

A Sip...



A Torquere Press Short

Off World: Negotiation
By Stephanie Vaughan

“Welcome to Mars, gentlemen. You’ll be speaking with our new Chief of Operations today. Your trip out was pleasant, I hope? Please, if you’ll just follow me.”

Cal glanced at Sarhaan, his eyebrow going up infinitesimally. Sarhaan caught the look, clasping his hands behind his back and letting a ghost of a smile flit across his face as they moved to follow the attractive assistant.

The attractive *female* assistant.

If the Martian mining guild had the kind of money behind them it took to recruit and retain an appealing female in the kind of conditions that existed on Mars, they could certainly afford to pay the team for courier duties and other miscellaneous tasks involved in running an operation this size.

Trying not to gawk, Cal sized up the operation, deciding that the guild's offices could accurately be called opulent. Plush gray carpeting underfoot ensured that their footsteps made no sound as they walked and the office furniture was correspondingly luxurious. Everything in sight was brand-new and top drawer. Cal was prepared to swear that was a Klimt he spotted hanging on the wall of one of the conference rooms as they passed.

The assistant was both young and exceptionally attractive, her clothing every bit as expensive as the rest of the furnishings. Her inky black hair and slightly almond-shaped eyes had Caleb betting she was from the Asian territories -- another expensive import. Ever since the realignment, immigration was strictly controlled and it would have taken someone greasing some very expensive palms to make that little miracle happen.

Stopping before a closed door, the woman turned, her gaze taking a side trip to run appreciatively up Sarhaan's long legs and torso before coming to a graceful stop at his face. "I'm afraid Mr. Byron is completely booked all week; I'm sure you understand. However, Mr. Wasson as COO is completely empowered to talk to you, as well as to conduct any relevant business negotiations."

She tapped discreetly on the door, its solid wood construction absorbing most of the sound, and leaned her head inside the door. As she bent and twisted at the waist, Cal and Sarhaan got a front row view of her trim, toned backside.

It took every bit of Caleb's diplomatic training to keep from rolling his eyes.

Obviously the woman had total faith in her ability to captivate and -- this far from civilization and any meaningful supply of female flesh -- it was believable that she had her choice of bedmates. It probably hadn't crossed her mind that perhaps neither Sarhaan nor Cal were particularly susceptible and it required a mental step back on Cal's part to keep from shaking his head at Sarhaan in disbelief.

Allowing himself an internal roll of the eyes, Cal called up his most benign neutral expression and when the woman turned back, she found nothing exceptional on his face.

"Mr. Wasson will see you now."

Pausing a beat, Cal let Sarhaan take the lead, admiring as he so often did, the superb lines of Sarhaan's ass: hard, muscular, and absolutely flawless. Cal never tired of looking at it -- not to mention licking, tonguing, and occasionally fucking it.

“Gentlemen, I’m Daniel Wasson, Chief Operating Officer. Welcome to Bradbury. Is this your first time on Mars?”

So busy checking out Sarhaan’s ass, Cal hadn’t gotten as far as taking a look at their host, but he couldn’t avoid the voice. “Daniel?”

In his early thirties and of slightly above average height, the man presently shaking Sarhaan’s hand was aided by the immaculate cut of his very expensive suit. A Wainwright, if Cal wasn’t mistaken -- and he wasn’t. Cal knew his haute couture designers.

Completing the ritual, the man turned. “Cal? Caleb Adams, oh my God, is that you?”

Cal shut his mouth and stepped forward, his hand thrust out automatically. Daniel Wasson had other ideas, though, using the handclasp to pull Cal forward into an embrace.

Cal’s brain couldn’t take it in.

Daniel Wasson. Here. On Mars.

Literally the last place Cal would have expected to run into him again.

“Daniel, how did you--?” Words failed him. No wonder he’d been a washout at the consulate. Although he’d made some strides since leaving Earth, for the most part, everything he thought and felt was still written plainly on his face.

“What the hell am I doing out here, in the armpit of the universe, you mean?” Daniel laughed and Cal was instantly reminded that it was one of Daniel’s best features. Perfect teeth and nice eyes added to the package, but it was the smile that had always ensured Daniel got whatever it was he wanted, be it a dinner date or a plum work assignment.

“I... holy cow, I just... Daniel!” Overcome, Cal threw an arm around Daniel’s back and hugged him. This was the first bit of home he’d seen in months -- since he’d “borrowed” his uncle’s shuttle and gone looking for the missing squad of Marines known collectively as “Rondi’s nine.”

