... you really didn't listen to anything in school, did you?"

"Sorry, this is a whole new world to me. It's not something I've thought to look into before!"

Anise giggled. "Well, that's okay, you're right that it's not something most people would think about unless it affected them personally. And no, they

didn't adopt, they used techniques pioneered early last century which allowed them to, for want of a better term, conceive naturally."

"So it's possible we could run into one of them while we're here?"

"Maybe. They probably want to be left in peace, though, so let's not go searching them out."

Isla's expression morphed once more, this time into incredulity. "I know exactly how much you love idols, Anise, you're not being very convincing."

This made Anise crack up. "Busted, huh? Yeah, I'd love to meet them. I want to learn everything I possibly can about idols. But I do understand there are boundaries, don't worry."

"Well... okay."

Isla was naturally sceptical of her best friend, knowing full-well how passionate she was for everything involving cute female idols. Whether that be their history, the current idols working in the industry, or the future of idoldom in general. On the other hand, Anise also wasn't a creepy stalker or anything, so Isla gave her the benefit of the doubt.

A knock at Anise's door interrupted their chat.

"Seems we're popular already!" Anise said, heading back through to her own room.

Isla smiled, moving to the built-in wardrobe at the foot of the bed. "I doubt that, this soon after arriving."

Anise opened her door to find two unexpected arrivals. "Lisa! Wasn't expecting to see you again. Hi, Mira."

Lisa beamed. "Greetings! We are technically here on official academy business, so I'm on my best behaviour. So Mother tells me." Her faux formal tone was clearly at odds with the wholly relaxed girl they had met earlier.

Mira stifled a quiet laugh. "Lisa doesn't do so well with being serious."

"You can relax in private, right?" Anise said, moving to one side and inviting them in.

"Thought you'd never ask," Lisa said, and slid into the room with Mira.

Anise led them through the connecting doors into Isla's room.

Isla looked around from the wardrobe and greeted the new arrivals. “Hey again. Feel free to crash on my bed.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, still fussing.

They did so, and Lisa immediately asked a question. “Settling in okay so far?”

“Great, thanks,” Anise said.

“Glad to hear it. Mum told you that you’d be getting a mentor each for the next week, yes?” Lisa said, receiving a nod in response. “Well, you’re lookin’ at them.”

Isla closed the wardrobe and sat with Anise.

To make room, Mira shifted herself over to the chair tucked under the desk.

Making herself comfy, Isla turned to Lisa. “Didn’t you say you only came here recently yourselves?”

“Aah, don’t let that fool you,” Lisa said with a knowing wink.

Mira crossed a long and shapely leg over the other and leaned back. “We’ve been active idols for several years now, working some of the colonies, outposts, starbases. Anywhere we could.”

“We’ll be here to help you settle in, and to help you both decide on your direction.” Lisa tugged her phone out a pocket. “I’ll be taking your numbers, if you please?” A brief bout of giggling filled the air, mostly from a lightheaded Anise, as they exchanged sMail and other contact details, and Lisa put it away again. “Right, any questions you’d like to ask?”

Isla raised a hand. “I was interested in how many girls are at the academy.”

“Three-hundred, I think?” Anise said.

“Close. Three-hundred girls, yes, but space for three-hundred-and-twenty in the dorm,” Lisa corrected her. “Mum’ll never turn prospective new students away if she can help it, and the dorm was built with a little extra capacity for just that reason. The two of you wouldn’t even be here otherwise, we’re more or less full. At least officially.”

Isla’s eyes widened with wonder. When Anise had suggested a couple of months previously—just after Isla’s return from Earth—that the two of them should try out to enter this academy, Isla had believed herself to be wholly

incapable of such things. And now it seemed they had been doubly blessed; without the extra space available, they couldn't even have entered.

Lisa crashed out full-length on the bed, propping herself up on an arm. Anise verged on hyperventilation at this point; Lisa's breasts continued to taunt her.

"Students drop out, graduate early, move for reasons beyond their control, all sorts," Lisa continued. "It fluctuates pretty regularly, but at full capacity there are normally around three-hundred idols here."

"And you're the headmistress's daughter? Did you have any trouble getting in, or wasn't this place full at the time?" Anise asked.

"I received no special treatment," Lisa said. "We had to go through the usual exams and things, same as anyone else."

Mira sniggered. "Quite the reverse, I suspect Amanda probably rides your delicious ass more than any other girl here."

"Probably!" Lisa jumped off the bed and moved to sit in Mira's lap, leaning down to peck her on the lips as thanks for the nice compliment.

Anise's eyebrows levitated. She pointed between them. "Hang on, are you two...?"

Mira's expression could best be described as suggestive. "Best friends. And a little more when the mood takes us."

"What she's not mentioning is that the mood takes us most nights," Lisa said, chuckling as Isla blushed. She moved back to the bed.

A manic grin now graced Anise's features. "I so made the right decision to come here."

This elicited an appraising glance from Lisa. "Oho? Interesting, maybe I'll be talking to you some more about this a little later, Anise. I'm paired with you, incidentally. Mira here will be helping Isla."

"Anything you need, just ask," Mira said.

Isla again raised a hand. "If you're the headmistress's daughter, will you be taking over the academy one day? I guess not, but I have no idea how this would work..."

Lisa shook her head. "Nah, it's not like an inheritance or something. I have zero interest in doing so anyway, Mum knows that."

"What *are* you interested in doing?" Anise asked.

"Music production," Lisa said, pointing at her. "Made a name for myself across half a dozen worlds as a DJ, playing all sorts of electronic music. But I've always loved tinkering with production, so that's what I decided to do."

"So one day you could end up writing songs for us to sing?" Isla said.

"I already do," Lisa said, making an okay symbol. "I love producing music, but I also love being able to play more of my own music at live events. I've got two albums out already, more planned. Plus a number of songs I've written for idols, here and elsewhere."

"Must be nice to have a solid idea of your direction," Isla said, her soft tone conveying a hint of despondency.

Mira leaned far enough forward to gently touch a hand to her leg. "That's why we're here."

Lisa placed her own hand on Isla's shoulder. "Exactly. We only decided to transfer in now because we'd spent the last year moving around so much with Dad that we didn't think the time was right. But just because we've only been here a month doesn't mean we're unable to guide you."

Isla perked up. "Thanks, both of you."

Lisa leaned forward to get a good look at Anise. "Mum says you're hoping to produce and direct music videos?"

"Partially," Anise said. "I love learning about idols in general, but that's more a hobby. My real passions are acting and music, so I figured putting the two together would be a good plan. Acting is number one, though. Oh, and photography. I'd love to do something with that, too."

Lisa held Anise's gaze for a few moments, smiling pleasantly. "I have the feeling we're going to get along well. And we can certainly help you with that, no problem. Though the photography thing... mm, yeah, I'm not sure about that, not really my area, sorry."

"That's okay, I'm sure I'll be able to figure something out," Anise said.

"What about you, Isla? Thought about what you'd like to do?" Mira asked.

“Thought about, yes. Still not sure beyond that. Anise mentioned that being a pure idol might suit me,” Isla said. “Uh, a Personadol?”

“Personadol as a term isn’t used so much these days, but personally I like it,” Mira said.

“In that case, let me tell you a bit about your options,” Lisa said. “The academy trains, promotes, and mediates, sets up auditions, puts students into contact with producers, directors, and others in need of talent, and all manner of other useful things.”

Mira cut in here. “The main academy buildings have all sorts of useful facilities, by the way. An acquaintance I met in Paris not so long ago has a workshop there, for example. I’ll introduce you to her one day soon, she’s always happy to meet new vict... I mean, subjects.”

Anise let out a hesitant laugh. “I’m worried, all of a sudden.”

For the third time Isla raised a hand. “An acquaintance...?”

“She’s a designer, so I’ve modelled a few outfits for her recently. We’re closer to friends than acquaintances now,” Mira replied. She turned her attention back to Anise. “And Sophie’s a lovely lady, you don’t need to worry. But as a designer she’s... pretty intense.”

Lisa chuckled at this. “I let her design a stage outfit for me a couple of months back. Felt more worn out than if I’d just had an all-nighter.”

An appreciable increase in the local temperature indicated Isla’s face now verged on melting down at such steamy comments. “You’re a very open girl, aren’t you, Lisa?”

“I see no point beating about the bush with what I like,” Lisa replied with a brief shoulder twitch.

“Might also be worth having Azusa take a look at you,” Mira added, doing her best not to openly laugh at Isla’s glowing cheeks. “She’s Sophie’s apprentice, a real talent already. Kind of hyper and a bit clumsy, but she’ll also design for free to gain experience.”

“Having custom-made outfits makes you stand out from the crowd,” Lisa said. “Anyway, back to what I was saying. Being an idol is like”—she paused to ‘*um*’ and ‘*ah*’ for a moment as she worked out the best way to explain this to a

new girl like Isla—“okay, at its simplest you can think of it like a framework. The basis on which to build other things. With me so far?”

Isla nodded.

“Right,” Lisa continued, “so this framework opens up new avenues for you, new disciplines, new paths, whatever you want to call them. Like me? I’m into music and audio production, largely electronic stuff. So I’m building those things on top of my idol framework, using connections I’ve made in the business to further those interests.”

“And I’m both a model and a producer, so I focus myself heavily on jobs that involve runway walking and modelling,” Mira said.

Isla’s face lit up. “You’re a producer?”

Mira gave an almost imperceptible nod. “I am, though I only just started in an official capacity here at Dreamstar. I coordinate outfits, set up meetings and events, deal with agencies, sort out personal problems... essentially helping other idols to be their best.”

“You mentioned pure idols, right?” Lisa said to Isla, finding her thread. “By doing that you’ll focus on variety shows, live stage events, singing, dancing... basically just being yourself. Never underestimate the power of personality, Isla, it can be the best weapon in your arsenal.”

“Using your own personality is advised, but it’s also possible to build a new one,” Mira said.

“Well, let’s not confuse her with character idols for now,” Lisa said, chuckling.

Mira indicated with a brief hand wave that this was probably a good idea.

“In any case, an idol’s fans want to see more of her, both public and private,” Lisa said. “The different personae she wears, to use the term you mentioned. And tapping into the goodwill of your followers is a great way to get a leg up on other interests.”

Anise piped up again. “I said to Isla earlier that Luna started out as a pure idol, but she does much more than that now.”

Lisa winked at Isla. “So you like Luna, huh? What was it about her that took your fancy?”

“Everything! She’s so pretty and her eyes shone like the moon and she’s got an amazing body and that gorgeous dark hair and...” Isla stopped and let out a brief cough. “I’d love to see her live one day, I’m sure those billboard holograms don’t do her justice.”

Lisa chuckled at Isla’s steamed up expression. “Seems you’ve got a bit of a crush. Though to be fair, pretty much everyone fancies Luna. As a pure idol, she used her public personality and looks to build a following of loyal fans, then leveraged that success to break into movies, stellarvision work, even playing a couple of sports at close to competitive levels. She’s crazy dedicated. You’ll need to put in one-hundred-and-twenty percent just to snap at her heels.”

“I might’ve underestimated what being an idol involves,” Isla muttered.

“There’s more to it than merely making people smile, though that’s also important,” Lisa said, turning a little more serious. “For every idol who succeeds, a dozen more fail, and hundreds more than that don’t even get the *chance*. Being an idol means being the best there is. Mum wouldn’t have admitted you if she didn’t see something in you. Something I can see as well, incidentally. You simply need to find it and make it shine.”

Anise slipped an arm around her best friend’s waist. “You understand now, right?”

“Much better than I did before we left Mars. I think I owe all three of you an apology, I wasn’t taking this as seriously as I should’ve been.” Isla looked mildly downcast, ashamed at accepting a position in what was plainly a prestigious academy, while having effectively no idea as to the level of commitment required of those who attended.

Aida was *the* place to be for anyone with an interest in any of the arts, both old and new; television—now known as stellarvision, because it was transmitted across the stars—music, movies, idols, stage shows, Aida had them all. A whole planet dedicated to entertainment in all its various guises, supplying talent to the entirety of the human realm across half a dozen major colony worlds and hundreds of outposts and starbases. Isla realised now that she had been silly to underestimate a place like that.

“You don’t need to feel bad about it,” Lisa said. “Not everyone knows what they want to do with their life, and sometimes it requires a bit of a kick up the ass to figure that out. I’m always available for a bit of butt kicking, by the way. And potentially other things involving your butt, just putting that out there.”

Isla managed a smile, despite her cheeks steaming like those antique kettles she had once seen. “I’ll bear that in mind, Lisa, thanks. Other than Luna, what sort of competition am I looking at?”

An evil grin appeared on Lisa’s lips. “Competition? Intense and more or less non-stop. Don’t worry too much about girls who aren’t doing what *you* are doing, but you also shouldn’t ignore them. Idols develop new interests and talents over time, and one of those you ignored could end up doing something you’re engaged in now. Finding a niche is a good way to stay on top, and simply putting in more effort than everyone else works, too.”

“You can also team up with potential rivals, that’s a perfectly valid tactic,” Mira said. “Mostly people are happy to have a friend or rival to train with. By constantly challenging each other, you’ll both be pushed to new heights.”

“Don’t let your guard down, though,” Lisa said, wagging a finger. “Sure, people are friendly and polite, and most of the time everyone is really sporting about the whole thing. But make no mistake, either of you, you’ll be competing at the very highest levels with top talent from half a dozen worlds. Aida and the academy here simply allow you a useful head start, they don’t guarantee success. That’s on *your* heads.”

“I said to Anise earlier that there’s a lot to take in and learn. Pretty sure that might be the understatement of the year,” Isla said, her brows furrowing.

“Now you know why you both have a mentor for the next week,” Mira said.

Jumping off the bed, Lisa stretched, then beamed at her new friends.

“Righto, we should get going and let you settle in properly. Any problems or questions, give us a call.”

Mira joined her and they exited, wishing their brand new friends—and potentially rivals—a pleasant evening.

Meanwhile, Anise had some difficulties thinking straight. “The way Lisa’s hair sparkles as she walks... aaah...”

“Shall I set idolgasm alert level to max?” Isla said, a half-smile on her lips.

Anise snapped back to reality with a discrete cough. “No, that’s okay, thanks.”

These enthusiastic outbursts of Anise’s always amused Isla. Her best friend’s predilection for perving over idols—though Anise would probably call it *research*—resulted in her regularly entering the misty-eyed and drooling state Isla had termed *idolgasming*.

Adjourning to her own room, Anise waved and closed the connecting door, wanting a little privacy for a time. Isla knew better than to ask *why* she wanted some privacy for a time; she had seen how her friend looked at Lisa, after all.

The rest of the evening was then spent between putting things away and occasionally sitting together to chat about their direction from here on out, before getting an early night in hopes of combatting the worst of the inevitable hyperlag.

Next morning would be the first day of the rest of their lives.

Chapter 9: The Fighting Falcon

Isla awoke with a start, wondering where the hell she was. Remembering that she now lived on planet Aida, she relaxed and crawled out of bed. The next couple of days would consist of what might be called orientation; being shown around both the academy and campus island, learning where all the useful facilities were, meeting some of the other idols and teachers, and acclimating to life on a new world.

This mostly went without issue, especially once the hyperlag effects faded a little, with Isla finally beginning to settle in and take stock of her new life. Anise, meanwhile, was already wholly comfortable spending time with Lisa, generally being a lot more lively than Isla had seen her in some years. But more than that, Anise had made a change to her overall look, and this time it was more than a simple hairstyle change.

Meeting up after a morning spent apart on their second day as idols—the third since arriving—Isla was surprised to see that her best friend’s hair was now a vivid fulvous tone, a shade similar to a ripe orange, or the rich coat of a British fox.

Poking her head through the connecting doors into Anise’s room, Isla stopped dead and whistled. “Hello, foxy lady.”

Anise was busy getting dressed in something fresh after spending some time in the city, but spun like a top at hearing this. “Eh? Oh, welcome back.” She left her blouse half-buttoned and ran her fingers through her loose hair. “You like?”

“You look great,” Isla said, wandering across and fondling her friend’s hair. “You got those nano-thingy implants? Does it hurt?”

“Went this morning. It’s super easy, basically just a quick injection after they set up what colour you want and all that. It hurt a bit, but nothing major.”

“Does that mean your hair will stay this colour permanently?” Isla asked, sliding her fingers through her friend’s slightly wavy locks.

“Unless I have the implants removed again. Pretty cool, huh?” Anise said, grinning all over her face.

“Yeah, it’s amazing how natural it looks,” Isla said, fixated on individual strands and how shiny and silky they appeared. “I like my hair as it is, but who knows, maybe I’ll give it a try one day.”

“It’s a good way to stand out as an idol. Especially if you’re going for an audition where specific colours are important.”

“I... wouldn’t even have thought of that,” Isla said, stepping back.

“It’s something you need to consider carefully. If you build your brand around specific colours, then changing your hair colour can actually have a negative effect. But that’s mostly for established idols who have a solid branding. As new girls, we can experiment more.”

“I’ll bear that in mind. Anyway, we’re meant to be meeting up with Lisa, right? I think she wanted to introduce us to someone?”

“Let me finish getting ready and we can head off,” Anise said, buttoning her blouse.

With the sun high in the sky and baking the campus like the oven of the gods, they left the dormitory and headed to the domes, where they were going to be introduced to a flamboyant man known as Warlock Falconi.

Anise explained to Isla on the way over that this was simply his stage name as a retired idol; he kept the name and the character he had built around it, becoming both a producer and tutor at the academy after a long and successful career.

However, simply being *told* about Falconi couldn’t possibly have prepared Isla for actually *encountering* him. As they neared the academy domes, hooking up with Lisa and Mira, a commotion around the central fountain indicated something interesting was afoot.

Lisa gave one of her amused chuckles and made a beeline over to the crowd of girls gathered there, pushing through them, at which point Isla got her first look at Warlock Falconi, *The Fighting Falcon*.

Standing on one of the five benches surrounding the fountain, he danced from one bench to another, juggled illusory balls of fire, tossed lightning bolts

around the vicinity, and occasionally even produced a rabbit or a dove from the top hat he wore, matching his black and white tuxedo. For a man of fifty-five, he could still move as though half that age.

During the entire performance he took sips from a glass of champagne he otherwise left perched on the fountain's upper basin, constantly on the verge of tipping over and shattering on the ground, but never quite doing so. Isla speculated on whether he used some form of magic to hold it there.

"And that's all she wrote, folks!" Falconi eventually said, rolling his top hat down an arm and bumping it back up to his head with the elbow. "I may or may not grace you with my presence here again. Tomorrow, next week, perhaps even *last month!* For the Fighting Falcon even has time as his ally!" Raising his glass in a toast, he downed the rest of the bubbling liquid and vanished the glass with a clap. "Cheers, my lovelies, I will see you soon!"

Jumping down from the bench, an unexpected pall of smoke swept up, obscuring the fountain and clearing within seconds to reveal that Falconi had vanished without a trace. Applause filled the air, then the assembled girls went their separate ways.

"I have no idea what I just witnessed, but it was awesome," Isla said, attempting to figure out where the magical magician had gone.

"Old Falconi's been around here for years, always entertaining the idols with his magic tricks. Sometimes puts on major stage shows, too," Lisa said, clearly approving.

Mira took Isla's hand and tugged her in the direction of Dome 02, to the left of Dome 01 where they had met the headmistress. Lisa followed with Anise, entering the building and making their way around one of the outer hallways leading around the ground floor's circumference. Stopping outside a door, Mira knocked.

"Enter, if you dare!" came a familiar voice from within.

Mira opened the door and the girls spread out in the room thus revealed; dark, foreboding, and with flags of various countries from several different worlds hanging from ancient bookcases along the left and right walls. At the far

end, a desk, behind which was a window with red velvet curtains, currently closed.

And everywhere, across every possible surface, various props of the magician's craft had been strewn, though with apparent care and attention; the room was a mess, but an *organised* one. Packs of cards, handkerchiefs, several caged and well-looked-after doves, a cane, magical and occult books, there was no end to the clutter. About the only thing missing was a Houdini box.

Behind the desk, an enormous leather chair swivelled back and forth, facing away so the girls couldn't see the occupant. Spinning around, Falconi graced his guests with a smirk almost identical to Isla's features after a particularly awful pun.

"Ah, greetings, my lovelies," Falconi said, tugging his goatee beard between thumb and finger. The goatee as a style had faded into obscurity over a century previously, but Falconi had made it his mission in life to reintroduce into popular culture the beard he considered to be superior to all others. "What can the Fighting Falcon do for you today?"

"Just showing the new girls around, Falco," Lisa said, pushing the two of them forward.

Lifting a hand, Falconi snapped his fingers and produced a flower; a single white Camellia Japonica for Anise, and a small sea bindweed, the stem wrapped around by some strands of canary grass, which he handed to Isla.

"A little gift for our newest arrivals. Welcome to the academy, and welcome to Aida!" Falconi said, standing and issuing a low bow, taking his top hat off and swishing it up in one hand in the approved manner. Straightening again, he winked. "Ask me anything. I may be old and decrepit, but don't hold that against me. My experience is unrivalled and, indeed, unapparelled!"

Isla wasn't about to let a word play like that slide past her. "Wouldn't that mean you have no clothes on?"

Falconi let out a boisterous guffaw, collapsing back into his seat with an amused smile on his face. "Good! Very good! What's your name, my lovely?"

"Eh? Oh! Isla. Isla Ainsworth."

"And you?" Falconi switched to Anise.

“Anise Kendall, nice to meet you!” She bobbed her head in a deferential manner.

“Wonderful! Old Falconi here will enjoy seeing you grow into lovely idols,” Falconi said. “Nurturing the new seeds until they flower is a fitting way to retire, I feel.”

“Thanks,” Isla said. “Um, can I ask something?” Falconi indicated she was welcome, so she continued with, “Why are you called the Fighting Falcon?”

Falconi shifted position, his expression softening from the intense look they had seen more or less continually since his show at the fountain. “That’s the name of the character I played in an old show a couple of decades ago now, my lovely. I can’t blame you for not having seen it of course, ‘twas before your time.”

Anise emitted a smug ‘*heh-heh!*’, proudly puffing her chest out once again. “I’ve seen it. All eight seasons. That was the show that got me into movies and stellarvision, so I need to thank you for that, Bianco. Without the Fighting Falcon I might not even be here now.”

Bringing his hand up to his lips, Falconi kissed and opened the fingers. “Magnifico! It’s been a long time since someone called me by my real name, my lovely. Grazie!”

“I’m a bit confused by your act,” Isla said.

“Act? This is no mere *act*, my lovely! It is a *way of life!*” Falconi said, standing and moving around the desk, then leaning back against it. “You’re new to the idol life, yes?”

Isla indicated this was so.

“Never seen a character idol before, hmm?” Falconi continued.

He gave a brief explanation of the path known as *character idol*. Creating a character—flamboyant, flashy, fun—these idols would stay in-character at all times, living their secondary life as though real. Some even went so far as to stay in-character during their private time, simply for authenticity’s sake.

Isla’s face had morphed into one of surprise, albeit with a healthy dose of interest. “There’s so much variety to idols!”

Lisa touched Isla's arm. "Remember we mentioned creating a personality? This is what we meant."

"That sounds really fun," Isla said, her face glowing with curiosity.

Falconi pointed at her. "Yes! Entire oceans of unique idols out there, which is why standing out is so important, my lovely. The path of character idol is a hard one to walk, takes *much* work and dedication. But if you can pull it off..." He left the sentence hanging.

Stepping forward, Anise prodded Isla's shoulder. "Even something like taking your interest in tennis and focusing wholly on that has the potential to make you stand out."

"Sì! Find your own niche, polish it until it shines, and you'll do well, my lovelies. Generalists exist, to be sure, but as the people of Earth used to say, a jack of all trades is master of none." Falconi returned to his seat, flopping down and putting his feet up on the desk. "I hope old Falconi has been of some help, hmm?"

Loitering in the background, Lisa moved forward. "As always, Falco, thanks. Now, we should be off, got a few more people and places to see yet."

"Yes, off you go. Falconi will be here if you need him. Pleasure meeting both of you. Arrivederci!" Falconi said.

They thanked him, Anise especially so, and headed back outside. The wonderful scent of freshly mown grass greeted them as they wandered back to the fountain and sat together on the lawns surrounding it.

Immediately, Anise entered an idolgasm, splitting her time between gasping and snapping pictures of the other three girls. "Actually getting to meet Bianco Falconi in person... aaah, this is the best day, thank you, Lisa!" Her slim-line camera emitted simulated click after simulated click as she photographed her new favourite girl several dozen times.

"Don't mention it. You get pretty excited over things like this, huh?" Lisa said, taking a few poses for her photographer.

Mira stifled a snigger. "I'd noticed that as well."

“Idols are basically my life. Well... idols and cute girls.” Anise gave a discrete cough, avoiding direct eye contact with any of the three cute girls in her immediate vicinity.

“I understand that feeling perfectly, no worries,” Lisa added with a suspicious wink. “Anyway, that’s Falco out of the way. He’s been here longer than anyone now, so he’s kind of the first stop for all new idols to the academy. Next up, we should probably get you familiarised with the rest of the buildings and staff, huh?”

“Job board?” Mira suggested.

“Sounds like a plan,” Lisa said, leading them over to Dome 01 and across to the left side of the foyer, past the welcome kiosk where the new girls had initially checked in on their original arrival.

Before them stood two white poles between which hovered an orange holographic display showing rows and columns, with the days of the current month in five-inch blocks. Each block could be tapped to view information and book time in specific facilities, or with particular instructors and producers.

“This is the booking terminal, generally called the job board,” Lisa said, pointing to the holographic display. “It’s a good idea to be here early, slots fill pretty quickly. Or you can use your phone. Technically you can cheat a bit and book slots at night, but the board only updates with cancellations and the like the next morning, so you might miss an opportunity if you do that.”

Anise appraised the terminal. “I’m guessing that’s on purpose?”

“What, only updating in the morning?” Lisa said. “Pretty much. It promotes competition because you need to physically come over to the board for the latest jobs. Being lazy is a great way to fail as an idol. My advice? Don’t be lazy.”

Laughing at this casually delivered harsh advice, Anise tapped one of the squares, receiving a pleasant little judder in response via the haptic feedback system. “This looks interesting, an audition to become a model for a retro-futuristic clothing brand.”

“You’re encouraged to try new things, especially this soon after arriving,” Lisa said. Stepping away, she looked Anise up and down. “The brand in question is Retrolution, they make heavy use of blue, black, and silver. And with

your gorgeous hair—the new colour looks fantastic, by the way—I think you’d be a perfect match, Anise.”

Mira was floating about in the background, but shifted to the foreground to speak. “You’ll be up against fans of the brand and idols who will have researched thoroughly, but at the end of the day the job will go to the one who most fits the image Retrolution are after. I agree with Lisa, you’d suit them perfectly.”

“I like their outfits, but I can’t honestly say I’m an expert,” Anise said, striking a pose for her mentor’s inspection. “Still learning about some of them, there just aren’t enough hours in the day.”

“Boning up on their brand and being able to demonstrate a knowledge of their product lines certainly won’t hurt. Remember my advice?” Lisa said.

“Don’t be lazy,” came the prompt response from Anise.

“Exactly. Okay, so the auditions start in a couple of weeks. I think you know what we’re going to be doing for that period.”

Privately, Anise had some ideas for how she might enjoy spending that time. “I can’t wait!”

Mira again stepped into the foreground and poked another audition on the terminal. “I’d also recommend you both try out for this one.”

Leaning forward, Isla read the display. It was an audition for a brand, some sort of luxury ice cream she had never heard of. She glanced at up Mira. “Both of us? So... we’d be competing?”

“Correct,” Mira said, touching a hand to Isla’s shoulder. “It’ll be a good experience for both of you. Idols have to be prepared to fight each other for auditions, Isla, and sometimes that means battling a friend.”

Anise said nothing, merely touched her phone to the display a second time, again receiving the pleasant little ‘*ping!*’ to tell her the registration was successful. She poked Isla. “Phone.”

“Eh? I’m not sure I want to enter...” Isla muttered.

“Phone,” Anise commanded again, holding her hand out.

Isla grudgingly produced the item in question and handed it over.

“There,” Anise added, touching the phone to the display. “We might never get another chance to face each other like this, Isla. I don’t know what you’ll end up doing with your life as an idol, but it’s probably going to be different to mine, so... let’s experience all we can right now, while we can.”

“Anise...” Isla said, her face relaxing into a smile. “Sorry, I shouldn’t be hesitating after all our effort to get in, should I?” She retrieved her phone and slipped it back into her pocket. “Looks like we’re enemies for a while, huh?”

“Enemies is such a negative term,” Lisa said with a head shake. “Rivals is more appropriate.”

“Aren’t they basically the same thing?” Isla asked.

“Not even remotely,” Lisa said, wagging a finger. “You’ll learn soon enough, trust me. Now, what next...”

“Gym?” Mira said.

“Actually, that works out pretty well, we can head straight to Arco Iris from there,” Lisa said.

“They’re closed today, remember?” Mira said.

“Ah, right, yeah. Well, there goes that idea.”

Isla raised a hand. “Arco Iris...?”

Heading outside, Lisa pointed over to the far eastern point of the island, directly opposite the end which held the dormitory. “It’s a café and bar over there. I was going to introduce you to the girls who run the place, but I’d forgotten they’re shut today. Got the inspectors coming in.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Isla said.

Lisa laughed and shook her head. “No, no! I don’t mean anything bad. Anywhere that serves food has to be inspected regularly to make sure they’re following the law and all that jazz. Today just happens to be that day.”

Isla relaxed. “That’s good, then.”

“Tell you what, how about we head into the city tonight?” Lisa suggested as they continued their jaunt towards the track field and gym facilities.

“Sounds pleasant,” Mira said. “We haven’t been to Stardew in a while.”

“Stardew? That a bar?” Anise asked.

“Our favourite one, yes. Well... of the ones we’ve so far visited,” Mira said. “Wednesdays are fairly quiet, too, good time for a few drinks and a nice chat.”

Both the new girls agreed it would be nice to check out a local bar now they were mostly recovered from the trip here, so they arranged to head over to the mainland that evening. Continuing across the campus, they made their way around the academy domes and on towards the gym complex.

Lisa pointed at the gargantuan building situated between the domes and the aforementioned Arco Iris. “There’s a track field inside, probably of interest to Isla. Good if it happens to be raining.”

“I need to work on my cardio, yeah,” Isla said.

“You’ll find plenty of girls there early morning and evening. Most of them’ll be happy to keep you company if you need a partner,” Lisa added.

Isla made a mental note to draw up a practice schedule with Mira one day soon. “Might check it out in the morning, then.”

“There’s also an indoor pool, gym, even tennis courts and the like. We’ve got pretty much everything here,” Lisa continued.

“Tennis courts?” Isla said, perking up.

Anise giggled. “I knew that’d get your attention.”

“You’re a sporty girl, right?” Lisa said to Isla.

“I am. Tennis mostly, but I like other racket sports as well,” Isla said, beaming.

“Not really my area, but there’s plenty of sports enthusiasts here. Lots of sweaty girls, if you’re into that sort of thing.” Lisa noted that Anise’s face had turned oddly waxen. “You okay?”

Anise twitched. “Eh!? Oh, fine. Fine! Nothing wrong at all, nope.”

Filing this highly suspicious reaction away under ‘*interesting*’, Lisa changed subject. “Shall we grab something to eat?”

This sounded like a fine idea, so they headed off to the dormitory to do just that, followed by exploring some more of the island.

Chapter 10: Stardew

That evening, Anise dragged Isla out to the city for a wander, dressed in something casual; a short skirt each, loose tops befitting the humid June temperatures, and boots for Anise, trainers for Isla. Even when dressed up, Isla tended towards comfy sports-style gear.

Lisa had been held up with some last minute work, so she and Mira had arranged to come along a little later, leaving the new girls to enjoy the busy evening streets by themselves. As they sauntered about taking in the sights and sounds, Anise picked up a variety of interesting scents—fast food, perfumes, alcohol—and decided that homing in on these would be a good plan.

Several street vendors plied their trade, selling a variety of foods still popular on Earth; ramen, curry, fish and chips, pizza, burgers. Anise had to exercise every last piece of her willpower to refrain from sampling absolutely every single dish they came across. They had already eaten and they had the next four years to sample the delights of this new and exciting world, so she restrained her impulses for now.

“Hell of an atmosphere at night,” Isla said. They rounded a corner and sauntered along a new street, again filled with the bustling busyness of business.

“Funny how it’s pretty similar to Mars, but also feels completely different,” Anise said.

“I guess because”—Isla spread her arms wide, staring up at the star-filled heavens—“*all that sky*.”

“It makes a huge difference, yeah. The streets here aren’t much more crowded than back home, but it feels less claustrophobic.”

“Surprised we can’t see the tower, that thing was massive,” Isla added, scanning the skyline for the Babylonian.

“We still need to visit,” Anise said as they turned into yet another new street, following instructions given by Lisa earlier that afternoon.

“Are we going to try and make time on the weekend? It’s only a couple of days away now.”

“Maybe next weekend? Let’s get properly settled in before we start sightseeing. Ah... this is it.” Anise stopped outside a doorway, open to reveal a set of stairs going down below ground to the left. Above the door, a sign spelled out ‘*Stardew*’ in glowing orange letters.

“It’s underground?” Isla said, peering down into the depths.

“Apparently. Let’s go.”

They descended, heading right through another doorway at the bottom. Entering the bar, they stopped to take a brief look around. Dim but not dingy, there was an air of refinement, with cool blue and warm orange lights providing a pleasant contrast of colours. In the far corner stood a granite-topped bar.

Behind this, shelves with row after row of polished and neatly arranged glasses. And between them a twenty-something female bartender, polishing a glass and wearing a snazzy black and white outfit, the sort of thing a butler and a magpie might produce as offspring.

Isla noticed something interesting. “Check that girl’s hair out!”

She pointed towards the bar, where a tall girl with vivid blue-white hair—almost ice-like—and amber eyes sat on a stool. Bathed in warm white light from the spots directly above, she had a leg crossed over the other and a tall glass of what appeared to be simple water held in an elegant hand. Isla’s gaze returned to the hair. It *glowed*, sparkling like a lake under the afternoon sun. Hints of deep purple and dark blue appeared as she moved, similar to a volcanic ice cave.

Anise inhaled like a vacuum cleaner. “Oh my god, that’s Yana Anisimova. She’s the academy’s number one model!”

“She goes to the same place as us?”

“Yeah, she’s *really* well-known. Super popular! She’s odds-on to be the next top model, I can’t believe I’m this close to her...!”

“Her hair is amazing, it’s like liquid ice.”

“Wouldn’t that be water?”

“Er...”

Anise laughed. "I know what you mean, though, it does look like ice if it could flow freely." She continued gazing, her breathing a little erratic and laboured.

Since Anise had entered one of her idolgasm sessions, Isla left her drooling over Yana and headed to the bar to acquire drinks, doing her best not to stare openly at the icy cool girl herself. Moments later, they were seated comfortably on a red leather bench seat directly opposite the bar, where Isla handed a bottle of Immersion to her friend.

"It's going to take a bit of getting used to, seeing all these fantastic hair colours," Isla said, still staring at Yana. Though with her best friend now having orange hair, she would probably get used to the idea soon enough.

Anise swigged her drink, awkwardly nodding at the same time. "I've been pretty immersed in the culture of idols for years now, so it's pretty normal to me. But seeing it in person is different to viewing it on the stellarnet."

"Was that intentional?" Isla asked.

"Was what...?"

"Immersed?"

It took a moment for Anise to realise what the hell her friend was talking about, but when she did she let out an audible groan. "Please don't start with the puns."

Isla merely grinned and went back to her own bottle of Immersion. "I can't help myself."

"Yes... indeed." Anise had attempted to ban Isla from punning on precisely one occasion, but her best friend's downcast face and depressed air had resulted in her relenting. These days she tolerated the awful word plays as best she could.

An hour soon slipped past, during which time Isla glanced idly around the room between conversations with her friend, her eyes settling at random on various interesting things; a young woman swiping a finger over the holographic display emitted from her phone; the way Yana Anisimova could make something as simple as taking a drink seem *way* sexier than it should be; a pair of girls in the opposite corner of the bar...

Isla shifted, feeling uncomfortable for reasons that had nothing to do with the seat. “Anise...”

“Mm?” Anise tilted her head towards her friend, taking a swig of drink. Her third bottle in the last hour. Better slow down a bit, it wouldn’t do to go turning up the next morning with a hangover.

Isla gave a discrete cough. “Is this a bar for, um... girls who like girls?” Her ears burned as she said this.

“Girls who... oh, you mean a lesbian bar? No, not that I’m aware of. Lisa didn’t mention anything, at least. Why?”

Isla pointed as stealthily as she could manage towards the opposite corner of the room, where the two girls she had spied were sitting together and... *getting to know each other*. Isla had some difficulty thinking in anything other than vague euphemism couched in an alcoholic haze.

Anise’s face lit up as she glanced across. “Oh! Yeah, you’ll see that a lot here, don’t worry. Remember, this isn’t stuffy old Earth, people here are generally more open and relaxed about, well, everything.”

“Really?” Isla shifted her gaze over at the two girls once more, noting how they moved, how they touched, stroked, kissed. Delicately, intimately, *sexily*. “So it’s, uh... it’s considered normal to be interested in the same sex here?”

“Normality is subjective,” Anise said in a mildly admonishing tone, a finger raised. “But I get what you meant, so I’ll let you off.” She smirked as her best friend’s cheeks glowed red once more. “I’ve been looking forward to coming here precisely *because* it’s so relaxed. If not for the Dreamstar audition, I’d probably be on Earth now.” A glance out the corner of her eye revealed that Isla was still staring at the tongue-tied girls. “You seem interested...”

“Eh!?”

“You’re staring at them.”

Isla shook her head, as though clearing her mind of thoughts she shouldn’t be having. “Sorry.” She fidgeted with her bottle for a time, turning it round and around in her fingers, going to take a sip and deciding against it, leaving it on a nearby table, picking it up again.

Leaning sideways to brush shoulders, Anise grinned. “Wanna try?”

“Eeeh!?”

Anise giggled at her friend’s outburst. “I’m up for it if you are.” She leaned closer and brought her face as close as possible to Isla’s, without actually touching.

“A-An... ise?” Isla stuttered, her eyes opening wide in terror and unexpected excitement. Anise’s breath caressed her lips, the intoxicating scent of sweet alcohol filling her nose. The excitement in her best friend’s eyes was clearly visible, physical indications being transferred via a touching knee; Anise *shook* with excitement, vibrating to the point where her leg could potentially function as a device of feminine stimulation.

“Not interested?” Anise whispered.

“I...” Isla began, then stopped and thought frantically. Her best friend had just offered to share a kiss. Back home this would have been utterly insane. But here... apparently it was okay? She edged closer, the tip of her nose touching Anise’s.

Closing her eyes and pushing that *tiny* bit further to brush lips with her best friend, Isla shared a moment of pure, unadulterated wonder, bathed in warm orange light closely resembling her friend’s hair.

It felt to them like the world had stopped, time slowing to a crawl, nothing outside of this singularly intimate moment existing. And when they finished, Isla let out a low moan that effectively caused Anise’s libido to explode. The stopped time came rushing back in a flood and the world started moving for them again.

“Wow...” Isla whispered.

“Yeah...” Anise muttered, eyes still closed. Leaning back in, she attached herself for a second go, before finally managing to pull away.

As the reality of what they had shared sunk in, a voice brought them both back with a start.

“Evening, girls,” Lisa said, entering arm in arm with Mira and making for the bar. She was dressed in a slinky silver skirt and black blouse contrasting with her hair, causing Anise’s already tortured libido to go into meltdown.

First a kiss with Isla, now Lisa in a hot outfit. Anise shivered imperceptibly at her good fortune, then waved, attempting to come across as nonchalant. Sitting upright, she beamed, as though she hadn't just shared an intimate first kiss with her best friend.

"Hey, how's it going?" she said, and went back to sipping at her drink, noting that Isla was unusually silent, gently tracing the shape of her lips with a finger.

Returning a few minutes later with a drink each, the new arrivals pulled up two chairs and sat opposite. Lisa guzzled half of her bottle in one go and let out a happy sigh. Mira, the more ladylike of the two, sipped at her cocktail with an elegant leg crossed over the other, eyes closed as she basked in the atmosphere.

Lisa noticed Isla seemed transfixed. "I think someone fancies my best friend, hmm?"

Snapping back to reality a second time, Isla's ears burned with embarrassment. "I... was just wondering what she's drinking, that's all. It looks delicious." If she was honest, Mira's outfit also looked delicious; a satin black skirt split up the side, twinned with a burnt umber blouse and black knee-length boots.

Mira held the glass out. "Have a sip, I don't mind. It's a Quantum Knocker cocktail. Probably a good idea to take it easy, it's got a kick."

Anise laughed. "That's some name."

"Some things never change, no matter how much time passes. On the contrary, cocktail naming seems to get progressively worse with every new generation," Mira said, watching with amusement as Isla's face screwed up. "Sorry, perhaps I should have mentioned it's quite a sour drink?"

Being the good friend she was, Anise gently patted Isla's back as she choked. "Isla can't stand sour stuff."

"Oh... I do apologise," Mira said, clearly unrepentant, going by the huge smile on her lips. The lips with a deep crimson gloss immaculately applied to them that Isla would have been paying rapt attention to, had she not been choking at this precise moment.

“Ugh... what is *in* that, Mira?” said their choking friend, managing to force the words out between desperately trying to clear her throat of the awful devil juice. The combination of strong alcohol and something sour had resulted in half of it going down the wrong hole.

“You know Quantum Sunset?” Mira said.

“Sure, we were addicted to that and Quantum Sunrise for a few years when we were at school,” Anise said. Yes, the two of them had drunk enough of this cola-like fizzy drink with a tangy flavour to potentially keep the company afloat for a full year or more by themselves.

“Well, if you mix that with equal parts whiskey, rum, tequila, and lime juice, you get a Quantum Knocker.”

“So named for its ability to knock your socks off,” Lisa added, tilting her bottle towards them.

Anise took a sip and made a face. “I don’t mind sour stuff, but I have to side with Isla on this one, that’s not very nice.”

“An acquired taste, certainly,” Mira said.

Lisa stole a small mouthful of the cocktail. “Mm, delicious. I love sour stuff. Or spicy. Anything with a strong flavour, really.”

“Such as?” Anise asked.

Crossing her arms and closing her eyes in a thoughtful sort of way, Lisa hummed for a moment. “I guess curry’s probably my favourite dish. Proper curry, I mean, not the various regional varieties people have come up with over the years. Mira’s folks own a restaurant here in the city that serves authentic curry, among other things. You can probably guess where I eat out a lot of the time.”

Anise privately had some probably quite accurate ideas of where Lisa ate out on a regular basis, but said nothing for now. She worried Isla might melt if anything else steamy took place.

“The discount for being my best friend certainly never crosses your mind, does it, Lisa?” Mira said, poking her friend playfully with an elbow and receiving a brief kiss in response.

“Where are you from originally, Mira?” Anise asked.

“Aida. But if you mean where my family originated on Earth? India. New Delhi, to be precise. My family lived there for decades, until the city was destroyed during the Resource Wars. After the rebuild... you could say things weren’t really the same any more.”

“So they moved away?” Isla said.

Taking a sip of her cocktail, Mira nodded. “Indeed, they were fortunate to have survived the war, but having their home destroyed took a toll. Have you heard of Andaman?” She noted the shaken heads. “I suppose that’s not surprising. It’s a small island chain off the coast of mainland India. My family moved there not long after the Delhi Reconstruction Project completed.”

“How did they end up on Aida?” Anise said.

“They were part of the initial settlement rush. I believe... hmm, around a hundred years, we’ve been here? My parents’ restaurant that Lisa mentioned? That’s been around for nearly as long. Since Apollotia was originally founded.”

Lisa beamed. “And that, my dear girls, is why I eat there. Best curry you’ll ever taste, trust me.”

Anise caught her eye. “Maybe we can all go there together one evening soon? I’ve never had real curry.”

“Works for me,” Lisa said, confirming with Mira that this was fine.

“I’ll pass, thanks, spicy meals aren’t my thing,” Isla said. She shifted a little, moving the leg nearest her best friend to touch her thigh, trying to appear casual.

Anise dropped her arm down, resting her hand on Isla’s knee, her stomach doing nervous cartwheels of excitement.

Sitting upright and crossing her other leg this time, Mira smiled at Isla, unaware of the intimate shenanigans occurring just out of sight. “You don’t need to worry about that, they serve all sorts of dishes. I recommend the fish and chips.”

“Fish and chips? I had that a fair few times when I stayed in Britain. Okay, that sounds great, thanks,” Isla said, a little happier that her immediate future probably wouldn’t include a scalding mouth; she had enough heat in her life after that steamy kiss.

“Mira’s not actually all that into spicy stuff either, you’re not alone,” Lisa said.

Mira finished her drink and stood. “I enjoy curry occasionally, but I tend more towards pretty basic cooking.” She pointed around the table. “Anyone want another?” Affirmatives were given, so she headed to the bar to get the next round.

“Damn... Mira is amazing,” Anise breathed. “She’s really cool and collected, but that only makes her way sexier.” She jumped at a gentle kick under the table. “L-Lisa!?”

“Just reminding you of prior engagements, my dear,” Lisa said in a sultry tone.

“Ah, don’t worry, I’m not intending to try anything! Though I think Isla might be...”

Sitting silently, hands clasped and staring intently at Mira, Isla’s face illuminated the area in red yet again. “I just happened to be looking in that direction, that’s all!”

“Sure, you were,” Anise said, giggling as her friend’s face threatened to ignite the atmosphere. Over at the bar, Mira chatted animatedly to Yana, piquing Anise’s interest. “Do those two know each other?” She pointed.

Lisa craned her head around. “You mean Yana? They’ve done a bunch of modelling projects together.” She narrowed her eyes theatrically in Anise’s direction. “Another girl you want to be *introduced* to?”

This made Anise blush—a rare occurrence indeed. “I’d love to meet her.”

Mira returned with their drinks, placing them on the table and resuming her position, again crossing a leg over the other. “Seems Yana’s heading home for a while.”

“Visiting family?” Lisa asked as Yana made her way out of the bar.

Taking a sip of her drink, Mira gave a vaguely affirmative ‘*mmhmm*’. “I was going to introduce these two, but it looks like that’ll have to wait a couple of weeks.”

Anise followed Yana with her eyes, then focused over to Mira. “She’s from Lyapunov, right?”

Isla cleared her throat and sat forward. “Um, Lyapunov...?”

“Some people call it the Winter Colony,” Mira said.

The light of understanding dawned on Isla’s face. “The Russian Consortium’s world? I always forget the real name.”

Mira placed her glass on the table after downing half of it in as ladylike a fashion as she could manage. “That’s the one. It’s an odd nickname, given the planet itself spends half of every year baking hot. But I suppose traditions carry on in some odd ways.”

Guzzling her remaining drink, Isla placed the empty bottle on the table beside Mira’s glass, then stood. “Reckon we should make a move? If we stay here too much longer I’ll end up with a hangover I don’t need.”

Anise jumped up after draining her own bottle. “As much as I could fancy a few more... yeah, we should probably head back.” Her body also felt hot, sexy, like it wanted... things. Things involving her beautiful best friend.

The other two agreed once they finished their own drinks, so they headed back to the surface, strolling casually through the slightly less bustling streets. They reached the station without problems, except for Isla again being uncharacteristically silent and thoughtful, and jumped aboard.

The monorail speeded them across to the island—at night it felt better for both Martian girls, probably because they couldn’t *see* the vast ocean below them, but it also reminded them of the system of tube transports back home—where they disembarked and made their way to the dormitory.

Loitering outside Anise’s room, Lisa dared a peck of her cheek. “Had a fun night, thanks. Let’s do it again soon!”

“Likewise, I enjoyed your company,” Mira said, smiling at Isla in particular. “Goodnight.” Taking Lisa’s hand, she strolled along the hall, heading upstairs to their rooms. Or probably more accurately *room*, singular; the chances of them sleeping alone were vanishingly small at the best of times, but especially so after an enjoyable night out.

Wishing their new friends a pleasant evening, Anise tugged Isla into her room and closed the door.

Chapter 11: Stay With Me Till Dawn

Pushing Isla against the wall, Anise smothered her in lust, pecking her cheeks, lips, even her *nose*, she was so excited.

Isla attempted to fend her friend off for long enough to speak. “Anise, wait, wait! Do we want to do this?”

“Yes!” Anise whispered.

This made Isla laugh; her best friend had always been a very forward girl, and tonight was no different. Pecking Anise’s lips, she simply gave in and let her best friend’s momentum carry her forward into something new and exciting, an activity she hadn’t expected to be enjoying this soon after arriving.

Pushing Isla towards the bed, Anise threw her onto the mattress and crawled on top, still kissing all over. Straddling her, she crawled up a little way, legs wide to the sides, and went back down for a second helping. “You sure about this? I want you like you wouldn’t believe, but I don’t want to push if it’s not what you want.”

“Bit late to be asking, isn’t it?” Isla said with a vague half-smile. Pulling her friend down, she instigated another kiss, her hands stroking down to Anise’s shapely little butt and *squeezing*.

“Aaah, this is the best evening ever!” Anise whispered. “Ah... wait a tick, need bathroom.” She jumped off and ran through to the toilet.

Isla laughed at her friend’s enthusiasm, sitting up and tugging her hair down from its usual ponytail. She shook it out and had a stretch, just as the sound of the bathroom door alerted her to Anise’s return, at which point... she almost fainted. Anise had no clothes on.

Not. One. Thing.

Isla took in her best friend’s loose hair, slender shoulders, her modest but perfectly formed breasts, her thin waist, those delicious hips, her shapely legs. Even her *feet* were perfect.

Anise posed, leaning against the doorframe with one arm up behind her head. “What do you think?”

“That I just died and went to heaven...” Isla muttered, her eyes finally sliding back up to Anise’s face. Her newly-awakened libido took charge, since her mind appeared to be too broken to do much else. She slipped off the bed and walked forward to embrace Anise, kissing her deeply, passionately, running her hands all over her body.

Anise tugged Isla’s top off, throwing it on her desk chair. The short skirt went next, sliding her hands up and down Isla’s waist a few times as she did so and kissing her tummy. She moved behind and cupped the breasts, flicking over her erect nipples. The pale pink bra was removed and tossed on the chair. Socks were deftly removed. And soon only the pale pink panties remained.

She hesitated. This would be her first time seeing another girl’s most private area close-up, and being her precious best friend’s made it even more of a nerve-wracking experience. She peeled the panties down, revealing Isla’s shaved pussy, immediately going in and tasting her friend, using her fingers to spread wide to allow her tongue easier entry.

“Ah, I think you’re doing things a bit backwards!” Isla said, giggling and moaning at once.

Her pleas were ignored as Anise used her fingers to pleasure Isla while her tongue explored the outside, sporadically rubbing her clit and producing equally sporadic moans of a much higher pitch and intensity whenever she did.

“M-My legs are going to give out!” Isla added in a pleading tone.

Anise kissed Isla tenderly on her wetness and stood, grinning from ear to ear, her face glowing with sexy satisfaction.

Isla gave her a brief snog, not thinking much of it, then blushed as she remembered where her friend’s tongue had most recently been. She felt embarrassed, yes, but also immensely turned on. Pulling Anise over to the bed, she sat, taking the opportunity to slip her panties off and toss them onto the chair.

Immediately, she was under assault once more as Anise pushed her down on the bed and laid next to her, kissing, touching, stroking, *fingering*. Anise shuffled down between her friend’s legs and pushed her tongue in a second time, the moans from further up the bed coming louder and faster.

Anise hadn't yet had any pleasure, however, so Isla decided a role reversal was in order. "Hey..." She used a leg to tap her partner's head a few times.

"Mm?"

"Time to switch, I can't let you have *all* the fun."

Isla sat up and pushed Anise backwards so she lay flat on her back, legs wide, spending a few moments exactly as Anise had, staring at her friend's intimate area, then moved up towards the shapely breasts, moving a hand across them, touching softly, a finger tracing the shape of a swollen nipple. A moment was spent sucking them, gently nibbling and flicking her tongue back and forth.

Shuffling back, Isla returned Anise's gift from earlier, a soft kiss of her centre, before moving further down, teasing and making her wait. She licked all the way down the insides of her thighs, placing tender kisses all over as she went. Apparently this was unexpected, making Anise giggle with ticklishness.

"Jeez, stop laughing, it's embarrassing!" Isla said, giggling in turn.

"Sorry, sorry!" Anise said, still laughing. "It's just ticklish. I really do like it, though, keep it up."

Isla went back to work, taking things to the next level. Lining herself up between Anise's legs, she went back down. Anise held her breath, waiting patiently for what she knew was coming next.

Isla surprised her with a delicate lick all the way from the bottom to the top of her pussy, making her shiver, the sensation seeming to run all the way from her feet to the top of her head and making her moan like mad. As Isla used her tongue to explore, she noted where Anise seemed most sensitive, what made her moan more or less, what made her shudder with pleasure.

Gradually, she built up a mental map of Anise's most intimate area, focusing on the clit at times, fingering and pushing her tongue deep inside at others, sending Anise over the edge to the point she worried her moans might be heard in the adjacent rooms.

"Okay, stop, stop, need a... breather..." Anise gasped, her chest rising and falling like a raunchy mountain range. "Holy hell... are you sure this is your first time?"

Isla sat up and beamed. “Yep.”

Anise moved all the way up the bed, Isla joining her, and they lay side by side at her urging. “Okay, this should work.” Before her friend could speak, Anise’s fingers deftly darted back down to her wetness, slipping two inside and using her thumb to vigorously rub her clit.

Isla’s brain fused into a sodden lump, only aware of the intense pleasure. Managing to bring her body back under some level of control, her own fingers found their way inside Anise and returned the favour.

Their voices rose higher and higher, a crescendo building in their bodies as they came closer and closer to finishing. Isla came first, arching her back as the first shock hit, a burst of pleasure the likes of which she’d never dared think possible rushing through her body. She almost screamed, the pleasure so intense that she felt she might black out.

Anise had started fingering herself the moment her partner came, figuring Isla wouldn’t be in a fit state to continue, and moments later she shuddered as her own climax knocked her flat, a continual moan of ecstasy escaping through clenched teeth. Lowering herself back down, she joined her best friend in feeling absolutely broken.

It took ten minutes of breathing heavily, staring at the ceiling and wondering what the hell they had just experienced together before either could reasonably speak again. They were completely drained, but equally felt an ultimate sense of relaxation and satisfaction.

Rolling onto her side, Anise draped an arm over her best friend’s waist and pecked her on the lips. “Thank you, Isla, for granting my number one wish.”

Isla glanced at her friend’s sweaty features. “I always had the general idea you fancied me. Guess I wasn’t wrong.”

