

INTRODUCTION

The Imperium is a vast human empire spanning hundreds of light years in a distant galaxy. The Imperium encompasses thousands of planets, each teeming with tales of intrigue and adventure.

The *Imperium Chronicles Collection* includes short stories set against the backdrop of these innumerable worlds. They include people of different social and economic backgrounds, from a wealthy, imperial aristocrat to a lowly robot devoid of simple human rights. Each must walk a path in the universe, never knowing where their road may lead.

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Detective Crawley was about to have a bad day and the growl in his stomach told him so. All he really wanted at the moment was a decent sandwich, but in Ashetown, a decent sandwich was nowhere to be found. The red-headed step child of the Imperial city Regalis, the Ashetown district teemed with the unwashed denizens that the rest of the Imperium had forgotten or merely ignored when passing them on the street. Cyberpunks and the homeless called this place home; a cesspool of burned out apartment blocks surrounded by garbage-strewn alleyways. And not a decent sandwich anywhere.

Crawley's stomach grumbled louder as he spied a street vendor down the sidewalk. The sign on the cart read "Gyros and Falafels - Real Meat!" The vendor was a Tor, a minotaur race from the labyrinth cities of Rochan. On his home planet, the Tor would have been a successful craftsman, hammering ruddy iron into intricate shapes and selling them to the off-worlders who came to gawk at the sweaty spectacle. Here, he shoveled carved meat into pitas and sold them for 2 creds apiece.

Knowing this was probably the best he could do, Detective Crawley made his way toward the xeno and his cart, passing walls the local youths had decorated with gang tags and unflattering caricatures of the Emperor. You could get yourself shot for that, but nobody really cared too much around here. Mind your own business was the rule of the day.

The Tor towered a good foot or more above the Human cop. The tip of one horn was missing and the ring hanging from the bovine's nose looked brown with tarnish. Like most of his race, he wore a leather kilt and not much else. Perspiration zigzagged down his bare, hairy chest, dripping into the row of pita breads sitting in the cart.

"You got any beef in that cart, cud-muncher?" the detective asked. He had left open his coat just far enough that the Tor could see the badge on his shirt and the strap of a shoulder holster.

"Yes, officer," the big brute replied in a slow, baritone voice.

"That's *detective* to you, xeno."

"Can I get you something, Detective?"

"Isn't it kind of strange for a cow to be serving beef?"

"It wasn't anyone I knew," the Tor said.

Detective Crawley smiled wryly. "Then I guess it's safe to eat."

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"I didn't say that."

The Human heard a warble coming from deep inside his coat pocket. He reached in and pulled out a small datapad. The image of his lieutenant, a middle-aged woman with grey hair, winked open on the screen.

"Crawley!" the woman said. "There's a possible homicide at the Greenwood Towers on the West End. I'm assigning the case to you."

"West End?" the detective queried. "That's not my usual beat, Lieutenant."

"Just do what you're told, Crawley."

The display went blank, revealing Crawley's reflection and the questioning look on his face. He rolled his eyes and popped the pad back into his coat. The vendor was handing him the gyros. The detective took the sandwich, without offering to pay, and turned on his heel. He headed back down the street where his gravcar hovered silently.

The bufferbot didn't know anything about Imperial society, but it knew a great deal about polishing floors. It knew exactly the right combination of cleaner and abrasive compound, enough to brighten the fine marble without scratching, and the precise amount of torque to keep its cylindrical body moving steadily

without getting pulled to one side or another. The bufferbot had no idea, however, that the floor it was polishing was in fact in the West End district, literally on the west end of the city, across the Regalis river opposite the slums of Ashetown. The robot would've been perfectly happy doing its job in either location, although marble in Detective Crawley's corner of the woods was even harder to find than a respectable ham on rye. The robot would do its best no matter what the conditions. It didn't mind. In fact, its mind wasn't partial as long as it provided a service, appreciated or not, in line with its corresponding protocols. Coincidentally, the Robot Freedom League abandoned trying to liberate janitorial bots for this very reason. It was frustrating to say the least.

