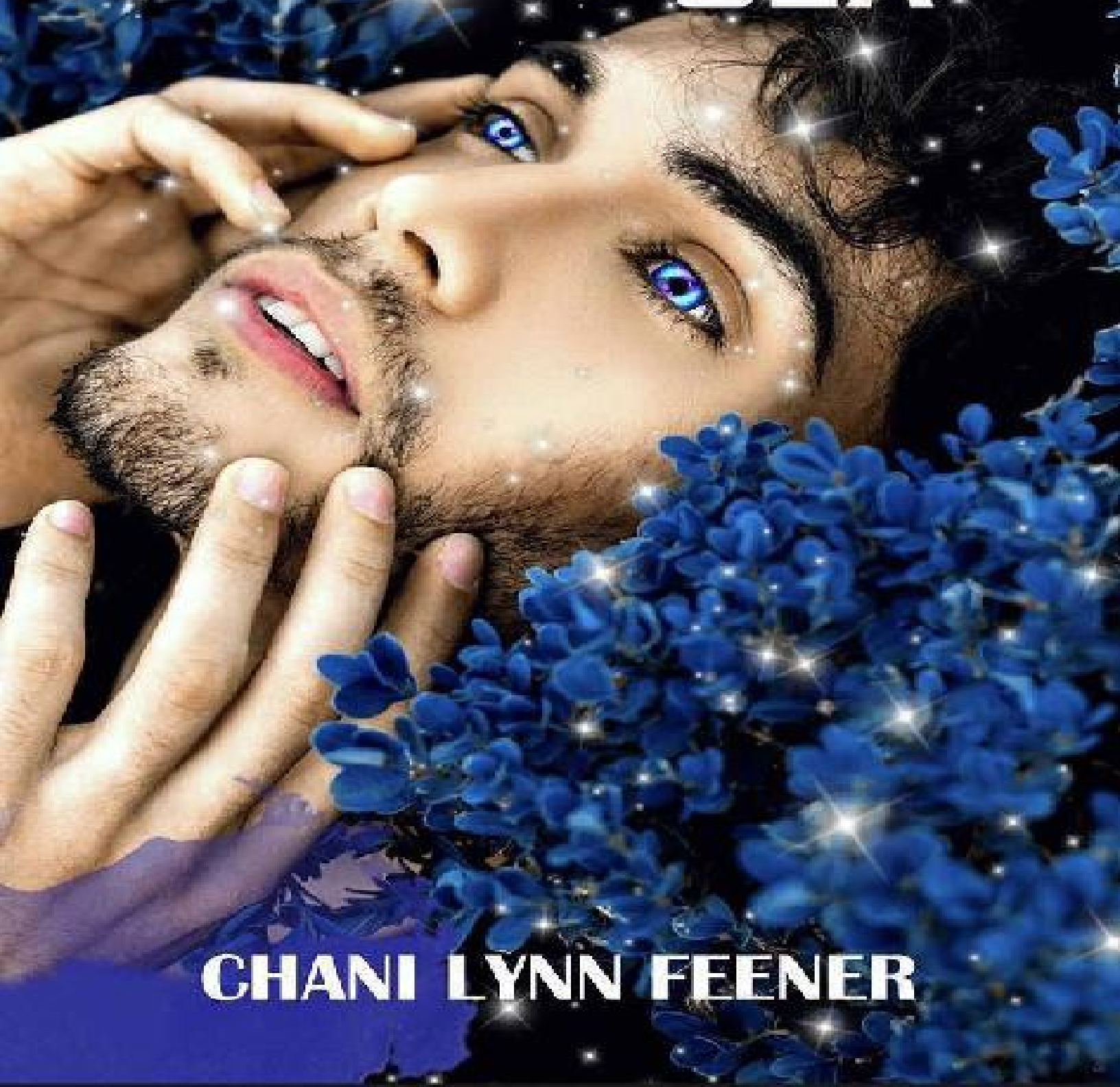


# a Bright Celestial SEA



**CHANI LYNN FEENER**

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# ALSO BY CHANI LYNN FEENER

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## **A Bright Celestial Sea**

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Chani Lynn Feener

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A Bright Celestial Sea

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To Rob, who would have thought this was badass but probably would have “complained” about the slow burn. Miss you.

# Chapter 1:

Something smelled like vomit warmed over.

Maybe it was.

Admittedly, Pryor didn't have extensive knowledge of Vexan foods, having only been to their home the once. Olympus Station wasn't exactly a vacation destination, not like some of the other well-known World Ships situated across the galaxy. There were few things they could boast about that couldn't be found on a fancy retreat planet. Few things that anyone would want to take from them or travel for, aside from a rare plant and a handful of unique gemstones.

"Do we have to be here right now?" the strained voice at his side struggled to get the words out.

Pryor spared his partner a glance, inwardly chuckling at the sight of the redhead pinching his nose together. He was trying hard not to insult the merchant standing across the spread of freshly prepared dishes—a strange fruit with purple and gold flesh that'd been lightly roasted, and the cause of the foul smell—so kept his head slightly turned away.

As if the burly woman opposite them couldn't see him simply because of a tilt of his chin.

"We've only just arrived," his partner, Castor, added. "The second we disembarked the Sodalite we should have reported to the proper authorities. We can't just wander—"

"Doesn't it ever get old?" Pryor moved along to the next setup, a small metal cart with something that decidedly smelled a bit better. When he glanced into one of the large metal tubs, however, the slight movement of whatever was inside had him quickly hurrying past. "You give the same old speech every time. It's got to get exhausting. It certainly is for me."

Castor was his junior by a year and had been his partner since they'd graduated from the academy. The two had developed a decent working relationship, and despite his words, Pryor was rather fond of him. Besides, the guy was simply doing his job as Inspector by reminding him of the rules.

Didn't mean Pryor was going to change his long-standing MO though.

"This was the last place Tiberius was spotted," he said, taking a look around at the marketplace.

It was situated on the west side of the station, in a massive domed wing with a ceiling that stretched high enough it would take a hovercar at least a few hours to reach the top. The streets were a zigzagging formation, lined with merchants selling all sorts of wares and packed with people out to purchase them. Buildings made of metal and glass towered at various heights and widths. Some had fresh neon signs flashing, others were covered in graffiti or old and torn papers promoting all sorts of things from the legal to the illegal.

The ambiance made it easy to forget that they weren't on a traditional planet, were instead on a massive hunk of metal hovering in space.

Pryor had visited many World Ships in his twenty-six years, but having been born on a traditional planet, with its own moons and all, he'd never fully adjusted to the idea of spending a lifetime aboard a ship. It didn't matter that simulation technology could provide everything—fake oceans, fake weather, etc—it wasn't real.

He had a thing about reality.

And about remaining firmly in it.

He was here on another job, one that hit a little too close to home for him, and had left him anxious. The sooner he solved the case, the faster he could put the past behind him again, where it belonged.

It helped that this was his usual reaction to a new case; his partner and teammates would be none the wiser about his discomfort.

"Isn't that interesting?" Castor asked, curiosity momentarily causing him to forget about his precious protocol and drop his nagging. "This doesn't exactly seem like the type of place an Imperial would hang out."

No, no it didn't.

"Roth Tiberius wasn't born an Imperial," Pryor found himself saying. "He spent the first fifteen years of his life as a Royal before familial circumstances bettered his fate."

Not that Pryor truly believed Roth was better off as the heir to the Tiberius throne. He did not. But one couldn't exactly go around saying as much aloud, especially not someone like Pryor.



“How do you know all that?” Castor reached for a small square that slightly resembled a cake, but Pryor grabbed his wrist tightly before he could touch it.

“I researched,” Pryor lied, then motioned with his chin toward the food. “That’s spicy.”

Castor frowned. “What? How do you—”

“Intergalactic Detective #455.”

Pryor closed his eyes for a second and silently cursed before schooling his features and casually turning to face the speaker.

Though he was wearing plain clothes to blend in with the crowd, it was obvious from the man’s stature that he was a soldier. He led a party of three others, and before either Pryor or Castor could confirm their identities, one of the others moved around him and into view.

He cursed inwardly a second time but dipped his head respectfully as this other man took lead. Like the soldier, he was dressed in a black jumpsuit, but even if Pryor hadn’t been given a file with photos of the Vexan ruling family, he would have easily been able to recognize the man for what he was.

An Imperial.

“You were meant to report as soon as you docked,” the man said with a voice like warmed butterscotch. “I was waiting.”

He was tall, with curly hair the color of ink. The set in his shoulders and way he held his spine straight as an arrow gave off a sense of authority, and though his expression was enigmatic, Pryor got the impression he was sussing him out.

“Intergalactic Inspector #353,” the soldier stated, glaring Castor down, “you will be reported for allowing this breach in conduct.”

Pryor grunted, unaffected when those affronted eyes settled on him. “As far as babysitting goes, my partner does a well enough job. Threatening him isn’t necessary. We’re all hoping for the same results here, are we not?”

“Insubordination is not tol—”

The Imperial held out an arm, blocking the soldier when he made to step forward. His gaze remained on Pryor, intense and unblinking.

Though it admittedly unnerved him, Pryor kept his composure. The best way to deal with any sort of Royal or Imperial and keep your sanity was to toe the line. There was only so far he could push them before they

actually got into trouble, and he wouldn't allow Castor to be punished for a decision he made.

Which meant keeping his cool and not letting on that being around anyone of highborn blood made his skin crawl.

Even if the highborn was as attractive as the one a mere five feet away.

"Pryor Oro," the way the Imperial spoke, it was almost as if he was testing the sound out on his tongue, "that's your name?"

"Yes."

The soldier cleared his throat.

"Yes, *Emperor Aurelius*," he corrected pointedly. He knew names too.

"My sister is current Head," the Emperor corrected. "You can call me Wystan."

That was...far too informal for comfort.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Pryor didn't bother keeping the edge of sarcasm from his tone, mouth twitching into a partial smile at the soldier when he stiffened in offense behind his Emperor.

"Forgive my partner, Emperor," Castor seemed to find his voice, moving closer to Pryor's side. "He's always like this with a new case, eager to dive right in and get it settled. We meant no disrespect."

"Of course," Wystan said. "This was the last known location of Royal Roth Tiberius, yes?"

"*Imperial Roth*," Pryor corrected, and for the life of him, he couldn't understand why he bothered.

Wystan tilted his head, a gleam entering his oddly colored eyes. Vexan eyes.

Up until this point, Pryor had only ever really thought of one pair of eyes like that. Even since stepping foot on this World Ship, he hadn't paid much attention to the eyes of the locals, pretty as they were.

One of their most sought after features, Vexan's had eyes that appeared as though they held tiny galaxies within them. Word was the use of a sperm bank here cost three times as much as a house on most other planets.

Wystan was still far enough away that Pryor could only make out so much, just hints of blues and greens and golds.

“You’re Tiberan, aren’t you?” the Emperor said rhetorically. “Your file claims you were born on Draftmeir.”

It wasn’t strange that he’d read their files. The I.P.F sent Pryor and his team here to solve a case involving missing royalty that had seemingly vanished without a trace in Emperor Wystan’s jurisdiction. If this wasn’t solved, and swiftly, it could cause problems with other planets, something the Emperor’s family had to want to avoid at all costs.

It was, however, a bit odd that he’d been so easily able to peg Pryor as Tiberan.

The people of Tibera didn’t have such flashy defining features as the Vexans did with their eyes. Pryor’s metallic gold hair, while a common color on his world, was also found on other planets. His high cheekbones and full mouth weren’t all that rare either. He’d been told on more than one occasion how attractive he was, sure, but attractiveness wasn’t a trait given exclusively to any one people.

Emperor Wystan was certain though, that much was clear. A part of Pryor was curious as to the reason why, but he knew better than to ask. Engaging at all was dangerous. Imperials and Royals alike were dangerous, self-absorbed creatures.

“My file is accurate. My mother had me on Draftmeir during a business trip. I was only there for six months before they returned home with me,” Pryor told him.

“To Tibera.”

“It seems too early in our relationship to sow seeds of doubt, Emperor Wystan, don’t you agree?”

“I’m not sure,” his expression changed then, the corners of his mouth smoothing slightly in what could only be considered a partial smile. “Only time will tell what kind of relationship we have, Detective.”

Was he...teasing him?

Pryor lost some of his composure, brow furrowing before he could help it.

It didn’t go unnoticed, and the Emperor’s smile bloomed into a full grin.

He *was* teasing him, the bastard. His hands instinctually fisted at his sides, dark memories from all the times he’d had to stand and endure that kind of poor treatment from other Imperials now fresh in his mind.

Fortunately, before he could do something stupid and get them thrown into a Vexan jail cell, Castor rested a gentle hand on his shoulder, effectively pulling him back to the present.

The redhead pressed on him lightly, all the while beaming over at the Emperor and his three guards. “He has low blood sugar. His surly disposition will brighten as soon as he’s eaten something.”

Pryor glared at the man at his side but didn’t verbally correct him. He *did* have low blood sugar, but there was no way anyone here was buying that that was the cause of his rudeness.

He should be more careful. He was usually more careful around Royals/Imperials. There was just something about Wystan...something about the way the Emperor had looked at him from the very start. Almost like he was seeing through him, or searching him for some hidden truth.

Pryor didn’t like his truths to be exposed. To anyone. He’d buried them for a reason, and he planned to keep them buried.

The body-borne computer—multi-slate— attached to his arm beeped then, and he was grateful for the distraction. The pad was a long computer, stretching from the bottom of his wrist to halfway up his upper arm. The flashing green circle at the center of the screen alerted him to the fact someone was trying to access the comms in his left ear. He tapped the circle and then pressed the small button on the side of the tiny device in his ear to accept the call.

“Report,” he ordered the second another beep signaled the connection was live.

“Boss,” Fir’s voice came through the line, directly into Pryor’s ear. “We’ve been given updated information. We know now why we’ve been called to duty.”

As criminal investigators, Pryor’s team was rarely given a missing person case, even if the case happened to involve important figures such as an Imperial. He’d known all along why he’d been the one the task had been given to, but the others had questioned it. Since there appeared to be more to the story than he’d been originally led to believe, that must mean there was some other aspect that was convincing enough.

He wasn’t sure if he should be happy about that or annoyed that things were no doubt about to become more complex.

“All right,” he replied, keeping his thoughts to himself. “We’ll meet you—”

“We’re no longer on the Soldalite,” Fir cut him off.

“What?” His gaze snapped up to Wystan, who was still closely watching him.

“We’ve been given official space in one of the royal attachments,” Fir explained. “I’ve sent the location to your multi-slate. We’re set up and ready to begin when you arrive.”

“Why didn’t you report this sooner?” It was impossible to keep the edge from his tone. This day was so not going how he’d hoped, in any way, shape, or form, and he wasn’t pleased about it at all.

“I’m sorry, boss, I tried to get through to Cast, but his comms are down. Before I could attempt to contact you, the Emperor’s people—”

Pryor hung up on him. Before anyone could say anything, he grabbed Castor’s arm, twisting it so that he could access the Inspector’s multi-slate. A quick tap of a few buttons had the device chirping to life. A second later, a string of message alerts sounded.

Castor laughed lightly, though there was no actual humor in the sound, and leaned as far away as he could manage with his arm still in Pryor’s hold. “Would you look at that. I was wondering why the others were so quiet.”

“How unprofessional,” the soldier sneered before turning to address Wystan. “Emperor, this is insubordination. Give me leave to report Inspector #353 to I.P.F headquarters. We can have him offloaded and replaced with someone more competent.”

“I apologize,” Pryor said, waiting until he had the Emperor’s full attention once more before dropping into a lower bow. Even when he straightened, he was sure to keep his gaze down and his shoulders pulled back in a show of formal regard for the man’s higher station. “Respectfully, if the Emperor deems us unfit for the job, we will officially excuse ourselves from the case. There’s no need to involve I.P.F headquarters. I can assure you that Inspector Bramwell isn’t the irresponsible type; this was simply a mistake.”

“A mistake?” the soldier repeated snidely.

“Yes.” Pryor lifted his gaze to him, allowing some of his displeasure to show. He might have to hide it from the Emperor, but he couldn’t bring himself to keep it from the asshole currently threatening his partner. “We all make them, soldier.”

For the second time, Wystan's arm shot out to keep his man from rushing forward.

"H, you'll remove yourself from this investigation," the Emperor said. "Effective immediately."

"What?" the soldier, H, sputtered in disbelief before he got a hold of himself. "But, Majesty—"

"Immediately means right this second." Wystan angled his head slightly toward the other man. "Or did I not speak clearly enough for you?"

"No, I—" He caught himself and stepped back, dipping into a low bow. "Of course, Emperor."

"Send Ink to Aura building 3. She'll be your replacement."

"As you command, Emperor." H retreated into the crowd, disappearing amongst them.

A quick glance showed that only a few people had stopped to look their way, most continued on with their daily lives.

"We can't talk out here," Wystan said to Pryor, possibly noticing his assessment of their surroundings. "Come. I have a hovercar waiting at the end of this street. It'll take us to the rest of your team where we can officially begin."

Which meant he wasn't planning on reporting them or having them removed off World. Pryor didn't entirely understand his reasoning behind it—if their roles had been reversed, he most likely would have listed to H—but now wasn't the time to question the Emperor's intentions, especially since they seemed to be leaning in his team's favor.

"After you, Majesty." Pryor motioned for him to lead the way.

Wystan grunted. "That almost sounded sincere this time, Detective. The way you said Majesty."

Pryor was saved from having to reply.

The Emperor turned and his remaining two guards fell into step at either side of him. In their plainclothes—long black coats over fitted charcoal pants—they blended well enough within the crowd.

Still, they appeared upper-class, while Pryor and Castor had opted for a more mediocre ensemble.

They'd removed their official uniforms before they'd disembarked the Sodalite, changing into white and light gray overalls. There were even rips at the knees of Pryor's. He'd thrown on an old t-shirt he'd gotten on some other planet like five years ago, which was forest green and only had

a couple of holes at the hem. His jacket was the only thing on him that had no imperfections, made from a windbreaker material, clinging to him close enough that his multi-slate fit comfortably over it.

There was no way an Imperial like Wystan Aurelius, dual Emperor of the Olympus, world to the Vexans, would dress in ripped pants. Even if it was meant as a disguise of sorts.

There'd been a time, once, when Pryor had been just like him in that regard.

But that was another life, and in *this* lifetime, he'd garbed himself in far worse in order to get a job done.

As it turned out, there wasn't just one hovercar awaiting them at the end of the street, but two. The sleek dark gray vehicles opened their side doors upon their arrival, but before Pryor and Castor could approach the second, Wystan stopped them.

"You'll be riding with me, Detective."

Pryor hesitated.

"We can discuss the case so far on the way." Wystan held the door open, waiting, making it clear it wasn't up for debate. "Don't worry, your partner will be right behind us."

Making a big show of scoffing over that, Pryor moved to the car. "Who said I was worried?"

The interior was made of a rich cherry leather, smooth to the touch as he slid in.

"Keep going." Wystan peered in from the still open doorway.

"Seriously?" he mumbled as he shuffled down to the other side until his shoulder pressed against the closed door there.

Wystan climbed in and then silently ordered the driver to pull onto the road as he adjusted the cuffs of his jacket.

They were on the ground-level road, in a hovercar that only lifted them a foot or so in the air. Above, there were three other tiers, each with its own sky-road. The whirs of cars high up could be heard.

Now that they were in such close proximity, Pryor could get a better look at the clean shaved lines of the other man's undercut. His jet black hair was silky looking, almost impossibly so, and he vaguely wondered what kind of shampoo the Emperor used to make it that way.

He could smell him now too, confined in this tight space, a mixture of sandalwood and something else, something sharp and sweet that Pryor

couldn't place.

It smelled good.

He hated it.

"You'll forgive me for coming to find you," Wystan broke the silence between them first. "I can't have just anyone wandering around Olympus. If you'd come to me first, like you were meant to, we could have skipped all that unpleasantness with H. He's very by the book, you see."

"He doesn't seem to be the only one," Pryor pointed out tersely. This wasn't the first time he'd been chastised for breaking this particular protocol, but man. Was the guy going to hold it over his head forever?

Wystan chuckled. "If I was as rigid as he is, I wouldn't be letting you off the hook, now would I."

"Is that what this is?" Pryor barely resisted the urge to snort. "Feels more like a scolding."

"Do you need to be scolded?" Wystan's eyes glimmered, the colors flickering in the lights they passed so that the golds and blues burst and sparkled.

Pryor cleared his throat and straightened in his seat. "I'm not quite sure what your intentions are, Emperor, but I'm not here to provide entertainment, even if you are an Imperial."

"Ah," he pulled back slightly, though the curve of his lips never wavered, "too much too soon, Detective? Understood, I'll keep my flirtations to a minimum. For now."

"The—" He couldn't even get himself to say the word, choking on it slightly, so that it ended in a coughing fit that had his vision blurring.

"Drink."

Water was thrust toward him and Pryor snatched the can with little thought to decorum. It took five deep drags from it before the fit subsided and he felt like he could breathe again. When he could, he shot a glare at Wystan, not caring that the other man was an Emperor or that some in his position would take a person's head for less.

"I apologize," the Emperor nodded to show his sincerity. "It was a poorly made joke. You'll forgive me."

"You can't order someone to forgive you," he snapped.

"No?" He hummed in mock disappointment. "Pity."

"Tell me about the case so far." Pryor adjusted himself in his seat, still clutching the can of water. He needed to get them back on track. He



wasn't here to be played with, he was here to solve a mystery. To find Roth.

"Imperial Roth Tiberius went missing three weeks ago in the merchant district—where we've just come from," Wystan began. "As you saw, that area is hectic at best, with daily foot traffic in the thousands. We've done a search of all security footage, however, there's been no lead. A camera outside the Max, one of the more...unrefined establishments in the district, caught the Heir Imperial entering, but no signs of him ever having left could be found."

"Yet you're sure he's not still in the building?" They would have done a thorough search. The Tiberius family wasn't one you wanted to piss off. Olympus and Tibera might be different Empires, but there was no denying which of the two held the most power.

World Ships were massive structures that could easily and comfortably house an entire civilization for tens of generations, but a ship, no matter how spectacular, still wasn't a planet.

The Vexans had lost theirs over five hundred years ago, and though they'd managed to continue on and rebuild, without natural resources to barter with, their placement amongst the galaxies' elite had plummeted.

If Tibera decided to go to war, there would be many who would back them up. Not that Pryor thought for even a moment war was on the table. Even if something horrible had actually happened to Roth—a thing he didn't like to even consider—the two kingdoms would most likely settle their debts in other ways.

The Interstellar Conference protected all planets and populations under their care within all twelve of the known galaxies, and it was a well-known fact that Olympus had signed with them same as Tibera and all other nearby Empires.

It wouldn't necessarily be enough to stop a war, but it would definitely be cause for hesitation. The last planet that went to war with another before first clearing it through the I.C were later stripped of its protection. Pirates ended up raiding to the point almost a third of the population were slain in the streets, and the planet's resources didn't last longer than twenty years before they were completely pilfered.

Pryor had read about it in the dusty pages of an actual, physical book when he'd been a child. He could still picture the browned edges.

“The Imperial Police were sent in,” Wystan said. “They did a full sweep, but there was nothing. I’ve been told they even went so far as to search for hidden rooms or exits, but again...”

“Nothing.” Pryor ran a hand through his hair. He’d known all of this before. If the policing force on Olympus had found anything, anything at all, things wouldn’t have been escalated and brought to the I.P.F—the Intergalactic Police Force—and he wouldn’t be here, seated next to an Emperor in a car that cost more than his apartment back on Flicker. “What about where he was staying?”

“The scene has been looked at, but otherwise left untouched. I’ll take you there once we’ve convened with the rest of your team.”

“That won’t be necessary.” The last thing he wanted was for the Imperial to stick around. “You’ve assigned someone new from your side—Ink, was it?—and I’ve been given all the needed information. If there’s anything else, I can just ask her. I’m sure you’ve got more important things that need your attention, Emperor Wystan.”

“I’ll decide what is and isn’t important to me, Detective.” The car came slowly to a stop. “We’re here.”

Pryor clenched his jaw shut to keep himself from snapping a retort, then followed the Emperor out of the car.

## Chapter 2:

Aura Royal, one of the main buildings belonging to the Aurelius family, was five stories tall and vastly out of place amongst the rest of the modernized setting this part of the Olympus provided. Made of limestone with iron fixtures, it stood out from the rest of the street, sectioned off by a winding road and a tall holo-gate made of vibrant blue lasers.

There were soldiers set in position around the gate, carefully keeping a two-foot distance from the neon poles which would instantly electrocute them upon touch. The grounds were grassed over, with a couple of smaller trees and a row of thick bushes set against the front face of the building.

Pryor stood on the top step, taking it all in, trying to seek out any holes in security around the perimeter. It wasn't necessary, no one was going to come after him and he doubted many even knew about this case, but old habits die hard.

"This is one of our most active government buildings," Wystan said, reminding him the Emperor was there and waiting. "The security is unavoidable."

He thought that was an odd way of putting it, but when he turned around, Wystan had already pulled open one of the two wide double doors. Pryor shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and headed after him, falling in a single step behind him, as was proper.

"The door handle has a fingerprint scanner," Wystan explained as he moved them through the massive foyer. The floor at their feet was checkered in navy blue and gold tiles, the Aurelius family crest—a star partially hidden within the overlapping petals of a flower—foiled across every third blue one in shiny copper. "You and your team have already been added to the system. You can come and go as you please, all that we ask is you abide by Olympus law."

An escalator ran to the left of the vast room, the metal and glass a major difference from the outside of the building. To the other side was a help desk with three secretaries, two men and a woman, deep in work.

Across the wall behind them, the words Vexan Bold had been spelled out in heavy metal letters.

The Vexan were known all across the galaxies for their daring, and oftentimes, blunt personalities. They didn't believe in holding back, resisting, or pussyfooting around. Though it had been near a millennium since their planet's extinction event, remembering their homeworld, and how quickly it had vanished had helped form their ideology.

They may have thrived thus far on the World Ship Olympus, but they were taught to recall that at any moment anything could be taken away, could disappear.

Vexan Bold was really just a fancier way of saying live in the moment.

Pryor had always liked the phrase, had once, when he'd been a child, terrified and alone, found extreme comfort in it.

"They're there to provide service for any of the three departments housed in Aura Three," Wystan told him, catching him looking in that direction and mistaking which part had captured his attention. "If you need anything that Ink can't help you with, try the front desk."

At the end of the foyer, there were three different paths, two on either side and one in the center. They headed down the middle, the tiles continuing their pattern down the hall even as the walls changed from white to a pale gray. There were various rooms with signs signifying which department they belonged to, but Wystan didn't slow long enough for Pryor to get a good look inside any of them. Not that it mattered.

The plan was to do his job, find Roth, and get the hell out of here. Preferably before he was left alone with the Emperor and his overtly flirtatious personality.

He thought of that term again, Vexan Bold, and felt some of his fondness of it wane.

Unfortunately, living in the moment for them also meant following their whimsy. The Emperor was most likely bored and found Pryor's obvious discomfort at his teasing entertaining. Which meant he'd keep at it if Pryor didn't stop reacting.

Easier said than done.

Finally, they slowed in front of another door that had been left partially open. Wystan pushed it the rest of the way and entered the room.

The setup looked a lot like the police offices back home, although the tech was better and therefore meant less cluttered desks. There were seven of them total, with short cubicle walls—easy to see over—sectioning them off.

“That’s yours,” Wystan pointed to the slightly larger desk to the far left, and then tilted his chin to the back right where another glass door gave a view into a meeting room. There were people inside waiting. “Let’s meet your team.”

A woman greeted them before anyone else could so much as rise from their seats around the long white table. She bowed deeply at Wystan and held the door open, stepping off to the side. Her outfit was a snug black material, with an officially issued blaster tucked into the holster at her right hip, and her mahogany-colored hair pulled up into a tight bun. The Aurelius crest glinted copper in the harsh overhead lighting from where it was pinned on her chest, opposite her heart.

After she’d greeted Wystan, she turned her attentions to Pryor, allowing him to enter as well before carefully shutting the door at their backs.

“They were just filling me in on the task at hand,” Ink said to Wystan, who was busy moving to the front of the table and easing into the seat there.

There were six places total, two at either end and two at either side. The entire left side was taken by Castor and Fir. On the right, the newest member of Pryor’s team, Erix, sat.

Wystan absently glanced around at the filled chair on his left where Castor sat, then reached a long arm over to tug the empty one on his right next to him. Now that both chairs were situated at the head of the table, he held out a hand, indicating Pryor should take it.

Pryor almost forgot himself and rolled his eyes. Almost. Instead, he pointedly folded his arms and turned to address the only blonde in the room, a man on the same side of the table as Castor. “Fir, report.”

Fir got to his feet, first dipping his head toward Wystan before answering his team leader. “It appears as though this is not merely a missing person case.”

“Watch how you word things,” Erix stated darkly, dark green eyes flashing with indignation. His irritation made sense; he was Tiberan, sent

here to help them find his missing Heir Imperial. This was personal for him, more so than for them, despite their jobs being on the line.

“What else is it?” Pryor didn’t have time to waste on infighting. He could feel Wystan’s intense gaze resting on him.

“Someone’s stolen information and possibly transmitted it off World Ship,” Fir said. “It’s unclear if the two issues are somehow entangled, but they want us to find out.”

He frowned. “Do they suspect Roth somehow has a hand in it? What kind of information was stolen?”

Roth Tiberius was many things, and maybe thief could be considered one of them, but...There was no reason the Crown Prince of Tibera, Heir Imperial, would *need* to steal something from Olympus. Tibera was a lush planet filled with all sorts of natural resources, and that helped ensure wealth was a non-issue. Roth didn’t need money. He didn’t really need anything, as far as Pryor was concerned.

Everything the man had ever wanted had been handed to him on a silver platter when he’d been fifteen.

Castor lifted his tablet from the table and clicked against the screen to access the proper file. “Something called...M.I.C.E.”

Pryor’s blood went cold. “Excuse me?”

“Fear of rodents, Detective?” Wystan asked, barely bothering to hide his smile behind his hand. He was casually sprawled out in his chair, elbow propped on the armrest.

“It’s an acronym,” Castor cleared his throat and continued. “It stands for Molecular Immobilized Cellular Energy. Wow. That’s a mouthful. Did they just string words together?”

It’d had another name the last time Pryor had heard it spoken.

They didn’t need to know about that.

“It’s nanotechnology not available to the general public,” Ink explained. “The project has been on ice for years, which is what makes the case especially difficult to solve. No one should have known about M.I.C.E’s existence, let alone how to access it. The files were restricted, highest security level.”

“Only my sister and I have clearance,” Wystan added.

“Who did you talk to about it?” Fir questioned, pulling up a blank page on his tablet to take notes. “Anyone recently?”

He gave a single curt shake of his head. "That project isn't mentioned ever, to anyone."

"Can I ask why?"

"There were only a handful of trials run and while it was deemed a relative success there were...complications. Irreversible side effects. My father always meant to revisit the technology, but the scientist who was in charge of the project passed suddenly and his protégée, unfortunately, wasn't as talented as he was."

"What exactly does this nanotech do?" Castor frowned. "What reason could someone have for wanting it?"

"That's highly classified, Inspector," Wystan stated.

"So then give us clearance. If someone went through the trouble of stealing it, there has to be a reason. We need to know what it does in order to figure that out."

"Why does I.P.F believe there's a connection to the theft and Roth?" Pryor cut in.

"They went missing on the same day," Ink said. "Around the same time of the theft, one of Roth's men was spotted near the medical facility where the original test files were kept."

"Test files?" Suddenly, Pryor felt like he couldn't breathe, couldn't move. "What test files?"

"Information on all of the people M.I.C.E was used on." Wystan held his gaze, expression unreadable.

"Have you viewed these files?" Pryor's voice was deadpan, but he couldn't bring himself to care. There was no way that—no. No, his mother wouldn't have allowed there to be any records left behind, and even if she had...There was nothing that could lead to him.

It'd been over a decade since his name change, and all official documentation that could be linked back to him stated clearly that he was Pryor Oro.

He was Pryor Oro.

"I have not," the Emperor replied, and for a split second, a rush of relief swept through him.

That was good. Although...

"We're going to have to interview anyone who was a part of the project." And that was yet another problem. Pryor regained his composure. There was nothing to be worried about. Nothing at all. "I assume you've

already searched for connections between them and any of Roth's people? Did any of them meet? Do they know one another? Anything?"

"Nothing," Ink was the one to answer. "Most of the scientists and engineers who were a part of M.I.C.E have moved on to other projects. Unfortunately, that also means a good chunk of them are off World Ship. We've gotten in contact with as many as we could, and so far none of them have even come close to Tiberan soil."

"That doesn't mean they didn't run their mouths somewhere else," Fir stated. "All it takes is one loose-lipped jackass and a nearby eavesdropper."

"It'll be impossible to find out if that was the case," Castor swore.

"I still have an on-world team working the stolen technology case," Wystan told them all. "They'll bring you any pertinent information. For now, I suggest you focus on finding the missing Imperial. I've been screening threats from Tibera for weeks now, and frankly, I've reached my limits when it comes to placating insufferable fools."

"What did you just say?!" Erix shot out of his seat, but Pryor was right there.

Before the man could even fully rise, Pryor had a firm hand planted on his shoulder. He shoved him down with all of his strength, keeping his hold there in case Erix tried to defy him and rise again.

"You will apologize to the Emperor, immediately," Pryor stated, glaring down at him.

"He insulted the Imperial family!"

"We're on Olympus right now," he stated coldly. "He is the Imperial family. Apologize. That's an order, Service."

Erix stilled immediately, the change as distinct as fire and ice. "Don't call me that. Don't *you* ever call me that."

The word had slipped out, and Pryor cursed himself in his head for it. Service was another term for soldier in Tiberan. One he hadn't used to address someone in a very long time, so long, in fact, he was actually a bit baffled that he'd fallen back on that old habit at all.

It must have been all this talk of M.I.C.E. Less than a day on this ship, and he was already starting to be affected by this case.

Erix roughly shook his hold loose, then set his angered eyes on Wystan. "I apologize for losing my temper, Emperor Aurelius."



Wystan looked at him for a long while and then lifted his face toward Pryor. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance we can have him replaced, is there?”

His brow furrowed slightly, but Pryor gave nothing else away. Hadn’t he removed H from this case because the soldier had insisted they fire Castor? Why was he then so quick to dismiss Erix?

“He was assigned by the Tiberan’s,” Pryor said. “The I.P.F has no say in his involvement unless it can be proven he’s hindering the team’s progress.”

Pissing off the Emperor of the World Ship they were currently on might count, but taking the time to file the claim and awaiting a verdict was a major waste of time and energy. As badly as Pryor wanted Erix gone, he wouldn’t slow the investigation just to obtain a small, and honestly petty, personal comfort.

Wystan rapped his fingers against the tabletop, clearly considering going through with the removal anyway. Finally, he sighed and got to his feet. “Split your team in two. Half of them will go with Ink to interview the final scientist from the project. My people have already located him. Annoyingly, he’s relocated to Hades.”

“That sounds fun,” Castor said, tone rife with sarcasm.

“That’s on the opposite side of the station,” Wystan said. “It’ll take two days to get there even by light-jet. You should pick two of your teammates to take care of that while you and the other handle Roth’s disappearance here. Might I suggest choosing Erix as one of the members sent far away?”

“You’ve suggested just about everything else,” Pryor pointed out but twirled a finger at Erix anyway. “You heard the Emperor. You and Fir follow Ink to Hades.” He lifted his gaze to Fir. “Keep me posted the entire trip. If you end up learning anything from the scientist—”

“You got it, boss.” Fir got up and started collecting his things, obviously sensing how eager everyone else was to get moving, and how close Erix was to arguing.

Erix did want to argue, but clearly saw he wouldn’t get them to change their mind. He grumbled under his breath the whole way out the door, with both Ink and Fir hot on his heels.

Pryor exhaled, glad to be rid of at least one complication, and then opened his mouth to tell Castor they should get moving too. Before he

could, however, the Emperor was talking once more.

“Now that that’s settled, the three of us should get going as well.”

Pryor quirked a brow.

“Don’t look at me like that, Detective,” Wystan grinned. “I already told you I would be your escort. It’ll be dark in less than two hours and the five-star hotel Roth Tiberius was staying at is at least a thirty-minute drive from here. We should go if we want to beat the artificial sun. Unless, of course, you’d rather be shown to your quarters for the evening. You must be tired, having spent the better part of your stay so far running around the city.”

“We went straight to the market,” Castor said sheepishly. “Right to the street vendors.”

“I wanted to see the building he supposedly disappeared from,” Pryor added. “Why are we still on this?”

“We might be a space station with a fake sun, but Olympus is home to an entire planet’s population. There are a million people on this World Ship.” Wystan made his way slowly around the table.

“What’s your point?” Pryor tried not to let on how uncomfortable the Emperor’s nearing proximity to him was. When the other man came to a stop in front of him, he stood firm, refusing to back away. They were roughly the same height, he was shorter by about an inch or so, so at least he didn’t have to tip his head back or anything to maintain eye contact.

“There’s a reason protocol dictates any visiting I.P.F agents meet with the head of a civilization prior to wandering an unknown world. Crime rates are down from the previous year, but that doesn’t mean we don’t still have the occasional murder case to deal with.”

“I can take care of myself,” Pryor said. “It’s sort of in my job description. You don’t have to pretend to care about my wellbeing, Emperor. If you’re pissed I trod all over your territory—”

“I’m Vexan,” he reminded swiftly. “We don’t pretend. It’s a waste of time.”

Pryor ground his teeth. “Sort of like this conversation.”

“I thought I was being clear—subtle, yes, but clear all the same.” Wystan closed the distance between them, so that they were nearly toe to toe. “I don’t like that the first thing you did when you got off your ship was roam around mine. I don’t like that your partner didn’t have his

communication device on while said roaming was taking place, and I don't like that other teammate of yours with the bad attitude."

For the first time since meeting a couple of hours ago, Pryor got a look at the Emperor for what he truly was, without the sugarcoated words meant to disarm or the flirtatious gestures and half-smiles.

Gone was any hint of the ease and playfulness Wystan had portrayed up until now. Instead, his mouth was set in a firm line, his eyes intense. Even the air around him had changed, shifting and stiffening so that the tension was almost hard to breathe through.

Pryor hadn't heard much about the Emperors of Olympus, and more was said about Wystan's sister, the current Head, than was about him. However, the man across from him seemed exactly like the type of overbearing, arrogant, *threatening* Imperial he was used to. The very kind he'd vowed to avoid at all cost.

Men with power only knew how to do one thing, take, and everything Pryor had he'd clawed and fought to obtain. He wouldn't lose anything, ever again, especially not to an Imperial.

"You don't trust us." That was fair. Pryor didn't trust him either.

"Whether I do or don't," Wystan drawled, "get used to me, Detective. You're on my world, you play by my rules."

"This isn't a game."

"Oh, right, because it's a Tiberan Imperial who is missing, and you also happen to be Tiberan. I thought members of the I.P.F stripped themselves of homeworld loyalty."

"Tibera can burn for all I care," he snapped, and he shouldn't have, he knew that even before Castor's gasp gave that away. "This has nothing to do with personal loyalties. Finding Roth Tiberius is my job, and I'm damn good at what I do."

Finally, Pryor gave in to instinct and took a single step back. "That's why you should find another plaything, Emperor. Not only am I not interested, I also happen to be incredibly busy."

Wystan made a sound, something akin to a chuckle or a snicker. All at once, that imposing exterior melted away, and he slipped his hands into his front pockets casually, as if they'd been discussing a sports game they'd just seen or a book they'd recently read, and not lobbing thinly veiled threats.

“Alas, I have a tendency to fixate. It’s a nasty habit of mine.” He leaned in, bringing his mouth up against the curve of Pryor’s ear. “Maybe if you’re good, I’ll eventually let you in on what we’re playing for.”

Pryor was so shocked he didn’t even consider masking his reaction.

Wystan pulled back and grinned. “Let’s go, Detective. You have a case to solve.”

## Chapter 3:

His suit itched in all the wrong places.

Pryor kept himself composed as he stepped off the landing belt and headed briskly down the boarding bridge, nose twitching at the overtly intense smell of peaches. Rumor had it an extract from a local fruit that smelled similar to the sweet stuff was the main ingredient in all Vexan cleaning solutions. It took maximum effort for him to keep his arms down at his sides and not press against his nose to block out the saccharine stench.

The hotel Roth had been staying in was practically on the other side of Abraxas, this section of the Olympus, which meant they'd had to take a hover-ship instead of a car. The ships were built to withstand the environment off-world, so it was a large chunk of metal made flashy only because it belonged to an Imperial.

The paint was a mixture of white and gold, and the piolet had bowed to the Emperor, already in full uniform as if he'd been ordered on standby—he most likely had.

It seemed as though Wystan had already decided to accompany them on this trip even before finding them in the merchant district.

For the life of him, Pryor couldn't figure out why.

He'd held the mistrust of a Royal/Imperial before, of course. As someone who showed up on a random planet, solved a crime, then left again, it made sense that the locals would be doubtful of his motives. The I.P.F, while highly notable and respected, ran like any other organization, meaning there were occasions when a dirty agent was uncovered.

Although Pryor had never been reprimanded for such a thing, it was impossible as of yet to tell whether or not Wystan suspected him of foul play.

He needed to keep himself alert while around the Emperor, that was for certain.

"This facility was built specifically with off-worlders in mind," Wystan said then, drawing Pryor's attention away from his internal thoughts. "Most visiting Royals stay here if they're vacationing in this

section of the station. Each room has custom capabilities so that they can be programmed to better suit the individual.”

Many species in the galaxy could survive comfortably on the Olympus, since Vexans breathed oxygen and their planet—before it was destroyed—had the most common gravitational pull for worlds with large masses of life. Their World Ship had been structured similarly to best accommodate the Vexans who were forced to relocate five hundred years ago.

Tibera was much the same, the only major difference being a slightly higher humidity. Nothing that would have made Roth so uncomfortable that he’d need to stay in this particular type of hotel.

“Do Royals vacation here often?” he asked, as they headed up the steep concrete path that led to the glass double doors.

“We’re located in the middle of the Sherbet and Tin galaxies. Equal distance both ways means lots of people stop off here, either to rest or out of boredom from space travel.” The doors slid open when they approached, but Wystan continued talking. “If you board at Epiphany Station, you’ll enter the west side of Olympus, known as Vivid. It was designed to more closely resemble the climate of the west side of our planet. The beaches aren’t real, of course, but the holograms are convincing enough, and the virtual sky runs on a twenty-four hour setting meant to mirror the time of year. Once this is over, you should visit. You’d like it.”

“No thank you.” Pryor stopped at the center of a large foyer, taking a quick look around. Unlike the Aura building—and much of the rest of the World Ship—this one looked exactly like what it was. A spaceship.

“Didn’t want to waste funding on interior design, huh?” At least he seemed like he fit in here, in his white overalls and standard-issue eggshell boots. He’d changed out of his plainclothes before they’d left.

“It was done with a purpose, actually,” Wystan corrected. “Many travelers seem to find comfort in the familiarity of it. Though, I have been told Imperial Roth was not one of them. He outwardly complained to the front desk about the ‘blasé white walls’.”

“He would,” he mumbled under his breath, catching sight of Castor over by said desk.

Having finished questioning the woman seated there, the Inspector headed over to where Pryor and Wystan stood, already tapping away on the

multi-slate attached to his left wrist. He'd traveled in the same transport as them, but had been at the head of the ship and therefore gotten a head start.

"Roth Tiberius rented out the luxury suite on the top floor," Castor told him. "As the Emperor mentioned, it's been cordoned off and no one's set foot in there since the Vexan police checked it after his initial disappearance."

That had been over three weeks ago. It'd taken a while for the information to travel across the galaxy, and even then, even more time for the Tiberius family to decide to get the I.P.F. involved. Most Royals/Imperials were like that, operating on pride in all aspects of their lives, even if it might mean the life or death of one of their own.

Even if it meant casting them aside.

Pryor gave a curt nod and motioned Castor forward, waiting for him to begin leading the way.

He'd already read the report made by the Vexan police. There hadn't been much. His room had been scanned yet nothing strange or telling had been discovered. Roth had only even been on ship for little under a week by that point, and had apparently booked the suite for a total of two. What he'd intended to do here for that long was a mystery, but he'd written vacation as his reason for visiting on his travel documents.

That could be all it was. Roth was a known party boy, even for an Heir Imperial. The only reason he wasn't ostracized by his people and allowed to continue living that kind of lifestyle was due to the fact he was the last remaining blood heir of the Tiberius line. Since his family claimed he was their only option, they allowed him more slack than most other Imperials would get—at least before they took the throne and made the rules themselves.

Pryor found his gaze sliding to the side, watching Wystan move with an easy gait next to him as they turned down a corridor. So far, it was apparent that the Emperor dictated his own life, despite not being the current Head of the ship.

It was rare, but the rules of the Olympus stated that the eldest child of the ruling bloodline would be the one to take over the throne. Wystan and his twin sister, Wynn, having been born less than one minute apart, were raised with the understanding they would share the role. A year on their home planet had lasted sixteen months, with each month consisting of

thirty-six days. Time on the Olympus was managed in a similar fashion, with the Head Emperor in charge changing hands every half year.

If he wasn't mistaken, Wynn's eight months were winding down. In less than two, Wystan would be taking the reign. Once that happened, Pryor seriously doubted he'd be as free to roam and do as he pleased as he was now.

Not that it mattered. Ideally, he'd be long gone by then. His superior had only given him two weeks to solve this mystery, and he'd never missed a deadline before.

As of now, they were all operating under the assumption that they'd find Roth alive somewhere. No ransom demands had been sent, and nothing had been picked up on any security cameras, so they were hopeful they could rule out a struggle or kidnapping. His accounts hadn't been touched, however, nor had his multi-slate been activated since an hour before he'd stepped into the Max.

Pryor had wanted to check that location out first, but then Wystan had arrived and whisked them off to the office building instead. If not for the fact he'd already seen video footage of the seedy club, he'd think the Emperor was trying to hide something.

It was curious that he hadn't immediately jumped to that conclusion. So far, Wystan had been a tad overbearing and an annoying flirt, but that was all. There was also literally no reason Pryor could think of for Wystan to have done anything to Roth himself.

No, it was likely the Heir Imperial had merely gotten wasted or high and had somehow gotten himself into a bind.

Wishful thinking? Possibly.

Most likely.

It wouldn't be the first time Pryor had dealt with a situation like that, though. Hell, even six months ago there'd been a case like that. The problem with intergalactic travel is that every planet and World Ship was different. They weren't all the same make and model. People tended to forget that, especially the ones in higher positions who were used to having everything go their way and/or handed to them.

Pryor and his team had been sent to a stalled cargo ship called Soya, since they'd been the closest agents at the time. The ship's communications had stopped abruptly days prior to his arrival.



Originally, they'd been sent to figure out what had gone wrong with the ship, expecting to arrive and find both the captain of the vessel and the Royal who had been overseeing the trip relieved to be given help. Instead, they'd boarded what had appeared to be an empty ship. The repairs hadn't taken that long, and they'd gotten the Soya up and running again in a matter of hours. Finding the missing crew, however...

Castor had eventually discovered them locked in a hidden compartment on the east side of the canteen area. Apparently, none of them had been aware of the hidden space since the captain was fairly new to the Soya, and they hadn't realized it only opened from the outside.

Did Pryor think they'd get that lucky with Roth? Not necessarily. But there was always the chance, and that prospect was much better than any other alternative he could think of.

The corridors of the hotel were all blindingly white, narrow, and with square light fixtures set on the ceiling every three feet apart. The light was harsh, illuminating everything right down to the specks of dust here and there, no doubt left by other occupants of the hotel.

"How many rooms are currently booked?" Pryor asked, eyeing the closed white doors. Each one had a room number painted on it in thick black. They'd passed five already, two on the left and three on the right, and were making their way to the end where a row of four elevators were situated.

"Out of the three hundred and fifteen rooms, two hundred and seventy are occupied at the moment." Castor, only a few steps ahead of them, tapped on his multi-slate, then added, "At the time of his disappearance, three hundred and one were filled."

"The people who stayed there?"

"A total of forty-seven individuals, all questioned by the Vexan Special Police."

Pryor quirked a brow at Wystan, who shrugged a single shoulder.

"A missing Imperial is no laughing matter. We take things seriously on Olympus," he said.

The Vexan Special Police were three steps up from the regular policing force in operation on the ship. The fact that they'd been called to action over this irked Pryor in a way it shouldn't. On the one hand, it was a good thing that they hadn't treated the situation lightly. On the other...

If the VSP hadn't found anything...

Pryor had his work cut out for him.

“Three of those guests had already left the World Ship,” Castor continued to inform him, having collected all of this information at the front desk upon arrival. He was good at his job, Pryor hadn’t been lying about that. “But they were contacted easily enough and they didn’t appear to be suspicious in any way.”

“Contact them again,” Pryor ordered. They reached the elevators and came to a stop. Sensing their presence, the doors automatically chimed and a second later slid open to allow them entrance. The interior was just as stark as the exterior, he noted as they stepped inside. No wonder Roth had complained. The guy had a claustrophobia issue he kept pretty close to his chest.

“The three that—”

“No,” he interrupted, tucking his hands into his pockets as the elevator doors closed. “All of them.”

“You want to question everyone a second time?” Castor asked, glancing between Pryor and the Emperor, doing a poor job of masking his worry.

Pryor sighed and tipped his head toward Wystan. “I mean no offense, Emperor, but this is my case now, and I need to ensure nothing was overlooked. I’m sure you understand.”

“Of course.” The corner of his mouth lifted, though the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “You’re just doing your job. I can have the VSP transfer all contact information over to your team. I assume you’ve already received their reports on each individual who was staying here?”

“Yes.” He’d combed through them on the trip over. It was true, it didn’t appear as though anyone in this building had anything to do with Roth’s disappearance, however... “Looks can be deceiving,” he muttered.

“What was that, Detective?”

He shook his head at the Emperor and then followed Castor as the elevator stopped and the doors reopened.

The room Roth had stayed in took up the entire top level, so the doors opened right up to a massive open floor plan. The main living area was set dead center, with an L-shaped white couch and an oval glass table. The table had a keypad to the right, indicating it was a holo screen—Though, it was clear that’s not how Roth had been using it.

Loose papers and magazines covered the surface, some even strewn over the cushions of the couch. There were also a couple of used glasses, still partially filled with a dark purple liquid that smelled strongly of salt and sugar when Pryor got too close.

“Munchberry whiskey,” he said before he could help himself, ignoring the pang doing so brought to his chest.

When he’d been younger, he’d always joked about one day being old enough to order that while out at dinner with his mother.

He’d never gotten the chance. To this day, didn’t actually know what the hard alcoholic beverage tasted like.

“Did he have a problem with drinking?” Castor suggested, ambling around the couch.

“He had a problem with all vices,” Pryor said.

“Drugs, alcohol, sleeping around, you name it, he probably partook.”

“Are you allowed to speak about your Imperial that way, Detective?” Wystan moved from the entryway, but stuck on the outskirts of the room, making sure not to interfere with their inspection.

“As you mentioned earlier,” Pryor stated, reaching into his left front pocket and pulling out a rectangular device, “as an agent of the I.P.F, I’ve renounced citizenship of Tibera, and therefore no longer consider Roth Tiberius my Heir Imperial.”

“So, you’re saying he’s just another job to you?” Wystan didn’t sound very convinced, but he kept his expression blank, making it impossible to tell what he truly thought of that possibility.

“Everything is just a job to him,” Castor saved him from having to reply. The Inspector came back over from the kitchen area, where he’d been opening the metal cabinets one by one with gloved hands. He turned to Pryor. “Nothing.”

“You said Vivid is the more common vacation destination, didn’t you, Emperor?” Pryor nibbled on his bottom lip, a bad habit he’d had since he’d been a child. “I assume the tropical setting attracts many partiers.”

“There are a lot more clubs and bars in that area, yes,” Wystan confirmed, easily seeing where he was going with this.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he murmured to himself, then louder, “Why would Roth come here, of all places? There’s nothing in Abraxas that

should have attracted him. Even the club he disappeared from, the Max is low-level compared to all of the other places he was known to frequent."

"There are definitely glitzier locations in Vivid that would have better suited the needs of a salacious Crown Prince," Wystan agreed, and when Pryor glanced at him, he shrugged. "His reputation proceeds him."

"Did you meet him when he arrived?"

"I did, briefly to give him an official greeting, but otherwise didn't bother engaging myself."

"He claimed to be here for holiday," Castor said. "Which meant you didn't have to. Protocol dictates you only need meet if he came on some kind of official business."

"I happened to have some free time that day," was the only explanation Wystan provided, and it was obvious it was all they were going to get.

Pryor nodded, because it probably didn't matter, and set a rectangular device on the center of the glass coffee table. The device was about five inches tall, three inches wide, and one inch thick. The edges were curved and a dim cerulean light rimmed the entire thing as soon as he pressed the single circular button at its middle.

A series of beeps sounded like music, the lights flashing once before settling again.

"Hello, Pryor," a rich male voice came from the device, greeting him warmly.

"Hello, Link," he said, making sure to speak clearly so that the device could pick up on his voice patterns and recognize him. It wouldn't operate at full functionality otherwise.

"Friendship confirmed." Link paused in the way a real person might before asking, "We seem to be in a rather large area at the moment, Pryor. Would you like for me to run a data scan?"

"I would." They'd done this dance so many times, it was no wonder the computer had picked up on it.

"What is that?" Wystan asked as a beam of blue light shot out from the device, moving at all angles around the room.

"An AI that can locate just about anything given the proper parameters," Castor explained. "Link is set up to look for biometrics—prints left behind and devices that require bio scans, for example—as well as anything that could be considered odd or illegal—like drugs. He can also

do a sweep search for any electronics, which is what he is currently doing. Pryor likes to start off easy and go from there.”

“Initial scan complete,” Link said then. “Nothing found.”

“We don’t have anything like that,” Wystan pointed at Link, “but we are capable of scanning for electronics. We also came up with nothing, aside from the devices already cataloged and brought to your attention in the main case file. The rooms appear to be clean.”

“We’ll see.” Pryor took another look around. “Link, adjust settings to Tiberan.”

“Right away.” The device beeped once, the sound lower than before, and the lights turned orange. “Action complete. Would you like me to scan for imprints?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it doing now?” Wystan tilted his head as Link got to work, watching with curiosity as the orange light spread outwards much like before.

“Collecting data from all of the sensors in the room and turning it into a visible pattern we can see,” Pryor explained. “It’ll pick up on Tiberan specifics, like average body temperature, bone density, salt levels...you get the picture.”

“Pryor designed Link himself,” Castor stated, an edge of pride in his tone that had Pryor’s nose scrunching in annoyance.

“I had help.”

