The Space Emperor

by toadstar

Summary

This started off as a one-time shitpost I started writing while I waited for someone to get out of the bathroom. Before I realized what was happening, it had spiraled into an ongoing and deeply self-indulgent comedy gay romance novella. I'm having fun here.

The space emperor is the tyrannical dictator of the observable universe, complacent on his palatial pleasure-planet. Little did he know that the power of gay love and an excess of pulpy sci-fi tropes would change the course of his life....... forever....... 

I reblog fanart and shitposts on space-emperor.tumblr.com

Notes

For now, I'm posting the beginning story as I first shared it--as a handful of disconnected chunks made up as I went. I may go back later and flesh out the beginning chapters.
“‘No’?!” echoed the space emperor. “‘No’?! No one. Ever. Tells me. ‘No’.”

He advanced, close enough that the threads on his rich robes could be counted by the naked eye. After a furtive glance over his shoulder, he dropped his voice to a desperate whisper and said, “Could you… could you do it again? Please?”

“No.”

The space emperor’s eyes shone like embers as he leaned forward, clasping his hands in front of his face. “So this… this ‘democracy’ you speak of. You’re telling me that people might… disobey me? They wouldn’t have to do everything I tell them to?”

“No if they disagree with you.”

“They can do that?!” He licked his lips, trembling with excitement. “And voting! You say I… you say I could lose?!”

“Yeah, uh. And you probably would.”

“Incredible,” he breathed. “Why, I could kiss you!” With a surprised laugh, he stopped himself mid-step. “But—you wouldn’t like that! Right? You’d have an ‘opinion’? Gosh… do you think other people have those?!”

The space emperor let out a long, melancholy sigh and turned to the hero, his lip trembling with delicate misery. “I’m going to miss you,” he sniffed. “I don’t think I’ll watch, you know, when they… when they do it.” The tear that had been clinging valiantly to his eyelashes finally broke free and rolled down his cheek. “Oh!” he cried, and threw his arms around the hero’s neck with a great, shuddering sob. “Yours will be the only skull I drink from ever again—I promise! I will think of you every time, and I’ll pretend you’re still here with me!”

“Or you could just… not have me executed.”

The space emperor inhaled sharply and took a step back, his face red and puffy from crying. “That’s an option?!”

The serving-woman stood with her back ramrod straight and her eyes fixed firmly on the floor. Every muscle in her body looked tense, and only the rapid rise and fall of her shoulders betrayed her terror.

“You’ve ruined my gown,” said the space emperor, regarding the growing purple stain on his sleeve. “These fibers were harvested on Lutoya-29, a planet that was demolished six units ago. There is no other like it in the galaxy. I could have you harvested for washing-water for this.” He looked up and met the hero’s eyes, his thoughtful expression melting into a delighted grin. “But I don’t have to, do I?”

“No, Your Incandecense,” whispered the woman. Her sweat-beaded skin had grown translucent
with fear.

“I don’t even have to have you killed at all!” he exclaimed. “I could… I could…” he cast around the chamber, as though searching for inspiration in the lavish furnishings.

“Please, Your Incandecense.” The woman’s voice was low and unsteady, but her gaze remained fixed on the floor. “I’ll do anything, please, forgive—”

“Anything! You’re right!” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together, stamping his feet in a little dance. “I could do anything! In fact—” he reached over the table and clasped the hero’s hand in his own. “Nothing is anything! I could do nothing! Nothing at all!” He giggled merrily and then froze, gingerly releasing the hero’s hand and leaning back. He tapped one bejeweled finger against his temple and gave an exaggerated wink. “Oh, right. Consent.”

The serving-woman’s eyes flickered to the hero’s for a moment, nervous questions burning in them. The hero gave a barely-imperceptible shrug and a very tiny, reassuring smile. The emperor did not seem to notice.

“Is there more wine?” he asked. “Splendid. Please. Do it again.”

“What…?” The woman’s skin flashed an alarming yellow.

The emperor gestured enthusiastically between himself and the crystal pitcher. “The wine. My gown. I think you should reacquaint them.”

“He wants you to spill the wine on him again,” explained the hero. “No, really. He’s, uh… he’s having an interesting day.”

“I am learning so many things,” said the emperor. “Did you know that you have feelings, too? It’s not just me! My new friend has feelings, that man over there has feelings, that… whatever that thing is has feelings!” He stood up and threw his arms wide in a sudden, emphatic motion, flinging droplets of purple liquid from his soiled sleeve. “Maybe everyone has feelings! Maybe robots! Maybe my enemies! Maybe—” he stopped, and the delirious grin vanished from his face. “Maybe the Lutoyans have feelings…” His voice dropped to a whisper, and he stared at the hero with a strange expression. “But… there aren’t any more Lutoyans…”
The space emperor took his breakfast in bed, bathed in sweet oils, allowed his hair to be combed and coiffed and his face painted with rare minerals, and then sighed in delicate frustration.

“None of this seems right,” he confessed to his wardrober, after rejecting the seventh gown he was presented with. It was deep blue silk, studded all over with crystals that glinted and sparkled like a night sky. “It’s just not working for me today.”

“That is one of the finest gowns in the galaxy, Your Incandescence,” said the wardrober. “It is an accurate star map of the constellations as seen from your boyhood home, rivaled in beauty and quality only by your other raiments. But perhaps this is more to your impeccable tastes—” It offered an eighth gown, a trailing cascade of iridescent blue-green fabric layered with shimmering, diaphanous beetle wings. “A species of rare insect went extinct for the construction of this one,” it said. “It was considered sacred to the inhabitants of that world. Wearing this gown declares your might and majesty to the galaxy.”

The space emperor pursed his lips. “Hmm,” he said. “Not that one, I think.” There was an unfamiliar twisting sensation in his gut when he looked at the gown.

“Very well.” The wardrober replaced the shimmering garment and crossed its arms. “May I ask what you wish to achieve today? I may be better able to help dress you if I know your desired effect.”

“I don’t know!” cried the space emperor helplessly. “I want to look impressive and handsome, but not… not too much so, you know?”

“Your radiance is always blinding, Your Incandescence.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But…” He looked up at the wardrober, uncertain which of its many eyes to fix his gaze on. “What would you wear?”

“Well,” said the wardrober carefully, “If I were trying to impress someone in particular, without intimidating them, I’d wear something that would accentuate my favorite features. I am quite proud of my horns, though of course, I am but a humble worm beside your magnificence.”

The space emperor considered this. “I like your horns,” he agreed. “They’re very pointy.”

Instantly, the wardrober dropped to one knee, bowing his head so that its neck was exposed and the tips of its horns almost brushed the carpet. “They are yours, if you desire them,” it said quietly. “But I beseech you to leave my skull intact.”

“That will not be necessary,” said the space emperor, watching as the wardrober’s shoulders relaxed. “I uh… I think I like them better on you.”

He eventually decided upon an amber-colored robe of embroidered velvet and a matching cap. The wardrober assured him that it enhanced the natural glow of his skin and suggested warmth and vitality, without being “too much”. The space emperor was inclined to agree with it. He had never previously appreciated the color yellow, save for in the luster of gold, but now he found himself smiling crookedly at his own reflection.

“How do I look?” he asked, adjusting the angle of his cap.
“Especially luminous, Your Incandescence,” said the wardrober. “Like a yellow star.”

He found himself disinterested in the morning blood sport, unable to shake the odd feeling that had settled in his stomach while he was getting dressed. He wished that he had sent for his new friend the moment he woke up, but he was oddly reluctant to seem over-eager, and had wished to first make himself presentable.

One of his attendants kneeled beside him. “Does the fight displease you, Your Incandescence?” she asked softly. “You are not your usual self this morning. Shall I call for a Lyran bull to be maddened? It always cheers you up when they impale things with their horns.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” The space emperor frowned. “Do you think the bulls enjoy it?”

“I… I wouldn’t know,” she said, startled. “If it pleases you, I’m certain they do.”

“And if it doesn’t please me?”

She hesitated. “Then I’m certain that they suffer, if that pleases you better. More wine…?”

He left the game early, troubled by something he could not identify. He would send for a doctor later if the strange sensations did not abate, but he wished desperately to speak with his new friend and could bear to wait no longer. He was not used to exercising patience and fond himself fatigued from the effort of self-restraint. Arranging himself splendidly on the couch, he practiced smiling and laughing until his cheeks began to grow sore.

When the bell finally rang, he sprang to his feet. “Come in!” he exclaimed, forgetting his carefully-planned greeting as his heart began to race. He was grinning from ear to ear, painfully aware of how inelegant it must look to show all his teeth at once, but too distracted to care.

“Your Incandescence,” said the war magnate, stepping into the room and bowing low. The space emperor’s face fell when he saw that she was alone.

“You’re not who I sent for,” he muttered, crossing his arms and sitting back down. “I don’t want to talk about war right now. Where’s the fellow with the funny yellow eyes?”

“Forgive me, sire. This is a matter of imperial security.” She straightened and looked swiftly around the room, scanning it with her ocular enhancements. “An assassin has been apprehended in the palace. You must evacuate while we secure the premises.”

“An assassin…? Here?” He shivered.

“He has been neutralized and handed over to the general,” she reassured him. “We will conduct a memory probe and find out how he breached your quarters, and have those responsible for the lapse in security punished…” she savored the word for a moment, “Proportionately.”
“I hope the feast is to your pleasure, Your Incandescence. We did not have much time to prepare before–”

“It is not to my pleasure!” cried the space emperor, lashing out and knocking the platter to the floor. The attendant winced as the tureen shattered and bent to clean it up. “I want to go back!”

“That would be inadvisable,” said the war magnate, rolling her eyes. “It is not yet safe for you to return planetside; there may be traps or other assassins lying in wait. I’m sure your friend is fine.”

“How can you be sure?” he asked. He stamped his foot, splattering soup under his golden sandal. “I want to see him! Bring him up to the ship.”

The war magnate closed her eyes and inhaled slowly, clenching and unclenching her fists. “Very well,” she said through gritted teeth. “I will see if any personnel can be spared from the vitally important security sweep to find this man you speak of.”

The space emperor smiled. “Excellent,” he said, settling into the cushions, and then, thoughtfully: “Thank you.” The list of things he wished to discuss with his new friend was growing longer, and he had half a mind to write them down so that he didn’t forget them. “You there,” he said, addressing the attendant who was still kneeling to mop the soup from the floor. “Remember something for me.”

The attendant looked up. “Sire?”

“I want to ask him what it means when something suffers.” He chewed his lip. “Remind me, once he gets here. I have questions about Lyran bulls.”

When the war magnate returned, he was once again disappointed to see that she was alone. Even worse, her expression did not suggest that she had any news he wanted to hear.

“Your Incandescence,” she said, “Could you describe this man to me again…?”

The space emperor ignored the icy apprehension spreading through his chest. There was nothing wrong. They were probably just unsure who they were looking for. “Yellow eyes,” he said, smoothing his hand down the front of his robe. “Um. Tall. A scar from here to here. Dimples. Muscular, but not too muscular, you know? Just enough that it’s kind of–”

“Got it,” she said, with a tone of voice and an expression he had never seen her use before, and turned on her heel.

“Wait!” he said, jumping up and rushing after her. “What’s the matter? Can’t he be found?”

“I will send for a courtesan of similar appearance,” she said. “If none can be found, a robot can be customized to–”

“But I don’t want a courtesan,” he snapped. “Or a robot! I want. My. Friend!” Suddenly he wished he’d stayed to see the end of the blood games. It might have relieved some of the tension he now felt. “What part of that don’t you understand?”

The war magnate glanced at the communication panel. The light was blinking green, indicating the channel was still active. “His Incandescence is very insistent, sir,” she said nervously.
“I will speak with him,” came the General’s voice through the speaker. “I’m sorry, Your Incandescence. I’m afraid we were too late. The assassin reached your… friend… before we could apprehend him. He is dead, sire.”

The space emperor opened his mouth, but only an odd, high-pitched whine escaped his throat. It couldn’t be true. He didn’t want it, so it couldn’t be true. That was how it worked—how it had always worked.

He did not remember sitting down, but gradually he was aware of a cool cloth dabbing at his forehead and several of his attendants watching him closely. His robe was opened to his navel and beads of perspiration had formed on his lip. The General’s voice was still speaking.

“—will be taken care of, of course. He will pay for his sins in blood. I will see to it personally, after we have extracted the information we need.”

“No,” he choked out. “No.”

“No’, sire?”

He took a shuddering breath. “I want to do it. I want to kill him myself.”

There was a long silence on the other end. The war magnate shifted uncomfortably and licked her lips.

“I see. Of course, Your Incandescence. I will make the necessary arrangements.”
Chapter 4

The entire palace was climate-controlled, including the military wing, so there was no reason for the space emperor to feel so cold as he walked through the halls. It was just another concern to bring up with his doctor later that evening, along with the pain in his chest and difficulty swallowing around the tightness in his throat. He so rarely fell ill—even as a child, the diseases of the common rabble had never touched him.

The doctor would have to wait. He had more important business to attend to.

He ran his thumb along the special weapon the General had given him. It was simple in design, as unlike the ornate ceremonial laser he always wore at his hip as it was possible to be. He didn’t understand exactly how it functioned, but he didn’t need to; all that mattered was that it worked. The General assured him that it would be a most fitting punishment.

He needed neither key nor code to access the dungeons. Every door was programmed to recognize his biometric data and opened automatically as he approached. It was always a nice touch when he wore billowing clothing, for it meant he never had to slow down or stop and his gowns could flow gracefully behind him.

At last he arrived at the chamber where the assassin was being held. He came to a halt just out of reach of the sensors that would open the door. Bracing himself, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and stepped into the room.

The assassin looked exactly as he had imagined. It was beastly and uncouth, a wretched, hairy thing with gnashing teeth and wild, jaundiced eyes—something from one of the outer colonies, no doubt. It strained against the chains that held it, snarling at the space emperor and snapping its jaws in his direction. It must have used one hell of a camouflaging hologram to make it all the way to the palace without being noticed.

“Hello, you great ugly brute,” he said. “Are you ready to die?” He laughed coldly. “Doesn’t matter; I’m ready to kill you.”

The creature snorted and rattled its chains, flaring its nostrils like a Lyran bull that had just caught the scent of blood.

“Actually,” he continued, “That’s not true. I don’t want to kill you just yet. I want you to suffer first.” He sniffed. “Very, very badly. Do you understand?”

If the assassin understood him, it did not show it. “I asked you a question,” he hissed, pressing the weapon up under its chin, his finger hovering over the trigger. “How does it feel, knowing you’re about to die a very painful death?”

If the assassin understood him, it did not show it. “I asked you a question,” he hissed, pressing the weapon up under its chin, his finger hovering over the trigger. “How. Does. It. Feel?”

He wanted to know, he realized with some surprise. Under the matted fur and snapping teeth, perhaps it too had feelings, of a sort. Why else would it go to the trouble of trying to kill him? Why else would it have left its homeworld, somewhere in the outer dregs of the empire? Why else would it be here now? Why else would it have killed the…
The space emperor blinked. “No, really—why did you do it?” he asked.

There was no reason to interrogate it. It had already been questioned, and once the results from the memory probe were analyzed, there was little it could hope to conceal. Interrogating a prisoner after their memories had been extracted was often useless, anyway; the probe had the regrettable and all-too-common side-effect of shattering the subject’s mind.

Still, it couldn’t hurt to ask. He had a feeling that the probe wouldn’t be able to tell him what he really wanted to know. If there was any coherent thought left in the beast at all, perhaps he could coax it out.

“Speak,” he ordered. “Or I will cut out your tongue.” His nose wrinkled at the thought of touching the slimy thing with his own hands. He really should have brought a servant with him, he thought.

The space emperor tried every tactic he knew: yelling, shouting, threatening, whispering threats, shouting threats, and sneering nastily, but if the assassin spoke, it was not in any language he recognized. He considered striking it, but he did not have the patience to wait for a whip to be delivered.

“Please,” he said finally, and the texture of the word sent an odd, forbidden shiver down his spine. “Just talk to me!” Nothing. The creature’s eyes merely rolled madly in its skull.

His heart sank. “Your mind’s broken, isn’t it? What a pity… I had hoped there would be something left.” With a sigh, he raised the weapon once again, aiming for what he hoped was the thing’s jugular. “I’ll make it quick, then.”

Perhaps there would be some satisfaction in killing it, though the space emperor doubted that. He wasn’t certain why. Something he had eaten was not sitting well with him, maybe.

The General had promised him that the weapon would deliver a slow and agonizing death—something about spreading cellular lysis that left the nerves intact until the moment of death. It was supposed to be excruciating. The more he thought about that, the more it troubled him. He tried to imagine what it would feel like if the weapon were turned on himself and found that his mind simply slid off the idea.

“Oh, what the hell,” he said, and withdrew his ceremonial laser from its holster. He fired a beam directly between the creature’s eyes, killing it instantaneously.

Or so he thought, until the hologram glitched out, and the robot underneath sparked and smoked from the circular hole in its forehead. The space emperor stared at it, mouth agape.