So much had changed since then. He’d not only helped the team, he’d joined them, and in the course of helping them he’d fallen in love with their leader Sarhaan. Fortunately, Sarhaan was in love with Cal, too, and life was good.

“It’s great to see you, Cal. No one knew what happened to you; no one who would talk, anyway.” Stepping back, Daniel looked from Cal to Sarhaan, smiling. “Well, come and sit. Let’s have a drink and get caught up. I have to hear how you ended up out here. This is fantastic. When I looked at my schedule today I was expecting a couple of... well, let’s just say I wasn’t expecting an old friend.”

Daniel rounded his desk and pulled out his chair while Cal and Sarhaan pulled a couple of the

guest chairs closer. The dark wood of Daniel's desk was flawless, polished to a high sheen. Its scale made even the behemoth in Sarhaan's suite seem like a child's version in comparison.

Catching Sarhaan's gaze, Cal flicked his own quickly around the room and was relieved to see a corresponding look in Sarhaan's dark eyes. The display of wealth was so ostentatious it verged on caricature. On the parched surface of Mars where even a glassful of water was a precious commodity, the only thing the place lacked was a swimming pool.

"Nice place you've got here, Daniel." Next to Cal, Sarhaan settled himself in the chair provided, a small Queen Anne-style that looked questionable as to whether or not it could hold his weight. Nearly two meters tall and weighing almost one hundred kilos, Sarhaan seemed a bit much for the chair's spindly legs to be expected to support. But he crossed a leg over one knee and relaxed into it. "The guild must be making its numbers every month, then."

"We're doing okay, Sarhaan. I can't complain. We're doing..." Daniel paused as he took a look around the room, letting his gaze touch on several of the room's appointments, finishing up with a smile that had a self-satisfied slant to it. "We're doing okay."

"I'd say you're doing better than okay, Daniel. This place is amazing," Cal responded. Watching Sarhaan out of the corner of his eye, Cal observed his lover's carefully neutral body language and the outwardly friendly smile. He knew they'd compare notes later, but he'd love to have five minutes right now to hear Sarhaan's thoughts. "I haven't seen anything like this since—"

"Since the Area Governor's mansion?"

Daniel grinned knowingly and Cal flushed a little. "Actually, I think this might be a little nicer."

"Is that where you two know each other from?" Sarhaan shifted in his chair and stretched his long legs in front of him. It took Cal a couple of seconds to think things through and realize that it hadn't been spelled out. Of course Sarhaan wouldn't know.

"No. Daniel and I worked together back at the consulate. He was a couple of years ahead of me, though, and a million years more advanced in terms of ability."

"Don't listen to him, Sarhaan. Older I definitely was, but in terms of ability? Not only was Cal the area governor's son, he was the bright young star on the diplomatic horizon. Everyone knew he was the one to watch." Daniel smiled at him and Cal caught a flicker of something he wasn't expecting.

Heat. Desire.

But Daniel wasn't gay.

A little off-balance, Cal looked to Sarhaan for an anchor, but Sarhaan was watching Daniel, a measuring look in his eyes.

“That is complete and utter bullshit. You know they only kept me on as a favor to my parents. Actually, I think Mom might have had something on the Consul-General.”

“You were good, Caleb. Your problem was that you were always second-guessing yourself, doubting you’d made the right call. Everyone around you knew how brilliant you were, believe me.”

“Yeah, well,” Cal glanced at Sarhaan, wondering how he was taking Daniel’s snow job. Maybe Sarhaan was the one who should have gone into diplomacy, because Cal couldn’t tell. “Be that as it may...” trying to make it clear from his tone that he wasn’t buying a word of Daniel’s flattery, Cal brought the conversation around to business. “The reason for our visit today is to talk about what Vigilant Security Services can do for the guild.”

As the talk turned serious, drinks were called for and Daniel’s assistant brought them in with a flourish: scotch for Daniel and Sarhaan, tea for Caleb. “Thanks, Adrianna.” Daniel took a sip of his. “Okay, let’s hear your pitch. I know you’ve been dealing with Trevor Byron, our CEO, but this is the sort of thing they brought me in to handle, so I’ll be taking over the talks now. I’ve reviewed the file and I think I’ve identified a couple of opportunities.”

Tapping a screen inset into the desk, Daniel glanced down at what Cal presumed was his file on VSS, the proposal and whatever analysis the Guild had done.

