



The Devil's Embrace (A Devil to Die for #1)

Author: *Chani Lynn Feener*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Calix Valimir has one goal...

Catch the killer terrorizing the galaxy and make it off the planet Emergence faster than anyone can recognize him. Of course, that's a pipe dream, and he's identified the very first night he's there. Fortunately for him, he's rescued by the resident golden boy, Doctor Aodhan Solace. Cal's past mistakes keep him from letting anyone in, but there's something about the charming doctor that has him instinctively letting down his walls, no matter how hard he struggles against doing so. He knows no one in this universe is ever what they seem, that no one can be trusted, and yet with every passing devilish touch, he falls deeper and deeper for the man he knows must be a liar. Because everyone is. Even himself.

Aodhan Solace likes games.

But he doesn't really have the patience to pull them off for long. What starts out as a passing interest quickly turns to desire when the detective submits to every one of his twisted demands. For a man who claims to be working on the side of good, Cal begs so prettily when he's restrained. Aodhan has a reputation to uphold, but the more time he spends with the detective, the more certain he is that it's time to take off the mask and show him who he really is. There's only one problem. Convincing Mercy to let him.

Mercy is always in control.

This situation is no different. When Aodhan comes to him begging they take a third, he plays hard to get to keep things interesting, but the reality is Mercy knows exactly what he wants.

And how to get it.

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The music was shitty and the company was even worse.

Even if he was the company he was referring to.

Calix Valimir stood by the punch bowl and tried not to look as uncomfortable as he felt as he faced the rest of the party. The high school reunion was in full swing three hours in, and many of his old schoolmates were tipsy or on their way to being drunk.

Since Emergency was considered one of the largest occupied planets in the Edith galaxy, there were many options for public and private schooling in each major city. Gradient High happened to be one of five well-known locations, and they held a reunion once every eight years and invited all the alumni to attend.

He'd had no interest in going, but his superior officer, Gideon, had assigned him a case on planet with dates that happened to coincide, and so...here he was.

What an epic mistake.

It wasn't like he was delusional enough to assume people had forgotten about that horrible event when he'd been eighteen, but a part of him had still hoped the reaction would be better than this. Every time he caught someone's eye, it was to find them glaring or looking at him with unbridled disgust.

At least when they'd been kids, it'd made sense, but now they were all adults, and to still garner this much hatred for something that had been an accident? He'd been found not guilty on all charges. His name had been cleared.

No one had cared back then. And no one cared now.

After the incident, Calix had been forced to give up on his dream to teach and instead immediately enrolled at the Academy, a military style training facility located on a man-made planet.

There were different fields of study at the Academy, same as any other school, though the focus was on training soldiers and police officers. Every galaxy in the universe had its own Academy, most kept separate from regular society in an attempt to help cadets cut ties with their roots. Once a person graduated, they could no longer be loyal to their home planet and instead swore an oath to uphold law and order throughout the universe.

He hadn't planned on that path, but once there, Calix had quickly realized he was actually pretty good. He'd breezed through hand-to-hand combat and weapons training, always top three in his classes. His course studies had also gone well, with him grading in the top five percentile all four years of attendance. When it'd come time to pick his focus, studying to become a detective had been a no-brainer.

He'd poured everything he had left into training, into proving himself to those around him. The determination to become something despite the incident. The dark thoughts that haunted him and called him a freak.

The guilt.

The shame.

All of it.

In some galaxies, the Academy was the only thing on planet, but not in Edith. Graduating cadets who went on to become commanding officers, detectives,

inspectors, off-site forensic scientists, etc., were all housed there as well. They were on the opposite side of the globe and didn't often come into contact with training cadets, but it was nice not having to pick up and relocate to a completely new planet.

Calix's decision to join the Academy had been the best he'd ever made. The people there hadn't known about his sordid past, hadn't questioned him or his sanity. If he hadn't been able to make any strong, lasting friendships, so what? The goal had been to live normally, not splendidly, and he'd somehow managed it. Managed to coast under the radar even with his perfect grades and stellar record as a sixth-class detective—impressive for his age.

Until Troya Shaw arrived.

In the center of the dancefloor—and the center of attention, as per usual—Calix's partner, Troya, laughed and swayed his hips to the gods awful techno beat thrumming through the bass speakers.

The two of them were from different graduating classes, with Troya a year behind, but that hadn't stopped his partner from entering the Academy already carrying the hatred of everyone back home as though it was his mission to uphold their honor through fury or some shit like that.

When they'd still been at the Academy, it'd been relatively easy to avoid him, at least, but that had changed when Calix's original partner got injured last year, and he'd needed a replacement to step in permanently. To this day, he still couldn't figure out why the two of them had been paired together. Just because the rest of the student body hadn't known about his past, didn't mean it wasn't written in his file.

The two of them should never have come into contact in the field, let alone have to work together. The worst part? Calix couldn't even put in for a transfer without seeming like a dick. It'd been over eight months since the two of them started

working together and he kept waiting for Troya to do it, but the guy kept surprising him.

Which made no sense, considering how openly he loathed him.

Even tonight, they'd arrived separately, and Troya hadn't so much as glanced in his direction. While everyone else openly glared or whispered spiteful words behind Calix's back, the man he'd spent six hours traveling on a spaceship with this morning acted like he didn't exist.

Cumbersome.

Infuriating.

Deserving.

That last one made him flinch, and he quickly turned away, hanging his head as he reached for another cup of the weird-tasting punch.

Only for someone to step up to his side and offer one before he could.

Calix prepared himself for the worst and glanced over, breath catching in his throat when he registered it was Heathe.

Heathe D'Leo, his first crush.

What were the odds he'd heard about the incident? He'd been a grade above Cal in school and had already graduated when it'd happened...

Wishful thinking again?

“Hey, it’s Calix, right?” Heathe waited until he accepted the cup and then held out his hand. “I think I remember having a class with you?”

“Fifth period history.” He nodded and slipped his palm against the other man’s, warmth trickling through where they connected. It’d been a long time since he’d last thought of the older guy, but this close, all those old longings and memories came to the forefront of his mind.

It hadn’t been that big of a crush—had been practically erased after the incident when Cal had met the doctor assigned to his case—but it’d certainly been something. Calix remembered gazing at Heathe, fascinated by his whitish silver hair. It always reminded him of moonlight, and he caught himself staring at it now, just like he used to.

The color wasn’t even that uncommon.

Maybe he’d had too much punch.

The stuff was spiked, after all.

Nervously, he dropped his hand and took a deep gulp of the drink he’d been given, because if he was already buzzed, what would a little more hurt.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you around the city since then.” Heathe propped a hip against the edge of the table. “You move after graduation?”

“To the Academy.” Did that mean he really hadn’t heard? Calix was pretty sure the other guy had gotten into Holder University on the other side of the planet. That should have been far enough for him to avoid the gossip. Still... “You?”

“Spent four years at Holder and another two at Divine Jury.”

“Law school?”

“Yeah, I only just moved back about a year ago. Dear old dad kicked the bucket and my mom needed someone to take over the family firm.”

“Oh,” Calix’s heart shrank, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “Dad and I hated each other.”

“Oh.” Some of the attraction fizzled, which wasn’t fair. Even back then, rumors about Heathe’s father had been abundant. The guy was supposedly an abusive prick who kept his wife and kid on a tight leash, hanging financial security over their heads.

The D’Leo family came from a line of Imperials who’d left their dying homeworld centuries ago. Without the title or the planet to rule, they’d been reduced to old money and keeping up appearances in society.

Not that Calix would really consider that a reduction.

Not when the man standing across from him could probably afford to buy a third of this planet’s resources, if not more.

Calix would never tell someone they were lucky for withstanding abuse.

But he also didn’t shirk the idea of inherited wealth and always having a home to go back to.

“You remember that old diner? My sister bought it and cleaned it up. Isn’t that funny? She’s always been the odd one in the family. Shit,” Heathe grimaced, seeming to realize his mistake and straightened. “Sorry, I forgot. You’re an orphan, right? My bad, man. I didn’t mean to bring up old traumas.”

“It’s not a trauma,” he lied, forcing his lips to form a friendly smile even though he was back to wishing he’d never come. “Anyway, that’s great you’re doing so well. We always knew you would.”

“We?”

“The school,” he motioned toward the crowd. “You were pretty popular back then.”

Heathe laughed. “Is that your discreet way of asking if I’m seeing anyone?”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. “What? No, no! Of course not.”

“Relax.” He dropped an arm over Calix’s left shoulder and leaned in, his warm breath gusting across his mouth. “I’m only teasing. Actually, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. But not here.”

Calix frowned when Heathe pulled away and glanced around them as if to make sure they weren’t being listened in on. Suspicion swirled to life in his gut, but he tried banking it down. All his memories of the older guy were good ones. He’d been student body president of his class, had volunteered for several charities, and no one had ever had a bad thing to say about him.

Heathe wasn’t the type of person he needed to be wary of, it was just old habits unhinging their maws, threatening to swallow him whole.

But he wouldn’t let them.

He’d never go back to that weak, frightened place again.

“That sounded weird, didn’t it?” Heathe must have seen something on his face before he’d gotten a hold of it because he chuckled awkwardly and ran a hand through his

hair. “Here’s the thing, it’s about…” he glanced around once more and then bent to keep his next words between them and said, “the killer.”

Calix’s brow winged up. No one was supposed to know he and Troya were here investigating a string of odd murders. That was half the reason they’d been ordered to attend the reunion in the first place, to give them a believable cover.

“I’m close with the chief of police,” Heathe explained. “And I also happen to have known one of the victims.”

“Okay.” This wasn’t exactly the time or the place for this, but it wasn’t like he could ignore a potential lead. He downed the rest of his drink and then set the empty cup on the table and motioned toward the side exit of the school gym. “Let’s go find somewhere quieter we can discuss this.”

“I think the third floor has been cordoned off,” Heathe said as he turned and led them out and toward the east stairwell. “We should be able to have privacy there.”

Calix considered going back and getting Troya, but the guy was in the middle of a crowd. If he walked up to him, he’d draw attention, which wasn’t something they wanted at the moment. With any luck, whatever Heathe wanted to talk about would help speed up the case so they could solve it quick and get out of here.

He stumbled a bit at the top of the stairs, pausing with his hand on the railing as he tried to recenter himself.

Heathe frowned. “You good?”

“Headrush,” he said. “Probably the alcohol.”

“Oh yeah. I didn’t even think about that. Look, if you want to do this later at the

station, I totally get it. We can—”

“No,” Calix stopped him when the other man went to descend the steps. “No, it’s all right. Please,” he held out a hand indicating he should keep going, “after you.”

The sound of their footsteps clipped down the hall as they made their way to one of the classrooms furthest from the stairs. The whole way, his head ached, a strange feeling overcoming him rapidly so that by the time they’d stepped beneath the threshold leading to the empty room, he was swaying dangerously on his feet.

Calix’s legs went out from under him, and he fell into an easel, taking the wooden object down with him as he hit the ground. He stared at the contraption, his mind struggling to place it as his blurry vision started to wink in and out.

By the time he realized what it was—and more importantly, where they were—it was too late.

“What’s...What did you do?” The drink. Cal struggled to sit up, his body refusing to listen. He found himself sprawled out on the cold, tiled floor, blinking up at the ceiling instead. He had a decent tolerance when it came to alcohol, which meant the cup he’d been handed had to have been spiked. “Why?”

“Just doing as I’m told.” Heathe stepped closer and started undoing his belt. “Someone asked me to lure you here and make you pay for what you’ve done. Any idea what that could be? Oh, good, it looks like you do. That’ll make this easier then.” His fingers went to the button on his jeans.

Fear zipped through Calix as the realization of what was to come dawned on him. Adrenaline kicked in, and he tried to get away, managing to flip onto his stomach and crawl a few feet before all of the energy drained out of him at once.

Whatever drug he'd been given, it was working fast. He fought against unconsciousness, panic, and actual horror, but his mind wasn't strong enough to keep his body in check. He was already slipping into a dark abyss when he heard Heath's next comment, as though spoken from very far away.

“Ever been fucked up the ass before? I really hope not. I like it when they bleed.”

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There were only snippets of consciousness.

Someone whispering something unintelligible in his ear.

Darkness.

A heavy weight on top of him.

Darkness.

Pain where he'd never felt pain before. But where he'd always secretly wanted to.

Darkness.

Disgust at himself.

Darkness.

Shame.

Darkness.

Pleasure.

Darkness.

Darkness.

Darkness.

Darkness.

* * *

There'd been a moment where he'd thought for sure this was over. The taunting and teasing. The jokes at his expense spoken loudly enough to be overheard. Cal had been careless, had given in to temptation in the locker room, and had been caught. He'd hated himself for his urges, but it was different when someone else openly hated him for them.

When someone else proved those internal whispers that told him he was a broken freak.

“We all know how dirty you really are,” a sharp laugh.

A sharp laugh and then...

His foot on the gas.

Calix on his knees, his hands stained red.

The last words Sister Grace had spoken to him when he'd left the orphanage with the police echoed seemingly all around him, thumping from the walls and out of the mouths of the onlookers.

“Good Light. May the gods have mercy on that poor boy's soul.”

That poor boy.

That poor boy.

May the gods have mercy on his soul.

His soul.

His.

May the gods...

* * *

“...mercy on...” Calix came out of the dream already speaking, uttering the words on autopilot. He didn’t notice. Didn’t know where he was or what he was doing, only that there was a searing pain somewhere and a rush of accompanying euphoria he’d never felt before. “Mercy...on...his...mercy on...mercy...”

“What was that?” a voice, harsh and out of breath, spoke directly against the curve of Calix’s ear, causing him to flinch.

He moaned and turned his head away, whimpering when the pain got sharper.

“Repeat that,” the voice demanded, louder when he wasn’t immediately obeyed. “Say it again.”

Say what?

Calix shook his head, not comprehending. The room was dim, and he couldn’t make anything out other than shapes and shadows. He could tell something wasn’t right, but couldn’t say what, only that he was uncomfortable and it was hard to breathe. Something heavy held him down, crushing his chest, and between his legs—

“Don’t...stop.” Weakly, his hands lifted, and he grabbed onto silky material.

“What?” the voice sounded shocked, but not disgusted.

That wasn’t right. He should find Cal grotesque. Everyone did, once they truly got to know him.

“Hard...er,” he said, clinging to the man’s shirt. “Make me...suffer. I want...to.”

“Repeat that,” the voice growled, losing his patience, and Calix struggled to follow, wanting the pleasure to return to mix with the pain, knowing from experience that obedience was the way to achieve that.

But...what was going on?

Where was he?

Why was he...

“I’m going to kill you for what you’ve done,” the voice said. “Don’t you get that?”

Oh.

For what he’d done.

Was this retribution then?

His comeuppance?

“...mercy...” Calix didn’t want to die. Or maybe he did, and he was simply too out of it to realize. Maybe his resistance was really just born of survival instinct.

A strangled sound was pulled from him when the heavy weight over him started to move again.

May the gods have mercy on that poor boy's soul.

Clearly, they weren't going to.

If only he could tell Sister Grace her precious gods hadn't listened to her pleas.

"...the gods..." Before he knew it, he was muttering out loud again. "...have mercy..."

The heavy weight came to another stop, but Calix was already slipping back into the darkness, welcoming it with open arms since it'd mean escaping the agony of being awake.

The agony of being him.

"Gods?" the voice laughed, the sound manic at best, demonic at worst. "I'll..."

Calix didn't catch the rest of that sentence.

The darkness encased him once more.

* * *

"What kind of freak gets hard while they're raped?" There was a dark sound, a chuckle maybe. "You came all over the place. Was that why you were spared? Is that why you're still breathing?"

Nimble fingers brushed sticky strands of hair off his forehead, and Calix blinked,

momentarily pulled back to the light. He didn't know what he expected to see, but the intense pair of pink eyes weren't it.

“Finally awake?” the owner of the pink eyes spoke, and his voice was familiar, instantly setting Cal on edge.

Had he been dreaming of that voice? Telling him to...do something?

Repeat...something?

His hand twitched at his side, but even that little movement caused shooting pain throughout his body, and he whimpered.

There was a flash in those eyes, almost like interest mixed with something more terrifying. Something soulless and black.

But before Calix could pick it apart, his vision winked out, and he disappeared into the abyss all over again.

* * *

“Stand back!”

“Make room!”

“He's coming to, Doctor.”

Calix groaned and then hissed at the sudden onslaught of agony in his lower region. He shifted in a poor attempt to rid himself of it, but all that did was make it ten times worse.

Someone shushed him, someone close, and when he growled defensively and lifted his head to curse at whoever was there, the word got caught in his throat.

“Detective Valimir, are you with me?” A pair of ethereal pink eyes held his for a moment, and when he got no response, his worried expression deepened. “The drugs are still in his system, and he’s most likely in shock. Has a room been prepared?”

“Yes, Doctor,” a different voice, this one female, spoke on Calix’s opposite side, and his head rolled to face her. She wasn’t as attractive as the pink-eyed man, but that same look of concern was painted over her face.

And pity.

Calix bristled the second he identified that emotion, trying—and failing—to sit up. He fell back onto the gurney, finally processing that’s what he was lying on and that he was currently being wheeled down a bright white hallway.

“Detective,” the pink-eyed doctor called out to him, waiting until he had his attention once more. “You’re at the hospital right now. I know this may be difficult, but I really need you to try and focus and tell me where it hurts, all right? Can you do that for me?”

Calix frowned and wet his throat, a bit surprised by how raspy he sounded when he asked, “Hurts?”

Well.

His throat certainly didn’t feel great. It felt like he’d been screaming for a week straight.

He hadn’t...had he?

Actually...

“What,” he coughed, winced, and tried again, “What happened?”

The doctor wore a pinched expression and then glanced over him toward the female nurse accompanying them. “Make sure the officers wait until I’ve done a full examination. He’s still too confused at the moment to answer any of their questions.”

“Yes, of course, Doctor.” They reached a wide-open doorway, and she let go of the gurney, bowing to the pink-eyed man before turning on her heel and speeding off, no doubt to follow his order.

Which had been strange.

“Officers?” Calix waited while the doctor brought him into a large private room, closed the doors behind them, and returned to his side. When he tried to sit up a second time, the doctor placed a gentle hand on the center of his chest.

“I wouldn’t.” He gave him a serious look. “I apologize if this seems intrusive to you, Detective, but I have to ask in order to properly do my job. I’m sure a man in your position understands that well enough to sympathize with me, no matter how...embarrassing it may be to talk about.”

“Embarrassing?” Calix really wished he knew what the hell was going on.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” the doctor asked.

“Um...” He thought back, worried for a second when his mind came up blank, then sighed in relief when something clicked into place. “I was at my dumb high school reunion. It sucked. I shouldn’t have gone.”

“I’m sorry to hear you had a bad time.” The doctor stuck close but pulled over a wheeled tray and started to organize items on its surface. His motions were meticulous but casual.

“You’re going through a lot of trouble to try not to spook me,” Calix observed. “Just give it to me straight, Doc. What happened to me?”

“You really don’t remember?”

“I don’t—”

“A few people saw you leaving with another man. You disappeared upstairs with him. Does that ring any bells?”

He’d what? Why would he have gone anywhere with anyone? No one at that school liked him. They all—

Oh.

The doctor noticed his change almost before he did, turning to set his palm on the center of his chest once more in a move meant both to hold him down and provide some sort of comfort.

Calix’s lungs constricted, and he gasped.

“You’re hyperventilating,” the doctor explained calmly. “It’s all right, Detective. It’s over. You’re safe now.”

“I…”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to say it. Not yet.”

Yet implied that eventually he would. As in, the doctor expected him to talk about it to other people and—

“No.” No, he was done being the social pariah. He’d put that role to bed years ago and he refused to allow anyone—even Heathe D’Leo—to drag him back to that place. Calix didn’t need or want the spotlight.

He knew all too well what happened to the people put there.

“Detective—”

“I won’t be pressing charges.” Even though it hurt like a mother fucker, Calix forced himself to shove up into a seated position, pushing against the doctor’s hand until he had no other choice but to let up.

It hurt, and he momentarily swayed, at risk of toppling off the table like an idiot.

The doctor caught him, his hands steady on his shoulders. “Breathe. There you go. Just breathe through it.” He held him still as Calix focused on quelling the pain in his rear.

“I’m okay,” Calix said, once he was certain he could sit there without passing out. He brushed the doctor's arms aside, smiling at him lightly to show that he appreciated the help even though a part of him was mortified. By all of this.

The only blessing was that the actual violence against him was a blur. There were blips of memory here and there, but nothing substantial, all more feelings than anything.

Feelings he would much rather bury deep inside and forget.

How ironic, considering how often he'd fantasized about something like this happening to him. But fantasies were safe. Controlled. He'd felt gross about even wanting those and now—

“Detective Valimir,” the doctor retreated a full step to give him space, “a horrendous crime was committed against you. It’s understandable that you’re a little confused, but—”

“I’m not confused,” he cut him off, gripping the edge of the table hard enough his knuckles went white. The pain was still bad, and he just wanted this to be over. Wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere to lick his wounds. He just had to make it through this first.

This, which was somehow more torturous than what'd been done to him in that classroom.

But maybe not more so than what he'd done to someone else in the parking lot that could be seen from the window in that room...

May the gods have mercy on that poor boy's soul.

Sister Grace, the head of the orphanage where Calix had spent most of his adolescence, had prayed for him when he'd been taken away. He'd never forget the look on her face, the pity in her eyes as she'd reached out for him. He'd explained the whole thing before the cops had arrived. Of course she'd believed him. She'd practically raised him, after all.

That was probably why it'd been too hard for her to bear. Why she hadn't been able to show up at the courtroom, not even once.

Why she hadn't even seen him off when he'd left for the Academy.

The thing was, Calix didn't blame her. Even if it had been a mistake, because of him, some guy was never going to walk again.

He deserved to be punished.

Foolishly, he'd believed all this time that's what giving up on his dreams had been. The punishment. But now he realized that wasn't the case.

Not only was he not going to allow himself to be thrust into the center of a brutal case again, he also wouldn't stoop so low as to take even more from the one person he'd hurt.

Because there was only one person who would send someone like Heathe to do something like that to Calix.

Honestly, he should just be grateful that was all that was done, and they hadn't also taken his life or a limb.

He should be, so he would be.

Simple as that.

Calix cleared his throat. "I appreciate what you're trying to do here, Doctor, but it won't be necessary. I won't be pressing charges because a crime hasn't been committed."

The doctor with the pretty eyes went still. "Excuse me?"

He steepled his fingers and set them in his lap. "It was consensual."

"Consensual?" his tone was dumbfounded.

He was probably changing his mind about Calix now. Probably considered him vile, like everyone else on this hell hole of a planet.

But that was fine, too.

After today, the two of them would never see each other again.

What did his opinion of him matter?

“You’re trying to claim that was sex between two consenting adults?” He motioned wildly at him. “You can’t see yourself right now, Detective, but if you could, you wouldn’t be spouting nonsense. You’re suffering from blood loss, and—”

“It was consensual,” he insisted firmly. “Things just got out of hand. We were drunk. That’s all.”

The doctor’s eyes narrowed. “Who is we? Who were you with?”

“Doesn’t matter.” He wasn’t going to be played that easily. “What happens now?”

The doctor pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, if you insist on this narrative—”

“I do.”

“—then I suppose, now I take a look at your injuries and patch you up as best I can. I’m meant to be using a rape kit, but—”

“No.”

He let out an annoyed breath. “You really must stop interrupting me, Detective.”

“So that you can convince me to change my mind?” Not a chance.

“No,” he surprised him by stating. “Because it’s rude and I don’t like it.”

Oh.

“Sorry.”

The doctor rolled a finger in the air at him. “Lay down on your stomach. It’ll hurt too much if you try to remove your pants on your own, so I’m going to have to do it for you.”

“My what?” He grabbed at his belt, only then realizing it was missing. With a frown, he glanced down at his pants...which weren’t his pants. “What am I wearing?”

Not pants at all, it turned out. Two dark brown aprons with dried paint smears on them were tied securely around his waist, covering his private areas from view.

“It was the only thing I could find,” the doctor told him, the apologetic and gentle tone from earlier no longer present. He pulled the wheeled table and stepped back in closer.

“You could find?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, grabbing a tube of cream and twisting off the cap as he spoke.

“I was the one who discovered you in the art room.”

“You were there?” His confusion deepened for some reason. He tried but couldn’t remember. The last thing he recalled was stepping into a room after Heathe and then...nothing.

“I was invited to the reunion, yes. I heard the sounds and got curious. By the time I found you, the assailant—my apologies, your consensual sexual partner —had already finished and was in the process of getting ready to leave. In my haste to check on you, he managed to get away.” He tipped his head at Calix. “Interesting that your lover didn’t stick around to make sure you were all right. If he’s your boyfriend, might I suggest breaking up with him?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” He hung his head, not wanting the other man to see how red his cheeks had gotten.

The doctor let out another sigh, this one sounding more annoyed than the last. “I already did a physical examination at the scene, Detective. There’s no need to be embarrassed.”

“Somehow, the fact that you’ve already seen me naked isn’t as comforting as I believe you intend for it to be.” Still, he forced himself to inhale deeply before lifting his chin back up. He gave a single, curt nod of his head. “All right. Let’s do this.”

“You seem to get over things rather quickly.” It was hard to tell if he was impressed by that or simply making an observation.

It was difficult, but Calix somehow managed to drape himself over the table, resting his head down on his folded arms. “I just process things and accept them as they are.”

“Accept them as they are?” He chuckled. “How very quaint.”

Calix angled his head to stare at the doctor as he stepped right up to the side of the table. “Doctor?”

“It wasn’t an insult.” The corner of his mouth turned up reassuringly. “Are you ready?”

“Yes—Wait.”

He quirked a brow.

“What’s your name?” Calix asked, hating how that sounded but needing to know. To save face, he decided to spin it into something funny, chuckling humorlessly as though he’d made a joke when they both knew he had not. “I’d just like to know the name of the guy who’s about to have his hands on my ass, that’s all.”

The doctor smiled back and then reached for the end of one of the aprons, not even bothering to untie it from around his waist.

Calix felt a gust of cold air stinging his torn flesh, but the doctor’s fingers were on him in a second, running numbing cream over him that worked instantly to soothe the burn.

He almost moaned. Would have, if not for the doctor’s next words.

“Aodhan Solace,” he introduced himself, kindly ignoring the way Calix’s breath hitched. “I look forward to working with you, Detective.”

He’d seen that name before, scrawled on the documents sent over by the chief about the case. There was a doctor who was meant to liaison with them to help make things run more smoothly.

What were the odds it happened to be the same doctor that was currently buried knuckles deep in Calix’s torn asshole?

He squeezed his eyes shut and rethought his earlier relief.

Had he thought it a good thing he hadn’t been murdered?

No, because at least then he wouldn't be in the process of dying right now.

A slow and agonizing death via mortification.

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“They aren’t happy to have been called here for nothing,” Aodhan said as he reentered the room, shutting the door at his back.

“Sorry. Thanks.” Calix was still on his stomach on the table, trying to hide his face from the doctor without making it too obvious. It’d taken over a half hour for the other man to log all of his injuries and treat them, and while the pain was gone, he’d been advised not to move for a while yet.

Honestly, as embarrassed as he still was, there was no way he was going to risk pushing himself back into that agonizing state of being, not if there was a way to avoid it. It’d been fine when he’d been getting something out of it—even if Heathe hadn’t realized he’d been getting Cal off as well—but now...

He probably seemed like a freak already. Since he kept insisting it’d been consensual sex gone wrong, Aodhan had offered to explain things to the officers who were waiting to speak with him.

“No problem. I imagine meeting one of your future coworkers under these circumstances is already more than enough. There’s no reason to feel humiliated, though, Detective. You’d be surprised by the kinds of things I see here on a daily basis.” He waited until Calix risked peeking out from his arms to smile brightly and added, “Consensual and otherwise.”

Cal groaned and covered his face all over again, not even caring if he was acting like a kid. Whatever drugs he’d been given to help with the pain—because it hadn’t just been a topical one, he was also currently hooked up to a floating IV and had been given a shot earlier—it wasn’t helping him keep his composure any.

“The damage wasn’t nearly as severe as I initially suspected,” Aodhan said, taking on that professional voice once more. He picked up a holopad tablet and began clicking away at the screen. “I’m prescribing a mild sleep aid and sun cream.”

“Sleep aid?” Calix frowned.

“Many people in your position find it difficult to get a good night's rest after...Well.”

He bristled. “Are you allowed to do that, Doctor? Make assumptions and prescribe medications based on them?”

Aodhan cocked his head. “Isn’t that basically my job? I take educated guesses to try and identify and then solve the problem. It’s not that far from what you do, Detective. I bet you enjoy that part as well, problem-solving. Am I right?”

He wasn’t wrong.

“You’re making me sound rather cold.” Cal felt that prickly of melancholy. Did the attractive doctor also dislike him?

“Really?” He seemed to consider it, pursing his lips before giving a single shake of his head. “That’s not how I see it. We see horrible things all the time. Of course lines have to be drawn in order to protect our mental health. We’re no good to anyone if we’re panicking or crying at every little thing.”

“Now it sounds like you have a thing against empathy.” That was a stretch, but Cal was admittedly on the defensive now that his mind was whispering the doctor probably hated him, the same as everyone else.

Hell, hadn’t he learned his lesson by now? Only hours ago, he’d followed Heathe to that room alone because he’d foolishly believed there could be someone on this

planet who didn't hate his guts. Look where that'd gotten him. And if Aodhan had been the one to find him, that meant he was also an alumni.

He knew who Calix was and what he'd supposedly done.

He had to.

If this was another trick, he refused to fall for it. He wouldn't let his guard down ever again, even if that meant he needed to be mean to the hot doctor—

“I don't see why either of us would need a thing like that to do our jobs properly,” Aodhan replied, cutting into Cal's thoughts. “I might even argue the exact opposite.”

He didn't sound offended or like he was joking. It was as though the doctor was taking the topic seriously, more so than Calix had meant for him to. It certainly didn't sound as though he was angry or judging him for his rude remark.