“You should have used the weapon I provided, Your Incandescence,” sighed the General, sweeping into the room to stand at his side. “Everything would have been a lot easier.”
Chapter 5

“What?” said the space emperor. “What just… happened?”

The General bowed his head and held out his arm. The space emperor took it numbly and allowed himself to be led from the room, away from the acrid smoke rising from the dead robot. “You must forgive me, Your Incandescence. I will bear the blame for this… unfortunate oversight. Walk with me, if you please, and I will explain.”

The space emperor craned his neck to look back over his shoulder. “The assassin was a robot?”

The hard line of the General’s mouth twisted grimly. “That… was not the assassin,” he admitted. “It is my job to crush the enemies of the empire and to protect you from harm, at any cost. I fear I have not been wholly successful in that.”

The space emperor stiffened. “Am I to understand that the assassin is still on the loose?” Heat was rising in his cheeks and spreading across his chest.

“He has been caught,” the General reassured him. “And he will be dealt with shortly. But first–”

“I wish to see him!” interrupted the space emperor. “I want to know why he killed my friend!”

The General grimaced and cleared his throat. “That would not be a good idea, sire. Please allow me to explain. The assassin was able to enter the palace under a false identity, using technology and armed with weapons we do not understand. He seems to have gained access to Your Incandescence’s person before the threat was detected. We do not yet know the… full nature or extent of your exposure, but we have reason to believe your security has been greatly compromised.”

The space emperor gasped and brought his hand to his mouth. “C-compromised…? How?”

“Unknown, sire. Nothing out of the ordinary has shown up on your health scans, and we did not wish to worry you unnecessarily.” The General regarded him seriously. “Have you noticed feeling anything… unusual?”

The space emperor swallowed painfully. “Yes,” he said. “I think so. Here–” he said, touching his throat, “And here.” He pressed his hand over his heart. “I have been feeling a little strange lately. I thought it was something I ate. Oh! General! You don’t think I’ve been poisoned, do you?!”

The General shook his head. “Your food tasters are all in good health, sire. Our chief concern is the possibility of telepathic influence. Are your thoughts in good order?”

“My thoughts?”

The General chose his words delicately. “I have received reports that you have been exhibiting some, ah, anomalous behaviors, Your Incandescence. Is it true that you walked out on this morning’s games before first blood?”

“Oh. Yes. That.” He clasped his hands behind his back, running his thumb over the soft meat of his palm. “I just wasn’t feeling it today.”

“Of course, sire. We all have our off days. Now, I admit; I am no scholar of fashion. I have worn only military uniforms since I left my mother’s home, and would not know good taste if it took me
ear off with a laser rifle.” He eyed the space emperor’s yellow robes and silk cap. “However, I seem to recall your famous preference for cool colors.”

“Jewel tones,” corrected the space emperor. “They bring out the natural glow of my winter complexion. What does that have to do with the assassin?”

The General shrugged. “Perhaps nothing.” His brow furrowed under his headdress. “Perhaps a great deal. Your Incandescence, do you think it’s possible that you have been… influenced?”

“Influenced?” He turned the word over in his mind, considering the implications. It was not the word he would have chosen when there were so many better options. Inspired, certainly. Awakened. Aroused. Electrified. He blushed, and hoped the General didn’t notice. “I don’t know.”

“Consider the possibility. We do not know what the enemy is capable of. If you should fall under the thrall of one of their agents and not even realize it… the empire would be in grave danger. Stay vigilant, sire.”

They came to a door that the space emperor had never had reason to pass through. It led to the military testing facilities, a high-security annex located deep underground. The more dangerous experimental research was done off-planet on one of the many colonized worlds not used for agriculture, but the annex served as the official headquarters beneath the palace.

The General paused. “Your Incandescence, forgive me. I only hoped to spare you further anguish. The robot was a decoy, yes—a small mercy on my part. I thought it might assuage your bloodlust and help you find closure. I did not wish to burden you with an unpleasant truth.”

The space emperor waved his hand, as if to brush away the other man’s concerns. “You are a loyal servant,” he said. “But I want to look upon the face of my enemy.”

The General bowed his head. “As you wish, sire. Follow me.”

They descended into the deep halls of the testing facility, heavily shielded with scrambling energy fields and layers of impenetrable alloys. In theory, an attack on the planet’s surface would leave the underground complex undamaged—and, in theory, an accident down below would be contained within the complex. Soldiers dropped what they were doing and saluted the pair as they passed.

“Sir!” barked a uniformed woman whose skin seemed to be crusting over with pebbled metallic scales. Her eyes widened when she noticed the space emperor. “Your Incandescence!”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“We were able to recover a partial profile on the prisoner,” she said, handing him a glowing screen. “Most of the data has been corrupted—we couldn’t reconstruct a complete biography from the imperial database, but there’s enough left to work with. We should be able to extract the rest once we finish disabling his neural defenses.”

“Iden Mudarra,” read the general. “An interesting name. See for yourself, sire.” He passed him the screen.

The space emperor’s heart stopped beating. Iden Mudarra’s glitching portrait stared up at him from the screen with unblinking yellow eyes.

“Your Incandescence, it seems the Lutoyans were declared prematurely extinct.”
The sprawling facility seemed to become oppressively small. The space emperor sucked in an unsteady breath and discovered that oxygen had suddenly stopped working while he was distracted by the screen. “Air,” he wheezed, stumbling toward the turbolift. “I need air.”

He didn’t make it more than a few yards before someone was pressing a glass of water into his hand and fanning him with a sheet of experimental insulation. The heat in his face had returned, and he was certain now that he was coming down with a dreadful fever. He doubled over, panting.

“But breathe out through your nose, sire,” murmured the colonel, averting her eyes and silently offering her elbow. “Do you require assistance?”

“I’m fine,” he said, dismissing her with a gesture. “I just… need a moment…”

Polished black boots appeared the edge of his vision. He looked up into the gray, battle-worn face of the General, stony as ever, save for a slight pinch of concern between his brows. “I’m sorry, Your Incandescence,” he said. “I wish it were not so. Do you see why I tried to deceive you?”

The space emperor could only nod. He did not trust himself to speak.

“We were foolish to think that the Lutoyans were fully exterminated,” said the General. “It was a shame to have to destroy a planet so rich in natural resources, but the vermin that inhabited it were judged far too dangerous to be assimilated into the empire. Clearly, that assessment was correct.” He stared down his nose at the garbled profile of Iden Mudarra with the expression of someone regarding an interesting but unwelcome patch of mold. “In fact, we have never had the opportunity to study a living specimen. If the rumors of their telepathic abilities are true…” he trailed off, meeting the space emperor’s gaze and letting his words hang meaningfully in the air.

“Telepathic abilities?” he heard himself echo.

“So they say. It would explain much, would it not?”

The space emperor swallowed thickly and looked away. “I suppose so,” he said quietly, his head swimming. “Will you… ah, will you hurt him?”

“He is Lutoyan, sire,” said The General coldly. In a softer voice, he continued: “Of course, his fate is entirely up to you. I ask only that you consider the good of the empire. The Lutoyans were disorganized and undisciplined, like beasts. They squandered their powers. We would not make such a mistake… it would be such a shame to let the secrets of telepathy slip through our fingers. wouldn’t it, Your Incandescence?”

He worried his lower lip between his teeth for a moment. The General was right, of course. Only telepathic influence could explain the strange disorientation he felt whenever his thoughts strayed to the treacherous Iden Mudarra and his funny ideas. Some common water smuggler he’d turned out to be!

“We could do great things with telepathy, sire. If it can be isolated and perfected, think of the military uses—whole battalions of soldiers under the command of a single intelligence. Spies, planted throughout the empire and among the hordes of our enemies, injecting thoughts directly into the minds of targets…” His face contorted into what could almost pass for a smile, if you were looking at it from across a dimly-lit room after chugging a very strong drink. “And if it all turns out to be a myth? Well, no harm done. Think of it as pest control.”
The space emperor shook his head to clear his mind and then straightened, lifting his chin proudly. It was the same regal pose that had been depicted in profile on all official coinage in the empire for generations. “Very well,” he said to the General. “He’s yours. But first…” his face hardened and he allowed dark, syrupy resonance to drip into his voice, “I’d like to have a little chat with him.” He clapped his hands. “Prepare the Gloating Chamber.”

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The Gloating Chamber, it turned out, was undergoing architectural renovations and temporarily unusable. A makeshift alternative was assembled on short notice out of a large but unimportant office in the lower level of the military complex. A scowling health and safety inspector carried an armload of personal effects out of the room as several imposing mechanical contraptions of indiscernible function were wheeled in past him.

The makeshift Gloating Chamber left a lot to be desired. Even after the motivational posters had been stripped from the walls and replaced with hanging shackles and whirring machines, it lacked a certain indefinable quality. The space emperor chewed his nails distractedly as he watched it come together, now and then ordering changes to the decor as inspiration struck. Particularly difficult was the choice between red or green mood lighting. Green won, after a surreptitious coin toss.

“What do you think?” he asked, anxiously pressing his knuckles to his lips as he took in the final effect. A full-color hologram recording of Latoya-29’s destruction played on a loop in the corner of the room, at the General’s suggestion. “Is it… too much?”

The colonel’s eyes roved from wall to wall, the blinking lights from unidentifiable machines reflected in her metallic scales. “Your sensibilities are impeccable, sire,” she said carefully. “Very intimidating. Shall I send for the prisoner now?”

An odd sound escaped the space emperor’s throat. “Not yet,” he said quickly, wiping palms that had suddenly become sweaty on the front of his robes. “I want to… to bask. In the atmosphere.” He realized his hands were trembling slightly and clasped them behind him, out of sight. “A drink, though, that would be fine. Something strong. But not gross, you know?”

The colonel vanished to carry out his order and he was left alone. He practiced setting his face into an expression of stern cruelty and checked his reflection in the polished steel of a machine that might have been an exotic torture device. It was hard to tell. The strange valves almost looked culinary, but he didn’t dare fiddle with it to see what they did.

“Hello,” he said, in his most sinister voice, and huffed in frustration. “Greetings,” he tried instead, and then: “How kind of you to join me.” That was better, he thought, but it was missing something. He repeated the phrase with different intonations, testing it out first as a growl, then as a purr, now as knife-edged sarcasm. None of it sounded right, somehow.

The colonel returned with a brilliant blue drink in a long, thin glass. He downed it in one gulp, shuddering at the faintly bitter aftertaste. “Okay,” he said, took a deep breath, handed her the empty glass, and shook the tension out of each his limbs one by one. “I’m ready. Bring him in.”

The real Gloating Chamber had a decadent luxury suite adjoining it, complete with a well-stocked pantry and bar that he could prepare in and retire to after the hard work of boasting about his triumphs in front of his enemies. The makeshift version had nothing of the kind, save for a storage closet at the back of the room, which opened with a mechanical door rather than an electronic one. The space emperor found this out the hard way. He had been provided with a special circlet intended to block external energy pulses—theoretically, it would also protect him from telepathic
interference. At the very least, it served to cover the bruise in the middle of his forehead from
where he’d walked into the door.

It did not seem appropriately sinister to be waiting in the room when the Lutoyan was brought in. It
would be better to make a sweeping, languorous entrance and arrive disdainfully late. He tried to
remember this as he sat in the storage closet, bathed in darkness and perched awkwardly upon a
stack of office chairs, rehearsing his lines under his breath. He’d prepared a loose script for the
occasion.

At last he heard a whoosh as the chamber door opened, followed by several pairs of footsteps and
the squeaking of wheels. There were voices, too, but while he could not make out the muffled
words, the jeering tone was unmistakable. He braced himself. His heart was racing, and even the
strong drink had not stilled the slight tremor in his hands.

After what felt like an eternity but was somehow still too soon, he pinched himself, arranged his
face into a cold sneer, and swept through the door into the Gloating Chamber and into the presence
of Iden Mudarra.

“How kind of you to...” he began, and stopped short.

The Lutoyan was shackled hand and foot to a raised platform, angled to face the hologram of his
exploding planet. The sheen of perspiration on his face and neck shimmered under the emerald
light, and dark curls of hair stuck damply to his forehead.

The space emperor felt his mouth go dry. “Hey,” he whispered.

Iden Mudarra smirked. “I have got to stop meeting guys like this.”
Fierce heat rippled across his cheeks and all the way down his spine. The space emperor tore his gaze away from the Lutoyan, gritting his teeth against the unwelcome feeling. He adjusted the circlet furiously until he was sure that his entire head was protected by its energy shield.

“How kind of you to join me,” he forced out, squeezing his eyes shut and trying not to think about the way the muscles in the other man’s arms flexed when he tested his restraints. “I hope you are enjoying our imperial hospitality.” It was not the self-assured and dangerous voice he had planned to use, but something strained and uneven.

“Not really, no. This kind of stuff isn’t my cup of tea,” said the Lutoyan dryly. “Speaking of which… is that a coffee machine?”

“What?” The space emperor’s eyes shot open. “No.”

“It sure looks like a coffee machine with all the labels ripped off…”

“Well, it’s not,” he snapped. He regarded the contraption uncertainly, squinting at what looked almost like traces of old adhesive clinging to its surface. “You’ll find out what it does soon enough, if you don’t comply.” He glanced at the Lutoyan out of the corner of his eye, watching his reaction closely. “And you won’t like it at all.”

“Ah.” Iden Mudarra grimaced and shuddered a little. “So it makes bad coffee—”

“Shut up!” interrupted the space emperor, balling his hands at his sides. A flash of anger crackled through him. He leaned into the emotion, following it desperately. “No more of your mind games, Lutoyan scum.”

He slammed his fist on the platform next to the Lutoyan’s head. To his relief, the other man flinched, no longer smirking with rakish confidence. They were already dangerously off-script. He grabbed the edge of the platform and lifted it until it was nearly vertical, and the would-be assassin hung upright, directly in front of the hologram.

“Marvelous, isn’t it?” the space emperor snarled, as Lutoya-29 exploded over and over again in high definition, the blue-green sphere shattering outward in a fiery inferno. “Your whole planet, blown to smithereens. Every last rock and tree, erased from history! And all. Thanks. To me.” He grinned, glad to return to familiar waters. He’d practiced this part under his breath half a dozen times. “Some of my best work, don’t you think?”

Iden Mudarra stared silently into the recording. A muscle twitched in his jaw as simulated space debris rained upon his chest, but his face remained otherwise impassive.

“Well?” urged the space emperor.

The Lutoyan sighed and gave him a withering look. “If this is your idea of psychological torment, you’re going to have to try a lot harder.” He turned back to the hologram, frowning slightly. “It’s not even a good fake.”

“‘Fake’? It’s a recording of your planet’s destruction!”

Iden Mudarra raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to believe that …?” He laughed softly and let his head thunk against the metal platform, staring up at the ceiling. “Of course you do.”
The space emperor narrowed his eyes, sensing trickery but unable to resist his creeping curiosity. He had been expecting to find his prisoner either mewling with fear or fiercely defiant, not cryptic and condescending, and wasn’t sure what approach he ought to take. “What are you talking about?” he spat, with all the venom of a Betelgeusian cobra.

The Lutoyan shrugged, as much as the shackles would allow. “It’s a hoax,” he said flatly. “Flashy propaganda for a gullible audience. No offense. I mean, look –” he gestured at the hologram with a flick of his wrist. “Even if you actually had a weapon capable of demolishing a whole planet in the blink of an eye, it wouldn’t look like that. What the hell do you think Lutoya’s atmosphere was made of?” He paused, as if expecting an answer, but the space emperor simply stared at him blankly.

“My point is,” he continued, “Why bother? The amount of energy it would take to blow up a planet of Lutoya’s size would be ludicrous! The only reason you’d go to the trouble of producing that much antimatter and carting it halfway across the galaxy would be to send a message. But it wouldn’t be enough to just blow it up, oh no–you’d have to blow it up extra good to keep all the debris from collapsing back in on itself. Can’t have your little power demonstration reforming.”

The space emperor frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Cheaper just to lie about it and kill everyone the old fashioned way, don’t you think?” Iden Mudarra smiled bitterly. “Burn off the atmosphere and you’ve got yourself a whole planet to mine, and no one there to complain.”

The space emperor opened his mouth and closed it again, unsure of what to say or how to say it. He could feel all hope for regaining control of the situation slipping away from him the longer the silence stretched on. “You’re lying,” he said finally. It sounded petulant to his own ears.

“Not any more.” The Lutoyan’s smile faded. “Look, I’ve been there. I’ve gone back. I went down to the surface and saw what was done to my home, to everything I knew… there’s nothing real you can show me now that I don’t already see every time I close my eyes. You can’t destroy me. Not with kitsch.”

The communicator ring on the space emperor’s finger buzzed. He ignored it, not wishing to be interrupted, and twisted the red stone to dismiss the call without answering it. Everything else could wait.

“You will be destroyed,” he mumbled. “Eventually.”

“Oh yeah? Is that what you want?” asked the Lutoyan.

