



# Off World

Stephanie Vaughan

**This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.**

Off World

Copyright © 2006 by Stephanie Vaughan

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

ISBN: 978-1-934166-31-4, 1-934166-31-6

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press electronic edition / November 2006

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.  
<http://www.torquerepress.com>

## Dedication

For the two Dans: Dan Wasson, who answered my questions about artificial gravity and everything else I threw at him; and for my son, Daniel Vaughan, whose boundless enthusiasm for all things s.f. was a constant source of inspiration. Thank you both from the bottom of my heart. -- SV

# Off-World

by Stephanie Vaughan

## Chapter One

“Look at me, boy.”

Caleb rolled his head and turned it in the direction of the voice, pried an eyelid open, and immediately wished he hadn't. Even by the crappy lighting of the shuttle's reserve power system, the dull gleam of the warrior's matte black body armor hurt his eyes. From his position on the floor, and with the uniform-wearer's blast shield still in place, the face itself was a blur. But the voice was as cold as the muzzle of the neutron rifle now jammed under his jaw.

Head pounding from the slam he'd taken into the bulkhead, Cal let his eyes slide closed, only to have the rifle muzzle jab him again – harder this time.

*“T'laar ishna kunvahdi!”*

A kick to his ribs made his misery complete. Cal rolled to his side, away from the serviceable Teflar boot that had connected with his kidney, and lost the remaining contents of his stomach onto the shuttle's dusty deck.

A second voice joined the first, and although Cal didn't understand much Kush, the tone sounded like the asshole with the boot had been joined by a more even-tempered comrade. Dammit, why hadn't he listened to his mother and paid more attention in school? She'd told him Kush would be more practical, but he'd insisted on taking seven years of classical French, the language of diplomacy. What the hell had he been thinking? Diplomacy wouldn't do him a priktar's penis worth of good if they killed him before he got a chance to use it.

Cal had barely dragged his hands under his body and shoved himself up onto all fours when the rush of air past his head and sounds of a scuffle made him glance over his shoulder at the source of the voices behind him. The goon behind the boot was being restrained by a second figure in identical black body armor and, thankfully, the second kick only glanced off Cal's hip instead of connecting like the first one had.

Even a glancing blow was enough to make him overbalance, though, one hand slipping in the slimy former contents of his belly and sending him face-first onto the deck.

*“Shivashta, phoohtok bwhea.”*

*Bwhea.*

That meant ‘idiot’ in Kush, Cal was pretty sure. Or was that ‘bwhana’? Shit. He couldn’t tell if they were going to revere him as a god or kill and consume him.

One of them -- he couldn’t tell which -- grabbed him by the shoulder and lifted him bodily, holding him steady as he wobbled a little before finding his feet and locking his knees. Cal began to think the kill-and-eat scenario was looking increasingly likely. A big hand encased in black tantalum mesh held him up as the head of the body attached to it looked back at his companion and barked an order.

Sure, Cal had read up on outlaw culture before embarking on this little adventure, but time had been short and accurate information hard to find, so his knowledge was extremely limited. He’d had no idea the mercs would be so well-equipped. Those looked like the latest in high tech military uniforms the two goons were wearing, and Cal was still searching visually for whatever mechanism it was that let them communicate with each other while simultaneously letting him listen in.

He didn’t care, though, when Kinder-Gentler Goon held out his black-gloved hand for Boots to slap a packet of what looked like an infantry pack beverage into it and said packet was subsequently shoved into his own hand. Anything to get the puke taste out of his mouth.

Cal looked at the container in his hand. He was pretty sure it was something to drink, but given that mere moments ago one of them had tried to get his stomach and his spine to meet using his foot as a transfer medium, Cal suddenly wasn’t so sure he wanted to take whatever it was they were offering. Trying to keep his worry from showing, Cal stood motionless, looking from the drink to his captor.

*“Kwa’a neen babak?”*

The big merc’s accompanying hand gesture confirmed that he was expected to drink whatever unnamed substance was in the container, that much was clear, but the irritated tone of it was what made him finally react.

“What? I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to find another way to communicate. I don’t speak Kush. *Sisemi kuKush.*”

Both of the uniformed men froze when he spoke, staring back at him silently for what felt like a dozen Standard Time Intervals.

Oh, shit. What had he said? He’d thought he’d told them he didn’t speak their language, but maybe he’d inadvertently insulted their sister’s virtue. Two smoke-colored blast shields reflected his own image back at him so that he looked scared shitless in stereo. Finally, one of them -- the nice one, Cal prayed -- spoke.

“You speak English -- the Republic’s English. Definitely a spy, then.”

“Spy? No!” What the...?

Cal looked from one shielded face to the other. Looking at the anonymous visages, facial expressions impossible to make out, Cal nonetheless had no problem reading the body language. Beefy arms crossed over armor-plated chest, Boots was a picture of disbelief. His more reasonable comrade, on the other hand, appeared less implacable. Amenable, even. Hands on hips, he looked like he might be willing to give Cal the benefit of the doubt. Looking to Boots, the second merc muttered something in Kush, and raised his hands to his helmet, pushing the twin buttons on either side of the suit’s neck to release it.

Pulling the helmet off, he wiped his sweat-soaked face on one shoulder before tucking the helmet under one arm. Getting his first look at either one of the merc’s faces, Cal’s breath caught in his chest. Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t this.

Sheer masculine perfection in shades of mahogany.

A wide forehead topped gracefully tapered eyebrows which themselves framed large, luminous eyes of a dark coffee brown. High, sculpted cheekbones, perfectly divided by a thin blade of a nose, cast lean cheeks into shadows accented by what looked like a day’s growth of beard. A sinfully sensuous mouth, framed by a neatly trimmed goatee, spread into the smallest of smiles as he gave Cal a thorough visual going-over.

“Drink the water, spy. No need to die with a parched throat.”

Dazzled by the marvelous face before him, Cal stood open-mouthed and gaping for several moments. He’d always had a particular weakness for dark hair and eyes, especially when matched by an equally dusky complexion, but this man was... Cal’s brain began to catalog the parade of words rolling through his head... *magnificent... beautiful...* he closed his mouth with an effort, an embarrassed flush heating his cheeks, but he’d never seen a more perfectly gorgeous man in his life. No wonder Cal was such a washout from the diplomatic corps -- everything he felt showed on his face. It was only when Cal thawed enough to wonder why everyone was staring at him that he realized he hadn’t answered. They were waiting.

“Uh, thanks.” He smiled self-consciously and tried to deflect attention from what no doubt showed on his face by focusing on the object in his hand.

It looked like some kind of canteen, made entirely of metal and surprisingly heavy for its small size. A flexible bit of tubing stuck out of one end and, for the life of him, Cal couldn’t figure out what he was supposed to do with it.

Boots pulled off his own helmet, and Cal observed that he was as fair as his friend was dark -- as blond as Cal himself. Whatever had gone wrong with the program that had produced both men it certainly wasn’t anything having to do with looks. They were both impressive examples of rugged masculinity and just being in their presence made Cal aware of each and every one of his own deficiencies.

“The Republic must be hard up if they’re sending their recruits out this young and green, eh, Sarhaan?” Cal saw the amused look Boots cast in the dark warrior’s direction -- Sarhaan, Boots had called him. A little thrill ran through Cal at learning even this smallest piece of information about the dark man. “You look like you ought to know the basics of how it works, spy. Put it in your mouth and suck on it.”

His hand halfway to his mouth at Boots’s first instruction, Cal froze at the suggestiveness he heard in the blond man’s tone. *Suck it?* How did they...? Was it that obvious? Cal glanced from one battle-hardened face to the other and wondered if wishful thinking was responsible for the momentary flash he thought he detected in the darker man’s expression, a brief narrowing of those beautiful eyes.

*Stop it, idiot! You’re here to do a job and you can’t do that if you’re mooning over a murderer.*

Not murderer. Isn’t that what he’d decided? These men had been wronged and he was here to do what he could to set things right.

Stuffing a lid on his wayward libido, Cal marshaled his thoughts. If he showed the slightest hint of fear, they’d eat him alive.

“Sorry, but I’ve never seen one of these. How does it work?” He put the piece of plastic tubing between his lips and sucked, without results.

“Use your teeth, boy. Bite, then suck.”

Cal couldn’t help a quick glance in the direction of that marvelous voice. Sarhaan spoke like a trained orator, his voice smooth and precise, yet warm as melted chocolate. That it so clearly described what he’d been trying not to think about was more than a little disconcerting.

Cal did as he’d been instructed, though, and the result was a drink of cool water, only slightly tinged with a metallic aftertaste. Grateful to have the bitterness in his mouth washed away, his positive assessment of the one called Sarhaan only increased. He couldn’t be sure, of course, but it looked as though the molded black chest armor didn’t require much padding. The body beneath it looked superbly fit, the broadness of the shoulders owing nothing to an artificial form and everything to impressive musculature.

Cal had never seen anything like the form-fitting knit cloth that made up the suiting under the plating, but he figured it must either be tantalum or something even newer. He knew the army hadn’t cut corners outfitting its most elite warriors. At least, not until problems had started cropping up and everything had gone to hell so quickly.

Cal took another swallow of water, trying not to look at Sarhaan's impressive thighs under cover of his lowered eyes, only to have the canteen snatched away from him mid-swallow.

"That's enough." Boots wanted his canteen back. "Now, why don't you tell us where you hid the contraband?"

\*\*\*

It was probably for the best that they were going to have to do something about the Republican spy that had fallen into their laps. Something about him disturbed Sarhaan's peace of mind and he definitely didn't need the distraction right now. Despite being outfitted in what was probably a civilian's idea of the last word in military gear, the kid had Old Guard Republican written all over his naïve, perfect face. Sarhaan'd been dealing with the type since he was old enough to understand that people like him might be good enough to defend the Republic, but they would never be part of its inner circle.

The privileged. The elite.

*Wouldn't mind doing him, though.*

Sarhaan immediately dismissed the errant thought as unworthy of him. Even if it wasn't against the code of conduct for the Republican Army, it was against his own personal code. Still... Sarhaan glanced again at that mouth now twisted into a worried frown, and the wounded look in those clear brown eyes and ignored the answering twitch in his dick. Regardless of how long it had been since he'd been intimate with anything besides his own two hands, he'd do better to put the rogue thought out of his head or, before anyone knew what was happening, Bartok would have the kid strapped down in medical and be working him over with a nerve stim wand.

"Contraband? I don't have anything! It's just me and the shuttle."

His partner took a menacing half-step forward and the kid looked to Sarhaan. Big eyes -- with lashes any post-revolution femme would envy -- filled with panic sought his with their gaze. "No. You've gotta believe me. I don't have anything—"

"Of course you don't." Dave Bartok cut the kid off mid-stammer, his tone full of mock-sincerity. "You're just out for a Sunday drive, checking out the back side of Mars with the old man's class two super-orbital space shuttle. We get those all the time, don't we, Sarhaan?"

The kid looked like he was about to hyperventilate, and Sarhaan could almost see the panicky flutter of his pulse in the tanned throat. He turned to his partner and away from temptation.



“Back off, Dave.” Turning to the kid, he placed a cautiously reassuring hand on one shoulder. “And you... you can relax. No one’s going to space anybody. Yet. Not until we get to the bottom of things, anyway.”

The shoulder under his hand was lean -- delicate, almost -- and Sarhaan pulled away as soon as he realized he was cupping it in a manner that might be construed as protective.

“Figures you’d step in.” He and Bartok had been at the same pay rate before they’d run for their lives off-world and Bartok didn’t appreciate Sarhaan’s countermanding him. “Thinking of taking on an apprentice? And you with that big stateroom all to yourself. Feeling lonely?”

Sarhaan took an extra half-second to check the impulse and went ahead anyway, bringing the back of his fist up to meet Bartok’s nose as he stood behind Sarhaan. He’d end up paying for it later on down the line -- probably more than once. But he shouldn’t have enjoyed sending Bartok crashing against a bulkhead quite so much.

“You picked a bad time to bring that up, Dave.”

Dave’s eyes narrowed as he wiped the trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “We’ll definitely discuss this later, *buddy*. Count on it.”

Sarhaan hated to give Bartok’s sly comments any more attention than was absolutely necessary. He had been dealing with the smaller man’s needling since boot camp -- too many years ago to think about. He’d learned the hard way to ignore Dave at his own peril, while any attention, good or bad, only encouraged more bad behavior. Damned if he did, damned if he didn’t. He turned his attention back to the spy.

“You have a name, spy?”

“Caleb. Adams.”

“Caleb.” He tried out the conservative name on his tongue; it had an old fashioned sound to it -- just what he’d expect from a spy. “Stand over there. Hands on your head and don’t move.”

Sarhaan indicated the only span of bulkhead plain enough to offer no target to a saboteur bent on meeting his maker and told himself that the pat-down for weapons was strictly business.

\*\*\*

Sarhaan stepped out of his uniform pants, tossed them in the direction of his bunk and headed for the shower. Always his favorite moment of the day, he savored the feeling of being out of the restrictive clothing and being able -- finally -- to move around his suite unencumbered. No restriction chafed more than the inability to strip down to nothing and

move freely. Back on Earth, it had been a highly sought-after reward, jealously guarded by the higher-ups and doled out as the most rare of inducements. Once, as an acknowledgement of placing first in the sergeants' exam, Sarhaan had secured an entire week at an elite spa.

Elaborate false ceilings in the artificial dome -- standard since the complete breakdown of the ozone layer -- gave the illusion of open sky. Filtered air and the continent's largest indoor pool created a resort area available only to the very rich and political or military elites. A full week there had been an undreamed-of treat. Problem was, once tasted, it became a memory Sarhaan was unable to purge from his mind. And they'd known it, of course. Just like the first hit from the drug dealer was always free, the time spent at the artificial Eden was used as a tantalizing taste, one that Sarhaan would relive over and over in his head and do almost anything to earn a trip back to.

Given a weekend there twice after exceptional performances in the field -- once after the New Brunswick campaign and again after six hellish months cleansing Alaska -- his unit had soaked up everything the exclusive resort had had to offer.

Sarhaan prepared to shower by scouring himself with bluesoap and tried not to think of the past. The last tour in Alaska still bothered him. He'd listened to his CO's description of the native peoples living there and accepted the order that they needed to be removed. Not only did he have no right to disobey a lawful order, back then he'd still nursed dreams of advancement.

Still, he and his men hadn't found any evidence whatsoever that Inuits possessed either weapons or plans to secede from the Republic. Sarhaan didn't need anyone to spell out for him what an Inuit secession would have meant to the government, and the pacification campaign had been both swift and relentlessly brutal.

He hadn't lost track of the body count so much as he'd never tried to keep one in the first place. Sometimes they came to him in his dreams, though. The headless torsos and bits of individuals he'd helped leave this life. Without eyes or mouths, they still somehow managed to convey their sadness. Some had no heads left to shake at him, but he felt the weight of their disapproval just the same. And just like in the morning after one of his dreams, Sarhaan pushed the memories away. Stepping into the shower, he turned his face up to the water.

Water.

What an unimaginable luxury. Sarhaan had fought savagely for the right to occupy a suite. The competition had been fierce and he'd shown no mercy, given no quarter, when it came to establishing his dominance. A working class grunt, he'd won the right to an officer's quarters by leading the op to get off-world. Unlike the unfortunate Inuits, the slimebag administrators of the transport terminal and their underlings hadn't bothered his conscience a bit. They'd been obstacles between him and survival, and Sarhaan hadn't hesitated a millisecond before sweeping them aside.

Done was done, though, and there was nothing to be gained from so much pointless introspection. Sarhaan slid one soapy hand down his body until he reached his cock. Irritable and itchy since they'd boarded the shuttle, a little stress-relief sounded like just what he needed. Leaning back, he rested against the shower wall and let the water cascade over his face, down his torso as he tugged hard and imagined it was another's hand that touched him.

## Chapter Two

Cal sat on the bottom bunk of the room he'd been given and worked on fleshing out the details of his back-up plan.

Plan A hadn't played out quite the way he'd envisioned, and it was obviously time to move on to Plan B. Trouble was, at this point, his alternate plan didn't consist of much more than 'try something else.' So he wasn't much of a military strategist. That was hardly news to anyone who knew him even slightly. Cal's talents were what were usually categorized as soft skills, meaning he could stand around making small talk and look good in a suit, but no one had better put him in charge of planning anything they hoped to succeed at.

The ache in his arms and shoulders was finally fading. He'd stood, hands on top of head, for a good two hours while the pair of storm troopers had taken his shuttle apart, piece by piece. Cal still wasn't sure what they'd been looking for. The one called Dave had wanted to take him somewhere and question him about whatever it was they thought he had brought with him. Thankfully, the other one – Sarhaan – hadn't agreed. Cal was still trying to work out the details of the command structure, but for now Sarhaan was calling the shots, and he'd insisted on searching Cal's shuttle himself.

So Cal had stood, fingers laced together atop his head while the blood drained from his hands and arms, as they'd searched. By the time they'd completed their investigation of the cockpit Cal couldn't feel his shoulders any more and he'd needed to pee so bad he'd nearly embarrassed himself. The one time he'd worked up the courage to ask to use the facilities, Sarhaan only shot him a dark look and told him to hold it.

Cal rubbed his sore shoulder and thought about that look.

The men had struck him as being not quite what he'd expected. Somehow they appeared both larger than life and, simultaneously, surprisingly normal. Yet Cal knew from the documents he'd reviewed that they were both far from normal. It must be the eyes: cold, dispassionate gazes worlds different than the polite looks he was used to at the consulate.

Sighing, Cal looked around the room they'd brought him to. Small by Earth standards, it contained not only the bunk he sat on, but three others as well, a small sink and toilet opposite the door, and that was about it. Obviously intended as crew quarters, it worked just fine for its current purpose -- impromptu brig. Still, the walk from the breeching tunnel the mercs had used to board his shuttle to his current location had been welcome. After being cooped up in the barely super-orbital Falcon-class vehicle he'd borrowed for nearly two weeks, the cruiser the soldiers piloted was positively roomy. He hadn't wanted to be obvious about looking around -- too easy for curiosity to be mistaken for intel-gathering. Still, stretching his legs for the time it had taken to get here had been most welcome.

The heavy clunk of boots on metal decking preceded the double-click of a force field powering down, and Sarhaan stepped into the room. God, how tall was he? Cal had to crane his neck to meet the big merc's gaze when he'd been standing. Sitting, he was forced to lean back and tilt his head to an uncomfortable degree, but oh, what a sight it was.

Body armor gone, snug black pants made from what could only be leather, and a loose, lightweight sweater did nothing to hide a soldier's powerful build. Helmet likewise banished, Cal tried not to gape at what its absence revealed: long black hair twisted into dozens – maybe a hundred – thin braids that hung well past his broad shoulders.

“Hungry?”

Uncertain where to fix his gaze, Cal shut his mouth and thought furiously. It seemed like a straightforward enough question. He'd try honesty. “Yes.”

Not quite a smile, but Cal thought he saw a gleam in Sarhaan's dark eyes. “Sure about that?”

Something in the tone of that cultured voice had Cal venturing a smile of his own as he nodded slowly. “Pretty sure. I was thinking about eating when your ship came out of nowhere and you fired that warning shot across my bow. That was hours ago.”

“What if it wasn't a warning shot?”

“Then somebody's a crappy shot. You missed by a mile.” Where he got the nerve to joke, Cal would never know. Instinctively he understood, though, that this man would respect strength, so he'd better start faking it now.

“Well, D'abu will be eating, too. You can tell him that yourself. Come on, then.” Sarhaan turned on his heel and Cal caught a glimpse of a hard, muscular ass encased in tight leather departing the room. Jerking his eyes away, Cal ignored the spurt of guilty pleasure low in his belly and jumped to follow.

As he hurried to catch up, it occurred to Cal that there was no one here to observe him. If he let his gaze linger on a forbidden pleasure, who would be the wiser? So he allowed himself an extra few moments of enjoyment and smiled inwardly at the sight of long, long legs striding away from him and the mesmerizing rhythm of that muscular butt working. So caught up was he that it barely registered when the movement stopped and he narrowly avoided slamming face first into the powerful body beneath the sweater. Sarhaan had stopped to wait.

“I'm taking a chance, letting you out. Don't make me regret it.”

Opening his mouth to say something -- what, he had no idea -- Cal paused. What was it he had been about to promise? That he'd be good? Don't be silly. He wasn't a child about

to sit at the adult table for the first time. Suddenly, though, it seemed entirely natural to want this man's approval.

Before Cal could answer, Sarhaan took a step to his right and a door Cal hadn't noticed slid silently open. Sarhaan stepped through, and Cal followed.

What he'd expected, he didn't know, but it surely wasn't this. It looked like soldier's night at the inn, with a half-dozen bodies strewn about in various poses of relaxation. Two leaned on a makeshift bar, deep in conversation, with what appeared to be alcoholic beverages in hand. Three others sat around a circular table, holding playing cards, cigars clenched between their teeth, and the omnipresent drinks at their elbows. One lone figure -- a giant of a man with big hands and even bigger arms -- sat alone at a corner table, reading a magazine as he methodically shoveled food into his mouth from an overloaded plate in front of him.

The two at the bar glanced over briefly as Sarhaan and Cal entered before going back to their conversation. But the three at the table paused as the one Cal recognized as Dave was beginning to deal. As they passed, a redhead Cal hadn't seen before spoke, his smile friendly enough for all that it didn't quite reach his eyes. Instead, it crawled slowly over Cal. Was it his imagination, or did it linger a bit at his mouth and waist?

"Decide to play after all, Sarhaan?"

"Not tonight, Jimi."

Sarhaan stopped suddenly, and one big hand came down heavily on Cal's shoulder. Using it to orient him, Sarhaan steered them both toward a locker. "Food's in there. Grab anything that looks interesting, and bring it over to the table."

Cal glanced around nervously, taking in what clues he could pick up based on posture and attitude, and decided to stick close to Sarhaan. The bluish haze that hung over the room looked to be made up of equal parts smoke and testosterone, and Cal wasn't taking any chances. "What's good?"

Sarhaan cocked one elegant brow at him and paused. "Good? None of it. Just stay away from anything with fish in the name. The rest may not taste like much, but it won't kill you."

This was bad. Just watching Sarhaan's full lips moving to shape words was getting to Cal. You'd think a lifetime of hiding his impulses, not to mention eight years in the diplomatic corps, would have left him better prepared. These men were about as far from what he was used to handling as it was possible to be, and hormone-crazed and stupid wasn't going to get him anything but dead.

"Okay. Can I just follow you and eat what you eat?"

About to turn away, Sarhaan abruptly turned back and stared at him hard. That harsh, dark gaze boring into him, Cal took an involuntary step backward and bumped into a table.

“What? What did I say?”

His expression giving away nothing, Sarhaan drew a deep breath and expelled it, his nostrils flaring. “Nothing. You didn’t say anything. Follow me, then.”

Cal’s heart resumed beating again.

\*\*\*

Only ten minutes in the kid’s company and already he was regretting his generosity. Something about Caleb had Sarhaan on edge, seeing things that weren’t there. Hearing things that weren’t said.

Sarhaan set his food down and sat, positioning himself to be able to watch the entire room. D’abu sat to his left, reading a technical manual the way most men read a skin mag. That left the only remaining chair on his right for the kid. Caleb.

“D’abu, this is Caleb. Caleb, D’abu.” He performed the introductions and quirked an eyebrow when the spy stuck out his hand.

“Caleb Adams. Call me Cal.”

Barely looking up at first, D’abu did a double-take before setting down his fork and meeting Caleb’s hand with an oversized paw of his own. “Aleksander D’abu. You can call me Sandy.”

*Sandy?* Sarhaan had worked with D’abu for three and a half years and never called him anything but D’abu. It hadn’t occurred to him to ask if the man had another name.

“Nice to meet you, Sandy.” Cal smiled at D’abu and looked at the huge pile of food still left on the big man’s plate. “How’s the eats?”

D’abu smiled back. “Label says chicken, but I have my suspicions. Tastes more like squirrel.”

“Squirrel?” Caleb paled a little, and the collar of his Triponi suit looked suddenly a size too tight.

“Yeah. Kind of like chicken, but not really.” D’abu shrugged. “My money’s on squirrel.”

Sarhaan had had about enough of feeling like Mr. Irrelevant. “Quit picking on the civilian, D’abu. He’s not used to what passes for a sense of humor around here. Look at him. He’s turning green.”

D’abu looked at the kid, then back to Sarhaan and chuckled. “Nah, he gets it just fine. Don’t you, Cal?”

“Oh, absolutely. I completely understood that you were joking.”

The kid shifted in his seat, hooking one arm around the back of the chair, doing his best to look like one of the guys and failing miserably. Sarhaan couldn’t decide if it was the physical or the mental that separated Caleb the most from the rest of the crew lounging around, making him stand out like a thoroughbred in a field of draft horses.

Shorter than most of Sarhaan’s teammates, but then, not being a product of the military and all that carried with it, perhaps it was to be expected. Lean and fit in a way that suggested flexibility and grace rather than the sheer overwhelming strength of a soldier -- especially one of Rondi’s squad -- it was Caleb’s face that would always give him away. A wide, unlined forehead and clean cut jaw line framed a face that betrayed its blue-blood origins with every feature. A mouth that could only be called lush and wide set eyes that by all rights should have been laser blue instead of soft brown set him up to be a poster boy for the old guard Republican government he no doubt served. Only a nose a shade too wide saved the boy from being utterly pretty.

Reminding himself that the ostensible reason for bringing Caleb down here was food, Sarhaan demonstrated the basic technique for opening one of the Meal Ready Packs. Too polite to say anything, but obviously hungry, the poor kid was practically drooling.

“Here. Like this.” Sarhaan peeled off the thin plastic covering and let the food mix with air, starting the process. “Wait a minute, then stir. Another two and it’s ready.”

Doing as he was told, Caleb raised a forkful to his mouth and, finding it too hot to eat, blew on it. Relaxed like it was now, his lower lip took on an intriguing fullness. Looking up, Caleb caught Sarhaan staring and immediately looked down again. Probably for the best. Something about those wide brown eyes was far too appealing.

Definitely for the best.

Sarhaan had always kept his work and his relationships -- as much as he’d ever had time for one -- as far apart as humanly possible. Now was no time to start thinking about mixing them.

“It’s not bad. I think it *is* chicken.” This last was clearly directed at D’abu. Better with machines than people, the big man was easily the most technically proficient in the group and was currently acting chief engineer. It wasn’t unusual for an entire meal or work shift



to pass with fewer than a dozen words spoken, so this social butterfly aspect of D'abu was new to Sarhaan. He'd picked a helluva time, that was for sure.

"So what brings you to our little corner of the solar system, Cal?" D'abu didn't let much stand between him and his food, so this uncharacteristic sociability was worked in around bites of his meal. The smile was still in place, but Sarhaan thought he detected some serious curiosity behind the mask. D'abu might be a giant of a man, but he was no dummy. No one stayed very long or went very far in Rondi's program by being stupid.

"Um ... " There were those eyes again. Big and brown and dividing their uncertainty between D'abu and himself. "I wanted to help."

Sarhaan knew a laugh disguised as a cough when he heard one and recognized D'abu's, chiefly because it sounded a lot like Sarhaan's own.

"Really? What'd you have in mind?"

Sarhaan never would have credited D'abu with tact or social skills if he hadn't just witnessed it with his own eyes. He stirred his own MRP -- Beef Enchiladas Ranchera, according to the label -- and watched. Much as it irritated him to be on the sidelines, Dabu might get more out of the kid in a social setting than anything Bartok was likely to in two weeks with a stim wand and his fists.

"Back home I work in the diplomatic corps -- the main consulate in New Atlanta."

He had to hand it to the kid -- he was handling himself well. If Sarhaan hadn't been watching so closely, he might have missed the fine tremor in the hand balancing chicken and rice on Caleb's fork. Question was, though, what was he hiding? The kid's reluctance was driving him crazy, and it was all Sarhaan could do not to reach down his throat and pull the words out. So he concentrated on clearing his plate and letting the surprisingly adept D'abu continue.

"And... ?"

Caleb hunched over his food, eyes down, concentrating a little too much on something that shouldn't have needed any at all. Flashing a brief look at D'abu, Caleb continued. "I'm a junior, *junior* attaché in the office of the security council. Nothing important. I'm responsible for reading reports, scanning news bulletins. I condense other people's reports, pick out the highlights, and then give that to the Vice Consul. The V.C. reads my report and anything he thinks is important is discussed at the next council meeting. All hideously boring."

It was tough to argue with the obvious. It sounded like hell on earth to Sarhaan. Paperwork had always been the bane of his existence, so the idea of having to do it professionally, every day...

Obviously stalling for time, Caleb took a bite from the food on his plate, chewed and swallowed before speaking again. Or maybe it was just old fashioned table manners. Sarhaan thought back to his mother's futile attempts to try to impress on him the importance of using the right fork. Or a fork at all, for that manner.

"So, one of the things they pay me for is to spot trends. Patterns. Anything likely to become an issue and bring them to the Vice Consul's attention."

"You're an analyst." Sarhaan had no trouble seeing the bureaucrat beneath the surface. A couple of weeks without a haircut or regular showers had probably taken some of the spit and polish shine off the boy, but something about the posture made it easy to imagine him behind a desk, shuffling endless stacks of paper.

Shaking his head, Cal swallowed quickly. "No, that makes it sound like more than it is. I just read and compile reports, try to weed out all of the detail. The V.C. doesn't have the time or the attention span for nuance."

To his left D'abu had been quietly working his way through the pile of food he'd had when Sarhaan had sat down. Chasing down the last fugitive vegetables and grains of rice, D'abu licked his fork before finally setting it down. Folding his arms across his chest, the big man leaned back, his chair creaking loudly in protest. "So, I still haven't heard what that's got to do with us. You're a long way from home for a desk jockey, and I want to know what report you read that brought you all the way out here."

Caleb set his own fork down, folding his hands deliberately on the table in front of him. Wide brown eyes looked first at Sarhaan, then to D'abu. "It was the murders, of course."

## Chapter Three

He could have eaten cardboard for all he'd tasted any of it. Cal folded his hands and concentrated on D'abu's face and breathing. It was safer looking at the big, uncomplicated presence across from him than letting any of the thoughts into his head that even just looking at Sarhaan put there.

“Murders?”

The man, it seemed, didn't like being ignored. Why didn't that surprise Cal? He summoned his best diplomatic attaché face and swung his gaze to his left. Dark, dark eyes, startling in their intensity, stared back at him, and Cal had the uneasy sensation they could see all the way down to his soul. To his innermost wants and desires. Desires he'd spent a lifetime burying deep.

Unable to look away Cal stared back, until D'abu repeated the question, and the spell was broken.

“Oh... um...” Cal shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it. “The ones on Hispaniola and Cuba. Well, mainly Hispaniola. You didn't know? I thought you must...”

Looking from one face to the other, Cal realized he was babbling, but dammit, nothing was going the way he'd pictured it. They were supposed to welcome his help, not glare at him like couple of police interrogators. “How could you not have heard? Your unit is being suspected.”

That got their attention. The look that passed between the two soldiers was gone so quickly, Cal wasn't sure he'd seen it at all, but he felt it in his gut, and the feeling lingered. The tension at the table was suddenly thicker than the smoky blue haze that hung over the room.

“Well, well, what have we here? Is this a private party, Sarhaan?”

The voice came out of nowhere. At least, Cal hadn't seen Dave's approach, and he nearly came out of his skin hearing the other man's voice so close. A knot the size of a grapefruit dropped into the pit of Cal's stomach, and the taste of bile rose suddenly in his throat. It took everything he had to hold his ground and not to leap from his seat to hide behind Sarhaan and D'abu.

“Go back to your game, Dave. Let D'abu and me handle this.” Sarhaan's voice was even enough on the surface, but Cal had sat in on enough security council negotiations to know the sound of a man who wasn't about to be pushed.

The ground had just fallen away from beneath his feet and, suddenly in way over his head, Cal realized he was edging his seat ever so slightly in Sarhaan's direction. He was a rabbit caught in the clutches of a hawk. The question was, though, what would this particular hawk do when challenged by another?

"Why should you have all the fun, Sarhaan? We've all been on this little pleasure cruise together now for way too long. I don't remember anyone dying and making you king." Taking another step closer, Dave braced his hands on the table and stared hard at Sarhaan. The undercurrents swirled around them, and Cal froze where he was. His only real experience in conflict resolution had taken place in the rarified air of the consulate and these two men looked like they'd like to settle things with their bare hands.

Sarhaan's voice was measured and cool, more like he was ordering food in a restaurant or describing the cut of a new coat with his tailor. "Remember our discussion about the options in sleeping quarters?"

The subtle but noticeable emphasis on the word 'discussion' told Cal that there was more to that particular story. Not striking him as the best time to ask for the rest of it though, he kept his mouth shut and watched, fascinated.

A muscle twitched in the side of Dave's face, about where you'd expect it if the man was gritting his teeth. "That conversation's not over, Sarhaan."

"It's over, Dave. Now, why don't you go back to your game, and let me finish my dinner?" Sarhaan's gaze left Dave and settled on Cal. The warmth he imagined he heard creep into the rich timbre was no doubt all in his head. Unfortunately, though, his dick heard it, too, and started to swell. "I'm not quite done here."

When Dave straightened abruptly and Cal jumped, nearly falling off his chair, Dave laughed and dropped a steadying hand to Cal's shoulder. "Have it your way, then. The little spy and I can have our talk later -- when he's not so busy."

\*\*\*

"You'd better sleep here tonight. I can't guarantee I can keep you safe otherwise."

Cal's gaze flicked to Sarhaan's for a moment before sweeping the room, taking in the desk, the table that was obviously a work area, the bed. Big enough to easily accommodate a man of Sarhaan's size, the standard issue mattress rested atop what looked like real wood. He knew the military was well-funded, but... real wood? Mind reeling at the likely cost, Cal kept going, taking in the rest of the room.

The pull to stare at the big bed was powerful, but Cal fought it. He tried distracting himself by looking at the framed picture behind the desk, a generic nautical scene of some kind of a historical ship. Cal's mind catalogued it and immediately rejected the idea that it belonged to Sarhaan, deciding it must have come with the room. Not sure exactly

what *would* have been Sarhaan's taste, Cal knew instinctively it wasn't this dry-as-dust, bloodless rendering of an old wooden sailing ship.

His gaze crept helplessly back to the bed, and an image of how it would look with a sleeping Sarhaan in it came immediately into his head. A magnificent chest -- entire torso to his lean hips, perhaps -- bared by the sheet draped negligently just above his—

“Caleb.” For the second time that night a heavy hand came down on his shoulder, startling a small oath from him. “Did you hear me? You’ll need to stay here. For a while, at least.”

Shrugging his shoulder, Cal moved away and tried to behave as though this sort of thing happened to him every day. “Sure. Whatever you say.” Cal clasped his hands loosely together behind his back like he’d seen the Vice Consul do a hundred times, even going so far as to try to imitate the V.C.’s well known businesslike tone. “Why, though?”

“Because the room you were in was a temporary brig, only minimally designed to keep someone in. Right now I’m more concerned with keeping someone out.”

Their gazes met and Cal stared a little, trying to pick out the pupil in the dark, dark brown of Sarhaan's eyes.

“Dave?”

“It crossed my mind.” Moving past him, Sarhaan's scent hovered in the wake of air displaced as he moved and Cal breathed in deeply, drawing the scents of leather and man deeply into his lungs. As they tickled his brain and stirred his cock, Cal took a few more quick sniffs of the irresistible smell. He even lifted a foot to follow before catching himself.

As he hitched a leg on the corner of his desk, Sarhaan turned in time to catch Cal sniffing at the air like a lovelorn bloodhound and raised an inquisitive brow in Cal's direction.

Cal shrugged again. “Allergies. There must be something in the ship's air system that doesn't agree with me.” *Behave as if they're going to believe you and they usually will.* One of the Vice Consul's favorite sayings came to mind, and Cal hoped fervently that it was true. In this case, at least. “Why is Dave so anxious to talk to me? Doesn't he trust you to get whatever information I might have out of me? You're on the same team, aren't you?”

“We're on the same team, but Dave Bartok has good reason not to think I'll tell him everything I know.” Sitting as he was on the desk, one leg balancing his big body as he rested on the corner, the thin black leather of Sarhaan's pants drew taut across impressive thighs while the big muscles of his ass bunched and strained at the garment's seams. Cal tried not to stare, but behind his back his hands clenched against the need to run them down those long legs -- to hold as much as he could gather of that amazing backside in

each hand and squeeze hard. He imagined running his tongue along the bulging placket at the crotch, and a shockwave of heat rushed through him.

“He...” Cal, his mouth suddenly dry mouth from the forbidden images tumbling through his mind, nearly choked. “...uh, does?”

“You could say that.” Two big hands clasped around his knee, Sarhaan looked back at Cal steadily. “As long as he thinks you’re hiding something, you’ll need to watch your back. And whatever you do, don’t let yourself be alone in a room with him. Now, why don’t you get comfortable, because I want to hear everything you know about the Hispaniola murders.”

\*\*\*

Sarhaan gritted his teeth against the wave of desire that washed over him and repositioned his leg. With luck, the added pressure on his cock from the leather pressing insistently down on it might keep him from bursting at the seams. He’d tried thinking of Caleb as a spy, a politician, a perfect son of the New Republic -- but none of it had done a bit of good. He couldn’t get that face out of his mind. That perfect, patrician, *entitled* face. The embodiment of the government that had created him.