“You don't feel bad for me.” The realization came to him then, and Cal's brow furrowed. The man still peering down at the holopad wasn't the same one who'd rushed him into this room with careful words. “Is it because I told you it was consensual?”

The doctor didn't believe him, that much was apparent—mostly because the guy wasn't an idiot. But Calix's insecurities shifted, and he found himself scowling and pushing himself onto his hands and knees, determined to climb off the bed and get out of here.

A strong hand on his narrow back shoved him down, pinning him before he could go much of anywhere, however. A surprised breath whooshed out of him and Cal froze.

“You aren't very obedient, are you, Detective?”

“What?” Surely he’d misheard him...

Aodhan sighed, his hand still holding Cal in place. “You aren’t good at following instructions,” he reiterated. “Doctor’s orders were you rest, so where do you think you’re going?” He paused and tilted his head curiously. “I said the wrong thing just now, didn’t I. What was it? I assure you, it wasn’t my intention to scare you off.”

“Scare me—” Calix shook his head, vaguely wondering how they’d gotten to this odd conversation. “You didn’t scare me off.”

“But I upset you.”

“Yes.” It hadn’t been a question, but he answered anyway.

“And why is that?”

“Could you...” He inhaled through his nose and exhaled slowly out his mouth.

“Could you remove your hand first?”

Aodhan pulled away and took a pointed step back. “Apologies, Detective.”

“It’s fine.” It wasn’t, mostly because of his swift reaction to the doctor. It’d been a long time since Cal had been physically attracted to someone.

There’d been that one person during the incident, brief and going nowhere. After the incident, all of his attention had gone into proving himself at the Academy. The three years since graduation had been no different. Because of his record, he’d always have something to prove.

He couldn’t even be mad about it. Even if it’d been an accident, he’d still cost someone their future.

It was only right that he pay the price for that.

“Will you explain what it is I said that upset you now?” Aodhan was watching him closely, and then observed, “You blush a lot, did you know that, Detective?”

“No, because typically that isn’t the case.”

“So you’re implying I’m the cause?”

“No, that’s—” Shit. Calix squeezed his eyes shut and then tried again. “I got upset because it sounded like you were dismissing me.” He recalled how they’d gotten here in the first place. “Since you were at the reunion—”

“Where I found you in the midst of getting raped?”

“Yes, well—” He froze. “Wait. No. No, that’s not...”

“Don’t worry,” Aodhan reassured. “Whatever your reasoning, I won’t tell the police you lied. They can’t do anything without your permission anyway.” Something interesting flickered in his pink eyes, but Cal couldn’t place it. “Is it because you know your attacker? Are you trying to protect him?”

“You know why I don’t want to say anything.” Cal stared him down, but when the other man didn’t waver, doubts started to creep in. “...Don’t you?”

“How would I know that?”

“You were at the reunion,” he repeated. “Everyone knows what happened to me at that school.”

“Oh, I wasn’t a student of Gradient High. I was there last night for someone else.”

Calix almost didn't want to believe him. "How old are you?"

"We're the same age," Aodhan said, smiling when Cal gave him a funny look. "I pulled up your medical chart, Detective. I had to in order to treat you. If what you're really curious about is how I seem not to know what horrible crime you could have committed as a child that would lead to you deserving to be raped, there's a simple explanation for that."

"Could you stop throwing that word around so cavalierly?"

"Why? It's what was done to you. Do you feel pity for the victims you have to seek out justice for whenever you're handed a sexual assault case? Is that it? You pity them, so naturally you assume that's what I'm doing with you now, and you're more embarrassed because of it? Does that emasculate you, Detective? The fact that another man—"

"Stop," his voice firmed, taking on an edge of authority. He typically only used that tone when he was interrogating someone, only able to call on that part of himself when he was deep into work mode, but it slipped out of him now, along with a twist of indignation he wasn't aware he was even capable of feeling. "It's got nothing to do with the person's gender. Or even the act itself, for that matter."

"No?"

"No," he snapped. "And if you knew the story, you wouldn't be so clueless."

"So fill me in." Aodhan leaned back against the counter that lined the wall on that side of the room, crossing his arms as though they were about to have a casual conversation and weren't discussing something as atrocious as rape and assault and battery.

“You want me to tell a complete stranger all about the worst moment of my life?” Calix asked incredulously.

Aodhan shrugged. “I’ve already seen you naked and...in a compromised position. I’d hardly call us strangers at this point.”

He winced. “How much did you, uh, see, exactly? Not here, obviously. I mean...”

“When I found you?” The doctor thought it over, clearly picturing the events from earlier.

Cal had to drop his gaze, uncomfortable knowing that the other man was literally thinking about him lying on the floor with his clothes torn off and—

“There was a lot of blood and other fluids,” Aodhan said matter-of-factly. “Your asshole was torn, and he’d left you on your back with your legs spread wide. Considering all the bruises and the fresh and dried tears on your face, anyone would have been able to guess what’d happened to you.”

“You said he was still there?” Cal tried to focus on that detail instead of the rest of it.

“Yes, he was adjusting his pants. I tried to stop him, but he left before I could and, frankly, I was more interested in you anyway. I assessed the damage and tried to wake you, but you were unresponsive for a long time.”

“And how did you get me out of there?” He couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of asking sooner.

“An ambulance, of course.”

He groaned. “Tell me the entire party didn’t see me like that?”

“I made sure your unmentionables were covered,” Aodhan stated. “They didn’t get to see anything they didn’t have a right to see. As far as what was done to you, all that was said was you were assaulted and found unconscious.”

That was something at least. Calix had long since learned to be grateful for the little things. He might not be ashamed because a man had overpowered him, but he wasn’t naïve. He’d come here for a job, and if word got out that he’d become a victim of a sexual crime on his very first night back, he’d lose face in front of the rest of the department. He had to spend however long it took to solve this thing, working with the local police force. He couldn’t afford to elicit doubts right out the gate.

Though, now anyone who did hear of it might think he was too weak to hold his own in a fight...

Shit.

Damage control. That’s what he needed. He’d worry about that later and come up with a plan before his arrival at the office tomorrow.

“Why did he do that to you, Calix?” Aodhan said his name and a shiver ran down Cal’s spine at the rich sound of it passing his rosy lips.

It shouldn’t affect him that much, didn’t make any sense that it did, but any thoughts of refusing to answer fled his mind, and before he knew it, he was telling a virtual stranger his biggest shame.

“In the twelfth grade, I made a mistake,” Calix began. “I hit another kid with my hovercar. He came out of nowhere. It happened in the student parking lot, so there was video footage of him leaping in front of my vehicle, trying to get a rise out of me. I was startled, and while moving for the break, my foot slipped and ended up hitting the gas instead.”

There were several cameras that had captured the incident, and while they obviously hadn't been able to film Calix's feet, the black box inside his car had also provided proof that he'd panicked. It could be heard in his voice during and after, and it'd captured him immediately darting from the car to go check on the student.

"I didn't run or anything like that, I took responsibility. Unfortunately for me, even though the law believed me, the rest of the student body refused to."

"Why?" Aodhan asked.

"Because it was Nero Quentin." He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "Do you know him?"

"I do not."

"You probably would have, if not for that day. He already had a full-ride scholarship to Greatly Academy. His future was all set, he was going to go pro."

"What sport?"

"Fly Ball."

Aodhan hummed. "Lots of running in that. What, did you break one of his legs?"

"I paralyzed him from the neck down," Calix confessed. "For life."

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“This is the only video footage taken around the area and time the body was presumably dumped.” Bruce, the police chief of Emergence Emerald Precinct, hit play on the fuzzy black and white video footage they’d all already seen a dozen times over.

The one that gave them nothing.

“What the fuck happened to you last night?” Troya hissed between pressed lips, trying not to be noticed. He sat at Calix’s left side at the long table in the meeting room, pretending to flip through the information being presented on the screen at the front and on each of their holopads. “Word is some fuckers got the jump on you on the third floor. Seriously?”

“You know how it goes. Always trust what you hear on the streets.” Calix knew Troya didn’t like him, but the feeling had long since been mutual.

All he had to do was make it through this one last case and he could quit. Leave the International Police Force—better known as the I.P.F—and start his real life.

Whatever the hell that meant.

Honestly, he didn’t know. All he knew was he was tired of constantly carrying his past around. He felt bad for what had happened, but he’d paid his dues.

Flashbacks from last night came to him in snippets. Harsh breaths against the curve of his ear. The smell of something woodsy and fresh. Hands groping all over...

It'd been impossible to sleep until he'd caved and taken two of the sleeping pills the doctor had prescribed, but by then it'd already been three AM, and the clock across the room read eight forty-seven.

Troya gave him a frustrated look. "Did you at least get some licks in yourself, or did you roll over and let those assholes beat you up for free?"

So he assumed it'd been multiple people. Calix thought maybe he should feel grateful that his partner at least didn't think of him as entirely pathetic and useless. Not that the younger Inspector had ever said anything along those lines before. If anything, Cal's fast rise through the ranks probably kept Troya from stooping that low.

That's how people were. The second they had cold, hard facts, they tended to leave the truth alone. But when they didn't, when they were able to sniff even the slight hint of a potential lie...

Ostracization.

Calix and Nero had been spotted by multiple witnesses having a massive fight less than an hour prior to the accident.

Fact.

Nero had a tendency to take things too far.

Fact.

Calix was the saint of the school, the guy people turned to for help.

Fact.

Nero was a bully.

Fact.

Calix was a Straight A student.

Fact.

Nero would have flunked out a long time ago if not for his mommy's money and his ability to throw a ball really, really far.

Fact.

Calix had only just gotten his license three days beforehand.

Fact.

Nero had jumped in front of the moving vehicle.

Fact.

Calix's foot had slipped on the gas.

...Fact?

Fortunately for him, the courts had voted in his favor. But as far as public opinion went...Calix was a pariah. He'd gone from friendly boy next door to crawling through the mud faster than he could blink, and to this day, he still didn't entirely understand why.

Well, that was a lie.

It was because Nero's mother had been in the process of running for mayor of the city—again—and her squeaky-clean public image had outshone his. When she'd called for justice, cried on camera, and demanded he pay for what he'd done to her son, the world had wept for her.

Hell, even Cal had felt the power of her speeches. His guilt had tripled every time he accidentally heard one on the radio or TV.

Really, with the kind of power she'd wielded, he should have gone to prison, no matter what reasons he may or may not have had for slamming into her kid. No matter the fact he'd gotten testimony from a renowned doctor in his favor. He was gearing himself up for that end, in fact, when by some twist of fate, the report on his hovercar had come back indicating there was a problem with his pedals.

The courts and Nero's mom turned their attention to the company that'd made the car, but the damage to Cal's reputation was already done.

Case in point, the way Amory Paige had been staring at him from across the table ever since he'd entered the room. Despite his good guy persona, Cal hadn't had any real friends—that was why it was so easy for them all to turn on him. He'd been friendly with everyone, but close with none, and that line in the sand had cost him everything. This was no different. He and Amory had maybe spoken a handful of times in the past; she'd been in the same graduating class.

She'd witnessed his whole fall from grace.

Had she been close with Nero back then?

Was she still?

Did she blame Calix?

Cal looked over and met her gaze before replying to Troya, “It wasn’t for free.”

He’d kept his voice down, but she’d caught what he was saying. Amory gave no reaction, however. Making it impossible to tell if she knew about last night’s plans, let alone guess if she’d been a part of them.

It didn’t matter.

Nero had to have been the one to send Heathe. After the incident, he’d been shipped off planet for intensive physical therapy in the hopes the diagnosis could be overturned. With how advanced technology was, everyone had been certain with the type of coin his family had, they’d find a way to get him mobile again in no time.

Last Calix had heard, they were still looking.

He shouldn’t be thinking about this now. After last night, surely he was the talk of the town again, anyway. It didn’t matter why she was staring him down—whether it was for what had happened eight years ago or eighteen hours ago.

Calix needed to focus. The second this case was done, he could finally be free of it all.

“That’s what I told everyone at the reunion,” Troya surprised him by saying then. “That it had to have been a group of guys that got the jump on you.”

He sent him a questioning look, knowing better than to assume that was done out of the goodness of his partner’s heart.

“We may be trying to keep a low profile now,” Troya explained, “but it’ll be all over the news before long. Everyone and their grandmother will know why we’re really here, and the last thing I need is for them to doubt our capabilities because you got

jumped your first night back on planet.” He sent him a sideways glance and then added, “And, actually, we both know you’re not that easy to take down.”

Calix had been drugged, but he didn’t bother pointing that out now. Instead, he chose to make them both even more uncomfortable by stating the obvious. “That almost sounded like you complimenting me just now.”

“I think you’re a dick with a not so secret death wish,” Troya stated. “But that also makes you hella good at your job.”

“Something to share with the class, boys?” Amory called them out, loud enough to cut off Bruce and catch the attention of the other three officers in the room with them.

“Show some respect,” Bruce snapped. “They’re I.P.F. agents.”

“They’re taking over our case after all of the hard work we’ve already put into it.” She glared between the two of them. “It’s funny, I don’t remember you as being the lazy type, Valimir. What? Can’t do your own legwork anymore? Have to come here and steal—”

“If you’d been capable of solving this,” Troya cut her off, settling back in his seat with a roll of his icy blue eyes, “you would have already. That’s why the case was handed over.”

Before she could say something biting back, Calix opted to attempt smoothing things over. They were going to have to work together on this whether they liked it or not, and he’d prefer if they at least pretended to get along in the interim.

“Similar murders have been logged on other planets in a neighboring galaxy,” Calix said, keeping his voice as friendly as possible with the woman openly glaring at him. “There’s a pattern, and that pattern led us here.” He tapped his finger to the linoleum

table top. “We all want this killer brought to justice.”

She snorted. “Funny, coming from you.”

“Great,” Troya grumbled. “Looks like another one of your fans from back in your glory days.”

Calix pressed his lips together but didn’t ordain that with a response.

“That’s enough, Paige!” Bruce’s cheeks were bright red. “Outside, now!”

She got up without another word and followed the chief into the hall, slamming the door behind herself, leaving them alone with the other two officers.

“What’s her problem?” Reed leaned over and asked the other officer at his right, a man named Saz.

“Uh,” Saz glanced at Cal and then cleared his throat, “it’s—”

“She doesn’t like me,” Calix answered for him, holding their gazes without flinching.

Reed frowned. “What? Why? Isn’t this the first time the two of you are meeting?”

“He’s an alumni of Gradient,” Troya filled in, and they both watched as the officer seemed to put the pieces together.

Those pieces, anyway.

“Oh, so you two knew each other in high school.” Reed laughed. “What? Bad breakup or something?”

Cal's mouth quirked. "Or something."

At least it was nice knowing he wasn't some fucked up urban legend. Between Aidan not knowing the story, and now Reed, it seemed like Cal had a better chance of getting through this so long as he avoided anyone from back in the day.

His partner must have realized it'd be easier for them both if that were the case as well, because he remained quiet at his side. When Troya didn't out him, he changed the subject back to the matter at hand.

"Is the head still missing?" he asked, and both officers straightened on the other side of the table, back to business instantly.

"Yes," Saz replied. "We still haven't been able to locate it." He flicked the screen on Bruce's device so the slide projected onto the wall showed a headless corpse tucked in an alleyway. "The body belonged to Williams Gorty. It's believed he was murdered elsewhere and dumped here."

Williams Gorty, aged fifty-five. Father of one, and the son of the late Edmund Gorty, who'd passed recently after a major surgery. According to the reports, the surgery had been a success, but a blood clot had moved to Edmund's brain and killed him in the middle of the night.

There was no suspected foul play; the only reason his death was important to this case was because of his son's presence at the hospital.

Hopeful Heart Hospital.

"Every victim found had a family member or close friend get treatment at Hopeful Heart," Saz continued. "But aside from that, we've failed to find any sort of connection between the victims. None of the illnesses are the same, so they were

treated in different branches by different medical teams. Even the way the victims were killed differs.”

“Except for the last two,” Reed reminded.

“Right, that.”

“It’s just strange that it’s not even the same department,” Troya said, going over his notes with a pinched brow. “Are we sure speaking with this doctor is even going to be useful?”

Aodhan Solace. He was talking about Aodhan Solace.

The guy who’d not only seen Calix at his lowest but had also saved him and patched him up afterward.

It was going to be so fucking uncomfortable having to see him again after all of that.

Especially after having the doctors fingers shoved up his torn hole, rubbing ointment on his stinging flesh...Had he noticed the way Cal had squirmed and flattened against the table to hide when his dick had twitched and threatened to harden?

Good Light, he prayed he hadn’t. But when had he ever been lucky enough for things to go his way? In the off chance Aodhan knew exactly what Calix had been feeling while he’d been treated by a medical professional simply doing his job, he was to be avoided at all costs.

Cal liked pain.

He did not like discomfort.

“Maybe we should go straight to the director instead,” he suggested. “Surely the hospital director will be more helpful.”

“Titus Mercer is busy,” Reed told them. “He’s the one who assigned Aodhan as the hospital’s representative. You’ll be able to speak with him, but he’s not as readily available as Doctor Solace.”

He’d almost forgotten. No, giving Titus Mercer a wider berth than even the doctor was for the best.

How long had it been since he’d seen the now director? Years, for sure, but he couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment they’d last been in the same room together. Maybe it’d been at the trial, when Titus had surprised him by testifying in his defense rather than against it. As Nero’s surgeon, everyone had anticipated otherwise.

“He spoke at your hearing, didn’t he?” Reed asked, not sounding like he was judging. “I think the chief mentioned it before.”

“Yeah.” He’d spoken in Calix’s defense, had been a big reason why the jury had voted him not guilty. The two hadn’t interacted much back then, but Cal could still recall the way Titus Mercer had made him feel when they were alone in a room together for the first and only time.

Like his soul was being sucked out of his chest and consumed by the damned.

He shivered.

Titus had come along, and Cal had forgotten all about pretty boy Heathe D’Leo. There’d been something almost intoxicating about the older man—who’d been a brain surgeon back then and not the director of an entire hospital. Even though he’d confirmed the point of impact coincided with Cal’s claim that he’d slammed on the

breaks as soon as he'd realized what was happening, he'd never been able to tell if Titus actually believed him or not.

Which made being around him dangerous.

Probably still as gorgeous as ever, but dangerous nonetheless.

Troya snorted. "I find it hard to believe a guy who sits behind a desk all day is busier than a legitimate heart surgeon."

Aodhan Solace was gorgeous in his own right too. And he wasn't just any heart surgeon either, a renowned one. A quick internet search on the guy had sent Cal spiraling down a rabbit hole of articles about the man's godlike skills with a scalpel.

Okay.

So maybe the flashbacks hadn't been the only thing keeping him up last night.

But Calix was chalking it up to the adrenaline rush and the drugs. He'd been vulnerable and out of it, that was all. That was why he'd felt such an instant connection with the doctor, because Aodhan had saved him and helped him. Because he'd still been trapped in that fuzzy state of being after the ordeal, where his brain wasn't capable of separating pain, pleasure, and a man just trying to do his job and not meaning to elicit either in him. Now that he was in his right state of mind, there was no way he'd have the same reactions.

Cal didn't do crushes, not since the one he'd had on Heathe in high school—because the mix of strange sensations he'd felt toward Titus Mercer couldn't be considered a crush.

At least this time, he could be certain his taste had improved. Going off everything

he'd read about Aodhan well into the early morning hours, the guy was a relative saint. Nothing like the psychotic rapist Heathe turned out to be.

"We have four bodies and—" Sax stopped talking when the door opened and Bruce stepped back inside.

"One of the heads was just discovered," he told them solemnly, directing his comments to Cal. "My men are securing the area, and I've sent Amory on ahead."

"We'll split the team," Calix suggested and stood. "Troya, go with Officers Binks and Craig to the hospital and meet with Doctor Solace. I'll head to the scene with the Chief."

"Sure thing." Troya never argued when it came to orders regarding the job. At least in that sense, the two of them didn't make for terrible partners. He collected his things and motioned to the other cops in the room. "Let's go, boys."

On the way out of the station, Cal told himself he'd made the choice based on what was best for the case.

Not at all because he was avoiding the sexy doctor and the shame he felt whenever he thought of how he'd seen him naked, afraid, and at his absolute lowest.

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“Sorry about Amory,” Bruce said once the two of them were on the road. “She’s a good kid, just a little misguided at times, that’s all.” He chuckled. “She’s opinionated. Actually, I think the two of you will get on great once you get to know one another.”

“Are you insinuating I’m opinionated? I’m not sure I fall under that category.” Calix had known Bruce since high school. He’d been the officer on his case back then, and the one person who’d truly stood in his corner from start to finish.

He’d believed him when no one else had, and that’d always meant a great deal to Cal.

In his mid-fifties now, Bruce had moved up the ladder and been promoted to Police Chief only two years ago. He was the run-of-the-mill family man with a loving wife, two kids, and a furry pet. Pictures of them all littered the desk in his office, and Calix had easily recognized their faces from the yearly holiday card Bruce sent him.

Technically, once you joined the I.P.F, you had to renounce explicit loyalty to your home world, but that didn’t mean breaking all ties. Calix had kept in touch with Bruce over the years, looked up to him even to this day. That was a major reason he’d agreed to take on this case as his last before quitting.

Calix couldn’t give two shits about Emergence, but he owed Bruce a lot, and helping him catch this killer and bring them to justice was a good way to pay off past debts.

“I’ve reminded her of the evidence,” Bruce said. “What happened back then wasn’t your doing. I know you still carry it with you, but it’s time, kid. Let it go. It was a faulty vehicle and you were an eighteen-year-old scared out of your wits.”

“Tell that to everyone else who remembers my face plastered all over the news,” Cal drawled, glancing out the window as they drove through the city.

For a moment, it was quiet, and then Bruce broke the silence. “I heard about what happened last night.”

Calix bristled, waiting to see what kind of gossip had spread.

“How many of them jumped you?” he sounded angry. “You sent the police away last night without giving them any details, but I’m sure you recognized them. Assault is a serious offense. You shouldn’t let them get away with it.”

So the assault story was holding, that was good. Better than everyone knowing the truth, at least.

“How much did the doctor tell them?” Calix couldn’t help but ask, pretending not to care one way or the other even though that was a lie.

“Aodhan told my guys that you were trying to be a martyr and let the thugs who beat you get off scot-free. He mentioned you thought you deserved what happened to you, and that it was within your rights not to press charges.” Bruce gave him a once over before returning his eyes to the road. “Got to say though, you look fine to me. What, did they just avoid your face or something?”

Right, because if he’d been beaten up by more than one person, he’d at the very least have a split lip. Especially since an ambulance had been called for him.

“The doctor feared I may have a few broken ribs,” Cal lied through his teeth. “That was why he insisted I get wheeled out of there. Fortunately for me, that’s not the case. There’s just severe bruising around my midsection.” Knowing that wasn’t nearly good enough to sell the story, he added, “Aodhan found me before they could

do any worse than kick me a few times.”

“Well, I’m grateful to him that he did,” Bruce said, seemingly believing it. “I was also glad when he was suggested as our liaison with the hospital. Aodhan is a fantastic doctor and charismatic as well. Everyone who meets him ends up liking him. He’ll be useful to the investigation.”

“You really think our killer has a connection to the hospital?” Calix asked, glad they were veering back toward a safe topic. Lying wasn’t a problem for him, but he worried the longer they spoke about last night's events, the better the chance of him slipping up and spilling the truth.

“A group of the medical staff traveled to the planet Vitality recently for a wedding. Would you guess that’s around the same time as when the third murder was committed?”

“Can’t be a coincidence.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Bruce pulled into a mostly empty parking lot where only a handful of police vehicles could be seen. “One of those staff members ended up arrested the day after the wedding for a murder. We thought perhaps it was him at first, but then the fourth kill happened.”

“Why couldn’t it be him?” Calix undid his belt as soon as they came to a stop in front of a dense line of trees and a single dirt path.

“He was still being detained in Vitality,” Bruce replied as they got out and headed toward the path where another officer Cal hadn’t met yet was waiting to greet them. “Something about his case tangling up with charges being brought against their Imperial Heir.”

Calix let out a low whistle. It was rare for an Imperial to be caught doing anything wrong—usually because they had enough power and money to make people look the other way. “Who’d they piss off to make that happen?”

“No clue. But it’s not looking good for Lyra Diar. Guess being an Imperial isn’t the get-out-of-jail-free card we always believed it to be.” He stopped in front of the other officer. “Brents.”

“Afternoon, sir,” Brents, a rookie officer by the looks of him, gave a curt nod to Cal, “Detective. If you’ll follow me, sirs. We’ve cordoned off the area, but so far there doesn’t seem to be anything amiss.”

“You mean aside from the severed head?” Bruce drawled, rolling his eyes behind the younger guy’s back, smiling when Cal noticed.

“Well, yes,” Brents said nervously, “there’s that, sir.”

The path led to a small clearing where a single towering decer tree with glittering orange leaves stood. Beneath it, clearly staged, was the head of the fourth victim, Williams Gorty. It’d begun to rot, the smell and the sight ghastly as they approached.

Bruce covered his nose and gagged a little. “Never gets easier, does it?”

“We’ve already taken photographs and tissue samples.” Amory stepped away from the small group of officers standing nearby and approached. “His eyes have been removed and his lips were sewn shut, but even with the rot setting in, we were able to confirm Mr. Gorty’s identity.”

Calix pulled a small, clear orb the size of a billiards ball from his right pocket and set it on the grass between his feet. The object made a whirring sound and then rolled forward, straight for the head. “N.I.M. will run a detailed forensics assessment.”

The N.I.M. was a useful tool given to all detectives in the force. It was a small AI that connected to Demeter Station, the largest knowledge hub in the universe, and could run all sorts of imaging scans within seconds.

“Have you contacted Meadows?” Bruce asked her. “I want to introduce him to Cal, since this is his case now.”

“Yes, sir, he’s on his way.”

“Mitri Meadows is our lead forensic scientist,” Bruce explained. “He’s a bit eccentric, but he gets the job done. Actually, he was recommended to us by Aodhan when our last scientist retired. He’s a big Effy fan.”

“Who?” Amory frowned.

“Effy Gar. He’s a Fly Ball player. Calix loves him.”

“Not anymore,” Cal corrected.

“Come on,” Bruce clicked his tongue at him. “You can’t keep letting the past control your life like this.”

“He’s right,” Amory surprised them both by agreeing. Until she looked him dead in the eye and added, “Only the guilty can’t let go.”

“Officer Paige,” Bruce scolded, but she merely shrugged, hands resting on her belt buckle.

“I mean it. He’s innocent, right? It’s about time he acted like it. That’s all I’m saying.”

It was obvious Bruce didn't believe her, but he chose to pretend, turning back to Calix. He slapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "That's the right idea. Get back out there and live a little. You've worked hard these past seven years. It's time for you to have a little fun. Take a break, go on some dates—"

Cal brushed him off. "I am not going on a date with your forensic scientist, Bruce," Calix stated dryly, only for someone to clear their throat behind them.

A man dressed in gray slacks and a buttoned navy shirt stood there holding a black case in his left hand. His hair was an interesting shade of silver that seemed to sparkly yellow and purple when it caught the light. The badge dangling from his neck by a violet lanyard explained who he was with a photo and his name, and he smiled politely once he had their attention.

"I typically prefer to be introduced to the men I'm being volunteered to go out with, but in this case, I'm willing to make an exception—After my date with that guy over there." He motioned toward the tree and then held out his free hand. "Nice to meet you, Detective. I'm Mitri Meadows."

It was on the tip of Cal's tongue to reply with, not interested, but that wouldn't be entirely fair to the other guy. He'd walked in on them talking about him behind his back, after all. "Calix Valimir."

N.I.M. finished up and sent a report to Calix's multi-slate, the ding interrupting whatever weirdness had been about to transpire. He pulled away and clicked the screen on the small rectangular device, scanning through the information just collected.

"There's something under his tongue," he announced, moving toward the head. One of the other lingering officers held out a box of gloves and he took a pair, slipping into them as he crouched down in front of the grotesque remains of Williams Gorty.

Since the lips were sewn shut, it wasn't as simple as sticking his fingers in there to recover the object, but he took a close look at all of the visible marks.

“According to N.I.M.,” he explained once he felt the others step up behind him, “the lips were sewn first, then the left eardrum and the right were punctured in that order. Finally, the eyes were taken. His throat was cut last, meaning he was alive throughout all of that, though it's unclear if he was awake for it or not.”

“Let's hope not,” Amory stated. “Poor bastard.”

“Poor bastard that liked touching his children behind closed doors,” Mitri drawled almost absently, snapping a pair of gloves on himself with a bit of flourish.

Cal glanced at him over his shoulder with a frown.

“What? You haven't heard?” Mitri glanced between them. “Seriously? It's all over the news.”

Bruce swore and stormed off. He could be heard making a call as he disappeared back down the path, no doubt on his way to check if what the scientist was saying was true.

Calix stood. “Fill me in.”

“Sure thing, Detective.” Mitri switched places with him so he could get to work while he spoke. “According to the reports, it was discovered that our friend here liked to take the edge off by playing games with his youngest daughter. Games that typically involved the removal of clothing and inappropriate touching.”

“What about the oldest?” Amory asked.

Mitri shook his head and swabbed Gorty's ears. "There's no evidence he did the same to the oldest, but reporters are coming up with theories."

"His oldest was in and out of the hospital frequently," Calix said. "She wouldn't make for an easy target."

"The youngest, however, would have been swept to the side by the rest of the family and medical staff. Attention always falls on the sick one," Mitri agreed. "They were given proof in the form of photographs taken on hidden cameras. Obviously the worst of it is blurred since they weren't about to post that on national television."

"You trying to say reporters have souls?" Amory made a shocked sound.

Mitri chuckled. "Just telling you what I saw on my way here, that's all." He stood. "I'm all set. Have this bagged and moved to the station. I'll go on ahead and prepare for it."

"You heard the man." Amory motioned to the two officers standing nearby who quickly got to work. "Anything important you think you should tell us now?"

"I think most of the important stuff already came from the Detective's fancy device," Mitri stated, tutting down at the orb as it rolled to a stop near Cal's feet. "Thanks for taking over my job, N.I.M."