“It’s what’s going to happen.” He looked at his feet, scuffed his toe against the ground, and willed his heart to stop beating so quickly. “But I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Why not?” Iden Mudarra shifted on the platform, twisting so that he was partially angled towards the space emperor, who kept his gaze fixed firmly on the floor. “Why not, huh? Isn’t this your ‘Taunting Room’ or something?”

“Gloating Chamber,” he correctly automatically. “Makeshift. The official one is being renovated.”

“Right, of course. So, go on, then. Gloat, if that’s really what you’re here for.” He could feel the other man’s eyes upon him, searing his skin with the intensity of their stare, but he could not bring himself to look up and meet them. “I’m just ‘Lutoyan scum’ to you now, right? So. What happens to me next?”
The space emperor shrugged and scratched his temple, clearing his throat to buy himself time to think. “Oh, you know,” he said vaguely, and winced at the crack in his voice. “All that stuff is beneath my concern.”

The Lutoyan made a noise that was almost a laugh. “Oh, sure,” he said. “Easy come, easy go. I guess empathy’s no different. Oh, well.” He sighed, and relaxed back against the platform, watching the space emperor out of the corner of his eye. “At least your buddies out there aren’t so stingy with details. Can’t say I’ve ever been vivisected before. Do think they’ll bother with anaesthesia, or just start cutting me open while I’m still–”

“Stop.”

The corner of the Lutoyan’s mouth twitched as the space emperor recoiled. “What’s the matter? Am I making you uncomfortable?” His expression darkened as a wicked glint sparked in his eye. “I don’t see why. I mean, I’m the one who’s going to have to feel it. You know, despite everything, part of me always hoped I’d die peacefully in my sleep in the arms of a loved one, not screaming in agony in some freaky torture chamber–”

“ENOUGH!” The space emperor seized the edge of the platform with a white-knuckled grasp and pushed down with all his might. The hinges squeaked in protest as it clattered back into a horizontal position and slid a few feet across the floor, bisecting the hologram of Lutoya-29 and colliding with the wall while its occupant gave a startled yelp and flailed like a pinned butterfly.

The space emperor wiped furiously at his wet cheeks and stood up straight, wagging an accusing finger at his prisoner. “You stop that,” he ordered shakily. “Don’t say another word! You’ve been doing funny things to my brain, putting strange ideas into my head with your… your alien witchcraft. Soon we’ll have you all figured out, and you won’t be able to poison my mind any further!”

“Oh, please. I haven’t ‘poisoned your mind’,” snapped the Lutoyan. “I just told you other people have feelings!”

“You lied to me.”

“No I didn’t! I..” He paused, and frowned thoughtfully. “I mean, I did, technically. But that was a means to an end–I only pretended to be a water smuggler so that I’d be brought before you. I didn’t lie about anything important.”

The space emperor hissed and shook his head violently, as if to dislodge the idea from his mind before it could take hold. “You are an assassin,” he insisted.

“That… was the idea, anyway.”

“You came here to to kill me!”

“Well… yes.” The Lutoyan took a deep, patient breath, as if he were explaining something simple to an exceedingly obstinate child. “But notice how I didn’t.”

The space emperor sniffed, curling his lip in disdain. “Of course not. We caught you. We found all your little tricks… I suppose you thought that hollow tooth of yours was very clever, didn’t you?”

The other man shrugged and made a noncommittal grunt. “It wasn’t exactly original, but it would have done the job,” he said. He then turned his head to look the space emperor dead in the eye. “I mean it. I came here expecting to die. I could have killed you from the first moment you were in arm’s reach… all I had to do was bite down, and the nanobots would have ripped us both apart.”
He spoke with such certainty and eerie calmness that the hair on the back of the space emperor’s neck stood up. With the form of an organic pathogen and all the mindless purpose of a machine, nanobot attacks were particularly feared despite their rarity. Bacteria and viruses capable of infection between multiple interplanetary species were uncommon and usually benign, but the virulence of nanobots was nearly universal. Only a few corporeal species seemed to be naturally invulnerable to weaponized nanobots; several specimens were being studied in the imperial laboratory, with more waiting in cryosleep to replace them.

The space emperor quickly looked the Lutoyan up and down, anxious not to allow his gaze to linger too long or too lasciviously on his spreadeagle frame. Something about the idea of ogling the man while he lay bound and immobile felt strangely uncomfortable—a feeling that did not go away when he uneasily checked the fit of the circlet on his head. Instinct, then, rather than a telepathic suggestion, reminding him to stay focused and cautious of his enemy.

It was sometimes popular for fashionable youths of the empire’s aristocracy to intentionally adorn themselves with stylish facial scars, to wear as badges of honor and conversation starters at exclusive parties. Though it hardly detracted from his looks, the thin, pale furrow that creased Iden Mudarra’s face from temple to jaw did not have the look of a vanity scar. A crust of dried blood across his knuckles suggested he had not come quietly when he had been arrested a second time.

“You are not a coward,” the space emperor said aloud, frowning. The Lutoyan stared back at him, eyes blazing with defiance, but utterly without fear. “What stopped you?”

The Lutoyan’s expression softened slightly. “Easy,” he said, voice quiet. “I saw another option I liked better.”

He realized he was still pointing, and allowed his arm to fall to his side. “Explain,” he ordered.

“There isn’t much more to it than that. I didn’t want to kill you, so… I didn’t.” He licked his lips, a gesture that was as sensual as it was slaverlike. “You should try it sometime. Doing what you want, I mean. I think it would be good for you.”

The space emperor laughed coldly, tenting his fingers and stepping forward to stand over him once again. “Have you forgotten who I am, traitor? I am the emperor! The galaxy is mine to command, every whim is mine to pursue. Even now you are in the dungeon-labs of Oureen, the jewel in the crown of my vast empire. I have everything I could possibly want for a thousand-thousand years. And what I don’t have?” He paused for effect. “I get eventually.” Finally. He was gloating once again.

If his words had any effect on the Lutoyan, it did not show in his face. He merely blinked and tilted his head to the side, languid, unafraid, and almost playful. “Well,” he said, “Try wanting something new.”

“You speak without saying anything.” Not a coward, then, but a fool. A wretched, gorgeous fool. “It won’t save you.”

“In that case, you’d better hurry up and kiss me.” He grinned a wide and impish grin. “It won’t be any fun if they cut my tongue out.”

The space emperor startled backwards like he’d just received a shock from an electroprod. “What?!” His commanding baritone cracked, becoming thin and squeaking in his dismay. “Kiss you?”

“Why not?” The Lutoyan’s eyes were half-closed, somewhere between sly and inviting. “I know
you’d like to.”

The telepath’s influence had ensnared him despite all precautions. He tore the useless circlet off his head and threw it to the ground, seizing fistfuls of his own hair as if he could physically pull the intrusive presence out of his mind. “Get out of my head!” he hissed furiously. He could feel the will of the alien’s mind wrapping around his own, constricting it, manipulating him like a puppet, settling into the quiet places between his thoughts and filling them with foreign ideas. How had he not been aware of it before? He pushed against the presence, growling. “Get out of my mind, telepath!”

Iden Mudarra stared at him, open-mouthed and uncomprehending. “Telepath…” he echoed.

The charade of innocence was almost insulting. Why play coy now, after he had just openly flaunted his trickery? “You’re reading my thoughts,” he said angrily. “Writing new ones. I can feel it.”

Then, to his great surprise, the Lutoyan threw his head back… and laughed. It was a hard, genuine laugh that rocked his whole body and creased his face with mirth, not the cruel, mocking sort of laugh the space emperor was familiar with. He waited, listening, wary of some new witchcraft.

When his laughter trailed off and his breathing steadied, the telepath bent his head to wipe his watering eyes awkwardly on his shoulders. “I’m sorry,” he said, wheezing. “But it doesn’t take telepathy to know you want to kiss me. You’re, ah, not exactly subtle.”

The space emperor felt himself flush. “You made me want that!” he exclaimed. “You put those thoughts into my head!”

The Lutoyan rolled his eyes, still chuckling. “No. Even if I had the ability to do that, I don’t think I’d need to.” He winked. “Have you seen me? I’m eminently kissible.”

They stared at each other in silence for a long moment, one tense with apprehension, the other disconcertingly brazen. The space emperor wondered if the prior fiddling with the telepath’s neural defenses had tipped him into madness. It was possible; some cybernetic implants designed to impede memory probes would release bursts of electricity when forcibly disabled, damaging or destroying small sections of the brain to prevent useful information from being extracted.

His ring buzzed again, and this time, he slipped it from his finger entirely and dropped it into a hidden pocket.

“Look at me,” said the Lutoyan. There was an unfamiliar edge to his voice that the space emperor couldn’t place, a tone that was at once commanding and pleading. “Look at me, and for once in your life, follow your heart.”

The space emperor looked down. Eyes like yellow suns, he thought, and steadied himself on the edge of the platform for fear of falling into them. “You’re mad,” he whispered, shaking his head slowly.

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“Nah.” A wry smile and a flutter of lashes. “But I guess it’s all relative.”

Clearing his throat and swaying slightly on his feet, the space emperor peered sidelong at the Lutoyan. “Are you, um. Are you asking… do you want me to…” He swallowed nervously. “To kiss you?” He held his breath, as though a gust of wind from his lungs might blow away the answer before he could hear it.

Bathed green under the tinted lights of the Gloating Chamber, the Lutoyan looked like an entirely
different species. A Viridian prince, perhaps, or a native of the ocean world of Glaucus-4… but Glaucaussians did not have lips, and Iden Mudarra’s looked soft and full. He nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Nice of you to check.”

“But… why?”

“Does there need to be a reason?” For the first time, the Lutoyan’s voice faltered, and he dropped his gaze, resting it upon the half-obscured hologram. “I just thought it might be… it might be fun, y’know? I don’t think I’ve got much else to look forward to.” He looked up at the space emperor again, closed his eyes, and tilted his chin up.

The space emperor ran his hand through his hair, paralyzed by an internal conflict he could not put a name to. There were no more hidden weapons, no more secret tricks, and no real reason to hesitate. He thought back to the last thing he had eaten; a pair of Kryllish moonstalker eggs, boiled in seabutter until their shells jellified and became translucent, delicately seasoned with rare Djenubian spices, and served on a hot stone platter that denatured the moonstalker’s mild poison. It was a simple, modest meal, but one with a distinctive and lingering aftertaste. He cupped his hand over his mouth, abruptly concerned about the scent of his own breath. It had never troubled him before when kissing, and he did not know why it troubled him now.

One of Iden Mudarra’s eyes cracked open, squinting at him impatiently. “Last chance,” he said. “Don’t worry. I had my venom sacs removed.”

The space emperor blinked. “‘What do you mean, ‘venom sacs’…?’”

The Lutoyan smirked, closing his eyes again and letting out a gentle laugh. “I’m kidding,” he said. “Just get on with it.”

“Okay,” breathed the space emperor. “Okay.” He lowered his face toward the waiting lips.

Warm breath ghosted across his cheek. He paused, hovering, suddenly unsure what to do. He had plenty of experience kissing, had never especially cared for it, but this was different—he was trembling, he realized. His body vibrated like a shuttle ship preparing for takeoff. What should I do with my hands? he thought wildly as they fluttered at his side.

He didn’t worry about it for long. All other thoughts were driven out of his mind when the Lutoyan’s mouth brushed feather-light against his own.

“There’s something you should know about me,” whispered Iden Mudarra, words tickling across his lips.

“What’s that?” he asked, his own pulse pounding thunderously in his ears, almost drowning out the Lutoyan’s voice.

“Slim wrists.”

Distantly, as if in a dream, he was aware of the sound of the door to the chamber crashing open and several voices shouting. There was something cold pressed against his temple, and then he was surging forward, losing his balance, and the warm weight of an arm was wrapped around his neck, holding him in place.

“Nobody move!” Iden Mudarra called out to the room. One hand was still pinned to the platform by a computerized lock. The other, though quickly bruising, was holding the strange weapon he’d slipped from the holster at the space emperor’s waist. “Release me now, or I start blowing holes through your emperor.”
A silence as heavy and uncomfortable as an unlicensed artificial gravity field settled over the room. With his head pinned to the platform, the space emperor could not lift his face to see the squad of soldiers he knew must have their lasers trained on the Lutoyan. The weapon prodded gently against his temple, chilled metal draining all the heat from his skin and sending a shiver down his spine.

“Tell them to release me and stand down,” the Lutoyan said into his ear. “Now.”

“Just do what he says!” gasped the space emperor, eyes stinging with the threat of tears.

After a moment’s pause, there was a soft click as the restraints were disabled. The Lutoyan pushed himself upright, switching the weapon to his other hand as he maneuvered the space emperor into a headlock. He was breathing hard, but his voice remained calm as he addressed the five soldiers that had burst into the room. “Put your guns down,” he said. “And step away from the door.”

The soldiers hesitated, their alloyed masks not quite disguising the glances they exchanged with each other. Reluctantly, they lowered their lasers and parted, leaving only the general standing silently behind them in his curved headdress.

The Lutoyan slid his legs over the edge of the platform and stood up. “Now you’re going to–” he began, only to hiss with pain as his knees buckled and gave way beneath him. He would have collapsed to the floor if not for his grip around the space emperor’s neck, which slackened slightly as his bare, sweat-damp arms shuddered with the exertion of supporting his full weight. He muttered something in a language the space emperor did not recognize, but there was no question from his tone that it was a bitter swear.

“I’m impressed you can move at all,” said the general, stepping into the room. “At the dosage we gave you, you should still be paralyzed. Some quirk of your alien biology?”

“I have a good metabolism,” drawled the Lutoyan, grimacing as he struggled to stay upright. “I always eat my vegetables.”

“Hm.” The general raised an eyebrow. Without looking away, he turned his head a few inches to the left and shot an order over his shoulder. “Take note: lower the temperature in the holding cell. We don’t want the subject sweating all his chems out.”

He took another step forward, reaching for the long electrobaton that hung at his side. “Stop!” cried Iden Mudarra and the space emperor simultaneously. The other soldiers shifted, looking between their emperor and their general for some kind of cue.

“I think this rat bastard is committing treason,” snarled the Lutoyan. “Another step, and I pull the trigger.”

The general froze and slowly raised his hands, holding them palms-open beside his head. “You don’t actually know what that is, do you?” he asked.

Iden Mudarra glanced at the weapon in his hand. It was heavy, sleek, and somehow foreboding despite its simplicity. “I know it’s something cruel,” he said. “Something that shouldn’t exist. If you think that means I won’t use it, you’re wrong. I’m not above that.”

The space emperor shuddered, and the tears that had been rallying forces in the corners of his eyes finally rolled down his cheeks. He watched them drip from his chin and fall to the ground, large
drops splattering as they hit the polished floor. If he had ever felt true fear before, it was lost somewhere in the long shadows of his memory.

The Lutoyan slipped another inch, tightening his fist in his hostage’s robes until the fabric pulled taut against his throat.

“Interesting,” said the general. “Perhaps the rumors about Lutoyans were wrong.” With that, he lowered his arms and strode across the room. The soldiers stirred but did not stop him as he unsheathed the electrobaton.

Iden Mudarra narrowed his eyes, studying the other man’s face. Then, deliberately, he turned the weapon to his own temple and bared his teeth.

“You would choose a painful death?” asked the general.

“Over spending the rest of my life as an imperial test subject? Yeah. Obviously.” He scowled. “Got any other suggestions?”

“You are making a fool of yourself.” The general pressed his thumb into the hilt of the electrobaton and it crackled to life, popping and hissing as sparks jumped across the pronged tip.

The Lutoyan tensed. “May my story be told kindly,” he whispered, and closed his finger around the trigger.

The Lutoyan’s body went slack and collapsed to the floor. The space emperor stumbled forward, unbalanced by the sudden shift of weight. The general caught him by the arm before he could smash his face against the ground. “Are you injured, sire?” he asked.

Numbly, he shook his head, and allowed himself to be helped to his feet and pulled away. Nothing felt quite real. The soldiers’ hands gripping his elbows might as well have been supporting someone else’s body, the keening wail coming from someone else’s throat.

“Feel stupid yet?” asked the general. The space emperor opened his mouth to protest before he realized that he was not the one being addressed. “You really ought to.”

“It’s a dud,” said Iden Mudarra, alive and unharmed, gaping at the sleek weapon in open disbelief. “But why–”

“Not quite.” The general picked it up and twirled it lazily around his finger, keeping his electrobaton hovering inches above the assassin’s chest. “It works perfectly, if all you want to do is change the settings on a hologram. Watch.” To demonstrate, he raised it towards the projection of Lutoya-29, still exploding in a continuous loop. With a click, the hologram went still, displaying only a cold, lifeless orb of pitted rock and dust. Another click, and the ghostly image disappeared entirely. The general tossed the hologram controller carelessly over his shoulder, where it skidded across the floor and came to a rest at the space emperor’s feet. “I was never a traitor. And you… you were never a threat. Seize him.”