Before it tried to kill him, that is.

By all rights, Sarhaan should want to sink a blade into the aristocratic neck displayed so trustingly before him as Caleb bowed his head in thought. He ought to want to wrap both hands around it and squeeze until the exquisitely delicate hyoid bone beneath his thumbs snapped. He really ought to.

So why didn’t he? That was the million-credit question.

Seven months on the *Vigilant* had done several things for him, though. Always stationed on Earth previously, he’d seen things since he wouldn’t have believed if he hadn’t witnessed them himself. Sunrise over a giant planet, the iridescent blue of the reflection nebula surrounding the Pleiades, an entire planet in smoking ruins from strip mining. But he’d never seen anything like Caleb. Not with his own eyes. Not this close.

From the mop of silky blond hair on his head to the expensive boots on his size nine feet, he was everything Sarhaan would never be. Never particularly wanted to be. But still... growing up as the Army brat kid of a single mom, it had been hard not to wonder what life must be like for the ones who had it made. ‘Silver spoons’ was what he and the rest of his rat pack buddies had called them. The ones who didn’t have to count their credits before buying a new pair of pants or eating in a real restaurant, not just the chow hall on base.

Sarhaan would bet that Caleb was a literal silver spooner. The diplomatic corps? Please. They didn’t let working-class stiff’s like him in there, that was for damn sure. You were

either born into it, you knew someone, or you had shitloads and shitloads of money. In Caleb's case it was probably all three.

Just look at him. The kid practically sparkled. Sure, he was a little the worse for wear, being stuck on the second-rate pile of crap civilian shuttle he'd commandeered for the two to three weeks it had probably taken to find the *Vigilant*. But just give him a shower and a shave, put him in clean clothes, and he'd be so bright and shiny it would hurt to look at him.

"Caleb, quit stalling. I want to hear what you know; what brought you out here."

A flash of big eyes from under a fringe of lashes and Sarhaan was glad he was sitting down. "Don't you want to wait until D'abu gets here?"

"I promise to fill him in on anything he misses. Besides, he's keeping an eye on Bartok for us. So sit. Talk. I want it all."

"Okay. Is this all right?" Caleb stood in front of the two-meter sofa that took up most of one bulkhead and would probably be the kid's bed for the foreseeable future. A dark little suggestion tried to worm its way into Sarhaan's consciousness at the thought of bed, but he tamped it down.

At his nod, Caleb sat. Hands folded and squeezed between his knees, the kid was the picture of a guilty conscience, and Sarhaan was instantly on alert. Why the nervous body language if he really was here to help?

"You heard about the murders, though, right? All the dead bodies? I don't remember the exact numbers, but the last I heard I think it's over three hundred. If you go back for the past couple of years."

"You're talking about Havana and Cuba and all of that?"

"Mm-hmm. Yeah. All of those 'Isn't it awful, how these poor prostitutes keep dying?' Those."

Sarhaan's unit had been too busy trying to keep the world safe for the new Republic and its new world order to spare much time to follow the news. But when the killings hadn't stopped and the bodies kept piling up, eventually even he had pulled up a news report and read about it.

"Right." His position on the corner of the desk was rapidly becoming unbearable. God, whoever'd had this desk commissioned must have had a hell of a lot of pull to be able to swing real wood. Not to mention an ego bigger than his common sense, since wood couldn't handle the advanced telemetry and chip implants that the modern stuff could. But nothing said you'd arrived quite like a piece of furniture that cost a small fortune. Especially when it wasn't your money you were spending. Regardless of the cost, dead

organic fiber was putting unbearable pressure on his balls and shifting where he sat only pushed his cock up against the placket so hard he was going to be wearing imprints of the snaps on his flesh for days. “So the last thing I saw had the governor trying to blame some ‘person or persons unknown’ for them. What did I miss?”

“I have -- had -- a friend in the coroner’s office. I’ve known Daphne since primary school. Funny girl. Great sense of humor. We could talk about anything.”

His discomfort growing, Sarhaan stood, drawing a startled glance from Caleb who’d been staring at nothing, his voice taking on the distant tone of recollection. Turning his back, Sarhaan moved to sit at the big captain’s chair behind the desk, telling himself that any surreptitious rubbing of his dick was only a result of sitting too long. He also told himself that any fleeting mental irritation he might be feeling was caused by the long-winded telling of the story. “That’s great, Caleb. What’s that got to do with the story, though?”

“Huh? Oh, the story. Yeah. Well, Daphne’s a forensics geek. She loves all of that gruesome, theoretical stuff, and she couldn’t stop tracking all of the little details about the bodies they kept bringing in. She kept a log of what she found and what she thought about it.”

“Bodies?”

“Mm-hmm. She worked in the main lab where all of the little local places sent their information, where all of the bodies eventually ended up.” Caleb shivered a little. “Daphne noticed that most of the people murdered had a similar kind of wound.”

“You cold? Want a blanket or something?”

Shaking his head even as he hunched his shoulders deeper into himself, Caleb was a picture of dejection with his bowed head and rounded shoulders. “I’m okay.”

Sarhaan told himself he wasn’t the kid’s babysitter -- he could only do so much. “So why your friend’s concern over the similarity in wound types? It seems reasonable that if they’re all the work of a serial killer... wouldn’t they be at least a little similar -- if not identical?”

Raising a hand restlessly from between his knees, Caleb scrubbed it over his mouth and chin before raising a brown-eyed gaze full of regret to meet Sarhaan’s. “Don’t you see? That was the problem: they weren’t identical -- only similar. As though different weapons of the same type were used. Beam weapons are notoriously hard to trace, but Daphne sees a lot of wounds caused by them, and like I said, she’s a geek for this stuff and she’s got a good eye.”

Big brown eyes be damned, Sarhaan wanted the rest of the story and he was going to get it if he had to reach down the kid’s throat and pull the words out. “Caleb, tell me what I



need to know here. What did your friend find out? That's what this is all about isn't it -- what your friend proved with her forensics work?"

"I don't know what she proved. She died before she could finish it." Those eyes again, bigger and sadder than ever, looked up at him.

"Died? Died how?"

The kid steadied himself visibly, sitting up straighter and meeting Sarhaan's gaze with a gritty one of his own. "She was mugged. They said she must have fought back, because whoever did it beat her up pretty bad. Beat her to death."

## Chapter Four

“Here you go. Drink this. You look like you could use it.” Sarhaan handed him a beer, the top already twisted off.

“Thanks.” Having something to hold in his hands was a welcome relief, and Cal took a long drink. Maybe it was only the expected letdown after the long day or maybe it was seeing Daphne’s face in his mind’s eye again, swollen and discolored -- barely recognizable -- but suddenly he was dog-tired. Weary down to his soul. The beer, frosty cold and bitter as hell, hit Cal like a slap in the face as he took another pull from the bottle.

“So why do you think your friend’s death wasn’t exactly what it was reported to be?”

“It’s a feeling, mostly. She was sure she was being watched. That someone had been going through her files. She was about to go to the media with what she had. She knew it wasn’t enough all by itself, but there was a reporter who’d written some stories that she thought might be able to find out more. She never got the chance, though.”

The past came filtering back to Cal, memories of Daphne and him at different ages. God, he missed her. He must have gotten lost in thought because when Sarhaan spoke again, it took him a moment to remember where he was and who he was talking to.

“Been flying long?” Seated in one of the big chairs that, together with the couch Cal sat on, formed a conversation square, Sarhaan tipped his own beer to his lips and took a drink, the dozens of thin braids falling behind his shoulders. Cal realized for the first time that Sarhaan’s jaw-hugging beard didn’t extend quite to the corners of his jaw, leaving intriguing bare spots just below his ears. Another mouthful of his own beer downed and Cal canted his head to the side and considered those bare spots. What would Sarhaan do if Cal braced his hands on the arms of the padded chair and leaned down to place a kiss on first one, then the other? Knock him into next week, probably.

Cal traced the trail of his thoughts and laughed at himself a little. Some things never changed -- not even one beer downed and he was already half-drunk. One Can Adams, Daphne had called him. Deciding he must be further gone than he realized if he could entertain a thought like that, Cal smiled. “Off and on, since I was a kid. I’ve got an uncle who flies. I was always the only one in the family who even pretended to be interested, so Uncle Gerry would take me up whenever he could.”

“Yeah? That must be nice -- a family with that kind of money. I had to join the Army to learn.” Arms folded atop his perfectly flat belly, Sarhaan balanced the bottle loosely between his hands as he fingered the label, the picture of supreme self-confidence. What must it be like, to be that sure of your own abilities? So comfortable in your own skin?

Normally Cal didn't let himself drink socially. Doing so would be not just an invitation to disaster, but one that arrived hand-delivered and engraved, no regrets accepted. He didn't have the head for it, and he knew it. So he had to ask himself: why now? Maybe it was the fact that for the first time in his life, there was no one to look over his shoulder. No government. No Vice Consul. No family. No one at all between him and this walking wet-dream of a man. "Do you like it?"

Sarhaan tilted the bottle up to his lips again, and Cal imagined lips wrapping around the first inch, pink tip of a tongue dipping ever so gently into the opening. Pressing his lips together, Cal clutched his own drink tighter in his hand before raising it again to his mouth. He was shocked when he opened his mouth expecting more of the cold, bitter brew and only a few drops trickled out. Empty?

"Like it? What, the Army?" No crude wiping the back of his hand across his mouth for Sarhaan. Oh, no. Instead, two long fingers -- pianist's fingers, his mother would call them -- thumb and forefinger settled at opposing corners of his mouth before sweeping together to meet in the middle. Cal tried not to stare, but he couldn't tear his gaze away.

Those lips. What must they taste like? Slick. Chilly and wet. But he could warm them with his own mouth. God. As the thought of tilting his mouth to meet Sarhaan's tightened its grip on Cal's alcohol-fuzzed brain, he lifted a hand to cover his eyes and drew a long breath to steady himself.

"Until fairly recently, I would have said I liked it pretty well. It's certainly brought me opportunities I never would have had otherwise."

Cal rubbed his eyes and gave up trying to follow the conversation. Too mush-brained to make much sense of what Sarhaan was saying, he could only let the beautifully modulated tones of that orator's voice wash over him. Smiling, Cal could almost see the shapes formed by the words as they tumbled through the air from Sarhaan's mouth to his own ears.

"Can I ask you 'nother question?"

"Sure, kid. Go ahead."

"What kind of name is Sarhaan? Is that all there is, or is there more to it?"

"Oh, there's more." Caleb couldn't begin to follow what came next. What must have been a dozen syllables of unpronounceable, if musical-sounding, syllables flowed over him. "Sarhaan's just easier."

"Wow." His brain was having trouble forming coherent thought. "That's really long."

Sarhaan sighed. "My mother. She got interested in her African roots while she was

pregnant with me. Decided I needed an African name. I hated it for a long time, but by the time I got old enough to change it legally, I'd gotten used to it. It's different."

Slouching deeper into the cushions of the sofa, Cal leaned his head back against the top of it and closed his eyes. He could lie there and just listen to the clean, precise diction all night. Only a slight burr on the occasional word hinted that Sarhaan's background might be even slightly different from his own. But it must have been. Hadn't the man told him so? Or had that been in one of the files he'd hacked? Cal couldn't remember any more.

"Hey, kid. You awake?"

Not bothering to open his eyes, Cal smiled. "Yeah. Just barely. But you can keep talking. I'll just sit here."

"The beer must have hit you pretty hard. I wasn't thinking, but it's Adrastean and it'll knock you on your ass if you're not used to it. I don't imagine they serve it much where you're from."

"Wouldn't matter if they did." Cal chuckled at his own joke, marveling at his wit. Daphne would have been proud of him, since she'd always teased him about his complete inability to tell one.

\*\*\*

It was raining.

The sound of it falling on the ground, splattering as it hit, seeped into Cal's consciousness. It took him a few seconds for his brain to sort out why that struck him as odd.

He wasn't at home, lying in bed, listening to the slow drip of rain that was an almost daily occurrence in Locke. He was on a ship somewhere out beyond Mars.

He was lying on his back, body refusing to obey his brain's commands. Head lolling in the direction of the sound, Cal concentrated hard and got his eyes to open and... *holy mother of God*... That wasn't rain at all. It was a shower. A shower containing an extremely naked Sarhaan.

Water cascaded over muscles and skin, all very much exposed to Cal's view. The light in the room was dim and Cal's brain -- still fuzzy in his half-drunken state -- couldn't make sense of how Sarhaan could be showering in the main room of his living quarters. Obviously some type of in-room set up. Whatever. Most importantly, the man was one-hundred percent, completely, bare-assed naked.

Good God in heaven. Cal tried to swallow and failed. His mouth, dry and tasting like old socks, hung open. He'd never... never seen... of course he'd imagined, sure. But... he'd simply had no idea.

Sure, he'd seen barely-clothed bodies before. Swimming was not only a great way to keep fit, it was also the only socially acceptable chance to see other men practically naked. But Cal was realizing that 'practically' was a far cry from 'totally.'

Head tilted back to allow water to stream over his upturned face, Sarhaan now faced away from where Cal lay on the room's only couch. The last thing Cal remembered was drinking a beer and talking about flying. How had he gotten to be prone and covered with a blanket? When had the lights been turned down? And, most importantly, when had Sarhaan removed his own clothing?

The way the muscles in the man's back and shoulders bunched and flexed was fascinating. Broad, broad shoulders bent inward and Cal realized Sarhaan must be washing himself. Army life must be strenuous in the extreme to sculpt muscles that powerful. Sturdy feet were planted firmly under a toned and utterly beautiful body, wide shoulders tapering down to a round, muscular butt. Cal could only watch, mesmerized, as Sarhaan rotated slowly under the water that beat down on his face as his hands and the rest of his front came slowly into Cal's view.

An involuntary whimper rose at the back of his throat as Cal got a look at muscular pecs and cobbled belly. Formidable thighs tapered down to broad calves and feet, but it was the geography that lay between that drew Cal's gaze like an irresistible tractor-beam. Hands full of soapy bubbles that glowed faintly blue in the darkened room, Sarhaan handled himself -- ebony cock fully erect in one hand, heavy dark balls in the other as he alternately stroked and squeezed.

\*\*\*

God, that felt good.

He'd thought he was going to burst. Or worse, shoot his load into his pants like some horny adolescent instead of a man in his prime.

Watching Caleb get shit-faced drunk on one beer had had its amusing moments. Watching him giggle at nothing and then slide down into the couch as though his very bones had liquefied had made Sarhaan nostalgic for his own rowdy high school days. Seeing Cal's eyes become heavy-lidded and slumberous had only added to the dangerous thoughts already fighting for dear life in his overactive imagination. It hadn't take much of a reach to imagine that that sweet, pouty mouth was smiling at him in invitation; that if he'd walked over and straddled Caleb's recumbent form and pulled him up for the kiss he longed to take from those gently curved lips, he would be welcomed. And suddenly Sarhaan wasn't laughing any more.

It had been both a disappointment and a relief when Caleb had finally given up the fight and let his eyes fall closed, the empty beer bottle dropping from his nerveless fingers to land noiselessly on the rubberized deck.

They could torture him for a week with sonic disruptors and never get him to admit that after Caleb had fallen asleep, Sarhaan had stayed in his chair and just watched the kid sleep. It had been a perfect opportunity to look his fill, and he'd taken it. Watched. And imagined. Until he'd found himself caught up in an internal debate about just how wrong *would* it be to take advantage of a drunken man. He might be a fugitive from the law and a disgrace to the uniform he wore, but that was one thing he'd never done.

The food might be crap and the company sometimes less than congenial, but one thing they'd done right in building these cruisers was make sure the air and water fabricators worked. A warm shower and some do-it-yourself relief sounded like about the best he could hope for.

After turning Cal sideways and pulling the kid's feet up on the couch, Sarhaan had dimmed the lights, stripped down and headed for the shower. Hell, he'd even taken pity on the kid and taken the time to throw a blanket over him, although he wasn't sure for whose benefit it was supposed to be.

Once in the shower, water flowing over his face, jets pounding him from a dozen different angles, Sarhaan hadn't even bothered with the pretense that the exercise had anything to do with cleanliness. He'd wondered before about the exact chemical composition of bluesoap. Sure, it was supposed to take care of any exodermal bugs and keep skin at optimal health. But did it have to tingle? Was it a requirement -- an absolutely critical component? Because between the pinprick stings of the water jets and the stimulation of the soap, it never failed to get a rise out of him.

Scrubbing hands over his neck, arms and shoulders, the familiar glow began to spread. His skin heated -- almost as though he was lying naked in the sun. Not that Sarhaan had ever been foolish enough to do so. Relaxing on the beach under the false sky of the resort facility was the closest he'd ever come. Still, the sensation was the same. His skin tingled, as though heated from within. If he closed his eyes and concentrated, he could almost hear the blood pumping in his veins.

Sarhaan didn't even try to resist. His hands, still full of subtly glowing bluesoap suds, dropped to his cock and balls. He'd been hard and ready to go ever since he'd seen Caleb tip the bottle of beer to his pretty mouth and watched the muscles of his long neck work to swallow the drink.

Rotating slowly, Sarhaan leaned back against the bulkhead and let the water stream down his chest and torso, missing his face altogether. Spreading his feet, he let his shoulders press solidly backward, providing an additional point of balance and began stroking himself.

With his eyes closed it was easier to imagine that it wasn't his hand at all. It could be a mouth. A mouth like the sweet and no doubt innocent one he'd been trying not to obsess over that currently lay open and snoring on his couch at this very moment. Sarhaan let his eyes come open enough to locate Caleb's location in the low ambient lighting, immediately spotting that mop of shiny blond hair. Left hand squeezing gently on his balls, his right stroked a fist from the base of his cock to the tip and Sarhaan could almost imagine he saw Caleb's eyes smiling back at him: looking at his cock, licking his lips a bit in anticipation before falling open to receive him.

A bolt of lust shot through him at that last flight of imagination, and he stroked harder, arching his hips up to meet the down stroke of his hand. The bluesoap left a thousand tiny pinpricks of heat wherever it touched his skin, but nowhere more so than the sensitive flesh of his prick. Taking another longing look at the sleeping figure on his couch, Sarhaan closed his eyes again, imagining that the vise-like grip on his cock came not from his own hand, but from the hot, tight ass of that same sleeping figure.

He lubed it first, of course, with gel spread by his own fingers. Slipped first one, then two fingers into the impossibly tight hole. Scissored them open, stretching, exploring. Caleb moaned and then begged, pushing back onto Sarhaan's fingers, pleading to be taken. After adding even more lube to ease the way, Sarhaan had taken those lean hips in both hands and slowly forced his way inside -- millimeter by glorious millimeter.

Inside now, he was stroking into Caleb, staring down at the bumps of his spine, the shallow valley that ran the length of his back, the slim waist, the perfect crevice that divided his ass and pointed the way to heaven.

*"Oh, yeah, fuck me. Please. Please. Fuck me harder."*

In his head, Sarhaan could hear Caleb begging and grunting. Could see him throwing that tight, beautiful ass backward, impaling himself over and over on Sarhaan's cock. Could feel his balls slapping Caleb's sweet skin. Could feel and hear and see it so intensely it was barely a half-dozen strokes more before he was shooting his load, imagining it was Caleb he was filling with his spunk. Not his own hand for the thousandth time.

\*\*\*

Sarhaan stretched, the glowing figures of the clock telling him wasn't yet time to get up. He'd had a little trouble with his lower back ever since he'd taken that shot going through the terminal -- re-gen could only do so much -- so an extra minute or two stretching was a necessary luxury. Something in the darkness moved, and last night came rushing back to him like the run-up on a planet when coming out of hyperspace too quickly.

Oh, yeah.

Temptation in the form of one dangerously attractive, possibly Republican spy lay sleeping a few meters away. He was going to have to deal with that and sooner rather

than later, and that was one bomb whose detonation timing he wanted control of. So, deciding there was no time like the present to test a theory or two, Sarhaan rolled from bed and approached his sleeping guest.

“Lights, twenty percent.” Light consistent with early morning came on and Sarhaan could see what he’d heard rustling a moment ago.

If Caleb had been sent as a spy, whatever governmental mastermind had selected him had chosen well. He could hardly look more innocent. Silky blond hair artfully tousled -- lush mouth relaxed in sleep. Even the slightly furrowed brow added to the effect, as though he couldn’t quite decide which good deed to perform next.

“Caleb. Time to get up.”

The hand Cal had balled up and used as a pillow flexed. The furrow between the brownish blonde eyebrows deepened for an instant before the eyes popped open and Caleb blinked slowly awake. “Oh. Right. G’ morning.” Scrubbing a hand over his face, Caleb’s tongue and mouth worked together to indicate obvious distaste. “Could I get some water? Or coffee, maybe?”

“Sorry, coffee’s down in the commissary. That’ll have to wait. You want a shower? Why don’t you jump in? You can have all the water you want.”

Gaze tracking to where the shower stood, it jerked back immediately, where it fixed itself on Sarhaan’s face -- a little too doggedly to be completely natural. Keeping his own gaze impassive, Sarhaan folded his arms across his chest and stared back, practically daring Caleb. If the boy was everything he claimed to be, a little thing like a naked man inches from his face shouldn’t present much of a problem at all.

“Sh-shower?”

“Yeah. I know you won’t take this the wrong way when I say you look like you could use one.”

Shoving himself upright, Caleb leaned back against the couch’s upholstered cushions and worked hard at appearing unflustered. If it was an act, though, he needed to work on it, because Sarhaan was prepared to swear the kid was at least as interested as he was embarrassed. That might even be a by-God flush creeping into those wicked-high cheekbones.

“Sure. That sounds good. Um, how about if I meet you in the commissary then? You don’t want to have to wait around for me. I can catch up.”

He should try to be a better person and not get such enjoyment out of watching the kid struggle. But between catching Caleb’s gaze sneaking back to check out the personal



goods, Sarhaan began to be concerned that the boy might actually do permanent damage to the lower lip he was worrying so fiercely.

“Sorry, no can do. Even if I thought you could find your way all right, until we get this situation stabilized, you’re going to be my little shadow. Yup. You and me, joined at the hip. Now get it done and get dressed so we can both go get some coffee.”

Those eyes again. Darting from the shower to Sarhaan, the bed, and back again. “But... I... I...”

“What? It’s just a shower. Get a move-on.” Turning his back, Sarhaan felt the shockwave of relief in the expelled breath behind him as he headed for his closet and his own clothes.

“I... um... okay.”

“Don’t worry, kid -- I can keep a secret. I won’t tell anyone that you’re gay.”

## Chapter Five

*Breathe.*

*Take a deep breath, hold it, let it out slowly.*

Caleb closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself. Just because nothing had gone the way he'd planned, practically from the minute he'd embarked on this little bit of idiocy -- No, this was no time for modesty. This *gargantuan* piece of idiocy. -- it was no time to give up. He could do this. He had to do this. He'd made a promise and he'd get through this, too.

Besides, there was no way Sarhaan could know. He might suspect, but he couldn't know for sure. Not unless Cal himself gave it away. "Taking a swing at my host would be bad manners, so I'm going to pretend I'm amused. Ha ha."

Don't be an idiot. Now was not the time to be ogling the man's ass -- even if it was amazing. His heart beating again, Cal looked away, searching for the least conspicuous spot to undress in. Dammit, it was one big room -- not even a separate bathroom, let alone a changing room.

"I mean it. What happens off-world, stays off-world."

Sarhaan smiled briefly, and Cal had no choice but to turn his back and pretend he did this every day. Sure. Like he wasn't still hyperventilating from being awakened by his most secret fantasy come to life. He'd nearly had a heart attack when he'd opened his eyes and realized who was standing less than a meter away. And in what condition.

Pulling his shirt over his head first, Cal let it drop to the floor and started on his pants. After being slept in, what difference would another wrinkle or two make? Ignoring the goose bumps from the room's cool temperature, he shucked off his pants; where the hell his socks and boots had gotten to, he had no idea. Whatever had been in that beer Sarhaan had given him must have been extra-strength because he'd never gotten so drunk, so fast, in his life.

The controls for the shower made sense after a moment's analysis, so Cal turned it on and stepped in.

"The soap works better if you use it before you get in. Lights, eighty percent."

Mercifully for Cal's composure, Sarhaan had put some pants on and stood a good four meters away. The lights got brighter and it was obvious that, even with the pants, the man looked indecently good. A broad chest without a trace of hair across the pecs, and thick biceps just begging for his hands and mouth to --

“Thanks.” Cal tossed the single word over his shoulder as he turned away and began applying the strangely gritty soap to his arms and shoulders. Weird. He slid the stuff between his thumb and fingers and discovered dozens of tiny, almost microscopic, pieces of grit in it. Grit that, when applied to the skin, made it tingle. Cal worked the soap into his skin, scrubbing his chest and legs. Hopefully, he could get through this with a minimum of embarrassment. As he worked his skin warmed and -- *ohmygod, no* -- blood began flowing into his cock.

Aw, crap. “Hey, what’s in this stuff, anyway?”

“What makes you ask?” The man didn’t have to sound so amused. It must be the voice, because it wasn’t the face. Eyes flinty and unreadable, Sarhaan still stood with his arms folded across his chest.

“Look, could I ask ... would you mind waiting outside for me?”

Things were about to get sticky, and the last thing Cal wanted was an audience. Maybe it was the memory of what he’d seen last night, Sarhaan touching himself; all of that prime, male flesh on glorious display. Maybe he’d found a previously undiscovered taste for exhibitionism and it was a result of standing naked in front of the sexiest man he’d ever seen. Or maybe it was the soap, silly as that sounded, but as much as he closed his eyes and willed it away, the raging hard-on he’d developed was showing no signs of going away.

“What’s the matter? Anything I can help with?”

“*No!* I mean, no. Thanks.” Calm. Act normal -- that was the key. “I just... need to take care of a little business, okay?”

His cock ached to be touched. Stroked. Cal didn’t know how much longer he could keep up the act.

“Oh. Hmm. Gotcha. Look, kid--”

“I’m not a kid. My name is Cal.” Why that should matter now, of all times, Cal had no idea. Hard and aching, a kid was the last thing he felt like.

“Okay. Cal. Like I said, I’m not leaving you alone until we get things sorted out. Just... do what you’ve gotta do. I need to check in with the bridge, anyway. Forget I’m even in the room.”

Yeah, right. As if.

The voice behind him moved away, and Cal breathed out. A lifetime of training was at war with everything inside him. Problem was, he didn’t *want* to forget Sarhaan was in the

room -- far from it -- and Cal prayed it wasn't as glaringly obvious as it seemed to him. Leaning one hand against the shower wall, the other reached unerringly for his dick.

*Oh, yeah. At last.*

Water streamed over his head, his shoulders, as he finally touched himself like he'd been dying to. "*Anything I can help with?*" Just running the words through his head again made his cock twitch in his hand.

The thought of Sarhaan watching him as he touched himself thrilled Cal. The idea that maybe, just maybe, the man found something about Cal attractive. His inner critic snorted at the idea, but some little voice in his head whispered, "What if...?" What if Sarhaan looked at him, his body, and found it attractive? Wanted to touch him? Taste him? Take him into that mouth? *Ohmygod*. Cal stroked harder at the thought.

His thumb brushed over the sensitive head of his cock, and the bright burst of pleasure made him think of looking deep into Sarhaan's eyes as one of those big hands stroked him. Cal would lean forward, offer his mouth, their lips and tongues would meet. He started to come and pictured spurting over Sarhaan's hands and belly and couldn't stop the groan that came with the images.

As the waves of orgasm began to recede, Cal came slowly back to himself and waves of another kind began to roll over him. Had he really? Had he just jerked off in front of another man? Maybe he'd left all of his hard-won circumspection back on Earth. Sarhaan might say everything was fine, but a man who liked other men was still extremely illegal back home, and Cal had to go back at some point. And what, in the name of all that was holy, was he supposed to do and say now?

"Cal."

His name and nothing else, spoken softly and from close by, startled him. Cal jerked his head, instinctively looking for where the voice had come from. His footing -- already precarious from the water flowing over tile -- slipped, Cal's shoulder and head catching glancing blows as his legs went out from under him and the floor rushed up to greet him as he landed on his butt.

Biting his lip hard on the profanity that wanted very much to come out, Cal closed his eyes against the embarrassment as much as the pain. Naturally. Didn't it figure that he should be at his clumsiest in front of the man he wanted almost desperately to impress? "What?"

"Jesus, kid, are you all right?" Cal opened his eyes to see Sarhaan squatting in front of him, reaching out to touch the bit of Cal's head that had connected with the shower wall.

"Did you have to do that? You scared the shit out of me." He knew he was being unreasonable, but Cal couldn't bear the concern in Sarhaan's dark eyes. The kindness. It

was humiliating enough to have done what he'd just done. What he deserved was to be laughed at. Not this. "Warn me next time, would you?"

Surprisingly gentle fingers probed at his skull, making him wince. "I will if you will." Lifting his gaze past the sculpted belly and impressive chest to Sarhaan's face, Cal was dazzled by dusky brown lips, so full he could feast for a week on them. The nose that had appeared thin at first glance was actually perfect up close. High cheekbones were the perfect backdrop for those amazing eyes -- so deep and dark Cal thought he could drown in them. At this distance, Cal could spot the smallest flaw and was therefore in a position to say unequivocally that Sarhaan had none. "If you're going to do that in my shower again I want to know about it. Because I don't want to miss a second of it."

Mesmerized by fathomless black eyes, Cal only realized later that the hand touching his head had moved. Long fingers speared through his hair, holding him in place, as Sarhaan's face grew slowly larger. Until all he could see was darkness. A second hand spread across his neck and jaw, cupping his face. Both hands cradled his head, moved him into position and then -- *ohmygod* -- Sarhaan's lips pressed his, and they were kissing.

A wave of dizziness came over him, and Cal braced himself against the floor's rapidly cooling tile. A hundred times better than his imagination, Sarhaan's lips were warm and dry. Then his tongue swept into Cal's mouth, Cal opening instinctively to accept him. So good. So incredibly, indescribably good. Warm and comforting. And right in a way no other kiss had ever been.

Cal tried to dig his nails in, but they only slid on the slippery floor. Searching for something solid as his world spun out of control, Cal gripped the first thing that came to hand: Sarhaan's uniform-covered knees. As Cal hung on for dear life, Sarhaan deepened this kiss, using his tongue to search and probe. Hopelessly outclassed in terms of experience, Cal followed Sarhaan's lead, hoped he didn't kiss like the neophyte he was. His head swimming, drowning in the sweet sensation of Sarhaan's mouth on his, Cal moaned and tried to inch closer.

"Sarhaan!" A disembodied voice bellowed from the intercom nearby. "We could use you up on the bridge, pronto. We've got company."

\*\*\*

Reaching down, Sarhaan grabbed his crotch and adjusted himself. It had been a near thing, and he still wasn't sure how he felt about it. The timing of Naslund's call from the bridge had been perfect. The way things had been headed, much later and he'd have had Caleb spread and ready for him.

Christ.

Just the thought of all of that pale, wet skin... soaped and available for use... Frustration clawed at him, what should have been a simple statement coming out an angry snarl. "Move it! Now. Finish that later."

"Okay. I'm coming."

Sarhaan looked back at Caleb as he all but towed him toward the lift. Big, brown eyes watched him from behind a fringe of damp hair. Another time he'd have enjoyed the circuitous walk from his quarters to the command deck, but the lift was quicker. Shirt hanging open, Caleb's chest was naked to his gaze, as was the trail of hair that disappeared into the pants that hung from Caleb's narrow hips.

Stepping into the lift, scenarios for battle and possibilities of the identity of their company swirled through Sarhaan's head, his brain automatically ticking off ready-lists and preparations even as he ran his tongue over his lips, cataloging the exact shape and taste of Caleb's mouth.

Numbers of the deck levels flickered past as Sarhaan's gaze switched from the lift's control panel to where Caleb stood, fussing unproductively with his shirt's closure. The kid kept trying to align the two pieces and missing and it was driving Sarhaan crazy, until he grabbed the sides of the shirt and did it himself. "Here... like this."

Only problem was that now he was once again standing deep in Caleb's personal space, looking into his eyes. And Caleb was looking back.

"Thanks."

Husky and low, it must be the adrenaline already pumping in him, because Sarhaan heard the aroused note in Caleb's whisper, and he had to move. Glancing up and seeing two more decks to go, Sarhaan backed Caleb against the lift's bulkhead and took both of Caleb's wrists in his hands. Pinning them to the wall, Sarhaan stepped even closer, until they were belly to belly.

He was nearly a head taller than Caleb, and the kid had to lean his head back to maintain eye contact, his mouth falling open in an exquisitely needy look of surprise. It was the flare of desire in Caleb's eyes that made him take another kiss even as he ground his cock against Caleb's.

Too soon he heard the click of the lift's magnetic brakes kicking in and stepped back. Sarhaan had a split-second before the doors opened to enjoy the dazed look in those fine brown eyes as Caleb blinked and grabbed at the lift's handrails for support. Turning on his heel, Sarhaan stepped out onto the bridge.

"So what've you got, Jake?"

Things must really be jumping to have half the crew already on deck. Jacob Naslund, the most likely candidate for the voice on the intercom, stood with his full attention focused on the long-range scanner readout. Crowding in for a better look were Marcel Primeau and Andy Sutton, while D'abu, Jimi Vilnius and Kai Xuwicha watched the main view screen.

"My guess is a Republican gunship, but come look for yourself." The shortest man in the unit, Jake also happened to have the best grasp of the technical readouts, so it wasn't unusual to see the other men deferring to his judgment when it came to interpreting scanner data.

Making sure Caleb had indeed followed him off the lift, Sarhaan moved in to get a look for himself. "Hard to tell from this distance. Got any info from the ion trail?"

Jake only took his gaze from the scanner long enough to toss a withering glance in Sarhaan's general direction. "Would I be guessing if I had an ion trail to read?"

"Dial back, buddy. Just asking." Sarhaan took a quick inventory of the rest of the sensor array. "That it, then?"

"Is that it? Isn't that enough? You know we've been asking for something like this, hanging around here so long. We should have taken off for Doradus weeks ago." Lack of height had never affected Jake's self-confidence. When convinced of the correctness of his opinion -- which was almost always -- Nas wouldn't hesitate to go toe-to-toe with anyone.

"And you know why we haven't. Hopefully, though, we got something to take care of that little problem from Caleb's shuttle. Anybody checked with Andrei lately?"

A speculative look crossed Jake's face as he surveyed Caleb briefly before pressing the intercom. "Andrei? What's the good word, my man?"

"Naslund. When you getting off my back, you little cocksucker? I tell you I call you when is done." The crystalline clarity of the intercom did nothing to soften Andrei Tishchenko's harsh Muskovian accent. Sarhaan had his suspicions about how much of it was for effect, but the man was too damn big to rile needlessly.

Things had changed since they'd been away from home, though, and new alliances had formed. Tishchenko and Naslund were now about as close as it got in what remained of Rondi's unit. "Easy, big fella -- just checking. Boss man is all over my ass so I'm down on yours. When's this piece of shit going to be ready to fly?"

"Soon. I would be done three times if no stand up blowjobs call me each minute."

Even making allowances for Andrei's questionable English, Sarhaan surveyed the room and saw that Caleb's wasn't the only face with a look of confusion on it.

Sarhaan turned to the ship's other big man. "D'abu, why aren't you down there helping him?"

"You know how he gets. Man said he had it handled."

"This is no time for egos. Come on -- we're going down there. Jake, you and Kai get the details of the nav path worked out. Get this pig ready to roll while D'abu and I see what we can do to help. Caleb, you coming?"

\*\*\*

Waiting until the lift doors closed behind them, Sarhaan let his gaze flicker lightly over Caleb. Christ, but he'd been amped up back there -- barking out orders and generally behaving like an ass. It hadn't occurred to him at the time, but he wondered now how much of his performance had been for Caleb's benefit. Eyes drawn inevitably to the way Caleb's pants clung to the curve of his ass, Sarhaan took a deep breath and shook his head. No time to be letting his thoughts wander too far down that road.

He switched his gaze to where D'abu stood, hands thrust comfortably into the pockets of his jumpsuit. "Do we have any theories about how they found us? *Have* they found us?"

Sarhaan felt the weight of Caleb's gaze on him and fought the urge to look back.

"Sure looks that way. The Republic stopped regular patrols in this segment of the system years ago. Why else would they send a ship -- a gunship, at that -- out into the middle of nowhere unless they were working off of a tip?"

Dammit, he would not look in Caleb's direction. This conversation had nothing to do with him. "Yeah, why else?"

"Theories have been offered."

"And... ?"

D'abu rocked back on his heels a bit, tucking in his chin and staring studiously at the tips of his boots. "There was that probe last week."

This sector of space was barren enough that Sarhaan didn't have to search his memory to remember which unmanned probe and reject the idea almost as quickly. "Too far away. Unless R&D has come up with something really hot since we've been gone, we should have been way out of its range."

"Should have been."



Still not meeting his gaze, D'abu was looking everywhere but at Sarhaan, and it was getting on his last nerve.

“C'mon, D. Don't pull this same shit like you did in Sitka. What else have you heard?”

“Well... the spy theory's got a lot of votes behind it.”