The device beeped as though it understood, but really it was just a programmed response to hearing its name called.

"It's the end of the universe as we know it." Mitri sighed and then set his hands on his hips, that friendly smile back in place full force. "Anyway, since the chief seems busy, want to ride back to the station with me? We can count it as our first date if you'd like."

Calix was in the process of trying to decide if that was meant as a joke or not when a deep sense of dread suddenly overcame him. He sucked in a sharp breath, turning toward a spot in the tree line along with the others who must have felt it too.

“What the hell?” Mitri’s brow furrowed. “Did anyone hear anything?”

“No,” Amory answered, eyes scanning their surroundings, “but I definitely feel it.”

“We’re being watched.” It wasn’t the first time Cal had felt someone’s attention, though he couldn’t recall it ever being this...potent before. Every nerve ending he had was screaming there was danger and he should get the hell out of there.

Which of course he wasn’t going to do.

Troya’s earlier assessment about his death wish came back to him, and he almost laughed. His partner would get a kick out of what he was planning on doing next for sure.

The blaster at his left side slipped out of its holster a second before he eased closer to the trees.

“Are you sure you should do that?” Mitri asked. “What if it’s a predatory animal? This forest is known for zem sightings. I’ve done autopsies on a few of the unfortunate souls who came into contact with them. It’s not pretty.”

“Stay here,” Amory ordered Cal, then stepped up to Calix’s side. “I’ll go check it out.”

“We’ll do it together,” he corrected. This was his case, he wasn’t going to stand around twiddling his thumbs simply because of a bad feeling.

“He’s right,” she said, “about the zem.”

“I don’t suppose you brought any zem spray with you?”

She shook her head.

“Too bad.” Calix motioned her forward. “There’s a chance it’s the killer and he’s come back to the scene to get a rise out of us.”

“By discreetly watching from within the trees?”

“Not so discreetly since we were able to sense his eyes on us.”

“Can’t disagree there.” She frowned. “Isn’t it kind of weird though? I mean, he obviously knows we’re onto him. Why is he still watching us instead of running?”

Cal took another step forward. It was either a taunt or some idiot hiker had stumbled on them and was too busy freaking out to use common sense and get out of there. It wouldn’t explain the bad feeling they were all getting, but a feeling was just that. It wasn’t proof of anything.

“Let’s go ask them and find out,” he suggested, and that was all the warning he gave before he took off into the woods with Amory hot on his heels.

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Whoever it was they were chasing, they were fast.

And quiet.

Hell, maybe it really was nothing, or Mitri was right and they were running after an animal. His lungs burned as he pushed himself further, the feeling of something heavy in his chest calling him forward.

By the time he burst through the clearing, he was already alone.

“Amory?” he risked calling out to her, figuring even if they didn’t know who they were after, whoever had been watching was well aware of their presence. When he didn’t get a response back and couldn’t make out the sound of footsteps, he silently cursed. Had she located their suspect? Was that why they’d been separated?

Cal took a step back, planning on finding her, when the feeling strengthened. His skin prickled as his instincts screamed at him to turn tail and flee. His heart raced as he ignored it, eyes catching on a large tree trunk.

Was there someone hiding behind there?

While he was distracted, someone snuck up from behind and shoved him. He stumbled, forehead whacking against the tree he’d been staring at. Stars instantly sparked as his vision winked, and he felt a trickle of blood roll down the bridge of his nose.

Strong hands took advantage of his dazed state, shoving him harder against the bark

and capturing his wrists. His arms were twisted, hands pinned at his narrow back. Cal fought, but there was a good chance he was dealing with a mild concussion or...something else.

Something that was causing his heart to flutter oddly.

He froze, realizing with a start that there was something wrong. Had hitting his head messed with his wiring? Sure, he liked pain, but he had no idea who it was behind him right now, or what they intended.

So why were his nipples suddenly hypersensitive to the way the fabric of his shirt rubbed against them when the man at his back pressed in close?

“You have a bad habit of following people into secluded places, Calix.” The voice was low, not entirely unfamiliar, but not one he could place either.

“Heathe?” Cal had followed him to the art room, was that what he meant? This had to be Heathe, right? “Wasn’t once enough?”

“Doubtful.”

He swallowed. “I won’t let you get away with it a second time. Consider the first as payment for what I’ve done. But that’s as far as it goes.”

“Payment?” he chuckled, and even though he had to be Heathe, Calix felt like maybe he was wrong.

But he couldn’t be.

Could he?

It didn't matter who this person was, they were a clear threat.

“You dropped this.” The man at his back held up Cal's gun just within view and clicked his tongue at him chidingly. “You should be more careful with your things. Wouldn't want to get into trouble again, now would we? You've barely managed to survive through your past mistakes.”

“Heathe, enough.” Was he going to shoot him? It was a very real possibility.

“You're the one who followed me, remember? I was minding my own business, keeping a safe distance. Controlling myself.”

“You were spying on a crime scene,” he corrected.

“I love it when you're like this, hot and bothered. Unsure of yourself but insisting otherwise. When you put on that front that everything is fine? It's endearing. You have no idea how badly I want inside of you,” the man breathed, hot breath gusting across Cal's nape. “Unfortunately, there's only so long I can keep your officer friends at bay, so we're going to have to settle for what we can get.”

Calix's nerves spiked when the man went quiet, but when he tested the hold on his wrists, the grip held firm. “What are you doing?”

“If I can't get my cock inside of you today, I'll get another part of me in there instead.” He reached for Cal's front, and when Cal bucked and struggled, tsked at him. “Now, now. You can't act like that. Let's get you in the proper mood, shall we?”

“Get—” Calix felt a rush of heat course through him so suddenly it effectively shut him up. Tension coiled in his gut, blood rushing lower until he felt his balls twitch and his dick stir. “No. Shit.” He set his forehead against the rough bark of the tree and willed the hard-on away even as his body betrayed him and it grew.

“Look at you,” the man pressed his face against Cal’s in a way that prevented him from turning to see him, “already so thick and needy. You’re straining in your pants. Let me help you.”

“Don’t.” Calix ground his teeth together as his pants were undone, internally struggling with himself. He wanted to resist, but his hips flicked forward as if seeking the man’s touch, and his mind was growing foggy with each passing second. “Did you drug me somehow?”

He went over everything he’d consumed that day, but couldn’t find a moment where he’d left his food or drink alone long enough something could have been slipped into it.

“It’s no drug,” the man explained, settling Cal’s tight jeans over his thighs so his front and back were exposed to the cool summer breeze. “It’s pheromones.”

“What?” It felt like he was about to burst out of his skin, like there was a heavy weight tied to the parts between his thighs, and the only way to relieve himself would be to come. No, it was more than that. He needed— “Stop it.”

“Should I be kind and open you up properly this time?” the man purred.

“Fuck off.”

“Wrong answer.” He hit Calix’s ass with the blaster, though it didn’t really hurt because it was the side of the gun. Another silent moment passed and then he kicked Cal’s legs as far apart as the restraints of his pants would allow, and lowered the weapon.

“Stop!” Cal’s nails dug into the man’s hand still encircling his wrists as he felt the blunt tip of the blaster jab against his puckered hole.

“If you squeeze like that, it’ll only hurt more,” the man warned, though it didn’t sound like he cared much about causing Cal more pain. “Come on, I got it nice and wet for you.”

It occurred to Calix the man had been licking the gun during those quiet pauses and he shuddered. While he was coming to that realization, the man managed to notch the tip of the weapon into his entrance. Even though he knew it was true and it would only make it worse, Cal tensed up as the metal was slowly forced into his unprepared body.

“You’re gobbling it up,” the man praised, his thumb drawing what were clearly meant to be soothing circles across the back of Cal’s left hand. “Your plump cheeks are cradling the gun like it’s a perfect fit.”

Against his will, his muscles clenched, rippling around the ridges of the weapon, and a moan ripped from his lips.

“It’s all the way in now. That was almost too easy, though I do suppose it makes sense. The cock you took the other night was a lot bigger than this weapon. Can you remember it? The other night?” He dragged the gun out with the same slow pace, sighing in contentment when that had Cal’s entire body shaking and his breath noticeably hitching. “You looked so perfect covered in come, blood, and tears.”

“Heathe, please—”

“Stop calling me that,” he ordered, his voice filled with a thread of warning that instinctively sent dread trailing down Cal’s spine. “There’s no blood this time. I know you like that sort of thing, but we’re going to have to skip that as well.”

Calix shook his head, eyes closed as tears tracked down his face. The worst part was, it wasn’t because he was sad or angry, it was because he was embarrassed and caught

between wanting to beg for the other man to hurry up and fuck him and his need to deny what was being said about him.

“I don’t,” he ended up forcing out. “I don’t like it.”

“As if. You came three times the other night thanks to the pain.”

“No.”

“There’s no other explanation for why you got off. You shouldn’t have been turned on at all.”

“You drugged me!”

“It was a sedative. All it did was make you sleepy. Your dick decided to wake up and play all on its own.”

Calix didn’t want to hear that. He’d been trying so hard to forget all about it. About those moments of murky clarity where he’d felt a mixture of extreme agony and horrifying bliss. Hadn’t he been called a freak that night, too? Clearly.

“You’re riding your own gun, Detective,” the man said then, breaking into Cal’s thoughts.

With a horrified start, he realized that was also true. He’d been rocking back against the blaster, fucking himself on the weapon while the man at his back had merely held it in place.

“Don’t stop,” the man ordered briskly. “Keep going.”

“No.” Taking revenge against him at the reunion was one thing, but they were now

out in the open, where any of his colleagues could stumble upon them. Even if he hadn't been drugged, something was clearly amiss here because, sure, he liked his sex kinky and the idea of being forced into it turned him on, but this wasn't a game.

This was real.

"You aren't my type, Heathe," he stated, even knowing he wasn't exactly in the position to take risks like mouthing off to the one holding the loaded weapon.

"We're here so you can be punished," the man said. "I didn't like the way Mitri Meadows looked at you. I didn't like the way you let him even more."

Calix didn't think that was entirely fair. It wasn't like he could control the way someone else looked at him. A thread of anger managed to snake its way through the lust-filled haze and he grasped onto it desperately. It gave him the strength to wipe his head back, connecting with the man's.

Pain radiated through from the hit, but the man also made a sound of pain. The satisfaction from having fought back only lasted a second, however, because instead of getting more upset, the man simply laughed.

"You really wanted that blood, didn't you, Detective? I think you may have broken my nose. Good for you." He started working the gun inside of Cal's body once more, thrusting the hard metal in and out of him quickly, ignoring when that had Calix hissing. "Relax, it'll get better in a moment. I lost control, but it's back now."

Almost as soon as he finished speaking, another wave of bliss blanketed over Cal, and he moaned, the sound loud and echoing amongst the trees around them. Desperation clawed at his insides. He forgot where he was or who he was with, everything boiled down to sensation, to the sparks of raw pleasure between his legs and the way his balls tightened with each harsh stroke of that unyielding metal object

rubbing against his inner walls.

“Should I allow you to come?” the man fucked the gun into him harder, shoving Cal’s front against the tree so his dick rubbed against the rough surface, making him weep as pleasure burst through him. “You’re so sensitive down here. Is that enough pain to push you over the edge? Or do I need to tell you how filthy you are for wanting to orgasm at a time like this? While a stranger pummels your hole with an object that could kill you in an instant. If my finger slipped on the trigger...”

“Do it,” Cal challenged, too drunk on the pheromones or whatever the hell it was to have any grasp on the concept of fear. “That’s why we’re here, isn’t it? You want to make me suffer for what I’ve done.”

“What have you done, Calix?”

“I hit Nero with my car.”

“Ah, that.”

His brow furrowed, but then the weapon twisted, sending him up onto his toes with a howl.

“Come,” the man ordered. “Show me how filthy you truly are.”

Cal was in the process of shaking his head, but then the hand holding his wrists let go, coming around to find his dick.

The man buried the gun all the way to the hilt and then gave him two pumps of his fist.

And that was all it took.

Calix screamed, the man wringing him through his orgasm and then past it, to the point where everything felt like too much. He squirmed in his hold, sounds of protest tearing from his throat even as the gun was fucked in and out of his battered hole and his dick was rubbed raw.

He came one more time in a matter of minutes before the man at his back whispered something he didn't catch, and Cal promptly passed out.

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The sound of his multi-slate ringing tore Calix from a deep sleep. Groggily, he slapped his hand against the end table, blindly searching for the device. “Hello?”

“Detective,” a familiar voice drifted from the speaker, causing Cal to finally blink open his eyes. “Apologies, did I wake you?”

“I—” He sat up. “Aodhan?”

Cal winced, glad this wasn’t a video call. They were hardly on a first-name basis, yet he’d boldly—and rudely—just called him by that. The clock across the hotel room said that it was only nearing midnight. A couple of hours ago, he’d laid down, telling himself he’d take a quick nap before getting back to work.

So much for that.

The lack of sleep the night before, added to the chase through the forest—and subsequent assault—earlier, had exhausted him. By the time he’d come to, the man had been gone. He’d left Cal there, propped against the tree on a bed of moss.

Calix had stood and waited for the aches to dissipate before collecting his blaster and heading out. When he made it to where the head had been discovered, Amory had been waiting for him.

She’d been concerned, especially when she saw the cut on his forehead, but he’d made up some story about being hit. He hadn’t wanted to lie completely and doubted she was stupid enough to buy an obvious fib like saying he’d tripped or something, so he’d gone with a partial truth.

When she'd questioned why his attacker hadn't killed him, his confusion had been one hundred percent honest.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "It's me. There's been a potential lead, but in order to make it, we have to leave right now."

"Leave?"

"I'm outside your hotel."

"You're what?" Calix climbed off the bed and headed for the window, pulling the thick black shade away so he could peer out at the front of the building. Sure enough, the doctor was standing next to a dark vehicle, staring up at him. "Why are you here? What lead?"

"It's time sensitive," he explained. "I think it's best you come down and I explain on the way."

"Okay." He turned and started collecting the few small things he'd need. He hadn't bothered to change before his nap turned sleep, so there wasn't much to do other than grab N.I.M. and his coat. Just as he was heading for the door, something occurred to him. "Wait. Why are you the one getting me for this?"

"The Chief of Police had Mitri reach out to me after they uncovered what was hidden in Williams Gorty's mouth. You should have received a text message from them. Have you checked?"

"Hold on." Calix strapped the multi-slate to his right wrist and tilted the screen so he could access messages. Sure enough, there were several missed ones from both Bruce and Mitri, the latter of whom had apparently created a group chat that included the three of them and Aodhan. The texts confirmed everything the doctor was saying.

“Let me go wake Troya and we’ll be down in five.”

“No,” Aodhan said before Cal could end the call. “Just you. Where we’re going, the fewer of us the better. Not to mention, this last minute I was only able to get two tickets.”

“Tickets?”

“You like to repeat people, don’t you, Detective?” he chuckled, but the sound was off, almost like he was laughing at a joke, only Cal didn’t get it. “Come down. I’ll explain once you’re here.”

The doctor ended the call and left Calix staring at his device a moment before he got himself back into motion. His room was located conveniently close to the elevator, and he scrolled through the missed messages as he descended to the main level, not that the texts were all that forthcoming.

There was a photo of the object pulled from Gorty’s mouth, a blood red wax seal with a leaf at the center. It didn’t mean anything to Cal, but according to the messages Mitri had sent, it was the symbol of some secret society, one that apparently Aodhan had a connection with. Bruce had been the one to suggest bringing him in on things, and from there the conversation had shifted to an exclusive party happening tonight.

Cal checked the time just as the elevator reached the floor, stepping out with a grimace when he saw the party supposedly had started six minutes ago. He picked up the pace, stepping into the brisk night air already searching for the black vehicle he’d spotted earlier.

Aodhan was waiting in the driver's seat and Calix let himself in, realizing they really were on a time crunch at this point.

“How do you know about all this?” he asked as they pulled away from the hotel.

“Read the messages, did you.” Aodhan was dressed in a three-piece pink suit a shade lighter than his eyes. There were tiny flowers decorating the left side of the jacket and the right side of the pants. The shirt underneath was white, and he’d gone without a tie, the top three buttons undone to show off the necklace he wore high on his neck.

He caught Calix staring at the bubblegum pink leather and gold chains and grinned when Cal noticeably dropped his gaze.

“It’s a martingale collar,” Aodhan explained, even though he hadn’t been asked. “If you put your finger through this center loop here,” his right hand lifted off the steering wheel so he could demonstrate, “and tug, the chain tightens the leather around my neck.”

“That’s...” weirdly erotic, “interesting.”

Aodhan barked out a laugh and let go.

“I’m underdressed,” Calix pointed out, and then, as though drawn there of their own accord, his eyes made a beeline back to the collar. “Do I need to wear one of those?”

“That’s not my call,” he answered cryptically, then motioned toward the back. “As far as the outfit, I got you covered. You should change now, we’re less than ten minutes away.”

Since there was no reason to be embarrassed about the guy seeing him in his underwear at this point, Calix didn’t argue. He undid his seatbelt and reached back to grab onto the garment bag. Inside, there was an almost identical suit to the one the doctor wore, only in a darker shade.

“This matches your eyes,” Cal said. “And your collar.”

“It’ll help sell that we’re together if we arrive as a matching set,” Aodhan replied. “This isn’t the type of event that takes kindly to uninvited law enforcement, Detective. It’ll be better for the both of us if we blend in while there. Which leads me to my next warning, whatever you see, just act normal.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Calix pulled his jacket off and tossed it into the back before making quick work of his gray t-shirt. “What kind of party is this?”

“The illegal kind.”

“And you were able to get tickets to an illegal event, how?”

“That’s a secret, Detective.”

“I don’t like secrets, Doctor.”

“How unfortunate for you.”

Seeing that he wasn’t going to be able to get him to talk, Calix shifted gears. “What’s the symbol mean? The one found inside of Gorty’s head.”

“It’s a grapevine leaf,” he told him. “It’s a symbol used for one of the more notorious underground criminals of the city. The public knows him only as Baccus. Not much is known about him despite there being many attempts by both the police and the press to identify him and bring him to justice.”

“What kind of crimes does he commit?” Cal stripped out of his pants, trying not to notice when Aodhan’s gaze greedily swept down his bare legs.

There was no way the other guy was attracted to him, not after what he'd witnessed at the reunion. It had to be all in his head.

"All kinds," Aodhan said. "You name it, he's probably done it a time or two. Take tonight, for example. The invites were kept vague to help prevent a leak, but anyone who's been around long enough will understand the subtext. Everyone has their own...vice, so to speak. What works for some won't work for others."

"Just get to the part where you tell me you're special and know all about it."

"Someone's getting snippy."

"These pants are too damn tight," Calix complained, pulling the pink monstrosity up his body and fastening the button.

"They're a perfect fit," he disagreed.

"What, did you hack into my personnel file and find my measurements or something?" Cal joked. "Come on, Doctor, what should I expect tonight?"

"Blood," he replied without flinching. "Whatever is happening tonight, the main event has something to do with bloodshed. That could mean anything really."

"Because you've attended lots of these things and it's always something different?"

"Do I sense a hint of accusation in your tone, Detective?"

"Just doing my job."

"I wasn't aware investigating me was a part of that."

“I’m here to solve a case. Everyone is a suspect.” Calix sighed and smoothed out his clothing, now fully dressed. “Don’t take it personally.”

“Your boss doesn’t seem to think I need to be looked into. He trusted me to bring you here, after all.”

“Bruce isn’t my boss,” he reminded.

Aodhan sighed and seemed a bit annoyed. “If you must know, I saved the life of one of the club members. In return, he invited me in. I’ve only ever gone to a single party and realized it wasn’t my thing. But I can’t tell you who the patient was—I took an oath—and the reason I never blew the contact and kept in touch was for this exact reason. I’ve known Bruce for a couple of years now. He’s a good man. Works hard. I told him if he ever needed to infiltrate the club, I would lend a hand. Which is what I’m doing now, with you.”

That added up, and really, if Bruce wasn’t pushing for a name from Aodhan, Cal didn’t really have a right to insist. He was an outsider here. It didn’t matter that he was born and grew up on Emergence. He’d never belonged and he never would.

Let Bruce and the rest of the people who did worry about their own damn home.

Hell, Cal was the only idiot still running around trying to find his.

Aodhan had brought them to the outskirts of the city where it’d been mostly trees outside the windows for a while. Now, he pulled up to a gated mansion, stopping for a moment. He must have been identified because a second later, the gate started to open for them.

“There’s a box in the back,” he said. “Can you grab it?”

Cal did as he was told, resting the box on his lap before pulling off the lid. Two golden masks with swirls of vines painted light green and blooms of pink and white flowers decorated them.

“Put one on,” Aodhan instructed as he pulled the car around a massive fountain. Masked men dressed in black were waiting for them at the bottom of a set of sandy steps that led up to wide open double doors.

The mansion was huge, but Calix didn’t have the luxury to take the outside of it in, quickly settling the clear strings of one of the masks over his head before handing the other to Aodhan.

“Thank you.” He donned his as well and then paused with his hand on the door handle. “Remember, we’re meant to be anonymous here. No one else will be using real names either, so don’t call me by mine or refer to me by occupation.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Doctor,” Calix drawled, “but your eyes are kind of a dead giveaway.”

“Would you like me to pluck them out then?” he asked without skipping a beat. “Are you into that sort of thing, Detective?”

“I am not.”

He hummed. “Pity. Just stick close by me and try not to speak unless absolutely necessary.”

“Wait.” Cal grabbed onto his sleeve before he could step out of the car. “You still haven’t explained what we’re looking for here.”

“That’s the problem with last minute planning, we don’t really know.”

“So, eavesdrop and hope someone is discussing all the bloody murders they’ve recently committed?” Calix clicked his tongue, filling his next words with sarcasm. “Sounds simple enough. Bet we’ll be out of here within an hour, tops. Care to make a wager?”

“Games are more my little brother’s thing,” Aodhan joked back. “Come on, Detective. We’re already late.”

They weren’t the only guests still arriving, but the trickle of people into the mansion was decidedly small, not allowing Cal many faces—or, masked ones, as it were—to log before they were ushered through a vast foyer and into a side room equally as massive.

He let out a low breath and leaned in closer to Aodhan as the two of them moved toward a long table out of the way of the doors. “This place is huge.”

“Don’t gawk,” he said. “The people invited to these sorts of things are used to this kind of wealth.”

“That your cute way of saying my orphan is showing?” Calix snorted at his own comment, and when he didn’t get a response, turned his head to catch Aodhan staring at him through the holes cut out of his mask. “What?”

“It’s interesting what you find funny, that’s all. It’s...unexpected. You are unexpected.”

He frowned. “What, did Bruce tell you something weird about me or something?”

“Bruce had never mentioned you before he found out you’d been assigned the case.”

Cal shrugged. Made sense. There was no reason for Bruce to be talking about him

with anyone. “So why the surprise then? You make it sound like you know me, but we’ve only just met.”

“It certainly feels like I’ve known you longer,” Aodhan confessed, still staring at him with a hard to read expression that was all intensity and little else. “You’re very easy to talk to. That’s...” he seemed at a loss for words, so Cal helped him out.

“Interesting?” He chuckled. “I’m guessing from your comment, you and I grew up on different sides of the track. You come from money?”

“I do.”

“It shows.”

“I can’t tell if you’re insulting me or not,” Aodhan admitted, but Calix merely shrugged a second time and motioned to the room.

“What’s this?” There were chairs lined up in one half of the room with a glass box set before them like a stage of sorts. Most of the seats were occupied. “There’s got to be like one hundred and fifty people here.”

“More like two hundred.” Aodhan’s hand rested on the small of Cal’s back, and he urged him toward the last row where there were only a few empty seats left. He grabbed a glass filled with purple liquid off the nearby table and handed him one. “Let’s sit before we lose our chance.”

Everyone sat facing the glass box, mingling and chatting with each other. Masked waiters and waitresses roamed about, offering up drinks and hors d’oeuvres on golden platters. The guests were dressed in a mixture of cocktail and grand ball attire, some clearly meant to upstage with their outfits. There was no identifiable color palette, and though Cal could overhear some of the chatter going on around them,

none of it was particularly noteworthy.

“You sure we’re in the right place?” he asked. Aside from the location—a massive mansion in the middle of nowhere—there wasn’t anything all that spectacular about what was going on. Just a bunch of rich people getting together to gossip and play dress up. If there was a murderer amongst them, there’d be no way of singling them out from the rest.

Aodhan wasn’t paying as close attention to him now, however. His eyes were locked onto the glass box at the front of the room. The glass had turned opaque as though to hide something within.

“Remember what I told you in the car,” the doctor said suddenly, eyes still stuck there, as though anticipating something. “No matter what happens next, we aren’t here to make any arrests. We’re guests, just like everyone else.”

Don’t play cop, was what he was really saying.

“This isn’t my first day on the job,” Cal stated, slightly annoyed. “Are you forgetting which one of us is actually in charge here?”

“Not at all.” He pulled his gaze away from the glass just long enough to stare Calix down. “Are you?”

“I—” Gasps from the crowd cut off whatever he’d been about to say, and his head swiveled back to the front to see what had caught everyone’s attention. Only for him to have the same exact reaction. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s a mermaid,” a very excited woman who’d taken the seat to his right moments ago exclaimed. She covered her mouth with both hands, absolutely giddy by this revelation. Her outfit appeared to have been made of spun gold, her yellow hair

pulled up in a complicated twist. Nothing about her seemed familiar, but she spoke to Calix as though they were old friends. “They’re so rare, the Intergalactic Conference had them added to the endangered species list almost one hundred years ago. It’s said they’re meant to reevaluate and decide whether or not to change that to extinct.”

“He looks pretty alive to me,” Cal said, and she giggled, her hand moving to rest on his knee.

“Doesn’t he? How fantastic! What a delightful treat! And to think, I almost skipped this month's revelry.”

Month? They got together like this monthly, and yet neither the police or the press were able to identify any of the two hundred some people in here? That seemed odd at best, suspicious at worst.

And Cal was the suspicious sort.

He drained the contents of his glass in one deep gulp, barely tasting the sugary alcohol that passed over his tongue and burned down his throat.

He’d bet money, of which he had very little, that behind some of these masks were the very people who went about their daily lives claiming to try and put a stop to this elite club, or whatever it really was.

Fakers, the lot of them.

He fit right in.

That familiar melancholy threatened to sweep through him and he fought against it, forcing himself to take in the creature currently thrashing on a gurney, much like the one he’d been wheeled into the hospital on just the other day. The major difference

was the length of it.

To accommodate the five-foot-long tail, the metal gurney stretched longer than a normal one would. The tail was held down by white straps in two places, with another resting against the man's stomach and his chest. They'd gagged him, and there was no sound coming from the room even though it was obvious he was struggling and trying to speak around the white cloth.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Aodhan asked, and dumbly, Calix nodded his head.

He really was though. His tail was a mixture of glittering blues and yellows and various shades. It sparkled and winked beneath the harsh overhead lighting being directed down upon him. His abs were toned and he had a long torso that led to broad shoulders. His face was a bit harder to make out, due to both the distance and the gag, but his long white hair gleamed like moonlight across the dark expanse of the ocean at night.

"Absolutely breathtaking," the woman next to him agreed.

Aodhan draped an arm around Calix suddenly, leaning forward to catch her attention.

"I wasn't talking about the fish."

She followed his gaze when he dropped it to the hand she still had resting on Cal's knee, and she pulled back as though burned. "Good Light! How rude of me. Please accept my humble apology. I didn't notice the two of you were together."

"Really?" Aodhan didn't even try to pretend to believe her, but she only giggled again.

"There was always the chance you would be open to company," she said sweetly.

"Can't blame a girl for trying."

“We’re a complete set,” he stated dryly.

“Oh, well then.” She sent Cal a wink and slipped an old-fashioned paper business card into his palm. “Call me if you change your mind, gorgeous. I like your style.”

The lights in the room flashed, signaling the beginning of...whatever they were about to see, and Calix shoved the card into his front pocket absently, curiosity getting the best of him as his attention returned to the glass box.

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There were two other men standing within the glass case, one dressed all in white, another dressed all in black, aside from his deep red mask. Their masks were decorated differently as well, the white one decorated in painted golden leaves, while the other had been left blank.

Somehow, Calix found himself drawn to the less flashy one, taking in the tall man and his inky black hair, the only personal feature that could be seen. Hell, he even had on leather gloves to hide his hands.

The man in white wasn't wearing any. He didn't have any shoes on either, and he seemed to be speaking to the merman, his facial expression hidden behind the full mask. Whatever he was saying though, it was clear the creature tied to the table did not agree.

The merman's thrashing became wilder, his muscles pulling taut against his bonds. The glass must be soundproof, maybe even mirrored one way, since no one inside had so much as glanced at the audience.

The audience who were watching silently with bated breath.

The tension and excitement in the room expanded until Cal could practically taste it every time he inhaled. Even Aodhan seemed riveted to the scene, leaving just him feeling like the outsider, clueless and left in the dark.

A door leading into the box from the other side opened, and someone handed the guy in white a cruz saw. The saw blade had a diameter of around two feet and was controlled by a wireless remote in the form of a fingerless glove. The tool had been

created years ago to help builders get to higher and harder to reach places. It also allowed a single carpenter to cut two objects at once by wearing a glove on each hand, doubling his productivity.

Maybe Calix was dumb, because it took him much longer than it should have to figure out what was going on, and it took the blade positioned to hover over the merman's tail for it to click.

Aodhan's hand slapped over his thigh and held him down when he would have leapt to his feet.

"Wow, I can't believe how lucky we are," the woman whispered next to him, having missed his reaction. "We're actually going to get to see firsthand if the legends are true or not."

"What legends?" Cal really didn't want to ask, but the words poured out of him anyway.

At the front of the room, the saw blade was being repositioned, as though the man in white had a specific place he wanted to...

Bile rose up the back of Cal's throat and he swallowed.

"Rumors are, if you cut a merfolk tail down the center, those two pieces will heal into legs," Aodhan filled in, keeping his voice down as well. "Since they'd been impossible to find in the wild, no scientist has been able to confirm or deny these claims."