“Kinda. Actually, more than kinda. Very,” Anise agreed, nodding sagely.

Isla’s shoulders shook with laughter. She rolled over to snuggle close to her best friend’s sweaty body and pulled the sheets up and over them both. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt this relaxed before. Totally different to playing with myself.” Her ears burned a little at admitting something this personal.

“I thought the same! Maybe because it’s more strenuous?”

“Mm... could be. But it’s not just that I feel tired, I feel *amazing*.”

“Pretty sure this is called the afterglow,” Anise murmured, stroking a hand up and down Isla’s shoulder, leaning closer and inhaling deeply. “Mm... jeez, you smell amazing...”

“Eh!? Where did that come from?” Isla said, now wide awake.

“Nowhere in particular, just paying you a compliment.”

Isla sniffed herself. “I know we’ve just been busy... but I had a shower earlier.”

Anise giggled. “I don’t mean a bad smell. I just love your scent, there’s a certain combination of smells that makes me... comfortable, at ease. It’s a feeling like I’m home.”

Isla’s face was hot enough to heat the rooms on every side of her own, even the one below them. “Th-Thanks... I think.”

A pleasant smile appeared on Anise’s lips. “You’re welcome.”

“Hang on...”

“What’s up?”

“Earlier, when we were outside the stadium and Lisa mentioned sweaty girls, you reacted *really* suspiciously. I get the feeling you have some unusual interests?” Isla said, resulting in her best friend blushing roughly the colour of a ripe tomato.

“You uh... you picked up on that, huh?” Anise murmured.

“Only because of your comment just now,” Isla said, laughing.

Anise’s lips curled up into an amused half-smile. “Guess it’s pointless denying it, then.”

Isla’s suspicious expression intensified. “Remember a couple of years back? I had that tennis tournament at the sports club? And the AC had gone wonky, so I was sweaty as hell?”

Anise shifted, indicating a guilty conscience. “Yes...”

“Do you also remember how oddly you were behaving around me?”

“Ahaha... yes. Yes, I do. I probably don’t need to say more.” Anise issued a cough, the type that says *‘please don’t ask me any more awkward questions’*.

“I also distinctly remember you running home quickly after we left. I seem to recall you did something similar right after Lisa left my room a couple of days ago, too...”

If Anise’s face had been any hotter, the academy would have needed to issue a heatwave warning. “All right, all right! I... might’ve needed to relieve a few tensions, I’m sorry. You just had a really good effect on me that day.”

Isla buried her face in the pillow, laughing uncontrollably. Lifting her head back up, she touched her lips to those of her wonderfully naughty friend, lingering a moment. “I suspect Lisa’s in for a shock if you manage to get her into bed.”

Anise beamed. “Maybe!” As her cheeks returned to a shade approaching normality, she propped herself up on an elbow. “So what about you? Any sexy interests you’d like to share?”

“No! Well... not yet? I literally just lost my... my virginity, Anise, it’s not like I’ve had a chance to develop any new interests!” Isla said, her own cheeks fading back to red, as though all the blood had rushed from Anise’s over to hers.

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Yes. Indeed.” Isla coughed and changed subject. “Anyway, we should probably talk about what happened tonight?”

Anise yawned, tracing random shapes on her friend’s tummy. “Probably easiest if I say I’d like to do Lisa from here to the moons and back?”

“I figured as much. Not like you hid it,” Isla said. She struggled a little under the delicate touches on her stomach, an area where she was quite ticklish, though she wasn’t about to admit it; Anise wouldn’t let *that* one be forgotten if she found out.

“What about you? Don’t think I missed all those glances and things at Mira,” Anise added.

“She’s incredible, and I’m pretty sure I fancy the pants off her? I mean, after tonight I think it’s clear I’m, you know, interested in girls. In her. But...”

“You find her a bit intimidating?”

Isla laughed and sat up. "Yeah. I'm comfy with you, we've been best friends for what, thirteen years now? But Mira is sexy and mature and experienced and amazing... and she terrifies me."

Anise struggled upright, fighting against her tired muscles so she could hug her friend. "Least tonight gives you a bit of experience?"

"I guess..."

"So we're both happy staying as we are? For now, at least?"

"Our relationship as friends is too important to rush into anything." Isla pulled away and studied Anise's beautiful face. "Maybe we can leave it as an open invitation of sorts?"

"Works for me. I'd love to call Lisa my girlfriend for a while, but she strikes me as a girl who likes to stay single."

"Mira seems the same, they're both super open about what they enjoy. Like a certain other girl I know."

Anise grinned a grin the Cheshire Cat would have been proud of. "You know me." Her expression softened. "Seriously, though, thanks for tonight. It's been hard bottling my feelings up for so long."

"Honestly, I think deep down I already had some idea. It's not like you hid being into girls or anything when we were alone, so..."

"Not much of a stretch to also think I found you attractive?" Anise suggested.

Isla leaned forward to touch noses, giving her friend a kiss. "Yeah. I really like you, Anise, you know? But that's also why we should take a little while to properly work things out." She giggled. "Me more than you, to be fair."

"Take as long as you need. My feelings for you won't change."

"Mm..."

"Okay, it's settled, then. Single for now?"

"Single for now," Isla said, sitting back and stretching, giving her friend a delicious eyeful of her own perky pair of pillows.

"Great," Anise said, doing her best not to stare too hard, now that she finally had a proper view of the girl she had dreamed of for years. She yawned again. "Need sleep..."

Isla agreed, so they ran to the bathroom to freshen up, then clambered back into bed and returned to snuggling, gradually drifting off in each other's warm and sweaty embrace.



Anise sat up and rubbed her head, glaring at the bright morning rays streaming through a crack in the curtains. Hangover. Great. She didn't even drink that much, though it was also likely her body hadn't fully adjusted to Aida's diurnal rhythm yet. Especially that big ball of fire in the sky, something they never had to directly deal with on Mars.

Looking down at her sleeping companion, she whispered, "Last night was amazing, Isla, thanks," while gently stroking her friend's loose hair.

"Mm... you're welcome..." Isla murmured, opening her eyes and gazing up at her one-time lover. "Morning."

"Morning," Anise said, tying her hair up into a single messy ponytail.

Taking a moment to admire each other's naked form—Isla in particular lingering on her friend's vivid orange hair, it still looked a bit strange after years of it being blonde—they took turns in the bath, then shared one more kiss before going back to their usual relationship. Wandering through into her own room, Isla grabbed some fresh clothes and dressed, completely forgetting she had left her outfit from the previous evening strewn across Anise's floor.

Dressed in a snazzy and sporty number—loose hotpants, a short sleeveless top, flat running shoes—she finally remembered to go and retrieve her clothes. Anise was half-naked, fussing about her wardrobe deciding what to wear, so Isla did her best to ignore this sexy vision and moved over to the chair, where Anise had moved her clothes.

She found all but one item. "Mm, where'd my panties go?"

Anise stiffened. "Uh, didn't you already take them?"

"Nope, they should be in here with everything else." Isla turned slowly, deliberately. "*Anise...* is there something else you'd like to share?"

“Oh all right! Jeez...” Anise muttered, defeated. Pulling the worn underwear item from its hiding place under her bedsheets, she held them out, pouting a little and avoiding eye contact.

“Do I even want to know why you have my panties?” Isla asked.

“Um...”

“Are you about to embarrass me, Anise?”

“Probably...”

Isla let out a light sigh and smiled. “All right, hit me.”

Anise leaned in close enough to whisper directly into her friend’s ear.

Blushing like mad, Isla gave a discrete cough. “You know exactly what you like, don’t you?” She had long ago grown used to Anise being kind of special when it came to cute girls and idols, but this one... this one very much took the cake.

“You bet! So um, can I...?” Anise said, twiddling her fingers.

If Isla had to hazard a guess as to how their sexy rendezvous might end, having Anise ask if she could keep her worn panties probably wouldn’t have made the list. Cracking up at this, she closed her friend’s fingers over the panties and pushed them back towards her. “Sure, you can keep them, just don’t tell me what you intend to do with them.”

“That’s probably for the best. Thanks.” Anise gave her best friend a snog for being wonderful.

Moaning a little at this intimate morning tonguenastics, Isla let out a happy sigh and tilted her head. “Out of interest, how long have you been after them? I’m guessing this isn’t a new thing.”

“Longer than I care to admit,” Anise mumbled, tucking the items back under her bedsheets.

“You could’ve just asked. I’d have happily given you a pair, even if I probably would’ve felt hugely embarrassed at doing so.”

Anise held a finger up and made a disapproving ‘*tut-tut*’ sound. “Can’t do that. They need to be... you know, lived in. And obtained as a result of, um...”

“Activities partaken of?” Isla delicately suggested.

“Exactly!”

Cracking up a second time, Isla hugged her friend. “You’re one of a kind, Anise, never change.”

Happy at having such an understanding best friend, Anise returned to agonising over what to wear—spending the day with Lisa meant she needed to look her best—while Isla wandered back to her own room.

Isla dumped the clothes on her bed to sort out later, and went for a morning run around the campus, figuring she needed to work hard on improving her stamina before anything else. Upon returning to the dormitory, she took a second shower and changed into something casual involving hotpants and a loose blouse, joining Anise for breakfast.

The dormitory’s cafeteria took up a full quarter of the ground floor to the left of the main entrance, no less impressive now than it had been their first time eating there. Wooden tables and chairs filled the room from end to curved end, and on the inner side there resided an enormous kitchen behind the serving counters, regularly staffed by a dozen or more cooks and helpers.

They grabbed an omelette each and sat at one of the large tables near the windows, at which point Anise tucked into her meal. Between mouthfuls she asked, “How was the run?”

Isla gave a thumbs up. “Great. It’s nice being able to run under a real sky again.”

“No hangover?”

“Nope, I drank less than you last night, remember.” Isla grinned at her friend’s annoyed expression; Anise still felt a bit off-colour.

“You’re spending the day with Mira, aren’t you?” Anise said, pointing her fork.

“Yeah, she’s helping me decide on a direction now I’ve probably settled on being a pure idol. I’m also hoping to get some advice for tomorrow’s audition.”

“She’s an amazing talent when it comes to fashion and coordination, listen to her advice seriously,” Anise said.

“I will.”

Polishing off their meals, they headed out to their respective activities. Anise, taking a different idol path to her best friend, would be spending the day

with Lisa, figuring out how best to tackle things, plus her own preparations for the ice cream audition.

Isla, meanwhile, would be spending her day with a girl who basically terrified her.

Part 03: Expanding Their Horizons

Having been intimate with each other for the first time, Isla and Anise have decided to remain single for now and see how things go. Isla immediately sets about deepening her friendship with her mentor, Mira, and Anise sets her sights on Lisa for some fun.

Chapter 12: The Lioness & Her Prey

Outside, Mira was already waiting, looking sexy as ever in a crimson two-piece outfit involving hotpants, a hot top, and an even hotter Isla. “Morning, girls. Ready, Isla?”

Isla was, sudden spikes to her libido notwithstanding, so they wished Anise a good day and strolled over to the academy buildings, entering one of the domes and ending up in a spacious room at the rear, overlooking the ocean.

Several large folding tables occupied the centre, while benches and shelves hugged each wall. And strewn across every flat surface, a veritable avalanche of materials; fabrics, partial outfits, tools, and a level of chaos indicating either an incredibly untidy person, or possibly just someone who got far too wrapped up in their work to care about cleaning.

“This is our humble little abode, Isla, make yourself at home.” Mira waved in the direction of a lime green sofa located under the window, and headed to a workbench to the right of this to make drinks.

“You’re a designer as well as a producer?” Isla asked as she made herself comfy on the soft and well-worn sofa.

Mira paused in the act of filling a kettle from a convenient sink. “No, that’s Sophie’s deal. She creates outfits, I coordinate them. Among other things, of course. Producing idols is a job of variety.”

“Sophie’s the friend you mentioned?” Isla asked, mesmerised. It was incredible to her how beautiful girls like Yana or Mira could make such utterly mundane tasks as drinking from a glass or making a cup of tea appear so *sexy*.

“Correct. You’ll meet her soon, I promise. She’s just heading out to the city with her apprentice to buy some materials she needs, so maybe in a day or two.” Walking over with two mugs, Mira handed one to Isla and placed her own on one of the central tables. “How are you settling in?”

Isla accepted the drink and took a sip of deliciously malty tea. “This is nice. What is it?”

“Assam, a blend I import from Earth.”

“Can’t you get it locally?”

“I can, but it’s not really the same. I have a relative in India send a shipment every month or two.” Mira took a sip of her own drink and made a pleasant expression.

“I never would’ve guessed you did the same thing,” Isla said, laughing quietly. “There’s a Martian brand of shampoo I love, so I’ll be having that imported as well.” And after Anise admitted to loving Isla’s scent—a scent which would naturally include the shampoo brand she *always* used—she had even more reason to continue using it. “And to answer your question, we’re both pretty much okay now, thanks.”

“Wonderful. You can ask Lisa or myself for advice and help, even after this first week. We may not be your official mentors any more past then, but that doesn’t matter a great deal, we both enjoy seeing new idols grow and mature.”

“Thanks! Had a nice run this morning, feels great being able to jog under a real sky again.”

“You’ve lived somewhere other than Mars?” Mira asked, placing her cup back on the table and rooting around for something in the various junk strewn thereon.

“I stayed on Earth for six months with Mum. Then went back to Mars for a month, before moving here.”

“Lisa and I moved around a lot. Sometimes staying on space stations, in tents, cruising on a military starship, and on one memorable occasion, a deep sea research station on Europa Colony. We never got used to any of those. We’re both happy being mobile and we settle in quickly, but nothing beats a real home to return to.”

Isla stared. “How did you even manage all of that...?”

“Lisa’s father is admiral of the UNSF’s 1st Fleet, so we decided it might be fun to go around with him for a while, putting on shows for the troops, that type of thing. Not much conflict these days, so there’s a lot of downtime and bored personnel. We merely helped spice their lives up a bit.”

“You both came across as really confident, guess now I know why,” Isla said, laughing a little at how utterly green she felt by comparison. About as green as the sofa her posterior now graced, in fact.

“Experience helps. We said before we’ve been at this for a few years now, yes? You don’t need to reach our level overnight, Isla, that’s why you have these four years at the academy. Use them well and you’ll be set for life.”

“With you helping me, I think I’m fairly well set already.”

Mira tut-tutted. “Naughty girl, don’t go expecting us to always be around to help you. Remember what Lisa told you your first day here. I want you to succeed, Isla, you’re a beautiful and cute girl who could become a top level idol one day, but you’ll need to put an equal amount of work in to make that happen.” She wagged a finger. “Never assume.”

“I-I’m sorry, Mira...” Isla stuttered.

“No need for apologies, just remember you have to stand on your own two feet first and foremost and you’ll be fine. The girls here are all really helpful and nice, and asking questions will generally get you answers. But remember they’re all potential rivals, too. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing.”

Isla’s burning cheeks gradually faded back to their regular colour. “I’ll remember that, I promise.”

“Splendid. Now... shall we take a look at you?” Mira tugged Isla upright and manoeuvred her stand before the central tables, having found the item she wanted. “Let’s see...”

“Should I undress or anything?” Isla asked.

Mira twitched. “I certainly wouldn’t mind...” She gave a brief cough. “No, that’s okay. For now we’ll be looking at colours and themes, seeing what suits you best.”

Retrieving the swatch book she had been searching for, Mira opened it and perused the various colours and patterns. “You’ve got a gorgeous head of hair, very attractive. Vivid brunette, coyote... maybe closer to chamoisee? Hmm... straight suits you well, but maybe we could add a touch of waviness...”

Isla let Mira fuss over her, asking a question while she thought of it. “How long have you been an idol?”

“Since I was sixteen, three years now. Technically I started at fifteen, but I don’t really count a year of training. To become a professional idol you need to be at least sixteen, but eighteen to enter Dreamstar, which is why we moved around with Lisa’s father for a while first. Mm, green works very well for you... lime, maybe? Something vivid and pop would contrast and compliment your hair beautifully...”

“I had no idea you could be an idol under eighteen, it was a prerequisite for even trying out to enter Dreamstar. Did you need to go to an idol school or anything?” Isla added, fidgeting as Mira continued poking and prodding.

“I attended an academy on Earth to learn about producing, but I was also fortunate enough to apprentice directly under an older idol. She taught me a lot of what she knew, I learned the rest myself by doing. We could tie in a hint of purple with the green? Perhaps...”

“Under? I think I know you well enough by now to get what you really mean.”

Laughing in an entirely too suggestive manner, Mira winked. “I wouldn’t have minded. Alas, she wasn’t interested in girls, so I let that one go. And anyway, I try and keep my personal and professional lives reasonably separate.” She decided on a particular shade of purple that worked well for her subject. “We’ll also need to determine what *type* of idol you’ll be.”

“Pure, wasn’t it?” Isla hazarded.

“There are sub-types. Some idols go for cute and bubbly, maybe creating a catchphrase or a random interest or look they accentuate heavily. Cat ears are always popular, for example,” Mira said, tapping her head. “Or they might create an extravagant character they role play at all times, similar to Falconi. Other idols go for the sexy and mature look. For instance, our very own Cassiopeia Luna, an idol you’re familiar with.”

“She’s super pretty, yeah. Um... so are you, by the way.” Isla blushed a little at openly stating this after her admission of utter terror the previous evening.

“Why, thank you, my dear,” Mira said with a theatrical bow. She ran her fingers through Isla’s soft and silky hair, pulling it down from its ponytail for a moment. “So what do you think? Personally, I believe you’d suit a cute look

with a hint of mature sexiness mixed in, but the decision is ultimately up to you.”

Isla deliberated for a time, taking sips of her tea and enjoying the continued hair fondling; she would never admit it publicly, but having her hair played with was a real turn-on, which made visiting the salon an awkward experience. “Well... Anise said to trust your judgement, so if you think cute with a touch of sexy would work, let’s try that?”

“Certainly, my lady,” Mira said, again with the bow, more of a butler-esque one this time.

The way Mira’s obsidian hair moved when she bowed low like this had the net effect of turning Isla on to the point of minor discomfort. Something about that mass of black swishing down to the floor, before whipping back behind Mira’s shoulders as she stood upright and flicked her head made Isla go weak at the knees.

Doing her best to remain calm, Isla asked another question. “What type of idol are you?”

“Me? Ethnic Sexy. I work as a model largely for fun. And to make money, of course, plus I occasionally model Sophie’s outfits now. But my *profession*, if you will, is production. I specialise in ethnic styles, though I can coordinate virtually anything.” Mira still circled, like a lioness and her prey, muttering to herself.

“Ethnic is like... mm, traditional outfits?” Isla hazarded.

“Something like that. Really, it’s more like modern takes on traditional styles, if we’re talking idols. Tell you what, how about you come to my room after your audition tomorrow and I’ll show you some of my own outfits?”

“Sure,” Isla said. She stiffened as she realised this would place her in close proximity to a girl who intimidated her like nothing else, but whom she also fancied like crazy. In a private setting. Isla began to think she might have made a mistake...

An hour later, Mira had number of notes for later perusal, and they now wandered back outside, where they split up for the day. Isla had a short notice audition to prepare for. Mira had given her a few tips while they chatted, such

as researching the company and taking into account what the audition stated the brand was looking for, and while she had also offered to provide some more direct help, Isla had declined.

This was her first audition, after all, not including the one she'd taken when applying to enter Dreamstar. Tips from an experienced idol were welcome, of course, but if Isla wanted to be successful, she felt it best to take full responsibility for herself and not rely on others.

Chapter 13: Our First Battle

Back at the dormitory, Isla now sat at her desk with her phone's holographic display active, reading up on the ice cream brand they would be auditioning for later that day, a company called Crème de la Crème. Unlike the audition to enter Dreamstar Academy, where it had all been about perfect form and choreography while maintaining a sunny smile, this one would be a little different in what was expected.

Like most entry-level auditions, the brand in question would be looking for an idol who could bring in a crowd and who fit with the overall look and feel of the company, but also someone who could put on a bit of an act.

"Hmm, so if I win, I'd be image girl for them for the next six months, doing events and things to bring in new customers. Okay..." Isla muttered, flicking through the audition details.

Wandering through from her own room after her day with Lisa, Anise stood by her friend and looked at the display. "Boning up on the audition?"

"Yeah. I'm not so used to all this stuff, so I can't afford to take it easy, right?"

Anise beamed. "Glad to see you're being serious about this."

"We've thirty lightyears from home, I can't *not* be serious," Isla answered with a low laugh. "Mum helped out with some of the upfront costs of coming here, but I'm going to have to earn a living if I want to stay."

"Idols are working girls. Some forget that, though," Anise added, heading back to her room. "I'll leave you in peace, I need to prepare as well, after all."

"Good... luck?" Isla said, remembering at the last moment that Anise was presently her rival for this job. "Hah, wishing my opponent luck in beating me. Good job, Isla."

A giggle was all the response she received from Anise.



Next morning, they headed into the city via the academy monorail, both dressed casually—as requested by the audition details—and nervous as hell. Even Anise, for all her usual confidence, was a bit on edge about this one. Her first audition for a real job, and it was up against a dozen other girls, one of whom was her best friend of thirteen years.

As they arrived at the small yet luxurious-looking storefront of Crème de la Crème’s Apollotia branch, Anise turned to her friend and held a hand out. “Best of luck to us both.”

Isla grasped and shook. “Don’t go easy on me just because we’re friends.”

“I had no intention of doing so,” Anise replied, grinning.

“Ah, you must be here for the audition?” came a voice from the shop front’s direction. A young lady had appeared. She gave a shallow bow and invited them inside the shop. “We’re just waiting on a couple of others now, please, feel free to enjoy a sample.”

Inside the store, which had been closed to the public for today’s audition, there were a number of tables with several china bowls placed on them, each filled with different varieties of luxury ice cream. Next to these, a dozen wooden ice cream sticks were placed on a silk napkin.

The new arrivals picked one of the sticks each and homed in on two of the bowls, something light green for Anise, mint by the smell, and a soft yellow tone indicating lemon or possibly banana for Isla. Nearby, another eight girls were also enjoying some samples.

“Mm, the refreshing mint washes over you like an alpine breeze, and the texture is soft yet firm, like the plumpest of goose feather pillows!” Anise gushed, having what appeared to Isla to be a foodgasm.

“You’re really into that ice cream, huh?” Isla said, stifling a laugh.

Anise stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Here’s a tip, gratis: the audition’s technically already started.” She winked at her and went back to her sample.

“Already started...?” Isla whispered, looking around and noticing for the first time that the lady who had brought them inside looked rather... interested in the group. Before she could adjust and attempt to formulate something fancy

to say about her own sample—if she even *could* on this short notice—the last couple of girls arrived and entered.

The lady from earlier moved to stand before the assembled girls and introduced herself as Sandra Carlton, head of marketing for the Apollotia branch of Crème de la Crème. Rather than hold proceedings up for the new arrivals to have a sample, Sandra hustled the group through into the back of the shop.

Wandering along behind Sandra, Anise leaned over to Isla and shook her head. “Bad idea turning up on time, those two missed out on the samples. Always be early to auditions!”

Isla nodded, taking this sage advice on-board. She’d had interviews and the like before, especially during her last minute scramble to find a university on Earth where she could pursue her tennis. *Last minute* was the important part there, because of her own lack of preparedness, her lack of direction, and not paying attention to her mother’s advice *when it would have made a difference*. She knew better than to leave things too late now.

Something occurred to her while they walked. Looking about the store itself, and even these areas that customers normally wouldn’t see, there was a definite colour theme going on. Similar to the city’s own Art Deco motif, Crème de la Crème had a royal purple and gold scheme *everywhere*, as befitted the aristocratic feel they were going for in their products.

Isla hadn’t thought anything of it when she met her best friend and walked into the city with her, but Anise’s outfit for today had an unusual amount of purple in it. Seeing the brand’s theme colours everywhere in the store and out back, Isla now understood *why* Anise had worn such an outfit. It fit in with the brand’s motif and gave her a unique edge that none of the other girls, Isla included, had considered.

Perhaps accepting Mira’s advice might have been a good idea, after all...

For new idols, most auditions were simple: attend and stand out from the crowd, and hope you were what the company was looking for. Rookie idols by definition had no following, no fans, and no real presence yet, so businesses big and small regularly advertised auditions for these new girls—and in some cases,

guys—because it was cheap and effective for them, but also helped the girls in question to get their feet on those first rungs of the ladder to stardom.

Like most things in life, luck played a role; if you didn't happen to have the qualities the company was after, you probably weren't going to win. But in some cases a girl could stand out simply by being better than everyone else, by researching the business thoroughly, wearing appropriate attire which fit the company's logo and brand image (much as Anise had today), and in general just telling them that you were the girl for the job, even if you didn't necessarily *look* the part initially.

They arrived at a long corridor with windows lining its length, through which the girls could see the small factory where the store's ice cream was freshly made. Several dozen people were hard at work preparing flavours both wild and popular, including their special chilli-choco-mint one, which Anise had sampled earlier.

Pausing here so the attendees could see how the sausage was made, so to speak, Sandra led them from this hallway into a light and airy meeting room, big enough to comfortably fit a few dozen people.

"Okay, girls," Sandra said, standing at the front of the room and facing them, "this is the portion of the audition where you get to show me how well you fit our brand's image." She pointed to the wall, where a large holo-display around the size of a whiteboard showed Crème de la Crème's slogan, which the girls would be expected to read in their very best TV advert voice.

First up was a girl who had apparently decided that something *pop* would be the way to Sandra's heart, a bright and cheery outfit similar to some of the colour tones in the ice cream flavours themselves. She was instantly disqualified for not having the right idea *at all*. A luxury brand did not want bright and flashy, it wanted suave and sophisticated. *Royal*, one might say, but also casual, in order to properly convey that this was luxury ice cream intended for the home, to eat with friends... or perhaps an intimate partner.

The next girl had also got the wrong idea. She had a suave outfit, and it even featured a few splashes of purple, but Sandra indicated that it failed to take into account the *casual* aspect; it was closer to the sort of thing she'd wear

out to a nice bar on a Saturday night, not for wearing when she had a few high-class friends around for gossip and ice cream.

Isla was picked next. She didn't really *do* suave, Isla was more about cute and sporty, and therefore crashed and burned almost instantly. Arriving back at the group, she gave Anise a sheepish smile, shook her head, and emitted a silent sigh.

And then it was Anise's turn. She stood at the front of the room, wearing her casual but sophisticated outfit, with its heavy focus on purple and gold, took a mouthful of ice cream from a pot on the table, did that little gesture where one places both hands up to their cheeks—as if to say, '*that was the most delicious thing I've ever tasted*'—and spoke the short line which ultimately won her the audition.

"For when *good* just isn't good enough, try Crème de la Crème luxury ice creams. Because the cream of the crop deserves the best."

The way she spoke this, perfectly enunciated and with that look of mild orgasm on her face—something any stellarvision commercial actress learned to activate on demand—had every single girl there, including Sandra herself, salivating.

After Anise's performance, most of the girls' hearts weren't really in it any more, but they gave it their best shot regardless. Another twenty minutes of this and everyone had had their go, so Sandra lined them up and addressed them.

"Thank you, everyone, I'm happy I got to see so many lovely smiles today. But as you are all well aware, we're not here for fun and games, so let's get on, shall we? I've made my decision, based on several factors, most-especially the sampling portion."

The girls, all except Anise and Isla, whispered amongst themselves, with variations along the lines of '*wait, that sampling was part of the audition!?*' regularly coming to the surface.

Isla knew this now, thanks to her friend's preparedness, but she also noted that Anise had not informed her *before* the audition. That would've been giving a rival an advantage.

Sandra continued. "Public samplings are commonplace in a business like ours, and we need a representative who can make people sit up and take notice. That means an ability to put across *why* our ice cream is special, and of the twelve of you, only one understood that. Anise, please step forward?"

Doing so, Anise turned to face the assembled idols, her face locked into a permanent smile of victorious satisfaction.

"Congratulations, Anise Kendall, you will be our new image girl for the next six months," Sandra added, placing a hand on Anise's shoulder. "For the rest of you, I hope you've all learned something useful here today to use in whatever auditions you take part in next."

They broke and were led back out to the shop, where each of them was given a cardboard pot of the brand's newest flavour as thanks for taking part.

Loitering here, Isla opened her pot and sampled the delicious rum, mango, and cinnamon flavour while waiting for her friend to return. "Congrats, Anise," she said once Anise returned, giving her a quick hug. "I didn't even come close, heh."

"You'll learn these little tricks over time," Anise said, thanking her for the kind words.

"You could say you... *creamed* it?" Isla added, bracing for the usual thump or verbal abuse.

"I'm in a really good mood right now, so I'm not going to let your horrible puns bring me down, just so you know," Anise said, sticking her nose in the air.

"Call it my revenge for you winning," Isla replied, giggling.

"Anyway, I know this stuff because I've been into idols and everything surrounding them for years already," Anise said, ignoring Isla's comment. "You pick things up when you read an idol's ChitChat timeline and see her talking about things that caught her out during an audition or whatever."

"I should probably sign up for an account?"

"Absolutely. All idols need a solid social media presence, especially early on when you're trying to build a following," Anise said, taking Isla's hand and walking them in the direction of the academy.

“I’ll do that when we get back, then. I guess you’ll be busy preparing for your new role?”

“They want me to start tomorrow, first a few photos and things for adverts online, then a special offer they’re running soon, where I’ll be talking about the offer and telling people what to do to participate.”

“Ah, for the new flavour?” Isla added. She held her pot of ice cream up for inspection.

“That’s right,” Anise said. “You might find luxury ice cream is a big part of your life for the next six months, I apparently get free samples whenever I want them.”

“Good thing we’re best friends, then,” Isla said, virtually drooling at the prospect.

They continued on to the campus.

Chapter 14: Indian Rhapsody

On arriving home, Isla sent Mira a message and confirmed it was okay to hit her up, receiving the all-clear. She found Mira waiting for her in the dormitory's foyer.

"Welcome back," Mira said, putting an arm around Isla's waist and walking her upstairs. "Looks like you didn't win, hmm?"

"How'd you guess?" Isla said, twitching her shoulders.

"Your expression, my dear," Mira replied. "Come on, let's take your mind off things, shall we?"

"Sure," Isla said, doing her best to remain positive. It always sucked to lose a competition, and losing to her best friend doubly so, but Anise had won because she knew what she needed to do *to* win. It was a good learning experience, if nothing else.

Upon entering Mira's room, the first thing that struck Isla was how different it was to her own. Mira plainly loved earthen tones; her bed was made up in soft satin sheets in a ginger shade, the curtains were a lovely terracotta, and she had a hot cayenne throw rug casually arranged in the centre of the floor.

"Should I take my shoes off?" Isla asked.

"If you like? Your feet will love you for it, trust me. That rug is warmer than a lover's sweaty embrace," Mira said, giggling as Isla's face turned approximately the colour of the rug in question.

Even after being intimate with Anise, Isla was still easily embarrassed by this type of talk. "You and Lisa both seem very open about your interests," she said, jumping as a pair of hands slid around her waist from behind. "M-Mira!?" *Yep, definitely a mistake.*

Resting her head on Isla's shoulder, Mira *purred*, an actual catlike burble of pleasure. "Mm, we both decided a long time ago that being indirect doesn't get you anywhere, you're quite correct." She pecked her way up and down Isla's neck. "I have the distinct impression you find me attractive, hmm?"

“Ah...”

“Should I take that as a yes?” Mira whispered, sliding a hand up under Isla’s loose blouse. Pushing her forward a little at a time, she gradually manoeuvred them across to the bed, sitting together on the edge.

“Ah, no, wait, wait!” Isla finally managed to stop their forward momentum long enough to gather her wits.

“Sorry, am I moving too fast for you?” Mira said in a pleasant tone.

Isla laughed, her fingers knitting together like a messy ball of yarn. “A bit. I... I’m interested, I think? This is all new to me, though! Even after last night—” She covered her mouth with a hand.

“So you and Anise enjoyed each other, hmm? Lucky girls, both of you.”

Isla gave a mute nod, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. “Yeah...”

“Say no more, I’m happy to step back if the two of you are together now.”

Mira went to move, but was stopped by her guest.

“Ah, no, it’s okay!” Isla wrapped her arms around this beautiful and sensual girl, pulling together enough courage to attempt something terrifying. Slowly, hesitantly, she brought her close enough for their noses to touch. Then... she softly pressed her lips to Mira’s, touching and pecking.

Mira accepted this advance like a pro, returning both the embrace and Isla’s affections. Circling Isla’s tongue with her own, she nudged her partner in the right direction with a moan here, a stroke there, letting her know the kiss was well-received. Pulling back, she emitted a happy little sigh. “Well, that just made my day, thank you, Isla. So you and Anise aren’t seeing each other?”

“We’re not, no. At least... not for now. She likes Lisa, and I wasn’t sure about taking things beyond friendship, so we agreed to stay friends. Meaning I’m available if you are? I can’t promise anything, to be honest I find you kind of intimidating...”

“Intimidating? Me? Aw, you’re too adorable,” Mira said, touching lips once more. “How about this? Lisa and I were going to invite the two of you to Arco Iris tonight, since they’re open again now. So let’s make it a date and see how things develop, yes?”

“I-I’d like that.” Isla looked down, fidgeting again. The idea of spending the evening on a date with Mira both excited and worried her, an interesting dichotomy.

Figuring they should probably do what they ostensibly came here to do, Mira took her guest across to her wardrobe and rummaged. An hour soon ticked past as she pulled various items out, showing each to Isla and talking passionately about the materials and colours; pastels and paisley, earth tones and elephant prints, silks and satins, vintage velvets, and all manner of other fabrics in a veritably diverse variety.

Mesmerised, Isla thought back to her home on Mars. They had their own quirks and talents, often involving the colour red or depictions of Mons Olympus or dusty browns and oranges, and she certainly felt proud of her inherited heritage. But compared to the rich history and variance in clothing and styles on Earth, they had a long way to go yet.

Mira pulled another item out and scanned over it, tapping her chin, then pointed the finger at her guest. “This would look stunning on you. Would you like to try it on?”

Isla eyed the long one-piece dress. Woven from silk saree in an almost lime green tone, it had cherry red hems and felt cool and soft to the touch. “It’s beautiful. Will it even fit? I’m shorter than you...”

“It might be a bit long, but that presents no problem in private, yes?” Mira said.

Isla conceded the point and struggled out of her blouse, feeling self-conscious and knowing, without needing to look, that Mira would be watching her like a hawk. She didn’t mind this; Isla was conscious of her own body, naturally, but thanks to the evening with Anise she didn’t feel *quite* so worried.

Her skirt and comfy ankle boots followed, leaving her in just the cute—far too cute, she hadn’t expected intimate company this soon after the last—sky blue underwear. Taking the dress, she slipped it over her head and let it drop, where it settled over her feet and piled up a little.

“A bit long, but nothing too terrible.” Mira walked around her subject, making further purrs of delight. “As I thought, you look stunning, Isla. It’s not a dress I like wearing, it doesn’t suit me. But you... you make it *shine*.”

Lifting the hem and twirling, being *very* careful not to trip or rip the fabric, Isla posed. “You think? Th-Thanks. Do you have a mirror?”

Mira opened the second door of her wardrobe to reveal a full-length mirror on the inside. “Here you go.”

Standing before the mirror, Isla viewed herself. “Is this really me?” She twisted left and right, incredulous that the girl in the mirror was her. “I’ve never worn anything like this before.”

“How does it feel?” Mira asked, wrapping her arms around Isla’s waist from behind and again resting her head on the girl’s shoulder.

“Amazing, it’s like I’m a totally different person.”

“You seem to prefer sporty outfits?”

“Yeah. I might have to look into some new things now I’m here, though. Maybe not exactly like this, I’m not sure I could walk around dressed like I am now, but—”

Mira sniggered. “Don’t worry, even I don’t dress like this. I keep a few things just to remind myself of where I came from. It belonged to my mother before me, you see.”

Isla turned her head, almost placing an accidental kiss on Mira’s cheek. “Eh? A-Are you sure it’s okay for me to be wearing this?”

“Of course.” Mira went back to the neck nibbling. “Isla?”

“Yes...?”

“Mind kissing me again?”

Turning her head once more, Isla did *not* kiss Mira. At least, not on the lips. She returned the favour and *nibbled* instead, up and down Mira’s neck, pecking her cheek a few times.

Mira tightened her embrace. “You know, I love girls who tease and play hard to get, so if your intent is to turn me on, *it’s working*...”

“Maybe we don’t need to wait for tonight?” Isla whispered, eyes bright.

Raising a perfect eyebrow, Mira's lips curled up into a pleased smile. "Now you're talking my language."

Isla wrapped her arms around Mira and suffocated her with lust. They kissed hard, passionately, Isla plainly desperate to ravish Mira, and Mira plainly happy for her to do so. Slipping out of the precious dress, Isla placed it back on its hanger. This minor concession out of the way, her hand found its way down the front of Mira's hotpants, manoeuvring behind her underwear and going straight for the main attraction.

Mira let out a cute little moan at how forward her partner was. "My... you don't hang around, do you?"

Resting her head on Mira's shoulder, Isla took a stuttering breath or two as her body fully awakened. "I didn't think I had it in me..."

"You do, trust me, be as naughty as you like," Mira whispered. "I'll follow your lead, wherever you want."

Isla dropped to her knees and whipped Mira's hotpants off, followed by the charcoal panties, staring in some wonderment at how she could be *this* sexy, then stuffed her face in, hesitantly licking up, down, and around. "Mira?"

"Mm?"

"Turn around, please!" Isla said. Mira obliged, facing the wall. "B-Bend over, hands against the wall?"

"Now you're getting the hang of it," Mira whispered, doing as asked. She extended her arms and placed her hands flat against the wall, bending over.

"Spread your legs wider, please!" Isla said. Mira did so. Isla took a moment to enjoy the sight of this amazing girl's rear end, then went in again, this time from behind, pushing her face in and using her tongue and fingers from below.

Mira's head hung down, eyes fixated on the floor and her hair gently wafting back and forth as Isla thoroughly worked her over. "That feels amazing... never tried it like this before..."

Isla hadn't believed herself to be capable of being this forward, this immediately sexual and naughty, and *especially* not with someone as mature and experienced as Mira. And yet here she was. Anise probably wouldn't have recognised her.

“Okay, let’s switch,” Mira said, turning around and leaning back against the wall. Her legs felt like they might give out, so the solid surface made for a helpful companion.

Isla traced her lips with a finger, pushing it in and licking it, before going back to vaguely tracing.

Mira giggled and kissed her, slipping a hand down her panties and inside, giving her clit a tender tweak. She pushed Isla against the wall and dropped down out of sight. Isla opened her legs in response.

Sliding the panties down and off, Mira tossed them beside her and softly rubbed Isla’s sopping wet pussy. She went straight to town, licking, touching, and stroking up and down the insides of the thighs, beaming as her partner shuddered with pleasure.

She stripped Isla’s loose top off and undid the matching bra, eager to see her in all her glory. Isla returned the favour and they stood for a few moments, staring and enjoying, each girl with her right hand touching the wet centre of the other, stroking up and down as pleasure shot throughout their bodies.

Mira pushed Isla back against the wall, pressing her entire body against this cute and sexy girl. Isla now discovered exactly how pleasant it felt to have another girl press her entire body to hers, breast to breast, tummy to tummy, Venus to Venus.

At this point, Isla lost control entirely, throwing caution to the wind and giving in to her passions, kissing and touching, fingering and being fingered in turn, and splashing the floor with their combined pleasure. Slowly, they edged closer and closer to their mutual endgame.

And in due time... Isla let go, Mira watching with a pleased expression as this surprisingly naughty girl buried her face in her shoulder and uttered something roughly equivalent to ‘*hnnnggh!*’, collapsing to her knees and using Mira’s legs for support.

Mira couldn’t take any more after witnessing this, plunging two fingers deep inside herself to finish. Taking herself the rest of the way to heaven, she exploded in a similarly powerful and exhausting manner, sliding down the wall with her legs to Isla’s sides.

Between laboured breaths, she managed to speak. “You really are an amazing girl. That was wonderful, I don’t mind saying.”

Isla was still too destroyed to say much, but she tried. “I’m not sure what came over me!” She laughed and moved forward to give her partner a tight hug. “Mind if we crash in your bed for a while?”

“A capital idea, yes.”

They remained like this for a little longer before Mira finally attempted to stand, wondering if her legs would support her. They did, so she helped her drowsy partner up and had a languid stretch. “Aaah, that was splendid fun.”

Wrapping her arms around Mira’s waist from behind, mirroring their earlier positioning, Isla kissed both her shoulders, inhaling deeply of Mira’s heavenly scented hair; a mild tropical fruitiness which made Isla hungry for some additional just desserts. Mira placed her own hands over those of her partner, and they simply stayed like this for a few minutes, swaying gently and enjoying the afterglow.



Moving to the bed, they jumped in, snuggling up and leaving the sheets to the side, given the time of year; Aidan Junes—at least in this region of the planet, which was roughly analogous to northern Europe on Earth—tended to be hot and humid, and both girls were quite sweaty enough already.

“Mm, truly the best way to spend an afternoon. Thank you, Isla, I didn’t expect such a sexy rendezvous, though I certainly hoped,” Mira murmured, shuffling herself into a comfortable position and wrapping her legs around her partner’s.

Isla laughed at this. “Makes two of us.”

“I’ve noticed you seem unsure of yourself at times. I’m here to help you professionally for the remainder of the week, but that doesn’t mean I can’t listen in private.”

Pecking Mira on the lips as thanks, Isla’s head bobbed a little, indicating a vague affirmative. “It’s probably the thing I like least about myself, to be honest.

I hesitate with important decisions and sometimes need kind of a push to go through with something.”

“A push provided by Anise?”

“Yeah.”

“You were pretty sure of yourself when you had me spread my legs,” Mira commented in a pleasant tone of voice.

Isla steamed. “Y-You’re really open about all of this, aren’t you?”

“Naturally. Lisa and I have been enjoying each other for a few years now, there’s virtually nothing that could surprise or shock us at this point. Take that however you like.”

“I’m not sure about that, Anise might give her something to think about,” Isla said, giggling as her best friend’s panty antics and sweaty shenanigans came to mind.

“Trust me, Lisa will give Anise something to think about as well.” Mira stroked her fingers through her partner’s hair, affection and a level of continued lust still clearly visible in her gaze. “And you? How do you feel about it?”

“It?”

“Relationships. Sex. Getting sweaty with a hot girl. You know, what we just enjoyed?”

“Oh! Yeah, I’m... not like Anise. She’s always been interested in girls and idols and wanting to experiment. She hid it pretty well when we lived on Mars, but in private with me...”

“She opened up?”

“Mm. She’s wanted to come to Aida for a long time, but never thought she had a chance until the auditions for Dreamstar came along. Now we’re here, I can see how’s she’s already changed for the better. It’s funny, she originally wanted to go to Earth first, somewhere close by to home, then come to Aida later. On Mars, she’d always be careful not to look at other girls too closely, never making more eye contact than necessary. I guess she figured Earth would be similarly restrictive.”

Mira giggled. “She certainly appears to have flowered, going by what I’ve seen so far.”

“Definitely. I’m glad she can be who she really is now, it was painful seeing how she had to pretend back home.”

“Mars is pretty liberal, right? It’s one of the few places Lisa and I never visited, so I can’t speak from experience, but it always struck me as quite open.” Mira stroked Isla’s arm as she spoke, occasionally breaking away to fondle her loose hair, looping strands around a finger before letting it fall back.

“On the surface, sure,” Isla said. “But in a closed environment like that, with everyone packed in tightly and most people knowing everyone else...”

“Ah, I see the problem. Once something like that comes out, *everyone* knows?”

“Pretty much. It wasn’t even Anise herself. She just didn’t want to put her parents through the potential fallout.”

“She’s a thoughtful girl, isn’t she?” Mira whispered, snuggling closer and inhaling deeply, enjoying the wintry forest scent from whatever shampoo Isla used.

“We met when we were both five, at a party Anise’s parents held for her birthday. I’d only recently moved to Mars, so I knew no one at all. Anise invited me to the party on my first day at school. Then she stuck with me for the whole thing, talking, telling me about Mars, which kids at school to avoid, running off and getting me food... yeah, she’s the most thoughtful girl there is, I can’t think of anyone nicer.”

“It’s clear to me that Lisa is soon to be a very lucky girl,” Mira said, a restrained laugh escaping her lips. She and Lisa lived entirely for the moment, enjoying whoever happened to be up for it, so situations like this where they found other partners weren’t uncommon. A mild degree of envy was evident, however, something Isla picked up on.

“Sounds like you’re interested in her as well?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t,” Mira said with a naughty wink. “Maybe we could arrange a foursome?”

Isla wasn’t sure her cheeks could handle this level of heat, she worried they might melt. “I, I, I don’t even know how to respond to that!” She sighed as Mira

laughed. “You asked what I think about this subject, right? I guess you have a clue now?”

“Indeed. It’s nothing to worry yourself over, though. Lisa and I enjoy being sexy, but we’re both well aware not everyone is quite as relaxed about it, even here on Aida. But I will say this: if you’d like more experience, or to try anything at all, just ask. I’m available for you in *any* way you need, idol or intimate.”

With her cheeks threatening to burn the room down around them, Isla nodded. “Th-Thank you, Mira. Especially for today.”

“You’re welcome.” Mira sat up and stretched. “Feeling better?”

“Anise won the audition, but... well, after what we just did, I kinda feel like I won in the end,” Isla said, glowing with pride, happiness, and maybe a little continued embarrassment.

“Glad to hear it. Now... I suppose we should see about doing something productive?”

Agreeing that this sounded like a wise idea after getting heavily side-tracked with a rather different type of idol activity, Isla clambered out of bed and they took a pleasantly intimate bath together.

Thanking Mira for the private show, Isla suggested working on a training plan next. She had excellent muscles on her, primarily as a result of excessive and enjoyable tennis practice, but her stamina lagged behind. For an idol, stamina was queen; simultaneously dancing while singing on a stage under bright lights before a crowd of potentially thousands—or even *millions*—of people caused fatigue like nothing else.

With this all tied up, they went their separate ways for a few hours, arranging to meet up with their friends at the cafeteria later.

Chapter 15: The Goddesses of Love

Later soon rolled around and Isla entered the dormitory's cafeteria to find the other three already there, sitting at a table and enjoying a cup of tea each. She grabbed a drink and sat next to Mira, clasping her hand on the table. This resulted in a happy expression from Anise, though she refrained from commenting for now.

Lisa waved. "Evening! Now we're all here, it's about time you girls met the lovely trio who run Arco Iris. When they're not touring, anyway."

"Touring?" Isla said, her drink hovering halfway to her mouth. "So they're idols?"

"Yumi, Erika, and Minami," Lisa said, pointing at her. "Three girls you'd do well to be on the right side of."

At the mention of these names Anise nearly dropped her mug. "Wait... you mean *Aphrodite*!?"

"The very same," Lisa said.

"Uh, isn't that a Greek goddess or something?" Isla hazarded.

Lisa nodded. "Yeah, but in this case we actually mean an idol unit. Come on, let's head to Arco Iris and I'll introduce you."

Anise let herself be girl-handled up by Lisa—because she had entered an intense idolgasm at the idea of meeting one of her favourite idol units—and shuffled towards the entrance, followed by the other two. "I don't know how I missed that little nugget. I'm sure Arco Iris was run by someone else?"

Lisa grasped her hand and manoeuvred her out of the building, strolling over to the academy domes. "It was. It's kind of a community run place, handled by whichever idols happen to be available. There's normally a few regulars, but they just graduated, so Aphrodite volunteered to take over."

Bringing up the rear, Mira chimed in. "They're doing an amazing job of it, too, they've made a few nice changes to the place over the last month."

"Is that why they had the inspectors in?" Isla asked.

“That’s right. New management means getting the place all checked out and okayed,” Lisa called over her shoulder.

They reached the gym complex and continued past it towards the golden spit of sandy beach jutting out on the eastern point of the island. Before this, a large redbrick building stood, single storey with a sloped roof, upon which a sign in the shape and colours of a rainbow was perched, the words ‘*Arco Iris*’ picked out in, of course, rainbow letters below it.

Along one side, the building had been thrown open, three sets of sliding doors letting in the pleasant summer breeze. Inside, a dozen circular tables were arranged on a polished wooden floor. And in the far corner, a counter with a veritable smorgasbord of sweets, cakes, and other confections displayed under the glass, their sickly scents filling the noses of all who passed by.

Running the length of the building, a wooden veranda terminated at a tennis court-sized wooden deck, square with steps leading down to the beach at the far end. In each corner, a large hole had been cut to allow four thick trees to grow through, towering overhead. These covered the entire area in a makeshift canopy of green, the rustling leaves providing a pleasant background susurration.

On the deck itself stood six circular tables similar to those inside, only much heavier and sturdier to withstand the elements. Each table had four chairs around it, and along the left-hand edge of the deck, a wooden bar backed by shelves filled with dozens of glasses plus various bottles of spirits.

As the light waned, several bulbs stationed both on poles in the centre of the deck and hung in the trees themselves flickered to life—a simulated effect for atmosphere more than anything—illuminating the area in a soft and romantic yellow-white glow. Already, small groups of idols milled about the area, drinking and talking and enjoying themselves.

Along the beach, off-duty idols relaxed on deck chairs and loungers, chatting quietly or swimming, and there were half a dozen lifeguard towers dotted at regular intervals around the circumference of the beach; idols, especially the top level ones attending a prestigious academy-agency like

Dreamstar, trained hard to be the best, but that didn't mean accidents couldn't still happen.

Lisa led them to the bar, where a girl roughly their own age was idly polishing a glass. She wore a swimsuit, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the summer temperatures and proximity to the beach, and had long hair in a mid-purple tone similar to in-season buddleia, tied up into a sidetail to the left of her head. Additionally, likely due to spending most of her time outdoors, she had a tan in a deep tawny tone similar to Lisa's skin.

"Evening, Minami," Lisa said as they arrived at the bar.

The girl stopped polishing and looked up. "Lisa! Haven't seen you in a while, we've missed you. And are these the rumoured new girls?"

"Sure are," Lisa said, holding out an introductory hand. "Anise, Isla, this is Minami, one-third of Aphrodite."

Minami had brilliant gold eyes, contrasting with the purple hair and giving her an intensity that was *quite* sexy. A petite, lithe, and athletic form under the purple one-piece swimsuit rounded her out nicely, at least to Anise's fevered mind.

"Great to meet you both," Minami said, nodding at the new girls.

Anise idolgasmmed instantly. "Aaah, I can't believe I'm talking to one of the members of Aphrodite...!"

Minami reached over the bar and waved a hand in front of her face.

"Heeeeey?"

Isla came to the rescue. "She's a huge fan of anything idol-related. She'll come back to us soon, don't worry. Nice to meet you, too, by the way." She shook Minami's hand and graced her with a smile.

Managing to reboot her addled brain, Anise composed herself, holding a hand out. "Anise Kendall, I'm *super* happy to meet you. I've loved Aphrodite since you formed!"

Minami indicated mutual feeling with a grin and a hand shake. "Great, we always love meeting new fans. Yumi and Erika are both inside, go say hi."

Mira stayed at the bar and obtained drinks, chatting to Minami while Lisa took the other two inside, at which point Anise melted down a second time.

“The real Aphrodite Yumi... in the flesh! Aaah...”

An older girl, early-twenties with vivid sky blue hair and paler pink skin than Minami, glanced over at them. Standing behind the counter, she appeared to be running numbers, tapping away on a small touch screen perched on the wooden surface behind the glass displays. Azure eyes appraised the three girls as they approached.

Yumi bowed. “Good day, Lisa! I hoped we might see you again soon.”

She had a truly magnificent head of hair, long enough to reach right to her knees but held in check by a large ring; not exactly a ponytail, it was too loose for that, but something close to it, held high enough to lift it up to her posterior. Unlike Minami, this young woman wore a flowing white one-piece dress, though this couldn’t hide her bountiful assets, something Anise had, of course, picked up on. Yumi gave Lisa a run for her money in the chest department.

“Hey, Yumi. These are the new girls, Isla and Anise,” Lisa said.

Isla gave an awkward bow for reasons that escaped her, and introduced herself and her best friend. Yumi beamed in response.

Lisa looked around the interior. “Erika about somewhere?”

“In the back, preparing for tomorrow,” Yumi said. Unlike Minami, who came across as forward and energetic, Yumi had a refined and elegant air to her, almost older-sisterly. She walked across to a doorway leading through to their kitchen and preparation area. “Erika! We have guests!”

A clattering sound from the kitchen made Yumi jump, followed by a girl who appeared to be between Minami and Yumi in age wandering out and dusting her hands off.

The new girl’s face split into a sunny grin. “We’ve got some newbies in the house?”

To the surprise of absolutely no one, Anise entered a third and final idolgasm session, but managed to come back to reality a little quicker this time, probably because her body was close to broken. “Pleasure to meet you, Erika, I’m a huge fan of Aphrodite!”

“Oh my, we have quite the lively one here,” Erika said. Rounding out the trio beautifully, she had perfect pink hair, worn loose with the sides tied back,

using a cute purple ribbon matching her royal purple eyes. Further introductions were given, and she smiled at Anise. “Meeting new fans is always such a pleasure.”

Everything about Erika seemed to fit nicely in-between the other two; well-enunciated speech delivered with enthusiasm, a happy medium on the age front, and a well-developed body somewhere between Yumi’s expansive chest and Minami’s lithe and modest figure. And a fairly regular outfit compared to them, too; a pair of black hotpants twinned with a white t-shirt, over which she wore an apron while preparing food.

“You three compliment each other really well,” Isla said.

Lisa made an okay symbol. “They sure do. There’s a good reason they picked the name Aphrodite for their unit.”

“I couldn’t even begin to guess,” Isla said, laughing.

Anise piped up here, seeing a prime opportunity to educate. “Aphrodite is the Greek Goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality.” She at pointed at Yumi’s pretty perfection. “Beauty.” Next, Erika’s friendly face. “Love.” And finally, outside to Minami’s sensuous silhouette. “Sexuality.”

Isla’s mouth morphed into a surprised ‘O’ shape. Even something as simple as naming a unit seemed to have an incredible amount of depth to it. “There’s so much to think about as an idol, isn’t there?”

“Kinda,” Lisa said, rubbing Isla’s arm. “Just remember you’re not alone and you should be fine. Competition is healthy, and helping each other out promotes competitiveness. Never be afraid to help a girl who needs it, Isla, next time it could be *you* in need. Or me!” She took Anise’s hand. “Right, introductions done, let’s go sit down.”

Outside, Mira was still chatting to Minami, but excused herself when the girls arrived, handing out a bottle of drink each before sitting at a free table in the centre of the deck. Despite current interests, they ended up unconsciously sitting in their existing pairings, Anise with Isla, Lisa next to Mira.