“You’re still a rat bastard,” countered the Lutoyan, pushing himself backwards across the floor. He snarled and raised his battered fists as two soldiers circled behind him. “Touch me and I’ll bite your fingers off,” he warned them. True to his word, he snapped at their grasping hands, sinking his teeth into the wrist of one that managed to catch his swinging fist.

The general sighed heavily, glaring as the soldier cried out and pulled away with her bitten arm clutched close to her chest. “It’s over, Lutoyan. You’re beaten. Now you’re just making things harder on yourself. Why do you keep fighting?”
Iden Mudarra grinned, teeth stained dark with the soldier’s blood and a fiery look in his eyes that could only be described as unhinged. “Why not?” he spat. “I’ve got nothing to lose—”

Every muscle in his body went rigid as the electrobaton tapped against his shoulder. It lasted only a second before the general broke the contact and lifted the device a few inches, letting it spark and pop in the air, a silent threat above the Lutoyan’s limp body.

“That’s not true,” he said lightly. “The only thing you lack is imagination. Knife, please.” He held out his hand until a short blade with a gently curved tip was pressed into it. Deactivating the baton and returning it to his side, he drew the knife and examined it under the ghostly light of the Gloatting Chamber. “You still have the rest of your teeth, after all. You won’t need them—we can always feed you through a tube.” He carefully thumbed the edge of the blade, testing its sharpness. “And when we run out of those, there are always your fingernails.” He frowned, lowering the knife to peer down at the defeated assassin. “I’ll be interested to find out if they’ll grow back.”

The space emperor looked down at his feet, unable to watch. A single tear dripped from his cheek and landed on the hologram controller, distorting the smooth surface of the metal barrel. It looked untidy, like a bubbled error in the manufacturing process, so he picked it up and wiped it off with the edge of his sleeve. Unsatisfied, he continued to polish it, wondering distantly why it was so heavy. It was probably solid, he thought, the electronics sealed within a tiny inner pocket. An imposing design for such a simple purpose. He wished he had used it on the robot and remained ignorant.

“Strictly speaking, all we need is your brain,” the general continued, kneeling beside the Lutoyan. “Your body is a convenient storage unit, but there are alternatives that will preserve your consciousness indefinitely, if needed. It’s your choice, traitor. Cooperate, and we might even let you die one day.” He reached down and pushed his thumb lightly against the thin skin beneath the Lutoyan’s eye, pulling the lower lid away from the sclera. “Would you like a souvenir, Your Incandescence? I think they can be preserved without losing their color.”

The alloys used in the construction of imperial armor, in combinations kept secret from most of the galaxy, were capable of scattering the energy of most martial wavelengths used in conventional weaponry. They were cheaper to produce than scrambling fields and did not require a constant source of fuel to function, but the very qualities that made them ideal for turning energy beams made them prohibitively soft and heavy to use on their own, and nearly useless against physical attacks. It was therefore preferred to coat panels of anti-ballistic materials with several thin layers of shielding alloys for use in all-purpose armor. The effectiveness of the energy shielding was slightly compromised for practicality, but there were few complaints about this; the appeal of heroically taking dozens of direct hits from a high-powered laser gun was diminished by the possibility of being impaled by a sharpened stick moments later.

The security of the imperial palace on Oureen made close-range physical attacks unlikely. An assassin armed with a long-range sniper laser was far more of a threat than one with a relatively imprecise projectile weapon. Scrambling fields were used whenever the emperor or members of his council made public appearances, but within the underground experimental laboratories of the military wing, the threat of experimental energy accidents was ever-present. All personnel were equipped with some amount of alloyed safety gear, designed as radiation shielding rather than combat armor. The masks, helmets, and breastplates worn by military scientists were far softer and more energy-resistant than those used by their martial counterparts.

It was lucky, then, that the general’s headdress was not constructed with melee physical combat in mind. Unlike the curved, chitinous crests of Djenubian warriors after which it had been modeled, it would not turn a blade, nor would it deflect the blunt force of a heavy metallic object crashing
down upon it from behind. Instead, it crumpled inward, layers of soft alloys collapsing and folding over themselves and into the general’s face. He fell forward with a groan and a clatter as the knife fell from his hand.

“Oh!” gasped the space emperor, staring at what he’d done. He held the hologram controller at arm’s length and let it drop to the floor, as though it were something foul-smelling and unpleasantly slimy.

The Lutoyan met his eyes briefly, an incredulous half-smile spreading across his face. He started to say something, but stopped himself, expression darkening as he looked around the room at the fidgeting, conflicted soldiers. “Get me out of here,” he croaked, shoving weakly at the general’s prone body until it rolled off his legs.

The space emperor swallowed, nodded, and grabbed his ankles. He dragged him a few feet towards the door before the Lutoyan swore again and kicked free, tugging his shirt down where it had ridden up his torso.

“Not like that,” he said. “You’ll rub my skin off. Help me stand up!”

With the space emperor’s help, he got to his feet, pausing to tug a laser from the general’s belt. Seeing the space emperor’s expression, he switched his grip so that he held it by the barrel and offered it handle-first—a peace offering. “I won’t shoot you,” he said. “I promise. You can hold it, if you want?”

The space emperor wrinkled his nose and shook his head. He still had his ceremonial laser tucked away in the folds of his robes, low on power though it likely was, but the idea of handling another weapon made his stomach contract uncomfortably. He didn’t dare look at the general’s body, lying face-down on the floor beside him.

They shuffled awkwardly out of the room, the Lutoyan half-stumbling, half-carried. As they passed the mysterious chrome-brushed contraption, he sniffed the air deeply. “I knew it!” he cried, and gave the space emperor’s shoulder a triumphant thump. “It is a coffee machine!”

The soldier with the bitten wrist held up her hands and carefully approached the general’s body. She sank to her knees, setting her laser aside, slowly and warily taking her commander’s vitals. “General Dumarish is alive,” she said, voice devoid of emotion.

“Tragic,” said the Lutoyan.

“Let us pass,” ordered the space emperor. “Do not follow in pursuit.”

“And start looking for a new job,” added the other.

A low, pained groan came from the general’s body as he began to stir. His headdress had caved into his face, and what damage there might be to his flesh was hidden by crumpled metal. The Lutoyan tugged urgently at the space emperor’s sleeve, and they backed out of the room, shutting the door behind them.

“Let’s go,” he said, and fired the stolen laser gun at the door’s locking mechanism, melting it.

“Go where?” asked the space emperor.

“You know,” said the Lutoyan slowly, as if the thought had just occurred to him. “I have no idea.” He looked up and down the smooth, polished walls of the hallway. “Somewhere we won’t be followed.”
They began to stumble toward the turbolift. The space emperor walked dazedly forward, his body operating on autopilot. Only the warm, electric weight of the Lutoyan at his side felt even a little bit real. He could feel the shifting of muscle beneath the other man’s skin and almost tripped, startled by how alive and present he seemed, and yet how fragile and fleeting his existence. Nothing a sun, he thought. A meteor.

The screech of an alarm interrupted his silent reverie. Behind them, the sound of many booted feet echoed down the corridor, growing louder with each passing second. A sliding door slammed shut a few yards ahead, cutting off their path. The Lutoyan stiffened, lifting the laser again, but the space emperor continued striding forward without losing momentum.

“What are you–”

The door retracted again, and they continued through unimpeded.

“All the electronic doors in the palace are keyed to my biometrics,” explained the space emperor, raising his voice to be heard over the shrilling of the alarm. “When I approach, they open automatically.”

“That sounds like a major security risk,” said the Lutoyan. “It would be so easy if someone were to just take you hos–” he stopped, gave a startled laugh, and shook his head. “You know what? I’m not complaining.”

They rounded the corner. The turbolift was ahead of them, blue lights on the exterior door indicating that it was unoccupied and ready to be used. It would normally take an authorization key to operate at all, and a high-clearance code just to take it to different levels of the military complex. The space emperor needed no such precautions to take it wherever he wished. The palace - and most of the structures on Oureen, for that matter - knew him.

“Halt!”

cried a voice behind them. Distorted and tinny from behind an alloyed mask, there was no mistaking it for anyone but the war magnate’s.

The space emperor turned and held up his hand. The war magnate and at least a dozen fully-armored soldiers blocked the hallway behind them, laser rifles raised and active. “Go away, you,” said the space emperor, waving impatiently. “You are dismiss–”

She fired. He could feel the heat of the bolt as it passed under his raised arm, singeing the delicate fabric. It should have hit its mark directly in the center of the Lutoyan’s forehead, and would have, but for some uncanny reflex he possessed. He threw back his head so that only the tip of his chin was caught in the blast.

“Stop that!” cried the emperor, lurching to the side as the Lutoyan’s weight shifted. “I am your emperor! I order you to–”

“You have been compromised by enemy forces,” she said coldly. “You cannot give orders at this time.” Her optical enhancements whirred softly as she took aim again.

He turned and ran, scooping the Lutoyan fully into his arms. The other man uttered a soft oof of surprise as his legs flew out from under him, then steadied himself and fired a few quick shots over the space emperor’s shoulder. From the sound of it, at least one struck its target on an unalloyed surface.

Their armor was heavy, but imperial soldiers were rigorously trained and unencumbered by the bulky plates. Regular trips to the training world of Beta Egoni-C, with its slightly stronger gravity
and thin atmosphere, allowed them to sustain the physical strength and endurance necessary for supporting a full suit of alloyed armor. Their sleek, powerful bodies and mysterious demeanors made imperial soldiers exceptionally popular at certain kinds of parties.

It did not, however, make them any better at seeing in the dark.

The Lutoyan fired twice more and the hallway was plunged into sudden darkness, broken only by the soft blue light of the turbolift just ahead. The soldiers skidded to an abrupt and extremely noisy halt as the remains of the overhead light fixtures rained down on top of them.

“Hold your fire,” said the war magnate, sounding deeply unimpressed. She adjusted something, and her optical fixtures illuminated with a faint red glow. “At least one of us is outfitted with night-vision.”

Another blast from her laser nearly caught the Lutoyan in the face. “Hey!” he shouted, curling tighter so that more of his body was blocked behind the space emperor’s. “Whatever happened to ‘keeping me alive for study’?!?”

“That is not my priority,” said the war magnate.

They were almost to the door of the turbolift. The space emperor was panting with exertion, his arms and shoulders aching from the effort of carrying the Lutoyan’s body. His mind, however, was curiously blank, driven by a single goal and buzzing as though it were full of static electricity rather than intelligent thought.

He tripped.

Long, flowing robes look majestic when trailing behind anyone, especially behind a supreme galactic monarch secure at the heart of his vast and sprawling empire. A sprawling emperor, on the other hand, is significantly less majestic.

“Ow,” he groaned, getting to his knees and untangling his legs from his robes. The fabric had torn and wrapped around his foot where he had stepped on it. “I think I’m going to bruise –”

He didn’t have time to dwell on it before the Lutoyan’s hands fisted into his lapels and yanked him forward and jammed a foot into his stomach. Then he was falling, soaring over the Lutoyan before landing heavily on his back. Unable to suck in a breath, he blinked up at the ceiling. He was inside the turbolift.

A moment later, the Lutoyan toppled over him, firing wildly through the open door as an armored hand closed around the door frame. “Close it!” he gasped. “Close the door!”

The space emperor sat up shakily, clutching his chest, and dragged himself to the panel of glowing buttons. He slammed his palm against the one labeled Door Close and watched anxiously as the light beneath blinked blue three times. Finally it beeped in confirmation and turned a pleasant shade of pink.

The sliding doors slammed around the gauntleted hand. From the other side, they heard a shriek of pain or frustration as the war magnate grappled with the crushing barrier. It was no use; her combat armor was strong, but the door was stronger. She fired a last shot through the narrow crack before retracting her arm. The empty gauntlet fell to the floor and the turbolift doors closed shut with a friendly beep.

They sat in silence for a moment, breathing heavily and staring at each other across the lift.
“I didn’t think those buttons actually worked,” said the Lutoyan.

“They usually don’t,” said the space emperor. “But they’re keyed to my fingerprints.”

“Oh. Huh.”

Soft, inoffensive turbolift music began to play over the speakers. The Lutoyan chuckled. Then he giggled. Then he began to howl.

“What’s so funny?” asked the space emperor, alarmed.

“I don’t... I don’t know!” he wheezed, clutching at his sides and falling into silent convulsions on the turbolift floor.

It wasn’t until the space emperor hiccuped that he realized he, too, had begun to laugh.
Both men were still grinning and hiccuping when the turbolift opened onto the private courtyard. The space emperor strode out eagerly into the perfumed air, almost skipping, but the Lutoyan hesitated as he pulled himself to his feet.

“You’re sure we can’t be followed here?” he asked, scanning the courtyard with narrowed eyes. They lingered for a moment on the generators overhead, spaced evenly across the top of the colonnade and carefully disguised as statues of kneeling figures. The faint hum of the machines was muffled by the sound of a fountain at the center of the courtyard, but the oil-like sheen of the force field they maintained caught the angled light of the setting sun.

The space emperor pressed a button on a panel beside the elevator. “I’m sure,” he said. “There. I’ve locked us in. No one can enter my private quarters unless I permit it.” He looked around, reaching up to tangle his fingers in a dangling sheet of flowering vines. “It’s just the two of us here now.” He brought one of the blue-green blossoms to his nose and inhaled deeply, sighing into the petals. “... Alone.”

“Good,” said the Lutoyan, bracing himself against the wall. “Bring me something sharp--knife, scalpel, whatever.”

The space emperor let the flower fall from his fingers. “S-sharp?” Several possibilities crossed his mind, none of them particularly appealing at the moment. He considered himself an open-minded man, but even he had limits. Some things were best left in the gladiatorial ring. “Are you sure?”

“Sharp, and preferably sterile.” The Lutoyan began to examine himself, bruised hands roaming methodologically across his skin, searching for something. “Aha!” he cried, pressing his fingers into his upper left arm, just beneath the swell of his deltoid. “Knew it.” He looked up, a slight frown on his face. “Do you have one, too?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” confessed the space emperor.

“Oh. Right.” The Lutoyan stretched his arm across his body, peering closely at the flesh he had pinched between his fingers. “There’s something here,” he said, tapping the skin lightly. “An implant, of some sort. It’s small--I can just barely feel it. If we’re lucky, it’s only a tracker or a data chip.”

“And,” said the space emperor cautiously, “If we’re un lucky...?”

“Oh, you know.” The Lutoyan shrugged. “It’s a bit small for a bomb. My money’s on a poison capsule--something you could activate remotely to stop a prisoner from escaping.” He squinted back at the force field that served as a translucent ceiling to the courtyard. “It could even be some kind of homing device. Would that shield up there stop a targeted missile, do you think?”

The space emperor looked up, unsettled by the idea. “I don’t know,” he said, as his own hands unconsciously began to search for irregularities under his skin. His whole body still felt like it was vibrating, but the wild delirium that had seized him was beginning to loosen its hold, replaced by creeping fingers of uncertainty.

“Let’s not find out.” The Lutoyan steadied himself and took a small, experimental step forward, breathing carefully. The chems were still affecting him. “We should hurry if we’re going to get out
of here. That fountain--is it potable?"

“All the water on Oureen is potable.” It was very nearly true. Clever terraforming and contemporary technology ensured that the planet was a natural paradise, criss-crossed with ribbons of freshwater seas and lacking the vast saline oceans of most progenitor worlds. The alloy-lined canals that bore water through the palacial city inhibited microbial growth and had earned Oureen the sobriquet *The World of Silver Rivers* and a reputation for health and longevity. Water-smugglers could live quite comfortably selling bottles of Oureenian water to superstitious outworlders, peddling them as panaceas, fertility treatments, and draughts of immortality. For the sake of tidiness, wastewater was shipped off-world for treatment, and even that was sometimes targeted by smugglers.

The Lutoyan managed to walk a few yards towards the fountain on his own before he paused and gave the space emperor a sheepish look. “It… it would be very thoughtful of you to offer me your arm right about now,” he said.

He had touched the Lutoyan before, had carried him fully in his arms not ten minutes earlier, but the soft warmth of the other man’s hand in his own surprised him like a newly-discovered texture. The brush of a thumb across his wrist sent a pleasant tingle up all the way up his spine. They were walking, and the Lutoyan was speaking, but the Lutoyan was squeezing his hand and the space emperor could not stop smiling. The courtyard was a blur of brilliant colors and exotic shapes, brighter and sweeter than he ever remembered it. Only when the warm fingers slipped out his own did awareness return to him, and he saw that they had arrived at the edge of the fountain.

“--Gives me the heebie-jeebies,” said the Lutoyan, finishing some unheard remark and wrinkling his nose as he waved at the ground. “Seriously, how the hell do you keep them alive? You’ve got black sundogs growing next to ghost-of-the-desert. There’s no way…” He knelt carefully next to one of the black sundogs, a large, inky black orb nestled at the bottom of a broad reflective funnel. “Oureenian sunlight is *way* too strong for these guys. It *looks* like a flower, but the ‘mirror’ is actually part of the stem--it focuses light on the ‘eye’, which is really a modified leaf. Last I heard, they’ve only been naturalized in dim binary star systems. I’ve never actually seen one in person!” He thumbed the edge of the funnel with awe, and looked at the emperor with excitement. “Has the empire secretly developed a more hardy cultivar…?”

