

(bm) ETERNITY

Karen Sandler

Hard Shell Word Factory

To Gary, the hero of my real-life romance.

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(bm) Chapter 1

2098 - Thea Station

Dr. Ian Llewellyn bent his tall frame over the keyboard in his lap, his feet propped on the console of his computer, Fuzzy. The rattle of Ian's long fingers across the keys silenced when his brain refused to produce the next data sequence. He slammed a fist against the arm of his chair and had to snatch a precariously balanced cup before it toppled to the floor.

"Shuttle due today," Fuzzy said, his voice eerily human.

Ian sucked hot simulated coffee from his fingertips, then settled the lid more firmly on the cup. "Already?" he asked Fuzzy. "Who're they sending this time?"

The meter-square light panel fronting Fuzzy's console rolled through shades of blue. "E. Krysynowski of the Pegasus. A new one."

Ian nodded with satisfaction. He didn't like seeing the same face more than once. "He'd better know the drill."

"She," Fuzzy corrected, then recited Ian's rules. "Pilot is to unload supplies by the dome's airlock. Complete delivery before the take-off window closes."

"And?" Ian prompted.

Fuzzy's panel faded into a reluctant sky blue. "Do not interrupt genetic research in process. But company would be good for you," Fuzzy protested.

"You're all the company I need. Sometimes more than I need." Ian picked up his cup and took a sip, wincing as always at the artificial coffee taste. "Run that last trial again."

Ian leaned his long body back in his chair and waited for Fuzzy to complete his request. Cup cradled in his lap, he stared out through the foot-thick glassite walls of his living dome. Outside, the asteroid Thea's stark terrain formed a bleak foreground for the steady glow of stars beyond.

"Results negative," the computer finally said, displaying the trial data on the screen.

Ian's mouth tightened as he tapped out a sequence on his console. He could interact with Fuzzy through voice commands, but he liked the tactile feel of the keyboard.

"Trial 681 - any chromatid pattern change at all?"

Fuzzy considered. "Mutational rate less than 0.003." Then his light panel drifted into a yellow-orange that usually meant the computer was up to something. "I have the pilot's scanned image," Fuzzy said, much too casually.

Ian knew this trick. Fuzzy would take a feminine image, juice it up, then watch Ian react. The computer had an absolute fascination for human sexual response.

Ian kept his eyes focused on his keyboard. "No thanks -"

But before the words were even out of his mouth, Ian knew Fuzzy had ignored him. He caught the barest shift of light as the scanned image replaced the data on Fuzzy's display.

Ian sighed. The computer's fuzzy logic enhancement might help him process like a human brain, but that ability was a double-edged sword. Little passed Fuzzy's notice, and he had an insatiable curiosity.

"She's pretty," Fuzzy said conversationally.

Fuzzy wasn't giving up easily this time. Ian would take a quick look, say something non-committal, and then they could get on with their work. Resigned, Ian tipped his head up.

He gave the image the briefest of glances before looking away, catching a glimpse of wild coppery hair and wide-set eyes. But something in her face pulled at him, dragged his eyes up for a second look. Then he couldn't look away.

She was no conventional beauty; he wouldn't even call her pretty with her pale skin and dusting of freckles across her nose. Striking, maybe, or even entrancing. And yet.... Ian skimmed his gaze across her image, trying to sort out the emotions her face had spun inside him.

She seemed caught unaware by the image recorder, surprise clear in her face, her full lips parted, her eyes wide. The unknowing sensuality in her innocent expression slammed into his gut, tore at his insides. To Ian's utter astonishment, raw desire surged through him. His brain tried to remind him that his reaction was due merely to the length of time since he'd been with a woman. His body had other ideas. Ian felt himself swell to painful hardness.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Ian slapped the keyboard to wipe the display. He was breathing hard, for God's sake. He could kick himself for looking at all. No doubt Fuzzy had not only augmented her image to heighten its sensuality, he had added to it something... else.

"Do you like her?" Fuzzy asked, all innocence.

"I'd have to be made of stone not to when you've juiced her image up like that."

"I did nothing of the kind," Fuzzy said. "I thought perhaps if you liked this one, you would want to meet her."

"I have no interest in meeting a shuttle rat."

"You used to," Fuzzy persisted. "When you first arrived here, you often invited female pilots into the dome for sexual -"

"I know why I invited them in," Ian snarled, still trying to bring his traitorous body under control. His hands moved blindly across the keyboard, scrolling page after page of data.

"But why do you avoid human interaction now? And why do you sublimate?"