"Until tonight." The woman was practically vibrating in her seat.

Calix blinked and turned on Aodhan. "You can't actually intend to just sit here

while—”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do,” Aodhan interrupted, giving him a warning look that sent a shiver straight down his spine to his toes. “It’s what we’re both going to do.”

He shouldn’t be giving into that tone or the authority ringing in it. He was the one in charge here. He was the lead detective on this case, and Aodhan was merely a doctor liaison. There was literally no reason Cal should be listening to him, and yet he found himself doing exactly that.

It wasn’t like there was anything he could do anyway, he told himself as they waited. Even if he called for backup, by the time the police got here, it would be too late, and considering the number of masked men who’d occupied the front of the mansion...Bodyguards, he now realized. Meant to protect the guests from any unwanted scrutiny.

Unless Calix wanted to be responsible for getting Aodhan killed in the merman’s place by outing them, the only thing he could do was sit there and shut up.

The main event started almost instantly, in a blink and you’ll miss it type of display that Cal’s brain struggled to process.

The man in white brought the controls over close to the saw blade, not touching it, but near enough the devices synced together. At first, there was no sound as the blade was quite literally dropped, slicing straight through the merman’s tail. From their angle, the audience in the back could only see a few inches of the blade sticking out the top as it was dragged down the merman’s body, slicing through flesh and scales with ease.

There was blood, a lot of it, though it was purple in color, gushing and spraying as the

merman's bottom half was cut in two.

Calix thought he might be sick, his stomach clenching painfully, his eyes wide as he stared in abstract horror at the scene before him, trying to convince himself it wasn't real. That he wasn't here, sitting in the audience like some accomplice to what was potentially a murder.

Even if it didn't lead to murder, this was torture. This was—

Something dragged his gaze up the merman's body, past the blood-soaked man in white. The breath caught in his throat when his eyes locked onto the red mask. Even from this distance, he was certain the man behind it was staring directly at him.

And he seemed angry.

The man in black stepped to the head of the table, all without breaking eye contact with Cal, and removed the gag from the creature's mouth. Then he set his gloved hands at either side of the screaming merman. The second his fingers connected with the metal table, audio switched on, the screams and shrieks of pain echoing throughout the room, causing everyone to jump in their seats.

But that was all.

They jerked as though startled, some laughing at their own reactions before settling back down to continue enjoying the show.

The show where another living, sentient creature was tortured and maimed, all for their entertainment. To appease some sick curiosity.

Cal met Red Mask's gaze again and a wave of nausea hit him hard enough to send him reeling. He scrambled out of his seat, practically knocking it over in his haste to

vacate the room, racing toward the only open doorway he could find, which happened to be directly across from the scene of horror.

He just barely made it beneath the threshold, turning to vomit inside the wide basin of a potted plant. Tears burned at the corners of his eyes as he upchucked everything he'd consumed that day and then some, one hand clawing at the wall as he shook and almost toppled forward.

An arm banded around his waist, keeping him upright as he puked his guts out, a soothing voice comforting him quietly all the while.

By the time he was done, the screams had stopped, and he squeezed his eyes shut and focused on trying to calm his breathing.

“Look, Detective,” Aodhan whispered, running a hand down his back.

Calix vehemently shook his head.

“Trust me, Cal.”

There was even less reason for Calix to trust him than there was for him to be following his orders, and yet the softness in the doctor's tone had him straightening and turning to glance back into the room.

The faint hum of the saw could still be heard, letting Calix know the soundproofing hadn't been reactivated. That wasn't the cause for the sudden end to the screams. It was the merman, and not because he'd died or passed out either. His entire demeanor had shifted. He was no longer screaming or fighting, instead, he was staring up at Red Mask as though elated to see him there.

What the fuck?

“Baccus brought Antitheus in to help soothe the merman,” Aodhan told him, an arm still around his waist. He spoke the words directly against the curve of Cal’s ear.

Those must be the names of the men in white and black. Since the leaves on the white mask matched the one he’d seen on the wax seal, it wasn’t a stretch to assume he was Baccus. That meant Red Mask was known to these people as Antitheus.

He sounded important.

He looked important.

“How?” Calix asked.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“It does to...me.” he frowned, watching as the mood of the whole room seemed to pivot suddenly. “What are they doing?”

People finally started looking away from the box, hands wandering, mouths seeking. Moans and soft gasps began filling the room, drowning out the saw so that Cal didn’t even notice when the device was shut off and a man dressed as a doctor stepped into the glass case and began working on the merman’s wounds.

Something prickled at his skin, something hot and uncomfortable, making him feel tight. He shifted, trying to work out a kink in a muscle he couldn’t identify. A familiar burn raced down his body, settling in his lower region. With another gasp of dread, he realized he’d gotten hard, his dick straining against the silky material of the pink pants.

The feeling was familiar, instantly bringing back memories of the woods when he’d been cornered by a man he’d thought was Heathe.

Thought then, anyway. The more he replayed those events in his mind, the more certain he became that it wasn't Heathe that day fucking him with his own gun.

The arousal was swift and all consuming, just like in the forest, and it wasn't just him and the rest of the party that were experiencing it.

Aodhan pulled him back suddenly, shoving him against the wall in the hallway they'd ended up in when he'd gone to vomit. His body pressed against Cal's, one hand diving through Cal's hair, the other grabbing onto his hip as he ground himself against him.

The doctor was aroused, too.

"What's—" Calix pulled back long enough to force the words out, struggling to turn away from Aodhan's insistent mouth. "What's going on?"

"Want you," Aodhan growled. "So badly."

"What..." Cal's lips were captured in a scorching kiss that had his hips rocking forward to meet Aodhan's.

Wait.

It took all his willpower to shove the other man away, but he somehow managed, clinging to the wall to remain upright. He flung out a hand when Aodhan went to step closer, shaking his head wildly. "We've been drugged!"

The purple beverage they'd passed out to the guests. It had to be that. Both he and Aodhan had finished a glass.

"It must be a date rape drug," he explained, struggling with the need to touch himself

and find friction for his weeping dick. Already, there was a dark stain at the front of his pants. He cursed. “I can’t believe this is happening again! This fucking planet, I swear to the gods everyone here is fucked up!”

Although, technically, the drug he’d been given at the reunion had knocked him out, not turned him on. It hadn’t made him desperate for it. Desperate to drop to his hands and knees and beg the sexy doctor with the impossibly pretty eyes to—

No.

No.

“We have to get out of here.” Calix reached for Aodhan’s wrist, but the second he made contact, they both moaned. He found himself back against the wall in a heartbeat, one of the doctor’s knees pressing between his thighs, making him croon.

“This is wrong.” His hands roamed up Aodhan’s back, feeling the muscles flex beneath his touch. “You don’t really want me.”

The doctor’s mouth covered his frantically, his tongue diving through his lips to stroke against his in a domineering display of false affection. He bit and licked at Cal, as though trying to consume him, only pulling back when he ended up biting too hard.

“Ow.” Cal felt a sting at his bottom lip and when he touched it, his finger came away red.

“You’re bleeding,” Aodhan said, voice impossibly deep. He went still as a statue, eyes staring at the blood for a moment before he planted his palms on either side of Calix’s head and used the wall to push himself away. He stumbled back, gaze sweeping out the doorway, and whatever he saw in the room had his breath

quickenings. “You have to get out of here.”

“What?” Calix wasn’t following.

“Go,” he insisted. “You have to leave.”

Oh, right. Because they’d been drugged.

“We both have to.” He patted himself down before recalling that Aodhan had been the one to drive.

The doctor pulled a set of keys from his jacket pocket and tossed them at Cal. “The first door on the left at the end of the hall. That leads to the parking garage. They would have put the car there.”

Calix went to move, but instead of following, Aodhan simply stepped out of his path, as though afraid they would touch and set each other off again. “What are you doing? Come on.”

“No, we can’t both leave. It doesn’t work like that.”

“What are you talking about? Aod—” He caught himself just in time, catching sight of movement over the doctor’s shoulder.

Red Mask—Antitheus—was headed toward them, not seeming any less angry than he had when he’d first caught Calix’s attention.

“Go,” Aodhan insisted, taking a single step closer to the door.

“But—”

“Good Light, Cal, if you don’t leave while you still can, I’m going to have you on your knees with my cock shoved so far—”

Calix spun on his heels and sprinted down the hall, but not because those words scared him. Because they didn’t. Things between them were already awkward enough, the last thing he needed was to completely botch this investigation by sleeping with the doctor while under the influence. Clearly the other man understood that, since he was being a good guy here and sending Cal away before anything serious could happen between him or anyone else.

And he most likely would fuck other people in this state too. The drug was potent, he could tell. Now those words spoken by that woman earlier made more sense. She’d been asking if she could have a threesome with them once the real party began.

After the torture and mutilation part of the evening had concluded.

His stomach recoiled at the reminder just as he reached the door Aodhan claimed would lead to safety. It cut through some of the haze of lust and he turned back, about to call out and insist the doctor leave with him.

But it was already too late.

Antithesis had Aodhan against a closed door to a side room, a finger hooked through the golden loop of the collar around the doctor’s neck. He was pulling on it, choking the man, but at the same time, it didn’t appear as though the doctor was struggling.

Aodhan made a needy sound in the back of his throat and practically rubbed himself against the other man’s leg, shamelessly pleasuring himself on his thigh.

Antithesis let him, one hand dropping to undo the top button on the doctor’s light pink pants. He freed his engorged cock and started stroking, still wearing those

leather gloves. He paid extra close attention to Aodhan's flushed crown, rolling his thumb over the sensitive area until he had the other man writhing between him and the door.

It was as though Antithesis had the doctor completely enthralled, entirely under his command. His very presence demanded obedience, all that coiled control waiting and ready to strike at any given moment.

Calix felt heat course through him all over again, didn't realize he'd taken a single step closer until Antithesis' head whipped in his direction. The second their eyes locked, he felt the air whoosh straight out of his lungs.

Before he could make a complete and total fool of himself, Cal shoved on the door and practically fell into the adjoining room. As promised, it was the garage, and it didn't take him long to locate Aodhan's vehicle with the key's location function.

It wasn't until he was already halfway back to the city, his dick still swollen and achy in his pants, that the guilt started to trickle in.

The doctor had only gone there tonight as a favor to Bruce and Cal.

And Cal had left him there to save himself.

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Calix almost ignored the pounding on the door, stumbling out of the bathroom bleary-eyed from all the vomit-induced tears. He'd spent the better part of the morning huddled around the toilet with his face in the bowl, all because of whatever had been in that single drink he'd consumed at the party.

It'd been hours since he'd finally stopped trying to convince himself it was because of what he'd witnessed there either. If he were a better person, he wouldn't even have to lie to himself about that. Wouldn't have to convince himself he was sick to his stomach because he'd watched another living being be sawed in half.

He'd seen the blood.

Heard the screams.

But that wasn't it.

It wasn't the gore that made him sick. It was all of those people sitting there watching it. Acting like someone wasn't being torn apart and tortured against their will.

It was the fact that he'd been one of them.

Despite all of his efforts to be a good person, Calix had sat there amongst them and done nothing. He'd merely watched. What did that say about him?

What did it say, that the entire drive home he'd been worried about Aodhan and not the merman? Hell, the merman hadn't even come to mind again until this morning. Instead of calling for backup or sending the police the location of the party, Cal had

gone back to his hotel, given himself several hand jobs while picturing Aodhan and Antithesis, and had promptly passed out with his dick still resting against his palm.

He passed the washer machine on the way to the door, the light flashing indicating it was ready for the dry cycle to be keyed in. His bedding and clothes had been covered in dried come when he'd woken, and he'd tossed it frantically into the machine to hide the evidence of his humiliation.

Except for the suit. The suit he'd tossed into a garment bag and thrown into his closet. He wasn't sure how that had to be cleaned and hadn't wanted to risk the washer, though now that he was thinking a bit more clearly, he realized that was stupid too.

It wasn't like he was going to return it to the doctor covered in his shameful bodily fluids.

He should toss it in the trash and make up some story about spilling coffee on it or something of the like.

"I'm coming," he called out tersely once he was only a few feet from the door, yanking it open when he got there.

Troya stood with a paper tray in one hand and a tablet tucked under his other arm. He took Calix in and then pushed past him, entering the hotel room without an invitation. "You aren't the type to take a sick day, but now that I see you, you really do look like shit."

"Gee," Calix let the door shut and followed him into the living room area where his partner was already making himself comfortable on the small loveseat, "thanks."

Troya set his holo-tab on the coffee table and took a look around at the space.

“What are you doing?” Cal asked.

“Weren’t we both supposed to have the same style suite? Why’d you get an upgrade?” He pulled the fancy powder pink throw pillow from behind him and held it up. “Is this real silk?”

Calix rolled his eyes and snatched the pillow, clutching it close before dropping down on a navy chair set across from the love seat. “I’m guessing you didn’t come all this way to find fault with my room.”

“I’m literally in a room two doors down,” Troya argued, “and I’m telling you, my room isn’t decked out like yours. Who’d you blow to get all the perks, huh?”

His gaze hardened and he went to stand, intent on kicking the Inspector out, but Troya threw up his hands and stopped him.

“Okay, okay. Fine, it was just a bad joke. Mostly. The room really is better, though. Anyway,” he tossed the holo-pad to Calix, “these are the notes I collected yesterday from the doctor and the rest of the staff we were able to speak with. Doesn’t seem like there’s going to be much help there.”

Cal scrolled through the file, forced to admit his partner was probably right. “We knew it was a long shot from the beginning.”

“You’re disappointed. Would have been nice if we could solve this thing quick and you could put in your retirement at the ripe old age of twenty-six.” Troya leaned back and rested his hands behind his head. “What’s up with you and the doctor?”

His finger momentarily paused on the screen before he collected himself and nonchalantly asked, “What do you mean?”

“He wouldn’t shut up about you yesterday,” Troya divulged. “It’s not like you to make friends. Has me wondering if maybe there’s something more going on...? He did rescue you at the reunion. Was it love at first sight?”

“Shut up.” Cal tossed the pillow at him, hard, grinning when the Inspector caught it and laughed. For a moment, he could almost believe that maybe they didn’t dislike each other as much as he’d always believed. But that wasn’t a thought he’d allow himself to hold onto.

“Do you like him?”

Cal’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

“Did someone...” He ran a hand down his face. “That’s dumb. We’re not in grade school anymore.”

“The doctor may or may not have asked me to feel you out on the subject,” Troya admitted with a shrug.

“Seriously?”

“What? I think it’s kind of cute. Don’t you?”

“No.”

“Sure.”

“I mean it.”

“Okay, I believe you. Anyway, those are the notes. I was able to record my meeting with the Director, so you can listen to it later if you want. Personally, I don’t think you should bother. There was nothing useful there either.”

“You met the Director? What’s he like?”

“Titus is...Well. He’s a Connect. So.”

Calix couldn’t help but stare. “No shit.”

“Yeah, really. Royal Titus Mercer, Director of Hopeful Heart Hospital, is a Connect, and a pretty high-standing one, if my instincts are any good.

“All Connects are high standing,” he reminded.

He’d never met one in person before, but they’d learned about them at the Academy in their beginner’s courses. Those who went on to study to become Inspectors like Troya might have gotten a more extensive course, but the fact that Connects, even at a basic level, were taught to all cadets meant they were important and fairly high up the proverbial food chain.

One of the oldest documented species in the universe, Connects were a regal and secretive bunch. Though their home planet, Tenor, was still occupied, due to dwindling populations, many Connects had dispersed throughout the galaxies in search of mates.

“I guess that helps to explain the weird vibe I got,” Troya said, though it was obvious by his tone that he was uncertain of his own words. “Connects can live for centuries. Maybe he’s just old and was looking down on me or something like that.”

“What do you mean? What vibe?”

“It was...chilling? I don’t know, man.” He tossed the pillow back at Cal, clearly embarrassed. “It sounds stupid when I say it out loud like that. He just had weird energy, okay?”

“He made you uncomfortable?” Calix had seen Troya talk his way out of a demerit with their captain before. If he was saying someone unsettled him, it was worth paying attention to.

“Yeah, but I’ve never met a Connect before. Maybe that’s just how they are. They have all this built-up energy, after all. That’s why they need to create pods. Each Connect needs to find two mates before the age of one hundred or they risk losing their mind. The influx of energy within them eats away at the brain first.”

“They must have trained you about Tenor in case we ever needed to take a case there,” Cal said, unable to help his curiosity. “What else did they tell you? I don’t know much, just the basics.”

“Pods are traditionally created with at least two of their own kind,” Troya told him. “In recent years, they’ve had to make due with taking mates outside of their species. It’s a great honor to be chosen by one, it’s supposed to make you set for life. Connects all have generational wealth that would allow them to live comfortably without ever having to lift a finger.”

Cal tilted his head. “And yet Titus has chosen to not only work, but oversee an entire hospital? Sounds stressful.”

“That’s not all,” Troya added, unable to help himself when gossip was thrown into the mix. “He was an infamous brain surgeon up until two years ago. But that’s not even the most interesting part! He’s only worked for the hospital for a decade. He’s thirty-five!”

That was pretty young to be made the director of a hospital of Hopeful Hearts stature.

“Do you think it’s because of his skill or because of his station?” Troya thought it over. “Maybe both?”

“What I think,” Cal drawled, “is he’s only nine years older than me and he’s already got his shit together. Lucky.”

“Says the guy who’s about to retire at twenty-six.”

He shrugged. “It’s not like I can go the rest of my life without a job. I’ll have to find something else to do.”

“Going to stick around here?”

He snorted. “Are you kidding? After the warm welcome I received? No.”

Calix didn’t want to think about the night of the reunion.

“I know you hate causing trouble, but you really should have reported them for jumping you.”

“Bruce said the same thing. But it’s not going to happen. Let’s just call it even and move on.”

“Even with what?” Troya shook his head. “You keep saying you were innocent back then, if that’s the case, there’s nothing to get even with.”

“Whether it was an accident or not—”

“Whether it was an accident or not, it’s time to fucking grow a pair and move on.”

Troya rolled his eyes and stood with a flourish, practically stomping over to the mini fridge. He stuck his head inside and pulled out a bottle of local beer. “Can I have this?”

“Whatever, it was already in there.”

“What?” Troya frowned. “That’s seriously messed up. My fridge has water and soda in it, that’s it. Why are you getting so many upgrades? I’m taking this up with Freya in booking once we’re back. This is bullshit.” He twisted the top off and took a swig as he headed back to the couch.

“Want to trade rooms?” Cal offered, only for his partner to get even more annoyed with him.

“Quit doing that shit. How many times do I have to tell you, it wasn’t me.”

“What wasn’t you?” He wasn’t following.

“You think I’m the one who spilled and told everyone at the Academy what you were accused of here, don’t you?”

Calix leaned back in his seat. “Well, the rumors only started up after you’d arrived.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“So it was a coincidence then?”

“You don’t believe me.” Troya snorted and then smirked. “This must be what you felt like back then. Telling the truth but having no one have your back.”

“Bruce did,” he corrected. “Bruce made sure I had a good attorney and helped keep

me sane throughout the entire process. The woman who worked at the orphanage I lived at did too. She couldn't leave the rest of the kids behind, so she never came to any of the meetings or the trial, but she wrote me a letter once."

"What'd it say?"

"I..." Calix's brow furrowed. "I don't remember."

"Weird." He changed his mind rather quickly. "Maybe not. I imagine there's a lot of stuff from that time you'd rather forget. Your mind probably wiped as much of it away as possible."

"Yeah," he agreed. "You're probably right."

"Anyway," Troya set the mostly empty bottle on the table and pulled up his notes on his multi-slate, "anything happen at the party last night? You didn't submit anything to the group forms."

"Right." He cleared his throat. "No, we didn't get anything."

Calix hadn't been there long enough to even attempt to. The whole night had been a mistake, and he still hadn't decided how much he wanted to share about the things he'd witnessed.

And allowed to happen.

If he did decide to file a report, it'd be with Bruce directly. Troya didn't need to know about the sick things that went on in the criminal underbelly of his homeworld.

Hell, Cal wished he still didn't know anything either.

But more than that, he wished he could stop thinking about Aodhan and Antithesis.

Wished he could stop wondering how far they'd ended up going.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:12 am

Soft moans filled the room, echoing from the speakers, the sound of flesh slicking against flesh accompanying them.

Aodhan kept his gaze fixed on the screen, left hand working his hard cock while the right trailed beneath his shirt and tweaked one of his nipples. The chair rocked beneath him, the springs creaking as his tempo built higher and higher, the image of the sexy detective fucking himself taking Aodhan's arousal to new heights.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

His plans had never involved finding Calix attractive. Sure, the guy had been cute in photos, kind of sad looking, like one of those quiet loner types. But in person...

He could still recall the way Calix's body had shaken against his, thrumming with energy.

Or maybe fear.

Quite possibly that.

His thighs spread wider, and he groaned, imagining what it would feel like if they were in the same room together again, right now. If he was the one burying his fingers deep into the Detective's hole. If he pounded his ass until he screamed and begged for mercy.

Again.

Good Light. That had been enthralling. Hearing those words uttered from Cal's lips.

On the bed, tucked away safely in his hotel room, Calix went about his business, completely unaware that he was being watched. That he'd had eyes on him all morning and throughout the day.

That Aodhan had seen the way he'd crawled on top of the sheets the second Inspector Troya had left, stripped himself of his clothes, and grown instantly hard.

Was he thinking about last night?

Aodhan shouldn't have let him leave. That hadn't been a part of the plan either, and he'd had to apologize to Nyxian for ruining the second half of the show, but when he'd seen the way Cal's complexion had bloomed, the way he'd come alive against him...Didn't matter that it'd been a forced reaction.

Mercy had pumped enough pheromone into the room that everyone had been half out of their mind within seconds, even Aodhan, and yet...

"I still want you," he mumbled, staring at the way Calix thrust his hips up into his fist, watching how he writhed in the sheets and nibbled on his full bottom lip. Since this was already the fifth time he was seeing him touch himself, Aodhan had picked up on the pattern. His detective was close. Any minute now and—

His .

What a dangerous word.

"Problem, baby?" Mercy appeared behind him as though having been birthed from the shadows, slipping up to the back of the chair to reach around and settle one large hand over Aodhan's where he'd slowed. With pointed measures, he began easing him

back into motion, until they were stroking his cock in a steady rhythm once more.

His head fell back, and he blinked up at the curve of his man's throat, sniffing at the intoxicating scent of mulberries and birch.

"You're not done watching," Mercy scolded, chuckling when Aodhan made a sound of protest and lifted his head, eyes going back to the screen. "He's beautiful, isn't he?"

"He's hot," Aodhan corrected. "Lithe and—" He yelped when Mercy's hand squeezed and then slapped him away. Despite the slight discomfort, he obliged, moving to rest his arms on the armrests so Mercy could take over. At the first twist of his dripping crown by those skilled fingers, he admitted, "I want him."

"So you've said."

"Let me have him."

He clicked his tongue chidingly. "I believe that's what last night's antics were meant for. It isn't my fault you got cold feet."

"That's not what happened."

"No?"

"You know it isn't." Aodhan made a whining sound in the back of his throat when Mercy's other hand traveled to his chest, twisting his right nipple painfully beneath the thin material of his light blue dress shirt.

He'd been forced to step out for a meeting with Med Team G about an important upcoming surgery on a Royal and hadn't bothered changing into less formal clothes

once he'd returned. Too eager to see what the detective had been up to in his hour-long absence. He'd walked in on Cal and Troya going over notes in the man's hotel living room.

Boring.

"They were discussing Connects earlier," Mercy told him, twisting again when Aodhan perked up at the news. "Eyes on the prize, baby. I want you to watch his dick leak for you. We both know you're who he's thinking of right now. Has he said your name yet?"

"Not this time."

"He will soon."

That was true. Calix tended to get more vocal toward the end, once he was really close.

"Do they know anything?" Aodhan asked, but instead of getting an answer, Mercy's touch left him. Before he could complain, his boyfriend's arm wrapped back around, this time with a toy in hand.

He hissed as the fleshlight swallowed his aching cock, the tight squeeze of the toy's inner walls making his hips jerk.

"So greedy." Mercy shoved him out of the chair suddenly, tossing his front over the desk, ass in the air. He pushed Aodhan's pants and boxers down but didn't bother undressing him, fingers going to his puckered entrance instead.

The next time Cal rode his hand on the screen less than five inches from Aodhan's face, Mercy drove three of his digits deep into Aodhan's body.

“Mother fuck—” He slammed his mouth shut to cut off the curse, realizing too late he’d let the brief spark of pain get the best of him.

Mercy sighed in disappointment behind him, dragging his fingers in and out, keeping the same pace as their detective. “You’re going to have to be punished for that, baby.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” He flicked a button on the fleshlight which started the sucking function. “I don’t think you are.”

Aodhan’s eyes practically rolled to the back of his head as his dick started to be worked by the toy, but he stubbornly forced his gaze back on Cal, knowing Mercy wouldn’t like it if he was disobeyed.

It was funny because two years ago, the thought of obeying anyone would have sent Aodhan into either a fit of laughter or a murderous spree. Up until that point, sex was merely something he did to take the edge off when he really needed to. Or when he needed to trick someone into going home alone with him.

But then he’d met Mercy and everything had changed.

Like, for example, the fact he took cock now.

Mercy didn’t give him any warning there either. One breath his fingers were working open his hole, and the next they were gone and replaced with the thick round head of his massive cock. He speared through Aodhan’s body, one hand resting on his hip to help steady him, the other tangling in his hair to yank his head back hard enough he cursed a second time.

There was nothing small or subtle about Mercy. He fucked Aodhan like he was reminding him that he owned him, riding his body hard enough the entire desk shook with every inward thrust. His cock forced him to submit, eliciting a complicated mixture of pleasure and pain that had Aodhan going crazy and wild with need.

“Doctor!” Calix’s husky voice cut through Aodhan’s lust-filled haze, and he watched as the Detective picked up the small knife he’d set off to the side. Cal made a shallow cut on his inner thigh—next to four or five others he’d made earlier—and then almost immediately came.

Going simply off the euphoric expression painted across the detective’s face, it was impossible to tell if he was punishing himself or rewarding himself.

Knowing how complex Calix really was, it was probably both.

“He’s made a mess,” Mercy said, pounding into him with even more vigor now that Cal had already reached the finish line. “If he were here, I’d make you lick him clean. Or, better yet,” he draped himself over Aodhan’s back, “picture that toy sucking on you as him. Do you think our sultry and sulky detective’s hole would feel the same? Stretched around you, squeezing you in deep? I’d fuck you both like this. Fuck his body with your body. Make you both scream my name and writhe for me.”

On screen, Calix was recovering, dropping an arm over his face as though embarrassed even though he thought he was alone.

How timid.

Pathetic.

Fake.

“I want him,” Aodhan said.

He shouldn't. But he did.

“I know, baby.” Mercy nipped at his earlobe. “So why didn't you take him last night when I gave you the chance? You had my permission then.”

“Give it again.”

“I'm not sure I want to.”

“You do.”

“How do you figure?”

Aodhan tore his eyes off the screen and glanced over his shoulder, catching the older man's gaze. “Fool me once...”

Mercy grinned and slapped his left ass cheek hard enough it would leave a mark.

“I want him,” Aodhan repeated, moaning when that earned him another spanking. “I want him.”

“You want to fuck him.”

Aodhan gave a curt shake of his head. “I want him.”

Mercy buried himself balls deep and stilled, searching Aodhan's expression.

“I want him ,” he reiterated, as though his true meaning could have somehow gone over the other man's head. “And you know that. That's why I called it off last night.

My little brother's husband might be fine with fucking him to an audience, but I'm not. What's mine is mine ."

Mercy lifted a thin dark brow. "Is that so, Killer?"

"Ours," he corrected. "You know what I meant. There's no me without you, not anymore." He blindly reached back until he felt Mercy's left thigh. "We're connected."

"That we are." Mercy pulled out and drove back into him roughly. He took him fast and hard, his sudden silence making it clear this conversation was over.

Aodhan let him, too caught up in the way his body felt like it was on fire and ready to explode. When he was yanked into an upright position by his hair, he only mildly protested, his grunts swallowed by Mercy's mouth as it sealed over his.

Mercy fucked him with his tongue and his cock, the fleshlight choking on his dick as his prostate was constantly battered.

The second he felt fingers pressing on his sensitive nipple, Aodhan lost it, crying out as he came, filling the toy a second before Mercy reached orgasm as well and started pumping his ass full of cream.

He growled in warning when Mercy dropped into the chair and pulled him with him, seating him on his cock as he continued to empty into his abused hole. All that did was earn him another sharp nipping of teeth against his earlobe as the older man wrapped his arms around his waist and held him tightly through the lingering pangs of their mutual release.

"You want him, Killer?" Mercy's palm settled around the front of Aodhan's throat, but he didn't apply any pressure, merely leaving it there so he could feel every sharp

breath Aodhan dragged into his lungs. “I’ll give you one more chance. Show me you’ve earned the right to choose, and I’ll let you have him.”

“Turn off the toy, Mercy.” The fleshlight was still slurping on his dick, keeping him in an uncomfortable semi hard state.

Mercy shook his head and angled Aodhan’s face back to the screen. “Our boy isn’t finished yet, which means neither are you.”

Calix had left a moment ago, and Aodhan had wrongly assumed it’d been to clean up. Instead, the Detective had gotten something from his bag. Now he was back, settling onto his stomach on the queen-sized bed, lifting his ass high into the air and spreading—

Aodhan groaned when Calix took a dildo only slightly smaller than himself and pushed it against his entrance. It slipped into him slowly, teasingly, and before Aodhan realized it, he was moving over Mercy, riding his cock the way he wished he had the Detective riding him.

“If you can come before him,” Mercy spoke darkly against the curve of his jaw, “I’ll let you pick first position.”

“Promise?”

“Whatever my little Killer wants.”

Aodhan used to hate being called that. The word little had ruffled his feathers, but he’d adjusted. He’d learned. Didn’t mean he couldn’t still push his luck every now and again.