“You’re talking about the plants?” The space emperor frowned. He had never paid much attention to what was grown in his courtyard, caring only that it was beautiful and that some of it smelled good. “I don’t know about those. Every few days, my gardeners remove the plants that have gone bad and bring new ones in. But never mind that--how do you like my topiaries?”

He gestured to the rest of the courtyard, dominated by hundreds of fanciful creatures, mythological scenes, and complex geometric shapes sculpted from living shrubs. Some, like the hulking form of the many-legged billipede, were so tall that they nearly scraped the underside of the energy shield ceiling. Little lights had been braided into the foliage so that they could be enjoyed even at night, glowing soft and cold when the space emperor retired to the peaceful solitude of his garden. He would sleep there now and then, whenever he felt particularly daring and adventurous.

“People come from all over the galaxy just to compete for the honor of designing my topiaries. Have you ever seen their like? That one there is my favorite, I think. It’s supposed to be a pair of Glatissan war-beasts, but I’m not really sure if they’re meant to be fighting or mating. Or both! I change my mind each time I look at it. What do you think they’re up to?”

The Lutoyan glanced distractedly at the topiaries, but he did not look sufficiently impressed by their splendor. “So you just… import stuff and let it die? Over and over again?” He withdrew his
hand quickly from the sundog, turning a look of undisguised revulsion upon the emperor. “You’ve got unlimited access to some of the rarest plant life in the known universe, and you let it go to waste?”

He looked upset. The space emperor could not understand why. “They’re only plants,” he said.

The Lutoyan turned away from him, chewing his lip. “Never mind,” he said stiffly. “Right now we need to focus on making our escape. Let me see your arm again.” The space emperor gasped audibly as the Lutoyan’s hand slipped suddenly into the sleeve of his robe, strong fingers palpating up his arm from wrist to shoulder.

“What… are you doing?” he managed to squeak, once he remembered how to use his lungs.

“Checking you for bugs,” explained the Lutoyan, using his other hand to press around the nape of the space emperor’s neck where the hair was standing on end. “I think you’re clean.”

“Of course I’m clean,” replied the space emperor, nearly offended. “There are no bugs on Oureen.”

“I mean trackers, implants, microph… wait. What?” He dropped his hands. “No bugs, as in, no insects?”

The space emperor shook his head.

“On the whole world?”

“Oureen is a clean planet—as clean as it can be made. We sterilize everything before it arrives here, as I’m sure you experienced. Why?” He looked at the Lutoyan curiously. “Do you like bugs?”

“Like them…?” The Lutoyan seemed confused by the question. “How can you have a habitable planet without them?” He took a step back, staring around the courtyard with a twisted expression. “What about the pollinators? What about the detritivores? What about the… the…” He stopped, looking far more distressed than he had when he’d been strapped down in the gloating chamber and threatened with torture. “How do you keep this planet alive?” he asked helplessly, the edge of something frantic in his voice. “This isn’t terraforming!”

“We are a very advanced society,” said the space emperor defensively. “We no longer rely on unclean and primitive ways. Technology and innovation supply all we need.”

“‘Technology and innovation’. Sure.” He grimaced. “That’s a nice way of saying ‘slave labor’, isn’t it?”

“And robots!”

“Right,” he spat. “And robots.”

The Lutoyan sat down heavily on the edge of the fountain. Above him loomed a massive marble statue of the emperor, stylistically depicted in the fashion of a primeval warrior. One huge marble hand rested on the pommel of an sword, the other balanced a jug on its shoulder and poured a perpetual stream of water into the pool at its feet. It wore an expression of noble determination, proud and hard and burning with the zealous passion of a conqueror. A delicate wisp of sculpted cloth, ostensibly modest, only served to emphasize the statue’s nudity and the hard lines of its muscles.

It could not have looked less like the real space emperor if it had worn someone else’s face.
“The sooner I can get you off this planet, the better,” said the Lutoyan wearily, wiping his hand over his face. “I mean, no wonder you’re like this. This world will poison the soul.” His eyebrows knit together in a slight frown, eyes darting rapidly from side to side. Suddenly his expression brightened. “Oh! That’s right!” He snapped his fingers and surged to his feet, wobbling only a little. “Poison!”

The space emperor marveled as he marched across the lawn, seeming to grow stronger and more sure-footed with each step. A sudden bubble of sadness formed in his chest at the thought that he would no longer need to lean against the space emperor for support.

“Is this glass?” asked the Lutoyan, stopping to examine an elaborate sculpture of twisting tendrils. It was one of many scattered artfully throughout the garden, blended seamlessly in among the plant life. From most angles, it was abstract—a sprawling, organic tangle of shimmering glass threads—but when viewed from the space emperor’s favored seat at the base of the fountain, it and all the others coalesced into dancing figures.

“Ahh,” said the space emperor as he held up his finger. “That’s real Saphian singing glass, yes. Made from the boudoir windows of the last queen of Saphia. She threw herself to her death from one of them, did you know?” He frowned, and stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I’ve never understood why...”

“I’m pretty sure it was to avoid capture after the fall of Saphia,” said the Lutoyan with careful patience. “She saw the shadows of imperial warships over her world, and chose death over domination.”

“But why go to the trouble? We would have executed her anyway!” The space emperor shook his head, sighing helplessly. “I suppose we’ll never know now, since we can’t probe her memories. But never mind that. Come look at this! If you stand right here, you can see how the glass actually forms a hidden fig–”

He was interrupted by the sudden sound of shattering glass, and stared in open-mouthed horror as the Lutoyan tossed aside a large, smooth stone and bent carefully over the remains of the sculpture he had just destroyed.

“What did you do that for?!” gasped the space emperor.

The Lutoyan flashed him a wide, dangerous grin and selected a gleaming shard from the rubble, holding it above his head and turning it slightly to examine the jagged edge. “Needed something sharp.”

“I could have brought you a knife!”

“Yes, well, we’re in a hurry.” The Lutoyan discarded the shard and chose another, testing the shape and sharpness of several more before settling on one that met his approval. “Besides,” he said, gesturing broadly with the piece of glass, “This place puts me in the mood to smash.” He cleared his throat and added quietly, “That was not a euphemism.”

Returning to the fountain, he rinsed the shard beneath the stream of water and set it aside. With an effortless grace, he stripped out of the simple green shirt he’d been issued as an imperial prisoner, and the space emperor sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of the Lutoyan’s bare chest. He was lean and corded with sinewy muscle, as though chiseled and polished by the lash of alien winds on some faraway world. His bronze skin was crossed here and there with the healed evidence of too many close-calls and narrow escapes, though no single scar stood out so clearly as the one on the side of his face.
Seeing him staring, the Lutoyan smirked, and his muscles tensed ever so slightly while he washed his arms. The space emperor watched, entranced, as thin rivulets of water ran down his torso and disappeared into the fabric of the loose uniform breeches.

Oh dear, he thought to himself.

“You might want to look away for this part,” warned the Lutoyan, stretching his left arm across his body and plucking the shard of glass from the edge of the fountain. “It could be difficult to watch, if you’re squeamish.”

“I’ve watched plenty of exsanguinations,” protested the space emperor. “A little blood doesn’t bother me.”

“Still. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

With that, the Lutoyan dragged the shard across his arm and his skin opened like the lids of a bloodshot eye. He did not flinch, but the space emperor felt a nasty lurch in his stomach as bile rose in his throat. This was nothing like an execution; he found himself imagining the pain of his own flesh splitting under a blade, and what the Lutoyan might be feeling behind that careful mask of concentration. It was an odd thought. He shuddered and looked away, and heard a soft, dark chuckle.

“Gotcha!” hissed the Lutoyan triumphantly. “Any idea what this is?”

The space emperor glanced back just long enough to see the Lutoyan pinching a small silver capsule between blood-slick fingers. It was hardly larger than a grain of cooked rice, with a thin band around the center that pulsed with a dull yellow light.

“No idea,” said the space emperor hoarsely, toes curling in his golden sandals even as an idea sprang into his mind. “An ill feeling has come over me. I need to... to clear my head.”

“You are looking rather green,” agreed the Lutoyan with a gentle laugh. “Do what you need to do. I’ll get rid of this, clean up, and then find a way off this godforsaken planet.”

The space emperor nodded hurriedly and left the other man beside the fountain, pushing through curtains of purple moss until he came to the covered walkway at the edge of the courtyard. He walked slowly, hiding the purpose in his step, and resisted the urge to look behind him. His mind raced. It was easier to think clearly when the Lutoyan was not in his sight. He hoped the other man was too distracted with his work to take notice, if he was able to listen to his thoughts as well as he was able to influence them.

The pillars that supported the walkway were ringed with vines and richly carved from the same black stone as the courtyard’s walls. The space emperor ducked behind one, glimpsing his own face in the mirrored surface of the polished stone. Strands of hair had slipped out of his elegant coiffure to dangle over his eyes, and the painted designs on his cheeks and temples had begun to smudge with sweat. His golden robes were askew, torn in places, and spotted with blood. He had rarely seen himself so disheveled.

He peered around the pillar, holding his breath. The Lutoyan had torn his shirt into strips and was using them to wrap the wound on his arm. His brow was furrowed, his tongue peeking out from the corner of his mouth as he used one hand to tie off the makeshift bandage. The space emperor shivered, remembering the ghost-light touch of those soft lips against his own.

Dammit, he thought, and reached for a concealed panel. The Lutoyan’s head snapped up
immediately.

Even as his fingers danced across the controls, the Lutoyan was springing to his feet and whirling to face him. “Don’t--” he began, sprinting towards the space emperor, but then the shield came down, sealing him inside the garden and dampening the sound of his shout.

“You’ll be safe in there,” said the space emperor in a firm voice, swallowing around the lump in his throat. “No harm will come to you. I promise that.”

The Lutoyan came to a halt at the edge of the energy barrier, eyes like smoldering coals in his dark, furious face. “You cannot keep me here,” he said coldly.

“Yes, I can!” insisted the space emperor. “The generators are outside the field. You won’t be able to disable them from in there. But there’s water, and oxygen, and things to eat, and... and couches to rest on. There’s even a pool. I’ll see to it that you get anything else you might need.”

“Drop the shield. Now.” If looks could kill, the Lutoyan was preparing for slaughter.

“No! I’ll have things built for you, if you like. It’s a very nice garden--really it is! You’ll come around to it, and you’ll have anything you could possibly want.”

“Emperor.”

“Whatever you want. It’s yours. Anything. You want riches? Treasures? I’ll send for them, from the furthest reaches of the galaxy.” He spoke quickly, the words rushing out of his mouth faster than his mind could parse them. “You can choose from any of my servants. I’ll have meals prepared for you, and you can drink my best wines, and... and gladiators? Would you like gladiators to fight for you?”

“Emperor!”


“I don’t want any of --”

“You could have your own wardrober! Access to every book and holoshow in the imperial library! Anything you like. Plants! Or... or bugs!”

“Bugs?” The Lutoyan raised an eyebrow.

“Yes! Bugs!” He wrung his hands. “If that’s what you like! Don’t you get it? I’m offering you the universe on a silver platter!”

The Lutoyan returned his pleading look with a harsh scowl. “I get it alright,” he said. “All that, so long as I remain here as... what? Your concubine? Your pet?”

The space emperor winced at the acid in his tone. “No,” he said in a small voice. “As my friend.”

“Your friend.” The Lutoyan’s expression softened a little, but his voice remained cold, almost cruel. “Involuntary confinement is a poor way of making friends, you know. I hate this planet and everything on it. I won’t be kept here for anything you offer. I’m leaving, emperor--one way or another.”

“But you could be hurt! You’ve been hurt before--and badly!” He pointed at the scars scattered
across the other man’s chest. “You could be killed if you leave. I’ll keep you safe here on Oureen… you’ll be waited on, attended to, treated with adoration and respect—”

“Your own general nearly carved my eyes out of my head,” interrupted the Lutoyan. “Being the emperor’s friend didn’t help me this morning when I was dragged out of bed by your secret police before I’d even had my coffee. Sorry, Your Incandescence.” The corner of his mouth twisted into a sneer. “I haven’t been all that impressed with this ‘imperial hospitality’. What makes you so sure I won’t wake up with a knife in my back from one of your loyal subjects?”

“Because I’ll tell them!” cried the space emperor, throwing up his arms in exasperation. “I’ll tell them all! If people know how I feel, they’ll feel it too, and no one will ever wish to harm you again. It’s just like what you said, about empathy!”

The Lutoyan sighed deeply and ran his hand through his hair, raising his head to stare up at one of the generators above. “I think something got lost in translation,” he muttered. Behind him, the last licking rays of the Oureenian sun disappeared over the rooftop, dipping the courtyard into shadow. Automatic sensors activated the lights woven into the topiaries and at the bases of the sculptures, and the courtyard came to life with an ethereal blue glow.

“I could give you a title,” said the space emperor quietly. “Power. You could be a count. A marquis, even!” He licked his lips, uncertain, searching for some hint of interest betrayed in the Lutoyan’s stony face. “Maybe… maybe you’d like to be a duke…?”

A long pause, an unrelenting stare. “I repeat. Turn off the shield. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

“No!” he shouted, stamping his foot. “I’ve offered you everything! Why won’t you just stay!?”

The Lutoyan straightened, gathering himself to his full height. He was not a tall man, but something about his presence or bearing suggested a greater stature than what he actually possessed, and the space emperor could not help but feel somehow loomed over by the shorter man.

“You have offered me all that you can,” said the Lutoyan, “But you have not offered me everything.” He held up his hand, and the space emperor shut his mouth, protests dying on his tongue. “I have come a long, long way, driven by one last, fatal purpose: to destroy the emperor on Oureen at any cost.” He paused, and his yellow eyes glittered like a drawn knife. “I will not be bought from my life’s goal.”

“But... you said...”

“Hear me out!” The space emperor felt gooseflesh raise along his skin. “You made your offer. Now it’s my turn.”

The space emperor regarded him critically. Here was a desperate man, far from a home he could never return to, barefoot and bloodied in the house of his enemy. He was deceptive, and dangerous, and too willing to die to be usefully manipulated. He had nothing to offer. The space emperor had countless worlds to lose. “Go on,” he said anyway, because he had eyes, and because the Lutoyan was shirtless.

“I see the way you look at me, emperor. I know what you think you want. I interest you, but you don’t even know why. Beautiful men are nothing new to you, are they?”

“That’s rather personal,” grumbled the space emperor.

“It wasn’t flattery that stayed my hand when your death was within my reach. You think I’m
something strange and special—a telepath. A witch. Even now you think I’m in your mind, twisting your thoughts, changing you. You hardly recognize yourself. And you’d give anything to know why.” That fierce, feral smile was back, sharp and dangerous—a carnivore’s rictus. The Lutoyan pressed his palm flat against the barrier, creating small ripples of static in the half-visible shield. It could not have been comfortable for him, but he persevered, ignoring the needles of numbing wrongness.

“All I have done is open the door. Everything you think, everything you’re feeling now—that’s only the beginning of what’s out there waiting for you to experience. There is no life for you on Oureen. Not anymore—not even if they somehow let you remain emperor. Surely you can see that! Stay here and you will stagnate—one dim, blunted day slipping away into the next, bookended by vacant pleasures, until your soul buckles and cracks beneath the weight of gathered dust. I’m offering you a way out.

“Come with me, emperor, and I will introduce you to the bittersweet wonders of reality as you’ve never known it. The hot-cold flush of life well-lived. I can promise you delight whetted on sorrow, toil tempered with ease. Fear and danger and pain you can scarcely imagine, but joys, too—come with me, and glut yourself on ever-changing fortune.” There was a lilting, melodic quality to his voice, as though he were reciting poetry—the space emperor half-suspected he was. The effect was nearly hypnotic, and he found himself leaning into the cadence of the words.

“I’m offering you life, emperor,” said the Lutoyan intently. “I’m giving the chance to find out what you’re made of.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then you will have made a fool of me.”

The space emperor took a deep breath and tried to imagine himself as a fugitive, far from the familiar comforts of Oureen. He found that he could not. The great yawning void of the unknown opened before him, ready to swallow him whole—he could almost feel the cold breath of it on his prickling skin. Something stirred within him, something ancient and hungry and yearning.

“Lutoyan,” he said, “What you are suggesting is madness.”

“Perhaps,” said the Lutoyan. “It will certainly be dangerous. We could die horrible, ugly, meaningless deaths at any time.” His smile broadened. “Doesn’t it sound like fun?”

The space emperor had heard of alien languages so dense with contronyms and double meanings that they could not be accurately translated into Modern Imperial Standard without experienced cultural interpreters on hand. Even when those planets were properly subjugated and their native tongues suppressed, the speakers still found ways to render the official language incomprehensible to outsiders. It occurred to him that “fun” might mean something very different in the indigenous language of Lutoya.

“Are you joking?” he asked suspiciously. The wicked glint in the Lutoyan’s eyes was all the answer he needed.