Ian's hands stilled. "What?"

"Robert says you work so hard to sublimate your sexual needs. He says it would be much more effective if you simply satisfied them. In fact, studies have shown a 39 percent efficiency increase when sexual tension is released."

Ian's jaw tightened. "Robert Ishimoto may be president of the Chemical Genetics Institute and besides you, my best -"

"Only," Fuzzy interjected.

"All right, only friend," Ian conceded. "But my sexual needs are none of Robert's business," Ian growled. "Or yours."

Fuzzy's light panel darkened into a forest green, which meant the

computer's feelings, such as they were, had been hurt. With an exasperated sigh, Ian turned to stare out at the stars again. His eyes caught a glitter of light in the velvet-black sky. One of Thea's inhabited companions in the asteroid belt – Ceres, probably. None of the other orbiting rocks was large enough to reflect the sun like that.

The sight of Ceres, Thea's nearest populated neighbor, only sharpened Ian's loneliness. Turning aside his dark thoughts, he pulled himself back into his work, rattling out a series of commands on the keyboard. He pushed back a stray lock of black hair with an impatient hand and waited for Fuzzy's response.

"Fuzzy?" Ian chided when the silence lengthened far beyond Fuzzy's usual rapid response time. "The last three trials?"

Too human by half, the computer hesitated to say. Bad news, then. "Negative," Fuzzy said. "All of them," Ian could have sworn he heard the computer sigh.

Ian stood, stretching his arms over his head to shake the tension from his tight muscles. "Thank God Oxygen Deprivation Syndrome is confined to a small sector of Earth. They sure aren't getting any help from me for a cure."

"ODS is survivable," Fuzzy pointed out.

"Sure, in one out of ten cases." Ian stared down at his hands, contemplating all they had wrought, good and evil. "I want you to corroborate all the current tests, sorting by mutational rate—"

Fuzzy cut him off. "Shuttle Pegasus in final approach."

"ETA?" Ian asked.

"Give her ten minutes." Fuzzy paused. "She's cutting it close. Low angle of arrival."

"How low's her AOA?"

"It's erratic. Three degrees, plus or minus zero point two." Fuzzy's lights rolled across his panel in shades of yellow, what Ian had learned to interpret as distress.

"Can you raise her?"

"Commlink on audible now."

"Thea Station to Pegasus. Are you in trouble?"

A feminine voice crackled with static over the comm. "That depends. Are you out of coffee?"

Ian's concern melted into irritation. "Pegasus, your AOA is dangerously low."

Her throaty chuckle danced with the solar static. "I like living dangerously."

Mere annoyance burst into full-blown anger. "Thea isn't like Lunar Base. You've got one-quarter the gravity and sunside to worry about. Increase your AOA!"

"You can stick my AOA – " Solar interference overwhelmed the comm. Ian slapped the proper sequence to bring up Thea's topology graphics.

"Give me projected coordinates, Fuzzy." Fuzzy displayed a vivid red line across the topological display showing the shuttle point of impact a short half-kilom from the dome. A half-kilom in the wrong direction – sunside.

"Projected force of impact?"

"Based on velocity, her correction procedures, and the strength of the T4-type titanium hull –"

"Fuzzy, can she survive the crash?"

"Probability 54.3 percent. If she can correct enough to avoid sunside."

Ian slapped his console in exasperation, angry that he was feeling concern for the shuttle pilot. "Fuzzy, feed her nav data!"

"Trying." Fuzzy fluttered through a rainbow of color. "Data packet received! She's correcting."

Ian saw the red line curve slightly, away from sunside. Landing on Thea's nightside was no picnic, but at least Ian would have a prayer of rescuing her after impact. His lifesuit could withstand the intense cold long enough to pull her free and transport her to the dome. If she survived the

crash.

The Pegasus slammed soundlessly into Thea, its force translating into a vibration that shook the dome, rattling through the lab. The impact disturbed clouds of centuries-old dust.

Ian ran to the airlock and began shoving his feet into his lifesuit.

"Integrity of the shuttle fuel tanks?"

Fuzzy reached out with his sensors. "Intact, best I can tell."

"Any communication?"

Yellow roiled across Fuzzy's light panel. "No."

Ian keyed in the airlock decompression sequence. The door to the lab sealed shut behind him. "Any signs from the onboard computer? Is life-support functioning?"

"Not certain."

The decompression cycle completed and Ian opened the dome's outer door. With no wind to disperse it, the dust cloud still clung to the shuttle. Ian moved as quickly as he could, but Thea's low gravity made navigation tricky. The magnetic boots he used to grip the dome's metallic floors were useless on Thea's gravelly surface.