Relaxed and confident, Sarhaan started his pitch. They’d worked it out on the trip over from their headquarters on the colonized asteroid Doradus, rehearsing it backwards and forward, until either one of them could present it cleanly and professionally. When it came to credibility in security matters, though, it was a no-brainer for Sarhaan to take the lead.

“What VSS has to offer the guild is simply the most comprehensive combination of security and transport capabilities available anywhere. We offer a full spectrum of services to support the security, peace and freedom of your off world business. We can also offer training to your staff - either at your location or our facility back at Doradus -- as well as high-level firearms, tactical, and armorer’s courses.”

Cal stifled a cough and looked down. Offering services at their facility back on Doradus was a new twist and one they hadn’t discussed, since their facility was currently comprised of a small storefront office, a few computers, and not much else. He’d just have to pray no one wanted to take them up on it any time soon.

Daniel listened to the proposal carefully, only glancing away when a low tone sounded, signaling a message flashing on his telemetry screen. He let Sarhaan go on a bit longer, but finally began drawing things to a close.

“This all looks really good, Sarhaan... Cal.” As Daniel began making eye contact with each of them, Cal tried not to smile at the Diplomacy 101 technique. Either Daniel wasn’t as smooth as Cal had remembered him being or he wasn’t giving it his full attention, because Cal could see the attempt to move things along for what it was.

“To be honest, I thought I knew what I’d be dealing with when I saw this on my calendar this morning. But Cal, you bring a whole new dimension to the table. I’ve got a couple of ideas, but I’d like to run them past Trevor before I propose anything. Would you by any chance be free for dinner? I’d like to treat you to a nice meal and talk about this some more. How does nineteen-thirty sound?”

Like there was a possibility they’d turn it down. They’d come a long way to do business, so of course everything was up to the convenience of the customer.

“Sounds great.” When Sarhaan stood, Cal took his cue and stood, too. “Where should we meet you?”

“Let’s meet in the lobby. We can eat at my place and it’s an easy walk. All magnetically shielded, of course -- solar flares make that a necessary luxury.” Daniel came around his desk, hand extended for Sarhaan to shake. When he turned to Cal, it was a handshake that morphed into a quick hug. “Great to see you again, Cal. Just wonderful. So I’ll see you both back here for dinner?”

“See you then.”

Conversation would have to wait until they were back on board the *Vigilant*, but there was plenty of non-verbal communication going on. Sarhaan allowed himself a small smile as they suited up for the short walk back to the ship and Caleb’s eyes positively sparkled with excitement.

Feelings of victory would be premature, but Sarhaan had to own up to a certain feeling of accomplishment. He’d never made his living with his mouth before. Relying on his speed and strength, his weapon and his body had been his tools and it took a bit of mental adjusting to think that this was how things were going to be from here on out.

Caleb pulled the helmet of his borrowed suit over his head, obscuring the shiny mop of blond hair that always drew looks, his ease at handling the equipment belying his civilian status. Flashing Sarhaan a grin, Caleb flipped the smoked blast shield down and suddenly it could have been any one of Sarhaan’s teammates standing next to him -- albeit one of the shorter ones.

The trip took maybe twenty minutes and when they were finally back on board, Caleb quickly tugged the helmet back off. “Wasn’t that amazing? What are the odds? This has got to be good for us, don’t you think? Seeing Daniel, I mean. And those offices -- holy shit. Did you see the marble console? These guys have to be making serious bank to be able to afford that stuff.”

“I saw it.” Storing his own helmet away, Sarhaan smoothed his short, chin-hugging beard with his thumb and forefinger while he eyed Caleb.

“That’s it? You saw it? Well, what did you think? With that much money, they can totally afford us. And I can work the angle with Daniel to get us the best deal. Aren’t you even a little bit excited?” Caleb’s voice was beginning to take on the tone Sarhaan had come to know. Wickedly smart, funny, passionate -- patience was not something that came naturally to Caleb and Sarhaan had learned the sound of Caleb’s frustration rising.

“I’m cautiously optimistic. I think we’ve got a good chance of not walking away empty-handed. Caleb, let me ask you something.”

Completely out of the black boarding armor that doubled as a surface suit, Caleb was back to his business attire. The russet collarless shirt did wonderful things for Caleb’s brown eyes and the chocolate brown suit flattered his trim body.

“Here, give me that.” Taking the last piece of Sarhaan’s black armor, Caleb stashed it in its locker and turned back, a questioning look on his beautiful, open face. “Yeah?”