Taking a swig of her drink, a pleasant peach and mango flavour, Isla posed a question. “Okay, so I’ve been seeing this since we arrived, and it’s confusing me. Why do so many girls here have weird eye colours? The Aphrodite girls all

have unusual eyes, and I've seen others here on campus who do, too. Anise explained the hair when we got to Aida, fine, but eyes? That seems really dangerous."

Lisa chuckled at this. "Contact lenses. Nothing more to it."

"Modifying eye colours would be a hard thing to do, and as you said, it's dangerous to even try, not to mention that genetic modification is super illegal basically everywhere," Anise said, poking Isla in the arm. "Idols need to stand out from the crowd, though, which is why so many use Microtek hair alterations or coloured contacts."

Isla cocked her head. "Microtek?"

"The company behind the nanotech hair solution I told you about before. There's quite a few companies who do it these days, but Microtek developed it originally," Anise added, before guzzling half her bottle. She examined the label. It was a Quantum Sunrise-based alcoholic drink similar to Isla's favourite Immersion. "Mm, this is nice, thanks."

"You're welcome," Mira said, tilting her bottle. "You mentioned at Stardew that you liked the Quantum drinks, so I thought you'd enjoy that one. And Isla will be pleased at the lack of sourness in her own drink, I imagine?"

Raising her bottle in a toast, Isla beamed. "I love peach Immersion."

"It appears I picked well, excellent," Mira said. She headed back to the bar for another.

Lisa tapped her head, remembering an interesting bit of trivia. "Oh hey, fun fact about Arco Iris. See the red bricks the building's made from?" The other two nodded. "Those are one-hundred percent authentic Earth bricks."

"What, like... they actually imported the bricks from Earth? Through hyperspace?" Anise said, incredulous.

Lisa pointed at her. "You probably noticed how most of the bricks around here are a sandy white? It's something to do with the mineral content in this area, if I remember right. More lime or something. Eh, I forget now, but whatever the reason, this region doesn't produce red bricks. So they bought them from Earth instead."

"That's kind of crazy," Isla muttered.

“But kind of awesome, too, fits an academy for idols to a tee,” Lisa said. “Something else kind of crazy is me not sitting in the right seat. Swap with me, please, Isla.” She stood and moved around the table, switching seats and shuffling the chair around to be right next to the object of her affections. “Much better.” She leaned over to rest her head on Anise’s shoulder.

Anise jumped as Lisa rubbed her leg under the table, sliding up and down, massaging and stroking. Doing all she could to avoid yelping at this intimate contact, she spread her legs a little to let Lisa slide around to the inside of her thigh. Her skirt rode further up with each tender grope.

Isla could tell that her best friend was already nearing her breaking point. “Looks like someone’s about to pounce!”

Lisa opened her mouth to query this, switching immediately to an enormous grin as Anise stood and awkwardly straddled her, the edge of the table pressing into the small of her back. “Well, this escalated quickly.”

“Not sure I can hold myself back any longer, Lisa, sorry,” Anise breathed, paying no mind to the other idols in the vicinity. The leg rubbing, especially once Lisa reached around to her inner thigh, had driven her past the point of caring, hanging over a sheer drop of pure lust similar to those old Wile-E Coyote cartoons she had watched on the online Classic Cartoons Channel as a child.

She shuffled herself into a more comfy position, a leg to either side, and brought her hands up to cup Lisa’s face. Leaning down, she hesitantly locked lips and did her best to suffocate the girl she had lusted over since the day they met.

Lisa accepted this sexy gift with all the assurance of a grand master, wrapping her arms around Anise’s slender waist and letting her dictate the flow.

Anise’s tongue hesitantly touched and teased, pushing a little inside and pulling back, circling and probing, a proxy for her own worries and insecurities. She did her best to put such thoughts to one side, giving a final brief peck of her partner’s soft and moist lips, glistening with fruity alcohol, and pulled away, eyes briefly remaining shut in pure euphoria.

She emitted a continuous “Aaah...” for a time, wondering if anyone would mind two girls getting sweaty in the middle of the deck...

Tracing random shapes on Anise’s leg, Lisa smiled up at her. “Pretty sure you just made me wet, well done.”

For all that she generally felt comfy talking about sexy things, Anise still blushed at this.

Mira wandered back across with a second round of drinks, placing them on the table. She sighed in her best friend’s direction. “I knew this would happen.”

Blushing heavily as she remembered where she was, Anise clambered off and resumed her previous position, this time clasping Lisa’s hand in her own. She grabbed her drink in the free hand.

Mira resumed her own position and turned to Isla, who again looked terrified being this close to her. She laughed, her expression softening. “Still feeling intimidated? I’m not going to eat you, I promise.”

“Probably.” Lisa raised her drink with a suggestive smile.

“Eat her out, possibly?” Anise whispered, eliciting a loud snort from Lisa. Fortunately Isla didn’t hear and was therefore saved a considerable amount of embarrassment.

“I’m looking forward to something a little more filling than simple take-out, my dear,” Lisa said, leaning over and nibbling Anise’s lips. “So... can I assume I’m getting lucky tonight?”

Anise gasped. “Eh!? Ah... um, I think so?”

“If you’re not comfy enough yet, that’s perfectly okay,” Lisa said, squeezing her partner’s hand again, comforting rather than instigating this time. “You’re more than worth the wait.”

Turning a happy shade of red, Anise pecked Lisa’s cheek. “Let’s head to my room and see what happens?”

“Works for me. We can talk as much or as little as you like, no worries,” Lisa said.

“I’m happy to see you’re a lot more open about your interests now, Anise,” Isla said, blushing after the impromptu show.

Anise shrugged. "Yeah, because of where we are. Before, I felt enclosed, like I was trapped in a locked box. Now... I feel like I've been released, the locked box opened and thrown away! The air here, the atmosphere, knowing I can be myself and openly show my love of cute girls and idols. Everything feels fresh and alive. We've only been here a few days and I feel more at home than I ever did on Mars. And you can forget Earth."

"Earth's not *all* bad, I enjoyed my time in the New British Republic. Though I guess it's also true that I wasn't thinking of anything romantic while I was there," Isla said.

Lisa hauled herself upright and gave Anise a kiss. "I'm with Isla on this one, Earth's not that bad. I've had a blast there in a bunch of different places. It's where I'm originally from, after all. It's just... yeah, it's not as relaxed or open as here on Aida, especially for girls like us. Overall, though? It's a nice enough place to spend some time."

"My issue has always been with being able to openly show my interests. I don't feel like I could do that on Earth," Anise said. "How did you get on, Lisa?"

"What, like... was I able to openly be a rampant hussy?" Lisa replied.

Anise was forced to bury her face in Lisa's sizeable chest for a few seconds, laughing to the point of tears. Upon settling down, she lifted her head. "I wouldn't have put it *quite* like that, but yes, something along those lines."

Lisa grinned. "I don't care a huge amount what people think of me, so yeah, I was just myself while I was there. I don't know how to be anyone else."

Now it was Mira's turn to laugh. "You'd probably be surprised at how effective that was."

"No girl was safe?" Isla suggested.

Lisa puffed her chest out with pride. "Pretty much."

"So you two have known each other a good while?" Anise said.

Mira tilted her bottle in Anise's direction. "We have, yes. Lisa's been my best friend for, what is it now? Seven years?"

Swilling her drink around her mouth a few times with a thoughtful expression, Lisa eventually nodded. "Yeah, guess it's about that long. Amazing how time flies."

“We’ve lived in a good few places, sometimes together, sometimes apart.” Mira finished her drink and idly stroked Isla’s leg for no particular reason beyond wanting to touch her. “It’s always upsetting being away from someone you’re so close to, but we generally end up together again.”

Lisa raised her drink in a toast. “We’re together now, that’s all that matters.”

“You’ve lived on other worlds?” Isla asked.

“We both have, yeah,” Lisa said. “Like when I was fourteen, I spent a year on Gran Manillo. That was amazing, it’s an incredible place, tropical and lush and gorgeous.” She went misty-eyed for a moment.

“I still haven’t quite forgiven you for that one,” Mira said.

This piqued Anise’s interest. “Did something happen?”

“Mira was busy at the time, so she couldn’t come along. That by itself wouldn’t normally be enough to make her really mad at me,” Lisa said, cracking up at her best friend’s frowning features.

“No. But staying at the Grand Palace for that whole year most certainly would, you lucky... person, you.” Coughing under her breath, Mira rearranged her features into the usual pleasant expression she preferred.

“You’ve actually stayed at the royal family’s palace?” Anise asked, aghast.

“Made friends with both the royal daughters, too.”

The way Lisa said this so casually, as though it was perfectly normal to be staying with royalty, made both Isla and Anise laugh.

“Maybe one day you can tell me how you wrangled that one?” Anise said.

Lisa tapped her bottle to Anise’s. “Sure. One day. Right now, however, I’m increasingly interested in seeing you with no clothes on, my girl... assuming you’re as interested as I am?”

Anise said nothing, just steamed gently and gave a brief head nod.

“Shall we head back, then?” Mira said.

They finished their drinks, said goodnight to the Aphrodite girls, and wandered in the direction of the dormitory.

Chapter 16: Under the Night Sky

Bringing up the rear again, Isla stifled a laugh, pointing at the other two walking ahead of them. “Anise looks terrified.”

“But excited as well,” Mira said, finding Isla’s hand and gently clasping. “I note that you still seem terrified around me, also.”

“A bit. Even after what we did earlier, you still feel like a world away, Mira. Sorry, I’m not sure how to describe it.”

“I get what you mean, it’s okay. I’ll just say that when we’re together like this, I’m simply a regular girl like you,” Mira said. “Try and ignore the producer part, or the model, or anything else I do professionally. I said earlier I wouldn’t eat you, Isla, and I meant that. If you’d like to be with me for a little while, that would be wonderful, but I won’t hold it against you if you’d rather not.”

Isla relaxed, squeezing her partner’s hand. “I guess we’ll have to see what happens, won’t we?”

“That’s more like it.” Mira giggled and placed a soft kiss on Isla’s cheek.

Walking ahead, Lisa wrapped an arm around Anise’s waist, pulling her close. “I love the atmosphere out here when it’s dark.” They wandered past the gym complex and towards the domes. “I’ve always liked taking random walks, but nothing beats a stroll around the campus late at night.”

“It’s my first time walking around at night, it’s really pretty,” Anise said.

All along the pink paths stood black lamp posts casting a soft yellow light, similar in general style to the type of thing a visitor to Victorian Britain might have seen. Though in deference to the modern age, they used an incredibly efficient evolution of the Earth-developed LED bulb.

As they passed the academy domes, Anise glanced up at the top of each, illuminated in red, yellow, blue, green, and purple, one colour for each dome. Similar to the Vegas pyramid on Earth, these were aimed into the sky, so bright they could be observed from orbit.

Only during night-time hours, however, much to Anise’s annoyance. “It’s a shame those are only lit at night. We couldn’t see them when we first arrived.”

“We could always visit the Tower, the restaurant at the top is a great place to view the campus from,” Lisa suggested.

Anise nodded. “We were going to visit. Need to make time while we still can.”

“Already preparing for stardom and the lack of free time that comes with it?” Lisa said.

“I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t serious about succeeding as an idol,” Anise replied.

“That’s what I like to see. I may appear carefree, but you’d better believe I’m ultra serious about my idol career,” Lisa said. They neared the dormitory now, so Lisa came to a halt, letting the other two catch up. She winked in their direction. “Go on ahead, we’re going to hang around out here for a while. Night!”

Mira waved as they entered. “Night! And good luck, Anise.” Wandering upstairs, she paused outside Isla’s room. “Looks like it’s just us, Isla. Whatever shall we do?”

“A-Ahaha... what, indeed...” Isla muttered, thinking maybe inviting this sexy girl to spend the night wasn’t such a great idea after all, especially after having already enjoyed each other once earlier in the day. She wasn’t certain her body could handle another go.

Outside, Lisa took her partner’s hand. “So... fancy a walk?”

“Weren’t we heading to my room?” Anise said.

“Where’s the fun in that when we have a night-time campus to ourselves?”

Anise experienced a thrill the likes of which she had never thought possible, at least until she had kissed her best friend. “Let’s go.”

Taking a stroll away from the dormitory, they made their way around to an area Anise hadn’t visited yet; the bay containing the landing pads. At this time of the evening there was no one around, leaving it eerily deserted. She felt like something could jump out at her from any shadow, from behind any tree.

Lisa tugged her along, walking over to the western end of the island, and from there to a grassy expanse leading to a rocky outcropping, jutting out over a small ribbon of beach that ran around to the far western point.

Sitting herself on the rocks, Lisa dangled her legs over the edge and looked out over the sea, towards the visible glow of the city on the far shore. "I come out here pretty often, it's a nice place to sit and think about stuff."

Anise dropped down next to her and slipped an arm around Lisa's back. "Stuff?"

"Nothing in particular. Auditions, gigs, music I feel like making, anything and everything." Lisa tapped the side of her head. "No distractions out here, it's just me and my thoughts."

Closing her eyes, Anise listened. The lapping of water against the beach. An occasional hoot from some nocturnal bird, whatever Aidan equivalent of an owl existed here. The rustling of grass, the gentle whisper of wind. An occasional giggle from a tipsy idol heading to the dorm.

"It's pretty relaxing, actually. So different to back home," Anise murmured. Next thing she knew, she was on her back with Lisa on top. "Waa!" She got no further as she found her mouth occupied.

Lifting herself up after her initial assault and panting with lust, Lisa stared. "I love how you kiss. The best kissers, at least for me, are girls like you who don't overdo the tongue. Keep kissing like that, my girl, and we'll get along great."

"R-Really? I've barely even done it before," Anise whispered. Once with Isla in the bar, and a good few times during their naughty little rendezvous afterwards. Beyond that? She was about as green as the nearby grass. Figuring she should show her mettle and take the lead, she slipped a hand under Lisa's short skirt.

"Mm... going straight for the gold?" Lisa murmured.

"I can't go letting you down, can I?"

Lisa grinned. "You know, I intended to take the lead here? I might've underestimated you a bit."

"Can't let you have things all your own way, can I?" Anise whispered.

This made Lisa chuckle between moans. "Good, I love sexy surprises."

Using her free hand to slip up under the loose top, Anise used a deft finger and thumb to unclip Lisa's strapless bra, tugging it out and dropping it on the

grass behind them. She brought the hand around and underneath to cup one of the more than ample shapes.

Lisa nibbled her way up and down Anise's neck, laughing. "You've been after those since we met, haven't you?"

"You noticed?"

"You didn't exactly hide it!"

This cracked Anise up. "I'm not so hot at being subtle, it seems." Her fingers increased their pace, Lisa moaning louder and louder, entirely unrestrained in her vocal indications of pleasure.

Leaning down to nibble her partner's earlobe, Lisa murmured, "Show me how unsubtle you can be." A few moments passed as the pleasure built. "Is this your first time?"

"Ah, no... though it is only my second," Anise said. "But I've uh... practiced a lot. Solo." She coughed.

Now it was Lisa's turn to burst out laughing. She sat up, straddling her partner and tugging Anise's hand out from her nether region. Holding Anise's gaze, she pulled the hand up and sucked both fingers clean.

Anise's cheeks glowed like a stubbed toe. "Oh my."

"You've got a way to go yet, my girl," Lisa said, grinning mischievously. She shuffled back a little, lined up between Anise's legs, and stripped her panties off, dropping them on her own bra and briefly scanning the horizon to ensure they would remain uninterrupted. "Incoming!"

"Ah, Lis—!" Anise attempted to speak, but Lisa's tongue had instantly fused her brain into a sodden lump, only aware of one thing: that this felt *amazing*.

Lisa lashed across Anise's clit with her tongue, her fingers going into overdrive to the point where Anise felt close to exploding already.

"I... I'm...!" Anise murmured.

Sitting upright and watching intently, Lisa finished her partner off splendidly, grinning like a maniac as Anise cried out in abject pleasure, shuddering and writhing. Again, she sucked her fingers clean, gave Anise a quick lick from bottom to top, and returned upright, still beaming.

Anise's hands waved about above her, back and forth, back and forth, vaguely grasping at thin air as her body relaxed back to a less taught state. "Holy... that felt... unbelievable..."

Lisa gave one of those naughty chuckles she was so fond of and sat up on her knees, shuffling forward to straddle Anise's midsection. "Your turn, let's see how quickly you can make me finish!"

"O-One sec, getting breath back..." Anise muttered. Her chest rose and fell a few times as she gulped down several lungfuls of mildly humid air, at which point she grinned and focused her gaze on Lisa's sopping panties. "Wow, you're uh... kind of wet, huh?"

"Not wet enough yet," Lisa said, waggling her hips from side to side in a suggestive manner.

Tugging the silver and shiny panties down, Anise took a good look at her lover's pussy. She touched with a finger, sliding up and down, hesitantly pushing in a little way, pulling back, pushing in...

Lisa giggled at the ticklish sensations. "Mira loves teasing like that. It never stops being frustrating, but it feels damn good, too."

"Eh? Oh, sorry, Lisa." Anise focused on the task at hand. She pushed two fingers in, slowly, carefully, and again began a steady rhythm, faster and more confident this time. Faster, slower, faster, she alternated randomly, using the other hand to rub over Lisa's swollen clit. Her own body felt hot, almost ready for another go, the cute and sexy moans of pleasure coming from above turning her right back on again.

Lisa's legs wobbled as the pleasure built to its inevitable crescendo, rapidly coming closer to having an enjoyable accident all over Anise. And so it was that within approximately one minute of Anise's second hand and its attached digits being introduced, Lisa collapsed forward, hands to the sides of her partner's head as a monumental orgasm rushed through her body.

Lisa cried out through gritted teeth, eyes tight shut, shuddering multiple.

Anise continued gently massaging, tenderly stroking, pushing in and out, and bringing Lisa down slowly. She giggled at the sweaty and sexy visage hanging above her. "Your face right now..."

Sitting upright and shuffling back a little, Lisa collapsed full-length, arranging herself into a more snuggly position—as much as possible on a rocky surface like this, anyway—and draped an arm across Anise’s chest. “Mm, you did that, my girl. Bravo.”

“Honestly, tonight was more terrifying than my first trip in the academy monorail,” Anise said, blushing a little. She noted a raised eyebrow from Lisa, and gave her a quick rundown on her initial dislike for the ocean, following up with an embarrassed comment regarding thunderstorms.

Lisa pecked Anise’s cheek. “Yeah, storms happen pretty often here, especially during summer. I’ll be *more* than happy to keep you company. I find rampant sex takes my mind off most things.”

Anise visibly relaxed, laughing quietly. “I imagine so. That was a perfect end to a great day. Wouldn’t mind seeing some of those expressions again soon.”

“So you’d like a little more of my sweet lovin’, would you?” Lisa said.

“Well... if you’re interested?” Anise sat upright, examining Lisa’s peaceful expression of bliss. “Feels like you’re the sort of girl who likes to stay single?”

Lisa opened an eye and gave Anise a crafty look. “I do. Sometimes. Other times I like being in a relationship.”

Reaching out a hand, Anise gently stroked through Lisa’s loose hair. “And which is it right now?”

“Take a guess,” Lisa said, and tugged her lover back down, kissing her tenderly and wrapping her arms around her waist.

Anise’s face lit up. “Even though I’m not experienced?”

“Why would that matter? I love everything I’ve seen of you so far, Anise. And trust me when I say I’ll be *more* than happy to help you gain experience, if you know what I mean?”

Anise came close to squealing in happy delight. “Lisa...!”

“Ah, now wait a sec, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.” Lisa briefly sobered, then said something that made Anise crack up entirely. “So, important question: how do you feel about threesomes?”

It took several minutes for Anise to settle down again. "I suspect I'm going to love this relationship. Not sure why."

"I live life as it comes, one moment to the next. But... there are times I'll put a bit more thought into it. This is one of them. I'm happy to be yours for a while."

"And the threesomes?"

"Hey, if you're up for it, I know a few girls. Mira, for starters." Lisa chuckled as Anise's cheeks glowed once more. "I'm more interested in you right now, though."

"So... can I assume I'm getting lucky for the next little while, then?" Anise whispered, mirroring Lisa's own words from earlier.

"As often as you like."

Anise beamed. "I can't believe how fortunate I am..."

Shivering a little, Lisa sat up again. "Getting chilly. So... your bed?"

"Sounds good."

Clambering to their feet, they collected their underwear items and jogged back to the dormitory, heading straight up to Anise's room. Pausing in the hall, Lisa glanced at the next door down. "Wonder how Isla got on..."

Anise opened the door and they entered, collapsing on the bed and snuggling without bothering to undress first. "If I had to guess, I'd say probably nothing happened. She's uh... not like me. Isla's a bit more reserved when it comes to this type of thing."

"Oh boy, Mira's likely to want her in that case," Lisa said, getting comfy.

"Isla's her type?"

"Most cute girls are her type, but she enjoys a challenge, let's just say that."

This made Anise giggle. "From what I've seen of her, I reckon she'd be good for Isla. They seemed really friendly earlier, so I guess there's some chemistry there."

"Mm, I agree..." Lisa murmured.

Sleeping seemed like a reasonable plan, despite Anise wanting to talk and get to know her new lover some more. She figured they had time, so instead she pecked Lisa's lips and closed her eyes.



Next morning, Anise sat up and yawned. Looking down at herself, she blushed at the realisation that neither of them had managed to undress before passing out. She leaned down and gave Lisa a good morning kiss.

Lisa's eyes flicked open. "Mm...? Oh, morning, sexy." Sitting up, she stretched, noticing immediately her semi-dressed state. "I really need to remember to undress before bed."

"Happens often?" Anise asked.

"Mira's found me passed out at my workstation more times than I can count. I normally crash in bed and worry about changing in the morning." Lisa undid her blouse and pulled it off, revealing the pair of pillows Anise had been hungering after for several days. Her bra had ended up dumped on the floor the previous evening, so Anise now had *ample* opportunity to ogle.

"Aaah..."

Lisa chuckled and crossed her arms over her chest. "Steady on, girl, we probably shouldn't be getting horny at this time in the morning."

Anise gave a discrete cough. "Sorry, it's just my first time properly seeing them, uh... unwrapped?"

Lisa jumped out of bed, giving Anise a kiss on the way past, and pointed to the connecting doorway. "Bath? You can look as much as you like then."

"Together?"

"Naturally."

Anise beamed. "I believe I may have achieved nirvana."

A few minutes later they were soaking together in the hot water. Anise sat between Lisa's legs and leaned back comfortably against her soft and inviting chest.

"Have you travelled much outside of Mars?" Lisa asked, stroking her lover's tummy.

"This is my first time off-world. I wanted to come to Aida more than anything, ever since I was young. I thought I was going to end up at the Royal

Academy on Earth, so when I saw the audition for Dreamstar, I couldn't believe my luck! My parents were happy to pay for me to come here, but I wanted to help out as well."

"You didn't take holidays or anything? So you could save up?"

"Yep."

Lisa's eyes turned a little moist. "That's some dedication. We'd better not let your efforts go to waste, then. Job board, once we're done here."

"That was my plan," Anise said, squirming a little under Lisa's continued tummy tickling. Unlike Isla, Anise wasn't ticklish there, but the mere *idea* of a girl as sexy as Lisa touching her while they were both naked was enough to turn her on, all the way up to eleven.

They clambered out of the bath after soaking a bit longer, dried each other, and dressed. Lisa temporarily put her outfit from the previous evening back on until she could pick up some fresh clothes from her room.

Anise tapped Isla's connecting door on the way out. Silence. "Wonder if she's still asleep?"

Lisa leaned past her and pointed to a small and nearly invisible panel, roughly an inch across, to the side of the door. "Press this if you want to get her attention, it'll play a chime in her room."

"That's handy," Anise said, and touched it.

A moment later the door swished to one side to reveal Isla, fully awake and dressed in a tracksuit. "I figured that was probably you."

"I'd be worried if it was anyone else," Anise laughed. She took a moment to explain the doorbell, then changed subject. "Anyway, how'd last night go? Come on, let's hear all the juicy details!"

Glancing over Anise's shoulder, Isla waved at Lisa drying her hair, seated on the edge of the bed in the other room, and received a pristine smile in response. "Morning, Lisa!" Returning her attention to her best friend, she averted her gaze. "Nothing happened. Sorry to disappoint."

"Nothing at all? Not even a kiss?" Anise said, noting that her friend seemed unwilling to maintain eye contact.

“Not even.” Isla coughed. “We were too tired after doing it earlier in the day. Sorry, Anise, looks like I went on ahead...”

“You jammy cow!” Anise exclaimed. Laughing, she hugged her best friend. “I’m happy for you. How was it?”

“Unreal. I don’t want to say much, It’s not really fair when we’ve been intimate as well. But I’ll say this: Mira is incredible. Like... *really* incredible.”

“So is Lisa. Seems we’re doubly blessed, huh?” Releasing her hug hostage, Anise placed her hands on Isla’s shoulders. “Going to stay with her?”

“I think so? For a while, anyway.” Isla shook her head, brows furrowed. “I’m not sure, to be honest. I still feel super intimidated, but that’s improved since we were intimate.”

“Well, I’m here if you want to talk, and I’m sure Lisa will be happy to listen as well if you want a different perspective.”

In the room, Lisa called across, “Any time!”

Isla waved again. “Thanks!”

“There’s no need to rush, right? Take your time to work out how you feel,” Anise said, removing her hands from her friend’s shoulders.

“What about you? I’m guessing good news?” Isla continued.

A smile as radiant as a supernova graced Anise’s face. “Good doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“That’s great,” Isla said, and embraced her friend in return. “So what’s your plan for today?”

“Today? I’m not sure—”

Again, Lisa’s voiced floated across. “I’ll be keeping her busy training for her Retrolution audition, once we’ve visited the job board.”

Anise gave a thumbs-up. “So she says.”

Before anything further could be said, Isla danced forward and hugged her friend. “I’m really glad we came to Aida, thanks for suggesting we try out for Dreamstar!”

“It’s been a wild ride already, right? And we’ve barely started.” Anise pecked her friend’s cheek and pulled away.

Lisa switched the hairdryer off and placed it on the bed, then pulled her hair up into a loose ponytail, holding it in place with one hand while she dug about in a pocket for a scrunchy. The waviness resulted in a degree of bushiness, a wild and sexy ponytail that had the net effect of making Anise want to jump her for the third time that morning.

“P-Ponytail Lisa...! I might have gone to second heaven...” Anise muttered.

Lisa paused, both arms above her head, mid-tie. “Mm? You like ponytails, do you?”

“More than anything...” Anise breathed. Behind her, Isla—a girl who routinely wore her hair in a ponytail—blushed, figuring Anise had probably admitted yet another secret without even realising.

“I could think about wearing it like this a little more often... I mean, if you *really* want me to?” Lisa tilted her head a little.

Anise rose to her expectations without hesitation. “I’ll do anything to see you like this again!”

Lisa chuckled, finished tying her hair, and walked across. “Nearly ready?”

Anise dried her hair and bunched it into its now-usual twintails, wished Isla a pleasant day, then followed Lisa out of the room and up to the third floor so she could change into some fresh clothes. On the way back down, they hooked back up with Isla and exited the dormitory.

Walking over to the academy domes, Isla took off for a morning run, Lisa entered one of the domes with Anise... and the two rookie idols began their new lives in earnest.

Part 04: Sunrise Over Apollotia

Mira gently pushes Isla in the direction of attending a special training camp for rookie idols which the academy runs several times a year. Here, she meets two new friends and potential rivals, while simultaneously learning just how much effort she will need to put in to become a professional idol.

Chapter 17: Try & Try Again

Isla Ainsworth sat up in bed, her gaze coming to rest on the polished walnut doors of the built-in wardrobe. Nearly a week at Dreamstar Academy and still she had trouble remembering where she was waking up. This minor existential crisis soon passed, so she clambered out of bed and slipped through into the ensuite for an early morning shower.

Gradually, bit by bit, she was acclimating to life as a brand new idol, though she still felt a little odd calling herself that. Unlike her best friend, the ever-pervy Anise Kendall, who had lived and breathed idol culture for years, Isla was wholly new to the entire thing. It was a new world, both literally and figuratively.

Back into her room, sneaking to avoid waking her friend next door, despite these rooms being so well soundproofed they were effectively airtight, Isla pulled her white and pink tracksuit on and did a few warmup stretches on the floor.

If she was going to be an idol, never mind a *successful* idol, she needed to work on her fitness some more, after slacking off for half a year while visiting Earth. She was an active girl in any case and had some good muscles on her from all the tennis she played, but she was nonetheless painfully aware that her stamina needed serious work. Her training with Anise before coming to Aida had helped, but she still had a way to go yet.

Now that they were both settled in as idols, step one of their new lives involved regularly visiting the job board. Idols live or die on auditions, whether they be for a confection brand such as Crème de la Crème, a sporting goods manufacturer, luxury pet foods, or anything else. *Everyone* wanted the exposure idols could bring to their companies, so there was never a shortage of jobs available.

Certainly, there were always enough jobs to keep a substantial percentage of rookie idols going while they grew. But then they either became well-known enough to start going for the mid- and high-tier auditions where competition

was fierce, or faded into obscurity until they were forced to look for other life avenues.

Emboldened by her victory at Crème de la Crème, Anise had decided to expand her repertoire a little by going for an acting audition this time. She wanted to act in any case, and the job she had found at the job board was a small bit part, perfect to get her feet wet and maybe meet some useful people. With any luck, she might be able to get her foot in the door somewhere, if she played her cards right.

The part in question was a last-minute casting for a maid in a sci-fi period drama called *Pride and Predators*. The movie was an ambitious melding of two genres one might not normally think of as being compatible—sci-fi horror and period drama romance—but by all accounts production was going well.

Anise would be auditioning for a part to replace a girl who had just come down catastrophically sick, playing a maid to the large, Victorian-era British household the movie revolved around. A maid who had the unenviable role of being killed off early in the movie by the titular predator from space.

At the job board, Anise was now perusing the job details, toying with strands of her orange hair; she still got a bit of a shock when looking in the mirror, but that was fading. Upon closer inspection of the audition details, she noticed something. “Oh my god... it’s being directed by Suzanne Netter!”

Isla had joined them in order to find another audition for herself, something where she wouldn’t be pitted against her beloved best friend. She looked up from the display. “That sci-fi director you’ve liked since we were little?”

“Yeah! Sure, this is only a tiny part, but actually getting to meet Suzanne Netter...! I need this role, seriously,” Anise replied, stepping from foot to foot in her excitement.

Lisa, Anise’s mentor and current lover, tapped her shoulder. “I’ll read the other parts, if you like? I’m free enough to provide you some support today, no worries.”

“That’d be great, thanks,” Anise said.

“Where’s it being filmed?” Isla asked.

“Uh... Slog?” Anise said, frowning at the strange-looking word. It was written *Slogh*. She knew of the city itself, but had never heard its name spoken aloud. “Oh crap, the audition’s later today, too. Talk about last minute.”

Lisa came to the rescue. “It’s pronounced ‘*slow*’, named after the man who founded it, Edward Slogh. It’s the next city over from here. I actually have a couple of gigs coming up there this weekend, maybe we can make a working holiday out of it? Pretty sure Mira’s planning a little something for Isla over the same weekend, so no need to feel like you’re missing out.”

Isla shivered. “I’m feeling worried, all of a sudden...”

“If I can win, sure, I’d like that,” Anise said, nodding and entering the audition. “Always wanted to visit, it looks like a nice little place.”

“It is,” Lisa said. “It’s a lot less... metro? One of those places that started out as a small settlement and kind of grew *out*, but not *up*.”

“I’ve seen pictures, it’s like a little English town!” Anise’s enthusiasm came dangerously close to activating her idolgasm mode. “What are the gigs you mentioned?”

“I’m playing at a couple of clubs on Friday and Saturday night over there. Nothing too fancy, only a few thousand people.”

“Only...” Isla muttered.

“I’ve played for more, though I’m not saying exactly how many,” Lisa said with a wink.

“Aaah, you’re such a professional girl. I feel like the luckiest girl alive right now,” Anise said.

“You know that old saying, ‘*work hard, play hard*’? I figure why not do both together?” Lisa said.

“And now I’m here on Aida, I intend to do just that,” Anise stated.

“You’ve made a pretty good start, my girl, can’t wait to see how you grow. Both of you,” Lisa added. “Now, let’s get you ready for this audition.”

“Sure thing,” Anise said, leaving Isla to continue perusing the job board by herself.

Half an hour later Isla had left the job board emptyhanded, and was now searching for Anise. Eventually she gave up and sent her a message to ask where the hell she was hiding, and found her in one of the Dome 03 training rooms.

Entering, she took in the space which greeted her; a polished wooden floor, pastel curtains blowing in the breeze, and white walls with gold stencilling in the shape of stylised flowers and wavy tendrils. It was quite serene, if she didn't take into account Anise screaming in agony and falling on the floor.

Lisa lowered the script she was holding and waved at Isla. "It's safe to come in."

Isla did so, standing with them and poking Lisa's script. "Is that real paper?"

"Yup," Lisa said, wafting the A4-sized flexible binder back and forth to illustrate. "Movie scripts are one of the few things still made of paper. Easier to control, for one thing."

"Control?" Isla said, head cocked.

"To avoid leaks. Digital is great, but it's also easy to make copies. Paper scripts with watermarks and each actor's name imprinted on it help prevent that to some degree, though obviously it's not perfect," Lisa said.

"What about those?" Isla said, pointing to the script in question. "Surely they don't print them up for every girl auditioning?"

"The academy has copies printed and is responsible for ensuring nothing leaks," Anise informed her, after getting back to her feet.

"The academy even handles things like that for us? Neat," Isla said, nodding.

"Sure does," Anise said. "Find anything?"

"Not yet," Isla said, shaking her head. "I'm after something involving sports, but didn't see anything. Maybe next time."

"Stick around and observe if you like," Anise said, going back to her practice.

“I might do that, never seen you acting before,” Isla said, wandering over to the nearest wall and leaning against it to be out of the way.

Anise raised the script. “Madam Belvoir said the goods absolutely must be delivered by this evening, Mrs Rose.”

“This is a pickle, and no mistake,” Lisa said, reading from her own script. “First that strange light in the sky, and now Mr Marcy visiting with nary an invitation, never mind observing the correct etiquette in timing. I’ll have you run to the shops now, with a dash of luck they will be able to deliver on time.”

“By myself, Mrs Rose? But, ‘tis nearly dusk,” Anise said, shrinking back like a frightened rodent.

“The local boys all know the trouble they’ll be in if they lays a hand on one of Madam’s kitchen girls,” Lisa replied, shooing Anise away. “Now, off with you, girl, this is an emergency.”

“Yes, Mrs Rose,” Anise said, dejected, and dashed away a few metres, where she proceeded to walk in place, as if taking a nervous stroll along a night-time street in Victorian Britain’s countryside. She looked left and right, glancing back and forth with such a level of authenticity that Isla almost felt like she could see the scene. Rustling the script to simulate a bush being tussled by a nocturnal creature of some sort, she walked a few steps, turned, and screamed, arms held up defensively...

“You’re getting the hang of the blood-curdling scream,” Lisa said, stifling a chuckle.

Anise grinned. “I’ve never thought of trying a horror role before, it’s kind of fun.”

“Want to give it another run over? You’ve got a couple of hours before the audition, and it’s being held here at the academy anyway, so no rush to travel,” Lisa added, waggling the script.

“I’ll keep practising until the deadline, I want this to be perfect,” Anise said, walking back over and flipping the pages to the start of the brief scene.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Isla said. “Good luck with the audition.”

“Thanks!” Anise said, and went through the scene again. And again. And several more times beyond that, until it was time for the audition. Now she just needed to win.

Chapter 18: Master & Apprentice

While Anise was busy with her own idol life, Isla decided that the best thing she could do would be to take another run around the campus island's full circumference, an enjoyable if occasionally agonising six mile distance, give or take a few hills and uneven surfaces along the way.

There were a good number of other girls out and about, nodding pleasantly at her as she passed. People on Mars rarely ran in public, instead electing for the safer and more efficient gyms, so being able to run under the bright summer sun whenever she liked was a welcome experience.

At the same time as Isla made her way around the island, one Cassiopeia Luna—Dreamstar Academy's top idol—had just stepped off the monorail and exited the station. She took a look at her beloved academy campus and broke into a brief run down the hill, making her way to the dormitory.

Her deep blue-purple hair flowed out like a cape as she strode along, sparkling with little points of white in a manner reminiscent of a starry sky. Issuing neutral greetings to the various idols and staff wandering the paths, she homed in on the sandy dormitory building and, more importantly, her bed.

After a month spent touring one of the colony worlds, the lush and often-tropical planet called Gran Manillo, she had returned to Aida for a well-earned rest. It would be nice to put her feet up for a day or two after a hectic four weeks of constant signing sessions, live events, and stellarvision appearances.

En-route, she stopped to pick up a few things at the shopping centre; snacks, some essentials for the bathroom, and a new pair of sunglasses after managing to break hers on the flight home. Exiting the store, she strolled towards the dormitory building and ran headfirst into a girl she had never seen before.

Bumping into Isla's chest, Luna rebounded onto her behind with a pained 'oof!', her luggage clattering to the path nearby. "Ow, watch it...!"

Isla gasped. "Oh god, I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going! Are you okay?" She reached down to help, and froze. "C-Cassiopeia Luna!?"

Luna uttered an expletive and looked up. Seeing Isla's outstretched hand, she scowled and climbed to her feet unaided, brushing herself down. "That would be me, yes. Hmm..." Her gaze took in the unfamiliar girl before her, looking Isla up and down in a mildly disapproving fashion. "I thought I knew all the idols at the academy. Not seen you before. New girl?"

"Ah, yes! I transferred in with my best friend a week ago. Isla Ainsworth, nice to meet you. I'm really sorry, I was in a hurry to get somewhere... though that's no excuse." Isla lowered the hand, her cheeks burning like binary suns.

Luna waved a hand. "I'll live. Now, if you'll excuse me." She retrieved her luggage and continued on her way, surreptitiously rubbing her aching butt. "Two new girls, hmm? Interesting, I shall have to investigate when I can spare a moment," she muttered, continuing on her way. Right now, she wanted more than anything to get reacquainted with her bed after a twenty-five hour hyperspace flight...

Meanwhile, after having headed back to the dorm to shower and change into something sporty in white and orange, Isla returned to running as fast as her legs could carry her to the academy domes, keeping a better eye out for potential collisions this time.

Mira had by now managed to crawl out of bed and start her day, inviting Isla to meet her friend Sophie Bellerose, and Sophie's apprentice Azusa.

Rushing headlong into the appropriate dome and through to the rear where the workshop resided, Isla entered the room and bent over, grasping her knees as she attempted, with limited success, to get her breath back. It would take more than a mere week of regular morning runs to improve her stamina, a fact that rapidly became apparent as she wheezed her way back to something approaching life.

She straightened, smiling at her mentor. "Morning, Mira."

Mira beckoned her across, already brewing tea at the usual workbench. "You appear a little out of breath."

"Went for a run around the campus," Isla said, standing by the central tables. She waited patiently for Mira to serve tea—which seemed almost like an observance at this point—while gazing idly out of the window.

“As much as I might enjoy joining you in being out of breath, I shall have to refrain for now,” Mira continued, handing over a cup. “Take a seat, Isla, there’s something I’d like to discuss.”

Accepting the cup, Isla did so, making herself comfy and massaging her legs.

“Now,” Mira said, sitting next to her, “how do you feel you’re getting on?”

“Okay, I think?” Isla hazarded, sitting back up. She stared into the mug, spinning it around in her hands and watching as the liquid swirled. “Direction is something I’ve always lacked, and now I’m here... it’s still a bit overwhelming. It’s like there’s too much choice?”

“You’d like someone to give you a little push, perhaps?” Mira said, taking Isla’s hand and clasping.

“Sure, I’d *like* that. But I also understand that I can’t keep relying on Anise or whoever to push me in the right direction. Gotta take responsibility for my own life eventually.”

Mira caressed Isla’s cheek, turned her head gently, and gave her a peck on the lips. “An admirable sentiment, my sweet, but it’s perfectly fine to accept help when you need it.”

Isla considered this for a moment. She could have accepted Mira’s advice for the audition against Anise. But no, she had tried to handle it herself and ended up losing to her best friend. “I would’ve done better in the ice cream audition if I’d asked you for advice, I admit...”

“You’re learning,” Mira said, and stood. She clambered up onto the sofa and straddled her. “You recall I mentioned I’m a producer, yes?”

“Y-Yeah,” Isla mumbled, hesitantly wrapping her arms around her partner’s waist, then dropping them down to rest lightly on Mira’s shapely ass, the mug awkwardly hanging from a finger to the point of almost spilling the remaining liquid.

“What do you think I need as a producer?”

Isla did her best to concentrate; Mira had quite a short skirt on today, and was presently giving her a pleasant eyeful of royal purple panties. “What you need? Well... idols, I guess?”

“Precisely. A producer with no idols is a very sad thing, Isla. So, allow me to extend you an offer. I would like *you*, my sweet, as my first idol.”

“Eh? M-Me?” Isla said, pointing to herself with the free hand.

“You’ve shown me you have what it takes, so yes, I want you, along with one other girl I’ll be approaching. You’ll meet her soon.” Mira shifted a little, ducking down to issue another kiss. “However, my offer comes with a caveat. In the event you accept, we’ll have to stop being intimate. I avoid crossing personal and private matters as much as possible.”

“Can I have some time to think it through?” Isla whispered, lingering around her lover’s lips.

“I have a little something lined up for you over the weekend,” Mira replied. “I can give you around that long. From what you’ve told me, you struggle to make decisions, yes? If you let me produce you, I’ll help you overcome that, Isla. Step one will be making a decision and giving me your answer by the end of the weekend. Deal?”

Isla opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a crashing cacophony of clattering, nearly giving her a coronary. She had Mira move and scrambled to her feet, then ran around to the girl who had entered the room and immediately fallen flat on her face, collapsing one of the folding tables in the process and littering the floor with the resultant mess.

Putting her mug down on one of the still-standing tables, Isla extended a hand. “Um, are you okay?”

Unlike Luna, the new arrival was quite happy to accept the help and grasped Isla’s hand, unsteadily getting to her feet. “Hey! Uh, thanks for that! Sorry, was in kind of a rush and holy crap you’re gorgeous?” She glanced at Mira. “Is this her!?”

Mira did her best not to laugh at the girl’s flustered state. “Yes, this is her.”

A gentle sigh from the doorway indicated another presence. Standing with hands on hips, a young lady in her early twenties with painfully vivid shoulder-length blonde hair, a pure yellow tone closer to lemon than lion, surveyed the carnage, her lilac eyes—coloured contact lenses, naturally—flicking back and forth from the mess to the girl.

“Good morning, Mira,” she said, switching her attention to Isla. “You must be our new girl? Pleasure to meet you, I’m Sophie.” She pointed to the girl, who was brushing herself down after her little mishap. “And this is my apprentice, Azusa. She’s currently learning how *not* to knock over my tables, aren’t you, my dear?”

Azusa let out an embarrassed laugh and ignored her mess for a moment, too focused on Isla to care about much else. Her hair—a vivid azure colour, another girl using the colour altering technology Isla had become a little more accustomed to by now—had also fallen forward, almost as a show of solidarity. She flicked the wavy twin ponytails over her shoulders where they settled behind her, reaching to the small of her back.

“You weren’t joking when you said she was a cutie, were you, Mira?” Azusa said, walking around Isla. “Anyway, nice to meet you, I’m Azusa, I design stuff. When Sophie lets me, anyway.”

Striding across to the workbench beside the sofa, Sophie placed her own bags down, grasping a cup of tea being proffered by Mira, who had immediately set about the tea ritual the moment they were interrupted. “Hmm... Isla’s a pretty girl, isn’t she? Petite yet shapely, lovely hair, very nice indeed. Azusa!”

Azusa jumped, snapping to attention. “Right here, Master!”

“Fancy a challenge?”

“Always, Master!”

“Take some measurements and make something for Isla. I’ll let you decide what you feel would suit her best. Hop to it!” Sophie placed the mug on the bench and clapped her hands a couple of times, smiling as her apprentice scrambled into action.

“I can make her something? Anything? Anything at all!?” Azusa looked Isla up and down. “I’ll make you something wonderful, Isla, just you wait.”

“Azusa might be clumsy, but she’s also incredibly talented,” Mira said.

Leaning back against the workbench, Sophie sipped her tea. “Quite so. She wouldn’t be my apprentice otherwise.”

Turning around in an effort to follow Azusa as she circled, Isla marvelled at this girl’s deep green-gold eyes, thinking they were vaguely reminiscent of a

piece of jewellery with a fine patina of verdigris, contrasting with the blue hair. “I’ve never had someone make clothes for me before.”

Azusa came to a halt behind Isla, checking out her butt. Then around the front, looking up and down. And finally her gaze came to rest on Isla’s face. “Great. Lemme take some measurements and oh damn... I buggered the tables again, didn’t I?” She sighed, surveying her mess.

Isla wondered what the deal was with this cute yet disorganised girl—who appeared to be much of an age with her—switching sentences halfway, but figured it was probably either an idol act, or Azusa was just easily distracted. Maybe both. She squatted and picked up some pieces of fabric. “Here, let me help.”

Azusa graciously accepted the offer and, together with Mira, they righted the table and dumped everything back on top, watched with eagle eyes by Sophie.

Remembering she had dropped the bags she came in with, Azusa collected the strewn contents and left them on the lime green sofa under the window. “That’s better,” she said, wiping her brow. “Sorry about that, Master! No idea how I manage to trip over my own feet and let’s get you measured, Isla.” Staring at the cluttered table, she muttered, “I’m sure I left my tape measure somewhere here...”

“I’m guessing this time I actually *do* need to undress?” Isla said, thinking back to when she had been here with Mira the first time.

“Well, I can’t measure you properly when you’re wearing clothes, can I?” Azusa said with a laugh. She rummaged on the tables and produced a tape measure and notepad.

“A paper pad? I thought pretty much everyone used flexitabs now,” Isla said. First Anise using a paper script, now a designer using a paper pad. Maybe this medium wasn’t as outdated as Isla had at first assumed?

“Mm?” Azusa looked up at Isla, then back at the pad. “Oh... yeah, I like scribbling on real paper and where the hell did I put my pencil?”

Sophie grasped an item from the workbench and tossed it across. “You left it over here last night.”

Azusa clumsily caught the sleek mechanical pencil. “What would I do without you, Master?” She clicked a length of lead out. “Okies, let’s do this.” Once Isla had tugged her clothes off, standing in her underwear and blushing lightly, Azusa began measuring, jotting numbers down on her pad and muttering under her breath.

Taking a seat on the sofa, Mira crossed a leg and rested her chin on her hand, enjoying the show. “While Azusa busies herself with that, I have a recommendation for you, Isla. The one I was about to mention before a certain someone interrupted us.”

Azusa made no comment at this, instead making a show of being busy.

“Go ahead,” Isla muttered, arms straight out to the sides and a tape measure wrapped around her waist.

“There’s a special camp the academy sometimes runs for idols who want to get a bit of a boost. Next one’s this weekend. A friend of mine who entered Dreamstar a few months back will be attending. You’re around the same sort of level, so you’d be well suited as training partners.”

“What sort of—*Azusa!*?” Isla jumped as a hand that didn’t belong to her went somewhere intimate.

“Stop struggling, please, I need to measure you down there as well.” Azusa murmured, attempting to measure from the top of Isla’s leg down to her ankle.

Letting this admittedly vivacious and interesting girl touch her as she liked, Isla tried to concentrate. “What sort of things would I be looking at?”

Mira waved her mug about. “Running, team building exercises, dance lessons, practice auditions, all sorts. You can pretty much pick the things you’re most interested in and focus on those. There’s also a nice wooden lodge you’ll stay in. Barbeques. Nights on the sand under the stars.” She laughed as Isla’s face lit up. “I see you like the idea.”

“It sounds super fun!”

An evil laugh emanated from somewhere around Isla’s feet. “Well, if you like being run ragged, sure.” Azusa stood and threw the tape measure on the table. “All done, you can get dressed now. Well, if Mira lets you.”

A relaxed shrug indicated Mira had already worked out any necessary tensions. "I'm quite content for now, Isla gave me a proper seeing-to last night."

"Mira!" Isla said, shocked, as she struggled back into her clothes.

"Azusa's perfectly trustworthy, you don't need to worry," Mira said. "As is Sophie, naturally."

"That's beside the point..."

Mira stood and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I'll try and restrain myself, sorry, my sweet."

"Jeez..." Isla mumbled. She had once worried her cheeks might melt under the weight of embarrassment. Today, it felt like it might actually happen.

Mira poked Azusa in the back. "Got everything you need?"

Azusa was already sketching something interesting, but stopped for a second to reply. "Sure have! Measurements, some ideas for things that might suit her, and isn't Luna supposed to be back today?"

Sophie paused in the act of taking delicate bites from a doughnut. "She is, yes. Just as well, too, I have her new outfit here."

Isla stiffened. "I ran into her earlier."

"Judging from your expression, you don't mean figuratively, do you?" Mira said.

"I kind of knocked her on her ass, yeah," Isla muttered.

Bursting into unrestrained laughter, Mira took Isla's hand and led her to the door. "Come on, I'll introduce you to Millie." She waved to her partner. "See you later, Sophie. I'm also looking forward to whatever you come up with, Azusa."

"Millie is the friend you mentioned?" Isla asked as they walked.

"Quite so. Lovely girl, originally from Slogh. Her family's been good friends with mine for the last few decades." As they emerged into the morning sunlight, Mira pulled her phone out and sent a message requesting a situation report from Millie. Seconds later, a reply: at Arco Iris, guzzling water after running twice around the campus island's full circumference.

Isla let out a quiet laugh. "Anise still can't get over how that name is pronounced."

“You mean Slogh? It nicely describes the pace of that city, it’s pretty slow and laid-back compared to Apollotia,” Mira said.

They walked past the main café building, the glass doors along its sides again open so the customers inside could enjoy the summer temperatures, and stepped onto the deck, where Minami was chatting to an incredibly cute girl with deep green hair, a little darker than in-season grass. The girl wore it loose and falling to just below her shoulders, with a slight curl inwards at the end. Her skin had a similarly bronzed tone to Isla—though Isla’s tan had faded a little by now—making for a nice compliment to her hair.

The green-haired girl turned at hearing footsteps, her crimson eyes widening with pleasure at seeing her friend. “Mira!”

Stepping a foot back for support as Millie slammed into her, Mira accepted her friend’s embrace. “Morning, Millie. Energetic as ever, I see?”

Millie pulled away and grinned, her features indicating a level of mischief Isla found appealing. “Aye. Always running at full speed, you know me.”

Mira pushed Isla forward and introduced her. “You’re still attending the camp, I believe?” she added to Millie herself, who bobbed her head. “Wonderful. I’ve suggested Isla accompany you, if you don’t mind looking after her?”

“Be happy to,” Millie said, turning her attention to Isla with a smile that could’ve melted even the most hardened heart. “Wow, you’ve got the trinkets an’ loot, ain’t’cha?”

“T-Trinkets?” Isla said. Appraising Millie in turn, she took in the heavily green-focused outfit the girl wore; green shorts, white T-shirt, green and white sneakers. There was a definite theme going on there.

Mira came to the rescue and placed a comforting hand on Isla’s shoulder. “Loot rhymes with cute, yes? She’s calling you cute. Millie likes rhyming. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to her soon enough.”

“O-Oh. Th-Thank you, Millie, you’re really cute as well,” Isla said.

“Planes and tanks! So what do you do here, Isla?” Millie asked.

“For now, I’m thinking of concentrating on being a pure idol. But I also love tennis.”

Behind the bar, Minami perked up. “You’re a tennis player?”

Isla waved at her and issued a good morning. “Mum got me into it at a pretty young age.”

“Sweet. Maybe we can play one day, I dabble a bit myself,” Minami called over, then went back to polishing a glass.

Isla indicated that would be nice.

“Maybe you can give me some lessons? I’m always up for learning new things,” Millie said. “I can help you with some dance moves in return, it’s what I’m best at.”

“I believe you’re best at being utterly adorable, actually,” Mira murmured.

Millie seemingly didn’t hear this—or simply chose not to respond verbally—so Isla agreed to help out, thinking that having some dance lessons would be incredibly useful.

“Remember, Isla, decision by the end of the weekend,” Mira said as she walked away.

“I’ll do my best,” Isla said, waving her out of sight. With that, she took Millie off towards the stadium.

Minami, meanwhile, ran inside the café. “Yumi!”

Yumi wandered out from the back, tying her hair up into its usual enormous blue ponytail in readiness for her day. “Something wrong?”

“Look after the bar for a little while, could you? I’ve got something to do quickly!” Minami said, sprinting out of the building.

“If you’re going to go running off immediately, why even ask? Silly girl.” Yumi smiled and did as requested.

Chapter 19: A New Challenger Appears!

Rounding the stadium and gym complex—a large dome similar to the main academy, though more of a rugby ball shape than spherical—Mira led the way through the double glass doors at the front. They made their way around to one of the wings, arriving in a changing room lined with lockers along the walls and benches in the centre. Mira wished them both well and headed back out, returning to the workshop.

Since they were already dressed appropriately, Millie took her new friend out another door, appearing in the centre of the vast complex; unlike the fully covered academy buildings, the gym's structure was similar to a stadium, open to the air, with tennis and volleyball courts, idols hard at work, and Cassiopeia Luna enjoying a practice tennis match with another girl.

"Looks like Luna's back," Millie said, doing a few stretches and limbering up.

Isla remained silent, eyeing the dark-haired girl on the court as she served up a near-supersonic ball. "She's good..."

"She's the academy's number two player," Millie said. "Couldn't Adam and Eve it when I found out one of my favourite idols plays tennis."

"I had no idea idols could be so many different things," Isla laughed, followed by a minor furrowing of her brows. "Adam and... oh, believe?"

"You've got it."

"Is there some reason for the rhymes?" Isla asked, still staring at Luna.

"If you want to be successful, you've gotta stand out," Millie said, starting another round of stretches. "But I also like Cockney rhyming slang. It's something that doesn't really exist now, more's the pity."

"So you decided to try something similar yourself? To keep it alive in some way?"

"You're a sharp one!" Millie said with a sly smile. "From what I've learned so far, it seems you had to be born within earshot of a particular church to be

considered Cockney. But the church was destroyed when London was trashed during all that nastiness couple'a hundred years back."

"That's really depressing, Millie," Isla muttered.

"Kinda. That's why it's up to people like me to keep these things alive. If I don't, who will, right?" Millie finished her warmups and grinned at her new friend. "How do you want to start? Tennis? Or dance? Or we could try both!"

Isla plumped for the option she felt sure of. "Tennis?" That, and the idea of dancing while playing tennis terrified for reasons she couldn't quite pin down.