Running lights on the side of the Pegasus glowed faintly through the dust. She still had power, then. However, the obscuring dust prevented Ian from determining the extent of the shuttle's damage.

When he reached the Pegasus' hatch, he was surprised to see that the shuttle's hull seemed entirely intact. He peered through the forward window. The pilot's chair was empty.

How the hell could she have broken free of the straps? That kind of impact would have nearly destroyed the shuttle. He reached for the latch on the cockpit hatch.

The hatch door swung open, nearly knocking him into the dust. The lifesuited pilot stood in the doorway, a red carrysack slung over her arm.

"Hey, a welcoming committee!" Her voice buzzed in his suit radio. She pushed past Ian and slammed the shuttle door shut. "I'll unload your supplies after I get settled."

Settled? Before Ian could inform her otherwise, she had headed toward the dome. Her graceful bouncing step barely disturbed Thea's dust. She moved like someone accustomed to low gravity, each foot placed with economy, despite her bulky blue lifesuit.

Like the afterimage of a solar flare, her scanned picture burst into his mind. The wide-set eyes, the mass of copper hair, the parted lips. Incredibly, just watching her shapeless form in her lifesuit pounded a shaft of desire through him. His overactive imagination filled in the details of what the curves of her body might be like under the bulky material.

When she disappeared behind a twelve-foot boulder, Ian dragged himself out of his erotic fantasy and hurried to catch up. He rounded the rock and closed the distance between them with his long strides.

"I thought you'd crashed."

She shifted her sack to her other shoulder. "Just a rough landing."

"Rough - " Ian took a deep breath. "You nearly landed on sunside."

"But I didn't. Thanks for the course correction, by the way. My nav computer was slow making the calculations."

"Thank Fuzzy."

"Who's Fuzzy?"

"My computer."

She laughed. "And I thought I was strange, calling my shuttle Peggy."

When they reached the dome, she began studying the airlock control. Ian blocked her view with his hand. "Voice lock, Fuzzy," he said into the receiver. Then he turned to her, attempting a patient tone. "If you'd landed on sunside, I wouldn't have been able to save you."

She cocked her head back to look up at him. "You didn't save me."

Beneath the solar glare reflected on her faceplate, Ian could just make out the lines of her face, surrounded by that cloud of hair. He wondered how

closely her face matched Fuzzy's augmented image. What was the color of her hair or her eyes, really?

With a shake of his head, he quashed his curiosity. Maybe Fuzzy was right; he'd been alone here too long.

She tried to squeeze her hand under his on the airlock control. "Are you going to open this thing or not?"

Damned if he'd let a shuttle rat do him in. "This station is restricted." Not precisely true, but she didn't know that.

She planted her hands on her hips and crowded close to him. Ian took a half-step back, not liking his body's instant response. Her aggressive stance and thick lifesuit added little to her slight stature. He could easily pick her up and carry her back to her shuttle if he wanted to.

"Are you saying you won't let me in?"

"I'm saying the experimentation performed here is proprietary to CGI." True, but the way Ian concealed his data in Fuzzy, even an expert couldn't make sense of it.

She peered up at him. "What have you got to hide?"

"Nothing! It's company policy."

"Company policy or Llewellyn policy?" When he didn't answer, she backed away, leaning against the dome. "I'm going nowhere until you let me in."

"That's nonsense! Your suit can't have more than three hours' worth of air left --"

"A little over an hour, actually."

"You can't stay here until your air runs out."

"Of course not. You're going to let me in first."

"The hell I am!"

She didn't respond, just kept her head tipped up as if she glared at him. He could picture her full lower lip thrust out stubbornly. Angry and frustrated, all Ian could think of was drawing that soft lip gently between his teeth.

Damn! Ian whirled away from her, ruthlessly shoving aside the image. Then, gripping his hands into fists, he turned back.

"Fine, I'll let you in," he bit out, typing a sequence into the airlock keypad. "I'll give you a drink, help unload, then you're out of here." Damned if he'd spend more time with her than he had to.

"It's me, Fuzzy," he snapped, releasing the voice lock.

They entered the airlock, then waited while the chamber recompressed and the inner door slid open. The all clear display had barely lit when the pilot unsnapped her helmet. Ian's stomach clenched in anticipation of seeing her for the first time. He didn't know what he wished more -- a plain face to bring him back to reality, or the fantasy of Fuzzy's augmentation.