“No one lives forever, emperor.”

The space emperor sighed and pressed the tips of his fingers together. “I have one question,” he said delicately, as though enunciating carefully might skew the answer in his favor. Blood rushed into his face.

“Yes?”
“Will there be…” He gulped. “Will there be any more… kissing…?”

The Lutoyan’s savage grin faded. “Perhaps,” he said softly. “If you’re very, very lucky. Yes, there might be some more kissing.”

Wordlessly, the space emperor reached up and disabled the barrier.

“I’m afraid,” he whispered, bowing his head and squeezing his eyes shut. The ancient thing inside him was waking; he could feel its aching hunger burning through his core. “Something’s happening to me, and I’m afraid.”

Strong arms closed around him. It was an awkward embrace, halting and unsure, and he had no idea where to put his own hands.

“There, there,” said the Lutoyan stiffly, patting his shoulder as the space emperor drew in a shaking breath.

Both men leapt apart as a loud, sudden blast sounded from the center of the courtyard. Part of the fountain exploded outward in a shower of marble splinters and vaporized water.

The space emperor’s heart thudded heavily in his chest. “What was that?!”

“Wow,” said the Lutoyan, whistling. “I guess it was a bomb after all. Guess I got it out just in the nick of time, huh?” He reached up to touch the edge of his bandage. “I think that’s our cue to leave. I think I can get us off-world if you can get us out of the palace undetected. Do you think you can do that?”

The space emperor opened his mouth to reply, but a small, dark shape flitted across the walkway and disappeared behind a pillar. The Lutoyan followed his gaze and wheeled around at once, drawing the laser gun from his waistband and aiming it at the pillar in one fluid movement.

“Show yourself!” he called. “Show yourself, or I’ll blast you to pieces.” He fired a warning shot at the ground, disintegrating chunks of the smooth flagstone.

There was no reply.

“You have to the count of three. One… two…”

With a squeak of fear, a short, horned figure stepped out from behind the pillar, all four of its hands raised above its head, all eight of its eyes wide with terror.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?” snapped the Lutoyan. “On your knees!”

“Don’t hurt me!” whimpered the wardrober, trembling violently. “I just work here!” Its eyes flicked to the space emperor, raking him up and down. “Sire! What have you done to your poor clothes?!”
Chapter 10

The wardrober pressed one long, bejeweled hand over its mouth. “Oh, your robes!” it wailed, shakily reaching forward to touch the torn hem of the rich fabric. “Your lovely, wonderful robes—oh, sire!” It made an unhappy chittering sound at the back of its throat when it noticed the bloodstains, and its whip-like tail began to switch irritably from side to side. “Who… who did this?” Its voice was low and murderous, terror forgotten as it turned, very slowly, to stare at the Lutoyan. “You.”

“Not on purpose,” he said.

The wardrober shifted into a crouch, lowering its horns and raising the sharp bristles along the ridge of its back. The Lutoyan’s finger hovered over the trigger of the laser gun.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he warned. “I’d rather not have to kill someone over dirty laundry.”

Several of the wardrober’s fists clenched. “Dirty laundry’?!” Its tail slashed across the floor, scattering pieces of the broken tile. “You call this dirty laundry? This is an heirloom! My family has served the emperor for over two hundred years—loyally, stylishly—and you slander our work as dirty laundry. This robe was embroidered by hand as an offering to a living god, did you know that? Did you think about that before you bled on it?” It flexed its hand, unsheathing a thin, needle-like claw from the tip of its finger, and began to worry at it with sharp little teeth. “First the Lutoyan wedding gown, and now this!”

The space emperor watched it curiously as it shuddered and chittered, unsure whether he was seeing anger, sorrow, or some unknown emotion on its chitinous features. Gently, he touched the Lutoyan’s elbow and leaned close to the other man’s ear.

“I think it’s upset,” he said in a loud whisper.

“Seems that way,” said the Lutoyan indifferently. “Perhaps it would like to be upset elsewhere.”

He did not seem at all concerned by the wardrober’s distress, watching it evenly down the barrel of the gun with the detached expression of someone resigned to watching a merchant calculate a large transaction on their fingers.

The space emperor frowned and pressed his palm flat against his belly, half-expecting to feel something writhing and churning under his skin. The uncomfortable twisting sensation in his gut was starting to become a familiar feeling. He had meant to bring it up with his doctor before he went to bed that night. Perhaps it would resolve on its own.

“Well,” he said slowly, brows knitted together in careful consideration. “We should… do something about it, shouldn’t we?”

The Lutoyan’s lips tightened. “The trouble with killing people,” he said, “Is that once you get into the habit, it’s difficult to drop.” He tilted his head to the side, distaste giving way to grim determination. “But desperate times…”

“I didn’t mean kill it!” said the space emperor, startled. “I just thought… what you were saying the other day. About ‘considering other people’s feelings’ and ‘making things right’. That ‘empathy’ business you were going on about…” He trailed off, trying to imagine himself as a small, spiny creature with a flicking tail and tufts of coarse fur. It made his head hurt. Instead, he imagined a shorter version of himself crouching on the floor, looking down the barrel of a laser gun.
The Lutoyan glanced sharply at the space emperor. “We can’t afford to let anything slow us down. The longer we stay here, the worse our odds—we have to get out of here before they seal off the palace and trap us inside.” He narrowed his eyes. “I hope you’re not stalling for time…”

“No!” The space emperor chewed his lip and began to pick at a loose thread on the front of his robe. “Shouldn’t we help it?”

“It’s upset about clothes!” snapped the Lutoyan. “They’re just things. Objects! Their stories are lost, they don’t matter now that--”

“Don’t matter?!” interrupted the wardrober, its mouth falling open in an outrage. “Sire, who is this man? He can’t talk to you like that! Why--why, he just rolled his eyes at you! You’ll have them plucked out of his head and fed to him, won’t you? And his tongue cut out?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that!” The space emperor grinned and patted the Lutoyan’s arm. “He’s an assassin, you see. Came all the way here just to kill me. Isn’t that right?” He beamed at the other man, who returned a small, forced smile.

“There was a change of plans,” he said.

“Yes, well, now he’s kidnapping me! It’s all very exciting.”

The Lutoyan turned his head to stare directly at him. “Am I kidnapping you…?”

The space emperor faltered as disarmingly yellow eyes bore into him. “A-aren’t you?” he asked, suddenly uncertain. “Well, I mean, in a way…” He sighed, and clasped his hands in front of him, returning his attention to the wardrober. “What I mean to say is, we’re very busy, so. Stop being upset.” He paused, and allowed the deep rumble of authority to creep back into his voice. “Now.”

Six wide, stricken eyes blinked as one, darting back and forth from one man to the other. “Sire...?”

“That’s an order,” clarified the space emperor.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” The Lutoyan groaned and lowered the ray gun, tucked it back into his waistband, and planted his hands on his hips. “Look,” he said, “If we’re going to do this, we might as well do it properly.” With an exaggeratedly graceful motion, he dropped to one knee so that he was at eye level with the wardrober and extended his hand. “Hello,” he said. “My name is Iden Mudarra. I do not know the greeting customs of your homeworld, but I come in peace.” He blinked. “Well. More or less.”

The wardrober stared blankly at his hand for a moment and then looked to the space emperor, as if waiting for instructions or a secret signal to attack. When none came, it slowly placed one of its hands in the Lutoyan’s, heavy rings and bracelets clinking together.

“Pex,” it said warily.

“Good to meet you. Now, Pex,” continued the Lutoyan, “So sorry about the clothes. You know how it is—you get caught up in a swashbuckling adventure and the next thing you know, you’re wearing somebody else’s entrails. You’re so busy thinking, ‘How the hell am I going to survive this?’ that you forget to ask ‘Who’s gonna have to clean this up?’” The emperor and I have had one absolute hell of a day, so I hope you’ll understand our lapse in decency.” He smiled winsomely and patted the wardrober’s hand. “You do outstanding work, Pex. Everyone agrees. Isn’t that so, emperor?”

“Oh,” said the space emperor. “Yes. Of course.”
“They all say he’s the best-dressed despot in the known universe. A truly unparalleled wardrobe, and in such good condition—you’d never know most of it was pillaged! In fact...” he turned and looked up, so that only the space emperor could see his wink. “The emperor here was just about to tell you how much he values and appreciates your service. He wants to shake your hand and say ‘Thank you, Pex!’” He jerked his head, and the space emperor crouched beside him.

The wardrobe’s hand felt strange in his own. The firm, pebbled surface of what wasn’t quite skin and not quite a shell reminded him uncomfortably of seafood, but it was warm and trembling with life. He stared at the peculiar shape of its joints, the glossy sheen of its claws, and wondered what his own skin felt like to its alien senses. Senses that must be different, he thought, perhaps unimaginable. Could it see the same colors that he could? Perceive pain as he did? Was it able to taste--

The Lutoyan’s elbow prodded him sharply in the ribs.

“Ouch! Er--thank you, Pex,” he said. “Hmm. Pex. Pex.” He rolled the word around on his tongue, experimenting with different intonations. “Pex.” It pleased him to say it aloud, and he was suddenly disappointed that he hadn’t said it before. “Pex.”

“The emperor would also like to apologize for damaging the pretty clothes you dressed him in,” said the Lutoyan. “He wants to say, ‘I’m very sorry, Pex, I hope you’ll forgive me’. ”

“I’m sorry, Pex, I hope you’ll forgive me,” echoed the space emperor.

The wardrobe had gone very still and rigid, as though it had suddenly been placed in suspended animation for a long interstellar voyage. Only the rapid rise and fall of its thorax betrayed its continued presence in the realm of the living.

The space emperor cleared his throat. “Pex. These clothes. I like them. And.” He blinked and glanced at the Lutoyan, who nodded encouragingly. “And I... I even like you, wardrobe. Pex. I’m glad I never had you beheaded.”

He squeezed its hand once more and then released it, sitting back on his heels and holding his breath. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Lutoyan press his fingers together in the universal gesture of approval.

When the wardrobe spoke, it was with a voice that cracked with emotion. “Thank you,” it said softly, eyes closed, as if it were savoring the moment like a glass of vintage Glatissan wine. “Thank you.” It opened its eyes and bared its teeth in what was probably meant to be a smile.

“Fantastic,” said the Lutoyan as he rose to his feet. “Thanks for being so understanding, Pex. The emperor and I appreciate your discretion. Could you tell me again how you wound up in here...?”

He was all bright smiles and languid movement, as though he were excusing himself after an evening with old friends. The space emperor marveled silently at the abrupt change in his demeanor, fascinated but uneasy. If he had not been there to see it, he never would have guessed from the Lutoyan’s easy body language that he had been firing warning shots at the floor not five minutes before.

“I was just delivering a fresh set of nightclothes,” said the wardrobe--Pex, the emperor reminded himself. “As I went to leave, I found His Incandescence’s quarters sealed behind me. I heard glass break, and shouting, so I hid--I thought he was just in one of his moods. But then there was an explosion, and...” Its tail flicked sheepishly. “Well, I couldn’t not look.”
The Lutoyan seemed satisfied by this, and thanked Pex once again before showering it with another round of compliments. The wardrober swelled with pride, lifting its chin high and coiling its tail into a cheerful curlicue.

“Well, emperor, we ought to head out and let Pex get back to work.” The Lutoyan waggled his eyebrows and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m sure it has big plans for the evening. Wouldn’t want to eat up its leisure time. Why don’t you say goodbye and wish it well?”

“Goodbye? No no no. I don’t think so,” said Pex, eyeing the Lutoyan with something like horror. “You really think you can simply walk out of here and steal the emperor?”

The Lutoyan’s smile vanished. His hand was at his waist in an instant, hovering over the ray gun like a serpent ready to strike. “Just watch me,” he hissed.

“I am a faithful servant of the emperor. I can’t let you do that.” Pex’s tail thrashed. “Not when you’re dressed like that.”
Chapter 11

Pex made a compelling argument. If they wished to escape Oureen at all, they stood a better chance of evading capture if they did not attract attention. Barefoot, shirtless, disheveled, and dressed only in the torn remains of a muted green uniform, the Lutoyan could not have looked more like an escaped prisoner if he’d had an electro-manacle dangling from his wrist. It was a look the wardrober dubbed ‘arrest me chic’.

“Your current ensemble screams ‘catch me if you can’,” said Pex. “You hardly need a hat when you’ve got such an extravagant bounty perched on your head.”

Even outside of the palace, Oureenian garb was famously lavish and experimental. It was sometimes quietly joked among offworlders that Oureen did not actually have roads, but rather a series of interconnected catwalks that criss-crossed the entire planet. This was not far from the truth; practical transportation was largely achieved via liftercar or gravtrain, with terrestrial roads reserved for shorter, recreational commutes, imperial parades, and exclusive street parties. Subterranean tunnels provided discreet transit for unsightly laborers without spoiling the aesthetics of the surface world.

It took some cajoling, but the Lutoyan reluctantly agreed to allow Pex to select clothing for both of them. He wrinkled his nose at the prospect of wearing Oureenian finery, but there was no disputing the need for disguise, and no hope of winning a fashion argument with the imperial wardrober.

Pex, for its own part, was beside itself. It had spent nearly its whole life in the personal service of the emperor, tending lovingly to his expansive and ever-growing collection of sumptuous clothing and helping him dress for every occasion. For the first time in many years, it had a fresh canvas at its mercy. It skittered about the Lutoyan like a thing possessed, observing him from every angle with the eye of an impassioned artist.

“You have a deep autumnal complexion,” it said, gripping his chin and turning his face from side to side. “Something bold and rich for you. I’m thinking dark purple or cobalt blue will really make your eyes pop. So distinctive! Maybe a deep red--”

“I’m an escaped assassin on the run,” the Lutoyan reminded it. “I don’t want my eyes to ‘pop’.”

Pex gave him a sorrowful look and sighed. They were in an anteroom adjoining the courtyard, a few rooms away from the space emperor’s second-favorite bedchamber. The walls were carved from floor to ceiling with brutal geometric patterns and set with glowing panels that provided steady, even illumination from every direction and did not strain the eye, providing ideal lighting for admiring oneself in the enormous mirror that covered an entire wall. An ornate silver machine in the corner synthesized hot drinks. The Lutoyan had eagerly prepared himself coffee the moment he saw it, only to grimace and spit it out with a mouthful of colorful swears.

“Is it not to your pleasure?” asked the space emperor from his seat on a couch.

The Lutoyan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glared into his cup. “Never trust a machine to do the job of an artist,” he murmured.

Pex took his measurements, paying no heed to the concept of personal space, and then scampered out of the room without a word. It returned a few moments later, carrying an armful of colorful fabrics that it dumped unceremoniously in the space emperor’s lap.
“Any of these should do, Your Incandescence,” it said, already turning away. “Just choose something.”

The space emperor stared down at the pile of clothing in his lap. A few gowns of varying weights, a matching set of tunic and trousers, several robes, and a dark, gem-studded mantle.

“You want me to wear these?” he asked. “Like I’m just anybody?”

If Pex heard the dismay in his voice, it did not show it. “You can dress yourself, I trust,” it said, grabbing the Lutoyan by the hand and almost bouncing as it dragged him out of the room. “I must tend to Mr. Mudarra. Come along, Iden!”

The space emperor felt a chill flutter of melancholy as he watched them go, aware of his own solitude in a way he had never registered before. They would be back, he reassured himself, and returned his attention to the clothing on his lap. He dressed himself now and then, but never for anything important, not when he would be seen by people who mattered. He briefly considered disabling the lock on his quarters to summon a servant to assist him, but thought better of it when he imagined the war magnate lurking outside with a predator’s patience.

After some fussing and deliberation, he decided upon the matching tunic and trousers. They were simple enough to put on and fastened in the front, and he felt confident that he had donned them correctly. Although he found most trousers unpleasantly restrictive and seldom wore them, these were generously loose and gathered only at the ankle. He had a mounting suspicion that there would be a great deal more running in his immediate future. He’d already tripped on his own clothing once that day, and it had almost ended in disaster— he did not wish to repeat the experience.

The tunic itself was long and flattering asymmetrical, reaching almost to his knees and trimmed with natural Djenubian pearls. The soft, draping fabric shifted with the light through all the colors of a crashing wave, from palest sea-foam to the deep shadowed blue-greens of a great salt ocean on an ancient progenitor world.

It felt strange to wear such humble clothing. He could hardly believe that the man staring out at him from the mirror was the emperor of the observable universe, and not some minor aristocrat or retired mineral trader. It was funny, really— somehow he felt more naked than he ever had without his clothes on.

By the time Pex returned with the Lutoyan in tow, the space emperor had cleaned the remaining paint from his face and was struggling to tame his stray hairs. He looked up as the door swung open and gasped aloud.

“L-Lutoyan!” he stammered, breath catching in his throat. “You look… you look… wow.”