“Does it still get you this horny?” he couldn’t help but taunt as he bounced rigorously

in his lap. “Knowing you—”

“Got you in the palm of my hand?” Mercy grabbed the base of the flashlight and flicked it up another setting. “There’s something sexy about knowing I control something as vicious and deadly as you. That I’ve managed to tame the untamable.”

“Careful.”

“Why? Going to revisit your feral ways? Need me to train you all over again, baby? String you up by the wrists and stuff this hole with—”

Aodhan shuddered at the memory of their first few months together. “No.”

Mercy chuckled. “Didn’t think so.” He motioned toward the screen with his chin, where Calix’s muffled cries spilled from the speakers. “He won’t be so difficult. I bet he’ll kneel for me in less time it took to get you to surrender.”

“Of course he will,” Aodhan scoffed.

“Why do you want him so badly then? You’re not interested in the weak.”

“He isn’t weak.”

“He—”

“I saw the video,” Aodhan cut him off, knowing when Mercy momentarily fell quiet that he understood what footage he was referring to.

“I take it you believe what I believe,” Mercy finally said.

“I do.”

“And how do you intend to prove it?”

“Easy.” Anticipation thrummed through him and his balls drew up. “I’m going to torture a confession out of him.”

“There’s my little Killer. Always so heartless.”

“Tell me I’m pretty so I can come and win this thing.”

Mercy clucked his tongue. “Cheating so shamelessly now, are we? Yes, punishment and some retraining are definitely in order. Later. For now…” He flattened his tongue over Aodhan’s pulse point and then whispered directly into the shell of his ear, “You’re so pretty I had to make you mine so no one else could so much as dream of fucking this body ever again. Come for me, pretty Killer. Remind me who you belong to.”

Aodhan screamed as the second orgasm ripped through him, only processing moments later when he finally started to come down from the high that he’d managed to beat Calix out by a mere thirty seconds, if even.

“That was close,” Mercy teased, probably noticing the scowl on Aodhan’s face as he watched Calix lying there, the toy still protruding lewdly from his clenched cheeks.

“I’m going to win,” he swore. And not just because they both knew this was just another game—Mercy wanted Cal just as much as he did. Aodhan was going to win because it was in his nature. He bowed to one man and one man only, the one currently fucking his sloppy hole past the point of pleasure and into that uncomfortable state of overstimulation.

There was no way he was going to lose to the Detective.

Mercy wasn't the only manipulative genius in the room, after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:12 am

Calix swore under his breath and stared down at the spilled contents of the takeout container now frying on the hot asphalt of the hospital parking lot. They were still working with nothing and Troya had called to tell him he should meet up with Aodhan to see if anything else had happened once he'd left the party that night.

Eventually, Cal had told him some of the events, realizing staying quiet would only make him appear suspicious. He'd left out everything about the merman and the gruesome live mutilation, but had mentioned the masks and the weird aphrodisiac drug. Troya had joked that perhaps that was the reason Calix hadn't wanted to share, and he'd let the Inspector believe what he wanted to.

Did that make him a bad person?

A man—with a tail—had been brutally tortured right in front of him, and not only had Cal sat there through it all, he hadn't even reported it after the fact.

He wasn't even sure he was planning on reporting it now, though he'd at least scheduled a meeting with Bruce, who was otherwise engaged with other crimes going on in the city. If he confessed to the chief what he'd witnessed, Aodhan would no doubt be called in for questioning. There was no reason for Calix to want to prevent that, aside from the fact he'd saved him that night at the reunion.

Cal believed strongly in karma.

Which was why he was standing there, forlornly staring down at his ruined lunch when the director of the hospital snuck up on him.

“Unfortunate,” Titus Mercer’s voice was cool, like icy spring water on a hot summer day, and before he realized it, Calix’s body was reacting.

A shiver passed down his spine, and his gaze snapped over to where the older man was standing on the sidewalk. He’d seen photos of him in the hospital and in the information packet about the case, but the pictures hadn’t done him justice. Neither, apparently, had Cal’s memories because he was looking a thousand times better than even his recollections.

Titus was tall with silky black hair he’d styled in a side part. He had on a pair of thick rimmed glasses and eyes so green Cal felt like he was being swallowed up by a deep, dark forest the longer he gazed into them. His charcoal pants were pressed, and he had a brown suit jacket over a dark turtleneck.

The last time he’d stood before Titus, Calix had just been found not guilty in a crowded courtroom. He didn’t want to be reminded of that awful time. Didn’t want the weight of the things he’d done back then to crush him even more than they already did. That was another reason he’d jumped at the opportunity to go to the Academy. To escape the people who thought they knew him.

And the people who’d maybe gotten close enough to catch a glimpse.

“Aren’t you hot?” the words burst off his tongue, and he snapped his mouth shut too late to stop them.

The corner of Titus’s lips twitched, but otherwise, he gave no reaction.

“It’s just,” like an idiot, Calix pointed up at the sun blazing overhead, “it’s basically summer.”

“The hospital has impeccable air conditioning, I assure you.” The Director glanced

pointedly at the food on the ground between them. “It appears you’ve lost your lunch, Detective.”

“It slipped out of my hand,” he admitted with a shrug. “I’m clumsy.”

For some reason, Titus found that funny and didn’t even attempt to hold back his grin, chuckling before adjusting his glasses.

Cal didn’t know what to say, so he just continued to stare while the other man laughed at him.

“Would you like to accompany me?” Titus offered then. “I was actually just on my way to the hospital’s cafeteria. You might be surprised to learn the food we offer isn’t half bad. Certainly better than,” he motioned to the spilled lunch again, “scooping that up and trying your luck.”

“I’m actually here on business,” Calix said.

“If you’re here to meet with Doctor Solace, you’ll be forced to wait anyway. He’s currently in the middle of surgery.”

Cal’s shoulders tensed before he could help it, mind going to all the horrible things that might have happened to him at that party after he’d just left him there.

Titus laughed at him again. “He’s conducting an operation, Detective. He’s a heart surgeon, if you recall.”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat then forced himself to smile self deprecatingly, knowing people liked that shit. Liked it when they felt they had the upper hand and thought you knew it. “I apologize. Apparently I’m destined to play the fool in front of you.”

“You can make it up to me by accepting my lunch offer,” Titus motioned with the expensive leather briefcase in his right hand toward the hospital entrance. “Shall we?”

“Yeah, sure.” Not seeing any reason to refuse, Cal followed the director into the building. “I’ve been hoping to meet with you, so this works out.”

Not.

“Did Inspector Troya leave our interview unsatisfied?” The cafeteria wasn’t far from the entrance, and he moved them off to the left and down a single hallway.

“No, nothing like that,” Calix reassured. “I just like to speak with everyone personally, as the detective on the case.” That was a bold-faced lie. He’d been glad the job had been given to Troya and he’d been spared, but now that they’d run into each other like this, the need to save face was overwhelming.

Cal had always struggled with that though. With how other people perceived him. He’d been a loner through most of school because it’d been simpler than letting people in. It wasn’t like he was going to invite them over to hang out at the orphanage, and even with his part-time job in high school, he’d never had enough coin to spend frivolously.

It’d been easier to keep to himself, to not draw attention so the old taunts from when he and his classmates had been younger didn’t start up again. Many of his childhood memories were of him crying in Sister Grace’s arms, her reassuring him that the other kids were just being cruel, reminding him that his parents hadn’t left because they’d wanted to.

Then there was that whole thing in the locker room that Nero had walked in on. One mistake, one slip, had led to another.

Had led to his foot on the gas.

“You don’t seem like the chatty type,” the director said as they entered the cafeteria, leading him over to the selection station. “Perhaps you could teach Doctor Solace the importance of silence.”

Calix quirked a brow. “You two don’t get along?”

“Oh, on the contrary, Aodhan gets along with everybody. That’s the problem. Nurses, patients, even members of the cleaning staff, he’ll talk their ears off if they let him.” Titus selected a sandwich and moved down the line.

“Sounds like you guys should switch positions,” Cal replied, reaching for a salad, only to hesitate when an uncomfortable feeling he couldn’t identify settled in his gut. Maybe he was hungrier than he thought. He grabbed one of the sandwiches from the tray Titus had gotten his from instead.

“Here.” Titus held out a zip berry soda, one already set on his tray.

Calix opened his mouth to reject it, originally wanting water, then changed his mind when the soda suddenly seemed appealing. He took the can and added a cookie to his tray for good measure. Maybe he needed sugar.

Without asking, Titus paid for both of them at the end of the line, scanning his multi-slate before Cal could even think to stop him.

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll get it next time.”

The director merely smiled and brought them over to a table set in the corner of the large cafeteria, away from the more crowded areas. He took a seat and waited for Cal to do the same before asking, “What makes you think we should switch jobs?”

For a moment, he was blank, then he remembered what they'd been talking about and he shrugged. "Aren't directors supposed to keep everything running smoothly? Seems like there'd be a lot of socializing involved with that."

"Ah." Titus popped open his soda can and then offered it to Calix, taking the one off his tray when Cal frowned but accepted. "That's true. Most of my day is spent dealing with one problem or another. Alas, I was never very good with hearts."

Cal took a sip from the drink, setting it down to open his sandwich and decided to overlook the kind—yet weird—gesture. He'd never had anyone open a soda for him before, and it was becoming more and more apparent that Titus was good at the socializing part of his job, even if he didn't particularly enjoy it.

"Just brains, right?" Calix quipped.

"You have no idea."

"Why'd you give it up?"

"You mean why stop if I was so good at it?" Titus shrugged. "I still do the occasional surgery. Was that not in your report?"

"We didn't get a full report on you," he said. "You aren't a suspect."

"You don't think I'm capable of sawing people's heads off?" the director joked.

"I didn't say that." Cal ate his cookie and then confessed, "I don't really know enough about you to say whether you are or aren't capable of that sort of thing."

"Sort of thing?"

“Committing a crime of that magnitude.”

“Murder.” Titus wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned back in his chair, fingers strumming on the tabletop next to his half-finished sandwich. “It’s definitely a messy affair. I’m a bit of a neat freak. A bit...particular, one might put it.”

That unsettling feeling in his gut was starting to return, only Calix no longer thought it was due to hunger. His skin prickled, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise, but he couldn’t pull his eyes off the director, almost as though instinct kept his gaze on the other man.

On the potential threat? Why? His reaction made little sense, but Cal wasn’t about to ignore it.

“I heard most of Aodhan’s department went on that trip to Vitality,” he kept his tone casual. “Did you happen to go with them?”

“It was Aodhan’s brother’s wedding,” Titus told him. “I got an invitation, and I attended, yes.” He tipped his head. “Why do you ask, Detective?”

“Just wondering if you happened to notice anything strange while you were there.”

“I believe I already answered questions along those lines the other day, or did your Inspector not share his notes?”

Troya had mentioned he’d gotten the creeps from Titus, but like an idiot, Cal was only now recalling that detail. Was this what he’d meant? Nothing had changed, they were still sitting in the cafeteria, hardly alone even though there wasn’t anyone near enough to risk being listened in on, and yet Calix couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off...

Wrong.

“Are you feeling all right?” Titus asked. “Your demeanor has changed. Is it the food? Did something not agree with you?” He lifted the top piece of bread off of his own sandwich, inspecting the ingredients. “It looks fresh, so that shouldn’t be it.”

As the director spoke, the anxiousness he’d felt slipped away, slowly at first, noticeably. By the time Titus had pieced his sandwich back together, the feeling was gone altogether.

What the hell?

“What’s going on?” Aodhan walked up to their table, hands stuffed into the front pockets of a white lab coat. He was clearly displeased, his lips pursed into a thin line as he practically glared at the man seated across from Cal.

Titus crossed his legs and rested his folded hands in his lap. “Doctor, have you finished with Mrs. Grayson already? Record time.”

“What are you doing?”

Calix glanced between the two of them, sensing the hostility. Guess they really didn’t get along after all. He stood and reached out, placing a hand on Aodhan’s arm. “I’m here for you, actually. There are some things we need to discuss.”

His multi-slate rang then, interrupting their conversation. Amory’s name flashed across the screen, and he popped out the earbud attachment and put it into his left ear before accepting the call.

“Hey, I think you should get down to the corner of Prix and Dash,” her voice came through, the sound of sirens whirring in the background. “There’s been a murder

but...Look, just come, okay?"

"I'm at the hospital," Calix said. "I can be there in ten."

"Pull into the back of the diner," she instructed.

"Got it." He turned to the others as soon as Amory hung up. "I have to go. Thanks for lunch, Director. Doctor—"

"We'll talk later," Aodhan offered.

"Thanks."

Calix only glanced back once before leaving the cafeteria, frowning when he saw Aodhan had taken his seat across from Titus.

The annoyed expression remained on the doctor's face, yet the director appeared unfazed. If anything, he seemed...intrigued.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:12 am

Calix could recall the last time he'd eaten at the popular local diner, Pen's. It was kind of hard to forget when a grown man threw a milkshake at your teenage face.

Glass and all.

He parked the hovercar the station had loaned him in the lot behind the diner, taking a moment to just look at it. The gray building with the bright red roof hadn't changed a bit, and for a moment, he felt a rush of trepidation, as though he were that eighteen-year-old kid again at risk of being booed out of the restaurant if he tried to order a soda.

His thumb pressed against his jeans, right over a spot on his right inner thigh where he'd run a razer blade that morning. It hadn't been enough to distract him from the fact he was a disgusting person—getting off to thoughts of Aodhan under the influence, getting fucked by Red Mask—but it'd dulled the self-hatred enough he'd been able to get dressed and leave the hotel with a normal expression plastered over his face.

The sharp sting of pain helped to ground him now, and with a defeated sigh, Calix popped open the door and slipped out. Ever since he'd gotten the call, he'd been worried at what he'd discover once he got there. She'd made it sound like whatever had happened was...weird.

Was it the merman? Had his body been unceremoniously dumped in the diner dumpsters or something? The mutilated and rotting corpse of a species thought to be near extinction was certainly cause for sounding the oddity alarm.

What was he going to do if it was the merman, though? Would he confess? Finally bring it up and just play it off like he'd planned to as soon as he was certain he no longer needed that party crowd for answers? Actually, that could work. It would be believable enough since he'd come away from that night with nothing. Even though he'd had no intention of asking Aodhan to take him to another one, they didn't have to know that. It wasn't completely out of the realm of possibility that he would.

It didn't take him long to find Amory—it helped that she was standing right in the midst of a commotion—and his fears were almost instantly put to bed the moment he did.

Two officers were currently wrestling with Heathe, struggling to keep him locked between them as he tossed himself from side to side in an attempt to get free. His face was pale, and he kept repeating the same thing over and over again in a frantic tone that gave Cal pause as he stopped at Amory's side.

"I didn't do it! I didn't!" Heathe insisted as they dragged him over to a cruiser.

Seeing him again made Calix's stomach tie into knots, but he kept his composure, forcing himself to sound only somewhat interested when he asked Amory, "What's going on?"

"He killed his girlfriend," she told him. "Would you believe it?"

Cal frowned, finally noticing the ambulance nearby and the body stuffed into the back already covered from prying eyes.

A crowd had gathered, probably people who'd been enjoying lunch and those that they'd summoned to come see the show. Another reason Calix couldn't wait to get off this damn planet. A part of him almost felt bad for Heathe, having experienced the weight of the townspeople himself, but then he recalled the night of the reunion.

He'd paid his debt then and made them even.

This? He didn't have to feel shit for the guy now.

"How'd it happen?" Calix crossed his arms.

"Better question is why," she said. "Turns out the body has been chilling in the walk-in freezer in the basement of Pen's for at least a couple of days."

"What?" He'd completely forgotten that Heathe had mentioned his sister buying the place. "He got away with that?"

"He was living down there," she explained. "Life after high school hasn't exactly been kind to our old Prom King. Honestly, I'm surprised he even had a girlfriend to kill."

"That's a bit harsh, don't you think?" Mitri walked away from the ambulance where he'd been discussing things with the paramedics and smiled politely at Cal. "Afternoon, Detective."

"Can you figure out a cause of death?" Technically, this wasn't what he'd been sent here for, but Calix wanted to know what was going on. How a guy who'd drugged and abused him the other day in the name of retribution could be the same one to murder the woman he loved in cold blood.

Well. That wasn't fair.

He had no way of knowing if the two of them had been in love or not.

And Calix wasn't really in a place to judge.

Even after spending the past six years trying to atone for what he'd done to his classmate, Cal had still ignored the merman's cries for help. He didn't have a right to comment on anyone's hypocrisy, not when he was still struggling to acknowledge and deal with his own.

"Sure, I can make an assessment right now even," Mitri replied. "She's got a caved-in skull. The mark is conducive to being hit on the head with something blunt. Whoever killed her hit her."

"It was Heathe," Amory insisted, scowling at the back of the police cruiser as it drove off with a panicked Heathe in the back seat. "He freaked out when she was discovered by the head chef and tried to threaten him into keeping his mouth shut."

"Isn't the head chef his uncle?" Cal thought he recalled that detail.

She grunted. "Yeah."

"Turned in by his own family," Mitri let out a low whistle. "Cold."

"Not as cold as Molly Fern currently is."

Calix shouldn't laugh. It would be wrong to. Inappropriate.

He covered his mouth and pretended to need to clear his throat, turning to take in the crowd that hadn't yet dispersed. "What are you planning on doing about them?"

"We'll ask around for witnesses and then tell them to go home. Obviously the diner is closed for the foreseeable future." She didn't sound pleased about that. "Anyway, I'm sorry I pulled you away from the case. I just remember seeing you and Heathe talking at the reunion the other night and figured you'd want to know."

“Weren’t you attacked that night?” Mitri’s brow furrowed in what appeared to be general concern.

Amory glanced away sheepishly. “I’ve been meaning to apologize for that too, actually. I lost sight of you two and didn’t think anything of it. Maybe if I had, I could have prevented you from getting jumped.”

“There was no reason for you to do that,” Calix reassured. “You and I didn’t really know each other, and I’m sure from the looks of it, Heathe and I seemed like friends.”

She stared at him a moment. “So it was him, huh? The guy who beat you up that night?”

“Yeah.” He sure as hell wasn’t going to tell her the truth of what was done to him, but there was no reason to deny that Heathe had been the perpetrator against him. “I’m not looking to press—” Cal’s breath caught in his throat when his eyes locked on a familiar pair of hazel ones.

Nero Quentin was standing off to the side of the crowd, close to the road. He must have just arrived because he seemed confused until his eyes found Calix’s.

For a tense moment, the two of them merely stared at one another, a mix of emotions tumbling through Cal one after the other, too fast for him to catch and hold onto. Amidst all the chaos, however, there was one thought that managed to stand out among the rest.

Sort of like how Nero was.

Standing.

“Good Light,” Amory followed his gaze to see what he was looking at and appeared just as caught off guard as he was. “Is he seriously walking?!”

He was.

Nero Quentin, the guy Calix had hit with his car and permanently paralyzed, was walking toward them without so much as a limp in his step. The only sign he’d ever been in a life-altering accident were the gray hairs mixed in with his brown ones, no doubt caused from severe stress and anxiety.

Two things Cal realized he was currently experiencing as well.

“When did this happen?!” Amory rushed to meet him partway, grabbing onto Nero’s arm as she took him in. “This is amazing, Que!”

Internally, Calix winced at her use of the guy’s old nickname. Those three letters had been stamped on the back of Nero’s jersey, chanted from the bleachers whenever he took the field.

But if it bothered Nero the same way it did Cal, he didn’t show it. He smiled at Amory instead and gave her a big hug, grinning from ear to ear as the two turned and strode the rest of the way together.

“Hey,” Nero greeted him first. “I didn’t know you were back.”

“I didn’t know you were walking,” it came out harsher than he’d meant for it to, and they all fell silent for an awkward second. Knowing that he had to be the one to break it, Cal forced himself to run a hand through the short hairs at the base of his skull and sent the guy an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, that was way out of line.”

“No,” he surprised him by disagreeing. “No, if anyone deserved to know about this,

it's you. It's my fault. I should have contacted you sooner; it's just..." He laughed uncomfortably. "I didn't know what to say or how to say it. But since you're here, can we maybe go somewhere for a drink? I'd really like to talk it out with you, man."

Was this a trap?

Cal hated that his first thought was this was another setup, and yet...

"Hold up," Mitri said, shockingly having the exact same doubts. "Didn't you just have your boys beat the shit out of him?"

Nero frowned. "My boys?" He shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"It happened at the reunion," Amory told him. "...Everyone said it was because of you."

"Heathe specifically made a point of telling me you'd asked him to do it." Cal ignored the way both Amory and Mitri looked at him. He'd wanted to keep details like those to himself. They'd already been wondering before why he'd insisted on not pressing charges. Did it make sense to them now, or only make them think he should have done so more?

"Here." Nero unstrapped his multi-slate and clicked the screen, pulling up flight details. "Proof I only just flew in late last night." He held it out to him. "Feel free to go through my messages. I haven't spoken to Heathe in years. That guy, like all my other so called friends, ditched me shortly after your trial ended and there was no longer anyone to publicly hate on."

Amory rubbed his arm comfortingly, and Nero smiled at her.

"Except you," he added a bit more softly. "Thanks, A. Your messages every birthday

were greatly appreciated.”

If this were true, it sounded like Nero hadn't had any easier of a time than Cal had.

“The diner is closed.” He motioned toward it with his chin, and then pointed across the street at the small café. “We can get a coffee? I don't have a lot of time but...I would like to talk.”

“Great. Yeah, that's perfect.”

And public.

But neither of them pointed that out as they crossed the street.

* * *

“It was all the way in Hurb galaxy,” Nero said as they both sipped their lattes at a table by the front window of the shop.

On the other side of the street, Amory and Mitri were both helping clear the place, though it wasn't in either of their job descriptions.

Were they worried for Cal or Nero?

“Took over three years for the nanites to repair all of it, but,” Nero held out his arms and grinned, “they did it.”

“I'm happy for you.” He really was, and if he was also happy for himself? So what. That didn't have to say anything about him one way or the other. “So that's it? You haven't experienced any side effects or anything, right?”

“Nope, I’m one hundred percent. Good as new, as my doc said the day I was able to run again.”

“Wow.” Calix gulped a few sips, grateful for the way the too-hot brew burned his throat on the way down. What was he so nervous about? Why did he feel like he was about to jump out of his own skin?

“It’s a miracle, isn’t it? How advanced we are?”

“It’s definitely something.”

Nero lost some of his luster and picked at the plastic rim of his to-go cup. “Look, man, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry. I was a total ass to you in school. The worst part is, I didn’t even really have a reason to be.”

“You didn’t like me,” Calix said matter-of-factly.

“I didn’t like how easy it was for you,” he corrected. “There you were, just coasting through it all, while I was struggling to keep myself afloat. Sports, friends, grades...balancing all that shit just got to be too much, and for some reason, whenever I saw you laugh with our classmates but turn down an invitation to hang out, that pissed me off.”

“Are you trying to tell me you were jealous?” Cal pursed his lips. That had never occurred to him before.

“I’m not trying, that’s what I’m doing.” He sighed. “Clearly a bad job of it, huh? Anyway, I’m an adult now, and I’ve since learned that we’re all responsible for our own emotions and actions. There were a million other ways I could have dealt with my negative feelings that didn’t involve pouring rotten milk into your backpack or spreading rumors about you.”

Those rumors had been half the reason the public had turned on him so easily after the accident, but Calix didn't bother pointing that out.

Because Nero was right.

They weren't kids anymore.

"You didn't exactly have an easy time after the accident either," Cal ended up saying instead. "It must have been really difficult."

"To go from being super active to unable to even wipe my own ass?" Nero chuckled. "Yeah, man, it sucked. I'll tell you though, the worst part? That was watching all of my so-called friends turn their backs on me. I meant it earlier. Amory and, like, one or two other people are the only ones who kept in touch with me. That's why I blew off the reunion. Originally, I was going to try to make it back for that, but then I realized, why bother? Everyone here is a two-faced prick."

Cal smirked. "Well, on that we can agree."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure everyone in this stupid city sees that I'm up and walking before I leave again. If they're still bothering you, you won't have to worry about it for much longer."

"They are, but you don't have to bother. I won't be staying long."

"No?"

"Just have to wrap up this case and then I'm off this planet, same as you."

"Glad to see neither of our past mistakes have held us down for too long." Nero's multi-slate chirped and he stood. "Gotta go, that's my sister. She's been my rock this

whole time, and she's throwing me this dumb welcome home party with all the extended family." He met his gaze across the table. "You could come, if you want."

"No, but thanks for the invite. I'm technically on the clock right now." Cal shrugged like that was really the reason, even though they both knew it wasn't.

"You sure? I met someone. Her name is Arlet, and she'll be there. I'd like for you to meet her." Nero grinned. "It's petty as fuck, but I still want to rub in your face how good I'm doing. You can't blame me, I mean, I might be over it now, but you did break my spine."

"Fair." Calix couldn't argue with that. "Unfortunately, I really am on the clock. Maybe some other time."

"At least follow me on Inspire." He opened the social media and moved his wrist over so their devices could sync. "That first year, lying in that bed, all I could think about was how one day I was going to walk again and show you how easily I could pick up the pieces. It was a stupid kid's wish for revenge, but it sort of stuck."

Cal accepted the invitation.

"Great. I'll post pics of the party later, be sure to check them out!" Nero winked and then went to leave, just before he made it to the door, though, he turned back. "Hey, Calix?"

"Yeah?"

"I do mean it, okay? No hard feelings. If I were you, I would have hit the gas too."

Nero left before Cal could even attempt to correct him.

Or remind him that it'd been ruled an accident.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:12 am

Calix wasn't expecting the knock on his door later that night. He was busy going over the case, poring through the personal files of all the medical staff who'd attended the wedding on Vitality. There still wasn't proof any of them were involved, especially since another member of the staff had been arrested at the shuttleport for a different murder, one that didn't fit their serial killer's M.O.

Figuring it was Troya, he opened the door without bothering to check through the peephole, mind still elsewhere, and froze when his eyes met bubblegum pink ones.

“Surprise.” Aodhan beamed and held up a paper bag. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything—That’s a lie. I sincerely hope I am. I figured you were holed away here working and hadn’t remembered to call room service for dinner. Am I right?”

Dinner?

“What time is it?” Cal’s eyes widened when he checked his multi-slate and saw it was close to midnight.

“Are you going to let me in, Detective?”

“Oh.” He stepped aside and motioned for him to enter, closing the door and following as Aodhan brought the paper bag to the kitchen and set it down on the small table.

“I knew if I called ahead, you’d tell me not to come, so I had to guess what you might be in the mood for,” Aodhan said as he moved about, grabbing plates from the cabinet directly over the sink and silverware from the door closest to the fridge. “Hopefully, I got it right.”

“Are you sure this isn’t your room?” Cal asked, taking a seat at the table while the doctor took out two Styrofoam containers and started arranging everything.

Aodhan chuckled. “I’ve been here a few times. Does it show? This hotel is closer to the hospital than my place.”

“Is that why you came?” Cal couldn’t help but wonder, gaze sweeping over Aodhan’s clothing. “Did you just get off work?”

He was dressed in black pants and a navy button-up, but there was no sign of his white lab coat. If he was tired from a rigorous day of saving lives one heart at a time, he didn’t show it, brightly smiling at Calix as he set the table.

“Do you want the beef or the sed?” Aodhan presented both plates, each coming with their own sides.

“Whichever.”

“You have to pick.”

“It’s really fine. I like both options.”

“Pick, Cal.” There was a firmness to his voice despite his friendly expression never wavering, and Calix felt a zap of something hot and primal shoot down his spine.

He slid the plate with the beef over to himself, dipping his head in the hopes he could hide the way his cheeks were heating. Something about the doctor had a tendency to do this to him, get this type of reaction with very little prompting.

Ever since that night when the two of them had made out and he’d felt how possessive and in control the doctor’s touches could be, Cal had been unable to shake

himself out of this stupor.

“Should we talk about the party?” The doctor asked suddenly.

He choked, accepted the can of soda Aodhan offered him, and downed half the contents in a few swallows. “What?”

“The party? You said you wanted to talk about it, remember?” Aodhan gave him a funny look but then shrugged. “I figured we might as well get the business portion of the evening out of the way first, don’t you think? It’s disappointing you weren’t able to get anything while you were there.”

“I’m sorry I left you,” he blurted, internally scolding himself for coming off like a guilty child. “I mean...”

“I told you to go,” Aodhan reminded, brow furrowing slightly. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I am curious, though, why haven’t you told Bruce anything? I was expecting him to show up at my door the next morning, demanding to know what I’ve gotten myself involved in, so imagine my surprise when days have passed and still nothing.”

“If he knows about the sort of shit that goes on in his city, right under his nose, he’ll be obsessed with figuring out how to put a stop to it, and I need him to remain focused on this case,” Calix said. It wasn’t entirely false. That was part of the reason he’d kept it all to himself.

But not the major reason.

“Really?” It was hard to tell if the doctor believed him, but he didn’t push the issue. “I ended up hearing something later on that night. A woman was laughing with some other people, bragging about how many heads she’s gotten. It could be nothing—you

saw it yourself, everyone there is crazy—but it could be worth looking into. The problem is I didn't get her name and I couldn't see her face with the mask on."

Cal frowned. "Basically, there's no way to find her even if she is who I'm after."

"I'll keep my ears peeled," he told him. "There's another party happening at the end of the month. Who knows, maybe she'll be there. If she is, I'll recognize her voice for sure."

"You heard her that well?"

"Loud and clear."

At least that was something, even if it was a small, mostly useless something.

"Have you been feeling guilty, Detective? Is that why you've been avoiding me?"

"I haven't. I've just been busy."

"There's no reason for you to feel bad about going. I'm glad you didn't stick around," Aodhan said. "Things got intense for a while there. A potent aphrodisiac was released. They didn't even clean the showroom before Act Two began."

"Act Two?" Cal assumed the showroom was the glass box.