“This Wasson guy... you ever fuck him?” Sarhaan had tried to keep his tone even, but judging from the shocked look on Caleb’s face, his results had been mixed.

“No, of course not.” Caleb sounded affronted and Sarhaan couldn’t really blame him. Caleb’s past was none of Sarhaan’s business. Except this was company business, so Sarhaan needed to ask.

“Why ‘of course not’? You’re both young and good-looking and he obviously wants you.”

“It’s not that kind of relationship. He doesn’t want me. I don’t think he’s even gay. Besides, it wouldn’t matter if he did, since I don’t want him.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“About what?” Caleb snapped, hands on his hips. Shorter and slighter than Sarhaan, he’d never been intimidated, a trait Sarhaan generally enjoyed despite its occasional pain-in-the-ass potential.

Like now.

Continuing to glare an extra moment, Caleb turned abruptly and began heading in the direction of their quarters. Sarhaan chased him down in three strides.

“About all of it. How do you know he’s not gay? And, not to rock your little world, sunshine, but a guy doesn’t have to be gay to like dick. I’ve had plenty of straight guys over the years.”

“Congratulations. What do you want from me, a prize?” Caleb was too innately graceful to ever look truly awkward, but emotion colored his movements. Stiff and jerky with anger, Caleb rounded the corner first and palmed the door’s thermal imaging lock open.

“Hi guys. How’d the meeting go?” Jimi Vilnius greeted them from the opposite direction, his characteristic toothy grin plastered on his face.

Caleb jerked his head in Sarhaan’s direction, said “Ask him,” and disappeared into the suite. The door closed behind Caleb, leaving Sarhaan and Vilnius momentarily stunned.

“I didn’t hear nothin’. I didn’t see nothin’.” Vilnius hustled away down the corridor, a muttered “T-t-t-trouble in paradise” floating in his wake.

Great.

Now it would be all over the ship in a matter of hours, if not sooner, that he and Caleb were fighting. And there was no time to let this thing blow over naturally, since they had tonight’s dinner meeting to get through. Perfect. Would someone please remind him why he’d thought he wanted a lover?

Entering the suite, Sarhaan stopped dead in his tracks, the answer to his own question right in front of him. Stripped to the waist, Caleb was shucking out of his business suit, a more comfortable pair of black jump pants laid out on the bed next to him.

Like it always did, Caleb’s body dazzled Sarhaan. So lean and toned. Skin like pure cream, smooth and almost eerily unblemished. His tiny pink nipples stood out on his firm chest, the faintest of happy trails disappearing down into white silk briefs. Shooting Sarhaan a single quick look from beneath the fall of blond bangs that slid down over his forehead, Caleb continued undressing, paying Sarhaan no further attention.

Working his pants down his legs, Caleb bent at the waist to step out of them, his tight, perfect butt silhouetted against the dark material of the bed’s coverlet in its white silk covering.

Reacting, not thinking, Sarhaan crossed the room. Reaching out, he let his hand trail down the series of bumps that formed Caleb’s spine, enjoying the slide of skin over silky skin. “Don’t be upset.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

Caleb lifted a foot to step into the jump pants, but Sarhaan derailed the attempt, dragging him closer so that Sarhaan could take Caleb in his arms.

“Caleb, I don’t want to fight.”

“Good, because I’d kick your ass.” Hands on Sarhaan’s forearms, Caleb leaned back, glaring up at him. “If you laugh, so help me, I’ll do it.”

The feel of Caleb’s skin under his hands, Caleb’s body next to his, rubbing on him, never failed to get to him. “No, baby. No. I just want to—” Sarhaan lowered his head, letting the scent of

Caleb's skin fill his head. Slowly, half expecting Caleb to take a swing at him, he took a chance and pressed his lips to the tender skin below Caleb's ear.

When Caleb didn't push him away, Sarhaan slid his lips down to Caleb's jaw, kissing and caressing along the way. Emboldened, Sarhaan took Caleb's ass in his hands, rubbing their bodies together, reveling, as always, in the feel of his cock sliding next to Caleb's.

A soft sigh eased up from Caleb's throat and Sarhaan took it as permission to keep going. Taking Caleb's mouth in a kiss, it quickly blazed out of control as their mouths met, each seeking what he needed.

Caleb broke away first, panting. "You are such a dick sometimes. Jesus, you piss me off."

"Yeah, I do." Sarhaan couldn't stay away from the smooth expanse of Caleb's neck and returned to tasting with little licks and bites. "Lucky for both of us I'm good in the sack."