“Spy? Guess I should have seen that one coming.” Sarhaan stopped fighting it and let his gaze roll back to Caleb, who stood, hands clasped behind his back, staring straight ahead and looking for all the world as though he'd heard not a word of what had just been said.

“It has a certain logic to it, you've got to admit.”

Sarhaan looked at his old friend and sighed. Letting his silence speak for him, D'abu looked back. His gut said no, but Sarhaan's head had to admit that there was indeed a sliver of reasoning behind it.

“Yeah, okay. I'll keep an eye on it.”

“I know you will. And, Sarhaan? Now is not the time to be thinking with the little head, to coin an old saying.”

“Understood and acknowledged.”

As the lift doors opened Sarhaan stepped out into engineering, where Tishchenko lay stretched on the floor, body half obscured by the main barrel of the ship's tachyon drive. One hand held something in place while the other groped blindly for a beam torch. Locating it, Andrei brought it slowly into proximity of whatever he was holding and the room exploded in a flash of light.

## Chapter Six

“Kid. Caleb. How many fingers am I holding up? C’mon, baby, talk to me. How many fingers?”

Caleb tried, but hard as he fought he couldn’t get his eyes to stay open. The pounding in his skull was overpowering and, as much as he’d like to, he couldn’t hold his eyelids up. The warm voice – Sarhaan’s voice – sounded worried and Cal wanted to reassure him, but speaking was too hard. Too much effort. So he grunted and squeezed the hand that gripped his before the darkness came up to swallow him.

\*\*\*

*He was afraid.*

*Arms folded protectively over his head, Cal squeezed his eyes shut and tried to hide. There was nowhere to hide, though. Every way he turned, there it was. No corner to hide in, Cal turned and ran. Ran as fast as he could. Turned the corner, and there they were, waiting for him.*

*No!*

*Heart pounding, stomach twisted in hard knots of fear, Cal turned yet again and ran. He couldn’t run fast enough. He wasn’t a runner. They would catch him. Even now he could hear them, inches off his heels.*

*Tired. He was so tired. His lungs burned, his sides ached from the effort of running, always running. Why wouldn’t they leave him alone? He didn’t know whatever it was they wanted from him. Why couldn’t he make them understand that he just didn’t know? Why wouldn’t they leave him alone?*

*A hole in the ground. Maybe he could hide. Cal crouched inside, made himself as small as he could. Tried to still his breathing so they couldn’t hear him. Please, please don’t let them find him.*

\*\*\*

“Anyone in there? Caleb?”

He kept his eyes closed. Breathing in and out slowly, Cal concentrated on keeping his breaths slow and natural. Like he was asleep. Some bit of animal cunning from the darkest part of his mind told him that it would be safer if they thought he was asleep.

“Caleb. Try to open your eyes for me, would you?”

A touch to his upper arm, light as the smallest of feathers, trailed down to his elbow and on down to the back of his hand. The bed dipped, and the warmth of a body pressing against his leg began to seep into his consciousness. It felt good. More than good. A hand picked up Cal's, meshing the fingers through his, and gently stroked it from knuckle to wrist and back again.

Cal reached out with his mind and began taking a mental inventory of ... what? What was it he was looking for? Pain. He slowly realized he was looking for the source of the pain and fear. The fear that had made him run as though his very life depended on it. It had, hadn't it? He'd never felt such paralyzing fear. At the time he'd been too scared to analyze it, but thinking back on it now he could pause and wonder at its cause.

This voice didn't produce fear, though. Quite the opposite; Cal wanted to crawl inside the voice and warm himself at the fire he knew instinctively was inside.

"Time to wake up, Caleb. Talk to me."

Taking a chance, Cal cracked an eyelid open. Dark eyes, dark hair, beautiful mouth. It was him -- the man. The one. He'd dreamed of that face, Cal realized in a sudden flash of recall. That must be it. He must have been asleep and dreaming. Stomach dropping suddenly, followed immediately by a flush of heat, when he realized he'd dreamed of kissing this man.

Trying frantically to quash the sudden unreasoning fear that someone somehow would read his mind and know his dream -- know what he was -- Cal cast about for a name to put with the face. It was something unusual, he remembered that much.

Opening his eyes fully, Cal gazed back into the depths of eyes so brown it was hard to tell where the pupil ended and the brown color began. "Sarhaan."

"Good. You're awake. And you remember. That's good." The half-smile on Sarhaan's full lips went a long way toward quelling the fear.

"What happened?" Maybe he was sick because his throat hurt and his voice was raspy.

Sarhaan's full lips compressed into a grim line and his gaze fell to their hands, entwined and resting atop Sarhaan's muscular thigh. Nothing made sense. How had he gotten back to Sarhaan's quarters from the engineering room? Why did he have no memory of having done so? Most importantly, why was Sarhaan holding his hand?

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Cal tilted his head a little, trying to get low enough to meet Sarhaan's gaze. Why the apology? He was missing critical pieces, obviously.

Sarhaan raised his gaze to Cal's, and Cal tried to decipher what he read there. "I left you alone and this is what happened." Lifting one hand to touch Cal's face, Sarhaan traced his brow, ran his fingers in the gentlest of touches over Cal's face. His forehead, his cheek, his jaw; now tucking a stray bit of hair behind an ear before coming to rest on Cal's shoulder.

Still puzzled, Cal gazed back, even as Sarhaan's touch sent shivers chasing down Cal's spine. He shied away from the feelings such exquisite tenderness created in him. "I don't understand. Did we-- ? The last thing I remember was getting into the lift with you. How did I get here?"

"You don't remember the engine room door opening? The blast? Any of that?"

It was hard to concentrate with Sarhaan running his thumb back and forth across Cal's cheek the way he was. So different from anything he'd ever known, Cal's mind refused to consider the possibilities.

"No. Just the lift. I think ... was Sandy with us?"

Pushing away abruptly, Sarhaan moved away from the bed and began to pace. Wearing loose-fitting pants and another of his lightweight sweaters, Sarhaan clasped his hands behind his back as he paced. Head down, those beautiful cheekbones would have been obscured were his mane of braids not restrained by a thong, forming a column of hair Cal wasn't certain he could encircle with both hands. As Cal watched, the material of Sarhaan's pants followed his movements, alternately obscuring and revealing the powerful muscles of his thighs. And that butt... oh, my. Even with the headache forming behind his eyes, Cal couldn't tear his gaze from watching that gorgeous, round backside as it supplied the power behind the walk.

"There was an explosion and you were knocked unconscious. There wasn't much left of the guy at ground zero and we had to have the engines up and running, so I left D'abu working on the problem while I took you to sick bay. I left you there with Vilnius -- he's the closest thing we have to a medic -- and went back to help D'abu."

As he stopped to pause and consider his words, Sarhaan looked up and caught Cal ogling his rear view. There was nothing to do but try to look thoughtful and perhaps attentive, as though it was the words he'd been hanging on. "Mmm-hmm. Go on."

"Our friend Bartok found out where you were and decided to take the opportunity to see what he could get out of you, information-wise."

"How could he interrogate me if I was unconscious?"

Sarhaan took a deep breath and resumed his pacing. "Part of our training is resistance to interrogation. A few years ago our side got their hands on a copy of the Alliance's torture

manual and used it as a jumping off point. If we know what they're going to do to try to get information out of us, we can train to resist that. Make sense?"

"Sure."

"I'd like to think we're better than that, but not too much later some creative souls started using the Alliance's own techniques back on them."

"Oh. That's not good." It was hard to keep his focus on what Sarhaan was saying, between the headache and the almost hypnotic effect of watching the man walk back and forth. Each step was measured, the exact length and placement of the one before, each turn an eloquent blend of military crispness and athletic grace. The man had the body of a god.

"Exactly. Very 'not good.' So Bartok, and probably a couple others, knows just enough to make him dangerous. He decided to use what he knows to see what he could get out of you. A few strategic drugs properly applied and you'd tell him anything he wanted to know. Everything you know and probably a few things you didn't even know you did."

"I would?"

"You bet. So they decided that he would take the opportunity to see what he could find out about you. What you're really doing here. My friend Dave's not above a little torture in pursuit of a good cause."

A pillow shoved up behind his back made the hard polymer headboard tolerable on Cal's back as he watched Sarhaan pace and talk. Focusing on the picture Sarhaan made helped him shove aside the feelings that lurked in the background of his mind, as though he wasn't quite ready to remember the nightmare he'd awoken from.

"Torture?" Cal's stomach began to churn, but he distracted himself by focusing on the way the silky thin material of Sarhaan's sweater clung faithfully to his arms, and Cal found his gaze running again and again over the curves and valleys hinted at underneath.

His back turned to Cal, the hands tensing and clenching behind his back were clearly visible.

Sarhaan turned. "The new drugs are better as far as after-effects go. Some people never even realize they've been questioned. Bartok's hardly an expert, though. There's more to it than placing the patch and asking questions. Regardless, it didn't sound to me like he got much useful information."

"I was really tortured?" The uneasiness was growing. Cal took a deep breath and let it out. He checked the idea against his memory.

“Dave’s not calling it torture, of course, but by the time I finally got back there it didn’t look like you were enjoying the experience much.”

Two more deep breaths and Cal wasn’t feeling any better. His heart was picking up speed, beginning to pound; he could feel it now. The nightmare feelings were pushing their way back up, and he remembered running. Cal’s gaze rose to meet Sarhaan’s before unfocusing, turning inward. “I was running. I hid and ... but that was a dream. Or was it? That’s what you’re telling me, isn’t it? That it wasn’t just a bad dream?”

He looked around the room, checking the corners, looking to see what might be hiding, lying in wait. The muscles in his legs twitched, getting ready to run again. How safe was he? What if Sarhaan couldn’t protect him? *What if Sarhaan was in on it?* Cal furtively scouted the room. Maybe there was a way out he hadn’t seen yet. Maybe --

“Easy there.” Moving quickly around the bed, Sarhaan sat again and gripped Cal’s shoulders. Cal looked at Sarhaan -- looked beyond him, his gaze skipping frantically from surface to surface until one of Sarhaan’s big hands left his shoulder and clasped his chin, that fathomless dark gaze boring into him. “It’s okay. I’m here. They’ll have to come through me to get you, and nobody’s coming through that door. Dave got the message loud and clear, believe me.”

Staring into those eyes, Cal could almost believe. When this man looked at him that way, he was ready to believe almost anything. Cal gazed back, his mind and body calming as something powerful rose up inside him. Opening his mouth to speak, no words came out. What did Sarhaan want from him? Whatever it was, it didn’t matter because Cal was prepared to give it. “Really?” Was that breathy, wondering voice really his?

“Really. A couple of days in re-gen never hurt anybody. While he’s healing it’ll give him time to contemplate his sins.”

Without seeming to move, Sarhaan’s face grew closer until it was all Cal could see. The scent of skin and something else, something earthy and musky, came into Cal’s awareness. He could only stare and wonder, his head filled with scattered thoughts, unable to hold onto any as the nightmare was pushed aside by Sarhaan’s powerful presence.

“Caleb.” It was statement, question and declaration, all together. And then their mouths were touching and nothing else mattered.

\*\*\*

Sarhaan closed his eyes and sank into the kiss. So sweet. So lush. So addictively good, he wanted to open his mouth and swallow Caleb whole.

Clasping Caleb’s head between his hands, Sarhaan positioned it to accept his kiss and swept his tongue into the hot center of that beautiful mouth. Caleb’s shocked intake of

breath was like old fashioned kerosene on his fire, and Sarhaan had to remind himself that Caleb wasn't another soldier or a quick fuck with a willing civilian. Caleb was special. He came from a privileged background, no doubt used to refined and cultured lovers. But, by God, Sarhaan would show him what he'd been missing.

Hands crept tentatively to Sarhaan's waist, and even that slight touch made him groan, the thought of hands not calloused from hard labor or scarred from innumerable beam splinters, did something to him. Pulling Caleb closer still, Sarhaan fused his mouth to Caleb's, sucking hard on the untutored tongue that had finally ventured out to meet his.

The hands at his waist dug in hard as Caleb moaned into Sarhaan's mouth. Unable to resist the desire to look -- to see what his kisses were doing to Caleb -- Sarhaan pulled back.

Eyes closed, Caleb remained passive and still in his hands, that rosebud mouth open and, even now, panting lightly. So unspeakably beautiful, Sarhaan couldn't believe his luck. This gorgeous piece of hot male beauty had fallen into his lap, and he'd learned a long time ago to seize good fortune at first call and not last.

Relaxing his grip, Sarhaan let Caleb's body rest against the headboard while he ran a finger down the elegant nose to touch the pink lips now reddened and moist with his kisses. He was tracing that full lower lip with his forefinger when Caleb's eyes suddenly popped open in alarm.

"Should we be doing this? Is it safe?"

"Don't worry, you're safe. We're safe." He couldn't resist going in for another brief kiss, pulling the lip he'd just been teasing into this mouth where he tested it lightly with his teeth. "The only people on this ship are guys from my unit and they don't care who or what I fuck, as long as I'm on time for my shifts and I don't disturb their sleep. I think we can manage that, don't you?"

He'd find out what his little civilian creampuff's real intentions were. Heat like he hadn't felt in a long time -- ever, maybe -- had been arcing between the two of them, practically since Caleb had first set his polished boot on board the *Vigilant*. Tired of fighting it, Sarhaan had realized how delicate Caleb was when he'd seen that slim body bow up off the table in pain and fear when that idiot Bartok had been having his go at Caleb. He wouldn't let this opportunity get away from him, only to realize later that it wouldn't be offered to him twice.

"Are you sure?"

Eyes that big and luminous ought to be illegal, or at least belong to a female where they'd be useless against Sarhaan. But Caleb looked up at him from behind a row of thick lashes that only added to his air of inexperience, and Sarhaan's dick got harder. "I'm sure. The door is secure."

“What about technology? I thought the military had scanners all over all of their ships.”

Running his hands up and down Caleb’s arms, feeling the slim muscles beneath, Sarhaan released the shirt’s magnetic closures with twin flicks of his thumbs and tugged it off over Caleb’s head. It wasn’t surprising he couldn’t keep his hands off Caleb. Even if it hadn’t been a while for Sarhaan -- even if he’d had real sex yesterday instead of months ago -- no virtual experience or paid companion could compare with all of that silky, pale skin. Sarhaan circled Caleb’s small brown nipples with his fingers, pinching them lightly and smiling at Caleb’s startled gasp. “First thing we did once we cleared the atmosphere was sweep the ship for sensors and tracking beacons. We’re clean.”

“You’re certain? I read that they’re making them really small now and that—”

“Caleb, it’s all right. You’re safe. No one will know what happens here unless you tell them. Even if they did, believe me, no one will care. We’re not on Earth any more.”

“Really?”

Maybe it was his imagination, but Caleb’s voice sounded wondering. Hopeful, even.  
“Really.”

“Well, then.” A tentative smile came to that pretty mouth and it was all Sarhaan could do not to climb onto the bed and have his way with Caleb like some ravaging barbarian. “If you’re absolutely certain... would it be all right then if I...?”

Sitting up, Caleb wrapped his arms around Sarhaan’s neck and slanted his mouth for a kiss that took Sarhaan’s breath away. A smooth, muscled chest pressed to his; Sarhaan spread his hands across Caleb’s back and held him close while Caleb pressed his mouth against Sarhaan’s in a series of energetic, if unpolished, kisses.

“So good.”

When Caleb came up for air, Sarhaan smiled at the heat glowing in those big brown eyes and pushed him back a little. Giving into desire, he climbed up on the bed and pulled Caleb down so that he lay flat on his back before straddling Caleb’s slim hips and grinding his cock down on Caleb’s.

Eyes going wide immediately, Caleb’s smile grew as he arched and wiggled and did his best to grind back. “That’s so good. You have no idea.”

Sarhaan struggled for control and could only grunt out the simplest of responses. “I don’t?”

Eyes rolling back in his head as lids that appeared weighted closed over them, Caleb --



oblivious to Sarhaan's inner struggle -- stretched his hands over his head in a gesture of helpless pleasure. "You have no idea how good you feel to me."

What was it about this slim, boyish-looking civilian that stripped away every bit of his hard-won sophistication and reduced him to a grunting savage? At every opportunity Sarhaan had worked to erase all traces of the scruffy army brat he'd been and replace him with a refined man. He might never be cultured or elegant, but he wasn't an animal. But animal was exactly what Caleb brought out in him. He wanted to strip off Caleb's clothes and pound his sweet ass into the mattress. "I want to see you."

Fortunately, Caleb's wannabe-mercenary pants had more give than the real deal would have and came off without a fight. Lifting himself up and grabbing the pants at Caleb's hips, a couple of good yanks had them down past that beautiful backside and freed up Caleb's straining dick. Torn between wanting to stop to admire it and getting the pants all the way off, Sarhaan paused. No -- better to have them all the way off and more options available.

"Is that what you're really going to do?"

Sarhaan looked up from his task of getting the pants over Caleb's idea of work boots. They looked expensive or he'd have already been half-way to cutting them off. "Going to what?"

"Fuck me?"

Brought up short by the whispered question, Sarhaan paused to stare at the mix of emotions he read in Caleb's eyes. Heat and desire mingled with uncertainty and... fear?... he ran through the past few minutes in his head. Had he misread Caleb? Deciding he hadn't, he asked, nonetheless. "That's the plan, pretty much. That okay with you?"

## Chapter Seven

“Umm ... yeah? I mean, yes. Please.”

Oh, dear God. It was so unbelievable. He was being stripped bare and was about to be ravished by this... this incredible warrior of a man. Of course, Cal had had his fantasies. Who didn't? But, *oh, yes*. One hand wrapped around his dick and Caleb was in love. He'd never felt anything that compared, not even remotely. Quick gropes in embassy cloak rooms and a couple of blowjobs so furtive and hasty they'd been over almost before they'd begun. But Cal blinked -- twice -- and pinched himself and it was still happening. Thank God he was already lying down or he'd have fallen down; he was paralyzed with happiness, and no way would his legs have held him up.

Squeezing his cock, Sarhaan lowered his head and sucked the tip that extended out past his fist into his mouth, and Cal groaned. So beautiful, his head couldn't take it all in. Hot and wet, suction and tongue flicking at the hole, Sarhaan made a slurping noise, and Cal didn't know if he could stand it. Holding him tight, to the point of pain almost, Sarhaan elbowed Cal's legs open wider, held his dick up and sucked both of Cal's balls into his mouth.

“Oh, wow. Oh, jeez. Fuck, yeah. Oh, my—” Cal dug his fingers into the sheets and hung on, sure that the top of his head was about to come off. Sarhaan's tongue was doing wicked, wicked things to his balls while his hand was constricting around Caleb's cock. “Yeah, yeah, oh, please... that's... jeez that's good. Please, please, *oh please...*” He didn't even know what he was begging for Sarhaan to do. “Anything. I'll do anything, just... please.”

A rumbling, buzzing really, vibrating around his balls was the last thing he felt before that hot heaven was taken away, and he was left bereft and cold. “No, don't!” was torn from his throat before the moist heat was sucking his cock down, down to the root and he was moaning again. Sarhaan began sucking in earnest now, and those beautiful cheeks hollowed out with the effort each time his mouth slid off, then back on again, the soft hair of his goatee tickling Cal's belly whenever it touched briefly. “Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.” Cal realized he was almost chanting the words, nearly in time with the motion of Sarhaan's mouth.

He couldn't have stopped himself from coming -- no way. Cal gave himself up to the pleasure, heart and soul. As his body gathered itself -- the orgasm roaring down on him -- a finger flirted with his back hole and Cal came harder than he'd ever come in his life.

Wanting just to float, to take his time coming down from the ceiling, Cal luxuriated in the sensual delight of Sarhaan's mouth still gently drawing on him. A few laps of the tongue and a squeeze of his balls and Sarhaan sat up. “I wouldn't have pegged you for a shouter.”

Cal settled deeper into the sheets of Sarhaan's bed and did his best to look contrite. "Umm... I'm sorry?" He tried summoning every bit of diplomatic gravity he'd ever possessed and still couldn't suppress the goofy smile he was sure curved his mouth. "I'll do better next time, I promise."

There was a tightness to Sarhaan's answering smile. "You think so? What say we test that little theory?" Sarhaan pulled the sweater he wore up over his head, the v-necked opening snagging on the thick bundle of his braided hair. Freeing it, Sarhaan tossed it aside and Cal had only moments to savor the broad, bare chest before Sarhaan moved on to his pants. The loose-fitting pants were stripped off, the bed compressing under Sarhaan's weight as he sat briefly to remove his boots before shoving the whole tangled mess off onto the floor.

So busy watching the miracle unfolding before him, the sense of Sarhaan's words only now began to sink in. *Oh, my.* Straightening, the curve of Sarhaan's fully erect cock drew Cal's gaze. Sitting up, Cal eyed it, fascinated. It looked... formidable. Dark brown, flushed and rigid, it quivered as Sarhaan brought one hand up to stroke it briefly. Reaching into a drawer beneath the bedside table, Sarhaan pulled out an unmarked tube, squeezed some of the contents into the same hand he'd used to stroke himself and began slicking himself up.

"Ready?"

Speechless with excitement, Cal could only nod, unable to form words. Anticipation hummed in his veins, his entire body quivering, the excitement almost more than he could bear. Sarhaan reached under Cal's knees and yanked him forward until Cal's bare ass reached the edge of the bed and his legs dangled over the side. *This was really happening. It wasn't just another dream he was going to wake up from, aching and unsatisfied. This was the real deal.*

Cal gasped when Sarhaan squeezed more of the tube's silky slick gel into his hand and applied it Cal's back hole. Feigning nonchalance, Cal gazed back into Sarhaan's eyes, concentrating on breathing in and out and committing everything, down to the smallest detail, to memory. If this was his one shot, he wanted lots of memories to savor later.

Sarhaan slipped one well-lubricated finger into Cal's body, and Cal tried to relax and not squirm. One hand on Cal's knee, Sarhaan kept his gaze glued to Cal's face, stroking in as far as he could reach; Cal shuddered when that knowing touch rubbed across his prostate. Eyes closing involuntarily at Sarhaan's ecstatic touch, Cal moaned at the feelings flowing through his body. The touch retreated, only to return with added fullness. Fingers gliding smoothly in and out, Sarhaan found nerve endings Cal didn't know he had. "Oh, God, yes. God, that's —"

Suddenly empty, Cal forced his eyes open to see Sarhaan take himself in hand and guide his cock to the entrance to Cal's body. Leaning back on his elbows, Cal was torn between

the need to close his eyes to better concentrate on the sensations flooding him and wanting to watch every sensuous move of Sarhaan's body.

As Sarhaan began to enter him, though, conscious thought fled and he could only stare into Sarhaan's eyes, gasping at the alien feeling of fullness. The pressure continued to build as Sarhaan pressed forward. Pushing Cal's legs back, Sarhaan closed the distance between their bodies, shoving the rest of the way in until all Cal could do was pant and shudder. Until Sarhaan began to move.

No way was Cal prepared when, reaching under Cal's legs, Sarhaan grabbed Cal's hips and pulled himself back. He was caught completely off guard by the delicious pleasure of Sarhaan's cock sliding almost out of him. The fat head of his dick caught, though, and Sarhaan pressed back in, his own eyes falling shut, ecstasy stretching taut those elegant cheekbones.

Cal moaned and sighed as Sarhaan stuffed him full again, only to trigger another wave of delight in Cal as he retreated. The cycle repeated itself as Sarhaan pushed in with a devilish twist of his hips, holding Cal firmly by the hips as he pulled out, not quite so slowly this time.

"So good. You feel so good. God." As his rhythm accelerated, Sarhaan began crooning to him, a non-stop commentary on everything he was feeling.

Touching this man, being fucked by him was, without a doubt, the most erotic thing by far that had ever happened to Cal. Gaining confidence under Sarhaan's mix of profanity and praise, Cal's moans gradually became words. "Yeah. Oh, God, that's good. Give it to me, all of it. I want it, you *know* I want it."

Their words blended in the air, Sarhaan telling Cal how beautiful, how fucking beautiful he was, how good it felt to be inside him, Cal groaning his appreciation, his strangled cries of pleasure urging Sarhaan to fuck him, fuck him harder, faster.

Cal's hand found his dick, and he jacked himself in time to Sarhaan's thrusts, splattering his chest much too soon with his orgasm, Sarhaan following him less a half-dozen strokes later, his face a perfect mirror of extreme pleasure.

Leaning forward, Sarhaan took his mouth in a kiss both harsh and sweet that somehow dared Cal not to kiss him back. As if that was possible. Cal was filled with gratitude and tenderness and could only wrap his arms around Sarhaan's neck, kissing him back with everything he felt inside swirling and tumbling in a delirious haze of happiness.

\*\*\*

Sarhaan woke to the irritating buzz of his comm link. Pressing the connecting button of his wrist unit, he answered without opening his eyes. "Yes?"

“You’re late. You were supposed to relieve me at oh-eight-hundred.”

“Jake.”

“Sarhaan.”

The comm line was so crystal clear he could hear the exaggerated patience in Naslund’s voice. Sarhaan scrubbed a hand over his eyes, as consciousness came back to him and he realized what he’d done. He’d fucked Caleb, that’s what he’d done. Suspected spy or not, Sarhaan couldn’t find it in himself to regret it. Asleep against his side, nose pressed to Sarhaan’s neck, one arm wrapped around Sarhaan’s waist and roused by the overheard conversation, Caleb was beginning to stir. Shifting Caleb closer with his free arm, Sarhaan made a command decision, not stopping to examine his motives.

“Jake, do me a favor: I need you to call Kai. I was up most of the night helping D’abu with the engines, and I’m beat. Tell Kai I’ll take the next watch and that I need him to take this one.”

Caleb murmured something unintelligible and licked Sarhaan’s neck, the hand at his waist wandering down to cradle his dick.

“What if he says no?”

“Tell him—” Moving from Sarhaan’s cock to his balls, Caleb took them both in one hand, running his thumb back and forth, caressing them. Sarhaan spread his legs. “Tell him I’ll owe him one. I’ll take care of him when we get to Doradus.”

“Hooo-kaaay. But you know how much he loves the early shift.” Jake’s voice was thick with irony, Kai Xuwicha’s antipathy toward mornings being legendary.

“Tell him I’ll make it worth his while. I’ll catch up with you later. I’ve got to get some sleep.”

“And what about our little friend, the spy?”

The hand that had been cradling his balls froze, and Caleb’s head pulled away. Sarhaan could feel Caleb’s gaze on him even through the room’s darkness.

“I’m keeping an eye on him. I’ll talk to you later.” Sarhaan pressed the link button, effectively ending the conversation.

“So they really think I’m a spy?” Caleb spoke softly, barely more than a whisper, and Sarhaan thought that quiet note underlying it might be hurt feelings.

“Put your hand back on my dick, and I’ll tell you.”

A little chuff of laughter accompanied Caleb's hand closing around Sarhaan's cock and, as Caleb's hand began to work him, Sarhaan cooperated by lifting his hips and fucking that smooth, uncalloused hand.

"I'm waiting." Caleb nibbled on Sarhaan's jaw, alternating sucking with bites just hard enough to pinch.

"I'm not." Sarhaan fucked harder into Caleb's hand.

"Hey, no fair." Both hand and mouth came to a halt. "I came through with the quid pro quo. You need to keep your side of the bargain."

"Or," Sarhaan swept Caleb's hand away and continued the motion, rolling on top of Caleb. "We could just do *this*," his last words accompanied by the slow thrust of his hips, seeking Caleb's dick with his own and finding it.

Caleb's legs drew up as naturally as if he'd done it a hundred times. Not with Sarhaan, he hadn't, and Sarhaan refused to think about when else Caleb might have practiced that particular move. Regardless, when Caleb's hips shifted, seeking more direct contact Sarhaan pressed harder, giving it. Sarhaan settled in, seeking and finding the friction he was looking for.

"Can we... do it again?"

"Thought you'd never ask." If Caleb kept reading his mind like that, Sarhaan would have to work on keeping him around. Here he'd been about to lead into it and Caleb had suggested it first. So if the subject came up later, he could always claim he'd just been going along to appease Caleb, good guy that he was.

"That was... amazing. I've never felt anything like that before."

A statement that sweet and artless called for a kiss, and Sarhaan, still rocking his hips, rubbing their dicks together, leaned down and took one. Caleb's kissing skills were growing by the hour, and this time he met Sarhaan's mouth with the perfect amount of pressure, tasting hungrily as he offered his tongue and sucked on Sarhaan's.

"Pleasure's all mine." Smiling as he reached for the lube, conveniently left on the bedside table. Sarhaan took another quick kiss before squeezing some onto his fingers for Caleb and then onto himself.

Caleb's laugh at that could only be called sultry, but it turned to a throaty moan when Sarhaan applied the gel. "Hurry. I can't wait. I want you inside me."

What had been merely quick, efficient strokes of lube on his dick turned urgent. Eyes sleepy and sexy, a pouty, well-kissed mouth had been incentive enough. But once Sarhaan heard Caleb's whispered plea, he couldn't ready himself fast enough.

Already pulling his legs, holding them back for Sarhaan, Caleb was breathtaking. An intoxicating blend of inexperience and natural sensuality, Caleb was every soldier's most cherished fantasy: beautiful, clean, and hungry for *him*. Sarhaan was sure he must have wanted someone else this much somewhere, some time, in his life, but right now he couldn't recall it. Caleb was everything he wanted.

"Hurry."

Sarhaan aligned his body with Caleb's, slipping in his haste to enter that tight, beckoning hole. Propping himself up with one hand, he used the other to hold himself in place and breached the opening, Caleb's warm flesh parting to welcome his cock. *God! So indescribably good. So hot and tight.* Afraid he'd exaggerated the intensity in his mind, Sarhaan realized that, if anything, he'd underestimated. Pleasure flooded his veins, his body, his mind, until he couldn't process any more, circuits overloaded.

All he could do was thrust, trying to insinuate every bit of his body that he could into Caleb. He had to fuck, get as far inside as humanly possible. Fuck and fuck until he imprinted himself, his body -- his very DNA if he could -- on Caleb.

Caleb.

His beautiful eyes squeezed shut, Sarhaan couldn't read their expression. Couldn't tell if it was pleasure or pain that twisted those fine features. It was pleasure, it had to be. Pleasure this intense couldn't be one-sided. It damn near killed him, but he forced himself to slow down.

"Caleb, do you want it?"

Soft brown eyes opened as Caleb nodded and panted. He smiled, then closed his eyes and groaned as Sarhaan's hips connected with the backs of Caleb's thighs and ass.

"Say it. I want to hear it. Tell me you want it."

Looking as though it took a gargantuan effort, Caleb smiled and grunted. "'S' good. Incredible. *God.*" The last word ended on a wail as Sarhaan reached down between them and squeezed Caleb's cock, pumped it in time with his thrusts until the sight of Caleb shooting his come over his chest and the spasms of his ass triggered Sarhaan's own orgasm.

He kept his hand on Caleb, so entranced by the bucking and arching of that slim body that Sarhaan continued to squeeze, prolonging Caleb's helpless reactions.

When Sarhaan's relaxed cock eventually slid from Caleb's body, Sarhaan rolled to one side, gazing up at the ceiling through the room's dim light, but leaving a hand on Caleb's

belly. He needed the physical touch, the connection, and rubbed his hand in slow arcs, enjoying the feel of Caleb's smooth skin.

Thoughts flashed in random patterns through his head, but all with a common theme that eventually coaxed a laugh from Sarhaan. "It's going to be tough getting anything done with you around."

Catching movement with his peripheral vision, Sarhaan rolled his head to look at Caleb and found Caleb already looking back.

"I'm sorry. Do you need me to go sleep somewhere else?" The worry in his eyes seemed genuine, and God bless Caleb's pristine heart if he could seriously consider the prospect.

"Not an option right now. Even if I didn't want you here, it's still the only way to keep you safe."

"But you need your sleep. I heard you telling Jake. I should go sleep on the couch."

The lean muscles under Sarhaan's hand grew taut as Caleb gathered himself to rise, and only the additional pressure supplied by Sarhaan kept him in place. "No need for that. You're fine right where you are. That is, if you're okay with it."

Sarhaan watched the reactions flicker across Caleb's expressive face. He definitely needed to warn the kid never to play cards for money, because every thought in his beautiful head was instantly telegraphed by those classical features.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean ... I like being here." A smile dawned slowly across Caleb's features as his gaze slipped sideways across Sarhaan's naked body. "I'm just fine with where I am. If you are -- if you're sure it's all right."

The pause before the last two words told Sarhaan volumes. Of course -- it should have occurred to him earlier. Caleb had grown up entirely under the New Republic and its New Order. Without the real world experience supplied by travel and a stint in the military to balance it, Caleb wouldn't have a clue.

"Caleb, you're off-world now. The repressive little group of politicians running things back on our corner of the world can't touch you. No one's going to lock you up or eliminate you because you'd rather fuck men than women."

\*\*\*

Opening his mouth with a reflexive denial, Caleb paused when he realized how stupid it would sound. Not to mention unnecessary.

Still, it was difficult.



Sarhaan held his gaze. No easy smile, no reassuring platitudes like Cal was used to. Just straight-out, point blank, honesty. What kind of sad commentary on his own character was it that he had to stop and consider how to respond to it? Drawing a deeper than usual breath, Cal disregarded all his training and met the challenge head-on.

“I know you said that. Before. That no one here cared. It’s... it’s hard to really take in, though. I’ve spent my whole life hiding it. Who I really am.”

“Of course you would. It only makes sense. Anything but their little vision -- one man and one woman, for the purposes of procreation -- is illegal. Of course you’re going to hide it.”

If they were going to talk Cal at least wanted to enjoy the view, so he propped his head with his fist and didn’t even try to restrain his gaze from wandering, drinking in the sight of a naked Sarhaan. “How do you handle it?”

“You learn pretty fast that things are different in the military.” Lying on his back, that amazing chest and abdomen casually displayed, Sarhaan folded his arms behind his head and gazed at the ceiling. His breathing was back to normal, slow and even, and Cal was fascinated by the way the room’s recessed lighting cast Sarhaan’s muscular body into relief. “Not that they hand out bottles of lube with the rest of the kit in basic exactly, but by the time I made it through training and to my unit, I knew how to get my business taken care of semi-regularly.”

“Really? How?” Cal couldn’t begin to imagine.

Sarhaan’s smile took on a nostalgic curve, or at least that’s how it looked, and Cal was instantly jealous. Some very lucky someone had been doing for Sarhaan what Cal had just done. Why couldn’t his path have led him to cross Sarhaan’s sooner? It should have been *him* doing those things all along.

“It’s easier away from home. There’s usually a friendly local or two looking for a diversion that won’t be around in six months’ time to cause trouble. Sometimes a discreet professional. Those are usually in military towns, though. Once in a blue moon there’s even a sympathetic teammate -- not that they’ll ever admit to it later, for a variety of reasons.”

Realizing his mouth was hanging open in an “O” of amazement, Cal spoke without thinking. “Did you -- Never mind. I didn’t ask that.”

“They used to have a saying in the old days, ‘Don’t ask -- don’t tell.’ But that was back on Earth before the second revolution. North American, New Republican Earth. Out here none of that means a damn thing. Hell, here on the ship, half the crew is gay. The other half really doesn’t care who or what I fuck, as long as I do my job competently.”

“Half? You’re kidding.” But Sarhaan’s face told the story. “You’re not kidding. Wow. I just never realized. I mean, I read reports and some of them are fairly detailed. Nothing overt, but sometimes it’s impossible not to draw conclusions, you know? But... wow. That’s amazing to hear. I never dreamed...”

“Yeah, I bet.” Sarhaan rolled his head over to lock gazes with Cal. “Listen, I wasn’t kidding when I told Naslund I needed some sleep. I could do without if I had to, but since I don’t, I wouldn’t mind catching a couple more hours. That work for you?”

Guilt stabbing him, Cal reached out a hand. “Oh, absolutely. Whatever you need. Would you like me to go sleep on the couch? I don’t want to bother you.”

Sarhaan grabbed his hand and used it to haul Cal up until he lay sprawled across Sarhaan’s chest and they were nose to nose. “Don’t even think about it. I’ll take your kind of bother eighty hours a cycle and twice on flip day.” A thorough kiss with plenty of silky tongue ended the argument. “Need to use the head first?”

“Um, head?” It really wasn’t fair the way a single kiss could drive all coherent thought from Cal’s mind, while Sarhaan hardly seemed affected.

“That’s the toilet, creampuff.”

“Oh, right. Right, I knew that. Sure. Be right back.”

Expecting cold, Cal was pleasantly surprised by the warmth of the synthetic flooring beneath his bare feet. The small, rounded nubs protruding from it would make it easy to keep his footing if the ship listed sharply, and Cal nodded admiringly at the intelligent design. Pin pricks of awareness tingled along his spine and, sure enough, when Cal glanced back he found Sarhaan’s gaze following him. Smiling to himself at the admiration he read there, Cal kept walking.

## Chapter Eight

“It’s not going to do us any good to get the power coupling replaced unless we do something about the transponder. How many Republican cruisers do you think they’ve got roaming around the asteroid belt? Enough that they won’t notice one with no detectable code?”

The little guy, Naslund, was giving Sarhaan a mountain of grief. Cal had been watching from the sidelines for close to forty minutes while D’abu, Vilnius and Naslund -- clearly the ship’s resident gearheads -- had gone around and around with Sarhaan and Xuwicha about the best way to evade detection. No one had taken the time to explain the command structure to Cal yet, but he’d deduced that Sarhaan and Xuwicha shared leadership duties, with Sarhaan at the top and the scary-looking Pan-Asian serving as executive officer. Nothing seemed carved in stone, though, and power shifted between the soldiers as they discussed different plans.