“Yes, that’s true. You and Pan.”

“Pan?” Wystan finally looked away from Link.

“She’s an inventor who’s frequently outsourced by the I.P.F. She lives on Flicker with us. We’ve known her since our academy days,” Castor said.

“You two went to the academy together?”

“We were roommates. Well,” he grinned over at Pryor, “after the first week, we were, anyway.”

“Why?”

“My original roommate got sick and had to quit and Cast was late for enrollment,” Pryor sent them both a disapproving glare. “Can we focus, please. We’re here to do a job.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Link dinged again.

“Action complete. Please prepare for holographic display.” The device whirled and the beams of orange light started to narrow and focus on particular areas around the room. Shapes began to form so that the outlines of people could be seen.

Whenever the person had stopped, the holographic was a darker, deeper shade of neon. When they were in motion, it was lighter and with less definition. It took a couple of minutes before it was done, and they were left with several solid impressions.

There was one over by the sink, another by the stove, three on the couch in various positions, one by the door, two behind the couch, and two across the room.

“Link, remove all imprints belonging to me,” Pryor ordered.

The two images behind the couch vanished.

The prints across the room were both by the in-ground pool that doubled as a hot tub. One image was seated, the other standing. They both showed the person staring down into the water.

“What is it?” Castor asked after a moment where all Pryor did was stare in that direction.

“On the list of places Roth visited, there wasn’t anywhere with a pool or anything, correct?”

“Not that I recall,” he replied.

“So then this was his only source of water.”

“He specifically requested a room with a pool,” Wystan said. “The nearest body of water around here is an hour’s drive away in Hoax. Abraxus is an industrial city. There isn’t even a community swimming pool available.”

“Another reason Vivid would have made more sense.” Pryor took a single step closer to the pool. “Even with your fancy room, Roth is from Tibera, a planet made almost entirely of water. He would have felt out of sorts if he’d gone too long without being wet, and yet...”

“Link shows that he only stopped at the pool twice during the entire week he was here,” Castor caught on, snapping his fingers.

There weren’t even faded patterns nearby showing that he’d walked near the pool. Just those two solid imprints and that was all.

There had to be a reason Roth had avoided it.

“Link, run a deep scan, use all specs.” It would take a while and severely drain the device’s battery, but hopefully, it would be worth it.

They all waited in silence as the device went to work.

“Four biometric access points have been discovered. Would you like me to list them for you?” Link asked roughly five minutes later.

“Are they all here in the main portion of the suite?”

“That is correct.”

“Standby.” Pryor pointed at the entrance, ticking off a finger as he spoke out loud. “Assuming that’s one, we also have—”

“The main computer station is programmed to fit the current guest,” Wystan told him.

The large desk set up in the left corner of the room, right before the hallway, was currently powered off but had a camera set on the top.

Pryor nodded. “That makes two.”

“The television also has a bio setting, in case there are children accompanying adult guests. Only those over the age of sixteen are given access.”

“That’s the age of adulthood to the Vexans,” Castor filled Pryor in.

“Link, that makes three. What’s the fourth?”

“There is a DNA Adapter located beneath tile number one hundred and seven, row six of the pool. It is in working condition. Would you like me to access its stored information pack?”

“There’s a *what now?*” Castor’s eyes went comically wide, head whipping over toward the hot tub. “What would Roth Tiberius need that for?”

“That is as of yet unclear, Inspector #353,” Link said, causing Castor to scoff.

Pryor would have laughed if not for the circumstances. As it were, they may have just gotten a lead and...well. It wasn’t looking like a very positive one. DNA Adapters were illegal in most galaxies, let alone on most worlds, ship or otherwise. As an Imperial, it made sense Roth had been able to gain access to one, however, *as an Imperial*, the device itself seemed pretty unnecessary.

Imperials had more leeway than anyone else in the universe. As leaders of their planets, they were considered visiting dignitaries pretty much wherever they traveled, and allowed diplomatic immunity as given by the Universal Galactic Alliance Act. The only things Roth wouldn’t have been given access to on the Olympus were those pertaining to their government or world secrets.

That was why DNA Adapters were so illegal. They could store and replicate another person's biometric print, of most known species, and use that fake to trick other advanced devices into unlocking. Afterward, there'd be no way to track down who had used it or why, as the scan log almost always came up as unknown once discovered.

Roth having one of these devices and there being a medical data breach at the same time...

Pryor purposefully resisted the urge to look at Wystan. No doubt the Emperor was already suspecting the same thing he did and was pissed about it. Hell, there was a chance he could order Pryor removed from this investigation because of the fact he was born on Tibera.

What was so shitty about that possibility was that Pryor couldn't even blame him if he did.

Though it was true he had renounced all claim to the planet and the people there, that didn't change the fact that he'd spent the first thirteen years of his life growing up on Tiberan soil.

"All collected information on the Crown Prince states he's a hardcore party boy with an average level of intelligence, at best," Castor said. "To even consider that he could be behind the med-breech—"

"We don't even know if the DNA Adapter is his," Pryor reminded. He began to unbuckle his uniform, the white overall straps snapping open and falling to his waist.

"What are you doing, Detective?" Wystan's gaze had intensified, and Pryor only caught his eye briefly before turning away.

"What's it look like? Someone has to go in and get it. Having Link hack it is risky. If there are blockers in place, the information could self-wipe." His thin shirt was easy enough to pull over his head, and he got that off first before continuing with the pants. Once he was down to his black boxer briefs he made his way over to the pool peering over the edge into the still water.

"Do you make it a habit of getting naked in front of people?" It was hard to tell just by his tone—and Pryor refused to turn and look back at him over his shoulder—but Wystan sounded either annoyed by that possibility or found it distasteful.

"We've all got the same equipment here." He shrugged, already focusing on the water below and the many, many tiles at the very bottom of the four-foot-deep pool.



“You’re in very good shape,” the Emperor stated. “Do you work out, Detective?”

“Physical health is very important to him,” Castor said. “Even when we’re traveling on the Sodalite, we have routine workout sessions. He likes a fit body.”

“Noted.”

Pryor gripped the edge of the pool, barely refraining from snapping at them both. “Why are we talking about this?”

“Because you started to randomly take your clothes off in front of me.” Wystan shifted on his feet, but it didn’t sound like he was approaching.

“I’m sorry, Emperor,” Pryor didn’t even bother to try and sound like he meant it, “was that too uncouth for an Imperial such as yourself?”

“Not at all. A little fair warning next time will be appreciated, however.”

“There won’t be a next time.” Why would there? It wasn’t like having to strip down to his underwear was a regular thing.

“You never know, Detective.” This time, it was unmistakable the way Wystan’s voice dipped low with an undercurrent of suggestion.

Pryor was glad he was facing the other direction and neither the Emperor nor Castor could see the way that caught him off guard. “I’m working here, Emperor.”

“All right, I can save the play for later.”

Castor made a choking sound.

## Chapter 4:

Pryor forced himself to focus on the task at hand, something that usually would have had his skin crawling and his stomach threatening to upend itself.

Despite everything he'd said about Roth and Tiberans needing the water, Pryor absolutely dreaded this.

He hated swimming, but out of the two of them, it made sense for him to go down there over Castor. Tibera was a planet that was eighty-seven percent water, the rest being pale pink sand beaches that stretched for miles and miles. At night, the color would change to a deep burgundy that sparkled under the dark inky sky and the glow from the planet's three moons.

Because of this, Tiberans grew up in the water and were capable of holding their breath for, on average, twenty minutes. Some could go even longer.

Pryor could only manage twelve on a good day. But that was neither here nor there.

He dropped down and slid his legs in, shivering slightly at the chilly temperature.

"Link," he called over his shoulder and waited for the telltale beep indicating the AI was listening, "I assume you were counting left to right, correct?"

"That is correct, Pryor."

The water around the rest of him was just as uncomfortably cold as he submerged himself. There was a mild state of panic at first, a moment where his lungs constricted and his instinct screamed at him to surface. Ignoring that, he pushed himself harder, getting to the bottom of the pool so that he could start counting the tiles in intervals of five.

It wasn't long—surprisingly, even shorter than he'd initially feared—before his body adjusted, muscle memory overthrowing the hysteria of his psyche. A peace he hadn't felt in a long time settled over him as he counted, reminding him just how much he used to enjoy swimming when

he'd been younger, before the disease had ravaged his bridmula, the internal organ responsible for all Tiberans advanced healing and longevity. Without the ability to heal, his body had no longer been able to sustain itself below water level for the same intervals it had previously.

Within three months, Pryor had gone from being able to hold his breath a record-breaking length of time for someone his age, to barely being able to stay under for a handful of minutes. On a planet made up mostly of water, this was devastating. Limiting.

Pryor found the correct tile.

He pressed against its smooth surface and then tried to pry at the edges but it wouldn't so much as budge. His nails were clipped short, making the task harder than it needed to be.

Made sense, considering this was meant to be a hiding place. He wondered how Roth had even discovered it. Perhaps he'd pried the damn thing up himself, that seemed like the most likely scenario.

Roth hadn't come alone, but there'd only been one other person accompanying him—another red flag because he was known to have an entourage—but that girl had long since left. She'd been questioned and then shipped back to Tibera on Tiberan Imperial order.

Pryor hoped he wouldn't have to call her back. Having Erix forced on his team was already more than enough contact with his homeworld.

Finally, he felt the tile shift and wiggled until he managed to get the short tip of his nail under the lip. It came free shortly after, the heavy plastic—modeled after ceramic—discarded almost as soon as it was in his hand. Beneath, a small hole had been dug to fit the square shape, and within it, a sealed plastic bag with a black object safely inside was kept.

Pryor grabbed it and twisted, pressing his feet to the bottom of the pool to shoot himself upward toward the bright surface. His lungs were starting to burn, only slight discomfort, but still noticeable.

The second his head breached the surface he sputtered and inhaled deeply, blinking thick drops of water from his eyes. The second his vision cleared, he was startled to find the Emperor crouched at the edge of the pool, watching.

"You were under for a long time," Wystan said, probably noting Pryor's questioning look.

Pryor chuckled humorlessly.

“He’s Tiberan,” Castor reminded casually, focusing solely on the tablet on his wrist, “remember? Sevan minutes and forty-two seconds is nothing for him.”

“You were timing him?” Wystan sounded surprised.

“Of course,” Castor sent him a quick smile before returning to his screen, “it’s my job as Inspector.”

“We look after each other,” Pryor reiterated for him, swimming over to a spot a few feet away from where the Emperor was still perched. He pulled himself up and settled, resting the plastic bag in his lap so that he could find the opening and unseal it.

He’d seen a DNA Adaptor before, on a few occasions. A couple of times, he’d even made arrests because of the possession of one. But those had all been shoddily made, shitty pieces of scrap metal thrown together. The results hadn’t been very accurate, and the perps who owned them had mostly given themselves away before Pryor had had to do much in the way of proving their guilt.

But this...

The device he pulled free from the plastic was a pristine, standard issue. Official. The black material gleamed in the dying sunlight from the wall of windows across the pool, the screen section—where it would read a person’s DNA—a smooth glossy square roughly one inch by one inch. It was set on the right half of the device, which was barely the size of an average candy bar, with the ON switch at the very top.

Pryor flicked the switch without much thought. He knew how these things worked, after all, had handled them in the past. Wasn’t concerned about it being rigged when it looked like it’d come straight from some government agency recently.

Mistake.

The sparks were immediate, not hot or anything, just a prickle of electricity snapping at his skin. Nothing he couldn’t handle.

But the buzzing that came after...

It was a deep vibration that came directly from the center of the device and worked its way out, entering Pryor everywhere he touched the little black box. He felt it humming through his blood, shooting up his arms, followed by a sharp sound like a kettle that had been left on too long.

“What the fuck!” Castor rushed over, but it was already too late, whatever had been triggered when Pryor had turned the device on had

started.

Pryor dropped the device, careful to toss it far enough from the pool that it wouldn't get wet since they still needed it, but only just. Honestly, it was amazing he even managed that much forethought, because he was already so hyper-focused on the buzzing sensation still burrowing into him.

He shifted, attempted to stand, and ended up slamming back down, this time onto his knees. They made a sharp cracking sound against the ground, but it barely registered to his ears, and the pain there was nothing compared to the excruciating burn that started to heat him from the inside out.

His brow was covered in sweat, and his skin prickled in the way it usually did when one had food poisoning. He felt his heart rate increase, knew his breathing had labored even though he couldn't feel the way he was sucking in air between clenched teeth.

Just the burn which was also turning into a sharp tearing sensation.

"What's wrong?" Suddenly, Wystan was there, leaning over him.

Pryor shook his head, not trusting his ability to form sounds at the moment. If he opened his mouth now, he was certain whatever came out wouldn't be words anyway.

He pressed his palm against the spot on his left side, just over his hip. The pain intensified and he momentarily saw stars.

"That's where his bridmula is located," Castor said, staring to the device with a frown.

"What?" Wystan snapped, arms banding around Pryor before the Inspector had a chance to respond. He helped him to his feet, holding him even though it was clear without his help Pryor wouldn't be able to stand at all.

"It doesn't make sense," Castor murmured. "Unless..." His eyes went wide and he quickly motioned toward the Emperor. "We need to get him medical assistance immediately."

"Tell me what's happening, damn it!" Wystan cursed.

Castor was the only member of I.P.F who knew Pryor's secret—one of them, anyway. It was a major reason why they'd been partnered up in the first place, and why Pryor trusted him to always have his back. It was comforting to know that trust hadn't been misplaced.

While Pryor had been panicking, his partner had come up with a hypothesis of what was going on.

Knowing that it involved spilling Pryor's secret, however, Castor hesitated before answering the Emperor.

Pryor shook his head and inhaled, trying to fight past the pain long enough to clear his mind and come up with a logical reply. Something believable.

Unfortunately, his body didn't want to cooperate with his mind, and instead, he felt what little strength he'd had in him flee.

"Shit," he somehow managed to say.

He didn't get a chance to see how the others reacted to his predicament.

He passed out a second later.

\* \* \*

"We should receive a report within the hour."

Pryor nodded at Castor then lifted the tiny paper cup to his dry lips. The water cooled his parched throat and his eyes drifted shut. He'd been told he'd screamed while he'd been unconscious, but blessedly, had no recollection of committing such an embarrassing act.

They were in KinMed, the largest medical facility on the Olympus. Pryor had been brought directly by advanced hovercraft, and if the room was any indicator, he'd also been given the VIP treatment.

The bed he was on could easily fit two, the white sheets crisp and pristine, along with the rest of the room. There was so much space, even the couch and the small metal table that accompanied it on the other side appeared as though it was far away, despite most likely only being twenty or so feet.

The wall on his left was made up of windows, with a remote control that could change the glass to block out the imitation sunlight currently spilling in. From it, a view of the domed ceiling of this section of Olympus could be seen, the panels which made it up currently set to mirror what midmorning would have looked like on the Vexan home planet.

The colors were a mix of purples, pinks, indigo, and vibrant golds. For someone like Pryor, who'd grown up with a similar sky, it was a lot to take in. In some ways, it was even too much to look at, and he found himself sneaking glances here and there only to quickly focus on something else, like the plain white walls or the metal tray set beside him.

He missed the plain shades of blue the sky shifted through on Flicker. Those dim, calming colors never elicited any unwanted memories for him.

He'd woken less than a half-hour ago and had immediately been given water and a nourishment pack. Despite everything he'd been through, he felt well rested and fingered the end of the tube attached to his arm. The IV bag was almost empty, which meant soon a nurse would wander in to unhook him and hopefully discharge him.

Pryor hated hospitals, even ones that looked more like fancy five-star hotels. Too much of his childhood had been wasted holed up, attached to tubes and fancy machines that zipped and whirled to the point it'd taken almost a decade for the sounds to stop entering his nightmares.

"Have the information sent directly to me," he told Castor, setting his unease at being hospitalized yet again aside. "The sooner we know who's DNA is programmed into the device, the sooner we can figure out if it belonged to Roth or not."

"That's not all," Castor reminded. "There's also the matter of figuring out who set that failsafe and why. If you ask me, the why is the most important part. If anyone else had activated it, they would have experienced some nausea, maybe vertigo. But you—"

"I got lucky," he joked, snorting when all it earned him was a stern glare from the Inspector. "What? You can't possibly think it was done on purpose."

"Don't you?"

He shook his head. "They'd have to have known specifics about my condition. That information is highly secured. Hell, most of my own damn family doesn't even know. What did you tell the doctors?"

"That you have a rare condition and all they had to do was stabilize you. They wanted to run advanced tests and a body scan, but I stopped them." He paused, seemingly like he was unsure whether or not he wanted to share the next part, but ended up adding, "The Emperor almost went over me and ordered them anyway. I calmed him down enough to prevent him from going through with it but...Pryor. He seems....He's too interested in you. I don't like it."

He grunted. "He's Vexan and an Imperial. He's probably just bored and getting a kick out of my reactions to his teasing. It'll stop once he loses interest."

“And what if he doesn’t?”

“Of course he will.” Pryor didn’t for a single second believe Wystan was actually interested. It was a game, a minor distraction.

Wystan’s palace was situated on the outskirts of Abraxas, unlike the main palace where his sister currently resided on the other side of the World Ship. He’d mentioned there was sometimes a murder case, but as Emperor, he wouldn’t ever have to become personally involved. That, coupled with the fact he’d spent the entire day with them yesterday insinuated to Pryor he had far too much time on his hands.

“He’s bored, that’s all.”

“I don’t think that’s what it is,” Castor disagreed, causing Pryor to snort.

“What? Don’t tell me some bullshit like love at first sight.” He pretended to make to move off the bed. “Should you be the one laying here instead? Did you touch the DNA Adaptor while I was out and fry your brain?”

Castor rolled his eyes, but couldn’t keep back the hint of a smile. “It wouldn’t be the first time you instantly won someone over with your charm, and we both know it.”

“Hate to break it to you, Cast,” he drawled, “but I haven’t been accused of being charismatic in a long time.”

Like, since he was thirteen, for example.

“Believe that if it helps you sleep at night,” Castor replied cryptically, then skillfully changed the subject back. “Anyway. There is one other person here who knows about your condition.”

“Roth wouldn’t have done it. He has no reason to.” It was true that the Crown Prince knew Pryor’s ailment, and that targeting his bridmula would cause him the most damage, but there was no way.

It was even less likely than Wystan Aurelius being into him was.

“Unless he’s not missing and instead is the one behind the stolen medical technology,” Castor pointed out. “It’s a real possibility, Pry. We can’t rule him out as a suspect yet and you know it.”

“Our main job here is to find him,” he said. “The medical tech is a whole other case.”

“Is it? Then why were our orders updated?”

Pryor frowned. “When?”



“We got a communication requesting an update while you were out. I told them about the DNA Adapter and how it was discovered in Roth's hotel room. They've since sent us new instructions on how to proceed.”

“Show me the update.” He curled his fingers, holding out his hand while Castor unlatched his multi-slate and placed it in his palm.

Pryor accessed the main files in the top corner of the screen and scrolled until he found one link highlighted in red. When he clicked it, words poured onto the screen in bold letters—Trypian, Castor's homeworld language. A right tap had the words instantly translating and changing to Ix, the main written word used by the I.P.F.

Though he was somewhat knowledgeable in Trypian, Pryor wasn't confident enough in his understanding of the language to risk misinterpreting something. Clearly, the importance of this mission had increased if they were bothering to send an updated version to them.

A quick scan of the information there confirmed everything the Emperor had told them yesterday about the stolen med-tech, and how the time of the theft coincided with the missing Tiberan Imperial. The cases were now being treated as one until further information was found, and Pryor and his team were in charge of solving it.

It seemed incredibly likely the two cases were linked in one way or another.

They'd also been ordered to keep this on the down-low, probably because the higher-ups didn't want to risk pissing the royal family of Tibera off by letting them know their precious Heir Imperial was currently a suspect in an ongoing criminal investigation.

“Why are you making that face?” Castor asked. “It's not like you didn't already suspect the two things were related.”

Sure, but there was no avoiding getting further involved with the Emperor now if he insisted to continue joining them, especially not when a leak of national information was such a serious matter. The medical technology that had been stolen fell under this jurisdiction.

Not to mention the medical technology stolen was M.I.C.E, of all things.

Why did it feel like his past was flooding back to drown him? He'd had years of relative peace. *Years*. And now this?

Pryor rubbed at his temples, trying to alleviate the tension headache that was starting up. He didn't know what it was about Wystan Aurelius that

disconcerted him so much, but the feeling was undeniable. And, while he wanted to believe it was merely because of the man's station in life, a part of him had this twisted inkling that maybe there was something more to it.

Maybe the two of them were just incompatible.

How ridiculous of him, to be this affected by someone he'd only just met. He was overreacting.

"Why would Roth steal medical technology?" Castor said then. "Can you think of any reason?"

No, and that was both a problem and a relief all on its own.

"He barely knows anything about it." Pryor thought back to when he'd been a child living on Tibera. Roth and he had rarely come into contact with one another, but when they had, Roth had been one of the few people who'd treated him like he wasn't a total lost cause. To everyone else, Pryor had been nothing more than damaged goods. A burden that needed to be dealt with.

"We were children the last we spoke," he'd cut contact the second he'd left, "and neither of us were told what was going on in more in-depth terms than 'go here and do that'. His knowledge of the technology used here was non-existent to the point you couldn't even consider it limited."

Castor frowned. "You've been here before?"

Shit.

His partner knew about his condition, sure, but he didn't know the details. Wasn't aware where he'd gotten the medical procedure that had saved his life, only that it was nanotechnology and that Pryor wanted to keep it a secret.

It was the furthest he'd ever gone to telling someone the truth about him, and even then, it was barely scratching the surface. But, while he trusted his partner more than anyone else, he still wasn't ready to take that plunge and admit to *everything*. Probably wouldn't ever be.

If Castor knew, things between them would change. There'd be no way around it, and Pryor didn't want that.

"Once," he tentatively admitted. "Just the once, and again, we were kids."

"Children grow up," Castor reminded. "Just have a look in the mirror, Pry. You know things you couldn't even dream of when you'd been a kid. Roth can't be any different."

“He would have had to have access to classified information,” he argued. “Not only that, he would have had to *want* to access it. Why would he?” Pryor pressed against his side, and this time the pain he felt there was a mere memory.

Roth knew what M.I.C.E did. He wouldn’t need it. Pryor’s condition was rare, so much so, only a handful of Tiberans in their long history had ever been recorded having it. It also wasn’t the type of thing that one could develop later on in life.

“Maybe there’s something we don’t know about,” Castor suggested.

“Like an illness? Roth is healthy, always has been.” Pryor took a shaky breath. “It’s why he’s Heir Imperial.”

“A healthy mind and a healthy body are two different things, Detective.” Wystan was standing in the open doorway, two soldiers at his back. It was impossible to tell how long he’d been there; the automatic door hadn’t made so much as a whoosh sound when it’d admitted him.

The Emperor had done away with the street clothes he’d been wearing yesterday. Instead, he was dressed in all the regalia befitting a Vexan ruler.

It took everything in Pryor not to openly scowl.

It wasn’t that the man didn’t look good in the getup—he did, in the most infuriating way possible even—it was just Pryor’s distaste for anything having to do with Imperial formality, including what they had to wear.

Vexan Emperors were different than Tiberan ones, of course, even down to the outfit. Wystan’s midnight black ensemble was made from a silky material, pants tucked into knee-high boots, high metal collar made of gold stiff around his throat. The long sleeves were different as well, a glittery mesh of silvers and whites and sparkling sapphires that made them appear as though they’d been made from the galaxy itself.

At least he wasn’t wearing the shirtless version. Pryor had heard about that one and knew that this time of the year either would have been an acceptable choice for the Emperor to have on.

Maybe Wystan had figured flashing his abs around a hospital wasn’t in good taste.

Not that Pryor *assumed* the man had abs.

“You suspect Roth Tiberus?” Castor asked, drawing Pryor away from his inner musings, hopefully before he could get caught staring.

“I do.” Wystan lifted a single hand and held up a finger, signaling for his guards to remain in the hall. As soon as he’d stepped through the threshold, the door slid shut at his back.

“Is there a reason?” Pryor didn’t like the way his pulse leaped with every step closer the Emperor took. Didn’t like that he couldn’t pinpoint exactly why it was doing so, or how badly it made him want to jump off the bed and hightail it out of there like a coward.

He didn’t run. Not anymore.

Pryor Oro, specifically, didn’t run. Not from anything. Certainly not from an infuriatingly overbearing Imperial who couldn’t tell the difference between friendly and friendly flirting.

“Care to share, Emperor?” He lifted a brow when Wystan came to a stop at the side of the bed and still hadn’t answered his first question.

“After you, Detective.” Wystan ran his gaze down the length of his chest, eyes lingering a little too long at the spot beneath Pryor’s exposed neck. The top three buttons of the white hospital gown he was wearing had been left undone. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

The Emperor crossed his arms and tilted his head, eyes narrowing down on him slightly. The pose was most likely meant to be intimidating, and no doubt was when used on others.

Pryor merely rolled his eyes and dropped back against the wall.

Castor cleared his throat, obviously trying to warn Pryor about his poor manors in front of an Imperial.

He was promptly ignored.

“Elaborate,” Wystan said. “You were in a lot of pain before.”

“That was before,” Pryor quipped, and almost grinned when the Emperor’s eye twitched in clear frustration.

“Use more words, Detective. Or should I file a report against you to your subordinates?”

“Report on what?” He clucked his tongue. “‘Detective #455 refuses to chat about the weather and it hurts my feelings’? That sort of report?”

Castor choked. “Forgive him, Emperor, he’s not usually like this. He’s typically very cordial!”

Wystan snorted. “Of course. In the same way he’s usually got a sunnier disposition when he doesn’t suffer from low blood sugar.”

“It’s true!” Castor insisted. “The Queen of Primeria even sends regular invitations requesting he revisit, and it’s been four years since we last worked there! She’s not the only one either. King Quartet even sent—”

“It hurts slightly when I breathe,” Pryor stated, needing to put an end to his rambling partner before things got far too out of context. As soon as Wystan’s gaze was back on him, he sighed in annoyance. “Other than that, I’m all better. Whatever your doctors gave me did the trick. Satisfied?”

“Hardly,” Wystan snapped back immediately. “It’ll take more than that to satisfy me, Detective, but that’s a conversation for another time. Right now, we should focus on finding Roth Tiberius, preferably before he can find a way to sneak off my World Ship with my technology.”

“How can you be so certain he did it?”

“I’m not, but I’m positive he’s involved somehow.”

“Why?”

“Because the results on the device have come back, and the DNA imprint downloaded into its database belonged to one of the doctors who used to work on the project when it was active twelve years ago.”

Pryor bolted upright so fast his head spun and he had to grind his teeth against the sudden dizzy spell. Still, he managed to maintain a scowl, which he kept set on the Emperor.

Castor snatched up the multi-slate from the bed, pursing his lips when he checked and found that they hadn’t received word from anyone about the completed tests.

“You hijacked my report?” Pryor didn’t bother to hold back the anger from his tone.

“I simply had it sent directly to me while you were otherwise out of commission,” Wystan said, lifting a single shoulder in an insulting partial shrug. It was obvious by the slight lift to his burgundy lips that he was at least mildly enjoying Pryor’s reaction. “I fully intended to share it with you once you were well enough to return to the case.”

“You don’t get to make that call,” he snapped.

“Careful, Detective,” Wystan planted a hand on the edge of the bed, leaning in so that his face was only a foot or so away from Pryor’s, “I find it rather entertaining when you toe the line, but let’s not overstep. You are on the Olympus, where I am the ruling monarch. You do as I say, when I say it. I’m the one who calls the shots here.”

“I quit.”

Fuck not running. This was bullshit of epic proportions and Pryor didn't have to stand for it. Who cared about his spotless record? Wasn't it spotless for this very reason anyway? Hadn't he worked his ass off so that if he was ever put in a situation like this, one where he couldn't handle being around a Royal/Imperial, he would be able to bow out without risking much flack to his reputation?

Wystan's expression hardened and he straightened back to his full height. "No, you do not."

"You can't—"

"I can. Unless you'd like me to contact the I.P.F and inform them that their Investigator severely insulted the Vexan Crown and therefore is being held in an optical cell for an indefinite amount of time?"

Castor inhaled sharply at the threat.

Optical cells were no joke. They messed with the senses of whoever was unfortunate enough to be placed inside them, causing all sorts of hallucinations, both visual and audio. Some, like the ones known to be aboard the Olympus, were even advanced enough they could mess with a person physically, making them feel things that weren't there.

Things like fire or the sharp edge of a knife.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Pryor blurted, admittedly affected finally by something the Emperor had said, and unable to hide the note of apprehension in his voice.

"I'm out of patience," Wystan said darkly. There was more to it than that, it was clear in his weighted gaze, but he didn't elaborate, and Pryor was left guessing at his meaning.

"There are plenty of capable agents the I.P.F can send over." He tried to calm himself so the words wouldn't come out insulting. "I'm sure there's someone who will be a better match."

"I don't want any other agent," Wystan insisted. "I want you."

"Pryor," Castor shifted closer, and though his voice was low, they both knew the Emperor could still hear clear as day, "let's just listen, shall we? We are currently on his World Ship, after all. He isn't exactly wrong."

"Good. Now that that's settled, the doctor has cleared you for leave. I've already arranged for your stay at the SandBox. Once the nurse comes in to give you a final checkup, the three of us can move there and—"

"Wait," Pryor held up a hand, "we're staying at Aura Building 3. *You* already relocated us *there*."

“That’s strictly office space. The SandBox is a living space, and has adjustable features like the ones available in the Breezy Hotel. More importantly, the Royal Physician has access to those suites. Should any other side effects crop up overnight—”

“I’m fine, Emperor. I don’t need fancy rooms; I don’t plan on getting much rest anyway. I need—”

“You need to stop being so stubborn.” Wystan sighed. “Let me help you, Detective.”

Pryor cocked his head, unable to keep in the flow of words that came out of him next, despite the warning look Castor was sending his way.

“Why does it feel like you’re just helping yourself, Emperor?”

## Chapter 5:

The SandBox was located right next to Aura 3, within walking distance, but directly attached to the Gallium Palace.

Wystan's palace.

Pryor felt a little foolish now, for not having realized the palace was right there when he'd been in the Aura building earlier. It also had his suspicions rising in regards to the Emperor. It was clear from his actions that he didn't fully trust Pryor or his team. Was that because Roth and he were both Tiberan and there was a fear of mixed loyalties, or was there something else?

The fake domed sky had been shut off for the night, so that a vast view of outer space could be seen whenever one tipped their head back. Pryor was staring at it now, out the window of his upper-level suite in a building meant for visitors of much higher station than himself.

He had stayed in fancier places before—Castor hadn't been lying, it was common for a Royal to invite him over after a case was solved—but Pryor only ever went for as long as duty dictated he must. He never stayed longer than a night, always made some excuse for why he had to get off-world immediately the next morning.

"Is everything to your liking, Detective?" Wystan asked at his back. The Emperor had escorted him up the elevator and into the room himself. A moment ago he'd been explaining something about room service and how to adjust the fancy thermostat, but Pryor had only been partially listening.

The rest of his team had been given rooms of their own, and Castor was currently in his one floor below. He'd argued at first, wanting to come with Pryor, but Wystan had shot that down, and Pryor had been too mentally drained to bother with either of them.

Besides, he was fine. Whatever the DNA Adaptor had done to him, he was recovered now. There wasn't so much as an inkling of pain. He didn't need someone to babysit him.

"The rooms the I.P.F booked for us initially were just fine," Pryor stated. They'd been simple, but secure. More than adequate.



His arms were crossed, shoulder pressed to the glass of the floor to ceiling window. He kept his body slightly turned so that he could catch any sudden movements the Emperor made without seeming like he was paying the other man much mind.

Below, the nightlife of Abraxas was in full swing, the flashing lights from speeding hover cars and neon projections from all of the businesses causing the city to wink and sparkle. During the day, everything had appeared average. Just another bustling metropolis on another World Ship, filled with hard-working people desperate to get by.

"I didn't realize Abraxas changed this drastically at night," he found himself saying, watching the whirling blue and red lights of a police drone detach from the side of a thirty-story building where it'd been hiding. The circular drone zipped after a speeding chrome-colored car. He couldn't hear the blare of the siren, but he could imagine it.

"The Olympus has a lot to offer," Wystan said. "Are you interested in the party scene?"

He snorted. "Do I look like the type?"

"Not at all."

"You made it seem like there was nothing to do around here before," Pryor reminded.

"I doubt anything happening down there is comparable to the type of excitement an Imperial party boy like Roth is used to."

True, but it could be considered reason enough for him to choose this place.

"Maybe he really did come for a vacation," Pryor murmured to himself.

Wystan overheard anyway. "And you're certain there wasn't an accident or anything of the kind? It's strange for someone to vanish the way this crown prince has."

"What's having a twin like for you, Emperor?" Yet another subject he typically tried to avoid. It seemed like he was being forced to acknowledge a lot of things he usually wouldn't.

There was a moment of silence before, "It's nothing special. Don't get me wrong, I care for my sister. We're...close, even. I would kill anyone who tried to harm her."

"But you wouldn't personally feel any of that pain." It wasn't a question. Pryor felt a chill run through him that had little to do with the

temperature of the room. "Tiberans are born in pairs, I'm sure you're aware."

"Yes."

"We share a unique bond with our birthmate, a psychic connection that links our bodies. If one of us gets physically harmed, the other feels it too." It only worked with physical injury though. Emotions were personal. Not even a birthmate could feel what their pair was feeling. It was an odd form of connection and disconnection, to be so closely tied to another, and yet still so cut off at the same time.

Some Tiberans remained attached at the hip all their lives, others parted to seek individuality. Even the latter never strayed too far for too long, however. There was always contact between the two, either through multi-slate or brief visits.

There were other perks to staying close. If one got sick, the other could heal them by donating material—whether it be as simple as plasma or an organ.

Pryor's birthmate had donated a part of his bridmula. They'd hoped it would be enough to cure him.

They'd been wrong.

"Roth's birthmate is currently on a business trip in another galaxy, but as soon as he's able, he'll travel closer. Once he's back within the Crystal Sea, the connection will return. We'll receive an update then. However, we do know that three weeks ago, on the day Roth vanished from the Max, Rath sensed nothing out of the ordinary. He wasn't even aware of the situation here until the report was filed."

Pryor hadn't spent much time with Rath either, but he recalled how quiet his cousin had been when they'd been younger. Like him, Rath had been born with an imperfection. He was colorblind. It wasn't considered an offense large enough to have him banished or kept from a title, but it did mean he could never aim for the throne.

He also had a strong alibi. The day Roth had gone missing, he'd been on the opposite side of the galaxy on Tibera preparing to leave for a diplomatic visit in the name of the Empress.

Whatever had happened to Roth, Rath wasn't involved.

"I've seen enough bodies. I'm not here to find his. Whatever has happened to him, Roth is out there, on this World Ship somewhere. I need to find him." Pryor sighed and forced himself to turn, meeting the

Emperor's gaze head-on. "Which means I don't have time to waste. Rest is something I can't afford."

"What happened to your birthmate?" Wystan asked, voice low, tentative.

It caught Pryor off guard because he'd been expecting the Emperor to argue over his statement, not bring up something so personal. It was considered rude to ask about someone's birthmate—even if they were still around, but especially if...

"That information is in my file," he recalled, with a hum of understanding given mostly to mask his discomfort. He hated talking about this subject. Hated thinking about it.

Hated remembering.

"It's rare for a Tiberan to join this line of work," Wystan said. "The pairbond your kind share makes it difficult to put your lives on the line for fear of inadvertently causing your birthmate pain. I'm sure this is something you get asked a lot."

"It isn't, actually."

Wystan merely stared, waiting.

"He's dead. He died when we were kids."

"From...?" His gaze dropped to Pryor's side, to the spot he'd been clutching at earlier. Of course he would have heard from the doctors, or possibly Castor, that he had a condition.

Castor had explained he'd managed to keep them from running scans, but had to mention that it wasn't necessary due to the fact he knew it was Pryor's bridmula acting up.

"No." The disease didn't work that way, and neither did birthmates. Despite their connection, they were still separate beings. Just because one body malfunctioned, didn't mean the others would. Pryor had been diagnosed, but his birthmate had been given a clean bill of health.

"It was an accident," he said, picturing the golden sky and the sound of the waves beating against the rose quartz cliffs. The sound of laughter as his birthmate and their friends chased each other around, daringly skirting too close to the edge.

They'd played that game a hundred times before, a thousand. But this time something had gone wrong.

"He slipped." Pryor hadn't seen that, fortunately. Had been turned away, picking at the fruits his nanny had given them earlier that morning.

They weren't allowed far from the palace at that point, still in recovery from the partial transplant surgery. His birthmate, with his healthy bridmula, was already healed, but Pryor was still struggling, still had an angry-looking wound.

"Have you ever been to Tibera?" he asked, and Wystan shook his head. "The cliffs are...Well. He fell and he didn't make it."

"I'm sorry." That sounded sincere.

It made Pryor uncomfortable.

He shook his head. "It was a long time ago. We weren't even teens yet. It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

"No." It took a second for him to slam the door shut on the range of emotions those memories had forced upon him, but he managed, stealing himself once more.

It was obvious by the way Wystan's shoulders stiffened that he could sense the change.

"The room is fine," Pryor hardened his tone, back to business. "It doesn't really matter anyway, because I won't be spending much time in it. I have a process when I'm working, Emperor, and so far you've interrupted that process more times than I care to count. I hope that from here on out we can establish better respect for one another. Starting with boundaries."

Wystan quirked a brow but remained silent for a long moment longer before the corner of his mouth tipped up. "All right. Say what you want to say. I'll listen."

"You'll listen," he caught on, "but that doesn't mean you'll agree."

It was an observation, not a question, and yet when Wystan responded with a single, absent lift of his shoulder Pryor found his irritation flaring to life.

Again.

"This is my investigation," Pryor held up a hand when he went to speak, refusing to allow him to interrupt, "and I am not one of your agents. I do not work for you, for the Olympus—or for the Tiberans, to be clear. My job is to figure out what happened to Roth and how his disappearance might be involved with your stolen technology. Yes, you are in charge of this World Ship, but *I* am in charge of this case. Since it's apparent you refuse to back off, I'll concede and allow you to help out, with the understanding that I'm running things.

“If you go behind my back and access information meant for me again, I will quit. Like I said, I’m not here for Tibera. Someone else can clean up after their Heir Imperial. And,” Pryor took a single step forward, “if you decide to try and stop me from doing so by threatening a member of my team again, I promise, I will make you regret it. Your majesty.”

“Threatening an Imperial is a serious offense, Detective.” Wystan didn’t sound all that offended, despite his words. It was hard to read him other than that, but at least he didn’t appear as though he was about to fly off the handle.

That was good at least. Pryor couldn’t deal with people who had a short fuse. It put him on edge and made him feel like he was walking on eggshells.

Reminded him of his mother.

“You’ll keep me in the loop,” the Emperor broke the silence then, “on your own, without me needing to pry for it, and I promise not to overstep again. You can run things however you see fit when you’re on the clock. Deal?”

Pryor cocked his head. Why did something about this feel off?

“Trust issues, Detective?”

“I don’t know you, and you don’t know me,” he pointed out. “We literally met yesterday.”

“I’ve read your file, in its entirety. You’re the top agent in the I.P.F Flicker branch. You have no unsolved cases on your record, you tend to choose ones involving the lower classes, and you donate to charity.”

“I’m pretty sure that last part isn’t written down on my record.”

“You haven’t taken on a case involving a Royal/Imperial in over a year, not since you’ve been given leave to select your own jobs,” he kept going as if Pryor hadn’t spoken.

“So, what? You suspect me because of that?” He couldn’t really blame him, not when it was spelled out in such a way. Just like that, the fight drained out of him and he exhaled, pinching the bridge of his nose to stave off the still lingering headache. “You trust that I’m good at my job, but not that I didn’t come here with ulterior motives. It’s been a long time since I’ve last stepped foot on Tibera, Emperor, let alone been welcomed there.”

“I know you care about people and are distrustful of Royals and Imperials.” Wystan slipped his hands into his front pockets. “I don’t doubt

your intentions.”

“Then what’s with the overbearing attitude?”

“Let’s just say I want to keep my eye on you.”

“Spy on me?”

“Help you,” he corrected, and for the first time since the start of this conversation, a twinge of annoyance filtered into his tone as well. “Figuring out what’s happened here is important to the both of us.”

This wasn’t the first time Pryor had encountered a ruling monarch who wanted to throw their weight around. Hell, it kind of came with the job description. But... Try as he might, he couldn’t seem to convince himself any longer that that’s what this was.

Wystan might not be the Head at the moment, but he was still an Emperor, and his sister’s palace was located on the other side of the Olympus, meaning everything on this side was within his jurisdiction. Sure, this case was a big deal, but that’s why Pryor had been brought in to handle it.

Imperials didn’t usually get *this* involved. Sometimes they wanted to take the credit, made big flashy public speeches about how they’d done their duty as ruler once everything was settled, but to actively aid in the investigation?

Pryor had been doing this job for six years, and not once had that happened.

“You don’t care about a missing Imperial, do you?” Pryor guessed. “It could start a war if Roth isn’t found, but you don’t seem all that alarmed by that prospect. This stolen medtech however...What is it? Why are you so invested in this particular technology?”

“Shouldn’t *you* be more invested?”

Pryor felt his blood turn to ice. “Excuse me?”

“I may not have seen the actual footage, but I got my hands on a list of those who were tested,” Wystan told him, and finally, things started clicking into place. “I know that Rune Tiberius was the only one to survive M.I.C.E’s final trial.”

He almost sighed in relief.

Almost.

Still...

“How—” He stopped himself, swallowed and tried again. “Anything pertaining to the royal family was meant to be scrubbed from

Vexan records. If the Tiberan Empress finds out—”

“Will she care?” Wystan held his gaze steadily. “I wonder. Though, it seems doubtful, considering this is the same empress who tossed her own flesh and blood aside.”

Suddenly, the room was too small and the air was too thick. Pryor felt like his skin was tightening around his body, and yet all he could do was stand there and try not to let any of it show. He couldn’t afford to break down. He needed to find out just how much Wystan actually knew.

“Is that why you’ve been acting this way? You’re suspicious because I’m Tiberan and you know that there are already two of my kind somehow tied up in this case?”

“Take a look at your people’s track record, Detective. The head of Tibera stripped her son of his title simply because he was in poor health. She abandoned him. Does that sound like the type of person you would trust?”

“No,” he said before he could help himself. “I don’t trust anyone, especially not anyone of high rank.”

“Not even me, you mean. What happened to all that talk about working together?”

“Why didn’t you bring this up sooner?”

“I assumed you didn’t want your team to know all the details,” Wystan said. “If you had, you would have mentioned it yourself the second M.I.C.E came up. It was obvious you were familiar with the program.”

“I used to be close to the royal family,” he confessed, mostly because he couldn’t see a way around doing so at this point.

“And yet you want me to trust you enough to allow you to go around my ship unsupervised.”

“The keywords there were *used to*.”

“So then why not tell your team about their ex-crown prince’s involvement?”

“Because it doesn’t matter,” Pryor snapped.

“How can you be certain?”

“Rune Tiberius couldn’t have been involved in your missing tech, Emperor. Not only would he not have a reason, it’s also just impossible.”

“He could have helped Roth, they could have planned something together,” Wystan insisted. He moved closer, stopping a few feet away. The dim lighting of the room cast shadows across his face, making it hard to tell

if he was scowling or not. “It’s the most logical explanation. Perhaps Rune wanted to get his hands on the tech to try and fix it himself. There were major side effects when he underwent the surgery over a decade ago. Times have changed, maybe he believes he’s found a way to correct things.”

“And, what? Get the throne back?” Pryor laughed at the absurdity of that idea. “First of all, things don’t work that way on Tibera. Even if he did somehow find a cure for his ailment, he wouldn’t be welcomed back into the fold. Second of all, why would Roth help his cousin? Roth Tiberius was elated when it was announced he’d be the new Heir Imperial.”

Rune had been thirteen when his mother had officially denounced him and placed fifteen-year-old Roth as the heir instead. It’d been years since then; Roth had more than grown accustomed to what it meant to be a crown prince, and all of the perks that typically came with that title. He wouldn’t willingly give that up, especially not for someone he hadn’t seen in over a decade.

“They were close as children. Maybe Roth’s pretended to be happy to bid his cousin time.”

“No, that’s not what happened. Whatever’s going on here, Emperor, I can assure you Rune isn’t involved. It’s impossible for him to be.”

“There’s no way to know that for certain.”

“Yes, there is.”

“No—”

“Rune can’t be involved because Rune is dead,” Pryor snapped.

Wystan paled. “What?”

Pryor hated to admit it, but it was kind of nice to be the one shocking the Emperor for once, after how often the other guy seemed to get off on doing it to him. That, and the mixture of exhaustion and anxiety that was currently flooding through his body had him speaking more bluntly, despite the way Wystan was reacting.

“Rune Tiberius is dead. He died years ago.”

“That’s not...” Wystan shook his head, frowning. “That’s not possible.”

“Of course it is. What’s wrong, Emperor? Upset that I’ve blown a hole through your theory? Were you really that sure of yourself?” He grunted. “Rune Tiberius was weak. His mother knew it. His entire planet knew it.”

“Enough.”



“It’s good that he’s dead. That means there’s one less lead for us to follow. You should be happy—”

“I said enough!” Wystan moved fast, one second standing in the center of the room, and the next less than a breath away.

He’d shoved Pryor back against the window, the cool glass pressed against his spine. His hand, which had been reaching for Pryor’s neck, was caught midair, so that only the tip of his middle finger brushed against the skin of Pryor’s throat and nothing more.

Pryor tightened his grip on Wystan’s wrist. “I don’t know why you’re suddenly so pissed off, Emperor, but I swore to myself I’d never again allow an Imperial to lay hands on me. If you don’t remove yourself from my personal space, immediately, I will break your arm. Doing so will count as self-defense, considering you just tried to choke me.”

“Again?” Wystan’s voice sounded distant, almost as if he wasn’t quite there anymore, too lost in his own thoughts. “An Imperial has harmed you before?”

“Imperials harm people all the time, it’s in their nature.” Pryor glanced pointedly at where he still held him. “I see now you’re no exception.”

Wystan pulled back so hard he almost ended up pulling Pryor with him. Not that he noticed. The Emperor was too busy spinning on his heels, rushing for the door. Without so much as a second glance, he practically ran out of the hotel room, the door whooshing shut sharply behind him.

The room instantly filled with an unsettling quiet, leaving a stunned and confused Pryor surrounded by a sense of perplexity. He slid down the wall and slumped on the ground, completely emotionally drained.

What the actual fuck had just happened?

## Chapter 6:

Wystan Aurelius stormed down the corridor in the West wing, promptly ignoring all the bowed heads of soldiers as he passed. They decorated the main areas of Gallium palace like baubles and statues, more ornamental than anything else. He could more than take care of himself, and the entire kingdom knew it.

But his sister was a worry wort, and this business with a missing Imperial had her even more on edge than usual. It'd been just the two of them for so long Wystan was used to humoring her, however today he was in no mood to be guarded and watched after like some sparkly gemstone about to be absconded with.

He knew where her fears came from, how important it was that he stay safe in case she—He killed that thought before it could fully formulate, turning into his private quarters. The door to his office was slammed with far more force than was necessary, but he was too hyper-focused on sequestering himself away from all the prying eyes.

Weakness wouldn't be tolerated in a leader and right now Wystan felt incredibly unhinged.

Rounding the ovular glass desk, he dropped down into the leather chair, well aware that he was brooding. Part of him wanted to go back to the SandBox and pound on the detective's door, decorum be damned.

Since Pryor's arrival, things hadn't gone at all the way Wystan had envisioned them.

With a flick of his wrist he had the large monitor set in his desk coming to life, the familiar jingle doing nothing to settle his nerves. As soon as he was able, he clicked into a hidden file he'd stored on the main screen, watching as it popped open to reveal dozens upon dozens of documents.

He'd been collecting for a long time, saving anything and everything that even had minor mention of the original Tiberan heir. For most of his life, he'd been determined to locate him, and now—

Wystan clenched his jaw and resisted the urge to chuck something across the room. Barely. Pryor Oro's words kept ringing in his ears,

repeating that dreadful news the same way one might reply about the weather.

He hadn't cared that with that sentence he'd shredded Wystan's insides. Hadn't batted an eye even, when Wystan had rushed him, reaching for his throat to...He wasn't even sure what he'd been about to do. No matter how angry or upset, he would never hurt the detective.

Some of his ire settled.

He'd recognized Pryor standing in the marketplace immediately that day he'd arrived. The picture in his file didn't do him justice; in person, there was a mysterious air that almost dared someone to try and take a crack at him, to get a peek inside. He was colder and more aloof than Wystan had expected, jaded in a sense, but focused and invested in his job.

Still, he'd thought he'd had the detective figured out, and now...He feared that may have simply been wishful thinking on his part.

With a sigh, he minimized the open file and selected another, opting to calm himself more before thoughts of Rune and the claim he was already dead really did drive him mad with fury. He was known for his steely disposition and intensity, but there was an underlying inferno that never quite seemed to quell that few had had the misfortune to discover. Wystan didn't want to lose his cool and do something rash.

He needed a distraction.

Roth Tiberius's file popped up and he went through it, sifting through photos and blurry security camera footage. Downtown was a crowded nightmare, bloated with people constantly in motion. There was a good chance Roth had used this to his advantage and slipped out unseen with a crowd, though Wystan and the Olympus police force had been unable to confirm or deny this theory, no matter how closely they looked at those leaving the Max.

He'd met with Roth once, upon his arrival, as was expected. There hadn't been much there of interest, and any notions of possibly picking the other man's brain about his relative fled quickly.

Roth was nothing like Rune had been. Sure, he was all smiles, but they came with an air of superiority and unsavoriness. He lived up to his party-boy reputation, that was for sure, and had barely spoken with Wystan for ten whole minutes before hitting up the nearest club.

If he wasn't the victim of foul play and was the mastermind behind his own disappearance, his acting skills deserved praise. He certainly had

Wystan convinced he wasn't worth a second glance.

Wystan found himself staring at two pictures side by side. One was of the adult Roth, the other was an old image of a child around thirteen years of age. It'd been difficult to get his hands on the second image; most had been scrubbed from every database in the twelve main galaxies.

Almost as if his family had been trying to erase him entirely.

Rune.

The boy in the photo smiled out at him, cat-shaped eyes crinkled at the corners, full mouth split into a wide grin. When they'd met, he'd been vivacious and charming, the epitome of a perfect little prince. No one would have ever guessed that he was suffering from a chronic, life-threatening, disease.

Wystan had collected medical files on that as well, had poured over them so many times he could recite passages from heart. He'd gotten a basic degree in genetics and biochemistry, but Tiberans weren't really covered in Olympus schools, and he wasn't about to travel to a high-tech university located on some other planet. He still had his duty as one of the Emperors, after all.

It hadn't done him much good anyway. He could study until the end of time and it wouldn't change a thing. The past was the past. If he were able to find Rune, things would be different then. He'd already put together a list of potential doctors and scientists who could help.

But...

Pryor's revelation crept back into his mind.

What if Rune really was dead? What if all of this had been for nothing and Wystan had wasted his and everyone else's time?

The Tiberan Empress has removed him from the line of succession after it'd been discovered Rune's illness couldn't be fully cured. Like with the Vexans, weakness wasn't allowed on the throne. Leaders needed to represent their people and create a strong front against their enemies. All of Wystan's research showed that just because he wasn't healed, didn't mean the state Rune had last been seen in was still life-threatening and yet...

He exited out of the picture and leaned back. Closing his eyes, he exhaled slowly and tried to calm his mind and still the racing beats of his heart. It was foolish to still be this attached to someone he'd met as a kid. Foolish to have planned and plotted his life thus far around a missing figure, but that's how Wystan had always been, ever since he was fifteen.

He was a moon circling a planet, desperate to get a little closer. To touch.

An image of Pryor popped into his mind, flashing behind his closed lids.

The indignant glint in his sea gray eyes when he'd threatened to leave had sparked something in Wystan's chest, instantly causing him to react and bristle.

The ultimatum he'd made in retaliation was nothing compared to what he'd wanted to do. Vexans were possessive, inflexible creatures at best, and dominating nightmares at worst, willing to do anything and everything to get their way. It was why most of them casually flirted through life, toeing the line, never allowing themselves to grow too attached until they were certain they'd found the one.

Wystan had already met his.

The rest of the galaxy might believe their amorous natures were due to their cultural belief in being honest. Only an off-worlder lucky enough to become a Vexans chosen lover would know better.

It wasn't the first time the detective had looked at him like that, haughtily, with that perfectly full mouth of his twisted in a partial sneer. Sometimes, it appeared as though he was at least trying to contain himself and be polite, as their stations demanded, but those occasions were few and far between, and he wasn't often successful.

Pryor hated Imperials, and he'd done little to hide that fact. Even still...

The picture in his head changed as he conjured another memory, another look. He'd caught Pryor sneaking glances here and there. They'd only known one another a little over a day, but those looks were impossible to miss. He might have an aversion to Imperials, but he wasn't impervious to Wystan's sexual desirability.

He was a prime subject of his species, and that wasn't hubris talking, but fact. Suitors had been throwing themselves at him for over a decade, ever since he'd come of age, some hoping to win his hand and gain a throne, others merely wishing for a chance in his bed.

Every now and again, he'd humor someone who fit into the latter group—Vexans had strong urges, and it'd be nearly impossible for him to live a life of celibacy even if that were something he'd wanted, which it had

not been. But anyone who was clearly after something more serious than a quick tumble between the sheets was rejected or outright ignored.

He'd even refused a few political mergers, so adamantly against it that his sister had stopped suggesting them.

Now, thinking about the detective's gaze on him, Wystan felt his cock swell. Settling more comfortably in his chair, he rested his head back and reached for his belt.

Pryor was the epitome of perfection, with sun-kissed skin that almost gleamed, and hair like spun gold. At a few inches shorter, his mouth would come level with the hollow of Wystan's throat, and he pictured what those lips might feel like on him, sucking and nipping at his sensitive flesh.

A guttural moan slipped out of him the same moment his engorged cock sprang free from the confinement of his slacks. He shifted his hips to pull the material lower, giving up on them once he'd gotten them around his thick thighs. Spreading his legs as much as he was able, he emitted another sound of pleasure when the band of his pants restricted him. There was something so hot about a little restraint.

He wondered what Pryor would look like tied to his bed...Wondered if he'd allow him to blindfold him and explore to his heart's content.

Wystan cupped his balls, rolling them in the palm of his hand as he went back to fantasizing about Pryor's mouth on his neck. With how feisty the detective was, he imagined he'd be a rough lover. He squeezed himself a little too tightly, grimacing at the burst of pleasure-pain, before traveling up his shaft to dip his thumb in the pearl of pre-come seeping from his slit.