"Yeah, there was a live sex performance. You recall the woman who was sitting next to you that night? She found someone who was interested. A man in a black mask fucked her on the floor in the merman's blood. I doubt that's your sort of thing, so—"

"Why would you think that?" Calix interrupted, and that internal voice of his cursed him yet again for not keeping his big mouth shut.

Aodhan laughed, then seemed to realize he wasn't joking. "Come on, seriously?"

"Are you not into that sort of thing?"

"I am," he replied without hesitation. "What? Did you think I'd beat around the bush? Why should I? We're both adults, and neither of us is a virgin."

"I've never told you I've had sex before."

"You have," Aodhan said confidently. "No virgin would be able to allude to being into blood play as straight-faced as you just did. You surprise me, Detective. In a good way. Maybe you're sad you missed Act Two after all." His gaze roamed down his chest, and he licked his lips suggestively. "You know, I could always tell you about it."

"Are you...hitting on me?" Calix blinked.

"Have you really not noticed how badly I want you?" Aodhan chuckled. "Wow, Cal. I'm not sure if I should be insulted or not. Here I thought I was being obvious, pulling out all the stops by bringing you dinner and asking you about your day."

"You haven't asked me that."

"Not yet. I was working up to it." He set his elbows on the table and propped his chin on them. "How was your day, Detective? Do anything fun? Think of me naked at all?"

Cal choked on another bite, but this time, he glared across the table at the doctor as he chugged the rest of his drink.

Aodhan merely laughed harder. "I'm going to choose to take that as a yes."

“Have you thought of me naked?” he countered, realizing too late he was flustered.

“Yes,” Aodhan replied. “I’m doing it right now, in fact.”

“You’re—” Calix couldn’t bring himself to say it, clamping his mouth shut. Then, because he really must hate himself, he ended up stating, “I’m leaving once I solve this case. I’m not staying on planet.”

“Relax,” he continued to smile, “this isn’t a marriage proposal. I’m attracted to you. I like you. I’d like to be inside of you. That’s all.”

“Oh, is that all.”

“You’d like it, too.” His grin widened, turning wolfish. “Promise. What do you say, Detective?”

“Say?”

“About me getting inside of you.”

“Aren’t you moving kind of fast?” Cal asked.

“Not at all.” Aodhan stood. “You aren’t planning on sticking around long, remember? I’ve got to make the most of the time you’ll give me. So?” He stepped around the table, stopping at Calix’s side so he was forced to tip his head to maintain eye contact with the doctor. “Would you like me to tell you about Act Two, or,” he dropped one hand to the back of Cal’s chair, the other to the table, blocking him in, “would you like me to give you a demonstration?”

Cal’s eyes narrowed. “You think I’ll turn you down.”

“Aren’t you planning on it?” he countered, the challenge clear as day.

He should, because getting involved with their liaison wasn’t professional. It was risky.

“You obviously don’t know me very well,” he found himself saying, flattening a hand against the center of Aodhan’s chest before shoving him away. Cal stood and followed, keeping his palm against the doctor all the while, pushing him until they’d entered the living room area of the suite.

Calix retreated once they were there, putting a few feet of space between them, and then started to undress. He took his time with it, enjoying the way Aodhan’s pink gaze tracked his movements as he stripped out of his tan bomber jacket and then lifted his white t-shirt over his head.

He didn’t hear the other man move, so he wasn’t prepared for Aodhan’s hands on his belt, unsnapping the leather and yanking it free before Cal had gotten the shirt fully over his head. He gasped when those frantic fingers tugged on the waistband of his white jeans, helping him out of the rest of his clothes in a flash of motion that should have given him whiplash.

The next thing he knew, Aodhan had him sprawled out on the couch, naked and trembling.

When the doctor’s mouth found his, he moaned against his lips, sucking down his hot breath along with his tongue. Electricity buzzed through him, sparking across his skin straight to his balls and he felt his dick twitch to life.

“It was like role play,” Aodhan breathed against him as he spoke, nipping at him between words. “That night? Act Two? She turned that man in the black mask into putty in her hand. Made him submissive and docile. Willing to do anything to please

her. Can you do that, Cal? Do you still want to?”

“Want to play?” He gripped the base of Aodhan’s skull and tugged him in close so he could feast on his mouth for another minute before letting him go long enough to growl, “Yes. Yes, Doctor. I want to play with you.”

A sound of desire rumbled out of Aodhan, and the look in his eyes shifted to something darker. Something that might have frightened Calix—or at the very least warned him off—if he were in any other circumstance.

As it were, his dick was too hard and he was already too drunk on the other man to notice a damn thing.

It wasn't enough.

Aodhan kissed him passionately, but it wasn't all-consuming. Wasn't that same desperate rush that Calix had gotten when they'd been at the party, only one room away from a man being cut in half.

"You were so hot that night," he found himself admitting. "Taking control of the situation. Helping me get away."

"You like persons of authority," Aodhan replied, and Cal was too far gone to note it wasn't a question but an observation. He captured his chin and forced his head up, grinning when that made Calix whine. "You'll be the perfect little sub for me, won't you, baby? Let me beat that ass raw?"

Was this the game? They'd agreed to role play, to feeling it out, but...

"Don't worry," the doctor seemed to sense his hesitation, "there's no wrong or right thing here, Detective. Just go by instinct. I'll follow your lead."

He licked his lips, thighs widening slightly to accommodate Aodhan better when the doctor's eyes immediately followed the swipe of his tongue. His dick was straining toward the other man, leaking despite the fact all they'd done so far was kiss and talk about the party.

"You like it rough," Aodhan said, voice turning seductive as he settled in closer, the hand on Calix's chin slipping down to wrap lightly around his throat. "I can see all your scars right now."

“They’re from work,” he rushed to excuse, but Aodhan tutted at him.

“Not all of them.” His eyes landed on the marks notched into Cal’s inner thighs. “You remember my profession, don’t you? I can recognize self-inflicted injuries when I see them.”

Calix shoved Aodhan away, scrambling to his feet. He turned just as the doctor settled onto the couch, eyeing him warily when he didn’t seem to be nearly as affected by that as Cal was. “You don’t care?”

Aodhan tipped his head and spread his arms out over the back of the sofa. “Should I?”

“Most people would, yeah.”

“In what way?”

“They’d call me disgusting or broken,” Calix suggested, frowning. “Freak...I don’t know. They’d at least ask why I did it, if I still do, and tell me to stop.”

“I know why you did it,” Aodhan said, ignoring when Cal sucked in a sharp breath. “You were trying to get something out of yourself. Trying to chase something away and using pain to do it.”

“I...” Calix blinked. “How do you know that?”

“Bruce talks about you,” he shrugged like it was no big deal. Like him sitting there casually picking Cal apart down to a cellular level wasn’t a big deal. “Do you still do it?” He snorted. “I don’t have to ask that either. Those wounds are old, but that doesn’t mean you’ve stopped hurting yourself. Your reputation precedes you, Detective. You’re the first to run headfirst into danger and the last to return home

from a fight. You still crave release, it's just the method in which you achieve it has changed."

"That's enough." Calix's dick was still heavy at the apex of his thighs, but some of the arousal had dissipated, replaced by a sick feeling of self-loathing.

"Why? I'm only telling you the truth."

"Normal people aren't into things like pain."

"I guess that depends on who you ask and what you deem normal. The universe is vast, Cal. Plenty of people are into blood play. Hate to break it to you, but you aren't the only masochist in existence."

"I'm not..." Maybe he was.

Was he?

He'd never allowed himself to think that far, had been doing all of this with the sole purpose of stopping himself from being able to think.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Aodhan asked. "One that may or may not lead to you trying to kick me out of here?"

He should say no. Hell, he should put a stop to all of this and kick the guy out anyway. This was too close to home for him. He'd never shared any of this with another person before, had never dared to dream to, and yet Aodhan had stripped him bare—both literally and figuratively—and all without batting an eyelash.

Like he really believed what he said, and all of this could be considered normal.

“Okay.”

“I’ve liked you since that first night,” Aodhan didn’t hesitate to confess as soon as Calix gave the go-ahead, a light flickering in his pink eyes.

“The first…” His chest tightened. “The night I was rapped?”

“It wasn’t the fact you’d been harmed that did it for me,” he said. “It was the way you clung to me when I held you. The way you looked with tears decorating your cheeks.”

“You…liked that I was crying?” That didn’t compute. It didn’t connect with the squeaky-clean image of the doctor he’d concocted in his head. The one everyone was always singing praises for and calling the sweetest. “Enjoying other people’s suffering isn’t sweet.”

“I don’t like that you suffered,” he reiterated. “I like how you looked when you cried. You’re overthinking it, Cal. Some things are just simple. They just are. Like how you can find sexual gratification from pain. It just is. That doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you.”

“Yes, actually, it does.”

“When we were talking about the party earlier, that turned you on, didn’t it?” Aodhan started to undo his pants, stripping slowly while Calix stood there and watched. “It turned me on. That night, I sent you away because I was going to fuck you on the ground, with the scent of merman blood and the sounds of an orgy tainting the air. I didn’t want that. Didn’t want to share you.”

Calix’s dick dripped when he got his first look at Aodhan’s naked form. It was so much better than he’d imagined in his fantasies, from the width of his shoulders and

the toned lines of his chest to the massive cock hanging between his legs.

“It’s big,” Aodhan chuckled. “You can say it.”

“It’s big,” he stupidly repeated.

“It’ll fit.”

He shook his head. No, no, it definitely wouldn’t. Aodhan was larger than any of the toys Calix had used. Bigger than any of the random hookups he’d had while traveling for work.

“This is nothing,” Aodhan said cryptically, but before Cal could ask, he took a single step closer, making the detective lock up. “Are you afraid, baby?” he asked cajolingly.

Or maybe mockingly. Calix couldn’t be sure anymore.

“Should I put you over my knee and tan your hide until you can’t even hope to crawl away from me?” Aodhan held up both hands and paused when that had Calix gasped. “Hey, it’s a game, remember? You’re safe, Detective. If you want me to stop, all you have to do is say so, and I will, all right? You’re in control here.”

Right, because this was play. They were playing.

“Have you done this before?” Calix asked.

“Once or twice.”

“So then...what happens now?”

“You tell me.”

“I...” He looked away, embarrassed all over again. “I can’t.”

“You’ve never acted on your urges in the bedroom before?” Aodhan sounded like he really wanted to know the answer to that. “Never asked an ex-lover to get rough with you or fuck you hard and dirty?”

Calix shook his head, unable to verbally respond.

“Why does that embarrass you, baby?” Aodhan captured the distance between them and cupped his cheek, forcing Cal to meet his gaze. “You don’t have to feel ashamed for the things you want. On the contrary. Put all those negative feelings that society trained you to feel aside. All you have to do is have the courage to,” he nipped at Calix’s bottom lip hard enough to draw blood, “take what you want.”

The taste of copper exploded in his mouth and Cal shoved Aodhan away again, only this time, he followed him, both of them tumbling down onto the couch. They grappled for dominance for a brief moment before he found himself lying chest down over the cushions.

Aodhan’s hand came down across his right ass cheek with no warning, the sound echoing throughout the room.

Cal jerked and swore, but the doctor didn’t let up, his other hand pinning Calix down by his narrow back as he spanked him, all of his attention on the same cheek. The pain accumulated, the sharp stings turning to a burn that coursed throughout his entire body. He couldn’t be sure how long the assault lasted, but the second he moaned, Aodhan finally let up.

“You look perfect with my handprints all over you.” The doctor massaged his cheek

roughly, hushing him when Calix protested with mewling sounds. “If I had my way, I’d mark you up well and good. But this is already further than I thought you’d let me take things tonight, and I don’t want to scare you away, baby.”

“What?” Cal was finding it hard to follow. Even more so when a second later he was hauled up the couch and practically tossed over the arm rest, ass now high in the air. His cheeks were spread, and then Aodhan hacked behind him. He jolted when a sticky glob of spit landed directly on his entrance. “What are you doing?”

“I know you want it to hurt,” Aodhan said, lining himself up so he could rub his thick crown against the spot, slicking the area up with spit and precome, “but if it’s too dry it’ll suck for the both of us. Also, pain? Not really my thing.”

“Wait.” Calix could only feel the press of that shaft against him for now, and even that felt huge. The doctor couldn’t possibly be planning on sticking that inside of him without any sort of preparation beforehand, right?

Right?!

“No, Aodhan, don’t—”

“Relax, baby,” he ordered, the authoritative tone momentarily cutting through Calix’s survival instincts. Just long enough for him to take advantage.

Calix’s vision winked in and out, the scream getting lodged in his throat so all he could do was gasp and emit a sharp sound when that two-inch-thick cock was pushed past his defenses. He felt it stretching his hole to the point he feared he would tear, his walls squeezing around the intrusion as Aodhan pushed in inch after inch, until all eight of him was fully seated inside of Calix’s body.

His body that had clearly gone into shock. He held still, hands flat on the floor to

keep himself from completely falling, even as his back and arm muscles twitched from the strain. There was pain even though Aodhan had gone still, allowing his body time to adjust, but the pain didn't matter.

Calix's heart pumped furiously in his chest, blood rushing through him at a rapid pace.

Some going straight to his aching dick.

He glanced down, catching sight of the tip where it was smushed against the leather of the armrest, and watched as a dribble of fluid leaked from his slit and plopped onto the carpet.

The slap against his ass almost had him losing his balance, but Aodhan's hands came to his hips then, holding him still as he finally started to move.

The doctor didn't ease him into things further; one second he was giving him time, and the next he was full on drilling into him, shaking the entire couch, laughing as Calix howled.

"There you go, baby. You take me so good. Just like that." Aodhan pinched Cal's left ass cheek, keeping him helpless, bent over the arm of the sofa. "You're bleeding a little, Detective. Would you like me to stop?"

He vehemently shook his head, not trusting his voice and hoping Aodhan saw.

The doctor, ever perceptive, did, and started viciously pounding his ass.

The squelch of blood and precome filled the room, a sound that should have been humiliating. At the very least, it shouldn't have been one that could make him moan.

And yet it did.

All of the guilt and inner turmoil he was constantly carrying had somewhere to go now, the pain turning sharp and pooling to the spot deep inside where he was being torn and battered. He could feel the ache, noted how it was going to sting in the morning whenever he moved, but that only aroused him more.

The idea of feeling the doctor's marks on him, even long after they were finished and the other man was gone, had Calix's hips flicking back to meet the next harsh thrust.

"There you go, baby," Aodhan praised. "Cry for me."

The angle of this position allowed for the doctor's cock to drive in deep, spearing through Calix's insides so he could feel him bumping against his lower abs. He struggled to breathe with the blood rushing to his head, his hands pushing against the thin carpet to keep upright, even as Aodhan's fingers dug into his hips bruisingly.

But the initial sharp bursts of pain had started to dissipate the slicker his insides got.

It still wasn't enough.

"Harder," he demanded, barely recognizing the needy, desperate sound of his own voice.

"Any harder and this ass will be sore come morning, Detective."

"I want that," he confessed. "I want it to hurt."

Pain chased away all the doubts and destructive thoughts. Pain grounded him.

"I'm not a good person," the words tumbled off his lips as a sob tore from his throat.

“Please. Make me forget. Give it to me harder. I can take it.”

Aodhan was quiet for a moment, though his hips never lost their momentum, fucking into him with the same frenzied pace as before. Because of this, the second he stopped, a strangled sound came out of Cal, one the doctor immediately shushed him for.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Aodhan reassured. “I just need to grab something from my pants. Hold on.” He reached down to where he’d discarded them earlier, hooking a finger through the belt so he could tug them close enough to grab something from his pocket.

From his vantage, Calix couldn’t make out what it was, and a trickle of delicious fear raced through him, causing him to shift. The movement had that hard cock pressing against his prostate and he hissed as sparks of electricity skittered throughout his entire body.

“So impatient,” Aodhan scolded, then seemed to hesitate.

“What?” Cal asked when the moment dragged on too long.

“I’m trying to talk myself out of this,” he admitted. “We should stop here, Detective. This is far enough for one night.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? What exactly was the doctor thinking about doing?

His mind went back to the party, and for the first time, real fear gripped him. “You’re not planning on mutilating me...are you? Because,” he shook his head again, “I’m not okay with anything like that. Pain is one thing, but—”

“I would never cut off any piece of you,” Aodhan told him, his voice softening. “I like you whole, Detective. You can’t possibly understand the gravity of that, or how ironic it is, but it’s the truth.”

“Then...? Why’d you stop?”

He chuckled darkly. “Baby, there’s a hell of a lot of other things I could do to you that don’t involve removing a body part.”

“I don’t care.” Shamelessly, Cal rubbed his swollen dick against the arm rest, the rolling of his hips causing Aodhan’s cock to move within him as well. They both moaned that time. “Do whatever, just don’t stop. Don’t stop. Keep fucking me. I want to feel you rearrange my insides with your—”

Aodhan pulled out and drove back in, his thrusts half mad as he pistoned in and out of Cal’s torn hole.

With his dick caught between him and the leather, the friction from each stroke brought him closer and closer to the edge. His balls tightened, and he bit onto his bottom lip, reopening the wound that had already started to heal.

Just before he could achieve orgasm, however, he felt the press of something cold against his right ass cheek. It dragged about an inch over him, his mind struggling to place the object, when suddenly it was turned, and the sensation altered.

“Fuck!” Calix cursed at the first cut of the knife against his ass, and swore again when Aodhan made another mark, and then another. Three in total, quick and clean. Something was tossed into the kitchen area, and his eyes landed on a scalpel, the blade tinted red.

Aodhan spanked the spot he’d just carved, laughed when Calix screamed and came at

the same time.

His vision blanked out and he lost his grip as the orgasm ripped through him more aggressively than the scalpel had. He would have fallen completely off the couch if not for the doctor. Calix found himself lifted and turned, repositioned so he was kneeling with his arms slung over the back of the couch.

Aodhan forced his legs apart and drove his cock back into him, his pelvis slapping against the cuts on his ass with every inward thrust.

Cal clawed at the leather weakly and whimpered. Just as he was about to beg for it to stop, Aodhan's cock tore from his hole, shooting a load of cream against the fresh wound. He cried from the sting, the tears pouring down his cheeks as all those combined feelings overwhelmed him.

Once Aodhan was finished and stepped back, Cal fell over, lying on the cushions, tucking his face protectively into his arms.

"It's okay, baby." The doctor kneeled at his side, running his fingers gently through his damp hair. "Cry it out. It's okay." He planted a soft kiss to Calix's shoulder that might have been considered sweet if not for the accompanying bite that threatened to break more skin. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. I would cry, too, if I caught the attention of someone like me. Actually," he chuckled, "I did."

"What?" Calix couldn't follow.

"Nothing. Just lie here and let it out. I'm going to go get a washcloth and some first aid from the bathroom so I can clean you up." He stood and left to do that before Calix could even decide if he wanted to stop him.

Or if he wanted him to stay and keep petting his hair like he really was precious.

Like all of this really was normal.

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“You don’t have to do this,” Bruce said outside the interrogation room. “This isn’t your case. We have other ways to get him to talk.”

“It’s fine,” Calix reassured, smiling lightly at the chief. “I want to help you.”

“Did you hear the good news? That Quentin kid’s been going around clearing your name.” He clapped him on the back. “Seems like now’s a great time for me to ask you to come back and join the force.”

It’d been a few days since Cal had run into Nero. Since then, he’d gone around telling all their old classmates that Calix had been right in the past, and he was glad the judge had found him not guilty. A few of those people had reached out since, mostly on Inspire, by liking one of Cal’s photos or leaving a generic comment or two. He hadn’t gotten any real apologies, but then, he hadn’t expected any.

Knowing that Nero didn’t like any of those people either, that he’d seen them all for who they truly were, gave Cal the confidence not to reply to any of them. In the past, he might have simply out of concern they’d get upset all over again if he ignored them, but not any longer.

It wasn’t just because of Nero either.

Aodhan and he hadn’t slept together again, but they’d met up a couple of times at the hospital, usually under the guise of meeting for the case. They ate together and chatted, and it was starting to feel a lot like the two of them were becoming real friends.

Friends who had sex and made sexual innuendos during office hours, but still just friends.

Because Calix wasn't planning on sticking around.

Everyone knew that.

"I'm serious," Bruce insisted when Cal merely chuckled. "A good agent like you would be wasted if you didn't stick with enforcing the law. What's the plan anyway, kid? Retire from the I.P.F. and, what? Go fish on some water planet? You're twenty-six, not sixty-two. You've got to make something of your life before you give up on it, and you've got plenty of that left."

"I'm not giving up on myself," he said. On the contrary, he was finally allowing himself to be free, but the chief wouldn't understand that, so he didn't bother trying to explain. It didn't matter anyway; he'd already made up his mind.

Calix was going to start over somewhere fresh. In a galaxy where no one knew his name, and no one knew the things he'd done, be that the incident in high school or the merits he'd achieved in the I.P.F. Hell, maybe he'd even change his name, ensure it really was a clean break.

"There aren't many people that I'll miss," he ended up saying, "but I will miss you, Bruce."

He huffed. "I'm not giving up on you, but all right, all right. We'll let it rest for now." He glanced at the closed door separating them from the prisoner concealed inside. "Do you need me to go in with you? Aodhan wouldn't say what your injuries were the night of the reunion, but it must have been bad if he'd felt the need to rush you to the ER. He's not the worrying sort, looks at everything very rationally, that one."

Cal had long since realized everyone had a different opinion when it came to the doctor, but no matter what words they used to describe him, it always boiled down to one thing. “You like him a lot, don’t you.”

“Of course,” Bruce agreed, even though it had been rhetorical. “I tried to set him up with my oldest once, but he politely declined. I’m not the only parent to try it. People come in with their sons and daughters all the time, playing it off like they’re visiting with them after surgery or whatever. Aodhan never gives any of them the time of day—He’s polite and charming, sure, but he draws a clear line. He’s married to his work. Very dedicated.”

Calix felt a rush of self-satisfaction, which he quickly dashed away. There was nothing to be proud of. They’d slept together one time. It didn’t mean the doctor had chosen him when he’d seemingly turned down everyone else.

“I’ll try and get him to talk,” Cal said, putting an end to the conversation before his mind could get further carried away with itself. He opened the door and entered the small room, ignoring the two-way mirror as he took the empty metal seat across from the man cuffed to the other side of the table. “I heard you wanted to speak to me?”

Heathe rattled the short chains around his wrists when he leaned forward, staring wildly at Cal. “You’ve got to get me out of here! It wasn’t my fault!”

Calix pressed his thumb to the table, accessing the built-in holographic screen, which switched on. A projection of data flooded the surface area before him, and he shook his head as he read. “Says here you hit your girlfriend on the back of the head with a hammer. That’s not exactly an ‘Oops, I slipped’ sort of accident.”

“No, I—” He growled, clearly frustrated. “I did do that, okay? But I didn’t mean to! I don’t know. It just happened. One second, we were talking just fine, and in the next, I was so angry for no reason. She wouldn’t shut up when I told her I needed a minute.

And the next thing I knew..."

"So you couldn't control your temper," Calix drawled, "killed your girlfriend, and then after you realized the mistake you'd made, you tried covering it up?"

"I'm telling you, something came over me. Like it took over my body! I wasn't in my right mind!"

"Are you trying to plead insanity? Because that's not my wheelhouse, Heathe. There's nothing I can do for you aside from getting your account of the events as they accurately took place." He tapped the screen to enlarge a quote. "You told one of the officers there was someone else there? You heard them on the stairs?"

"Yes, but that doesn't matter," he stated. "That officer already told me as much."

"Why?"

"Because I'm still the one who killed Molly. If anything, whoever was there listening to us, if found, would only hurt my case."

"That's why you stopped mentioning them?" Calix's colleagues were hoping to get more of a lead on this mystery person. If they could find them and their theories of that day's events could be corroborated, the case would be open and shut.

Of course, having realized this, Heathe had stopped talking about the person he'd sworn was present, and after a week of being pushed, had finally agreed to talk, but only to Cal.

Technically, this wasn't his problem, but he'd been curious and had wanted to make things easier on Bruce if at all possible. Things with his own case were going nowhere, so it wasn't like he was super busy or anything, either. On the contrary,

they'd hit another dead end. All they had to go on was Aodhan's comment about a potential female suspect, and that wasn't much.

Especially when taking into account the gruesome ways in which the victims of the serial murderer had been killed. Calix one hundred percent believed a woman could have it in her. But some of the coroner reports had come back indicating they'd been beheaded in one stroke. That seemed rather difficult for an Emergence female to pull off, but what did he know.

There were stranger things.

Like the beloved, Prince-Charming-type doctor being into kink play and bloodletting.

Now that he was aware of it, Cal shifted in the chair, even though the capital A Aodhan had carved into his ass cheek that night had already healed. There was a very fine scar left behind, one Calix had caught himself staring at in the bathroom mirror before and after a shower one too many times. A twisted part of himself didn't want the mark to disappear, as if being branded with a scalpel had some romantic connotation to it that eluded the average person.

Cal had always thought there was something wrong with him, something dark. The things he was into, the things that he fantasized about...They certainly weren't the types of things a boy who'd been raised at Safe Divinity Orphanage by someone as faithful to Light as Sister Grace should be attracted to.

In only a handful of hours, Aodhan had shown him maybe he wasn't so abnormal after all. Everyone adored the doctor. Sung his praises and thought he could do no wrong. He'd saved more people in his line of work than Cal had managed to save in his own, and he was practically revered for it. A guy like that couldn't be flawed, surely, someone would have noticed by now.

If Aodhan didn't think there was anything wrong with his sexual proclivities, then that had to mean Calix's guilt and misgivings were misplaced, right? They were two consenting adults, after all.

He pressed down into the seat, wishing the wound hadn't already healed so he could feel the comforting sting where the A had been carved into his flesh.

Not deep enough. Not nearly.

Cal wondered...would Aodhan think it was too far if he asked him to do it again, only deeper this time? Would that be enough to push the doctor away and make him call Calix a freak?

With an internal grimace, he realized he was already starting to lose faith in the doctor and that night. If he wasn't careful, he'd lose his grasp on this newfound confidence and string of self-acceptance before it was able to fully set in. Years of trying to stay under the radar and keep his head down had clearly affected him if, in the span of ten minutes, he could go from confident to doubtful.

"Look, the reason I asked to see you specifically is because you'll understand where I'm coming from," Heathe said, dragging Cal out of his tumultuous thoughts.

He frowned. "How so?"

"Because you've been here before. You know what it's like to be accused of something you didn't do."

"But you did do it." Calix shut the screen down. "You did kill her, Heathe."

"Yeah, and you crippled Nero," he snapped, "but it was an accident!"

“Was it?” He held his gaze, the corner of his mouth twitching upward when Heathe instantly quieted. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. That’s not what you said the night of the reunion either.” It was on the tip of his tongue to mention what’d been done to him, but this interview was being monitored and recorded.

“That?” Heathe made a face like he couldn’t believe that was being brought up. “So I drugged you and had a little fun, so what? My best friend is Nero’s older cousin. He found out you were going to be there and couldn’t make it, so asked me for a favor.”

So it really hadn’t been Nero? Huh.

“What’s the big deal?” Heathe asked, sounding like he really didn’t understand and found this whole thing tedious. “You work for the I.P.F., you see worse shit than what I did to you every day.”

“Yeah,” he drawled, hand fisting on the table as he struggled to keep his composure, “like assholes bludgeoning their girlfriends to death.”

“All I did was knock you out and—” Heathe went oddly silent for a moment, a far-off look entering his eyes a moment before all hell broke loose.

Calix jolted back from the table when the other man suddenly lunged for him. The cuffs kept him locked into place, but Heathe practically leapt out of his chair, tugging on his arms as though the metal digging into his wrists didn’t hurt.

“Asshole! You’re a psycho! I know what you did!” Heathe screamed, completely unhinged, his anger only seeming to grow with each passing second. “Yeah, I killed her, so what?! You’re worse than I am! At least I admitted it! At least I confessed! You—”

The door slammed open, and Bruce pulled Cal out, two cops rushing in once they’d

cleared the way.

“Are you okay? Good Light!” Bruce moved them partially down the hall to where the adjoined room was located. He’d left the door there open when he’d rushed to save Calix, and the other occupants could be spotted within.

Calix frowned before he could help it. “What are you doing here, Director?”

Titus was standing by the counter, clearly having been watching the scene through the two-way mirror. Which meant he’d just witnessed all of that. Had heard...

It didn’t matter. The guy was eerily attractive but made Cal uncomfortable as all hell.

“I’ve got to take care of this,” Bruce excused himself and went after the cops as they dragged Heathe back to his cell.

“I remembered something and decided to stop by on my way to the hospital,” Titus answered his question and stepped out of the room, slowly closing the door behind him so the officers within couldn’t overhear. “Is there somewhere we could go to speak more privately?”

“If it’s about the case, it’s all right to talk about it here,” Cal replied.

Titus tipped his head. He wasn’t wearing his glasses today, those bright green eyes of his seemingly peering directly into Cal’s soul. It was off-putting, to say the least.

“You don’t like me very much, do you, Detective?” the director asked.

“That’s not true,” he played it off.

“Are you sure? I get the feeling you’re uncomfortable being alone with me.” Titus

slipped his hands into the front pockets of his black dress pants. “Is it because I was a part of the medical staff six years ago?”

“I...” He cleared his throat and shook his head with a little more force than necessary. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not the one being ridiculous here,” his tone took on an almost scolding edge that had Calix’s spine instantly stiffening. “I’m telling you I have information, and you’re allowing personal feelings to influence your judgment in regards to this case.”

“I apologize.” Wait, what? Why’d he just say that? Shit. Now he couldn’t continue to deny it. “Let’s use one of the conference rooms.”

Calix frowned at himself as he led the director to an empty room in another part of the station. The walk over gave him time to collect himself, though he wasn’t entirely sure why he’d reacted so strongly to Titus’s tone. It had to be because of the first time he’d seen the older man when he’d been a teen. A lot had gone on back then, but obviously Cal hadn’t forgotten his instant attraction to the director like he’d thought.

In the past, once he’d managed to clear his name and make it off the planet, a large part of his fantasies had featured Titus Mercer.

And they’d been black from the start.