Acquiring a racket each and half a dozen balls from a nearby store room, they jogged over to the second court, entering and doing their best not to stare too hard at Luna. After the morning run-in, Isla didn't want to annoy her further if she could avoid it.

Half an hour ticked past as Isla walked Millie through some basics such as swing, grip, and stance, additionally teaching her the general rules of tennis as a sport. Talking, joking, and enjoying each other's company, Isla soon felt her protégé was probably ready for some real practice matches.

Luna had taken an interest by now, glancing across between her own matches, studying the slender and athletic form of the girl who had knocked her over that morning. While Luna certainly had no delusions of grandeur—she ranked at number two in the academy, yes, but she wasn't at full competitive level—she had enough experience to see serious skill in another.

And Isla felt like a threat.

Serving a sedate ball for Millie, Isla focused wholly on her own activities. Millie learned fast, getting the hang of serving and returning within the space of a short ten minutes, and soon they had a nice rhythm going, knocking the ball back and forth and picking up the pace.

Missing a ball, Millie ran off to the rear of the court to retrieve it, at which point Isla was given the fright of her life.

"Hey, girl over there! What was it... Isla Ainsworth!" Luna called from the other court, pointing her racket in a semi-threatening manner.

Isla visibly jumped at being addressed by a girl who already worried her far more than Mira ever had. "Yes!?"

Wandering across to the fencing between courts, Luna jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “You look like you can handle yourself pretty well. Fight me!”

“F-Fight?” Isla said, recoiling.

“A game. I’m challenging you to a game!”

A round of gasps accompanied this. The academy’s top idol, challenging an utter newbie? The idols in the vicinity gathered around the court, figuring this wasn’t something to miss. And loitering in the stands high above, remaining out of sight and hearing range as best she could, Minami watched with interest, leaning forward on the railing and twiddling strands of her purple hair in her fingers.

Millie returned to a veritable commotion. “Uh-oh, what happened?” She listened as Isla explained, then gave a thumbs up. “A chance to face Luna one-on-one? Go for it. We can practice more later, no problem.”

Isla held her racket out in response. “Ch-Challenge accepted!”

“Excellent,” Luna said, making her way around the net to her own side, hoping she wasn’t making a mistake. After attempting to sleep and failing miserably despite being incredibly tired, she had come to the courts in hopes of helping matters along with a few matches. Sleeping during daylight hours had never been easy, regardless of how tired she might be.

Isla moved to the other court and lined up diagonally opposite her opponent, followed by Millie. “I’ve not played properly in a while, Luna, go easy on me!”

Luna scowled. “Hmph! Don’t disappoint me now, little girl.”

“Little—*we’re the same age!*” Isla snapped. At least, she figured they probably were, give or take a year or two.

“Perhaps so, but the gulf between our skill levels can scarcely be measured.”

Millie leaned against the fence directly perpendicular to the net and placed a hand on her hip. “Tit for tat time, Isla! You’re not going to let that stand, right?”

Hardening her expression and loosening her stance, Isla stooped down with her legs spread, racket at the ready. “Guess I’ll have to see how far I’ve dropped.”

“Ready, Isla Ainsworth?” Luna called, receiving a single nod of confirmation. She tossed the ball up and served.

Isla moved, slamming the ball back with such speed that Luna almost fumbled, managing to return but adjusting her expectations accordingly. Luna soon scored a point and Isla served. Luna again scored. Next, Isla managed to smash the ball right to the very edge of the court, making her opponent think it was a foul; it wasn't, and she scored.

Ending at 3-1 to Luna, they began their second set, Isla managing to pull ahead with two points immediately, pushing herself hard as sweat poured down her forehead. The second set ended at a draw of 2-2. Isla felt fatigued and worn down thanks to pushing herself too hard as they entered the final set.

Luna, equally worn down but doing a better job of not showing it, racked up three points in rapid succession, followed by a lucky score from Isla, but the match ended as everyone, Isla included, expected; Luna had won. However, while she had indeed won, it was by a margin far smaller than those present could have predicted.

Bringing her breathing under control, Luna stared intently at her opponent. “I underestimated you. That was a good match, Isla. I... would like to play you again one day.” She held her hand out in a sportsmanlike—if also mildly grudging—manner across the net.

Isla clambered unsteadily to her feet and let out an awkward laugh. She clasped the proffered hand. “I'll train hard and challenge you one day soon, I promise.”

Putting her custom racket away in its protective sleeve, Luna exited the court, touching a hand to Isla's shoulder on the way past, and made her way to the changing rooms, intending to head back to bed in hopes of finally being able to sleep.

Up in the stands, Minami slipped away, speeding back to Arco Iris after leaving her partners in the lurch. As she ran, she muttered to herself. “Things are heating up! I'll have to keep an eye on this Isla girl's progress.” She reached Arco Iris, apologised for running off, and got back to her duties.

At the stadium, Millie ran up to Isla and hugged her. “That was amazing! I can’t believe you kept up with her.”

Isla accepted the hug despite her legs feeling like they might give out at any second. “I’m pretty surprised, myself. And sorry, Millie, that interrupted our practice. I should’ve said no, but—”

“It’s okay. Seeing you give Luna a run for her money was worth it.” Millie laughed, a pleasantly high-pitched sound of utter joy to match her bubbly personality.

Isla pulled away and rubbed her legs. “I guess we should put the dance practice off for now? Not sure my legs could cope.”

“How about I dance for you instead?”

“Sure, I’d like that.”

“In that case, if you just grind your axe, I’ll give you a good old performance in appreciation for showing me how amazing you are,” Millie said, helping her fatigued friend back to the dormitory.

“Axe?”

“Relax, it means relax,” Millie explained, laughing again.

They headed briefly to Isla’s room so she could dry her sweat and change for the third time that morning, then ran downstairs.

Millie led them through the cafeteria, picking up a soft drink and chocolate bar each on the way, and through to the next hallway. Here, she opened a heavy door to the right, leading out to the central doughnut hole where the gazebo stood.

“In here, Isla,” Millie said. Bounding up the wooden steps and inside the large structure, she had Isla sit on one of the benches, then moved to the centre. Here, she took a few breaths and began, spinning and pirouetting, dancing and jumping, alternating styles, sometimes contemporary, sometimes more traditional, and always beautiful.

There was a hypnotic rhythm to her movements, a flow and grace in which Isla could almost see patterns and images in the air; a swan taking flight, a leaping tiger, a dancing dragon, until Millie gradually wound back down, issuing a low bow to end.

Isla burst into spontaneous applause. "That was great!"

Returning upright, Millie beamed. "You better cotton sleeve it. Been practising my moves for more than ten years now. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Cotton sleeve... believe..." Isla muttered, taking mental notes. "I can't wait to get started."

"Maybe tomorrow? Assuming you're not challenged by another top idol first," Millie said, sitting beside her new friend. "We'll have plenty of time at the camp, and they have dance instructors and things, too."

Isla agreed. Attempting anything today after pushing her body *way* too hard in her desire to, if not beat, then at least keep up with Luna didn't seem wise. Not with a weekend camp to attend over the next three days.

"You said you'd challenge her again, right? Think you can beat her?" Millie asked, cracking open her bottle of Quantum Flux, an isotonic energy drink by the makers of Sunrise and Sunset.

Guzzling her own bottle of same, Isla swilled the mildly fizzy drink, humming thoughtfully. "Now I've played her, I have a better idea of her ability. She's good. Very good. But I think I'm better... at least, when I'm not out of practice like now."

Millie spread her hands in faux shock. "That's a bold claim!"

"I'm pretty indecisive about a lot of things, Millie, but tennis isn't one of them."

"You're super cute when you have that determined look," Millie commented in a pleasant tone. She unwrapped her chocolate bar, some strange concoction of chocolate, salted cashew nut pieces, and caramel.

Blushing at the unabashed compliment, Isla pointed at her friend's snack. "That seems like an odd combination. Chocolate and salt?"

"Pff, this is tame. Ever tried chocolate-covered crisps? Or strawberry pizza?"

Isla physically recoiled. "No! Ew, the very idea of strawberries on pizza..."

"Not that different to a crepe at the end of the day," Millie said with a shrug. "How about a doughnut burger?"

“A doughnut burger,” Isla said, not even bothering to attach a question mark.

“There’s loads of great food combos out there. I’ve made it my mission in life to taste as many as possible.”

“Well... um, good luck?”

“Don’t judge without trying for yourself,” Millie said, a touch primly.

Unwrapping her own bar, Isla figured this one was at least halfway sane. “I guess that’s fair.” She closed her eyes and took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed. Opened her eyes in mild surprise. “It’s actually pretty good.”

“See? We’ll work our way up to strawberry pizza nice and slow, no worries.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that one. But this is nice at least, thanks.” Isla finished the chocolate bar and stood on wobbly legs. “I need a shower after that game, so... see you in the morning?”

“Yup, meet you outside the foyer,” Millie said. “We’ll be flying to the lodge in one of the academy’s skybuses. Bring a bag and enough clothes for three days, you shouldn’t need much else. Just toiletries and all that.”

With this decided, Millie wished her new friend well and ran off to another engagement, leaving Isla to her shower, followed by checking in with Mira at Dome 02. Azusa was hard at work sketching ideas for the new outfit, so they left her to it and spent the rest of the day relaxing, talking about Isla’s run-ins with Luna and preparing for the camp.

Chapter 20: Lodging a Complaint

Isla swung her legs out of bed and yawned, doing her best to avoid waking Mira; this would have been easier, if not for Mira's legs being entangled with her own. She spent a few minutes simply staring at her mentor's face, truly blessed to have been able to call Mira, if not her actual girlfriend, then certainly her lover. A status that looked set to change in the near future...

Deciding to be a good lover while they *were* still together, she ran to the area between her room and Anise's to make them both a cup of strong morning coffee. She returned a moment later with a tray, which she placed on the floor after moving one of the full cups across to her desk. Taking her own cup from the tray, she straightened up and sat on the edge of the bed, sipping her drink. "Morning!"

"Mm..." Mira murmured, sitting up, her hair a mess. She glared at Isla. "Coffee..."

Isla laughed at this vision of sexy sleepiness; it seemed that Mira didn't deal well with early mornings. Hovering the mug at her lover's lips, she carefully tilted it for her to take a sip.

Mira duly did so, nodded vaguely, issued a thank you, and promptly collapsed back into bed.

"What time do you normally get up, out of interest?" Isla asked.

Opening her eyes and staring at the ceiling, Mira stroked Isla's leg for no particular reason. "If I have a modelling job or other work? Whatever time is required. Otherwise, normally around ten."

It was currently seven.

Isla giggled. "Sorry, I didn't want to wake you, but you... well, you had your legs wrapped around mine. Kind of hard *not* waking you, to be honest."

"Mm, that's okay," Mira said, and sat up once more, a little more awake now she had caffeine coursing through her veins. "Alas, I'll have to curb this little habit, can't go lying in when I have girls to produce."

Leaning over, Isla gave her a tender lip peck and whispered, “I almost don’t want to give you an answer.”

“Being an idol means being a hero to your fans, Isla,” Mira replied, giving her a few pecks in return. “And heroes are expected to make sacrifices. As much as they might feel inclined to stay with a girl they may or may not have grown very attached to over the last few days.”

Isla responded by escalating to a full-blown snog.

“Mm, while I’d love to get sweaty, you have a camp to attend, my sweet,” Mira whispered with a low giggle.

“One of those sacrifices, huh?” Isla said, emitting a sigh.

“I never said it’d be easy,” Mira said, and gently pushed her away so she could stand and have a morning stretch, which did nothing but turn Isla on even further, followed by getting dressed.

Before Isla could focus on the camp, there was one other thing she needed to do. Grabbing her phone from the desk, she activated the holo display and loaded Me2B and performed a quick search. Finding what she was after, she watched the short advert featuring luxury ice cream and her best friend’s gorgeous face.

“Looking good, Anise,” she whispered, a happy smile on her own face. Sure, she’d lost the audition to her, but seeing her in the actual commercial, Isla knew Crème de la Crème had picked the right girl for the job.

As she went to put the phone back on the desk, it pinged to indicate a message, startling her to the point of almost dropping it. She looked at the message she had received. There was no text, just a photo of Anise with the Pride and Predators script in her left hand, her right hand held in a victory V-sign, and the biggest, cheesiest grin Isla had ever seen from her.

“Looks like she won,” she said, showing Mira.

“If she’s serious about acting, a bit part like this should basically be autopilot territory,” Mira said with a smile.

“Guess that means she’ll be heading to Slogh today,” Isla added, placing the device back on the desk.

“Less worrying over what your friend’s doing, more thinking about your own weekend,” Mira said, clapping her hands a few times.

Getting ready and grabbing the overnight bag she had prepared the previous evening, Isla took Mira’s hand and dashed downstairs.

Lingering a moment just inside the dormitory’s entrance, Mira gave her a kiss. “Enjoy yourself. It’s a tough camp from what I’ve been told, but it’s well worth it.”

“I will,” Isla said, backing away and running over to the skybus waiting on its landing pad, and hooking up with the waiting Millie en-route.

Waving after her, Mira yawned and headed back inside for a couple more hours’ kip in her own bed before properly starting her day, while she still had the opportunity.

At the end of the line of girls making their way on-board the black and white space shuttle-like skybus, the last two arrivals shuffled into the queue.

Millie took her newest friend’s hand. “Ready?”

“For once in my life, yeah, I think I am,” Isla said.

“Let’s go, then. I’ll be by your side the entire time.”

They climbed up the three-step entrance into the skybus, the last two of the thirty attending the camp, at which point the door was raised behind them, shutting with a reassuringly solid ‘*thunk*’. Making their way to the back, they sat together on the rear seat, looking out over the academy as the skybus got airborne, its thrusters muted by several layers of soundproofing.

Isla investigated their destination while they travelled. “Where are we heading, exactly?”

“A deserted island,” Millie said.

“... seriously?”

“The academy owns it, along with a large area on the mainland side. The lodge we’ll be staying at is on the mainland, and we’ll be taken across to the island in the skybus.”

“It’s occurred to me before, but I’m incredibly fortunate to be here, aren’t I?”

Millie tapped her friend's shoulder. "You wouldn't be here at all if you didn't have the talent, right? Headmistress Lawson is pretty stringent, though if someone catches her eye she'll bend over backwards to get her enrolled."

"Sounds like you have some experience."

"I'm a scholarship student. Or the closest we can get. Scholarships aren't normally a thing at Dreamstar." Millie settled comfortably back into the seat, resting her knees on the backrest of the empty seat before her. "Mira pulled a few strings. Otherwise I might've had to join an agency instead."

"Why am I not surprised?" Isla said with a quiet laugh, not wanting to disturb the other idols. Through the rest of the vehicle, a low buzz of voices filled the air. Something else filling the air was a pleasant aroma of coffee. "You're not tired already, are you?"

Millie stopped halfway through filling a cup from her flask. "Eh? Nah, I just really like coffee."

Thinking back to her new friend's comments on food combinations, Isla's features turned mildly sceptical. "Is this going to be some crazy combo of flavours again?"

"Not with coffee. I like that super strong, black as night, and unsweetened." Millie lifted the plastic cup to her nose and inhaled of the heavenly jet fuel.

While these vehicles all featured high-grade inertial dampers fitted to prevent buffeting and general discomfort for the passengers—especially during extra-atmospheric trips—changes in altitude could still be felt, not least by the popping of one's ears. Such a change had just occurred, indicating they neared their destination.

Again peering out of the windows, Millie saw the lodge and pointed it out to her friend. "That's where we're staying."

As the vehicle came in to land on a large black platform some three metres above the ground, supported by thick beams and poles with two staircases running down to a paved area not far from the beach, Isla gazed out at the lodge.

Two storeys of wood construction with a pointed blue roof, the building had a balcony running along the front of the second storey. Eight French doors

opened out onto this, informing them that the building probably had at least sixteen bedrooms, and probably double that, given the number of girls here today.

On the ground floor, a small porch led up to the front door, with a wooden veranda running right under the balcony to either end of the lodge. And surrounding the whole structure, hundreds of square metres of golden sand leading right to the water, all nestled between thick copses of trees.

Touching down, the pilot shut the engines off and opened the door, letting the idols jump out and run down the staircases to the sand. Here, they were met by some of the academy staff, primarily fitness instructors, dance coaches, and even an ex-army member or two. They were led across to the lodge, inside, then split into pairs with a key being issued to each for the rooms upstairs.

Millie already bounced off the walls with excitement. “We get to room together? This is the best!”

“I have to admit... I feel a bit more relaxed knowing you’ll be sleeping with me,” Isla said, laughing.

“That an invitation?” Millie said, head cocked.

“Is what...?”

Millie winked. “You want me to sleep with you?”

This made Isla blush. She hadn’t meant it like that, but now she thought about it, the idea certainly appealed.

Upstairs, they made their way along the pleasantly wooden-smelling hallway connecting both ends of the building with a staircase leading down from both. Halfway along, Millie stopped before a door, unlocking it and leaping across the threshold.

Joining her, Isla entered and took in the spacious room. To their right was a built-in bunk bed arrangement. Directly ahead, the French doors to the balcony. And to the left, a small table against the wall with two comfy armchairs.

“Pretty nice, huh?” Millie said.

“Yeah, it’s really cosy,” Isla said, turning to the bed. She pointed. “Should we toss a coin?”

“Eh?” Millie looked at the beds and laughed. “Pick whichever you like, I don’t mind either way.”

“Mm, top? Never slept in a bunk bed before.”

“Sure thing. I slept in a bunk for a few years at home, until my older sister moved out. We used to swap bunks all the time.”

“Sounds nice. I’m an only child so I’ve never experienced anything like that,” Isla said, unpacking her clothes for the weekend and placing them in a small chest of drawers to the right of the door on entering.

“Not sure I could imagine life without my awesome older sister in it. Though she’s left Aida now, so... I guess I already know,” Millie said, using a second chest of drawers under the window to stow her own clothes.

“Having Anise by my side for the last thirteen years more than made up for not having siblings.”

Millie paused in the act of unpacking. “Anise?”

“My best friend.”

“Ah. You came to Aida together, I think? Mira mentioned there were two of you.”

“Yep, she’s off with Lisa to Slogh right now, though.”

Millie let out a suggestive giggle. “Anise is pretty dirty and mucky, then.”

“Dirty...”

“Lucky!”

Isla was beginning to understand what she had put Anise through with her puns over the years. Millie’s rhymes were equally hard going. “In that case, yeah, Lisa’s a lovely girl.”

“Also dirty.”

“You’re not rhyming this time, are you...”

Returning to her task, Millie chuckled. “I guess dirty isn’t really accurate, she’s just super easy-going and sexy.”

Isla finished and leaned against the bunk. “I’d noticed, yes. Um, you appear to be pretty well-informed about, you know...”

“Sexy stuff? Well, having the bends with Mira helped there, she ain’t what you’d call reserved.”

“Having the bends... being friends? Talking to you gives my brain a workout, Millie, I don’t mind admitting,” Isla said, laughing. She sat in one of the armchairs. “Mm, these are comfy.”

“Mebbe we can enjoy a nice beer together later?” Millie said, dropping into the other chair and putting her feet up on the table.

“Sounds like a... a fruity flan?” Isla hazarded.

Millie exploded with delight. “Perfect!” She jumped across to the other chair and hugged her new friend. “People don’t normally join in, I’m super happy, Isla, thanks. Righto, we better head back outside, can’t relax yet.”

They ran downstairs and out to a paved area at the front of the building.

Chapter 21: Running, Running, Running

Gathered here, the thirty girls lined up in three rows of ten, ready for inspection. Several of the academy's top instructors stood off to one side and, dead ahead facing the girls, a gruff-looking man in fatigues, standing to attention. Muscles bulged, his skin gleamed, and the bald head caused additional worry for the assembled idols.

He took a deep breath and bellowed, "Good morning, idol ladies!"

The girls issued a subdued response, unsure what to make of this situation.

Another bellow. "I can't hear you!"

This time the idols managed a volume sufficient to potentially be heard back at the academy.

Nodding once in satisfaction, the man spread his legs a little and placed both hands behind his back in his at-ease pose. "You are thirty very lucky girls today! Each of you has taken it upon yourselves to endure my camp, and for that you are to be commended!" He looked left and right across his recruits. "My name is Sarge, and it is my proud duty to train you until you drop!"

Sarge went on to inform the girls that this first day would entail physical exercise the likes of which they had never before experienced, followed by two days of slightly more *relaxed* tuition by the specialist instructors. Hustling the girls over and into the skybus, they took the short trip across to the island, visible in the distance, where it squatted like a pimple on the face of the ocean.

A second landing pad identical to the one at the lodge greeted the skybus. Setting down, the idols jumped off and milled around on the sand of a huge clearing. Ahead of them, thick woods covered the island, interspersed with streams and rocky areas, and at the rear a small mountain poked up through the trees. And a sweet scent hung on the air, produced by a variety of fruits native to Aida growing in the immediate vicinity.

To their right stood a squat building of sandy brick construction with a sloped black roof. At its rear, a metal covering held up on thick wooden posts

with half a dozen tables and benches beneath provided an area to eat, protected from both the sun's rays and rain.

The building was open to the seating area at the rear, with three large openings in the brick walls, each roughly a metre across with no glass. Clearly this was a *summer* building. Inside, shiny silver metal surfaces for food preparation, fresh running water, and cooking facilities. At the very rear, beyond the benches, three red brick barbeque pits stood, ready to be lit.

And off to the side, a little way from the food prep and eating areas, another sandy brick building providing bathroom facilities.

Scanning the area, Isla wondered if they could simply put some tents up out here. She leaned over to Millie. "I'd love to camp here."

Millie whispered back, "Have you been camping before?"

"No, it's not really something you can do on Mars."

"I guess not having an atmosphere isn't so great for that whole breathing deal." Millie took her friend's hand and squeezed. "I love camping, I'll take you one day if you like?"

Isla's face lit up. "Wouldn't say no."

"Any time. There's some nice places for camping around the outskirts of the city, I'll take you to my favourite one day, I promise."

They were interrupted by Sarge yelling at them. "All right, idol girls, time to learn about the fine art of running!" Sweeping his gaze across the recruits, his eyes came to rest on a certain green-haired girl. "Back again, Millie Bright? Can't stay away, am I right?"

Millie snapped to attention and saluted. "Sir, yes, sir!" Her face split into a huge grin. "Also, nice rhyme, sir!"

Sarge grinned. "Good response." With that, he bellowed for the girls to run the full circumference of the island, a distance of some five miles. Before Millie left, he sauntered across to her. "How's your brother getting on?"

"Really well, thanks," Millie said, chuckling as Isla's face morphed into one of confusion. "Sarge trained my brother."

"Your brother's in the army?" Isla asked.

“Not any more, he’s running security at Mariposa Starport now. Done really well for himself.”

“Talent and hard work run in the Bright family, it seems,” Sarge said in his usual boisterous tone. “Now, off you both go, you’ve got running to do!”

Okaying him, they zipped off after the other girls, making their way around the sandy edges of the island. Soon, they ran into a straggler, a pale-skinned, gothic-looking girl with deep purple-black hair falling to just below her shoulders and honey-gold eyes. Wearing a dark purple tracksuit of a similar shade to her hair, she did her best to maintain a reasonable pace with sweat pouring down her forehead and cheeks.

Millie fell in alongside her and beamed. “I’m Millie, nice to meet you.” She extended a free hand to the girl.

“Ah, hello! Evangeline le Fay, pleasure to meet you, Millie,” said the gothic girl, awkwardly shaking hands while attempting to remain focused on breathing regularly.

Sliding into position on Evangeline’s other side, Isla introduced herself also. “Here to improve your stamina?”

They rounded a small grouping of rocks and entered the woods, making their way towards the island’s rear side with the mountain visible to their left.

Evangeline managed a vague laugh. “No... I believe my stamina is beyond hope. I’m hoping to improve my walking.”

Millie navigated some roots and other detritus, helping her new friend in the process. “You’re a model?”

“Yes...”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant,” Isla muttered. She had wondered why anyone would want to improve their walking; most people got a pretty solid handle on that before they were three years’ old.

“Hope you survive today, then,” Millie said.

“Aha, thank you, Millie,” Evangeline said between breaths.

Isla had a new appreciation for her own body already, seeing how Evangeline struggled. Spotting a prime opportunity to put something Lisa had once said to her into action, she hung back with this girl, giving encouragement

and simply being there in the event she was needed. Millie smiled to herself, happy to see her new friend being so thoughtful.

They managed to stagger back to the main clearing by the time ten o'clock rolled around. Half an hour's rest was followed by more running. Then some running. And finally, for the coup de gras, an extra helping of running. Returning to the clearing, wholly ruined by two full hours of intensive and non-stop exercise, the girls were well and truly ready for a rest and something to eat.

Sarge announced that lunch was ready, so the weary idols made their way to the tables behind the building. This turned out to be a nice spread of baked potatoes with cheese and butter.

Millie collapsed onto one of the wooden benches next to Isla and they ate in silence for a time. "Aaah, that's better," she said, rubbing her tummy upon finishing. She noticed Evangeline gazing in her approximate direction, so she gave her a wave and a wink.

This resulted in much blushing from their gothic friend, who waved and got back to her meal.

"Getting friendly with the other girls again?" Isla said, still stuffing her face.

"Yep. Evangeline's really cute, *love* her hair," Millie said.

"She's pretty, yeah."

With the sun roasting the girls from directly overhead, Sarge had them run through the wooded areas in the centre of the island next, navigating treacherous terrain, branches, rocks, and all manner of other fun and mildly dangerous things. Millie tugged Isla over to Evangeline immediately, making sure to stick with her for the run, and the three of them now jogged together.

Doing her best to focus on running, Millie couldn't help but occasionally glance over to Evangeline, noting a degree of reciprocal glancing in return...

"Ah, wait, wait, Millie... need a... breather..." Isla managed to say, collapsing against a nearby tree. "Holy hell, this is... knackerin..."

Evangeline dropped down with her and Millie sat opposite them both.

"I was just thinking," Millie said, gazing at Evangeline, "that you've got a really pretty name."

“Eh!?” Evangeline said in a surprised tone, or as much as possible between laboured breaths.

“Evangeline... maybe Eva? Yeah, that’s cute, mind if I call you that?”

Isla piped up between attempts to re-oxygenate her body. “I agree... um, Eva?”

“I’ve never had a nickname before,” Evangeline said, her quiet tone conveying a distinct hint of pleasure.

“Eva?” Millie said, still staring intently. An embarrassed nod confirmed that Eva liked her new nickname, so Millie gave a thumbs-up. “Great, then it’s decided.”

Glowing with happiness, the newly christened Eva asked an unrelated question. “Have you known each other for long?”

“Nope, we only met a couple of days ago,” Millie said. She unhooked a water bottle from her belt and took a swig, then handed it off to Isla.

“You get on like you’ve known each other for years,” Eva said.

“I guess we sort of hit it off?” Isla said, proffering the bottle to Eva, who took a swig.

Millie took the bottle back and reattached it to her tracksuit’s belt; as a regular runner, she always had a belt upon which to attach her essentials.

“Pretty much. Isla’s a cute and energetic girl, really easy to get along with.”

This resulted in Isla’s cheeks burning with happy embarrassment to match that of Eva’s.

“You’re like that as well, Millie,” Eva said.

Millie gave her a wink, then stood. “Anyway, let’s get back to it, we’re nearly halfway.”

The other two sighed, but agreed that getting it out of the way would be best.



An hour later, they arrived back at the building to find most of the others already there. Sarge congratulated them on completing the full circuit and gave them all an hour break.

“Jeez, even I feel worn out now,” Millie said. She filled her bottle from the kitchen taps, then flopped down onto one of the benches, guzzling half the bottle in one go and enjoying the shade.

“I’m getting back into the habit of running, but not fast enough, it seems,” Isla muttered.

“I love running. Morning, noon, and night,” Millie said, tilting her bottle towards Isla.

“So do I, I’ve just been a bit lazy recently.”

“You said you’re out of practice, right? So you’ve played tennis pretty regularly?”

“I spent six months on Earth before coming here,” Isla said, collapsing back and lying full-length along the bench. “Kinda got a bit lazy with my training while I was there, too busy... well, having fun.”

“Tennis isn’t fun?” Millie asked.

Isla waved a hand. “No-no! I love tennis, I mean I had other things on the go. I stayed with Mum at a nice place near Canterbury in the New British Republic. A little house in the country to ourselves and nothing to do but explore.” She avoided mentioning the part where she had completely failed to find a university to attend while she was there.

“Sounds lovely.”

“It was. But as I said, I kind of slacked off too much and I’m paying the price now.” Isla sat up and stretched. “My legs feel like they’re going to fall off.”

Millie burst out laughing. “First day’s the worst, don’t worry. Remember what Sarge said? Our next couple of days here will be more focused on what we want to improve. I’ve been to this camp once before, trust me.”

“I have to wonder if I’ll be physically *capable* of doing anything more.”

“You might be a bit sore, but you’re an idol, right? What discipline are you going for?”

Pausing with her drink halfway to her lips, Isla thought of the beautiful girl she had played at tennis. “A pure idol like Luna. At least... I think so. I’d like to keep up with my tennis, though.”

Millie poked her in the leg. “You’re doing fine, then. You’ve only been here a couple of weeks, right? Some people drop out after only a few *days*.”

“That short?” Isla said, aghast.

“You get people like that sometimes, rich kids or the kids of famous celebrities and the like. They think they can just waltz in and become an idol and not put any effort towards it. Never works out the way they think it will.”

“I admit I didn’t take it as seriously as I should’ve, at least when we first got here. Lisa soon put paid to that.” Isla’s ears burned; she still felt embarrassed at how flippantly she had treated her new life.

Millie wagged a finger. “Lisa’s one of the most hard-working girls you’ll ever meet. Mira, too. And Luna.”

Touching a hand to Millie’s arm, Isla stroked once or twice in silent thanks. “I understand, don’t worry.”

“My brother used to say that understanding is half the battle.”

“You said he runs security at Mariposa? Isn’t that the big starbase orbiting Europa Colony?” Isla asked, splashing herself with some water in her efforts to cool off.

“That’s the one. Worked his way up from being a regular grunt, then did one of them lateral moves. Left the army and used his skills to get the job he really wanted in a related field. Loves his job because Mariposa’s still a super busy base even after Orion Station went online. Lots of traffic in and out thanks to the Europa research station and mines.”

“What’s your sister do?”

“She’s a vet. Always loved animals, decided to do something with that. Cost a fortune, but she managed.” Taking a run to refill her bottle again, Millie returned, guzzled some of the cool water, and grinned. “Now it’s my turn to do what I’ve always dreamed of.”

"I hope you succeed, Millie," Isla said, choking up a little at how hard working her new friend was. "You say Lisa and the others work hard, but I think you've got them beat already."

"My family hasn't got much money, and Aida's not a cheap place to live either," Millie said with a resigned shrug. "So if we want to do something, we have to work super hard to get it. Though... that's something I'm hoping to change."

"How so?"

"I want to give something back to my parents for all their support. So I've decided to work as hard as I can in order to do something special for them."

Isla gave her friend a hug. "That's wonderful, Millie, I hope you can do it."

"Thanks." Millie enjoyed this brief moment of contact, then retreated back, staring idly at the sky from their position in the shade beneath the metal roof.

"How did you end up becoming an idol?" Isla asked. "You said Mira pulled some strings?"

"She's a friend of the family, and we ended up being good friends as a result. Basically... she introduced me to Headmistress Lawson, I showed her some of my dance moves, she funded my entry immediately." Millie chuckled, thinking herself lucky to have friends in high places. "Though I suspect Mira also told her a good bit about me and my family."

"Why do you think that?" Isla said.

"Having both Lisa and Mira pretty much sponsor me helped a load, but I figure they must've told the headmistress about my money situation as well. Knowing how hard we work to achieve our goals probably helped sway her." A glance at Eva indicated that Millie was wholly glad of her situation. "Whatever the case, I'm super happy I had this opportunity. Got to wonder if I've just used up my entire lifetime's supply of luck in one go."

Isla giggled. "I'll share some of mine if you need it."

"You're such a generous girl." Millie hugged her new friend in return for the earlier one. "Anyway, we're not far off whatever Sarge has planned next, better get ready."

Break time over, they were put through the wringer a third time.

Chapter 22: Sarge's Assault Course

"Gather round, girls!" Sarge bellowed. They did so. "We're going to get busy with some team building, hope you're prepared to make some new friends!"

With this, he split the girls into five groups of six each and had them line up at a banner held up between two tall poles, upon which was written three simple words: *DO YOUR BEST*. His subordinates, two men and two women equally khaki-clad, ran off into the wooded areas of the island, leaving Sarge alone with the six groups.

Isla raised this with her more experienced friend. "Didn't expect to see ex-army people here. Is this normal?"

Millie glanced at Sarge as he harangued the groups into position. "I think so? Lot of army types seem to go into fields like this after they leave, like my brother going into a security role. Guess it's a good way to use their particular skills, training idols and whatnot."

"Anise mentioned once that being an idol is a constant battle. I didn't think she was being literal," Isla muttered, laughing.

Cracking up at this, Millie wrapped an arm around her friend's waist, pulling her close. "She's not actually wrong. Stop putting the effort in and you'll be overtaken. So let's promise each other we'll keep at it, no matter how hard it gets, okay?"

Isla straightened up and put her determined face on. "I won't let us down."

"Great! Now, we should pay attention or we'll be breaking our own promise."

"All right, idol girls!" Sarge yelled, standing beside the banner. "This here is Sarge's Assault Course! Idols need stamina, grit, and determination, but you also need teamwork and camaraderie! This course will test all of those things and help you appreciate the finer points of being an idol. By which I mean you'll be wishing for a swift and painless release!"

The girls in the first group exchanged worried glances.

Sarge grinned at them. "Maintain a steady pace and do your best, and remember that the only person you need to impress is yourself!" He swept a finger across them. "You're here to improve yourselves, so let me see the best you have to give. Group One, ready! Go!"

Group One's six girls scrambled away, running under the banner and into the trees, where a course had been laid out using sticks, stones, and pieces of fabric tied around strategic tree trunks. They soon disappeared, leaving Group Two, which included Millie, Isla, and Eva, to prepare themselves.

A few minutes ticked past, at which point Sarge bellowed for Group Two to get started. Isla was first off the mark, jogging into the trees, followed by Millie, Eva, and the other three girls they hadn't spoken to all that much.

First up, the girls had to navigate a section of rough terrain, all twigs and stones and uneven surfaces. This was followed by jogging along another path that led them straight to their first *real* obstacle; a series of netting firmly hammered to the floor with wooden posts.

Isla dived under and crawled, followed by Millie, emerging at the other end and dashing away towards the next challenge. Eva lagged a little already, struggling her way under the nets and finally managing to exit the other side, jumping to her feet and running onward.

Between the trees, hanging over the path itself, a series of monkey bars had been erected, each set at a forty-five degree angle from the next, necessitating some tricky jumping to proceed along the zigzag-shaped course.

Millie jumped up first, easily swinging her way across the first set. "Come on, Isla, it's easier than it looks," she called behind her, barely out of breath.

"I'm coming, I'm coming..." Isla muttered, making her way over with less acrobatic flair than her friend. Three sets of bars later, she dropped back down, joining Millie in a gentle jog around a large rock and towards something unexpected.

"Looks scary, right?" Millie said, pointing to the wooden wall before them. In its surface, three roughly girl-sized holes had been cut, through which they were expected to do a forward jump-roll. Millie demonstrated, diving headfirst

into the hole and rolling on a soft mattress the other side, bouncing upright to stand with her hands held high in the traditional gymnastic pose.

Off to the side, one of Sarge's subordinates—there to keep a watchful eye on the girls in case of injury or other problems—clapped. "Very smooth, Millie, well done." She turned to Isla. "Take it slow, you can practice a couple of times first if you like. Millie's been here before, so don't think you need to equal her right off the bat."

Isla nodded. "Here I go..." she said, and ran, awkwardly jumping through the hole. She landed face-first on the mattress, failed to roll, and ended with her butt high in the air and her face in the dirt. "Okay... maybe not my most elegant moment ever..."

She ran around and lined up for another try, just as Eva arrived and barrelled through the hole without thinking.

Rolling almost entirely by accident, Eva ended up on her feet, staring dead ahead and about as stiff as a corpse. She emitted a terrified little giggle and collapsed to her haunches. "I don't believe I just did that...!"

"You did great," Millie said, helping her up. "Your turn, Isla."

After being shown up, albeit unintentionally, by Eva, Isla now had to perform. With a solid run-up, she jumped, rolled, and returned upright in the same pose as Millie had used. "Hah! Did it."

Happy with their efforts, they zipped off as the other three girls from their group turned up.

Isla hesitated, hanging back and keeping an eye on them. "You can do it!" she called, noting how they were all staring at the wall with deeply suspicious expressions. It took a few tries, but soon the three of them had passed the challenge and all four now ran at full-tilt towards...

A wall.

Millie had already scaled the eight foot surface and now sat on the top, legs to either side. Embedded in the whitewashed wall itself were a number of brightly-coloured stones sticking out at various angles, useful handholds for climbing. Eva was presently halfway up, a hand outstretched to hold Millie's as she attempted to reach the top.

Isla rushed across and gave her a boost, pushing her via her feet until Millie had pulled her up and over, where Eva dropped to the floor and sighed. A running jump saw Isla scale the wall with minimal fuss, sticking with Millie at the top to help the other three over.

“You okay here?” Millie said, swinging a leg over and preparing to drop.

“Sure, go help Eva,” Isla said with a thumbs-up, then leaning down to help one of the others up.

Ahead, Millie caught up with her gothic friend and the two of them stopped at another set of bars, similar to the monkey bars earlier. These ones were taller, however, and the framework supported a series of net tunnels like the ones they had crawled under at the start, but suspended a metre above ground level.

“I’m not sure about this one,” Eva said. Another of Sarge’s subordinates was around to help, stepping forward to give Eva a boost up to the net. She clambered in, then did her best to remain steady; every time she moved the netting wobbled back and forth, and finding hand and footholds was difficult thanks to the gaping holes everywhere.

Millie had already jumped up and into the next set of netting over, struggling her way through like the nimblest of monkeys and emerging on the other side. She fell out as gracefully as she could manage, and now stood ready to catch Eva.

“I-I’m coming down!” Eva said, scrabbling around in the netting so she could exit feet-first. Like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, she slid out bit by bit... and dropped straight onto her friend, the two of them ending up flat on the floor with Eva on top. “A-Are you okay, Millie?”

A degree of happy giggling indicated Millie was *perfectly* okay with this state of affairs. “No worries!”

Eva clambered off and to her feet. “Sorry about that, I lost my grip.”

Arriving behind them, Isla and the others took their own wobbly journey through the nets, and the six of them now pushed through another set of trees, crossed a shallow stream with much splashing, danced across a series of

wooden posts studded into a four metre long pit, and now stood before their greatest challenge yet.

Another wall.

Except this wall was close to twenty feet in height and constructed from heavy-duty concrete, a veritable barrier of impossibility missing any of the handholds of the previous wall. Instead, four ropes had been attached firmly at the top, dangling down to the ground where several thick mattresses had been laid in case of accidents.

"I'll go first," Isla said, grasping one of the ropes and rappelling up.

Millie swung her way up alongside, and together they sat at the top like last time. Unlike last time, however, there was a very real sense of vertigo here, resulting in Isla's head swimming a little. She clamped her legs close to the wall's sides as though her life depended on it, lacking any sort of hyperbole whatsoever.

"Up you come," Millie called down to Eva.

Isla helped the other three girls, all of whom managed to make it up and over before Eva had reached the top. Instead of abseiling down the other side with the rest, she waited at the top, shuffling along to be near Millie. "Give us your hand, Eva."

Panting and puffing, Eva climbed one hand at a time, her lungs feeling like they might explode at any moment and her heart thundering like the footfalls of giants. Closer and closer she came, until finally she could grasp Millie's hand. Isla wrapped an arm around her waist and helped tug her up, steadying Eva until she could get her breath back.

"Haha... haha... I did it...!" Eva breathed. She had trouble focusing and her brain felt like it wanted to shut down and sleep for a week, but she'd done it!

"Now we need to get back down," Millie said, laughing. She hugged Eva and dropped down the rope to the other side of the wall, landing with the usual flourish.

"Ready?" Isla asked.

"I think so," Eva said, taking a few breaths and carefully swinging a leg over so she could crawl down, holding the rope with one hand and Isla keeping a

watchful eye on her. Letting gravity do some of the hard work, she slid down as slowly as possible; it wouldn't do to go getting rope burns on her hands.

At the bottom, another Sarge Subordinate congratulated them and sent them on their way, where they reached the final challenge. Two small hills, each around a metre tall and several metres apart with a deep trench dug between them, greeted the girls. Built over the miniature chasm, a triangular-shaped structure made from sturdy metal stood with a thick rope similar to the ones at the wall hanging from the centre point.

"A rope swing?" Isla said, running up the hill and peering over into the gap. "Okay, that's actually a pretty big drop."

The other three had already managed the distance and were waiting on the other side. On this side, the last of Sarge's henchmen stood on the hill, holding the rope. He wagged it meaningfully. "This is the final stage, girls, you're nearly done!"

Millie went first, running up the gentle slope and jumping, taking the rope from the man's hand and swinging across with no obvious effort on her part. She landed on the other side and swung the rope back for him to catch.

"Next?" he said.

"Millie will catch you," Isla said to Eva, pushing her up the slope.

Eva crested the hill, standing at the top and staring down into the yawning chasm. In reality, it was no more than a few metres to the other side, but the human brain cares little for reason when presented with something it fears, and Eva had never been good with heights.

"If you jump from there you can make it across, you don't need to take a running jump," Isla added.

"Have you done something like this before?" Eva asked with a touch of tremolo in her voice.

"No, just looking at the distance and making an educated guess," Isla said. "If you mess up that side, you can always swing back, I'll be here as well."

"O-Okay," Eva said, setting her face into a determined expression. She took the rope, counted to three, and instantly bottled out. "This time, for real," she said, and tried again. With a jump into the great unknown, she swung across

with a continual ‘aaaaaah’ of terror and let go on the other side, slamming straight into Millie. They rolled down the slope and came to rest at the bottom, this time with Millie on top.

“Ow...” Millie muttered, giggling again. “You did good, Eva!”

“Thanks,” Eva said, pushing Millie off and helping her up. “That’s twice I’ve knocked you flat now.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Millie said with a suggestive wink.

A sound vaguely reminiscent of a certain vine-swinging jungle man preceded the arrival of Isla, who landed perfectly, lost her footing, and tumbled down to land at Millie’s feet. Here, she shook her head and gazed up at her friend’s upside down face. “Need to work on my landing.”

Millie helped her up. “Your landing was fine, it’s your recovery that sucks.”

“Thank you for the blunt yet strangely kind words, Mistress Millie,” Isla said with a bow, and brushed herself down.

The other three girls crowded around, thanking Isla for the earlier support and giving some support of their own, then the six of them took a jog back to the start point, where Sarge awaited.

His angular features split into a wide grin. “Welcome back! Good job, all of you, especially Millie and Isla. I’m always pleased to see my girls helping each other with support and encouragement.”

Millie grinned in response. “I love helping others.”

Sarge beamed at her. “Seems our Slogh recruit isn’t so *slow* when it comes to team building.”

Millie saluted. “Yessir! I’ve helped out with a bunch of camps and things where we did this kind of thing, it can be a lot of fun.” Behind her, Isla’s expression indicated that she was pleased at their instructor’s horrible pun.

Another hour ticked past and soon the other four groups had completed the course and returned.

Sarge lined them up and stood before them, giving a round of applause.

“Congratulations, idol girls! You pass with flying colours!”

The girls cheered.

“Remember,” Sarge continued, “while it’s possible to reach the top by yourselves, helping each other will get you there faster and far more enjoyably! Now, run back to the building, the rest of the evening is yours to use as you like. Good job, all of you!”

They thanked him and departed, wearily in some cases, excitedly in others, and relieved in all of them. Millie tugged Eva along with her, hooking up with Isla on the way past, and the three of them headed to the building to get some water before the flight back to the lodge.

The moment the skybus touched down and the girls piled off they were greeted by the tantalising scent of glorious food; more jacket potatoes, hot dogs, burgers, ribs, kebabs, and various other items being cooked over several barbeques ranged along the front of the lodge.

“Sweet, I haven’t had a barbeque in a written page,” Millie said, drooling in a manner reminiscent of Anise upon seeing cute new idols.

“Written page...?” Eva said.

Isla came to the rescue. “Age. In an age. Millie likes rhyming.”

“Ah, I see,” Eva said, giggling at this new nugget of information. She wished them both a pleasant evening and headed off to get some food.

“You like her, don’t you?” Isla said.

Unsure of her friend’s meaning, Millie simply smiled. “Yep, she’s lovely.” She pulled Isla over to one of several folding tables the staff had set up on the paved area, deliberating over what to have.

“Well... at least Azusa’s not here to knock them over this time,” Isla muttered, laughing.

“Mm?”

“No, nothing!”

Shrugging, Millie surveyed the spread. “In any case, need food, let’s see...”

“You’re not about to do something disgusting, are you?” Isla said with a theatrical groan.

“Not this time,” Millie said, picking up a plate and loading it with a couple of buns. She added ketchup and mustard, then moved along to grab two burgers.

Isla took some things as well, they spent a short time cooking—mostly Millie, as Isla had very little clue about this particular skill—ate, then crashed out by the water’s edge, exhausted after their day’s activities. An hour slipped past as they chatted about inconsequential topics such as Millie’s disgusting food combinations and how adorable Eva was, then they headed inside to their room.

Upon arriving upstairs, Millie saw Eva coming from the other end of the hall. She waved. “Sleep tight, Eva.”

“Ah, yes, and you!” Eva said, blushing, the soft red contrasting with her dark hair. She disappeared into her room.

Millie giggled. “Man, she’s way too cute.”

Entering her own room with Isla, they jumped into their respective bunks and got an early night.

Chapter 23: She Who Dares...

The second day of their camp dawned bright and sunny, and Millie was up first. She ran downstairs, prepared them a drink each, and zipped back up to the room. “You’re not doing so great this morning, huh?” She handed a mug to her vaguely awake companion.

“Mm, I’m not normally this bad, but yesterday was rough. How are you okay?” Isla said, sitting up—fortunately the ceiling was high enough that she didn’t bump her head—and rubbing her aching legs.

Millie shrugged. “Running is an activity I can do without needing money.”

Isla’s entire store of blood rushed to her cheeks. “Sorry, that was thoughtless of me.” She drank some of the deliciously sweet coffee, slapped her cheeks a few times, and jumped out of bed. Half an hour was spent showering, then breakfast was obtained.

As they ate, sitting together at one of the tables outside the lodge, Millie caught sight of Eva looking at her. She waved, received a blush, smile, and wave in response, then went back to her meal.

Today heralded the start of the two days the girls had in which to pick the brains of the academy instructors in specific disciplines. Eva had immediately headed off with several of the others in order to accost the academy’s very own retired top model, a beautiful, tall, and imposing lady called Nicola Ward, who had been Aida’s number one model for close to a decade before retiring to become an instructor at Dreamstar Academy.

Meanwhile, Millie tugged Isla off to one of the other instructors—a fabulously dressed and blonde-haired man known as the Dancing Sunkiss to his many fans—to obtain some personal tuition alongside a few of the others. Isla’s interest in becoming an idol like Luna meant she needed to be capable of dance, so this would be her first step.

Around the side of the main building was a paved area large enough for several dozen girls to practice, and the Dancing Sunkiss was already there, giving a dozen of the idols some tuition, filling the air with the gentle grunts

and gasps of extreme activity. Half of the girls were presently engaged in stretches while the other half performed a basic set of dance practice steps.

At the edge of the paved area furthest from the building, the Dancing Sunkiss stood casting his gaze over the assembled idols and occasionally issuing some advice here, or a gentle rebuke there.

“So this is the Dancing Sunkiss?” Isla said, nodding towards him.

Millie smiled. “Yup. Best dancer I’ve ever seen.” She walked over to their resident dance instructor. “Morning, Dan.”

“Dan?” Isla said, surprised.

The Dancing Sunkiss winked at her. “That’s my name, try not to wear it out.”

“Hang on... you mean your stage name is actually based on your real name?” Isla added.

“It’s more common than you might think,” Millie said, tapping Isla on the shoulder and heading for the paving to begin her stretches.

“Get your stretches in with Millie and we’ll begin,” Dan said, gesturing for Isla to join her friend.

Isla confirmed this and got started with warmups; reaching their arms down to their toes; side to side with arms straight up in order to stretch their back and shoulder muscles; seated on the floor with legs stretched wide open so they could reach down and touch their toes. Fortunately, Isla was well-versed in pre-tennis warm-ups and had no issues keeping up.

Next was a series of simple steps forward, back, and side to side while swinging their arms out alternately and keeping a proper sense of spatial awareness; rookie idols had a tendency to focus on their own bodies while they trained, and could end up bumping into their dance partners.

It was a full hour before Dan was sufficiently satisfied that they were getting the hang of things. He therefore introduced a new aspect to their training.

“Remember your smiles!” he called across, clapping his hands a few times and making several of the girls jump in surprise. “Some idols can get away without smiling, most cannot. Always, always be smiling, no matter how worn out you are!”

The girls responded with a weary ‘*okay!*’ and returned to their exercises, each of them sporting the sort of rictus-like grin you might see on a skull at Halloween. On-demand smiling, while also putting forth the insane energy and effort required for a fully choreographed dance routine during a live performance, was one of the most difficult aspects to becoming a professional idol.

“Smile, not grimace,” Dan added, noting the strained expressions of most of his students. He had them focus on him, then demonstrated the sort of perfect and pristine smile he meant; the whitest, brightest live television show host smile any of the girls had ever seen. “The very best way to maintain a smile like this is to enjoy yourself to the fullest. Your fans can sense when you’re truly having the time of your life, they’re there to share in it with you.”

Isla could attest to this, thinking back to the performance by Hot Stuff when they had just arrived on Aida. The look of utter bliss on her face as she performed at the park had been infectious.

Dan had them try again, this time receiving thirteen beautiful smiles with less of the constipated look. “Better! Always be aware of your expression while training, make it a habit so that you don’t need to consciously think about it when you’re performing for real. Got it?”

They gave a crisp ‘*yes!*’.

“Kick-ass!” Dan said, striking a pose. “For idols, your body is your weapon, and your smile is one of the most potent tools in your arsenal. Be sure to cultivate it and use it well. Now, let’s move onto some basic dance practice.”

With that, he pulled Millie out of the group and used her for illustration purposes, given he already knew her ability. He had the rest line up in two rows of six, started a simple drum beat on a small music player he had set up on a table nearby, and launched into a basic set of practice moves with a one-two-three-four rhythm, mirrored by Millie. The girls danced along in time.

“Get used to the beat, synchronise yourself with it until your body moves of its own accord,” Dan said, coming to a halt and gesturing for Millie to continue. “One-two-three-four! One-two-three-four! Eyes ahead, remember your smiles!”

Another hour soon vanished, at which point he adjourned them for the day. Overdoing their practice could easily lead to accidents of a painful and long-lasting nature, so he had them spend another fifteen minutes on cool-down stretches, then let them make their weary way over to the building for a shower.

“That was intense,” Isla said, wiping herself down with a towel.

“Aye,” Millie said, beaming all over her face.

“You know Dan, then?” Isla said as they walked around to the front entrance and upstairs to their room.

“He hires me sometimes for stuff like today,” Millie said. Opening the door into their room, she crashed on the bunk and beamed. “Back when I first tried out for Dreamstar, it was Dan who assessed my ability.”

“You mean he was so impressed that he decided to give you a job?” Isla said, dropping into one of the comfy chairs in their room.

“Pretty much. Never a good idea to turn your nose up at potential work, right?” Millie nodded. “Especially if you need the money.”

“Opportunities are everywhere, huh?” Isla murmured. She nodded. “Something to keep in mind.”

“Anyway, let’s go get a shower,” Millie said, grabbing her things and heading back out.



The rest of the Saturday went past at speed, the various idols in their groups so busy that they barely noticed the sun sliding across the sky, and soon it was time to head back to the lodge for supper. Splitting into groups based on their interests, they grabbed a bite to eat and wandered off to points along the beach so they could sit and discuss their individual action plans, crafted over a full day of enjoyable activities.

Again, Millie caught Eva staring at her, so she left Isla sitting on the sand and wandered across to their gothic beauty, crouching down. She leaned closer, noting with interest how Eva’s eyes widened in mild terror. “What’s up?” She moved closer still. “Fancy me?”

“Eh!? Ah... no...” Eva shook her head, laughing awkwardly.

“No? Oh. Shame.” Millie moved close enough to whisper, “Because I fancy *you*.” With this, she blew gently into Eva’s ear—resulting in a cute little ‘*kya!*’ of surprise—and wandered back over to Isla, dropping to her knees to chat about their day.

Eva was rooted to the spot for a few minutes, a hand up to her ear and staring intently at her playful new friend. She shivered a little despite the warm temperature here on the beach, and joined her own group.

Another hour passed by as the shadows lengthened and one of Aida’s twin moons loitered around the horizon, unsure whether it wanted to be seen just yet. Sarge had constructed a large campfire in the sand between the landing pad and the lodge, and now worked hard to light it while the staff members lounged around on folding seats with cool refreshments, indicating the day was done.

The girls crowded around after obtaining their own drinks—some alcoholic, some not—pulling up a number of short logs to sit on, retrieved from the side of the lodge where they were normally stored. They toasted marshmallows, sipped their drinks, and simply enjoyed some time kicking back and relaxing after another hard but fulfilling day.

Isla had run off to talk to the Dancing Sunkiss again, so Millie joined Eva in hopes of advancing things a little.

“Mind if I sit here?” Millie asked.

“Not at all!” Eva said, a little flustered; ever since the ear-blowing incident earlier she had been on the defensive around Millie, wondering what to make of her. She shuffled sideways on the log to make room.

“How’s it going?” Millie asked, dropping down and toasting a chunk of marshmallow.

“Very well, thanks. Pretty tired, but okay otherwise,” Eva said between bites of a hot dog. She had been late to supper thanks to spending additional time on her walking.

Millie edged a little closer to her. “Glad to hear it. Also, just letting you know... I wasn’t joking earlier when I said I fancy you. I like you a lot, actually.”

“You do...? But—”

“We’re both girls?”

“Yeah...”

Millie let out a suggestive laugh. “I barely even think of things like that. All I know is that I like you, and I’d really enjoy getting to know you better. Anything else just gets in the way of fun things happening.” She ate the blackened marshmallow in silence, staring at the flames and chuckling at Isla attempting some new dance moves, with limited success.

Meanwhile, Eva stared at Millie, the hot dog still hovering around her mouth entirely forgotten. “Do you ever worry?”