Caleb was tugging at the opening of Sarhaan's pants now, making short work of the fastener and freeing Sarhaan's cock, rolling it between his hands as Sarhaan thrust into Caleb's grip. "Don't be modest. You're not just good, you're a freak."

"And it gets you going every time."

"Yeah, it does." Flashing those big brown eyes, Caleb dropped to his knees and took Sarhaan into his mouth. Using his thumb to put exquisite pressure on the spot behind Sarhaan's balls, Caleb paid special attention to the sensitive head, licking up the shaft, then encircling the dark plum head.

So perfect. So hot. So everything Sarhaan wanted and needed. It was crazy hot to see that pretty blond head between his legs, working him with an enthusiasm that did wonderful things for Sarhaan's ego. That this gorgeous, smart son of one of the Republic's first families -- who could have chosen anyone from here to Earth -- had selected him, did something to him.

Got him fucking hot, that's what.

There was something twisted and wrong about it, but Sarhaan couldn't help the little burst of wicked delight that flashed through him at the thought of what the good folks back home would think if they could see some of the things that he and Caleb did together.

Twisting his fingers in Caleb's hair, he directed Caleb's sweet mouth as it moved over him. He gave himself up to the pleasure, erotic and intense, of fucking Caleb's face until he was coming - coming in hard spurts down Caleb's long, elegant throat.

"Welcome to my little corner of the world. Planet. Solar system. Whatever. Won't you come in?"

Caleb preceded Sarhaan, whose hand lingered at the small of Caleb's back. They'd spent a quality hour in bed, first getting Caleb off, then exchanging slow kisses, lingering over favorite areas of each others' bodies with slow caresses. Too soon they'd had to interrupt their time together to brief Kai and D'abu -- Kai via vidlink -- on the likely course of the evening's discussion, as well as leave time to dress and walk back.

They now stood on the threshold of Daniel Wasson's company 'apartment' -- luxury villa was more like it.

Although Wasson had greeted them at the door himself, staff worked silently in the background, completing the meal preparations and arranging the table. No doubt they would have handled hat and coat check duties, had Sarhaan and Caleb been wearing any.

For dress, though, they had both opted for something less formal than the afternoon's strictly business meeting. Caleb in a collarless shirt and loose pants that somehow still displayed his every curve in teasing glimpses that drove Sarhaan crazy, while Sarhaan had gone with his favorite leather pants and soft sweater.

"Very nice place you've got here, Daniel. The guild treating you okay, then?" Caleb stepped forward and Sarhaan let his hand fall away as Caleb seemed intent on a visual inventory of the room. To Sarhaan it looked like a floor display in a high-end furniture store, or a museum, maybe. The generous use of real wood and luxury stone was eye-popping to a working-class stiff like him. To Caleb, it must seem like old home week.

"It's not bad, I've got to say." Wasson's shrug and aw-shucks grin might work on the diplomatic crowd, but Sarhaan wasn't buying.

"Not bad? This is fantastic. Isn't it, Sarhaan?" Caleb glanced back with one of his typical sunny smiles, the kind that made Sarhaan remember what it felt like to stand in bright sunlight again. Except he was gazing at the overdone bachelor pad of an obscenely wealthy businessman. Hard to blame Caleb, considering how he'd been living since leaving Earth.

"It's nice."

He'd meant to say 'beautiful,' not because he thought it was, but as a sop to Caleb's friend's ego. Because that's what this was all about -- ego and ostentatious show of wealth. Apparently his subconscious wouldn't go along, though, and had edited his remarks for him. So be it.

Returning to him, Caleb put one hand on Sarhaan's chest, reaching up to brush a kiss across his lips. "You're tough to please tonight."

Gazing down into Caleb's smiling face, something moved inside Sarhaan. Nothing so simple as love, this was primitive and dark.

Looking up, past Caleb, Sarhaan checked their host's reaction. Sure, Mars was an international mining colony and Republican law didn't hold here, and maybe Caleb knew enough about his friend that caution wasn't a concern. Then again, a lot had changed since the two of them had seen each other.

While Wasson coughed into his hand and gazed at the ceiling, Caleb waited for Sarhaan's response, comprehension gradually dawning in his eyes. Slowly he withdrew, clasping his hands together in front of him and turning back toward his friend.

"So, what are we having for dinner tonight?" Caleb's smile was cool and practiced, so different from what had been on his face just moments ago.

Without missing a beat, Daniel Wasson turned to the supremely professional, balding man dressed a touch more formally than anyone else in the room. "Preston, were you able to pull together what we discussed?"