Fantasies of him using that same clipped voice he’d used in the courtroom to order Cal to do all sorts of deplorable and depraved things. Really, he either owed a lot to the older man, or he needed to find a way to get back at him, because it was Titus’s fault that Calix had realized what he was into in the bedroom.

He’d been a sexual awakening for him of sorts, one that had haunted him all throughout his training at the Academy and his time working as a detective. Cal may

not have thought specifically about Titus in years, but that didn't change the fact that he was at the heart of his problems.

All of them.

"I'd like to request you not bring up the past like that again," Calix stated as soon as the door shut behind them. Titus had already moved to take a seat at the long table, and he did the same, choosing the corner while the other man had taken the head.

He chose not to point out how their spots should probably be reversed, given their roles here. As the detective in charge, Cal was in charge of leading this discussion, not the other way around.

"I wasn't sure you remembered me when we ran into each other at the hospital," Titus said smoothly, crossing his legs and resting his folded hands in his lap. "I see my fears were for nought."

"That was a different time," he told him. "I was a different person back then."

"Were you?"

"Yes." Pointedly, he opened a new page in the notebook app on his multi-slate. "You mentioned there was something you needed to tell me? What is it?"

"Very well, we'll do things your way, Detective." Titus licked his lips and got down to business. "I recalled something recently that may be of interest. There've been...problems with one of the orderlies in the past."

"What kind of problems?"

"Behavioral. Rhett Elliot has been reprimanded more than a few times for the way he

speaks to patients' families. He tends to find fault in the way they're treating their sick loved one. On more than one occasion, he's even taken it as far as to file reports against them for endangerment and abuse. Since I've never worked with him personally, it completely slipped my mind, but I went over the names of the victims and at least two of them are people I recall Rhett having a problem with."

Cal entered his name, typing as the director spoke.

"Here's a signed recount of events from the doctor who's been working closely with Rhett for the past year." Titus brought his multi-slate close to Cal's and synced them long enough to send over the document. "I had him write down everything he remembered about those two incidents with the family members."

He scrolled through, wondering why they hadn't been told any of this before. Cal supposed it was probably minor enough that people had forgotten all about it. The issues Rhett had supposedly taken problem with were serious, though, like accusing the daughter of a man for never getting off her device, leaving her mute father lying in his own filth for hours, even though she was seated right next to him.

The daughter wasn't one of the victims who'd lost their head, but her boyfriend was.

"This could be something," Calix said. "I'll look into it."

"I'm glad to be of service."

Cal finished writing his notes and then paused, glancing up to find Titus watching him closely. "Is there something else, Director?"

"I was curious if you still have that scar," Titus asked, and for a split second, Cal's mind went straight to the A carved into his ass before he clarified, "The one behind your right ear? How did you say you got it again?"

Absently, he reached up to the spot in question. “One of the other kids at the orphanage.”

“Right,” he hummed. “He hit you with...?”

“A rock.” Calix bristled. “Is there something you’re getting at?”

“Still as paranoid as ever, Detective. You were like that when you were eighteen as well. And here I thought you’d claimed you were no longer the same person.”

A tingle of dread coursed through him and Cal struggled to maintain his composure. “You’re playing with me,” he blurted, the accusation springing forth even though he knew better than to allow it to. “Just like you did back then.”

Titus smiled at him, but it lacked any sort of kindness or warmth. “I had a feeling you felt that way.”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“So certain?”

“Yes.”

“As certain as you are that you didn’t mean to hit Nero Quentin with your car that day?”

Calix clamped his mouth shut, unwilling to push things too far.

“That’s old too,” Titus said, and he almost sounded pleased all of a sudden. “You’ve always liked to take risks, but you understand there are lines that should be drawn. You have good instincts, Calix.”

“Even if my instincts are telling me it’s feeling more and more likely that you are capable of cutting off someone else’s head?”

He grunted. “Those aren’t instincts, that’s anger. You don’t have much pride, but you certainly get defensive when triggered.”

“We don’t know each other.”

“See?” If he’d been wearing his glasses, there was little doubt in Cal’s mind that Titus would have adjusted them as he said that. “Defensive.”

“What exactly is it you want, Director?”

“I just came to give you information, Calix.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“It’s your name.”

“We aren’t on a first-name basis.”

“I’m older than you are, I get to decide that.” Titus rose from his seat, peering down his nose at him. “If the things Heathe said start to get to you, the hospital has a fantastic psychologist I can recommend.”

“I don’t need to see a psych.”

“Very well.” He bowed his head ever so slightly. “Until next time, Detective .”

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A petulant part of him wanted the lead to go nowhere, but of course, since the director had presented it, it held some weight to it. Cal and the others had split into two groups, with Troya and another officer tasked with speaking with Rhett, while Calix and Amory checked hospital logs and met with family members of the deceased.

He'd wanted to be the one to speak with Rhett, but Troya had insisted, giving him a knowing wink as he left the station before Calix could argue further. The Inspector had gotten it into his head there was something going on between Cal and Aodhan, and he was pushing for them to run into each other.

The thing was, it wasn't Aodhan Cal was trying to avoid.

His talk with Titus the other day had left him more than a little unsettled. If anything, running into Aodhan would be a good thing. It'd give him an excuse to ask about Titus and whether or not the two of them got along.

Whether or not he felt the director could be trusted.

"Trouble in paradise already?" Amory asked as he begrudgingly followed her down one of the wings in the hospital. They'd already spoken to everyone they needed to, leaving the hospital visit for last.

He frowned, silently asking for her to elaborate.

"Oh, come on." She gave him a look. "Everyone knows."

“Knows what?”

“About you and Doctor Solace,” she shocked him by saying. “He’s been going around talking about you to everyone with ears—even a few other species who don’t. Everyone knows how he feels about you.”

Calix came to a halt in the middle of the hallway.

Amory’s brow furrowed. “...Everyone except for apparently you. Wait, you’re joking, right?”

“I...” What was he supposed to say? He sort of had an idea because he’d let the guy dick him down and slice him up? They’d spent time together since, sure, but it hadn’t been anything serious, nothing outside of the hospital even.

No more late-night visits that included food deliveries.

Not that Cal was upset about that.

He wasn’t.

Because it’d been one casual and fun night, and he was leaving soon.

Period.

“It’s not like that,” he ended up telling her. “We just get along, that’s all.”

“Do I look like I was born yesterday?”

“You look very pretty today, actually. Did you get a new haircut?”

“Ha ha.” She rolled her eyes. “Seriously, tell me how you do it. What’s the big secret?”

His frown returned.

“How are you getting all the Emergence men to fall head over heels for you?” She punched him on the arm—and not lightly. “I just don’t see it, no offense. I mean, I see it,” she waved a hand from his face down to his toes, “You’ve got a great body and your face is hot.”

“It is?”

“Yeah, you’ve got that cute, corruptible vibe going for you. You’re standoffish and quiet, but that only makes you seem mysterious and secretly a closet freak.”

Calix blinked at her. “I what ?”

“Hey, it’s not a bad thing. Who doesn’t love tying people up and having their way with them every now and again?” She cocked her head and tapped her chin. “Or, is it the other way around for you? Like to take instead of—”

“This is sexual harassment in the workforce.”

She sighed. “Don’t be like that. I’m trying to be friends here.”

“Why? Because Nero can walk again and suddenly you and the rest of the people who treated me like shit want to believe me?” It was harsh, harsher than she deserved, considering she’d been nice to him ever since that first meeting.

Another thing Titus Mercer had been right about.

“I’m sorry.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and feigned a migraine. “I get defensive when I’m embarrassed.”

“No, you’re right. Just because I feel shitty for misjudging you in the past, that doesn’t give me a pass. Not everyone is comfortable talking about sex, and I just tried to steamroll you into the conversation.” She gave him a sheepish smile. “For the record, I don’t think there’s anything to be ashamed of when it comes to enjoying sex.”

That wasn’t exactly what he’d been embarrassed about but...okay.

“Anyway, I’m glad Nero came to your defense. Everyone feels really awful about back then,” Amory added.

“I’d like it if we just discussed the case.” So they could take this far, far away from the topic of kinky sex before he had another slip of the tongue and he asked her what she thought about blood play and sadism.

“Of course,” she seemed disappointed, but didn’t push things further. They started walking down the hall again, weaving their way between patients and nurses as they went. This wing wasn’t as busy as some of the others, but they still needed to keep their voices down and avoid saying anything classified out loud. “I may have uncovered something, but I’m not sure how much it has to do with your case.”

“Tell me, I’ll decide.”

“Well, apparently, there have been a lot of domestic abuse cases involving patients of this hospital and their family members, dating all the way back for around eight or ten years. They’re sporadic enough that no one noticed. Hell, I wouldn’t have noticed either if I wasn’t specifically trying to find a pattern.”

“If it’s been going on that long, Rhett can’t be the only one involved.” Rhett was too young and had only been on the job for a couple of years.

“If he’s involved at all,” she said, “you’re right. Here’s the thing: they’re all weird cases, nothing like what you’re here to solve. Most of these reported domestic cases are minor, but at least once a year, someone takes things too far.”

That didn’t sound all that suspicious to Calix, but he tried to see it from her perspective. To him, people lost their cool and snapped all the time. Look what happened with Heathe.

What had happened with Nero.

“How many murders do you guys typically deal with?” Cal asked, and she lost some of her luster.

“I know, it seems like a long shot, and even if it wasn’t, it’s not like I can actually connect any of those deaths since the killer always confesses. The thing is, many of them sound remarkably similar to Heathe. Don’t you find that part strange at least?”

“What do you mean?” They were nearing the end of the hall now. “Sound like him, how?”

“They all said it was like suddenly they were overcome by this outside force that led them to do it.”

“Like being possessed?” Calix quirked a brow. “Do you believe in ghosts, Amory?”

“Of course not. But what if there really is something—”

“Evening, Detective.” Aodhan turned the corner just as they came to it, propping his

shoulder against the wall as he grinned at him. His gaze pulled away after a moment, momentarily moving to Amory before he returned all his attention to Cal. “Officer Paige. What are the two of you talking so seriously about?”

“Dead people,” Amory replied bluntly. She went to step around him and mirrored Troya’s earlier move by winking at Cal once she was behind Aodhan. “I’ll go check the other databases myself. It’s not really a two-person job. Calix skipped lunch today, Doctor Solace, in case you were wondering.”

“Thanks, Officer,” Aodhan’s smile dropped despite his upbeat words, “I was.”

Cal waited until she was far enough away before stepping in closer to ask, “What’s wrong?”

“Come with me.” He took his wrist and pulled to the right, entering an empty storage room. He seemed nervous, running his hand through his dark hair as he paced in front of the door.

“Aodhan,” Cal couldn’t help the slight nervousness in his tone, “what’s going on? Talk to me.”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “It’s...No, it can’t be. I had to have misheard.”

“Misheard what?” Calix exhaled and then captured the other man by the arms and led him to a mostly empty table set in the corner. Once he had him seated, he crossed his arms. “It’s okay, just tell me what’s wrong.”

“That officer just now...”

“Amory?”

“Yes. Look, I know how this is going to sound but...I heard the two of you talking before I turned the corner and saw who it was. I’ve worked with Bruce and a few of the others in his department before, but she and I haven’t had much interaction in the past, which is probably why it didn’t register for me until I could hear her but not see her face.”

Cal got a bad feeling. “What are you saying? Are you implying that Amory...No, she can’t be.”

“I’m fairly certain she is though,” he insisted. “Amory’s voice sounds exactly like the one I heard at the party after you left. She was bragging about having a collection of heads.”

“Maybe...,” his mind spun for a way to make sense of this, “maybe you’re right and she is a member. Couldn’t she have been talking about the case then?”

“If that were true, why would they need me to bring you in the first place? She already had an invitation. When I discussed it with Bruce, he was clueless about the event, which means she never brought it up to him herself.”

“Maybe she wanted to try and do things on her own? Get a leg up on me and make me seem incompetent?” This had been before Nero’s return home. Even though she’d been nice to him, she could have still harbored ill feelings toward him. Solving his case would definitely be one way to flip him the proverbial middle finger.

Aodhan leaned back, effectively pulling away from him. “I didn’t realize the two of you had gotten so close these past few weeks.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then why are you so readily making excuses for her?”

Calix rested a hand on Aodhan's right knee. "I'm not saying I don't believe you. I'm saying I don't want to. I'll look into it." Something else occurred to him, and he pursed his lips. "I'll have to speak to Bruce about this immediately."

Was it weird? Yes, but there was no reason for Aodhan to lie about something like this. Whether or not Amory really was the woman they were looking for, the doctor believed she was, which meant Cal had to trust him and check. It shouldn't be too hard, all they had to do was find out where she'd been the night of the party.

"As badly as I was hoping we could grab lunch together," Aodhan said, "you should probably go do that now. I'll distract Officer Paige."

"You sure?" He hesitated, knowing he was right, but also kind of bummed about having to skip out on spending time together.

"Yeah, the sooner we can prove I'm either right or wrong, the better."

"Thanks."

"I can think of a better way you can thank me, Detective," the suggestive lilt to his voice gave him away.

It was super unprofessional, especially given all the circumstances, but Calix moved in and kissed him anyway.

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After the heavy make-out session in the supply closet earlier, Calix was less surprised by the knock on his door this time.

He'd been going over his notes—again—piecing together Rhett's whereabouts on the nights when the murders had taken place. It was starting to seem like he was a really good suspect, but he'd cooperated with Troya earlier, and the Inspector said there'd been nothing suspicious about his behavior.

Cal knew that didn't mean anything, but still. Either this orderly really had flown under everyone's nose all this time, or there was more going on here. All he knew for certain was they had four dead guys, and if they didn't come up with something concrete soon, he was going to get an earful from his commanding officer.

“Hello, Detective.” Aodhan grinned at him as soon as he opened the door. “Mind if I come in?”

“And if I said I did?”

Aodhan chuckled and then brushed past him, entering the hotel room with confident steps. Like the first time, he set a paper bag on the kitchen table and began fixing them a meal. “I'm guessing you didn't eat lunch even after we parted ways earlier?”

“That would be a good guess.” Cal ambled over and smiled at the pizza and garlic knots pulled from the bag.

“Brain food,” Aodhan explained.

“I don’t think that’s accurate,” he drawled. “Not very heart-healthy either, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I’m the doctor here, and I say it’s good for you.” Aodhan came around the table and settled his hands on Cal’s waist. “I figured you could use some stress food after what I told you today. Come on, I swear by G’s Red Hot Slice. They’ve got the best pizza in town. Got me through some of the worst double shifts at the hospital.”

“I actually love G’s.” He hadn’t had it in years, but recalling how good the slightly sweet and tangy homemade sauce was with the gooey cheese had his mouth salivating.

“Perfect. Looks like I chose correctly again.” Aodhan glanced at the blank wall across from the couch where Calix had the notes from his tablet projected. “Working hard, Detective?”

“I don’t know why I bother. It’s not like I give a fuck about this job.” Cal went still. “I shouldn’t have said that. You’re a doctor who saves lives and cares about people, and I just confessed I don’t. Can we pretend this didn’t happen?”

“I do save people,” he agreed, “and so do you. You don’t have to enjoy doing your job to be good at it.”

“Yeah, well, apparently I’m not that either.” He motioned toward the projections. “It’s been a month, and I still don’t have any answers. The only upside is that there hasn’t been another murder, but that’s also a downside, because it means we won’t be getting any more clues.”

“The killer knows you’re here,” Aodhan surmised. “They’ll lie low until you’re gone.”

“Or jump planet, if they haven’t already.”

“Unless it’s Amory.” He shrugged when Calix scowled. “Do you really like her that much, Detective?”

“It’s not that...” Although he didn’t dislike her. “I told Bruce about it earlier and he had the same reaction. Amory is a hard worker and, unlike me, she’s not only good at her job, she also likes it. I just can’t see her being a murderer.”

“What about me?” Aodhan took a single step closer, his gaze turning intense. “Can you see me being one?”

Cal felt his heart leap in his chest and tried to get it to calm down. Considering the topic of conversation, the last thing he should be experiencing right now was lust, and yet... “You do something odd to me. I can’t put my finger on it, but whenever I’m around you, I feel...”

“We have a similar energy pattern,” Aodhan said, smirking when Calix’s brow furrowed at that. “It doesn’t matter. We can talk about it later. What I’m really saying anyway is that we’re compatible.”

It took him a moment, but then it clicked. “Ah, you mean sexually.”

“We definitely have great sexual chemistry.” The doctor moved closer. “I haven’t stopped thinking about what you felt like gripping my cock since that first night. The way you cried for me and begged...”

“Did I?” Cal couldn’t remember. A lot of the smaller details were admittedly a blur, the pleasure having been so overwhelming and unexpected that he’d blacked out practically everything but the way it’d all felt.

“How’s the mark on your ass, baby?” He tipped his head as if to look, then asked seductively, “Can I see it?”

“Right now?” Calix expected him to laugh it off and say he was kidding, so when that didn’t happen, a rush of arousal flooded through him straight down to his dick.

“Take off your clothes,” Aodhan’s voice dropped low, the order clear and leaving no room for arguing.

Something inside of him snapped at the command, his hands going to remove his white jeans with only a split second’s hesitation. Wordlessly, Cal stripped for him, right there in the middle of the kitchen.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” Calix said, even as he tugged his shirt over his head and dropped it to the pile at his feet. “You’re a respectable member of the community, and I’m—”

“You forgetting that party I took you to?” Aodhan asked.

“You said you didn’t go that often.”

“And if I lied?”

Cal considered it. “I already know you’re a liar.”

“Do you?” he didn’t seem worried; he sounded intrigued.

“If I tried to tell the nurses at the hospital that you carved your initial into my ass, there’s no way they’d believe me.”

“Are you trying to say I pretend to be a good person when I’m not one, Cal?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I’m saying there’s more to you than meets the eye. Do you...” He nibbled on his bottom lip nervously and then forced himself to ask, “Do you go to those parties for the... You know?”

“The orgy?” Aodhan grunted. “Can’t even say it?”

“I’ve never... Not with multiple people before.”

“That something you’re interested in?”

“No.” He frowned. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

“Don’t like being shared, or don’t like sharing?”

“This seems to have taken a dangerous direction.”

Aodhan quirked a brow, silently urging him to elaborate.

Calix sighed and ran a hand through his blond hair. “I’m leaving. I’m not sticking around.”

“So you’ve claimed.”

“Talking about whether or not I’m comfortable being shared sounds too...exclusive. Let’s just focus on the present, yeah?”

“You mean,” Aodhan undid the first three buttons of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves, “the present where you were trying to say we shouldn’t be doing this?”

“We shouldn’t.” And yet Calix couldn’t seem to look away from that swath of golden flesh that now peeked from the dress shirt. “Didn’t it disgust you? When I asked you

to hurt me?”

“What gave you that impression?” he drawled. “Did you feel that way before or after I slashed you open with a scalpel?” Aodhan rolled his pink eyes and set his hands on his hips. “Cal, you’re insulting us both right now. There’s nothing wrong with craving a little pain in the bedroom, and I don’t mind being the one to give it to you. In fact, I actually insist.”

“You do?” That should terrify him. Calix should stop this and use his head—the one on his shoulders and not between his legs—to assess this whole crazy situation. He was a detective, for gods sake. The last thing he should be doing was partaking in fucked up sexual fantasies wherein someone hurt him. But... “Will you do it again?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask him to make sure to carve the A in deeper this time, but Aodhan gave a single shake of his head before he could, dashing those hopes.

The doctor chuckled. “Don’t look so forlorn, baby. I only mean we won’t be playing that hard tonight. There’s a lot going on for both of us, and I wasn’t supposed to come here. I only did so we could take the edge off, so to speak.”

“What does that even mean?” He couldn’t help the way his spine straightened. “Are you not going to fuck me?”

Aodhan gave a shocked laugh. “You’re cute when you’re dirty and blunt, Detective. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you get yours before I leave. And,” he reached down and undid his belt, sliding the leather suggestively through the metal buckle, “I’ll make sure you get it the way you like.”

Cal’s eyes stared at the belt as the doctor wrapped one end around his hand, hating the small prick of disappointment when it was the side the buckle was on.

He didn't want to be beaten to death or anything like that. Wasn't keen on the idea of broken bones or any long-term or permanent damage—aside from the occasional discreetly placed scar, of course. But Aodhan was right; he was stressed and feeling anxious over everything that was going on, and Calix could really use a release.

“Something is seriously wrong with me,” he murmured, only to have the doctor snap the belt in the air.

“Nothing is wrong with you, Cal,” he growled, losing some of his patience. “Now, go to the coffee table and bend over. If I have to whip self-acceptance into you, I will, and I'll enjoy every moment doing it, too. Want to tell me there's something wrong with me as well?”

“No, I wouldn't do that.”

Aodhan stared at him with an enigmatic expression and then shook his head. “You've got terrible instincts for such a good detective, Detective.”

Cal bristled, but before he could come up with a reply, Aodhan pointed to the living room area.

“Go.” He took a threatening step closer and that, along with the sexy authoritative way he spoke the single command, was enough to get Cal into motion.

Calix stopped at the end of the coffee table, glad he'd left it mostly clear aside from the remote, and then lowered himself until his palms were flat against the smooth, polished surface. From between his parted thighs, he could see Aodhan's lower half as he approached, and his breath hitched.

“Embarrassed, Cal?” Aodhan asked. “I can see everything from this position. Everything you have to offer. Everything you have to take. You mentioned the nurses

earlier? What about you? How do you think Bruce or Troya would react if I told them you're a natural born sub who likes to ride my cock while I make you bleed for me?"

He winced and squeezed his eyes shut against the image. "They can never know."

"Why? Worried they'll judge you the same way Sister Grace used to?"

She'd only caught him the once, when he'd been sixteen and most of the other kids had been asleep. Most, but not all. Cal had gotten up to use the bathroom and overheard Felix and Bella fooling around in one of the stalls in the girls' room.

He'd listened for a bit even though he knew he shouldn't have. At that age, his experience with sex was limited, and Felix and Bella were both older than him at eighteen. She'd pleaded with him to stop.

Cal, thinking she was being hurt against her will, had barged in there and yanked Felix away.

Only to be told in no uncertain terms by both of them that he was out of line and she was into it. Bella had explained in a rush of jumbled terms and phrases that he'd only partially been able to process what consensual nonconsent was, how some people liked to pretend to be forced to do sexual acts.

Even though he'd been trying to do the right thing, Calix had left them that night feeling like the one who needed to be embarrassed. The next day, using the school computers in the library, he'd searched CNC up.

That's when the idea was planted. For weeks, all he could think about was the desperate sound of Bella's voice, how scared she'd seemed.

How it hadn't been real.

His research had introduced him to other aspects of kink play he hadn't been aware of, like that some people enjoyed hurting or being hurt during the act. He'd been whipped dozens of times by that point in his life, and he couldn't fully process how anyone could find that a turn-on. But he was curious enough to want to see if a fresh perspective and a new mindset could allow him to.

At first, it'd been mostly because he'd wanted an escape from the pain of the beatings. The idea of being able to turn that horrible sensation into a pleasurable one had been appealing. He'd stepped out of line more frequently at the orphanage, pretended to be remorseful and forlorn when Sister Grace called him into her office and took out the cane.

It took more than a few attempts, but eventually, Cal figured it out. He thought about the grunts and groans Felix had made in that bathroom, the scared ring in Bella's voice. He imagined it was Felix behind him instead of Sister Grace, beating him not to hurt him, but to get him ready for what was to come. To get him ready to take his cock.

Calix already knew he didn't have a preference when it came to gender at that point, so it wasn't really a shock when it'd been Felix that came to mind and not Bella, though, he'd thought at first he'd like to be the one delivering the punishments instead of the other way around, as a change of pace from reality. That simply just wasn't the case.

He'd been wrong about something else, too, or, rather, he hadn't had the foresight to think it all through.

Because the moment he got an erection while Sister Grace was tanning his hide was the moment he made things infinitely worse for himself. Before that, he was merely an unruly youth who needed sorting out. But after?

After he became a sinner.

“Good boys don’t dishonor Light by giving in to morbid appetites,” he repeated the words she’d spoken to him then frowned, recalling where he was and the man he was with. “Did I...mention her before?”

“Troya told me where you grew up,” Aodhan said. “I know the place. Sister Grace still believes in beating religion into those under her charge. Their schools bring them into the hospital now and again, but not often. Medical bills aren’t cheap, and orphans aren’t known to have much coin.”

Cal didn’t know how to reply to that. He wanted to defend her, but logically knew that was programming more than anything else. She’d brought him up, made sure he was clothed and fed when no one else gave two shits about what happened to him. Allowed him to go to school and even made sure he didn’t have to go in rags or covered in filth like some of the other orphans from other locations.

And if she sometimes beat him harder than necessary? If he’d felt wronged, and like the punishment perhaps didn’t fit the crime? So what? No kid, especially a teenager, believed they deserved to be reprimanded.

“Were you into her?” Aodhan asked then, an edge to his voice Cal hadn’t heard before. “Is that where these morbid appetites come from? Some compulsive yearning to be slapped and pushed around by your caretaker?”

He made a face, grossed out by that notion. “Ew, no. She’s three times my age.”

“You don’t like older people?”

“I didn’t have the hots for my forty-year-old guardian at sixteen,” Cal snapped.

“That when you first had your sexual awakening? Cute.” Aodhan moved closer so that Calix could feel the heat from his body, but he didn’t touch him. “Who was it then, if it wasn’t her?”

“Just some other kids. They were older. I caught them.” He blew out a breath. “It’s a dumb story.”

“You’re right, we’ve gotten a bit off track, haven’t we, baby? It’s your fault. You should pay the price for it, don’t you agree?” Aodhan took a single step back, clearly not expecting an actual answer.

The snap of the belt in the air had Calix twitching even before the hit came. He hissed at the sharp sting, adjusting his hands on the table to better secure himself.

“Stay still,” Aodhan ordered, letting the belt fly again, this time with more force than before. He hit the backs of his thighs and then slapped his ass again across both cheeks, not letting up even when Cal’s sounds turned to cries and his entire body shook.

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“Tell me how you’re feeling, Cal.”

“It hurts,” he hissed, dropping his head between his arms. The move gave him the perfect view of his dick, heavy and weeping between his spread thighs. He couldn’t tell if his face was wetter from all the tears or if his dripping hard-on was. “It hurts.”

“That all you got for me?” He tutted him and gave another harsh whip of the belt. “That’s not good enough. Try again.”

He’d agreed to this. Some fuzzy part of Calix’s brain reminded him of that fact. Here he was, bent over a coffee table, presenting himself to a respectable man of the community...begging to be beaten.

And he was begging, he was under no delusion otherwise, no matter how much he cried or how badly he trembled.

Cal wanted this. He wanted to be debased by the public's most beloved doctor. Wanted to be punished and forgiven for all his sins. He’d be able to breathe again after, just like how he’d been able to breathe for days in the post sex bliss.

“Please,” he said, “it’s not enough.”

“Want it harder, baby?”

“I want you to hurt me more,” he instructed.

Aodhan chuckled darkly. “Someone’s getting greedy.”

“Please.” He dropped his forehead to the table, lifting his ass even higher. “I’ve been bad. I deserve it.”

“Have you?” One of Aodhan’s hands stroked his right ass cheek, smoothing over the welts forming here. The touch both soothed and burned, a delicious combination that had Cal mewling. “Focus, baby.”

“I have,” he rushed to say. “I doubted a friend, and I—”

“I heard you had a conversation with the director.”

Calix’s mind went blank. “Who?”

Aodhan laughed, only stopping when Cal lifted his head and glanced at him over his shoulder. “Sorry, sorry.” He pressed a hand against the back of his skull and forced him into position once more. “The director of the hospital, Titus Mercer. He will not be pleased that you forgot about him, baby.”

“Oh, him.” Right. “He’s scary.”

“Scary?” He spanked him with an open palm. “That’s true. Anything else you want to say about him?”

“Like?”

“Like that he’s hot?”

Cal frowned. “Do you think he’s hot?”

“I’m not blind, Detective, but we’re talking about what you think. From the sound of it, you two were alone at the station for a while. Discuss anything interesting?”

Was he...

“Are you jealous?” Calix blurted, earning himself another bark of laughter and an even heavier hand against his rear. “We were talking about the case, that’s all.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” He yelped when suddenly the belt looped around his neck and he was hauled up. Cal grabbed onto the sides to keep himself from being entirely strangled, his back slamming into Aodhan’s chest. “What are you doing?!”

Aodhan walked him backward, snorting whenever Cal almost tripped. When he stopped them at the table and turned, he loosened the belt and forced his head down. “I forgot my favorite topping. Can you help me out?”

Calix frowned. He couldn’t actually mean...?

Aodhan’s hand wrapped around his dick and gave him one solid pump that nearly had him lifting onto his toes. “There you go. That’s the cream I’m looking for. Care to share, Detective?”

“Aodhan...” He wasn’t sure about this. Did he seriously want him to ruin a perfectly good pizza? That seemed...

“Here, I’ll make it easier for you.” That was all the warning he gave before two of his fingers drove into Cal’s entrance. He fucked them in and out a couple of times and then hooked them, pulling upward in a way that formed a hook inside of his body.

Calix cried out at the stretch, his dick gushing precome over Aodhan’s other hand as he started to rigorously stroke him.

“Next time, I’ll use an anal hook on this sweet ass,” Aodhan breathed against the side of Cal’s neck. “String you up and have you entirely at my mercy.” He laughed, the sound a bit hysterical, but composed himself before Calix’s mind could really lock on the oddity of it and question it. “Gods, you’re going to look so beautiful, Detective. Coming apart at the seams. I can’t wait to destroy you and remake you in my image. Tell me, have you ever broken a person before?”

“Aodhan.” A trickle of fear slipped past the lust and Calix tried to fight it off, not wanting to leave his current headspace where everything was blissful and simplified.

“Relax, baby,” he whispered reassuringly, kissing the curve of his jaw. “It’s just a game.”

Right, they were playing. This was just an intense sex game between two consenting adults. There was no reason to feel embarrassed or be worried.