He swirled it around the tip of his cock, smoothing it into the swollen flesh. The light touches hiked up his arousal, causing him to thicken until he was solid steel in his hand. Another burst of precome dribbled out, rolling down the length of him, and he caught that up as well, working himself with one solid pump.

He took his time with it, jerking his hips in motion with the glide of his palm, tightening whenever he reached his wide base, twisting when he returned to his bulbous mushroom-shaped tip.

The fantasy changed, the imaginary Pryor in his head dropping to his knees before him. The detective licked his lips and it was all Wystan could do not to cry out from that mental image alone.

He wanted to know what he'd really look like kneeling, wanted to know what it'd feel like to have that mouth wrapped around his cock,

taking him deep. Would he work him fast, slow? Would he tease Wystan with his tongue, or suck him in until he hit the back of his throat and—

His rhythm picked up a beat, hand now entirely slicked in precome, working himself in hasty motions. The lewd sound that filled the room, coupled with his grunts and gasps, only turned him on more.

Gods. What would Pryor sound like when Wystan slipped inside of him—

The orgasm hit him seemingly out of nowhere, sticky ropes of come shooting out, coating his chest. In the throes of it, he didn't care about his ruined dress shirt, more focused on wringing himself dry, stroking himself while he fondled his sack until he finally went limp and the first stings of oversensitivity crackled over his skin.

Wystan slumped into the leather, breaths labored, skin now covered in a thin sheen of sweat that was already starting to cause a chill. But he couldn't move to dry off yet, completely spent. For a long while, he remained there, flaccid cock out, covered in come.

Pryor's taunting grin ever present in his mind.

## Chapter 7:

“So no one came and spoke to you?” Castor repeated the question for what had to be the third time since their arrival.

They’d gotten up early and traveled outside of the city. The DNA found in the illegal adaptor had belonged to a woman who’d once worked on the project. Unfortunately, she’d been dead for some time, which was also why the Vexan police hadn’t bothered interviewing her family.

Her husband, Thea, a stout man with round-rimmed glasses sat awkwardly on a navy couch across from Castor. He’d been surprised to receive their call but had been very cooperative, inviting them over and offering to answer any of their questions that he could.

Pryor circled the living space, taking in the tiny details that made up a home, like the family photos projected on the beige walls, and the tiny knickknacks, some merely collected stones or shells. They had two children, both of whom had come of age already and moved out. Their dad had spoken to them and they’d said the same thing in response to that question as their father.

“No,” he shook his head, a thin wisp of silver hair falling across his wrinkled brow. “No one has contacted anyone in my family about Yana’s work in years.”

“And you don’t know anything about her past projects? She didn’t share any details with you?” Castor asked. “I promise, even if that information was classified at the time, we aren’t interested in tarnishing your wife’s reputation.”

“I wish I could tell you something useful,” he said, “but there really isn’t anything. She took her job very seriously. Some day’s she’d come home burned out and in a bad mood, and even then getting her to tell me what was wrong was like pulling teeth. She was always very careful, wouldn’t let any actual details slip. I don’t even know the real names of her co-workers. She referred to them by nickname.”

“What kind of nicknames?” Pryor came back around and stood at the end of the couches where the others sat.



It was just the two of them, him and Castor, out today. He'd woken to no sign of the Emperor or his guards, half expecting to find the man waiting for him at the office when he got to Aura Building 3. He hadn't been.

Pryor was trying hard to ignore the odd way Wystan's sudden absence made him feel.

"Random things, like," the husband tapped his mouth as he thought, "ah, like Green, for one of her co-workers who always wore a red tie. And Buckle, for another who constantly bragged about this flashy gift his mother had given him for getting the position. Stuff like that."

"Did any of these people have a higher clearance than your wife?"

"Yes, she was an assistant to the head doctor, but their job was to work on the medical side of the project. There were others involved in the rest, the technical stuff, like inventors and engineers." He twirled a hand in the air and looked apologetic. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good with any of this jargon. I was an artist before she and I met, science was never my interest."

"What you're saying is, she held a high position in the program, but not the highest?" Pryor planted his hands on his hips as he thought that through.

"Not in the slightest," he agreed. "It was my understanding that there were many above her. That was the source of most of her bad moods, all that red tape and disagreements with other teams."

Which meant there were a lot of other choices, better choices, that someone could make when it came to collecting a DNA sample. What was the reason that person had chosen this man's wife over someone else?

Convenience?

"Do you have any idea how someone was able to get a hold of her DNA?"

Thea shook his head, a flash of anger igniting behind his glasses. "Absolutely not. She was cremated, as is the Vexan way. We've kept nothing here that could have supplied that."

"You don't have any guesses?" Castor said.

He thought it over, and a second later his eyes went wide. "I believe her genetic imprint was kept on the database of the hospital she used to work at before being scouted for the program. Could it have been taken from there?"

"It's certainly a possibility," Pryor stated.

“It’s the only lead we have, so let’s hope.” Castor pulled up the doctor’s file on his multi-slate. “Koaha Hospital, correct?”

“Yes, that’s the one. She worked there for over eight years,” the man told them.

Pryor lifted his multi-slate and clicked a few buttons, waiting until the rectangular device resting on the table in front of Thea chimed. “I’ve just sent you my direct line. If anyone contacts you about your wife or the project, please let me know immediately.”

“Of course.” The man stood and gave a quick bow. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

Castor waved his notes and smiled. “This will hopefully be more than enough. Thank you.”

The two of them exited the man’s home and started walking down the narrow street. Thea lived in a somewhat crowded, overdeveloped area, where the residential and commercial buildings all seemed to overlap.

“Let’s grab a bite first,” Castor suggested less than a block away when they came upon what could only be described as a small diner.

The place was practically squished between two larger brick monstrosities, to the point it almost appeared as though the windows would pop out of their panes and shatter all over the sidewalk.

“Here?” Pryor took in the peeling orange paint and the tarnished brass doorknob.

Castor clapped a hand on his shoulder, practically corralling him toward the entrance. “Don’t be so uptight. Could be the best food we’ve had all year.”

Pryor wouldn’t call himself a health freak, per se, but he was overly cautious about the types of things he put in his body, and he was well aware of that fact. Having spent the better part of his childhood confined to a hospital bed, it was no wonder. He didn’t ever want to be put in that position again, one where he’d been a slave to his broken body, unable to will himself better despite how strong his mind had remained.

The inside of the establishment was just as condensed as the out had made it seem. There was an incredibly narrow path between the tiny two-seater tables that made up rows on either side. A long counter in red and white took up the entire right wall, with a door at the end leading into a backroom that was out of sight. There were only the windows at the front and back, with decorations on the walls in the form of framed pictures all

depicting a hodgepodge of random things, some identifiable, others a mystery.

There were three other customs inside already, and Castor led him and Pryor away from them, dropping down in one of the creaky metal chairs at a table close to the tail end of the restaurant.

Almost as soon as their asses had hit the torn and peeling cushioned seats, a panel set against the counter slid open and a small robot no higher than Pryor's knees came rolling out. The bot beeped as it approached, a lackluster metal-being that had seen better days. Parts of him were tarnished, and there were specks of old food splattered across his surface in different areas.

He had a round top and a cylinder-shaped body—a typical waiter bot, an older model to boot.

“Welcome to Ray’s,” the robot said in a chipper, digital voice. It held up a thin metal arm, projecting the menu across the bare surface of the table between them. “What can we serve you today?”

Castor's gaze skimmed the menu, and before Pryor could read more than a third of the many items listed on it, he excitedly tapped at two of them. “We'll get a number a thirty-seven and a number twelve, thanks.”

“Of course.” The robot pulled back its arm, taking the menu with it. “And to drink this evening?”

Pryor glanced out the windows at the vibrant sunshine outside.

It wasn't even noon yet.

“Two coffees.” Castor grinned at the bot thankfully.

“You do realize he doesn't have any emotions, right?” Pryor asked the second the bot had slipped back under the counter and the panel had sealed shut behind him.

“So?” He shrugged. “Can't I just be friendly?”

He snorted in response, but dropped it, turning his attention back to the scattered art on the walls.

“You two fight?” Castor asked after a moment, that smile back in place when Pryor frowned at him. “Last night, you and the Emperor. I can't help but notice he's decidedly absent this morning.”

“He's probably just got better things to do,” he said, hoping the subject could be dropped quickly.

“Right,” he grunted. “The guy's been shadowing us since our arrival two days ago, but I'm sure he's over it now.”

“Exactly.”

“That was sarcasm,” Castor drawled. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t catch that. Seriously, what’s up?”

“Seriously,” he mocked, “nothing. I asked him to give us space to investigate. Surprisingly, he’s obliging.” Maybe.

Hopefully.

That was sort of the gist of what he’d said last night to Wystan, in any case. And perhaps that really was what was going on. Maybe the Emperor had decided to give them the space they needed to solve this.

Or...

“Maybe he’s bored already,” Pryor suggested absently, careful to keep his expression uninterested.

“Uh-huh.” Castor didn’t sound convinced.

He didn’t want to, and yet... “What?”

“Nothing.” The Inspector pretended to find interest in the artwork now as well. “Just doesn’t seem likely, that’s all. Typically it takes a person longer than that to get sick of you.”

“I’m not sure if that was meant as a compliment or an insult.”

Castor winked. “Maybe a little of both?”

Pryor rolled his eyes but was saved from having to reply by the waiter-bot’s return.

He waited until the thing had rolled off again before he allowed himself to react to the food that had just been deposited onto the table. “What the actual hell did you order?”

“I have no idea,” Castor admitted, clearly eager to find out. He rubbed his hands together for good measure and then snatched up a fork.

The two plates had very different looking items on them. The one in front of the Inspector had something square and green, with tiny pink things sprinkled over the top and a weird oozy yellow inside that spilled out the second he speared his fork into it.

The one in front of Pryor looked a little more typical to the breakfasts he was used to, with a fluffy white mush that had blue and green circular berries inside.

When he poked at it, it was springy, and even though it was closer to the porridge he’d had before, it still made him hesitant.

“Loosen up and give this a try,” Castor said, shoving a forkful of the green and yellow stuff into his personal space.

Pryor wanted to resist, but years of experience with Castor had taught him his foodie friend wouldn't budge when it came to testing out new morsels.

Reluctantly, he opened his mouth and allowed him to plant the weird stuff on his tongue. It took a second for his taste buds to adjust, but once they had, he was surprised. It was kind of enjoyable, a nice balance of tangy and sweet, not at all what he'd expected considering the muddy green color.

"See?" Castor stared at him triumphantly. "Trust me, Pry. I'd never lead you astray."

"Easy," he said, pointing to his plate, "this one is still undecided."

Reaching across the small table, Castor scooped up a forkful of the white food and popped it into his mouth. He chewed a couple of times, clearly thinking it over, before swallowing.

Before Pryor could ask what he thought, he swapped their plates and began digging into the white dish like it'd been his all along.

Pryor lifted a questioning brow the second Castor stopped chowing down long enough to look up at him again.

"You won't like this one," he explained, motioning at it with his fork. More than half the plate was empty already. "It's too bland for you."

Tiberans were used to salt in their diet, to the point that most dishes on other planets tended to fall flat in that department for them. Castor was very aware of Pryor's pallet, not just because he knew where he came from, but because the two had been close for a while now.

The only other person who had ever bothered to learn about Pryor's particular tastes had been Roth—and even then, his knowledge had been limited due to the fact they hadn't spent much time with one another.

Accepting his partner's assessment, Pryor started eating the green dish, sipping lightly at the coffee—surprisingly rich and flavorful with nutty notes—between bites.

"What do you think about this new lead?" he asked when they were both mostly finished.

"I think the whole thing is suspect," Castor said. "There were better candidates to steal DNA samples from, but whoever the culprit is went with this particular doctor. Why?"

"Maybe because her DNA was so readily available?" he suggested. "Think about it. If it really is on file, that means easy access. At least as far

as stealing genetic material goes. All our perp would have to do was find a way into their private systems.”

“Easier said than done.”

“But still doable. A lot more so than getting it from a pile of ashes.”

“True.” Castor pursed his lips. “So, what? You’re thinking maybe the person we’re looking for is on staff there?”

“Koaha Hospital has to have a list of employees, and an employee makes the most sense. Otherwise, they wouldn’t even know about the DNA storage.”

“I wasn’t aware that was something they did on the Olympus, so makes sense.” Castor pressed the tiny red button on the side of their table, summoning the bot back over. He held up his multi-slate in front of where the robot’s eyes were, letting it scan his card for payment.

“We could have split it,” Pryor said but was waved off. He’d noticed a while back that paying for their meals was a habit that Castor had. In the beginning, he’d tried to argue with him over it, had offered to pay for them both on more than one occasion, but was always rejected. “I do have money now, you know. I make more than you, in fact.”

He’d been eighteen when he’d arrived on the World Ship Status, their galaxies general training hub for the I.P.F. He’d barely squeaked his way into an acceptance letter at the academy, had fled his current location with barely enough funds to pay for his trip to the station. Trainees were given free meals, so he hadn’t worried about how he was going to feed himself at first.

Not until a few months in when everyone started making friends and traveling into town to eat and hang out.

There’d only been so many excuses Pryor could make before Castor, a boy he still barely knew, had dragged him out with the rest of his crew and treated Pryor to anything he wanted. He’d felt guilty, had always tried to select the cheapest thing on the menu, suggest activities they could all do that wouldn’t cost anything.

Castor had caught on. He started by giving Pryor snacks between classes, saying things like he didn’t want them and didn’t want them to go to waste. Then there were little things like repairing his computer for him when he noticed the screen was cracked—it had been for years.

Slowly but surely, Castor had become the family Pryor hadn’t had in a long time, maybe ever.

He owed him a lot, more than a cheap meal at a rundown place like this, no matter how good the coffee had ended up being.

“You’ve more than paid me back,” Castor said, heading for the exit.

In their final year at the academy, Castor had almost flunked out. Pryor had spent months staying up all night tutoring him, ensuring he’d pass the Inspector test. He’d tried to convince him to go for a detective position, but Castor had refused. In the end, it’d all worked out. They’d both passed, and upon graduation, Pryor’s top marks had won him the ability to choose his own partner, something that was typically randomly assigned.

The two of them had worked together ever since.

Shaking his head, he followed after Castor, mood brightened slightly from having a memory that didn’t drop him into instant misery. Finally.

“How far is Koaha Hospital?” he asked once they were back on the street, standing in the warm beams of simulated sunlight.

“About thirty minutes.”

“Let’s go.”

## Chapter 8:

Pryor tapped the end of his stylus against the edge of the glass table, eyes locked on the projection board at the end of the room. They'd drawn up everything they knew about the case so far—which admittedly amounted to very little.

"How's the list going?" he asked Castor, who was seated across from him.

The Inspector had a large tablet in front of him which was connected to the projection board. Everything he wrote on the tablet appeared on the board, and he was currently scrawling notes in the top right-hand corner, next to a somewhat blurry photo they had taken of Roth from the security camera feed he'd been captured on.

That was the last known footage of the Heir Imperial; him entering the Max and never coming out again. Pryor had to make sure that wouldn't be the very last photo anyone ever saw of him. Just a blurry, hardly recognizable image of Roth's side profile.

Castor added the list to the board, sizing it to fit on the left-hand side, and tapped at it. "I went over it again, and still nothing."

They'd gotten a list of people who had access to staff members' medical files from Koaha Hospital yesterday. What had started as a surprisingly substantial list had dwindled to only five names once they'd factored in they were looking for someone who could specifically locate and open the files of past employees. There weren't many who had that kind of clearance.

"We've got Kira Hobs coming in at two," Castor said. "And Lox Tion scheduled for three."

One of the five had already passed away, which left only four suspects. They were hoping to figure out something during questioning, but Pryor wasn't holding his breath. Obviously, someone willing to commit this type of crime wouldn't be too quick on coming clean about it.

"If it ends up not being one of these employees, we'll be back at square one." Which they really couldn't afford. Four days into the



investigation and they had nothing to show for it. Pryor tossed the stylus down in a burst of frustration. “How the hell does an Imperial just disappear on a World Ship.”

“Stranger things have happened.” Castor’s multi-slate beeped. “We’ve seen them. Besides, this ship is massive. I’m honestly surprised more people don’t go missing. Not only are there tons of places you could stash a body, but with overpopulation, it’d be easy enough for someone to hide if they didn’t want to be found.”

Pryor frowned at him. “You really think Roth is missing on purpose?”

“It’s a possibility. The DNA Adaptor was found in his room, Pry. There’s nothing to connect Roth to M.I.C.E, sure, but that could be a clue in and of itself.”

Because it could indicate that Roth was covering something up. Like a secret.

Reminded of the conversation he’d had with Wystan, Pryor was forced to glance away. He hadn’t seen the Emperor since that night and wasn’t sure how he felt about that fact.

“Pryor...” Castor’s voice grew tentative, his uncertainty drawing Pryor back in, “Are you sure there’s nothing else you know that could be helpful? You and Roth—”

“No,” he stopped him. “I’ve told you a million times. I knew the royal family, but we weren’t close.”

“Still,” his gaze dropped to the edge of the table, down to where Pryor’s side would be, “He might try and contact you. M.I.C.E is medical nanotechnology, and you’ve got—”

“There are a million different types of nanotech in the universe,” he reminded. “There are even ones that build and repair damaged organs, just like M.I.C.E. I’m hardly an expert in that field just because I happen to have nanobots in my body. As an Heir Imperial, he has better options, even if I did come to mind, which is doubtful. He doesn’t even know me.”

Castor was looking at him a little too intensely.

“Come on,” Pryor tried to joke, uncomfortable by the other man’s staring, “would you risk getting thrown into a detention cell by reaching out to a stranger? I’m an agent of the I.P.F, and stealing from another world is a high-level crime. He could be stripped of his title if he came to me to ask questions and I turned him in. Which I would.”

An awkward silence passed between them until Castor's multi-slate beeped again, this time a little more loudly.

"You gonna get that?" Pryor motioned to it, grateful to have some kind of distraction.

Still, at first, it appeared as though Castor wasn't going to answer, his blank expression still set on Pryor.

"Cast?"

Almost woodenly, the Inspector reached down and pressed against the center of his screen. After, he swiped to the left so that whatever was there appeared on the projection board.

An image of Fir and Erix took up the entire rectangular board then, both looking exhausted. They were standing in a white room with a large window at their backs overlooking a pond. It could have been real, or it could have merely been a projection, there was no way of knowing.

"Report," Pryor ordered. The two of them would have arrived at their destination late last night.

"We found something," Fir began, rubbing at the two o'clock shadow on his chin. "Turns out, this final scientist didn't stop work on the project as he claimed."

"Officially it was discontinued," Erix picked up. "But this guy was so certain he could make a breakthrough, he kept at it behind the royal family's back."

Castor frowned. "And he just told you guys all of this?"

"Of course not." Erix crossed his arms, and the two of them got a brief look at his knuckles.

Bloodied and torn.

Pryor saw red. "Are you insane?!"

"Why didn't you stop him?!" Castor demanded of Fir.

"I wasn't there," Fir admitted, sending a side glare at Erix. "I was speaking with the scientist's wife in the kitchen at the time. As soon as we heard the commotion, we both ran to the living room but—"

"He was already talking by then," Erix said. "And it's a good thing too. He wouldn't have told us anything if I hadn't threatened him."

"You can't just go around beating people up," Castor growled.

"It worked, didn't it?"

Pryor pressed his fingers to his temple. "We're going to have to report this to the Emperor."

“Oh, that’s already been done, Detective.”

He jolted in his seat at the sound of Wystan’s voice, head snapping up to find him already breezing in through the doorway.

Wystan did not look pleased. His expression was tight, and he’d dressed officially again, his stance when he came to a stop between the table and the projection board stiff and threatening. He avoided Pryor’s gaze, didn’t so much as glance in his direction.

“The two of you will return to Abraxas immediately,” Wystan declared, leaving no room for argument in his tone. “I’ve sent members of the Imperial Police to escort you.”

Erix bristled. “We aren’t criminals.”

“You certainly act like them.”

“It’s because of me that you know your citizens aren’t as under your control as you’d think,” Erix argued. “For a highly classified project to continue in secret right under your nose? What does that say about you, Emperor?”

“Enough!” Pryor stood, slamming his palm down on the table so hard the ceramic coffee mugs he and Castor were using rattled. “As soon as you’re back here you’re off the case.”

“As soon as he’s back here, he’s under arrest,” Wystan corrected.

“What?! That’s ridiculous! The guy had a split lip and a couple of bruises, that’s all! I’ll pay his doctor bill, but there’s hardly any reason for —” Erix said, only to blanch as soon as Wystan spoke again.

“Ko Gemina is dead,” the Emperor stated flatly. “He died less than twenty minutes ago, shortly after the two of you left his residence.”

“That’s not...” Erix finally turned to Pryor. “I swear, I didn’t hit him that hard. There’s absolutely no way. There’s no way. I swear on the sea goddess Risa.”

“He’s right,” Fir confirmed, “he beat him, that’s true, but it was a few punches to the face. There was blood from a split lip, but I checked the scientist out before we left. His nose wasn’t even broken. If he’s dead it wasn’t Erix’s doing.”

“Until the autopsy report comes back,” Wystan said, “it’s your word against his wife’s. You’ll forgive me for choosing to believe in one of my people over an outsider who came into her home and beat her loved one in front of her.” The sound of someone knocking at the door echoed through the video call then, and both Fir and Erix looked to the left where

presumably the entrance to their room was. “That’ll be the Imperial Police. Do not resist and make this any more difficult.”

Fir turned to Pryor, awaiting confirmation on the orders.

He hated Erix, but he didn’t for a second believe that the guy had beaten someone to death. There was nothing he could do from here, however.

“Don’t resist,” he told them. “Follow their instructions and get back here safely. We’ll go from there.”

“Yes, boss.” Fir nodded his head. Just as Erix began to argue again, he reached out and disconnected the call.

The projection board settled back onto their main screen, the details of the case laid out before the Emperor.

“My men will confiscate any information they collected,” Wystan said tightly. He didn’t turn away from the board. “As per our agreement, it will be shared with you, but the arrest of Erix Hobian is nonnegotiable.”

“Of course,” Pryor agreed. Whether or not Erix was behind it, someone was dead, and there was literal blood on his hands so... “My team and I will cooperate however you need.”

That seemed to catch his attention, and finally, Wystan turned, angling his head slightly to peer at Pryor over his shoulder. “If the program really was continued without my knowledge, that seems more of a reason my earlier assumptions about this case are correct.”

Pryor frowned. He’d been certain they were done with this topic after the Emperor had stormed out of his room the other night. “I’m not sure why you see it that way, considering all the evidence against it.”

“What evidence?” Wystan shifted so that he was fully facing him now. “You have yet to present anything concrete, Detective.”

“You aren’t serious?”

“Very. Rune Tiberius is dead, you say? Prove it.”

“What are you two talking about?” Castor glanced between them, slowly rising from his seat now as well.

Pryor didn’t want to answer, thoughts catching on what Castor had suggested earlier. The two of them were both clearly out to get him, they had to be. His fists tightened at his sides as his mind struggled to come up with a way to handle this—handle both of them—and put their assumptions to bed once and for all.

“The Emperor believes that Roth is doing this to help Rune recover his throne,” he stated, seeing no other way around that part, at least. “I tried to tell him that was impossible, but clearly, he doesn’t believe me.”

“You’ve given me little reason to believe you,” Wystan replied, before taking a single step closer. The room seemed to close in on them. “What was that you said about Imperials harming people? Take a look at your own team members, Pryor. They’re no saints.”

“Erix is a Royal,” he blurted, even though he knew it was stupid, pointless. The Emperor was right. One of his citizens was currently dead, and whether or not Erix was responsible for the killing blow, he’d had a hand in harming the man. Pryor should be bowing his head and accepting the insult.

Should be.

But he couldn’t make himself. Something about the way the Emperor was looking at him now was rubbing him wrong, irritating him. Calling to a buried nature he’d long believed was gone.

Arrogance and pride weren’t so easily set aside. Especially when they were a learned behavior from birth.

His chin tipped up defiantly. “It’s a step down from Imperial, true, but I must have misspoken the other night. I classify both Royals and Imperials as dicks.”

Castor gasped. “Pryor! Stop!”

“No,” he sent his dark look briefly to the Inspector before placing it back on the Emperor, “I’m sick of this. Erix is awful, arrest him, contain him, whatever, I don’t really care.”

“He’s your team member. You’re responsible for him.” Wystan reminded.

“He’s a Royal, a *Tiberan* Royal,” he practically sneered at that word, seeing red just thinking about it. “I don’t give a shit about him, and I sure as hell hold no responsibility toward him.”

“You’re getting extremely worked up, Detective,” the Emperor cocked his head, eyes narrowing. “Almost like you’ve got something to hide.”

“Here.” Castor held up his multi-slate for the Emperor to see. He’d pulled something up on the screen while the two of them had been arguing. “You wanted proof? Here’s proof. Rune Tiberius is dead.”

Pryor blinked, mind needing a comically long moment to process what the Inspector was saying.

Wystan leaned in, reading the screen with pursed lips. His jaw clenched once, but then he was pulling back and his face went lax once more. "Death certificates can be faked."

"What?" The floor seemed to drop out from under Pryor's feet.

"Seriously, Emperor?" Castor dropped the device to the table with a loud clatter in a rare show of losing his temper. "What would satisfy you then? Do you want us to bring you his body? Tiberans are cremated just like Vexans; the crown prince was no different."

Wystan quirked a brow. "Don't you mean the ex-crown prince? You aren't even from Tibera."

"My homeworld is a neighboring one," Castor said. "We have a political alliance."

"Ah, so you're also involved with the Tiberan royal family, is what you're implying."

"Stop," Pryor bit out. He wasn't going to stand here and allow the Emperor to twist Castor's words like that. Wouldn't allow his one real friend to get in trouble for something that he had nothing to do with. "Castor has never even been on Tibera. Your accusations are groundless, and frankly, inconsequential."

"I just want the truth, Detective."

"That's what my team is here for. Finding the truth. We're all just trying to do our jobs. We have a couple of leads now."

"We've already established I could care less about finding that particular missing Imperial," Wystan said.

"Whether or not that leads us to find Roth, it will at least give you answers about who took M.I.C.E and why." Pryor held his ground.

"And you're certain you want answers to those questions?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I can think of a few reasons," he replied cryptically, but then a small device on his right wrist started flashing an orange light and he sighed. "Looks like we'll have to cut this discussion short for now. Until Ink and your other two team members arrive in two days, you are both restricted to the Aura 3 and SandBox buildings."

"Excuse me?" Pryor moved to go after him when Wystan started for the door, catching himself before he could get that far. What was the plan?

Aggressively grab the Emperor and demand he change his mind? Or, what? Pryor didn't have any cards here.

"Don't worry," Wystan told them, pausing briefly in the doorway to turn back and meet his gaze, "I'll have the information collected by your teammates sent over right away, as promised. You won't have a lack of things to keep you occupied while you wait."

"You're putting us on lockdown, but expect us to keep working like nothing has happened?" Castor demanded, but Wystan didn't bother turning to address him.

"I like knowing exactly where you are," he said, the statement clearly meant for Pryor alone. "It means I can come find you whenever I want."

Then the bastard smirked, and Pryor hated himself for the way his gut twisted a little.

With one last weighted look, the Emperor turned on his heels and marched off, quickly making his way through the outer office and out into the hall before Pryor could even think up something else to say to stop him.

Not that he even understood why he'd want to stop him at this point, knowing how futile talking to him in this state would be. Wystan was the type of person that, once his mind was made up, it was nearly impossible to change it. Pryor had only known him a short while and that fact was glaringly obvious.

He was about to give in to the stress and plop back down into his chair, but Castor stopped him.

"Pryor."

"It'll be fine," he reassured. "I'm sure the autopsy will come back with proof that Erix didn't do it. As for us, as infuriating as he is, the Emperor isn't wrong. Once we have that information about the continued program, we'll have our hands full anyway. Let's just keep focused so we can get this over with and get off this damn World Ship."

"Pryor."

He plastered a friendly smile on his face, meeting Castor's inscrutable expression. "Is this about Rune? Thanks for having my back. I didn't realize there was a death certificate for him, if I had, I would have shown it to Wystan myself so you wouldn't have to get involved."

"There isn't one," Castor said. "I faked it, like the Emperor suggested."

“How did you know to do that?”

“I made it quick while the two of you were arguing,” he waved him off before he could say anything more about it. “That’s nothing, you know I’m always in your corner. But I’m going to need you to tell me something else now.”

“Okay...?” Was he going to ask why Wystan was so hung up about Rune’s involvement? Or was he going to ask him why he thought the ex-crown prince was dead in the first place? A million possibilities ran through Pryor’s mind at warp speed, but what Castor ended up saying still somehow managed to blindside him.

“Before the Emperor arrived, you said something, something odd,” he began, pausing before finally just rushing out, “How did you know what M.I.C.E does, Pryor?”

Right. Because that was highly classified information that the Emperor hadn’t shared with them the other day. Which meant none of them should know.

Pryor *shouldn’t* know.

Fuck.



## Chapter 9:

When Pryor had been younger, he'd dreamed of becoming a pirate. Admittedly, he hadn't actually known much about them, but it'd been the middle of the great uprising, a time in his planet's history when the Tiberius family had dealt with civil unrest from certain parts of their world.

The term pirate had been tossed around so frequently, it became a commonly used word amongst the people, and at only six years old, Pryor had latched onto it. Something about the idea of getting to sail across the fourteen seas, free to roam or dock wherever he willed. Free to do anything he wanted...Even at such a young age, the concept was appealing.

He and his birthmate would play this one game constantly, where he was a famous pirate king come to pillage and plunder, and birthmate was a first-class Ship Master under the command of the Imperials. It was sort of a joke amongst their friends and family, that Pryor always played the villainous character, and his brother always the hero.

Even after they'd grown out of it, and he'd moved on to different childhood fantasies, that one comment never died. It'd been a story told at most events, around the dinner table, repeated casually in the mornings over a rushed breakfast.

Even when he'd gotten sick, they'd continued, twisting it into a "joke" about how that's what happened to bad people. They were punished.

It didn't stop until his birthmate's death. Then it was like a switch had been flicked, and any mention of Pryor's past life that included his brother in it was taboo. There were no statements about how this could also be a part of his punishment. How wanting to be bad at the age of six had not only made him sick but also taken his brother's life.

The gods were dangerous and fickle, that's what they'd always been taught, and even though no one had said it in so many words, Pryor had felt the guilt eating away at him. Had spent nights awake, staring at his bedroom skylight, up at the stars.

Months passed like that, with his mother only speaking to him whenever there was another doctor's appointment to go to or more rules to

instill about the things he could and couldn't do in an attempt to preserve his quickly deteriorating health. If she'd noticed his state of mind, she didn't call it into question. He'd carried that with him for years.

Until she'd brought him to the Olympus.

Now, seated on the white couch in the center of the lofty hotel room with his head tipped back, Pryor stared up at the dome that encased this part of the World Ship. He watched the tiny pinpricks of light, counting stars absently here and there, only to forget where he was or what number he was on and start all over again.

It was an old habit, an old wish even, in a sense. Looking at the night sky or out a window into outer space was comforting because it made him feel small. It reminded him that he was nothing in the grand scheme of things. That, even if there were gods out there, they'd have plenty to worry about without bothering to even waste a single thought on him.

Tiberans were known for their aloofness, but the reality was they were mercurial beings. Grounding was a technique taught early on to children, usually with the usage of the ocean as a focal point.

Having been tossed from home so young, Pryor had since developed the habit of using space instead, though he'd mostly aged out of that as well. It'd been a long time since he'd last needed to ground himself in order to control his emotions and keep focused. Now, whenever he stared up at the night sky, it was for a different reason.

He wanted to fill himself up with that emptiness, breathe in the vast darkness of space and allow it to swallow him up. Swallow up all of the tension, the heartache, the guilt...Then he wanted it to spit him out again. Somewhere new. Somewhere fresh. Somewhere no one would even recognize the name Tibera.

Initially, his goal had been to join the I.P.F and be assigned to some other galaxy. But then he'd met Castor, and his friend had wanted to stay. Pryor had settled for Flicker knowing that it was at least on the opposite side, as far away from Tibera as one could get without leaving the Crystal Sea—the name of their galaxy.

He'd thought he was okay with it, that he'd put those old wishes for more escape aside. Being here, however, having to work with Erix and search for Roth... Pryor wasn't over it, and living on Flicker wasn't enough.

“How do you feel about asking for reassignment?” his voice cut through the silence that had been surrounding them for the past hour or so. It was low, breathy, but it managed to cause the other man to jump.

Castor had dragged one of the dining room chairs over and planted it on the other side of the coffee table. He'd been going over the notes collected by the Imperial Police from Fir, Erix, and Ink, transferring information he thought could be important to the tablet set on the side of the screen being projected on the center of the long table.

They'd been informed that due to unforeseen circumstances, their team members' travels had been delayed. Currently, they were being held at the Hades police station awaiting the autopsy results.

Castor paused in his machinations and cocked his head. “I doubt the Emperor will agree to that.”

“I don't mean for the case.” The vastness of outer space peered down at him from outside the dome. Far away, yet right there. In a couple of hours, the panels would start to change, the sunrise setting taking effect. Soon, a false blue sky would block out all signs of the universe that surrounded them and this hunk of metal they were pretending was a planet. “Let's leave the Crystal Sea. The captain mentioned something about an opening in the Tin galaxy branch.”

He'd told Pryor about it months ago, and there was a good chance the spot had already been filled but... “It's close enough to your homeworld you can still visit your family on major holidays.”

Pryor thought about earlier that day when he'd fucked up and let slip he knew information on M.I.C.E that he shouldn't. He'd managed to convince Castor that he'd been able to get his hands on the classified information, and the Inspector had seemed to believe it. Still, he hated lying to him, to the one person who'd always had his back. If staying here, in the Crystal Sea meant there'd be more occasions like this one, ones that forced him to twist the truth, he didn't want to.

Castor had been upset that he hadn't shared said information, but had dropped the subject rather quickly when Pryor had claimed it was on the Emperor's orders that he keep tight lipped about it.

Which meant he'd also inadvertently dragged Wystan into the lie.

Wystan, who was clearly furious with him over....Well, honestly Pryor wasn't even sure anymore. Initially, he'd thought the Emperor was

mad because he'd disproven his theory, but after what had happened this afternoon, he was starting to think there was more to it than that.

"Give me some time to consider it," Castor said. "I'm not sure I'm willing to leave just yet."

Frowning, Pryor finally straightened in his seat so that he could face his friend. "Yet? Are you waiting for something?"

"Kind of." Castor smiled and tapped the back of his stylus against the tablet. "Shouldn't we be focused on finishing this before thinking about what comes next anyway? You're always so strict on the rest of us about that."

That was true. Pryor had a one-track mind when it came to work. He didn't explain that the sole reason for that was because it helped him to forget his past and pretend like his life now was everything he'd ever dreamed of and more.

In a way, it sort of was. He had freedoms to an extent. More than he would have in the past. Sure, he was still tied by the whims of Royals/Imperials, but everyone was like that. If anything, that only helped drive home that Pryor Oro wasn't special.

He was, however, very good at his job. Was well known for that being the case. Which meant Castor was right and he needed to get his head out of his ass and refocus on what mattered.

"You've been acting weird all day," Castor pointed out. "Is it because of what happened with the Emperor?" His eyes narrowed. "There's not something else about M.I.C.E that you're keeping from me, is there?"

"No." Another lie.

"Really? Because even if the Emperor told you to keep it a secret, you should tell me. We'll never get this thing solved if you don't trust me, Pry."

"He hasn't ordered me to withhold anything else." Or anything at all. "Look who's talking though. Aren't you supposed to be telling me to do everything the Emperor says? That's your job, Inspector. To keep me in line."

Castor snorted and rolled his eyes, the tension draining from his shoulders like Pryor had hoped it would. "You did that, and I ended up not liking it much. When did he let you in on what M.I.C.E's function is anyway?"

Shit.

“Doesn’t matter,” he waved the question off and made a big show of stretching. “We’ve been at it for hours. Let’s call it a night and start fresh in the morning. Hopefully, we’ll have word back on the autopsy by then and the rest of our team will be released.”

“I bet Fir is living it up right now,” Castor joked as he stood and began to collect his things. “That guy loves not having to work.”

Pryor chuckled. “Yeah, I’m sure the cell he’s currently confined in against his will is totally comfortable.”

“He’s probably asleep,” he said. “Let’s be real. That guy could sleep comfortably on the back of a aqualoon.” At Pryor’s perplexed look, he elaborated. “It’s this large water/land creature back on my homeworld. They’re about the size of a hovercar and are covered in this slick, waterproof moss green fur. They’ve got two humps on their backs, and usually have a ton of barnacles stuck to them.”

“Ah,” he nodded, as if he could picture the odd creature in his mind even though he couldn’t, “so not really a good resting spot.”

“Understatement.” Castor picked his jacket up from the back of the chair and slipped it on. “What time tomorrow should—”

The chime at the front door had them both frowning.

“Who could that be?” Castor asked, heading for it since he was closest. He didn’t bother tapping on the screen next to it, the one that would show them a visual of whoever it was on the other side. He merely slapped his palm against the latch and waited for the door to slide open.

H stood in the hallway, as imposing as the first time they’d met him. He also happened to be scowling in the same way, though he quickly dismissed Castor and lifted his gaze, finding Pryor still on the other side of the room.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Castor demanded in a rare show of rudeness that surprised Pryor. While it was true they hadn’t exactly had a great experience with the guard, that didn’t change the fact that H was a member of the Imperial staff, and therefore deserved their respect so long as they remained on World Ship.

“I’ve been instructed to clear the room,” H informed them, sounding none-to-pleased about it. “Return to your suite, Inspector #353.”

“What’s this about?” Pryor stood and rounded the chair still situated on the other side of the coffee table.

“The Emperor has commandeered this space for the rest of the night, and has ordered the removal of any entity other than you, Ninth Class Detective.”

“Don’t say it like that,” another voice, this one gruff and almost whiny, sounded from H’s left. The speaker couldn’t be seen, but it was unmistakable who it was, even with his slightly slurred speech. “It sounds brutish. He’ll point that out for sure, won’t let me hear the end of it. Use the word...request.”

“Wystan?” Pryor moved closer, but couldn’t see around the guard into the hallway.

H appeared to grow uncomfortable, that authoritative aura slipping somewhat for the first time around them. He cleared his throat, shifted toward the Emperor, and lowered his voice. “Request implies they’re allowed to reject you, Majesty. Do you still—”

“He can’t reject me,” Wystan snapped and shoved H out of the way, suddenly spilling halfway into the room. He caught himself on the doorframe, blinking into the room, no doubt slightly blinded from the change in lighting. It was much darker in the hallway.

“Are you...” Pryor took in the Emperor’s reddened cheeks, and the way he seemed to sway on his feet. “You’re drunk.”

“You,” Wystan’s gaze settled on Castor, “out.”

“You heard the Emperor,” H said darkly.

Castor remained in place, and it was obvious that he was trying to figure out a way he could refuse without risking putting them in a tight spot politically. He’d already been threatened reassignment, probably feared it would happen again and this time the Emperor would actually allow it to.

There were also the other threats made to his person to consider... The ones Wystan had made back in the hospital. When he’d been sober.

Pryor heaved a frustrated sigh. It was too late for this, and he was already at his wit’s end. “He can’t leave.”

Wystan’s look soured. “Are you refusing to comply with a direct order, Detective?”

He blew out another breath and motioned pointedly toward the doorway. “He can’t leave because you’re blocking the only exit, *Majesty*.”

Castor glanced at him, silently questioning whether or not he wanted him to go.

Wystan chuckled, and almost toppled forward again before catching himself a second time. “We’re back to you sneering my title. That’s got to be a good sign, right?”

“What?” He’d spoken so low, there was a good chance Pryor had misheard him.

Wystan stepped inside, moving to press against the wall right by the door. After a moment where his eyes were squeezed tightly shut and he was clearly collecting himself, he looked back at Castor and motioned with his chin for him to go.

“It’s okay,” Pryor said when his friend continued to hesitate. It wasn’t like they could tell the Emperor to get lost. With any luck, he was here to drunkenly complain about the case and Pryor’s attitude, and once he’d said his peace, he’d be on his way.

Pryor just had to get through it, then he could head to bed himself and be done with this shitty day.

Which meant speeding things up so they could reach that point and his head could reach a damn pillow.

“It’s an order,” H unhelpfully reminded them both, and this time Wystan was too busy focusing on evening out his breathing to reprimand him.

Pryor shook his head at the Emperor. What kind of regent got drunk and showed up at a police detective’s door?

“Call me if you need anything,” Castor told him, before stepping into the hall next to H. As soon as the doorway was cleared, the automatic door slid shut, the sound of the lock clicking into place blocking out anything said between the Inspector and the soldier.

“How much did you drink?” Pryor asked once the two of them were alone.

Wystan practically peeled his eyes open, staring at him from beneath hooded lashes. His full mouth pursed in what could only be considered a pout. “Why are you so far away?”

Pryor quirked a brow and glanced at the ten feet of space between them. “I’d hardly call this far, Emperor.”

“I’m not talking about physical distance,” he replied cryptically, then hoisted himself off the wall before his body could manage to slide any further down it. “Where is...?”

“Where is what?” Pryor watched his head swivel around a bit, clearly looking for something.

Finally, the Emperor’s eyes locked on to the couch and he grunted. When he tried to cross the room, his feet knocked against one another and he toppled straight into Pryor.

Pryor caught him but hissed when his forehead whacked sharply against his jaw. Though it was tempting to drop him, he tightened his arms around the Emperor’s narrow waist, cursing as he practically dragged the man over to the couch. Unceremoniously, he dropped him to the white cushions and made to step back only to be stopped by a hand at his wrist.

He glared down at where the Emperor was now holding him, but his anger didn’t seem to deter Wystan.

“Let go.”

Instead, Wystan resituated himself so that he was sprawled across the couch more comfortably. His head had landed on one of the end pillows and the arm rest, so that he was slightly propped up, and he stretched his legs across the length of the couch, taking up as much space as was possible.

Like he had a right to it. Like he belonged.

“This is my room,” Pryor reminded tersely.

“Only for a little while.”

“That doesn’t change the fact it’s mine right now.”

“That means I’m a guest,” he said, the corner of his mouth tipping up in a teasing smile. “You should treat your guest better than this, Detective.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Using his free hand, he ran his fingers through his thick hair, sweeping golden strands off his forehead.

The Emperor’s gaze tracked the move, so intensely that it made Pryor a little uncomfortable.

He caught a whiff of something then, something salty and sweet. Leaning in, he sniffed, pulling back as soon as it was confirmed the smell was coming from the Emperor. “Munchberry whisky.”

A Tiberan drink.

He scowled.

“Have I offended you again?” Wystan drawled. “I seem to do that so very often, despite how hard I’ve tried not to.”



That caught his attention, even though he really wished it hadn't.  
"Have you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I like you," he stated bluntly. "You know I do. I've made that clear."

Pryor felt that familiar locking of his bones and tensing of his muscles. A reaction that seemed to be happening more often when the Emperor was around. He hated that loss of control, that he didn't seem capable of containing his shock when otherwise he was so good at it.

It was part of what made him so fantastic at his job even. A detective needed to have a poker face to get people to talk.

"Imperial's flirt," he ended up saying, wanting to brush this whole topic off and hopeful that in his drunken state Wystan would let him.

Of course he had no such luck.

"Vexans are honest." The Emperor's brow furrowed and his fingers cinched around Pryor's wrist. With little effort, he tugged him closer, not enough to make Pryor feel the pressing urge to yank away, but enough that his knees had to bend to keep him standing.

Wystan searched his face for something for a moment. "You aren't Vexan though."

"No." He had no idea why he was engaging in this at all, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. There was something about the look in Wystan's eyes, the way the colors seemed to swirl and expand and suck him in, similar to how the night sky did.

"Tell me you're a liar." It didn't sound like an order. It sounded like a plea. "Pryor Oro," he practically breathed his name, testing it much like he had that first time he'd said it. "Tell me you're a liar."

He should refuse, partly because this whole thing was nuts, and partly because giving in to the Emperor's whims in any way shape, or form couldn't be good for him in the long run. And yet...

"I am," he found himself admitting, oddly feeling like a weight was lifting off his chest, even if it was the smallest of all the ones he was currently carrying. "I'm a liar."

Wystan grinned, seeming all too satisfied. His eyes drifted shut, but his hold never loosened. "Yes, that's right. You are. You're a liar. I knew it."

"You're drunk," he said back dumbly.

“That is also very true.”

The Emperor was drunk, and had shown up here to...confess he had a crush? While also calling him names? Just this afternoon, it'd seemed like the man could barely look at him, and now...

“I have no idea what is going on,” he admitted, only to receive another chuckle in response.

“That seems to be a long-standing habit of yours,” Wystan told him, his words starting to grow further apart.

“Hey.” Pryor wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but it was obvious the Emperor was already drifting off. He grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him. “Hey. You can't sleep here.”

“Liar.” With more strength than Pryor thought he could manage in his drunken state, the Emperor tugged him down.

He stopped himself with a hand on the edge of the couch, near Wystan's head, but only just. The top half of his body hovered a few inches above the Emperor's, his captured wrist now pressed to the center of his chest in a vice-like grip Pryor was unsure he'd be able to break free from.

“Why Pryor Oro?”

“What?” he asked distractedly. This close, he could practically taste the salty-sweet liquor on the Emperor's breath.

Wystan ran his thumb lightly over the side of Pryor's wrist. “It's okay,” his voice lowered to the point that Pryor had to tip his ear and lean in even closer just to make out what he was saying, “you can continue being a liar. If that's what you want, it's what I want too.”

“I don't—” Pryor frowned down at the now sleeping Emperor. “Damn it.”

His arm was starting to burn from holding himself up, but when he tried to free his wrist, he couldn't budge, even with Wystan unconscious. Too exhausted to bother torturing himself over whatever the hell had just passed between them, Pryor gave in and lowered down so that he could at least curl up against the side of the couch.

Resting his head against the curve of the arm still clutched against the Emperor's chest, he allowed his gaze to take him in.

Wystan had thick, dark brows that arched over almond-shaped eyes, and a sharp jawline that led to ears that had several piercings in them. He counted the tiny silver and black ball studs, watching them wink in the overhead lighting that he hadn't had the chance to turn off.

“You’re clearly unhinged,” Pryor said softly, “but you’re...” he wanted to say gorgeous, but caught himself, “fascinating, I’ll give you that.”

And *he* was exhausted, more so than he’d even realized. He’d planned on waiting it out and trying to remove himself later on, but instead, he found his body slowly easing, the day’s tension slipping from him so that his mind began to settle and his eyes began to shut of their own accord.

It wasn’t like this position was very comfortable. If anything, he’d probably sleep for a half hour or so and wake again. Maybe by then Wystan would be in a deep enough sleep that he could separate himself from him and head to his room.

Yeah. That would work.

Plan decided, Pryor finally allowed himself to give in and relax fully.

Besides, since he was such a good liar, no one had to know he’d slept next to the Emperor. Wystan was too drunk to wake and probably wouldn’t remember any of this anyway.

Comforted by that thought, he dozed off, the familiar scent of salty and sweet mixed with sharp citrus lulling him into peaceful oblivion.

## Chapter 10:

“Wake up.”

Pryor groaned and rolled over, tugging the pillow beneath his head free so he could resituate it over his right ear. There were few things he hated more than being woken up by anything other than the annoying beep of an alarm. Since his hadn't gone off yet, that meant he should have more time to sleep, and whoever it was who was bothering him now needed to—

“Go away,” he practically growled, curling in on himself beneath the thick blanket.

“Still not a morning person I see.” Whoever it was tugged the pillow free and tossed it out of reach, then bent down so that Pryor felt their breath hot against the curve of his ear. “I’ve let you sleep as long as I could, but it’s time to wake up, Detective. We’re going to be late.”

Pryor bated him away, frustration growing when he received an amused chuckle in response. “I have a few more minutes.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Alarm.” Why was this person still talking to him?

“Oh, that? I turned it off hours ago.”

“What?!” Pryor snapped into a seated position so quickly the other person had to step away to avoid being head-butted. He blinked, needing a moment for his vision to clear and his head to stop spinning before his gaze finally settled on the person who’d been bothering him. “What are you doing here?”

The Emperor adjusted one of his cuff links, the corner of his mouth tipping upward. “I spent the night, don’t you recall?”

Pryor blinked at him, then down at the couch where he was currently sitting. Shit. That was right, Wystan had shown up drunk and the two of them had fallen asleep here. Only...Hadn't he been on the floor and the Emperor been the one on the couch? And, where had the blanket come from? He ran his fingers over the silky blue material, confused.

“Good, looks like you remember now.”

Pryor frowned at him. “What are you still doing here?”

“Waiting for you, obviously.”

“Where did you get those clothes?” He realized the suit Wystan was wearing definitely wasn’t the outfit he’d arrived in last night. Instead, it was a navy three-piece with silver pinstripes. It was a bit more like something worn by an upper-class businessman than an Emperor.

“I had them delivered. Why? You don’t like it?” Wystan held out his arms as if to supply Pryor with a better view.

He grunted and looked away, trying to hide the fact that, for some reason, he was suddenly embarrassed. Tossing the blanket off, he rose to his feet and stretched his arms above his head, working out some of the kinks he’d developed from, first sleeping on the floor, and then on the couch.

Trying not to think of the fact the Emperor had been the one to lift him and give him the blanket, he spun on his heels and headed for the bedroom.

“Dress nicely!” Wystan called after him but was promptly ignored.

Pryor didn’t exactly know what to say. This whole situation had him for a loop. What possible reason could the Emperor have for sticking around and not simply leaving as soon as he was up?

“Pryor—”

“Yeah, yeah,” he waved over his shoulder and kept going. “I got it. Fine.”

It was not fine. None of this was fine.

Especially not the way his heart seemed to want to flutter.

\* \* \*

“What is this?” Pryor took a long look around the rooftop sitting area. It stretched across the top of the building, placing them high enough they had a vast view of the city below and the pale stretch of blue sky above.

“Have you never been to a restaurant before, Detective?” Wystan said, unbuttoning his suit jacket before lowering into the silver chair across the small square table from Pryor.

It was a small table too, pressed against the side of the glass wall that surrounded the rooftop. Though there were at least three dozen other tables just like it, some of which were also occupied, it still managed to come off intimate somehow.

Would both of their legs even fit beneath the table?

“Are you planning on standing there forever?” the Emperor asked a second before a glimmer entered his multi-colored eyes. “Or are you waiting for me to pull the chair out for you? I’ll be—”

Pryor dropped into his seat just as Wystan began to rise from his, prompting another chuckle from the Emperor’s full lips. “What are we doing here?”

“Have you—”

“I’ve had breakfast before,” Pryor cut him off, “and we can stop with the lame jokes now, thanks.”

The Emperor sat back in his seat but didn’t argue.

Sure enough, their knees did, in fact, rub up against one another.

To avoid having to look at him, Pryor searched the small surface area of the table, frowning when there was nothing to be found aside from a couple of napkins. “Where are the menus?”

“You’re full of questions today, you know that?” Wystan shrugged when Pryor glared at him and replied, “We don’t need them. I already ordered ahead when I placed the reservation this morning.”

He’d placed it this morning?

“If this is you trying to be apologetic for showing up wasted last night—”

“It isn’t,” this time it was Wystan’s turn to cut him off. “I have nothing to be sorry for in that regard. I just wanted to take you out. Can’t I?”

“No.”

“Well,” some of the mirth on his face faded, but not all, “it’s good for me that I’m the Emperor here and you aren’t.”

A waiter with a large silver tray balanced on one shoulder came weaving through the other tables toward them.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Wystan told Pryor, “trust me.”

“I’m not the one with the trust issues here, *majesty*.” Why he brought it up was beyond him, but then, he wasn’t really sure what he was doing seated at a five-star restaurant with Wystan Aurelius either. “Aren’t I meant to be on lockdown, by the way?”

“When you’re not with me, sure,” he replied absently, more concerned with pointing out where the waiter should deposit the five dishes

he'd brought over. It seemed as though there was a very specific way he wanted them placed, with three of them ending up closer to Pryor.

Vexans weren't considered early risers, with most of their days beginning mid-morning. Because of this, their breakfasts tended to be on the lighter side, since it was closer to lunchtime, and most of the foods set before them now were smaller morsels doled out on fancy white plates trimmed in gold.

Pryor frowned as he took the dishes in, annoyed with himself for not bothering to learn more about the food customs of the Olympus. He knew enough to get by, but not enough to know for certain if what was placed before him was common.

"Are these the typical dishes?" he asked, unable to hold in the curiosity. Lifting his fork, he stabbed into one of the nearest ones, spearing a browned ball of dough. A fine layer of opaque green sugar coating cracked and flaked off as he brought it up to his mouth. The familiar taste of intense sweetness with a hint of melon and butter burst across his tongue, sparking a memory he'd long since buried.

*"Don't cry," a boy, probably one or two years older than him, urged before dropping down next to him on the stone step. He held out a paper bag, shaking it once to get Pryor's attention. Within the bag were half a dozen or so tiny dough balls. "Here. Have one. You'll feel a lot better once you do. Trust me."*

"They're popular amongst children," Wystan said, cutting into Pryor's thought.

"Trying to call me childish, Emperor?" He clucked his tongue and stabbed his fork into another dish nearby, this one light pink. Custard oozed out, the smell somewhat akin to burnt vanilla. "Not sure you can say anything of the sort, all things considered."

"And what exactly are you considering, Detective?"

"I've been here before," he confessed instead of answering. Leaning back in his chair, Pryor stared out over the city, enjoying the light breeze that blew by and the way it wafted the smell of food toward him.

"To this restaurant?" It was obvious he knew what he meant, but when Pryor glanced at him, Wystan was busily picking at one of the plates in front of him.

He rolled his eyes, but couldn't hold back the curve of his lips. "To Olympus. I came here once when I was a kid. Pretty sure I had these then."

He motioned to the greenish dough balls.

Wystan stilled, but the moment was so brief, Pryor couldn't be sure if he'd made the whole thing up or not.

"Did you try anything else during your visit?" They'd been given drinks as well, and Wystan reached for his, bringing the glass to his lips.

The contents were the same color as coffee, and curious, Pryor followed suit, surprised to find the drink tasted more like star nuts, a type of nut from his homeworld. It was deep and rich, with a hint of salt at the very end. Pleasing.

And also familiar.

"I've had this as well." He twirled the contents of his glass, mostly to give him some time to collect his thoughts. He'd tried to put his visit here from his mind, tried not to allow it to creep up on him, even if the trip hadn't been all bad. His reasoning for coming to the Olympus had been, and that was more than enough for him to wish he could cut the whole experience out the way one cut away rotting fruit.