"Yes, sir. As you requested, you and your guests will be eating sautéed dayboat scallops with smoked andouille sausage jambalaya, basmati rice and crab butter. The side dishes are English peas and fava beans with parsley garlic butter, and sautéed corn and okra succotash. For dessert, vanilla shakes with chocolate ice cream."

"Sounds perfect, Preston. Thank you." Wasson beamed and Sarhaan had just about had it with all of the smiling. "Does that meet with your approval?"

"Uh... yum. After eating nothing but ship chow for a month, that sounds incredible. Don't you think, Sarhaan?" Caleb smiled and rubbed his hands together, while Daniel Wasson looked on happily.

It was wrong.

It was all wrong and Sarhaan couldn't wait to get their business concluded and get the hell out. "Oh, absolutely."

"Excellent." Wasson shoved his hands in his pockets and looked smug. "I've got a little proposition for you both and I want you well-fed and mellow before I hit you with it."

"This is nice. It was decent of the guild to put us up for the night." Caleb called to Sarhaan in the suite's main room as he ran his hand across the stone countertop in the bathroom. "Did you see this in here? I don't think this is granite. I'm pretty sure it's basalt. Sarhaan?"

Getting no response, Cal poked his head back through into the main room. Sarhaan stood to one side, gazing grudgingly around the room.

“Sarhaan? I said, did you see this in here? I think these tiles in the sauna are seriously old. Like, fourteenth or fifteenth century old. Italian, I think. *Holy shit*. What kind of money must they be bringing in to be able to afford all of this? It’s crazy money. Gage Burnett-kind-of-rich money.”

“You’re not going to talk about it, are you?” Sarhaan was looking back at him now, his gaze so intense Cal half expected scorch marks on his skin. He knew Sarhaan didn’t do it with the intent to intimidate -- it was just a function of how focused the man was. And passionate.

“There’s nothing to talk about. I’m not going to take the job.” Cal shrugged and moved to examine the art hanging on the wall nearest him. He wouldn’t have thought ancient Russian religious icons would have suited the modern lines of the room’s furniture, but somehow they did. The rich blues, golds and browns, undimmed by age, accented the room’s otherwise neutral cream tones. Gazing at the old saint’s brown-black eyes, Cal decided they were reminiscent of Sarhaan’s eyes. He nearly laughed at the improbability of his own comparison, until he remembered that most things reminded him of Sarhaan these days.

“You’re not going to even think about it?”

Leaving the paintings, Cal crossed the room to stand in front of Sarhaan and look him in the eye. “I’ve already thought about it and I gave Daniel my answer. You heard me.”

“How can you be so sure, though? Look at all of this.” Arms folded across his broad chest, Sarhaan nodded his head in the general direction of the room. “You don’t think you’re going to miss this when you’re back on Doradus, living on a military ship and eating meat grown in a vat? Or worse?”

Cal followed Sarhaan’s gaze for a moment, before deciding what was right in front of him was much more appealing. “Sure I’ll miss it -- I’m human. And I’ll think about the swimming pool they’ve got and wish I could swim in real water again instead of just virtual. The food was unbelievable, but I’m not with you for the food.”

“Caleb, I’m just saying be realistic for a minute. You don’t think that after a few months of eating synth meat and living with a bunch of ex-soldiers whose idea of a good time is drinking games and competitive puking, you won’t be wishing you’d said yes? And maybe getting a little pissed off at me for being the reason you didn’t?”

Placing his hands on Sarhaan’s forearms, Cal looked up, trying to read what was behind that stoic mask of soldierly calm. “Do you *want* me to take the job? Is that it? Monogamous and committed isn’t everything it was cracked up to be, after all? I guess I can see that. Maybe I shouldn’t assume that just because I’m in love and happy, you are too.”

“Oh, for— You know that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Do I?”

“Of course you do. I just think we need to be practical and look at things with our eyes open.”

“Really?” Cal took a step back, gazing up at Sarhaan’s carefully controlled expression. “Then why does that sound so much like an ‘I’m-about-to-get-dumped’ line?”

“You tell me. If there’s going to be any dumping going on, I won’t be the one doing it. I’m not the one with rich businessmen hanging on my every word, trying to recruit me away.”

“Would you get over it, please? I’m not taking the job and I’m not leaving unless you kick me out. Is that enough for you? Does that make you happy?!”

Practically shouting Cal felt his temper rising and he wasn’t quite sure why. Why were they even fighting?