Then she pulled her helmet off, shaking free a cascade of auburn curls. Ian ran a hand over his eyes; obviously his brain had superimposed Fuzzy's sensual image over the pilot's face. Her lips couldn't be as full and soft, her hair as richly copper as his eyes wanted him to believe. Narrowing his gaze to bring her into better focus, Ian immediately wondered how the fiery tangle of her hair would feel against his palm, which only irritated him more.

He took the helmet from her, hanging it with a trembling hand next his own on a wall grip. He expected her to leave on the lifesuit, but her hands skimmed the front closure, her slender fingertips dipping inside to open the suit.

A sudden picture of her nude underneath flashed in his mind; he could see every detail of her small breasts and tiny waist in that brief, erotic image. For a bizarre moment, he wondered if she was part of some perverse scheme of Fuzzy's to "satisfy his needs." But when she stepped out of the suit, he saw her red coverall, modestly unfastened to just below her collarbone.

As she hung up the suit next to her helmet, the scent of wildflowers drifted from her. Ian imagined flowers scattered in her hair... her hair spread across his pillow....

"Man, I hate wearing lifesuits." Her slightly husky voice startled him out of his ridiculous fantasy. She slung her carrysack back on her shoulder and glided into the lab.

Ian stood in the airlock doorway and watched her gaze around the dome. Her cherry red coverall accented the body underneath, following every curve lovingly, smooth over the swell of her hips. His loins tightened in response, and his lifesuit suddenly felt too warm.

Ian unsuited quickly, then strode into the lab. She was looking up through the dome at the stars overhead, her short fall of auburn hair caressing the creamy column of her neck. He tried to see her eyes, to see if the color matched Fuzzy's image, but she turned away from him.

"I never get tired of seeing the stars," she said as she moved to the transparent wall. She gazed out at desolate Thea, hand pressed against the wall's glassite surface.

Then she slanted a look at him over her shoulder. "It must have been quite an undertaking, shuttling your dome out here from Lunar Base."

He shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest. "CGI brought over a quadrant at a time."

"But no one had attempted a living space this large in the asteroid belt before that - what was it, twenty years ago?"

"More or less. Plenty of construction now, even on the outer planets."

She scanned the arched ceiling of the dome, then peered at Ian shrewdly. "Quite a lot of room here for one person. It must be -"

"Seven hundred square meters, give or take. Is this an inquisition, Ms. Krysynowski?"

A flush rose in her cheeks. "Of course not. I'm just... curious." She fluttered a hand at him. "The story of Thea's dome construction is required reading in Space History, so naturally, I wondered -"

He cocked a brow at her, captivated by the turbulent emotions in her eyes. "You wondered?" he prompted.

She looked away from him and stared out the dome as if searching for answers. When she turned back, she seemed to consider and discard a number of responses. Ian kept his gaze fixed on her eyes, still trying to fathom their color, but they seemed to shift from gray to green to hazel.

Just as he thought he'd pinned down the exact shade, she blurted out, "Where do I sleep?"

For a moment, the question didn't sink in. Then it hit him. Her carrysack. Her comment earlier about getting settled. The fact that she, unlike every other pilot who shuttled supplies here, had finagled her way into his domain and now behaved as if she belonged here.

"Sleep?"

"During my stay. While I wait for the outer planet delivery."

"What outer planet delivery?"

She looked puzzled. "Didn't you get the comm?"

"Fuzzy screens my communications. If an incoming message is unrelated to CGI business, he handles it. However - " Ian turned to Fuzzy's light panel. "If a message concerned me, he would let me know, right Fuzzy?"

Fuzzy's lights flickered through a rainbow of yellow-greens. "I might have neglected to pass along one message."

"Give it to me now," Ian demanded.

Fuzzy's lights flared in a final burst of lime-green, then Robert's voice kicked in. "One last item. Outer planet gas samples will arrive at Thea shortly after your next supply run. To avoid the two month wait, your pilot will layover at Thea Station until that delivery arrives so she can bring it in to Lunar Base. Let me know if that presents a problem. Robert out."

The pilot stood at his elbow, a thread of her scent tickling his nose, tangling in his gut. She stared, rapt, at Fuzzy's light panel.

"He's an AIFLE, isn't he?"

Ian nodded. "Artificial Intelligence Fuzzy Logic Enhancement. I call

him Fuzzy."

She slanted him a look. "I didn't think you were the type to name an inanimate computer. An AIFLE, though...." She ran a hand over Fuzzy's panel. "What are the lights for?"