“Sure. But not often.” Millie spent a few minutes telling Eva some of her background. “I don’t see much point to worrying. If I want to try something, I will, even if it turns out badly or wasn’t what I expected.”

“That’s a really positive way of looking at things,” Eva said quietly, and finally ate the rest of her dog.

“Life’s full of all sorts of fun things, some of them things I’d miss out on if I worried about what people thought of me, or what was accepted, or whatever. For example...” Millie sneakily placed a kiss on Eva’s cheek. “I’d love to try kissing you!”

Eva glowed about as brightly as the campfire. “M-M-Millie!?”

“Tell you what, if you’re interested... there’s a little clearing in the woods.” Millie pointed at the treeline beyond the landing pad. “See the path going into the trees? Just follow that. There’s a little stream beyond the clearing. Meet me there, say... eleven o’clock? If you’re not there, well... I understand, don’t worry. I hope you will be, though.”

With that, Millie stood, making her way across to Isla and leaving a thoughtful—and again mildly terrified—Eva. She retreated to the building with Isla, running up to their room. “Aaah, that was a fun day. As much as I enjoy running and exercise, being able to get stuck into some dance is the best thing.”

Isla beamed. “Yeah, it was fun.” She yawned. “Mm, also tiring.”

“Go to bed if you want, I don’t mind.”

“Yeah... yeah, I think I will. Night, Millie,” Isla said, and struggled into her pyjamas, climbing up and jumping into the top bunk.

Millie read some random webpages on the stellarnet, enjoying an ice cold beer from the fridge downstairs and sitting comfortably on the balcony, keeping an eye out for any gothic beauties she might spot.

A little before eleven, the beauty in question exited the building, running across the paved area, over the sand, and into the woods, her voluminous hair bouncing in a way that made Millie hyperventilate.

Entering the room, Millie closed the French doors, checked Isla—peacefully sleeping—and changed into her tracksuit. “Wish me luck!” she whispered, and exited. Downstairs, she ran into the woods, following the path to the clearing. “Now, let’s see if I really did use my entire lifetime’s supply of luck.”

She certainly hoped to get lucky tonight, so this seemed like a good time to check her remaining fortune reserves. Millie heard by the splashing of water that she was closing in on the correct area, and soon reached the clearing.

There, glowing in the moonlight and looking more beautiful than Millie could ever have imagined, stood Eva, leaning against a tree and staring at the running water. A snapping twig made her jump and look around.

Millie waved and stopped before her. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you!”

Eva appeared... nervous. Very nervous, perhaps understandably, given what her presence here effectively meant. “Um, evening.”

Millie embraced her. “Relax, tonight goes as far as you want, no further. Let’s just see what happens, okay? Also, if it helps, I’ve never done anything like this before either.” She took Eva’s hand and squeezed tightly, reassuringly.

“You haven’t?”

“Nope.”

Eva’s jaw dropped. “You seemed so confident earlier!” she whispered in a tone that carried to the ocean.

“I just do things as they occur to me, I don’t worry beyond that.”

Eva laughed, relaxing. “I’m actually more comfortable knowing that. I thought you were really experienced.”

Millie stroked Eva’s cheek with the back of her hand. “Totally new to this. You’re certain?” The hand made its way down her neck, gently caressing and stroking.

Closing her eyes, Eva enjoyed the intimate and sexy sensation of her new friend's fingers tenderly touching her. "I think so. I don't want any regrets, Millie, I really like you!"

"I was hoping all those little glances and things weren't just my imagination. Thanks, you've just made my day!" Millie touched her forehead to Eva's, their breath coming rapid, fast, warming each other's lips.

Wrapping their arms around each other and closing their eyes, they shared a moment of intimate wonder, bathed in moonlight streaming through the rustling leaves above them. Brief moans escaped their lips, pecking and nibbling and tying tongues, their hands slipping and sliding all over...

Coming back to reality, Millie exhaled, opening her eyes. "That was..."

"...amazing," Eva murmured, and went in for another.

And another. Then several more. Similar to the non-stop running they had been put through upon arriving, they were now intent on non-stop kissing. Every single touch of their quivering lips pumped their combined libido higher and higher.

"So... guess this means I'm getting lucky tonight?" Millie said, grinning in the moonlight as she clasped her partner's hands and touched her forehead to Eva's.

"Eh!?"

"I'm kidding!" Millie gave her another kiss. "Actually, that's a total lie, I want you more than anything."

"I... I'm not sure," Eva whispered. Gazing into Millie's eyes, it was plain as day that she probably was in fact interested, but anxiety is a powerful inhibitor.

"Let's head to my room? Isla's there, so we should probably behave anyway," Millie whispered, nibbling her way up and down her partner's neck some more.

Eva agreed this sounded nice, so they strolled back along the path to the lodge, holding hands and sharing an occasional kiss. She hesitated as they reached the landing pad. "Um, Millie?"

"Aye?" Millie stopped and turned.

"I wanted to thank you. I'm glad you approached me."

“I just take each moment as it comes, can’t go wasting them, right? And I’m not about to let a girl like you slip through my fingers,” Millie said. Privately, she thought she might be able to find some *other* uses for said fingers, however.

They remained locked into each other’s embrace for a few minutes, then disengaged, kissed, and walked—Millie wrapping an arm around Eva’s waist, preferring this to hand holding as it allowed closer physical contact—back to the lodge. Upon arriving, Eva softly pressed her lips to her partner’s one more time, lingering a moment.

In the room, Millie stripped in the blink of an eye, slipping into a loose white T-shirt. Just that, plus her equally virginal panties. Eva, meanwhile, ran down to her own room to grab pyjamas and toiletries.

She returned to see Millie in a barely dressed state and had to exercise *all* her willpower to not openly stare at the beautiful and slender legs presented for her inspection. “Is that how you sleep?” she asked in a low voice, doing her best to drag her eyes away; as much as she tried, she couldn’t seem to, Millie’s lithe body kept pulling them back.

“In the summer it is, I don’t like humid weather much,” Millie said, sliding into the bottom bunk and patting the mattress.

Eva gently steamed, pulling her clothes off and struggling into a sexy and silky two-piece set of pyjamas in a fetching violet colour. She was watched intently by Millie, who had *no* qualms about openly staring. Crawling into the bunk, Eva slid under the covers and immediately snuggled without thinking.

“This is more like it,” Millie whispered.

“Ah, Millie...!?” Eva whispered in a shocked tone. A finger that didn’t belong to her was delicately placed somewhere *very* private indeed.

“No?”

“We’re in the same room as Isla, you said we’d have to beh—*ah!*” Eva had trouble speaking as her bed buddy gently rubbed a finger up and down the soft material of her pyjamas, pressing tenderly into her soon-to-be-wetness.

“We just need to be quiet, no problem,” Millie said.

“I think I want to, Millie, but I’d like it to be special. Just us. Without having to be quiet? And maybe after getting to know each other some more?” Eva giggled.

Millie stared, her lips curling up into an amused smile. “You enjoy being loud?”

“I didn’t mean like that!”

Retracting her arm, Millie instead wrapped it around Eva’s waist. “I’m perfectly happy being loud and late, no worries.”

“Loud and...?”

“Wait. I’ll wait for you. It’s my first time, too, after all, better make sure we do it right.” Millie went in for a kiss but instead tenderly licked all around her lover’s lips.

Eva fidgeted. “A-Aha, that’s really ticklish. But it feels so good, too...”

“Do mine next!”

“S-Sure,” Eva whispered, and did as asked, tracing the outline of Millie’s lips with her tongue. “I never imagined something like this could feel so naughty.”

“Pretty good, isn’t it?”

A silent nod was all Eva managed, before going in for some additional licking, resulting in them accidentally tying themselves together; Millie had quite the dextrous tongue, something Eva privately wondered as to the efficacy of vis-à-vis certain intimate areas of her body...

They were briefly interrupted by Isla poking her head over the edge of the above bunk. She smiled, still half asleep. “So Millie pounced, huh? Congrats, both of you.”

Millie grinned at her friend’s upside down face, happy to know Isla was apparently already versed in these relationships. “Couldn’t resist, Eva’s just too much of a cutie.”

Eva nodded, embarrassed at being discovered in bed with another girl. “Um, thank you!”

Isla’s head vanished, her loose hair whipping up and out of sight. “Back to sleep I go... night!”

In an effort to mask their noise a bit, Millie pulled the sheets up and over their heads. This had the additional effect of making things even more cosy and intimate. A few minutes were spent like this, simply kissing and licking lips, occasionally staring into each other's eyes in the dim depths.

"I might've got a bit carried away tonight, so let's head to my room tomorrow when we get back and see what happens?" Millie suggested. "Or we could hit up Isla first?"

"That sounds wonderful, yes, I'd like to spend more time with both of you," Eva whispered back, missing the naughty intent behind Millie's phrasing. She fidgeted, interested in going further, but also feeling it was too soon.

Millie yawned. "Mm, okay, now I'm super tired. Night, Eva."

"Night...!" Eva murmured, closing her eyes and attempting to process her new relationship while simultaneously trying to sleep. Not the easiest thing to accomplish, if she was honest...

Chapter 24: A Quiet Sunday Afternoon

The Sunday went much as the Saturday had, split into their respective groups working hard on their chosen interests, and soon it was time to head home. They were ferried back to the mainland at around five in the afternoon, spent a short time tidying the site and packing, then got underway.

Sitting on the skybus's rear seat again, Millie held Eva's hand, fingers interlocked and enjoying this last half an hour or so of time together before they had to separate, if only briefly. Isla dropped down to Millie's other side and remained silent, lost in thought.

By the time they reached the academy, the sun was dipping back down towards the horizon, so Isla tugged Millie to her own room with the intention of simply spending some time together. Anise would be back later that night, but for now a pleasant Sunday evening with a cup of cocoa and nothing to do but chat and get to know Millie sounded wonderfully enjoyable.

Eva gave her brand new lover a kiss outside Isla's room, and headed upstairs to her room on the third floor to unwind and relax for half an hour, arranging to head back down to Isla's room a bit later.

Preparing a drink for them both, Isla ran back through and placed two mugs on her desk, followed by collapsing on the bed. "That was a fun weekend. Also a crazy one."

Millie sat with her. "Last one was worse, if you can believe it. Dan was ill and couldn't make it. I ended up running for most of the second day as well."

Shivering a little in abject terror, Isla drank some of her cocoa. "Good thing I came to Dreamstar when I did."

"Eh, I still had fun. I said before I love running, right? I know every inch of Slogh. All the little streets and alleys, the areas surrounding the city, everything."

"So you know Hotel Grandia?" Isla asked.

"I've worked there," Millie said, pointing her mug. "Part time, and only for a few months when I was at school, but still. Nice place."

"It's where Anise is staying with Lisa."

"Knowing Lisa, she'll have booked a nice room with a big ol' double bed," Millie said, giggling.

Shuffling back to sit with her back to the wall, Isla let out an inaudible sigh.

"I'm a bit jealous, if I'm honest."

"Of Lisa?"

"Mm."

"Mira hasn't told me much about you, so I'm guessing here, but... you like Anise?" Millie hazarded.

"More than anything," Isla said. "Feeling's mutual, too, which is... kind of awkward."

Millie tilted her head. "What, she feels the same? Uh, in which case why aren't you together?"

Isla explained about the evening out at Stardew, and the agreement to stay single and see how things went. "Pretty much where we are now. Interested, but also kind of wanting to experience other relationships for a while."

"So you're exploring?"

"I guess that's a good way to put it. And figuring out my feelings for her. Fair to say I'm done figuring and want her like nothing else." Another gentle sigh escaped Isla's lips.

Sitting back, legs stretched ahead, Millie edged a little closer to Isla. "You're best friends, right?"

"Yup."

"Wouldn't that make your decision easier?"

Isla paused with her drink before her lips. "How so?"

"You said it's awkward, yeah? Because you've known each other for so long? You need to think more carefully about it because of your existing relationship, something like that?"

"Yeah..."

"I just thought it should be a pretty easy decision if you've known each other that long. Have you ever argued about things?"

“Well... yeah, occasionally, but we always make up really quickly because we talk about basically everything,” Isla said, brows furrowed.

“What’s there to think about, then? You fancy each other, you’re super close and everything already, not much of a stretch to go that bit further, right?”

Tapping her mug a few times, Isla stared at the opposite wall for a moment, then laughed. “You have an amazingly easy-going streak, don’t you?”

“Hasn’t let me down yet,” Millie said, beaming with pride. “If you wanna talk about anything else, lemme know. Might help to have an outside perspective.”

Isla leaned over to brush shoulders, kissed Millie on the cheek, and sat back upright. “I might like that one day, sure. For now I’m content to see where life leads me. Thanks, Millie, I’m happy I met you.”

“Likewise. If you wanna talk, gimme a Peter an’ Paul, I’ll come running right over.”

A knock at the door indicated their third had arrived, so Isla jumped off the bed and let Eva in, dressed in a black knee-length one-piece with white lacy trims and details. “That’s a really pretty dress,” she said, standing to one side to let her new friend in.

“Thank you,” Eva said, bobbing her head on the way past. She sat with Millie and gave her a quick peck on the lips in greeting.

Returning to her position on Millie’s other side, Isla pulled her phone out. “Either of you into Aphrodite?”

“I’ve not looked into them much, to be honest,” Millie said.

Eva indicated she also hadn’t.

“You were talking to Minami when we met, though,” Isla said.

Millie shrugged. “Sure, I know them, everyone does. But I’ve not followed much of their professional life.”

“So you’ve not seen their last tour?” Isla added. The other two shook their heads. “It was amazing. Anise got me hooked on them a few days ago. I always knew she liked them as a unit, but I’d never checked out any of their music or shows before now.”

“Don’t they also do short dramas?” Eva said.

“Half-hour one-shots, yeah,” Isla replied. “I’ve only seen a couple so far, but they were really good. Mystery and all that, if you’re into it.”

“I love mysteries,” Eva said, eyes bright.

“You into acting at all? Or just the modelling?” Millie asked.

“I do have an interest in acting, but I’m not that good yet,” Eva said. “I’m more interested in modelling, but I’d like to maybe work in film one day.”

“Your gothic and sexy looks would be a sure winner in either,” Millie said. She beamed as her lover’s cheeks broke at least one of the laws of thermodynamics.

“I agree, I think you’d look stunning on the big screen,” Isla said.

If Eva’s cheeks had turned any redder the universe would probably have imploded. “Th-Thanks.”

Isla fiddled around with her phone, placing it on the edge of the desk and activating its built-in holo-display. “Mm, so what sort of things are you two into? Mysteries, sure, but anything else?”

“Things? You mean like genres? Thrillers!” Millie stated. “Especially thrillers with mystery elements.”

“I enjoy mystery books,” Eva said, happy to have found a point of common ground this soon after meeting her new lover.

Isla skimmed through her phone’s files in an attempt to find one concert among many; since arriving on Aida she had download *many* new things, and Isla wasn’t the most organised of girls. “I’ve never really been into mystery stuff until I saw Aphrodite’s shows. Makes my head hurt trying to figure it out,” she murmured, still searching.

“I like a lighter tone in my movies more than serious stuff, though,” Millie continued. “I like a bit of flair, a bit of *panache*.”

“Something like the Fighting Falcon?” Isla said.

“Yup,” Millie nodded.

“Anise loves his work,” Isla added, finally finding the right file and setting it to play.

Quietenning down, they watched the two hour long live concert. Isla explained during breaks between the songs that Aphrodite put on four special

tours per year, one for each season—always themed to match—and the one currently playing was recorded from their spring tour.

“If I’d known about them I could’ve gone to their summer tour,” Isla said as another song ended. “Too late to get tickets now. Might try and hit the winter one instead.”

“Not autumn?” Millie said, draining a drink she had prepared during a break.

“I could... but don’t you think winter is more romantic?” Isla said. “They theme it differently each year. Like last year’s was snow-themed, but the year before they did something to do with death and skeletal imagery.”

Eva’s face lit up. “How did I miss that? It sounds wonderful.”

“Uh-oh, am I dating a necrophile?” Millie said, a faux look of worry on her features.

Giving her partner a gentle thump on the arm, Eva glowed with embarrassment. “I like anything gothic, skulls and things are a natural part of that!”

Isla buried her face in the pillow, laughing to the point of tears. She sat up and wiped her eyes. “Jeez, Millie...”

Millie chuckled at her friends’ glowing faces and ran to the bathroom to prepare another drink.

While she was gone, Eva investigated further. “How did you mean, they used skeletal imagery?”

Pausing the video, Isla waved a hand about in a proprietorial fashion, hoping to come across as an authority on Aphrodite despite having only been interested in them for less than a week. “You know how trees and things die in autumn, the leaves all drop and leave a skeleton until the next year? They did something with that as a theme, going all spooky. Kind of like that festival people used to celebrate on Earth.”

“Wow... I wish I could’ve seen that in person,” Eva said. “And do you mean Halloween?”

Isla pointed at her. “That one, yeah. We have our own traditions and festivals and things on Mars, we’ve never really celebrated any of Earth’s.

Well... not in the last hundred years, that I know of. Think we might've done when we first colonised, not sure."

"I'd love to hear about them some day. I'm into all sorts of festivals, especially anything with roots in folklore or legends," Eva said, her tone considerably firmer than Isla had become used to over the weekend. "Apollotia has its own festivals as well. The next big one will be the Lantern Festival in October."

"How about we go somewhere together one day soon? We can maybe eat out somewhere? We never did go to Mira's place..." Isla said, trailing off as she remembered making plans that had yet to come to fruition.

"Mira?"

"Mm? Oh, sorry. She was my mentor for the first week I was here. Her parents own a restaurant in the city we wanted to visit. Haven't found time yet."

Millie returned and handed out hot drinks. "You talking about Mira's folks' place?"

Isla accepted a steaming mug of cocoa. "Yep."

"Aaah, the curry there is to die for...!" Millie whispered, drooling in gastronomic excitement.

In order to stop Millie exploding messily all over the room, the girls arranged to go out together sometime over the next few weeks. This was followed by finishing up the live event, at which point Millie pounced on Eva, smothering her in kisses.

"I can leave you two alone?" Isla said, cocking her head. She remembered where they were. "Hang on, this is my room!"

Millie chuckled at this. "Maybe we should head back to mine?"

"Perhaps so," Eva murmured, mildly ashamed at allowing herself to get carried away.

"Off you both go, I could do with an early night anyway," Isla said, laughing at their antics.

Chapter 25: Decisions

Once they had left, Isla sent a text to Mira. An early night wasn't in fact on the cards, simply because there was something she needed to do first. A knock alerted her to her lover's arrival. She let Mira in and sat with her on the bed, immediately hugging her. "Mira... I..."

Mira tightened her embrace. "You've made your decision?"

"Mm... two of them."

"It's okay, just say what you need to," Mira whispered.

"I've been thinking about Anise, especially after meeting Millie," Isla said. "I felt jealous of Lisa, knowing they've spent the weekend together. Probably doing... things. But I also feel like I'm being unfair to you because I can't commit to anything... which brings me to the *other* decision."

"Both decisions require that we no longer be a thing, I'm fully aware of that, Isla. I will confess that I like you sufficiently to desire a relationship, but our lives as idols have to come first, yes?" Mira said, gently stroking her partner's back.

"Yeah. I'm not sure how I feel, there are girls I find attractive, girls I'd like to... well, you know. But I keep coming back to Anise and if given a choice, it has to be her," Isla responded with a brief sigh. "Not that I can do anything about it right now, which just makes it worse, hah."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive, you know," Mira said.

"What aren't?"

Pulling back for a moment so she could stare into Isla's beautiful eyes, Mira winked. "Think of my relationship with Lisa."

"Oh, you mean being casual? Mm... I don't know how that would work, to be honest."

"It's not for everyone. I'm simply pointing out that there are many ways to handle a relationship. My advice would be to talk it through with Anise when you get a chance. She seems like an open girl, just tell her how you feel and see what's she up for."

“Yeah, that’s probably the best way. But first—”

“—the offer?” Mira finished for her.

“The offer. It’s funny, we’ve been really casual and it’s only been a few days, yet I really don’t want to let you go, now it comes time to do it,” Isla murmured, shaking her head.

Tenderly stroking down the nape of her partner’s neck, Mira let out a soft laugh. “That’s perfectly normal. I’ve had a number of intimate liaisons of this nature, it never gets any easier to let go, no matter how long or short the relationship ended up being. You’ve made your decision?”

“I think so. Anise said she’ll wait as long as I need, so that’s not a problem, but you gave me until the end of the weekend, so...”

“So...”

“I want you to produce me! You’ve already given me some help, and I’m honestly struggling with where to even start, so having a proper producer feels like the right direction. I’ll do everything I can to not let you down.”

Burying her face in Isla’s shoulder, Mira whispered, “Thank you, Isla,” and pulled away. “In that case, let’s talk next steps. First, a confirmation. You’re absolutely sure you want me to produce you?”

“I am. Honestly, considering how much I normally hesitate with decisions, I’m surprised at how quickly I came to this one.”

“Time pressure helps, which is why producers exist, to prevent idols from being lazy,” Mira said with another wink. “Next, I’ll have to talk to Amanda and fill in the necessary paperwork. As your producer, I’ll be entering you for auditions, setting up live events, and all manner of other things that require I have permission to speak on your behalf. That also means signing a contract, which will be handled by the academy.”

Isla nodded. “No problem.”

“Third and finally for now... I want to jump into your bed for one last night of fun.”

Isla blushed a little, but nodded again regardless. “I think that can be arranged.”

“Wonderful. Now, one other thing. I’m always available for you. As a producer or a friend or just someone to confide in about intimate matters. I’m a great believer in talking problems out. That said, here’s a little advice for you and Anise: talk. And by that, I mean *really* talk to her.”

Isla raised an eyebrow. “We already do?”

“You may think you do, but do you really? For example, have you ever discussed how you like to masturbate? Or exactly where you like a partner to touch you? Whether you prefer fingers or tongue?”

Isla’s ears burned. “Those aren’t things I’d normally think of talking about with a friend, so no...”

Mira stifled a cute little giggle quite outside her usual character. “I talk to Lisa about these things on a regular basis. But then our relationship is kind of special. Once you’re together, talk to her about what you want from a relationship. I can definitely say my time with Lisa has been much enhanced by us discussing what we like.”

“Well... Anise loves talking about naughty things in any case, so I doubt that’ll be a problem,” Isla said, thinking back to a certain conversation involving her panties. “Uh, I kinda need a bath before anything else, do you mind waiting?”

“I’m more than happy to occupy myself with a book, don’t you worry, a little frustration is enjoyable to me. As long as I’m getting that action later?” Mira said, tilting her head slightly.

“Maybe I should leave the bath until we’re done...” Isla muttered, laughing as she wandered off to the en-suite. She called back through, “And you’re definitely getting lucky, Mira!”

This made Mira crack up, a full-throated laugh the likes of which Isla had never heard from her before. “That’s my girl.”

In the bathroom, Isla settled down into her steaming hot bath. As she soaked, she considered the last week, during which time she had seen Mira a fair number of times, often briefly, occasionally for a little longer, and always enjoyably. And tonight would be the final *enjoyably*... for both of them. Her stomach sank at the thought.

A mere week, and she was already super fond of her. But that was the point, wasn't it? She *did* like Mira, and that meant she couldn't go stringing her along while her thoughts were almost entirely centred on Anise.

A week was barely any time at all. But similar to how a few simple words—'*I love you*', '*we're breaking up*', '*I like pineapple on pizza*'—had the ability to ruin someone emotionally, whether in a positive or negative way, one week was more than enough to become very attached, if it was the right person.

Heaving a sigh, Isla clambered out of the bath, dried herself, wrapped a towel around her body, and wandered back to her room.



She returned to see Mira seated demurely on the edge of the bed with a leg up, reading a book on her phone.

"What are you reading?" Isla asked, sitting next to her.

Mira looked up. "*101 Ways to Seduce Cute Girls.*"

"As if you need a book for that," Isla said, stifling a laugh.

"You're quite correct, but it's always fun to play with you, my sweet," Mira said, placing the phone to one side. "It's not far off, though. It's a collection of a dozen short romance stories."

"Do I even need to ask if all the characters are girls?"

"Probably not."

"Figures."

Isla's hair still needed some drying, so Mira disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a hairdryer and brush, plugged the dryer in, and waved it back and forth, brushing it out as she went. Isla fidgeted. Heavily.

"Something wrong?" Mira asked.

"No, I'm fine... fine!" Isla said, plainly indicating that she wasn't, in actual fact, fine at all.

Mira laughed. "You don't seem fine, you're fidgeting like mad."

Isla froze, eyes closed. Breathing heavily. Thinking, considering, deciding.

“Wa—!” Mira yelped as Isla turned and pushed her down on the bed. “Oh my, unusual for you to be this aggressive.”

“I promised you were getting lucky tonight, so...” Isla murmured.

“Music to my ears.”

Aggressively, passionately, much more sexy and determined than ever before, Isla kissed Mira all over, losing control to the point of sliding her partner’s skirt zip down and stroking her somewhere intimate. Returning to reality, she stopped, eyes tightly shut, her laboured breaths warm against Mira’s lips and her hand gently cupping her lover’s crotch.

“I get the feeling this is going to be one hell of a final night together,” Mira whispered.

“Aha, yeah, it uh... it seems having my hair brushed gets me going,” Isla mumbled, her body feeling like it was on fire with lust.

“I noticed.” Mira chuckled and held Isla tightly, enjoying the feel of her body lying lightly on top of her, the rapid beating of her heart indicating extreme excitement.

“Okay, I’ll try and control myself this time. Please, carry on,” Isla said, sitting up and putting a modicum of effort into making sure her towel stayed in place. For now, at least.

“Feel free to do it again if the mood takes you.” Mira continued brushing, waving the hairdryer back and forth until Isla’s hair was dry. She placed the dryer and brush on the desk beside the bed. “There, all done.”

Isla heaved a sigh of relief at that minor ordeal being over. All that remained now was to head to bed, even though it was only late afternoon. Sometimes waiting just wasn’t an option.

Mira grabbed Isla and pushed her down, lying on top. “You’re all set to jump into her arms, yes?”

“Yeah. I’m certain of my feelings now, I love Anise, I want to be with her, even if there are still some minor worries over doing so.”

“Splendid. I’m happy for you. Though slightly less so for Lisa... and myself,” Mira said with a wink.

Lifting her head a little, Isla pecked her lover’s lips. “Sorry, Mira.”

“No apologies, my dear. Also, you know some people might consider it odd to be discussing your future partner with your current one?”

Isla narrowed her eyes. “And who was it that said I should talk about everything?”

“A fair point.”

They jumped off the bed again and Mira undressed, watched by Isla, whose towel had fallen away to reveal her slender form.

Isla unconsciously moved an arm over her breasts and covered her lower region with a hand. “It’s amazing how, even now, I’m a bit self-conscious when you stare at my body.”

Mira couldn’t tear her gaze away from this vision of perfection. “You have precisely nothing to feel self-conscious over, my sweet.” Tugging the rest of her own clothes off, she was now down to just her coal black underwear, something so sexy and mature that Isla probably wouldn’t even have felt comfortable wearing it. It had an oddly chromatic effect, like a shifting rainbow, moving and altering whenever she changed position.

“You’re only a year older than me and yet you’re so sexy,” Isla said, taking in this glorious sight.

“I’ve always been tall, so I suppose the mature image suited me best, even from a young age,” Mira said.

Isla manoeuvred them back to the bed and they climbed in together, pulling the sheets over and snuggling. A degree of suspicious movement under the sheets combined with heavy breathing indicated naughtiness already taking place.

Isla found this intriguing. “Mira... what are you up to?” A suggestive giggle was all the response she received, resulting in her cracking up. She lifted the sheets a little and peered down into the dim depths, where her partner was playing with herself, a hand stuffed down the front of her panties. “Getting started without me?”

“Have I ever told you I *love* being watched?” Mira murmured.

“You have not...” Isla said, transfixed by her partner’s fingers moving around under the material of her panties like a cat attempting to escape a duvet. “Is this how you normally...?”

“Play with myself? No, not even close. This is how I do it for a partner,” Mira said, pushing the sheets back over to the side and sliding her panties down. She used a foot to drop them on the sheets, then placed a hand flat over her pussy, playing coy.

Isla swallowed. Hard. “So you’d like me to watch you m-masturbate?”

“Mm, if you please?” Mira whispered, lifting her hand and using a single finger to slide up and down her wetness, staring all the while into her partner’s embarrassed eyes.

“You mentioned before about talking to your partner on how you like to masturbate, is this what you meant?”

“Mmhmm. Used to do this for Lisa pretty frequently back when we first started enjoying each other. We’d sit opposite and watch each other play. *Quite* hot, let me tell you.”

Isla’s pulse pounding heart was testament to the current hotness levels in her room. The sun had nothing on this heat. She shuffled her way down the bed and sat, legs crossed, between her partner’s legs. “O-Okay, give me a show!”

“With pleasure.” Mira ramped up her action, her gaze continually locked into Isla’s as she rubbed and fingered and stroked, using circular motions over her clit, pressing fingers deep inside, sliding up and down the entire length of her wetness...

“This might be one of the sexiest things I’ve ever witnessed,” Isla murmured.

“Let me see you, too,” Mira mumbled, shuddering a little as she enjoyed a near miss, stopping momentarily and letting her bits settle down again.

Nodding, Isla stripped her own panties off and went up on her knees, bringing herself up high enough for her partner to have a good view, while maintaining her own sexy vista. Her own fingers went to work caressing and fondling, splashing her lover’s legs with a few droplets of pleasure.

Delighted moans filled the air as two beautiful and cute girls brought themselves closer to joint climax, and before long Isla simply couldn't resist being more involved with proceedings.

"Sorry, needs must!" she said, dropping herself down and lying back, manoeuvring to touch her own pussy to Mira's. Then she proceeded to grind like her life depended on it.

Wrapping her legs around Isla's and accepting this delectable position change without a word, Mira did all she could to align herself, creating a sexy, rhythmic gyration and using her fingers for additional stimulation.

Isla felt an eruption fast approaching, speeding up her action as much as possible until finally, virtually in sync with Mira, she enjoyed an explosive orgasm, the sort that knocks you flat for the next half an hour, the sort that seems to go on for approximately an eternity and a half, the sort that results in a great deal of post-coital clean up.

Mira cried out as her own finisher hit, equally as powerful and destructive, her back arching and legs shuddering as she came once, twice, three times in rapid succession and feeling like she might pass out from sheer pleasure overload.

After a few minutes of rising and falling chests, much panting, and a general glow of euphoria, Isla managed to crawl around and up the bed in order to collapse with her wonderful and amazing and incredible lover, snuggling close.

"Better?" she whispered into Mira's ear, once she had calmed down sufficiently to process speech again.

Mira gave a single crisp nod. "Much better. Ah, that felt amazing. Truly an evening of delicious tribulations." She gave Isla a wet kiss, slumping back and staring at the ceiling.

Isla's eyebrows arched upward. "Tribulations?"

"Never heard the term '*tribbing*' before?" Mira asked, stroking her fingers through her partner's hair. The *clean* hand's fingers; she was a naughty girl, but also a thoughtful one.

Isla shook her head. "Can't say I have."

“It’s an ancient word now, still in popular use, though. It’s the word for what we just enjoyed.”

“The grinding thing?”

“That’s the one.”

“Huh, had no idea there was a special word for it. Nice to know.”

Mira snickered. “There are many fun words for our enjoyable activities. Maybe ask Anise about some of them, I’m sure she has every single one memorised.”

“I’m sure!” Isla laughed.

Lifting her head, Mira searched for something downstream. “Where’d my panties go?”

“Uh, pretty sure I might’ve been sitting on them, sorry.” Isla sat up and retrieved the damp items, handing them over.

“No problem, I’m going to make them wet anyway,” Mira said, taking the items and using them to clean herself up. “There, now I can sleep in comfort.” She noticed her lover staring. “You appear to be interested in my underwear... which is an entirely fair reaction. I’m just wondering why?”

Isla was again transfixed, this time because Mira was now dangling her panties from a finger, swinging them back and forth. “Of course I’m interested, they belong to you. But I’m thinking more of Anise, as it happens.”

“Oh? Is this going to be some deliciously sexy titbit of information on your soon-to-be lover?”

Explaining her best friend’s predilection for other girls’ used panties, Isla finished by asking the question she never expected to be asking anyone, ever. “Would you mind me keeping them?”

Mira burst into wholly unrestrained laughter for the second time that evening, agreeing readily. She pinged the item across like a slingshot, expertly landing them on Isla’s head. “You’re welcome to my panties any time you like, inside or out. I’d love to see Anise’s face when you present those to her, but I suspect that’ll be during an intimate moment I probably shouldn’t be intruding on.”

Isla inhaled her partner's unique scent, going bright red at doing something that would normally be Anise's territory, before tugging them off and folding them. "She'll love you for this, trust me."

Once they had cleaned themselves up to satisfaction—including Isla putting the new acquisition away in one of her desk's drawers for safe keeping—they returned to snuggling under the covers.

Doing her best to avoid thinking too much about the next morning, when she would officially be single again, Isla shuffled a little closer, gave her partner a kiss on the lips, and closed her eyes.

This weekend would go down as one both one of the most enjoyable and most upsetting of her entire life. But as Anise had just enjoyed her own final weekend with a girl she very much liked, Isla could at least take solace in the knowledge that she wouldn't be alone.

Part 05: A Slogh Weekend

At the same time as Isla is being run ragged at Sarge's camp, Anise heads across to the neighbouring city of Slogh in order to record her brief role for Pride & Predators. With Lisa for company, the two of them enjoy some intimate time together and meet Lisa's other best friend, a high-born lady from the powerful colony world of Gran Manillo.

Chapter 26: Pride and... Predators?

Rewinding to when Isla had just left for her camp, Anise was also getting ready for a trip. In her case, after winning the acting audition, she had to head over to Slogh to record her small part in *Pride and Predators*. The brief filming session would be handled on the Friday afternoon.

Lisa had a couple of important engagements in the city the same weekend, so they booked a hotel together for totally innocent and professional reasons which had nothing to do with their current status as lovers.

Friday morning dawned and Anise had just come to after a late night getting sweaty, followed by chatting about her interest in producing music videos, something Lisa agreed to help her with when they reached Slogh.

She grabbed a quick shower, then returned to find her partner semi-awake. "Morning, hot stuff."

Lisa rubbed her eyes and sat up, her sparkly hair falling loose around her shoulders, un-brushed and sexy. "Morning..."

Anise's chest tightened at this cute display from an otherwise confident and poised girl. She grabbed a super slim-line camera out of her desk drawer, snapping several delightfully cute pictures of sleepy-head Lisa.

"Okay, less flashing me first thing in the morning, please," Lisa muttered, holding a hand up to shield her eyes.

"Flashing's not really my area of interest, but I admit I wouldn't mind seeing you do it," Anise said, grinning. She sat on the edge of the bed and put the camera away.

Lisa wore a blouse again, half-unbuttoned from their previous evening's activities, so she whipped it up briefly to show one of her breasts, currently unsupported. "There you go."

Anise creased up at this casual exhibitionism. "I'm always happy to see those, but maybe it'd have more impact if we were out and about."

“Can’t argue with that,” Lisa said, having a languid stretch. “So... I was thinking today might be a good time to get you acquainted with a couple of people before you’re due to film your part. Up for it?”

“Sure. Anyone in particular?”

“A director I met a couple of months ago, she’ll be able to give you some pointers. She works in movies, but she did a bunch of other things when she was younger, including music videos.”

“Great.”

Lisa snapped her fingers a couple of times. “Also, there’s a guy I work with regularly who’ll be useful for you to know. He’s an audio mastering specialist, does all my music. I’d love to do my own mastering, to be honest I’m kind of picky. But if I want the time to actually *create*, I need to hand some things off to others.”

“I do all my own photo work from start to finish, wouldn’t want anyone else doing it.” Enjoying a brief morning snog, Anise stood. “Got our weekend all planned out, huh? You’re such a professional girl. Kinda turns me on, if I’m honest.” She winked in an entirely-too-suggestive manner.

Lisa jumped out of bed, a happy smile occupying her face. “There’s one other person I’d like to introduce you to while we’re there, but I have no idea if she’ll even be available.”

“Seems everyone you know is super busy at all times,” Anise said, getting to her feet.

“Busy people are successful people,” Lisa said, waggling a finger. “In any case, there’s a flower festival at Slogh tomorrow and she’ll have been involved, no doubt about it. We’ll just have to see whether she’s free enough to meet up.”

Having packed the previous evening at around the same time as Isla enjoyed some time with Millie, all that remained was to head to the mainland and catch a skybus to Slogh. Dressed casually—hotpants and T-shirt for Anise, another loose blouse and crops for Lisa—they reached a skybus terminal not far from the city-side monorail station.

An airy and cavernous structure similar to the spaceport, just on a vastly smaller scale, the skybus station saw a great deal of traffic; taking people not

only to the nearest city of Slogh, but east over the mountains to the aptly named Movie Town—a city dedicated entirely to making movies—and to the original frontier town of Meadowstone in the west, now a tourist trap.

The skybuses themselves had a sleek design in white and black, reminiscent of twentieth-century space shuttles, with four stubby wings, one at each corner of the fuselage. Attached to each wing, a variable-direction engine provided both vertical lift and horizontal thrust. And all along both sides, circular porthole-like windows indicating approximately one-hundred seats inside. Roughly a third of the way along the fuselage, a section had been lowered, with three steps on the inner side of the door providing a means of entry.

A mere fifteen minutes saw them transported the twenty mile distance across rolling plains, fields of crops, and occasional villages and smaller towns, representing a significant portion of this region's food production. Flying above the Capp River for much of the duration, soon the picturesque and quaint city of Slogh came into sight, squat and spread out in a vast network of houses and businesses, rarely above three storeys in height.

Disembarking at a skybus station a little way into the city, they took a stroll through the busy streets. Anise, perhaps unsurprisingly, was like a kid in a candy store who had an *unlimited budget*. Everywhere she looked stood little black and white timber-framed houses, cottages, even bungalows; a building such as this would be inconceivable on Mars, where vertical space was normally used as efficiently as possible, both up and down.

On the outskirts of the city a lake some four miles in diameter connected to the London River, named in honour of the long-destroyed city on Earth. Boats, jet skis, and luxury star-yachts dotted the surface, some out for pleasant summer activities, others moored by a half-mile of port with multiple jetties extending around the city side of the lake.

Unlike the bustling metro of Apollotia, this city, as mentioned once by Lisa, had grown *outwards* instead of *upwards*, preferring a more reserved and restrained look and feel focused more on stone construction rather than metals, albeit with numerous modern concessions.

The people of Slogh had largely settled there from the New British Republic, bringing with them a particular way of thinking and a unique outlook on life. Not least of which a continued love of complaining about the weather and queueing, much to Anise's great amusement.

Lisa explained a little of the history of the place as they walked, pointing out the thatched roofs and timber frames and cobbles. "Pretty different to Apollotia, isn't it?"

"Totally different. The atmosphere here is... I can't even describe it! It's so laid-back," Anise said, turning round and round. "Sort of slow-paced?"

"Pretty good way to put it. Mira's mentioned before that she loves it here for that reason."

"You said you're originally from Britain, right?"

"Indubitably."

"So I guess you feel at home here?"

Lisa stopped outside a small shop front, a delicatessen with a variety of cheeses and meats on display in the windows, the savoury scents wafting out from the open door making her salivate. "Yes and no. I'm a big city girl, so I feel most at home in places like Apollotia or Canterbury. But I'm also kind of a history buff so I love old-timey places, too."

"Canterbury? You've been there?" Anise asked.

"Been there? Nope. I grew up there. It's where I was born." Lisa peered through the window, checking out a side of beef. "Mm, could fancy grabbing a few things while we're here..."

"I'm going to have to be jealous now, hope you don't mind."

Lisa craned her head around to look over her shoulder. "I thought you didn't like Earth?"

Anise shrugged. "It's not so much that I don't like it, I've never been. I just don't think I'd feel very comfortable there. And anyway, Canterbury's one of the original idol homes. Still jealous over Isla getting to stay near there, hah."

"I'm heading back there soon, as it happens. Wanted to visit in any case, but I've got a bunch of events lined up on Earth, too." Lisa straightened up and eyed the door.

Anise stepped forward and took her lover's hand. "When do you leave?"

"Week on Tuesday, just before ten. It'll be springtime on Earth when I get there, coming up to the summer season's start." Lisa wandered inside, tugging her partner along for the ride. "Mm, bacon..."

"Now that's something I need to eat more often," Anise said, drooling over the displays.

"Hard to get hold of on Mars?"

"Not hard so much as expensive, at least if you want the real stuff. We don't have the space for large-scale farming, so most of our meat is vat-grown stuff. It does the job, but that's about the best you can say."

"Wow... can't imagine life without legit smoked bacon in it," Lisa muttered, feeling bad on behalf of her lover. "I've tried the vat-grown stuff before. It was... okay."

"Yeah, that's about as much enthusiasm as I have for it, too," Anise laughed. "Now I'm here on Aida, though? I'm going to go hog wild," she added, feeling an indeterminable sense of relief that Isla wasn't around to pick up on that pun. Though she figured her best friend's pun detector might be powerful enough to detect it even this far away.

Ordering several items, Lisa paid and moved back to the door. "I'm more than happy to indulge in some mutual bacon sharing, any time you like."

Anise followed her outside. "I may take you up on that. Anyway, shouldn't we get checked in at the hotel?"

Agreeing that they should indeed, Lisa led the way through the streets until they reached a large building, Horseshoe-shaped and three storeys, with a thatched roof crafted from composite micro-fibre materials made to match original Earth-based thatching, but without the downsides.

Lisa pointed at the roof. "You know there are people on Earth still using real thatch? Incredible, really. There's a little place not far from Mum's house that specialises in old techniques like this. Never found time to visit."

"First time seeing it," Anise said. "I'm used to plastics and metals and boring designs. Sure, Mars has a lot going for it, and I love how efficient everything is, but..."

“That’s the beauty of travel, my girl,” Lisa added, taking her lover’s hand. “Highly recommend you travel as much as you can, you’ll learn a lot, trust me.”

“I intend to.”

After this brief interrupted, they entered the foyer and checked in, heading up to the second floor and through to their room.

“Here we go,” Lisa said, opening the door, immediately stuffing her bacon and other items into the room’s fridge.

Anise whistled. “Wow...”

Judging from the outside, she had expected something small, quaint, and cosy. Instead, they were greeted by a space twice the size of her room at the academy. To the left, a large window looked out over the street at the front, under which stood a double bed, made up in soft satin sheets and plump goose feather pillows. And overhead, thick wooden beams a tall girl might easily bang her head on if she wasn’t careful.

“So... are we on our honeymoon, or...?” Anise added, giggling.

Lisa tilted her head. “A weekend away with a girl as amazing as you? You didn’t honestly think I was going to book a regular room, did you, my dear?”

Anise melted, running forward to smother her lover in kisses and hugs. “Aww... thanks, Lisa, I feel all special now.”

They unpacked their luggage and Anise went exploring to find a tiled ensuite wet room with shower and other facilities, plus a frosted window above the paved path along the building’s side.

She returned and sat on the soft and bouncy bed. “Nice. Can’t wait to snuggle later.”

Lisa dropped down and wrapped her arms around Anise, falling over backwards with her on top. “Why wait?” They spent a moment tongue-tied. “Though we should probably do something productive before we get too carried away, huh?”

“Not least of which my job, yeah.” Anise jumped off the bed and made a show of brushing herself down.

Leaving the hotel, Lisa flagged down a taxi similar to the ones in Apollotia—though in black rather than yellow, reminiscent of old London cabs from before the city was destroyed—and had it drop them on the outskirts of the city.



Upon exiting the taxi, they wandered through an industrial-looking district towards one of many movie studio lots.

“I can’t quite decide how I feel about this movie,” Lisa said, heading through the gates into a spacious concreted area. The two of them flashed their phones at the guard on duty, showing their credentials.

He took a look and waved them through.

Anise raised this with her. “Uh, okay, it makes sense for me because I’m here for a job, but how did you just get in without any questions?”

“You’ll see,” Lisa said, keeping her cards close to her chest.

“You like teasing, huh?” Anise said as they made their way across the lot, past several enormous hangars, and out to an open-air set with a variety of explosions and action taking place.

Lisa stopped at the yellow tape cordoning off the set. “Ah, there she is.” She pointed at a lady giving directions and generally taking charge on the set.

Stepping from one foot to the other in excitement, Anise’s expression changed to one of shock and awe. “You know Suzanne Netter?”

“Surprised?”

“Just a bit.”

Lisa’s expression shifted to something a little more serious. “Let me tell you another of the big secrets to success: timing. I just happened to meet her while I was working on a project last year, complete coincidence. I generally consider that you make your own luck in this business, but still, random chance does play a part.”

Anise nodded at this, still fidgeting like mad. “Mum’s an author, she’s said the same thing to me a few times.”

“It’s the same for most creatives,” Lisa continued. “If you happen to be in the right place at the right time, you can find yourself flying the skies of fame and fortune. Release a book or song at the wrong time and you might go completely unnoticed.”

“I couldn’t be luckier to be standing here with you, I know that,” Anise said, surreptitiously pecking her mentor on the cheek.

“Flattery goes a long way with me, keep it up,” Lisa replied, chuckling.

“What did you mean earlier, by the way? You said you’re unsure about this movie?”

“I love history, and I also love sci-fi, but generally I’m not a fan of putting them together like this. Personal preference, nothing more,” Lisa said with a shrug.

By the set during a lull in the action, Suzanne turned, tucking her fluffy cocoa hair back over her shoulders to settle around the base of her neck as she harangued several actors in a good-natured way. Her skin, a deep brown with hints of warm umber, glistened a little in the humid atmosphere, and a number of gentle wrinkles around her nose and forehead indicated both age and wisdom.

Hanging around in the background, Lisa whispered, “Have you heard of a band called Earthbound?”

Anise shook her head, too busy watching the scene before them to respond verbally.

“They were super popular on Earth a few decades back. Suzanne did most of their music videos. You should check them out sometime.” It looked like the movie crew were about to go on break, so Lisa moved forward to accost her associate. “Morning, Suzanne.”

Suzanne’s face lit up. “Finally managed to make it over here, did you? Also, what did I tell you about calling me that?” Her expression turned theatrically annoyed, an eyebrow raised and a smirk on her lips.

“It’s just because I respect you so much!” Lisa said, waving a hand and laughing.

Suzanne chuckled in response. “That’s the Lisa I’ve grown to know and love.”

Lisa grasped Anise’s shoulder and pushed her forward. “Someone I’d like you to meet, Suzy. This is Anise, she’s interested in producing music videos. She’s also your actress for the role you needed filled.”

Suzanne examined the new arrival. “Pleased to meet you, Anise. Lisa mentioned she had a new love interest, seems her standards are as high as ever.”

“And you, Suzanne... um, Suzy?” Anise hazarded, bowing her head and blushing at the compliment.

Suzanne indicated that the short-form version of her name was fine.

Gathering her courage, Anise continued. “Lisa told me you used to produce music videos? I’d love to talk to you about that if you’re not too busy one day, maybe?”

“Eager *and* polite? You certainly know how to get on my good side. Has Lisa been telling you about me?” Suzanne said, her eyes flicking back and forth from Anise to the set, keeping an eye on proceedings while simultaneously giving attention to personal matters.

“Only good things,” Lisa said.

“I’m a huge fan,” Anise stated.

“I could use one with how humid it is today,” Suzanne said, stifling a laugh. “Come on, let’s find somewhere to sit and chat.”

They followed her around to a twelve-berth tent away from the set, open at the sides to let the breeze through, along with a variety of savoury scents. Inside, several tables were set up with various food and drink for the movie staff and cast, so they grabbed a few bits and pieces and sat together just inside the entrance.

Settling herself comfortably on a chair, Suzanne enjoyed a mouthful of a spicy sausage, then focused on Anise. “So... you’re interested in directing music videos? Anything in particular? If you’re here with Lisa, I guess you’re at least partially interested in electronic music?”

“Actually, I’m interested in working with idols mostly,” Anise said, taking a bite out of a burger. “But after Lisa let me listen to some of her music, I’ve started thinking that might be nice, too.”

“Idols and electronic music go together very well,” Suzanne said. She went on to explain a little of her own experience. Working exclusively with bands in the Coalition of American States, the wildly popular deep rock band Earthbound had been her crowning glory, boosting her to new heights as a director.

She had been at the forefront of new technologies such as hard-light holographical imagers, small-scale holotechnics—the natural evolution of older pyrotechnics—and Deep Movie technologies, allowing for the viewer to experience a movie as though they were there in person. Thanks to her successes producing music videos she moved on to direct several stellarvision shows, followed by breaking into movies.

Anise finished her burger and now sat silently, enraptured and enchanted by this mature and experienced woman. “I’d love to hear some stories one day, sounds like you had an amazing career.”

“Had? I still do!” Suzanne said, laughing. “Speaking of which, you’re my new maid, correct? Come along, then, I need to get that scene shot today so we can get back to the main scenes we’re filming this weekend.”

Lisa glanced over at the set, noting resumed activity. “I’ll leave you to it, Anise, do your best. Give me a ring when you’re finished and I’ll come pick you up, still one other person to meet today.”

Suzanne snapped her fingers at a nearby assistant and had him run off to retrieve her handbag. She rummaged and produced a business card, one of the very small number of things that hadn’t gone completely digital. “Give me a call sometime and we can set up a proper meeting, Anise. For now, though, we need to get to work.”

Anise took the card and bowed her head. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Suzanne stood, placing a hand on Anise’s shoulder. “Any friend of Lisa’s is a friend of mine. And to be honest, you kind of remind me of me when I was just

starting out. I hope you succeed, Anise.” Waving Lisa out of sight, she took Anise off to the main mansion set in another part of the studio.

Chapter 27: Fingers in the Shower

An hour was all it took to get the scene Suzanne needed. A bit part for a character who died after a single scene, using a rookie idol who exuded the confidence of someone who had been in the business for years resulted in a single, clean take and no messing about.

With this concluded, Anise contacted Lisa and met up with her just outside the studio gates. They now strolled through the streets of Slogh, eventually arriving at a glass-fronted building near the heart of the city. Anise found it interesting how the city changed from quaint and quasi-rural to crisp and modern the closer they came to the centre.

Inside, they headed downstairs to an underground complex of halls and rooms, all pristine greys and plastics and metals, with polished marble floors and soft white lighting.

Along the length of the hall, doors studded both sides, each with a light above to indicate active recording. A small touch panel beside the door itself would activate a subtle light within the studio to inform of a guest's presence without unnecessary noise or interruption.

Lisa touched the panel outside a particular door. "Aedan knows I'm coming in to see him today, shouldn't take long."

"Aedan?" Anise said, idly toying with strands of one of her twin ponytails.

"Aedan O'Hare, my audio mastering specialist." Lisa leaned against the wall. "I've worked with a few different people over the last few years, but Aedan's the best. By a significant margin."

"You said it'd be helpful for me to know him?" Anise said, taking position next to her lover, close enough to touch shoulders and hold hands.

"Yeah, though not necessarily for the reasons you're probably thinking. It's simply helpful having a lot of contacts," Lisa said, squeezing Anise's hand. "You never know when a random person you met once might end up being able to put you into contact with exactly who you need."

Anise squeezed Lisa's hand in return. "I'm so stupidly lucky to have met you, aren't I?"

Lisa burst out laughing and leaned over to nibble her partner's ear. While in the vicinity, she whispered, "In this business, it's all about who you know. Same could be said of relationships, right? You're not the only one who's happy to have met."

This made Anise shiver in delight, partly because of the warmth of Lisa's gentle breath on her earlobe, partly out of happiness that she'd had a similar impact on this professional and sexy girl.

The light above the door flicked from red to green, at which point the silver door whooshed to one side to reveal a young man in his early twenties. He had mid brown hair, soft grey eyes, and wore an outfit so stylish that Anise felt that maybe he had chosen the wrong career, and might in fact be better off modelling on a catwalk somewhere.

Aedan posed and pointed a finger at Lisa. "Hey-hey, wondered when you'd be dropping by. Come in, come in!" He backed into the room and flopped into a large, black leather swivel chair, pointing at an equally glossy and stylish black sofa along the rear wall.

His guests sat on the sofa and crossed a leg each, more or less in sync, making Aedan chuckle. "So, guessing you're here to check up on your latest tracks, Lissy?"

Anise's eyes widened to the point it was possible they might fall out. "*Lissy?*"

"Ugh, don't start with that again, *Danny*," Lisa said, narrowing her own eyes as Anise's widened.

Aedan proceeded to laugh and swivel around to face the row of equipment involving many knobs, buttons, and sliders, where he brought up a file on his workstation. A holo display showed a waveform and he pressed a button to start it playing.

Lisa wandered across to stand next to him, grasping a proffered pair of headphones and listening silently for a few minutes, nodding along to the beat.

Eventually she handed the headphones back. "Perfect. Not that I'd expect anything less from Dan the Man."

"Am I missing something here?" Anise asked, her shoulders shaking as she laughed at this oddly cute banter.

"First time we met, Aedan decided it'd be fun to hit on me," Lisa said as she walked back to the sofa. "Trying to chat me up by calling me Lissy didn't work so well, did it, Danny?"

"Hey, a guy's gotta try," Aedan said, spreading his hands. "Speaking of which, who's your cute friend?"

"*Girlfriend*," Lisa corrected, glaring. Technically they weren't in fact an official couple, but she wasn't above using the term in defensive situations.

"Again? Damn, girl, you've got a different lady on your arm every time we meet. I'm jealous," Aedan said, winking at them.

"What can I say? I'm apparently irresistible to the same sex," Lisa said, indicating with a smug expression that this was a-okay with her. "And to answer your question, this is Anise, she's a new student at Dreamstar. Figured giving her a head start by introducing some people would be a good idea."

"Always helping the new girls, I love that about you," Aedan said. "Anyway, guess you still have things to do today?" *Like each other*, he thought.

Lisa, knowing exactly how Aedan's mind worked, graced him with a half-smile. "No, we're pretty free to spend the day how we like now. Probably in our comfy double bed at the hotel, right, Anise?"

Playing along, Anise leaned over to brush cheeks. "Snuggling under the covers, sweaty and hot? Yeah, sounds like a plan, doesn't it, Lisa?"

They kissed, a brief peck of the lips, nothing more, then turned back to Aedan.

"This is payback for the Lissy thing, isn't it?" Aedan muttered. He let out a brief chuckle and rearranged his face into something more sunny. "I'll get those new tracks finalised and sent over in the next week, can't wait for whatever you come up with next."

Lisa strolled across and stooped down to place a delicate kiss on his cheek. “There you go, you’ve more than earned it.” She took Anise’s hand and made for the door.

“Hey, Lisa? You playing anywhere this weekend?” Aedan asked, touching a hand to his cheek.