"Did you come to visit someone?" Wystan asked. "Family maybe?"

He shook his head. "I don't have ties to anyone on this World Ship. If I did, it would have been in my file, and you would have known about it."

"A file only contains what was once written down," he disagreed. "If someone doesn't want something recorded, there are ways to ensure it won't be."

Pryor sighed. "And there's that distrust again. What exactly are you suspicious of, Emperor? It's getting hard for me to follow."

"Should I state it plainly then?"

"Please."

Wystan seemed to think it over before, "No."

Pryor quirked a brow.

"I don't want to." The Emperor popped another morsel into his mouth and chewed, maintaining eye contact all the while.

Exasperated, Pryor dropped his fork down with a clatter that drew the attention of some people seated nearby. To avoid them listening in, he leaned forward, propping his elbows on the edge of the table.

"What is this?" he demanded. "Why does it always feel like you're playing with me?"

"Do you want me to play with you, Detective?"

"Stop with the sarcasm."



“I wasn’t being sarcastic.”

Pryor opened his mouth, almost cussed, but caught himself and exhaled slowly instead. “Forget it. I don’t care anymore.”

Wystan cocked his head. “Does that mean I can show up at your door more often?”

“Why? Were you planning on doing that anyway?” The Emperor’s silence was answer enough, and Pryor felt another wave of uncertainty course through him. “I’m not that interesting, I can assure you. If you’re doing this because you’re bored—”

“We’ve had this discussion already,” Wystan waved his comment off.

“Fine.” After a moment, Pryor went back to eating. “Why’d you drink last night?”

“A personal question?” he sounded pleased.

“We could talk about the case instead if you’d prefer,” Pryor stated, knowing the Emperor wouldn’t want to.

“I love talking about myself,” Wystan said. “Unlike you, I’ve very aware of how interesting I am.”

“Well?”

“I got drunk because I was upset.”

“About?”

“You.”

Pryor snorted. “Because of the case? Erix is a hotheaded idiot, but he’s not a murderer. He’ll be cleared soon enough and then I can get us back on track. There’s nothing to worry about where the case is concerned. Besides, shouldn’t *I* be the one getting drunk because of that?”

“You sound confident.”

“I am.”

“Even though things don’t always work out the way we want them to?”

Pryor met his gaze. “They do for me.”

“Have they always?”

No. “Does that matter?”

“I wasn’t upset because of Erix,” Wystan brought them back on topic. “I said you were the reason, and I meant that.”

“Please don’t tell me this is about—”

“Your comments about Rune. Yeah.”

Pryor's hand gripped the handle of his fork tightly, but he held himself composed otherwise, not wanting to give anything away. Maybe if he appeared nonchalant about the whole thing, the Emperor would finally drop it.

"I'm sorry that you had to find out your theory was incorrect," he began, keeping his tone even, "but getting to the truth is why I'm here. I wasn't going to cater to you when I knew for a fact you were wrong."

"I could be," Wystan surprised him by agreeing, before following it with, "partly."

Pryor's questioning look was enough to have the Emperor elaborating.

"It's true Rune most likely has nothing to do with what's happened here," he admitted. "But that doesn't mean I believe he's dead. I don't."

"You saw the death certificate," he said dumbly.

"It was faked."

"You don't—"

"I do."

"You can't—"

"I can."

Pryor sat back and ground his teeth. "All right."

"That's it?"

"What more do you want me to say?" He just wanted this conversation over. If that meant giving the Emperor the last word, fine. He could live with that. It was just about the only outcome he could live with, in fact, because this was dangerous territory, and he wanted to stop before he accidentally stumbled onto a landmine.

"I want you to say you're a liar," Wystan's voice dipped low, and there was an edge there that it'd been lacking up to this point.

It put Pryor on even more guard than his actual words did, and he didn't like the feeling. Seeing as how they'd mostly picked the plates clean, he thought now was the perfect time to put an end to breakfast and get out of there.

His ass had barely left the seat before Wystan was shooting out of his. The Emperor planted his hand over his where it was resting on the table, trapping him in place.

"What do you think you're doing?" Pryor demanded, painfully aware that they had the attention of those nearby now. People recognized

their Emperor, so had already been stealing glances, and Pryor hadn't helped when he'd lost his temper with the fork earlier but...He risked a look over Wystan's shoulder and grimaced.

Oh yeah. There were definitely going to be rumors about this later.

"What's the news like here?" he asked, momentarily forgetting he was mad. His mental well-being relied heavily on avoiding the spotlight. Unless it was work-related, he wanted nothing to do with public acknowledgment. The idea of people recognizing and knowing his face... "Let go."

Wystan didn't seem to have the same problem, not bothering to spare the onlookers any attention at all. Instead, he leaned in closer across the small table. "Why? Afraid to be splashed all over the tabloids?"

Pryor's eyes went wide, but he shoved down the wave of very real fear that actually did cause him and bit out, "It'll interfere with the investigation."

The Emperor pretended to think this over. "A half-truth. That's certainly a reason, but it's not *the* reason, is it."

He felt the fear twist until there was a heavy block of panic seemingly sitting on his chest.

"Don't worry," Wystan said, "I won't let them publish anything, and no one up here has access to a camera. Do you think I didn't consider that before bringing you here? I wouldn't put you at risk like that, Pryor."

"You mean the case," he corrected automatically.

"No," he gave a single curt shake of his head, "I mean *you*. Now, if you want to stop drawing their attention, sit back down."

Pryor hesitated, but in the end, there wasn't really an option to refuse. Making a big show of it, he dropped back down into his seat, raising a brow pointedly to silently ask if Wystan was happy once he had.

The Emperor remained standing. He speared his fork into the last piece of the greenish dough and offered it up to Pryor. "Here. Have one. You'll feel a lot better once you do."

He snatched the fork and popped it in his mouth, chewing in annoyance.

Before the statement resonated, repeating in his head over and over as if his brain were trying to work through a problem conscious Pryor hadn't even been aware was there.

The fork suddenly felt like lead in his hand, the food in his mouth dry and tasting like sawdust. Even though it was the last thing he wanted to do, his eyes found Wystan's, and he searched his expression, trying to convince himself that he was wrong and just being paranoid.

Those words weren't exactly uncommon. It didn't mean—

"Trust me," Wystan said, smiling softly when Pryor sucked in a breath.

No, there was no way the *Emperor* was the same boy Pryor had met on the Olympus years ago. It wasn't possible. He needed to say something, anything, to change the topic before he showed his hand even more than he already had. Before the questions really began and he lost control and blurted out something he would regret.

He had to—

"Forgive me, majesty." H was at the side of the table, head bowed, and Pryor had no idea when the man had arrived or how long he'd been standing there.

"This is very bad timing," Wystan warned, and it sounded more like a threat than anything.

"I'm sorry, but you ordered me to alert you the second the autopsy report came in," H told him.

For a moment, Wystan continued to stare at Pryor, but it was impossible to tell what he was waiting for, or if he was even waiting for anything at all.

Finally, he exhaled and turned to the guard. "Well?"

"The coroner has concluded the death was a homicide," H explained.

"No way." Pryor stood once more. "Erix didn't kill him."

"No," H confirmed, silencing Pryor with that single word.

"What caused his death?" Wystan asked.

"Poison."

Pryor pursed his lips. Erix had hit him, but there was no way he'd also poisoned him. There'd be nothing to gain from it, no motive. Which meant—

"Shit," both he and the Emperor swore at the same time, and almost as one they both whipped out their multi-slates.

"Castor, get in touch with Ko Gemina's wife. Stall her," Pryor ordered the second the Inspector picked up the call.

Next to him, Wystan barked out his own orders. "Contact the Hades police and send them to the Ko household immediately!"

"What's going on?" Castor asked, only to have Pryor end the call.

There wasn't time to explain.

"Let's go," Wystan told him, breakfast officially over.

"Hades?" Pryor followed close behind as H led them both across the rooftop.

"Yes."

"If your men aren't quick, Ko's wife could get away, and take any remaining evidence with her." He ran a hand through his hair in aggravation. "It's a two-day trip."

Wystan shot him a look over his shoulder. "Then we better pick up the pace, Detective.

## Chapter 11:

Pryor answered the knock on the door already dreading who it might be. Sure enough, as soon as it whooshed open to show the Emperor standing out in the hall, he found himself rolling his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” They were on board the Royal Lantern, a large speed train owned by the Imperial family. It was the fastest way to get them from Abraxas to Hades, and they were a day into their trip. Outside the windows of the sleeper cabin Pryor had been assigned, he could see make out the night sky.

Wordlessly, Wystan pushed past him, entering the small room without invitation. He dropped down onto the edge of one of the beds, if it could even be considered that.

There were two in total, tiny single-person cots at either side of the room, screwed into the wall. Between them, a small table sat before one of the three-paneled windows. Pryor's tablet was on and resting on the opposite cot where he'd just been preparing to sleep.

“This is a private room, Emperor,” Pryor said between clenched teeth, though he slid the door shut and flicked the lock into place. He lay down on his bed, staring up at the ceiling sightlessly while he waited for Wystan to explain what he was doing here.

He hadn't seen the Emperor since breakfast, the two of them branching off to deal with separate matters as soon as they'd stepped foot onto the train. He'd been working diligently with Castor, going over all of the information they'd collected on the case so far and the Inspector had only just left moments before Wystan's impromptu arrival.

“I suppose no one told you that we're roommates for this trip,” Wystan finally said, voice soft as he sprawled out more comfortably on the cot. “There aren't many cabins on this train.”

Pryor sat up. “Then I can go stay with Castor—”

The Emperor's leg shot out, blocking the exit pointedly. “Stay, Detective. I promise I won't bite. Unless,” he grinned at him wolfishly, “you're into that sort of thing.”

A tiny thrill skittered down Pryor's spine and he settled back down onto his cot quickly, not wanting the other man to see his reaction.

The cabin was barely big enough to fit three people, yet here the two of them were, cramped and crowded. Already, the Emperor's particular scent was starting to permeate the air, making it hard for Pryor to focus. He wasn't sure why he was experiencing this sudden reaction toward Wystan, but he didn't like it and he wished it would stop.

Playing into the Emperor's flirtations was a dangerous game he couldn't afford. No matter how enticing he looked with his suit collar tugged open and the first four buttons of his dress shirt undone.

"I'm too exhausted for your antics tonight, Emperor," Pryor admitted, surprised when Wystan hummed in understanding.

"All right, a normal conversation then." He turned and rested on his cot as well, so that they were both lying flat. "Talk to me. Tell me why you became a detective."

"Why do you want to know?"

Wystan shrugged. "Call it mild curiosity."

He debated whether or not to keep silent but...It couldn't hurt, and he doubted sleep was an option now that the Emperor was there with him. At least this would pass the time.

"It was the only place that would take me," he said, thinking back on those dark days when he'd been a teen struggling to get by. "I applied to pretty much every place that didn't require station or a degree to enter. The academy offered room and board, as well as three hot meals a day for all of their trainees. I passed the fitness and aptitude tests on the first try and the rest is history."

"So it was pure chance." Wystan sounded like maybe he was a little disappointed by this.

Pryor didn't understand why, but he found that irked him. He didn't like the idea of the Emperor thinking he'd settled for this job purely out of convenience and didn't take it seriously.

"If that's all it was, I most likely would have quit by now," Pryor pointed out. "It's not exactly an easy job. But I like it. I've liked it since the first year of classes ended. Working for the I.P.F, knowing that I help keep the universe safe...There's something really great about that." It made him feel useful.

"It gives you a purpose."

He blinked and glanced over at the Emperor, but Wystan was busy watching light splay across the ceiling, dancing and twisting as the train sped past streetlamps outside.

“What about you?” Pryor asked and the corner of Wystan's lips twisted up.

“Why am I the Emperor? I didn't have a choice, amazingly enough.”

“No,” he grunted, then hesitated before reiterating, “What gives you purpose?”

Wystan scratched lightly at the side of his neck. “I'm not sure. Doing what's best for my people, I suppose.”

“And what is that?”

“I'm not sure.” He laughed then finally turned his head and caught Pryor's eye. “Perhaps I haven't found it yet.”

The Emperor's eyes were like dark chasms in the dimmed lighting of the cabin, glittering shocking bursts of blues and greens and golds every time light spilled in through the windows.

“Haven't found?” Pryor could probably get lost in those colors forever without even realizing it.

The Emperor grinned. “My purpose, Detective.”

“Right.” He forced himself to look away, embarrassed.

“I think we all have something that keeps us going,” Wystan said then, “something special to us.”

“Are you actively searching for that something?” He mostly talking now just to cover up the fact he'd been caught staring, barely aware of the words spewing from his mouth.

“I was,” he said softly. “But I don't think I need to anymore.”

Pryor frowned, not sure what he meant by that, but didn't get the chance to ask.

“You like helping people?” Wystan watched him closely.

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“I like long walks on the beach and rainy days and telling annoying emperors to shut up,” he drawled.

“I'm just trying to get to know you better, Detective,” he didn't sound the least bit offended. “Would you like to ask me something instead?”



“No.” Well... “Why are you bothering with this case? You don't have to get involved. No one would hold it against you. Most Imperials stay out of things like this.”

Wystan was quiet a moment. “There's something I need to see through. And with Tibera involved, I know how important solving this is.”

“You're bored,” he guessed, not because he didn't believe him, but because he wanted to poke fun.

Wystan chuckled. “Yes, Detective. I was bored. But I'm not anymore.”

Pryor didn't have to look to know that the Emperor was still staring at him. Clearing his throat, he rolled onto his side, giving him his back. “We should get some sleep. I have a lot of work to do tomorrow before we reach Hades.”

“Isn't it cold though?” The sound of rustling fabric came from where the Wystan was. “Why don't we share and—”

“Goodnight, Emperor.”

The rustling stilled and he laughed lightly. For a second, Pryor was worried he was going to push it, but then he heard the other man settle back down onto the creaky cot.

“Goodnight, Detective.”

\* \* \*

Pryor spent most of the time the next day in the cabin. He'd used the holo setting on the table to spread out digital sheets with notes and information sprawled across them.

They'd, unfortunately, overlooked one very important detail, and he was beating himself up over that fact now.

“Here,” Castor handed an open can of Vexan coffee—incredibly strong stuff with a hint of bourbon and cherry at the end—over Pryor's shoulder, “you haven't had anything to eat or drink in over twelve hours.”

“Did you see this?” Pryor took the can and absently sipped at it before setting it down on top of one of the less useful hologram pages. “Why didn't Fir take this into consideration?”

“I did.” Castor sighed and dropped down onto the edge of the bed, planting his elbows on his knees so he could lean in over the table and view

everything. “It’s a mistake, but also one you can’t really blame him for. How was he supposed to know it was the wife he should be looking into?”

Ko Gemina’s wife had been married once before. To a Tiberan.

“Ko Hiar paid a lot of money to have that information buried,” Castor continued, “including from her husband. The poor guy. Despite it being against Vexan custom, he took his wife’s last name to honor her Uxa heritage, all the while not knowing that another bastard out there had taken it first.”

“Being divorced isn’t a sin,” Pryor said. “Especially not to the Vexans. She had to have kept it a secret for another reason, something that had nothing to do with protecting her current husband’s pride.”

“You’re right,” he agreed. “You’re thinking that it’s to cover up her connections to Tibera?”

He nodded.

“Which also means she’d have to have reason to want to do that.” Castor hummed in thought and steeped his fingers beneath his chin. “Fortunately she’s currently in custody, so we’ll get the chance to interrogate her and find out for sure, but taking everything at face value, it appears as though she’s been working with someone and using Ko Gemina in the process.”

“If she is the one who killed him, she must have poisoned her husband to keep us from looking further into things.” Pryor ran a hand through his hair, frustration growing. “But that was stupid of her. We might not have looked into her at all if not for Gemina’s sudden death.”

“Perhaps she wasn’t thinking clearly,” Castor suggested. “Fear has a tendency to do that to a person, strip them of all common thought and reason.”

Pryor glanced over to find his partner staring at him intensely. “What?”

Castor opened his mouth, but before he could get a word out, a knock on the door followed by it swiftly sliding open interrupted him.

Wystan stood in the hall with both hands in his front pockets. Last night, Pryor hadn’t noticed he was still wearing the suit he’d had on the other day when they’d gone to breakfast. Now, his hair was damp, a clear indicator he’d taken a shower.

Eventually, the two of them had fallen asleep, and he’d woken this morning to find the other cot empty. The odd urge to go and find the

Emperor had taken Pryor off guard, and in retaliation against it, he'd poured himself into his work, refusing to even take a single step out of the cabin.

Unable to help himself, Pryor asked, "What? No time to pack a spare change of clothes?"

The corner of his mouth tipped up at the comment, though the weariness in his gaze remained.

Had the Emperor been awake this entire time?

"Unfortunately my subordinates didn't think ahead like yours did," Wystan said, motioning with his chin at the clean set Pryor was wearing.

Castor had packed their bags in a hurry as soon as he'd gotten word they'd be headed to Hades.

"We're about to reach our destination," he told them next. "The two of you should collect your things and get ready. We'll head straight to the Hades main police station where they've got Ko Hiar in custody."

"What about Erix and Fir?" Castor asked.

"They've been released and are waiting there as well. They've been told not to begin the interrogation until Pryor has arrived."

It was a massive waste of time, but Pryor had agreed to it. There was still unease surrounding Erix and his involvement with the Ko's. Whether or not the beating had been the cause of Ko Gemina's death, it'd still been against protocol and a shitty thing to do. No one on the Hades police team would trust Erix in the same room as Ko Hiar, and Pryor couldn't blame them.

He didn't trust Erix there either.

But that was neither here nor there.

Pryor waved a hand over the surface of the table, and the digital files all flooded into a small black square at the bottom right corner. He unplugged the tiny device and connected it to his multi-slate as he turned toward the door where Castor was already waiting with their bags.

He'd only managed to pack one for each of them, with only two sets of clothes to change into. Still...It was more than the Emperor's people had managed, which Pryor couldn't help but find a bit strange. They should be used to Wystan having to leave at a moment's notice.

The room they'd been given wasn't far from the exit, and they got there just as the train began to slow. As soon as it'd stopped, the doors opened with a whoosh, and a blast of hot air blew into their faces.

“I can see why you call it Hades,” Castor said between coughs, waving his hand in front of his face as if that would help. Not only was it humid, the smell was a mixture of oil and tar, intense and gag-worthy. Even though this was a private train, it still had to dock at the same station as the rest traveling there.

The station was located in the heart of Hades, with only a single track separating the Royal Lantern from the publicly used trains. The false sky above them was a pale blue, indicating they’d arrived midday, and when they stepped off, it was obvious from the way people on the other side were hurrying that it was winding toward the end of lunchtime.

“Everyone’s rushing back to work,” Pryor noted when Wystan stepped onto the platform next to him. He scanned their surroundings, a sense of unease working its way through him. “Are you sure this is safe? There are a lot of people around.” And there were only a half dozen royal guards with them.

It was an odd reaction—hadn’t the Emperor traveled into the overly populated marketplace to find him upon their first meeting? That should have been proof he was safe amongst his people. And yet, Pryor couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right.

“Worried for me?” Wystan leaned in and whispered against the curve of his ear, causing Pryor to bat him away.

As soon as his arm lifted and he made the motion, one of the guards took a threatening step closer.

Wystan held up a hand to stop him and chuckled. “See? Everything is under control, Detective.”

“Says the guy in the same suit as two days ago.” It was all he could do, to try and push aside his apprehension by smothering it in snide humor.

They took a private hovercar to the Hades police, a short fifteen-minute drive from the train station that passed too quickly for Pryor’s liking. It’d been a long while since he’d felt this sort of discomfort, and try as he might, he couldn’t quite put his finger on what was causing it.

There were no indicators that he should be worried about anything. So far, their trip had gone without a hitch, and even H, who was typically tightly wound, seemed calm and collected at the Emperor’s side.

Their group was already halfway up the twenty stone steps that led to the entrance to the building when it finally hit Pryor what was going on. He came to an abrupt halt, pressing a hand over his chest with a frown.

His heart was beating way too fast. The change had been subtle at first, so much so he hadn't noticed and had mistaken it for anxiety. He'd had coffee this morning, but that had been hours ago—no, he recalled Castor telling him earlier that he actually hadn't had anything since yesterday. Not that it really mattered, caffeine wouldn't cause this type of reaction in him.

"Detective?" Wystan had noticed he'd fallen behind and turned. He was only a few steps ahead, and quickly came back down when he didn't get an immediate response. "What is it?"

Pryor shook his head, still trying to figure out what it could be. Usually, a little change in his body wouldn't concern him but...This felt a lot like a symptom he used to experience as a kid, and even though it'd been years ago, he was pretty sure he was reacting to it the way one would with PTSD.

"Hey," Castor turned now and saw them, "what's going on?"

"Detective?" Wystan reached for him, and instinctually, Pryor took a step back, momentarily forgetting where they were.

His foot missed and he slipped, but before he could fall, Wystan was there grabbing onto his arm. He was pulled flush against the Emperor, his forehead smacking into his chest.

Wystan bent some and cupped his cheek so that he could stare down at him. His gaze swept across the expanse of Pryor's face, brow furrowed in concern. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted, voice low and slightly raspy. "My chest feels tight."

He pulled his chin out of Wystan's grasp when he went to get a better hold on him. He was in the process of following the move up with a glare when movement caught his eye.

A man had crossed the street and was now walking toward them. There wasn't anything particularly interesting about him, he was dressed casually in blue overalls and a black long-sleeved shirt. His head was tipped down and he had a cap pulled low over his eyes, hands in front pockets.

It was only because Pryor was already watching that he noticed the slight change when it came over the man. His shoulders tensed and he came to a sudden stop fifteen or so feet away from them.

It took a split second to register the item pulled from the man's pocket as a weapon, and Pryor didn't even get the chance to shout a

warning. Acting on instinct, he shoved Wystan away, just as the sound of a gunshot boomed. The bullet sliced through the side of his right arm, and he hissed, dropping to the ground on all fours.

His face scraped against the edge of a step, but he was too focused on the burn from the gunshot wound to care much at the moment.

Around him, everyone else was going frantic, the royal guards already chasing and detaining the shooter. Castor was among them, helping to take the shooter down by leaping onto his back. It would have been a comical sight if not for the fact Pryor's vision was blurry.

"Pryor!" Wystan hoisted him up and into his lap with ease, panic ringing in his voice. "Pryor!"

"Shh," he hissed, gripping his injury as best he could, though he was pretty sure only the tips of his fingers managed to cover it. "Staunch the bleeding."

Wystan planted his entire palm against the hole, pulling Pryor in closer against him with the move. "You idiot."

Pryor laughed, but the sound ended on a groan of pain. "It's fine. Better me than you. The gunshot wound isn't the problem. My chest feels tight and it's getting harder to breathe."

"Stop talking. The ambulance is on its way. Just focus on staying conscious and—"

"Sorry, majesty," Pryor grunted, "too late for that."

The last thing he registered before passing out was the Emperor tucking his head beneath his chin as he cradled him.

## Chapter 12:

“He’s making a commotion, majesty.” H glanced nervously over his shoulder toward the sealed door to the hospital room. Through the thick material, voices could be heard arguing, only growing in volume with each passing second.

Wystan had spent far too much time in hospitals since Pryor’s arrival and was in no mood to deal with the Inspector’s temper tantrum. With a flick of his wrist, he motioned for H to leave and deal with it, leaning forward to prop his elbows on his spread knees as the soldier left.

The voices receded.

“Am I going to have to lock you up just to keep you safe?” he murmured, tipping his head to watch the steady rise and fall of Pryor’s chest.

He was asleep, resting on the hospital bed, hooked up to yet another machine. The bullet had fortunately sailed past him, though the injury on the side of his arm was bad enough he’d needed over twenty stitches. They’d kept Pryor sedated for it, and he’d yet to wake. But that was the least of Wystan’s concerns.

That wasn’t nearly enough to have caused Pryor to pass out. A full-body scan had been ordered, much to the Inspector’s chagrin, and a discovery had been made.

Pryor’s bridmula was filled with nano-tech. And it was malfunctioning.

The organ was producing too much fluid, and it was building up inside of him. The doctor said they needed to monitor him for a few more hours because there were times when a Tiberan got ill and this happened, and in those cases, the body always fixed itself.

But the doctor didn’t know what Wystan knew, couldn’t tell him what the nano-tech had been placed there to accomplish. He didn’t understand just how important that tech inside of Pryor was.

Whenever Wystan replayed the shooting, considered how he’d almost lost him...His hands clenched so tightly his knuckles went bone

white.

Their attacker had already been caught and was currently undergoing interrogation at the Hades police station. Wystan had sent a couple of his personnel there as well to oversee and make sure things ran smoothly.

He wanted answers, and he wasn't going to be satisfied until he got them.

The door behind him slid open, and he turned his head to find the doctor entering.

Doctor Tuz was holding a tablet in his hands and he paused at Wystan's side. "I've got good news. It looks like as of five minutes ago, the patient is completely stable."

Wystan took a look at the screen, wanting to see for himself.

"Whatever damages the tech inside of him underwent, it appears to have mended. The nanobots are working properly once more and filtering the organ the way they should. Aside from some lingering discomfort and soreness for the next couple of hours, he should be back to normal." Tuz cleared his throat, and divulged, "I've never seen technology exactly like this before, Emperor. It appears as though it was Vexan made, however—"

"I'll have to cut you off there, doctor." Wystan gave him a pointed stare. "We're dipping into classified information. So long as you don't need to know more in order to treat him, I would suggest you refrain from discussing things better left unspoken."

He wouldn't risk outing the detective, not to others, in any case. He also didn't like the idea of knowledge of M.I.C.E getting around and possibly getting in the way of the investigation.

"Of course," he bobbed his head. "I won't say a word to anyone. Only I and the one lab tech you allowed in the room know anything about this."

"Please be prepared to sign a non-disclosure agreement."

"Whatever you wish, Emperor." He turned the tablet off then and motioned toward Pryor. "In any case, this is fantastic news. Proof that he's capable of stabilizing on his own. There's no need for continued observation at the hospital. Though, I advise you to keep a close personal eye on him for the next twenty-four hours or so. You'll notice if his bridmula stops functioning properly again."

"And if it doesn't within that timeframe?"



“He should be in the clear.”

“What about my other question?” Wystan had ordered an inspection of the tech, though anything short of cutting Pryor open to remove some—which he would absolutely not allow—wouldn’t glean them much. It was good that they knew it had come from the Olympus, that was already proof enough, but he wanted all that he could get.

He needed to arm himself for when the detective undoubtedly tried to deny everything.

“The most I can tell you is it’s been there for a while,” the doctor said.

“What about twelve years?” Wystan asked, holding his breath while the doctor contemplated the possibility.

“That seems likely,” he finally said, “but I can’t be certain.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Wystan glanced back over to Pryor. He had him now. “Please start the release paperwork. As soon as he’s awake, we’ll be leaving.”

“Of course, majesty.” Tuz bowed low and then backed up to the door, making sure it was tightly closed behind him.

Wystan took a moment to assess how he was currently feeling. On the one hand, it was highly unlikely now that he’d been mistaken all this time. On the other...It left a bad taste in his mouth, knowing that Pryor had gone to such great lengths to remain hidden, even in front of him.

How much did the Inspector know? He didn’t like the idea of Pryor confiding in someone else, even if that meant things would have been easier for him all these years. No, he should be hopeful that Castor did know.

He liked imagining the detective alone even less. His jealousy was misplaced.

“You scowl too much,” Pryor’s grumbled words captured his attention. “Not exactly the picture of gratitude I was hoping to wake up to.”

Wystan moved to help Pryor into a seated position when the detective went to do it on his own. “Careful.”

Pryor rotated his shoulder and turned his bandaged arm. “How’s it look?”

“It shouldn’t scar.” Wystan remained on his feet, staring down at him. There was a light sheen of sweat on Pryor’s brow, and even though his main injury had been dealt with, his coloring was off, mouth tightening now

and again in a grimace. “You don’t have to hide your discomfort. I already know there’s something wrong with you.”

Pryor frowned, a momentary wave of fear flashing behind his eyes before he seemed to get a handle on it. It was impossible to know if the fear was aimed at Wystan having discovered something he shouldn’t, or over something else.

“By all means,” Pryor licked his lips, “don’t keep a guy guessing.”

“It’s your bridmula.”

He closed his eyes. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“You didn’t know?” Wystan found that puzzling.

“I was fine up until the pool,” he admitted. “When I was electrocuted? Something must have gone wrong then. I think it messed with —”

“The nanotech,” he hummed in understanding.

Pryor deflated against the headboard. “So you know about that now as well.”

“I do.” He crossed his arms. “You should have told me.”

“We aren’t close, Emperor.”

“Liar.” Maybe in Pryor’s mind that was actually a truth, but so soon after seeing him fall, seeing him bleed, Wystan was in no mood to pander to his misconceptions. “I’m closer to you than anyone else on this World Ship, Detective.”

Pryor hesitated, uneasy, before he quipped, “Well you are the only one in the room.”

He gave a curt shake of his head. “You know what I’m saying.”

“Not really,” he frustratingly disagreed. “Why don’t you spell it out for me.”

In the beginning, Wystan had been afraid that the person he was looking for had turned into someone else. That the years hadn’t been kind, that the things he’d been through since their parting had inadvertently warped him into someone unrecognizable.

Then he’d gotten Pryor Oro, and in part, his fears had been met, because the man before him now was a far cry from the boy who’d spent the better part of the last decade living in Wystan’s memory. It hadn’t been all bad. It’d been clear that while prickly, Pryor wasn’t a bad person. Not the type of person who would orchestrate a heist and force another Imperial into hiding, in any case.

Still, he'd picked his brain a time or too, planted the seed that perhaps Rune was a part of the problem, if only so he could gage Pryor's reaction.

What he'd gotten hadn't at all been what he'd anticipated. It'd rarely occurred to him that Rune could have died, that his search could be fruitless. He'd almost grieved after hearing those claims, falling apart on the way to his palace before he'd locked himself in his study.

The second he'd seen Pryor's photograph again he'd *known*.

He was not wrong to wait.

But his waiting was over.

In one swift motion, Wystan had Pryor backed against the headboard, his arms caging him in on either side as he planted his palms against the wall. He lowered himself down so that they were face to face, noting how the other man's pupils dilated in an obvious mixture of surprise and something else.

Arousal.

It was all Wystan could do not to focus on it, instead, capturing Pryor's gaze with a steady look. "I'm done playing this game."

"What game?" Pryor's words came out breathy and low, barely audible between them.

"You recognized me at breakfast," he stated. "I know you did."

"I have no idea what—"

Wystan grabbed him by the jaw, tilting his head back, holding him hostage so there was no chance he could run. Not again. Not from this. The truth was a burning white dwarf between them, just waiting to explode.

"Detective," he coaxed, "*trust me*. Whatever the reason you've stayed hidden all this time, there's no need to keep from me. I would never hurt you."

The tension was palpable, and he was torn between the need to crush the other man's mouth with his own in a claiming kiss or soften himself. The original plan had been to wait, to let Pryor come to him when he was ready.

But after twelve long years, and a week of no progress between them, Wystan was unsurprisingly out of patience.

He gentled his hold, tracing the pad of his thumb lightly in the dip just beneath the detective's full bottom lip, and finally uttered the truth they'd both been struggling to carry.

“I’ve missed you,” he locked their eyes together, “Rune.”

## Chapter 13:

Pryor's entire being shut down for a long moment where all he could do was gape at the Emperor. A million emotions raced through him at once, speeding through him too quickly to catch and hold on to any one thing long enough to process. There was the thick, heady tension that cut through him like a sharp blade, searing more painfully than the bullet had earlier. Then there was the fear, thick and sticky, like tar settling in his chest cavity, restricting his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

The anger was a mere thread amidst all of that, tiny and insignificant until Pryor grabbed onto it and held it with dear life.

All at once, he snapped back to himself, slapping the Emperor's arm away from his face first, before planting his palms on his chest and shoving with as much strength as he could manage.

As a Tiberan, even an ill one, that was a lot.

Wystan flew off the bed, only catching himself from falling entirely at the last second. He glared, fire crackling behind his multicolored eyes as he seethed, any sign of the calm demeanor he'd been trying to portray gone in a flash.

Good. That's what Pryor needed right now. An angry Imperial, a wake-up call and reminder of who and what Wystan Aurelius was.

A threat. Maybe the biggest he'd encountered in his entire life even.

"You're deranged," he growled.

"Did you help Roth steal the technology?" Wystan bit out.

"You're not listening," he snapped back.

"Are you trying to heal yourself?"

"You're wrong."

"Do you want to take the throne back?"

Pryor shot off the bed faster than either of them could blink, ignoring the way his head spun and his body ached at the sudden motion. They may have sealed the wound shut, but he'd still been shot. There were still smaller aches and pains that he'd have to wait to go away on their own.

He pressed Wystan up against the far wall, his hand wrapping tightly around his jugular. Every fiber of his being was shooting off warning bells, the word danger flashing like a neon red sign in his head.

Threat. To everything he'd fought for, tooth and nail. For the life he'd created and the friends he'd gained in the process. For his reputation, one which he'd earned, not one handed to him at birth. And for the most precious thing of all. The thing he coveted and cared for the most.

Anonymity.

Wystan was trying to strip him of all of that.

"Detective." Despite the fact Pryor was most definitely cutting off his air supply, the Emperor didn't seem the least bit concerned. Instead, he was back to being calm in an obvious attempt to mollify him.

It wasn't working.

Entirely.

"I am not Rune." He needed to get that point across. Had to be sure that he was believed because—

"Imperials harm people all the time, remember, Detective?" Wystan replied smoothly, and it took a minute to filter through the red-tinted glasses Pryor was wearing, but once it did he froze.

Those were the exact same words he'd said the night Wystan had made a grab for him.

His gaze skittered to where his fingers were currently choking the Emperor, and with a gasp he let go, stumbling back a few steps until he came up against the end of the bed.

Imperials harm people, and Pryor was an Imperial.

No. Rune was. Pryor was a detective. He *helped* people.

He shook his head, guilt mixing with panic, chasing away all other emotions. "Rune is dead," he reminded himself, words shaky. His hands gripped the sheets, twisting them in his fingers. "I'm not him."

"Detective..." Wystan took a step closer, then another when Pryor didn't immediately react. When he dropped his hands to his arms, Pryor jolted, but he didn't let him go.

"You met him *once*," Pryor found himself saying, the words tumbling past his lips in a twisted mess of truths and inner fears. "You knew him for less than a week. You have no idea. What his life was like. The things he had to go through. The suffering he had to endure just because of his name." He tried to pull away, but Wystan refused to let him, only

vaguely noting that something was comforting about that. “I lost my birthmate. My mother. My home. At times I thought for sure I’d lost my sanity as well until I clawed my way back to some semblance of a life. Until I was Pryor Oro, and nobody cared where I came from or the things that had happened to me.

“The throne?” He barked out a humorless laugh. “Why would I want that? Out of all the things I’ve lost, that’s the one that matters the least. I wouldn’t go back there if they *begged* me. No one is going to make me. Not even you.”

Wystan pulled him in then, cradling him against his chest. He shushed him and held him in an embrace that was tight but not suffocating. He kept him close and ran his fingers through the hair at the base of Pryor’s skull soothingly.

There was no anger, no judgment.

As the panic began to recede, Pryor began to playback the recent events, noticing things he’d been too scared to right after Wystan had outed him.

Outed him with something a lot like tenderness in his eyes.

“We met once,” he said, words muffled against the thick cotton material of Wystan’s shirt. It didn’t matter, they were mostly for himself anyway.

Still, somehow Wystan seemed to hear him. “Did you not think of me at all?”

He sounded...hurt.

Pryor pulled back with a frown, peering up at the other man, searching his face for signs that he was wrong. It was true, the Emperor had been flirting with him, he was well aware. But there was a difference between being attracted to someone and caring for them. They’d gotten to know one another since his arrival—it’d be a lie if he didn’t admit, if only to himself, he was interested in Wystan as well—but they were still a far cry away from anything serious.

From the way the Emperor was currently looking at him.

No, whatever Wystan believed he felt, those feelings were clearly for the boy he’d met those many years ago. That boy who’d still had hope that things would right themselves, that his family would protect him.

That he had a home and a place and a purpose.

Rune had believed in those things.

Pryor knew better.

People made their own destiny. He'd chosen his. He wouldn't go back. But...

"You don't have that freckle anymore," he whispered, searching the bridge of Wystan's nose for it, even though he'd inspected his face so many times he had it memorized and knew it wasn't there.

"It vanished when I was twenty," Wystan replied, sounding pleased. The corner of his mouth turned up, just a little, as if he was testing it out and seeing how Pryor would react. "You've changed more than I have."

"M.I.C.E messed with my memory," Pryor said, somehow knowing that's what he was getting at, that he was hurt at having not been recognized. "Small details are still there. The freckle." He glanced up. "Your eyes."

The way he'd made him feel. Safe. Like a person.

His mother had searched all over the twelve galaxies for a cure, but by the age of thirteen, the illusion had been broken. He'd known it wasn't for him. She'd merely wanted to protect her legacy. He was little more than a burden to her, and if his birthmate had lived, she probably would have kicked him out sooner.

He wasn't about to admit that though, keeping those thoughts to himself.

"The things I said you," Wystan prompted, probably referring to breakfast.

He'd done it on purpose then.

Pryor should have known. All of sudden, all the hints the Emperor had given this whole time made sense. He'd suspected as much but hadn't wanted to admit it, too afraid of what that could mean.

What *did* it mean?

"What now?" He tried not to sound jaded when he spoke, swallowing the bile and hoping to school his features so it wouldn't be so obvious how terrified he still was. This type of secret could upend his life. If Rune was forced back into the limelight, Pryor would be shoved into the dark.

"I like who I am," he attempted to explain, but the rest got caught in his throat. He felt ridiculous for having to have this conversation. He'd never confessed these things out loud before, hadn't told a soul about the way he felt. Doing so now, and to the Emperor no less, was degrading.



He'd built up this persona of strength and confidence and he didn't want to tear that down. He didn't want to admit that there was more to him than just that front he led with.

Wystan shushed him a second time and patted his head, seeming to enjoy the feel of his hair running through his long fingers. His gaze hardened slightly when he lightly scraped his nails against his scalp and Pryor made a sound of pleasure before he could help it.

Pryor froze.

Wystan smirked.

He went to shove the Emperor away a second time and instead found his wrists trapped together.

Wystan pulled his arms in front of him, pressing them to the center of his chest. "I like who you are too."

He held his breath, waiting for him to elaborate, hating the inkling of hope he felt spark to life.

"I would never hurt you," he repeated. "You can be whoever you want to be, Detective. As long as whoever that is is mine."

Pryor became all too aware of their positions then, of how he was perched on the edge of the end of the bed with the other man leaning over him, his wrists trapped against the solid wall of muscle that made up the Emperor's chest.

Wystan pulled him back in when he tried to move away, refusing to budge even when Pryor managed to glare. He merely chuckled, a grin splitting across his handsome face, chasing away the rest of the lingering shadows this conversation had placed there. "That's more like it. Just stick with being your usual surely self. I'll come to you, you don't have to do a thing."

"Don't." He wasn't even sure what he was trying to tell the Emperor not to do. His heart had kicked up a notch, blood rushing through his ears, drowning out most logical thought.

"I know I'm ahead of you," Wystan added, ignoring him. "You need time to catch up. You came here to solve a case, not fall for an emperor."

"Fall for—" Pryor choked around that, snorting. "You think way too highly of yourself."

"We'll see."

He tugged at his wrists pointedly. "Let go."

"Never."

His mouth dropped open.

A sharp knock came at the door, and regretfully, Wystan released him, stepping back to adjust his rumpled clothing. He winked at a still stunned Pryor a second before the door slid open. "Saved by the bell."

"Your majesty," H stepped into the room, keeping his head bowed, "Intergalactic Detective #455 is free to leave. We've also received word from the station that Ko Hiar is acting up. She's been placed on the danger-to-herself watch list."

Pryor pushed up onto his feet. "We should head there now."

His fingers had already started on the ties at the side of the hospital gown he was wearing, uncaring that H was present.

Wystan's hand settled over his, stopping him. There was concern written across his face. "You need rest."

"And I'll get it," he said, "after. You heard him. If we don't get this interrogation done quickly we might not get another chance. Not only is it important for the investigation, reliving her of her burden could help change her mind about self-harm. If there's nothing left to hide, there's nothing left to fear."

He hadn't meant anything by that, but the way Wystan's gaze homed in on him clued him in to the fact he'd maybe misspoken. Rolling his eyes, he stepped away from the Emperor, rounding the bed in part to put distance between them, but also so that he could grab his multi-slate off the end table.

"I hope you don't feel like there's anything else you have to hide from me, Detective," Wystan spoke enticingly, with a timbre meant to lull someone into complacency.

Pryor ground his teeth.

Because it was working.

"You're a pretty ruthless secret excavator, *majesty*," he bit back.

Wystan's pleasant laughter filled the room.

## Chapter 14:

Ko Hiar was already in the interrogation room when they arrived, along with Fir who'd taken care of the initial questioning as soon as he'd gotten word Pryor was finally on his way.

The Hades police station was a large industrial building fitted with the most technological advancements, running full-body scans of them when they entered and exited and requiring biometric codes to enter most official areas. Considering this was also where they were holding the shooter, and Hades happened to have one of the highest crime rates on the Olympus, the intense security measures made sense.

Pryor headed down the corridor with his head held high, relying on all of his acting skills to provide a strong front and conceal the fact that he was a wreck on the inside. The Emperor finding out about his real identity still rocked him to the core, and he was too close to another panic attack for comfort.

He couldn't let it get to him though, not now, not here. The last thing he was going to do was allow Wystan's big reveal to ruin the one thing he had going for him.

His job was his life.

And now more than ever, the need to solve this case and get off World Ship itched at him. The more distance between himself and the Vexan Emperor, the better.

He was going to have to expedite his plans for reassignment. It'd been a possibility a few days ago, but now leaving the Crystal Sea was imperative for his survival. During the ten-minute drive from the hospital, Pryor had finally gotten the chance to come to his senses and evaluate everything that had taken place there.

It didn't make sense that Wystan would have real feelings for him, no matter how hard he thought about it. Their exchanges had been volatile and Pryor was constantly fighting him every step of the way. If anything, that had most likely called to the Emperor's ego.

Wystan didn't like him, he just had something to prove, even more so now that he was aware they'd known each other as kids.

Pryor thought back on that trip once in a while, briefly, with fondness. But he'd never even dreamed of seeking that kind boy who'd helped him out. Even when he'd been assigned this case, the thought hadn't crossed his mind. Sure, the Emperor had been older than he at the time, but there was no way they'd connected enough for a one-sided bond that strong to have formed.

Unless...He'd forgotten? M.I.C.E had really done a number on his memories, though he'd always assumed he recalled most of that exchange. Had there been more to it? More to Wystan comforting him with native foods the night before the surgery?

"Detective?" Wystan called, lips pursed in a frown. There was a hint of worry written on his face.

Pryor didn't like seeing it there. Didn't like knowing that the Emperor was worried about him at all. He wanted things to go back to the way they'd been, with the two of them at each other's throats and nothing more or less.

Wystan had been right. Pryor hadn't come here to fall for an emperor. Even if said emperor was sexy, and fit in all the right places. Even if he had eyes Pryor felt like he could get lost in, and a voice like honey.

Even if his heart skipped a beat whenever he thought about those words he'd whispered back at the hospital.

Romance wasn't for someone like Pryor. He couldn't afford it, especially not with another Imperial.

No, he had to get away before things became too tangled. Before it became too difficult for him to do so.

Pryor cleared his throat and took the tablet from Fir, who'd just entered the observation room. The room had a wall with a two-way mirror that looked into the interrogation space.

Ko Hiar had her chin tucked against her chest, her shoulders slumped in defeat. Her hair was down, the straight, tan locks messy and knotted in places, and she'd already been dressed in the baby blue jumpsuit given to prisoners.

"They found evidence while searching her home," Fir explained, noting the way Pryor's gaze lingered. He flicked the screen to bring up

another page. “Here’s a compilation of notes, I wrote down everything important that happened while you were out.”

“Thanks.”

Fir clapped him on the shoulder. “Glad you’re okay, boss. Let’s try not to do anything else stupid for the duration of our trip.”

He tried not to side-eye Wystan. That was the plan.

Erix hadn’t been allowed anywhere near this area of the station after what he’d done to Ko Gemina, so it was just the three members of their team, the Emperor, and two of the Hades police observing.

Motioning to Castor, he exited the room and entered Interrogation. Both he and the Inspector settled across from Ko Hiar, and he took a moment to scan Fir’s notes, letting the tension build in the silence to unnerve her.

He’d been worried it would be difficult to concentrate, but years of compartmentalizing had turned him into an expert. The second he clicked the tablet down on the metal table, all thoughts about Rune and Wystan and his past receded to the outer reaches of his mind.

“Why did you murder your husband?” he made his tone curious, leisurely folding his hands on the edge of the table. “Were you trying to cover something up?”

Ko Hiar lifted her gaze, showing him bloodshot eyes still glassy from unshed tears.

“We have proof that you did it,” he continued when she refused to speak. “All we need is a motive now. If you give us one, I can at least try for lighter sentencing. As it stands, you’re looking at the rest of your life spent behind bars. Is keeping your secret really worth it?”

Her eyes darted to Castor and then back again.

“You can trust us,” Castor said.

“Your co-worker beat my husband,” she reminded, her voice coming out scratchy and weak.

“I apologize for him,” Pryor leaned forward, “but he’s already been cleared of the murder charge. If you hope to pin it on him—”

“No,” she cut him off with a curt shake of her head. “No, I did it. I killed him.”

“Why?” Castor asked. “Tell us the truth. We can’t help you if you don’t.”

She hesitated, before, “I heard someone tried to shoot the Emperor. Is that true?”

“Yes,” he confirmed.

She let out a shaky breath. “We were given instructions. Should anyone come asking about M.I.C.E, we were given a specific protocol to follow.”

“Who gave you these orders?” The tablet was recording their conversation, so Pryor didn’t have to worry about jotting anything down, instead remaining focused on the woman and her movements. There was a lot to be learned about a person just by watching. She was nervous, but it didn’t appear as though it was due to them or having been caught.

She wrung her hands together, the handcuffs rattling against the tabletop with her movements. “The person who sent me to the Olympus.”

Pryor stilled. “Someone sent you here?”

She nodded.

“Mrs. Ko,” Castor tilted his head, “are you telling us you’re a spy?”

“I married Gemina to get close to the project. We knew he was secretly still working on it. It was my job to give updates on his progress,” she admitted, staring at the shiny metal surface, as if unable to meet their gazes now that she’d decided to cooperate.

Pryor was a little shocked. M.I.C.E was upper-security level information on its own. No one should have known of its existence. Not to mention, even the Emperor of the Olympus hadn’t been aware Ko Gemina was still working on it. How the hell had someone else found out about it? Whoever it was, they were either high-ranking or an impressive hacker.

“Who do you work for? What kingdom?”

“I don’t know,” she told them.

“So, you’re saying you just decided to uproot your entire life and dedicate yourself to some stranger?” He clucked his tongue. “Not buying it.”

“It’s not...” She blew out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know who sent the orders, we’ve never met, and I’ve never seen his face, but I do know that he’s a male, and that he started this for Tibera.”

Ko Hiar used to be married to a Tiberan man, but she wasn’t considered a citizen even though she’d lived there for most of her life before moving to the Olympus.

“Why do you care about a planet that isn't yours?” he asked, and her nostrils flared.

“It's not the planet I agreed to help,” she said. “I lived on Tibera for twenty years. My parents relocated due to job prospects when I was a baby, so even though I'm not officially a citizen, that planet is my home. We didn't have a lot of money, so when I came of age there weren't enough funds to send me to a good college. I took a position in a royal household to save up.”

She was forty-three now, and the age of adulthood on Tibera was eighteen which meant this had to have been around twenty-five years ago.

“I was praised for doing a good job and transferred within a year to the Imperial Palace,” she added, and Pryor felt the ground drop from underneath him.

Why was this happening? After everything he'd been through, all the hardships and tribulations, the running he'd done to put distance between himself and his past...Why this? Why now?

He barely resisted the urge to turn toward the two-way glass, where he knew Wystan was standing on the other side. The Emperor would have heard that. Would he start changing his mind and suspecting that Pryor did have a hand in whatever was going on here?

Didn't he already?

He'd asked Pryor point-blank at the hospital if he was working with Roth. Despite his candy-coated words and confessions of wanting him, Wystan suspected him. Maybe that's all any of this was, a ploy to trick Pryor into confessing to the crime.

Why did that hurt?

It shouldn't matter what the Emperor thought of him.

It *didn't*.

He took a closer look at the woman seated across from him, taking in the sharp rise of her cheeks and the pointed slops of her jawline to her narrow chin. There was nothing familiar to him about her, not even an inkling of recognition.

“How long did you work there?” he found himself asking. If it'd been twenty-five years ago, he'd been a mere baby. That would help explain why he didn't know her. Not to mention, the Imperial Palace had hundreds of employees at any given time, and she'd yet to give a detailed description of what it was she'd done. If she'd been another maid—

“Several years,” she said. “I was a nanny to the pair bonded princes. Right up until Ruse Tiberius’s accident.”

“He died,” Pryor snapped, only vaguely aware that he shouldn’t be reacting so emotionally to something that shouldn’t have anything to do with a detective who lived on Flicker. But he hated the way that sounded, *accident*, like he’d merely tripped and stubbed his toe or broken a finger.

“I was with them at the bluffs that day,” she continued, solemnly. “There’d been a horrible storm that had lasted days prior, and the prince wasn’t paying attention to his footing...He went too close to the edge and... It was horrible. The ground just broke off beneath him and he tumbled into the sea.”

Pryor might throw up. His hands tightened, linked fingers pressing into each other hard enough it ached. He needed the pain as a distraction to keep himself in check. This was the first time in years that he was talking about this. It wasn’t just having to relive those memories, though, it was also the implications that arose with every sentence.

The more she spoke, the more tied to this mess the Tiberian Imperial family became.

But the Empress had ordered this investigation, had even gone so far as to inform the Interstellar Conference. She’d gain nothing from stealing M.I.C.E, or ordering her nephew to go into hiding.

“What does any of this have to do with why you murdered your husband?” Pryor needed to get them back on track.

Castor sent him a look, having caught on to something in either the sound of his voice or the way he was carrying himself. He wouldn’t ask here, in front of everyone, but he would want to know what was up, which meant there was yet another conversation for Pryor to look forward to.

This was a nightmare.

“Those of us who were with them that day were reprimanded and investigated,” Ko Hiar said. “It was our job to watch them, and we failed. I was busy cutting fruits for the eldest prince, Rune Tiberius, when it occurred, however, so was the first to be cleared of guilt. I stayed with the young prince throughout the coming weeks, was witness to the horrible things his family put him through.”

Pryor frowned. He remembered his brother’s death and the day of the funeral when they set the pyre on fire and offered Ruse’s body back to



the gods. But everything in between was a blank. Like most of his childhood memories, those events had been deleted from his mind as soon as M.I.C.E had been implanted into him.

“What did they put him through?” Castor was the one to ask.

“They said terrible things,” she told them, “things no child should ever have to hear. His mother was the worst. She was grieving, that’s true, but the day it happened, you could hear her screams throughout the entire palace. She kept wailing that the wrong son had died, even going so far as to beg the gods to change their minds and take Rune instead. The prince heard everything.”

“That must have been hard for him.” Castor seemed to be upset, squeezing his fists beneath the table. There was a glimmer in his eyes that wasn’t often found there, a clear indicator he was angry.

Pryor only noticed because he was seated on this side of the table and could see. That, and he knew the other man well enough to catch on, in the same way that Castor knew him well enough to know he wasn’t all right either.

Castor had taken this job because he hated injustice, especially done to children. This must be difficult for him to take, especially knowing it was all in the past and there was nothing he could do to change it.

Pryor should buy him a drink later. They could both use one.

“That was the worst part,” she blinked away tears, staring up at the harsh florescent lighting to help keep them at bay, “he was so used to it by then, he hardly reacted at all. He mourned the loss of his brother, blamed himself, but he’d stand there still as a statue and take every harsh word thrown at him if his mother commanded it. The only good that came of Imperial Ruse’s death was how desperate the Empress became to find a cure for her only surviving child.

“Bloodline is important on Tibera, and while she’d supposedly been searching for a medical solution for years, it wasn’t until she was out of other options that she magically stumbled on a way.”

“M.I.C.E,” Castor noted.

“That’s how you knew about the project’s existence.” Pryor put two and two together, though that still didn’t answer how whoever was standing behind her knew. “Imperial Rune was stripped of his title and banished years ago. What good does stealing the technology now do? Who are you hoping to cure?”

“His birthright was stolen from him,” she argued. “If you knew the things that Roth has done, in the name of being the Heir Imperial of Tibera...” She sneered. “I came here with the prince when he underwent surgery. I saw how scared he was, saw the courage that little boy summed up just to try and make his mother proud. And I was there the day she tossed him aside. She fired me not soon after since there was no longer a ward that needed tending.”

“So you’re doing this for revenge?”

“I’m doing this for justice,” she snapped, slapping her hands onto the table loudly. “Because of what I knew, I was also shipped off-world, banished from ever returning. I found odd jobs on space stations and traveled, trying to find peace, a purpose. For the longest time, all I could think about was making the Empress pay for what she did to me and her surviving son. Then I met my first husband, and for a while things were good. He was a zip minor, it kept us apart but we spoke frequently through holo-coms. We were on call when the ship he was on malfunctioned and exploded. One second he was there, smiling at me, and the next...”

They’d read about her first husband’s death, but seeing how affected she still was by it all these years later had Pryor feeling for her. Until he recalled why they were there.

“Your first husband died in an accident,” he stated, “but your second died because of you. What did he do to deserve that?”

“Nothing,” she surprised him by saying, “his only fault was not being as smart as his predecessor. If he had been, he would have solved everything and fixed M.I.C.E. I would have left in the dead of night then, and he would have been none the wiser.”

Pryor blinked at her. “You can’t honestly be blaming him?”

“How did you manage to seduce Ko Gemina in the first place?” Castor asked.

“We’d met before, when I went with the Tiberan Imperials for Rune. He remembered me, I guess I made an impression. It was easy enough to progress things from there.”

“And he had no idea that you were just using him?”

“No,” she said coldly. “He wasn’t very perceptive. If it didn’t require an equation to solve, he wasn’t all that interested.”

“You sound bitter.”

“Why agree to this in the first place?” Pryor agreed, she did sound unhappy with her lot. “When you were contacted by a stranger and asked to dedicate your life like this, why did you accept?”