When the bufferbot sensed the apartment manager of the Greenwood Towers crossing the freshly polished lobby floor, the robot's circuits nearly jumped with glee at the prospect of redoing what he had just finished. The manager, a Dahl named Eadan, barely acknowledged the bot's existence as he trotted anxiously past. His mind was on the oddly misplaced Human standing just inside the lobby entrance. Slight of build with pointed, elf-like ears — a typical Dahl in every respect — Eadan approached the stranger with the trepidation of a host encountering someone crashing an otherwise wonderful party. The Human, in his late forties, wore clothing of someone who gave up on making a mark in the world long ago. His coat was a synthetic blend, probably made by cheap labor off planet, and his shirt, tie, and pants were hopelessly

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outdated. The manager noticed one of the large potted plants to one side and momentarily considered dragging it over to the man, blocking the view of him from outside the entrance, but thought better of it. The Dahl's frame was too slight to move such a heavy pot and, anyway, the Human wouldn't be staying long with any luck.

"Can I help you?" Eadan said doubtfully.

"I'm Detective Crawley, Regalis PD."

"Yes, of course, I was told to expect you, but I was expecting something...else."

"Sorry to disappoint," Crawley blatantly lied. He didn't trust Dahls; they tended to be psionics and he didn't like having his mind read without permission. He thought of a racial slur, but the manager didn't flinch. A non-psi, apparently.

Eadan motioned toward the elevator. "This way."

Once inside the lift, the manager attempted a more cordial tone, failing miserably. "Obviously, we're very concerned about appearances," Eadan said. "The thought of one of our tenants being murdered could damage our reputation. That just wouldn't do."

"That's not my problem," Crawley replied.

"All we ask is a level of decorum in your investigation. There's no reason our other tenants need to know a murder has occurred."

"Well, I guess that all depends on you."

The manager's eyebrow rose slightly. "How so?"

"I normally canvass the apartments near the crime scene, you know, to see if anybody heard or saw anything unusual. I'd have to explain to the neighbors the circumstances of the questioning, the murder that is, during the canvassing process."

"Is this canvassing really necessary?"

"Not if I concluded the murder was an open and shut case."

"Is that common?"

"Not particularly," the detective said matter-of-factly.

"What if you were motivated to consider it such a case?" the manager asked.

"Well, I can't imagine what kind of motivation that would entail."

The Dahl fumbled awkwardly in his pocket and produced a small, plastic chip.

"Would this suffice?"

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Detective Crawley took the chip. The tiny LED display on the cred stick read 500. "Yeah, that'll be enough."

"Good," the Dahl replied as the door to the elevator spread apart with a rush of air.

Outside in the hallway, an android waited patiently, its casing painted black except for a silver trim and the lettering FU42 stenciled in yellow. "Detective Crawley, I presume?" the robot asked, holding out his hand.

Briefly taken aback, Crawley shook the machine's hand but immediately felt stupid for doing so. "Yeah, who are you?"

"Forensic Unit 42," the bot said. "Please come this way."

The detective left the elevator and the manager behind and followed the robot down the corridor.

"Aren't there any other detectives here?" Crawley inquired.

"No, sir."

"Not even a green shirt?" he asked incredulously, referring to the uniform worn by regular policemen.

"I was the only unit sent to the crime scene, sir," Unit 42 said in a clear, monotone voice. "Do you require another officer? I could request another FU bot if you're dissatisfied with my performance."

"I just got here," Crawley said. "I don't know if you've been satisfactory or not."

"Except for preliminary scans, I've left the crime scene as undisturbed as possible, sir. I hope I can fulfill any FU needs that you require."

"I'm sure it's fine."

Unit 42 opened the door to an apartment and walked in, its gait mechanical yet steady. Without pausing, the robot took the Human through the main living room, down a short hallway, and into the bedroom. On the bed, a nude woman was lying with the sheets covering her lower body. Her left arm hung over the side. Her cold, dead eyes greeted the detective with sharp indifference. Crawley heard someone talking, glanced around the room, and saw a large shimmering holodisplay next to the far wall. A man, some kind of news anchor, was speaking. "...more about the retirement of Duke Tertulla after these messages."

Video: Camera up on a man and woman, their backs to the camera, sitting on folding chairs on the beach as they look out on a brilliant azure sea. Between them is a small wicker table with an ice bucket sitting on top.

(Sounds of the ocean and sea birds in the background.)