“You think it’s better to have an oh-one code in there, like we’re standard military transit?” Not exactly antagonistic, Sarhaan didn’t look ready to concede anyone’s theory without a thorough examination.

Arms folded across his chest, Naslund leaned back against what Cal had decided was the navigation console, his chin lifting a fraction with every exchange. “I think it’s worth a shot, yeah. They don’t have the time or force levels to chase down every anomalous signal that comes their way. Odds are the guy manning the readout will decide his computer’s crap and disregard it completely.”

Cal’s stomach rumbled, and he wished for the umpteenth time that the command deck had a coffee machine. Or a beverage dispenser of any kind -- he really wasn’t fussy. He’d trailed in Sarhaan’s wake for most of the previous six hours, and they’d been on their way to dinner; stopping by the bridge was supposed to be no more than a five minute delay. His internal clock was still messed up after the blow to his head -- Cal still hadn’t remembered any more about the torture -- and the weird sleep schedule hadn’t helped, but it had passed five minutes a while ago. Cal passed the time by trying to learn what he could about the ship’s bridge strictly from observation, but he was no engineer and it didn’t take long to decide he should stick to what he knew.

He let his gaze wander from Sarhaan’s broad shoulders, down to the trim waist he knew lay beneath another of the lightweight sweaters Sarhaan favored. Filling in with his mind’s eye the curve of Sarhaan’s back where it gave way to the taut muscles of his ass, Cal stifled a sigh. At this moment he’d like nothing more than to grab a quick dinner with Sarhaan in the group dining hall, then see how quickly he could get them both back to their sleeping quarters.

None of that looked very likely at this juncture, though. Kai Xuwicha narrowed his eyes a bit and gave Naslund a look Cal didn't envy. "Unless we can do something about the protocol sequence the transponder sends, we're still screwed. Got a fix for that, Jake?"

"No, I don't. But I'm open to suggestions. If you've got a plan, Xuwicha, let's hear it."

This didn't look good. Tempers were fraying, and Cal could almost smell the testosterone as the decibel level rose. He was never going to get his dinner at this rate.

"Would it help if you had someone to hack in and change the codes for the transponder and the ship's I.D.?" Well. Good to know he could still stop a conversation in its tracks without trying.

Nope, he definitely hadn't lost his touch. As one the soldiers all turned to look at Cal, with everything from slack-jawed astonishment to outright suspicion. Hunching his shoulders, Cal immediately backed down. "Sorry. I'm probably just stating the obvious. You've already tried that, I'm sure. I'll be shutting up now."

Xuwicha took a step toward the chair where Cal had sat unnoticed for the past three-quarters of an hour, and Cal suddenly knew how Naslund had felt when those cold dark eyes narrowed on him. "Know something about hacking transponders do you, Caleb?"

They were all watching him and Cal caught the inferences when, one by one, they looked at him, then at Sarhaan, and back to Cal again.

Stammering like a schoolgirl, Cal tried to explain. "I, um... I'm good with computers. I've fooled around a little bit. You know, raising a grade for a friend. Fixing a parking ticket. The usual stuff."

"Fixing a grade with a university system and hacking a military transport's mainframe aren't exactly co-equal. No disrespect intended, but... what makes you think you've got the chops?"

Looking to Sarhaan for support and reading nothing beyond the cool-eyed assessment of the ranking officer in charge, Cal stiffened his spine and did his best to project self-confidence, even as he quaked inside.

"Because I did it when I borrowed my uncle's shuttle to get here."

\*\*\*

"That would have been good information to know going in."

Sarhaan walked and concentrated on relaxing his hands, one finger at a time. Anger and frustration bubbled beneath the surface of his skin so that every time he forgot and looked at Caleb, his hands clenched up into fists to keep himself from-- From what? From hitting

him, of course. From grabbing him and shaking him and why did just the thought of having his hands on Caleb make him hard?

*Dammit!*

“I’m sorry. I guess I should have mentioned it. I’m not quite sure when I would have, though. Maybe when I was jacking off in your shower.”

There was a mulish set to Caleb’s mouth and the sarcastic tone of his voice surprised Sarhaan, even as the memory the actual words conjured ratcheted up his frustration that much more. Grinding his teeth, Sarhaan kept walking. The chow hall wasn’t far now and with it would come the buffering presence of teammates.

“Or maybe some time when you weren’t fucking me. When would have been optimal, do you think? Before? After? Or maybe in between the first and second times?”

His temper didn’t need much of a push, and whatever bug Caleb had up his butt had him running his mouth in a way Sarhaan would have sworn he wasn’t capable of.

“Is there anything else I should have told you? You’ll probably want to know I didn’t vote in the last two elections. Shocking, I know. And I cheated on my senior year biology exam.” Caleb cocked an eyebrow. “It’s true. My friend Daphne gave me most of the answers. I got my first hand job when I was fourteen from one of my father’s staffers. Do I need to specify male staffer or should that be obvious? Let me think... what else am I forgetting? There must be more.”

“Fourteen? When was that, six months ago?” The sneer in his own voice came as a surprise to Sarhaan. Anything to distract himself, though, from the thought of some old pervert putting his hands on an innocent like Caleb must have been. Sarhaan would have liked to be there to see Caleb discovering his sexuality. Be the one who explored it with him. Not to mention squeezing the staffer’s balls until they resembled *nyang’au shetri*.

“Try more like twelve years. I’m twenty-six.”

“Liar.”

Why was he being such an asshole? Why did it matter? Why did any of it matter? Angry and stirred up, irritated beyond reason, fucking was the only thing that sounded good to him right now. Fucking Caleb senseless sounded just about perfect, in fact, and he was seconds from changing course and steering them both toward his suite. Shutting up that pretty mouth by stuffing his cock in it was becoming more appealing by the second. Or sinking it into that tight, perfect ass again and again until neither one had the strength left to move.

Thank God that they were close to the dining hall. It was only the thought of Kai and the rest coming in search of them if they didn't arrive by the agreed upon time that tipped the balance in favor of showing up.

“Why don't you scan my chip if you don't believe me? Even I haven't been able to hack that information. Yet.”

Having stopped and now standing stock-still in the corridor, all seventy-five kilos -- if that much -- of him, Caleb looked ready to fight. Fists braced on his hips, left shoulder leading as if offering it to be examined for his identi-chip, Caleb should have appeared comically overmatched. He didn't, though. The look in Caleb's eyes was dead serious. It said he meant every word, and Sarhaan narrowed his eyes as he absorbed this new bit of information.

He wanted to kiss Caleb.

He wished he'd never laid eyes on the man.

The clank of heavy boots on metal deck grating reached Sarhaan's ears seconds before Kai, Naslund and D'abu rounded the corner.

“Come on, you two lovebirds. Let's go grab some chow and figure this thing out.” D'abu slapped Sarhaan on the shoulder as he passed, eager as always to meet his dinner.

Sarhaan never took his gaze off Caleb. “You go on -- we'll be right there.”

Caleb stared back. “I don't need you to speak for me, thank you. As it happens, I'm ready to eat.”

As Caleb tried to move around him, Sarhaan reached for Caleb's arm and spun him around. “Don't be such a femme. We're not done here.”

Caleb set his jaw and stared back stonily.

What kind of sick fuck did it make Sarhaan that Caleb's new attitude only made him want Caleb more? “What else don't I know about you that's going to make a difference?”

Jerking his arm free, Caleb folded his arms across his chest and looked Sarhaan up and down. “To you? Not a damn thing.” Then Caleb walked past him into the dining hall.

\*\*\*

The discussion over yet another meal of MRP's had ranged from Jake's assertion that they were too far away in a lightly patrolled quadrant to have to worry about it, to Kai's and Sarhaan's belief that doing something about the transponder had to be top priority.

Sarhaan had watched and listened, not just to what was said, but what wasn't. He'd seen the looks -- so quick and furtive as to be almost undetectable -- and known what they'd meant. Realizing no one would openly question Caleb's right to be in the conversation while Sarhaan was present, it had fallen to him to question Caleb's reliability as a comrade. So, as though he hadn't heard bits and pieces of Caleb's story already, Sarhaan had questioned him.

"Why should we trust you with our lives? For all we know you're a plant, sent by the government to make it easier to get this ship, and incidentally us, back."

He'd watched Caleb grow frostier with his every question, but it had to be done. This operation had started out suicidally dangerous and it had only escalated from there. Sarhaan couldn't take the chance of every man on the ship's life that his gut was right. They needed to hear and decide for themselves.

Caleb had barely glanced in Sarhaan's direction when answering his questions, as though he hadn't sighed and shivered in Sarhaan's arms the night before. As though he hadn't begged Sarhaan to hurry, because he couldn't wait to have Sarhaan inside his body again. As though... It had been the pinch of his dick swelling against the placket of his pants that reminded Sarhaan he needed to keep his head -- his big head -- in the game and helped yank his thinking back to the present.

"Because I think that the same people who are killing prostitutes and telling everyone you and your team are the stone cold killers who did it are the ones who killed my friend Daphne. I think I know who's behind it, and I want to prove it. I want people to know that she wasn't just mugged. She was murdered because she knew something someone powerful didn't want anyone else to find out. I think it's all the same person, or group of people that tried to kill all of you, and I was hoping you'd be like me and want to do something about it."

Retelling the story of his friend's murder brought the look back to Caleb's eyes -- the same look Sarhaan had seen the night Caleb had gotten drunk on one beer. Just like he hadn't been able to put his arms around Caleb and tell him everything would be all right then, Sarhaan do it couldn't now either.

That didn't stop him from wanting to, though.

And what kind of thinking-with-his-dick idiot did that make him?

"That's a good enough story, but who's to say it really happened? Your friend, I mean. What do we have beyond your word?"

A raised eyebrow accompanied the contemptuous look Caleb shot Sarhaan this time. At that point, Caleb pulled a small hand-held computer from his pocket -- *how they hell had they missed that in the search of his shuttle?* -- and pulled up some grisly pictures of what remained of a young woman's body on a morgue slab.

“She’s definitely dead.” Using a technique he’d learned from the creeps in Intel, Sarhaan had leaned in, crowding Caleb’s personal space. “But it’s still just a story. You see where I’m going with this? There’s no way to prove that it really happened the way you say it did. You’re asking us to believe that trusting you won’t buy us a very ugly end in a military prison.” He’d backed off then. Leaned against the table behind him, propping himself up on his elbows. “What else have you got?”

The momentary look Caleb had given him reminded Sarhaan of one he’d seen countless times during the Alaskan campaign. Technologically overmatched, the Inuits had been powerless in the face of the Republican Army’s offensive. It had been that lack of any viable response that had fueled the impotent fury Sarhaan had read in their faces time and again.

As quickly as the image flashed through Sarhaan’s head, the look was gone, though. Maybe Caleb’s consulate training kicked in because in the blink of an eye the frustration was gone, replaced by the cool-eyed look Sarhaan had seen outside the chow hall.

“How about a transponder code that makes the ship invisible to all known air traffic control systems? Would that interest you and the crew?”



## Chapter Nine

“That’s pretty slick. Where’d you learn to do that?”

Finished inserting the last of the fake code he needed to hack the transponder, Cal used a technique he’d honed through years of dogged experience at his mother’s charity balls and again later at the consulate, responding with a bland smile. “Here and there. I picked up a lot on my own, starting pretty young. I added to it whenever I could at work.”

Smile. Be vague. Stick to the truth -- just don’t give them much of it to work with.

“Work, huh? Diplomatic corps, right?” Kai Xuwicha leaned back in his chair and Cal could swear he was letting his short, definitely non-Army-issue shirt ride up deliberately, showing Cal a good eight to ten centimeters of chiseled belly. Tall and lean, Xuwicha lazily scratched an itch on the exposed skin, drawing Cal’s gaze.

“Consular Services.” Distracted by the sight of so much skin, Cal made the correction without thinking, then kicked himself mentally. The slip was a small one, unless Xuwicha understood the difference, and the ship’s second in command didn’t appear to be anyone’s fool. “Same thing though, pretty much.”

“Good deal. I’m thinking it might be good to have you around when we get to Doradus. We’ll be using the facilities there to take care of some things we don’t have the tools for here. Fixes for the ship.” Straightening, the other man looked around -- at what, though, Cal couldn’t tell.

“Sure. I’d be happy to help.” Cal wasn’t naïve enough to think he’d won over the XO; they would keep a close watch on him for a long time. What puzzled Cal, though, was the reason behind the flirtation, because there was no doubt in his mind that was what it was. Reading non-verbal cues was what he did best. Even if he hadn’t been trained in diplomacy, being gay made it a basic tool of survival and Xuwicha’s behavior was interesting on a number of levels. “How long before we get there?”

“Probably another two-hundred, two-hundred and fifty hours. Depends on how close Nas was with his calculations. He’s a pilot, not a navigator. We could end up in New Jersey for all I know.”

Cal laughed and realized it was the first time he’d seen Xuwicha smile. It changed his whole face and caused Cal to lower his estimation of the other man’s age by years. Dark hair, dark eyes -- just like Sarhaan’s. So why didn’t they raise his pulse even a little?

“If you like I could take a look at what he’s doing. I know a little about it. I—“

“-- you’re pretty good? Fooled around a little with it?” Kai was really laughing now. At him, not with him. “Made it all the way from Earth to out past Mars, didja?”

Why it even bothered him, Cal didn't know. He was used to being underestimated and overlooked so it wasn't like it was anything new. Maybe because, for the first time in his life, he was actually trying. "Okay. Just thought I'd offer."

Cal looked down at his lap and wondered what Sarhaan was doing. Dropped off to work with Xuwicha after a night spent sleeping on Sarhaan's couch again, Cal had gotten precious little sleep. The silence between them had made Cal want to crawl out of his skin. To lie there in the dark, listening to Sarhaan breathe, drinking in his scent even from across the room, Cal hadn't been able to keep from touching himself. Maybe someday he'd be able see Sarhaan, hear him, smell him, and not think of sex. But not now.

Moving as quietly as he knew how, Cal had slipped his hands beneath his shorts. Taking his balls in one hand, his dick in the other, he'd closed his eyes and used his memory. Imagined it was Sarhaan touching him. Afraid of letting on what he was doing, Cal had kept his movements to a minimum, mostly just squeezing. Eventually taking his cock in both hands, he'd used his thumb to rub on the sensitive head until he'd thought he would come. He hadn't, though. Something kept him from release and he'd lain there, aching and horny, until he'd finally fallen asleep in the early hours of the morning.

"I'll, uh... I'll let them know you're available for consultation." Slapping his hand down on the console beside them, Xuwicha smiled as he rose to his feet. "Listen, I don't know about you, but if I don't get some physical activity I'm gonna go stir crazy. Wanna hit the gym with me and run a few miles?"

Looking up to meet Xuwicha's gaze, Cal weighed the offer. Maybe exercise would help. "I'm really more of a swimmer than a runner."

"Sorry, slick, but not enough water for swimming. You're in the Presidential Suite so you wouldn't know, but most of the water on board is reserved either for drinking or for life support. I *can* offer you a couple of crappy military-issue treadmills, though."

"Sure. Why not?"

\*\*\*

"Here ya go, Ess. Safe and sound and only a little the worse for wear."

Grinning as he gave a two-fingered salute that owed more to the Boy Scouts than the military, Xuwicha had delivered Cal back to Sarhaan's rooms. It was humiliating, being handed off like child who couldn't be trusted to walk up two levels and down a corridor. It took everything Cal had not to flop down on the couch and glare at Sarhaan like a teenager who'd been grounded.

"How'd it go?"

Sarhaan sat at his desk, wearing nothing but a pair of loose shorts, studying a computer screen. Tossing aside the pen he'd been using to make notes on an old fashioned writing tablet, his dark eyes scanned the two of them, their sweaty hair and disheveled clothes impossible to miss.

"Pretty well. Slick, here, certainly seems to know his way around a Republican military server. In and out faster than a sailor on shore leave, I tell you what. Reprogrammed the transponder and we're good to go. We think. Just as long as..."

Preoccupied with covertly studying the way Sarhaan's muscles moved beneath miles of smooth, coffee-colored skin, Cal had only been half-listening. Xuwicha's had been report sounding generally positive until his voice trailed off. By the time Cal's ever-so-casual glance caught up with Sarhaan, he was just in time to catch a glimpse of the raised eyebrow look disappearing from Sarhaan's face.

"Yes?" The look now was no more than polite interest.

"As long as the code does what your friend here says it does."

"Couldn't you tell? I thought that's what you were supposed to be doing there -- watching whatever he did."

One lean hand pushed Xuwicha's poker-straight hair off his sweaty face, accentuating the hard lines of its narrow architecture. "I watched. But unless I can duplicate it -- which I can't -- it all comes down to trust at some point. I guess we'll find out when we waltz into Doradus, won't we?"

Sarhaan picked up the pen he'd tossed aside and began to roll it across his knuckles, from finger to finger. Caleb knew what those long, blunt fingers could do and was swept up in a memory, recalling how deftly they'd manipulated his flesh when Sarhaan looked up and caught him staring. He didn't look away, but held Cal's gaze. "You mean, if we're greeted by a Republican welcoming committee we'll know we've been sold out?"

Unable to break Sarhaan's gaze, Cal heard Xuwicha let out a long breath. With his peripheral vision he picked up what he thought were hands being shoved into pockets, but Xuwicha took his time replying. "Something like that."

Staring back at Cal for a long time, Sarhaan scratched his jaw, where the thin line of his neatly trimmed beard disappeared, hidden by the dozen or so braids that had fallen forward over his bare shoulder.

"I appreciate it, Kai. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I'll go write my report now?" At Sarhaan's brief nod, Xuwicha was gone, and he and Cal were alone again.

Sarhaan leaned back in the big chair, steepling his fingers over his mouth, and stared at Cal for long minutes. Cal stared back as long as he could, eventually breaking under the accumulated weight of Sarhaan's gaze and bent to remove his boots. He couldn't bring himself to look back at that considering expression any more, wondering what the final judgment would be. "Do you mind if I use your shower?"

*"Matokeo ya Utafutaji kwa geto, chako ni chako geto."*

"I told you before, I don't speak Kush. If that means, '*Tu es ici comme chez toi,*' then '*ak'chhata.*'" As if he didn't know he was being tested. "I hope you don't mind."

Boots off, Cal stripped off his shirt, laying it as neatly as possible across the arm of the couch before reaching for the snap of his pants. Without looking, Cal felt Sarhaan's gaze flicking over his naked chest like a thousand tiny points of flame, and a slow flush rolled up Cal's neck, heating his cheeks as he undressed. A sustained intake of breath was the only response when Cal unfastened the pants and shoved them down, baring his ass and legs as he stepped out of them. Feigning a nonchalance he didn't come close to feeling, Cal laid the pants next to his shirt and crossed the room to the shower where he played with the dials until he had the water flowing at the temperature and force he wanted.

His back to Sarhaan, Cal was just stepping under the water when Sarhaan spoke. "I'm warning you: you make one move to touch that pretty cock -- I'm going to take it as the invitation we both know it is."

\*\*\*

Hadn't Caleb heard him? He must have. If he had, though, he didn't give any sign. Just stepped under the water, threw his head back and let it stream over his naked body.

The water hit Caleb's upturned face first -- flowed over his hair, darkening its normal bright gold to a sleek brown. His eyes were closed, lips drawn back and opened slightly, as if in ecstasy. Sarhaan's gaze was drawn to Caleb's hands as they cupped his own shoulders briefly before sliding down opposing arms.

Dropping down into the closest chair to watch, Sarhaan's hand went automatically to his dick, nearly half hard already just from seeing Caleb naked. As Caleb filled his hand with soap and began to rub it down his perfectly proportioned legs, Sarhaan ran his fingertips down and back the length of his ever-hardening cock, savoring the sight of Caleb's high, round ass. He thought about kicking off his shorts and taking the half-dozen steps it would take to close the distance between him and Caleb... imagined taking those slim hips between his hands and squeezing, rubbing his dick in the narrow cleft between Caleb's cheeks. Inserting a couple of fingers, magically covered in lube, and preparing that tight, velvet glove of a fit for his seeking cock.

*Oh, God.* Caleb leaned over to reach his feet, his wide-legged stance exposing the tight rosy hole Sarhaan had just been dreaming of penetrating. As quickly as it was exposed, though, Caleb straightened, and it vanished from view.

“I meant what I said,” Sarhaan reminded himself as much as Caleb.

Gritting his teeth so hard against the desire to reach for Caleb that the words barely intelligible to his own ears, they must have been clear enough because Caleb turned to look. With a glance over his shoulder so casual it could only be deliberate, Caleb’s gaze connected with Sarhaan’s for a moment and the sleepy, sensuous look in his eyes had Sarhaan’s dick standing at attention, begging for the hot velvet feel of that sleek body surrounding it.

“Oh, still there?” Turning his back on Sarhaan again, Caleb slid both hands down to his ass, gripped it firmly and squeezed. Rubbing his open palms in circular motions, Caleb massaged himself, turning slowly until he faced Sarhaan.

Sarhaan’s breath caught in his chest as Caleb let himself fall back against the bulkhead, water cascading down his perfectly smooth chest, across his flat abdomen until it struck his hard, curving cock and parted to flow around it.

Arms still trapped behind his arched back, Caleb’s cock strained upward, and this time Sarhaan recognized the choked groan as coming from his own throat.

Pushing away from the rubberized wall of the shower, Caleb straightened slowly, head coming up last as he stepped out of the water. Shaking his head, water droplets flew in all directions and Sarhaan lifted his face to try to catch some on his tongue. The smell of hot, wet skin filled the air as Caleb took two steps forward, until he was almost within Sarhaan’s reach.

“I don’t need your permission to touch myself. Never have, never will.” Shoving his wet hair back with one hand, Caleb reached down with the other and took himself in hand. Palmed those sweet balls. Watched himself give his cock a slow, loving squeeze. A stray lock of hair fell forward, dripping more water on his already wet hands and mixing with the strings of slippery pre-come that Caleb was thumbing across the broad flushed head.

Looking up at him, the heat in Caleb’s eyes was already sweetly familiar to Sarhaan. The little hitch in his breathing, the way Caleb dragged his lower lip into his mouth and bit it softly, it all got to Sarhaan somewhere deep inside. Already he’d rather watch Caleb’s pleasure than participate with almost anyone else he could think of.

But he’d shot off his mouth. Made that stupid challenge. And here was Caleb sending him signals so mixed they could have been run through a Republican Super Stealth scrambler.

“If you’re thinking of mistaking that for an invitation, don’t.” So caught up in the mesmerizing beauty of Caleb handling himself, it took a split-second for the meaning of Caleb’s words to sink in. About to protest, Sarhaan stopped himself when Caleb raised his gaze to meet Sarhaan’s. Taking the last step that brought him within arm’s reach of Sarhaan and, still holding his cock in one hand, Caleb slid the fingers of his free hand in to tangle with Sarhaan’s hair. So close now he could smell the sex emanating from Caleb’s body; knew that sweet cock would be only millimeters away. All he had to do was open his mouth and take it in -- if only he could tear his gaze away from the brown eyes that stared down into his own.

Stepping even closer, something warm and sticky nudged at Sarhaan’s chin and the fingers in his hair tightened. “This—” Caleb’s lush pink lips moved, “—is an invitation.”

Somehow Sarhaan tore his gaze away from Caleb’s, looked down at the beautiful flesh being offered to him so brazenly and could only wonder briefly what had happened to the sweet, untutored innocent he’d taken to his bed only days ago. In his wildest dreams, he couldn’t have imagined Caleb behaving like this.

To hell with dreams, though, because this was certainly not his imagination at work.

“Go ahead. It’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Partly.” His lips were so close to Caleb’s taut flesh that the puff of warm air ghosting over it made it twitch and strain, that last movement breaking Sarhaan’s last grip on civilized behavior. Shoving Caleb’s hand aside, Sarhaan snaked one arm around Caleb’s bare backside as he opened his mouth over that pretty cock that was temptation incarnate and worked it down.

He let it fill his mouth, his tongue swirling wetly up and down its length; savored the sweet salty taste of the drops pearled so invitingly on its tip; buried his nose in the nest of damp curls at its base and dragged the fresh scent of newly scrubbed skin down into his starving lungs.

Lost in the pleasure of the moment, Sarhaan could only delight in the feel of Caleb on his tongue, in his mouth, in the satisfaction of holding that firm flesh in his hands as he held Caleb’s ass in both hands. He worked Caleb forward and back as he went down to the root then backed off to toy with the flushed, rose-colored head of Caleb’s dick.

It wasn’t enough, though.

His own neglected cock pushed painfully at the opening of his shorts, even their generous cut not full enough to accommodate Sarhaan’s present state of rock-hard arousal. Sarhaan wanted to feel himself surrounding Caleb, Caleb’s body beneath him as drove himself in so deep that they were two halves of one hungry, needy whole.

Reluctantly Sarhaan released Caleb's dick and stood, clutching Caleb to him with one arm around Caleb's waist while the other hand palmed Caleb's head to hold him still for the kiss Sarhaan was dying for. Caleb's eyes were closed, his mouth open to gulp one shallow breath after another as Sarhaan's mouth descended. Those full pink lips, already slick from being worried by Caleb's own teeth, called to him. A mouth made for kissing. And sucking. And fucking.

His own eyes drifting shut, Sarhaan was unpleasantly surprised when, instead of Caleb's lips, his mouth found the side of Caleb's cheek. What the hell? He'd turned away. *He'd turned away?*

"Don't kiss me."

That startled Sarhaan eyes open. Caleb's neck was arched invitingly away, leaving the long, graceful column open and available, but that lush, kissable mouth was out of reach.

"Why not?"

Caleb felt like heaven in his arms, but the idea that he would hold part of himself back made Sarhaan crazy.

"Kissing is for lovers." Eyes still closed, as though this was a perfectly normal conversation they were holding, Caleb's dick pressed insistently against Sarhaan's belly.

"And what are we?"

"I don't know."

"What?!"

*This was... unbelievable.* Sarhaan drew back. "I can have your dick down my throat, or mine up your ass, but I can't kiss you?"

The most unbelievable thing of all was the stoically calm look on Caleb's face when he finally opened his eyes. "Take it or leave it."

## Chapter Ten

“—less than fifty hours out now. Sweet Jesus, I can’t wait—”

Cal stared at the computer screen and tried to block out the conversations going on around him. He scratched an itchy eyebrow, propped his chin on his hand and compared what he was seeing with what he knew of the military’s main system. He’d already been inside this particular civilian contractor’s system for close to fifteen minutes. He knew from experience that in and out in under thirty was the way to survive undetected. Or at least not to end up in custody.

“No shit. Some real food—”

“A little poker.” Laughter.

“A little poke-*her*.” More laughter.

Another day spent on the bridge, under the watchful eye of Kai Xuwicha’s babysitting service while he tried to figure out if the transponder code he’d switched was a) still working and b) not on any military watch lists. If it was, that meant locating another clean one to substitute once they reached Doradus. Anything else left them more vulnerable to detection.

Shifting in his seat, the deep ache in his ass yanked Cal’s mind back to last night. As angry as he’d been and -- okay, admit it -- hurt, he hadn’t been able to resist Sarhaan. Cal shook his head and tried to push the image from his mind of Sarhaan bending him over the very chair Sarhaan had used to watch Cal shower. Resist, hell, he’d—

*Focus, dammit.* He needed to get through at least two more levels of security and time was not his friend on this one. Rolling his shoulders, Cal told himself it was to relieve the tightness in his neck and not so that he could feel the twinge again from the bite mark and subsequent bruise currently blooming on his shoulder. Cal’s first two attempts at cracks on this system hadn’t worked, so he massaged the bruise while he tried a third, and then a fourth.

It took a few moments for Cal to register the unease growing inside him; a few more to pinpoint its source. The collective tone of the voices was lighthearted -- the sort of good-natured ribbing that men who worked together and knew each other well were prone to.

“—’s our newest security expert working out?”

That brought a couple of chuckles. Trying not to be obvious, Cal looked sideways under his lashes and froze.

Dave Bartok. Looking fit and ready for service.



A cold chill washed over Cal at the same instant a giant shot of adrenalin flooded his system. His gaze went instinctively to the exits. Shit. Bartok stood between Cal and both exit lifts. His heart pounded and breath became harder and harder to drag into his lungs.

“Hey, little buddy. Good to see you. Remember anything interesting?” Bartok’s smile, wide and showing plenty of teeth, didn’t fool Cal. It wasn’t a smile of friendship, but rather one of pure sadistic enjoyment. The sweat beginning to break out on Cal’s body probably wasn’t visible yet but it would be soon and, in the meantime, Dave Bartok was no doubt enjoying the fact that he was its cause.

Eyes rabbiting around the room, Cal assessed every man in it. Why hadn’t he noticed before the subtly menacing quality behind Naslund’s slouch? Or that the freckles covering Jimi Vilnius’s face were perfect camouflage for a cold-eyed killer’s stare? Even Xuwicha, who just that morning had been joking with him—

“Dave, you’re needed down in life support. Why don’t you go take care of your call before Sarhaan has to get on your ass about it?” Xuwicha shifted until he stood between Cal and Bartok. Still no clear path to the lift door, but better than nothing.

Kai’s reminder only made Bartok laugh louder before smiling nastily. “I’m not worried about Sarhaan. He’d have to get off our little friend’s ass first to do it. Am I right, or am I right, Caleb?”

Looking away, Cal focused all his energy on listening for Bartok’s tread on the metal grating underfoot as Bartok evidently took Kai’s reminder more seriously than he outwardly showed. Listening intently, Cal wasn’t prepared for the hand that came down on the back of his neck.

“You okay?”

Cal kept his head down and nodded. Now that Dave was gone, his pulse and his breathing were beginning to come down a bit. He could draw breath normally again. Searching his mind, Cal looked for the reason behind the sheer unreasoning terror that had come over him.

“He’s gone. Ready to get back to work or do you need a minute?”

Work.

Shit.

Everything but escape had gone out of his head the minute he’d heard Dave Bartok’s voice; seen his ugly, smirking face. Cal looked back at the computer screen before him, and his stomach that had been normalizing only seconds before plummeted again. “I’m locked out. I’ll have to start all over again somewhere else.”

\*\*\*

“You know how to lock it, right? Call me if you have any problems. Sarhaan and D’abu should be done pretty soon.”

Feeling foolish and not a little guilty, Cal nodded at Kai and stepped alone into Sarhaan’s quarters. His paranoid fantasies seemed the height of idiocy now. After getting Bartok off the bridge, Kai had worked with him to find the info they’d been looking for on the transponder. Not an elegant hack, but effective. “Thanks. Appreciate it.”

“No problem. Lock the door.”

Cal stood and stared at the door until the sound of Kai Xuwicha’s footsteps died away. It was so quiet in Sarhaan’s rooms, Cal had a nostalgic wish for one of those rock and water garden things like the one his father had had in his office back home. Cal had never stopped to wonder before who had bought it or why his father had bothered to keep it. Probably a gift from some visiting foreign dignitary. Here, now, with nothing but the thoughts in his head for company, even something as simple as the sound of water on rocks would be welcome.

Antsy after sitting in front of a computer console most of the day, Cal wandered around the room. Walked around to stand behind Sarhaan’s desk. Looked at the orderly piles of documents -- no matter how hard they tried, seemed like no one ever succeeded in doing away with paper documents. Okay, so they were mostly plastic now, still... Not obsessively neat-looking, as though a straightedge had been involved, but nonetheless very tidy. Only a single pen lying at an angle, as though Sarhaan had been rolling it through his fingers the way Cal had seen him do before tossing it aside on his way out the door.

His mind still a bit unsettled from his run-in with Dave Bartok, Cal’s gaze drifted around the room, absently cataloging the various pieces of furniture, picturing in his mind’s eye some of the amazing things that had happened within these walls since he’d come on board the ship.

Cal wished Daphne was here. A second opinion on the decisions he’d made and the actions he’d taken so far wouldn’t be a bad thing. Being able to pick her eminently sensible brain was just one of the things he missed about her. Daph could always be counted on for an intelligent, dispassionate view.

For one thing, she’d be thrilled to hear that he’d finally connected, even minimally, with someone. Seeing him romantically involved had been a goal of hers for years. It still made him smile to think of the number of hours of her high-powered brain time that she’d wasted trying to get him paired off. Maybe less than perfectly romantic, but still... it was a hundred times more than anything he’d found back home.

Reaching into his pocket, Cal pulled out the mini-comp that was his constant companion. He turned it on as he made his way toward the couch, flicking buttons until Daphne's forensic files came up on the screen. A little ashamed that he hadn't already devoted more time to them, Cal scrolled through the numbers, rereading the profiles of the victims whose lives his friend had detailed so carefully in her notes.

It wasn't the first time he'd gone over them -- far from it. In fact, it had been the nagging feeling that the cumulative weight of evidence pointed inescapably to one particular elite military unit that had first led him to seek more information on Sarhaan's unit. The intriguing trail of evidence that had led him to the discovery of Dr. Elihu Rondi's very secret -- very illegal -- experiments in eugenics and the manipulation of human genetic material that had brought him inescapably to this place at this time.

What to do, what to do?

Images from the previous night began to move into Cal's consciousness like unwanted visitors he was unable to refuse. Looking down at his lap, as if he could see through the black flight gear he'd bought in preparation for his trip, Cal pictured the two rows of small bruises he'd found this morning. The ones that ran just inside his hipbones, four to a row, one row on each side.

Fingerprints.

Cal scrubbed a hand over his eyes, thinking back over the events of last night. Where on earth had the impulse to say those things, withhold other things, come from? Somehow he'd known that Sarhaan wouldn't be happy to hear them. The choice had been made, though. He could no more deny Sarhaan than he could fly the *Vigilant* single-handedly. But somewhere inside he'd known that he couldn't continue to kiss and hold Sarhaan, to open himself up emotionally, when he was clearly being used for sex and sex only.

Being grilled on the bridge, asked to prove the unprovable. Then handed over like a tiresome task, delegated to someone further down the chain of command. Cal guessed he understood it on an intellectual level. Sarhaan was only doing what was prudent. So then why did it burn, like a slow-dissolving acid deep down in his soul, that he was not trusted? Why did it even bother him that Sarhaan needed proof?

Because Cal wanted more, that's why. He'd taken one look at this beautiful, beautiful man and he'd wanted. Too bad Cal was just now realizing that wanting was only the beginning of his problems.

Sarhaan wanted only one thing, and Cal wanted everything.

\*\*\*

The problem with magnetic doors was that you couldn't slam the fuckers.

Having just spent the better part of fourteen hours down in life support trying to get the algae system balanced and back online, Sarhaan was ready to slam something into next week. Fucking Bartok *had* to be the fucking expert on the fucking system. Couldn't be D'abu or Kai or even that little bastard Sutton. No. Had to be fucking smirking rat bastard weasel Bartok.

Bad enough on a good day, since Caleb had been on board Bartok had become nigh on impossible. After what he'd done to Caleb? More than once during the course of the day Sarhaan had had to walk away and take a few deep breaths. Because what he really wanted to do was shove Dave's head under the stinking water and hold it there.

The little bastard.

Always flirting with the edge of unacceptable, even in the admittedly informal command structure they'd hammered out post-Earth. His smile a little too broad, always the suggestion of a wink in his eye.

Outside the door of his suite, Sarhaan resisted the impulse to slam the heel of his hand into the unresponsive thermal imager and spoke into the voice-recognition back-up system. "Open door."

Expecting the door to open automatically, only good reflexes kept Sarhaan from stopping in time to keep from breaking his nose when it didn't. Another muscular string of curses rose to his lips as he finally entered and Cal, seated to his left on the couch, looked up, startled questions written large on his gorgeous, open face.

"Fuck! What now?"

Not proud of the look of alarm his snarled curse brought to Caleb's face -- or the little spurt of satisfaction it brought him -- Sarhaan finally gave in to the urge to throw something and pitched his own mini-comp hard at the bulkhead. It was a field model, though, so it only bounced off, clattering to the deck.

"Tough day at the office?" The brown eyes that looked up at him from where Caleb sat -- hunched over a writing tablet and looking industrious, generally mussed and desirable as hell -- might have been totally sincere. In his present state of mind, though, Sarhaan was prepared to take it as argumentative.

"Matter of fact, yes, it was. Your fucking friend Bartok—"

That got Caleb's attention. Pen falling to the floor, his gaze flashed to the door. "Where? Here?"

"No, take it easy. Down in life support all day. Little pig-fucker's begging for a slow, painful killing, and I'll tell you what..."

Well, shit. Caleb's gaze was glued on the door, tension evident in the rigid way he now held himself. "Caleb. It's all right. I told you, you're safe in here." Maybe distraction would help. "What are you working on?"

Caleb's gaze flicked away from the door for a couple of seconds. "Uh... what?" Looking disoriented, Caleb finally looked away from the door. He only glanced briefly at Sarhaan, though, before going back to his comp. One of those artlessly provocative prolonged stares that got Sarhaan's motor going was probably out of the question.

Making a conscious effort to gentle his voice, Sarhaan moved toward Caleb slowly. "What are you working on? What you got pulled up there?" Sitting down beside Caleb, Sarhaan slid one arm along the back of the sofa.