“I’d like to tell you I did it entirely for Imperial Rune, for justice, as I’ve said,” she confessed, “but that wouldn’t be the whole truth. My husband left behind elderly parents. They were sickly, and their medicines alone cost more than half of our combined monthly wages. Without his support, I couldn’t handle the financial burden. His mother was already on her deathbed because we couldn’t afford her meds when I got the first communications.

“I call him Neighbor. That’s the only thing I’ve ever called him. He offered me a deal I couldn’t refuse. The money was more than enough to set them up comfortably for the rest of their lives. In return, I had to spy for him. I was on the fence, of course, it didn’t feel right to trick someone like that. And I wasn’t sure I could pretend to fall in love with someone, but then Neighbor told me his end game.”

“Which is?” That pit in his stomach seemed to yawn wider even before she answered.

“Perfect M.I.C.E and heal Imperial Rune,” she straightened her spine as if she well and truly believed what she’d been doing all this time was for a just cause. “Return him to his rightful place.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint,” Pryor replied robotically, “but Rune Tiberius is dead.”

She slumped into her seat. “I know.”

“You know?”

“I’ve only recently found out.”

“...And you killed your husband anyway?”

“Neighbor has been good to me all these years,” she said. “I made a promise to him, and I kept it. We all have protocol to follow, a plan in place for if things go south. I was told to upload the most recent files on the project and kill Gemina if anyone ever came by asking about it.”

“You seem awfully comfortable betraying your benefactor now,” Castor pointed out, only to have her reject that notion.

“I would never.”

“What do you call this then?”

Pryor searched her expression for the millionth time. “He told you to tell us, didn’t he.”

It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway.

"He's fucking with us." Pryor heaved a sigh, rubbing at his temples. All of this, just to discover that someone out there was yanking their chain.

"What about Roth? Do you know where he is?"

"I don't. I wasn't a part of that mission."

"You said he did things? What things?"

She glanced between the two of them, appearing nervous again for the first time since starting her confession. Then she slid her chair as close as she could and leaned in, lowering her voice. "Rumor is his party-boy persona is just that. He puts on the act in order to gain access to World Ships and planets, uses it to slip by unnoticed. Then he steals."

"Steals?" Pryor scowled. "What could he possibly want? He's heir to one of the largest kingdoms in the galaxy."

"He doesn't do it because he needs to," she told him, coming close to rolling her eyes at him, "he does it because he's bored, and the Empress apparently has him on a tight budget. He blew so much of the Imperial funds on partying—for real—in college that she'd tightened the reigns. He didn't like that. He steals for money, skims off the top of a planet's resources, just enough to go unnoticed. It's as you've said, he's from Tibera. No one would suspect a Tiberan Imperial of theft."

"Do you have any proof?" This was all hearsay without it.

She shrugged. "No, but I'm sure you can find some, Detective. Isn't that technically your job? I looked into you as soon as I found out you were being assigned his case. You have...an interesting past yourself, don't you? Very mysterious. No one seems to know anything about your origins at all."

"We're done here." Castor stood abruptly, surprising them both. At Pryor's questioning look, he motioned to the tablet. "We've got what we needed. She's just going off on a tangent now, and we still have to interrogate the shooter."

That was true, they did.

Pryor rose and picked up the device, turning for the door before a thought struck him. He glanced back at Ko Hiar. "I was informed that you've been placed on the self-harm watch list."

"Don't worry about me, Detective."

He canted his head, unsure if he should voice his suspicions. This conversation had brought up so many questions, however. He wanted to at

least get answers for the things that he could. “Because you only pretended to want to hurt yourself to speed this up and get us here?”

She smiled at him, and though it didn’t quite reach her eyes, it was obviously genuine. “If only Gemina had been half as perceptive as you are, Detective. He might not have ended up in the morgue.”

## Chapter 15:

“The Hades police already got him to confess to a few things,” Fir filled them in inside of the observation room while they waited for Ko Hair to be switched out with the shooter from the other day. “We’ve also discovered his identity. His name is Miles Vat. His older sister works at Koaha hospital.”

“Why didn’t we hear of this sooner?” Castor asked. He and Fir were standing nearest the door. Aside from them, the only other person in the room was Wystan.

“Their parents died when they were underage and they were separated and lost contact. Their old records were lost in the process, so there was nothing to connect the two until a series of messages was discovered on Miles multi-fit this morning. There are other conversations, but they’ve been encrypted. We’re waiting to see if they can be cracked.”

“Are you telling us that we found the person who stole Yana’s DNA?”

“It looks like, yes,” Fir confirmed. “Miles Vat recently reached out to his biological sister. It’s only been four months.”

“Which means the theft had to have taken place within that timeframe.” Castor crossed his arms and rocked on his heels. “They would have stolen the DNA sample and then immediately used it to access M.I.C.E. We can check the accuracy of that theory pretty easily.”

“I’ve already requested access to the hospital’s security footage for the days leading up to when M.I.C.E was hacked into.” Fir tapped away at the screen in front of them, the panel attached to the large computer which gave them access to information in the Hades police station system. “Once we’ve ID’d him, we can tie this part of the investigation up.”

“Did he say why he tried to shoot the Emperor?” Castor glanced over at Wystan where he stood close to Pryor’s side.

Pryor was listening but had yet to contribute to the discussion since leaving Ko Hiar. There was too much to think about, and he trusted his

team could handle the influx of information they'd received on Miles and sort through it.

"That's the thing," Fir's lips turned up slightly in the way they did whenever he got a lead, "he claims he was ordered to do it."

"Neighbor."

He snapped his fingers. "Bingo."

"We thinking it's Roth?" Castor quirked a brow.

"It's a possibility." Fir glanced up as the two police stepped into the attached interrogation room, forcing a dejected looking man in with them. "Showtime, boss."

Pryor was too busy nibbling on his lower lip as he stared at Miles Vat. Unlike Ko Hiar, Miles appeared to be young, probably around the same age as Pryor. There'd only been one kid that he could remember interacting with when he'd been thirteen and visited the Olympus, but after everything that had just been discovered, he wasn't sure how much those memories could be trusted.

He couldn't recall Ko Hiar at all, even though she'd supposedly been in his life for at least ten years. Some of that could be attested to the fact he'd been a child, but...To have no recollection of her?

He used to think his memory loss was a blessing, a small boon from the gods to make up for the otherwise shit hand they'd dealt him. But now...

What if his memories could have helped solve this case? What if he inadvertently put them all in danger because he couldn't recognize someone right under their noses? There'd already been one attempt made on Wystan's life. If Pryor wasn't there the next time someone tried something, and the Emperor got hurt—

"Clear the room," Wystan spoke authoritatively, leaving no room for argument. He glared when Fir and Castor both turned to him with dipped brows. "You two will take care of the interrogation. Tell the officers to remain outside. The detective and I will stay here, alone."

"I don't think—" Castor began, only to have Wystan turn on him.

"I don't believe I was asking for your opinion, Inspector."

Castor glanced at Pryor, and it was all Pryor could manage to nod for him to do as he was told.

They should both be used to this version of Wystan by now. Once he made up his mind about something and put his preverbal foot down, there

was no arguing. They'd only be wasting time trying.

Pryor watched in silence as the others left the room, reappearing a moment later on the other side of the glass. They settled at the table, Castor taking lead.

He tried to focus on what was being said, but could barely manage to. A moment later, he heard the distinct click of a lock slipping into place and turned to find Wystan standing at the door.

"You're distracted," Wystan got straight to the point.

Pryor inhaled slowly, hating how a part of him wanted to cower away from the Emperor after everything that Ko Hiar had said.

"Talk to me." He made his way over to him, carefully as if stalking skittish prey. His presence filled the tiny room, sucking most of the oxygen out.

Now that it was just the two of them again, it was impossible to keep those thoughts from earlier repressed. It was too soon, he didn't think he could handle it, and Pryor absently glanced over the Emperor's shoulders at the door.

"Don't even try it," Wystan warned, low. He shook his head slowly and came to a stop a couple of feet away. "I'm not letting you out of here until you tell me what's going on in that pretty head of yours."

"Stop." He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to block everything out. The sound of rustling clothing had him snapping his attention back on the Emperor, only to find that he'd fully invaded his personal space now.

Pryor went to push him away, but Wystan was quicker, latching onto both of his wrists and backing him up against the wall. His arms captured at the sides of his head, all he could do was stare daggers at the other man, who didn't seem the least bit affected by his irritation.

Wystan pinned him in place, rubbing himself against Pryor in a move that was obviously meant to be comforting.

He didn't know enough about Vexan shows of affection because he'd never planned on getting involved with anyone while here, but he was pretty certain he'd heard mention that this was usual for them when they were trying to seduce a potential new lover. Touch was important to them, unlike Tibera, where skinship wasn't common even between couples.

That was probably because on his home planet, relationships were more transactional than anything else. Hell, he didn't even know who his



father was because the Empress had never bothered to take him as her husband. And she had that right.

The Emperor nuzzled the underside of Pryor's left jaw, forcing him to tip his head up. He jerked when that warm, wet mouth latched onto the sensitive skin there and sucked.

"What," Pryor took a breath, attempting to focus through the stars currently winking in his vision, "are you doing?"

"Have you been sexual with anyone before?" Wystan asked, trailing a long lick down the length of his neck.

Castor's voice rose in the other room, drawing Pryor's attention.

He pulled at his wrists, not enough to even try dislodging the Emperor's hold, but just to get his point across. "Stop."

"Answer the question."

"Of course I've had sex before," he snapped. "Now let go."

Wystan stilled and then lifted his head, pulling away enough that he could meet Pryor's gaze. "Do you want me to stop because you aren't attracted to me?"

He heaved a sigh in exasperation, highly attuned to the fact his partner was getting louder by the minute in the interrogation room, while he was in here... "I want you to stop because this doesn't solve anything. I'm still going to feel like shit over what Ko Hiar said, and you're still going to suspect me of being in on it."

Wystan seemed taken aback by that. "You think I don't trust you?"

"How can you?" He grunted. "You heard her. Apparently all of this is some ploy to get Rune back on the Tiberan throne. Sure, someone told her that he's dead, but you and I both know that the death certificate Castor showed you last week was a fake. With that in mind, you know what this looks like."

It looked like he was the evil mastermind of some massive scheme that either included his cousin willingly or not so willingly. Either way, all signs pointed his way.

"You think I'm trying to tempt you into bed with me to get you to drop your guard and slip up?" Wystan dropped his arms and took a deliberate step in retreat. "Do you think so little of me?"

"The opposite, actually," Pryor admitted. "If our roles were reversed, I'd suspect you."

"Well, then I suppose it's a good thing our roles aren't reversed."

“You asked me point-blank in the hospital,” he reminded.

“Only because I wanted to hear it from you that you weren’t involved.” Wystan eyed him. “If you tell me you weren’t, I’ll believe you.”

Things couldn’t be that simple, for Pryor, they never were. But he found himself wishing this could be different. He wanted to trust Wystan for reasons still unknown to him. There was something about the Emperor that both infuriated and made him feel safe at the same time. Maybe it was that tried and true Vexan honesty.

The energy drained out of him so quickly, Pryor almost slid down the wall, catching himself enough to remain upright. Wystan was there in a flash, one hand on his waist, the other at his elbow, concern rife in his eyes.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m just so tired,” he confessed. He didn’t mean physically either.

“Let’s go.”

“The investigation—”

“Ink is on her way. Between her and your coworkers, it’ll be fine. They know how to do their jobs, Detective, and you’re good to no one in your current state.”

He wanted to argue there, but had to acknowledge that Wystan was right.

He groaned. “I hate that I’m falling apart. I hate even more that I’m falling apart in front of *you*.”

“Subconsciously, you know you can trust me,” Wystan said.

Pryor snorted. “You’re reaching again, Emperor.”

“That’s okay,” he pulled Pryor gently away from the wall and turned them toward the exit, “one of these days I’ll catch you, and all my attempts will have been worth it.”

\* \* \*

Whenever one of the Imperials visited Hades, there was a specific hotel they stayed at. By the time they arrived, guards had already been situated at every corner.

Pryor tried not to let their presence affect him, but after all the other reminders of his past today, it was difficult. The period of his life where he’d been followed and watched just like this haunted him through the

spacious foyer of The Brimstone, a stoic face reflecting in the many polished gold surfaces wherever he turned.

Waiting for the elevator was the worst. There were four in a row, all with shiny surfaces, and no matter how he shifted on his feet, he could always see one of the guards clear as day on the doors.

“How are you doing?” Wystan leaned in and asked, noticing his discomfort, just as the doors finally dinged.

Wordlessly, Pryor rushed forward, sucking in a deep breath the moment his back hit the wall, the tiny box providing a modicum of privacy. The Emperor gave him as much space as he could manage, which he appreciated, and as soon as they were closed-off and alone, his nerves started to resettle.

It didn’t last, of course. There were guards on the tenth floor as well, though not nearly as many. Pryor counted three as Wystan led them down to a room at the end, pressing his palm against a scanner at the side so his biometric imprint could open it.

The latch clicked and then he stepped aside, allowing Pryor to enter first.

He didn’t argue. Slipping past him, Pryor shot to the center of the room before coming to a stop, bending to plant his hands on his knees and inhale deeply in an attempt to calm himself.

“Panic attack,” he explained quietly when he felt Wystan come up to his side. “I used to get them a lot as a kid.” They’d stopped years ago, but this was the second or third today and it was wearing him down. He’d thought he was past this, that he’d accepted the things that he’d experienced before and had fully embraced who he was now.

Yet...The lines were starting to blur, and all it’d taken was one conversation with the Emperor for it to happen.

“I’m weak,” he uttered to himself, hands tightening on the rough material of the standard-issue detective uniform he’d been given before leaving the hospital—since his clothing had been covered in blood and discarded. It was different from the one he’d been assigned by the I.P.F, exclusive to those who worked on the Olympus. He didn’t like the way it cinched his waist, or how the material had a sparkly sheen to it that glittered in direct lighting.

A heavy hand settled on the back of his neck and Pryor froze. “You aren’t. It’ll be okay, just breathe through it. I’m right here.”

For some reason, that left Pryor seething.

He straightened and slapped the Emperor's arm away. "You're the reason this is happening to me!"

Wystan pulled back, eyes narrowing, lips flattening into a straight line. He slid his hands into his front pockets, silently waiting, which somehow only pissed Pryor off more.

"I was fine until you came along," he declared. He'd been in hiding for years with no one the wiser. And he'd been, maybe not happy per se, but certainly content. Now...Even knowing that the Emperor probably didn't intend to out him, Pryor felt off-kilter. Having a connection to his past life, even one as small as meeting the older boy he'd interacted as a kid, was messing with him.

And there was more to it than just that. More to how badly he hated this feeling of wrongness, this feeling that everything he'd built had turned out to be merely a sandcastle and now the ocean had come to knock it down and wash it all away.

Pryor thought back to how it'd been since their very first meeting. All the subtle touches the Emperor had given him, all the times he'd invaded his space. At first, Pryor had at least given him the benefit of the doubt, but he should have seen things for what they were.

He *had*, if he were being honest with himself, he'd just shoved that revelation as deep down as he could so that he wouldn't have to shine a light on it.

So that he wouldn't have to admit that the Emperor's method was working.

"You are clearly having a hard time regulating your emotions," Wystan unhelpfully pointed out.

"You think?!" He ran both hands through his hair, tugging a little at the strands. He was well and truly going through it.

"Is that typical for a Tiberan when there's an issue with their bridmula?"

"Don't blame this on my medical history! This is your fault!"

"All right."

"No, it is not all right!"

"All right."

"Stop it!" Pryor needed something to help ground himself, but there was nothing in the general vicinity he could spot that would be of any use to

him or his nature. His explosive behavior had nothing to do with his illness, and everything to do with him being Tiberan.

As a people who lived by or on the sea, they were raised learning to time the beats of their hearts and the inhale and exhales of their breaths to the waves. They didn't grow attached in the same ways other beings did, didn't crave touch as often—some never did—and their emotions were dulled.

It was possible this had to do with their lengthy lifespans, and their body's ability to process things faster. Even his mother's grief over having lost Ruse had diminished by dinnertime that same day. The next morning, she'd ordered a search for a cure for her remaining son.

They were clinical, logical, and the best at debating because they didn't often lose their cool. But when they did, because having emotions still meant that every now and again they could be overcome by them, the same as any other sentient species, they turned to the ocean to find balance.

To find serenity.

For almost a decade after he'd been banished, Pryor had carried a seashell in his pocket. Whenever things became too great, he'd run his fingers over the smooth surface of the pearlescent shell, or press the pad of his thumb against the sharp edge—not enough to break skin, just to feel a prick of pain.

It was the only thing he'd brought from his homeworld, and he'd kept it right up until the day he'd lost it chasing after a perp on the planet Ignite. There'd still been the stars after that, so he hadn't been too distraught over the loss. It'd been a while since he'd missed it, to be honest, and he'd attested that to having grown up. Having coped and matured.

Today had taken that from him as well.

He hadn't matured. Hadn't gotten over it.

He'd merely buried the need for physical grounding deep, along with everything else, replacing his coping mechanism with others without realizing that's what he was doing.

The Emperor was still watching him. Waiting. Steadily.

He seemed to be rather good at that, with the patience of a saint even.

"How long have you had this planned out?" Pryor's accusation split through the stillness. "You think I don't know? You went out of your way to try and get me accustomed to your touch. You must have known it was me

the moment I arrived.” He paused, rethought that. “Before even.” The Emperor would have received an information packet with his photo included. “What was your end game?”

“Haven’t I made that clear already?” Wystan replied darkly. He was holding himself back, but he wasn’t unaffected by Pryor’s words.

“Spell it out,” he told him. “Vexans hold truth in high esteem, but you’re also used to gleaning information off of emotion. I’ve had to teach myself those types of observation skills, and I find myself constantly falling short where you’re concerned. Put it to me plainly, Emperor. You’ve exposed me, turnabout is fair play.”

“I want you,” Wystan said it matter-of-factly.

“You want to sleep with me?” Pryor cocked his head. “Up until we saw each other again at the market, we’d only interacted as children.”

“I was fifteen,” Wystan corrected, “but I see where you’re going with this and no, I didn’t plan on fucking you until after the pompous way you looked at me. The pompous way *Pryor* looked at me.”

“Hurt your pride, did I?” He tried not to get hung up on the crass way Wystan had worded that. Back on Tibera, bluntness in regards to sexual acts was common, but Pryor had left when he’d still been too young to experience anything like that on his home planet. Interactions with past lovers since had been tame, as far as dirty talk went.

“Actually, I thought it was sexy. I find most ways you look at me alluring.” The corner of his mouth tipped up. “Even the way you’re looking at me now. Like you can’t decide if you want to punch me or—”

“I can’t,” Pryor stated, and Wystan quieted once more. “You’re right. My system is overwhelmed. I’m confused. And since you’re the cause of this massive freak-out that I’m having, you’re going to help me fix it.”

His brow winged up. “Am I?”

“Yes.” There’d only been one thing holding Pryor back all this time, keeping him from acting on the burning need swirling in his gut. His real identity. Now that he’d already been discovered, there was no reason for him not to give in to these urges.

He wanted the Emperor too. He was infuriating, and complicated, and Pryor had no clue when these other feelings had crept up on him, but they had.

“Maybe I’m feeling this way because of everything that’s going on,” he said, “maybe not. There’s a chance you’ve tricked my subconscious into this with all those purposeful touches you got me used to.”

“The Inspector touches you all the time,” Wystan stated. “I observed that right away. Don’t tell me you haven’t? Any chance he gets to brush against you, he takes.”

Pryor frowned, not quite sure if that were true, but not caring at the moment either. This wasn’t about Castor. Still... “Are you jealous?”

“Need I be?”

“If he does do that, I’ve never noticed,” he admitted.

“But you knew I was doing it.” Wystan seemed pleased. He took a step forward.

“Stop.” He held up a hand and the Emperor immediately came to a standstill. “Before we start, we need to clarify something. I’m a ninth-class detective working for the I.P.F. I didn’t have anything to do with whatever is happening on your World Ship, and I do not know Roth Tiberius.” The kid he’d grown up with certainly wasn’t the man everyone spoke of today, so he wasn’t lying. He didn’t know the Tiberan Imperial heir. Not anymore. “I’m Pryor Oro.”

“I told you,” his expression softened some, “you can be whatever you want to be.”

“Then I want to be in charge.” If the Emperor refused, Pryor would put an end to this here and now.

“All right,” there wasn’t even a second’s worth of hesitation. “Tell me what you want, Pryor.”

He swallowed, wetting his suddenly parched throat. Part of him hadn’t expected the Emperor to concede so effortlessly, and he needed a moment to collect himself. That was going to be more than half the point of this exchange, however. Pryor was going to use him to figure out his own feelings, and whether they had substance, or were mere tufts of cotton candy planted by the Emperor.

“Take off your tie,” he ordered. It was time to find out what the Emperor of Olympus was made of.

## Chapter 16:

Pryor shoved him roughly into the chair he'd dragged to the living room from the kitchen, admittedly testing how far the Emperor would let him go.

Wystan didn't get angry at the poor treatment though. He dropped into the wooden seat, shifting slightly to more comfortably situate his bound hands behind himself. He'd been like that a moment earlier when Pryor had used his tie to bind his wrists together. Calm.

"Get tied up often?" he couldn't help but ask, not sure how he felt about that possibility, or why he scowled when thoughts of someone else's hands pinning Wystan down flickered through his mind.

The Emperor shook his head. "I'm not one for giving up control."

But he was doing that now, the implication didn't go unnoticed.

Pryor cleared his throat.

The hotel suite was a wide-open space with the living room and kitchen area attached, and a single door that led into the bedroom on the opposite side. He'd yet to check that space out but was happy keeping things here for the time being, close to the exit in case he realized midway through he wasn't, in fact, interested in the Emperor the way he thought he might be.

Although looking down at him now, that already seemed like a massive impossibility.

Having his wrists tethered had forced Wystan's already broad shoulders to widen, his chest coming forward and catching Pryor's attention. He'd already removed his jacket when he'd taken off his tie.

Pryor stood over him, just between his spread knees, and counted the buttons trailing from the top of the dress shirt down to the bottom where the thin black material disappeared behind the Emperor's tight waistband.

"Have you pictured me naked before, Detective?" Wystan's voice came out sultry and sweet.

He hummed in confirmation; busy trying to decide where he wanted to start. If he viewed this from a logical standpoint, he should save the best



for last. Not only, but if part of the goal was to settle the swirling chaos within himself, he'd need to take things slow. Deliberate.

Reaching forward, he slipped the button closest to Wystan's starched collar through the hole, before moving on to the next. He watched intently as his shirt slowly came undone, the two ends of cloth separating inch by inch to reveal toned flesh and skin that reminded him of the silver sand beaches he'd grown up on.

Pryor paused on a middle button, brow furrowing slightly at that comparison. Escaping thoughts of Tibera today seemed unlikely. The only option left was to embrace them.

He continued with his task, getting to the end and tugging the rest of his shirt out from behind his belt. Once all of the buttons were undone, Pryor sidled in closer and brought his hands back up to the base of Wystan's throat. His knuckles brushed against the sharp rise of his clavicles as he gently opened his shirt, pushing the silk off until it caught on his biceps. Because of his bound wrists, that was as far as it could go.

Despite his position, the Emperor's body was coiled tight, his taut muscles flexing slightly under scrutiny. He was all harsh lines and angles, the divots between each well-defined ab causing something tight to stir inside of Pryor. His body was the stuff of fantasy, better even than Pryor had imagined those few times he'd allowed his mind to wander in that direction.

Before he knew what he intended, his hand settled over the swell of Wystan's right pectoral, testing the solid flesh against his palm. He felt like steel, yet was soft to the touch, his skin smooth and silky. His pert nipples and their dark rosy color were of mild fascination to Pryor as he flicked his thumb lightly against that sensitive spot, eliciting a guttural groan from the Emperor.

It was the first sound he'd made in the past few minutes, and with a little thrill in his gut, Pryor realized he wanted to hear it again.

"Do you know about Tiberan grounding?" he asked, circling that tight bud, tracing over the outline of his areola.

Wystan clenched his jaw and shook his head, sending tendrils of his dark curly hair splaying around his forehead.

He made a mental note about how responsive this area seemed to be for him before continuing. "It's an important part of our daily routines. You

could call it self-care. It helps keep our minds balanced, our emotions in check.” He pressed against his nipple, tweaking it for good measure.

Wystan groaned a second time, and suddenly the spot at the apex of his thighs grew, an impressive bulge momentarily distracting Pryor. He’d figured the Emperor would be large, but even trapped behind the tight confines of his pants, it was painfully obvious *large* was an understatement.

Pryor forced himself to remember his earlier plan of attack, returning his attention to the other man’s nipples. He moved onto the other one, lavishing it with more strokes and pinches as he spoke. “Touch and sound are the key points we use to ground ourselves when things become too much to handle.”

He trailed his fingers down the center of Wystan’s chest, slowly making his way over every bump and rise of his abs, noting the heat and the satiny feel of him. When his hand reached the top of his pants, he stilled, then leaned down and took one of those perky nipples in his mouth. He sucked hard, unable to hold back a chuckle when that was enough to cause the Emperor’s hips to jolt completely off the seat.

In one swift motion, Pryor straddled him, settling his ass over the man’s firm thighs, trapping him back down in the chair. He twisted his hips once, almost gasping himself when his hard-on rubbed against Wystan’s.

Pryor pressed his palms against his sides next, silently counting his ribs as he investigated all the exposed flesh before him. The second his eyes caught sight of his earrings, the wink of metal sparkling suggestively, he leaned in and breathed against the curve of his ear.

Wystan didn’t smell like the sea. Instead, his scent was sandalwood and something sweet with a hint of spice Pryor couldn’t place.

“You took liberties with me, Emperor,” he reminded before his tongue darted out to rim the outer shell of his ear, bottom to top. The five studs rubbed against the pad of his tongue roughly. “Touched me whenever you found an opportunity. Now it’s my turn. Today absolutely blew but we’re miles from any ocean; you’re going to be my new grounding tool.”

Wystan turned his head slightly, nuzzling the side of Pryor’s head. “I’m yours to do with as you please, Detective.”

Pryor’s cock twitched and he inadvertently settled himself more firmly against Wystan’s lap, causing them both to inhale. The hand he’d left at the top of his waistline moved now, making its way over to the side to

trace the swoop of his vee line. At the same time, he got to work planting soft closed-mouth kisses down Wystan's jaw. He nipped his chin when he got there and moved on to the other side.

His body was buzzing, electricity popping and crackling beneath his skin like a livewire, more intense than anything he'd felt in a long time. Possibly ever. He was no stranger to sex, had slept with his fair share of people, but something about this was different. He couldn't recall ever having lost control this early on before.

Petting Wystan was also doing wonders to his psyche. Pryor's mind had started emptying, and the tension in his shoulders now had nothing to do with the panic from earlier, and everything to do with arousal.

"You make a very good grounder," he said but didn't give the Emperor a chance to respond.

His mouth sealed over Wystan's, his hand delving down the front of his pants at the same moment. He sucked his full bottom lip, forcing the other man to open for him, and then flicked his tongue inside. The kiss was brutal, filled with frustration and pent-up desire. Pryor was met stroke for stroke, the Emperor's tongue tangling with his in a mad bid for dominance even though he was still securely bound to the chair.

Pryor's hand wrapped around the thick length of him between his spread thighs, exploring his wide base before circling down to cup his heavy sack. His other hand held Wystan at the base of his skull, keeping their mouths pressed together, the almost furious give and take causing them both to swell even more in their pants.

Curiosity finally got the best of him, and Pryor pulled back, leaning on his haunches so that he could get a look down at the massive shaft in his grip.

He'd pulled Wystan free, his cock pointing straight up between them, bobbing in the air. When Pryor's fingers tightened around his balls, a vein visibly pulsed up the length of him. A milky drop of precome seeped from his slit, and Pryor instantly went for it, twirling his thumb in the sticky substance. He swirled it over the wide, flushed head of Wystan's dick, that same silky sensation he'd enjoyed when touching his chest returning to him tenfold.

He moaned and widened his legs, hips lurching forward to bump right up against the underside of Wystan's cock.

More liquid flooded from him, painting Pryor's hand in glistening white before he even knew what was coming. He got to work rubbing the length of him, watching the glide of his fist as he pumped Wystan up and down. Now that he could see it, it was impossible not to recognize that he was a monster size, thick and long, Pryor's fingers only just able to wrap around it fully.

He splayed them as he traveled up his dick again, and twisted his hand around the angry, swollen crown, collecting more precome in the process. The Emperor leaked a lot, it seemed, not that Pryor was complaining. He was fascinated with every twitch and pulse of the cock he held, tightening and loosening his grip here and there to try and elicit a response from Wystan.

Reedy noises escaped him whenever Pryor pressed at his glans, or when he cinched around the base of him, just barely reaching out to stroke lightly at his balls, refusing to give them the attention they so obviously craved.

The Emperor was sensitive everywhere, and by the time he had the other man writhing in his seat, the only thing on Pryor's mind was listing all the best places to touch him later on.

Later, because right now he was barely resisting the urge to press the hot length of the other man against his front and rut against him straight to orgasm. It would be satisfying, no doubt, but not at all where he wanted this night to end.

If nothing else, he'd learned one thing from this exchange.

His yearning for the Emperor was very real.

Feeling like he was about to combust, Pryor scrambled off of Wystan's lap, reaching around him to pull at the tie, unbinding his wrists and discarding the length of silk uncaringly to the ground. He retreated, taking a moment to suck air into his burning lungs and shake himself out of his lust-charged stupor long enough to formulate a sentence that wasn't simple two words strung together.

"Take me to the bedroom." There. That was five. Five was good. Five got the point across without being too crass.

Wystan's pupils were blown, his cock so red and stiff by this point it almost appeared as if someone had lit him on fire. When he rose to his feet, the move was slow, calculating. He inhaled deeply, and no doubt caught a good whiff of his own musty scent in the air.

Pryor had been aware of it for ages.

His mouth watered when Wystan shifted on his feet and his dick bounced, slapping against his stomach, leaving a shiny smear in its wake.

“Are you sure?”

It took a moment for him to process the Emperor was speaking to him. He couldn't even muster up a shred of embarrassment at having been caught staring, was certain he was way past that point anyway with how flushed his cheeks must be and how engorged he was in his pants.

“Take me to the bedroom,” he repeated, and in the next instant, Wystan had lifted him into the air. His legs circled his hips, tightening as the Emperor carried him to the other side of the room and through the open doorway.

Wystan's mouth attacked his with a mirroring ferocity of their first kiss. He bit and sucked until Pryor's lips were puffy and swollen, and he stroked his tongue deep, entering and receding as if in a prelude to what was to come. Without looking, he found the bed, practically tossing Pryor onto it before tumbling down over him to pin him to the mattress before he could move so much as an inch.

Not that Pryor had any intentions of trying to get away, he didn't. He wanted this. Wanted the Emperor to take him and make him forget everything and anything but the two of them and the inferno that blazed between them.

Wystan rolled his hips, grinding their cocks together in a way that had stars bursting behind Pryor's eyes. He rocked against him a few more times before seemingly losing patience. Unlike Pryor, he didn't bother taking his time removing their clothing. His dress shirt and his pants were off in a flash, and in no time at all, Pryor's jumpsuit was unzipped and off him as well, landing in a heap next to them on the floor.

The cool air danced against his exposed skin, causing it to prickle, but the Emperor was there to chase the cold away, his hard body settling over him once more. He was careful not to crush him, but also made sure Pryor was aware of every place they touched, keeping him confined between the bed and a wall of solid muscle.

He kissed him again, hand capturing Pryor's jaw to tip his head back for a better angle. His tongue speared into him as he planted a knee between Pryor's thighs, forcing his legs to part. When his hand finally dipped down and circled the head of his cock, Pryor cried out.

Wystan untangled their tongues with a wet popping sound, already glancing down to stare at Pryor's exposed flesh. His eyes wandered over the plains of his abs, down to the shaft he was playing with in slow measured strokes.

Pryor wasn't as large as Wystan, and his body was leaner, but he was also well defined, and no one had ever accused him of being small before. Instead of feeling self-conscious, a rush of blood traveled down the length of him as he stared down at them too. They were pressed together, slicked in sweat, their cocks jutting proudly.

Wystan gathered some of the precome leaking from Pryor's tip then dipped lower. The second one of his thick fingers pressed against the rim of Pryor's hole his hips jerked off the bed. The move accidentally pushed his finger in further, and he moaned at the slight burn of the invading digit.

The Emperor spread his thighs wider and buried them right up to his last knuckle. He circled against his inner walls, pulling back to collect more lubricant before returning. This time, he pressed two fingers inside, slowly easing his way past the tight barrier. He expertly twisted, grinning when Pryor gasped and grabbed onto his shoulders.

It'd been a long time since he'd last been stretched like this, his last sexual partner some fling on a planet he'd taken a case on over a year ago. Pryor had almost forgotten how good it felt, that initial sharp sting slowly receding, replaced with a searing heat that seemed to catch fire to every nerve ending in his body.

He keened as Wystan finger fucked him, only vaguely aware of his quivering cock jouncing with every uptick of his digits against that sweet spot inside of him.

The Emperor stretched him open, eyes watching Pryor's reactions like he was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen, stopping only once his fingers slipped into him without any resistance. He pulled himself free and climbed off the bed, returning a moment later before Pryor could miss him too much.

He held up a small packet of lube for Pryor to see and then tore it open with his teeth. Wystan poured all of it onto his left hand before chucking the packet aside. Next, he applied a liberal amount of the lube to his jutting cock before reaching back down to smear the rest over his entrance. As soon as he was satisfied they were both as slick as they were going to get, he settled between Pryor's spread thighs.

One of his hands pressed Pryor's right knee down onto the mattress, forcing his legs even wider apart, his other dropping to the pillow at the side of Pryor's head. He settled himself more comfortably, getting into position before he glanced up and captured Pryor's gaze.

With one thrust of his hips, he speared through Pryor, fully seating himself before the burn even had a chance to register.

Pryor ground his teeth against the shooting sparks of pain that traveled up his spine, momentarily dimming the pleasure. His eyes squeezed shut and he focused on breathing in through his nose and exhaling from his mouth.

Wystan was careful not to move while he adjusted, quietly waiting for the signs that it was all right to continue without hurting him. The second Pryor's tense shoulders eased, he pulled almost all the way out and snapped his hips forward hard enough Pryor slid up the bed. He lowered over him now that they were in position, moving to brace himself on his arms, caging Pryor's head.

It brought their faces close, close enough that Pryor could see the swirl of colors in his eyes alter and change each time he bucked, the greens darkening before making way for the blues, only for those to be chased out by a burst of gold so bright he thought he'd witnessed an exploding star.

Pryor settled his hands on Wystan's side, holding on for dear life as the other man pounded him into the mattress. He felt like he was being split in two, each upstroke of that massive cock causing his hole to flutter and his insides to clench desperately.

Neither of them spoke, not wasting any of their harried breaths attempting to formulate sentences, the pleasure too great for them to handle.

It was good; the quiet helped him keep focused, helped him feel the heavy weight of Wystan's chest pinning him down, and the slap of his balls against the curve of his ass. He listened to the sound of his groans and felt his dick drip where it was trapped between the two of them. Every time Wystan slid against him, the combined friction of being stuffed full and having his cock rubbed on had Pryor moaning wantonly.

Wystan thrust into him at a rapid pace that would have been impressive if it hadn't also taken away Pryor's ability to think properly. His movements became frenzied, and he forced a hand between them, taking Pryor's cock in a firm grip. He gave him two solid strokes, and that was all it took.

Pryor's balls tightened a second before he exploded, the orgasm rocking through his entire body. He twitched beneath Wystan, shooting a heavy stream of cream as the Emperor continued to wring him dry. Come splattered against the underside of his chin, but before he could find shock in that, the Emperor buried his head against the curve of his throat and let out a wailing sound that had his toes curling.

He felt the burst of heat inside of him as Wystan came, filling him up as he plunged into him a few more times, chasing the high. When he was completely spent, he dropped, coming dangerously close to crushing Pryor. In the last second, he seemed to recall where he was and shifted just enough that Pryor could still force air into his lungs.

He softened but remained seated, and Pryor found that he didn't mind, too happy enjoying the afterglow to care about much of anything at the moment.

Wystan still had his face tucked against his neck, and Pryor reached up, gently running his fingers through his hair, only partially aware of what he was doing when he nuzzled his cheek against the side of his head and sighed contentedly.



## Chapter 17:

It was a comfortable kind of silence, and one Wystan could easily get used to.

They were still in bed, and Pryor's head was resting on Wystan's outstretched arm. Though he'd pulled away first, the detective didn't seem to mind using him as a pillow, which he was taking as a sign to mean whatever he was thinking, it wasn't how to best escape.

Wystan didn't want to let him go.

In the beginning, he'd hoped to at least rekindle the friendship he'd had with Rune. Though brief, their meeting had imprinted on him, and thoughts of the boy were constantly lingering in the back of his mind. He'd spent years searching, if only to know if he was okay, but had only ever uncovered dead ends. He hadn't known that when he did find the banished Imperial, *this* was where things would lead.

At least, not until spotting Pryor in the flesh.

It'd been clear to him from the very first time their eyes had locked that he wanted the detective, and not just as a friend.

"Have you heard about Tiberan feelings?" Pryor's voice cut through the quiet, spoken low and thoughtful. "That our emotions don't burn as brightly."

"That's how you can all remain so calm and logical." Of course he knew about that. He'd done enough research on Tiberans at age fifteen to write a book on them.

How foolish he'd been, for not realizing sooner that the bond he'd felt between them then was more than simply passing friendship. It was true, he hadn't thought of the skinny boy who seemed to always be forcing a smile as anything other than someone he wanted to protect, and they'd both been too young to understand something as complex as a real crush. But his lifelong obsession should have clued adult him to the reality of the situation.

Pryor snorted. "It's a lie."

He frowned, turning his head to try and see him in the partial darkness. Outside, the windows showed an evening sky, shrouding the room in shadow. Neither of them had bothered to turn on a light since it'd been clear enough when they'd first entered, but Wystan was tempted now.

If only he could do so without getting up. Part of him worried if he pulled away, Pryor would no longer welcome his touch. It was impossible to know what the detective was thinking. Best to play it safe.

"We process them faster, that part's true. And, you weren't entirely wrong about our bridmula's playing a role. The chemicals in our bodies filter out more quickly than with most other species. Things that leave a lasting imprint tend to affect our emotions longer and more efficiently."

Apparently, his book wouldn't be a best seller. Every culture had its secrets, and the Tiberans were no different. It was similar to how the Vexans kept tight-lipped about their possessiveness.

There was a reason Pryor was telling him though, and while he wanted to believe it was leading up to a love confession, he knew better. He'd had time to mull over their past and their present, to figure out how the pieces fit and what he wanted the final puzzle to look like.

The detective had not. He couldn't be rushed, because, no matter how quickly his kind processed things, Pryor was an over-analyzer. It made him fantastic at his job, but it also kept him trapped in his thoughts more often than not.

Wystan had witnessed this on more than one occasion.

"Grounding." That had to be what this was about.

"Yeah." Pryor blew out a breath. "We're trained early on how to manage ourselves. We must maintain an air of serenity in the face of other-worlders. Even those who live in major cities, which are frequently filled with tourists and foreigners, are taught this."

"It's interesting that the rumor is that you're all cold and aloof."

"It's not actually some majorly kept secret," Pryor confessed. "Again, ask anyone who lives on Tibera, even if they weren't born there, and they'll tell you about grounding. I haven't needed to do it in a long time, but today..." He audibly swallowed and Wystan ached for him.

"I'm sorry."

"You needed to know if I was involved in the case," he lifted a shoulder in a shrug, bumping against Wystan's arm, "I get it. I'm not happy about it, but now that I've had time to think it over, I understand."

“I haven’t suspected you in a long time,” Wystan told him. At first, there was doubt, of course. He would be a terrible leader if he hadn’t considered that Rune could be involved. But Pryor had also done a good job of keeping him on his toes. He’d constantly flip back and forth from being certain he and Rune were the same person and being uncertain. “I could have used some grounding that night you told me you were dead.”

It was a slip of the tongue, he’d meant to refer to them out loud as separate beings since Pryor so clearly wanted it that way. He tensed, waiting for the other man to freak out or scold him, but that reaction never came.

“I pulled out all the stops,” Pryor said, not sounding the least bit upset. “You just had to be stubborn. It was supposed to stay hidden forever. The past was meant to stay there.”

It was tempting to ask him if he missed home, or if he ever wished that things were different, but Wystan kept those questions to himself.

“I don’t know what’s going on or why they’re using Rune’s name,” he told him, pursing his lips, “and I didn’t know anything about any of this until I received the information packet on the case. I wouldn’t lie about that. It’s a cover-up. I’ll find the real motive, I just need—”

“Pryor,” Wystan shifted, rolling onto his side so that he could stare down at him, waiting for the other man to pull his gaze off the ceiling, “I believe you. You don’t have to convince me of anything.”

A splay of emotions ran across his face, one chasing after the other, changing too quickly for Wystan to get a good read on any of them.

“If you’ve flirted with me this whole time because you hoped to uncover some massive scheme, you made an error. The biggest secret I have, you already know. There’s nothing else for you to find, Emperor.”

An inkling of anger stabbed through the center of his chest, but he held it in, careful not to let it show. “Is that really why you think I slept with you? To earn your trust and exploit it?”

Pryor thought it over, and the few seconds or so that it took him may as well have been a lifetime.

Wystan held his breath. It’d taken all of his efforts just to get them here. If Pryor still didn’t trust him—

“No,” he finally admitted. “Lying about being attracted to me would go against the Vexan way.”

“It’s not just about being physically into you, detective.” He’d assumed he’d made that notion clear, but when Pryor merely gave him one of those forced smiles—the ones he recognized from when they’d been children—he realized he’d failed.

Pryor planted a palm against Wystan’s chest and eased him off, moving into a seated position. “I’m going to shower.”

“I’ll join you.” Wystan went to rise but was stopped with a shake of the detective’s head.

“I can handle it on my own.”

“Your injury—” Guilt that he hadn’t considered that when he’d tossed him onto the bed rushed through him. Had he hurt him?

“I’ll avoid getting it wet.” Pryor got up and paused to stretch his arms over his head, giving Wystan a great view of the rounded globes of his ass and the sexy curve of his spine. He glanced at him over his shoulder, catching him staring, and chuckled.

He watched him cross the room and disappear behind a closed door. A moment later, the sound of the shower turning on reached him and he sighed.

This was going to be more work than he’d expected. Admittedly, the second Pryor had bound his wrists behind him, Wystan had thought he had him. He should have known things wouldn’t be so easy where the detective was concerned. He wasn’t pulling away, but he wasn’t exactly opening up to Wystan either.

Pryor was used to the people in his life tossing him aside without hesitation—it made sense that he was taking everything said to him with a grain of salt, despite everything they’d already been through.

He’d have to be convinced that this meant more to Wystan than scratching an itch.

It was obvious the detective was trying to draw a line, keeping what happened between them strictly physical. But Wystan couldn’t do that. He didn’t want to. His feelings for him ran too deeply to pretend or turn a blind eye to them any longer.

The boy he remembered had grown to be an intelligent, independent man with a quick wit and a sharp tongue. The detective was calculating, and intense, and had a scowl that had the people around him instantly wanting to behave and please. He may no longer carry the title of Imperial, but that air about him was still there.

They hadn't known each other long, at all, but the connection was undeniable.

He wanted Pryor, and not just in his bed.

He wanted all of him, mind, body, and soul.

He'd been successful with the first two, now all that was left was the third. He needed to come up with a way to persuade him to give them an actual chance.

Wystan was confident he could make Pryor happy. But first, he needed to be open to the idea of happiness. Since leaving Tibera, he'd clearly settled for contentment. Perhaps he believed he was truly satisfied with that, or maybe he stupidly thought he didn't deserve anything more. Either way, Wystan was going to make it his mission to show him that wasn't the case.

After everything he'd been through since birth, Pryor deserved happiness more than anyone.

The sudden sound of the doorbell stopped Wystan's thoughts short. With a groan, he forced himself out of bed, searching for something to wear before spotting a pair of navy boxer briefs nearby.

He grinned wolfishly, snatching them up and slipping into them before heading out into the main area of the suite. He didn't bother checking the intercom to see who was there, answering the door with an arm pressed up against the frame, unencumbered by his near-nudity.

Still, he'd been expecting someone like H or Ink, so was surprised to find Castor standing in the hallway waiting.

"Evening, Inspector," he drawled, catching onto the way Castor's eyes widened at his state of dress, before his gaze locked onto the underwear.

He recognized them.

Wystan banked down the seed of jealousy. There were many explanations for why the other man knew what Pryor's underwear looked like, most of them innocent. Besides, no matter what the reason, *he* was the one wearing them now.

"I'm here to see my partner," the Inspector bit out, lifting a glare to Wystan that broke all the courtesy rules he was meant to follow.

It also confirmed what he'd been suspecting for a while now.

Castor had a crush on Pryor.

And he was pretty sure his detective was none the wiser.

“He’s in the shower,” Wystan took more pleasure in saying that than he should, lips curling up when the Inspector bristled. “I can relay the message.”

“I’ll wait.”

“It’s late already,” he disagreed, “and the doctor ordered he rest. You should take this opportunity to get some extra sleep yourself. You’re not looking too good.”

His nostrils flared.

This was a completely different reaction to the ones Castor would give if Pryor were present. In fact, their roles were usually reversed, with the detective giving Wystan grief while Castor tried to talk him down. It was curious, to find that behind proverbial closed doors, the Inspector wasn’t exactly what he seemed.

But then, unrequited love could do that to a person. Wystan should be more understanding.

Should be.

He just couldn’t find it in him.

“Pryor is spending the night here, with me,” he found himself saying, “Leaving is in your best interest.”

If looks could kill, Castor would have just committed regicide.

“Here.” He shoved a tablet at Wystan, barely waiting for him to take it before letting go. “This is all the information on the interrogation of Miles.”

“Did you get anything useful?” Wystan asked, only to be shut down.

“This too.” He held out a plastic bottle filled with a pale green-colored liquid. “He drinks this when he’s stressed. Considering he got shot and was in a bad enough state he needed to leave the station before completing his task, he’ll need it.”

Pryor was a workaholic. It hadn’t even occurred to Wystan how annoyed he probably was at himself right now for not being able to interrogate Miles Vat himself. He’d most likely taken it as a personal shortcoming.

Wystan took the drink and was about to thank the man. He didn’t get the chance.

“Goodnight, Emperor.” Castor made a big show of bowing his head, then spun on his heels and walked off.

Wystan watched him go a moment, then returned to the bedroom, placing both items down onto the empty desk set before the large window.

From what he'd personally gathered, there was nothing but friendship between Castor and Pryor where the detective was concerned. He couldn't help but question if that had always been the case, or if there was more to their relationship than Wystan knew.

Pryor exited the bathroom, a towel hung low around his tapered waist. He was using another to dry his hair, missing a couple rivulets of water that rolled down his neck and across the expanse of his chest. He saw Wystan standing and cocked his head. "What's going on?"

"The Inspector just stopped by," he explained, motioning with his chin down at the tablet as he turned and propped a hip against the corner of the desk. "He brought notes for you."

Pryor tossed the towel in his hand to the corner of the room and came over, dropping down into the chair. It was like someone had snapped their fingers and suddenly night was day. Gone was the man Wystan had just roughly taken and then shared soft confessions with. Determination and a different kind of hunger burned in Pryor's eyes now.

"This too." He pressed a finger to the top of the bottle and tipped it back and forth, balancing it on its base.

"Thanks," he said absently before snatching up the drink and popping the top. He drained half the contents of the bottle before setting it aside again.

Wystan had every intention of letting him work, but then Pryor flicked the lamp on the desk on, bathing himself in a golden glow, and the side of his arm became more visible.

Moving behind him, he planted a palm lightly against the back of his neck, pressing him forward a bit to catch more of the light.

The stitches were meant to be absorbed into the body as it healed, but even that should have taken days. There was no sign of them or even a mark to indicate he'd ever been shot at all.

"What is it?" Pryor asked.

"Your wound," he frowned, "it's completely healed."

Pryor snorted. "If I were any other Tiberan, I'd believe you, but since I'm me, that's not possible."

"I'm serious." He ran the pad of his fingers across smooth, unblemished skin right where the bullet cut. "There's not even a scratch."

Pryor got up and went back to the bathroom, Wystan hot on his heels. Once there, he twisted so that he could see himself in the mirror, eyes widening when he saw it was true. “That’s not...I still have advanced healing, but nothing of this magnitude. Did the doctor give me something?”

“No,” Wystan said. He recalled his earlier fear. “Did it hurt when I was fucking you?”

Pryor’s brow winged up, and he realized how that sounded, rushing to correct himself.

“No, that’s not what I mean. You were pinned to the mattress. Your injury would have rubbed against the sheets.”

Pryor paused, then shook his head. “I didn’t feel a thing.”

“It was there before we left the hospital.” He’d seen the nurses change Pryor’s bandage less than an hour before he’d woken.

“It’s a medical anomaly then.” He went back to inspecting his reflection. “I can’t think of any explanation. Someone with a fully functioning bridmula could heal a wound like this within six hours, but me...It should have taken me two days.”

Wystan grabbed his wrist. “Let’s go back to the hospital. Run some tests.”

“No, thank you.”

“Detective—”

“You said it yourself. The doctor told you I needed more rest but was otherwise fine. And that’s all he said. I don’t know how this happened, but I’m not going back to the hospital to be poked and prodded again to find out.”

It was tempting to insist, but Wystan refrained. “Promise that you’ll get checked once the case is solved. That’s the only compromise I’m willing to give.”

He gave him a look. “My body and what I do with it is up to me.”

“Of course.” Wystan dropped his hand.

Pryor sighed. “All right. Even though it’s probably nothing more than a fluke, after the case is solved I’ll get it checked out. Happy?”

Wystan grinned.

Pryor rolled his eyes and pushed past him, then found the pile of his clothing on the floor and rifled through it until he could get to his multi-slate. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you’re wearing my underwear, Emperor.”



He plopped back down at the desk. “Any other weird proclivities of yours I should know about?”

“I like to separate work hours from personal hours, typically by using the artificial sun?” That was a total lie, but he couldn’t be blamed for trying.

Pryor grunted. “That’s funny. I like to work whenever there’s work that needs to be done.”

“I figured you were going to say that.” He came up behind him, planting his palms on the table so he could lean over Pryor and rest his on the curve of his shoulder.

He'd thought perhaps that the detective would playfully bat him away, and was pleasantly surprised when instead, Pryor reached up and ran his fingers through his hair.

## Chapter 18:

The room they'd been given in the Hades police station was large, a conference table with enough chairs to seat them all readily available. Pryor's team—minus Erix, who had officially been removed from this investigation by Wystan—gathered around, going over all the material they'd collected.

There'd been a moment where Pryor had wanted to argue in Erix's favor, but he'd realized that had more to do with not wanting to piss off the Tiberans by telling them their person had been removed, and less to do with wanting the man himself around.

Erix was difficult to work with, and he had enough on his plate without having to worry about what he'd lose his temper over next. Besides, the fact that he'd attacked a citizen of the Olympus was more than enough just cause to have him kicked from the team.

"We've been here weeks, and this is all we've got?" Fir clicked his tongue in disappointment, snapping his tablet down onto the table with a clatter.

"You aren't alone in your frustration," Castor assured him. The two were seated next to one another on the opposite side of the table from Pryor and Wystan.

Ink was with the two officers who'd helped them yesterday, trying to wring any other tidbits of information from either Ko Hiar or Miles Vat that they could. It seemed unlikely but was worth a shot.

Beneath the table, Wystan bumped his knee against Pryor's.

The Emperor had woken him at dawn with gentle kisses and a fervent hand between his legs. He'd already stroked him to semi-hardness by the time Pryor had processed what was going on. As soon as it was clear he was fully conscious, Wystan had slipped inside of him, taking him with slow, steady thrusts. Pryor's release had built up at a torturous pace so that he'd been a writhing mess, desperate to come by the end of it.

Afterward, they'd washed off, gotten dressed, and headed to the station together. The whole thing had felt entirely too domestic for Pryor's liking. The easy way they'd fallen into that type of pattern made him uncomfortable.

He couldn't get used to it.

Giving in to his urges last night was one thing. He didn't regret it, would sleep with Wystan again if given the opportunity, but that didn't mean anything in the long run. It couldn't.

Come the end of this, Pryor would be boarding a ship and heading back to Flicker. He'd be returning to his life where no one knew his old name and there was no fear of discovery. That's what he needed. That's how he'd managed to survive, and it was the only way he could see himself continuing to do so.

The Emperor? He lived in the spotlight. He ruled a kingdom. It would be impossible for Pryor to remain hidden from the rest of the galaxy if word got out Wystan was seeing someone. That would draw interest and reporters, and before long, someone would manage to uncover the truth.

And then Pryor's mother...

If asked about it, she would reject him all over again. Or, worse, she'd insist on a meeting so she could threaten him to stay away. Probably take it as far as blame him for wanting attention in the first place. Others would no doubt feel the same, and then the Emperor's judgment would be called into question.

No matter how he thought about it, he could only see this playing out the one way.

With both he and Wystan hurt in the end.

He glared at the Emperor pointedly then turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

They still had no clues leading them to where Roth could be located, or whether or not the guy had been kidnapped or was a part of the theft of M.I.C.E.

"Miles Vat stole his sister's DNA sample from Koaha hospital and used it to hack into the computer storing information on M.I.C.E.," Pryor ran through the list of notes he'd compiled last night. "It was easy enough since the backup files were stored at the same location."

"On oversight, I admit," Wystan said. "To be honest, the experiment had all but been forgotten. It's not too surprising that it was left there and

not moved to a more secure location, especially since we all assumed the biometric key would be enough.”

“He was in contact with Ko Gemina, who was secretly still working on the project illegally,” Pryor continued, then glanced over to Fir. “Do we know why yet?”

“His ego was bruised that it was shut down after the death of his predecessor. It was made painfully clear that the reason for it was a lack of confidence he could continue the work,” Fir explained. “Basically, they didn’t think he was smart enough, and they told everyone.”

“That would do it,” Castor blew out a breath.

“What was his plan if he did complete it?” Wystan asked.

“M.I.C.E was created to help repair several different organs, none of which are a part of the Vexan anatomy,” Pryor said. “It was meant to provide better health care to those who chose to relocate to the Olympus, as well as attract others. It did, at least where the Empress of Tiberan was concerned. She came running and she paid them handsomely for their services.”

“Even though it didn’t work?” Fir quirked a brow.

“Rune wasn’t cured, but his life was saved,” Pryor stated. “I suppose that was enough for her to be generous.”

“The woman banished her son less than a week later,” Wystan said. “There isn’t a generous bone in her body.”