“No.” Sarhaan grabbed Cal by his shirt, dragging him close. Close enough for the puffs of Sarhaan’s breaths to drift over Cal’s face. Close enough to read the fire in Sarhaan’s eyes. “No, it doesn’t make me happy. It’s not nearly enough.”

Nothing he would do for fun, Cal didn’t push Sarhaan very often. For one, he didn’t need to. Cal liked life to be smooth and uncomplicated, with everyone happy, if it could be conveniently arranged. For another, the man was too damn big. Cal could handle himself, but Sarhaan was not only a soldier, he was a genetically enhanced one, at that.

“What *would* make you happy, then?”

Sarhaan stopped glaring down at Cal long enough to look quickly around the room and Cal only had a moment to wonder why before Sarhaan swept his legs out from under him and tossed him down on the nearby sofa. Following him down, Sarhaan caged Cal with his body, pinning him down with powerful arms and legs.

“What would make me happy?” Cal couldn’t see how Sarhaan was getting the words past his clenched jaw -- the man looked seriously disturbed. He leaned down, until only millimeters separated them. “I want to *own* you. That would make me happy.”

Shocked, Cal froze for a moment, until a sly ribbon of lust swirled through him as he considered Sarhaan’s words. Wriggling his body, Cal squirmed underneath Sarhaan, trying to align their bodies. He wanted to feel Sarhaan’s weight pressing him down into the deep cushions.

“Own me?” More squeaky than sultry, Cal was happy he’d managed to form any words at all.

“Yes. You’re mine and I want everyone to know it. Strangers, friends, it doesn’t matter. Everyone.”

“Oh.” Cal had no idea what to say to that. “Um, okay?”

Catching his mouth in a bruising kiss, Sarhaan dominated him, demonstrating in part what he was talking about. Cal kissed back, a little in awe, a little intimidated, and a lot turned on.

Pulling back, Sarhaan raked his gaze over Cal, stopping at Cal's lips. Narrowing his eyes a bit, Sarhaan moved lower, on down Cal's chest and beyond, stopping again at Cal's crotch.

Puzzled, Cal couldn't resist asking, "What?"

"A ring is too small, too easy to overlook."

Oh. Things were beginning to make sense.

"A brand might work. My initials, maybe, right on your ass."

Cal gulped. "A brand?"

Clearly warming to the idea, Sarhaan sat back on his knees, quickly stripping off Cal's pants. Shifting a bit, he smiled a bit at Cal's erect cock, but didn't stop there, just began barking orders. "Turn over. Show me your ass."

Cal hurried to obey. Now lying on his stomach, he clutched a pillow to his chest and arched his back a bit, offering his ass. "Like that?"

"Good. Yeah, maybe my name. Right here."

Crap. Sarhaan had a lot of names. This had the potential to hurt.

"Or that fake tattoo thing you did that time. '*Property/pleasure*.' Only permanent this time."

But Sarhaan was stroking his big hands over Cal's ass, parting his butt cheeks to run his fingers down in between, teasing Cal's hole. Cal bit the pillow and tried to stifle his groan, but his body had its own ideas and was pushing back against Sarhaan's hand.

"Not enough people would see that, though," Sarhaan continued. "Unless I made you go naked all the time. Or wear one of those thong things. The naked idea has appeal. Doradus is warm. It could work."

Cal was pushing back, working himself onto Sarhaan's fingers, then rocking forward a little to rub his dick against the sofa cushions. Both were good, but neither was enough. "Sarhaan."

Ignoring Cal's plea, for that's what it was, Sarhaan continued. "A collar -- that might work. To most people it would look like a necklace, but some people would see it and know. The right people."

Oh, God. Sarhaan was sexy just breathing. But when he got edgy and a little aggressive, he was fucking irresistible.

Cal needed him.

Needed to be fucked by him.

Hard.

Manhandled a little.

Now.

“Sarhaan.” Cal rolled his head, tried to look over his shoulder, push up onto his knees, but Sarhaan just swatted his ass.

“Stay put. You know, there is something tragically appealing about your ass with my hand print on it. Just... wrong. But I do love it.”

Sarhaan smacked his butt again hard, the other cheek this time, and the sting made a provocative counterpoint to the pleasure Cal knew was coming. Sinking his teeth into the heated flesh he’d just spanked, Sarhaan bit down until Cal yelped.