"Huh? Oh, um, Daph's files. Daphne, my friend. Remember the one I—"

"Right, right, I remember. What are you looking for?"

After spending most of his day with his arm up to the shoulder in rank blue-green algae, Caleb smelled wonderful. Hell, he smelled wonderful any time, and Sarhaan found himself several millimeters closer with no recollection of having moved.

"I'm not sure. I—" Glancing up from the screen, Caleb froze -- mouth open, gaze flickering quickly between Sarhaan's eyes and lips. Sarhaan was riveted. Breathless. But Caleb marshaled himself and went on. "I know Daphne saw something that didn't fit. She said she thought there was more going on than it seemed at first. That someone wanted it that way."

"Something that didn't fit?" It was hard to keep his mind on business when Caleb was this close. The collarless shirt Caleb wore left his neck temptingly bare and Sarhaan desperately wanted a taste. "Something... like what?"

"I'm not sure. I think it had to do with the entry wounds and the type of weapon used. The problem is, I'm not expert enough at any of this stuff. It's probably staring right at me and I'm just too dense to figure it out."

"Let me take a look. I know a little something about weapons. Entry wounds, too, for that matter." Unable to resist, Sarhaan slid his arm further down the back of the couch. Let himself touch his lips to the side of Caleb's neck. Suck in some of the sweet, smooth skin there, humming a little at the pure pleasure of having his mouth on Caleb again.

"That would be, uh, that would be great. If you could. Look at it."

"Mmm, yeah. I'll get right on it." How was he supposed to concentrate on anything besides just how damn good Caleb tasted? Warm and clean, pure male. Sliding his mouth down the curve of Caleb's neck, Sarhaan worked his way down to the magic spot where

neck and shoulder met. So good. Something about it triggered the primitive part of Sarhaan's brain. Made him want to bite and hold on, so he did.

Until Caleb's little yelp of pain brought him up short.

"Too hard? Sorry." Sarhaan sat up, smoothing the hair out of Caleb's eyes, savoring the sweet flavor of Caleb on his tongue. Wanting more. Wanting the whole gorgeous package.

"Sorry, it's just a little tender."

What was with the apology? And this not wanting to look him in the eye shit was really getting on Sarhaan's nerves. Why wouldn't he -- *tender*? "What happened?"

"Really. It's nothing."

"Let me take a look." Not waiting for permission, Sarhaan pulled the shirt back to find a round bruise surrounding a fainter set of bite marks, perfectly preserved. Stunned, it took him a moment to process the evidence and bump it up against his memories of last night. "I did that."

"It doesn't matter."

"It sure as fuck does matter. I don't want to hurt you. You've been hurt enough already."

Aw, crap. Why did he have to bring up Bartok and the torture again? Not only that, but his vocabulary seemed to have regressed to his ignorant Army brat days. Something about Caleb cut through all of the surface polish Sarhaan had worked so hard to gain in his life and went straight to who he was down deep.

"It's okay. Really." Setting his notebook and comp aside, Caleb turned to face him. Put one cool hand up to the side of Sarhaan's face and finally, *finally* looked into his eyes. "Really."

"Yeah? How do you figure?" There was something about the look in Caleb's eyes that Sarhaan didn't like.

"I've been thinking about this and it seems to me that no one's going to get what they want. So we might as well enjoy what we do have."

Why was this conversation rapidly taking on the characteristics of a mine field? "Which is what?"

"What we have or what we want?"

"How about both?"

Scotting closer on the couch, Caleb dropped his hand and began slowly flicking open the closures of Sarhaan's shirt. The complete damn strangeness of the conversation was fading for Sarhaan, pushed aside by rising desire. He'd never been this attracted to anyone and to witness Caleb's growing sexual confidence, especially when it was directed at him, took want and need to whole new levels.

The shirt completely open now, Caleb pushed it aside with both hands and thumbed Sarhaan's nipples to hard little points while gazing at them, a bemused smile on his face. "You want sex -- uncomplicated and often. Am I right?"

Electricity ran on direct lines from Sarhaan's nipples to his groin. He'd been hard already, but being teased by Caleb was a new experience and Sarhaan was getting harder by the second. When he didn't answer Caleb's question right away, Caleb pinched Sarhaan's nipples and Sarhaan's dick jerked hard as he let out a little moan. "Yeah. Oh, yeah."

His hands clutching his own thighs, Sarhaan closed his eyes and smiled. What had he been worried about? They were obviously on the same page here. Caleb raked his thumbnails over Sarhaan's nipples, supersensitive now, and the flames licking at Sarhaan's cock leaped higher. Sarhaan wanted to thrust into the heat, but Caleb was talking again.

"Lucky for you I want sex, too. Too bad I want something else as well, though. Know what I want?"

Caleb fastened his mouth over one of Sarhaan's besieged nipples and sucked. Swirled and stabbed with his tongue. Bit down with increasing pressure. Sarhaan could only shake his head.

"Love."

\*\*\*

Luckily for Cal he had his face buried in Sarhaan's chest, ready to attack the other side when he dropped his bomb and committed emotional suicide. He didn't have to look at Sarhaan's face and see the pity and disgust.

Cal knew he was a freak.

A freak and a disappointment, he'd wondered for a long time why his parents didn't just turn him in and be done with him. Didn't want the scandal, he'd eventually decided. Being an area Governor's son had a couple of perks, it seemed. So he closed his eyes and focused on the taste and smell and the feel of the man in his arms.

Smooth, taut skin surrounded the tight little nub of flesh his lips and teeth worried. With every flick of his tongue, Cal listened to the panting, took note of what caused a moan or indrawn breath -- then did it again. He loved the feel of hard muscles beneath his hands as he clutched Sarhaan's thick torso, drowned in the musky scents of man.

It was exciting beyond anything he'd ever done, to touch Sarhaan, to feel his body react and know that he was the one making Sarhaan respond. Making Sarhaan's body arch and writhe, hips flex and thrust blindly, making the hard bulge beneath his pants even harder.

Cal brought one hand down to shape and squeeze the straining cock behind the black, stretchy fabric and Sarhaan's freeform moans coalesced into words. "Oh, yeah. Do it."

Looking up past Sarhaan's half-reclined form to his face, stretched tight with restrained passion, Cal licked his lips and smiled. "Do what?"

As if he needed to ask. As if Sarhaan wasn't already putting gentle pressure on his shoulders, pushing him down. "C'mon, baby. Suck it. Oh, yeah."

The heartfelt groan was in response to Cal squeezing harder with his hand while he bit and licked his way down Sarhaan's torso. Feeling the controlled power beneath him, dozens of frantic butterflies sprung up in Cal's stomach. He'd only given two blowjobs in his life -- one and a half, technically -- and he was completely unprepared.

What if he did it wrong? Sarhaan might be disgusted. Or, worse, laugh at him.

Impatient, already unhooking his own pants, Sarhaan didn't look prepared to wait for Cal to decide. Just got in there and freed himself, shoved his pants down, and *Cal was holding Sarhaan's naked dick in his hands.*

Backing off, settling on the floor between Sarhaan's knees, Cal gazed up, rapt.

So pretty.

Cal hefted it in his hand, felt its weight and warmth, touched his tongue gingerly to its tip. The groan and full-body shudder that ran through Sarhaan was his confirmation that he was on the right track.

Emboldened, Cal gripped Sarhaan's cock more firmly, pursed his lips a little and used them to caress the tip of it. Moved his head and Sarhaan's flesh in opposite circular motions, flicking out his tongue intermittently to capture the salty liquid beginning to seep out.

"Stop... oh, God... stop the torture. Suck me, dammit."

Glancing up, Cal caught the flutter of Sarhaan's eyelids, the white-knuckled grip Sarhaan had on the sofa cushions, and a rush of power flooded Cal's veins. He was doing this to



Sarhaan. Him and no one else. “I was afraid of that. I knew I was going to do it all wrong.”

“Not wrong, just... ah, Jesus... put the whole thing in your mouth.”

Cal tried to hide his smile at the tone of desperation in Sarhaan’s voice. Sarhaan might not love him, but he loved what Cal was doing to him.

“I’m not sure I can. I don’t think it will fit.”

“Oh, fuck it. *Try.*”

Making a fist and holding Sarhaan’s cock steady within, Cal took what he could of it into his mouth. Oh, God, the rush of power was dizzying. From almost the minute he’d met Sarhaan, this was where Cal had wanted to be, but he’d imagined that Sarhaan would be the one in charge. Yet, here he was, his fantasy coming true and it was nothing like he’d thought.

Not sure what to do, Cal remembered what Sarhaan had done and tried to imitate it. He didn’t have to think long, though. Instinct took over and the sheer rush of living his fantasy was enough.

Sarhaan tasted wonderful. His groans and muttered curses fed Cal’s imagination. Cal made love to Sarhaan with his mouth, pretended to himself Sarhaan loved him back, was into it because he was into Cal.

He’d had a lot of fantasies over the years -- lived on them for long periods of time. But this was sweeter, hotter, than any fantasy he’d ever dreamed up. The scent of Sarhaan’s skin, the tiny tight curls at his groin, the salty sweet taste of him -- it was all light years beyond Cal’s limited ability to imagine and a thousand times more satisfying.

“Sweet Jesus... so good.” Sarhaan’s strangled commentary ran unabated. Word fragments and truncated swear words, some possibly in Kush, provided a lewd backdrop that spurred Cal higher. “Suck me. God. *Pemba mati*. Dammit. *Nwa ch’hango!*”

If whatever Sarhaan said in Kush was meant as a warning, Cal missed it. When Sarhaan came, for a split-second Cal froze, unprepared. But the taste of it hit Cal’s mouth, and he began swallowing, drinking Sarhaan down as fast as he could, praying he didn’t embarrass himself. Somehow he remembered to milk Sarhaan’s cock with his hand as he chased more of the amazing flavor.

Cal stayed where he was for what seemed like ages, until Sarhaan’s slow exhalation ended in a grunt of relaxed satisfaction and brought Cal back to reality. Keeping his eyes downcast, Cal rested his head on Sarhaan’s knee while he ran his tongue around his mouth, finding little pockets of Sarhaan’s flavor. He studied the neatly utilitarian design of Sarhaan’s boot, rubbed a hand idly back and forth across one of Sarhaan’s muscular

calves. The fantasy was over, and already reality was creeping back into Cal's consciousness.

"Caleb."

"Hmm?"

"Why don't you come up here? I'd come down there but I can't move."

Leaning his head back, Cal looked up, past the long legs partially bared and Sarhaan's spent cock, completely exposed. Miles of bare chest flowed out of Sarhaan's relaxed slouch, head supported by the sofa back, eyes sleepy and relaxed. If Cal squinted a little and used his imagination he could see affection and maybe even -- *don't say it, don't even think it* -- something more in that look.

Maybe there was a little juice left in the fantasy, after all.

\*\*\*

Cal stretched in the dark, burrowing deeper under the covers and shoved his nose into the pillow, the better to breathe in Sarhaan's scent. This was so much better than sleeping on the couch. Better, but a lot more dangerous. Lying here for who knew how long, Cal was content just listening to the deep, regular breathing of the man sleeping next to him. Turning his head, Cal peered through the darkness and tried to make out Sarhaan's shape.

God.

Would he ever get used to it? Cal laughed a little at the idea. When would he have time to get used to anything? They were only hours away from arriving at the hollowed out asteroid of Doradus, the marker on his internal timetable for when he'd need to start working on a plan for returning to Earth.

It had taken Cal several moments upon waking to orient himself. To identify the warm bulk resting solidly against him as Sarhaan's ass. He really was a small-town provincial at heart if something as simple -- basic -- as the warm, bare flesh of Sarhaan's backside pressing up against his made his head swim. Cal couldn't help it. It made him happy. So he pressed back against Sarhaan and tried to imagine what it would be like to have this every day. Always.

Spending the next few minutes fleshing out the outline of his happy little dream, Cal pictured himself as part of the crew of the *Vigilant*, roaming the asteroid belt doing... he wasn't sure what exactly, but something more adventurous than reading intelligence reports and writing up synopses for the Vice Consul, certainly.

What would it be like to be Sarhaan's partner? Cal could see himself, working on projects with Kai and D'abu, the lot of them having a meal together, laughing and joking.

Strolling back to their quarters together with Sarhaan -- *their* quarters, his and Sarhaan's - arms around each other's waists. Undressing each other, Cal kissing every newly bared centimeter of Sarhaan's outrageously beautiful body. Touching Sarhaan anywhere he liked, any way he liked. Falling into bed together. Making love, Sarhaan inside him, *him inside Sarhaan*.

A delicious shiver raced through Cal's body at the thought. He'd never... not with anyone. And the thought of doing that with Sarhaan was unbearably exciting. Cal's hand went to his cock and stroked it as he thought about preparing Sarhaan the way Sarhaan had prepared Cal's body. Oiled, primed, he would slip slowly inside Sarhaan's body and—

And what?

He didn't know.

Cal had no idea, except that it would be amazing -- beyond anything he'd ever done. It would be better than a hand, he knew that. Better even than a mouth. But what could better than a mouth possibly feel like?

Hard just thinking about it, touching himself, Cal rolled to his side and eased up behind Sarhaan. Wrapped as much of his body as he could around Sarhaan. He propped one leg atop Sarhaan's and let his dick settle in against Sarhaan's ass.

He couldn't, of course, but it was crazy wicked to think about.

Cal slipped one arm around Sarhaan's waist while the other propped up his head. Closing his eyes, Cal lay still and breathed. He thought about how incredibly perfect everything was in that moment as he pressed closer to Sarhaan and let Sarhaan's body put the most exquisite pressure on his cock. Waves of heat washed over him, and Cal wondered if he could come from only this and no more.

Just then a low, resonant bell rang overhead three times, and Cal could tell somehow that it was being broadcast ship-wide. A voice he now recognized as Jacob Naslund's made the announcement.

"Five hours out, everyone. We're five hours out of Doradus. Begin initial preparations for approach and docking."

## Chapter Eleven

Sailors anticipating shore leave, Marines in a foreign port, some things never changed. Like he'd been doing for the past couple of hours, Sarhaan alternated between checking the automated readouts and watching with his own eyes through the forward visual display. So far everything looked good. No unexpected forward scouts. No suspicious sensor pings. Everything quiet and uneventful, just the way he liked it.

So far.

Most of the rest of the crew -- those not involved in actual operation of the ship -- were gathered on the bridge to watch the forward display, like old time sailors hoping to catch that first glimpse of land.

Scanning the room, Sarhaan stopped, as he invariably did, when he got to Caleb. With every twenty-four hour period that passed, Caleb seemed to grow more comfortable with the crew and they with him. Currently, Caleb sat off to one side, alternately tapping on his mini-comp and staring at the main viewscreen.

D'abu stopped and said something to Caleb, too quietly for Sarhaan to hear. Caleb looked up and flashed the wide smile that always made it seem like the sun shone a little brighter on him, and a stab of envy slipped between Sarhaan's ribs. When Caleb threw back his head and laughed in response to something D'abu said, Sarhaan curled his fingers into the chair's armrests.

What the hell? This wasn't primary school. He didn't own Caleb or his smiles. So why did he have to squelch the urge to go stand between them, maybe drop a possessive hand on Caleb's shoulder? What Caleb said to D'abu wasn't any of his business, and D'abu was certainly capable of managing his own affairs. So why did the devil on Sarhaan's shoulder have him squirming inside at just the use of the word 'affair'? Just because Sarhaan could imagine Caleb opening D'abu's shirt and running his hands up the hard rippled belly Sarhaan knew lay beneath, smiling that smile all the while, didn't mean it was going to happen. *If it hadn't already*, his inner devil prodded.

"Hey, Sarhaan. What do you say we take Cal here to *Durty Nelly's*?"

"Since when are you a fan of watered drinks and canned music? If memory serves, you lost most of your credits and the shirt off your back last time. You getting a cut of the door now?"

"Your man here's never seen a live sex show. We have an obligation to educate young Mr. Adams. Don't you think?"

Sarhaan had been around the block and back enough times to know when his chain was being yanked.

“Your selflessness is killing me, D’abu. Nowhere you wouldn’t go to help out your fellow man.”

D’abu had the nerve to look hurt. “See? That’s the problem with developing a reputation. People never believe me when I’m completely sincere.”

“I believe you, Sandy. Don’t feel like you need to go for my sake.” Caleb smiled up at D’abu for an instant before turning to Sarhaan. “Or you either, for that matter. I can find it on my own -- I have a decent sense of direction. Just give me the address.”

Sarhaan stuffed down the cold chill of panic that skated down his spine at the thought of Caleb wandering the streets of Doradus unaccompanied. “If you can wait for D’abu and me to get free, I think we’ll throw ourselves on our swords and go along. I’d be willing to make that sacrifice.”

The smile he got in return made it all worthwhile. Even if he hadn’t wanted to go for his own prurient interest, that smile would have won Sarhaan over. Not to mention just the thought of the unspeakable hotness of watching Caleb’s face as he viewed the main event at *Nelly’s*. Maybe he should give some thought to reserving a room this time.

Arguably the best thing about Doradus was the near total separation of beliefs -- and the laws that defined them -- from life as it was currently lived back home. If the idea of not being thrown in jail and possibly terminated for being gay made Caleb’s head spin, the respect and high pay accorded relaxation specialists might cause it to implode.

“If you can get away, that would be great. Sandy, what about you?” If Caleb’s smile for Sandy was any less bright, Sarhaan couldn’t tell from where he sat and the glow he got from being the focus of Caleb’s attention dimmed a little.

D’abu smiled. “If I didn’t want to I wouldn’t have brought it up in the first place. I’ve seen my share of sex shows over the years, but *Nelly’s* is special -- first class all the way. I’m just afraid that once you we get you in there, we won’t be able to get you out.”

“Why?”

Caleb’s open expression looked genuinely puzzled and Sarhaan couldn’t resist stepping in. “I think what D’abu is trying to say is that real life can seem just a little mundane after a night at *Nelly’s*.”

“That’s hard to imagine.”

The sidelong glance Caleb shot him went straight to Sarhaan’s groin. His chest swelled right along with his dick, and it was all Sarhaan could do not to grab Caleb and haul him back to his suite. A little afternoon delight sounded like just the thing to take the edge off the endless tedium that was docking preparation.

*Whoa. Down boy.* Doradus was still more than two hours out and nothing would be known for sure until they docked and saw what their reception was. Sarhaan's gut told him that Caleb was being straight with them. Anyone could see that the kid didn't have an ounce of guile in him. Too bad it was Sarhaan's duty to think with his head and not his cock.

Too bad staring into Caleb's eyes wasn't doing anything for his objectivity, either. All connecting with those pretty brown eyes did for Sarhaan was make him want to suck cock and fuck that sweet ass. Maybe it showed in his own eyes, because Caleb opened his legs to give himself more room, tugged discreetly at his crotch and looked down. When Caleb cleared his throat and went back to his mini-comp, Sarhaan took a deep breath, let it out slowly and mentally swore in three languages.

Sometimes he was his own worst enemy.

He'd meant it for the best, though, telling Caleb on their way to the bridge that he needed to focus on the ship's entry into the asteroid's airspace and making sure the docking went smoothly. What he hadn't felt the need to mention to Caleb was that, at the same time, Kai would be quietly making preparations to shoot their way out of there if anything went wrong. Seeing Caleb doing his best to cooperate pumped Sarhaan's ego at the same time that it only made him want Caleb that much more.

Even presuming Caleb would agree, Sarhaan couldn't leave the bridge right now. And God knew thoughts of Caleb kneeling and sucking him off as he sat in the captain's chair weren't helping, either.

\*\*\*

Beside him, Kai rocked on his heels a bit and glanced Sarhaan's way before turning back to stare at the readout panel as the second of three sets of safety doors closed behind them. As the numbers climbed, the air pressure increased and Sarhaan absently thumbed the safety on the rifle that hung from a strap off his shoulder and tried to think of nothing.

Not the series of scenarios they'd discussed as a group, chosen the three most likely and developed primary and secondary plans for. Not the people behind him on the ship. Not the chafing of the insulating suit he wore under his body armor. Breathing in to a silent three-count and out to a four-count rhythm, Sarhaan shoved aside thoughts of all of the individuals depending on him and Kai to read the situation and either establish a good working relationship with the station leadership or get them the hell out. Previous visits meant nothing if Caleb had sold them out.

One more set of doors was all that stood between them and the artificial atmosphere inside the asteroid. From their last trip here, Sarhaan knew to expect less gravity and air pressure at the docking station. The roughly tube-shaped asteroid spun to create gravity and the successive layers of safety doors served to keep the painstakingly created

breathable air inside from escaping out the multiple connections offered at the docking portal.

The adrenalin was flowing, and Sarhaan had to remind himself to keep the body language neutral; no weapons raised or pointed, despite the indeterminate number of bodies he could see gathered through the small, double-paned window. As the two sets of numbers equalized, Kai turned to Sarhaan, this time with one eyebrow raised.

“Show time.”

The final set of doors slid open silently and the chill, foggy air of the docking station swirled in around their feet. A sandy-haired man of medium height, flanked by a half-dozen armed security guards, took a step forward.

“Good morning. Welcome to Doradus. I’m Seth Loftin, chief of station security. What say you gentlemen stow your weapons in the locker over there and we have ourselves a little chat?”

## Chapter Twelve

“Let me see that first picture again.”

Cal had his mini-comp linked to the ship’s secondary computer and was using it to compare Daphne’s photos of the dead bodies. D’abu was seated beside him, and the two of them were poring over the pictures and accompanying documentation.

Flipping back, Cal retrieved the first picture they’d looked at, lining it up side-by-side with the last. D’abu cocked his head, his gaze bouncing back and forth between the two pictures.

“Can you bring up a couple more? How many can you get lined up in a row?”

“I don’t know -- five, maybe?” Once Cal had all the pictures assembled, the similarities began to stand out, even to his untrained eye.

“See this burning here? And here? And here and here? They’ve all got it. I think... Cal, can I see Daphne’s notes again? I want to see the cut-aways of the angle of the shots.”

Cal pulled up the cross-sectional shots Daphne had begun making to satisfy her own curiosity when two plus two began adding up to five in her mind. “Here you go. What do you see?”

D’abu leaned forward on one muscular forearm and traced with his finger the angles of the shots fired into the skulls of each of the dead prostitutes. “See this? See how this angle isn’t quite clean?”

He had to get his face closer to the screen, but once he did Cal noticed the slight variances in the angles. “Like this?” Cal tapped the screen on the picture closest to him to enlarge it. “Do you mean how it’s off a little right here? And this one’s a little low; this one’s off to the left. This one is off to the right again?”

His mouth fixed in a grim line, Sandy nodded, never taking his gaze from the screen. “Your friend was definitely on to something.”

Scalp prickling as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, Cal’s stomach took the express elevator to the bottom floor. Pulling his gaze away from the cold, clinical pictures to look at D’abu, Cal wasn’t sure if he wanted to ask the next question that came into his head. “She was right?”

“I think we should pull in Sarhaan and Kai on this. Maybe Naslund, too.” D’abu turned his head to meet Cal’s gaze. “Nas has a good eye for the analytical stuff. But, more importantly, they’re all expert shots.”



“What are they going to tell me?”

Somehow, hearing Daphne’s suspicions confirmed brought her death back to Cal in a way he hadn’t anticipated. When he’d thought it all might be in his head, it could still seem like a big mistake. There was a chance that it really was just a random mugging. But D’abu was taking away even that small hope from him.

“That these shots weren’t made by anyone from our outfit. Every man in this unit qualified in the top one percent of his class. We have the most elite marksmen in all of the armed forces. No one here has made a shot that sloppy since *before* we entered the corps.”

Cal searched D’abu’s eyes for... he didn’t know what. The truth, maybe. “Seriously?”

Nodding silently, D’abu turned back to the pictures. “We couldn’t if we tried. Not only did we start out with superior reflexes and hand-eye coordination, we’ve trained at a high level for years. Drunk -- hell, unconscious even -- any one of us would make a cleaner shot than that.”

“Then why... ?” The fragments of thought swirled in Cal’s head, too quick and amorphous to grab onto, his question trailing off as he and Sandy gazed at the pictures.

“Why would someone kill your friend? Because she was onto something someone powerful didn’t want out, probably.”

“Yes, that too, but...” Cal thought back to when Daphne was still alive. Her frustration at having her questions stonewalled at every turn, her anger at being lied to. Her outrage at the injustice of what she suspected. “Why blame your unit? Why not just leave the crimes unsolved? For that matter, why kill prostitutes in the first place?”

\*\*\*

“You’re back. *Excellent.*”

“So how’d it go? How soon can we get off the ship and into town?”

“Man, I can’t wait. First thing, I’m gonna get me some sushi.”

“*Sushi?* What are you, nuts? Steak -- now that’s *real* food.”

Cal hung back while Vilnius and Naslund peppered Sarhaan with questions. This would be Cal’s first time setting foot on anything besides Earth, and he was excited. So maybe he wasn’t as excited as those two, but still... It was understandable. They’d been on the ship a lot longer than he had. If he was tired of packaged meals, they must be, too -- times ten.

Then there was the question of companionship, too.

Letting his gaze roam over Sarhaan, Cal admired the fit of his black suit -- boarding armor, he'd learned to call it -- the same thing Sarhaan had been wearing the first time Cal had laid eyes on him. Cal ran the memory through his head again, this time trying to see it from Sarhaan's point of view and substituting what he knew about Sarhaan and the crew.

Maybe the reason his enthusiasm for getting off the ship was a fraction of the rest of the crew's had to do with Sarhaan. As far as Cal had been able to discover, there were no other couples on the ship. Not that he and Sarhaan were a true couple. Still, having more than a little experience at living without sex, without so much as the touch of another in tenderness, Cal could sympathize.

He'd tried worming details from Sandy and the rest of the crew of what life was like on the asteroid. Naslund had told him about the Recreational Time Specialists, or 'RaTS' for short. *Holy shit*. Apparently on Doradus the sex trade was not only legal, it was actually something of a prestigious occupation. Companionship and time were something to be savored and appreciated. The economy on Doradus had developed specialists for everything, seemingly, and sex was no exception.

The main reason for the trip to the asteroid, according to Sandy, was its repair facilities. Apparently some things that weren't working were beyond the technical capability of the crew to repair, the ship's external sensors being one. D'abu had already been in contact with a sensor specialist with expertise in that area. He'd been negotiating for an appointment, their time being at a premium, and the last Cal had heard it might be somewhere between fifty and a hundred hours before they could get one.

"D'abu, any idea when we'll be able to get someone out to look those sensors?" As though reading Cal's mind, Sarhaan's first priority was the ship and its repairs.

"Still working on it, *jefe*. These guys are harder to get than the clap in a Martian nunnery."

"Well, keep on 'em. Be the squeakiest wheel on the station. Caleb, how's it going? What've you been up to?"

Finally, *finally* Sarhaan turned his attention to Cal. Trying not to preen visibly, Cal gestured to the mini-comp. "Not much. Still going over these files, trying to find something that will help. Sandy's been a big help. In fact, I think we may have found something."

God, why did he feel like such a kid, showing off for the teacher's attention? He couldn't help it, though. Beyond just the physical, Cal admired Sarhaan and wanted to be admired in return. So maybe he was showing off a little bit. Sarhaan moved closer, ostensibly to look at the computer, and Cal's awareness went into hyperdrive.

“Yeah? What’ve you got?” Sarhaan leaned in close and Cal swallowed reflexively. A damp, moldy smell clung to Sarhaan’s body armor, but beneath it Cal could still detect Sarhaan’s own particular scent, and his body couldn’t help but react.

“Sandy thought he saw something in the burning and, um, the angle of the wounds. He said it couldn’t be your unit that was involved. That you’d never be that—” Sarhaan leaned closer still, the odd mix of odors enveloping Cal a little more, “—sloppy.”

“He’s right. Look at that.” Sarhaan slid a stool closer and sat down next to Cal. “Any forensics person worth his pay would spot that in a heartbeat. No wonder they didn’t want your friend drawing attention to what she saw.”

“I think I can find out more. Do some digging and try to narrow down who might really be responsible.”

“That’d be great.”

Why did Sarhaan sound so singularly unimpressed? As though none of this really involved him, almost. This was his life after all, and the entire crew’s, Cal was talking about. If they ever hoped to return to Earth... “I’m hoping to find enough to clear your names. And... I could ask my contacts back home to see what they could do. To clear your names.”

Sarhaan wasn’t looking at the pictures any more. He’d slowly turned his head and now gazed down at Cal. “How about we talk about this later? I want to change out of this get up and go find a really good dinner. Maybe go to that show that D’abu was talking about. What do you say? Ready to get off this boat and see the town?”

What did he say? Staring up into those incredible eyes, dark as the night sky and a thousand times more beautiful? Autopsies and burn marks went out of Cal’s head like a dream upon waking.

“I’d love to.”

\*\*\*

“How do you like the food? Better than the reconstituted stuff?”

Sarhaan had deliberately waited to ask until Caleb had a mouthful of the steak he’d ordered for them. The *Golden Horseshoe* was within walking distance of *Durty Nelly’s* but more importantly, Sarhaan knew that the steaks they served were from actual cows and not the tank-grown variety. The look of happiness on Caleb’s face when he’d taken his first bite made it easy to forget about the obscenely high prices.

“Mm, ‘s’ good. Incredible.” Caleb’s normally precise diction was garbled by the food and the glow of pleasure in his eyes approached orgasmic. “Really, really good. Thanks.”

“Any time. It’s my own little tradition -- at least one really good meal for each shore leave.” Part of Sarhaan’s enjoyment was seeing Caleb’s face looking back at him from across the table.

“Thanks for paying, too, I mean. I don’t know why my credits won’t work here.”

“Who knows? You know how banks are. They’ll steal your money, tell you whatever the problem is, it’s your fault and then charge you extra for straightening it out.”

That made Caleb laugh. “Bitter much?”

It was a measure of Sarhaan’s contentment that not even a guaranteed-to-rile subject like banks and money could piss him off. “Easy for a trust fund baby like you to say. I’m a working stiff and, uh, let’s just say the bank presidents don’t jump when guys like me walk in.”

Washing his food down with more of the red wine they’d ordered with their dinners, Caleb’s smile took on a flirtatious edge as he let his gaze rake over Sarhaan. “They do if they’ve got eyes in their heads.” Setting his glass back on the table, Caleb took a slow, deliberate swipe of his tongue and caught an errant drop of wine that clung to his full lower lip, holding Sarhaan’s gaze the entire time. “Besides, how do you know I’m trust fund baby? For all you know I’m penniless orphan, alone in the world, dependent on the kindness of strangers.”

For all his head realized Caleb was being deliberately provocative, his dick didn’t give a rat’s ass. Sarhaan took a swallow of his own wine, swirling the liquid in the glass and letting the restaurant’s soft lighting catch the deep rose color. He could get used to this. Good food. Better company. The hum of expectation buzzing through his system, settling deep in his groin. He took another swallow of the very good wine as he pondered that lush, forbidden mouth and thought about bruising it with his kisses, about biting it softly as he ground his cock against Caleb’s.

“Your rich uncle who taught you to fly, remember? My guess is that there’s more than just a little spare change lying around the old homestead. Besides, you’ve got that look that says you’re used to things a certain way -- a certain quality. Am I right?”

As if he could read Sarhaan’s mind, Caleb pushed out his lower lip in a perfect caricature of a pout. “Maybe. And maybe the old man cut me off when he found out how unnatural I am. And even worse, that I won’t marry some poor female to cover it up.”

Was the wine getting to Caleb? Remembering how gone the kid had gotten over a little beer, it wasn’t unbelievable. Sarhaan looked into Caleb’s big brown eyes and tried to imagine the parent that would cast aside a son like Caleb. “Is that what happened?”

His glass now empty, Caleb refilled it, taking an inordinate amount of time to first pour the wine and then examine the bottle's label before answering. "Not yet." He looked up and Sarhaan saw regret and something else -- shame maybe? -- in Caleb's eyes. "But who knows? This little escapade ought to be the last straw."

Somehow Sarhaan hadn't imagined that Caleb could possibly be worried about something so minor as parental approval. What Caleb had done carried the death penalty. If he was ever fool enough to go back, that was.

It bothered Sarhaan to see Caleb looking even a little sad. They weren't celebrating, exactly, but it was supposed to be quality down-time. Dinner and a show. Like a date, almost. Now that he stopped to think about it, Sarhaan realized it was a date -- his first that really counted. Anything previous had either been with a woman, as cover to throw off the morality police or with a man, but in full 'buddy mode.' But here, off-world... here he could touch if he wanted. Let his feelings show.

Reaching out, Sarhaan traced his finger along the back of Caleb's hand, letting it slip over to the soft skin of the wrist's underside. "Are you done eating? Kai's holding a table for us at *Nelly's*. I asked him to try to get something in the main room. I think you'll enjoy the show."

Caleb looked up from his moody contemplation of his wine glass. If his smile and nod looked a little forced, Sarhaan was willing to let it go. He had a feeling Caleb would have an interesting reaction to *Nelly's*, and he couldn't wait to find out if he was right. A night at *Durty Nelly's* had been known to make strong men weak and Sarhaan was betting Caleb would go off like a rocket.

As a matter of fact, he was counting on it.

\*\*\*

The walk over from the restaurant had taken longer than Sarhaan had anticipated. The climate controlled interior of the asteroid that housed the community known as Doradus was always a little damp, foggy even. Caleb's shirt was thin, and his first shiver of cold had given Sarhaan a perfect excuse to drop an arm around Caleb's shoulders. The mix of uranium miners and hydroponics gardeners that made up the normal full-time residents of the town were a scruffy lot, by and large, and Caleb's shiny blondness stood out. Maybe Sarhaan was imagining the envious looks being thrown his way, but he didn't think so, and he'd taken the first opportunity to let any potential poachers know that Caleb was taken.

The feel of Caleb plastered to his side had been a strong counter-inducement to walking quickly. Caleb's answering grin to Sarhaan's move had been full of guilty pleasure, and it had only taken a second for Caleb to slip a shy arm around Sarhaan's waist. The tendency of Caleb's hand to slip down and caress Sarhaan's ass was something that would never

have been allowed back home, so maybe it was the novelty that kept it happening with increasing frequency.

Regardless, by the time they'd made it to *Nelly's* all the seats had been taken, Kai's attempt to hold two more unsuccessful. When they'd arrived, Kai had been arguing quietly with the new security chief, the two extra chairs melting away like water on the surface of Mars.

So they stood in the back, watching the opening act warming up the crowd.

Decorated to look like an Old West music hall, the place was filled with small tables, each having three to four chairs crowded around it and just enough room to hold drinks. Filled to capacity, the crowd was raucous but relaxed, ready to be entertained. Music pulsed around them, filling the room with a slow, rhythmic beat suggestive of sex, hot and sweaty.

All the tables taken, Sarhaan found a large support beam to lean against and pulled Caleb up to stand in front of him. His arms looped lightly around Caleb's waist, Sarhaan let gravity and the crowd push Caleb back against him, Caleb's ass pressing nicely against Sarhaan's dick.

Two muscular young men prowled the stage, dressed in someone's idea of Western wear: old fashioned broad-brimmed hats, vests with fringe over bare chests, and chaps. Except instead of traditional blue jeans, the pants underneath it all were thin and looked painted on. As the two men crossed paths, the shorter of the two reached down beneath the other man's chaps and yanked, the tear-away pants coming away clean. Playing to the crowd, the first man twirled his prize over his head, keeping time to the music with his whole body, his hips pumping suggestively as danced.

"Ho-- holy shit."

Sarhaan settled Caleb more securely against his body, twining his arms through Caleb's and drawing them behind Caleb's back. Just the opener, Sarhaan knew he had time before anything interesting was likely to happen and preferred to concentrate on the man in his arms.

"Oh, wow. Sarhaan, did you see that?"

"Mmm. Uh-uh." Busy kissing his way down Caleb's neck, Sarhaan hadn't seen anything. "You taste good."

It only took tightening up his arms a couple of extra millimeters to remind Caleb he was well and truly caught. His arms were held captive, and Sarhaan's dick pressed suggestively against his ass, while Sarhaan feasted on the succulent flesh of Caleb's neck.

“Look at that. Would you look at that?” Caleb’s voice was filled with urgency, so Sarhaan looked. Both men had lost their pants and were now kissing deeply, as each stroked the other’s cock.

“Yeah, whatever.”

“*Whatever?* But they’re... God, that’s so hot.”

Like Sarhaan wouldn’t have been glued to it if he didn’t have Caleb in his life -- in his arms, that is. But he did. “You’re hotter.”

Trying to maintain the balance between holding Caleb snug, but not too snug, was hard. *Nelly’s* was the classiest example of what Doradus called “gentlemen’s clubs” and it was filled with horny miners, hydro farmers and miscellaneous spacers, any one of whom would be on Caleb like a crooked cop on an unmarked credit chip should Sarhaan’s attention wander. It took a sizeable chunk of his mental capacity just to keep an eye on the room while he tried at the same time to drive Caleb crazy.

Caleb groaned weakly and Sarhaan flicked a quick glance at the stage in time to see the taller man leaning back on an old leather saddle, rolled on stage expressly for the purpose, while the first pants yanker kneeled at his feet, enthusiastically sucking him off. Hands on the tall man’s ass, head bobbing and plunging eagerly, the kneeling man looked capable of going all night.

Closer to home, Sarhaan echoed the suction Caleb was watching on the stage, sucking hard on Caleb’s neck, intent on leaving as conspicuous a mark as possible.