Pryor tried not to give a reaction to that, aware that he’d already said too much by offering up that information on M.I.C.E. He should have kept his mouth shut, but he’d been distracted by the Emperor’s knee—still pressed against his—and the fact that Fir was right about them having nothing to show for all their hard work.

Fortunately, he wasn’t the only one engrossed in their notes, and no one pointed out or asked how he knew things about the program that he shouldn’t.

“So we’re thinking Ko Gemina planned to get it working, and then, what, present it to the Emperor in the hopes he wouldn’t be punished?” Fir clicked his nails against the table. “Seems like a crap plan.”

“He was hoping to sell it off-world,” Castor filled in. “Ko Hiar admitted overhearing as much. She passed that information on to whoever this Neighbor person is. Soon after that, she was given the instructions to murder him if the police came knocking.”

“Cold.” Fir gave a mock shiver.

“He was only able to download part of the files before the program was taken from him,” Castor reminded. “That’s why when he was contacted by Miles about having the rest, he jumped at the opportunity. We discovered a cash transfer between their bank accounts. Ko Gemina paid him for the stolen tech.”

“Imagine having over a decade to work on something and being so incompetent you can’t even figure out the part that had already previously existed,” Fir said. “They were right. He should have found a different line of work.”

That was true. He must not have come very close to fixing it. It seemed more like something he worked on as an afterthought, and less like a get-rich-quick scheme he had brewing. Perhaps Ko Gemina wasn’t as involved as they expected, or, at least, not as involved as he was being made out to be.

Pryor didn’t doubt he’d illegally kept a copy of part of M.I.C.E, but if he’d actively been trying to solve it, he wouldn’t have been so eager to pay Miles Vat, a stranger, for the missing pieces. Even if he wasn’t as intelligent as his predecessor, the man who’d created the technology, he couldn’t be *that* inept. Right?

No, some things weren’t adding up here.

“What about this Neighbor person?” Pryor was certain whoever he was, that was their guy. “Both Miles and Ko Hiar mentioned him. He’s obviously the ringleader. He planted Ko Hiar knowing that Ko Gemina was all but sitting on this tech, but didn’t bother to escalate things until recently.”

“You think this was a long game?” Wystan asked.

“Don’t you? Who spends a decade on something but makes no progress? According to Ko Hiar, he’d barely scratched the surface in all the time she was married to him.”

“How did Neighbor know he’d stolen a copy anyway?” Fir said. “No one else did.”

The problem was they’d already checked with everyone who’d been an active part of the project. If there was a lead somewhere amongst them, they hadn’t been able to find it.

Fir snapped his fingers. “I got it.”

“What?”

“M.I.C.E was only successful the one time, on Roth Tiberus, but you just said it was created with the intent to help others, not just Tiberans.”

Pryor noticed Wystan going stiff at his side. He felt the same way, the breath catching in his throat as he waited for Fir to continue.

“We never checked into the others who were operated on,” Fir concluded excitedly.

Pryor blew out a breath. That was close.

But also...

“That’s a good point.” They hadn’t checked because those files were still marked confidential, and since at that stage only Royals and Imperials could afford the experimental treatment, it hadn’t seemed like it would matter. If one of them wanted the technology, they would have petitioned the Vexan Head Emperor.

When Pryor had asked in the beginning if anyone had shown an interest, Wystan had told him no.

He turned to the Emperor. “Can you get us a list?”

“That will be breaking several galactic laws,” Castor stated before Wystan had a chance to respond. “We’re already toeing the line by discussing Roth Tiberius so openly. If word gets back to one of the other kingdom leaders that we’re poking around classified files—”

“It won’t be a problem,” Wystan insisted. “There were only two other experimental cases. I don’t know anything about them, but I can get the information. I’ll have to ask my sister first, as the acting Head she needs the final say on anything that could bring unwanted attention to the Olympus, but I’m certain she’ll see reason. I’ll offer to go over the information personally, that way I can vet whether or not either of the subjects would be a threat should their involvement be leaked to the public.”

Pryor preferred to do things hands-on, but he understood Wystan was in a precarious position here. “Let’s do that. You’ll tell me if either of them stands out?”

Wystan nodded. “If so, I’ll give you their file and you can fully investigate. If not, we should avoid pissing off another planet’s Imperial family.”

“That might not be necessary at all,” Castor cut in before transferring a file from his multi-slate to all of their tablets. “I spent last

night working with the Hades police. We cracked the encryption on Miles Vat's phone. This is what we discovered."

The device in front of him dinged, alerting him he received the file, and Pryor clicked to open it, heart lodging itself in his throat less than three sentences into the first document.

It was a screen capture of a chat group involving three people. Miles and Roth were two of them.

The other was named Rune.

"No way." Pryor's hands tightened around the tablet, hard enough the screen actually flickered once in protest. "This isn't true. It's been doctored."

"I'm sorry, Pry, I wanted to discuss this with you first but..." Castor glanced over at the Emperor and cleared his throat. "It doesn't seem that way. If you read these, it looks like Roth came to the Olympus to grab the completed tech from Ko Gemina once he'd finished it. He was just waiting for Miles to deliver the missing pieces first. And Rune—"

The person typing with Rune as their name was the one leading the charge. All of the text written by him were orders and instructions on how to get away with their plan, with Neighbor merely going along with it.

"The banished Imperial is in on it?" Fir frowned.

"No." Pryor felt bile rising and desperately swallowed it down. Why the hell was this happening? At least up until this point, there'd been no implicating evidence, but now...it was impossible to prove that Rune had nothing to do with this without first exposing himself. And he wasn't going to do that. It was bad enough that the Emperor—

His gaze snapped to Wystan's.

The Emperor was peering down at his own tablet, carefully reading. The longer he stared, the deeper his brow seemed to furrow. When he finally glanced up, his eyes went to Castor first, before finally traveling over to Pryor.

There was suspicion there.

He was suspicious.

Pryor's gut twisted painfully and he struggled to maintain his composure. "It's not true."

"Forgive me, boss," Fir leaned in across the table, "but am I missing something? How do you know? This seems pretty damning."

“It’s fake,” Pryor snapped, immediately moving his hands beneath the table, not wanting them to see them turning to tight fists. He dug his nails into his palms, carving tiny moon shapes into his flesh, hoping to ground himself before he blurted something stupid.

One of Wystan’s large palms settled over his. “It’s okay, Detective.”

“It’s not,” he argued, though had to admit the Emperor’s touch was doing what his nails had been unable. His mind cleared enough he could keep an even tone without yelling. “Someone is setting Rune up. I don’t know why, but I’m going to find out.”

“How—” Fir tried to ask a second time.

“Rune Tiberius is dead,” Wystan announced, squeezing Pryor’s hands beneath the table, out of sight from his teammates.

Pryor couldn’t help but stare at him, surprised that he’d lie, even if it meant helping hide his identity.

But Wystan was too busy looking pointedly across the table at Castor, as if silently daring the other guy to speak and expose him.

Because he knew Castor had faked the death certificate.

Shit.

His friend glanced between them silently, obviously confused, before confirming, “It’s true. He is dead. Pryor is right. It can’t be him.”

“Well shit.” Fir exhaled. “Things just got more complicated. We thinking it’s this Neighbor guy then all around? Using two accounts? It’s got to be, right? He’s trying to deflect and get us to suspect Tibera.”

“Which means he’s likely not Tiberan,” Wystan concluded.

Pryor didn’t know if he truly believed that, or if he was merely covering for him. It didn’t seem likely to be the first, however. What kind of emperor would he be if he overlooked all the evidence against Rune now? When there was only Pryor’s word that it wasn’t true?

He had nothing. No proof to help clear Rune’s name in Wystan’s eyes.

Even his own mother had blamed him for things, and she hadn’t had nearly as much damning evidence to use against him as the Emperor now did with these chat logs.

Something seemed to break apart within him then, and he slumped a bit in his chair before he could prevent his reaction. It swept through him, stinging his insides. Vexans were known for their honesty, yet the lie had slipped easily enough from Wystan’s lips about Rune’s death.



When he'd told Pryor he believed him last night...had that been a lie as well?

He pulled one hand free to rub at his temples. It'd finally felt like he could breathe for a second there. Having someone who knew his secret felt like a weight off his shoulders once he'd come to terms with it. Last night, next to Wystan, he'd slept better than he had in years.

There'd been a relief in knowing there was someone in his corner, whether his name was Pryor or Rune. Someone who wouldn't look at him differently because of his imperfect health, or look down on him for being an ex-Imperial tossed out like rubbish.

But he hadn't been mistaken just now. There'd been suspicion on Wystan's face.

Logs like these could easily be doctored, hell, when someone created a username they were able to input whatever they liked.

It was believable...But did Wystan believe it?

Or was Wystan now second-guessing him, the way every other person in Pryor's life had come to at one point or another?

"Detective?" The Emperor shook him slightly, snapping him out of his spiraling thoughts.

"Are you still feeling down?" Fir asked, and it took Pryor a moment to realize he didn't mean emotionally. He was referring to the gunshot.

"I'm fine." He set his tablet on the table and turned to Castor. "Are we running traces on the usernames?" *That* was one way he could clear his name, and he felt like an idiot for not instantly realizing it.

"We are," Castor said, "but it's proving difficult."

"We have some of the best tracing programs in the galaxy," Wystan assured him. "We'll find them."

Pryor nodded, not knowing how to reply. Suddenly unable to look the Emperor in the eye.

"We were told it'll most likely be another twenty-four hours or so." Castor cocked his head. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Fine," he repeated, then pushed back his chair and got to his feet. He needed to get out of this room. "I'm getting some air. Call me as soon as we have word on the tracers."

"I'll go with you." Wystan stood.

"No, it's okay. I just...I'm going to walk around a bit. Clear my head."

“He does this sometimes,” Fir helpfully stated, waving a hand absently in their direction as he gathered his things. “He likes to go off and sort through the case up here.” He tapped his temple.

“You were shot recently,” Wystan protested, but they both knew that he’d already healed from that injury.

Pryor shrugged. “They were aiming for you. I’ll be fine.”

“Detective—”

“The crime rate in Hades is high, yeah,” he said, “I remember. I’ll stick nearby.” He nodded at his teammates and then left before the Emperor could argue further.

They both needed time to think, and there was no way they were going to be able to do that properly unless they were apart.

Wystan must have realized this as well, because, despite all his protests, he didn’t follow after him.

## Chapter 19:

Pryor stiffened at the sound of approaching footsteps, hating how his heart skipped a beat when an image of Wystan flickered in his mind. When he angled his head, however, it was to find Castor coming toward him.

He was seated on a stone bench beneath a sprawling tree, the crinkling sound they made whenever a breezy blew by, and the canopy made of leaves—all various shades of blue—had momentarily distracted him. He'd been out for hours, wandering around the city, barely registering anything at all. He should feel guilty about not working the case and wasting time, but the reality was, there wasn't much he could do at the moment.

It was hard not to feel like a complete and total failure.

"How did you find me?" he asked as soon as Castor was seated next to him.

"GPS in your multi-slate," his friend said, then pulled two cans of az cider from the large pockets of his overalls. He held one out to Pryor. "Let's have a Just Because."

He managed a smile and took the offering, snapping the tab at the top open before taking a deep drag. Back in their academy days, they'd sneak off like this now and again, risk demerit and find someplace quiet and secluded to sit and drink. Sometimes they talked, other times they just enjoyed one another's company.

Pryor had been dealing with a lot in his late teen years, and Castor had always seemed to know when he was at his wit's end and desperately needed to step away from it all.

They'd called it a Just Because to avoid being overheard saying they were going out to sip at the hidden beers Castor kept tucked behind the clothes in his closet. Since graduation, with the need to hide their proclivities unnecessary, they'd only had an official Just Because on a few occasions.

"I wanted to apologize for bringing up the chat feeds," Castor broke the silence first.

"It's not like you could have kept it hidden," Pryor said. "You're just doing your job."

"Still, you obviously wanted to keep Rune out of this and away from the Emperor's notice. Why else would you have gone to such great lengths to tell him he was dead?"

Since that was no longer an issue, it was tempting to fess up, but Pryor held his tongue. Instead, he offered his friend a small smile. "I'm not mad at you for not telling me about the chat logs first. You probably tried." Most likely when he'd come looking for him last night.

When Pryor had been too busy sleeping with the Emperor.

"Go ahead," he said then, draining his can, the berry-flavored bear zipping across his tongue a familiar flavor that helped settle him even more. "Ask me."

"Don't know what you mean." Castor sipped at his bear lightly, taking his time with it.

"Come on," he urged. "You know you're curious."

"You mean about why the Emperor answered the door last night in your underwear? Or about why he told Fir Rune was dead when we all know I faked that death certificate?" He shook his head. "Nope. Not curious at all."

Pryor was about to laugh at the joke, but part of that response caught his attention. "Did I tell you he figured out that the certificate was fake?"

"It was obvious he didn't buy it," Castor explained.

"Right." Made sense. "I slept with him."

Castor paused with the can halfway to his lips but recovered quickly. "I figured. Was he any good?"

Pryor chuckled. His friend already knew he didn't give detailed descriptions of his lovers.

"Is that why you've been acting weird?" Castor asked. "You've fallen for the Emperor and you wish otherwise?"

"I haven't fallen for him," not exactly, anyway, "and the sex is only part of it."

"What else could there be? You're usually more focused than this."

He had to find a way to explain without telling Castor the whole truth, so took a moment to assess his options. It was tempting to confess it

all, to finally reveal who he really was. Cast would be hurt at first, but he'd understand why Pryor had kept it from him.

There wasn't much about his homeworld that Castor spoke about either. From the very beginning of their friendship, diving too deeply into each other's pasts had been an unspoken taboo. Neither of them had prodded.

"You know you're my best friend, right?" he said, wincing at how pathetic it sounded.

Castor cringed as well, playing it up to show that he was just messing with him. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm pretty sure I'm you're only close friend, Pry."

How could he. The reason for that lay entirely on him.

At the start, it'd been out of fear of being discovered. Later, after befriending Castor, it'd been because he knew how much guilt came with purposefully keeping such a massive secret from someone he cared about.

Fear outweighed the guilt every time.

What he'd said to Wystan the other night was accurate. He wouldn't go back.

"What would you do," he rolled the can between his hands, "if you found out something about my past? Something unexpected?"

"Like...that you're secretly a murderer?"

"No," he snorted. "Nothing like that."

Castor nibbled on his bottom lip and thought it over. "What would you do?"

"What?"

"If you found out something unexpected about me," he reiterated. "What would you do?"

During the academy, whenever Pryor felt like giving up, Castor was the one who boosted his confidence again. There'd been days where he would slip into a melancholy, unable to shake off the memories of home or stop thinking about the way his mother had looked at him the day she'd sent him away forever.

Like he was a stranger.

Like he was beneath her.

But then, that's what Imperials did. They looked down their nose at anyone not of equal station to them. They ruled kingdoms and planets, protected their citizens, yes, but they also sent their prodigy to the most

expensive schools and hosted political parties with nearby dignitaries to form alliances and save face.

They cared about what benefited them the most, and nothing else.

Inadvertently, Wystan popped into his mind. Was he different?

Did Pryor want him to be?

"I'd accept who you are," he answered. Maybe there was a chance that Wystan didn't fit the stereotype he'd created in his head. Maybe he was an Imperial that could be relied on, who cared about more than his appearance and his bloodline. Whether he was or wasn't, however, that was the type of person Pryor wanted to be. "You don't have to do anything for me, Castor. That's not why we're friends."

"Well," he stretched his legs out before himself, kicking lightly at some of the fallen leaves, "that's not entirely true, is it. I'm your partner, the inspector to your detective. Keeping you safe is my job."

"Actually, that's my job," he reminded. "You're only meant to keep me in line."

"Yeah, but," he scrunched up his nose, "I'm not very good at that, am I?"

Pryor laughed. "Not really. Sorry. I know I'm stubborn and single-minded."

"Sometimes I want to ask you why it's so important to you," Castor confessed. "You treat every single case, no matter who it involves, the same. Like you were born to solve it. You'll go days without eating or sleeping just to help people you've never met before."

"I'm a detective." He wasn't sure where he was going with this. "Isn't that why you signed up too? To help people?"

Castor grunted. "Have we never talked about this before?"

"I don't think we have." It'd never even crossed his mind to ask why Castor had chosen to leave his home planet willingly and join the I.P.F.

"My sister was attacked one night coming home late from a party," Castor said. "She survived, but her injuries were great. There was serious damage to one of her major organs. My parents tried everything they could, took her all over the galaxy to have her fixed but...She ended up dying on the operating table."

Pryor had been under the impression that he was an only child. He'd never spoken of anyone else in his family, only his mother and father now and again in passing. "I'm so sorry."

Castor didn't know his identity, but he was aware that Pryor had lost his birthmate at a young age. He felt awful knowing that they'd wasted all this time, when they could have been sharing that pain, maybe even helping each other heal.

"The perpetrator almost got away," Castor said tightly. "It was an accident that he was discovered, just in time too. We were about to leave him on another world."

"Why?"

"He was a close friend of the family. When my mother discovered a new treatment that could possibly help save my sister's life, he came with us under the guise of moral support. Once his treachery was exposed, he admitted that he planned to run off as soon as the surgery was finished."

"How was he found out?" The detective part of Pryor was desperate to know. It sounded like the crime was committed on Castor's homeworld, and yet they somehow managed to expose the culprit on a different planet.

Castor smiled, and though it was sad, there was a thread of happiness in there as well. "Another patient in the same ward as my sister noticed him acting strangely. The part of the hospital they were staying in didn't have many spare rooms, so they were staying in the same one. This little boy feigned sleep when my family friend entered the room well past midnight, and saw the man lean down and whisper something in my sister's ear. She'd been in a coma for over a week by that point, but the boy overheard what was said."

"Did he report it?" He must have. "That was very brave of him."

"It was," Castor agreed. "He was. Even an adult would have hesitated in the presence of a murderer. We were able to catch him already trying to escape. My sister died on the table the next day, but at least we had closure in the sense that the man who'd killed her would pay."

"That's why you became an investigator instead of a police officer on your own planet?"

He nodded. "I liked the idea of helping those who couldn't find help from home, wherever home might be for them. We travel the galaxy taking on strange cases, or cases that no one else wants to bother risking their necks over. Like this one. A Tiberan? No one wants to get involved with that. They're too afraid of the Tiberan Empress's wrath if they were to mess up."

Pryor felt his gut clench at the mention of her. He'd come so close just now, to finally forgetting, if only for a little while. "What about the boy? The one who helped you?"

Castor glanced away. "I heard he's dead."

"Our stories are really uplifting, huh?" he joked, though it came out flat.

"Probably why neither of us jumped at the chance to tell them." He turned back then, staring at Pryor searchingly. "What about you? What did the Emperor find out about you?"

"He discovered one of my secrets." Was it wrong of him to not want to talk about it, even after the big revelation Castor had made? It couldn't have been easy, rehashing all of that, and yet...Pryor wasn't ready.

Castor frowned. "Like, a big one?"

"The biggest one I have."

"So something you haven't even shared with me."

He paused. "Something you still don't want to."

He flinched. "I'm sorry. We've been friends a long time. I don't want you to think—"

He butted his shoulder against his. "We all have our secrets. You're mad if you think I tell you every little detail of my life. Up until twenty minutes ago, you probably thought I was an only child, didn't you? We've all got a past, Pry."

"I just wish mine would stop haunting me."

"Try embracing it then." At his dark look, Castor shrugged. "Or don't. What do I know? You haven't even shared this super-secret secret with me. How'd the Emperor manage to find out?"

There was no way to explain that without being honest, so he merely shook his head and grew quiet.

"You do like him though?" Castor asked after a beat.

That was why their friendship had survived as long as it had. Because Castor knew when to backtrack and let Pryor breathe. It was something he'd be forever grateful for.

"Yeah," he admitted. "But he doesn't trust me."

"Why not? Because of the state of the case? We've done the best we could so far," he argued. "And, really, we've gotten a lot, even if we're still not close enough to solving it as we'd like."



That was true. Despite his complaints at their meeting this morning, they had made a dent. At least where the stolen tech was concerned.

“We have no idea where Roth is or what happened to him,” he reminded.

“Sure, but—” Both of their multi-slates went off at the same time, interrupting Castor. He glanced down and then gasped. “Holy shit, did you just will that into the ether or what?”

Pryor read the words across the screen on his device three times. It was a message sent from Fir.

Imperial Roth has been found.

\* \* \*

He was dead.

Pryor stood over the body in the morgue, arms at his side, expressionless as he took in his cousin’s lifeless form. He’d been discovered four days ago and incorrectly logged as a John Doe, with the information never sent to Abraxas station like it was meant to be. That was why they hadn’t heard about it and hadn’t had the chance to run the deceased’s DNA against Roth’s.

Until now.

Someone had caught the error this morning, and it’d finally reached their team.

Pryor took in the stitched marks across Roth’s chest. His autopsy had already been performed, and though his body had been preserved with advanced technology in the hopes to keep him long enough for his family to be located, he still didn’t look anything like the man in photos Pryor had combed over after taking this case.

His cousin used to be full of life, always with a smile on his face—even if it was a mysterious, smarmy kind of one. Now his facial muscles were lax, his pallor waxy. Gone was any hint of the lustrous golden skin the heir to the Tiberan throne was known for.

It’d been forever and a day since the last time he’d been in the same room as a member of his family, and though the circumstances were bleak, this counted in Pryor’s mind.

The urge to vomit was there, but it was unclear if it had to do more with the smell of the room—formaldehyde and stale blood—or the empty

shell that had once been his cousin. Maybe it was a bit of both. It didn't matter.

"Detective," Wystan entered the room, coming through the door at his back.

Pryor had been alone up until this point, wanting to see for himself. He'd sent the rest of his team to gather the autopsy report and whatever personal belongings had been discovered with the body. In his haste to get to Roth, he'd forgotten that the Emperor would no doubt be on his way as well.

"I'm sorry," Wystan whispered when his presence got no immediate reaction.

"Don't be." Pryor took one last lingering look down at Roth, then turned to face the Emperor. "We know he got himself involved in something. Ending up here was always a possibility."

"Yes, but he's family—"

"He isn't." He set a warning look on him. "And it's going to stay that way."

"I won't tell your team," Wystan promised. "You can trust me."

"Do you?" He didn't want to do this, not now, not standing so close to a body, but... "Trust me?"

Wystan frowned at him, confused, and then seemed to realize what this was about. He stepped further into the room, making sure to stop with a good amount of space still between them so as not to make him feel crowded. "Are you really letting that bother you? Detective, it'll take more than a few counterfeit chat logs for me to lose faith in you. I know you."

"You don't—"

"I. Know. You," he insisted.

Pryor opened his mouth, closed it. With a heavy sigh, he swept the hair off his forehead. "Or you're just trying to get me to drop my guard."

Wystan's jaw clenched. "This again? Are you trying to piss me off? Why are you always picking a fight?"

"I'm not."

"You are." He took a step closer. "Whenever you get scared, that's what you do. Before, it was any time you thought I might get too close to your secret. Now that that's already out, you're doing it because you're afraid of this thing between us."

Pryor stiffened. "I'm not afraid."

He wouldn't deny that there was something between them, even though he was tempted to just to further get on the Emperor's nerves.

That urge had nothing to do with fear, though.

It didn't.

His hands clenched. "What if I told you those logs weren't faked?"

"I would call you a liar."

"What if I insisted?"

"Then I would work with your team to prove that you are lying. Either way, the end results would be the same."

"What are the end results?" there was too much uncertainty in his tone, but he couldn't hold it back.

Wystan filled more of the gap between them, easing his way closer. "What do you want them to be, Detective?"

Even if he wanted to answer that, he couldn't.

"I know how you feel about Imperials," Wystan said then. "I know these feelings were built up over time and based on your own experiences as a child. We aren't all the same though. It isn't just our uniforms that are different, or our languages, or the types of foods we eat for breakfast. On Tibera, you pray to the Sea God Oune. We Vexans honor the Great Goddess Win, Lady of Truth. Tibera is a planet made of ocean and sand, a paradise where even for the poor food is plentiful. My homeworld was destroyed many years ago. My people could have scattered, but they didn't."

He'd gotten close enough now that all Pryor had to do was lift his arm and he'd be able to touch him.

"They regrouped and rebuilt. They didn't give up on the things that mattered to them just because it got hard. The Olympus is modeled after my planet, but it isn't what Vexans at the time thought they would be raising their families on. The unexpected often happens and things change. That's natural. You were born with a horrible illness that you did nothing to deserve. It's awful. But it happens."

Wystan reached up and cupped the side of Pryor's face, and he was so enthralled by the lull of his voice and the sincerity in the Emperor's eyes, that he stood there and let him.

"On Tibera, the Empress judged you as weak. On the Olympus, the Emperor sees you as strong." He bent slightly, brushing his lips feather-light against Pryor's forehead. "I know who you really are, Detective.

Pryor. I see you, and I won't ever abandon you. This Imperial would rather die than see you walk away from him."

Wystan leaned down, a look of disappointment and hurt flashing across his face when Pryor planted a palm to the center of his chest and stopped him.

"There's a dead body right behind me," Pryor explained, not wanting to let the Emperor suffer too long from the misunderstanding. "If we were somewhere else, after a speech like that, I would one hundred percent be kissing you."

He searched for signs that he wasn't being honest.

"I mean it," Pryor assured him. "It's not going to be that easy to set my prejudice against Imperials aside, but I'm trying. And...I know that you care for me."

"I really do," he said. "I don't have an ulterior motive. I need you to believe that, the same way that I believe you had nothing to do with whatever caused your cousin to end up here."

It was strange, how easily the knot he'd been carrying in his chest all day had come undone. But those doubts and worries where Wystan was concerned were gone, not even a lingering note there to hold him back. When he looked up at the Emperor, there was nothing but acceptance in the other man's eyes.

He was right. All this time, Pryor had been the one trying to push him away. No matter how many times Wystan had told him otherwise, he still hadn't been able to believe in the Emperor's words. He wasn't sure why now was so different, why he'd been able to reach him when all other attempts had failed, but he had.

Pryor trusted that he wanted him.

For now, at least where they were concerned, that was enough.

## Chapter 20:

“Imperial Roth Tiberius’ death has been reported to the Tiberan Embassy,” Fir explained the next day. They’d reconvened in the same room at the Hades police station, though the mood was more somber than ever. He clicked on his multi-slate and aimed for the screen at the center of the room, mirroring what was on his device so they could see as he walked them through everything. “These are the data files we were able to recover from his comms.”

The body had been discovered in an infrequently visited back alley on the outskirts of Hades. The area was up for remodeling, and many of the businesses there had already closed in preparation.

“His communicator was damaged,” Fir continued, “but we were able to trace it even with its weak signal. Thankfully, otherwise, who knows long he would have been there.”

“The buildings he was hidden between were set for demolition today,” Wystan said. “They would have cleared the body without knowing. The culprit had to have known this; that’s why he chose it as the dumping ground.”

“Agreed.” Pryor had gone over the autopsy report several times while they’d waited for the Hades technical team to recover the data from Roth’s device. “Roth’s injuries were severe. He was tortured right up until the end.”

Fir grimaced and peered up at the small image of Roth’s ID photo in the top right-hand corner of the screen. The rest of the space showed square files with text in them, currently too small for the words to be made out. He didn’t click into any of them yet, waiting for Pryor to give the command first.

But other things needed to be discussed before they even bothered with chat records.

“The medical examiner was able to deduce that the cause of death was a fatal injury to Roth’s bridmula.” Pryor stared at his teammates pointedly. “It seems highly likely that someone was testing the M.I.C.E

technology on him. He suffered multiple injuries ranging from minor to fatal. Some show signs they'd healed or had begun to before his death. Finally, he was suffocated. This leads us to believe the murderer was done with him and killed him on purpose."

It was horrible, and clearly showed the type of monster they were dealing with. Whoever this Neighbor person was—because all signs pointed to them being the culprit—they'd viewed Roth Tiberius as little more than a rat in a lab, to test and dispose of at their whim.

For someone to treat an Imperial that way...It was bold. They were either looking for someone with an incredibly high station, or they were looking for a lunatic.

"Testing..." Fir's eyes went comically wide, "it on a man with a perfectly healthy organ? How would that even work?"

"They'd have to start by ensuring the organ no longer was," Castor said, reading the autopsy report on his tablet as he spoke. "Looks like they poisoned him first with mim roots, then proceeded from there. To damage his bridmula enough for proper tests to be run with M.I.C.E..." he did some calculations in his head, "it would have taken about three days."

"Poor guy was already a goner before we even got to Hades." Fir leaned back in his chair, pensive.

If only they'd discovered him sooner...But they hadn't even been looking in the right area. Though they'd yet to discover where these experiments had taken place, it would have had to be somewhere nearby where the body was dumped.

"We wasted too much time in Abraxas." Pryor inhaled.

Wystan rested his hand on Pryor's knee under the table. "There was no way any of us could have known he'd been taken out of the city, Detective, and the Olympus is one of the largest World Ships in the twelve galaxies. What matters now is finding who did this to the Tiberan heir."

"Preferably before the Empress arrives and tries to take all of our heads." Fir blew out a breath.

Pryor paled. "What?"

"Yeah, she's coming here. Damn Imperial's, always getting in the way. Will she be bringing help for the investigation? Nope." Fir rolled his eyes. "That lady has some serious screws loose."

Castor kicked him.

“What?” Fir glanced at them all, eyes settling on Wystan. He dipped his head. “Forgive my rudeness, Emperor.”

If Wystan reported him for badmouthing an Imperial, he could be demoted. Fir had never been good at keeping his thoughts to himself, however. More often than not, that helped solve cases, because he didn’t shy away from asking the tough questions. But every now and again he made a dumb slip.

Fortunately, Wystan waved his apology aside. “There’s no love lost between Rue Tiberius and myself. This is also the first I’m hearing of her trip.”

“She alerted the acting Head this morning,” Fir told him.

Which meant his sister hadn’t found the time to tell him about it yet. Pryor felt bile rise up the back of his throat and struggled to keep it down. Things had just gone from bad to worse. He’d taken this case on the understanding that he wouldn’t have to come into personal contact with any Royal or Imperial members of Tibera. That had been his one stipulation when he’d gotten the assignment.

He reached beneath the table and settled his palm over Wystan’s hand. The Emperor was warm, the skin over his knuckles a bit rough. Absently, he stroked the pad of his thumb over them, feeling the hard rise of bone and the dip between each finger.

His mother’s arrival, and what he was going to do about it, would have to wait. Right now, he needed to remain focused on solving this mess with Roth. If he could do so before the ship carrying Empress Rue arrived, he might even be able to get off the Olympus without having to see her at all.

“Did you say mim?” He glanced over at Castor. “The flower?”

“Yes,” Fir was the one to answer, clicking to pull up an image of the plant on the main screen. “It’s one of the Olympus’ most valuable resources, brought from the Vexan homeworld before the planet expired. It’s got serious holistic properties if used correctly, but if incorrectly—”

“It’s a poison,” Wystan said. “The petals and stalk of the plant are safe for consumption, but the roots have a high enough toxicity level to hospitalize a grown Vexan male within twenty minutes. Typically, the stomach needs to be pumped and the antidote needs to be administered within an hour after the roots have been eaten.”

Pryor looked at the picture, scanning over the buttery soft ice-blue petals. There were typically five or seven on each bloom, and their stalks were long and neon green, leading down to thick leaves with serrated edges. They grew in patches and were difficult to maintain to fruition. Because of this, and the plants' rarity, it wasn't common to see them out in the wild. Instead, they were cultivated in strictly run facilities.

He remembered the taste of the petals, though when he'd taken them, they'd already been ground up into a paste that had been smeared onto his tongue. It'd been bitter, with a hint of honey—not nearly enough to keep thirteen-year-old him from gagging. The effects had kicked in quickly, causing his body to feel light and his eyes to slowly close. He'd slipped into a deep sleep within moments, and when next he'd woken, the M.I.C.E surgery had been completed and there was a bandage over his lower abdomen.

It was popular on and off-world because it was a safer way to put someone under for surgery. It also acted as an opioid without any of the side effects or addictive properties. The plant had been tested on most known species in the collective galaxies, and not a single one had been allergic.

"There's a greenhouse less than forty minutes from here," Wystan told them, "but it's closed to the public and the security levels are high."

"You can't purchase it anywhere else?" Castor asked.

"The flowers, leaves, and stalks are all sold in corner stores." Pryor continued to run his thumb across Wystan's hand. "The petals are used in a tea popular with the elderly because it helps soothe aches and pains. The leaves are turned into an oil that helps with minor burns, and the stalks are sold in stick form. If they're chewed slowly a half hour before bed, they're supposedly good for insomnia."

"Isn't mim worth a ton of money?" Fir quirked a brow. "If we needed some at the hospital on Flicker, we'd be charged a couple hundred for a single dose."

"That's because it's only allowed off-world for hospital usage," Wystan explained. "It's sold and shipped directly to hospitals, with the intention of it being used on patients. The things the detective mentioned are only available on the Olympus; I wouldn't charge my own people an arm and a leg to use a resource their ancestors helped to preserve. Still, the doses found in stores are carefully measured and not nearly as potent as the ones used by medical staff for surgeries."



“So why not offer these versions elsewhere as well?”

“Because we can only grow so much a year,” he said.

“Aside from breaking into one of the facilities, or being an employee in one capable of stealing, the only other way our perp could get their hands on mim roots is if they went through the black market.” Personally, Pryor’s money was on that last one.

Fir linked his fingers and rested them behind his head. “No matter where we’re sent, there’s always a criminal underground. But, uh, I have something else I need to report before we continue...”

“What is it?”

He pulled up a new document on the screen. “We’ve found proof that Roth Tiberius was, in fact, here to steal from the Olympus. Two guesses what he was hoping to stock in his inventory.”

“Mim.” Shit. Anger toward his idiot cousin had Pryor grinding his teeth while Fir continued.

“We’ve only managed to sort through half of the information recovered from his comms, and his multi-slate was smashed to bits so, we can’t get anything off of that. I left some of the Hades police working on it when I came here. They might have found something since. I can’t confirm whether or not he’d already purchased some before he’d gone missing.”

“If he did, that could help explain where his murderer got it from,” Pryor said.

“Using his own stash to torture him to death?” Fir clucked his tongue. “That’s cold.”

“Check in with them first,” he ordered. “See if they’ve found anything. If Roth had already purchased mim illegally, there might be a way to trace the sale to its source. Pass the information on to the Hades police if that’s the case. As for us, it’ll help narrow down our options. Until then, we should look into any illegal sales ourselves.”

Whether Roth had purchased mim or his attacker had, either way they needed a link.

“Want us to find the black site?” Fir asked.

Typically, Castor hacked into whatever internet system was available, found that planets version of the dark web, and then Fir was the one who infiltrated to flush out whoever they were looking for.

“Too complicated.” Pryor shook his head. “We don’t have the time for that right now either.”

“I’ll give you access to all the information we have on illegal mim sellers,” Wystan offered. “I’ll contact the head of the department here in Hades and have them meet with you.”

“Castor will handle that,” Pryor said. “Fir, head back to the Hades team and help them sort through the covered data. Hopefully, you’ll find something quickly so the rest of us don’t waste the entire day. Contact me as soon as you’ve got something.”

He glanced at Wystan. “Can you find out if there’ve been any recent problems or break-ins that have gone unreported at the greenhouse?”

“My pleasure.”

“Great. We’ll pay a visit. I need to go through their list of employees.” Anyone who’d taken an impromptu vacation recently, come down with a sudden illness, or had obvious beef with the bosses who ran the greenhouse would need to be looked into further. There was no way of knowing yet where Roth was planning on getting his mim from, or if he even had.

If he hadn’t, not too much would change. It only meant his murderer had brought it along. Though, they’d still need to find out where the mim had come from.

And they needed to find out fast.

\* \* \*

Hot water sleuthed across Pryor’s skin as he dipped his head under the harsh spray of the shower. Steam billowed around him, fogging the glass door to the stall and heating his lungs when he inhaled deeply, trying to chase a calm he didn’t feel.

He kept seeing Roth’s body on the table, kept picturing his mother’s pinched expression. It was already too late for his cousin, but it wasn’t too late for him. Yet. Pryor needed to solve this and make a mad dash for it before her arrival. He’d changed his name. But he’d done nothing to alter his appearance.

She would recognize him.

He couldn’t give her that chance.

If they could just figure out the true motive behind all of this, maybe they’d have better luck finding the culprit. So far, all they had was the nickname Neighbor and theories they couldn’t prove.

Neighbor had set this plan in motion at least six years ago when he'd contacted Ko Hiar and convinced her to spy on Ko Gemina. Though her husband hadn't made much progress, she'd alerted Neighbor that he'd claimed to have made a breakthrough recently. They assumed that's what triggered him to reach out to Miles Vat, knowing that Miles could break into the hospital's computer system and steal the DNA sample needed to access M.I.C.E. Programs like that were kept on a single server cut off from all other avenues, so impossible to hack. Using the sample and then downloading the program onto an external drive had been the only way.

Miles had been deleted from the security footage aimed at the basement where he'd stolen the tech, but had been left on the hospital's main feed.

Was that because Neighbor had wanted them to eventually see? Or had he just been too busy to finish the job and wipe the cameras completely? They didn't know enough about this mysterious person to make a strong guess, and that drove Pryor crazy.

Pryor had read through the text files supposedly sent between himself, his cousin, and Neighbor. In them, both the fake Rune and Neighbor were convincing Roth that healing Rune was in all of their best interests. Roth was happier dealing with the dark market than he was handling Imperial affairs, and word was Empress Rue planned on stepping down by the end of the year.

If the chats were to be believed, Roth didn't want all that responsibility and was more than happy to hand it all back to Rune—so long as this scheme worked and Rune became healthy again. Because even though he didn't want it, Roth understood the repercussions of putting a sickly person on the throne.

He hadn't wanted his people to suffer. He just hadn't wanted to be the one ruling them.

Not all of the chats were recoverable, the files too damaged, so there was no way of knowing if in the end he'd fully agreed to any of Neighbor's plans or if mim had ever been brought up. The last thing they read, Roth had informed them he'd gotten the handoff from Miles Vat—the DNA sample which they'd found hidden in his hotel, and what they assumed was the harddrive containing M.I.C.E. Since only one of those things had been found, it was safe to say the other had been delivered to Neighbor.

Neighbor, who had then used it to experiment on an unsuspecting Roth.

But why?

And when?

Had the trade been meant to take place in the Max? Is that why Roth had gone there that afternoon? If so, had he left on his own and avoided the cameras because of the stolen technology he had on his person, or was he kidnapped from there?

Pryor slapped a palm against the tiled wall and squeezed his eyes shut, sticking his face under the spray. The more they seemed to uncover, the more frustrated he became. To have so much and yet so little...

He still didn't understand why this Neighbor person wanted M.I.C.E at all. It obviously had nothing to do with Rune, considering he knew he wasn't actually involved. Rune must have simply been the best tool to use against Roth to convince him to partake in this wild plan.

A hand settled on the back of his neck and he jolted, spinning so quickly he almost slipped.

Wystan reached out to help steady him, holding him up by the arms.

"Don't just sneak up on a guy," Pryor growled.

"I called your name several times," Wystan said. "You didn't seem to hear me."

"Oh."

The two of them had returned from their visit to the greenhouse, where they'd poured over employee records for hours to no avail. There hadn't been any strange occurrences at the facility, and while they'd been there, the stock was meticulously combed over. Nothing had been missing.

The wasted day had only added to Pryor's stress levels, and he'd disappeared into the bathroom of their shared hotel suite almost immediately upon their arrival. It was the same room Wystan had brought them to the other night, and though Pryor had been partially tempted to request a private room, he'd decided being alone right now probably wasn't the best idea.

There was only one person in all twelve of the galaxies who knew that Pryor was Rune, and therefore understood what he was going through at the moment.

And right now that person had joined him in the shower, and despite his best efforts, Pryor could already feel his body heating and his mind

wandering from the case.

The Emperor had stripped out of his clothing and was on full display. Though Pryor blocked the brunt of the spray, his skin was already damp and glistening, his hair curling even more at the ends around the tips of his ears and over his forehead.

“Relax, Detective,” he said, voice soft and low, the corner of his mouth tipping up. He ran his fingers gently through Pryor’s soaked hair, pushing it off his face. “If you keep overanalyzing everything, you’ll hurt yourself. Take a breather.”

Pryor’s eyes drifted shut and his head tipped back slightly when Wystan started to massage his shoulders. Just when he was starting to feel himself loosen up, he was spun around to face the wall.

Wystan’s hands returned to his shoulders before he could ask what he intended to do, and a moan slipped past Pryor’s lips when he dug those skilled digits into his tense muscles once more.

As he worked through the knots, Pryor felt himself turning to putty in his hands and lowered his forehead against the slick shower wall.

As soon as the Emperor was done there, he worked his way down, kneading and rubbing at the spots down Pryor’s back. Little by little, he eased lower, and it wasn’t until his large hands had made it to the narrow of his waist that Pryor realized he’d also been slowly shifting forward. Now, his front was practically sealed to the wall, the solid feel of Wystan at his back suddenly less soothing.

All at once, he became excruciatingly aware of the other man, and the fact that they were both naked.

As if he’d merely been waiting for the turn in Pryor’s thoughts, Wystan’s touch changed, hands gripping his hips. He kicked Pryor’s legs open, forcing them to spread, and the sound of a bottle popping open cut through the lulling rhythm of the shower.

“What—” His question ended on a drawn-out groan when the Emperor suddenly pressed those fingers against his hole and pushed. There was little resistance, the stretch around the invading digit only burning for a split second before a rush of pleasure tingled through him. His cock pulsed and thickened against the shower wall, and he planted his palms there to help steady himself when a third finger slipped in to rub at his insides.

Wystan must have brought lube in with him. Pryor hadn’t noticed. He wasn’t mad about it, though, not with the slick glide of those long

fingers expertly delving in and out of his fluttering hole.

The Emperor shifted closer so that the hefty crown of his shaft could be felt against Pryor's lower back.

He couldn't help it, he thought about how badly he wanted that cock just a few inches lower and another needy moan escaped him.

Wystan chuckled close to Pryor's ear, then planted a chaste kiss at the top curve of it. "Do you want this, Detective?"

"Yes," he said, breaths already harried.

"Are you sure?"

"Wystan—"

The Emperor dropped to his knees and spread Pryor's cheeks. His tongue shot forward, tracing the rim of his entrance teasingly before wiggling inside.

Pryor jerked against the wall and Wystan adjusted his grip, one hand on his thigh, the other back on his hip, to keep him still as his tongue mercilessly lapped at him. It darted inside of him, flicking in deeply to twist around. When he found Pryor's g-spot, the tip of his tongue pressed against it before stroking back, applying just enough pressure for not nearly enough time.

His breathing grew even more labored, and his hands fisted on the wall. When he opened his eyes and glanced down, it was to find his poor dick squished against his front, the angry red head swollen and leaking.

Wystan got back to his feet, pulling away long enough for Pryor's ass to clench desperately around air. But then he was there again, the thick, round crown of his cock forcing Pryor open. He slid in, completely seating himself in one slow and tortuous motion that had Pryor almost clawing at the wall.

Once his cock was snug, he shifted his weight, getting better footing and effectively pinning Pryor in place. Then he jerked his hips a couple of times, just a slight forward motion that rocked him into him. His balls slapped against Pryor's ass and buried him impossibly deeper, as deep as he could go. Seemingly satisfied with that, he stilled.

Pryor grew impatient rather quickly. He tried to push back but was too trapped to do so. A frustrated sound traveled up his throat. "Wystan."

"Shh," he leaned in and dropped his hands over Pryor's, "You feel so good, Detective. I'm trying not to come from the squeeze of you and end this thing too quickly. Give me a minute."

There was something extra hot about knowing Pryor wasn't alone in this, that he wasn't the only one losing himself to sensation, so he quieted and gave the Emperor a moment to settle. Around them, the steam continued to billow and the hot temperature of the water remained consistent. That paired with the fact there was a solid, unmoving cock planted deep inside of him, it felt as though the world had frozen in place.

If it weren't for the fact he was desperate for Wystan to move, Pryor probably would have enjoyed the fact it felt like everything had paused. It meant he'd no longer have to deal with the case or fear running into his mother. Nothing would matter but the heat and the feeling of being stuffed so full he was almost bursting.

The feel of the Emperor, solid and warm at his back.

Wystan shushed him again then, nuzzling his chin against the top of Pryor's head. "Just think about us," he told him. "If you need to run, run to me."

The Emperor finally eased his way out, then slammed himself forward so hard Pryor gasped as he was squished against the wall. He repeated the motion, slowly pulling free only to pound back in as if he was trying to burrow into Pryor until they became entangled and one.

"I've got you, Detective. I'll catch you," Wystan said, words gusting against the back of his neck, "I'll always catch you."

Pryor's nipples rubbed against the wall, pebbling almost painfully from the friction. His poor cock was no different, caught so tightly that the sensation was starting to become too much. He clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut as Wystan quickened his pace.

Brutally, he thrust into him, the sound of their flesh coming together ricocheting throughout the bathroom loud enough that if anyone were outside right now they'd hear. He took Pryor with increasing desperation, fucking him against the wall as he nipped and bit at his shoulders.

Pryor tried to shift on his feet, lifting slightly onto his toes in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure on his dick.

Wystan let out a low growl and grabbed him around the hips, pulling him back to meet him. It changed the angle of penetration, and they both keened. He swiveled his hips and pressed forward, all while pulling Pryor on and off his cock.

Just when Pryor thought for sure he was about to pass out from the pleasure, Wystan reached around and wrapped his large fist around him. He

pumped in time with his thrusts, hand cinching around his base whenever he was fully seated, fingers squeezing around Pryor's tip whenever he'd pulled back.

"You feel so good," Wystan repeated, his strokes frenzied, voice raw and filled with wonder. "So good."

They were both close.

"I'll never let you go," Wystan said and then he thrust home one last time, sending them both off the edge.

Stars burst behind Pryor's eyes as his mouth gaped open on a silent scream. The orgasm flashed through him, searing his nerve endings as his cock emptied itself in spurts that seemed to go on forever.

At the same time, he felt the Emperor's release, felt his twitching cock as it pumped come inside of him, filling him up with even more heat.

"You're mine, Pryor," he whispered as he continued to jerk his hips against him in short, lazy motions.

Those words somehow penetrated through the haze of Pryor's endorphin-addled brain, and a sliver of fear managed to break through the effervescence he'd only just acquired.



## Chapter 21:

Pryor padded across the bare floor to the end table where he'd left his multi-slate, needing an excuse as to why he was no longer meeting Wystan's gaze. He hadn't stuck around to get dressed, merely wrapped a towel around his waist and left, those possessive words clanking around his head like loose shrapnel.

The Emperor could be heard drying off in the bathroom, his movements unhurried and languid, a sign he'd yet to notice the shift in Pryor.

The light on his device was blinking when he reached it, and Pryor tapped the screen to see he'd missed a call from Castor. He held the multi-slate up as he wandered over toward the large bay window that overlooked Hades, the city lights glistening like stars in shades of yellows and golds below. Resting his head against the cool glass, he waited for his best friend to answer the return call.

"Where are you?" Castor's voice came steadily through the speaker.

"I was in the shower. What's going on?" He was hoping for a break on the case so that they could wrap it up. But if there had been a major discovery made, he already knew that the Inspector wouldn't have waited for him to get back to him, he would have just shown up at the room.

"Are you with the Emperor?"

"Yeah," Pryor said.

"So, you're sharing a room again?" It was impossible to tell what Castor was getting at. He didn't sound particularly annoyed or judgmental, but he wasn't thrilled by the idea either.

"Did something happen, Cast?" He was honestly too mentally drained to even attempt untangling his friend's thoughts. His own were still on what had taken place in the shower and how he was going to have to deal with it.

"No. I'm still working on figuring out where Roth Tiberius was kept all this time." Castor was trying to use the location services on Roth's communicator to ping where he'd been held captive. There was a chance

it'd been around the area they'd discovered his body, but they knew for a fact that he'd been dumped in that specific location. That meant the actual killing had to have taken place in a separate spot. If they could find it, they might be able to get a real lead on whoever this Neighbor person was. "It's going to be a long night."

"Do you need me to come help?" Pryor wasn't a technology wiz like the Inspector, but he could find his way around a system. He probably wouldn't bring anything to the table other than relief from boredom, but that was neither here nor there.

Castor thought it over for a moment, tinkering in the background the only sound trickling through the line before he replied. "It's fine. I'll concentrate better without you around."

"Ouch." He chuckled, knowing it was true. "Let me know the second you find anything."

"Will do. And, Pry?" Castor hesitated. "Get a good night's sleep, okay? Your body can only take so much."

His best friend was aware that he had connections to the Imperial Tiberan family, probably thought that Pryor was acting this way because of the death and a sense of failure. He felt bad, that he couldn't tell him the truth, that he had to continue to lie even after something as major as this had happened...But it was what it was.

Pryor wasn't going to go back to being Rune Tiberius, and the more people who knew that secret, the more likely it was it would be leaked. Having a Royal or an Imperial on the I.P.F force was unheard of, even if that person had been stripped of their title.

It was unclear if this was something he wanted to do for the rest of his life—becoming a detective had been more a means of survival than a calling, although once he'd started, he'd found gratification in being able to help people. Until something else came along that he felt he absolutely, positively couldn't let go of, this was it for him. This job was all he had.

"You too," he found himself saying, even though, knowing Castor, the other guy really would be up till the crack of dawn trying to find something. Their one-track minds had made them great partners over the years. But it also meant the two of them were always equally burned out by the end of every case.

They usually took a couple of days off to relax, sometimes even took a mini-vacation.

Pryor heard Wystan finally exit the bathroom.

“Jita’s once this is all over?” he asked, lifting his voice so that he sounded a lot more positive than he felt.

“Yeah?”

“We can probably get away with asking for an entire week off even.” One of the three tiny moons that circled Flicker was considered a retreat for many of the I.P.F officers. Jita’s was a hot spring resort that offered a huge discount on weekly packages for anyone ranked over level five. Both he and Castor qualified yet had never taken that much time off at once before, so had never experienced it.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Castor said. “Later, Pry.”

The device beeped signaling the call had been ended and Pryor’s somewhat lifting mood went with it. He could see the Emperor’s reflection in the glass, saw the way his lips were pursed and his brow had furrowed.

He fiddled with the multi-slate for a moment, before finally inhaling. He turned his head and caught Wyatan’s eye, forcing the corners of his mouth upward in a partial smile. “Castor is determined to put an end to this. I’m guessing he’s taking it as a challenge. We have evidence piling up and yet none of it helps piece together the bigger picture.”

None of it spelled out who Neighbor was. He was as big a mystery as the meaning behind his alias.

“Since no one met with the assailant face to face, it’s making things even more difficult. There’s nothing to go on aside from an online handle that’s untraceable. We can’t even tell which planet this person was on when he sent those messages to Roth.”

“Detective,” with that one word, Wystan made it clear he didn’t give a shit about the case at the moment.

Pryor pretended not to notice. “Our only chance right now is finding the kill site. With any luck, there will be clues left behind and we’ll finally be able to nab the culprit. It’ll take four days to get here from Tibera,” he held up a hand and ticked off fingers, “so if the Empress left this morning —”

“Detective.”

“—that gives us less than seventy-two hours to wrap this up and—”

“Damn it, Pryor, look at me.” He didn’t yell it, but he might as well have for all the force and tension with which he spoke. Some of the confusion in his eyes had morphed into anger now.

But that was good. Pryor needed that. Needed a spark to cling to, a reminder of who they both were. The other day at the morgue, they'd come to an understanding. It was clear, however, that they'd never been on the same page.

"I'm leaving." He made sure to hold the Emperor's gaze. "As soon as this case is closed, I'm gone. I was always going to go, Wystan. You know that."

"No," he shook his head. "I don't."

Pryor heaved a sigh. "I'm a detective working for the I.P.F, and I'm stationed on Flicker, not the Olympus. I'm only here to do my job. Once that's done, there will be no reason for me to stay. And even if there was," he hated the way the Emperor flinched and had to force himself to keep steady, "I won't. I don't belong here."

"You belong with me," Wystan insisted. Even though he'd spent so much extra time in the bathroom, he'd also only thrown a towel on, the dark blue material highlighting the sharp dip of his hips and the v-line leading downward.

The ridiculousness of this situation—the two of them having this argument practically in the nude—caused Pryor to let out a harsh chuckle. It was grating even to his ears, but he refused to bow down.

"I belong wherever I see fit," he said. "This isn't my home, and you aren't my emperor."

"I'm not asking you to uproot your entire life," Wystan told him.

"Well, you're certainly not going to," he pointed out. "You've got responsibilities here, ones that will *keep* you here for the rest of your life. If one of us were to bend for the other, it would have to be me, wouldn't it? Come on, you aren't stupid. And neither am I. Don't try and play me."

His eyes flashed. "I should be the one saying that to you. What was this, Pryor? If you never intended to even give us a real chance, why did you—"

"Let you fuck me?"

"Stop." Wystan clenched his fists at his sides. "There's more to this than just sex. More to us."

"There is no us, Emperor," Pryor snapped. "Don't you get that? There never was and there never will be. It's been fun, and I admit, these past couple of days would have been unbearable without you, but bad days pass." He motioned between the two of them. "And so will this."

Wystan cocked his head, expression changing some as he took Pryor in slowly. "This is about what I said in the shower, isn't it."

Pryor glanced away, jaw tightening.

"I spoke in the heat of the moment. I would never keep you against your will," he said.

"So then I'm free to walk out of here right now?" Pryor lifted his chin toward the door leading into the living area. Across there was the exit. He could grab a change of clothes and be in the hallway in under two minutes and they both knew it.

Wystan's expression darkened. "We aren't done talking yet."

"That's what I thought." He'd promised to work on his preconceived notions where Imperials were concerned, but some things were a given, no matter how badly one wanted to believe otherwise.

"I'm not possessive because of my station," Wystan stated, clearly able to guess where Pryor's thoughts had turned. "I'm Vexan."

"And I'm Tiberan," Pryor reminded. Two could play this game. "Relationships? We have relations, but that's as far as it goes. This is a fling, Emperor, nothing more. That's not outside the Vexan scope. I thought we both understood."

"What I understand," Wystan took a threatening step closer, and Pryor straightened from the window, "is that you're afraid. I only just got you to open up to me, don't shut down now. You said you knew how I felt."

"I care about you, too." Their talk in the morgue may as well have been weeks ago instead of mere days. So much had already happened since. How much more was bound to come? "That doesn't mean I'm willing to give up my life."

"I'm not asking you to do that."

"Maybe not right this second," he agreed. "But you're right. You're Vexan, and what happened in the bathroom proved you're too invested in this already. If we close the case tomorrow, or the day after, what did you picture happening? Honestly?"

Wystan grew quiet.