Pex had outdone itself, he thought. It had found a close-fitting doublet that had not fit the space emperor for many years, but which looked utterly resplendent on the other man. It was deep red, with a high collar and billowed sleeves slashed with gold, embroidered all over with intricate botanical shapes stitched in gleaming thread. Black trousers hugged his legs, lightly padded for comfort and protection without compromising style. The injuries to his hands and wrists were hidden beneath elegant gloves, and the burn on his chin had been expertly disguised with cosmetics.

“You look like a prince,” breathed the space emperor.

The Lutoyan scowled at his own reflection. “I look like an insufferable shithead, you mean.”
“Then you’ll look right at home on the streets of Oureen,” said Pex cheerfully. “Though that scar might pose a problem. I’m afraid dueling is out of fashion at the moment. No tasteful young man of your age would be caught dead wearing a gash like that.”

“Can’t you cover it with makeup?” asked the space emperor.

“Not my forte,” said Pex. “I can fill wrinkles, but this…” It clicked its tongue, regarding the deep-furrowed skin with dissatisfaction. “Beyond my skills. Not to worry—it’s my philosophy that there’s no problem in life that can’t be fixed with the addition of good headwear.”

It tugged insistently at the Lutoyan’s wrist until he knelt beside it, and then removed a length of beaded fabric from one of the bags it had brought. It wound the fabric carefully around his head and pinned it in place with a brooch, letting the trailing end hang loose to conceal the side of his face. There was enough length remaining to drape the extra fabric over his shoulder like a scarf.

“There!” it cried. “No one will notice a thing!”

“Great,” said the Lutoyan. “Splendid. I have no peripheral vision.”

The wardrober waved his concern away. “We all make sacrifices in the name of fashion,” it said. “There’s no law that says style must be convenient.”

“I could change that,” mused the space emperor, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “It would be no trouble at all.”

Pex shuddered and shook its head. “No, no, no, sire, you’re busy being kidnapped! You need to be getting a move on. I’ve packed each of you a bag—nothing special, just some toiletries and old jewelry you might be able to sell. And…” It looked away, and its voice fell to a whisper. “And my business card. In case, um, I’m out of work.” It looked up, and offered the space emperor a weak smile. “I don’t think helping my employer be kidnapped is good for job security.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” said the Lutoyan unconvincingly. “We’ll write you some nice references.”

“What about me?” asked the space emperor. “Shouldn’t I also wear some kind of veil?”

“What for?” Pex cocked its head to the side, six eyes blinking slowly. “You don’t have any distinctive features.”

“I’m the emperor! I’ll be recognized!”

“Ahh. No worries.” The wardrober tittered at some secret joke and emptied a small pouch of gemstones onto the table. “I’ll just stick a few of these to your forehead. I’ll make it look natural—no one will suspect a thing.”

The space emperor sat quietly while the gems were adhered to his face. I’m really doing this, he thought numbly. Whatever ’this’ is, I’m doing it. Everything was happening so quickly, and with no warning at all. He had known the Lutoyan for less than a week, and already his world had changed almost beyond recognition. He felt like an alien in his own skin.

To his surprise, the idea of leaving Oureen did not frighten him as much as it should have. The Lutoyan had kindled a flame of curiosity in his heart that was quickly growing into a blaze; he thought it might consume him if it could not be satisfied. He wished he had time to put his affairs in order before he left, to visit the Rooms of Remembering, to pass a handful of decrees he’d been putting off, and to spend a few hours floating in the warm salt-baths until his body forgot all its
little complaints. Perhaps it was best that he did not have time, or he might start having second thoughts.

He looked shyly at the Lutoyan, who was standing very regally with a sideways glance at the mirror. “A marquis,” he chuckled quietly to himself, squaring his shoulders and arcing his back a little. When his reflected eyes met the space emperor’s, he coughed and suddenly became engrossed with examining his fingernails through his gloves.

“There!” said Pex as it affixed the last gemstone to the space emperor’s forehead and leaned back to admire its handiwork. “You look like a completely different species! My, my, who’s the exotic stranger with the jewel-encrusted skin? He’s so well-dressed! Who does his clothes?”

The jewels tugged lightly at his skin whenever his face moved, and when he ran his fingers over them, some ancient ancestral instinct squirmed in revulsion, reminded of pustules or parasites. He had to resist the urge to pluck them off, and stared doubtfully at his glittering reflection. “Are you sure this will work?”

“It has to,” said the Lutoyan. “We’re out of time.” He took a deep breath, adjusted his collar, and grinned at the space emperor. “Ready to make a run for it?”

The space emperor pulled his ray gun from the pile of discarded robes and dropped it into one of the bags. “I suppose so,” he said, and slung the bag over his shoulder.

Pex made a bleating sound that might have been its species’ analogue to clearing its throat. “Pardon me, sire, Mr. Mudarra, but… how do you plan to escape?” It was a question the space emperor had wondered about distantly, as a future problem for somebody else to deal with.

“I’ve been making arrangements,” said the Lutoyan. “I had a couple of days between being pardoned and being arrested again to secure passage offworld. I will say no more about it here—the less you know, the safer we all will be. Once we’re out of the palace, follow my lead and do exactly as I say.” He locked eyes with the space emperor. “Do you understand?”

“I--”

Pex interrupted. “And how are you going to get out of the palace?”

“I have a plan,” the Lutoyan answered airily, hand drifting to rub the back of his neck.

“Is your plan to blast your way through doors and soldiers in a hail of laserfire?”

“I didn’t say it was a good plan.”

The wardrober’s tail thrashed again. “Evidently not,” it said. “They’ll gun you down where you stand, and these nice new clothes of yours will be burnt to a crisp. I won’t stand for it!”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to stay here forever until we starve,” drawled the Lutoyan, throwing his hands in the air. “We can draw straws to see who gets eaten first. Don’t worry, it’ll all be very humane.”

The space emperor leaned down to Pex’s level and hid his mouth behind his hand. “I think he’s probably joking,” he whispered reassuringly.

“We could do that,” agreed the wardrober. “Or you could take the laundry chute and live to tell more tasteless jokes.”
The Lutoyan and the space emperor exchanged glances.

There was something strangely fascinating about laundry chutes, the space emperor thought. They were almost eerie, snaking between the walls of a building like a secret throat, waiting for something, anything, to be dropped into their gullet.

The heart of the palace had been built long centuries before, and many archaic features remained intact. The laundry chute had been constructed long before the advent of practical matter transmission devices and had never been sealed off; matter transmission was still widely believed to have a degrading effect upon organic materials, and was used on Oureen chiefly in the transportation of garbage. Nothing as fine as the emperor’s personal clothing would be risked in transmission, and so the laundry chute remained, covered by an ornate metal grate that bolted from the outside.

Pex opened the grate. *You could fit a body through there,* the space emperor thought, staring into the void that waited behind it. *You wouldn’t even need to chop it up first.*

“It’ll be a tight squeeze,” said the Lutoyan, peering into the inky blackness. A slight breeze stirred his hair, like the gentle breath of an open mouth. “There’s airflow—that’s good. I guess the shield didn’t block us off completely.”

They began to dump as many armfuls of clothing as they could carry through the chute to ensure a soft landing. The wardrober had protested at first, insisting that not everything could be safely laundered, but had relented at the Lutoyan’s grisly description of mangled, broken corpses bleeding through their finery.

Pex drew something from the pile of clothing and sighed, running the white-gold fabric through its hands. “Too bad about the stains,” it said. “I tried *everything*. Perhaps I could salvage some of the material...” It held the long garment up to the space emperor, measuring with its eyes. “Cut it into something summer-length and flirty. What do you think?”

“No,” said the Lutoyan abruptly, flinching as he turned from the chute.

“A scarf, then? It’s got so much stretch to it that--”

“Give it to me.” He held out his hand. There was a thin, brittle quality to his voice that the space emperor had not heard before.

Pex pulled the garment out of reach and narrowed its eyes at the Lutoyan. “What do you want with it? If you’re eloping, I insist on custom gowns. If you’re just going to cut it up--”

“It’s not a wedding dress,” said the Lutoyan. “Give it to me.”

“It might be!” said Pex. “Nobody knows what it is. The planet it’s from was destroyed years ago, and the secrets of its textiles have been lost to time. This may be the last sample in the universe. I want to study it, to--”

The Lutoyan’s words came hard and fast, like a punch to the face. “It’s the ceremonial uniform of a Lutoyan Master Truthseeker. It’s made from *pashuun* silk from the Keval province on the continent of Lut, stronger by far than steel, and will not tear or burn. You will never see its like again.” His mouth twisted into a rictus. “I should know. I used to farm it.”

Pex allowed him to snatch the silk out of its hands, too startled to question him. The Lutoyan
shoved it hurriedly into his bag without looking at it. “Well, I’m ready,” he said, and threw one leg over the edge of the laundry chute. “Coming, emperor?” He patted the ledge beside him. “There’s room for two.”

The space emperor took a step forward, only to stop and lick his lips, troubled by a new thought. “Pex,” he said slowly. “Will you, um… will you be alright? You won’t be hurt...?”

The wardrobe purred, as though the question pleased it. “Your Incandescence, no one will even know I was here. My ancestors lived among the crevices of sheer rock faces— I think I know how to hide myself.” The tip of its tail twitched. “Thank you for your concern.”

With some difficulty, the space emperor squeezed into the mouth of the chute beside the Lutoyan until they were pressed back-to-back. Alone, they would have plummeted into the blackness; together, they were able to brace themselves on the sides to control their descent. Pex wished them a final goodbye, and then closed and bolted the grate, plunging them into complete darkness.

The Lutoyan leaned his head back, resting it upon the space emperor’s shoulder. “Are you ready for an adventure?” he asked.

“I think so,” replied the space emperor. “Lutoyan?”

“Iden. Just call me Iden.”

“Thank you, Iden.” Saying the name aloud for the first time sent a rush of warmth all the way down his spine and into his toes.

“Don’t thank me just yet,” said Iden. “Emp… uh. What is your name, anyway?”

The space emperor frowned, stretching his mind back as far as it would go. He had a name, surely, but for the life of him, he could not remember the last time it had been used. He signed documents only with the seal of the emperor and answered to a long list of regal titles and honorifics. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Everyone calls me ‘Your Incandescence’ or ‘Your Imperial Majesty’.”

“Yeah, well, fuck that.” Iden was silent for a moment, and then his shoulders seemed to shake slightly as though he were repressing a laugh. “Maybe I’ll call you ‘Patsy’.”

The space emperor stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Short for ‘Patrician’?”

Iden made an odd sound. “Yes. Of course. Short for ‘Patrician’.”

“I like it.”

“Well, Patsy, let’s blow this joint.”

Slowly, awkwardly, and crushed together in the narrow passage, they began to descend into the stale and uncertain darkness that waited below.
General Dumarish stood up from his desk and grimaced as the thudding ache in his skull intensified. He regretted turning down painkillers when they had been offered to him, but his soldiers had been watching. He could not allow himself to appear vulnerable in front of his own men, whose ambitions he had whetted to a cutting edge. He needed them hungry, yes, but above all else, he needed them to fear him. Any weakness on his part would be blood in the water to their scavenger’s senses. *One does not limp before wolves*, read the old family proverb.

Not that it would matter. Once the search was concluded, he would have them all detained and scheduled for memory wipes, and any who seemed resistant could be disposed of quietly.

He touched his cheek. It was still tender, but much of the swelling had gone down, and he could see out of his left eye again. The surgeons had assured him he would not scar, which was some comfort; he wanted no physical evidence of the day’s embarrassments to remain. He’d even had the surgeons sent off for dememorization when they’d finished treating him.

Dumarish did not feel sorry for himself. Self-pity bred weakness of character and inspired delusions of fairness. *Fairness* was the false idol invoked only by losing sides, the favored refrain of those who allowed themselves to be subjugated. The worthy would rise above, while the undeserving would spend life on their knees. Still, failure burned through him like a hot coal on a naked tongue.

The emperor had yet to be found. He was not in the palace, and each passing hour cemented Dumarish’s suspicion that he was no longer on Oureen at all. The better part of a day had been wasted hovering outside his personal chambers, unable to force the locks or disable the shield without the emperor’s biometrics. They had finally resorted to the brute force of an Ansaro device. The explosion had destroyed two rooms and part of the baths, but neither the emperor nor the yellow-eyed savage could be found.

*Stupid.* It was all unbearably *stupid*, and Dumarish cursed himself for the hundredth time that night. His fingers twitched with frustration, yearning to feel the pressure of fluttering eyelids beneath crushing thumbs. When the Lutoyan was found, he would be ready with an arsenal of torments—it would not be enough just to kill him. A rare smile pulled unpleasantly at the corners of Dumarish’s mouth. Iden Mudarra must be *unmade*.

But these were dangerous thoughts, and he forced his mind to turn from them. Indulgence in recreational brutality could lead to vice if left unchecked, and he could not afford distraction now, when the empire needed him most. Duty before all things. The telepathy project must be completed, the emperor found and reclaimed, and this whole sorry business put to an end before he could allow himself to scratch the itch of personal retribution.

One loose end he could not tie off so easily. She waited for him in the hallway, out of uniform and holding her arm at an awkward angle in a blatant display of undisguised pain. That was the trouble with her kind. A life of privilege and a purchased rank left her entitled and undisciplined, but her family was too important to have her punished like a real soldier. She could not even be forcibly dememorized without first disabling her cybernetics.
“Admiral Vada Ansaro,” he said crisply, observing the smear of purpling bruises peeking out from the hem of her sleeve. It left a sour taste in his mouth to address her by a rank she had not earned, but she had paid handsomely for the right to use it, and he needed her in an amenable mood. He noted the fractional shift in her posture as she stood up a little straighter.

The war magnate saluted him, and he imagined he could detect a hint of insolence in her electronic eyes. He wondered distantly if she’d had her real eyes preserved, in case the novelty of cybernetics wore off.

“Report,” he ordered, beckoning her to walk with him.

He listened in silence as she described the search of the palace and the surrounding city. Much he already knew and nothing surprised him--his own informants had filled him in before she arrived. It was not what she said that interested him so much as how she said it, and what she chose to omit. Swift, thorough, well-organized sweeps of the city were described in painstaking detail, while their failure to find anything was only implied. She was as embarrassed as he was, though it took her differently.

“You are certain the emperor is no longer on Oureen?” he asked, interrupting her as she took credit for her own lieutenant’s ideas.

She hesitated, searching for an answer that would satisfy him without implicating her. “He…” she began, and licked her lips. “It seems that… while there is no indication that he remains on the planet, if we close the ports--”

“No!” said Dumarish immediately. “It is too late for that. Word of the emperor’s disappearance must not get out. All will continue as usual until he is located and retrieved, quietly and without spectacle. You are to tell no one of this, and to do nothing that may obstruct the ordinary affairs of the empire. Do you understand?”

Her mouth tightened into a thin line, but she nodded reluctantly.

“Good.” He paused to open a door, pressing a complicated clearance code into the lock panel. It slid open, and they continued into a long, narrow room made entirely of reinforced glass. The transparent floor was polished to perfection, and through it could be seen the splendor of Oureen stretched out far below. The city was beautiful at any time of day or night, but in the raking light of the rising sun, it was especially breathtaking. Domed rooftops glinted pink and orange, rising up from blue-stained streets still left in shadow. Dumarish could see a ribbon of silver canal glinting beneath his boots.

He liked this room, despite the uncomfortable lurch he felt in his stomach each time he watched his feet step out into empty space. For all its nauseating openness, the glass box guaranteed absolute privacy. There was nowhere for an eavesdropper to hide, nowhere to secret away even the smallest listening device--best of all, it seemed to have a profound effect upon all who entered it. He found that most people were more open to suggestion when they were in mild distress.

He studied the war magnate. She had the arrogant bearing of someone who had been born wealthy and known no hardship that she hadn’t sought out. Her grandmother was the governor of the Jacoris Protectorate, a planetary system that provided a significant portion of the empire’s most exciting weaponry. Her appointment to admiral had been a small boon to ensure her family’s loyalty, though Vada herself seemed unaware that her rank was unearned.

That entitlement was what Dumarish found so distasteful about her. He had no qualms with nepotism or treachery, had even encouraged a healthy amount of conniving among his own
soldiers, but Vada expected power to be given to her without struggle. Plotting and scheming was all part and parcel of imperial service, and Dumarish firmly believed that anyone with any sort of ambition ought to know how to machinate, or at least to connive. He did not trust anyone who could not scheme; if someone with power was not hatching plot upon nefarious plot to gain more, he reasoned, they were surely up to something.

It was gratifying to see the perspiration beading at her temple. She was by all accounts an accomplished pilot, and her profile mentioned nothing about a fear of heights, but standing unsupported nearly two thousand feet above the city in a glass room that swayed gently with the wind was a far cry from sitting behind the controls of an aircraft.

“We find ourselves in a difficult situation,” he said, gazing at the ghostly crescent of Oureen’s smallest moon as it sank below the horizon. “The empire has never been more vulnerable. What happens now will likely decide the fate of coming centuries, as well as our careers. Tell me, Admiral, have your soldiers been dememorized?”