“Tonight at Merlin’s, tomorrow night at Central. Give me a ring if you need in, might be pretty packed,” Lisa said, winking in a way that suggested there was no doubt in her mind that both nights would be utterly heaving.

Wishing him a good day, they exited out and headed back upstairs to be greeted by deeper orange sunlight and lengthened shadows. With both appointments for the day now kept, Lisa figured spending a few hours wandering the city might be fun, so that’s what they did.



Later that evening they returned to the hotel, tired and hungry. In Anise’s case, hungry for more than simple food. Seeing Lisa being all professional and amazing had resulted in an insane degree of sexual frustration, and she was eager to release some of it.

But first, she needed a shower. Entering the spacious en-suite, she stripped, ran the water, and stepped in, washing herself down and enjoying the invigorating spray against her skin and weary muscles. Not long after she entered, a subdued click indicated company. In came Lisa, naked with a mischievous smile on her lips.

“Well. I should’ve seen this coming,” Anise said, raising her voice a little to be heard over the spray.

Lisa cocked her head. “Yes, you should.”

“Let me guess, you’d like me to wash your back?” Anise said.

“Mm, that might be nice, too, but I was actually hoping for you to stick your fingers in me.”

Anise immediately cracked up, laughing to the point of tears. “I’ll never get bored of how forward you are with your desires, Lisa.”

“Horny girls need an outlet or two. I see no point beating about the bush, as you well know.” Lisa crossed her arms under her breasts, lifting them up for inspection. “I believe you’re after these? As usual?”

“Hell, yes...” Anise said, extending a hand and inviting Lisa to step into her watery wonderland, and moving aside a little to allow room for her naughty companion to enter the shower cubicle

Lisa did so, taking the hand and softly kissing the back. The rivulets of water running down her body made her glisten and gleam, especially those rounded shapes pressed into Anise’s own modest pair.

“Aaah... I’m so horny I could burst...” Anise muttered.

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” Lisa’s hands found their way down to her partner’s shapely ass. She squeezed, massaging and kneading, then moved a hand around the front, cupping Anise’s crotch before sliding a finger inside, then two, then three.

Anise rested her head on Lisa’s shoulder, moaning with her eyes closed to protect them from the water. She felt it building already, the shivers and shudders pulsing throughout her body. Lifting herself up on her toes as the pleasure rose higher and higher, her body gave in completely after a mere minute or two of action.

Crying out, Anise bit down on Lisa’s shoulder, leaving minor bite marks, though soft enough not to be too obvious. Lisa’s fingers continued their assault, slowing gradually, slipping in and out with no resistance. She tugged her fingers free and Anise dropped back down from tiptoes, steadying herself against her partner’s body.

“Wow...” Anise murmured, her own fingers temporarily stilled. “You know exactly how to touch me, huh...?” She pulled away a little, then took Lisa’s hand and sucked her fingers clean, enjoying a sexy new activity she hadn’t thought to experiment with before.

“Glad to see you’re getting naughtier, my girl,” Lisa said with a happy grin.

“I was naughty anyway, you’ve just unlocked some new potential I didn’t know I had,” Anise said, laughing under her breath. “Now, shall we finish up? We’ve got plans tonight, right?”

“Not for a couple of hours yet, but yeah, we do.” Lisa washed her partner down, lingering here and there, touching and stroking and turning her back on. “Maybe I shouldn’t go giving you another orgasm, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say no... but you’re probably right.” Anise pecked her partner’s lips. “You’ve not had anything yourself...”

“No worries, I enjoy getting sweaty after a gig. You can give me a proper seeing-to when we get back tonight.”

“Something to look forward to,” Anise said, and focused back to the matter at hand.

Finishing up what they had ostensibly been in the shower to do in the first place, they spent some time drying each other—carefully, so as to avoid getting back into the mood, which would just lead into a dangerous cycle they might never escape—then exited back to the main room.

Anise sat herself in a comfy armchair to the side of the bed, facing into the room. Lisa decided the best thing she could do would be to sit in Anise’s lap.

“Comfy?” Anise asked.

“Very much so,” Lisa replied in a glib tone. She leaned down and enjoyed a few moments swapping saliva.

“I’m not sure I could handle another go, just saying,” Anise said. All the pleasure had been flowing in one direction on this occasion, so she was well aware that Lisa was still in the mood for some action.

Lisa chuckled at this. “I enjoy letting it build a bit, you follow?” She jumped off again to prepare for their evening.

While Lisa busied herself getting dressed up and sorting out her equipment, Anise deposited herself on the bed with her phone, listening to one of Aphrodite’s songs and singing along.

Stopping what she was doing, Lisa sat on the bed and stared at her lover’s beatific expression. “Holy hell, Anise...” she whispered.

Anise looked up and realised she was under scrutiny. “You okay?”

“More than okay, I think I just came,” Lisa breathed. “You’ve got possibly the most gorgeous singing voice I’ve ever heard.”

“Y-You think?” Anise stuttered, blushing.

“Hell, yeah.” Lisa graced her lover with a particularly evil smile. “How quickly can you learn a new song?”

“Eh? Eeeh!? A new song? Like... right now?” Anise put her hands up.

Leaning close enough to touch noses, Lisa’s grin widened. “You were good enough to get into Dreamstar Academy, my girl. You’re not going to let me down here, are you?”

“I believe I’ve risen to expectations so far?” Anise whispered, pecking her partner’s lips.

Lisa sat upright and clapped her hands together. “Damn straight, you have.” She pulled her phone out and found a particular music track, handing the device over.

Anise swapped her earbuds over and spent the next few minutes listening to a vocal and melody-led electronic track, unconsciously tapping a foot in time to the energetic beat. “I can’t believe I’ve never listened to this kind of thing before,” she muttered, humming along despite barely knowing the melody yet. “So you want me to sing this? Live?”

“Up for it?” Lisa said, retrieving her phone.

“How long do I have?”

“I’m playing another gig tomorrow, same as tonight’s, though a bigger venue. I’ll be debuting the track there, so about that long.”

The track in question had minimal lyrics, similar to most vocal music of this genre, and those it *did* have were relatively simple and catchy. Anise made an instant decision. “I won’t let you down.”

“Sweet, I’ll be expecting good things, then. I’ll be playing the track at the end of the set. Those are my own dulcet tones you’re hearing, incidentally.”

Anise, who had found the vocals to be both sexy and emotive, nodded once or twice. “I figured it was you, you’ve got a beautiful voice as well.”

“Why thank you, my dear. In any case, I don’t have to worry about upsetting another vocalist by having you sing instead, so I’ll use the instrumental version and have you go on stage as a special surprise. Sound good?”

“Perfect! And terrifying.” Anise emitted a nervous giggle.

“Nothing good is ever easy,” Lisa said, wagging a finger. “I have absolute faith in you, Anise. I’ve seen enough this last week to know you’re a talented girl.”

“Coming from you, that means a lot,” Anise said, bowing her head in thanks.

They finished preparing and headed into the city, threading their way through the busy night-time streets towards a club called Merlin’s.

Chapter 28: Clubbed

Entering through the rear door for staff, Lisa led them through a brightly lit room with two dozen pool tables, a number of twentieth-century arcade machine recreations, and a long bar in one corner.

She waved to some of the employees on the way through, issuing greetings to bar staff, bouncers, and glass collectors; plainly this wasn't Lisa's first gig at this venue. Anise stuck close, waving or nodding and attempting to blend in. Nightclubs were a little different to the casual bars she generally preferred.

Through a double door at the far end of this room they entered a dark and cavernous space roughly half a football pitch in size, large enough to fit a few thousand people like sweaty sardines. In the far left corner stood another bar in a hockey stick shape. And in the nearest corner just past the doors to the pool room, a raised area for the DJ.

Lisa hopped up here and placed her bag down on a table along the wall far. To the left of this, facing the dance floor, a surface was covered with equipment of a similar nature to that used by Aedan. Knobs, buttons, sliders, blinking lights, and several slots for data crystals adorned the matt black metals and plastics.

Soon, the lights dimmed to a deep blue and the night was ready to begin. Easing the crowd in with a slow-paced house track, Lisa kicked the evening off, raising a single hand up high; the crowd cheered louder and louder as she raised it.

In the background, Anise busied herself by staring at the crowd or Lisa's back, barely conscious of the cheers or even the music. She had entered what almost felt like a trance, only aware of the heat, the pressure of the crowd and, most important of all, how utterly incredible Lisa was.

An hour in, Lisa had ramped things up to trance-styled tracks including a number of vocal ones Anise wanted to sing along to, if only she knew the lyrics. Her skin prickled, stomach doing cartwheels; not out of nerves or anxiety, but intense excitement. Sweating like mad in the hot atmosphere, she drank an

occasional bottle of Immersion and wondered how the hell she had ended up here.

Another hour slipped past in a daze, during which time Lisa bumped from trance to hard house, playing such banging—in her own words—tunes that Anise could barely keep up. Dropping down from the DJ area to join the crowd, Anise danced and danced and danced, throwing her hands up in the air and letting herself be lost in the moment.

Nearing two in the morning Lisa finally wound it back down, playing some chilled tracks to finish as the crowd gradually thinned, leaving the cool cavern empty and silent, just the lingering scent of alcohol and sweat remaining to remind the few stragglers of the amazing evening they had enjoyed.

Anise had returned to the DJ area now, leaning against the rear wall and breathing erratically, eyes half-closed, her brain addled and unsure of things. “Wow...”

Lisa laughed at the beatific expression on her lover’s face. “You enjoyed that, huh?”

“I think so? Honestly, I barely remember much of it. I’ve just got this overriding feeling that it was unreal.”

“Not been to a night like this before?” Lisa added as she put her things away.

“First time.”

“First couple of times clubbing can be pretty intense.” Lisa moved over to place a delicate kiss on Anise’s lips. She whispered into her ear, “Now imagine the rush you’ll get *singing* for that crowd.”

Anise shuddered. “I’m not sure my body could handle it.”

Lisa chuckled. “I felt the same when I first played for a large crowd. There’s an old Earth saying that’s pretty accurate: ‘*the first time’s always the hardest.*’”

“Tonight was pretty long, is it normally like this?” Anise asked, attempting to reboot her brain.

“No, tonight was a couple of hours longer than I usually play. Tomorrow’s will be two hours from eleven to one, then I’ll be handing over to another DJ.” Lisa finished packing up her things and slung the bag over her shoulder.

Shivering a little in utter delight, Anise leaned over to whisper, “Have I told you how much it turns me on when you’re in this mode?”

“This mode?” Lisa said, pausing with her foot on the step down to ground level.

“Yeah, you know... professional idol mode. Delivering advice and being my mentor and playing live events and all that. Makes me go weak at the knees.”

Lisa cracked up to the point where several of the club staff in the vicinity looked around. “You did mention something along those lines, yes. I’m glad I’ve left such a positive impression on you.”

Passing on the offer of a free drink on the house, they instead headed straight back to the hotel. Anise was tired, worn out, elated, and above all else *horny*, and there are times when waiting around isn’t an option.

The moment they entered their room, Lisa dumped her bag on the floor and pushed Anise down full-length on the bed. “So... I’m kind of in the mood for some good things...”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same,” Anise replied with a particularly naughty giggle. In deference to the fact she now had a new song to learn, she put the track on as background. Then she yawned. “Mm, having said that, I’m also *really* tired.”

“Seems you need to take a leaf out of Isla’s book and be a bit more diligent in your running,” Lisa suggested.

“I’ve been running! Mostly. Maybe not as much as Isla, though, you’re right.” Anise gently pushed Lisa off and had her lie across the bed, legs dangling over the edge. “Anyway, enough talk, I feel like trying something different.”

Lisa raised an eyebrow. “Such as?”

“Maybe we could play with ourselves more than each other? You know... mutual, like?”

This made Lisa grin. “Haven’t done that in a while. Used to play around with Mira like that until we got fully comfy with each other.”

“I’ve not tried it before,” Anise said, stripping her clothes off until she was down to her underwear, something duck egg blue and sporty on this occasion.

Lisa took in this sight with lust-filled eyes. “You are so damn sexy, my girl.”

A brief giggle and Anise helped her partner undress, revealing the luscious silver underwear Lisa had put on earlier. "You wear silver a lot, don't you? Even your hair is nearly silver."

"It's my favourite colour. I love anything silver, soft, shiny, or sparkly. Or all of the above." Lisa pressed her arms close into her sides to accentuate her breasts, straining against the fabric of her silver, soft, shiny, and sparkly bra.

"It suits you. Perfectly," Anise whispered. "Fancy a quick massage?"

"Another talent revealing itself?" Lisa asked, sitting up. She moved around to face the headboard.

Sitting behind her, Anise unclipped her partner's bra and dropped it over the edge of the bed. "Ask Isla about my massages sometime."

"Or you could just demonstrate?"

"Or I could do that, yes," Anise said, laughing. She slid her hands under Lisa's arms and around to cup the soft yet firm shapes around front.

"You know there's an old Earth myth about breasts getting bigger if you massage them?" Lisa said, fidgeting a bit. "Honestly, I think they're big enough, maybe massage somewhere else?"

Anise was forced to bury her face in Lisa's soft and sweet-smelling hair for a few minutes until she could calm her laughter down. "Sorry, getting a bit carried away." Pulling her own bra off, she pushed Lisa down flat, then slid her panties off and threw them across the room, followed by her own pair. She straddled Lisa's ass and began kneading and pushing, focusing on the back and shoulders for now.

Lisa moaned more or less nonstop for half an hour until eventually, after much enjoyable massaging and touching, the pleasant sensations ceased.

Anise's fingers felt a bit numb, and she still needed those for other activities. "How was it?" she asked.

"Awesome...!" Lisa murmured, eyes closed as she turned her head over. "Haven't had a massage in ages, and none of the ones I *have* had came close to what you can do, my girl..."

"You're welcome," Anise said, again stroking, this time with sexy intent, focusing on Lisa's shapely butt. "Feel free to play with yourself."

“Mm? Oh... right, forgetting myself,” Lisa muttered, her shoulders shaking with understated laughter. She lifted herself enough to slide an arm under her body, pushing her fingers deep inside. Moaning, she buried her face in the pillow.

Meanwhile, Anise stuffed her fingers inside herself and vigorously went all-in. A few minutes were spent like this, then she collapsed forward along Lisa’s back, continuing to finger, again burying her face in the hair of her partner, visions of neon nightclubs and electronic music dancing before her eyes as Lisa’s new song looped in the background.

Warm droplets of liquid from Anise’s own excited pussy ran down the sides of Lisa’s butt, making her laugh between moans. “You know how to turn me on, don’t you?”

“Getting messy is fun,” Anise murmured, thinking that Lisa’s intensely sweaty form right at this moment might result in spontaneous orgasm if she wasn’t careful. Her moans intensified, muffled by her lover’s hair.

Lisa came soon after this, followed immediately by a second, smaller one. Then she went back to fingering in hopes of a third; the shower earlier and playing a gig that evening had ganged up on her senses to the point of ecstatic overload. She fancied a change of position first, however. “Mind lifting yourself a bit?”

Anise did so, allowing Lisa to roll over and lie on her back. Lowering herself again, Anise straddled the tummy and Lisa immediately went back to work, awkwardly manoeuvring her arms between her partner’s thighs so she could continue fingering herself.

Staring into each other’s eyes for a time, fingering faster and faster, Anise figured she was about ready to let go; one *really* big one by the feel of it, despite enjoying one earlier that evening. And let go she did, moaning loud enough to potentially be heard in the room below.

“Now that,” Lisa said, eyes bright as Anise collapsed forward, using a hand to steady herself against the headboard, “was a show worthy of praise. Bravo, ten out of ten for excellent orgasms.”

Anise got her breath back and shuffled down the bed, sitting right before Lisa's pussy. "Being an idol's all about giving your fans a show, right?" Opening her legs wide to allow enough room, she moved forward far enough to press their bits together. "Your turn to give me a show, I believe?"

Lisa beamed, speeding up her action and eventually bringing herself to a third and final climax all over her lover's tummy. She collapsed back, her chest rising and falling like an excited mountain range. "And how does my audience feel, hmm?"

Anise sat up, went forward, and laid herself on top of Lisa, enjoying the feeling of their combined sweat on her bare skin. "Wonderful. Eleven out of ten. Perfection." She let out a contented sigh. "So... mutual masturbation. It's good. Real good."

Lisa gave her a kiss. "It's a different type of fun, yeah."

"Mm... let's stay like this for a while, I don't feel like moving."

Lisa was perfectly happy with this state of affairs, so she wrapped her arms around the girl lying on top of her and spent the next half-hour simply enjoying the warmth and intimacy. They eventually managed to get up and take a cosy bath together, before collapsing in bed and snuggling until they fell asleep.

Chapter 29: The Flower Princess

A few rays of morning light crept through a crack in the curtains, waking Anise. She sat up, stretched, and stared at the far wall. A day wandering the city followed by a night out, lots of sweaty dancing, and enjoying some sweaty activities of a rather different nature had taken a toll on her body.

Nevertheless, she made a supreme effort to clamber out of bed and visit the bathroom, then poked Lisa until she sat up. "Morning!"

Lisa nodded. "Mm, you're right, it is."

"You're playing that gig tonight, aren't you?"

"At Central, yeah," Lisa said, managing to focus on the second try. "It's the biggest club in Slogh, fits around five-thousand people in the main stage area. Nothing too major."

"Nothing major? Lisa..."

"Hey, from my point of view five-kay is pretty sedate," Lisa said, laughing in a manner Anise found intensely attractive; an assured and measured sound indicating extreme self-confidence, but never devolving into arrogance.

"I'll take your word for that," Anise said, figuring Lisa wasn't just being coy. It wasn't difficult to imagine her playing for hundreds of thousands of people, so five thousand really would be sedate for her.

Lisa chuckled at this, then jumped out of bed to grab a quick shower. Returning, she sat on the edge of the mattress to dry her hair.

"So what's the plan for today?" Anise asked, sitting behind her lover, cross-legged in the middle of the mattress.

"You like flowers?" Lisa asked, raising her voice over the noise of her dryer.

"Sure."

"In that case, you'll enjoy today. There's a big flower festival and parade Slogh holds once a year, and today is it."

"This'll be the thing the person you want me to meet is involved with?" Anise said, stroking her fingers through Lisa's hair, getting in the way of drying, not that Lisa minded.

Closing her eyes and emitting a pleased moan at the hair fondling, Lisa made a vague okay symbol. "One and the same."

"Oh... is this festival why you're playing a big gig tonight?"

"Sure is. Most of the clubs have a special event of some sort for the parade," Lisa said, switching the dryer off and placing it to one side.

Anise swiped the hairbrush and spent a while brushing her partner's hair, shifting around to sit with her legs to Lisa's sides. "This is something I seriously need to do for Isla one day soon..." she murmured.

"You'll be pouncing on her the moment we've finished our fun, I presume?" Lisa said.

The brushing stopped. "You heard that?"

Lisa pointed to one of her ears. "I've got really good hearing."

The brushing resumed. "I want to, more than anything. I love her so much it hurts, but I also don't want to push her away. Just need to give her the time she needs."

"Believe it or not, I do understand how you feel."

"You do? Um... Mira, maybe?" Anise hazarded.

"Nope," Lisa said, shaking her head. "Well... yeah, she's my best friend and I love her to bits, but no, not in the way you mean. No, I mean the lovely girl we're off to see today."

"Are you going to tell me who it is?" Anise asked, switching the brush over to her other hand and continuing.

"Remember I told you I spent a year living with the royal family on Gran Manillo?"

Anise gasped. "You fell in love with a princess?"

Lisa's shoulders shook a little as she stifled a laugh. "Fell in lust might be more accurate. But by the time I left? Yeah, it had definitely turned into love."

"There are two, right? Which one did you fall for?"

"The older sister, Keliana. She's beyond incredible. Smart, sexy, mature, refined, beautiful. Pretty sure her little sister had me figured out, but she never said anything." Lisa chuckled, followed by an unusually sombre sigh of regret.

Leaning forward, Anise poked her head into Lisa's field of vision. "So what happened?"

"Nothing happened. Kept my feelings to myself. This was ages ago anyway, more of a teenage crush than anything. I was still figuring out my own sexuality." Lisa issued a quick lip peck.

Anise shivered a little and returned to her brushing. "Makes two of us, huh? I was about fourteen when I first realised I fancied Isla."

"Kelly was the catalyst for me. I guess Isla was for you?"

"No question. Even if I'd looked at other girls, none of them made my heart beat like Isla did."

"Mira did that to me. One day I'll tell you about how we met and ended up shagging. But for now, we should probably get ready if we don't want to miss the parade."

"Okay!" Anise said, and finished up by grasping Lisa's hair gently in both hands and doing something with it.

Lisa glanced over her shoulder. "What are you up to back there?"

"I fancy seeing you scored for ponytail today. If you don't mind?"

"Whatever makes you happy," Lisa said.

Dressing in something a little more refined on this occasion for reasons Lisa remained evasive on—though Anise knew it was simply to look good for her royal friend—they exited and headed into the city, noting how the streets fairly heaved with people.

They wandered aimlessly for an hour, weaving in and around the crowd as best they could. Various stalls had been erected along a number of smaller side streets selling baubles, trinkets, and souvenirs, plus a variety of British-themed foods.

Grabbing themselves a tray of chips with a sausage and some curry sauce each for breakfast, they continued their jostled yet jolly jaunt. Lisa led them to a wide area lined with diamond-shaped pink and white alternating tiles, and a fountain in the centre surrounded by two storey stone-built houses, each a sandy beige.

“Is Keliana around here somewhere?” Anise asked as they sat together on a convenient bench near the white stone fountain, finishing up their impromptu meal.

Lisa shook her head. “Doubtful. I suspect we’ll see her when the parade starts.”

“Sounds like you know something...”

“Well, it’s just a guess.”

“When does it start?”

Lisa consulted her phone, a snazzy silver affair with cool blue decorative lights around the edges. “About an hour.”

Said hour was spent exactly as the last hour had been; aimlessly wandering the streets. This whole section of the city had a similar aesthetic to the fountain plaza, utilising sandy stone and pedestrianised streets tiled in the same pink and white diamond design.

“There’s a nice uniform look to this area, huh?” Anise commented.

“You know Aida was settled partly with the intention of turning it into an entertainment world?” Lisa said, waving a hand at the buildings.

“Of course.”

“You don’t think these cities were built randomly, do you?”

“At school we learned that they were built the way they were because of the cultures who built them. Like this place was mostly British people, so it’s got a very British look?”

Lisa wagged the hand. “You’re half right. Some schools leave bits out or don’t think they’re important, but if you study history you’ll learn that these places were built specifically to accommodate movie filming.”

“That’s why *Pride and Predators* is being filmed here? Because it’s partly a period piece?” Anise suggested.

“Some of it’s being filmed on Earth as well, but yes, that’s why.” Lisa stopped and stared at Anise. “I’m surprised you don’t know this already. Isla mentioned you’re a total maniac for Aida.”

“I am. But mostly Apollotia, since that’s where the idols hang out,” Anise said.

“I shouldn’t be surprised, should I?” Lisa added with an amused smile, moving forward again.

They reached a wide main street running through the centre of the city alongside London River, with ornate bridges every mile or two along its length. On both sides of the road, portable metal railings had been erected, behind which a throng of people awaited the parade.

Lisa had acquired a large bottle of Nipton’s Iced Tea for something refreshing while they were hanging about, occasionally passing it back and forth with Anise. Aida’s summers were well known for being hot and humid, but today they had been graced with blistering heat minus the usual moisture, a happy occurrence for all concerned.

Sweet floral smells already filled the air, lilies and tulips and roses making for a fragrant and pleasant wait despite the mass of people all around them. And in the distance, far up the street, a thumping of drums indicated something headed their way.

Coming into view at the far end, a marching band preceded the first of the floats, playing something upbeat and catchy, almost jazz-like. They strode past, trumpets blaring, trombones blasting, and drums drumming.

As the floats passed by, Lisa stared, searching for something. “I know you’re there somewhere...”

“Lisa?” Anise said.

“There,” Lisa said, pointing.

Anise looked up at the float, a bright orange and yellow affair covered in thousands of flower petals. Standing in the middle, holding a sceptre with a shiny diamond knob on the end, the first princess of Gran Manillo stood, her expression blissful.

“First time seeing Kelly in years, and she runs off to Slogh. I shall have to have *words* when the parade’s over,” Lisa said in a surprisingly miffed tone.

Another two dozen floats made their way past, filled with costumed dancers, petal-covered animal statues and, in one particular case, a Martian Space Industries X-701 prototype starliner, built from mesh and coloured using

petals from an Aidan flower known for its soft, ash grey colour called Cinder Lily.

Lisa pushed through the crowds with Anise's hand held firmly in her own, following the floats on their journey around the city until finally, on the outskirts where the organisers of the parade had set up in and around several warehouses and open fields, it came to a halt.

The moment this happened, Lisa strode forward and waved at her princess. "Keliana, dear, would you mind coming over here?"

Anise had to do a double take at the posh tone and distinctly irritated way Lisa had said that. "Wow, never heard you actively annoyed before."

Lisa smiled at her. "I'm not really annoyed, but Kelly certainly needs to explain herself."

A tall girl, the princess stood a good two inches over Anise. Her hair was currently a deep purple reminiscent of buddleia, combined with an apple green tone in an alternating barcode style which she had braided. It looked a lot like an apple and grape twisty chew sweet Anise had enjoyed as a child. Keliana clearly made use of the extremely expensive, high-end Microtek hair solution; achieving a barcode effect as neat as this was nigh-impossible with the regular single-use implants.

Dressed in a pale pink dress that glittered and sparkled under the sun, Keliana's special flower parade outfit contrasted against the princess's light brown skin, a degree of olive hue indicating potential Mediterranean—or a colony world similar in general clime—heritage.

Keliana had noticed Lisa by now and was presently attempting to seem nonchalant. She strolled over, avoiding eye contact. "Um, good day, Lisa."

"Don't you *'good day'* me, young lady. Running off to Sloth for months... you know I leave for Earth soon, right?" Lisa said. "I wanted to spend some time with you, but no, flowers are more important than your best friend."

Keliana, a girl who was in fact a year Lisa's senior, coloured. "I... I apologise, Lisa, I simply—"

Lisa cracked up and rushed forward to hug her princess. "I'm just playing with you! Though I meant the bit about wanting to spend time with you. I've missed you like mad, Kels."

"I truly am sorry, Lisa, I let my newfound freedom best me, it seems," Keliana whispered, her eyes welling up.

"You're free now the parade's over, right?" Lisa said, pulling away.

Kelly composed herself. "Absolutely!"

"Great." Lisa pulled her lover over. "Anise, allow me to introduce Grand Princess Dona Keliana Francisca Madeiras." She extended an arm and bowed, a reverential gesture Anise would never have expected if Lisa hadn't already mentioned her feelings for this girl.

"Lisa, please, you know I dislike all that pomp and circumstance," Keliana said with a perfectly princess-like frown of disapproval. "While in private, at least. Alas, I do have to maintain appearances in public."

A mischievous grin occupied Lisa's face. "I know you do. I just love your blushing face."

"Really, now..." Keliana murmured, the blush deepening. She switched attention to her new friend. "It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Anise."

"Aaah, a real princess...!" Anise murmured, instantly going weak at the knees. "Lovely to meet you, too, Keliana."

"Please, *Kelly* is perfectly acceptable for any friend of Lisa's," Kelly said, waving a hand.

Lisa beamed. "So, figured you'd be the Flower Queen. Looks like I was right."

Kelly shook her head. "Honestly, I had no intention of being involved beyond helping to decorate the floats, but everyone seemed to think I was the only choice. It was very awkward when the eight queen candidates all nominated me."

"It's not every day you get a real princess turning up," Lisa said, stroking Kelly's arm.

"Yes, but I didn't want to rob a young girl of her chance to shine..."

“You could always put on your own parade when you get home and invite them to participate?” Lisa suggested, only partially joking.

Kelly clapped her hands together. “Yes... yes! A splendid idea, Lisa, thank you. I shall ask Nisette the moment I return to my suite.”

“Nissy’s still your guardian, huh? I can’t wait to see her,” Lisa said.

“In an ever-changing world, she feels like the only constant, yes.” Kelly led them through into areas the public normally wouldn’t be allowed into, strolling between the stationary floats. “I shall miss this. Today has been such an enjoyable day. To be surrounded by such wonderful people and flowers...”

“Glad to see your love of all things green is as strong as ever,” Lisa said.

Kelly said nothing, merely nodded with a forlorn smile on her lips. She wandered freely, gently stroking her fingertips across the flowers and petals covering each float. Eventually, she let out a melancholy sigh, a sort of ‘*aaah*’ of absolute contentment and mild depression rolled into one.

Anise melted at this cute display. “She loves her flowers, doesn’t she?” she whispered.

Lisa leaned over, lowering her voice. “When I stayed with her family at the royal palace, she’d be up at the crack of dawn just so she could spend as much time as possible in the palace gardens.”

“What... like, actually tending them?” Anise asked, surprised.

“Sure. There are whole areas of the gardens she won’t even allow the gardeners *near*,” Lisa replied, laughing. “She’s known among her people as the Flower Princess. Pretty apt.”

“She’s next in line for the throne, right?”

“She is.”

“I’m a bit worried for her world’s future, gotta admit...” Anise added, giggling.

Lisa cracked up further. “You’re not the only one.”

Staring at Keliana, Anise assumed a thoughtful pose, hand on hip and a single eyebrow raised. “It’s funny. On the one hand, I can see her being well-loved by her people, a good thing for a queen. But on the other hand, the

distaste for anything that gets in the way of her love of flowers seems like a pretty major drawback for a monarch.”

“You know she has a younger sister, right?” Lisa said. “Lily’s queen material, no question. She’s driven, focused, passionate... and she loves her sister more than anything.”

“Is that a nickname as well?” Anise asked.

“Her full name’s Liliana. Lily’s something only a few people call her, same as Kelly.”

Tilting her head, Anise smirked. “You’d be one of these people?”

Lisa winked. “Good guess. I’m the reason Kelly’s here on Aida, after all. Lily contacted me a few months back, when I was getting ready to enter the academy, asking me to help persuade her parents to let Kelly become an idol for a while.”

Wandering along behind the princess, taking a last look at the floats and enjoying the wonderful scents of flowers, including a number of Aidan native types Anise wouldn’t even be able to name, Lisa went on to explain that she had helped formulate a plan to have Kelly travel to Aida to train.

Doting parents who both expected their first daughter to take the throne, the King and Queen of Gran Manillo had readily agreed to Lisa’s request, sending their beloved daughter to gain knowledge of the world and a wealth of new experiences with which to improve and enrich her own world upon return.

Unfortunately, Kelly had immediately been distracted by the wealth of new flora she discovered on Aida...

“So you persuaded her parents in order to get her away from home?” Anise said.

Lisa stopped next to a float filled with flowers arranged in rainbow hues. “Something like that. Teamed up with Lily, she approached their parents, Kelly left a week later.”

“Leaving Liliana in a position to take over any duties of her absent sister?” Anise suggested.

“Exactly. Kelly gets to spend her time surrounded by greenery and Lily gets to do what she’s always wanted. At least until her sister comes home. Though the world isn’t *quite* so lenient as to allow Kelly free reign on that front.”

The princess finished her rounds and returned, doing her best to hide her disappointment that such a lovely day had to end.

Lisa rearranged her face into a welcoming smile. “All done, Kelly?”

“For now, yes. I could stare at beautiful flowers all day long, but alas, I do have several other important liaisons to keep today.” Kelly let out another sigh, this time of mild annoyance. “It is most vexing that even here on Aida I find myself hamstrung by a multitude of distractions.”

“The nature of the game, I’m afraid,” Lisa said.

“Yes. I understand, Lisa, worry not.” Kelly stared for a moment, finally understanding what had been bothering her for a while now. “I believe this is my first time seeing you with your hair up.” She placed her hands together before her chin. “It suits you perfectly.”

“Blame the missus,” Lisa said, jerking a thumb in the direction of said missus.

Kelly’s face morphed into one of extreme shock twinned with minor embarrassment. “The... missus?”

“Anise. I mean Anise,” Lisa said, chuckling at her best friend’s flustered state. “She wanted to see a ponytail, and who am I to refuse a request like that?”

“You always thought so much of other people,” said the princess, apparently reminiscing.

“Well, we can talk more later. Perhaps with a few drinks?” Lisa suggested.

Kelly shook her head a few times, at which point a transformation took place; like waves lapping against a beach, the purple overtook the green until it was a single uniform shade, removing the barcode effect entirely. It has been said that purple is the colour of royalty, and Kelly’s hair truly embodied that idea in all its glory.

She beamed at the two of them. “In that case, would you care to join me at my star-yacht?”

“She’s a princess, all right,” Anise muttered.

Chapter 30: Catching Up

Arriving at a staff car park to the rear of the warehouses, Lisa walked over to a pristine white limo, all exciting curves and black tinted windows, sort of an Art Deco on steroids look.

Opening the door and sliding along the rear seat, she waved at the driver. “Afternoon, Nissy. Nice to see you again.”

Nisette—Keliana’s personal assistant, driver, pilot, and bodyguard—issued a curt nod, glaring at Lisa in the rear view mirror. Her expression seemed to be permanently in a state of minor annoyance, as though she had just discovered something unpleasant stuck to the sole of her shoe.

Anise shuffled onto the seat and immediately panicked at the scary face in the mirror. “Ah, um, hello. Nice to meet you?”

“Nissy’s lovely, don’t worry, she just finds smiling hard going, don’t you?” Lisa said.

Their princess entered and sat on the seat opposite, facing the rear. “In the ten years Nisette has been with me, I might have seen her smile three times.”

Nisette’s expression hardened further. “To the yacht, Lady Keliana?” Her voice was soft and low, to the point of being hard to hear.

Confirming this, Kelly sat back, fiddling with the queen outfit she still wore. Threading their way around to the lake, they drove through the port and reached a large jetty, by which was moored a jet black star-yacht approximately the size of a medium aircraft.

They made their way up a set of metal steps at the rear starboard side, stepping onto the polished wooden decking. Kelly led them down a set of stairs to the cabin, a spacious and airy room twice as long as Anise’s room at the academy, blinding white with black accents and details to match the limo.

To the left, a long sofa, again pure white. Along the right wall, an enormous holographic stellarvision emitter, a table, and several stools. Further along, a small bathroom, the kitchen, and—through an open door—a luxurious bedroom

furnished in walnut all the way from Earth, with silk sheets on the bed and enough stuffed animals to start a zoo.

Settling down on one of the pristine white sofa seats, Kelly flopped over sideways, lying flat along its length. "I could scarcely believe that was you, Lisa," she said, tilting her head to look at her best friend.

"Wouldn't be much of a surprise if you'd known beforehand," Lisa said, laughing. She sat opposite on one of the stools, Anise next to her. "New place? Haven't seen this one before."

Nisette wandered through to the kitchen to prepare drinks, her expression neutral for now, though neutral for Nisette was more like vaguely annoyed for most people.

Kelly sat up and waved an expansive arm. "Indeed, yes. Mother insisted. We can't have the princess travelling around like a commoner. So she says."

Lisa chuckled. "We knew there'd be a few concessions. You're free to do as you like for the most part, at least. As long as you remember the agreement we made with your parents."

"Yes..."

Lisa narrowed her eyes. "Do I need to mention your lack of attendance at the academy again, my dear?"

Nisette returned carrying a tray with three fluted glasses, each filled with a luscious crimson wine. She handed them out, then retreated above decks.

The princess took a sip of her wine, brows knitted. "I find myself so easily distracted by flowers and plants and greenery. Too easily. And I apologise, Lisa, I meant to come back sooner, but—"

Anise raised a hand. "Um, what agreement? If you don't mind me asking?"

"If she doesn't become this year's Dream Queen, it's off back home with her," Lisa said. "She has until April next year."

"That's the award given to the idol who most captured the hearts and minds of the academy, right? I read about it, it sounds really nice," Anise said.

Kelly nodded at her. "It also sounds like it requires an incredible amount of hard work."

"It does, you're right. But at the end of the day, it's up to you how you want to live," Lisa said. "If you want to spend the year you've been given by concentrating on what interests you, that's fine. As long as you have no regrets when you head home, it's all good."

"Regrets, yes. Perhaps not for myself, but Lily..." Kelly murmured, staring, unseeing, at her best friend's chest.

"Jeez, Kelly, stop staring at my tits," Lisa said, grinning and crossing her arms over said area of her body.

"Pardon?" Kelly came back to reality and realised she was in fact gazing at her best friend's breasts. "My apologies, Lisa, I... I wasn't staring intentionally."

"Hey-hey, my breasts not good enough for our princess?" Lisa added with a wink.

Kelly's face verged on setting the yacht's fire alarm off. "You know what I meant, Lisa!"

Lisa spent a minute or two laughing at her princess's glowing cheeks, before finally managing to settle back down enough to talk. "I guess they have grown a bit since we last saw each other, huh?"

"Yes. I thought you looked a little more, hmm, mature?" Kelly replied.

"Or more confident? I've got a few years' experience under my belt now."

Kelly gave a refined and ladylike giggle. "You were always a confident girl, Lisa. I recall you came into the Royal Palace like a veritable hurricane."

"You mentioned before that you spent a year there when you were thirteen?" Anise said.

"Fourteen," Lisa corrected her.

"That was the most enjoyable year of my life," Kelly said, smiling in a melancholic way.

"I'm always up for making more memories, Kels," Lisa said. "Whenever I have time, that is."

"How did you even end up staying there?" Anise asked.

"Thanks to Dad's connections," Lisa said. "The Lawsons have been career military for centuries, right back to the old galleons sailing the salty ocean waves or whatever. I'm not a poet, leave me alone."

Anise giggled at this. “So your father is in the UNSF?”

“You could say that.”

Kelly let out an un-princess-like snort. “Lisa... you always had that habit of understating important facts.”

“Hang on, hang on. Lawson? As in... Fleet Admiral Peter Lawson?” Anise said, aghast.

“As I said, my family’s been at this game a long time,” Lisa said.

“I figured you just had the same name, it’s pretty common, after all. I can’t believe I’m talking to a descendant of Sir Peter Lawson! Aaah...!”

Now it was Lisa’s turn to laugh. “You get excited over the weirdest things.”

“You have some interesting friends now, Lisa,” Kelly said.

“Don’t I just?”

“She sure does,” Anise said, indicating with a stare that she considered Kelly to be the more surprising one. “So come on, Lisa, how did you end up staying with Kelly?”

“Kelly’s folks owed Dad a favour, simplest way to put it,” Lisa said, guzzling half her glass of wine.

“Have you heard of the São Castro Crisis?” Kelly asked.

“Rings a vague bell,” Anise said.

“It was a Manillian colony world,” Kelly continued. “Or rather, a moon in orbit around a gas giant. It was... an unwise project, with the benefit of hindsight.”

Lisa shrugged. “People always push boundaries. But yeah, this one was a bit less than wise. The moon was habitable, the sort of green and lush world you don’t find that often.”

Kelly tilted her glass towards Lisa. “And because it was rich in resources, a small but vocal group wanted to claim it for Gran Manillo, causing some problems with Lyapunov once more, as if we hadn’t already had enough conflict. My parents agreed to this despite their misgivings.”

“Didn’t their cabinet of advisors push for it?” Lisa said.

“Yes. New resources means new trade and influence, they said. It was also a chance to bloody Lyapunov’s nose, something I am very opposed to. Politics rarely changes, alas.”

“To be fair, things were a bit dicey with Lyapunov at the time anyway, if I remember my history correctly?” Lisa added.

“You do. According to Father, that was the first time in several decades it appeared things might flare up into actual conflict again. Fortunately it didn’t, not least thanks to the actions of Father himself. The issue with São Castro certainly didn’t help, however.”

“Anyway, getting off track here,” Lisa said, and explained how her father had ended up being owed a hefty favour by the Manillan royal family.

Twenty-one years ago, when the Queen was pregnant with Keliana, the new colony of São Castro had been founded. Despite many protests and a great deal of advice *not* to go ahead with it until the moon had been more extensively surveyed, the 22,000 colonists set out on several elderly but serviceable Explorer Ships.

Initial surveys of the moon had shown thick deposits of various ores and minerals in the region surrounding a dormant volcano. Experts had determined the chances of the volcano ever erupting to be effectively zero, and construction of the colony commenced on schedule.

Several months passed, during which time heavy mining operations began, resulting in the eventual triggering of an eruption. The colony was far from regular traffic routes between the major worlds, had only a few spacecraft at their disposal, and the Explorer Ships they arrived in had been cannibalised as part of the building process for the settlement itself.

São Castro would have been—*should* have been—doomed, if not for the actions of then-Vice-Admiral Henry Lawson...

Kelly sat back and crossed a leg, sipping her wine. “Lisa’s father commanded the only ship close enough to help the colony.”

“An Atago class heavy carrier,” Lisa said in a surprisingly enthusiastic tone. “British-Japanese joint project to build the next class of UNSF carrier. Loved those ships, real shame to see them decommissioned.”

"I didn't expect you to be into spaceships," Anise said. "And you mentioned *me* getting excited over weird things."

Lisa shrugged. "I'm not any more, but as a kid? Hell, yeah, loved 'em. Growing up with a father in the UNSF will do that."

"Aw, that's really cute," Anise said.

"Oi..." Lisa muttered, a little embarrassed for once in her life.

"Lisa was quite the tomboy as a young girl, from what she told me," Keliana said.

Raising her glass, Lisa winked. "More of a rascal than a tomboy."

"So your dad rescued the colonists?" Anise said, mentally making a note to ask for photos of this rascally Lisa.

"You know big ships like carriers and cruisers can't enter a planet's atmosphere?" Lisa said.

"Yep."

"That's not *strictly* true. They can, up to a certain size threshold where it's impossible, but it's very dangerous and normally illegal except under exceptional circumstances. Dad kind of did that. With a heavy carrier."

"Wow..."

"Quarter of a million tons of ship entering the planet's atmosphere is quite a sight to see," Lisa said, waving her glass about. "There's archive footage someone from the colony grabbed while they were stuck on a roof waiting for rescue. Worth watching."

"Surprised it didn't burn up," Anise breathed.

Lisa gave a one-shoulder shrug. "All military vessels have energy shields to protect against radiation and impacts and the like, but even those aren't enough to avoid damage from atmospheric entry. It's effectively a coin flip. And if it had been an Earth-sized world, it wouldn't have worked at all."

Kelly piped up here. "Because of Lisa's father risking the safety of his ship and crew, twenty-thousand people were saved. Without him, they might have managed to save two-thousand at most."

"Why enter the atmosphere?" Anise asked.

“Calculated risk,” Lisa said. “Sending shuttles down takes time, and time is an issue with something as fast-moving as lava.”

“That was a hell of a risk,” Anise added, aghast.

“Dad’s pretty dedicated. To uh... say the least. Worries me sometimes, to be honest.”

“Goes with the territory?” Anise said. “My dad’s a test pilot, so I know how it feels.”

“Sure. Doesn’t make it any easier when something like that happens, though.”

“And that’s how your parents ended up owing him a favour? Sort of as a thank you for rescuing their people?” Anise asked Kelly.

“He was officially recognised, as were his crew,” Kelly said. “But yes, my parents unofficially granted him a single request. Anything they could feasibly provide.”

Lisa drained her drink and placed it on the counter. “Eleven years later he cashed in when I decided I felt like travelling.”

“Your father must really love you,” Anise said, her eyes filled with tears.

“Kinda. Though I seem to recall a certain princess had been moaning bitterly about not having any friends. The queen got just as much out of it as I did.”

On the sofa, Kelly’s cheeks had turned roughly the same colour as her hair. “I saw all the young children in the city playing together and merely wished to experience the same. I could scarcely have asked for a better friend than you, Lisa.”

Jumping off the stool, Lisa ran across and sat in Kelly’s lap, giving her a tight hug. “Likewise, my lovely princess.” Returning to Anise, she grabbed her hand and tugged her upright. “Time we were off, still gotta prepare for tonight.”

“Are you playing somewhere?” Kelly asked.

“Central Main Stage. Fancy joining us?”

“That would be lovely, yes,” Kelly said, and yelled up for her guardian.

“Nisette, would you mind driving us somewhere this evening?”

A confirmation floated back down from above decks.

Lisa grinned. "Oho, laying on the limo for us?"

Kelly avoided eye contact. "I feel I owe you a little something for not being there these last couple of months."

"Never look a gift limo in the mouth, I always say," Lisa said, and wandered upstairs to the deck, followed by the princess. "We're at Hotel Grandia, pick us up around eight?"

"Certainly."

"Great. See you later, then." Lisa pecked Kelly on the cheek and made for the exit stairs to the port.

Anise dared a quick hug of their princess. "Super happy to have met you, Kelly, can't wait to see you again."

Kelly agreed that she'd had a wonderful day thanks to the two of them, and waved them both out of sight.

Chapter 31: Sing!

Wandering back to the hotel, navigating the narrower side streets away from the general hustle and bustle of a Slogh Saturday afternoon, Anise used the first available moment of privacy to jump Lisa, smothering her in kisses.

Lisa had to step a foot back for support under this assault. "I'm never averse to cute girls throwing themselves at me, but this is pretty unusual even for you."

"Just realising again how lucky I am to be with you," Anise said in a quiet tone.

"Because I helped Kelly?"

"Yeah..."

"I didn't do much, it was mostly Lily's plan."

"Maybe so, but it's still really nice that you'll put this amount of effort in for people."

Pulling away from the hug, Lisa pecked Anise's lips a couple of times for the nice words. "One of the big reasons I became an idol is because I love how close everyone is. Even rivals and girls directly competing for rare opportunities generally stay on good terms and help each other out. I love that."

"So do I," Anise whispered. Disengaging, she took Lisa's hand and continued walking.

As they entered the hotel lobby, the young lady behind the reception desk called across. "Miss Lawson? There's a package for you."

Lisa skipped over. "Sweet, right on time." She signed for it and grasped the brown box, some six inches deep and rectangular, approximately a metre on its longest side. In their room, she placed it on the bed. "This is for you, Anise. A little gift for spending your time with me. And all the associated activities, naturally."

"For me? Aww, you shouldn't have," Anise said, tugging the lid off. Inside, hidden under several layers of soft tissue paper, was an outfit. A blue, black,

and silver outfit, in fact, futuristic yet retro. She inhaled as though it were her last. “Is this...?”

“A Retrolution coord? Yup,” Lisa said, using the idol industry term for a matching outfit, coord, pronounced *chord*, and shortened from the term *coordinate*.

“How...?” Anise said, speechless for possibly the first time in her life.

“I placed a special order yesterday when we got back from seeing Suzanne and Aedan. Can’t have you going on stage to sing my latest song without an appropriate outfit, can I?”

Anise floored her, smothering her in kisses for the second time in the last half-hour. “Aaah, you’re too amazing, Lisa. Thank you, I’ll treasure it!” She stopped. “Wait... that’s your latest song?”

“Sure is. Nobody’s heard it but you, me, and Aedan.”

“Jeez, no pressure...”

“You’ll be fine. I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t confident you could pull it off. I was going to play the studio mix, but I reckon having you up on stage doing it live will cause a much bigger buzz. For both of us.”

“You said this is for about five thousand people?” Anise said, stiffening a little.

“At the event? Yeah. It’ll be streamed live on the stellarnet as well. To several hundred million people, most likely.”

Anise shut down. “Several hundred...?”

“Million.”

“Haha... haha...”

“I’m joking, I’m joking, relax,” Lisa said, worrying for her lover’s sanity. “It’ll be broadcast to this region, but apart from certain specialist streams it won’t go much further. Few million people still, but that should be okay, right? You’re an idol, Anise, can’t shy away from exposure.”

“I know. I just figured I’d be building my exposure a bit more gradually,” Anise said, laughing. “Hang on...”

“Mm?”

“How did you get this made for me? You don’t have my measurements!”

“Your measurements can quite adequately be summed up as *perfect*, my girl,” Lisa said, pecking Anise’s lips, lingering and nibbling a little.

“Aaah...”

Lisa sat back. “Being serious, though... you’re talking to the daughter of Dreamstar Academy’s headmistress, remember? I asked her to send Retrolution your measurements. That sort of information is available for certain purposes as part of the contract you signed on arrival.”

“You always put so much effort in for others. Inspires me to do more, if I’m honest.”

“Having more successful idols helps everyone. Though I admit you’re getting preferential treatment for less than altruistic reasons,” Lisa said with a half-smile.

A couple of hours slipped past as they prepared for their evening, Anise burning the lyrics into her mind while Lisa checked over her equipment and rough set list; she generally had a reasonable idea of what she wanted to play, but might end up changing the song list entirely depending on how the audience reacted.

Dressing in something considerably more swish than the previous evening, Lisa finished first, checking her silver miniskirt and crop top in the bathroom’s full-length mirror. She nodded in satisfaction and sat on the bed to lace her equally silver knee boots up.

Anise, meanwhile, agonised, holding up the Retrolution coord. “Should I wear this new outfit now? Or change later?”

“Best wear it for the performance, it’s more of a stage outfit than anything,” Lisa said, tying her laces. “Plus it’ll have more impact if you’ve not been seen in it already.”

Anise nodded and carefully placed the outfit back in its box. She instead dressed in an orange and white ensemble featuring a short skirt and camisole-style top.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Lisa wandered over and opened it to see Kelly, inviting her inside. Their princess issued greetings, made a beeline for the bed, and immediately flaked out face down.

“Tired, are we?” Lisa asked.

“Yes,” Kelly said, her voice muffled by the pillow. “The parade has quite taken it out of me.”

“I distinctly remember you saying ‘*don’t be lazy*’ once, Lisa,” Anise said as they stared at the beautiful girl lying on their hotel bed.

“Kelly’s always been kind of lazy, but she puts plenty of effort into her idol work,” Lisa said. “At least when it comes to flower-related idol work. She’s never lazy when it counts, right, Kelly?”

The lazy princess managed to summon enough energy to roll over onto her back. “I am most certainly not lazy, Lisa, I merely enjoy life at a sedate pace.” A degree of primness entered her perfectly enunciated speech, indicating mild annoyance tinged with amusement.

“Sure, we believe you,” Lisa said, grinning. “Right, are we about ready?”

They were, so they grabbed their things, including Anise’s precious new outfit, and headed down to the limo.



Arriving at Central, a black glass-fronted building in the city centre large enough to fit several circuses inside, Kelly dropped her passengers at the rear of the building, then had Nisette drive her around to the front.

Lisa entered through the rear staff entrance like the previous evening at Merlin’s, and made her way to a backstage area with Anise. Dropping her bag and equipment off in a small dressing room, she led the way back out, issuing greetings to some of the staff on the way, and walked around to the front of the building.

“Going in the front way now?” Anise asked.

“We’re meeting Kelly in the main bar area, it’s actually faster from the front.”

“Wow, the stage areas are that big?”

“Five thousand people, remember. And that’s just the Main Stage, both Side Stages fit a thousand each as well.” Lisa waved at the bouncers and led the way

through the front doors, bypassing the already sizeable queue. She checked her phone. “Nothing from Aedan, guess he was too busy to make it. Oh well.”

Making their way through the grey-carpeted foyer, where Lisa signed in as staff, they headed through a set of glossy black double doors leading them into a bar area, cool and dark, lit by vivid blue and green neon tubes running around the ceiling and above the bar.

Dead ahead, another set of doors led to the Main Stage where Lisa would be playing later that night. In the left wall, another door revealed a hall leading to the two smaller, specialist stages where upcoming or niche DJs were frequently showcased.

And sitting at the bar along the right-hand wall, a certain princess primly sipping at a glass of champagne. She caught sight of the new arrivals and called them over, swivelling her stool around to face them. “Hello!”

Anise stared. Kelly had changed her hair again, this time to a vivacious yellow, but with a sharp gradient effect halfway down changing into a deep orange tone. “Your hair looks amazing, Kelly.”

“Thank you,” Kelly said, bobbing her head. “Yellow orange-tipped roses are some of my favourite flowers, so I felt like emulating one this evening.”

Anise did all she could *not* to hyperventilate at this vision of beauty; she privately felt she wouldn’t mind pollenating their princess...

Lisa stepped close and pecked Kelly’s cheek. “Hey. Looking good, Kels.” She bought a bottle of Sex Appeal—another alcopop type drink similar to Immersion, albeit with different connotations—for herself and Anise and leaned back against the bar.

Scanning the area, with its stylish black and white leather seats and well-dressed clientele, Anise sipped her drink and sighed. “Wish Isla could be here to see this. Pretty sure Stardew is the most upper class place she’s ever been.”

“Who is Isla?” Kelly asked.

Anise explained, finishing up by mentioning that her best friend was likely still being run ragged at the camp. “Can’t help but think she might have the short end of the stick this time.” She laughed, but felt bad about it.

“She sounds lovely, I’d like to meet her. Alas, I don’t have many friends here yet,” Kelly said in a wistful tone.

Lisa cleared her throat in a menacing fashion. “And whose fault is that, hmm?”

Kelly immediately coloured. “A-Ahaha, yes, whose indeed.”

Giggling at this exchange, Anise delicately changed subject before her new friend dug herself any deeper. “You’re into flowers, right?”

“It would be fair to say that flowers are my life,” Kelly replied.

“I wonder if you could help with something that happened when Isla and I transferred into Dreamstar?”

“Master Falconi gave you both a flower?” Kelly asked, apparently reading her mind.

Anise raised her bottle. “Not sure why, but it was a nice gesture.”

“His wife is a well-known botanist,” the princess continued. “He is also well versed in flower language himself. If he gave you a flower each, as he did me, it will have had a purpose. Can you describe them?”

“Uh, sure?” Anise said, her brows creasing up as she tried to bring the flowers to mind. “Mine was white. Really pretty, lots of petals. Um... oh, and yellow in the centre.”

Poking her phone a few times, Kelly spent a moment looking something up. She held the device out. “Something like this?”

“That’s it!” Anise said, pointing at the screen.

“White Camellia Japonica, it is a very pretty flower, no? It also has a meaning of ‘*perfected loveliness*’. It appears you left a positive impression.”

“He’s not wrong, either,” Lisa said.

Anise blushed at the compliments. “Aww... thanks, both of you.”

“Do you remember Isla’s?” Kelly asked.

“The flower itself was purple? With, uh, I think yellow-white bits in the petals? Like a five-point star shape?” Anise hazarded.

“Possibly Sea Bindweed...” Kelly murmured, tapping her phone’s incredibly thin surface. She owned a particularly high-end style of phone that could be set

to rigid mode, like now, or a wrap-around flexible mode allowing it to be worn on the wrist. Anise was already green with envy.

“And for some reason he gave her a bit of grass wrapped around the flower’s stem. Green, obviously. It had sort of bushy bits at the end?” Anise added.

Nodding a few times, Kelly held the phone up, receiving a confirmation, so she swiped to another picture, again receiving confirmation. “Is Isla indecisive at all?”