"Exactly." Pryor rested his hands on his hips. "I'm not saying this to be an asshole. I just want it to be clear where we both stand."

"It's clear, Detective," Wystan stated. "It's clear that you're unwilling to give us a shot. That you went into this already decided on where and how we would end."

“That isn’t fair.” The Emperor had been the one hitting on him, not the other way around. Pryor had tried to keep things professional. He’d tried to ignore his growing attraction and his bubbling feelings.

“Don’t talk about fairness. Fifteen minutes ago you were coming for me, and now you’re giving me the brush off. You talk a good game about no longer being an Imperial, but from where I’m standing, you’re just as selfish as one.”

Pryor jerked at that as if he’d been physically slapped, but Wystan wasn’t finished.

“More so actually, because I didn’t sleep with you with the intention of tossing you aside the second it was convenient for me to do so. I took this thing between us seriously from the start. Now you’re claiming I was alone in that? No.” He lowered his head slightly, invading Pryor’s personal space, ensuring that for at least a brief moment, all he saw was him.

“You’re afraid, Detective. Afraid I might want to control you the same way your mother controlled you before. Afraid that being with me might make you want something outside of the perfect mold that is Pryor Oro. The truth is though, you’re the same as you were back then. The only thing different is your name. When we first met, you were a child pretending to be fine with his lot in life. Always with that fake smile painted across your lips. Dutifully bowing your head at your mother’s every ridiculous request. Standing there taking the insults as she spewed nonsense about how much of a burden you were both emotionally and financially.

“Look at you now,” he gave him a once over, “pretending that everything is fine and you have it all under control when in actuality you’re a mess. Planning vacations with your teammates and smiling at them as if that wasn’t your cousin’s cold corpse you were crying over. As if you aren’t terrified that somehow this will all lead back to you and wreck everything you’ve built.”

Wystan brought his face up next to Pryor’s then. “You care about me?” He snorted. “No, you don’t. You don’t use the people you care about. You used me to make yourself feel better. I don’t blame you, not entirely. I let you do it.” His tone firmed. “But not anymore.”

When he pulled back and stepped away, gone was the man who’d just clutched Pryor tightly in the bathroom while they’d found their release. In his place stood the Emperor of the Olympus, enigmatic expression, squared shoulders and all.

Pryor even forget entirely about the fact the man was only dressed in a thin piece of terry cloth. The air around the Emperor crackled and popped.

“You’re so eager to put distance between us, Detective? You think that’s what you really want? Allow me to get a head start.” Wystan spun on his heels, moving across the room quickly, leaving little to no room for argument.

Not that Pryor even tried. His mouth opened and closed several times as he watched the Emperor leave, as he disappeared into the main room, as the sound of the door swishing open and closed echoed loudly through the space.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there, dumbly staring at the empty doorway, before he finally snapped out of it. Moving to drop down onto the edge of the bed, he groaned.

That had escalated quickly. Maybe he’d been too harsh.

Wystan’s claim over him in the shower replayed in his mind and he straightened with renewed conviction.

No, no he’d said exactly what had needed to be said. This wasn’t some fairytale and the two of them weren’t going to ride off into the sunset once this was over. The opposite, in fact. Wystan Aurelius was the Emperor of one of the largest World Ships in the galaxy, while he was a detective who lived on a planet located two days’ travel away. Maybe it had been naïve of him not to have considered the extent of the other man’s expectations, but for Pryor, a relationship had never been in the cards.

And he didn’t just mean this instance either.

Since the day his mother had banished him from Tibera, Pryor had known he was going to spend the rest of his life untethered. Dating? Marriage? Those things simply weren’t for him. Because, for one, he’d have to lie. He’d decided to change his identity and never tell another soul about being Rune Tibera again. He couldn’t knowingly do that to another person, enter a relationship with them as a liar.

Even if he did, if he took the risk and acted self-serving in that way, what if they eventually found out? They certainly wouldn’t stick around afterward. Even if they could look past the lie, who’d want to be tied to an ex-Imperial?

There were very few cases of someone having their official title striped; Rune’s was one of only a dozen recorded in history. That wasn’t the type of reputation one wanted to be tied forever to their family lineage.

Afraid? Wystan was wrong. He wasn't afraid. He was practical.

The Emperor had known who he was from the start and had gotten involved with him anyway. If anything, that only proved that this whole thing was meant to be a fling. There was no way Wystan had actually considered a future with him. What would his people say if his identity was leaked?

A person of Wystan's station couldn't afford to be linked to someone of poor health like Pryor. Someone whose own mother had given up on.

So soon after the earth-shattering orgasms they'd experienced in the bathroom, Wystan wasn't thinking straight. That had to be it. Come morning, he'd realize that Pryor was right.

Hopefully, by then the inkling of doubt that had gripped his heart the second the Emperor had left would be gone as well.

Pryor had to stay focused. It didn't matter how sexy Wystan was, or how safe and understood he made Pryor feel. He needed to unmask Neighbor.

And then he needed to get the hell off this World Ship.

He needed to leave the Emperor where he should have stayed this whole time.

In the past.

Only then would the two of them be safe from the scrutiny of the rest of the universe.

He lay back on the bed, dropping an arm over his face, and inhaled a shaky breath, trying not to notice the tears prickling the corners of his eyes or the tightness of his chest.



## Chapter 22:

A hovercar took them to the outskirts of Hades the next day. Pryor remained quiet as Fir and Castor went over their notes, rehashing the information they'd managed to collectively gather since their last meeting.

Castor spent the entire night working, finally making a breakthrough in the early AM. He'd contacted them before the artificial sun had even begun to rise in the sky, and the three of them had piled into the official police cruiser they'd borrowed from the station. He'd programmed their destination into the GPS and had already pulled up a series of holographic notes to show Pryor as soon as the car started in motion.

The hovercar drove itself, allowing them the freedom to discuss the case without having to worry about taking wrong turns or following traffic laws. This early, there weren't even that many other cars out; they'd been the only car on the road since exiting the city twenty minutes ago.

Castor had pinpointed the location Roth had been at the longest, making it the most likely place where the experiments on him had happened. It was in a large abandoned building less than a mile away from the site his body had been dumped. The Hades police had supposedly already combed the area and come up empty-handed, but with no other leads to follow, Pryor agreed that going themselves was the best move.

"Any ideas on who Neighbor could be?" Fir asked from the back seat. He leaned in, popping his head between the two of them. His hair was in disarray like he'd rolled out of bed, tossed some clothes on, and headed out without checking a mirror first.

Still, he looked a hell of a lot better than Castor.

There were dark purple splotches beneath the Inspectors' brown eyes and he was flushed. The light gray jumper suit with the Hades police insignia over the left breastplate looked identical to the one he'd been in yesterday, right down to the small yellow stain on the right sleeve.

Pryor felt bad about the three hours of sleep he'd somehow managed to get, even after his fight with Wystan and everything else. Meanwhile, his best friend had been awake, pushing through to help end this.

Castor had to know how much Pryor wanted to avoid running into the Empress of Tibera.

“There’s no way to get a set location on his whereabouts when the messages were sent to Roth,” Castor replied to Fir’s question, oblivious to Pryor’s scrutiny as he scrolled through the pages on his tablet. “But I’m guessing he wasn’t on World Ship at the start.”

“What makes you think that?” Fir pursed his lips.

“If he were here, he wouldn’t have needed to involve so many outsiders,” Pryor answered for him. He’d considered that possibility himself. “The risk increases with every moving part added. If any of the people he’d recruited had a change of heart and turned him in, all of his efforts would have been in vain. If he were here, he wouldn’t have needed so many middlemen.”

Ensuring there were others there to take the fall was one thing, certainly, but Neighbor had Ko Hiar spying on Ko Gemini, Miles Vat sneaking into the hospital to steal government sealed files, and Roth Tiberius holding onto the device which stored the DNA sample needed to pull the whole thing off. They’d confirmed Roth had also been the one to handoff the M.I.C.E program. Even if he wanted to keep his identity hidden, there were easier ways of doing it.

Although...

“Neighbor played it this way on purpose,” he said. “He wanted to get close to Roth, earn his trust. That’s probably why it was so easy to abduct him from the Max.”

Whether Roth had left the club of his own volition or not, it was clear that Neighbor had been able to kidnap him after because he’d won the Imperial over with his lies.

“Since Rune is dead and we know those communications weren’t sent by him,” Fir brought up, “do you think Roth was aware? There were no records in any other databases of his death, and from what I read in those messages, it truly seemed like he believed he was speaking to his cousin this whole time.”

The ache in Pryor’s chest had him turning away to glance out the window. They’d entered the demolition area, and were currently driving down a long, windy dirt road that twisted between multiple commercial buildings.

It felt awful, knowing that Roth had died in the end possibly believing that Rune had betrayed him. They hadn't spoken in over a decade, and yet the whole reason Pryor had taken this case was because of how nice to him his cousin had once been.

Even trying to connect the boy he'd known as a child with the man he'd discovered Roth to be was hard to swallow. Thievery? Plans to abdicate the throne? The first was enough to get him tossed into an intergalactic prison, the second was considered an insult to their people.

"There's something that's been bugging me for a while now," Fir confessed. He reached back and picked up a can of coffee, the logo unfamiliar to Pryor. After he'd popped it and taken a sip, he noticed him looking and offered it up.

"I brought one for you," Castor said before Pryor could take the offering. He pressed on the dashboard and pulled out a glass bottle filled with seek, a liquid similar to coffee with a slight lemony aftertaste.

Pryor twisted off the cap and chugged a third of its contents before motioning back to Fir. "You were saying?"

"Okay, just, bear with me for a moment. What if," he held his gaze, "Rune Tiberius isn't actually dead."

"What?" He paused with the bottle halfway to his lips again, an inkling of panic slipping through his defenses. How much longer was this going to go on? One minute he was in the clear, the next he was dodging one of his teammates' comments about his past all over again.

"No matter how many times I play it all over in my head," Fir clucked his tongue, "nothing else makes sense. You know how you ordered me to request a list of all other known Tiberans who suffered the same illness?"

Pryor nodded stupidly. He'd told him to do that over a week ago but had completely forgotten to ask for the results.

"Well, not only have there only been two dozen cases total, but only one person is listed as having survived past childhood. Guess who?"

None of them needed to bother guessing.

"Everyone else died before reaching the age of fifteen," Fir continued. "The strain on their organs was too great for them to overcome it on their own, and no other treatments worked. There was a case of a girl named Ra Huk two years ago. Her father desperately tried to get in touch with Rue Tiberius about how her son had managed to survive, but he was

denied all audiences with her. She didn't speak with him once. His daughter passed at home in her sleep."

The only news that had been made available to the Tiberan press during Rune's treatment had been that he was undergoing it on another planet. The planet wasn't named, and neither was the type of treatment. They'd even stopped at a couple other locations to throw off any tails. This was at the insistence of the then Vexan Emperor, Wystan's father, who'd wanted to ensure the technology remained a secret until it could be perfected.

They'd never gotten that far since Pryor was the only surviving test subject.

And apparently, also the only one to survive this illness.

The project had been shut down years ago, and no one had known about Ko Gemina or his attempts to conclude his predecessor's work, but still...The least his mother could have done was meet with Ra Huk's father and explain.

He'd always known how cold she treated him, but Pryor had been under the assumption she was better to her people. Having left at such a young age, there'd been few times he'd witnessed her interact with them outside of the palace. He hated hearing about how she'd treated that poor man just as much as he hated the fact that Fir was traveling down this path.

He didn't want to lie to him. The two of them, while not close in the same sense he and Castor were, could be considered friends at this point. Sure, they might not spend much time hanging out when off duty, but they had a comfortable working relationship and had built a repertoire of sorts over the years.

Perhaps...Pryor glanced subtly at his teammates. Telling them now could paint him as a suspect in their eyes. But continuing to keep this major secret was weighing on him, and the further they delved into this case, the more likely it seemed he was going to be exposed.

If they didn't solve it before the Empress's arrival, he most certainly would.

"It wasn't Rune," Castor said then, causing Pryor to blink at how sure he sounded.

"There's literally no one else in the twelve galaxies who would benefit from perfecting this technology," Fir argued.

"M.I.C.E wasn't meant to just heal bridmula's," Castor reminded.

“That’s true, but a bridmula was the only thing that it successfully healed. No one else would even know about M.I.C.E’s existence. All three families of the test subjects signed non-disclosure agreements prior to the surgeries. Rune had his mother and his maid accompany him to the Olympus. The names of the other two subjects are still classified and we don’t have names, but Emperor Wystan was able to get us information on the relatives that accompanied them. The first only had his father, who has since passed. The second had both parents and an older brother with her. Her mother died shortly after her, and when I sent a transmission to her father, he refused to reply.”

“You reached out to her family?” Castor glared. “Without talking to either of us about it first?”

“How did you even manage without names?” Pryor frowned.

“There was a number attached I could send a communication to.”

That seemed odd. Why would information from the secure files be doled out like that? They were able to get a contact number but not names?

“That was in poor taste,” Pryor had to agree with Castor there at least. “Hasn’t he already been through enough? And you said he lost his daughter.”

“Yes, but I wanted to confirm he never told anyone about it,” Fir said. “I was under the assumption this information packet was sent to the two of you as well.”

“When did you receive it?”

“Late last night. The Emperor sent it directly to my multi-slate.”

Pryor grit his teeth. Wystan must not have sent it to him because of their fight. How petty. He couldn’t believe the Emperor would go so far as to mess with the case out of anger.

“I never got anything,” Castor told him.

Fir frowned. “That’s weird.”

“You said her father never responded?”

“No, and I doubt he will. But again, I don’t think it matters. It was mostly just me wanting to tie up any loose ends before talking to you guys about my theory.”

“Which is that Rune Tiberius is alive and orchestrated all of this, including the torture and death of his cousin, in order to heal himself with as of yet faulty tech?” Pryor said.

“With Roth out of the way, the position of Heir is open,” Fir stated excitedly. He really thought he was on to something here.

“He can’t just take it,” Pryor reminded. “It’s up to the Empress, and she would never bestow that on him. Not if he’d killed his cousin.”

“She might if she didn’t find out it was him.”

“And when he showed up in perfect health, right after M.I.C.E was stolen and Roth was murdered because of the theft?” His mother was many things. An idiot wasn’t one of them.

Fir deflated some, but persevered. “We should at least look into it.”

“There’s no point. Rune didn’t do it,” Pryor said.

“How can you be so certain? Because that death certificate? I don’t buy it. If Cast looks into it, I’m positive he’ll be able to prove it was doctored and then—”

“Rune isn’t dead,” he confirmed, and it was almost like an out-of-body experience. The words left his mouth, but it didn’t feel like they were coming from him. “But he also isn’t behind this. I know because—”

“We’re here.” Castor looked up from his tablet finally as the hovercar began to slow. Unlike Fir, he didn’t appear to be the least bit interested in what Pryor had been about to say. “Shelve this topic for later. Right now, we should focus on the task at hand.”

Without waiting for either of them to reply, the Inspector shoved open the driver’s side door and stepped out onto packed dirt. The car had stopped a few yards away from a large industrial building. It was four stories high, with windows lining this side. Through them, abandoned office spaces could easily be made out.

“It was in operation right up until the final eviction day,” Castor told them as Fir and Pryor got out of the car and rounded to meet up with him at the front. He pressed a few buttons on his multi-slate and held it out toward the building. A moment later, it beeped. “Infrared scanners say it’s clear.”

He headed toward the front doors, two large glass rectangles with metal pull bars. They creaked as he yanked them open, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Fir coughed, then quirked a brow at Pryor. “You going to bring that with, boss?”

He was still holding onto the seek. He’d been so taken aback by Castor’s cutting his confession off—not to mention the fact that he’d almost confessed at all—he’d forgotten he was still holding it. Now, he chugged

the rest of the contents and set the empty bottle at the side of the door, planning on grabbing it on their way out.

They entered a large foyer with a waiting station and a check-in desk off to the right. Another set of doors led to sectioned-off office spaces to the left, and a stairwell, as well as two elevators, were on the far side. Even though the scan had shown they were alone in the building, it was safer to take the stairs instead of their chances.

“Didn’t bother to clean up before they left, huh?” Fir kicked at a couple of pieces of loose paper that were scattered across the gray linoleum floor.

“Someone bought the place out just before it closed,” Castor explained. “Guess they didn’t care about the previous owner’s work. They’ll probably turn this building into hotels or something anyway, once everything’s cleared away. It should be empty. We’re just here hoping to find clues.”

They followed Castor up the stairs, Fir slipping his blaster from its holster in the hidden side pocket on his navy jumpsuit. The stun pistol had several settings and could take down just about any creature on any of the planets or World Ships in the Crystal Sea. As soon as they’d reached the third level, he was motioned forward by the Inspector and took lead.

Pryor and Castor took out their own blasters as well.

"Set to stun," Pryor ordered.

“How far?” Fir asked over his shoulder as he led them down a narrow hall, passing several doors on the way.

“I’m not sure,” Castor said. “I was only able to pinpoint that Roth spent some time on the third floor. We’ll have to search.”

Fir paused and lowered his weapon. “Could have said that four doors ago.”

“You two check these,” Castor suggested motioning the way they’d come. “I’ll look through the ones from here to the end.”

There were seven doors total, four on the left and three on the right. Depending on the size of the room, it wouldn’t take too long for them to make their way through them all, especially since it’d be fairly obvious at first glance whether or not someone had been held captive and tortured within one of them.

If they came up empty-handed, that’s when they’d have to resort to combing through.

They separated and got to work, Pryor and Fir heading back down to check the doors they'd already passed. Each room was similar to the last, with a couple of empty desks and barren bookshelves. Nothing special.

In the third, Fir clicked his tongue and put his weapon away. "Please don't tell me this is going to be yet another dead end."

"We'll find something," Pryor assured him. They had to. "Roth was in seriously bad shape. The types of things that were done to him wouldn't be so easily covered up. If the torture did take place in this building, we'll find out soon enough. Plus, M.I.C.E requires a massive server to function. Not exactly the type of thing someone can easily move."

And after all the trouble Neighbor had gone through to get their hands on the tech, there was little to no chance he'd risk transporting it anyway.

"Let's—" Pryor sucked in a sharp breath as a wave of burning pain stabbed through him. He almost doubled over from the intensity of it, pressing a palm over his lower front. It was similar to what had happened before, only five times stronger and more painful.

"What's wrong?" Fir was at his side in a heartbeat, pulling his arm over his shoulders so he could help him out into the hall. He settled him against the wall, cursing when Pryor immediately dropped to the floor. "What the hell is going on?!"

"Don't know," he said through clenched teeth. He was trying to focus on his breathing to keep from passing out, but it was a struggle. "Something's wrong with my bridmula."

"Shit." Fir shot to his feet. "I'm going to get Cast. I'll be right back and then we'll rush you to the nearest hospital! Hang in there!"

The multi-slate attached to Pryor's upper arm rang suddenly, the chimes mingling with the sound of Fir's receding footsteps as he ran down the hall. Pryor glanced at it, a mixed sense of relief and annoyance flickering through him when he saw the Emperor's name flashing across the screen.

The annoyance was obviously due to their fight, but the relief...He realized with a start that he wished the Emperor was here with him. As if somehow that would make the pain more bearable.

It took him longer than it should have to press his pointer finger against the side of the device, popping out the earpiece so that he could speak privately and not have to stare at the screen. His head thumped back



against the wall as soon as he'd worked the piece into his ear, barely managed to hit the accept button. It felt as if all of his energy was draining away from him.

"Wystan," his voice was tight, and even if he'd wanted to, it would have been impossible for him to keep the fact he was in pain from seeping through.

Sure enough, he was met with a momentary pause before, "What's wrong? Where are you?"

He chuckled, the sound ending on another gasp as a wave of fire burned through his gut. "You sound so concerned, Emperor."

"Stop joking around," he could be heard moving now. "Get me a car!" he ordered to someone before lowering his voice some to coaxingly ask, "Pryor, what's going on?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "Hurts."

"Were you injured?"

"Don't know."

Wystan barked out another command to someone. "It's your bridmula, isn't it."

"Yeah," he said, even though it'd been posed rhetorically. He wheezed and caved in on himself as another wave hit him.

"Pryor. Tell me where you are, baby."

"Gross." He snorted.

"We can discuss terms of endearment you like later," Wystan told him, an edge to his tone making it clear he was losing his patience. "Tell me where you are. Now."

Pryor opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, a shot went off at the other end of the hall. It wasn't the soft snap and crackle of the stun setting either, but the full-on pop of a bona fide blaster. The sound was immediately followed by a deafening silence that had the hairs on the back of his neck rising.

Castor and Fir were down there.

Wystan called his name, but Pryor was too focused on forcing himself back onto his feet. It was difficult, and he needed to use the wall to manage, practically hugging it as he did so. The pain was excruciating now, causing his vision to wink in and out as he desperately made his way one step at a time down the hall.

“Damn it, Pryor, talk to me!” Wystan said, words finally cutting through Pryor’s concentration.

He tapped at one of the buttons at the top left corner of his multi-slate, sending his coordinates directly to Wystan, unsure if he’d be able to formulate a sentence at this point. As it were, his jaw was clamped so tightly against the onslaught of throbbing in his lower side his teeth were starting to hurt as well.

“Good job, *dow*,” Wystan praised cajolingly. “Hang in there, okay? I’m coming. Wait for me.”

The fact that the Emperor had listened and switched from calling him “baby” to the Vexan term of endearment “*dow*” had the corner of Pryor’s mouth turning up in a partial smile, even in the midst of all this. But now wasn’t the time to swoon over Wystan, or pick apart why being called something sweetly by him made Pryor’s heart skip a beat. It was already taking everything in him just to move, a trip which should have taken two minutes tops having been stretched to five or six.

His teammates could have bled out by now.

Vaguely, he was aware that even once he made it to the room at the end, he was in no condition to fight, and yet, that wasn’t enough to get him to stop.

He pressed his back against the wall and adjusted the weapon in both hands, inhaling a shaky breath in a poor attempt to center himself. He just needed to keep it together long enough to assess the situation. He could do this.

“Pryor?” Wystan’s voice sounded a million miles away, despite the fact the earpiece was still snug in his ear. “I’m in the hovercar. I’m coming. Can you hear me? I’m coming for you. Hold on.”

Pryor noted how panicked the Emperor sounded, and it made him feel kind of bad about what he was about to do. Still, he inhaled one last time, squaring his shoulders and ignoring the pain as he twisted, coming to stand directly in the doorway with his blaster held out in front of him.

Within a second it became obvious this was the room they’d been looking for, with a massive computer station setup and already running. The low hum of machines and whirring of fans filled the space with a steady rhythm. A medical examination table had also been prepared.

Fir was slumped against one of the windows to the right, a hand over his abdomen. He wasn’t conscious, but Pryor could make the uneven

rise and call of his chest at least.

Castor stood off to the other side, head cocked, watching Pryor with an odd look on his face that he couldn't place.

The image of him wavered as his vision swam, and Pryor almost fell over as he lost his footing, the weapon in his hand shaking.

Someone else stepped into view, a woman who had been hidden behind one of the three large servers set on the left of the room. She seemed familiar, but in his current state, Pryor couldn't place where he'd seen her from.

"What—" the rest of the sentence died on his tongue as another wave of dizziness hit him hard. This time, he did fall, his legs going out from under him. He hit the solid ground hard, whacking the side of his head against the cement. Stars exploded and he curled in on himself, only partially recalling the weapon that clattered next to him and that he needed it. His multi-slate cracked, the lights winking before sputtering out, cutting contact with Wystan.

Something was wrong.

Castor walked over and dropped down into a crouch in front of him. For a moment, all he did was stare, then he reached out and gently brushed a flop of hair out of Pryor's eyes. "Does it hurt that much?"

Pryor's eyes went wide but his entire body had tensed and locked up from the anguish, both physically and mentally.

Because there was remorse twisting Castor's features, the type that only someone who'd done something wrong would have. This close, it was easy to see the splatter of blood across the front of his jumper.

He tried to glance over at Fir, but couldn't tip his head that far.

"I didn't mean to shoot him," Castor confirmed what he feared, clearly following Pryor's train of thought. He'd always been good at that, always been observant. "I wasn't ready for either of you yet. He got in the way too soon. But," he spared a single look at Fir before resting his gaze back on Pryor, "he should live. It might be for the best anyway. I sent him that information packet hoping he would jump on that girl's father as the suspect. He was supposed to grow more suspicious when his communication was denied. Who could have guessed he'd get so hung up on Rune."

This couldn't be happening. Pryor wanted to ask him what was going on, demand answers, but all he could manage was a single shake of

his head.

"I'm trying to help you," Castor insisted. He lifted a hand and curled his fingers, calling the woman over.

She was dressed as a surgeon Pryor realized with another start.

Castor's gaze lifted, traveling over Pryor, but before he could prepare for whatever was there, someone planted their hands beneath his arms and lifted him off the ground. The forced movement had him crying out, in too much agony to even be embarrassed.

"Careful," Castor shot a warning glare at whoever was now holding Pryor upright.

"Apologies, Imperial," the person behind him said, the words clearly meant for Pryor.

Words spoken in a familiar, deep tone.

Erix.

Erix, who'd just addressed him as Imperial.

Castor's fingers delved into Pryor's hair again, smoothing the strands off his sticky forehead. "Don't worry. I've got you."

*I've got you, Detective.*

That statement, so similar to the one Wystan had said to him, gave Pryor a burst of adrenaline. He yanked his head away from Castor, mouth twisting into a sneer of disgust.

"Don't. Touch. Me," he managed to get out, though it was barely audible.

"You're angry," Castor said, "I understand. But you won't be for long. I'm doing this for you." He took a step closer cupping the sides of Pryor's face, easily subduing his attempts at a struggle in his highly weakened state. He smiled, and it was the same smile he often gave Pryor, friendly and open and filled with trust, that for a split second he thought maybe this was all a bad fever dream brought on by his malfunctioning bridmula.

The second passed rather quickly though.

He smoothed the pad of his thumbs over the rise of Pryor's cheeks and held his gaze. "I'm going to make you whole again. Rune."

## Chapter 23:

Something smelled like vomit warmed over.

Pryor was fairly certain it was him. He'd thrown up when Erix had dragged him over to the medical examination table. It would have been one thing if he'd managed to upchuck last night's dinner on one of these assholes currently securing his wrists tightly down, but aside from the tips of Castor's shoes, most of it had ended up on himself.

He'd managed to pull away from Erix and Castor long enough to discreetly slip the earpiece from his ear and drop it to the ground, kicking it under the table. With any luck, the three other people in the room hadn't noticed he'd been on a call.

Wystan had received the coordinates, right? It'd been difficult to concentrate through the pain and the sense of desperation he'd felt to get to his team. He thought for sure he'd heard the Emperor confirm, but...Doubt was creeping in.

It wasn't the only thing.

Panic assaulted him, slipping past the awful feeling of sickness and sharp pains, as soon as his ankles and wrists were restrained. He'd been tied down to the table and despite his struggles, there was no budging.

"Calm down, Pry," Castor said, leaning over him while the doctor pulled over a metal rolling tray with an array of different tools laid out. "I'll undo the ties as soon as you're unconscious. I promise you won't have to wake up held down, but you won't cooperate right now and this is too important. I know this isn't how you'd want things to go; this was the only way. You wouldn't have agreed to steal M.I.C.E otherwise."

As far as issues were, that was only one of them. There were so many other unanswered questions, but through the stabbing sensation in his bridmula, it was hard for Pryor to focus and grab on to which were the most important ones. His head felt like it'd been hit with something heavy, and his vision hadn't fully recovered. In fact, it seemed to be worsening with every passing minute, with prisms and spots of light winking in and out.

"Of course not," he grunted. "This is crazy. What happened to you?"

“Nothing,” he rested a hand over Pryor’s heart, ignoring when he tried to shake him off, “I’m who I’ve always been. You seemed like you really wanted to pretend, so I went along with you, but now that we’re here, playtime is over. How soon?” he directed that last question to the doctor.

“We need to remove his shirt,” she didn’t even glance at Pryor as she spoke, too busy checking her supplies. It was extremely cold. Clinical.

“You were at the hospital that night.” That’s why he recognized her. That night back when he’d been thirteen and about to undergo the trial surgery. She’d been one of the nurse attendants.

But not his.

“Castor?” He hated how unsure he sounded, but there was no way around that. This was his best friend, the man who’d stuck by his side for just shy of a decade and...And this had to be a hallucination. It had to be.

“Are you starting to remember something?” Castor asked him, but the doctor answered before he was able.

“That’s highly unlikely, sir.”

Pryor looked at her. “I know you.”

This gave her pause, and finally, she gave him a little of her attention, though it was brief. “It’s an honor to see you again, Imperial Rune. I swear I will do my utmost to ensure this operation goes smoothly.”

“I’m not Rune,” he said, more so out of habit than anything else. Obviously he wasn’t going to convince them. Proof came when they both promptly ignored his statement. He switched tactics. “I don’t want this operation. I am an unwilling patient which means you’re breaching Med Code #365.”

“I have a debt to pay,” the doctor simply replied. “If you would like to report me afterward, I will of course cooperate with the arrest.”

Pryor frowned. “Has everyone in this room lost their mind?”

After placing him on the table, Erix had moved off a few yards, no doubt to secure the room—even though Fir was still unconscious and bleeding out. He’d ditched his police uniform and was dressed in sand-colored slacks and a sleeveless powder-blue silk shirt. Clothes that would be worn if they were on Tibera.

“And you? What’s your excuse?” Pryor was pretty sure the guy hated his guts. He’d certainly acted that way this entire time. If not for the fact he trusted Castor—at least, he trusted that Cast wasn’t trying to kill him

—he'd assume Erix was here to ensure he left in a body bag as revenge for Roth.

Roth, who was murdered by Neighbor.

Supposedly in this room...With the very tech that the doctor lady was currently getting ready to hook Pryor too...

"Please tell me you didn't," he turned to Castor. "You didn't, right? You aren't—"

Castor sighed. "You already know I am, Pry."

"He's in excruciated pain at the moment," the doctor explained absently. "His mind is probably a bit jumbled. He might not recall this conversation later on. He might remember it in great detail."

"My mind is fine, thanks," he snapped, although, she had a point. He'd realized what was going on the second he'd walked in to find Fir shot and Castor standing there straight-faced, hadn't he? Just because he hadn't wanted to admit it, of course he had. But...Mostly he'd assumed that Castor was working with whoever this Neighbor person was, not that..."Why? I just don't get it. Why did you do all of this?"

It'd been so easy for him, too. Pryor had helped make it easy.

Castor had been in charge of the encrypted data they'd found, both where Miles Vat and Roth were concerned. Planting evidence, like the chat logs between Roth and the fake Rune, would have been a piece of cake for someone who could create a legitimate looking death certificate in under five minutes.

He must have been in contact with people here on the Olympus for a while—Ko Hiar had been undercover for years.

Erix placed his hands on the sides of his neck and bowed low. "Erix Ger hails Heir Imperial Rune Tiberius."

Pryor dropped his head back to the table. "I think I'm going to throw up again."

Castor turned a concerned look to the doctor.

"We need to get started soon," she said.

He reached for the buckle at the collar of Pryor's jumpsuit, slipping the material through the loop to expose the zipper. Without hesitation, he yanked it down, opening the suit to reveal Pryor's bare chest. He didn't stop until he'd reached the band of Pryor's boxer briefs.

"That's fine for now," the doctor assured him when he glanced up at her for confirmation. She quickly got to work, pressing suction cups

connected to wires leading to the large machine at her back to Pryor's chest and upper abdomen.

"Cast, seriously, stop this." He was trying not to think about how his best friend had basically just undressed him. They'd changed in front of one another a million times, had been roommates all throughout academy so had seen one another fully nude on more than one occasion. But this didn't feel like the guy he'd known.

This didn't feel like his best friend. And the strange gleam of adoration—or, at least something like it—in Castor's eyes gave Pryor an icky feeling in his gut.

"Doctor Tet swears this will be successful," Castor told him. "We ran as many tests on Roth as we could and I'm positive the results today will be everything we hope for and more. I needed the doctor's help on the medical side of things, but the mechanics of it all were purely done by me. You trust me, don't you?" He grinned. "You're always saying how I'm the best tech you know."

"I always say my partner is the best there is," he corrected. "I don't know who you are."

"If I tell you now, you might not remember later but..." Castor glanced over at Tet quickly, then, "all right. I can always tell you again. You were getting somewhere anyway, before getting distracted. Doctor Tet was a nursing assistant for my sister. She traveled with my parents and me to the Olympus."

"Wait." Pryor felt like this should be a simple enough dialogue to follow, and yet was finding it difficult. "Your sister? Who died?"

He nodded. "The same night she was rescued from that family friend I told you about. Admittedly," he rubbed at the back of his neck, seeming sheepish, "I lied to you a bit. It went a little differently. For one, Heen—the family friend—was in the process of strangling her when the boy asleep in the same room woke up and noticed. He hit the emergency call button and attacked Heen, despite being a third his size and in poor shape."

Images flashed through Pryor's mind, pictures of a man with dark red hair bent over a hospital bed. Followed by memories of being tossed nearly across the room and knocking over...something.

Pryor squeezed his eyes shut, trying to capture the allusive memory, but it was no use, that was all that came to him.



“The medical staff arrived just in time to save you both,” Castor continued, “but you’d both sustained injuries from Heen. The M.I.C.E operations were moved up by five hours. Heen fled during the chaos, but my family went after him.”

“Both?” Pryor barely recalled his time at the hospital. There was the food he’d eaten just outside with a younger Wystan. The fear he’d felt as he’d been wheeled into the room just before the start of the operation. The color of Wystan’s eyes. But...that was mostly it. Everything else had been stripped away of that time.

“When you woke up and couldn’t remember, we were told not to say anything. We were dealing with my sister’s death, so at the time we left without much argument. But, as time passed, it didn’t sit right with my parents. The people of Deign are brought up believing it imperative to repay our debts. It wasn’t long until you were publicly banished from Tibera, and it took a while before I was able to locate you again.”

Castor had arrived at the academy only a week after Pryor. Since admissions were a month long, due to the fact people from all over the galaxy needed to travel to get there, there’d been nothing suspicious about that at all.

“I was bummed when you didn’t recognize me, but I tried not to take it personally. It isn’t your fault. It’s Heen’s, and Heen was only there because my family brought him along.” Castor tipped his chin down, his expression morphing into one of guilt. “You hit your head really hard while trying to pull him off my sister. That’s really why you can’t remember anything, Rune. It’s not a side effect of M.I.C.E.”

“Well,” Tet spoke then. She’d put on a face mask and was checking the contents of a needle. “Not entirely. M.I.C.E wasn’t able to restore your bridmula fast enough to heal all the damage your brain underwent. It healed it so there were no long-lasting repercussions, but those memories were lost. Don’t worry though, Imperial, there’s no fear of memory loss this time.”

Gods he hadn't even considered that.

Her words did not reassure him either. What if she was wrong and he ended up forgetting things?

What if he forgot Wystan?

“I really don’t want to do this,” Pryor tried again as she rolled up his sleeve. “I’m perfectly happy the way I am. And,” he turned back to Castor,

“you don’t owe me anything. In the end, you still lost your sister.”

“But we caught her murderer,” he said. “That’s enough. It has to be.”

He struggled against his bonds one last time, but it was even more useless now than it’d been five minutes ago.

“Stay still,” Tet ordered, lowering the tip of the needle to the curve of his arm. “This is going to pinch, Imperial.”

“I am not an Imperial.”

“You will be again once this is successful,” Castor told him excitedly. “We’ll take back everything that was stolen from you. Don’t you get it? This is a gift, a repayment for everything you’ve done for my family. For everything you’ve done for me over the years. And besides, it’s already too late to stop now. Unless you want to die.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been feeling strange for weeks,” Castor pointed out.

“I got shocked by that device,” he reminded. “It must have—”

“It reset the nanotech already inside of you.” Castor stared at the spot on Pryor’s body. “I’m sorry that it hurt, a major jolt was the only way.”

That made no sense. “Resetting the bots would have rendered them useless.”

He’d been feeling off, yes, but if the tech inside of him had stopped working entirely, he’d have one foot in the grave by now at the very least.

Maybe he did.

“I was feeding you replacements,” Castor reassured him. “The new tech was built to travel through your system. Once it reached the bridmula, they attached to the old bots and reprogramed them.”

“We realized early on from Ko Gemina’s research that the one major issue with M.I.C.E was how invasive it was all at once,” Tet began. “The patient’s body wasn’t given enough time to adjust to the intrusion, or the repairs being made to them. We found if we prepped them weeks in advance, the body would be more susceptible. Your bridmula is already at eighty percent functionality. Have you not noticed any positive changes, Imperial?”

“Your arm is healed.” Castor smirked knowingly.

Pryor hadn’t thought much about his rapid healing because he’d been certain it was a fluke, or that there was something special they’d given him at the hospital. Vexans were known for their medical advancements,

after all. He should have looked into it the second Wystan had shown concern, even if nothing could come of it.

From what he was gathering, the new bots that had been forced inside of him were similar enough to the old that they would remain undetected. Wystan had told him about the medical report and how they'd discovered the nano tech's presence, and that it appeared as though they'd been there a long time.

Even if he had gone running tests, they wouldn't have found anything.

Castor hadn't wanted them to.

"How?" Pryor would have noticed if the guy was stabbing him with a needle consistently, and he'd used the word feeding...Right. "The drinks."

"Bringing them to you wasn't out of character," he lifted a single shoulder, "so it was the perfect plan. Besides, I had time to figure out how to do all of this. It took almost six months to convince Roth I could be trusted, and he only came around after I introduced the fake Rune account. Since I know your mannerisms, it was easy enough to convince him I was you."

"It helped how desperate he was to abandon his own people," Erix added in disgust.

"I found Erix three years ago," Castor said. "I was after evidence I could use to blackmail Roth into helping me if need be, but I ended up capturing Erix doing the dirty work. Roth was such an asshole, he abused his power and got others to do the actual stealing, that way if they were caught it could never be linked back to him."

If that were true, that meant Miles Vat was probably hired by Roth and not Neighbor. That was why the DNA adaptor had been stashed in Roth's hotel room, and why he'd taken the technology to meet with Neighbor after it'd been stolen instead of Miles.

Roth wanted all the credit and rewards, but none of the risk.

It was so hard to picture his cousin in that light after holding him in such high esteem. But then, with Castor looming over him ready to put him under the knife against his will, perhaps Pryor had to admit he wasn't a good judge of character like he'd always assumed.

"Erix was more than willing to join our side," Castor continued. "He hated Roth and is loyal to the Imperial family. You're the only living replacement, the obvious choice once Roth was removed from succession."

Was this Pryor's fault? Should he have been upfront with Castor? Maybe not right away, but eventually? If they'd only talked about this, if he'd had the chance to explain all the reasons he didn't want to be involved with Tibera ever again, would they have still ended up here?

"Why didn't you bring this up before?" Pryor asked. "I could have told you I didn't want this. We could have at least still—" Have been friends.

The words died on his tongue.

For years he'd had one person by his side. One person he'd trusted implicitly.

And that person had betrayed him.

"We both kept secrets," Castor said. "I won't hold yours against you, so don't hold mine against me."

That was true. Pryor claimed that he trusted him, and yet he'd never told Castor the most important thing about himself. He wasn't even sure if he ever would have. After Wystan had discovered it, it'd been tempting. He'd gotten to experience what it was like to have the secret out there, to have it known and yet not be judged.

But Wystan was a different story. They'd never been friends. Tensions had been high between them from the start and then had slowly morphed into something else.

Regret filled Pryor's chest with a tight feeling.

He'd been such a jerk the other night. If he could, he'd go back and change the way he'd handled things with the Emperor. Starting with not flippantly ignoring the guy's heart, and ending with trusting him more.

Because that was the rub, wasn't it. If nothing else, this mess should teach him as much. Pryor had always been aware of his trust issues, but he hadn't realized until now just how toxic they were. How negatively they were affecting his life.

It wasn't keeping him safe. It was cutting him off from people who cared about him.

"I'm ready," Tet announced, swiftly putting an end to any further conversation.

"Castor," Pryor wasn't too ashamed to give in to the full-blown panic that swept through him then, "please. Don't do this!"

"You'll see," Castor leaned in and helped hold his head steady as Tet brought over a plastic mask attached to a tube, lowering it onto his face and

securing it in place, “when you wake up you’ll feel better than you ever have. You’ll thank me then.”

“No,” he tried to speak despite the mask, but a sweet and bitter gas was already filling it, forcing its way into his lungs. His eyelids started to droop despite how hard he fought against the sudden drowsiness. Castor was still bent over him, talking to him, but he couldn’t make out a single word through the ringing in his ears.

Old traumas of being secured to a hospital bed had him clenching his jaw against the gas, even knowing it was too late. Anything to feel like he wasn’t just giving up or giving in. Castor and Tet sounded confident, but Pryor knew how surgery went.

There were no guarantees.

What if he never got to see the Emperor again?

He used the last bit of his energy to try and think up how much time had passed between when Wystan had told him he was on his way and now, but it was impossible to figure out. He could only hope that the Emperor was close, that he’d managed to stall long enough by fishing for information and explanations.

If he could at least get here in time for Pryor to tell him how sorry he was, for pretending not to feel the same way, for being too cowardly to take a risk, that might be enough. He’d spent years building this life for himself, but it wasn’t true that he was attached. He liked helping people, liked feeling like he was making a difference, but really, being a detective had given him a place to call home.

Pryor wasn’t afraid of losing his tiny apartment with the empty fridge and the two half-dead plants that’d been gifted to him over the years by coworkers he couldn’t even remember the names of. He’d been scared of losing that sense of belonging, no matter how lonely or minuscule it was.

Scared he couldn’t handle the pressure that came with being anything of higher rank than a detective.

But, now that he was stuck here, and there was a very real chance he wouldn’t make it to see another day, those fears felt foolish and paper-thin. They didn’t matter. Reduced to nothing in the face of the overwhelming feeling of regret at having accepted all of this too late.

Because, truthfully, he was pretty sure he was in love with Wystan Aurelius.

And now he might never get the chance to tell him.

## Chapter 24:

The thirty-minute trip to the outskirts of Hades may as well have been thirty years. Every second felt like a second too long, a second wasted.

A second that meant the difference between arriving on time and too late.

If anything happened to Pryor—

Wystan shut that thought down and focused on the words H was saying to him. The two of them had only just arrived outside of the abandoned office building where Pryor was supposedly located. He'd summoned both the Hades police and the Imperial guard, but they'd arrived ahead of the cavalry.

"The heat scan shows there are five bodies on the third floor," H told him, turning his multi-slate so that Wystan could get a look at the positioning of the red and orange blobs on the screen. Of the five, only three were on their feet. "Backup is less than ten minutes away—"

Wystan got out of the car, not bothering to close the door. His strides ate up the space between where they'd parked and where a familiar police cruiser had been left, no doubt the transportation used by the detective and his team earlier. They'd tried to get a trace on it, but the tracker had been shut off. Whoever was responsible for this, they'd planned ahead.

"There was a shot fired," he said the second H ran up to meet him, repeating that information for what had to be the dozenth time at least. "And the detective was hurt." He didn't think Pryor had been shot, but there was no way to be sure. His voice had been strained on the call earlier.

When he'd woken this morning he'd felt terrible. All of the things he'd said in anger haunted him as he'd dressed quickly and made his way a floor down to the hotel room he'd left Pryor in. Only the detective hadn't been there. He hadn't been at the station when Wystan had looked either. The chief of police had alerted him that Pryor's team had borrowed a hovercar, but he hadn't known where they'd gone to.

His biggest fear when placing that call had been that Pryor would ignore him. How foolish, to forget what the detective did for a living and how that could place him in danger at the drop of a hat.

“They’re only eight minutes away, majesty,” H informed him, checking his messages for an update from the sergeant leading the team of Imperial guards.

“*Still*,” Wystan corrected. “They’re still eight minutes away. We don’t have that long.” He removed his jacket and tossed it to the ground uncaringly, reaching for the zipper on the side of his black pants to remove the *ku* he typically had on his person. The weapon was tiny, barely the length of his palm, but fired short bursts of laser beams hot enough to instantly burn through solid steel. Because of the danger level, very few people on the Olympus carried such a weapon, and he’d only ever had to pull it out on two other occasions that he could recall.

There was a sensor at the bottom of the boomerang-shaped gun, one that scanned his fingerprint. Identity confirmation took less time than it did to blink, and the gun heated slightly in his hand to indicate it was turning on.

“Majesty,” H was clearly gearing up to give a speech on why they should wait. He’d worked closely with Wystan for six years now and knew how he operated.

“Stay here and wait for the others,” Wystan ordered before he could launch into the spiel. “When they arrive, send backup immediately, but be careful, I have no idea what’s going on in there.”

“I have to insist that you don’t put yourself in jeopardy this way,” H told him. “Pryor Oro is a mere detective, hardly worth you risking your life —”

His hand lashed out and had the other man by the collar before he even registered he was in motion. Wystan tightened his grip and yanked H toward him threateningly. He could see how this was going to play out already; if he went in there alone, H would send backup for *him* and ignore the fact they’d come here for Pryor. Even thinking about that infuriated him past the point of reasonable thinking, and in the next instant, threats were spewing from his lips faster than his mind could process or stop them.

“Take heed, soldier,” he growled practically in H’s face, “that is my royal consort in there. If anything happens to him from this point on I will be holding you personally accountable, is that understood?”

H sucked in a sharp breath and dropped his chin. “Forgive me, majesty, I was unaware.”

Pryor was going to be furious at him for this, but Wystan couldn’t see a way around it right now. The only way to guarantee that H and the others placed his safety at the same level of importance as his own was by giving him a title.

If he didn’t want it later, Wystan wouldn’t argue. He regretted everything that’d been said last night, but maybe the detective still stood by his words. If that was the case, he would respect that. All he cared about was making sure Pryor was all right, and if the pain in his voice and the sound of that gunshot were any indicator...

“The Royal Consort is in danger,” he stated, letting go of H roughly, “and we know nothing of the situation. For now, treat everyone else as a suspect. Understood?”

“Of course,” H bowed. “I’ll alert the command chief as soon as she arrives. But—”

“You can’t talk me out of this,” he’d already wasted enough time out here having this conversation. His multi-slate beeped and he clicked on the screen almost before the sound had ended, even though it was unlikely it was Pryor again.

Sure enough, the message had come from the Royal Recovery, the department in charge of keeping all confidential information sealed. They were responding to his previous order and had sent the files containing information on the other M.I.C.E test subjects. If it’d been anything else, he would have ignored it, but since Pryor had come here for the case and this pertained to that, he opened and quickly scanned the document.

His stomach plummeted.

“Majesty?” H took a step toward him, but Wystan was already moving, shooting toward the entrance of the building.

“It’s the Inspector!” he called over his shoulder as he ran. “He’s the enemy!”

Trusting that H would take care of informing the others when they arrived, he rushed into the building, uncaring about the noise he was making as he bolted across the large foyer and headed up the stairs. The sounds of his boots clicking against the steps echoed, merging with the pounding of his heart.



When he'd been fifteen, he'd met Rune Tiberius outside the hospital. He'd been visiting with his father—who he'd later discovered was there specifically for the M.I.C.E project—and had been left to watch over the younger boy while the adults discussed the procedure in greater length. They'd picked up some breakfast on the way, and when Rune had looked up from where he was seated on the curb, Wystan had instantly felt this urge to comfort him. It hadn't made much sense at the time, because Rune had been smiling this wide, bright grin.

For the next two days, the two of them had been practically inseparable. He'd gotten the impression that Pryor no longer recalled the time they'd spent together, but those were memories he would never let go of. The only reason he hadn't been there the night before the surgery had been because Wyn had fallen and broken a finger. She was at another hospital and he'd gone for moral support, promising to return in time to see Rune before he was wheeled off for the actual operation.

Because of some attack that had happened that night, however, the surgery had been moved up and Wystan hadn't been there.

The next day, when he'd finally arrived and met with Rune, the boy had been different, less vibrant.

He'd assumed it was due to the fact he'd just undergone invasive surgery and he would return to his usual self once he'd healed.

It wasn't until a week later, after the Tiberius family were long gone, that he heard the news of Rune's banishment and found out the operation hadn't been a complete success. Vexan doctors had managed to save the prince's life, but that wasn't good enough for the Tiberan Empress.

Out of the three test subjects, the Tiberan Imperial family had been the most important, which was why his father had left him specifically with Rune and hadn't bothered introducing him to any of the others.

Wystan hadn't even seen them, since he'd been forced to leave each night as soon as visiting hours ended. During the years he'd spent researching, he hadn't bothered looking into them, respecting their wish to remain unknown. Even when the tech had been stolen, he hadn't wanted to suspect any of the families.

He had, admittedly, feared Rune's involvement because of Roth. He'd been so worried that the boy he'd met had changed, that he was wrapped up in something he shouldn't be. Maybe that had blinded him. If he'd opened up the investigation sooner and had looked into these things

himself, he could have both protected those families and sussed out whether or not any of them could be possible suspects.

If he had, he would have seen what'd been staring at them all this whole time.

Test Subject #2, Coral Lian, age 16, accompanied by father Capper Lian, mother Yu Lian, and brother Castor Lian. Additional personel: nurse attendant, Tet Bryant, and guard Heen Lynt.

There were small passport photographs next to each of the names listed at the bottom of the document. Though he'd been much younger then, and had since changed his last name, it was impossible not to recognize Castor's face.

If he hadn't gone through these lengths to hide it, Wystan would never suspect the Inspector, even given the circumstances. He cared too much about Pryor to ever harm him. At least, that's what he'd always believed.

Castor held a burning torch for the detective. It was obvious in the way he looked at him, the way he spoke to him, the lingering touches, and all of the subtle gifts in the form of food and drinks. But he was also there that night M.I.C.E was tested, and he'd lost his sister in the process.

Wystan didn't slow until he'd reached the third floor where the heat imprints had been detected. Judging from the specs, they were down at the end of the hall, and he carefully stalked forward, trying to calm his breathing and still his nerves. Panic and anger made a person foolish, and there was no room for error here. Even if Castor was somehow involved, that still didn't supply him with enough information.

The last thing he'd heard through the comms was a crash—possibly Pryor falling. It was safe to assume that he'd been attacked, either before or after accepting his call. Now, with how quiet things were, fear that he might be too late was returning tenfold.

There was only one entrance into the last room, and he paused with his back pressed against the wall next to the opening, straining to hear anything within. It took a moment, but eventually he made out the low whispers of two people, and the familiar whirring and beeping of technology.

He thought back to the heat imprint, bringing it up in his mind. One body had been slumped by the window on the right side of the room. As badly as he just wanted to rush in there blind, years of military and tactical

training kept him in check. Since he'd been too perturbed to think clearly before, he just had to hope he hadn't unwittingly announced his arrival when he'd run up the stairs. At least the stairwell was a good way away, and the people talking within the room didn't appear to be frazzled or on guard. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but their tones were relaxed and conversational.

Wystan shifted on his feet, just enough that he could angle himself to get a better look inside the room without outing himself in the process. He moved a step forward and to the side, tipping his head until he finally caught sight of the window and the person on the ground beneath it.

Fir Welch was motionless, sitting in a puddle of blood. The wound in his side had been left untreated, the poor man left there to bleed out.

A mixture of relief and outrage had Wystan's skin prickling. He was glad it wasn't Pryor, but also felt awful for Fir, who'd always seemed like a good guy. With any luck, it wasn't too late to get him the help he needed, though if the shot that Wystan had heard over the comms had been the blow delivered to him, by now, Fir had to be teetering on the edge of death.

With one person's location confirmed, Wystan turned his attention to figuring out the whereabouts of the others. At least two of those people had to be Castor and Pryor. If Castor was the culprit, it was safe to assume he wasn't tied up, which meant the heat imprint lying on the table had to be the detective.

Before he could think on it any further, a loud screech belted out a warning, followed by yelling.

"What the hell is happening?!" That was Castor, and he sounded worried.

"I need to stabilize him," a female voice responded, just as concerned. "Hand me that!"

Shuffling feet and clinking metal came next, and that was all it took for Wystan to toss caution to the wind.

He pivoted around, filling the doorway with his broad stature, ku held aloft and at the ready. With the frantic state of the occupants in the room, he had a moment to note where everyone was before any of them noticed his arrival.

Erix was standing between Fir and a large computer station, his gaze locked on the commotion taking place in the center where a makeshift operating room had been set up.

It was roughly twenty feet away from the entrance, and was complete with plastic covering on the floor and walling off the back and sides. A vital sign monitor was loudly ringing, and a female doctor was bent over a patient, jumping back and forth between checking that machine, another behind her, and the actual body.

The opening to the plastic sectioning had been left up, giving Wystan a perfect view into the tiny operating structure, and of the half-naked man lying on the operating table.

Pryor.

There were straps attached to the bed, but none of them were being used now. They must have secured him before he'd been knocked unconscious and undone the binds once he was out and could no longer fight against what they were doing.

The doctor was on his right, working, and Castor was standing on his left, garbed in a medical gown and gloves, though it was obvious he wasn't helping with the surgery itself.

The bastard was holding Pryor's hand.

Wystan saw red a second before Erix gave a surprised exclamation. He shot the man before he could react more than that, however, the ku laser zipping forward in a blur of blue light, burning a hole from front to back straight through his heart.

Erix's body dropped, practically shaking the floor when he landed. The blaster he'd been holding—at his side, the idiot—clattered to the ground and skidded a few feet away before bumping against the wall and coming to a stop.

Wystan ignored it since it wasn't anywhere near the two people now gaping at him wild-eyed. Keeping his gaze locked on Castor and his ku aimed in their direction, he took a single step into the room. "Back away, immediately."

Castor threw out an arm to stop the doctor from following the command, then turned back to Wystan, seemingly unconcerned by the fact the ku was now pointed directly at his forehead. "If she stops now, he will die. Do you want that, Emperor? I certainly do not."

As if in response, the vital machine let off another series of beeps and whistles. Though they'd calmed some since the initial clamoring blast, the jarring red lines traveling across the screen were pretty clearly not great signs.

He was torn. On the one hand, he wanted them away from Pryor immediately. On the other...

"You," he motioned to Castor, "back away, slowly. You," then the doctor, "explain to me what you're doing. Fast."

"We're in the final stages of surgery," she told him, holding her hands before her to keep from touching anything and contaminating them. There was blood stained on the tips of her gloved fingers, but not much. She saw him looking. "It's as non-invasive as we could make it. I only had to do a single incision to get the endoscope camera in. I've injected new nanites into his bridmula and they need to be monitored while I send them the correct programming." She pointed with a thumb over her finger at a large monitor and a computer. The keyboard was covered in a thin sheet of plastic, and the screen showed a blown-up image of a couple of dozen nanobots surrounded by various shades of red.

Wystan felt sick the moment he realized he was looking inside Pryor. "Something's gone wrong though. What?"