“Oh. Oh, wow. That was—”

Another groan shook Caleb’s body and he slumped against Sarhaan. Gazing down with satisfaction at the lurid mark on Caleb’s neck, Sarhaan knew the instant Caleb’s mind came back to him, because Caleb pressed his ass hard against the bulge in Sarhaan’s pants. Rubbing himself back and forth as much as he could, Caleb settled the ridge of Sarhaan’s erection in the crack of his ass and pressed. Then pressed harder.

Someone on stage must have shot his load, because the crowd burst into applause, a couple of especially appreciative observers whistling their approval. Caleb let his head fall back against Sarhaan’s shoulder, twisting his neck until their lips were close, almost touching, and they breathed each other’s air.

“Sarhaan?”

“Yes?” Their mouths brushed, not quite a kiss. The noisy room faded away, and Caleb’s eyes were all Sarhaan could see.

“Fuck me? Please?”

## Chapter Thirteen

He was going to lose his mind.

Or worse, come in his pants.

Sarhaan had him pinned -- Caleb's arms immobilized and useless. His dick harder than maybe it'd ever been, Caleb squirmed and pressed back on Sarhaan, trying to find some relief. God, he was just... he needed... Needed Sarhaan. Needed to have all of these clothes gone, rubbing himself on that big body.

"Please, Sarhaan? Let's get out of here. Go somewhere. Back to the ship."

Smiling down at him, Sarhaan didn't move. "That sounds good. But the show's just about to start. Don't you want to see the show?"

"The show? Screw the show. I want you." The mingled scents of wine and Sarhaan, the heat of Sarhaan's body, plastered along Cal's back, the tangy scent of sweat and the aroma of cigars everyone seemed to be smoking hovered over the crowd, the sight of the two men going at each other like they would never get enough -- it all made Cal want Sarhaan desperately. He was about to crawl out of his skin.

"That was just the warm-up. The teaser. This next bit is the hottest ticket in town, and I really want you to see it."

Cal stared up into Sarhaan's eyes. As dark as they were and as little lighting as there was, somehow Cal could still tell that Sarhaan wanted him. Whether it was the flare of his nostrils or the intensity of the gaze that stared back at him, the hard cock that felt like iron digging into his backside left him no doubt. So why couldn't they leave?

"Can't we go? I really want to go. I promise I'll be good." Channeling his frustration, Cal let his voice fall to a whisper, drawing out the last word. It drove him crazy to be this close, so completely aware of Sarhaan's size and heat, but unable to touch. He tried rubbing like a cat, but Sarhaan held him too close. Still, that felt like a hard-on worth worshiping in Sarhaan's pants.

Cal craned his neck to close the gap and touch his lips to Sarhaan's, only to have Sarhaan pull back. "No. Watch." Slipping an arm up, Sarhaan directed Cal's head with one big hand on his chin, turning it back toward the stage.

The cowboys must have taken their saddle and gone, because the stage now featured sand, palm trees that swayed in the ocean breeze and a bamboo hut. Only the hut was a bar, and the shirtless man standing behind it was a bartender, serving drinks to two men wearing swim costumes. Lighting so realistic that the sun seemed to be setting behind the



ocean revealed a fourth man lying on a chaise, wearing nothing but an easy smile and stroking an impressive erection while the three at the bar watched.

Cal wanted to ask Sarhaan which of the three watchers he thought would join the man on the chaise. Even half turned his head to speak when the bartender moved from behind the bar, removing his shorts with a practiced flourish to the delight of the watching crowd. Stroking himself as he approached the single man on the chaise, the bartender mouthed something to the two pretending to be patrons.

“Oh, wow. Are they...? Oh, look.”

Even knowing his mouth was hanging open, Cal didn't care because the two seated on stools in front of the bar turned to each other and kissed. One pinched the nipples of the other as his shorts were removed by the man being pinched. More kissing and pinching and in seconds all four on the stage were naked.

“Which one do you like best? The guy on the lounge? What about the bartender?” Sarhaan's voice rumbled low in Cal's ear and his arms came around Cal, one wrapped around his shoulders while the other dipped to palm Cal's crotch.

“Huh? Which one do I...? Oh, I don't know.”

The bartender bent low to kiss the man on the chaise briefly before filling his hands with lube from a bottle he must have brought with him. Handing the bottle to the two who had been seated on the stools, the darker of the two greased the backhole of the lighter skinned man, a hungry look in his eyes that Cal could spot even from the back of the room.

With so much going on, Cal didn't want to miss a stroke and things became easier when the two groups converged, centering around the man on the chaise. Nearly on overload already, Cal's breath caught in his chest when the bartender joined the first man on the chaise. Instead of either one penetrating the other, though, they aligned bodies so that their asses touched and the bartender cupped both cocks in his hands, stroking languorously. The first bar patron moved to stand at the head of the lounge, while the second straddled the two men now reclining, butt to butt, their cocks poised and ready.

“S-Sarhaan.” His throat so dry he had to begin twice, Cal couldn't believe what he was seeing.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Are they...? I mean, they can't. Can they?”

Cal groaned as Sarhaan removed the hand that had been cupping his crotch so comfortingly. He was cold without its protective covering. Vulnerable.

“I think they not only can -- I think they will.”

“Oh...” Needing more contact, Cal rubbed the side of his face on Sarhaan’s shoulder. So hard. So big.

Meanwhile, the fourth man, supported by the man at the head of the chaise, slowly lowered himself down until the first cock brushed his well-lubed asshole and the room held its collective breath. The chatter had died away and the room was all but silent except for the throbbing music, and even it seemed quieter somehow. Expectant.

As the man about to be fucked lowered himself further, the first cock breached his hole, and a chorus of appreciative sighs went up from the room.

“What do you think, Baby? Think he can really take two?” Sarhaan’s breath was warm in Cal’s ear, and Cal felt the tickle vibrate all the way down his spine and lodge in his crotch. His dick and balls were humming on the same frequency now, and Cal was so tight he was afraid he’d explode. He was squirming and groaning non-stop. He couldn’t help it, though. Being held by Sarhaan while he watched something even his most fevered imagination couldn’t have conceived of...

“Please, Sarhaan. Touch me. Put your hands back on me. Fuck, would you...? Oh, holy shit. Look. Look!”

“What do you think that feels like, huh, Caleb? He’s got two cocks in him now. Look how they’re stretching him.”

It was true.

The stage rotated ever so slowly and big mirrors overhead made sure no one missed a thing. Once the first man had his cock fully seated, the bartender gradually forced his cock in as well.

The dark-haired man being fucked looked... ecstatic -- there was no other word for it. His head lolled back on the chest of the man standing behind supporting him, his mouth open as one long, fevered groan poured out.

And then the two cocks inside him began to move. Pumping in short, measured strokes the dark-haired man could only lie passively -- accepting -- as two cocks plowed him with alternating strokes.

“Breathe, Baby. Yeah, watch that. Doesn’t he look incredible? Not as incredible as you, but still...”

“Oh, God, Sarhaan.” Cal panted, his dick so hard he hurt and nothing to rub against or to squeeze him. “*Please. Please?*”

Like warm chocolate, Sarhaan's voice poured into Cal's ear. "Soon, Baby. Soon. Caleb?"

The man being fucked *by two dicks at once* looked content, relaxed even, as he was buffeted by two bodies, each with its own separate rhythm. His mouth was open, still groaning, eyes rolled back in his head as though he was on a different plane of existence where nothing mattered except the demands of his body.

"Caleb?"

"Huh? Oh. Um, what?"

"Caleb, do you want me to fuck you?"

The voice was closer, hotter now somehow. Did he want? Of course! Hadn't he been saying? "Now. Yes."

"Then turn and look at me -- tell me something. Am I your lover?"

Suddenly the arms around Cal relaxed, big hands turned him and he could finally see, touch, taste Sarhaan. Wrapping his arms as tight around Sarhaan's neck as he could get them, Cal pressed close. "Of course you are. Of course you are." And then they were kissing. Swallowing each other whole. He couldn't get enough. Couldn't get close enough. Wanted, needed more.

Tearing his mouth away, Cal could barely get enough air to even speak. "Now. I need you now." Cal thought heads might be turning. People watching, maybe. He didn't care. He'd never wanted so badly in his life. Holding Sarhaan's gaze, Cal whispered the words into Sarhaan's mouth. "Fuck me."

"Let's go."

\*\*\*

The rooms were rented by the hour.

Sarhaan had reserved the Roman Bath suite for two hours, but he doubted they'd last that long. Caleb's hand clutched in his, Sarhaan threaded their way through the crowd and across the lobby to the side where the rooms were located. Aware of the glances they drew, Sarhaan knew that every last hungry-eyed one of the men they passed wished he was in Sarhaan's place -- about to enjoy some very private one-on-one with the angelically sweet, volcanically hot man at his side.

"Where are we going? Not all the way back to the ship, I hope."

Caleb's eyes reflected a small amount of worry layered on top of a whole lot of want. He licked his full lower lip, then dragged it between his teeth in that way that drove Sarhaan

absolutely crazy. Caleb looked like an angel who had wandered beyond the gates of heaven and fallen into bad company. This particular angel seemed to have gone in search of debauchery, and Sarhaan was more than happy to be the one to supply it.

“I reserved a room for us.”

“Here? Now? Where is it?”

Fishing in his pocket for the electronic chit that also served as a key, Sarhaan took a moment to savor the look in Caleb’s eyes. There were no barriers there now. No look that said, ‘only so much and no more.’ Sarhaan was looking directly into Caleb’s soul and seeing nothing but want and desire for him, and Sarhaan gloried in the knowledge.

Leading the way down the darkened hall Sarhaan searched among the half-dozen lighted signs, each displaying a stylized icon depicting the theme of the rooms, for the one he’d chosen. Stopping before the sign matching the key he held in his hand, Sarhaan glanced down at the visible bulge in Caleb’s pants. “Right here.”

Pressing the key to a magnetic pad recessed into the wall, Sarhaan ran his thumb over Caleb’s lips as they waited for the door to open. Holding Sarhaan’s gaze, Caleb turned his head just enough to capture the thumb and suck it quickly into his mouth, where he swirled his tongue around it in a wicked imitation. But it was the droop of Caleb’s eyelids and the extended intake of breath that stoked Sarhaan’s fires that much hotter, as much as it was the hand already reaching to undo the closure of his pants.

The door opened behind him and, with one hand on Sarhaan’s pants, Caleb grabbed a fistful of Sarhaan’s sweater and tugged Sarhaan along as he backed into the room. “So what are you waiting for?”

“You.”

Leaving the work of undressing Sarhaan half done, Caleb unfisted his hands and pulled his own shirt off. Pants next, Caleb shoved them down until they caught on his boots, ripped those off and then lastly the pants. Totally, gloriously naked, Caleb looked up at Sarhaan, a challenging look on his gorgeous face. “And now you’re all out of excuses.”

It defied description what Caleb’s attitude did to Sarhaan. His mouth opened reflexively to respond, but words eluded him. All Sarhaan could do was reach for Caleb and pull him close for a bruising kiss. Grinding their mouths together, Sarhaan grabbed Caleb’s ass in both hands and pressed their hips together, reveling in the feel of Caleb’s unencumbered cock rubbing freely against his own. Caleb was right about one thing, though -- too many clothes.

As much as he hated to, Sarhaan reluctantly released Caleb to get rid of the rest of his own clothing. Searching the room with his gaze as he stripped, Sarhaan quickly located the comfortable horizontal surface guaranteed for the price of the room -- a low bed with

plenty of small pillows -- as well as the adjacent tabletop covered with a selection of lubes and toys.

His hands busy undressing, Sarhaan gestured with his chin. "Over there. Go get ready." Clearly torn, Caleb glanced in the direction of Sarhaan's nod. "Go on."

Keeping his gaze glued on Sarhaan, Caleb backed slowly away, finally turning to examine the contents of the table. Shucking the last of his clothes, Sarhaan kicked them aside to join Caleb as he not so much selected as grabbed the first lube that came to hand. "Is this okay?"

"That's fine. Anything's fine. But let's go with this first." Ignoring the dildos, butt plugs and vibrators, Sarhaan grabbed two cock rings, one with snaps made of soft leather for Caleb. He dropped onto the adjacent bed, which placed the still standing Caleb's cock at a perfect height. Perfect for a lot of things, not just what Sarhaan had in mind, and he ignored the urge to lean forward and take Caleb's beautiful weeping cock into his mouth. Instead, he positioned the soft leather to run from underneath Caleb's balls, up and over his cock, where he snapped it into a snugly fitting ring. "Better late than never."

"Oh, wow. That feels... different."

"Hold on, we're almost there." Another time he'd like to lie back and study Caleb's face as the blood flowed into his cock and stayed there, restrained from flowing out by the leather cock ring. No time for that particular luxury now, though. Sarhaan gritted his teeth and ignored the voice of reason shrieking in his ear -- desperate times called for desperate measures -- as he fitted himself with another type of ring.

Also made of leather, the ring he'd chosen for himself had all the same features as Caleb's as well as something additional: small metal studs lined the inside. Hardly a masochist, wound up as he was, Sarhaan knew it would take something extraordinary to keep him from coming the second his cock slid into Caleb. So Sarhaan snapped the torture device into place and leaned back onto the bed. "Okay. Ready to ride?"

Caleb was nearly in another world. His eyes had that sleepy, unfocused look of someone truly gone -- so aroused he was barely conscious.

"Ride?"

"That's right. You're going to ride me. Now come over here."

Sliding back on the bed, Sarhaan enjoyed every second of Caleb's struggle to form coherent thoughts and force his body to obey commands. Caleb climbed haltingly onto the bed, crawling on all fours and only belatedly realizing part of his difficulty lay in having one hand already occupied holding the tube of gel lube.

“Put some on your fingers and rub it into your ass. Here, give me some too, first.” It was incredibly arousing to see Caleb so out of control with want that the man’s neurons could barely fire. “Take this,” Sarhaan squeezed some gel onto Caleb’s fingers, “and rub it into your asshole.”

Sarhaan drizzled more onto his own aching cock, getting a minute amount of relief from the chill of the gel, only to have his plan backfire and nearly lose it from watching Caleb’s arm twist behind him and his fingers disappear into the hot recesses of Caleb’s body.

“That’s enough.” Good ever-loving God, was that enough. “Now climb on and fuck yourself on my cock.”

That got Caleb’s attention. “Huh? But aren’t you...?”

“No, you are.” Sarhaan figured Caleb still had enough programming from home stuck in his head that being done to was probably easier than admitting the doing was co-equal. Well, that was one more barrier that was coming down tonight.

“Oh. Um... how do I do that?”

The poor boy looked adorably flustered, and Sarhaan was ready to take pity on him when the memory of Caleb turning his face away from Sarhaan’s kiss and declaring that off limits perversely appeared in Sarhaan’s head.

“Just how you think you are. You’re greased. I’m greased. And now you’re going to slide yourself down on my cock until you feel me in the back of your throat.”

“I am?”

“Oh, yeah. You are.” They stared into each other’s eyes, and Sarhaan could read the internal struggle going on there as clearly as if Caleb had spoken the words. But he wouldn’t back down. Caleb was going to admit to himself what was going on between them, and he was going to do it tonight.

Caleb looked away and the cold stiletto of fear slipped in between Sarhaan’s ribs. *No! Don’t deny me. Don’t deny us.*

It had to be Caleb’s decision and, although Sarhaan wouldn’t coax, he couldn’t stop himself from willing the response he hoped for with everything he had in him.

Caleb rocked forward as he rose up on his knees, reached behind him and fumbled a little before locating Sarhaan’s cock. Once he had, though, he sucked in his breath and held it as he slowly, slowly lowered himself down until the flushed head of Sarhaan’s cock brushed eagerly at Caleb’s entrance. God! It was unbearably hot to watch the

concentration on Caleb's face. His brow furrowed and Caleb's gaze lost its focus as his thoughts turned inward and he listened to his body.

The pinch of leather-bound metal squeezing his cock and balls provided a constant, if low level distraction for Sarhaan as Caleb let his weight carry him down. As Sarhaan's cock breached Caleb's body, Sarhaan dug his fingers into the bed's coverlet to keep from thrusting. Caleb moved slowly, cautiously downward, and Sarhaan ached to be completely buried in Caleb's body, not the dozen or so millimeters he was now.

An eternity of torture later, Caleb's ass rested on Sarhaan's thighs. Caleb was panting lightly and Sarhaan was so focused on the exquisite sensation of finally being where he'd longed to be that Caleb's voice was a shock.

"Sarhaan."

Grinding his teeth against the need to go wild inside Caleb's body, Sarhaan drew a long breath and concentrated hard to form a single word. "Yes?"

"Kiss me?" The need in Caleb's eyes made something inside Sarhaan turn over and he lost the ability to speak -- could only nod in response.

When Caleb bent forward and their lips touched, something else broke loose inside Sarhaan. He didn't stop to figure out what it was, just kissed Caleb back. And Caleb moved. Broke the kiss and raised himself up off Sarhaan, until his body caught on the hard knob of Sarhaan's bound cock, and slid back down.

It was as though once Caleb started moving, he couldn't stop. He lifted himself and let gravity pull him back again and again, until Sarhaan couldn't hold back any longer and began thrusting to meet Caleb. Their bodies merged, blended, worked together to ease the feverish ache.

Sarhaan couldn't have stopped himself if a full complement of base security had kicked down the door and held a beam rifle to his head. Thank God they didn't, because the tingling in his spine and the tightness in his balls meant he was coming soon and it felt world class, life altering, mind-blowingly fantastic.

Then he was coming and the force of it shocked Sarhaan. For long seconds, minutes, hours maybe, he pumped powerful jets of his spunk into Caleb's welcoming body. Sarhaan was still coming, in twitches and spasms, when Caleb brought a hand up to stroke himself off and come with his own strong bursts of pale semen splashing Sarhaan's chest.

When Caleb's gaze finally focused on Sarhaan's, it was dazed. Wondering. A weary, blissful smile curved Caleb's lips, and Sarhaan pulled him down for a slow, tender kiss. Finally, Caleb collapsed in a messy, boneless heap on Sarhaan's chest, Sarhaan's dick still buried in his sweet, hot ass.

Drawing a deep, satisfied breath, Sarhaan let his gaze roll up to the ceiling, seeing for the first time the elaborate erotic carvings that adorned it. Three-dimensional and painted to add realism, Sarhaan studied the scenes illustrated in the style of a long ago era. Men enjoying sex with other men in a wide variety of combinations and poses. Huge, outsized penises and extraordinary contortions were the norm. There was even a horned half-man, half-goat figure having sex with a goat.

Something about the goat figure drew Sarhaan's eye and it was with mixed relief and anger at his own stupidity that he realized what it was that had caught his eye.

It wasn't the goat, thank God.

It was the tiny camera disguised there.



## Chapter Fourteen

“Can’t we stay a little longer? I’m not ready to leave yet.”

“I’d like to, but I need to have a word with some— unh... someone.”

Cal smiled to himself and took another small bite of Sarhaan’s neck. Sarhaan liked to think he was tough. So above it all. But Cal could tell that he got to Sarhaan. “The water is nice. Have you ever made love in a Roman bath? I haven’t.”

Reaching between them, Cal cradled Sarhaan’s dick in his hand, thumbing lightly over the head. He pressed the sensitive spot just below it before running his hand down to capture Sarhaan’s balls. He’d done it innocently enough the first time, but the look on Sarhaan’s face and the catch in his breath pushed Cal to try it again.

Seated in the large, square bath that gave the suite its name, Sarhaan sat with his arms draped expansively along the edge. Although Cal had started out the same way, it hadn’t taken long for him to leave his spot next to Sarhaan and slide over to straddle Sarhaan’s lap. Now naked, wet, and moving suggestively over Sarhaan’s equally naked, wet body, Cal decided he was ready to stick around a while.

“You make your point pretty effectively. But I need to see a man about a, a room.”

The little stumble in Sarhaan’s speech came courtesy of Cal’s hand on Sarhaan’s balls, squeezing, even as he hooked his free arm around Sarhaan’s neck, swept back the heavy fall of braids and bit down on the soft skin behind Sarhaan’s ear. “What’s wrong with *this* room? There are more toys I want to try.”

“I’ll buy you all the toys you want. We’re leaving.”

Nose to nose, Cal studied Sarhaan’s dark eyes before pulling back to widen his survey to the sweep of Sarhaan’s eyebrows, the lean cheeks dominated by dramatic high cheekbones. The full lips, so expressive. Sensitive.

“But what if I don’t want to?” Looking down at the beautiful brown cock in his hand growing stiffer by the minute, Cal didn’t bother to hide his smirk. “Pardon me for thinking the interest isn’t all one-sided.”

“Baby, haven’t you figured out I’m always interested in you?”

“Good.” The sensations of lips touching, chests rubbing, dicks sliding had Cal’s head spinning. “Think that lube’s water-proof? See if you can reach it.”

“Slow down, Baby. This isn’t going anywhere, so you can just stop worrying about whether or not the lube’s waterproof, okay?”

“But, why?” Cal couldn’t resist a quick taste of those lips. God, so sweet. “We both want it.”

Sitting up to take Cal’s face between both his hands, Sarhaan spoke so softly into Cal’s ear he had to strain to hear. “Because they want it, too.”

Cal pulled back to look Sarhaan in the eyes. No question, Sarhaan was deadly serious. Shaking off the fog of desire that swirled around them was hard, though. He was naked. Genitals to genitals with the perfect embodiment of desire. Was it any wonder all he could think of was sex? Canting his head to one side, even shaking it a little, Cal couldn’t grasp what Sarhaan was talking about.

“Who?”

“Trust me?”

As if he had to ask. “Always.”

Again, speaking tonelessly into Cal’s ear. “Lean back while I hold you. Look up in the ceiling for the goat.”

“Kiss me first. I need a kiss.” God help him, it was true. What he saw in Sarhaan’s face was making him nervous.

Sarhaan didn’t hesitate, just gathered Cal close and kissed the daylights out of him. Wrapped one hand around Cal’s back, the other spread wide to palm the back of Cal’s head and then lips and tongue and teeth were mashing Cal’s. Then, just as abruptly, Sarhaan released him.

“Now lean back. Find the goat.”

Cal did as he was told. Held on to Sarhaan’s shoulders and let Sarhaan slip both hands behind Cal’s back and lower him down. Spreading his arms wide, Cal tried to pretend he was just enjoying the way the water buoyed up his body. The hot water and bubbles felt wonderful, but nowhere near as wonderful as his cock pressing hard against Sarhaan’s as he leaned back.

Half-floating, Cal closed his eyes and thought about how good Sarhaan’s bare skin felt. It was still hard to take in. Just a few weeks ago he’d been alone and lonely, his best friend dead and no one to turn to. What a difference a few weeks could make. Now he had a lover in a million -- how about a lover, period? -- as well as a real shot at making whoever had killed Daphne pay.

Steadied by the thought of Sarhaan and how far he’d come, Cal opened his eyes.

Pictures. A bas relief mural celebrating men loving men. Cal couldn't believe it. For someone who'd felt like an unnatural freak his whole life, seeing ancient depictions that said Cal was just another in a long line was incredibly liberating. He wasn't alone.

*Oh, stop it, Cal. This whole station can't be more than thirty years old. Forty, tops. Okay, so maybe they were recreations. Still. But wait -- he was supposed to be looking for something. The goat, Sarhaan had said.*

All right, there was the goat. While it didn't look to Cal as though the goat was having nearly as much fun as the horned creature buggering him, still ... that couldn't be what Sarhaan meant.

Little waves lifted Cal and carried him closer to Sarhaan, pulled him away, then pressed him close again. God, why couldn't they do something about the fire building inside him again?

"I give up. What am I missing?"

"The goat's eye. Look closer."

After just a few seconds Sarhaan hauled him up until they were belly to belly, so scanning the ceiling was out. "Are you sure we can't fuck again? I'd really like to." Cal added some hip thrust action to lend his argument piquancy.

"Caleb, that's a camera. Someone is watching. Maybe several someones."

"Really?" Cal craned his neck, but he couldn't be sure. "Who do you think it is?"

Sarhaan looked pissed. "No way to know. Probably anyone with the money to pay. They might even have regular subscribers."

"*Really?*" He tried leaning backwards again, but Sarhaan wouldn't let loose of him. "That's just so odd. Why would people pay? To watch."

"Like you and I just watched the floor show? Like that, you mean?"

The idea was beginning to take root in Cal's mind. It seemed unbelievable that anyone would pay to watch him do anything. He was just a policy analyst wonk from the government. Still, there was something undeniably titillating about it, nonetheless. Something a little forbidden.

"You are incredibly hot, it's true. But I'm just... me. People would pay to watch me?"

Sarhaan met his gaze. Took his face in his hands again and kissed him. God, that was nice. Would he ever get tired of it?

“Honey, when it comes to sex, people will pay for just about anything.”

\*\*\*

“You wanted to see me? I’m Joe Sotheran. And you are...?”

“Are you the manager?”

They’d been kept waiting a while so Sarhaan had had time to build up a good head of steam. It had been a pretty full evening and Cal was more than ready to call it a day, but he hadn’t had much success in persuading Sarhaan.

“Manager and part owner. What can I do for you, Mr...?”

Good-looking in a smooth sort of way, Cal could imagine that most people Sotheran met would be charmed. Not Sarhaan, though. The arm he had wrapped around Cal’s shoulders could have turned coal into diamonds, and he was clenching his jaw so hard Cal was afraid it would crack.

“Sarhaan. With the Republican gunship *Vigilant*.”

“Ah, yes. The military. I should have guessed. I noticed you and your companions in the Gold Dust room during the main show. I trust you found the show enjoyable?”

“Very. The room, too. Everything was great -- right up until we spotted your surveillance cameras.”

*Cameras?* Plural? He’d only seen the one Sarhaan pointed out. Cal looked questioningly at Sarhaan, but Sarhaan was too busy glaring at the manager to notice.

“Ah, yes.”

Oh, boy. That calm acceptance obviously ratcheted Sarhaan’s blood pressure up another notch.

“You’re not denying it, then?”

“Deny it? Of course not. If you examine your key card, you’ll notice in the fine print that we reserve the right to record all activities that take place on these premises.”

Cal decided the man was probably telling the truth. Hands shoved negligently into the pockets of a very expensive suit, the body language was anything but defensive. In fact, he seemed almost pleased with himself. Interesting.

Sarhaan, on the other hand, was seething. “That,” he sliced the word as though it was Joe Sotheran’s throat, “is something you would do well to let people know in advance.”

He really had to admire the man's calm. The easy shrug Sotheran managed in the face of Sarhaan's displeasure was impressive. "We do try to get people to read the room rental agreement in full but, you know how it is. Everyone is always in such a hurry."

"So what's your distribution? How widely is the feed seen?"

It made sense that Sarhaan would want to keep his face off of anything that might make its way back to Earth and pinpoint his and the rest of the team's whereabouts. They might be physically distant, but Cal was testament to the reality that in this day and age, no information was truly secure. Not that Cal cared so much for his own sake. He'd made his choice when he'd borrowed his uncle's ship and come looking for the *Vigilant*.

"In some cases, quite. You might be surprised who all likes to watch our little entertainments. In this case, though," Joe Sotheran, who had been concentrating his charm thus far on defusing Sarhaan's temper, turned to Cal with an easy smile, "there was no recording."

"Really? And why is that?" Sarhaan's glare remained unchanged.

"You might take it as something of a compliment, actually. I'd seen the two of you in the crowd watching the show and considered offering you a contract. Depending on what I thought of your performance privately, obviously."

"A contract for what?"

"To perform, of course. Either publicly in one of our salons, or for private shows. The two of you are each striking individually, but together ... you're quite something special. And yes, I was impressed. I would like to extend an offer, if you think you might be interested."

\*\*\*

"Do you think he gets many takers on his offer?"

"Oh, yeah. You bet. Five stages and every show sold out? I imagine he gets a fair number of recruits that way."

The tram back to the docking area and the *Vigilant* needed its linkage adjusted. The jerky ride was playing hell with Caleb's stomach, and watching the scenery go by in the circular pattern dictated by the spiral path back only made it worse. So he rode tucked close against Sarhaan's side, Sarhaan's arm around his shoulders, his face buried in Sarhaan's sweater.

Without the smirk on Joe Sotheran's smarmy face to ignore or the half-dozen beam weapons of *Nelly's* well-known security team pointed at his head, Sarhaan's adrenalin

surge was finally subsiding, and he could pause and reflect. A million conflicting emotions running through him at the time and nothing to be done but get through it.

Make love to Caleb with a hundred pairs of strange eyes watching? Not in this lifetime.

“Were you tempted? You didn’t ask, but I’ll bet the money was pretty good. Everything in the place looked first class.”

Caleb looked up only long enough to get his question out before turning away from the scenery going by in stomach-churning fashion.

“No. Not at all. You?” His own stomach a little queasy, Sarhaan gathered Caleb a little closer, resting his chin on Caleb’s head. Individually striking, were they? God, if he hadn’t had weapons trained on him the evening might have ended differently. As it was, seriously outnumbered and Caleb to think of, there’d been nothing to do but fall back and plan for another day.

“Not really. I mean, being as my credits aren’t working right now, the money would be nice, but—” Caleb shook his head, rattling Sarhaan’s teeth. “I can’t get over it. Back home it’s a capital offense and here they’re hiring people fresh off the street for the floor show. It’s a strange world, don’t you think?”

“You’re out on the frontier now, Babe -- there aren’t a lot of outposts further out than this. A few deep space mining operations aside, you’re in the back of beyond. You might have noticed that the average citizen on Doradus wouldn’t fit in well back home and there’s a good reason. A person doesn’t take off for the outermost edge of civilization if they’re satisfied with the status quo.”

Rubbing his hand absently up and down Caleb’s arm, the goose bumps beneath his fingers reminded Sarhaan that the temperature and other climate controls didn’t work as well toward the poles of the rotating cylinder Doradus was carved from. His problem was that he hadn’t been around enough civilians lately to be used to their sensitivities to heat and cold. Just another adjustment he’d need to keep in mind as long as Caleb was around.

“I guess that makes sense. Sandy and Kai told me a little about the place, but sometimes you’ve just got to see things with your own eyes.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

Caleb didn’t respond, so Sarhaan let the conversation lapse. Holding Caleb, he watched the lights of Doradus retreat behind them and let his mind go blank.

\*\*\*

“Do you mind if I—?” Caleb didn’t wait for an answer, just slipped his arms around Sarhaan’s waist, chilly hands burrowing under Sarhaan’s sweater at his back.

“Still cold? Only one more airlock to go.”

“I’m sorry. No one mentioned how damp it is out here.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind.” Sarhaan let Caleb’s weight settle against him and leaned against the wall. Warm in all the right places, just the feel of Caleb pressing his body close had Sarhaan thinking about skipping the debriefing he’d planned with D’abu. It was a little unsettling, how much he wanted Caleb and how much time he spent thinking about him. Anticipating their next meeting. Thinking about what they’d do together.

He’d never had this kind of connection with anyone before. Ever.

Sure, he and his teammates were close. Sarhaan had worked with D’abu and Kai so long they were like family. More so than even his mother or his sister. On extended missions, or sometimes even just after a few beers, they would bicker like some demented old married threesome.

But what he was feeling for Caleb... It was all new. Friendship, sure. He liked the basically sunny nature paired with a first-class brain. And the body... good lord. The lust that seized him even when he just looked at Caleb was staggering.

It was the tenderness, though, that really threw Sarhaan for a loop. He wasn’t used to that -- not by a long shot.

“Thanks for taking me to *Nelly’s*. That was interesting. Mmm, you taste good.” Caleb’s first tentative lick morphed into an open-mouthed kiss, suction pulling at the skin of Sarhaan’s neck.

“You’re welcome. That’s going to leave a mark, you know.”

“Like the one you left on me, you mean? Would you mind?” Pulling back, Caleb met Sarhaan’s gaze, something unreadable in it.

“For myself, not at all. The other guys are already envious enough, though. I don’t want to rub their noses in it.”

“Hmm. I’m not so sure about the envious part, but I guess I see your point.” His gaze turned considering, Caleb tilted his head a bit and squinted. “I don’t think I can resist, though. You’re too tasty.”

Caleb was angling his head to go after Sarhaan’s neck again when the click of the airlock unlatching stopped him in mid-swoop and the door slid back. Kai Xuwicha stood waiting, standing quietly, yet still managing to convey patience stretched to its limit.

Dropping an arm around Caleb's waist, Sarhaan and Caleb stepped on to the *Vigilant*, Kai falling into step beside them. Caleb was shorter than he and Kai by just enough to make eye contact over his head with Kai possible. "I don't usually rate a welcoming committee. What's the occasion?"

"I wanted to give you a sit rep so you'd know what you're walking into."

"Go on."

"It was a lively night at *Nelly's*, as it turns out. Seems we weren't the only ones enjoying the amenities."

That telepathy he'd just been musing on made an appearance and asking the question was really just a formality. "Bartok?"

Making the turn from the long tunnel of the succession of airlocks and toward the center of the ship, they passed Vilnius and Naslund hurrying in the other direction, obviously wasting no time in taking Sarhaan and Kai's slots on leave.

When they'd passed, Kai nodded. "Yup. Hauled back to the ship by the good sheriff's men, no less, and looking like he did a face-plant into a spin de-coupler."

"Poor Dave. He's either going to have to learn to be less of an asshole or improve his defensive skills. Who'd he piss on this time?"

Between them, Caleb was looking from Kai's face to Sarhaan's, his agitated expression growing. They weren't far from their quarters, though. Reassuring Caleb would have to wait.

"I saw him a couple of times, with a couple of different entertainers. Probably trying to get a deal, knowing him. Dave would push it, figuring he could get away with it. He doesn't get that we're not back home any more and he probably mouthed off to the wrong person."

"They don't take any crap at *Nelly's*."

"No shit. But that's not the really interesting thing that happened. Guess who else I saw at *Nelly's* tonight."

At his and Caleb's suite finally, Sarhaan opened the door and stood back, waving Kai inside as he and Caleb followed. "Who?"

"Alex."

Sarhaan could only stop and stare, a doomed face with tragic eyes haunting his memory. "Really?"



“Uh-huh. He’s working there now.”

Alex.

If only. If only Sarhaan had done more. Tried harder. “Really? Is he doing okay? How did he look?”

*Alex.*

“Not bad. About what you’d expect. Okay, he looked like shit.” Kai’s gaze flickered, glanced at Caleb and... Crap. Caleb.

“Caleb. Can you give me a minute here?”

Oh, perfect. Now Caleb was looking at him like he’d just drop-kicked a puppy.

“Sure. No problem.” Caleb turned his back, clasped his hands behind him and walked over to the desk, pretending to examine the monstrosity of a painting that hung behind it.

Maybe it was leftover residue from the tram ride, but when Sarhaan turned back to Kai, his gut was churning. “You’re sure it was Alex?”

Brows raised, Kai stared back. “You really think I’d mistake him? Could you?”

“Fuck.”

“What am I missing here, Sarhaan? I thought you’d be happy he finally got out of that place. I know I was.”

How to explain the complex mix of emotions running through him? “No, of course. I mean, yes. Absolutely. Only now I have to go see him. Tell him why we didn’t do what we said we’d do.”

“You did what you could. We all did.”

Disgust fought with shame and embarrassment inside him. “Did I?”

Kai, it seemed, hadn’t given up on him. “Listen, you can beat yourself up later. In the meantime, though, I think we ought to get back there and talk to him A.S.A.P. He’s got some pretty interesting things to say about who’s behind the murdered prostitutes. In case you’re interested.” Kai paused and looked to where Caleb stood, looking for all the world as though he was fascinated by a second rate bit of paint on canvas. “And I think Cal ought to come along.”

Folding his arms across his chest, Sarhaan let out a long breath and joined Kai in staring at Caleb's back until, finally, he faced the inevitable. "Okay. Oh-eight-hundred?"

"Better make it ten-hundred. The staff at *Nelly's* doesn't strike me as much of a morning bunch of people."

Sarhaan saw Kai to the door. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

Looking back at Caleb, Kai looked thoughtful. "Any time."

The door snicked shut and Sarhaan returned to Caleb, moving behind him and wrapping Caleb in his arms, talking softly into one ear. "Hey."

"Hey."

"So you heard all that?"

Caleb nodded and Sarhaan couldn't decide if talking to the picture made it easier or harder. "I heard."

"What do you think?"

"I think I want to know who Alex is."

## Chapter Fifteen

“Comfortable? Are you warm enough?”

Cal chided himself for offering his heart up on a platter to be diced into little pieces, even as he laid his head on Sarhaan’s chest and pressed closer. There wasn’t a micron’s worth of air between them as it was, but still he tried. “I’m okay. Tell me.”

That was a lie. He wasn’t okay. Cal ached inside and wondered how much more he could take. It wasn’t like he thought of Sarhaan as his own. Not really. It wasn’t as though they’d made promises to each other. But still... He hated hearing Sarhaan talk to Kai with that special note of concern in his voice.

Sarhaan sighed and cinched his arm tighter around Cal, while Cal’s free arm rested over Sarhaan’s belly. If this had been another sort of conversation, Cal would have let his hand stray down to cup Sarhaan’s dick and balls. He wanted to even now, just as a superstitious measure, like touching a lucky talisman. But Cal held back. If this was the beginning of the end, he wanted to go out with as much of his dignity intact as he could manage.