“Not all of them. Not yet.” She stared resolutely forward, a quaver of tension in her voice. “Half a dozen have been assigned to lead search teams, and another few are working on restoring the Lutoyan’s profile. I thought it best that they remember his face.”

“Have they learned anything?”

She grimaced. “Only a little. Some data has been corrupted or erased entirely, but it appears that his profile was never completed in the first place. Someone tried very hard to keep information about him from getting out, and then to destroy what little remained. The only section left intact were the details of his death.” She snorted. “It says he drowned on Djenubi as a teenager, more than a year before Lutoya’s destruction.”

Dumarish raised his eyebrows at that. “Djenubi? Interesting. That would explain a few things.”

“Sir?”

“What do you know about the Djesh, Admiral?”

“Um.” She shrugged. “Big. Scary.” She held up her hands and made an arc around the sides of her face. “Heads like this.”

“You would do well to research them,” he said coldly. “It may be the difference between life and death, should you have the misfortune to meet one in battle. I do not wear a crescent headdress merely for aesthetics. Do you know what the Djesh do to their prey?”

“Eat them, I presume?”

Dumarish laughed. “Yes, Admiral, they eat them. Eventually. First they sting them and drag them back to their hives. Djesh venom does not kill--it slows the metabolism to a crawl, keeping their victims alive and unmoving in a state of suspended animation for weeks at a time. We use a synthetic derivative of the stuff in our own paralytics.” The part of him that enjoyed watching other people squirm reared its head, and he smiled as he went on. “They leave you like that--frozen, alive--so that you’ll still be fresh when their eggs hatch. Djesh larvae won’t feed upon dead meat. They’ll eat you alive, little by little, saving your vital organs for last. Can you imagine that, Admiral? It is not a soldier’s death.”

The war magnate was beginning to turn a very interesting shade of green. As much as he enjoyed her discomfort, Dumarish did not care to see her become sick right there on the floor of the glass
box and spoil the view. “The Lutoyan regained mobility much sooner than expected,” he said, changing the subject. “He shook off his chems faster than a Terran-type of his weight should be able to. What does that tell you?”

She blinked, frowning. “He’s immune,” she said after a moment. “A built-up resistance to Djesh venom.”

“Very possible,” agreed Dumarish. “It may be that Lutoyans are naturally resistant, but if he has taken on the Djesh and survived, if he is in league with them, he is more dangerous than we can imagine. Of your soldiers, are there any that you trust?”

“I trust all my soldiers, sir.”

“Then you are either a liar or a fool,” he snapped. “And you will die an early death. Is there anyone under your direct command that you would trust with your life? With your family’s future?”

He watched her think, considering both the question and the purpose behind it. “There are a few,” she said at last.

“Do they love you?”

“Sir?”

“You are young still, and not un-handsome. You ought to have some who love you more than they love themselves, and use them carefully.” His own days of seduction were over, put to rest along with his predecessor. Fear was a more reliable motivator for most things, and less likely to inspire the passion of revenge. “Is there anyone smart, capable, and completely under your thumb?”

“There might be,” she said carefully. “Why do you ask?”

Here it is, thought Dumarish. He folded his hands behind his back and adopted a grave expression. “We cannot entrust the recovery mission to just anyone,” he said. “There is too much at stake. It must be someone skilled. Dependable. Willing to make sacrifices for the good of the empire. Someone who will not betray us when all is said and done, and can be trusted with secrets.” He resisted the urge to look at her to see if she would take the bait. “With power.”

She did not disappoint. He could feel her radiating curiosity like physical heat. “What sort of power?” she asked in a hushed voice.

He looked at her then, into the black apertures of her artificial pupils. “Are you religious, Admiral?”

Her lip curled. “Hardly,” she spat. “What, just because I’m a cyborg, you think I--”

He waved his hand. “I meant no offense,” he said. “There is power in religion, whether you believe in it or not. Any student of history would tell you the same. It’s a tool we can’t afford to ignore, and anyone we choose for this mission will need to be… comfortable with it. Come. I think it’s time we make a little pilgrimage of our own.”

Whoever or whatever had created the universe must have done so impulsively and with
consideration for its inhabitants’ feelings. Nearly every intelligent species had devised a concept of God, and those that had not were quick to adopt the idea just to have someone to blame. For all the infinite complexity of the universe, nearly every form of sentient life was plagued by the three chief existential mysteries of life: \textit{Why are we here?}, \textit{Why do we suffer?}, and \textit{Why is it that virtually every life-sustaining planet has evolved creatures shaped more or less like crabs?}

Despite the universality of these questions, there was little consensus on the nature of God. It was often joked that there were more definitions of “God” than there were sentient lifeforms in the known universe, and evidence suggested that this was probably true. It was also joked that only masochists became scholars of comparative religion--this was probably true as well.

There were mighty and terrible gods, strange and unknowable gods, loving gods, blind idiot gods, lonely gods, and pantheons of many gods with many names and faces. There were small gods, fat gods, blue gods, crab gods, worm gods, edible gods, vengeful gods, incorporeal gods, embodied gods, and gods that defied description and understanding. Some gods had particularly strong opinions about underclothing, or fruit, or which tentacle to use when initiating a romantic overture. Some seemed entirely uninterested in the affairs of mortals. Some believed that God was a disembodied metaphysical force that pervaded the universe and infused every living cell with spiritual energy and influence, while others believed it was the ultimate unification of organic life and machine intelligence that would one day fuse into a single point and re-create the universe.

It was this mess of conflicting opinions that had so troubled the ancients in the early days of interstellar travel. Whole planets had been rendered inhospitable in the wake of holy wars, entire species obliterated from existence. It was the same story that had unfolded countless times on nearly every progenitor world whenever cultures met and clashed, and the whole history of interstellar civilization may have come to a sudden and bloody end, had it not been for the construction of OMEN.

The only thing the people of the galaxy generally seemed to be able to agree on without too much fuss was that God--whatever It, They, He, She, Xe, Zie, or E might be--could have left a clearer message.

No one could say for sure what OMEN originally stood for. A popular guess was that it meant ‘Observational Multifaith Electronic Neuralscape’, but it had been constructed before the foundation of the empire, by engineers whose names and origins were long forgotten. It was not the only supercomputer, but it was certainly the largest, and it had never once displayed any sign of malice or resentment towards organic life. OMEN’s job was not to think, but to listen, and it did so extraordinarily well. A vast array of computerized radiotelescopes scattered across the galaxy probed into the furthest reaches of the universe like straining ears; if God had ever spoken, OMEN would hear it, and the problem of religion could be settled once and for all.

In the meantime, it gave everyone an excuse to wait, and whatever scraps and pieces OMEN turned up were identified and interpreted by a priesthood of cyborg augurs. Their neural implants allowed them to interface with the numinous machine, adding an essential organic perspective to otherwise lifeless datasets.

Dumarish seldom troubled himself with existential questions, but he was a pious man, in his own way. He visited the augurs frequently, took great interest in OMEN’s discoveries, and consistently campaigned for further expansion and funding of the project. He had often counseled the emperor to pour resources into encouraging public trust and confidence in OMEN’s findings and in the interpretations of the augurs.

Privately, he suspected that OMEN may have originally stood for something like ‘Omniscient
Multicomputational Espionage Network’, and imagined that it had been created by someone very much like himself.

Augurs greeted them outside the temple. They nodded at Dumarish but stared curiously at Vada, no doubt wondering if she was a rare adult initiate to their order. Augurs were almost always recruited as children, when their minds were more elastic and better able to adapt to the extensive cybernetics and neural tampering that connected them to OMEN.

They were led discreetly through a side door of the temple, avoiding the large foyer where supplicants came to ask questions of the augurs or submit prayers on the provided terminals. With a warning not to touch anything button-shaped, they were left alone beneath OMEN’s central processing station. The massive computer loomed over them, beeping and humming intermittently like the gurgling belly of a tremendous mechanical beast.

“Why are we here?” asked Vada, staring up at the rows upon rows of blinking lights that vanished into the darkness overhead. Thick twists of cables and wires clung to the high walls like creeping vines in a mechanical jungle. The fact that much of OMEN’s technology was several hundred years behind the times only served to enhance its solemn dignity and sense of timelessness. “Are we going to pray that the emperor returns?”

“Petulance does not suit you,” chided Dumarish. “We are here to collect a favor from someone in a position to help us. She may be the single most powerful person you will ever meet, even if you live a very long time. Ah... and here she is. Do not stare.”

From somewhere above their heads came a muted rustling sound, accompanied by a soft click-click-click of muffled mechanics. Vada inhaled sharply, able to see the source of the sounds in the darkness before Dumarish’s eyes could adjust. The clicking and rustling grew louder, and slowly the silhouette of something like a woman resolved itself against the background of blinking lights.

What little remained of her real skin was thin and drained of color—a damp, hairless membrane stretched across a limbless torso, through which could be seen the pulsating red light of a cybernetic heart. Dozens of soft robotic tendrils sprouted from anchor points in synthetic flesh and lowered her nimbly to the floor, bending and curling with surprising fluidity. So much of her body had been replaced with mechanical parts that her original species could not be distinguished. Artificial organs whirred and gurgled and kept her alive far beyond her natural lifespan, but there was no telling from her appearance whether she was closer to two hundred years old or two thousand.

“Hello, General,” came her smooth synthetic voice. Her lips did not move when she spoke, but a dry, rattling wheeze passed through them with each movement. “How kind of you to visit. Is it business or pleasure that brings you here today...?”

The hair on the back of Dumarish’s neck stood up as the High Augur approached. No matter how many times he consulted with her, he still found her unsettling. She reminded him of something that had been dredged up from the bottom of an ocean on an uncharted planet—grotesque, foreign, and only nominally alive. He gritted his teeth and pushed his revulsion aside.

“Neither, I’m afraid. I have a personal favor to ask.”

She leaned forward to examine him, optical lenses extending from her sagging eye sockets on long, flexible stalks.

“Another favor?” she asked. “You’re burning through those rather quickly, aren’t you?”
She was toying with him, teasing with a familiarity he did not appreciate. “Your order enjoys certain special privileges and status in recognition of your service to the empire,” he said coolly. “But privileges may be revoked or suspended in a state of emergency. Should an imperial servant be found to be infirm and unsuited to their appointment or disloyal during a period of--”

“That bad?” interrupted the High Augur.

“Not yet,” said Dumarish. “There is no need for it to reach that point. I’m looking for a man. All you have to do is find him, and a lot of trouble can be avoided.”

“A man,” the High Augur repeated. “You want me to find a single man out of trillions in the galaxy? I can’t observe everything, you know.”

Dumarish gazed evenly into her lenses. “You can come close enough. But no matter--I understand if you are not up to the task. It must be exhausting, interfacing with OMEN and operating all those enhancements. Perhaps there is someone younger and less burdened among your order who can help me... a sharp augur would have much to gain in the coming days.” He sensed Vada stiffen very slightly at his side.

The old cyborg was silent for a long moment, optical lenses swinging away from Dumarish to study his companion. Vada was young and strong, with broad, sinewy shoulders and a crown of thick, ruby-colored hair that grew in a ridge down her spine. She was the very picture of vitality even by the standards of Oureen, on which disease and ailment were almost unheard of. If she was clever, and careful, and very, very lucky, she might live another century or two in good health, provided she did not get caught in the teeth of someone else’s ambition. People like her were prone to tragic accidents.

The High Augur was difficult to read and lacked most of the features with which to emote, but her synthetic voice was tight with apprehension. “And just who are you?” she asked coldly.

The war magnate held out her hand and grasped one of the High Augur’s tendrils. “Admiral Vada Ansaro,” she said, shaking it firmly. “Grand-daughter of Wetiid Ansaro of the Jacoris Protectorate and heir to the Ansaro Corporation.” Her fingers squeezed the pliant material with more force than necessary.

Dumarish almost rolled his eyes—it was a wonder she hadn’t listed her GPA and bench-press record. If she did not learn subtlety, Vada might not have long to wait before an accident befell her.

He cleared his throat. “The Admiral has proven herself to be a faithful and competent servant of the empire,” he said. “Due to the… delicacy of the current situation, her security clearance has been raised to assist in the reclamation mission. Don’t worry.” He smiled, adding a little levity to his voice. “Vada’s a committed soldier, and an atheist. Your job is safe from her.”

“Mmm.” The old cyborg stared at the younger woman for a moment longer before twisting her eye stalks to face Dumarish again. “This man of yours… I will need to know what to search for. Do you have data for me—a name? Biometrics? A place to start?”

“We have enough to go on,” he said. “So you will help us?”

The High Augur’s tendrils rippled and lifted her a few feet into the air, back into the obscuring shadows of OMEN’s core. “Of course, General... I can always spare a favor for an old friend.”
“Why didn’t you tell her about the emperor?” asked the admiral, once they were alone and a high-security door had sealed behind them. They were deep beneath the heart of the palace, in what had once been a habitation bunker—an ancient remnant of Oureen’s early history, from long before the planet had been tamed and terraformed. It had withstood the test of time remarkably intact.

“She doesn’t need to know,” said Dumarish. “The fewer who do, the better. A search for the Lutoyan will lead us to the emperor without alerting half the galaxy of our… embarrassment.”

“You don’t trust her not to talk?” The admiral raised an eyebrow. It would have been an insolent expression on any other face, but her enhancements rendered it oddly wooden. “On Jacoris she would know the price of indiscretion.”

“She is old,” he said. “I do not doubt her loyalties, but she is long past her prime... you know how old people talk.” He paused, and dropped his voice slightly, though there was no one to hear. “The augurs should not be given more power than they already have. Knowledge is dangerous in the wrong hands, and they have more than enough of it as is. They don’t need us feeding them state secrets.”

Dumarish was coming to appreciate the value and utility in half-truths over lies more and more each day as the telepathy project progressed. He imagined he could hear the gears turning in the admiral’s head as she considered his words. It was best to leave her to her thoughts and allow her to begin scheming on her own--too much spoonfeeding and she might grow suspicious of him, brash and unsubtle though she might be.

It wouldn’t matter if the High Augur discovered the emperor’s disappearance. She would almost certainly figure it out eventually, if she had half the wits she was credited with. If she thought she had stumbled upon a precious military secret, she would guard it fiercely as blackmail to use to her own advantage. Let her believe she had an ace in the hole until she was ready to show her hand. By then it would be too late.

“How do we explain the emperor’s absence?” asked the admiral.

Dumarish made a dismissive gesture. “A robot can be made up to resemble him,” he said. “We should be able to pass it off as the real thing for some time--with shrewd planning on our part, no one will suspect a thing.”

The bio-locks would pose the greatest challenge. Without the emperor’s own biometric signature, a robot would not be able to pass through them unassisted. Someone would have to be trusted with the codes to open them by hand.

“The emperor is not known for the… complexity of his personality,” continued Dumarish. “Still, it would be wise to provide a distraction. We ought to arrange a spectacle--something impressive and bloody enough to keep people from studying the emperor too closely. A billipede, perhaps. Pit it against half a dozen warbeasts and see how many prisoners the winner can eat in an hour. It was the emperor’s idea--I’m sure he’ll be sorry to miss it.”

Vada’s mouth fell open in a dreamy half-smile as she imagined the carnage of such a scene. “That would be--” she stopped, frozen mid-step by an alarming thought. “General,” she said slowly, “What if he’s not? What if he’s been… corrupted?”

Dumarish did not answer. He continued walking until he came to stand beneath a symbol carved into the wall. It was an ancient version of the imperial seal--a seventy-pointed star that pierced the
darkness of the cosmos with many rays of civilizing light. Over the ages, the star had been simplified until it reached the sleek three-pointed design Dumarish now wore on his uniform. The contemporary version was far easier to mass-produce, but there was something about the original that Dumarish found stirring. He traced his fingers along the carving and felt his pulse quicken with excitement.

“Brainwashing can be reversed, and if not... we are servants of the empire, Admiral Ansaro. Keepers of the imperial flame. It is our job to ensure it does not get extinguished.” He placed his hand flat against the center of the star. “Should a candle gutter or go out, we must light a new one.”

“Are you suggesting treason, Gen--”

Dumarish pushed.

Vada’s gasp was drowned out by the grinding of metal against stone as the wall began to shift. A thin thread of light formed along every facet of the star, growing thicker and brighter as the rays began to separate. The star was opening, seventy splinters of stone retracting into the wall, pulling away from the center by means of some ancient, elegant technology.

Dumarish shielded his eyes and stared through the new doorway into the brightly-lit room beyond.

“An empire needs an emperor, after all.” He beckoned to Vada, enjoying the stricken expression on her face. “If the old one is lost to us, it may be time for a new one.”

Chapter End Notes

A plot emerges from the depths!

This chapter is long and was a long time coming, but it didn't seem right to break it up into parts. Thank you to everyone who helped me polish this. I was nervous about doing a POV switch, especially between two people as mentally different as the space emperor and Dumarish, and without your help I might have lost some steam on this story. I think this turned out clear and fun all the same, even though I had to kill a few of my favorite jokes.

ALSO I realized I could make some of the characters using BitMoji and that has, uh, been the best/worst discovery of my life.

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