"Can I continue, Emperor?" the doctor requested, and though he hesitated, in the end, he opted to allow her to.

What other choice was there? He wouldn't risk Pryor's life. So much had gone into this plan; that alone had to be proof enough that their goal was to save him and not cause him further harm.

"Keep telling me what's going on while you fix him," he stated, making sure to emphasize that last part. "If he doesn't make it, neither of you will either."

"If he doesn't make it, neither of us will have reason to. To pick up where she left off, we've been preparing him for the new bots," Castor was the one to answer, "but the original plan was to go another couple of days before conducting the surgery. There are still remnants of the old nanotech inside of him that are fighting against the new ones."

"You were forced to move up your timetable because Roth's body was discovered sooner than you'd hoped," Wystan surmised, hand tightening around the thin handle of the ku when Castor's expression confirmed everything he'd been dreading. "You're Neighbor." He thought about what he knew about the Inspector. "You're from Deign."

The planet Deign was closest to Tibera, though only half the size and not nearly as wealthy. They were oftentimes referred to in passing as Tibera's neighbor.

“What matters,” Castor said, “is that I’ve been closer to Rune than you ever have.”

“He’s unconscious and at risk right now,” he pointed out angrily.

“He’ll be fine once I finish tuning the new tech,” the doctor assured. She brought his attention back to the monitor. “See?”

On the screen, the enlarged bots were attacking one another. There were less than a handful trying to fight off the new wave of nanites, and it was easy to make out that it was one against a dozen in each case.

“After they’re finished, his body will return to peak health,” the doctor concluded.

“He’ll be angry at first,” Castor picked up the conversation, casting his gaze down on Pryor, “but eventually he’ll come to understand why I did the things I did. It was all for him. To return him to the place he belongs. He won’t have to hide on Flicker or slum it on cases anymore. Especially with Roth out of the way. The Empress will have to reinstate him. Rune can go back to living his life of prestige and wealth, without fear of discovery or mockery. He won’t have to worry about anything ever again.” The Inspector turned to Wystan. “*I’ll* have given him that.”

The implications were clear, but Wystan felt no need to rise to the bait. He was feeling a lot of things at the moment, but jealousy wasn’t one of them.

“You may have been in love with him for over a decade,” Wystan said, “but you don’t know him at all.”

Castor bristled. “Just because you’ve slept with him doesn’t mean *you* know him. In fact, it doesn’t mean anything at all. Sex?” he snorted. “Rune’s no virgin. I could tell you stories of his conquests to pass the time while the good doctor finishes.”

Okay. A little jealous. But not of the Inspector.

“The fact that none of those stories are about the two of you should be telling enough,” Wystan stated. “You’re not an idiot. Surely you’ve realized Pryor isn’t interested in you that way. Your feelings are one-sided.” Maybe his were as well, that was neither here nor there.

“He doesn’t need to reciprocate,” Castor hissed. “I’m not doing this for that.”

“So you’ll be fine when he wakes up hating you then?” He doubted it. No matter what the other man said, he harbored hope. Wystan could see

it plainly, understand it even. But he was delusional if he truly believed Pryor was going to want him anywhere near him after all of this was done.

“He won’t.” It was impossible to hide his uncertainty, and Castor’s voice wavered. “He’ll know that I did this for him.”

“You didn’t,” Wystan corrected. “You did this for yourself. If it was for him, you would have asked first. The crown? He doesn’t want it. He never has.”

“He doesn’t want it because he knows it’s not possible,” Castor said. “He’s given up, that’s all. Once he’s healed, he won’t have to anymore. He won’t have to run from who he really is. He can go home. *That’s* what he’s always wanted.”

Home. Wystan played the word over in his mind. That sounded like the most logical thing the Inspector had said this whole conversation.

Hadn’t their argument last night been about that very thing? He’d felt pressured because of Wystan’s possessiveness, afraid that he would be forced to give up his lifestyle to meet an emperor’s whims. Like he had with his mother.

At the time, Wystan had been too hurt to see where Pryor was coming from, but when he’d woken this morning it’d been clear as day. Of course he’d scared the detective.

The machines attached to Pryor were still beeping noisily, though the doctor worked meticulously. It wasn’t enough for Wystan to relax. Operations of any kind had risk factors. Not to mention M.I.C.E had only recently been improved and it was by these two people.

People who would willingly kidnap someone and force them under the knife.

“You murdered his cousin.” Wystan tried not to allow his mind to wander to the worst, focusing instead on keeping them all distracted. Reinforcements were on their way, but even if they rushed in here this very second, with Pryor still undergoing surgery, they’d be at a standstill.

“Roth was a disgrace to the Tiberius name,” Castor said. “I’ve collected enough data on him over the years to prove his crimes to not only Rune, but a jury as well. Tibera will see the truth of their false heir. I told you. I’ll pave the way for Rune. I’ve left no loose ends.”

Wystan canted his head. “I’m not sure what you’d call me then.”

“If something were to happen to you that would be unfortunate,” Castor sighed, “but not unmanageable.” He chuckled his chin toward Erix’s

dead body. “The two of you had a shoot-off. You died valiantly trying to protect us from Roth’s man.”

He planned on painting Erix as the bad guy? Made sense since he was a Tiberan known to have worked with Roth in the past. There was no doubt enough of a paper trail to make that believable. All he’d have to do is claim Erix wanted revenge for the dead Imperial. Didn’t explain how Castor planned on explaining how or why he’d gotten his hands on M.I.C.E, but it certainly handled one problem.

Except...

“I’m the one with the weapon,” Wystan reminded, shaking the ku a little.

Castor grunted and was about to reply when the doctor interrupted.

“It’s done.” She stepped away from the table and over to the vitals machine, watching as the lines settled and the beeps smoothed out. She waited a beat as if to be sure before turning to address Castor. “I’ve removed the camera and sealed the wound. He needs at least an hour to stabilize, so I’ll keep him under until then, but otherwise—”

“Step away from him, both of you,” Wystan ordered. There was no reason to wait any longer if Pryor was out of the woods. “I don’t want either of you anywhere near him.”

“You’re certain he’s in the clear?” Castor asked the doctor and received a curt nod. “Then I’ve got a better idea, Emperor.”

The Inspector moved so fast, Wystan almost wasn’t able to process the motion. He caught sight of the blaster at the last second and pulled the trigger on his ku in retaliation. The sound of both weapons going off filled the room, but he was already dropping to the ground.

He hit the solid floor with a hard whack, his shoulder smarting from the blow. There was no time to worry about the minor pain, however. Castor’s shot had missed but so had his.

The doctor let out an alarmed yelp and ducked behind one of the large towers, leaving the two of them out in the open to duke it out.

Castor aimed again, stepping around the end of the table, the tail of his lab coat brushing against the side of Pryor’s leg in the process. He fired, growling in frustration when Wystan rolled out of the way.

He ended up by the window, only a few feet from Fir’s hunched body. The sound of engines from outside reached him and he almost gave it



away with a sigh of relief. The cavalry had finally arrived. All he had to do was hold Castor off until they got up here and then—

The doctor came back around this time holding a gun of her own. The weapon was old, probably something smuggled onto the World Ship instead of obtained on world. Even from where he stood he could see it was a junker that fired bits of shrapnel instead of real bullets. That type of thing was popular amongst star raiders and pirates.

Castor seemed shocked that she even had it, cluing Wylan in that he'd been unaware she'd been armed.

Before either of them could do something to stop her, she pressed the tip of the gun against Pryor's temple and time seemed to freeze for Wylan.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" Castor spun on his heels and set his weapon on her. He'd gone pale, his nerves showing in the slight shake of his hands as he held the blaster.

"I owed your family a debt," the doctor said tightly, "and I repaid that by fixing his bridmula. If I kill him now, that will be a separate event. I will not exchange my life for the life of an Imperial who, from the sounds of it, didn't care enough about his to even want to be saved."

"That's not true!" Castor advanced a single step, stopping abruptly when she pressed the barrel of the gun harder against Pryor's head in warning.

Wylan considered shooting her, but if her finger was already on the trigger, that could just end up setting her off. If she shot him point-blank like that...

"I'll let you walk free," he said, the promise spilling from his lips. "You can go, right now even. I won't come after you."

Her eyes narrowed, but her stance loosened some, a sign she was listening.

He changed tactics. "You were just doing what you were told. You're a doctor and you healed a sick patient. I can see that the person to blame here isn't you. Leave," he made a big show of stepping to the side, moving further from the exit, "this no longer concerns you."

She nibbled on her bottom lip and glanced between him and Castor. "What about the World Ship?"

"I didn't know about your involvement until I walked into this room," he reminded, "and I still don't know your name. There's no way for

me to have flagged you. You're not on any no-flight lists. You can catch the first ship off the Olympus." He checked the small clock at the top left corner of his multi-slate. "You're in luck. One leaves in forty minutes from the Hades port. If you go now, you can make it."

"You swear you won't come after me?" She sounded scared, her voice wavering, that confidence she'd maintained throughout the surgery splintering.

"Do you swear he's okay?" He indicated Pryor and she nodded vehemently. "Then yes, I give you my word. Go, and I'll forget you were ever even here."

That was enough to have her taking her chances. She pulled away from Pryor and shot forward, making a beeline for the door, not bothering to grab anything on her way. For someone who'd seemed so invested during the procedure, she was surprisingly uninterested in sticking around now that they'd been caught in the act.

It made Wylan wonder what type of relations she and Castor truly had.

In her haste, she'd seemed to have forgotten about the Inspector entirely. Which cost her.

Castor took a shot at her, the bullet lodging itself in her left arm.

She stumbled and spun, raising her gun to fire back.

"Don't!" Wylan yelled, but it was too late.

Shrapnel exploded from the end of the weapon, launching in a spray of razor-sharp pieces straight toward the operating station. Debris lodged itself into the end of the bed, some cutting into the soles of Pryor's feet. Others slashed against the computers, one larger chunk cracking straight through the center of the vitals reader, rendering it useless as it sparked and died. A couple of other pieces clunked into a canister behind him, causing clouds of gas to spill into the air.

Castor lifted his arms to protect himself, but metal slashed into his arms, cutting through the thin material of his medical gown. He cried out, angrily swinging his blaster back up and opening fire without even bothering to look.

Wylan dropped and rolled forward, taking advantage to get closer to Pryor and avoid getting shot at the same time. He came up behind the massive computer where they'd run M.I.C.E. and glanced back over to find the doctor now lying still on the ground less than five feet from the exit.

She'd been hit at least four times, and her glassy eyes stared up at the ceiling unseeing. With her death, the body count had risen to—possibly, depending on whether or not Fir was still alive—three.

“Rune!”

Wystan shuffled until he could peer through the crack between the bulky computer and the first tower. He watched as Castor pulled the rubber mask off of Pryor's face, wanting to be sure he was all right before confronting the Inspector again. Pryor's safety was the priority.

Castor tossed the mask, running his hands over Pryor's face and down his neck, before drifting lower to his chest. He inspected every inch of him visible, and the only reason Wystan stood there and allowed it was because it was a clinical search. He was making sure there wasn't any serious damage, which was something Wystan wanted to know as well.

When Castor got to his feet he cursed and, using his fingers, pulled the three small shards out, one from Pryor's left big toe, and two from the pads of his right foot. He let out a relieved sigh once that was done, wiping the sweat from his brow with the hand that still tightly clutched his blaster.

“Let's get you out of here,” he said then, voice low and meant for the unconscious Pryor.

Wystan saw red and circled to the end of the bed so that he was standing across from Castor once more, ku at the ready. “Forgetting something, Inspector?”

The second Wystan had moved Castor had lifted his weapon, and they were back in a standoff within a second. He blinked at him though, as if confused before regaining his bearing. “I thought I'd shot you, actually.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” He was pretty over this. He wanted to check Pryor for himself, needed to touch him and feel the warmth of his skin, the thump of his heart beneath his palm to stop his own from beating in a panic. If he'd been turned any other way when the doctor had let that shrapnel loose...That was too close of a call and now his nerves were shot. He didn't want to waste any more time. “Get away from him.”

“Not going to happen,” Castor argued, placing his other hand on the gun for a better grip. “If you shoot, I shoot, Emperor.”

“How else do you see-” Wystan was cut off by the sound of pounding footsteps approaching in the hall. Both he and Castor turned their heads toward it, watching as several soldiers dressed in protective gear burst through the doorway.

They spread out, blocking the exit, with automatic rifles aimed at the Inspector.

Who still stood far too close to Pryor for comfort.

“Drop your weapon or we fire!” one of the guards threatened, breaking the line to advance a single threatening step.

“Do not shoot! The Royal Consort—” Wystan began to order, diverting his attention from the Inspector for a brief moment when fear of Pryor getting caught in the crossfire clouded his mind. The shot stopped him short, the bullet piercing straight through his left shoulder, forcing him back against the computer. He knocked down the monitor, sending it sprawling backward, crashing to the ground, and splintering into a million pieces upon impact.

He lost control of his arm, hand dropping the ku, leaving him defenseless against the now furious Castor.

“What the hell did you just call him?” Castor’s mouth sneered into a twisted line of contempt. “The plan was never to kill you, Emperor.”

The guards shifted forward, forced to another stop when Wystan held up his good hand, silently ordering them not to engage. Pryor’s safety. That’s what mattered here.

“But I should have the moment you got in my way.” Castor moved so that he was standing further away from him, but was now up at Pryor’s side instead of at his feet, almost as if he were protecting him that way.

What he was really doing was using Pryor as a shield, and they both knew it.

Wystan felt a wave of disgust toward the other man, but remained still, even as the blaster was aimed directly at his head.

“Emperor!” the lead guard called.

“Hold!” he ordered, glaring straight into the Inspector’s eyes.

“Rune is mine,” Castor told him.

“His name is—” Movement on the bed caught his attention.

Castor turned to look as well, but it was too late.

Pryor was awake.

He was body-slammed by the detective, taken down in one swift motion that left both of them on the floor. Castor struggled with his attacker, startled by the sudden ambush.

Wystan and the others stood there watching as he grappled with Pryor, pinned beneath the detective who, up until a minute ago, had been

unconscious. The whole ordeal happened so quickly, like a horror picture playing out in slow motion.

He was weaker than usual, but aside from lagging a bit, there were no obvious signs that he'd just forcefully undergone surgery. Even his coloring was returning, his cheeks flushing with exertion as he struggled to keep Castor pinned, fighting against his flailing limbs. There were a few places where he was bleeding, minor injuries caused by him ripping out the needles that were in his arms keeping him hooked to the machines, but nothing serious.

There wasn't even a scar on his lower abdomen from the incision the doctor had made. The skin there was completely smooth.

In the next moment, Castor managed to slip his right arm free, leveling the blaster on Wystan in one final attempt at finishing the job. There was no dithering this time, as soon as he'd positioned the weapon he pulled the trigger.

Pryor threw himself to the side, blocking the line of fire. The shot rang out, and his body jerked as he hit the ground. He rolled onto his back, giving them all a great view of his bare chest and the fresh hole beneath his right pectoral. Blood swelled and spilled forth, seeping into the thick material of the jumper suit he still had on.

"No." Castor let the blaster go as if it'd burned him, mouth hanging open as he stared at Pryor with dismay. "No, I didn't—"

"Arrest him!" Wystan didn't wait to see if the squad complied or bother worrying about Castor possibly retrieving his weapon to try shooting him again. All he saw was Pryor, pressing his hand against his wound, clenching his teeth tightly in obvious pain. He pulled him up into his arms, flinching when that caused Pryor to cry out. "Why would you do something so stupid?!"

Pryor grunted, the corner of his mouth twisting upward despite his current predicament. "Your welcome, Emperor."

"You promised you wouldn't do something like this again!" He'd made him swear it after the first time.

"Well," he coughed and winced, "as you know, I'm a liar. Check to see if the bullet passed through."

The command came so seamlessly after his comment, it took Wystan longer than it should have to process. Once he had, he carefully

slipped a hand around Pryor's side, feeling up until his fingers dipped in blood.

Pryor hissed and curled into Wystan's chest, breathing labored. Then he let out a humorless chuckle. "Guess that answers that. At least we don't have to worry."

"Worry?" Wystan stared down at him incredulously, only vaguely aware of Castor being dragged from the room or the pleading way he was calling out to Pryor. "You've been shot!"

"Yes, thank you, I haven't forgotten. Relax, Emperor. I'll be fine."

"You—" He stopped himself, and inhaled deeply before he could angrily scold the other man. He should just be grateful that he was joking around with him and not cursing his name. "We need medical attention!" he told the nearest soldier.

"The med tech is on the way up now, majesty," he said.

Wystan tightened his arms around Pryor, tucking his head beneath his chin. He was still afraid—he was bleeding out, after all—but it was impossible not to welcome the balm of knowing that he was still breathing. That Castor and that doctor hadn't inadvertently taken him from him.

"Wystan," Pryor's voice sounded like it was starting to drift, and in a panic, Wystan pulled back to meet his gaze. "Don't worry, I promise I'm not about to die on you—pass out though, probably. So, before that, there's something I want to discuss."

"We can talk about anything you want to later." He growled low and set a threatening look on a different soldier—the first one he'd spoken to was no longer there. "Get that med tech here right now!"

"Hey," Pryor tapped the center of his chest, "I'm serious."

"So am I. Do you know how afraid I was? I am? You're bleeding out right now, Pryor. If I went through all of this just to lose you anyway—"

"Ah, right, because Vexan Imperials only get to play the Royal Consort card the once don't they." It was impossible to tell what he was feeling by the sound of his voice because Pryor's energy was draining.

Wystan closed his eyes. "You heard that?"

"First thing I picked up on when I woke," he said.

"Let me just say, I needed to tell them something so that they would take your protection seriously. That's all. I don't in any way expect—"

"All right."

Wystan froze and blinked down at him. "I'm sorry?"

“I accept, Emperor.” Pryor closed his eyes and leaned his head against the curve of Wystan’s bicep just as the med techs came running into the room with a gurney. “I’ll be your royal consort.”

He was rendered speechless, which probably didn’t matter much, since Pryor passed out a heartbeat later.

## Chapter 25:

Pryor Oro was a liar.

Standing at the center of the stage, staring out at the mass of reporters who'd arrived for the press release, he felt his confidence about no longer wanting to be one waver. After a day's stay at the hospital where his wounds had fully healed on their own thanks to his brand new fully functioning bridmula, Pryor had gotten back to work tidying up the case. His report to the I.P.F had ended up being over ten pages long.

Fir's had been roughly the same length.

Though he was still recovering in the hospital, Fir had also pulled through. They'd gotten him medical attention and miraculously, the shot had avoided all major organs for his kind. His people also had a backup storage of blood that his body was programmed to access only in cases of emergency. That had kept him alive when most species would have bled to death.

It was unclear if Castor had recalled any of this, but Pryor liked to hope so, even after everything else the man had done.

He hadn't personally met with Castor since they'd thrown down in that office building three days ago, and he didn't plan to. With both he and Fir out of commission, and as ex-teammates, Ink had gone in to question Castor further. The I.P.F was also sending an escort team to remove him from the Olympus. Since this had all taken place in Vexan territory, Wystan had been offered the choice of placing Castor on trial here and controlling his fate. The Emperor had rejected.

When Pryor had asked him why, he'd simply stated he wanted the Inspector as far away from the both of them as possible.

Pryor couldn't agree more.

Though he was sad and felt betrayed, those were all emotions he could unpack later, once this mess was well and truly finished with.

So, soon. Ideally.

This press release was the last thing on his itinerary before the case would officially be closed and he could wipe his hands of it. Members of



the Olympus press, as well as the Tiberan and Deign press, had trickled in throughout the day so that now the large room was swarming with bodies and cameras.

Imperial guards kept anyone from getting too close to the stage where Pryor stood in front of a podium. Both Wystan and Wynn—whom Pryor had only met an hour ago—were seated at either side of him, and behind him, set high enough for the reporters to see his face, was a screen broadcasting Fir from his hospital room.

The point of the release was to inform everyone of the basics of the case, but nothing more. With any luck, they'd finish this all within a half-hour, max, and Pryor could get the hell out of dodge.

While it was true he'd healed physically, emotionally he was still a wreck, and he wasn't above admitting it. Doing this, standing here, felt like something he had to do, however. Something he'd insisted on doing despite Wystan's many efforts to get him to change his mind.

Finally, the presser began, and Pryor launched into an introduction and a basic explanation of why he and his team had been called to the Olympus in the first place. Every once in a while, Fir was asked by someone to confirm a detail, just as further proof, but for the most part Pryor was able to get through his briefing seamlessly. There was only one part he initially left out, needing to gear up to it.

"The perpetrator, Castor Bramwell, has since been arrested and is currently being held in custody, awaiting transport to Flicker where he will stand trial for his numerous crimes," he said, and a reporter in the front who worked for the Hades press raised her hand for the third time. "Yes?"

"Detective, I understand that you're telling us Castor Bramwell, who was up until three days ago your partner on this case, is the one responsible for the theft, kidnapping, and murder of an Imperial. What isn't clear to me is the motive behind all of these heinous acts. Surely you've discovered his motive, haven't you?" She eyed him expectantly.

He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. This was it. The real reason he'd chosen to head this release. He was nervous and part of him wanted to ditch the whole crazy idea he'd been working toward the past forty-eight hours since it was conceived.

But then the doors at the end of the room opened, both of them easing inward to admit a slender woman who held her head high. Her deep burgundy lips were pursed in consternation as she entered, as if she was

annoyed that the press release had started without her. Her golden hair was done up in a twist, shaping a figure eight at the back of her head, and she was dressed in a form-fitting dress the color of warm sand, with a short, crisp white collar that had the Tiberan insignia pinned to it. Two bodyguards escorted her, surveying the room as they walked in, but the rest of her entourage remained out in the hall, seen only until the doors were closed once more.

The chairs in the room had been set up in aisles, with enough room between the rows for anyone to move through, and she was heading down the center as though she expected a seat at the front despite there being no vacancies. When she finally bothered to lift her head toward Pryor, she was already halfway across the room. The second their eyes met, however, she faltered.

Pryor tightened his grip on the sides of the podium, stroking his thumbs against the smooth wood. It wasn't quite as effective as when he touched the Emperor's bare skin, but it did the trick enough to have his nerves settling some.

Before more attention could be turned to the still frozen Empress, he spoke.

"We do know his motive, yes." He tore his gaze off of the Tiberan Empress and went back to addressing the press. "Unfortunately, much of the information involved with this case is sealed from public knowledge, however," he held up a hand when the protests began, "I'll tell you everything I am legally able to. Twelve years ago, Castor Bramwell visited the Olympus with his family. During this visit, his sister ended up losing her battle with a long-standing injury. While on this trip, Mr. Bramwell met a boy of similar age to himself, and we've confirmed with him the reason for his scheme was to fulfill a false sense of debt he felt he owed to this boy."

"Who is the boy?" the female reporter blurted out, not bothering to raise a hand this time.

"Tell us his name!" another reporter two rows back said, followed swiftly by a ton of like-minded calls.

Pryor inhaled and braced himself. "The boy was Rune Tiberius. At the time, he was best known as the Heir Imperial to the Tiberan throne. Shortly after meeting Castor, Rune's health was deemed unfit for a ruler and he was stripped of his title."

There were gasps.

“Was Rune Tiberius involved?” the female reporter appeared overly excited by that notion, and Pryor almost snapped for her to remember multiple people had died because of all this.

He’d almost died. And Wystan...

When Pryor had come to in the building, his mind had been so fogged over he’d spent a good amount of time blinking blankly up at the ceiling before the noises around him finally processed. He’d realized Castor and Wystan were talking and picked up the gist of the conversation. After that...Well, most of it was a blur, but he’d reacted without thought or care for his own personal safety.

The visceral fear he’d felt thinking that Castor was about to shoot Wystan had given him the burst of adrenaline he’d needed to propel himself off the bed. He’d practically tossed himself at Castor, unceremoniously, still unable at the time to fully control his own body. It’d all happened so fast, he honestly couldn’t say what exactly he’d been thinking other than he had to do whatever it took to protect Wystan.

It wasn’t until a few minutes after the bullet tore through him and he’d felt the familiar burn and stretch of the healing process that he’d realized the surgery Castor had forced on him had been successful. By that point, knowing that Wystan was safe and he wasn’t going to die from the injury, he’d given in to all the emotions and the thoughts he’d been holding himself back from.

He’d given in to the truth of who he was, and who he was willing to become.

“No,” he said, “Rune Tiberius was not involved.”

“How can you be so certain?” a reporter shouted.

“Hasn’t he been missing for years now?”

“No one has reported seeing him since his banishment, isn’t that right?”

“Enough,” Fir surprised them all by stating loudly. There was a camera set at the top allowing him to see into the room, so he saw Pryor turn to look up at him and sent him a barely visible smile. “Rune Tiberius is as much a victim of Castor as I am. More so, even. Please rest assured we are positive of this fact. That’s all we can say on the matter.”

Pryor felt his chest constrict. Up until this morning, Fir still hadn’t been able to look him in the eye. He’d taken the news of Pryor’s identity, and that he’d kept it from them all this time, pretty poorly. Which was

understandable. So to have him defend him now, publicly no less...It gave him the final push he needed.

Turning back to the crowd, Pryor locked eyes with the Tiberan Empress. With his mother. "Actually, there is more we can say."

"Pryor," Wystan called him, concern threading his tone even though he spoke low enough not to draw attention his way.

He shook his head in response and continued. "At the start of this press release, I introduced myself as Pryor Oro. That's true, but I've only held that name for twelve of the twenty-five years I've been alive." Was he going to throw up again? No. No? He clutched at the podium.

This was it. He was doing it.

For himself.

For Wystan.

For the two of them and the "us" the Emperor had spoken of the night of their argument. The "us" that Pryor had realized while he'd fought with Castor as the Emperor bled that he wanted.

He wanted them to be an "us".

Which meant, first, he had to admit to being himself.

"My birth name is Rune Tiberius," he announced, slightly amazing when his voice didn't shake.

His mother's eyes were open so wide, it was a wonder they didn't fall right out of her skull.

"I am the banished ex-Heir Imperial to the Tiberan throne," he continued. "I was subject X mentioned in the briefing earlier who was kidnapped and forced to undergo an illegal operation conducted by Castor Bramwell and one of his accomplices, Tet Bryant. While the operation was successful, it was conducted *against my will*. I repeat, I in no way wanted what was done to me. Castor Bramwell was aware of this, and that is why he used force."

"You—" the Empress didn't speak loudly at all, but she may as well have screamed for how piercing the sound of her voice was to Pryor's ears.

It'd been so long since he'd last heard that voice.

Yet he flinched from it all the same, embarrassed that she could still elicit that kind of reaction from him.

If she noticed, she didn't let on. Or, and this was more likely, she didn't care. She pulled herself up to her full height, going from shocked

mother to regal ruler in the blink of an eye. “Are you saying you are healed?”

He didn’t want to respond, but the reporters turned between the two of them as if they were spectators at some sporting match and the two of them were volleying a ball between them. “I have a fully functioning bridmula, yes.”

“You said subject X was shot during the struggle,” a reporter said. “Is that why you’ve healed? The Emperor’s shoulder wound is still bandaged.”

“Yes, well, it’s unfortunate for the Emperor that Vexans don’t have the same insides as a Tiberan.” That was crass, and snippy, and probably not something he should have replied with, but Pryor had done the big thing he’d set out to do and now he was finding his patience running thin.

Reporters had been taking photos and recording this entire time, but the flashes seemed to be coming at rapid-fire. He’d anticipated as much, but now that he was experiencing it, he was debating whether or not he’d maybe bitten off more than he could chew.

Perhaps a public announcement like this had been a bad idea. He should have done a single private interview with someone and had the news leaked that way instead. Saved himself this trouble.

“Your bill of health can be confirmed?” the Empress spoke over the rest, and everyone else immediately quieted.

He quirked a brow. “You mean you would like more confirmation than the fact I’ve healed from a bullet wound? Sure. I suppose. We can have my medical file made public if need be.”

“Absolutely not,” Wystan stated.

His sister, Wynn, the current acting Emperor, rested a hand on his arm and whispered something to him.

Pryor left them to it. There were no blasters here, and he wasn’t hopped up on sleeping gas. He could more than handle his own battles.

“You do not get to make that call, Emperor Aurelius,” the Empress told him tightly. “Whether or not my son is in good health is information I am entitled to.” Her head swiveled back to Pryor. “Rune, you will return to Tibera with me at once, where we will send off your cousin’s spirit and rename you as heir to the throne.”

The whispers grew in volume.

“I will not.” Not that she’d bothered asking.

“Excuse me?” Her eyes shot daggers at him. “You will return to your place, son. That is not up for debate.”

“Again,” he leaned in closer to the microphone he’d been speaking into, “not going to happen.”

He’d thought the reporters had been frenzied before, how wrong he’d been.

The Empress stormed across the floor, her two guards hot on her heels, and came to a stop directly below him. “Rune, get down here at once. We are leaving. That is an order.”

“There seems to be a slight misunderstanding here,” he said, still speaking into the mic despite her obvious motions for him to stop.

“You are Rune Tiberius, and I am the Tiberan Queen. You answer to me,” she snapped, “there is no misunderstanding.”

“See,” he held up a finger, “that’s where the misconception is, actually.” He grinned at her, full-on, allowing himself to smile in a way he didn’t think he had since the day she’d shipped him off the only planet he’d called home. “I may be Rune Tiberius, and you may be my mother, but I am also the Royal Consort to Emperor Wystan Aurelius.”

He ignored the reports as they went up in another wave of hoots and gasps. He imagined he was giving them all enough material here to get them promotions. Instead, he maintained eye contact with the shocked Empress.

“You’re certainly an Imperial ruler, Empress, but you aren’t mine, and I do not have to listen to you ever again. My life is my own.” He allowed himself one last lengthy look at her furious face.

Had she ever looked at him with anything other than contempt? He wasn’t sure. If she had, he couldn’t recall.

“Goodbye, mother.” He didn’t bother officially concluding the press release, leaving that to someone else as he twirled on his heels and headed off the stage. Guards kept anyone from following after him, try as they might, including one infuriated Empress.

Pryor could hear her screaming his name all the way out the door and down the hall.

But he didn’t once look back.

## Chapter 26:

“Pryor.” Wystan came up behind him, wrapping his arms around his sides to plant his palms against the windowsill. He buried his face against the curve of his neck, nuzzling him before he purred coaxingly, “Dow, come back to bed.”

Pryor smiled at the term of endearment, eyes still locked on the speck of orange light traveling upward. Though he couldn’t see it from this distance, he knew that the ship he was watching was moving through a large tube, which would safely spit them out into space. He’d been watching ships leave all morning, their bright flickers easy to spot in the dim gray cast of dawn, but this was the one he’d been waiting for.

The Tiberan ship that was carrying his mother.

He’d done a good job holding his ground, refusing to meet her despite all of her protests and attempts. Not that it’d lasted very long. A week after the press release, and she was already leaving.

He should be happy—*was* happy—but it was impossible not to acknowledge that layer of grief that stuck to his insides like tar. Six days. That’s how long she’d bothered to try.

Wystan noticed where he was looking and sighed. “I was going to wait until at least breakfast to tell you, but I suppose I may as well now. The Empress has threatened war. She sent a missive stating she’ll be going straight to the Interstellar Conference. Apparently, I’ve kidnapped her heir.”

Shocked, Pryor twisted around to face him. “She *what?!?*”

He shrugged. “Don’t worry. It’s under control.”

“This is exactly the type of thing that warrants concern, Emperor. My mother does not make threats lightly. She’ll do everything in her power to get her way.” He’d spoken to his immediate superior on Flicker late the other night, once word of the press release had traveled across the galaxy. Though as of this moment he still had a job, things were rocky. The I.P.F was in the process of trying to figure out how to keep on an ex-Imperial and in what capacity they could do so.

With his face now plastered all over the news with headlines like *Missing Heir Imperial Discovered Living a Secret Life*, anonymity was no longer possible. Famous detectives could still get the job done, but not if they were constantly being hounded by reporters. With any luck, the novelty would die down, and he could return to his relatively normal existence, at least where work was involved.

Nothing else about his life as Pryor Oro was ever going to be the same, and not just because his mother was making things difficult for him.

His announcement at the release about being the royal consort had made waves. Gifts from all across the World Ship were pouring in, congratulation banners were hung and parades were being thrown in every city. Somehow, he hadn't taken into account just how important of a role he'd agreed to take on, and it was all a little much in the grand scheme of things. It felt cowardly, but he was grateful that he'd been able to use avoiding his mother and reporters to hole up for the past week.

"Did I kidnap you?" Wystan asked then, pulling him from his tumultuous thoughts. "Am I holding you," he indicated the arms he still had around him, "against your will?"

He frowned up at him. "What? Of course not."

"Then there's nothing to fear. She doesn't have a leg to stand on. If she does file a report, the Intergalactic Conference will simply send an envoy here to check the validity of her claims. Once they meet with us, hear our side, and see that she's merely bitter about not being able to control you, they'll drop the whole thing."

"And if she still decides to wage war?" His mind raced with everything he knew about both worlds. Financially, Tibera held the power, but as far as technology went, the Olympus was ahead. If the Empress called for allies, many would jump at the chance to form a strong, lasting, alliance with her planet. Could Wystan say the same?

"Without the Intergalactic Conference at her back?" He clucked his tongue. "You're overthinking things again, detective. We've all signed protection acts with the I.C. If she is foolish enough to risk it, I'll fight her for as long as I must until the Conference can step in and put a stop to her antics themselves. That is what they're there for. Maintaining galactic peace."

It was part of their slogan and everything.



Pryor blew out a breath. He was right. He was beating a dead horse here. Right now she was angry and embarrassed that he'd publicly refused her. But, no matter how terrible of a mother she'd been, or how strict of a ruler, she wasn't bad. She wouldn't want to put her people at risk any more than Wystan would.

War was never good for either side.

"The call you took last night," Wystan changed the subject, "what was it about?"

The Emperor had been busy fending off more reporters, taking calls from various government officials to clear the air and sort through the mess that Pryor had inadvertently created. There was also a ceremony to prepare in regards to him being the Royal Consort—yet another thing Pryor hadn't considered.

Over the past week, with everything the two of them had to do in regards to picking up the pieces of their once separate lives, there hadn't been too much time to really talk. At least, not deeply.

The only reason Pryor even knew that Empress Wynn was pushing for the ceremony was because he'd accidentally overheard them talking about it the day after the press release. As soon as he'd entered the room, all conversation on the matter had halted, and Wynn had greeted him with a smile and a warmth that had him wondering if Wystan and she were actually blood siblings.

When he'd first met Wystan, he'd been cold and calculating—flirty, sure, but not warm by a long shot.

Still, Pryor hadn't brought it up, because it wouldn't be fair to. There were things he'd yet to tell the Emperor as well. It'd been clear they'd both needed time to sort through their own shit, figure out what they wanted and where they stood.

The question could be innocent enough, except Wystan suddenly found interest in something outside directly over Pryor's head, no longer making eye contact.

Pryor supposed this meant that he was ready to have *the talk*.

He cleared his throat, nervous all of a sudden. "As soon as this thing with the Empress settles, I have to fly to Flicker."

Wystan's expression was shuttered, but he gave a single silent nod.

"Whether or not I still have a job is up in the air," he continued, "but either way, I have to meet with the Chief of Police in person. A

representative from I.P.F headquarters will also be there. After speaking with me, they say they'll decide on where and how to proceed. Either way though, I'd have to go back."

"Right." Wystan went to straighten, but Pryor dropped his hands onto his hips, causing him to still.

"I need to collect my things, Emperor," he said, grinning when Wystan's gaze finally snapped to his. "What? Did you think I'd changed my mind or something?"

"You could," he blurted as if the thought had been on his mind for a while and he was only now getting the opportunity to say it. "I would never keep you against your will, Pryor. I know that this is sudden, that my proposal wasn't exactly romantic or—"

"Technically," he drawled, "you never actually even asked me."

Wystan paused, clearly realizing for the first time that that was true. "I never meant to put you on the spot. Yes, Vexan law states I can only claim one person to be my royal consort in my lifetime, but you have every right to leave if you want to. Because, no, I didn't ask you. If this isn't something you want, don't even consider my feelings. If going is what will make you happy—"

"Ask me." Pryor had spent the last six days mulling it over, trying to decide what he wanted. He'd been in a pretty poor state when he'd come to and thrown himself at Castor. When he'd agreed to be Wystan's Royal Consort. And then, at the press release, seeing his mother had set something off in him, something that had urged him toward the petty side.

Making that claim in front of everyone had been a way of severing ties with her officially and legally.

But it was a big decision. A life-altering one. If he accepted the role, this new title would affect the choice made by the I.P.F. It would also change the way Pryor was allowed to go about things. A royal consort was an Imperial. After spending so many years trying to avoid that...He'd been afraid he'd been hasty, selfish.

Then the week had progressed, and Wystan had stood by Pryor's side through the onslaught of reporters and the demands made by his mother and her aids. He'd introduced him to his sister, had ordered Pryor be allowed run of Gallium Palace where they were currently staying. He hadn't pushed him for answers about their future or pressured him to confess his

feelings. He'd simply been there. In a way no one ever had for Pryor in the past. Without judgment or want for anything in return.

Even in the beginning with Castor, Pryor had always assumed they'd become friends due to circumstances since they were roommates.

He didn't want to think about Castor though.

Flicker had been where he'd made a life for himself, yes, but it'd never been a home. Here, with the Emperor? It felt right.

It felt like where he belonged.

"Ask me," he repeated when all he got was stunned silence in return. "Unless," he faltered some, "...you really did only say it to H to protect me and you didn't actually want me to be—"

"Be my royal consort," Wystan interjected, wincing at himself before inhaling slowly and trying again. "I want you. I've always wanted you. I'll always want you. Will you be my royal consort, Pryor Oro?"

He pretended to think about it, chuckling when that had the Emperor letting out a sound akin to a groan or a whine. He tugged on his hips, pulling him flush against him, and tipped his head back to maintain eye contact. "Yes, I accept the position of royal consort."

*"My royal consort."*

Pryor sobered some. "Honestly, I thought you wouldn't want me that much. I figured after the case, you'd realize how complicated being with me would be and you'd want to end it anyway." He'd never even considered that Wystan would ask him to be a royal consort. "When I heard you call me that, saw you'd been shot trying to protect me..." It'd finally clicked, exactly what the Emperor had been trying to say all this time.

"You are aware you were also shot in my stead," Wystan reminded. "Twice, in fact."

He lifted a single shoulder smugly. "Who's counting."

"I am. Don't do it again."

"Can't make that promise." He leaned back, resting his head against the chilled glass of the window, putting a little distance between them so he could get a better read on the Emperor. "My job is dangerous. I get shot a lot, get into knife fights—someone threw a pig at me once. It's not easy work, and it's certainly not safe work, but I love my job and I'm damn good at it."

He decidedly left out mention of what a hot mess this particular case had been.

“I recall you saying as much.” Wystan smiled softly.

“If they’ll keep me, I have no intentions of quitting the I.P.F. You understand that, right?”

Wystan reached out and gently cupped the back of Pryor’s neck, easing him forward to meet his lips when he lowered his mouth. The kiss was tender, and over far too quickly. “This week, thinking that you might tell me you’re leaving...It was torment. I was preparing for the worst, taking all I could get from you before you were ready to give me the news.”

He had been particularly affectionate as of late, but Pryor had just assumed that was because of everything that had gone down.

“You can be whatever you want,” Wystan told him, “I just want you to be mine. Please.” He sounded desperate at the end, needy, and Pryor felt something inside of him come alive.

He pulled the Emperor in and held him close, giving himself a moment to just feel. Wystan was strong and solid around him, the warmth of his body seeping through their clothing to chase away the chill from standing so close to the window. The familiar scent of him, sandalwood, and what he now recognized as the smell of those breakfast dessert balls cloyed past his senses, soothing his nerves. This wasn’t anything near what Pryor had imagined when he’d first arrived on the Olympus, yet, even though there was so much that he’d lost, there was also something amazing from all of this that he’d gained.

“Turns out, the life I was struggling to hold on to so badly never even really existed,” he said. “I’m Pryor Oro, but I’m also Rune Tiberius. Changing my name couldn’t strip me of my past, no matter how desperately I wanted it to. Castor—” he choked on the name, had to pause and try again, “He’s proof of that.”

“You haven’t talked about him,” Wystan tentatively pointed out. “You don’t have to start. Ink keeps me updated. He’s admitted to all of the charges.”

“I still can’t believe he played me. From the beginning.” Pryor had been so excited to make a friend. He’d thought, for the first time, someone liked him for who he was and not because of his title or his name. But that had also been a lie. The only reason Castor had even approached him, had even joined the I.P.F, had been to get close to Rune Tiberius. “How could something I did as a child have such a negative impact on the world?”

“Hey.” Wystan cupped his cheeks and tilted his face up. “What happened is not your fault. None of it.”

“Roth died—”

“Imperial Roth was a coward and a thief who was trying to take the easy way out. It cost him. Plain and simple. You knew him as a child when he was nice to you, but he was no longer that kid, the same way you’re no longer that thirteen-year-old boy I met outside the hospital.”

“That’s not what you said before.”

Wystan grimaced. “I was upset with you; I shouldn’t have spoken out of anger.”

“No,” Pryor shook his head, “I think it was something I needed to hear. I’d tricked myself into believing I was no longer running, but I was.”

There was guilt over what Castor had done in his name, and there probably always would be. Even if he’d been unaware of what was going on, it was impossible to separate himself from the situation entirely. What stung the most was seeing how little the Inspector actually knew him. It should have been obvious that he wouldn’t be pleased with breaking the law or hurting people. He wondered how much of that blame lay with him; maybe if he’d told Castor the truth early on, things would have been different. They would never know.

In the end, he’d lost his best friend, and there was grieving to be done where that friendship was concerned. He also still needed to figure out where he and Fir stood, whether or not they could continue working together or if the other man would ask for reassignment.

Then there was dealing with learning everything that came with being a royal consort, and planning to travel to Flicker to meet with his bosses...There was a lot to do, so much that it was a bit overwhelming.

But Pryor wasn’t alone, and with any luck, he never would be again.

He smirked against the curve of Wystan’s neck before nipping at him. When the Emperor jolted, he laughed. “Enough with the serious talk. What was that you mentioned earlier? Something about a bed?”

Not needing any more prompting than that, Wystan spun them around, mouth latching onto Pryor’s as he urged him back until the curve of his knees hit the side of the bed. They toppled down, the Emperor breaking the kiss so that he could turn Pryor over. When he had him how he wanted him, he readjusted over his prone body, planting heated kisses and licks on the sensitive skin beneath Pryor’s ear and down the slope of his jaw.

Wystan bit at his throat, hard enough to make him gasp but cause no real damage, and he continued onward, tugging at the thin material of Pryor's shirt to get it out of his way. He paused at the spot between his shoulder and neck, latching onto him and sucking. There was a reddish-purple splotch left behind when he finally pulled back, and with a satisfied hum, he traced the pad of his thumb around the blurry edges.

"Your Vexan is showing, Emperor," Pryor teased. They'd slept together again the night of the press release, and every night—as well as most days—since, and he'd discovered that he was sort of partial to this side of Wystan. The slight edge of possessiveness, that display of devotion, had his dick hardening against the press of the firm mattress. He let out a long and low groan and tried to grind down for more friction.

No one had ever cared for Pryor before, not the way Wystan did. Not openly, and honestly, and thoroughly.

"Fuck me," he barely processed growling out the command but felt Wystan's rumbling chest against his back as the other man laughed.

Wystan moved away, ignoring Pryor's frustrated whine.

The sound of a zipper dropping and the rustle of material clued him into the fact the Emperor was undressing, and he shifted so that he could watch him. Wystan seemed more than eager to please, slowing his ministrations, skillfully stripping and revealing swaths of smooth flesh and rippling muscle.

Pryor had this thought then, that this was probably the single greatest decision he had ever made in his entire life. Being with Wystan. Staying with him.

Then the Emperor dropped his pants and Pryor's mind fizzled out.

In the next instant, he'd somehow managed to pull Wystan toward him and reversed their positions. He had the Emperor splayed out on his back, and his own clothes lying in a heap on the floor in less time than it took to count to ten. When he moved to straddle him, his cock rubbed against Wystan's and they both hissed.

Pryor moved closer, and momentarily rested on his haunches, bringing his dick right up against the Emperors. He caught them in his hands, stroking them together, the velvety sensation as their cocks met causing his head to drop back. They were both leaking, thick rivulets of precome dribbling down their shafts to spill onto Pryor's hand and his

thighs. That, coupled with the sounds the Emperor was currently making, desperate grunts and pleading moans, had him harder than he'd ever been.

Wystan wasn't even inside of him yet and he already felt so connected to him it was unreal.

He lowered his hand to the base of Wystan's cock and squeezed, leaning forward when the Emperor's eyes popped open and he let out a stuttering breath. "Mine."

That sounded so right to Pryor's ears. He smoothed his free hand down the plains of Wystan's chest, feeling the divots of his abs, touching him everywhere and anywhere he could. This was what he'd needed. Grounding.

"Gods, you're better than the ocean," Pryor whimpered, and Wystan's cock throbbed in his hold.

"I don't know what that means," he admitted.

"It means," done with the foreplay, Pryor climbed higher up the Emperor's body, until he was in the perfect position to slot his thick crown into his hole, "I love you."

He eased down, slowly taking Wystan's length inch by trembling inch. There was little pain, but the burn was there, as was the electricity firing off as his insides stretched and tightened around the invasive member. Once he had him all the way in, he rocked his hips, grinding down onto him as he undulated.

Wystan grabbed onto him but didn't complain about the leisurely pace he'd set. Instead, he encouraged him with softly spoken words and throaty rumbles. "That's it, *dow*, just like that. Take me, Detective, I belong to you."

Pryor rode him harder, lifting himself almost entirely off of his cock before slamming back down. His breathing was labored and he was covered in a thin sheen of sweat in no time at all, his muscles tensing and aching from the exertion. That burn only drove him to move faster, chasing the edge.

"Wystan," he was begging, but he wasn't even sure what for.

Fortunately, the Emperor didn't seem to have a problem deciphering his meaning. He caught Pryor's jutting dick in one tight fist and pumped him twice. That was all it took.

The orgasm ripped through Pryor, and he screamed, jets of come shooting from his head to splatter all over Wystan's chest.

Finally, the Emperor took control, thrusting up into his body so forcefully fireworks exploded behind Pryor's eyes. His own release hit him, and he continued to piston his hips upward as he unloaded, not stopping until he was completely spent.

Losing control of his limbs, Pryor fell forward, uncaring about the sticky mess he ended up smearing between them or how half of Wystan's softening cock was still nestled inside of him. He breathed deep, sucking air into his lungs, greedy for more of that sweet sandalwood scent.

The steady rhythm of Wystan's heart beating against his own, and the harried uptakes of their mingled breaths filled the room with a kind of music Pryor never wanted to stop. If someone told him right now that this was going to be his home, this moment, this feeling, for the rest of his life he would gladly accept.

"Pryor." Wystan's warm hand settled on the back of his neck, his fingers brushing through the hair at the base of his skull.

He groaned. "Don't want to move."

The Emperor chuckled. "I just...I want to say it back."

His brow furrowed. "Say what?"

Wystan stilled, and when he didn't follow up with a reply, Pryor peeled himself off of him enough to stare down and meet his gaze. As soon as their eyes locked, the Emperor smiled. "I love you, Pryor Oro."

His cock zipped back to life.

"Seriously?" Wystan asked in surprise.

"I love you, too," Pryor said, hoping that the truth of those words shone clearly in his expression despite how turned on he suddenly was. "Now," he lifted himself off of him and plopped down on his back next to him on the bed, curling his fingers suggestively, "Let's go again, *Emperor Aurelius*."

Wystan laughed and kissed him, surrounded him, until the only things Pryor was aware of was the feeling of his tongue and the pleasure of him thrusting deep inside of him.

Until there was only him and the Emperor and nothing else.

He wrapped his arms tightly around Wystan's neck, holding him close, and whispered against the curve of his ear, "I love us."



# Epilogue:

## One Year Later

“Intergalactic Detective #455.”

Pryor closed his eyes for a second and silently cursed before schooling his features and casually turning to face the speaker. “He told you to say that, didn’t he, H.”

“You were meant to report as soon as you docked,” the Imperial standing next to him said in a voice like warmed butterscotch. “I was waiting.”

The three of them stood in the middle of the bustling marketplace. It was midmorning, which meant all the best breakfast vendors were out and the smells of savory and sweet foods mingled in the air.

“Hey, boss, I—” Fir came around the corner and abruptly stopped talking the second he spotted who Pryor was with. He cleared his throat and straightened his spine, bowing. “Emperor Aurelius.”

Wystan had taken the position as Head less than a month ago. This was the second changeover Pryor had been around for, and he’d thought from experience he’d have more time to get away with things, now that the Emperor was so busy with official business.

Whoops.

H glowered at Fir. “You’re meant to be ensuring Imperial Pryor follows form.”

“Actually—” Fir held up a finger but was beat to the actual punchline.

“That’s my job.” Ink came around the corner, slightly out of breath from having run. Pryor had sent her to the opposite side of the market less than ten minutes ago to wait in line for the buns at this popular shop that always sold out. She handed the bag over to him before planting her palms on her knees and

giving a good heave.

“She’s right,” Fir confirmed for her while she filled her lungs. “She’s the new Investigator, after all.”

New wasn't exactly the right word. At his meeting with the I.P.F a month after the press release where he'd announced his identity to the twelve galaxies, Pryor had negotiated terms. Not only had he been able to keep his job, he'd also walked away with all of his demands met. Apparently, that flawless record he'd built for himself over the years as a ninth-class detective was worth enough to them to keep him on whether he went by Rune Tiberius or Pryor Oro.

It had made him feel a little bad at the time because he'd gone with a lot of stipulations.

For one, he'd needed someone else to fill Castor's position, and he'd wanted to select the person himself—for obvious reasons. They'd easily agreed to that one. Ink had been the perfect candidate and had shown interest. As the Vexan Royal Consort, Pryor was also meant to be accompanied by a Vexan guard, so this checked off two boxes at once. Fir had thankfully agreed to stay on his team, so finding another new member hadn't been necessary.

Pryor had been worried the man would change his mind after being told that he wanted to cut his work hours by two-thirds, but the opposite had happened. Fir had been ecstatic over the idea. Pryor hadn't been the only one wanting to settle down it seemed.

They'd both moved to the Olympus, where they were based permanently, and they only accepted cases nearby. That still meant there was travel involved, but not as much, and Pryor tended to take more cases during the time of year when Wystan was Head and therefore too busy for him anyway.

Amazingly enough, they'd settled into their new routines rather easily. For a while, he'd waited for the other shoe to drop, but it never had. Even his mother had admitted defeat and finally stopped sending them threats.

"I refuse to take responsibility," Ink said then, straightening. Her cheeks weren't nearly as red as they'd been a moment ago. "He's impossible to keep in line. Just does whatever he pleases."

"Tell me about it," Wystan murmured.

Pryor held up the paper bag and shook it at him. "I was getting us breakfast."

"I could have had that delivered to the palace and you know it."

"Where's the fun in that?"

“Detective.”

“Boss,” Fir tapped on his multi-slate, “we’re getting an assignment call.”

Before Wystan could pout, Pryor pulled Fir’s arm over and clicked on the speaker to connect the comms. “Chief?”

“Imperial Pryor,” the gruff voice of their commanding officer at the Flicker branch crackled through the device. “I know you just wrapped up, but I was hoping you could take on another case. There’s this marauder the Glade Empress would really like caught and she requested you personally.”

Pryor glanced at Fir, silently asking him if he wanted the case.

Fir pretended to ponder over it before nodding.

“My team will take the job,” he turned to catch Wystan’s eye, noting the sour expression the Emperor was now wearing, “but I won’t be joining them.” He winked.

“Oh, but—”

“Fir’s my second in command, and more than capable of handling a case like this,” Pryor insisted. “As for me, I’m taking the next month off. I’ll pass you over to Fir so you two can go over the details.” He dropped the man’s arm and motioned for him to leave to find somewhere more private.

With a tip of his head, Fir did as he was told, disappearing into the crowd.

“I should go with him,” Ink said. “If he’s on the case, that means I am too. Not like I wanted a break as well or anything.” She sent Pryor a side-eye as she passed, but it was all in jest. Ink was passionate about being Inspector, and unlike him, didn’t have anyone waiting for her on the Olympus to help keep those workaholic notions away.

“A whole month huh, Detective?” Wystan smirked at him, the adoration in his look unmistakable.

Pryor had been gone for over a week working this case, and though it was hardly the longest time they’d spent separated, he understood what the Emperor was feeling right now. He was grateful that the I.P.F hadn’t fired him and he could continue doing what he did, with flexible hours and the option to choose or reject the cases as he saw fit.

But if he *had* to choose, he’d pick staying here with Wystan any day of the week.

Maybe it was time for him to start looking into the local force and how one went about transferring to it.

“What do you think, Emperor,” he held up the bag a second time, “can you fit me into your schedule?”

Wystan cocked his head, pretending to think it over. He took a step forward, closing the distance between them. “Let’s start with breakfast,” he lowered his mouth to the curve of Pryor’s ear, voice slipping into the familiar seductive timbre that always had Pryor semi-hard in under a second, “and work our way from there.”

Pryor reached for his hand, linking their fingers, and Wystan pulled back to smile down at him softly.

“Welcome home, Detective.”

# Acknowledgments:

This book was a passion project of mine that I picked up, put down, picked up again, put down again, etc. etc. There were times when I thought it would never be finished, but I love these characters and this world, and I'm so excited to finally be getting a completed copy out to you all!

This project started off on Kindle Vella. Because of the formatting of that—serial novel—this finished story is pretty different from what I had initially envisioned. At first, I thought about stretching things on for as long as I could, making this story longer than it needed to be to fit in that serial novel mold. In the end, things didn't work out that way, and I'm pretty happy with the results, and that I got to complete Pryor and Wystan's story without dragging it on. There's an added chapter in this version that isn't available on Vella, since I couldn't change chapter 6 there like I was able to here. I hope if you started the book there, you enjoy this completed and updated/edited version! I am super grateful to anyone who chose to give this book a chance, especially since it's my first official MM release.

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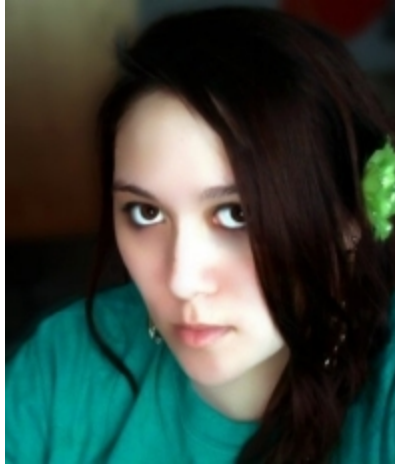
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