“There’s a resort back home. It’s called *Earthly Delights* and it’s primarily for the rich and powerful, although there’s the occasional exception. It takes a lot of money or influence to get in and even then it’s not a certainty. You have to know someone. What makes this place different, though, is that members can get anything they want there. Anything.”

Even with his eyes closed, Cal could tell when Sarhaan was looking at him. Was he expecting a response? “I’ve heard of it.”

The silence dragged out before Sarhaan picked up his story again. “Normally someone like me wouldn’t be allowed within kilometers of the place, but last year after a long deployment, Kai, D’abu and I were sent there for a week.”

“A reward.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. Even though homosexuality’s been outlawed for fifty years, they still have... ‘entertainment’ at *Earthly Delights* for those inclined.”

Cal brushed his fingers lightly over the firm muscles of Sarhaan’s waist and got no small amount of satisfaction from the shiver he elicited. “You were inclined.” He didn’t know how he knew. He just did.

“Of course. A false sky you could take your shirt off under and not be afraid of a radiation burn. Water enough to swim in. Beautiful young men who would do anything to

make sure we were sufficiently 'relaxed.' Maybe someone, somewhere, could resist that, but I couldn't."

Afraid he was going to be physically sick, Cal took long, steady breaths in through his nose, letting them out slowly through his mouth. "Alex?"

"Mmm-hmm. He was assigned to Kai and me and he kept us very relaxed. Massages, alcohol, drugs, sex."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh.' By the end of the week we couldn't imagine life without Alex in it. We were even high enough to suggest it. Everything is surveilled there -- everything recorded. They knew the second it was out of our mouths, if not before." Sarhaan stopped talking, and Cal looked up. Eyes unfocused, gazing off into the distance, Cal wondered what Sarhaan was seeing in his memory.

"But it didn't happen?"

"Huh? No, of course not. We got to see, via video, though what happened to Alex after we left. They made sure we knew that it wouldn't stop so long as we tried to contact him. We tried, once we were back on base, to come up with a plan. We didn't get very far."

"You were in love with him." Cal could hardly get the words out, but he had to know.

"In love? I don't know. We cared about him. He was sweet and funny. Sarcastic as hell. We all laughed a lot, I remember that. It was... hard... to want to help and not be able to do a goddamned thing. About the best I could hope for was that all the drugs they gave him let him not remember much."

"What were they giving him?" Why torture himself? Cal didn't want Alex to be a sympathetic character, or even human, because Alex had something Cal didn't and never would have: Sarhaan's heart.

"Pink."

"Pink Diamond?"

"Yeah. Perfect for keeping gay boys hard and receptive. Enough of that -- especially if they combined it with Fire, or even alcohol -- he'd be in no position to say no. To even want to."

His heart ached for everyone involved. Cal wanted to be angry, or even hurt. But that called for a villain, a bad guy to rail against. And except for the rich, corrupt individuals who exploited the system to create this sort of situation, Cal couldn't see one. Not Sarhaan, nor Kai and certainly not Alex. Maybe that was why Sarhaan couldn't love Cal -

- because he'd already given his heart to Alex. That would be like Sarhaan: loyal to a fault. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. If I was smarter or stronger..."

"Shh. It's not your fault, either. Kai says the same thing and he was there." Cal's chest hurt. The dull pain behind his ribs that had begun when Sarhaan had sketched out the first broad outlines of his story and peaked when Sarhaan had blamed himself was subsiding a little. But it wasn't going away entirely, and Cal doubted it ever would.

"Kai's letting me off the hook and he shouldn't. He knows better. Neither should you, for that matter."

"How about if we try to get some sleep? I don't know about you, but I'm beat and tomorrow's looking like another long day."

Thank God his consulate training had given Cal plenty of practice in, if not lying, judicious use of the truth with intent to mislead. He knew he would be a long time falling asleep, if he managed it at all. He just couldn't stand to hear any more tonight.

\*\*\*

Alex wasn't what Cal had expected, not at all. He couldn't have said what that was, though -- sleeker, prettier, taller, maybe.

Not this thin, dark-haired boy with circles under his eyes, tipping spoonful after spoonful of sugar into his coffee. Wrapped in a dressing gown, his narrow feet bare, even the thick plush of the gown's material couldn't disguise the fact that Alex could stand another twenty kilos of weight on him. Even then he'd never be bulky and Cal had a hard time picturing Alex taking Sarhaan's weight -- not that that could stop his overactive imagination from trying.

"Alex. How are you?"

"Not bad, Ess. Not bad at all. Better now that I'm out of that dump. How about you? Kai told me you and the team left town in a hurry, too."

Traces of what had probably been a charming smile showed through. It didn't reach Alex's eyes, though. His otter brown hair stuck out at odd angles and what was probably once a peaches and cream complexion had a sallow cast to it.

"What was left of us. But yeah, there are a few people would like to have a serious word with us." They were all gathered around a small table in one of the private apartments above *Durty Nelly's*. Most of the staff, they'd found out, made more than enough money to afford more luxurious surroundings. But Alex, new to Doradus and not many credits to his name, was accepting management's offer of a place to stay temporarily.

“Alex, tell Sarhaan and Cal what you told me about your last client at *Earthly Delights*.” Kai, standing behind Alex, placed a reassuring hand on Alex’s shoulder and left it there, rubbing in slow, circular motions. Alex looked over at the hand, then up to Kai’s face, and Cal wondered what passed between them. Whatever it was, Alex must have found what he was looking for. After staring into his coffee for several moments, he raised his gaze.

“Sometime after you all left, I got a new client. I knew he was military because he didn’t try to hide that, but I didn’t find out his name for a while. I knew he was important by the way the handlers would all go into a tizzy before one of his visits and by the way they got him anything he wanted. It didn’t matter how much extra work it took or how difficult to obtain, whatever he wanted he got.”

Alex took a long drink from his coffee, his gaze not fixed on anyone in particular. As though he could somehow maintain his distance if he didn’t make eye contact with any of the concerned faces at the table.

“Those of us at *Earthly Delights* with specialties got a lot of repeat customers, but I’d never seen this guy before. I don’t know where he’d been getting his jollies previously, but it definitely wasn’t his first time with another man. He had most of the usual requests, plus he liked to be called ‘Daddy’ -- and not in any leatherdaddy, D/s kind of way, either. Not that it makes a whole lot of difference to the story.”

Cal’s stomach twisted at the small, bitter smile that formed on Alex’s face. Whatever past he shared with Sarhaan and Kai, his more recent experiences sounded like hell on earth, all the more chilling for the matter-of-fact tone of the telling.

“So, anyway, one day when he’s visiting me -- after another round of ‘Daddy seduces his virgin son’ -- he thinks I’m asleep and he gets on the comm line. I hear him talking to someone he calls Jim, asking how the new product testing’s coming along. They talk and, of course I’m only hearing his side of it, but I get that just as the second phase is being rolled out, the first round that they thought was so successful is having problems.

“Something about levels of the drug -- ‘cause it’s a drug they’re talking about -- build up over time. When it reaches a certain threshold in the body, instead of being docile and eager, the effects flip and they go into a rage. Completely uncontrollable. They’re so whacked out and it takes so long to bring them back from it that it’s just cheaper to kill them and get new ones.

“So I guess people are beginning to notice the numbers of bodies piling up. It sounded like the ones that have been found were just a fraction of the real total. Apparently most of them were disposed of more discreetly, but their man in Havana got lazy and let some be found. People started asking questions. Jim and my guy were looking for ways to make the problem go away while preserving the profit margin.”

“Like shutting up the coroner’s assistant who’s keeping notes on the victims?”

Cal’s question hung in the air for a moment before Alex turned to answer. “Was the assistant female? There were a few people they wanted off their backs. A couple of reporters, I remember. And he mentioned ‘that little cunt in the lab.’ Does that fit?”

Nodding briefly, Cal saw Daphne’s face, swollen and discolored from the beating she’d taken before she died and thought about the kind of people who would do that to protect a business interest. “You said you found out his name eventually?” He had to know.

“Lt. Colonel Stephen Thurmond. I’m pretty sure Sarhaan and Kai know him.”

Cal looked from one to the other, witnessing the instant recognition in their eyes.

Sarhaan looked at Kai. “Our boss’s boss. Small world, huh?”

\*\*\*

“Oh good, you’re back. I want to show you something.”

The way Caleb’s eyes focused on him so intently, Sarhaan could tell whatever it was had him pretty excited. Seated at Sarhaan’s desk, his hair was ruffled, as though Caleb had run his hands through it repeatedly -- just the way Sarhaan had seen him do when he was concentrating.

“Yeah? Whatcha got?” Sarhaan set his beer down long enough to pull his shirt over his head and toss it on the couch before retrieving the beverage and heading over to take a look at what Caleb had going.

“I’ve been working on—”

Something about the way Caleb’s eyes went wide for an instant and the way his mouth dropped open briefly when he turned his head made Sarhaan’s day. Caleb was so beautifully made, so insanely sexy, that Sarhaan couldn’t help getting a kick out of turning the tables, even just a little.

“Yes?”

Caleb was getting better at reading him, though, because it only took a glance at Sarhaan’s grin for Caleb to realize he was being played. “Don’t try to distract me. I’ve been working with the information we got from Alex and trying to track down this guy Thurmond.” Caleb’s smile widened to near blinding, and Sarhaan knew what to expect. “I found him.”

Rounding the desk for a better view, Sarhaan braced one hand on the chair Caleb used, the other on the desk and leaned in. Caleb had turned back to the screen where he’d

assembled a jumbled hodgepodge of unconnected images and information. Obviously doing his best to resist his body's urges, Caleb gripped a pen so tightly in one hand Sarhaan was amazed it didn't shatter. For his part, it was all Sarhaan could do not to guide Caleb's mouth to the naked skin of his belly. Who knew where that might lead?

"Very nice. What's all this here?" He tapped the computer screen, where a map of Hispaniola was covered with clusters of dots.

"You'll like this. I looped in a map of the area with Daphne's notes. First I scanned everything I could find on Thurmond's life for connections to the name Jim -- there were kind of a lot, as I'm sure you can imagine. Then, I took Thurmond's movements and tracked them against the places the bodies were found. Of course there wasn't much there, but then, I didn't really think your buddy would be disposing of the bodies himself. So—" Sarhaan threaded his fingers up through Caleb's hair, palming the back of his head. A shiver rippling across his shoulders, Caleb persevered. "So, I plugged in data from the police and coroner's files for missing persons in those areas. That's when things got really interesting."

Caleb looked up, sought and found Sarhaan's gaze. Filled with excitement, Caleb's face positively shined, and Sarhaan couldn't resist. He had to lower his head the rest of the way until their mouths met.

Stroking his tongue into Caleb's mouth, Sarhaan took his time as Caleb's hand came up and gripped the bare flesh at Sarhaan's waist, took things deeper when Caleb's fingers curled inward for a tighter hold.

"Wait. Wait." Abruptly, Caleb pulled away, the hand at Sarhaan's waist moving to cover Sarhaan's mouth. "Don't start. I need to show you this."

Clear brown eyes looked back at him with heartbreaking sincerity. How could he possibly tell Caleb? It didn't help that Sarhaan knew this wouldn't end well.

"Look." Caleb turned back to the computer screen. "The blue dots represent business holdings of one James Van Aukken. Mr. Van Aukken, it turns out, not only went to school with your man Thurmond, but he's got some very close ties with several area governors as well as more than one member of the High Council. The black dots represent sites where bodies were found. Don't you think it's interesting that the black dots are found almost exclusively in areas surrounding blue dots?"

Pulling up a second chair, Sarhaan sat next to Caleb and looked at what Caleb had assembled. He must have worked on it all day. While D'abu had been working with the exosensor specialist, Sarhaan, Kai and Naslund had been following up with local contacts on business possibilities. Their banked credits wouldn't last forever and they had to find a way to bring in money now that they didn't have the government taking care of their needs.



“That’s great work, Caleb. How’d you put it all together?”

Caleb grinned, obviously proud of himself. “It was easy once I knew where to look. That was unbelievable luck, running into Alex. I mean, really, I shouldn’t have needed him to tell me. But once he did, everything fell into place.”

Sarhaan spent a moment looking at the map Caleb had assembled while he ran what he knew of the facts through his head. “Okay, I see Van Aukken’s interest, but how does Thurmond tie in? Why does Van Aukken even need him?”

“Oh, I didn’t mention that? Sorry. He needs him for the drugs -- they’re made in a military lab. They were actually a by-product of the same program that turned out your unit.”

“Not sure what you mean. You mean the military selection process? What’s that got to do with making drugs?” Poor kid. Concentrating on following information trails all day must have fried his circuits.

“No. Rondi’s lab. Dr. Rondi? He was in charge of the lab, the project, the whole deal.”

Fingering the label on his beer, Sarhaan tried to focus. Caleb seemed so sure of himself, but he wasn’t making sense. “Sorry, not getting it. What project?”

“The Prometheus Project. Eugenics. Breed a better soldier. All of the—” Caleb suddenly froze, his gaze fixing itself on Sarhaan’s. “You didn’t know? Ohmy...*you didn’t know*. None of you?”

Eugenics? Prometheus Project? A cold, solid mass settled like stone in Sarhaan’s stomach as incidents from his life rolled through his head. Order and reason were impossible. Jumbled memories rushed in and fought for priority. Always being taller, stronger, fitter than the other kids in his class. Natural aptitude for anything involving action or conflict. The inherent assumption of the military as the prime focus of his life. But most of all, his mother’s countless evasions on the topic of his father’s identity.

His mother.

His sister, for that matter. *And why was he taking Caleb’s word?* He’d been trained to test the quality of the intel he received. This would be a prime time not to forget that.

“You’re sure?”

Caleb was staring at him, an ‘oh, fuck’ look frozen on his face. “Sarhaan, I’m sorry. I never thought—”

“Yeah, well I think we’ve established that this is new information for me. Tell me what else you know that I don’t.”

Looking like he'd been slapped, Caleb turned back toward the computer and began closing some files, opening others. "I'm sorry. I never would have said it like that if I'd had any idea—"

"Okay, got it: you're sorry. Can we move on to the pertinent info now?"

"Sure. Of course. Just let me..." Caleb sat up straighter and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Give me a second, I've got it right here."

Sarhaan adjusted the screen to give himself a better angle, edging his chair closer.

"Thanks. I need to look at this."

"No problem. Let me just get out of your way."

In a sick sort of way it all fit. The constant medical monitoring, the incessant physicals, the way no one in the unit ever seemed to get so much as a cold. What an idiot. How could he have been so ignorant? So stupid. So blind.

Of course, it was all brutally clear now. Just like Caleb had said: now that someone pointed it out to him, it was so glaringly obvious.

It took him a while to wade through the material. Caleb had earmarked files that had to have been pulled from the depths of the government's gargantuan data warehouse. Any sort of explanatory details of Project Prometheus were scarce. Mostly it consisted of pages and pages of charts, empirical data cross-referenced to clinical trials; genetic mapping abstracts, some going all the way back to the Human Genome Project of the last century.

What kind of mind was required to come up with something like this? What monumental hubris did it take to play God with human lives? To try to perfect humanity? To breed humans the way they did horses or dogs?

Not to mention waste on a scale it was hard to even comprehend. Was this truly the best use of precious resources? Had disease been wiped out? A solution to world hunger found? The environment healed?

"Caleb, do you have any more data on how many total subjects were involved? And what about parallel projects? I'm counting... in the hundreds. So where did they all go?"

Sarhaan combed through another screen, looking for information on where all the test subjects ended up. His unit was pretty well accounted for but— "Caleb! Did you find out where the rest of the test subjects went?"

Looking up, a scan of the room took only seconds.

Caleb was gone.

## Chapter Sixteen

“This isn’t bad. What do you call this?”

“That’s a martini.”

“You’re lying. I’ve had a martini and it tasted like rocket fuel. But this... this is nice.”

Cal swirled the bright green liquid in his glass, admiring the color. Tart but sweet, the tiny chips of ice floating in it reminded him of stars floating in the night sky. Except stars were usually white, not clear like ice. And the sky was black at night. It was black during the day, too, come to think of it. But except for that, it looked exactly the same.

The man behind the bar smiled and shrugged. “I made a couple of minor modifications to the recipe, but that’s a martini. Trust me.”

Twirling his glass until he had the contents spinning like planets around a sun, Cal opened his mouth and downed the rest in one long, sustained gulp. “Another, please, bartender?”

“You got it.” The past few weeks aside, Cal didn’t have much experience flirting. But he was pretty sure that’s what the man behind the bar was doing. The bartender’s grin kicked up on one side as he shot Cal a sidelong glance from beneath curling dark lashes.

Maybe it was the martinis talking, but Cal couldn’t help smiling back. “Thanks.” The pleasure didn’t go straight to his crotch the way it did when Sarhaan smiled at him, but still... It was nice to be desired.

“Here ya go.” Setting down the drink on top of the napkin he’d slapped down a half-second before, the bartender picked up a towel and went back to polishing the glass he’d been working on before Cal’s order. “I don’t think I’ve seen you in here before. New to the station?”

The third drink slid down as smooth as the second, and Cal had a nice little buzz going. It felt good to smile and bask in the glow of a stranger’s admiration. “It shows, huh?”

“Eh. After a while you get to know the look and, believe me, you don’t have it. For one thing, you’re too clean. Spacers, miners and farmers -- aren’t any of ‘em the sweetest-smelling folks you’ve ever met.”

Licking a bit more of the sugar from the drink’s rim, Caleb laughed. “So I have to reek to fit in?”

“Not for me, you don’t.” The bartender’s killer smile faded. “Friend of yours?”

“Huh?” Following the direction of the man’s gaze, Cal turned. “Sandy! What’re you doing here?”

The big man settled onto the stool next to Caleb’s and nodded to the barkeep. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

“Hey, Sandy. This is great. I won’t have to wait for the tram by myself.”

Sandy eyed the drink placed in front of him suspiciously and took an exploratory sip. After making a face Cal couldn’t decipher, he quickly tossed back the rest. “Not bad,” and nodded again in the bartender’s direction. “You here by yourself? How many of these things have you had, anyway?”

Cal propped his chin in his hand. “Just a couple. Three, maybe? But yeah, here by myself. Sarhaan needed some room, so I got out of his way.” Sandy’s question brought back everything Cal had been trying so hard not to think about. “It’s good to see you, Sandy.”

“Good to see you, too. What do you mean, got out of Sarhaan’s way? Since when are you in his way?”

“Since I—” *Idiot. Don’t make the same mistake twice.* He’d been about to open his big mouth again. “Since I told him something he didn’t want to hear. And besides, now that Alex is back in the picture, I think it’s probably time for me to start making alternate plans.”

A hand twice the size of one of Cal’s came down on his shoulder. “Listen, Cal, I don’t know what you’re talking about. But, first of all, Sarhaan’s a big boy and I guarantee if what you told him’s the straight truth, he wants to hear it. And second, I hope you let someone on the *Vigilant* know where you are.”

“I don’t need a babysitter, Sandy. I can take care of myself.” As a matter of fact, he’d come to town, in part, to try to begin handling things on his own. Swinging around on his barstool, Cal scanned the room, sizing up its assorted occupants and not finding anything he didn’t think he could handle.

“I’m sure you can. But letting someone know your whereabouts at all times is a good habit to get into. Besides keeping an eye on things, it makes it easier to round folks up when it’s time to leave. I don’t think you want to be left behind when we finally get going again.”

Cal looked around the room and tried to imagine what living on the station full-time would be like. If it wasn’t for the need to go back and make things right for the sake of Daphne’s memory, Cal didn’t think he’d mind staying. It was certainly a different life than he’d been raised to expect.

As his gaze idly swept the room, Cal intercepted an appraising look from a miner sitting alone near the back. The man had all the earmarks typical of the independent miners that frequented Doradus: drab utilitarian clothing, spiky, punked-out hair, and enough weapons to kit out a small army. Not normally what Cal considered his type -- nice enough face, but tall and beanpole thin -- still, Cal gazed back for a moment. Although his first instinct was to dismiss the man and move on, maybe the smart thing was to be open to possibilities. Who knew what changes were coming?

It took a few extra moments for Sandy's words to sink in. "Get going again? Are we leaving soon?"

Sandy turned on his seat, matching Cal's slouch, elbows on the bar behind them. "I don't think anything's been definitely decided, but I'd guess in another day or two, three at the most. Docking here is expensive. Repairs are expensive." Sandy arched an eyebrow in the direction of the bar. "Drinks sure as hell aren't cheap. We need to get something going that brings in the credits, pronto, or we'll be leaving whether we think we're ready or not."

"What kinds of things are you thinking about?" That sounded semi-intelligent. Already one drink past his usual limit, Cal was pleased to not only be following the conversation, but actually contributing.

"A little of this, a little of that. Use your imagination." Sandy glanced pointedly at the nearby occupied tables. "We can talk more when we get back to the ship."

Enlightenment dawned. "Oh, I get it. Sure thing. Gotcha. We'll talk later." Cal reached for his drink and, realizing it was empty, signaled to the bartender for another. He probably shouldn't but, what the heck. They went down easy and with every one he drank, the certainty that he would lose Sarhaan soon got easier to ignore.

"Kid, no offense, but do you think you really need another one? I'm not your mother, but I say one more of those and we'll be pouring you into the tram."

"I can take care of myself, Sandy. I'm not a kid and like I keep telling people, I've had training. Once we get back to Earth and we finally have the chance to do something about Daphne's murder and your team being blamed for it, maybe someone will finally believe me. What? Why is that funny?"

This was really starting to piss Cal off. It was bad enough that Sarhaan didn't take him seriously, but Sandy— He'd thought Sandy was his friend, yet that was definitely a snicker Sandy was trying to hide. Just then the bartender arrived with Cal's drink, setting it down in front of Cal. Before Cal could so much as taste it, Sandy reached over, picked it up and drained it himself.

"C'mon, kid, what say we get out of here? Don't you think we've done enough damage for one night? I say we go back to the *Vigilant*, ease your boyfriend's mind that you're

safe and sound and continue this discussion somewhere a little more private. Sound good?"

That stopped Cal in his tracks. "My boyfriend?"

*My boyfriend.* His temper floated away on the tide of bittersweet nostalgia that rose in him at just the mention of those archaic, forbidden words. Memories of lying in his bed at night dreaming of having someone to call his own slid easily past the doors Cal had locked them safely behind. Before he'd even known exactly what it was men did together, the thought of holding hands -- kissing had seemed too daring to even contemplate seriously -- of having a boyfriend had been the secret he'd kept from everyone in his life. Everyone except Daphne.

Daphne hadn't been shocked. She hadn't thought he was weird or sick or any of the names society, the government and all its handmaids, and even religion put on him and people like him. Daph told him that love was love and the only sin was not being true to yourself.

"Aw, you're not going to go all modest and femme-y on me, are you? Please. Man's crazy about you. Walks around half the time with a hard-on that could dent titanium."

"You really think so?"

Cal couldn't help the breathy, hopeful note in his voice any more than he could help the wild fluttering going on inside him. The tiny detail that what Sandy was telling him didn't match up with anything factual Cal could actually point to didn't matter. If wishing could make it true, this would be it for him.

\*\*\*

It shouldn't be hitting him this hard.

Sarhaan wasn't pacing because he was worried. It was just a build-up of unspent energy needing an outlet, that was all. And he wasn't upset, either. D'abu had commed him to let Sarhaan know he'd found Caleb and that the two of them were on their way back to the ship. The tightly clenched ball of muscles in his gut was just... was just...

Sarhaan gripped his hands behind his back. Re-gripped them. Stopped dead in his tracks and stared at his boots. Who the hell did he think he was fooling? Certainly not himself.

He was eaten up with worry for Caleb.

Ever since he'd scanned the ship for Caleb's identi-chip and come up empty, scenarios had been running through his head, each one worse than the last.

If Caleb could be hijacked and assaulted on board the Vigilant, God only knew what might happen to a creampuff like him let loose in the town at large. The station's new security chief might think he was all kinds of kick-ass wonderboy, but Sarhaan knew that no amount of defense was going to stop a seriously determined crook.

Peering through the narrow view-window in the airlock door, Sarhaan tried to see into the next compartment where the sensor readout told him D'abu and Caleb were located. Nothing but the dull gray of the enclosure walls was visible, though, so Sarhaan went back to pacing.

By the time the last door finally opened, Sarhaan had had plenty of time to think up more horrific possibilities and, in turn, gradually talk himself out of them. He was on the sixth repetition of the cycle when the muffled click of magnetic locks signaled the door opening.

*Holy crap.*

“What the hell happened to him?”

Slumped limply against the wall of the chamber, Caleb looked like he'd been worked over by a pro. Barely able to hold his head up, arms folded protectively across his stomach, skin color the muted green of meat gone bad.

“Take a deep breath there, Sarhaan. He may not be feeling much like it at the moment, but he's okay.”

Groaning pitifully, Caleb's eyes rolled back in his head as his legs gave out and he slid bonelessly to the floor.

“D'abu -- talk to me. What happened?” Sarhaan crouched beside Caleb, thumbing back one eyelid. Pupils looked normal. Good. Not drugs, then.

“You think this is bad, you should've been sitting next to him when he lost it, like I was. My boots will never be the same and guess who's going to be getting the bill for new ones?”

Sarhaan looked up. D'abu wasn't joking.

“Comedy later. What. Happened?”

Obviously his thousand-meter stare needed work because D'abu was singularly unimpressed.

“Relax, sweetheart. Your boy's going to be fine. He learned a valuable lesson today. Namely that vodka, an empty stomach and tram rides on rotation-aided gravity systems don't mix. Before I dragged him out of there, he was bellied up to the bar at the Busted



Flush, knocking back vodka martinis like they were free. Although, who knows? Maybe they were.”

“Alone?”

The slow grin that spread over D’abu’s face had Sarhaan’s hand curling into a fist. If he couldn’t kick his own ass for leaving Caleb unprotected again, D’abu’s would do.

“After I got there things settled down, but the wolves were circling. Licking their chops over some prime fresh new.”

Sarhaan’s stomach hit the floor at that confirmation of one of his milder fantasies. God only knew what might have happened. “Thanks. Appreciate you stepping in. What’s so funny?”

“You.” D’abu rubbed his chin, his grin widening, bringing an unusual lightness to his normally serious expression. “If you’re planning on keeping this one, you’d better start taking some precautions, my man.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? “Like what?”

“I think you had the right idea when you locked him up the first time. This one attracts trouble like mercs to a half-off ammo sale. At your age, your heart can’t take it.”

His heart. Yeah, no shit.

“Thanks. I appreciate the input.” Taking Caleb in his arms, Sarhaan pressed up into a stand. Nodding at Caleb, Sarhaan forced words past the lump in his throat. “Thanks for helping out. I owe you.”

D’abu’s laughter followed him as he carried Caleb away.

\*\*\*

“I feel like crap.”

Sifting his fingers through Caleb silky light hair, Sarhaan smiled a little. Even miserable and hung over, Caleb was gorgeous. “I guess no one explained about alcohol in lowered-gravitational situations, huh?”

“It’s worse than usual? I already have no tolerance.” Caleb groaned and buried his face in the pillow. “Why did it seem like such a good idea at the time?”

“It usually does. So what were you doing there, anyway?”

The smooth flesh of Caleb's bare shoulder drew Sarhaan's hand with the inevitability of gravity. Not only couldn't he escape it, he didn't even want to try. So warm and firm. Not broad and bulky like Sarhaan's own, but lean and sleek, like a dancer or a runner.

Arms buried beneath the pillow, Caleb rolled his head to the side just enough to peer up at Sarhaan with one tired eye. "I don't know. I thought I ought to get out and give you some room to work. You weren't very happy with me at the time."

Sarhaan's hand stopped in mid-stroke, coming to rest in the middle of Caleb's back. "It probably seemed that way, but it wasn't you I was upset with. You did a great job putting all of that information together and I'm impressed as hell. If I'm unhappy with anyone it's those conscienceless motherfuckers we worked for -- our beloved government. Not you. Never you."

The doubting look on Caleb's face bothered him. Poor kid. What kind of ungrateful, shoot-the-messenger asshole did Sarhaan look like to Caleb? As he pondered, a fall of soft blond hair slid over Caleb's eye, and Sarhaan had to touch. Leaning down, he brushed the hair aside and placed a kiss on Caleb's forehead. "You smell good."

Caleb had closed his eyes to receive the kiss and spoke without opening them. "I can't imagine how. The bar was smoky, and I hurled all over Sandy. I was a mess."

"I've seen worse. I've *been* worse." He loved the feel of Caleb's skin beneath his lips. One kiss led to another. And another. On Caleb's closed eyelids. On his upturned face. "Besides, we cleaned you up last night. Don't you remember?"

With only minor urging Caleb rolled to his back. Eyes still closed, a smile spread across his irresistible lips as he shook his head. "Not really. Oh, wait... I do. You were very sweet. You could have tossed me on the couch to sleep it off, but you didn't. Did I even thank you?"

"As a matter of fact you didn't." Sarhaan needed a kiss from those lips. Needed it bad. Decided he couldn't wait and brushed his lips over Caleb's. He licked the upper one, with its irresistible bow, took Caleb's full lower lip between his teeth and gently tugged.

Wonderfully obedient, Caleb opened his mouth and invited Sarhaan in. Tongues stroked. Lips clung. Hands caressed.

"Come to bed."

Caleb's whispered words were fuel to the fire that was already burning, low in Sarhaan's belly. God knew he wanted to. "Are you sure? I thought you weren't feeling well."

"I'm feeling better." Threading his hands through Sarhaan's braids, Caleb pulled Sarhaan's mouth close again. "I think I could feel even better."

Their mouths met hungrily this time. God, Caleb was sweet. So incredibly hot. Caleb's hands in Sarhaan's hair tugged, and even that little bit of pain felt good. Accentuated the connection between them.

"You feel perfect to me. Give me a minute, wouldja?"

It was true. Caleb felt perfect. Tasted perfect. Was perfect. Sarhaan had his clothes off and was climbing onto the bed in seconds, but even that much separation was unbearable. He needed the touch. He needed Caleb, skin to skin, all along his body.

"Roll over. On your back." Caleb's eyes glittered. "I want to suck your cock. Is that okay?"

Sarhaan nearly swallowed his tongue. "Yeah. That'd be okay, I guess."

*Oh, God.*

That angel's mouth descended and Sarhaan's dick responded, rising to meet it. Rapt, completely caught up in the visual, Sarhaan's breath caught in his chest. Caleb took the tip in his mouth, licking delicately. Lips came down and surrounded the sensitive head. Caleb's tongue flicked at the big vein running along the bottom, swirled around and around the head, dipped lightly into the hole, sucked on it like a lollipop.

"Oh, God. Please. Suck it."

Giving himself up to the pleasure, Sarhaan was relaxing into it when Caleb lifted his head. "Is that okay? Am I doing it right?"

"No, it's good -- it's good. Don't stop. Please."

Big eyes stared him down as Caleb's tongue sought him out again and sucked him down.  
*Oh, God.*

Hands slipped under his ass and it wasn't as though he couldn't have gotten away if he'd wanted. But who in their right mind would want to? Caleb's hands anchored him as that unbelievably hot mouth came down and surrounded him. Swallowed him down in a vortex of suction and heat. God.

"Oh, do it. *Do it.* Suck it. Oh, yeah."

Caleb moaned around him and the vibration shot straight down Sarhaan's spine. A hum that shuddered up his cock and lodged in his balls. Rhythmic suction pulsated around him, drawing on him like his cock gave life. Worked him. Heat and suction and the unbearably erotic sight of Caleb's blond head bobbing and working between his thighs.

“Fuck, yeah. Oh, Baby. Please. Please, don’t stop. Yeah, just like that. Oh, God.” Sarhaan would have sold his soul, his ship, anything, just please God, keep sucking. Harder. Yeah, just. Like. That.

He was coming, coming in hot spurts, shooting down Caleb’s throat, and he thought he might come forever. Coming, shooting, pulsing. *Oh, suck me, yeah.*

Caleb sucked him gently, tenderly, drawing on him even as he had nothing left to give. Finally, Caleb released his cock. Rested his head against Sarhaan’s thigh. “Was that okay? It’s okay to tell me if it wasn’t -- I can handle criticism.”

“No, that was... good. Excellent. Practice on me any time.”

“Good. I wasn’t sure. We can practice all the way back to Earth. I really want to find that asshole Thurmond and make him pay. How long do you think it’ll take?”

\*\*\*

The muscular thigh beneath Cal’s cheek made a surprisingly comfortable pillow. The scent of Sarhaan’s skin overlaid with the musky smell of sex and the taste of Sarhaan’s come lingered on his tongue. He wanted to stay here like this -- just like this -- forever, if he could arrange it.

Sarhaan’s spent cock was centimeters from Cal’s nose, relaxed now and still shiny from the attention of Cal’s mouth. Studying it, everything, the whole picture, Cal wanted to fix the details in his mind. Preserve the memory so that he would always remember this moment. He couldn’t remember ever being so at peace, so replete, in his whole life.

He didn’t actually expect Sarhaan to take him up on his offer. Not really. Still, it was worth a try.

“Caleb, I—” Sarhaan’s hand combed through Cal’s hair and Cal knew in that moment -- knew deep down inside -- that it was over.

Maybe it was the regret in Sarhaan’s tone that tipped him off. The hesitation in the way Sarhaan’s fingers delicately raked Cal’s scalp. He was probably searching for the words to tell Cal. What was the protocol for telling someone who’d just sucked you off that it was time to get lost?

Cal let his fingers stray over Sarhaan’s ridged belly, smiling at the way Sarhaan flinched and squirmed. The big, bad warrior was ticklish. Or maybe still sensitive from having just come.

“Caleb, I’ve been going over things with the rest of the crew and...” Sarhaan’s hand left Cal’s hair, capturing Cal’s hand as it roamed Sarhaan’s skin. He squeezed it gently while Cal waited for him to finish his sentence. Sarhaan didn’t, though. He just sighed and

rubbed his thumb across the back of Cal's hand.

So Cal finished it for him. "You're not going back, are you?"

"No, we're not. At least, not right away. Maybe not ever."

"Why not?"

Using his free hand, Sarhaan tipped Cal's head back until their gazes met and Cal read the purposefulness in them that made Sarhaan such a natural leader. There was pity, to be sure, but no relenting.

"Because there's no reason to. There's a lot of downside potential and nothing much to be gained."

Cal searched Sarhaan's face for some sign that he might be open to changing his mind. Any indication that he might be persuadable and saw none.

Still, Cal had to try.

"Doesn't it bother you that you and your friends are being blamed for dozens of murders? Doesn't your good name mean anything to you? Clearing your name is the only possible chance you might have to be able to go back."

"Caleb." Another big sigh from Sarhaan. "We can't ever go back. Not with any hopes of living there again, even if we were able to convince enough of the right people that Thurmond was behind everything. The odds on us staying alive long enough to do that are pretty small to begin with."

"But you and your team are the best -- I've read all the files. Everything I could find. You don't think you could do it?"

Sarhaan's smile was bittersweet. "I love your faith in us. I wish my COs had your confidence. Even if we could, though, it still wouldn't matter."

Turning his hand, Cal laced his fingers with Sarhaan's. "Why not?"

"I don't know what all was in the files you read, but did you see anything about how we got out of there? How we ended up on the far side of Mars in a stolen Republican gunship?"

"No. There weren't a lot of details about that. But so what? I'm sure if you give the ship back--"

"It still wouldn't matter." Sarhaan cut him off, lifting their clasped hands to touch Cal's cheek. "We didn't just find the *Vigilant* sitting outside a liquor store with the keys in the

ignition and the engine running. We eliminated multiple targets to get to it and get away. I know the people in charge and they won't be in a hurry to forgive that."

"Eliminated? Oh. I see."

"Exactly. Granted, they stood between us and living. And every one of them had a weapon pointed at us. They were perfectly prepared to use deadly force to stop us and would have if we hadn't been quicker."

"Oh." Now it was Cal's turn to sigh. "I can see how that complicates things. So you don't feel the need to bring anyone to justice? You're okay with the guilty going free?"

"No, I'm not okay with it, Caleb. But I've been a soldier all my life and I've learned the value of the strategic retreat. When your forces are outnumbered and the enemy has overwhelming advantage. Times like that, it's okay to fall back and come at it from another direction, at a time of your choosing. It's called living to fight another day and it's not just okay, it's smart."

Cal met Sarhaan's gaze as long as he could. Eventually, though, he had to look away. How could he blame Sarhaan for wanting to live? Every one of the points Sarhaan had raised was completely valid and there was no way Cal could hold it against him. Just like there was no way he could go along with it.

"I see. So what will you do, then? Stay here?" *Stay here with Alex?*

"Kai's just about got something worked out that has some long term potential. The *Vigilant* has better than average speed and there are always people willing to pay for getting things -- supplies and whatnot -- a little bit faster. We might even be carrying an occasional passenger. The size of the ship comes with its own set of restrictions as far as how many we can carry, but you can usually find someone with credits to burn and a compelling reason to get somewhere else in a hurry."

"You'll use Doradus as your home base, then?" With a job to keep him busy and easy access to things Earth-bound people only dreamed of -- *and his Alex back* -- why would Sarhaan want to go back to Earth? Why would anyone?

"For the time being, at least. Who knows? We'll have to re-evaluate frequently in the beginning. It's a start, though."