“How the hell did you guess that?” Anise said, aghast.

Kelly let out a ladylike laugh, a hand held up to her mouth. “Sea Bindweed can represent uncertainty, and Canary Grass represents perseverance. Master Falconi is quite the eminent judge of character.”

“Mum probably gave him some idea as well,” Lisa added. “He’s a showman, knowing how to wow the crowd is part of his stock in trade.”

“Well, he’s pretty much done that,” Anise said. “Also, why Master?”

Kelly glanced at her, glass halfway to her lips. “Master? Oh, how I refer to Falconi? I’ve had a fascination with magic since a young age.”

“And you caught one of Falconi’s shows when you entered the academy?” Anise hazarded.

“Correct,” Kelly said, pointing at her.

“I’m a huge fan of his as well.”

“Fabulous! Perhaps we can indulge in a little mutual fangirling one day soon?” Kelly said.

This made Lisa choke on her drink. “F-Fangirling? Where did you pick up that word, Kels?”

“I have been studying since I arrived,” Kelly said, plainly proud.

“Good on you,” Lisa said, raising her bottle in toast.

Grabbing another round of drinks, the girls chatted, danced, and enjoyed the atmosphere for a couple more hours until Lisa was due on at eleven. She arranged for Anise to head out back to change fifteen minutes before the final song was due to play, and headed off backstage. Anise and Kelly mingled, waiting for the show to start which, in due time, it did.

Much like the previous evening, Anise found herself getting lost in a trance-like fantasy of great music and sweaty bodies, dancing with Kelly and forgetting for a time that she needed some energy left over for her performance.

Later soon arrived and, some fifteen minutes before the end of Lisa's time behind the decks, Anise went up on the Main Stage in her brand new outfit. Surveying the thousands of people in this enormous hall, she breathed steadily, keeping the nerves under control using techniques studied and practised regularly for two full years before she even suggested trying out for Dreamstar Academy.

Standing next to her, Lisa held a hand up. "I'd like to introduce Anise Kendall! She's a new girl here on Aida, all the way from the Red Planet! Let me hear you say hello!" She held a cupped hand up to her ear, the audience screaming a thunderous '*hello!*' back. "Are you ready for my new song!?" Again she held the hand up, and again the crowd responded.

Lisa grinned and ran back to her decks, leaving Anise front and centre, nervous as all hell and hyped to high orbit.

Closing her eyes, Anise awaited the beat, the melody, the tempo that would boost her to heights past the stratosphere and beyond. She opened her mouth and sang. For the crowd, for Isla, for Lisa, for everyone, but especially for herself.

The crowd was eerily quiet, dancing and jumping and enjoying the moment, unsure who this sexy and beautiful girl was, only aware that she had a voice fit for a choir of angels. Five minutes was all it took, five short minutes for hundreds of new fans to pop up, resolving to find out who this girl was, figuring that if she was involved with Lisa, she must be something special.

Fading the song out, Lisa held a hand out for a round of applause, which Anise duly received, then handed the decks off to the next DJ for the evening.

Anise bowed, then waved to the crowd and backed away, stepping off into the wings and collapsing to her knees. "Haha... that was terrifying..."

Lisa joined her lover in the wings. She dropped down and issued a tight hug. "That was amazing, Anise. Honestly... I'd like to have you sing the real thing, but it's too late to make changes at this point."

“I can’t believe I sang for that many people,” Anise muttered, shaking with both nerves and excitement. “I’ve always enjoyed singing, but mostly as a hobby. Thanks, Lisa, I owe you for letting me experience this!”

“You are *more* than welcome. Now... I feel like snuggling up in bed, how about you?”

“Without clothes?”

“Without clothes.”

“Let’s go,” Anise said, giggling like mad and hoping her legs might support her now. They did, so she staggered off to the dressing room with Lisa, changed back into her original outfit, then strolled through into the club proper.

They hooked up with Kelly on the way out and arranged to see her briefly before heading back to Apollotia the next day, then returned to the hotel to relax, snuggle, and maybe kiss. But nothing more despite the clothing deficiency; the euphoria of the last several hours had left them both feeling an almost post-coital afterglow in any case...

Chapter 32: Homeward Bound

At Kelly's yacht around midday on the Sunday, they said farewell to their princess. That was the plan, anyway. Kelly instead dropped a minor bombshell on them while hanging around on the yacht's rear deck.

"I apologise for being absent, Lisa," she said. "To make up for it, at least somewhat, allow me to give you both a ride back home."

"Now we're talking," Lisa said, giving her friend a hug and pecking Kelly on the cheek. "Been good seeing you again, if only briefly."

"Perhaps I could visit you on Earth?" Kelly suggested.

Resting her hands on her beloved friend's shoulders, Lisa grinned. "I wouldn't be averse to that. I'll show you around Canterbury and the Royal Academy."

Anise butted in here. "The Royal Academy? I wonder if I could come along..."

"Hey, the more the merrier," Lisa said, chuckling at her lover's rosy-cheeked idogasm. "I'll be busy while there, but I'd probably be able to keep a week or two reasonably free in the event any lovely girls might feel inclined to jump me. Or visit. I get those confused pretty often."

Kelly let out a princess-like giggle. "You certainly seem to have flowered since we last saw each other. I felt during your visit that you didn't understand yourself. I was much the same at the time."

"You're quite the perceptive girl under that cute exterior, huh?" Lisa said. She let out a short cough and beamed, hoping to derail things there. "So, we ready to get going?"

Kelly was perceptive enough to understand Lisa didn't feel like saying more, so she simply smiled and motioned for Nisette to fly them out of there. As the name implied, a star-yacht could be flown not only in-atmosphere, but also through hyperspace. On this occasion they would enjoy a mere five minute jaunt across to Dreamstar Academy, however.

Nisette made her way up to the bridge via one of two staircases to either side of the spacious cabin's entrance, and went through pre-flight. All hatches and doors were closed and hermetically sealed, and two reinforced plastiglass covers were extended up from the sides of the yacht, closing over the deck at the rear, allowing for passengers to look out while in transit.

Their guests remained on deck as the yacht got airborne, water splashing down from the hull to the lake below as it gained altitude.

Anise pulled Lisa to one side. "No intentions of telling her how you feel? Not like you're tied down or anything, and she might be interested..."

Lisa shook her head. "I like the idea, but no. You understand how I feel because you feel the same for Isla, right?"

Anise nodded.

"But in my case, I've not seen her for years, it'd be a bit awkward bringing it up now. Especially if I told her how often I'd... thought of her back then." Lisa coughed, indicating a guilty conscience.

"By thought of her, you mean...?"

"Don't make me draw you a picture, please."

Anise stifled a loud snort. "Dare I ask if you've *thought about me*?"

"Probably unnecessary," Lisa said, chuckling. "I'm perfectly comfortable with myself and my interests. But Kelly... she's special. I'd feel weird about trying anything."

"I won't mention it again," Anise whispered, and pecked Lisa's cheek.

"You don't need to go that far. It's just that I have two best friends, one I'm happy to be sexy with, the other... not so much." Lisa shrugged. "Though don't get me wrong, I'd love to get her naked. But... I dunno, it's difficult to explain."

"It's a bit disconcerting seeing you be this hesitant over something," Anise said, tilting her head a little in a '*discovered something new and interesting about someone*' way.

"Which should tell you all you need to know about how odd this makes me feel," Lisa said.

Kelly reinserted herself into proceedings here. "I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation, but we are close to Apollotia now."

Lisa straightened up. “Guess you’re heading straight back to Slogh?”

“I am, yes,” said Kelly. “A few last affairs to put into order before I return to the academy, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll be gone before you return, then.” Lisa embraced her friend, enjoying her princess’s warmth and wonderful fragrance, floral of course. “I’ll do what I can to leave some space in my schedule in the event you can visit Canterbury, Kels.”

“I shall be focused on becoming Dream Queen from now on, but Fates willing, yes.” Kelly disengaged and turned her attention to their silent third. “I believe you will still be at the academy, Anise?”

“Yep. I’m in room B34, stop by any time you like,” Anise said with a thumbs-up.

Kelly gave her a brief hug, almost causing an instant idolgasm. “I will look forward to it.”

They came in to land on one of the academy’s landing pads south of the dormitory, and Kelly’s guests hopped off, running down the metal stairs and over to the campus island via one of the sturdy bridges.

The yacht lifted off once more, its thrusters blanketing the area in ear-bending noise, and Lisa waved her princess out of sight. Her shoulders slumped. “And there she goes.”

Anise squeezed her hand. “You’ll see her again.”

“Yeah... I guess I will, huh?” Lisa said, perking up. “Now, I believe we probably have something to discuss?”

“As much as I don’t want to.”

They headed up to Anise’s room and entered, dumping their things at the foot of the bed for now. Sitting on the mattress, Anise hugged Lisa tightly, to the point of discomfort. Despite the casual nature of their relationship, she had become considerably more attached than she might have intended. She forced herself to speak, to say the words that would effectively end this wonderful—if brief—relationship.

“The last week has been amazing, Lisa. Especially this weekend. Thank you, I mean *really* thank you for being with me like this.” She nibbled her way all around Lisa’s neck, up to her cheek, and finally pecking her lips a few times.

“Any time. I mean that quite literally, of course. Any time you want another go, just ping me,” Lisa said, chuckling. “I’ve had a total blast with you as well, my girl. Not often someone as amazing as you strolls into my life like this.” She tugged her lover’s hair from its accustomed twintails, admiring one last time how incredibly beautiful Anise was with her hair loose and wavy, especially so in the new colour.

Anise blushed, looking down and fidgeting. “Thanks...”

“You going to pounce on Isla, then?”

“I’d like to, if she’s ready. And I want to be intimate with her again, that’s for sure. But we’ve been such good friends for such a long time now that it’s always awkward thinking about her as more than that. No different to you and Kelly, I suppose.”

“You only get the one life, Anise.”

“This from the girl who just told me how hesitant she is about jumping Kelly?” Anise said, an amused smirk on her lips.

“That’s more to do with her station in life and how busy I am most of the time. But you raise a valid point, I admit,” Lisa said, stroking a finger down Anise’s cheek. “You don’t want to miss out on something special, right? Isla’s spending the weekend with a friend of mine called Millie, a girl I’m very fond of and who I can tell you right now is as gay as a tree full of drunken monkeys.”

Anise creased up with laughter. “Sounds like a girl I need to meet.” She returned to a slightly more sober mode. “So basically... I shouldn’t hang about if I don’t want Isla taken by someone else?”

“You’ve got it. Why’d you think Mira and I maintain a permanent sexy relationship in addition to our regular friendship?”

Anise pondered for a moment. “The obvious answer is physical pleasure and intimacy, but I don’t think that’s the *right* answer.”

“Correct, it’s not.”

“I guess... living life for the moment? Or maybe more like... not wanting regrets?”

Lisa issued a kiss as a reward. “Correct again. It was nothing more complicated than me deciding I found Mira attractive and talking to her about it. She confessed to fancying me in return, we agreed to get naked and explore, rest is history.”

“This was after leaving Kelly’s place?”

“About a year later, yeah. We were together at the Royal Academy for a year, studying and all that good stuff. And I was... pretty frustrated, let’s just say that.”

“I understand that. I’ve had to relieve Isla-related tensions quite a few times over the last few years,” Anise said. She avoided mentioning the one time she had to relieve Lisa-related tensions; she figured this girl was more than perceptive enough to have guessed anyway.

Lisa tilted her head. “Other than Mira, I suspect you understand me better than anyone else alive. An impressive feat, considering we only met less than a week ago.”

“I honestly didn’t expect to run into someone like you, Lisa. I... don’t want to let you go...”

Lisa wrapped her arms around Anise, rubbing her back. “You’ll always have a special place in my heart. And you’ll always be welcome in my panties, naturally. But we both know who your heart truly belongs to, right?”

“Mm...”

“I’d love to spend the next week with you before I leave, but it’s also true I’m going to be pretty busy and need to focus, so... with that said, one last night of hot, steamy sex, my dear?”

Anise emitted an odd mixture of laugh and sob. “Yeah... yeah! Let’s go out with a bang.”

“Now we’re cooking with fusion,” Lisa said, and went in for a kiss... followed by considerably more than a kiss.

Part 06: A Life Less Ordinary

Over the same weekend as Isla and Anise are away on their respective adventures, a directionless eighteen year old called Ema Campbell struggles to figure out what she's going to do with her life. She still lives at home and desperately desires freedom and independence, but these things require money that she doesn't have.

But after her best friend Jun takes her to see a Cassiopeia Luna concert on the Sunday evening, Ema reawakens to a love of idols she had long forgotten. After a chance meeting with Isla, she realises that becoming an idol might be a good path forward for her.

The only problem is that her mother despises idols and will likely disown Ema if she so much as mentions them...

Chapter 33: Dreams Aren't Made for Dreaming

On the Saturday morning, while Isla and Anise were away on their respective adventures, another girl was hanging around in a small park out in the Apollotia suburbs, waiting for a friend to arrive. She was cute, had a wonderfully vivid beige-blond hair tone, soft blue eyes, and looked to be around eighteen years old.

She was presently sitting on a bench just off to one side of the park, reading something on a small flexitab. Nearby, a couple were walking their dog, a stand opposite her bench was doing a steady trade in hot dogs, and a pleasant summer scent of grass and ice cream lingered in the air.

On the webpage she was reading, a picture of one Cassiopeia Luna at some concert or other was displayed. She was apparently due to put on a live event here in Apollotia in a day or two or something. The girl paid it little mind, tapping the screen a few times to find something else to occupy her mind until her friend showed up. A new page loaded, again showing an idol. It seemed she couldn't get away from them if she tried.

Something stirred in her head, a vague image, hazy and just out of reach of her conscious mind. A memory of holding a microphone as a young girl, singing and dancing and having the time of her life, her father in the background cheering her on.

It had always felt like a good memory, a *positive* memory, on those rare occasions it sprang to mind. She just couldn't remember it *clearly*, it was like an itch she couldn't quite reach, or that word you know but can't bring to mind. Hadn't she loved idols back then? That much she *did* remember, vividly so. But these days? She rarely thought much about them at all.

A voice intruded into her thoughts. "Ema!"

Coming back to reality as a gentle gust of wind ruffled her shoulder-length hair, the girl looked up and saw that her friend had finally arrived, preceded by her voice. Her best friend Jun had always been a boisterous girl, the chin-length

ginger hair and freckles giving her a tomboyish and mischievous air even when she was saying nothing.

Jun came to a stop before the bench and grinned. "Sorry I'm late!"

Ema shook her head. "It's fine, I don't mind waiting when the weather's this nice." She spoke softly, though not *quietly*; it came across more as stoicism than anything, a sort of resignation to her fate. "So... what did you want me for?"

"What, I can't ask my friend out on a date?" Jun said, pouting.

Spinning the flexitab between her two index fingers, showing a level of unconscious dexterity she had never used for much beyond swiping a touchscreen, Ema tilted her head, though her lips remained steadfastly uncurled. "You always have an ulterior motive, Jun."

"Not always, just nine-plus-one times out of ten," Jun replied, crossing her arms. "Anyway, you're coming to Luna's concert with me, right? I got you a ticket and everything!"

"Luna...?"

Jun let out a put-upon breath and placed her hands on her hips.

"Dreamstar Academy's top idol? You know, the Lone Idol? Midnight Mistress? Lunar Lady? Throw me a bone here, Ema!"

"Oh... her. I was going to concentrate on job searching, actually..." Ema mumbled, remembering the article she had just seen on her flexitab.

"Not a chance," Jun said, wagging a finger in front of her friend's face.

"You can job search any time. And I had to jump through *all the hoops* to get these tickets. All of them. Not a single hoop missed!"

"It's pointless arguing, isn't it?" Ema said with a resigned sigh.

Jun's face split into an evil grin. "Totally. You've not won an argument against me in the last year, so just give up and come see Luna with me. Okay? Okay!" She sat next to her. "You used to love pretending to be an idol, right?"

"A long time ago. But ever since Mom said what she did..." Ema said, her shoulders dropping a little.

"Oh right... sorry, Ema, I forgot about that."

"Don't worry about it. She's right anyway," Ema said with a shrug. "I don't have the talent to be an idol, I just need to find a job so I can move out."

“Well, either way, come on. This is going to be great, you can’t miss an opportunity like this. It might be your last chance,” Jun said, tugging her friend’s arm.

Ema caved, as she knew she would. “Oh all right... I guess it can’t hurt to check it out this once.”

With this decided, the wait for Sunday evening to roll around began.



Sunday morning arrived with minimal fanfare, giving them a sunny and pleasant day for their trip to the Infinity Dome, Apollotia’s largest event arena. Ema now walked the streets with Jun, taking in the sights and sounds and smells; a hugely popular idol like Luna always drew crazy crowds, but today seemed even more busy than usual.

“Lots of people today,” Ema said as they pushed their way through the packed street.

“Luna’s just released a new song, everyone wants to hear it live,” Jun said, barging her way through the throng without a care.

“Wait... you mean some of these people are here to listen outside of the event?”

“That’s right,” Jun replied, ducking down to run through a crowd with a comical waddling gait. “If you can’t get tickets, listening in outside the arena has its own atmosphere as well. Done it myself a few times.”

They arrived at the venue, an enormous domed structure the size of several of the largest football stadiums placed side by side. Out front, the carparks were already filled to capacity, thousands of people were milling about waiting to get in through the overflowing front entrance, and the whole place had a festive atmosphere.

Ema looked around, eyes wide. “I’d forgotten how insane these places could be...”

“Even worse inside,” Jun said. She grabbed her friend’s hand and made for the snaking line leading to the glass doors into the building. It only took two

hours to get inside. The last time Jun had seen Luna live, nearly a year ago, it had taken five hours. Top idols weren't called that for nothing.

The foyer was just as bad, filled with dozens upon dozens of fans interspersed with staff, shops, stands, and a variety of reporters covering the event, including some from academies like Dreamstar; even idols got into the journalism game, and some made that their focus rather than being a regular idol, simply because being part of an idol academy meant easier access to big events like these.

"Always wanted to be an idol journo," Jun commented, apropos of nothing much.

Ema grabbed Jun's arm as she was buffeted by the crowd, and raised her voice to be heard over the din. "Why didn't you?"

"Because it's my hobby, I didn't want to turn it into a job," Jun yelled back. The overall increase in volume meant one thing: the event was getting close to kick-off. Making their way up a staircase opposite the entrance doors, they emerged into the bright daylight of the dome itself, open to the air and filled with one-hundred-thousand Luna fans, making for a veritable *sea* of people.

Lights and strobes flashed and flickered all around, smoke machines worked overtime to bathe the stage, and Ema's heart rate ticked up higher and higher as the atmosphere and sense of tension and expectation washed over her. Finding their way down the stairs to the midway point of the main floor, they elbowed their way into the crowd and prepared themselves for two hours of shock and awe.

Moments later, a beat started, then a simple piano overlaid it, followed by a deep bass line, and finally Cassiopeia Luna appeared through a hole in the stage, rising up through the smoke as the lights faded and a holographic screen covered the arena above, blotting out the sun.

Despite her usually fairly apathetic surface attitude towards idols, Ema found herself tapping a foot to the energetic tune... then she was bouncing back and forth... then jumping and raising her hands in the air with the rest of the crowd, thoroughly lost in the moment.

After an hour of this, Luna slowed things down with a ballad, allowing the crowd to get their collective breath back before the next increase in tempo. Ema swayed back and forth with the sea of people around her, her eyes locked on like twin range finders taking in every single detail of Luna's face, the amazing purple outfit she wore, the sparkly midnight hair, the fluid way she moved.

Jun glanced beside her and saw her friend's enraptured face. She was well aware that Ema loved idols, for all that she seemed to have forgotten it right now, and the expression on her friend's face, the sheer *bliss* told Jun everything she needed to know. She poked Ema in the side. "You okay?"

Managing to drag her gaze away from the stage, Ema turned her head, eyebrows raised. "Eh?"

"Luna's only a year older than us," Jun yelled, grinning like mad at the change in expression this elicited.

"She's only a year older?" Ema mumbled, turning back to the stage. "A year older, and yet she's up there on the stage having the time of her life, while I'm..."

Jun slipped an arm around her friend's shoulders. "Amazing, isn't she?"

Ema nodded mutely, her whole body momentarily stilled, again staring at this amazing girl on the stage who was filling her whole world with brilliant light and a feeling of euphoria.

The next hour of the show vanished as quickly as the first had, but this time she was barely aware of it, her mind was too busy mulling over the fact that Luna was only a year older than her, yet here she was putting on a live event for one-hundred thousand people, and millions more watching through the net.

With the last song of the evening's final notes lingering, Luna thanked the audience, mouthed something silently that no microphone could pick up, and exited to the side of the stage.

"Aaah, that was even better than last year's," Jun said, enjoying a stretch and taking a few deep breaths after all the recent exertion. "Love the new song, too, her label just has the best composers."

"Label?" Ema said, still staring at the stage.

"She has her own music label, Dark Moon Recordings," Jun replied.

“Hah... she’s so far beyond me, it’s not even funny,” Ema muttered.

Jun grabbed Ema’s hand and tugged her back out to the stairs up. “It’s not too late to start.” She lead them through to the massive foyer and pushed the crowds until they were outside.

“I don’t know about that,” Ema said, taking a gulp of the fresh evening air. Aida was well-known for its humidity, at least in this region of the planet, but it hadn’t set in fully yet, giving evening time more of a cool and atmospheric feel than the wet heat of high summer.

“Find a nice little agency or something, give it a try,” Jun enthused. “You can do that and still be looking for a job, right? And hey, if you make it big, that’s both problems solved.”

“Except for the problem of Mom disowning me if I did that,” Ema said, beginning the long walk across the vast carparks. “Still, that was really fun, thanks, Jun.”

Jun grinned. “You’re welcome.”



Arriving home after seeing Jun back to her place, Ema entered her little house in Apollotia’s suburbs, a nice three bedroom place she had lived in her whole life. There was nothing too unusual about it; an upstairs, a downstairs, a garden out back, and a quiet and relaxed neighbourhood. Perfect for an energetic girl with a love of idols to grow up in.

The trouble was, she was no longer a young girl, or quite so energetic. She was an eighteen year old young woman with a desperate need for some financial independence and a place of her own. And Jun *did* have a point, idol agencies took on all sorts of girls and accepted risks the big academies simply wouldn’t be willing to entertain.

But did she really have what it took to be an idol? She barely remembered how to *smile* these days, never mind anything else... and smiling was all but essential to success. Not to mention that she would have to keep it an absolute secret from her idol-disliking mother as long as she remained in this house.

Entering the building, she poked her head into the lounge just off the entrance hall, said hi to the folks—both of whom were under the impression she had been at Jun’s place looking for jobs—and dashed upstairs to her room.

As much as she wanted to be independent and have her own place, Ema *did* love her room. It was pretty basic, sure, with creamy-white walls and a light red carpet plus matching curtains, and a single bed with the comfiest mattress in existence, but it suited her to a tee.

She closed the door behind her and leaped onto the bed, reaching over to the bedside cabinet where she had dumped her flexitab after meeting Jun earlier in the day. Swiping the screen, she activated the holo-display so it hovered in the air before her, and opened a web browser.

“Okay... Luna, Luna... uh, what was her full name again?” Ema mumbled, casting her eyes up towards the ceiling as she attempted to remember what one of the most popular idols in the world was called. “Cassio... something?”

A search for this gave her approximately a billion results. “Oh wow, I didn’t expect that many. Ah, here we are, Cassiopeia Luna... top idol at... oh. Dreamstar Academy, huh? Of course she would be, no way someone like her would be part of an agency.”

Reading Luna’s entry on the academy’s website—which took some time, given how much Luna had already achieved in just the year she had been there—Ema’s stomach sank further and further.

Just nineteen years old and Luna was putting on shows for millions of fans across the globe and beyond. She had her own record label with a staff dedicated wholly to creating new songs for her and only her to sing. And that was to say nothing of her own personal clothing brand which she modelled for regularly. *And* she attended the number one idol academy on not just Aida itself, but across *all* colony worlds and Earth, too.

Luna might as well be a literal lunar goddess for how unattainable and out of reach she was to someone like Ema.

Tossing the flexitab to one side, Ema collapsed back into the welcoming mattress, her eyes drooping. Since entering middle school some five years ago,

she had barely thought of idols. Not much to think *about* really, she'd been too busy with schoolwork to bother with such flights of fancy.

But tonight...

Tonight, she had been more hyped up and energised than at any time she could remember in the last ten years. Her body *tingled*, that jumpy and jittery feeling she got when she was so excited she couldn't sit still. Despite herself and her situation, she felt a stirring of something she hadn't felt in a *long* time, a desire to be an idol and make people smile and laugh.

Her eyes gradually closed as she thought of Luna and that incredible event of hers, eventually dozing off and entering a wonderland of bright lights and smoky stages and adoring fans...

Chapter 34: A Chance Encounter

By the time Monday morning dawned, Isla had just about managed to recover from the exertion of her weekend at the camp. Up a little earlier than usual after an early night, she went for a run around campus followed by a shower and a consultation with her brand new producer. She found Mira in Dome 01's foyer, talking to the lady who occupied the welcome kiosk. "Chatting up the staff?"

Mira turned at this, her face morphing into a mild smile. "Contrary to what you may believe, I am in fact capable of functioning like a normal person occasionally, Isla."

Inside the kiosk, the lady—the very same one who had welcomed Isla and Anise on their original arrival—blushed a little. "Mira's well known around here as something of a confidant."

"What can I say? I like talking to people," Mira said, giving her a wink. "I hope things improve soon."

The kiosk lady nodded and smiled at her.

"Always helping people, huh?" Isla said, walking with Mira back outside.

"What goes around comes around," Mira said. She walked them over to the central fountain and sat with her idol on one of the five benches surrounding it. Heavy hints of roses and tulips wafted across from the gazebo garden nestled between the rear domes. "Mm, I love it here in the morning. There's something to be said for getting up early."

"This, coming from someone who normally lies in until ten?" Isla said, stretching her legs out.

"It's never too late to start a new habit," Mira said with a smile.

"Can't argue with that. So... I'm guessing you have something for me?"

"Very astute," Mira said. "At ten, we'll be heading to Memorial Park in the city. There, you, my fine young idol, will be handing out free samples of Japanese boxed lunches, made by a well-known New Meadowstone company called Good Morning Bentou."

Isla nodded. “I’ve heard of them. We had a transfer student at middle school who used to have them for her breakfast before she had to move. She used to love them.”

“They are rather tasty, it’s true,” Mira said with a brief expression of gastronomic delight. Her tastes leaned heavily towards plain foods, and the simple rice, rolled omelette, and sausage boxed lunches that Good Morning Bentou sold were easy on her palate.

“This is something like that first audition I did with Anise?” Isla asked.

“Similar. You’re not competing with anyone, however, this is just a simple little job to get you some exposure in a public setting,” Mira said, standing.

“Dress in something casual but smart, and bring your best smile.”

“Got it,” Isla said, and returned to the dormitory to prepare.



The park in question was one Isla was familiar with; she had watched the idol known as Hot Stuff perform here, and it was well-known for attracting idols of one stripe or another. Regular stands and stalls sold a variety of trinkets and foods—often utilising the services of a rookie idol—and the air was filled with the voices of people playing football, or practising dance moves, or even taking a simple morning stroll.

A row of stands had been erected in a small paved area to one side of the park. Here, five stalls were plying their wares at the tops of their voices, except for one table in the middle of the other four, where a conspicuous space was clearly intended to be occupied by a certain rookie idol.

The table was filled with a number of plain white plates, each polished to a perfect shine. Behind the table stood a portable fridge roughly half the width of the table itself, humming gently under the morning sun.

“No one here?” Isla said, glancing about in hopes of seeing someone official-looking she could collar for instructions.

Mira tapped her on the shoulder. “Some jobs expect you to use initiative. This is one of those. It’s simple enough, just ask passers by if they’d like a free

sample of the boxed lunches Good Morning Bentou sells. The types of lunch are all listed here.” She handed over a flexitab.

Looking at the device’s screen, Isla quickly read over each item. Half a dozen boxed lunches, all for breakfast use and for a variety of palates. She nodded. “Seems easy enough.”

“There’s a D-code on the lid of each lunchbox, have anyone who’s interested scan the code with their phone for details of the lunch,” Mira added.

Isla opened the fridge and tugged a box out, placing the shiny black item on the table. On the lid was embossed a golden symbol, square and featuring a number of slashes and dots, an evolution of QR Code technology that allowed for all kinds of information to be stored in a small icon less than a centimetre across.

“Okay, I think I’ve got this,” she said, placing the box back into the fridge.

“Wonderful. In that case, I’ll leave you to it. Once you run out of samples, send me a message and I’ll come pick you up,” Mira said, walking away with a wave.

Arranging a number of the boxes on the table, Isla set about her task for the day. It didn’t take long for people to start showing a vague interest in this cute girl and the delicious scents of the lunches themselves, and before she knew it she had a queue of half a dozen people waiting for a taste.

At the back of the line, a certain beige-blond-haired girl stood, peering around the other people in an attempt to see what was going on. Ema’s thoughts had been a little hazy since the concert the previous evening, so she had decided that some fresh air and a walk in a nice park might help clear her head a bit.

Isla was already into things, despite only having been doing this job for the last hour, talking to each person and giving them a personal recommendation based on what they told her. Next up was Ema, so Isla beamed at her. “Would you like to try a free sample?”

Ema stopped a few steps shy of the table itself. “I guess?” Her expression was currently set to ‘*suspicious*’ as she took in this girl’s own facial features; pretty and cute, sure, and that hair was *really* nice. She’d always thought

ponytails looked great on basically anyone but herself. But the main thing was the *smile*.

She drew a little closer, each footstep happening at around the same speed as continental drift, and wondered how other people could smile so... *effortlessly*. Seeing someone who could smile instantly and disarmingly with no apparent effort was mildly irritating. And perhaps just a little upsetting.

“Uh...” Ema murmured, noting there were half a dozen black boxes, each with the lid off to show an appetising series of Japanese-style morsels. She had seen programmes on the net involving Japanese cooking every now and then. It looked intricate and delicious, but she’d never been all that interested in trying it. Mostly due to the sushi. Raw fish just didn’t appeal.

“Try anything you like,” Isla said, making some vague hand motions towards the boxes. She picked up a pair of disposable chopsticks the company had provided, the type which had a small spring connecting the two sticks together for ease of use by inept foreigners. “Here, you can use these. I recommend the eggs!”

Ema grasped the proffered item and pressed them closed once or twice. They seemed easy enough to use, so she hesitantly selected a piece of *tamagoyaki*, rolled omelette. “I guess I’ll try one of these, then, it looks safe enough...”

Chewing the mildly sweetened dish—a fairly common occurrence in Japanese-style omelettes—Ema’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly, just enough to express surprise at how tasty it was, but not enough to show what might be called her *true* feelings.

“Nice?” Isla asked.

“Yeah,” Ema said with a nod. “Super nice, actually. I’ve never had a sweet omelette before.”

A muffled and tinny sound made Isla glance at the girl’s chest, where a pair of ear buds hung from a thin cord around her neck. “I recognise that tune...”

Ema grasped the buds protectively. “I was just looking into idols, I’ve not really kept up with them recently.”

“I performed that song for my entrance audition,” Isla said with a thumbs-up.

“You’re an idol?” Ema said, tugging her phone out and pausing the track.

“Only started a couple of weeks ago, but yep, I am.”

“Agency, or...?”

Isla shook her head. “Dreamstar Academy. My best friend kinda pushed me to try out with her and next thing I knew, I was an idol.”

This resulted in Ema frowning. “Hah, you make it sound so easy.”

“I wouldn’t say that, but it wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be,” Isla added, noting the strained expression. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s okay, I don’t have what it takes to be an idol anyway. Gave up on that dream ages ago,” Ema mumbled.

“From what I’ve gathered so far, you only really need a few things to be an idol. Obviously you need to be fairly fit, and you look pretty toned to me.”

Ema looked down, her cheeks radiating an aura of heat.

“The only other things you really need are a positive attitude and a great smile,” Isla added. She illustrated this by stretching her mouth into a pearly white ‘*I just won the lottery*’ level of smile.

“That’s me out, then,” Ema said with an unamused laugh.

“Give it a try,” Isla said, pointing both index fingers towards the corners of her own mouth.

Ema did so.

“Well, it takes practice,” Isla laughed, though she felt bad about it. “Do you actually want to become an idol?”

“I... don’t know, to be honest. My friend Jun said I should try an agency, since they’re willing to take chances and are easier to get into, but my situation right now isn’t ideal.”

“If you want, I can help out? I’m not sure what help I can really give, but maybe just talking about it... or something?” Isla said, replacing the lid onto the box. “Also, scan the D-Code on the lid here if you want to know more about Good Morning Bentou.”

“I might try some Japanese food again, it was really nice,” Ema said, scanning the code with her phone. “And... I don’t know about being an idol, but I’m always happy to make new friends, so maybe we could meet up later or something?”

“Works for me,” Isla said. “I’ll be here for a few hours, then I’ll be free. I’m Isla, by the way, nice to meet you.”

Ema introduced herself in return, then exchanged details so they could get in contact later. “I’m heading home, need to do some job searching. Should I ring you later, or...?”

“I’ll send you a message when I’m done,” Isla said.

“Okay,” Ema said, and excused herself.



Hooking up with Mira after another few hours of handing out samples, Isla broached an awkward subject. “So... there’s a girl I’d like to help.”

“A girl?” Mira said, pausing in the act of tapping her flexitab’s screen.

“She kind of wants to be an idol, but apparently there’s some situation at home that makes it difficult. After Anise helped me prepare for becoming an idol, I want to return the favour by helping this girl. What goes around comes around, right?”

Mira’s expression switched over to the one she used when she was especially pleased about something, a sort of vaguely knowing half-smile. “You think you’ll get something out of helping her?”

“Not really, I just know how it feels to be confused by everything and wouldn’t want her to go through the same, not if I can help her avoid it.”

“I have no issues with you helping a potential rival, go for it,” Mira said, nodding. “Just remember what I told you before. There isn’t always going to be someone around to help you, so you need to learn to stand on your own two feet. This girl will have to learn the same.”

“Got it,” Isla said.

“In which case, consider this an official side project,” Mira added. “As your producer, it’s my job to steer you in the right direction and take some of the—shall we say?—admin off your shoulders. I expect you to listen to and absorb my advice, but I also want to see you using your own initiative, Isla. So go ahead and see where it leads.”

Isla beamed. “I will. Thanks, Mira.” With that, she sent Ema a message asking her to meet up back at the park, and passed the time with some idle chat to her producer.

Chapter 35: Secret Dreams

Ema was laid on her bed browsing various job sites when the message came in. If she was honest, she had kind of expected Isla not to bother, but apparently she wasn't quite the judge of character she thought she was. Tossing her flexitab onto the pillow, she got ready and ran downstairs.

"I'm off!" she yelled upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, receiving an okay from her father in the kitchen.

"And exactly *where* are you off to?" came the voice Ema had wanted to avoid. Her mother, a blonde woman by the name of Madeline, had just arrived home from the city and was now glaring at her. Worse, she was also blocking the front door.

Ema thought fast. "To... check out a job I saw online! A music agency, they want a... receptionist." Well, if she was going to look at being an idol, mentioning an *agency* might stand her in good stead for later, in the event she found one who would take her on. Then it would be a case of making damn sure her mother didn't find out the truth.

"Well, don't be out for too long, there's some jobs I'd like your help with," her mother said, stepping inside and heading through to the kitchen.

"Okay," Ema said, and scurried out of the house before any further awkward questions could materialise.

A fifteen minute walk later and she was back at the park from earlier, navigating her way over to where she had met Isla. She hesitated on arrival, noting that Isla seemed to have acquired an imposing-looking friend.

Mira was leaning against the table where Isla had been handing out samples. She nodded at the new arrival. "I'm guessing this is her?"

Turning, Isla waved Ema across. She introduced them to each other. "Mira's my producer."

"Dreamstar idols even get their own producers?" Ema said, her expression dropping a little.

“Not normally, no, self-production is more common there,” Mira replied. “I’m technically a student, but rather than working as an idol, I work for the academy as a freelance producer. I chose Isla here as my first idol.” She circled Ema a couple of times, looking her up and down in much the way she had with Isla just after her arrival on Aida. “I’ve had this thought before, but you seem to be a magnet for cute girls, Isla.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Isla said, doing her best to look innocent.

“Anise has erased all other girls from mind, has she?” Mira added with a wink, despite the minor pang of discomfort; they had only stopped seeing each other the day before, after all.

Clearing her throat in a highly suspicious manner, Isla grabbed Ema’s hand and dragged her away. “Anyway, I’ll see you back at Dreamstar.”

“Have fun,” Mira said, emitting an amused laugh and sauntering away.

“I kind of expected relationships between idols and producers to be a bit more... serious,” Ema said.

“Couldn’t really say, but Mira’s always been super relaxed with me since we met a week or two back.” Stopping at a small stall selling icicle sticks, Isla grabbed two, handed one to her newest friend, and started walking again. “So what’s the situation you’re having problems with?”

“My mom, mostly. I’m eighteen now, I want my independence and a place of my own. But to get it, I need a job, and I’m not really sure what I can even bring to a business around here.”

“Being an idol can pay well,” Isla said. “The job board at Dreamstar tells you how much each job pays, and even relatively low level ones will keep you afloat.”

Ema walked in silence for a while, thinking. “Okay, but you’re a student at Dreamstar, right? You don’t have to think about paying rent or bills.”

“I’m actually pretty indebted to my mum, it’s not cheap to get into Dreamstar,” Isla informed her. “If I’m not earning money, I won’t be able to stay beyond the first year, which we paid for up front.”

“Hmm. Well, either way, I need a fairly steady income stream if I want to move out, and I don’t know if being an idol could provide that,” Ema said with a shrug.

“Maybe not at first, but isn’t it worth trying? You can at least be earning *some* money so you can save up a bit.”

“I suppose. Only problem is... my mom hates idols. If she found out I was even *thinking* of becoming one, she’d flip out...”

Isla frowned. She knew Ema’s situation better than she might like, it wasn’t so different to Anise’s situation back on Mars. Always having to be careful, never being able to openly be herself or admit to her interests or sexuality. Especially around her older sister Annelise, who often tended to be a bit too overprotective in a hostile sort of way.

“I understand the problems you’re facing, trust me. A friend of mine went through something similar,” she said, rubbing Ema’s arm. “Why doesn’t your mum like idols?”

“I don’t know. I just mentioned liking them once when I was about twelve, I think it was, and she exploded. Told me never to mention idols again.” Ema sighed, turning a corner into a new street, one with a number of idol-related stores. “After that, I put idols out of mind and concentrated on school.”

“What changed?” Isla asked, stopping outside a storefront with idol merchandise on display, including high quality rechargeable glow sticks for use at live events.

“Jun dragged me to a Cassiopeia Luna concert over the weekend,” Ema said, studying the merch on display. “I’d forgotten how amazing live events could be.”

Isla glanced at her new friend’s face, noting how she appeared surprisingly subdued for someone who had so recently seen Luna perform live. “I’ve only seen recorded events, but even those were incredible. Though I’ve also met her, so...”

Straightening up and facing Isla, Ema’s expression told its own story; envy twinned with annoyance. “You’ve met her? Oh... hah, of course you have, you go to the same academy.”

“You kind of remind me of her, actually.”

“I... do?” Ema said, pointing to herself.

“You both have a stoic look.”

“Oh, that? I’ve been told I don’t smile much. Nothing much to smile *about*, to be honest.”

“That just tells me you need to become an idol even more,” Isla said, taking Ema’s hands in her own. “I’ll help any way I can. I’ve only been an idol a short while myself, but compared to how my life was before, it’s already a massive improvement. I feel more positive and fulfilled than I have in... well, forever.”

“It does interest me, and I remember really liking idols when I was a kid,” Ema said, staring into space. “But Mom...”

Isla placed her hands on Ema’s shoulders. “Look at it like this, it’ll take a while for you to build a fan base, yes? So it’s not likely she’ll find out what you’re doing, and that’ll give you time to figure out if it’s for you. But if you *did* somehow become an overnight sensation... you’d have the means to move out, thereby sidestepping the issue.”

Ema tilted her head slightly. “You’d get on with Jun, she’s really good at making me go along with her crazy ideas.”

“Let me tell you a secret,” Isla said, and leaned close enough to whisper, “I’m terrible at making decisions. I know how hard it can be to get out of a rut of your own making, and you only get one life. I’m here because my best friend gave me the push I needed, so now I’m giving you a push.”

“I don’t even know where to start,” Ema muttered.

“How about coming to Dreamstar for a visit?” Isla suggested, holding out a hand. “Aphrodite are putting on a small gig at the Arco Iris stage tonight. You’re welcome to join me.”

Reaching out her own hand, Ema hesitated a second, then clasped. “If it’s okay? I doubt I’ll get another chance to see them in person.”

“I’ll ask Mira just to be sure, but I can’t see why it’d be a problem,” Isla said, realising at the last moment that maybe she should confirm it *was* okay to bring guests onto the campus without warning.



A brief jaunt over to the academy monorail was followed by the equally brief trip across the bay. Ema presently had her face glued to the window, watching the frothy white spray some thirty feet below as the monorail sped along.

“Having fun?” Isla asked, stifling a giggle.

“I’ve never been on a monorail before, I normally walk,” Ema said, reluctantly pulling away and sitting forward. A few other idols and guests in the carriage were watching with amused expressions, so she clasped her hands in her lap and did her best to be inconspicuous.

Pulling into the station on the campus island, they jumped off and walked down the hill.

“Wow,” Ema murmured, looking out over the verdant panorama.

“Come on, they’ll be starting soon,” Isla said, taking her hand and tugging her along.

“Must be nice living here,” Ema added as she was hurried down the hill and over towards the gym complex. “You have gym facilities and all that, right?”

“And an indoor pool underneath the main building, though I’ve not tried it just yet,” Isla replied.

“I like swimming. Wish I could go a bit more often.”

“I can probably get you in here one day, if you like?” Isla suggested, continuing on past the complex and towards Arco Iris, where groups of idols were already congregating on the deck behind the main café building.

“You don’t need to go that far.”

“We could hit up somewhere in the city, if you prefer? I’m just fishing for a swimming partner. Anise isn’t all that into it.”

“Anise?”

“My best friend,” Isla said, being careful not to use the *other* term she had been thinking about recently, the one she figured it would be a good idea to keep secret, certainly until they actually got around to actually asking each other out.

They weren't girlfriends yet—given how recently they had both broken off their previous brief relationships, they were both taking a little time before jumping into anything else—but it was always wise to be prepared in advance, and this was the sort of thing that could easily catch someone out if they let their guard down. Especially in the idol world, where it was generally accepted that idols didn't get into relationships. They were there for *everyone* to enjoy, not to be monopolised by a single person.

It was an awful tradition of the negative variety, a holdover from decades past. In reality, people were a lot more receptive to idols falling in love and having relationships than they had been in previous eras, but the mild taboo surrounding it still persisted.

As a direct result of this, the Aphrodite girls themselves had been embroiled in what amounted to a storm in a teacup some months ago, when a rumour had got started that Erika and Yumi were in a relationship; a photo of them embracing in a way people thought was overly intimate had spread like wildfire.

Erika had been dealing with some family drama at the time and finally broke to the point of tears, resulting in Yumi—an immeasurably caring and generous young woman—comforting her while they were out in the city.

No matter how they tried to downplay it as nothing to get worked up over, and that it wasn't what people thought, it just resulted in people thinking Yumi was trying to protect her lover. In the end, they simply made this new relationship, for all that it wasn't technically true, a new part of their unit's mythos and integrated it into their stage events.

Isla had cried tears of joy when Anise told her the story one night soon after arriving. To this day, people still believed Yumi and Erika were together and it had hit a point of complete acceptance, even by the few vocal fans who had initially disliked the idea of their favourite idols being in relationships.

However, it was also true that Aphrodite were hugely popular and could leverage the support of their fans in smoothing over any potential issues, regardless of the validity of the claims of their relationship status. As a rookie with no fans yet, Isla had no such luxuries.

Arriving at the bar, Isla made her way past—noting that Minami wasn't there; instead the bar was being run by one of several temporary girls who occasionally took over to cover for events such as this—and down a shallow flight of stairs terminating at the golden beach, followed by Ema, who felt more than a little out of place here.

Along the shining ribbon of sand which ran around this spit of land at the eastern end of the campus, a large stage stood. Big enough to comfortably accommodate a group of seven idols and whatever choreography they might need, the academy stage was important for two reasons.

First, it was a place for the academy's idols to put on live events in front a crowd of likeminded people without the pressure that came from performing for an audience of strangers. This was perfect for practising the art of performing before a large crowd, especially for new girls like Isla.

Second, it brought in substantial revenue for the academy, by live streaming some of the events across the stellarnet to fans hungry for more personal and intimate stage shows than those performed for audiences at venues like the Infinity Dome.

A crowd of idols already milled about on the sand before the stage, and everywhere could be heard a low-key susurrations as the girls excitedly discussed their favourite aspects of Aphrodite, both as a unit and each idol individually.

Ema heard various comments on all sides; *"Aaah, Erika's so cute and bubbly, I want to buy her a drink...!"*; *"Yumi's so calm and collected, I'd love to have her read me a story!"*; *"Minami's smile is the best, I can't wait to see it!"*

Her face fell. Smiling didn't come naturally to her, she considered this to be a simple fact of life. But hearing people state that they were looking forward to seeing an idol's *smile*, not the idol herself, her *smile*... that stung. She could at least console herself with the fact that Luna also rarely smiled, and she seemed to get on okay.

They shuffled in among the other idols and awaited the start of the concert. Aphrodite had been running Arco Iris for several month now, and the one thing everyone looked forward to was their weekly stage event on a Monday evening.

It was something fun to start the week and provide inspiration to all those who were still climbing.

From backstage, Aphrodite's three members appeared, walking up a shallow staircase that led to the stage proper. First was Yumi, her glorious mass of azure hair held in its usual ponytail and flowing out behind her. Then Erika, her vivid pink hair held in twintails for the event. And finally Minami, with her purple hair worn in a ponytail rather than the usual sidetail. They fanned out to stand side by side.

Ema leaned over to Isla, nodding at Erika and Yumi. "Aren't those two together?" she whispered, unsure if this was something she should be discussing openly. "Jun mentioned something about it once."

"Yep," Isla responded, eyes fixed firmly on the stage in excited anticipation. "I kind of wonder how Minami must feel about it, actually."

"Why?"

"Well... she's the odd one out, right? If I was in a unit with two other girls and they were together, I'd probably feel a bit lonely."

Staring at the stage for a moment, Ema eventually shrugged. "It's only a problem if you like girls, I suppose? I don't know why you'd be worried otherwise."

Isla stiffened. Perhaps it would be wise to stop talking before she accidentally dropped herself in it. She coughed. "Anyway, it's about to start."

With everyone present, the three members of Aphrodite launched straight into their first song of the evening. Sometimes they engaged with their audience first, but other times called for immediate action.

The show went off perfectly as always, the three Aphrodite girls having the time of their lives on stage singing, dancing, and showing their intense love for each other as partners, but also as part of their routine, performing a rock-style track all about fighting for their love and being a team, heavy on the guitar and filled with positive imagery.

After the scandal, their performances had been altered at their own insistence. As the goddesses of love, their whole performance revolved around

intimate choreography and telling love stories of various stripes through the act of song and dance.

With some help from the academy's top dance instructor, the Dancing Sunkiss, they had created new choreography for the songs they performed; hand holding, gentle brushes of their fingertips, linking arms, all initially centred on Yumi and Erika.

They had then integrated all manner of other little touches, flourishes, and intimate moments into their choreography, showing their affection for each other openly and without restraint. And their fans *loved* them for it.

Minami's own dance moves during their songs leaned more towards *balance* than direct involvement. She occasionally insinuated herself between the other two, breaking them up, taking one or other girl's hand and waltzing with her for a time, telling a tale of love and betrayal and tragedy using nothing more than their song lyrics and how they moved and danced.

Representing sexuality, Minami had readily agreed to playing the role of antagonist in their stories; the lustful girl interested in both of the others, constantly attempting to usurp, to get in the way, to break the balance and recreate their relationship to her own design, according to complex and well-rehearsed choreography.

While there had been a minor degree of worry over their fans potentially hating Minami for always getting in the way after joining the unit—regardless of the theatrical nature of their shows—in fact the precise opposite had happened, and their fans had welcomed her with open arms. The additional intimate touches and flourishes added after the scandal had merely fuelled their ascent to ever greater heights.

The half-hour show was over far too quickly for the girls watching, ending on a ballad, a melancholic song all about first love of the unrequited variety, a fan favourite that had been written shortly after Yumi and Erika had officially accepted the rumour as being real in the eyes of those they performed for.

Their fans would be happy to watch them for hours upon hours, if they but could. Alas, Aphrodite's three members were only human and couldn't perform to this level for that long, though they certainly tried.

Walking to the front of the stage together, they held hands and took a combined bow, then dashed down the steps and backstage, where they relaxed together in a small dressing room attached at the rear of the structure.

Back outside, the assembled idols were clapping and cheering and, if anything, making more noise than Aphrodite had with the event itself.

All except Ema, who was staring at the stage, utterly gobsmacked for the second time in as many days. How had she *ever* managed to forget how wonderful idols were? A gentle tap on her shoulder made her jump in surprise. She rounded in a defensive posture. “I-Isla?”

“You should’ve seen your face,” Isla laughed.

“My face?”

“You said you have trouble smiling, right?” Isla added, holding her phone up. On the screen was a picture she had sneakily snapped of Ema as she jumped and bounced and swayed along to the music.

“Is that... me?” Ema asked. She took the phone, her eyes widening a little. The girl on the screen clearly seemed to be her, yet she was smiling in a way she had thought herself incapable of. A few drops of moisture appeared in the corners of her eyes.

“You okay?” Isla said, rubbing her back.

“Why can’t I smile like that normally?” Ema whispered, brows knitted.

“You were having a blast, weren’t you? Enjoying whatever you’re doing will naturally make you smile. So... find something you enjoy doing. You know what I mean, right?”

Ema rubbed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I love idols!” she said, considerably louder than she intended, receiving a number of glances from the collection of idols surrounding her. While this was intended to reinforce something she had finally remembered over the last two days of idol-soaked fun, all she really did was massively embarrass herself. She sank down to sit on her haunches, covering her face in shame.

Bending over, Isla held a hand out. “You can’t go getting embarrassed just by saying what you feel.”

Uncovering her face, Ema did her best to compose herself, grasped the hand, and stood. "I've made my decision! I think."

"Great," Isla said, nodding. "You're already a step ahead of where I was a couple of months ago."

Opening her mouth to speak, Ema gasped instead. "I totally forgot Mom wanted me to help out with something...!" She pulled out her phone and checked it; three missed calls and an angry message. The event had been so loud she simply hadn't heard them or noticed the vibration; she'd been too busy dancing and jumping around.

"Oh crap, sorry," Isla said, clapping her own hands together in apology.

"It's not your fault, I should've remembered. Honestly, it's worth any amount of complaining, that show was wonderful. Thanks, Isla."

Isla gave a thumbs-up. "Any time." She changed the thumb to a pointed finger. "You should probably get going?"

"Probably. When Mom's finished chewing me out, I might start looking into an agency to join," Ema said, managing a weak smile for once. "Um... message me whenever you like." With that, she dashed away towards the hilltop station and the waiting monorail.

Chapter 36: Remembering How to Smile

After her unscheduled activity with Isla, Ema ended up back at home, lying on her bed exhausted and confused and, of course, chewed out. Eighteen and still getting chewed out by her mother, talk about pathetic. Meanwhile, Isla had independence and a place to call home where she wasn't constantly being made to feel uncomfortable by an overbearing parent. She even had a producer!

Rolling over onto her front, Ema buried her face in the pillow and heaved a sigh. She felt... less than stellar. But she also felt something else, a thrill, an exhilaration similar to when she had seen Luna's event. The idea of becoming an idol against the wishes of her mother was, admittedly, worrying...

But more than that, it was *exciting*. An illicit arrangement where she would have to be careful and stealthy and cunning. Or at the very least avoid letting her mother know what was going on. Ema wasn't sure she had it in her to be cunning like the protagonists in those old adventure movies she enjoyed. But she could at least keep a low profile. Probably.

Fortunately, her current need of a job meant she could simply say she was out job hunting. *Technically*, she wasn't lying. She just needed to ensure her mother didn't discover what *type* of job she was hunting *for*...

Closing her eyes for what felt like only a few minutes, she awoke the next morning to the rumbling of her stomach combined with a mouthful of her own hair. Sitting upright, she spat her hair out and blew it to one side, then stretched and gazed around the room, her ears delivering a message that something was amiss. She finally managed to wake up enough to realise it was her phone ringing.

She answered. "Hello?"

"Morning," came Isla's voice. "*I'm coming into the city in an hour, fancy going swimming?*"

"Right now?" Ema said, getting to her feet.

"*Why not? You're not doing anything else, are you?*"

“Thanks for rubbing it in,” Ema said with an unamused laugh. “I guess I can spare an hour or two. Where do you want to meet?”

Isla gave her directions to an indoor pool not that far from the city’s main bay area, and had her meet up there in an hour.

“Okay, see you soon,” Ema said, and hung up. She clenched her hands and nodded. “All right, Ema, keep it together.” She had a quick shower, got her things ready, and ran downstairs. “I’m off to Jun’s place!” she called through the hallway into the kitchen, then exited before anything further could be said.

Half an hour later she stood before a large structure made from shiny metals and glass, glinting and glowing under the morning sun. “Doesn’t this place have a really big dive pool?”

Standing next to her in hotpants, a loose T-shirt, and sandals, Isla grinned. “You going to put on a show for me?”

“I... might,” Ema said, remaining noncommittal. It had been some time since she had last done any serious swimming, and doubly so for diving, but she figured it was like riding a bike. You never forgot.

Inside, they paid and made their way through to the changing rooms, entering a cubicle each. A few minutes later, they both exited and spent a moment checking each other out.

“Nice swimsuit,” Isla said with a nod at the plain white yet strangely sexy one-piece Ema had on.

“Jun bought it for me last year. Said it’d suit my boring tastes.”

Isla stifled a giggle. “I think I need to meet Jun one day soon.” Her own swimsuit was a two-piece with a sarong arrangement around the lower piece, suiting her cute looks to a tee. She struck a pose.

“You look good, too,” Ema dutifully said, her expression stoic as usual.

“Forgetting how to smile again?” Isla said, walking them through to the pool proper.

“Sorry.”

They entered the pool and took a walk over to the deep end, where Isla lined up in one lane and waited in that expectant way that indicated a certain other girl should line up in the next lane over. Ema did so.

“I think you know what we’re doing first,” Isla said.