“Ouch! Shit, fuck. Watch it, would you?” Cal twisted beneath Sarhaan, but Sarhaan grabbed Cal’s hips and held him still. Running his tongue down the furrow of Cal’s ass, Sarhaan licked and teased at the clenched opening and Cal’s protests faded. Groaning, Cal shoved back on his arms, trying to get closer to the delicious torment of Sarhaan’s tongue. “Please, Sarhaan. Please.”

“Mmm, you taste good. All of that food and I’m still hungry for you.” Sarhaan punctuated his murmuring with more licking, ending on a bite. “Eat you... or fuck you?”

“Fuck me. Definitely, the fucking thing. Oh, that’s good.” A well-lubed finger slipped inside him and Sarhaan was allowing him to rock back and forth a bit. Just a little, though. Never too far, never enough to truly satisfy. “Sarhaan.”

“What, baby? Is that good? Do you like that?” Sarhaan was crooning now and Cal knew that voice. When Sarhaan was thoroughly turned on and fucking was imminent, his voice slipped into a rhythm, a deep purr that flipped Cal’s switch in a big way. “Is that enough, or do you want more? More like *that*?”

“More. Yeah, more, more. Please. Sarhaan, do it.”

“This?” He stroked with his finger inside Cal and, good as it felt, Cal knew there was something much better coming. “Is this what you want?”

Panting as he rocked, Cal could only shake his head.

“What, then? Not this? Really?”

Sarhaan rubbed smoothly over his prostate and Cal knew without a doubt it was deliberate. Ask him a question, and then make it impossible to answer. Reduce him to nothing but a jumbled pile of nerves and need and want.

“Dick. Your dick. Give it to me.” He didn’t mind begging, really. The result was so worth it and sometimes it was even Sarhaan who begged.

The warm, slick flesh of Sarhaan’s cock replaced the fingers and Cal held his breath. Heat gradually filled him, stuffed him full and Sarhaan pushed until he was all the way in. Inside Cal and the pleasure was washing over him in great waves.

Sarhaan pulled slowly out and the sensation was amazing. He would never get used to how incredible it felt to be this close to Sarhaan, to have him inside and moving and sweet Jesus, that was good. Do it again. Do it. *Do* it.

Cal didn’t think he was actually chanting in time with Sarhaan’s thrusts.

Maybe he was.

Could be.

It didn’t matter.

All that mattered was that Sarhaan was with him, they were together, and he was giving Sarhaan every bit as much as his love was giving him. They were both grunting and he was babbling and Sarhaan took Cal’s dick in a tight fist and Cal was fucking Sarhaan’s hand.

It was too much and Cal went hard over the edge, shooting spurts of warm come into Sarhaan’s hand. Sarhaan kept fucking him and Cal loved being the one Sarhaan chose. So everything that Cal wanted, it never seemed quite real that Sarhaan could want him back.

And then Sarhaan was coming, pumping into Cal’s ass with jerky, arrhythmic movements, before he finally slumped over Cal, pressing him into the luxurious fabric of the sofa beneath them.

The bed was big and obscenely comfortable, dwarfing Sarhaan’s own bed back on the *Vigilant*. Before dragging themselves to the bed, they’d taken a long shower together in the suite’s lavish twin unit. The shower itself was a show-piece, and Sarhaan figured it probably had more jets than could be found on the entire ship they’d come in.

Sarhaan wished he was a better person, but he’d smiled a bit at the mess they’d made of the expensive sofa.

Caleb shifted in his sleep, and muttered, his foot sliding along Sarhaan's calf. Sarhaan rubbed a hand lightly over the indecently smooth skin of Caleb's back and Caleb tossed his head back and forth before settling in against Sarhaan's side.

Awash in the wave of tenderness that swept over him, Sarhaan let his gaze move to the small table next to the bed, picking up in the darkness the outline of the weapon that lay there. He didn't expect trouble, but it never hurt to be prepared. He didn't care what it looked like from the outside -- he'd do what he had to, to protect Caleb and keep them together.

That walking smarmfest Wasson would still have to be dealt with in the morning.

Over dinner they'd agreed in principle to trial basis for some contract work, but it fell far short of the long-term contract Sarhaan and the rest of the team had hoped for.

Sarhaan was no salesman and he doubted he ever would be. But he'd do whatever it took to keep food on the table, the *Vigilant* flying and all of them away from the long arm of the Republic. So he'd do his best to appear businesslike while tamping down on the urge to do violence to that poaching asshole, Daniel J. Wasson.

In the meantime, though, he would wrap himself around Caleb and get a few hours rest.

Off World: Negotiation

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