How to respond to that? Cal lay thinking for a long time, a hand on Sarhaan's belly as his thoughts spiraled ever downward. He could press on with his own plan to find Daphne's killer and seek justice in her memory. Or he could stay on the *Vigilant* with Sarhaan and become a glorified delivery boy.

Or could he? For that matter, was he even invited? No mention of his presence had been made at all. Maybe he was supposed to hang around and be a place-keeper for Alex when the real thing wasn't available. At least no one could say he hadn't seen it coming.

Belatedly realizing that he'd been stroking Sarhaan's skin in a mindless self-soothing motion, Cal withdrew his hand. He ran different scenarios through his head, nothing sounding good to him.

He fidgeted.

Tugged at his upper lip.

No point in putting it off any longer.

Leaning his head back, he took another look at Sarhaan. So beautiful, his braids falling behind his shoulders and all those lovely muscles... Cal had only just gotten to the point of not dropping his jaw in open-mouthed awe every time the man removed his shirt -- too bad that didn't look as though it was going to be a problem much longer.

Cal drew himself up and sat back on his heels, letting his gaze roam lovingly over Sarhaan's naked body. Just amazing. He was so much more than just a great body, though. Smart, tender, caring. Being with Sarhaan had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience and Cal knew how lucky he was to have had the opportunity.

Dropping onto all fours, Cal crawled up the bed until he could reach Sarhaan and kissed him -- an open-mouthed, complete with tongue, everything he could put into it kiss -- before he rolled off the bed and began gathering his things.

He didn't have much and it didn't take long to stuff his extra shirt and pair of pants into shoulder pack he'd brought along on the trip.

"What are you doing?"

It was easier if he concentrated on the task at hand, jamming his belongings into the pack and scanning the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything.

Slanting a quick look in Sarhaan's direction, Cal kept moving. "Just grabbing my stuff. I think that's it. Have you seen my comp?"

Sarhaan sat up and leaned forward. "Why? Are you going somewhere?"

"Yeah. I need to keep moving with my plan to do something about Daphne. If you and the *Vigilant* aren't going to be heading back to Earth any time soon, I need to find another way back."

“Caleb, put the bag down and come talk to me. You can’t go haring off on your own, figuring you’re going to take this guy out all by yourself.”

Cal paused, interrupting his search for his mini comp to look at Sarhaan. It still amazed Cal that anyone could be so unselfconscious about his body. Maybe if Cal was as beautifully made, as supremely fit, he wouldn’t blush every time he had to walk naked from the bed to the toilet.

“Don’t worry about it, Sarhaan. It’s not your problem. She was my friend, and I’m the one with the obsession over doing something about it. I’ll figure something out.”

“Caleb.” Sarhaan was off the bed and across the room in three strides, grabbing hold of Cal’s shoulders and staring him down. “I can’t let you do it. You don’t have a hope in hell of succeeding.”

Cal stared back. He refused to be intimidated. “I appreciate the input, but you’ve already told me what you thought of my plan. I would have liked your help, but I’ll make other arrangements.” Taking hold of Sarhaan by his forearms, Cal leaned up and brushed a kiss over Sarhaan’s mouth. “I appreciate you helping me get this far, but I’ll take it on my own from here. Now let go, please.”

Sarhaan didn’t move, just swore long and low under his breath. “Goddammit, D’abu was right. I should lock you up for your own good.”

A little thrill ran through Cal at Sarhaan’s words. Now probably wasn’t the best time to let Sarhaan in on his little slave boy sex fantasy. Or that, under the right circumstances, being locked up by Sarhaan sounded so hot he might spontaneously combust.

“Take care of yourself. Maybe I’ll see you around some time.”

“Caleb, I—”

Please, God, get him out before the concern in Sarhaan’s eyes had him weeping and promising anything, so long as he could stay and be some part of Sarhaan’s life. When the hell had he been so stupid as to let himself fall in love?

“You know I’m right. Now stay safe.”

Ducking out from under Sarhaan’s grasp, Caleb made for the door and didn’t let himself look back.



## Chapter Seventeen

“So what do you think?”

Sarhaan surveyed the faces in the room, taking in the surreptitious glances being thrown around in between meeting his gaze and looking at the flight plan he'd detailed on the group monitor. He was pretty sure which way D'abu and Kai would vote, although Kai's face was its usual impassive mask.

Primeau, Vilnius and Sutton were less of a known quantity. They'd been new to the unit when the shitstorm had come down and probably owed their lives to not having been around long enough to piss off anyone in power.

It didn't come as any surprise to Sarhaan that it was the outspoken Naslund who asked the question on everyone's mind.

“Tell me again why we would want to trash the business deal Xuwicha's just put together -- our first chance to actually turn a credit -- and go play white hats back on Earth? Didn't we just barely get away by the skin of our teeth?”

It killed Sarhaan to have to waste time explaining the plan, but it was an unfortunate bit of reality that no one on the *Vigilant* had to listen to him. He and Kai were de facto leaders by virtue of knowledge and ability, but, unlike back home, there was no obligation on anyone's part to follow them. Every minute he spent going over details with the crew meant time that Caleb could use to put his plan further in motion and take him that much further from Sarhaan. The clock was ticking.

“Because we need to if we want to keep Caleb Adams as part of our crew. He's good and he's got critical skills that we could use. Unfortunately for us, taking care of Thurmond is unfinished business for him, and he's not going to sign on until he's done that.”

“Since when did tight blond ass become a critical skill? To any of us, that is?”

And then there was Bartok.

“Glad you could join us, Dave, since this involves everyone. Even you.” Nothing got to Dave more than civility, but it was tough. The idea of wrapping his hands around Bartok's throat and squeezing 'til it snapped had never been more appealing. “You might have missed it but, as it turns out, Caleb knows his way around military computer systems. He hacked us one code already and it's a skill that's likely to continue to be of value for some time. So if you have *serious* questions, let's hear them. Otherwise, let people with something substantive to add to the conversation have the floor.”

“I'm sorry, did I come across as not being serious?” Dave folded his arms over his chest and settled in against the wall. “I'm sure your little friend looks positively fetching down

on all fours with your dick up his ass. But are you seriously asking me to risk my life for that? Unless you're planning to share, that is, because—"

He didn't remember moving. Couldn't recall crossing the floor. The next thing Sarhaan knew, though, he had Bartok's arm twisted up behind him and a forearm pressed hard across the man's throat.

Almost as quickly Kai was at his side. "Whoa, whoa. Think about it, Sarhaan. Is that what you really want to do?" Kai put a hand on Sarhaan's arm and leaned in, nose to nose. "Not that I don't sympathize."

It would be so easy...

Dave's face was turning a mottled reddish-purple, and his eyes were beginning to bulge. Goddammit, but the man deserved it. More than deserved it. Kai had a point, though. Sarhaan wasn't going to let Dave goad him into doing something he hadn't thought through.

Reluctantly Sarhaan let up on Bartok's windpipe and let go of the man's arm. "Shut up and sit down. You can vote, but that's it. One more word out of you, it'll be your last, I swear to God."

Still sucking down air into his starved lungs, Dave clutched his throat and glared at Sarhaan. "You're not my CO and you never will be, you motherfucker, and you can't tell me what to do. You got lucky this time, but you'd better watch your back. You, too, Xuwicha." Straightening, Bartok extended his free arm, all fingers but one rolled into a fist. "You want my vote? Here's my vote." Like a petulant teenager who'd lost his privileges, Dave turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

Perversely, Dave's outburst seemed to have a unifying effect on the rest of the crew and debate went quickly in his absence. This time it was Vilnius who spoke up. "I agree that your friend is a good addition, skills-wise, but I'm with Nas. We barely made it out of there, and I'm not interested in getting anywhere near Earth if it means ending up in the brig, or worse."

Naslund jumped in where Vilnius left off, nodding in agreement. "Exactly. I guess I'm okay with this if it can be done from a safe distance. Can we take this guy out without getting nailed ourselves?"

"Well, Kai and D'abu and I've got a couple of ideas."

\*\*\*

"This isn't good."

Sarhaan and D'abu stood outside *Durty Nelly's*, where the trail of Caleb's identi-chip had led them. The building where the trail ended looked quiet and respectable in the increased lighting of the asteroid's artificial day -- the sedate and businesslike opposite of the glittering, sumptuous den of iniquity it transformed itself into every night.

"What do you think he's doing here? Place doesn't even look like it's open." D'abu absently shifted his rifle to the other shoulder as he raised his gaze to the roof line, perusing the outside of *Nelly's*. The rows of colored lights that drew the eye when lit and open for business looked dusty in the light of day and the old fashioned saloon-style swinging doors currently lay hidden behind a serviceable, if unsightly, gray roll-up security gate.

Praying he was wrong, Sarhaan walked past the main doors and around the corner, his boot heels thudding hollowly on the raised wooden sidewalk. The attention to detail the material of the sidewalk illustrated only confirmed for Sarhaan that the management of *Nelly's* didn't mind paying a little extra to provide the complete experience. And what could complete some grungy asteroid miner or foul smelling synth-meat farmer's trip to the outpost like a—

Sarhaan shut the thought down before it could go any further. Even just that much, though, was enough to send a shiver down his spine. "I'm trying not to think about it. Okay, here we go. Let's do it."

Leading the way, Sarhaan opened a side door marked Employees Only. As he waited for D'abu to catch up, Sarhaan fingered the safety on his own beam rifle slung comfortably over his shoulder, opting to leave it on. They'd already violated multiple ordinances as explained to them by their friend Sheriff Seth, but Sarhaan hadn't given it a second thought. The security chief could either get over himself or plan on staying the hell out of their way. Sarhaan had one priority and it didn't include worrying about anyone's delicate sensibilities.

He'd come for Caleb.

Muted voices led them further down the carpeted hall from the service entrance to an open door. An expensive-looking suite of furniture was just visible through the opening and the voices became audible as they got closer.

"Very good. I'm not sure we can work you into tonight's show on such short notice, but why don't you go down to the performers' lounge and introduce yourself around? You can meet some people, see if there's anyone you think you'd like to work with. Ask someone there to show you to wardrobe; you can at least get measured. That should be enough to keep you busy for a while. I'll check with Ralph, my facilities manager, about getting you a room for as long as you're here. I think you're all set then, Mr. Adams. Don't you?"

“Thank you very much, Mr. Sotheran.”

“Call me Joe.”

Caleb stepped through the doorway and into the hall, his back to Sarhaan and D’abu. Even if he hadn’t recognized the voice, Sarhaan would know that head of bright blond hair anywhere. “Joe. Thanks again, I—” His words stuttered to a halt and Caleb’s eyes went momentarily wide when, turning, he caught sight of Sarhaan and D’abu. “What are you doing here?”

“We came to give you that lift you were asking about. I talked to the crew and we agreed that our business plan can be put off a little bit. That is, if you’re still interested.”

“Sure. I mean, yeah, absolutely.” The wary, incredulous smile that spread over Caleb’s face made Sarhaan’s chest ache. When it finally hit full wattage it was blinding, like looking directly into the sun. “That is... I just...” Caleb looked hesitantly back at Joe Sotheran.

Sotheran followed Caleb into the hall. “What Mr. Adams is trying to say is that he’d be delighted to join you -- as soon as he’s fulfilled the terms of the contract he just signed.”

Time slowed down as Sarhaan swung his gaze from the glory of Caleb’s smile, even dimmed as it was now by doubt. Eyes narrowed, the blood in Sarhaan’s veins pulsed thick and slow as he focused on the man standing between Caleb and himself.

“Contract?”

“Yes. Our standard performer’s contract. Mr. Adams has agreed to perform four shows for our audiences -- two solo and two as part of an ensemble -- in exchange for enough credits to get him where he wants to go.”

Sotheran’s smile was positively smarmy. It had been a case of want-on-first-sight on the part of the club’s owner, and Caleb had played right into his hands by providing the means to make it happen. The man might swear it was all just business but Sarhaan didn’t care. For the second time in just under two hours he thought about killing a man.

Lowering his rifle and thumbing off the safety in one clean move, it was inordinately satisfying on Sarhaan’s part to watch the smirk slide from Joe Sotheran’s face.

“He’s coming with us. Now move it.”

\*\*\*

“Caleb, don’t worry about it. Nothing’s going to happen, I promise.”

“But I signed a contract. I gave my word.” As happy as Cal was to see Sarhaan and Sandy again, he couldn’t help the little guilty twinge of his conscience. Happy didn’t

even begin to cover how he felt. He'd gone from aching, miserable, gotta-get-on-with-it loneliness to never-been-so-happy-to-see-someone-in-his-entire-life giddiness in the time it took to register Sarhaan's words. Cal had wanted to jump Sarhaan and kiss him silly. Wanted to do more than that, but there'd been no time.

Sarhaan and Sandy had hustled him out of *Nelly's* and down the street toward the tram station before he had time to say, "You look utterly fuckable. Are you sure we don't have time to get a room?"

His biggest problem aside from being forced to run out on a legal contract, the electronic thumbprint on which had barely been logged, was that he flat out couldn't keep up. Sandy and Sarhaan both had nearly twenty centimeters' height on him and legs at least that much longer. They'd been walking for several minutes -- correction: they'd been walking, he'd been walk-jogging -- and already he was falling behind.

He was about to yell a breathless "wait up," when hard hands latched onto his arm, yanking him sideways and off his feet into a narrow alleyway.

The overpowering stench of sweat mixed with too much cologne assaulted Cal's nose, even as his arm was yanked backward and something sharp pressed against his neck. "Go on, sweetcheeks. Try something. I've been looking forward to this... you have no idea how much."

*Bartok. Ohmygod, ohmygod.*

He'd heard that same voice whispering in his ear before. "*You can hide behind Sarhaan all you want, but it won't do you any good. His time's coming, that arrogant prick.*"

"Bartok." Just the small movement to say the name pushed his throat closer to the knife. Or maybe it was Bartok himself doing it as he dragged Cal deeper into the alley.

"Stand up and walk, you little shit. Don't make me drag you."

Cal's head swam from the fear and adrenalin blasting his system. The smell and the voice in his ear and the arm crushing him as he was dragged backwards were all swirling in a nauseating miasma. Spots danced in front of Cal's eyes and no amount of blinking and trying could clear his head. "*The ship should have been mine. I'm the senior officer.*"

"Too bad I don't have time to draw out the fun a little bit, but I've got an urgent appointment to keep."

Light from the street was blocked by the tall buildings on either side of the alley and Cal figured Bartok was using that somehow as he dragged Cal farther from the street. Something in the emphasis on the words 'urgent appointment' caught Cal's attention, though, even over the pain in his shoulder where his arm was separating from its socket.

“Okay, sweetcheeks, this is it. Say bye-bye, baby.”

Suddenly it clicked in Cal’s head. “*One well-timed fusion blast and it’s bye-bye, baby*”

He remembered now.

He remembered!

One recovered memory triggered more. That bastard Bartok *had* tortured him. Been in his head. Probed him for information and laughed about getting rid of Sarhaan and Kai.

“*One well-timed fusion blast and it’s bye-bye, baby*”

Cal’s training kicked in. He’d hated every minute of it, but he’d also been undeniably good at it, and it was as natural as breathing to slam his foot backward into first the shin, then the thigh and the big nerve that ran through it. When the knife fell from his attacker’s nerveless hand, it took no thought at all to turn into the body behind him, drop his shoulder and drive the heel of his hand upward, snapping the head back. The force of the blow carried Bartok backward into the faux brick wall of the building behind him and he slid to the ground, in an awkward unconscious heap.

Between the pain in his striking arm and the agony in the shoulder he was pretty sure was dislocated, Cal was afraid he might cry. God, no wonder he’d always hated hand-to-hand. Shaking out his relatively good arm as he gingerly tested his shoulder, Cal trudged toward the light and the street behind it.

Sarhaan and Sandy stood at the entrance to the alley, mouths open in blatant astonishment, which only served to set off Cal’s already shaky temper. “You don’t have to look so amazed, you know. I told you I could take care of myself. I’ve had training.” He knew what he sounded like, but Cal was too annoyed and hurting to care. “I *told* you.”

When they continued to gape at him, even as they snapped out of their stupor and approached, he totally lost it. “Can we go now? Please? My shoulder hurts like a bitch, and I really think I want to try that re-gen thing I’ve heard so much about. If that’s all right with you two?”

Cal didn’t wait for an answer. Just shoved past them and began putting one foot doggedly in front of the other, one after another, as he headed slowly up the street.

## Chapter Eighteen

He was floating. On a cloud. Not just any cloud, but the softest, fluffiest cloud ever made.

A hand stroked his hair and lips touched his forehead, his nose, his lips, in a series of kisses. Angel kisses. Cal smiled when he pictured his own, personal angel. Black, black hair twisted into hundreds, thousands, millions of braids. Big, fat muscles. Big, fat cock. Heh.

“He’s loopy. Better let him sleep it off some more.”

\*\*\*

“I want to fuck. Please, can we go back to the room and fuck? I’d even settle for a quickie. I’m going crazy here.”

Cal leaned over the back of the command chair and spoke softly into Sarhaan’s ear. He’d left his post at the ship’s main computer, tracking Thurmond’s movements, working out the details of his plan. Well, their plan, to be fair. Sarhaan had spent most of the morning checking logistics with Sandy and Jacob Naslund, always within Cal’s sight, but out of reach. They’d agreed no public displays, but this was ridiculous.

It was so unfair.

Since they’d been back on the *Vigilant*, Sarhaan had been treating him like an invalid. First step had been thirty-six hours spent in re-gen. After Cal had been released, Sarhaan would eat meals with him, sleep next to him at night, work along side Cal, but he wouldn’t touch him the way Cal longed to be touched.

This close, the scent of Sarhaan’s skin, his hair, even the leather of his pants, drifted up for Cal to breathe in. Cal was dying to nuzzle Sarhaan’s neck, sink his teeth into the hard muscle that merged into Sarhaan’s shoulder. He’d use his nose to push the sweater aside, baring the smooth, taut skin for his seeking mouth. He’d—

Sarhaan had gone completely still, even his breathing barely noticeable. Without turning his head at all, Sarhaan spoke quietly back. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Nas ... Kai ...” Both men looked up from the readout screen they hunched over. “Are we good if I take a break for a while?”

Kai's response when he answered for both of them, was typically sardonic. "I think we're up to the challenge." Sarhaan's second-in-command managed to look both amused and annoyed, all without cracking a smile.

"Back in a while, then. Caleb?"

Sarhaan stood and gestured for Cal to walk ahead of him, and Cal couldn't resist putting a little extra movement into his walk. Fighting a grin, Cal preceded Sarhaan into the lift and had the breath knocked out of him when Sarhaan spun him and pinned Cal to the wall. His gaze more intense than Cal had ever seen it, Sarhaan held him, shoulders pressed back. "Are you back for good?"

Cal had already been interested, his dick half-hard from just thinking about sex with Sarhaan. But now... with Sarhaan's body pressed to his, their cocks rubbing, his interest went from theoretical to extremely specific in a heartbeat.

"I can't think when you do that. Back? I... well, yeah. Ooh, yeah." The last came out on a low moan, as Sarhaan pressed their lower bodies together with more strength and lowered his head to kiss Cal.

The kiss was hard and possessive and there was nothing for Cal to do but hang on and take it. Nothing else he wanted to do besides hold himself open and be entered. To be held in this man's arms and kissed as though nothing else mattered was better than any dream Cal had ever had. Sarhaan's tongue moved in, taking command as though daring Cal to say no.

As if.

"I need to know." Sarhaan broke off the kiss, pausing to catch his breath and pressing the lift's HALT button. "Are you going to stay? I'm taking a pretty big risk here, and I'm asking the rest of the crew to do the same. I told them it was because you made a good addition to the crew and that part's true; you would. But I didn't go back to Doradus because I wanted a hacker. I can buy one of those on any street corner. I went back for the same reason I'm going back to the place I swore I never would -- because that's what I need to do if I want to keep you with me. And I do."

Cal stared up at those hard, dark eyes, the arched brows narrowed as Sarhaan stared back intently, and Cal was afraid he might swoon. *Sarhaan wanted to keep him?*

"But what about Alex?"

Oh, God, he was so stupid. Why even bring that up? If Sarhaan wanted Cal to stay, why bring up the competition? Might as well remind Sarhaan in case he'd forgotten.

"What about him?"



Because he couldn't stay away, couldn't be this close to Sarhaan and not want to touch, Cal slipped his hands up to rest on Sarhaan's forearms. The hard muscle beneath was instantly seductive, and Cal ran his hands up and down Sarhaan's arms, enjoying the easy slide of Sarhaan's sweater over skin.

"Now that you and Kai have found him again and he's so close..." Cal shrugged. He didn't want to give Sarhaan any ideas he didn't already have. "You'll want to be together again, won't you?"

"Caleb..." Sarhaan tipped his head until their foreheads touched and Cal breathed Sarhaan's air. He was so close -- so close -- it was torture to be this near and realize it might still all be gone in an instant. "I'll always care what happens to Alex, and Kai and I are doing what we can to help him. But he's not you. I wouldn't go back, even if I could. I..."

"Yeah?" Cal had heard the phrase 'heart in his throat' before, and he finally understood what it meant. He could barely speak around the boulder-sized lump there, but Sarhaan seemed to have stalled.

"I want you. To stay. Here, with me."

"You do?" Hope was blossoming in Cal's heart. The instant the words were out of Sarhaan's mouth, hanging in the air between them, Cal's heart leaped. He wanted so much to believe, but he was afraid.

"Yeah, I do."

"So does that mean you love me?"

\*\*\*

"Love you?"

Oh, hell. What did he say to that?

Caleb pulled back far enough to meet Sarhaan's gaze, and the look he gave Sarhaan was measuring. "Yeah. Because I'm in love you and it would really stink if this whole thing was one-sided."

"I don't know. Yeah, sure -- I guess."

"You guess? How can you not know? Either you do or you don't." Caleb was openly skeptical now, tilting his head to one side and narrowing his gaze.

Sarhaan hated being under the microscope like this. Especially for something as slippery as feelings. Give him something he could get his hands around. A door to breach. A building to secure. But feelings?

“I don’t know, all right? I’ve never been in love. I don’t— What does that even mean?”

“I haven’t either -- before. But I know what it is.” Caleb looked up at him, all big eyes and kissable mouth. “It’s what I had with Daphne. I cared about her and what she thought, what she wanted for herself. It made me want to be the person she thought I was: smart, brave, giving. Like she was.”

Caleb lowered his hands, slipping them around Sarhaan’s waist before sliding without pause down to cup his ass. “It was love without the physical side. I loved her, but I didn’t have the overpowering need to fuck her. To be as close as two people can be and still be in their own skins. To be fucked by her. To be part of her.”

“Oh, Baby.” Sarhaan groaned and grabbed Caleb’s face between both hands then and kissed him hard. What Caleb said... the images they put in his head... He needed to be with Caleb. Needed Caleb in his life and in his bed. Needed it in the worst way. Needed it now. “So beautiful. So smart. Your friend Daphne was right.”

Caleb smiled. “About what?”

“About you. You are brave and smart and... what was the other thing?”

“Huh? Oh, um, giving. She was big on the altruism thing.”

“Well, I’ve got something I want to give you, and we need privacy to do it.” Sarhaan put his hands on Caleb’s butt and pulled him close, looking for more of that electrifying cock-to-cock friction. “And while we’re at it, I want to work on that ‘as close as two people can be’ part.”

The walk from the lift to his quarters had never seemed longer. Sarhaan couldn’t stop glancing down at Caleb, snuggled up close to his side and smiling up at him. The time he’d spent looking for Caleb, first on the ship and later tracing Caleb’s identi-chip, had changed Sarhaan. It hadn’t taken many minutes of wondering if he’d ever see Caleb again and picturing his life without him to make keeping Caleb with him his top priority.

Pausing long enough to palm the door’s thermal imaging lock open, Sarhaan gave in to temptation and kissed that irresistible mouth even as he hooked his free arm around Caleb’s waist and tugged him inside. Caleb kissed him back, their mouths meeting in a frenzied kiss.

“I want you so much. I want to fuck you. Will you let me? Can I fuck you?” Caleb murmured the words against Sarhaan’s mouth, but took his time about lifting his eyes.

When their gazes finally met the effect was hypnotic. Sarhaan didn't bottom often, but in that moment he couldn't think of anything he wouldn't do for Caleb.

His smile grew slowly, gaining energy from the heat in Caleb's eyes. Something told him this would be Caleb's first time and the thought was unbearably hot, made the moment that much more special. "I think I'd like that."

The answering grin that burst over Caleb's face was like the first day of sun after a winter of leaden skies. Sudden and blinding, it only added to the heat already building in Sarhaan. Caleb leaned up and kissed Sarhaan hard, practically humming with eagerness.

"Oh, wow."

Stepping back, Caleb immediately began removing his clothes in a frantic rush, yanking his shirt off and dropping it carelessly to the deck, his pants and boots following quickly. Slightly bemused, Sarhaan stood by, drinking in the sight of rapidly increasing sections of bare skin over lean muscle.

His clothes dispensed with, Caleb's heated gaze ran hastily over Sarhaan, an impatient, exasperated snort issuing forth from that elegant nose. "What are you waiting for? Move it."

Before Sarhaan could take action on his own, though, Caleb stepped close and began using the same hurried technique on Sarhaan that he'd used on his own clothes. Not used to being the one done to, Sarhaan was surprised at the rush of enjoyment that flooded him as Caleb worked on his clothes. Standing passively, he let Caleb tug his sweater off over his head, luxuriated in the feel of Caleb eager hands inserting themselves beneath Sarhaan's waistband and shoving them down over his ass, skimming down his legs to his feet.

Pants and boots gone, Caleb leaned back from his crouch at Sarhaan's feet, gaze immediately zeroing in on Sarhaan's cock, bobbing flushed and weeping, at full attention. A wicked grin stole over Caleb's face as his eyes narrowed. Grabbing Sarhaan's ass with both hands, Caleb plunged his mouth over Sarhaan's eager cock, and Sarhaan had to lock his knees against the wave of pleasure that threatened to buckle them.

Heat and suction, lapping tongue and firm lips blew every thought out of Sarhaan's head like so much debris from an unsealed airlock. Sarhaan's world narrowed to the incoming rush of feeling, to Caleb taking control of his mind and body as hot mouth swallowed needy cock.

After days of holding himself back, of denying himself the gift of Caleb's body, to have Caleb working him, demanding a response even as he worshipped Sarhaan's cock

brought on an overload of sensation. Sarhaan's balls tightened and the characteristic tingle began forming at the base of his spine as his mind floated.

"Huh-uh, not yet." Caleb's mouth was gone and a rush of cold air hit Sarhaan's throbbing cock. "Bed. Now. Come on."

"Oh, no, don't stop. That's too good." There was something so viscerally appealing about the sight of Caleb's blond head working between Sarhaan's thighs. The contrast of wheat-gold hair and his own dark skin and crinkly black hair jacked up Sarhaan's desire until he couldn't remember ever wanting anything more.

"No way." It was thrilling to see Caleb in take charge mode, and Sarhaan had a mental flash of Caleb in his professional capacity at the consulate: in a snug black suit, every hair in place, coldly dictating terms of surrender to a foreign dignitary. "Now lie down."

Without thinking, Sarhaan did as Caleb demanded and sprawled backward across the bed, arms thrown wide, legs spread. Caleb's eyes were intent as he reached for the lube on the bedside table and greased the fingers of one hand. Squeezing more onto the tips, Caleb applied them to Sarhaan's hole, and Sarhaan flinched a little at the icy chill of it. It had been a while. More than a while, in fact. But watching Caleb moving eagerly about the task was a turn-on Sarhaan hadn't anticipated.

Then Caleb slipped a finger inside him, and Sarhaan didn't even try to stifle his sigh of pleasure. So good. So right.

Caleb switched to two fingers and began moving them in and out, sliding up looking for the gland, scissoring wide to open him up. A small self-congratulatory thought at how quickly Caleb had learned was the only thing in Sarhaan's head competing with the realization of how unbelievably freeing it was to lie back and allow himself to be pleased.

So rapt by the mindless pleasure that had taken him over, Sarhaan barely noticed when the fingers left him, except to groan a little at how good it felt as they slid out. Lazily opening his eyes -- *when had he closed them?* -- Sarhaan gazed up at Caleb's look of determined anticipation as he aimed his greased cock at Sarhaan's body. Caleb wasn't put off by the resistance of the first ring of muscle, just changed his angle and pressed harder, and Sarhaan didn't know if he was smiling more at the pleasure of being entered or as a reflection of what he read on Caleb's face.

Caleb must have been holding his breath, because when he was finally in all the way, when the fronts of his thighs met the backs of Sarhaan's, Caleb let out a long shuddering breath, a brief grin breaking over his face. Sarhaan enjoyed the unaccustomed feeling of fullness as Caleb paused, motionless until Caleb pulled back, and then they both gasped at the unbelievable delight of Caleb's outstroke.

“Oh, wow. Yeah, that’s...”

Easing back in, the triumphant smile on Caleb’s face only added to the intensity of Sarhaan’s feeling of being filled by him, of knowing the joy and contentment of being joined together this way. When Caleb began moving out and in, Sarhaan had a brief twinge of regret at his own ignored cock, but dismissed it as the satisfaction of being fucked by Caleb took over. And then a hand came down beside Sarhaan’s head while another wrapped firmly around his dick and pumped him in time with the cock sliding so satisfyingly in out and out of his ass.

Caleb was talking to himself, a stream of random words of happiness tumbling out of his pretty mouth. “Sweet. Yeah. Oh, fuck. Beautiful. Oh, man.”

The angle changed, and Caleb’s cock began hitting his gland, and Sarhaan was flying. The hand on his cock squeezed harder. *So good. So fucking good.*

It was too much for Sarhaan and he came in great spurts across his belly. His ass clamped down hard around Caleb’s dick in irregular spasms of pleasure, and Caleb was coming inside him, Caleb’s body jerking as it hurtled past the edge of its own limits.

Sarhaan was still coming down from his orgasm when the thump of Caleb’s body collapsing on his chest finally registered with his paralyzed consciousness. Caleb released Sarhaan’s cock and pulled his hand out from between their bodies to rest beside them, his chest sliding easily on the slipperiness of Sarhaan’s come. They lay that way for a long while, the sounds of their breathing and mingled sighs the only things breaking the silence in the room.

He must have dozed.

He had a vague recollection of being cleaned up, but Sarhaan was content to stay asleep and dream of lying on a sandy beach somewhere, being catered to by his very own blond cabana boy. Bits of exotic fruit were being fed to him by hand, and he was sucking the juice from playful fingers. The hands were just beginning to toy with his cock, teasing him by rubbing it with more fruit, the juice from which would have to be licked off, slowly and thoroughly, when the soft murmur of a voice began to seep into Sarhaan’s consciousness.

“I love you, Cal, and I think you’re amazing. I don’t know how I lived before I met you. Whatever you do, please don’t leave me -- I couldn’t take it.”

Sarhaan opened an eye briefly. Long enough to see that it was Caleb, head propped up on one fist and gloriously nude, talking into Sarhaan’s ear. Letting his eye drift shut again, Sarhaan settled back into his pillow. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you subliminal suggestions.” Caleb gave a little shrug and looked away. “It was worth a try.”

“Caleb?”

“Yeah?”

Rolling onto his back, Sarhaan reached out an arm and took Caleb with him, settling him in next to Sarhaan and within easy kissing distance. “I do love you and you’re more than amazing. You’d better not be thinking of leaving because if you are I’ll do whatever I have to, up to and including chaining you to this bed, to keep you.”

Caleb’s brave little smile faded as he gazed back at Sarhaan. “Are you teasing or are you being serious?”

“Absolutely serious.” Sarhaan looked deep into Caleb’s eyes and wondered if it was possible to read the heart. “Are you?”

“Very absolutely.” Caleb climbed on top of Sarhaan, bracing his arms on Sarhaan’s shoulders and grinning down at him as he rubbed his dick against Sarhaan’s. “I think we need to talk about this potentially kinky fetish of yours, though. Exactly how far does it go?”

## Epilogue

*Two weeks later.*

“Ready, Jake?”

Cal’s heart was pounding, and he couldn’t stop the nervous jiggling of his foot, which seemed to have taken on a life of its own. He just prayed that his fingers wouldn’t shake so badly he pushed the wrong button.

Naslund looked Cal’s way. “I got your six, big guy. You ready?”

“Got it. Kai, tell me when?”

Looking up at Kai, who would give the signal when they were in position, Cal allowed himself a good luck glance at Sarhaan who sat in the navigator’s chair for this operation. Sarhaan met his glance with a reassuring look and a slight nod that said, *You can do it, Caleb. I’m just here to cheer when you pull this off.*

Cal double-checked the routing sequence and the file readiness. Everything looked good, so he checked them again.

“Everyone move on my mark: three ... two ... one ... that’s a go.”

Jake Naslund pressed a complicated sequence of keys, his fingers flicking capably over his keyboard, and the main forward view screen filled with an image from the combined senate chambers. Part of the intricate sequence of events that had gone into the plotting of Cal’s plan was the timing -- maximum exposure called for the guaranteed audience of the Chief Magistrate’s speech on the State of the Republic.

The C.M. was thundering away, pounding the lectern, black ribboned queue of ceremonial hair bouncing in time with his fist. Cal -- hands visibly shaking -- hit his own designated sequence of keys and the live feed of the C.M.’s speech was interrupted by what amounted to a homemade porn movie. The production values were notable, with no hint of blurriness or poor audio quality, so when Cal’s video of Lt. Col. Stephen Thurmond having blasphemous, highly illegal sex with a boy young enough to be his son went out, the face was clearly visible. There would be no denying exactly who was doing exactly what to whom, and the lieutenant colonel would be going to prison for a very long time. For something so politically embarrassing and impossible to cover up, it might even be the iron mines on Mars for him.

“That should be enough to fry the LT’s bacon, don’t you think? Good job, Cal. Nas, you sent the rest of the evidence to the news agencies?”

“Done and done. Their chickens are coming home to roost, where they’ll be sautéed and pan fried, thanks to Cal.”

Kai and Jake were grinning, and there was whooping and hollering all around him, but all Cal could think was that it wouldn’t bring Daphne back. True, Thurmond wouldn’t be making life a living hell for any more ‘resort hosts’ like Alex or Praza, the boy in the video. He just wished there was more they could do.

“I know it won’t bring her back, but maybe she’ll rest a little easier.” Sarhaan’s arms slipped easily around Cal’s shoulders.

“You’re getting too good at that. You’re starting to scare me.” Cal spoke softly, leaning his head against Sarhaan’s.

“With a face like yours it’s easy.” Sarhaan pulled back a bit, raising his voice in order to be heard by the rest of the room. “Let’s get out of here before they figure out who interrupted their broadcast. Jake?”

“I’m on it. It’ll be like we were never even here.” Naslund leaned forward in his chair and began pushing more buttons.

\*\*\*

“I told you what would happen if you did that again.”

Sarhaan glared at him and Cal remembered seeing the same scowl on Sarhaan’s face that first time they’d met; now, as then, every line of his elegant face radiating stern authority.

Only this time instead of black boarding armor and blast shield, Sarhaan wore nothing, fresh from his cherished shower and dripping water on the floor. It was the reddish spot on one otherwise flawless brown butt cheek that was the cause of the glare, being the result of a well-timed towel snap. Standing frozen, Cal still held the offending towel in one hand.

Cal bit down hard on his upper lip. If he laughed now he knew Sarhaan would totally lose it. “I’m sorry. It was, um... an accident?” He couldn’t help it, though. Sarhaan looked *pissed* -- the picture of offended dignity -- and Cal couldn’t hold back the laughter any longer, snorting at the hilarity of it.

Without warning Sarhaan lunged. Cal jumped, shrieking like a girl, and dodged behind the bed. The problem was, there was no place to run to with Sarhaan standing between Cal and the door.

Unless ...



Feinting left, Cal went right, escaping over the bed.

Except Sarhaan was too fast, fooled not even a little by the reverse fake and grabbed Cal, throwing him down on the bed. Before he could catch his breath, Cal found himself forced face down into the sheets, both hands twisted up behind his back.

“And now I’m going to beat your ass.”

Stinging blows began raining down on Cal’s butt, the thin material of his pants doing nothing to protect him from Sarhaan’s wrath. Blood pumping hard through his veins, Cal laughed and gasped even as his skin heated.

“Ow! Ow! Stop it! I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I won’t do it again, I promise.” Cal squirmed and begged, but Sarhaan was pitiless.

“Too bad, so sad. You should have listened to me last time, shouldn’t you, you little brat?” Sarhaan brought his hand down hard a half-dozen more times before climbing atop Cal, still holding his hands behind his back, and rubbing his erect cock in the crack of Cal’s ass. “I bet that cute little butt of yours is nice and rosy pink about now. Maybe even some handprints standing out on it. What do you think? Shall we check?”

“We can’t. We’re meeting Kai and Sandy for dinner. You don’t want to be late, do you?” Cal squirmed beneath Sarhaan, his own cock filling at the feel of Sarhaan’s weight pressing him down into the mattress, powerful thighs bracketing his body.

“They can wait. This can’t.” Sarhaan’s dick moved suggestively against Cal’s ass, and Cal could only groan and push back, wanting it all. He always wanted Sarhaan, and Sarhaan knew it.

Cal rolled his head to one side as a shudder shook his entire body. “Please…”

They were going to be late to dinner. Again.

End