“It’s been a while since I raced seriously, but I still think I can beat you,” Ema said. She bent over, arms extended and ready to dive.

“Them’s fighting words!” Isla said, and assumed the same posture, then counted down from five. “... two, one, go!”

They hit the water at roughly the same time and Isla immediately drew a little ahead, both girls using a practised crawl. At the quarter mark, Ema pulled ahead and stayed there for the remainder of the first length, dipped under the water to reverse direction, and kicked away from the edge of the pool, leaving Isla in the very damp dust.

“I might’ve underestimated you,” Isla said as she surfaced after finishing the second length.

One side of Ema’s mouth curled up a little. “You’d probably beat me at running, but swimming’s my speciality.”

“And diving?” Isla said, nodding towards the segregated dive pool, off to one side of the main building.

“I’ll show you,” Ema said. Wandering around the slippery tiles, she led the way through the metal gates into the dive pool, which was presently devoid of people.

Isla stood to one side of the pool, noting how much deeper than the regular pool it was. Hardly surprising; dropping from twenty feet up would be pretty painful—terminally so—if someone dived into the shallower main pool.

Climbing the ladder all the way to the top of the dive platforms, Ema walked forward to the board, which waggled and wobbled under her feet. With arms out to the sides, she posed, jumped, hit the board, and dived, her form perfect and proper.

Isla whistled under her breath, watching Ema’s petite form as she fell towards the water. “Looking good...”

Clambering out of the water, Ema padded around and joined her newest friend, her face radiating happy pride. “What did you think?”

“Honestly? I think some lucky agency is going to love having you on their books,” Isla said, giving a thumbs-up.

“Y-You reckon?” Ema mumbled, looking down. “I’ve always enjoyed swimming, and I was on the dive team at my old high school. Never really thought it might come in handy for being an idol, though.”

“One of the first things Anise taught me was that idols can be pretty much anything you like. I enjoy tennis, for example.” Isla touched a finger to Ema’s cheek. “The smile’s back.”

“I love diving, it’s exhilarating,” Ema laughed. She gently felt her face with both hands, as if trying to burn the feeling of smiling into her brain in hopes of creating a new muscle memory. Back at the main pool, she slid into the water and leaned back against the tiled edge next to her new friend. “You know, it’s been ages since I last did something really fun like this?”

“Too busy trying to be a responsible adult?” Isla suggested.

“Hah, yeah.” Ema’s lips curled up into a happy and genuine smile. “I think somewhere along the way... I forgot how to have fun. Too busy studying, or looking for a job, or trying to keep Mom happy.”

“And now?”

“If I want to be an idol, I need to be able to enjoy myself, don’t I? If *I’m* not having fun, how can I ever expect my fans to?”

“I had some lessons with the Dancing Sunkiss a couple of days ago. He told us pretty much the same thing.”

Ema’s smile was replaced by a thin-lipped expression of annoyance.

“You’ve had a personal lesson with him?”

“I wouldn’t exactly say personal, there were a dozen of us,” Isla said with a half-smile. “Are you a fan?”

“Yeah, I like how flamboyant he is. I suppose... I might’ve seen something in him that I’d lost myself,” Ema murmured, staring down at the rippling surface of the water.

“How did you feel when you saw Aphrodite?”

“Wonderful. My heart was beating like mad and I just wanted to jump around and wave my hands in the air.”

Isla winked. “I seem to recall you were in fact doing that.” She stepped sideways to be a bit closer. “It’s an infectious feeling, isn’t it? Seeing a crowd of people all having the same experience as you?”

“It’s almost like a religion, to be honest,” Ema replied.

“I... hadn’t thought of it like that, but yeah, it kind of is. The stage is our church, idols are our preachers, and our fans are the flock... haha, there’s something kind of fun about that image.”

“And the fans are the congregation, there to hear the sermon of song...” Ema said, then shrank until her face was half underwater in sheer, Apocalyptic embarrassment. Rising back up again, her face went through one of those changes that indicated an epiphany had just occurred. “Oh... I get it now. That’s why that girl wanted to see Minami’s smile...”

“Hmm?”

Ema explained about the girl she had overheard talking about how much she wanted to see Minami’s sexy smile. “I think I’ve figured out why she wanted to see it. Because seeing your favourite idol smiling makes *you* want to smile as well.”

“That’s right, you’re sharing in her joy,” Isla said, nodding once. “I can’t even count the number of times I’ve seen that look on Anise’s face.”

Lifting herself up out of the water to sit on the edge of the pool, Ema clenched both her hands. “When I get home, I’m going to put together a list of agencies to try. I’ve had more fun over this weekend than I’ve had in the last five years. I want to share it!”

“You’ll need to audition,” Isla informed her, turning around to face the poolside so she could gaze up at her friend.

“I know. I’m not sure how I’ll get on, but I’m going to give it my all.”

With that, they enjoyed another half an hour of racing each other, Isla even managing a couple of wins this time, then headed home.



After helping her mother out for most of the afternoon—mostly as penance for not doing so the previous evening—Ema thundered upstairs and launched herself onto the bed, doing her best not to spill the half-glass of banana milkshake she had in-hand, then grabbed her flexitab and opened a web browser.

Now... how to begin?

She tried searching for ‘*idol agencies*’. This yielded so many results that it simply wasn’t helpful, so she refined it down to just the city of Apollotia itself, and only agencies that were actively recruiting. Even then, there were several hundred hits, ranging from brand new start-ups to the longest-running agencies, some of which had been around nearly as long as Dreamstar Academy itself.

“Well... I have basically no real idea how to be an idol yet, so I guess one of the newest would be best?” she mumbled, tapping the screen for more details on an agency that had caught her eye. “303 Productions?” She read the details, nodding a few times while idly taking sips from her milkshake.

“They’re scouting new talent, interested in girls who want to learn and are willing to work hard...” she continued, now with a ring of yellow around her mouth. She wiped this away with a tissue and read on. “They have nearly a dozen girls already, eager to make a name for themselves... run by Lucy Lancaster? I have no idea who she is. Um...”

A few more minutes of sotto voce comments were followed by grabbing her phone from the bedside cabinet. Her thumb hovered over the screen, slowly tapping out a number.

After what seemed like an eternity she had finally managed to tap out a full phone number. She hit the call button and brought the phone up to her ear, taking a deep breath. It was answered with commendable speed, giving Ema precisely no time to prepare herself.

“*Three-oh-three Productions, Lucy speaking,*” said a pleasant female voice.

“H-Hi, my name’s Ema Campbell, I’ve kind of been thinking of becoming an idol,” Ema said, keeping her voice low in the event her mother happened to come upstairs.

"Well, you've rung the right place, then," Lucy said, her whole voice managing to convey an excitement that was on par with Anise in full-on idolgasm mode. *"You're at least eighteen, yes?"*

"I am."

"Perfect. In that case, how about you come and say hi, oh, let's say Saturday morning? I'm kind of busy this week, sorry. How's that sound?"

"Saturday's fine, thanks. What time?"

"Ten okay?"

"Sure," Ema said, nodding even though she felt like she wanted to end the call and hide under the duvet; the reality of what she was doing had set in and given her what Jun liked to call the screaming willies.

"Awesome. Wear something comfy, a tracksuit or whatever is fine, you'll need to be able to move about. And bring your best singing voice. See you Saturday, Ema, I'm always stoked to see new girls interested in my agency. Cheers!" Lucy said, and cut the connection.

Ema breathed out and tossed the phone on the mattress. "Well, I'm in it now." She went back to looking at 303 Productions' website, gathering together the courage to ask Isla if she'd mind training with her...

Unfortunately, she was interrupted by her mother barging into the room unannounced. "Ema, we're out tonight to see a show, keep an eye on the place..." She trailed off, taking in the scene; Ema seated cross-legged on the bed with a guilty expression and her arms behind her back, clearly hiding something. "Is there something you'd like to share?"

"N-Nothing at all! You just startled me. Don't just barge in, jeez..." Ema said, avoiding eye contact.

Her mother danced across and grabbed the flexitab before Ema could react, holding it up and scanning the screen. "Idols? What did I tell you about wasting your time on this nonsense? You're not cut out to be an idol, just forget it!"

"It's not for me!" Ema snapped, and snatched the device back. "I met a new friend a couple of days ago, I'm just helping her out with some research, that's all."

"A new friend?"

“Yeah, Isla. She wants to be an idol, and since I apparently suck too much to be one myself, I wanted to help her.”

Staring for a moment, her mother eventually walked back to the door. “I’m happy that you’re being a good friend even to someone you’ve only just met, but remember you need to be focusing on finding a job.” She exited, closing the door behind her with a quiet click.

Exhaling as the tension drained from the atmosphere, Ema collapsed forward with her face buried in the pillow. “That was way too close...”

In a strange way, she wished it had been porn or something displayed on the device. It would’ve been easier to explain.

Dozing off in her comfy pillow, her mind was again filled with hazy images of her time as a child. She remembered dancing, and there was definitely a voice in the background, her father’s, no doubt about it. But her mother was there, too, and not the often angry and stern woman she lived with now... no, this was a more relaxed incarnation, but Ema still couldn’t quite grasp the full image, it was always just out of reach...

Chapter 37: Stepping Stones

Meeting up with Isla a couple of evenings later, a warm but overcast Wednesday with a surprising lack of activity in the city streets, Ema navigated them across to the same park where they had originally met, dressed in a comfy tracksuit each.

Dropping onto a wooden bench seat, Isla patted next to her. Once Ema had seated herself, she began. "Okay, so you've got an audition on Saturday, yes?"

Ema nodded. "Right. A bit over two days. I... can't say I'm confident..."

"I wasn't either when I auditioned for Dreamstar," Isla said.

"I can't even imagine how much harder that must be."

"It wasn't too bad, but that's because I had Anise helping me. By myself, I'd have been screwed." Isla grabbed Ema's hand and squeezed. "I'm still pretty much a rookie, but I can help you out by being a training partner." She got to her feet and tugged Ema up with her. "I hope you're prepared for my Hell Training."

"Hell... training?"

"Being an idol is tough. You need to be prepared to put in a lot of hard work. *Are you ready?*"

Straightening up, Ema took a breath. "Yeah, I am. Mom doesn't think I can be an idol, so I want to prove her wrong."

"Let's go, then," Isla added, and set off at a steady pace. "You won't be winning *this* time," she called over her shoulder.

"Think again!" Ema shouted back, managing a smile for once and running after her.

Two hours later, she wasn't smiling any more.

They had done a complete circuit around the full circumference of the city centre, including some of the side streets and awkward areas with uneven floors; Isla had learned since arriving on Aida that idols might be asked to do all manner of odd things, so being prepared for anything you could possibly think of simply went with the territory. Back at the park, she was now doing a few

cooldown stretches while Ema did her best to bring her breathing back under control.

“Okay, I concede defeat on that one,” Ema eventually said, standing up and stretching. “You’re a really good runner.”

“I’ve been doing it for years,” Isla replied. “Once you’ve got into a routine, it becomes second nature.”

“Swimming used to be like that for me, though I fell out of the habit a while ago,” Ema said.

“Time to fall back in, then.”

“Running’s probably better if I want to be an idol?”

Isla shrugged. “Sure, but having an interest like swimming could help you build up a following. Honestly, both are good, swimming exercises different muscles to running.”

“Oh. Right,” Ema murmured, doing a few stretches before collapsing on a nearby bench. “So, what’s next?”

Thinking back to the camp with Millie, Isla looked Ema in the eye and grinned. “Running. Lots and lots of running.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” Ema asked, shaking her head.

“It’s called tough love,” Isla replied. “What did Lucy tell you about the audition?”

“Not much, just to bring my best singing voice.”

“No mention of a particular song or anything?”

“No.”

Isla nodded. “That means she’ll probably have you doing scales rather than singing a song.” At least, that was what Mira had told her, and Mira knew her stuff.

“Like... do-re-mi? That sort of thing?”

“Ah-ah-ah-ah-aaah!” Isla sang, pitching up three times, then back down again for the final two.

“I’ve seen singers on the net doing that with a piano,” Ema said, repeating the same basic scale and showing herself to have a cute and nicely-pitched voice, high in tone but soft and easy on the ears.

“Great,” Isla enthused. “I’m not really sure how agencies operate, but from what Mira tells me, you’ll probably just need to prove you can carry a tune and move your legs in a vaguely rhythmic way. They’ll train you properly after that.”

“You said you actually sang a song for your audition?” Ema said, hesitating with a bottle of water at her lips.

“With super complex choreography, too. Anise said it’s to weed out anyone who isn’t already at a high level.”

“Rub it in, why don’t you...” Ema muttered, placing the bottle on the bench beside her.

“I’m not blowing my own trumpet. I’m still as much of a rookie as you are, I was just fortunate to have a best friend who knew what we needed to do to win. Like I’m doing for you now.”

“Ah... sorry, I’m being ungrateful, aren’t I?” Ema said, looking down at her feet.

“It’s not easy being positive after years feeling like the world’s out to get you, is it?” Isla said, leaning back and stretching her legs out.

“How...?”

“I was in a similar situation before I auditioned for Dreamstar. Spent six months trying to find a university or whatever, failed hard, ended up back at home with no idea what to do next.”

“Hah... sounds like me when I left school.” Ema emitted a silent sigh and jumped off the bench. “How about another run?”

“Now you’re talking.” Isla got up and they set off for another jaunt around the city streets.

The next day, they did it again, interspersed with more singing practice and even a few dance moves, courtesy of Millie. Ema was thoroughly bushed by the time the weekend rolled around. Bushed, yes, but also filled with a new energy she’d not felt in years.



Ema turned up at the agency building on Saturday morning with mildly aching legs and an overall positive attitude. The building itself was a five storey affair, bog standard and plain, sandwiched between two much taller skyscrapers. Along the windows of the fifth floor, '303P' had been written in red text, using coloured tape stuck directly to the glass on the inside.

She entered through the ground floor door and arrived in a small hallway with a staircase leading up. Everything was grey. Walls, floors, even the atmosphere. With her stomach sinking a little, she headed up the stairs and turned left, arriving at the first floor landing, where a hallway led through the building with rooms to the left and right.

As Ema was about to try the next floor, a door opened a little way up the hall and a young woman with blonde hair and a pair of bright pink sunglasses raised up to the top of her head walked out. She loitered in the door a moment, poked her head back inside the room, said, "Get the place booked ASAP, Timo, we can't afford to miss a lucrative contract like that," and closed the door.

Placing one hand on her hip, she used the other to scratch her head, causing the sunglasses to fall and clatter to the floor. "Damn and blast!" She reached down, grabbed them, and on the way back up noticed the new arrival. "Ah, you must be my new girl? Ema, was it?"

Ema's head bobbed. "That's me."

"Sweet, let's take a walk," the young woman said. "I'm Lucy, I own this place, though sometimes I wish I didn't, hah. Anyway, this shouldn't take long, I'm already liking what I'm seeing, so we just need to give you a couple of quick test-a-rinos and we'll be set."

"That seems... easier than I expected," Ema said, running to keep up with Lucy's long strides towards the stairs.

"I don't mess about. If I like the look of you and you fit my criteria, you get a chance, simple as that. It's up to you to *make* something of that chance," Lucy replied, heading up to the third floor.

"How many girls do you have?" Ema asked as they ascended the stairs.

"Nine right now, though maybe ten soon, hmm?" Lucy said, laughing. Reaching the top of the stairs, she turned into the hallway directly above the

one they had just been in, and opened a frosted glass door. "Poke your head in here for a sec, Ema."

Ema did so, noting that there were four girls training together, each with the outlandish hair she had grown to know and love on idols. "They look amazing. Are they practising for something special?"

"Got a big festival coming up soon, but they're also staying in shape for whatever auditions might come their way," Lucy said, quietly closing the door and continuing on. The next door along this dimly lit hallway opened into a similar room with polished wood floor and foam around the walls, overlooking the street out front.

In one corner was a real grand piano. Lucy sat before it. "Let's get this show on the road." She waved for Ema to come over and stand beside her. "Have you ever done scales before?"

"Only once, thanks to an idol friend of mine," Ema said, nodding.

"Oooh, do I sense the presence of a possible rival?" Lucy asked with an amused grin.

"I don't know about that," Ema began, but stopped and looked thoughtful for a moment. Maybe Lucy wasn't far off? Isla was a lovely girl and Ema liked her a lot... but she *was* an idol, albeit one with slightly more experience.

"Actually... I guess she could be?"

"Great. Having a rival will push you to new heights, make sure you hang onto her," Lucy said, and plinked a few of the piano's keys. "Ready to start?"

"Sure."

"In that case, after me..." Lucy said, and began. Moving up the scale and back down again, she paused so that Ema could match the pitch with her voice. "Mm, good, good, you've got a nice voice. Again."

Ema once more followed the notes produced by the piano, with barely a wobble or mistake.

Half an hour of this resulted in Lucy clapping her hands together and getting to her feet. "Awesome job, you pass with flying colours."

"Does that mean I'm an idol now?" Ema said, once more surprised at how easy it seemed.

“Hold your horses, sport, we still need to make sure you’re not going to fall over your own feet.”

This made Ema blush.

“Follow my moves,” Lucy continued, and went into a simple routine of dance practice steps; forward, back, side to side, forward, back, side to side, pirouette, repeat, similar to the ones Isla had endured at the camp. “Now you try.”

“O-Okay,” Ema said, and fell in alongside, matching Lucy’s steps with minimal fuss, though she almost managed to trip up at one point. Valiantly recovering, she finished these practice steps with no further mishaps.

“We can work on your dance, no problem,” Lucy said, and held her hand out. “Welcome aboard.”

“You mean it? I can be an idol?” Ema said, hesitantly grasping the proffered hand and shaking. “I don’t need to do an interview or anything?”

“What, you thought there’d be a bunch of silly questions about why you want to be an idol? Nope. As long as you can carry a tune and know your left foot from the right, you’re already more than qualified. Just remember, agency idols don’t normally get the same breaks as academy ones. So here’s the deal: you work hard for me and I’ll work hard for you.” Lucy spread her arms wide. “We’re a happy little family!”

“A happy family, huh?” Ema said under her breath, an image of her mother hanging in the forefront of her mind. Her mother loved her, Ema didn’t need to be told that. But the sternness, the irritation whenever idols were mentioned, the apparent lack of confidence in her daughter’s ability to *be* an idol...

It rankled, that’s what it did.

Ema gave a single decisive nod. “I want to be an idol, please let me join your agency!”

Lucy closed her arms around Ema and gave her a brief hug. “Done.” She walked her out of the room and along the hall. “First, we’ll get you some awesome composite photos, then maybe we’ll think about finding you an audition or two to go for. After that... the world’s your pearl.”

“Isn’t that normally oyster?”

“Oh... yeah, could be,” Lucy said with a shrug.

Ema emitted a cute little giggle and let herself be shuffled along, thinking that she should send Isla a message with the good news at the first opportunity. For now, though, she needed to discover what these mystical *composites* might consist of.



Visiting Mira at Sophie’s workshop later that day to discuss future plans, Isla was interrupted by her phone pinging. She read the message, grinning like a maniac at hearing of Ema’s success, and held it up for producer to look at. “I think I’ve made a decision on the kind of idol I want to be.”

“Oh?” Mira said, reading the screen.

“I had a lot of fun helping Ema, and the camp with Millie was fun, too, especially when we met Eva... and it was a lot of fun helping them and working together, too.”

“I think I know where this is going,” Mira said with a smile.

“I want to be known as an idol who helps other idols,” Isla said, clenching both hands, to the point where she might shatter her phone’s screen.

“Lots of idols help each other out, but I can’t say I’ve heard of one who went out of her way to make that her goal in life,” Sophie said, eyes cast up towards the ceiling as she thought. “Yeah, nothing springs to mind. The ones who do generally end up becoming producers.”

Mira was well aware of how badly Isla struggled to make important decisions, so she immediately confirmed her idol’s new direction. “If that’s what you’ve decided, let’s run with it. Just remember that you’ll need to balance helping other idols with actually competing against them. As we’ve mentioned before, helping another idol get a leg up creates competition, which is a good thing for everyone.”

“I’ll think about it seriously, I promise,” Isla said, giving her producer a kiss on the cheek as thanks. “Okay, I need to be off, I’m heading out with Anise this evening.”

“Have fun,” Mira said.

“I’m sure we will,” Isla said, waving as she left.

Chapter 38: On the Verge of Togetherness

While Isla was busy talking to Mira, Anise was running to the dormitory cafeteria to prepare a little something. Satisfied with her efforts, she headed up to her room to get some stretches in, followed by a shower, whereupon she asked Isla to join her downstairs.

Sitting her friend down at one of the tables in the darkened cafeteria, Anise switched a single light on for atmosphere—after flicking the wrong switch several times in a row, dulling the romantic impact a little—and retrieved two enormous parfaits from one of the kitchen’s fridges, each easily as tall as her forearm was long. She placed them on the table and sat opposite her friend.

“You’ve really gone out of your way here, this looks delicious,” Isla said, eyeing the tall glass filled with ice cream, strawberries, chocolate, and all manner of other wonders of an excitingly sweet nature. “I get the feeling this wasn’t as spontaneous as you’re hoping to make me believe it was.”

Anise’s cheeks flushed a little. “I may have planned parts of this evening, you’re quite correct.” She took a spoonful of her own parfait and extended it across the table.

Isla opened her mouth with an ‘*aaaan*’, closing it around the spoon and leaving some ice cream behind. Anise retreated back to her side of the table, acutely aware that she now had a spoon that Isla had just had her mouth around. She sucked the remaining ice cream off.

Isla watched, red-faced. “I’ve been noticing this a lot more since we came to Aida, but... you’re *really* naughty, aren’t you?”

Anise stared at her. “I can’t deny that.”

“Didn’t even hesitate.” Isla laughed and had a spoonful of her own parfait. “I love that about you.” She placed her spoon on the table. “I’ve been thinking again, Anise. About us.”

“Us?”

“Yeah... after what happened that night we went to Stardew?”

“Oh, *that* us. Go on.”

“Mm, actually, I should ask first how things are for you and Lisa?”

Placing her spoon down, Anise clasped her hands on the table. “About the same as you and Mira. It was immense fun, and we might even work together one day. But if we leave aside the issue of us, she’s heading to Earth for a while anyway.”

Isla laughed at this. “Long-distance probably isn’t a good idea.”

“How about you and Mira?” Anise said, taking another mouthful of her parfait.

“She seems okay. We weren’t together long, but it still stings,” Isla said with a sigh. “Honestly, being able to call her my lover was beyond my wildest dreams, even if only for a few days. But there’s someone I already like. Someone beautiful and wonderful, a girl I’ve probably liked for longer than I realised.” She stared across the table, maintaining eye contact.

Anise’s face lit up. “You mean...?”

“Now, let’s not go getting ahead of ourselves,” Isla said in a theatrically serious tone, holding a hand up as her friend stifled a laugh. “I’m still worried about our friendship. But...”

Jumping to her feet, Anise rushed around the table to sit in her friend’s lap, wrapping her arms around her shoulders. “But?”

“But I’m leaning in the direction of saying yes. If you still want to, that is?”

“I said my feelings wouldn’t change, so of course I do. More than anything!”

“In that case, let’s see what happens? Spend time together and... see where it leads? You know, spending time together with the agreement that uh... that we’re spending it together as more than friends? Um, you know, so that anything that might happen can... happen?”

Anise cracked up at her friend going in circles. “Oh, trust me, things will happen, I promise you!”

Isla relaxed. “I may hold you to that.”

“Did something happen to change your mind?”

“Just thinking of how Mira is Lisa’s best friend, but they’re intimate and stuff, too. Made me question my own hesitations, I suppose? Like... couldn’t we be best friends *and* girlfriends?”

"I think we could," Anise replied, rubbing Isla's back. "The two aren't mutually exclusive or anything. And we have no intentions of working together, right?"

"Yeah. Maybe I'm just overthinking it," Isla said, after a pause.

"I'd rather you do that and be sure than not think enough and make a mistake."

"You know me and being indecisive." Isla laughed, resting her head in her friend's inviting bosom. "And you're right that we have our own interests, so we probably don't need to worry we'll cause friction by being lovers."

"Friction can be fun."

Isla tilted her head up with an expression of scepticism. "I get the feeling you're talking about something else entirely now."

"*Maybe...*" Anise said, giggling uncontrollably. "Can I mention something super personal?"

Isla raised an equally sceptical eyebrow. "Since when did you ever give a crap about asking personal questions? Starting to think you've been replaced by aliens or something."

Laughing at this, Anise pecked her friend's lips. "I shouldn't try and be all delicate and stuff, that's just not me, right?"

"Yup. So come on, let's hear it."

Anise leaned down to her best friend's ear. "I just wanted to say that making love to you felt unreal."

"U-Unreal?" Isla stuttered, blushing at how openly Anise stated this. "I mean... I agree, it was incredible, but it was our first time. Not sure how unreal that could be?"

"Remember I thanked you for fulfilling my wish? I meant that as much as enjoying the physical bits. I've liked you for a long time. And finally getting to experience you fully was unreal, it was my biggest fantasy."

"Maybe we should make the fantasy into reality one day soon?"

"Maybe," Anise said, and lowered her head enough to gently touch lips with her best friend a second time, a tender peck, nothing more. "A down payment. In case you still need some time to, you know, get over her."

“I don’t mind admitting that breaking up with her was no fun at all.” Isla let out a brief sigh. “We were pretty casual anyway, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be upset at having to end it. Easier for you, I guess? You just said Lisa’s leaving anyway, right?”

Anise moved back to her side of the table. Picking up the spoon, she finished her parfait. “I wouldn’t exactly say it was easy. I *really* like her.”

“In a way, I’m a little envious of you. Lisa going away gives you time to move on. I’m still seeing Mira regularly, though.”

“I’m always available if you need to talk. Or even just a hug!”

Isla smiled. “Thanks.”

“So... can I make a suggestion?”

“Depends what it is,” Isla said, sticking her tongue out. She knew her friend well enough by now to know there was a good fifty-fifty chance of whatever came out of her mouth next being naughty in some way.

Anise therefore surprised her with something wholly innocent. “How’s about we head into the city and visit the Babylonian? A little treat after our recent efforts. I want to check out the revolving restaurant. Lisa said there’s a great view of the campus from up there.”

“Huh. I was expecting a dirty suggestion. Colour me surprised,” Isla said with a half-smile. “We haven’t eaten yet, have we?”

“Parfaits notwithstanding?”

“I’ve heard of places on Earth where they eat dessert first.”

This made Anise grin like a hyena. “Been learning some history?”

“A bit. Kinda got interested after spending a while on Earth.”

“Maybe we should visit as a couple next time?” Anise suggested. “A double room somewhere nice, just us.”

“We’re not even together yet and you’re making plans?”

“No harm being prepared.”

Isla giggled. “True. Okay, I could do with something to eat.”

Clearing their desserts away, they headed back out to the main foyer, where Anise stopped at seeing a familiar face.

Walking through the front entrance with a large, wheeled suitcase in-hand, Yana Anisimova, the academy's top model, came to a halt and stared at the two of them, her ice-like hair flowing down her back like a waterfall of purest silver. "Didn't I see you two at Stardew?"

Anise idolgasmmed instantly. "Y-Y-Yana Anisimova!? Aaah, I'm actually talking to her...!" She very nearly drooled.

Yana turned to Isla and jerked a thumb in Anise's direction. "Is she some kind of pervert?"

Doing her best not to crack up, Isla shook her head. "I don't think so, she just gets really excited over idols." Technically, she had just told a minor lie; Anise *was* in fact a raging pervert, but Yana didn't need to know that.

"Hmm..." said Yana, appraising Anise in turn. "Well, I'm tired after my flight, maybe we'll meet again. Night." She wandered off towards the stairs.

Anise exhaled. "She's every bit as cool and amazing as I'd heard..."

At this point Isla figured they'd get nowhere if she left things up to her best friend, so she took Anise's hand and dragged her upstairs, where they separated into their own rooms for a short time, getting dressed for a night out and making a reservation.

Chapter 39: A Trip to Babylon

Dressed appropriately in nice skirts and fancy shoes, they met up outside Anise's room and headed down to the foyer, then across to the monorail.

Stepping out the other end and walking into the city proper, Anise figured this would be a good time to get caught up; given the situation with Lisa and Mira, they had decided to defer talking too much about their weekend until later. "So... how was last weekend?"

Isla stiffened briefly. "Hard. Tiring. Mildly terrifying. But also fun."

"Can't really say mine was hard, but it was definitely fun," Anise said with a low laugh. She leaned sideways to brush shoulders as they walked, the towering Babylonian already visible before them. "That was such an amazing weekend, seriously. Lisa is amazing. Slogh's a lovely place. And I met a real princess!"

"You did?" Isla said, surprised.

"First Princess of Gran Manillo, Keliana. She's amazing as well, everyone's amazing! Aida is amazing!"

Glancing at Anise's glowing expression, Isla wrapped an arm around her waist. "Haven't seen you slip into an idolgasm this strong in a while. Kinda missed it, to be honest."

"Plenty more where that came from."

"I'm sure," Isla said, fully aware of the various depths her best friend could draw from. "You'll be introducing me to your princess friend, right?"

"Of course. I think she's coming back soon, but she didn't say exactly when."

"No rush," Isla said.

"Introduce me to this Ema girl as well," Anise added as they arrived at the entrance gates into the tower's grounds.

Isla rolled her eyes. "Yes, dear." As much as she wanted to give her best friend the benefit of the doubt, she knew Anise far too well for that.

They arrived at the tower's base. As the name implied, the building *towered* over them, blotting out the sky and making them feel tiny and insignificant, kind of how Isla imagined an ant must feel when confronted by a human leg.

Pushing their way through the throng of people, they managed to get inside with only slight ruffling and headed for the central lift up to the revolving restaurant, aptly called The Tops. They exited the lift and were confronted by a vast, circular area similar to those old 20th Century UFOs people used to think were visiting Earth on a regular basis.

Around the edges of the restaurant were swish tables in curved and polished metal, flanked by red leather bench seats, looking out over the city through a continuous window running around the whole circumference. In the centre of the space was an equally circular bar with the usual assortment of on-tap drinks, bottles of spirits, fridges filled with alcopops, and soft drinks. And down one floor, through a service elevator, were the kitchens, which produced some of the best quality meals in the city.

Anise collared a waiter and they were led to their reserved seats, which currently looked out across the western mountain range beyond Apollotia, across which lay New Meadowstone, the second major city founded on the planet after Apollotia itself.

Settling into her seat opposite Anise, Isla glanced at the window running around the structure. "I wouldn't want to be the person who cleans the outsides of those."

"Real romantic, Isla," Anise laughed, ordering them a glass of wine each.

"Sorry, these things just pop into mind sometimes and worry me," Isla replied with a vague smile.

A few minutes were spent perusing the menu, at which point Anise ordered the only thing she possibly could: a juicy steak. After the weekend with Lisa, she had been hankering for something meaty, and celebrating their respective victories seemed like the perfect time to do so. Isla concurred, and ordered the same.

While they waited, a brief rumbling coincided with the scenery outside the windows changing. The restaurant was about to go through one of its hourly

rotations, revolving by 90 degrees clockwise to face Apollotia's bay and the Dreamstar Academy campus. With the light outside waning over the course of the next fifteen minutes while they waited, the restaurant's own lighting came to life.

The contrast of the blackness outside and the soft yellow lighting inside made Isla shiver. "Okay, *this* is romantic."

"More than talking about window cleaning, yes," Anise said as their meals arrived. A wooden platter held her steak, a portion of chunky chips, and a bowl had some salad-y bits she would probably forget all about in her eagerness for the steak. "Look at this, just look at it...!"

Isla did so. "Yep, looks like a steak. Crushed black pepper over it, too. Are we going to spend all evening talking about it, or actually get on with eating?"

Anise answered by cutting her steak and salivating openly at the incoming taste explosion. "How do you think you're getting on since we arrived?" she asked between mouthfuls.

"As an idol?" Isla said, staring out at the dusk skyline just as Dreamstar Academy's campus lights began popping into life in the distance. "All in all, so-so for now. Learning what I like, what I'm good at, what I'm not. Learning how to fail, too, heh."

"That's another aspect to being an idol."

"I'm used to getting things wrong while I learn, but this is a whole new life for me. It's difficult adjusting, if I'm honest."

Anise poked around in her bag under her seat and pulled out her flexitab, placing it on the table. "You'd say you're not sure of your direction? Even after being here a while?"

"You know me and hesitating over things, but there's so much to learn about being an idol that I'm not sure where to focus," Isla said, enjoying her penultimate mouthful of steak. "Fortunately, Mira's producing me now, so things should pick up."

Anise froze except for a single twitch under her left eye. "Since when?"

Explaining Mira's offer, Isla avoided eye contact, instead focusing on the last of her meal. "So uh... that's where things stand now. I wanted to make sure I was happy with everything before I told you."

"That's amazing news," Anise exclaimed, eliciting a few glances from the other patrons. "You couldn't have done better, Isla, seriously. Congrats!"

"Thanks," Isla said, beaming and finishing her meal. She slid the platter to one side. "Mm, that was a damn good steak. Easily on par with anything I had on Earth." She sat back and patted her tummy, wholly content with her current lot in life.

"Been enjoying the high life while we were apart, hmm?" Anise said, shooting her another glance.

"Hey, you could've come along."

"Yeah, but I was saving money, as you well know." Anise prodded the screen of her device, sliding her fingers back and forth until she had what she wanted, and pushed it across the table. "Well, even if you have a producer now, watch this, it might give you some ideas."

"What is it?" Isla asked, picking the device up and connecting her wireless earbuds.

"A possible direction," Anise said, and finished her steak, closely watching her friend's face for reactions. "You were interested in Luna, right? Well, that's Luna at the top of her game. Watched it live with Lisa last Sunday." Naked in bed after *other* activities, though Isla didn't need to know that right now.

"Damn... the way she moves is sublime," Isla whispered, watching the academy's top idol dance back and forth on an enormous stage, using complex choreography Isla didn't think she could reproduce even if given a year to practice. "And the crowd! They're perfectly in sync with her, it's amazing."

"You're looking at the pinnacle of pure idol perfection," Anise said. "Top of the academy, and most likely to be the next stellar level top idol, too. That event had over one-hundred thousand people attending it live, and millions more watching it over the net. And it wasn't one of her really big events either."

"She's amazing. You said she's a pure idol, right? So she does all sorts of things, not just big shows like this?"

“That’s right. A pure idol doesn’t necessarily specialise in any one thing. You can be doing a commercial one day and a massive stage event the next, or a part in a stellarvision show, or a photoshoot. You could call pure idols the all-rounders of the idol world.”

“So... if a girl happened to be super indecisive, being a pure idol might be just the thing for her?” Isla added, still staring at Luna on the screen.

Anise’s mouth curled up into a happy little smile, satisfied that Isla had picked up on the hint. “As I said, a possible direction. Do lots of things and figure out what you like, then focus on those once you’ve made your decision. I’m sure Mira will be able to set you up.”

“Thanks, Anise. I’ll talk to Mira about this when I see her next.”

“You’re welcome,” Anise said, and caught a waitress’s attention. She ordered two lemon sorbets.

“The whole thing still feels surreal,” Isla said, unpausing the video. “Honestly, I felt a bit directionless, like there was too much choice? So having Mira there to guide me in the right direction should help.”

“And she’s experienced enough to be able to steer without pushing too hard,” Anise said.

“Right. Mm?” Isla muttered, bringing the device up closer to her face. “Luna mouthed something at the end there, I’m sure of it.”

“Saw that, too, huh?” Anise said. “It’s always the same thing, every concert. ‘*Can you see me? Am I shining?*’ It’s been the subject of much debate online and in the idol world. People have had lip reading experts on and confirmed that’s what she says, or variations along those lines. But no one knows why.”

“Maybe I’ll ask her one day,” Isla mused as their sorbets arrived.

“I wouldn’t,” Anise said, devouring half of her dessert in short order.

“No?”

“No. Part of the reason no one can figure it out is because she gets pretty touchy on the subject if it’s brought up,” Anise said, demolishing the last of the sorbet in record time.

“Well, I’ll keep it in mind. If it’s something she doesn’t want to talk about, it’s probably super personal or something. And unlike a certain idol perv, I’m not one for digging into private lives.”

Anise bridled. “I’m not that bad! Sure, I’d love to know her real name, and the reason she says that after every concert, but I know where the boundaries are.” She crossed her arms and glared out of the window, sulking.

Isla used one of her feet to stroke her friend’s leg under the table in silent apology. “You know I’m just messing with you. Though other girls might not look at it quite the same as me.”

“I like idols, nothing wrong with that,” Anise muttered.

“It’s entirely coincidental that basically all idols are cute girls around our age, right?”

“Absolutely.”

Giggling at this, Isla changed tack. “Should we head off? I’d like to spend tonight alone.”

“Alone?”

“Us. Alone.”

“Oh! In that case, let’s go,” Anise said as her excitement rose. She paid for the meal and headed to the lift down. Exiting the tower, she looked up at the sky. “Reckon it’s going to rain soon, we should get a move on.”

“Anise?” Isla said.

“What’s up—” Anise began, but got no further as an extra pair of lips entered her life with gusto. She emitted a happy giggle—albeit muffled by Isla’s soft and lovely lips—and accepted her friend’s affections without further comment. A hint of Isla’s delicious lemon sorbet remained, giving Anise a tangy and fresh surprise alongside the kiss itself.

Pulling away with all the reluctance of someone having to get up and go to work at 5AM in the middle of winter, Isla opened her eyes and smiled. “A little thank you for the lovely evening.”

“I might have to pamper you more often, if that’s how you’re intending to thank me,” Anise whispered, swaying back and forth as Isla tugged her towards the academy.

Chapter 40: The Promise Fulfilled

Back at Anise's room, they settled down on the bed and Isla went to say something, but was cut short thanks to finding an extra tongue in her mouth. "Mmph!" she managed between Anise's attempts to suffocate her with lust.

Anise pushed her flat, kissing for all she was worth. Her hands slid up under Isla's loose blouse, stroking her silky smooth skin and lingering around the bra.

Managing to fend her friend off for long enough to speak, Isla giggled. "You weren't joking earlier, were you?"

"Mm?"

"You promised things would happen?"

"Ah, yeah... having a hard time holding back now that we're alone, haha..."

Isla gently pushed her friend off and sat up, then dashed through to her own room, retrieved something from her desk drawers, and returned. "I figured not rushing things would be best, but screw that, I can't wait any longer either."

"Isla?" Anise said, raising her eyebrows in some minor shock at how forceful her friend suddenly appeared. Her excitement levels shot up, breaking through the hyperspace barrier on their way to Lust Central.

Isla held out a small box, around six inches square and two deep, in a sky blue colour. "For you. A special... present. Yes."

Anise noted her friend's flushed cheeks. "Why do I get the feeling I'm going to love you even more in the near future?"

Isla avoided eye contact. "I wonder..."

Anise opened the box and stared at the contents. A charcoal pair of panties with an oddly chromatic effect to them. And a matching bra. But something about the panties seemed... different. "Are these...?" She pulled them out and turned them this way and that, eyes wide.

Isla coughed. "Um... yeah, Mira's. Mira's panties. And her bra. Ahem."

"Aaah..."

Isla issued a second cough, her cheeks glowing brightly enough to be classified as a new star. “There’s a bit more than that...”

“More?”

Isla leaned over to whisper, “Mira might’ve enjoyed herself while wearing them. With me.”

“...!” Anise’s voice went. She was shocked into abject silence.

“I figured you’d like them,” Isla said, amused at Anise’s vacant expression.

“God yes, it’s the best present, thank you,” Anise said, coming back from her catastrophic idogasm and throwing her arms around her friend.

Isla looked shifty. “Well, maybe not the *best* present.”

“Oh?”

Inhaling deeply, Isla closed her eyes and ejected three simple words, three words that she knew would make her friend cry. “I love you!” She opened her eyes to see that, yes, her best friend now had tears in her eyes.

Isla took her friend’s hand in her own. “I’m sorry for taking so long to notice your feelings. I can be a bit dense sometimes, you know that better than anyone, but I trust you with my life, Anise. I trust that we can work through absolutely anything and everything together. So...”

“So...?” Anise croaked, her face little more than two beautiful waterfalls of happy tears.

“Will you go out with me?” Isla asked.

Anise cried harder than ever before, so incredibly happy and blessed that she wanted to have the moment itself framed and put on the wall. “Yes! I want to be yours forever!” She threw her arms around Isla.

Pulling away, they stared at each other for a time, still teary-eyed, before bursting into laughter. They settled again, embracing and enjoying the moment.

“So come on, tell me about it. I know it’s probably a weird time to ask, but I want to know how you ended up stealing Mira’s panties,” Anise said, her voice filled with naughty enthusiasm.

“Jeez, we’ve just got together and you want to know about *that*?” Isla laughed, then gave as much of an accurate picture as she could, given the current state of her mind.

Anise grinned. “Been enjoying some delicious mutual masturbation as well, huh? Good, isn’t it?”

“You, too?” Isla asked, mildly ashamed at probing her new girlfriend’s sexual activities with Lisa. Despite said girlfriend having started it.

“Yep. Wouldn’t mind trying something like that with you one day soon...”

“How about right now?” Isla suggested.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, silent, smiling, wondering who’d make the first move. As it turned out, Isla snapped first and struggled out of her clothes, followed in short order by her new girlfriend.

The moment they were naked, sitting together on the bed, Isla was under assault; Anise couldn’t hold her own raging passions in check any longer either, so she immediately went to town, kissing and touching and fondling, throwing Isla flat on the bed.

Anise surveyed her girlfriend’s perfection. Petite, cute, gorgeous, sexy, adorable, all of the above... she could barely think of enough adjectives to adequately cover how much she loved her best friend and her tight little body. Leaning over to her desk, she whipped her camera out of its usual hiding place and snapped some pictures of a very naked and very embarrassed Isla. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Anise...” Isla said, crossing her arms over her chest. She figured now might be a good time to prod her friend over her photography habits. “You take a lot of pictures of idols. How much of that is your love of idols? And how much is your love of girls? Inquiring minds want to know.”

Anise stopped flashing for long enough to consider her response. “Probably fifty-fifty?” she said, rolling the camera around in her hands and staring at the ceiling.

Isla snorted. “I don’t believe that for a second!”

“Aha, that probably wasn’t very convincing, was it? I love both, but idols are the higher of the two.”

“Hmm, but idols are also girls, and girls are also idols. So wouldn’t that mean you love both at one-hundred percent?”

Pointing a finger, Anise nodded. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. It’s pointless separating the two, they’re one and the same. So I was right the first time, I like them equally!”

Isla paused. Her friend was exactly correct and Isla had lost that by trying to be too clever. “Okay, you win. What is it about idols that you like so much?”

“Everything. There are so many types. So many wonderful hairstyles, body types and shapes, different skin colours, voices, personalities, aaah... everything! Everything about them is lovely! Idols really get my juices flowing!”

Isla took a moment to gently stroke Anise’s pussy, noting she was indeed a little wet down there. “You’re not joking, huh?” she said, grinning as her friend turned roughly the same colour as a freshly boiled lobster.

“Isla!” Anise exclaimed. While her friend could occasionally say things to surprise her, this was a bit beyond what she normally expected.

“Can I see your pictures sometime?” Isla asked, tactfully changing the subject and taking a pose for her photographer.

Anise returned to idolgasming while snapping picture after picture as Isla—now a bit more relaxed and happy to play along—posed for her. “Uh, sure, I guess that’s fine...” She held the camera up to her face in an effort to hide her expression.

This intrigued Isla. “I spy a guilty conscience...”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Anise said, avoiding the accusing gaze to the best of her ability.

“How many pictures of me have you taken without me realising?”

Anise froze. “One or two?” she said in a careful tone, though she knew she wasn’t going to get away without showing her camera’s memory, along with all the private folders she had on her phone. Password protected and encrypted, naturally.

Isla’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “I detect a colossal untruth.”

Anise brought the camera up to eye level so they could both view the screen on the reverse. “I can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

Isla gave an indulgent smile and swiped the camera. She looked through a picture at a time, eyebrows going up and down as she saw various photos,

mostly of herself, snapped in a number of places and poses she wasn't certain how her best friend had managed, both here and on Mars.

"Isn't this..." She stared at a picture on the screen for a moment. "It is, isn't it? It's me in the bath a couple of weeks ago, just after we arrived. How did you even snap this one? I was alone!"

"I'm quite proud of that one," Anise said, nodding.

Isla flicked through a few more and stopped again. "Hang on... isn't this one from our first couple of nights here as well?"

Anise grasped the camera and had a quick gander. "Ah, that one? You just looked so cute, I couldn't help myself."

On the occasion in question, Isla had fallen asleep on her bed, fully clothed with her hair down, an occurrence Anise had been *quite* sure to catalogue for posterity. Mostly her own.

Gently tugging the camera from her girlfriend's hands, Isla leaned in for a kiss. "Looking at pictures is nice, but how about we make some new memories?"

Anise jumped as a finger went somewhere intimate. "Not hanging around, are we?"

"I can go slower if you like?"

"No chance!"

Isla let out a low laugh and tenderly slipped back inside her girlfriend's wetness. Slowly, in and out, in and out, she watched the pleasure seep into Anise's expression. "Incoming," she said, and disappeared down the bed.

Anise gasped. "Ah...!" Settling back into the bed, she tugged her hair loose and let it settle around her shoulders, spreading her legs wide for her lover's inspection.

Isla immediately went into meltdown. "I've always thought you're really attractive with your hair down, so let me add this now we're together: you're sexy as hell with your hair down!"

Anise prodded her with a foot. "Aren't you supposed to be concentrating on something else right now?" She pointed towards her crotch, though she also blushed at the lovely compliment.

Isla grinned and went back to work, happy at managing to confess something she might have occasionally thought over the past year, but never understood before.

As this was her first time properly exploring Anise's inviting pussy, Isla spent a time touching and stroking, flicking and rubbing her clit and staring intently. Moans from further up the bed indicated her touch was well received, so she went down and introduced her tongue into proceedings, using techniques taught by Mira.

"Oh jeez... you've been practising, huh?" Anise muttered, shuddering a few times as the shocks of pleasure rose to levels of intensity she felt might lead to a great deal of mess in the near future.

"Little bit," Isla said, pulling away for long enough to speak before going straight back in, lashing her tongue across Anise's clit and speeding her fingers up.

As the pleasure built higher and higher—enhanced further by the simple knowledge that it was her beloved Isla between her legs—Anise waved a hand about, hoping to get her lover's attention.

"M-Mind sitting on my face?" Anise finally managed.

"Lisa's been teaching you things as well, hasn't she?" Isla said, sitting up with a blush the size of Mars on her own face.

"Little bit," Anise echoed, laughing uncontrollably between brief moans.

Isla moved up the bed, did a one-eighty, and hesitantly lowered her rear end. "You know this is actually really embarrassing...?"

Reaching a hand up, Anise stroked her girlfriend's wet pussy, hovering right above her face. "Not for me, it isn't." She grasped Isla's butt and pulled her down, thrusting her tongue deep inside as her lover bent forward to resume her own activities.

Thanks to the activities earlier, especially Anise getting all excited over cute idols, Isla felt like she was going to explode with pleasure just by *thinking* naughty thoughts. Anise was even further gone and hit orgasm within the span of roughly thirty seconds, crying out as the evening's sexy shenanigans finally came to a head.

Panting hard, Anise opened her eyes and grinned at the delicious sight of her girlfriend's lower areas. "Your turn."

"Hurry, please...!" Isla murmured, her own fingers still slowly slipping in and out of Anise's wetness, gently bringing her down at the same time as her own pleasure went *up*. Seconds later, thanks to some vigorous effort on the part of her lover, Isla erupted, giving Anise a damp face.

"Uwaa..." Isla whispered, barely coherent. "That was intense." She crawled forward, turned, and slid back up the bed to collapse next to her sweaty and content girlfriend, eyes closed.

Anise snuggled up. "Mm, I finally feel complete."

"Complete?" Isla murmured, opening an eye to look at her friend's beatific expression.

"Yeah. I've liked you since we were about fourteen. You don't know how frustrating it's been for me, being so close to you but never being able to say anything."

Isla shuffled closer, transferring her feelings via touch. "We're together now, that's what matters."

"Exactly, hence why I said I feel complete. I could get way too used to this feeling of bliss."

"So could I," Isla mumbled. Her breathing had returned to its normal rate now, and she felt entirely at peace with everything. Judging by Anise finding her hand and clasping it, she did, too.

Over the next half an hour the two of them simply snuggled in silence, enjoying the afterglow. Eventually, Isla decided it was time to move; she wanted to talk about something important. They sat up, sitting cross-legged opposite each other.

"Something I wanted to mention..." Isla said.

Anise stretched, then flopped forward to rest her head on her girlfriend's shoulder. "Go ahead."

Isla turned a happy shade of red at how beautiful her girlfriend's naked body was, stroking her fingers through her wavy and currently slightly damp

hair. "It's something that Mira suggested when we split. Something really important."

"Okay." Anise sat upright and took Isla's hands in her own.

"I want us to talk. About everything. Every single thing, no matter how important it might or might not be... mm, actually, we already kind of do that. But I'd like us to talk even more. Every little thing. If something I do annoys you, if you feel like trying something new in bed, anything at all."

Anise gave a brief nod. "I agree. A lot of the world's problems are caused by misunderstandings, after all." She shuffled forward a small amount to be closer to her new girlfriend, nibbling Isla's neck. "So let's talk. About us, our relationship, our lives, our loves, our dislikes, every single thing! Let's be open about everything, no matter how embarrassing or dirty it might be."

Isla laughed at that last line. "I'm well aware of one or two of your interests already."

"I know I'm kind of naughty," Anise said, lowering her gaze and giggling. "I just find girls so sexy and hot that I can't help it, I find myself... fantasising, and things just sort of pop into my mind."

Isla hugged her. "I love that part of you as much as every other part. No need to feel embarrassed about what turns you on." *Like other girls' used panties*, she thought. "Right, I think we're sorted?" she said in her outside voice. She pulled away and stretched, giving a delicious eyeful in return, satisfied that everything of importance had been dealt with.

"Let's take a bath together," Anise suggested.

"Oh, nice idea."

Yes, that *was* a nice idea, their first time bathing together as an official couple. Isla vibrated with delight, noting that Anise was radiant and bright-eyed also. They grabbed what they needed and wandered through to their cosy en-suite for a soak. Upon returning to Anise's room, they jumped back into bed, still naked.

"So... sleep?" Anise suggested.

"Sounds good."

"Together?"

“You don’t even need to ask,” Isla said with a smile.

They pulled the sheets up and over, snuggling closer still.

“This doesn't feel real,” Isla whispered.

“I know, but it is,” Anise whispered back. She put her left arm over Isla's hip, gently caressed her cheek with the other hand, then closed her eyes. “You can feel my touch, right? Doesn’t get much realer than that.”

“Mm, I’m not sure, maybe we’re living the fantasy?” Isla suggested.

“Who needs fantasy? I have you, Isla, my fantasy already became reality,” Anise murmured, her eyes drooping. It was getting on by now, and turning up with bags under one's eyes is a *big* no-no for an idol. As such, Anise indicated that they should probably get some shut-eye.

“Night, Anise. Sweet dreams!” Isla whispered.

Anise managed to set an alarm on her phone, then they drifted off in each other’s warm and loving embrace.



Anise awoke with a start. She carefully sat up so as to avoid waking her sleeping companion, and checked her phone. “Mm, what time is it?” she muttered, checking the device’s display. “Nearly nine!?” She panicked. “I know I set the alarm!”

Checking her phone’s alarm settings, it was indeed set, but she hadn’t tapped the button to activate it. “I’m not meant to be the airheaded type, what the hell!” Though it was also true that their little rendezvous the previous evening might have addled her mind a little.

Anise prodded her new girlfriend until she opened her eyes and sat up. “We need to get ready, come on, up you get.”

“Uuu, Anise...” Isla protested, vaguely scratching the side of her head where she had managed to imprint her own hand by sleeping on it. Said hand was now entirely numb, flopping around as though the bones had gone walkabout.

“Lisa leaves in less than an hour,” Anise added, frantically jumping out of bed and dithering, unsure what to do first.

Isla was instantly awake, flapping her hand in an effort to bring it back to life. “Why didn’t you say so sooner, jeez.”

Freshening up in the bathroom, awkwardly moving around each other in the confined space, they were soon ready to head down and see their friend off, dressed in whatever came to hand. Mira already loitered outside the dormitory’s entrance, looking surprisingly subdued for once.

Isla stroked her ex-lover’s arm. “You okay?”

Mira turned. “Mm? Oh, morning. I’ll be fine, Isla, don’t worry. The first day or two without her is always the worst, but we’re both professional idols, always busy.”

“Being busy is a great way to take your mind off things,” Anise said, doing her best to remain chipper. Privately, she felt it might take more than a mere week or two to properly say goodbye to Lisa.

Lisa herself, placing several suitcases into a waiting taxi, closed the boot and waved to the driver. The vehicle speeded off towards the tunnel leading over to the mainland, leaving Lisa to wander across to her friends.

She beamed. “Going by your radiant faces, you’re together now?”

Anise placed hands on hips and grinned. “Damn straight!” she said, stealing one of Lisa’s favourite phrases.

“Glad to hear it. You look great together,” Lisa said, then moved over to hug Mira. “Look after them for me, huh?” she whispered into her friend’s ear. “Just one week and I’m already super fond of them both.”

“Naturally. I think they have it in them to become top idols, to be honest,” Mira whispered back.

“With a little help from their friends?”

Mira laughed. “After telling Isla not to rely on us always being around?”

“We don’t need to be around to be a help. Even a simple text message can bolster confidence, right?” Lisa said, pecking her best friend’s cheek and pulling away.

“A fair point. But yes, you have my word, Lisa. I’ll be here,” Mira said. “It’s my job now, after all.”

Lisa moved a few steps away and swept her gaze across the three of them, lingering on Anise. “I’ll miss you girls. Make sure you come visit me. I’m itching to show you around Canterbury.”

“Aaah, I can’t wait...!” Anise said, entering idolgasm condition red.

“So you could say you can’t-bury well hang around?” Isla suggested, eliciting a groan from Anise.

“I’ll miss those cute little outbursts of yours especially, Anise,” Lisa added, her smile slipping to something a bit more melancholy. “And Isla’s puns, awful though they are.” She coughed. “Anyway, better get going. I’m expecting great things from you two, don’t disappoint me now.”

Isla and Anise moved forward and placed a kiss each on Lisa’s cheeks, hugged her, then backed away.

With a delicate kiss on the lips, Mira touched a hand to Lisa’s cheek, lingered a moment, then raised the hand in a wave as her best friend and erstwhile lover strolled towards the hilltop monorail station.

This just left three girls—three *idols*—and years of wonderful idol activities to look forward to, with all the ups, downs, and sideways that would entail.

-END-

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Thanks again!

Lily Lancaster