The sound of his fly coming undone came then, and suddenly Aodhan’s fingers were leaving him. He ignored the way Cal whined about being empty, slipping his engorged cock between Calix’s thighs. His flushed crown bumped against the underside of his balls, and then thrust forward to rub against his dick.

Aodhan adjusted his stance, forcing Cal’s legs closer together as he began to fuck against him. Their cocks rubbed together with each inward and outward stroke, the slick sound of their precome mixing and easing the glide resounding around them.

Cal’s hands found the edge of the table and he squeezed his eyes shut as pleasure snapped and sparked throughout his entire body. His skin felt too tight and there wasn’t enough air in the room. He gasped and stood there, taking whatever the doctor was willing to give him, driven higher and higher toward release just from frotting.

“Squeeze me,” Aodhan ordered, his command breathy. “Make me come, Cal.”

He did as he was told, pushing his thighs together to create more friction for Aodhan's battering cock. The slap against his ass, that pain against the welts, was enough to send him over the edge and he cried out as he released.

Aodhan bit down on the spot between his neck and shoulder and then hit his own peak, come splattering across the table, covering the pizza in a spray of opaque white. He clung to Calix, holding him up even as he partially collapsed into him, his face buried against his throat.

"I can't believe you managed to get me off just from that," Aodhan chuckled and then pulled back enough to reach for one of the slices. He selected the one that was coated the most in their mutual come, and then brought the tip of it up to Cal's lips.

Instinctually, he turned his head away, but when he tried to step back, Aodhan's solid chest kept him firmly trapped between his body and the table.

"Come on, baby," Aodhan cooed. "Eat up. I went through all this trouble to prepare it for you." When Cal continued to hesitate, he nipped at his earlobe. "It's fine. It's just a game. You don't have—"

Before he could chicken out, Calix turned his head and took a large bite of the pizza. He chewed, only noticing Aodhan was staring at him wide-eyed after the initial ick factor wore off. This time, when Cal went to move away, a shocked Aodhan let him. He snatched the slice and propped a hip against the edge of the table, making eye contact with the doctor as he took another hearty bite.

"Good. Fuck me. Light," Aodhan said, causing Cal to laugh.

"I'm pretty sure that's not how that expression goes."

"You're seriously eating that."

“You told me to.”

“Okay, yeah, sure, but still. I definitely didn’t think you actually would.” His nose scrunched up. “What does it taste like?”

“Honestly?” Cal polished off the rest of the slice and dusted his hands off. “It doesn’t taste any different. Maybe just a little saltier?”

“Bull shit.” Aodhan grabbed a slice and ate a bite. “Why’s it also a little sweet?”

“That would be me.” Calix shrugged when his brow winged up. “That’s what I’ve been told, anyway. Some past lovers have commented on it, that’s all.”

“Some other people have tasted your come and told you it was sweet?” Aodhan’s mood noticeably darkened. “Yeah, that’s—” His multi-slate started to ring, cutting off anything he was going to say. He turned and stared at the screen, and it was obvious he was debating whether or not to ignore it when he finally relented. “It’s the hospital, sorry.”

“No problem.”

Aodhan popped out the earbud attachment and stepped back into the living room as he took the call. His shoulders were tense, and he didn’t seem pleased, but he finished talking rather quickly.

“I’m being called in for an emergency,” he told Cal, coming over to plant a kiss on his forehead. “I’m really sorry about this.”

“Oh,” disappointment swept through him, “okay.”

“It’s not because you ate the come pizza,” Aodhan rushed out, going around the table

and picking up the bag he'd left on the floor earlier. "Or because you enjoyed being spanked and whipped. I know you can get wrapped up in your head, and I don't want you wasting the rest of the night doubting things."

"...All right. That's kind of more insightful than I would have liked, but thank you." He hadn't realized his struggles with self-compassion had been so noticeable. Shit.

"Feel free to eat that one if you want, but..." Aodhan pulled another box from the bag and set it on the table next to the one they'd ruined. "I got a backup for after."

Cal's cheeks heated as the box was opened, showing him an identical pizza. "Did you plan this from the beginning?"

"Kind of?" His multi-slate beeped, and he growled. "I get it, I get it. I'm fucking coming already, chill."

"You should go." Still naked, Cal walked him to the door. "Thanks for coming."

"Literally." Aodhan kissed him quickly, biting on his bottom lip hard enough to break skin. "Whoops. Sorry. I'll call you later."

He left Calix standing there, bleeding. Wondering how the hell they'd gotten to this place where suddenly, the idea of solving the case and leaving the planet as fast as possible was no longer as appealing as it'd once been.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:12 am

“He was found this morning in his car,” Troya spoke hoarsely. “It was parked by the river. A jogger spotted him through the window.”

Calix stared down at the body on the table in the hospital morgue, an odd sense of numbness taking over him. He’d gotten the call less than twenty minutes ago and had rushed here, still wearing his pajama shirt over his jeans, which he’d only just remembered to throw on.

“Estimated time of death is between eleven and one.” Mitri, who was standing next to Troya on the opposite side of the table, took Cal in with a solemn expression. “Would you like to sit down, Detective?”

“No.” His fists tightened at his sides, though they couldn’t see it with the table blocking their view.

There was only a small thread of anger he could feel through the wall of ice that had encased him the moment he’d stepped foot into the room and seen the body with his own eyes. He tried to grab onto it, tried to cling and allow himself to experience the emotion it was clear the other two were, but it eluded him.

Not because he didn’t care.

Because he had never experienced a loss like this before in his adult life, and he didn’t quite know what to do with it.

If he even had a right to it.

“Maybe you should,” Troya suggested. “He was like a father figure to you.”

“I spoke to him once or twice a year,” Calix corrected in a clipped tone, but even though he was frozen inside, he wasn’t fooling either of them.

“Sit down, Cal,” the Inspector snapped, and even though he’d never followed his authority, the soothing balm of having a straightforward order got Calix into motion, at least a little.

He didn’t sit, but he did step away from the body, finally tearing his gaze off the still face that only yesterday had been colored with life and possibility.

“How did he die?” He swallowed the lump in his throat and forced himself to say more firmly, “How did Bruce die?”

Bruce, who had been placed on this table and would later be placed in a casket and placed in the ground. The one person who’d believed in his idiotic teenage self, despite all the noise from the public and the evidence that could have leaned either way. If not for Bruce and Titus, Cal wouldn’t be here right now, he’d be locked up in prison on the other side of the city.

“Where’s Amory?” he demanded before either of them could answer his first question.

Troya grasped the back of his neck, obviously tense. “We can’t find her.”

“She’s disappeared,” Mitri confirmed. “I tried calling her a dozen times, but her multi-slate is off, which isn’t like her. I’m afraid whoever did this got to her, too. The last thing she told me yesterday evening before leaving the hospital was she’d gotten a call from Bruce and planned on meeting with him.”

“It wasn’t a meeting,” Cal corrected. “It was an interrogation.”

“Pardon?”

“There’s reason to believe she’s involved with the murders, either as the killer we’re after or as an accomplice.”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“What are you talking about?” Troya rested a hand on Mitri’s shoulder and frowned at Cal. “We’re looking into Rhett Elliot still, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but—”

“According to the head nurse I spoke with this morning,” Mitri interrupted them, “Rhett never showed for his shift last night.”

“What?” Calix swore. “Why weren’t we notified?”

Mitri stared at him wide-eyed. “Amory said she was going to tell Bruce once she met up with him and go from there.”

“Fuck.” Troya turned and punched the metal door of the mortuary cabinet directly over the one that housed Bruce.

“There’s no way she did this,” Mitri insisted. “I know her! She would never! Being an officer of the law is her life! She’s wanted this job since she was in grade school!”

“Yet she chose to stay here and attend regular training instead of joining the Academy?” Troya set his hands on his hips. “Why is that? If her big dream had always been to be a cop?”

“Here,” Mitri snapped. “She wanted to be a cop here , specifically. Multiple paths can lead to the same destination, Inspector. Amory has always believed in cleaning up Emergence streets. Hunting down the corrupt and the monstrous—”

“What did you just say?” Calix stopped him. That word. Monstrous.

The man who’d fucked him in the woods that day had called him that.

Right after Cal and Amory had gotten separated.

Mitri’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Just that—”

Cal’s multi-slate rang then, and concerned it might have something to do with their missing suspects, he answered, not even bothering with the earpiece. “Detective Valimir.”

“Detective,” Titus’s cool voice came through the speakers, “I’d appreciate it if you could come to my office.”

“I’m kind of busy.” The last thing he wanted to do was confront the director and have another weird misfiring of his emotions. Seemed like whenever he was around the older man, he felt strange, and right now, he needed to keep his wits about him.

“It’s rather urgent, I’m afraid,” Titus said.

“So is this. I’m sorry but—”

“Give it to me,” another voice, this sounding more frantic and impatient, growled a moment before he spoke to Cal. “This is Rhett Elliot, Detective. Currently, I have a blaster to the director's head. Are you willing to come see him now?”

His blood went cold. “Give me ten minutes.”

“Five,” Rhett said. “I know you’re in the building. Five minutes and Director Mercer won’t have to leave here with his brains splattered all over the carpet.”

There was a derisive snort and then a loud cracking sound that had Calix and the others in the room with him tensing.

“What was that?” he asked, but the line went dead.

“This is a trap,” Troya stated the obvious as Calix and he headed for the exit.

“Call the station and get backup,” he ordered. “We need to secure the area in case he slips past me.”

“There’s a hotel next door,” he divulged, already typing on his device to send the commands. “Titus’s office faces it. I’ll see if I can get a sniper up there. If there’s a good enough vantage—”

“Tell whoever you get if they can find a clear shot,” Calix stepped into the elevator, “take it.”

“Understood.” Troya followed him inside, but Cal stopped Mitri when he went to do the same.

“You stay here. I want answers about Bruce when I come back. I need everything you can possibly find,” Calix said.

Mitri wrung his hands but ended up nodding just as the doors shut on him.

“You thinking he might be in on it?” Troya asked as soon as the elevator began to

rise. “He and Amory seem pretty close.”

“They went to the same college for a bit before she switched career paths,” Cal told him.

“Didn’t he just say being an officer has always been her dream?”

“Yeah, but apparently her dad didn’t approve. She went to college for a year before dropping out.”

Troya eyed him. “I didn’t realize you two had also gotten this close.”

“We haven’t.” He shrugged. “It’s my job to ask questions, you know that.”

“Pry, you mean,” Troya grunted. “That’s what you do, Cal. You pry. For a quiet guy, you’re pretty good at opening people up.”

He scowled, not sure why he’d felt the need to word it that way, but they came to their floor and the doors dinged. Both of them placed a hand on their weapons as they headed down the hall where a crowd was already beginning to gather.

“Clear these people,” Calix said.

“I’m going in with you.” Troya stuck close to his side. “We’re partners.”

“We’re I.P.F. agents,” he corrected. “Protecting the public comes first.”

They stopped in front of the closed office door and both unholstered and raised their weapons.

“Back up, people!” Troya waved at the crowd, putting himself between them and the

door as Cal placed his hand on the control panel set in the side of the wall and opened it. “Shit, Cal, don’t!”

He stepped inside, gun aimed, and allowed the door to swish shut behind his back.

Rhett was standing on the other side of Titus’s desk with a blaster pressed against the director’s temple. The man was about a foot shorter than the director, and he didn’t seem nearly as put together, which was odd, considering their positions.

“Hello, Detective,” Titus greeted him in a breezy tone, as though he wasn’t currently at risk of dying at the hand of a madman. “I see you were rushed this morning.” His gaze lingered on Cal’s pajama shirt, a mint green color with a single yellow star stitched over his left hip.

“Shut up!” Rhett warned, shoving the tip of the gun more firmly against Titus’ forehead before turning to address Calix. “I didn’t do it, you have to help me, Detective.”

He quirked a brow. “Kind of hard to believe you’re innocent when you’ve got a weapon to the director’s head like that.”

“I don’t know why I’m doing this!” he hissed. “I don’t know what’s going on, I just feel so...”

“You’re anxious, Rhett,” Titus supplied.

“Yes!” He nodded vehemently. “I’m anxious and scared! I didn’t do anything wrong, so why are you looking at me?! I haven’t killed anyone!”

“Let’s keep it that way,” Calix suggested. “Put the gun down, and we can talk.”

“You’ll shoot me if I do that.”

“No, I won’t. I’m an I.P.F. agent, remember? I’m not allowed to go around shooting people for no reason. This, this is pretty bad, but so far you haven’t actually hurt the director, so there’s still a chance for you. Put the weapon on the desk and step away, Rhett. I promise, I’ll hear you out.”

“No, no, that’s what she said too! She said she was an officer of the law, so I didn’t have to worry about a thing. That she’d keep my secret. Lying bitch!”

“Are you talking about Officer Paige?” Were they working together after all? “Do you know where she currently is?”

“Ask him!” Rhett shoved the blaster against Titus’s temple so hard he ended up losing his footing.

The director caught himself on the edge of the table, but Rhett was still annoyed that he’d moved, whacking the gun against his head.

“Hey!” Calix took a step closer, then froze when Rhett righted himself and pointed the gun back at Titus.

“Don’t you like the blood?” Rhett asked, and his mood seemed to shift dramatically from paranoid to bubbly in the blink of an eye. He even giggled. “That’s what I heard. Isn’t it? You like blood, too. How many people have you hurt, Detective? How much blood have you spilled to satisfy your monstrous cravings?”

“Where the hell did you hear that?” There was that word again. Monstrous. What the fuck was going on here?

“He told me,” Rhett pointed at Titus.

“I did no such thing,” the director instantly denied.

“Well, not directly. Not really. Sort of,” Rhett rambled. “They were talking about you, though, I’m sure of it. Hard to miss. Hard not to realize. There’s only one guy who’s famous for breaking the spine of a famous sports protégé, isn’t that right, Detective? Isn’t that you ?”

“He’s not in his right mind,” Titus said. “Rhett, you need mental help. You’re having a break. That’s all this is. Let us get you—”

“I won’t take the fall for something I didn’t do,” Rhett snarled. “I’ve seen you and the doctor. I’ve seen—”

“Were you accosted in the woods four weeks ago, Calix?” Titus asked suddenly, noting the way Cal bristled. “It was Rhett.”

“What?! No! Liar!”

“It was different than it was at the reunion, wasn’t it?” Titus kept going. “You had a feeling it wasn’t the same man.”

Yes, that’s why Cal hadn’t referred to him as Heathe in his mind during the act. He’d wanted to believe it was Heathe because that made the most logical sense. There’d been differences in their demeanor, of course, but he’d chalked that up to the version he’d met at the reunion being an act. Heathe had been trying to lure him from the party. Of course he’d been charming up to that point.

But then again...

He frowned at Rhett, taking in his stature. While he hadn’t gotten a good look at the man who’d fucked him in the woods, he was certain he’d been taller and broader than

the orderly. Their syntax had been similar, but that wasn't enough to convince him.

"Oh, I get it, I understand." Rhett waved the gun between them, too fast for Cal to risk firing his own weapon. "You're in it together, aren't you? Same as you were back then. When he cleared your name."

Calix struggled to maintain control of his own emotions, but a zap of insecurity and suspicion rocked through him. "Excuse me?"

"He got you off the hook, so now you're here to ensure he walks away as well, that it?" Rhett laughed, the sound off, manic. The bubbly mood was slipping as well, and the paranoia was returning.

"You ran a fellow classmate over with your car. He," he jabbed Titus with the gun, "cuts off a few heads. They're not really equal, Detective."

"He's lying," Titus told Cal, holding his gaze steadily. "I've never cut off anyone's head. You have my word."

"It wasn't an accident," Rhett said. "You both know. We all do. You hit that kid on purpose, and the director let you get away with it. You're working together. Which means this was a mistake, and I should just shoot you both."

Paranoia swept through Calix now as well. The jumble of words pouring from the orderly's mouth brought forth old emotions and fears he would much rather stay buried. The guilt was there as well, because right now Bruce's cold body was lying on a slab, while the three of them were up here still breathing.

It should be them on that slab.

Should be Rhett.

Should be Cal.

Hell, should be Titus if what Rhett was saying had even a modicum of truth to it.

Rhett took a step to the side, as though he'd need more room to pull the trigger. It was foolish and made no sense, but then again, nothing he'd been saying this entire time did.

Calix reacted faster, pulling the trigger on his blaster once before turning the weapon on Titus.

The first bullet went straight through Rhett's head and out the other side, pinging into the wall. The body stood there for a moment, wavering on its feet before toppling to the ground in a heap.

"Are you planning on shooting me next, Detective?" Titus asked, still as calm as he'd been with the other gun pointed at him.

"Cal?!" Troya's voice came through the door, followed by banging. "Calix?! Open the damn door! Cal?!"

"Well?" Titus cocked his head. "Now's your chance, I assure you, you won't get another."

"Chance?"

"Don't play dumb. We're past that point."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Rhett did."

“Rhett was clearly insane.”

“Yet you believe him?”

“I never said that.”

“If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be aiming a gun at me, Detective.” Titus stood there, poised and graceful, as though in total control of the situation.

There was something comforting in that, something that made Cal want to take to his lead. Made him want to follow.

“Did you know I was broken?” he found himself asking. “Back then?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation, no need to think his answer over. Just short and simple.

Cal exhaled. “How?”

“I saw the footage, remember? You were aroused when you stepped out of the car to check on Nero Quentin. Some would call that an abnormal reaction to having just hit someone with a vehicle.”

“Some?” he licked his lips. “But not you?”

“Calix, it was a misattribution of desire. It’s as simple as that and actually rather common. The fear and adrenaline you felt when you hit Nero increased your heart rate and your blood pressure, which in turn increased blood flow to your genitals.”

Cal grimaced at that term, but the director wasn’t done.

“For someone like you, someone who’d already experienced a blending of pain, fear, and pleasure, it’s not surprising your body reacted that way. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. In the eyes of society, it might not be considered normal, but in the eyes of science...Well, that’s a separate matter.”

Calix searched his gaze, seeking out any signs of change when he asked, “Was it you? Did you get rid of the tape?”

He’d always thought it was Bruce but...The chief had never mentioned noticing he’d been hard in that video. Honestly, Cal was a bit surprised Titus had picked up on it. It wasn’t that noticeable, which was why he’d believed Bruce hadn’t seen. Why he hadn’t been worried about it all this time.

“A simple thank you will suffice,” Titus drawled. “There’s no need to wave a gun in my face. Unless you plan on shooting to silence me? I just reminded you I’ve seen the tape.”

He’d seen the tape and he was clearly more perceptive than Bruce or any of the other officers who’d been assigned Calix’s case. He’d seen them, which meant he knew what Cal knew deep down.

“Did you tell him?” He motioned to Rhett’s cooling corpse.

“I haven’t told a soul,” Titus reassured. “And I never will.”

“Because?”

“Because, little monstrous one, I see no reason to.”

If Cal hadn’t already been thrown by that word twice already this morning, he might believe—

There was a chirp, and all of a sudden the door to the office began to open. Calix dropped his weapon, frowning at Titus as Troya and three other officers flooded into the room.

“Are you okay?” Troya demanded, shaking Cal to get his attention.

Was he?

Cal maintained eye contact with Titus even as the director began answering the questions of the officer nearest him.

He had no fucking clue.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:12 am

The funeral was held a week later, just as they finished wrapping the case. Amory was still missing, but they'd linked her to Rhett through encrypted text messages found on the orderly's home computer. The belief was she was on the run, but that wasn't Calix's problem; he'd done the job he'd been sent to do.

"Here." Troya filled Cal's empty glass and then took a drag straight from the liquor bottle. He turned and stared at the framed photo surrounded by purple flowers, Bruce's smiling face appearing a little younger than he'd been when he'd lost his life.

They still didn't know who'd made the final blow, but Mitri had been able to determine the cause of death as asphyxiation. The forensic scientist was currently seated at another table across the room, despite all the empty seats at the one Cal and Troya sat at.

"He's taking this hard," Calix observed, and Troya turned to see who he meant, snorting.

"That'll happen when you find out your friend is secretly a psychopath."

"We don't know that." Though the evidence against her wasn't great. Along with the conversations they'd discovered, the forensics on the blaster Rhett had used at the hospital had come back as Amory's.

"She helped cut off the heads of three people. If that's not psychotic, I don't know what is," Troya insisted.

"Technically," Titus's clear voice rang out to them as he and Aodhan appeared, "a

diagnosis for psychopathy is a bit more complex than that, and many of those who are diagnosed live perfectly fruitful lives that don't include chopping the head off of unsuspecting victims, but I do agree, clearly there's something wrong with Officer Paige."

"Hey." Aodhan dropped down in the spot next to Cal and placed his arm over the back of his chair. "How are you holding up?"

"That's an insensitive thing to ask at a funeral," Titus chided, easing in next to Troya.

"It's fine," Calix said. "I'm fine."

"This bastard already quit his job and everything," Troya told them, shaking his head. "He didn't even wait until Bruce was in the ground to file the paperwork."

"If you're trying to make me feel guilty," Cal snatched the bottle out of his hand and took a gulp, "mission accomplished."

"Good."

"I saw on the news that evidence has been collected against Rhett," Titus brought the conversation back to the case. "So that's it?"

"He was our guy," Troya confirmed. "Him and Amory. She's still loose, so if either of you hears from her—"

"She doesn't like me much." Titus gave a chilly smile.

"More of a reason to keep your guard up."

"He's right," Cal said. "Both of you need to be careful until she's caught. The local police will be taking over from here. Ideally, she'll have hopped on a ship and

jumped planet by now, but if not, she could still be a threat to you.”

“I don’t see why she’d want to harm either of us,” Titus disagreed. “All of her victims were people who’d harmed others.”

Aodhan snorted, but when Cal turned to him, he merely shrugged. “It’s just cute that you’re worried, that’s all. But he’s right. Amory couldn’t hurt us even if she wanted to. We don’t fit the serial killer’s MO.”

“Killers break pattern all the time,” Troya warned, standing. “I’m going to go give my condolences to Bruce’s wife, I didn’t get to earlier when you were speaking with her, Cal.”

The funeral home had opened up an entire hall for Bruce and his family, with hundreds of people in attendance throughout the day. There’d been a lot at the actual service as well, proof that Bruce had touched many lives and done a lot of good in his decades on Emergence. The planet had lost a great cop.

They wouldn’t be missing out on much once Calix left.

“Don’t go,” Aodhan said suddenly, surprising him. “Stay.”

Cal shook his head. It was tempting, but...His gaze wandered over to Titus, who was watching him with that eerie, unblinking expression.

“Why not?” the doctor asked. “You’re a local hero. You caught the killer, made a daring rescue at the hospital, and your name has been cleared by that Quentin guy. With you no longer a part of the I.P.F., there’s no reason for you not to stick around.”

There was one. One single reason.

But it was a good one.

“I can’t,” he said apologetically.

“Where do you plan to go?” Titus questioned, seemingly only somewhat interested despite the way he was so closely watching him.

“Alter, ever heard of it?”

His brow winged up, a rare show of surprise. “The world ship?”

“The red light district world ship, yeah.”

“Why there?”

Cal shrugged. “The I.P.F. doesn’t have jurisdiction there. It’s a good a place as any to lay low and figure out my next move.”

“Which would be?” Aodhan asked.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “That’s why I said I have to figure it out.”

“I’m not seeing why you can’t stay then.” Aodhan dropped his hand to Calix’s thigh beneath the table.

“I just...” Cal glanced away from Titus, “can’t.”

“Leave him alone, Aodhan,” the director said. “He’s allowed to want to go.”

It was weird, but the doctor listened, removing his hand from Calix’s thigh, putting distance between them.

And if Cal didn’t like that, so what?

It didn't change anything.

It couldn't.

* * *

It only took another two days for everything to be filed and completely wrapped up. Cal's retirement was approved, and he'd packed his meager things in his hotel room. The lone suitcase was in the rental car he was planning on taking to the airport, but he was making one final stop first, as per the doctor's request.

Admittedly, Calix had been more than a little disappointed by the thought of never getting to fuck the other guy again, so when Aodhan had sent him an invitation to stop by his house for lunch before his flight, he couldn't resist and had accepted.

Even though this wasn't going anywhere, he thought maybe he could still convince the doctor to carve a more permanent A into his flesh. Like a fucked-up memento to take with him. Once he was gone, there'd be no reason to ever return to Emergence, and as far as souvenirs went, Cal wouldn't complain if he got that one.

Typically, this was where his brain whispered how disgusting he was for wanting something like that, but ever since their last time in the hotel room and his talk with Titus after shooting Rhett, those voices had gone quiet.

Ironic that all he'd had to do was face the things he'd always hated about himself to finally accept them. Though Aodhan and Titus had been a big part of that.

The doctor lived in a secluded area just on the outskirts of the city, only a twenty-minute drive from the hospital. It was a two-story brick home with an attached two-car garage, surrounded by lush trees and plenty of privacy.

Calix parked in the driveway and got out, sending a quick text to Aodhan to let him

know he'd arrived before heading to the porch. He noticed the front door was slightly ajar by the time he reached it, and even though it was possible the doctor had left it open knowing he was coming, Cal couldn't shake the bad feeling.

His hand instinctively reached for his gun, which he'd yet to return. Technically, he was still a registered detective for another forty-two hours.

"Aodhan?" he called out once he'd reached the door, pushing it lightly so it swung inward. "Are you here?"

For a moment, there was nothing but silence, but then a loud bang resounded from down the hallway, followed by a shout.

"Detective!" Aodhan called out to him, sounding panicked, and Cal burst into the house, racing down the long hallway that led straight from the entrance to the back of the home.

It was a fairly large house, too, with a back exit and two large openings on either side of the wall. He swiveled to the left when he made it to the end, certain that's where he'd heard both noises.

He expected Aodhan, but instead, another familiar face greeted him.

Amory was standing in the center of the kitchen, and for a brief second, the two of them merely stared at one another. Then suddenly she snatched a large knife off the island and moved toward him with clear intent.

Calix reacted, dropping the blaster low and pulling the trigger.

The bullet ripped through the meat of her thigh, and she cried out and dropped to the ground.

“Oh dear,” a cool voice drawled from behind him, close enough to send a shiver racing down Calix’s spine. “It seems you missed.”

The barrel of a gun appeared next to Cal’s head, and before he could even think to do something, it went off.

He gasped when another bullet hit Amory clean in the center of her chest, killing her instantly.

The knife she’d been gripping clattered to the floor.

“What...” His mind reeling, Cal stumbled away from the man at his back, forced to enter the kitchen in order to do so. He gave Amory’s body a wide berth, glaring accusatorily at the other man with a gun. “Titus, what the hell did you just do?!”

Titus Mercer tipped his head. “You should tell the truth now.”

“What?” Calix shook his head. Did he mean about the incident in high school? “I thought you promised to stay quiet.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, little monster.”

Cal blinked at him, but then strong arms captured him from behind, pinning his hands down at his side so he couldn’t lift the blaster to defend himself.

Not that he’d been doing that anyway. Like an idiot, he realized too late that he should have been. That he should have been pointing it at Titus. But everything had happened so quickly, and Amory was a wanted criminal, so he’d just assumed—

“Hey, baby.” Warm breath fanned across his neck.

“Aodhan?” He shouldn’t be so surprised. This was the guy’s house after all. But still.

He looked at Titus. “What’s going on?”

Titus sighed and used the end of the blaster to adjust his glasses. “You really shouldn’t have mentioned leaving. There was no way I was going to be able to stop him after that.”

“Stop...him?” Was he talking about Aodhan? Cal wiggled his arms, but the doctor squeezed him tighter.

“Should we recreate it, Mercy?” Aodhan’s voice sounded...off, and it wasn’t just because he had his face buried against the crook of Calix’s neck.

“Shouldn’t we ask the detective for his opinion?” Titus moved closer, pulling a multi-slate from his pocket.

“No, we shouldn’t,” Aodhan stated. “He’ll like it better if we don’t let him have a say.”

“What’s going on?” Cal hated that he sounded uncertain but... “We need to call this in.”

“We need,” the doctor said, “to recreate it.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Let me go.”

Aodhan made a sound akin to a growl and Titus shushed him.

“You’ll want to refrain from saying things like that for now,” the director suggested, stopping in front of Cal. He clicked something on the screen of the multi-slate and then turned it around so he could watch the video that started playing. “This. This is what he’s referring to.”

Under the harsh lights of the school classroom, Calix writhed and sobbed on the dirty ground. His clothes had been torn away, and he was naked aside from the socks that had been left on. He was clearly slipping in and out of consciousness, sometimes mumbling before going silent, only to rouse and cry out again.

He hadn't noticed there'd been a camera in the room the night of the reunion.

He hadn't noticed his assailant had changed either.

Cal had passed out before Heathe had actually touched him, but he'd just assumed it'd been him since he'd had his cock out and everything.

But it wasn't.

In that very moment, the man rutting between his thighs tossed his head back, looked directly at the camera, and grinned.

A hand reached past Cal, pausing the video so that he was left staring into that familiar pink gaze.

“Don't we look pretty?” Aodhan purred. “Let's do it again, shall we, baby?”

Calix stomped down on Aodhan's right foot and then slipped an elbow free, swinging back into Aodhan's side. He spun, attempting to lift the blaster, but Titus was faster than him.

The director wrapped an arm around his throat, cutting off his air supply while his other hand smacked the gun away. It hit the ground and slid across the floor. He tugged Cal back, putting some distance between him and Aodhan, but he didn't let up, no matter how much Calix struggled and fought.

“Relax,” Titus told him in a tone that could almost be considered gentle. “I'm only

putting you to sleep for a bit. Relax. We won't hurt you."

"Not yet, anyway." Aodhan grinned in a mirror of the vicious and twisted image still paused on the multi-slate on the floor between them. "It's not fun when you aren't awake for it."

The video had started to play again when it'd fallen, the sounds of Calix crying and begging, of Aodhan moaning and laughing that night echoing around them. All this time, Cal had gotten it wrong. It hadn't been Heathe who'd hurt him, it'd been the doctor.

The same doctor he'd opened up to and allowed to touch him after the fact.

The one who'd played him.

Cal's last thought before passing out was that everyone was a liar.

Which meant he was a monster after all.