"An afterthought of Fuzzy's creator. Fuzzy uses them to... express himself." Ian flicked a hand at the sickly lime-green that still hung there. "I call this color guilty green." The lights immediately flared into neutral blue.

Krys laughed at Fuzzy's sudden change, the sound like cool water running down a dry throat. "I thought AIFLEs were pretty darn close to human. Why do you suppose he didn't give you the message?"

Gazing down at her, wondering what that trail of freckles would feel like under his fingertips, Ian knew the answer to her question. Devious Fuzzy hadn't wanted Ian to have a chance to cancel the layover.

Aloud, Ian said, "A glitch, no doubt." Fuzzy's panel glowed sheepish pink. "I'll have to run him through his maintenance check."

To the computer, the pilot said, "I'm Krys. Krys Krysynowski."

"Fuzzy, Ms. Krysynowski. I'm glad to meet you."

"Just Krys will do. And thanks for that nav correction." Krys turned to Ian. "Dr. Llewellyn, I presume."

"Ian," he said with an impatient wave of his hand. "But listen, you can't stay here. I haven't the facilities."

"No problem." She ran her fingers through her curls, increasing the disarray. "The layover should only be a few days, a week at most. I can shag out on the lab floor."

Ian's hands itched again to take a handful of auburn fire. He shoved them into his pockets. "That's not feasible. I work in the lab all hours."

"Then I'll use your bunk while you're in here."

The image of her sweet, warm curves beneath his blankets crowded into his mind. "Absolutely not."

Fuzzy cut in. "There is the spare quarters, Ian."

Ian glared at his mutinous computer. "Stay out of this, Fuzzy."

Krys grinned at him. "The spare quarters sounds fine."

Ian shook his head emphatically. "It's a mess, I use it for supplies. Besides, I haven't sufficient food for two."

"I brought extra." She tossed her carriesack out of the way. "Speaking of which, I'd better bring in your supplies." She moved to the airlock with light careful steps.

"Wait!" he called out.

She paused with her suit pulled halfway up and Ian imagined pulling it and the coverall off her. He ran a sweaty palm across his face.

She looked at him expectantly. "Yes?"

"I - Can I help you unload?" Good God, where did that come from? He had no desire to be near her.

"Thanks, no." She smiled, her eyes bright with humor. "I have a sled." She reached up for the airlock control.

"Krys!"

Her hand stilled. "Yes?"

"Thea's only got a 50 meter safety margin between sunside and nightside. Don't start wandering around out there."

"Right." Then just before the inner airlock door closed, she added, "A drink would be nice when I get back. Something cold." Then the door closed, shutting her from view.

Ian stared at the airlock a moment, then looked up, through the dome at the stars above.

Green. Her eyes were definitely green. But even as he thought it, certainty faded.

Slapping Fuzzy's console, Ian barked out, "Get me Robert."

Fuzzy's lights glowed an uncertain turquoise. "To report status?"

"No. To get Ms. E. Krysynowski off my asteroid."

A pale green sigh flashed across Fuzzy's panel. Ian sat down and swivelled his chair away from the computer. Damned if he'd feel guilty. E. Krysynowski. What did the E stand for anyway?

Eugenia "Krys" Krysynowski leaped from Thea's dusty surface into the Pegasus and slammed the door behind her. Sinking into her pilot's chair she waited, gloved fingers drumming the armrest, while the shuttle's cabin recompressed. When the safe signal beeped she popped the latches on her helmet and hooked it on a wall grip. Then she stared out the viewscreen at Thea.

She'd made it. To Thea, to the great Ian Llewellyn's sanctified genetics lab. It had taken schedule juggling, two lost contracts and an unknown amount of skullduggery to get her here. The canceled contracts would pinch her credit balance; as an independent pilot she lived on a fine financial edge. She'd just as soon not know about the underhanded tricks used by the Supporters of Ethics in Science to arrange for her presence here.

Krys wondered again why Leonard had sent her to Thea. She knew the order had come from above Len, from some mystery man in the SEIS organization that her longtime friend said must remain anonymous. It went against her grain to follow orders, but she bit back her rebellion and accepted Len's directives. Observe and ask questions. Stick close to Llewellyn.

She grimaced as she considered how poorly she'd filled that role so far. Around Ian Llewellyn, Krys felt as transparent as the glassite walls of his dome. She wished she could just tell Leonard to jettison her part in the plan.

Krys wondered if her mother had agreed to such secretiveness. When Marcella Russo Krysynowski had founded SEIS twenty years ago, her mission had been clear - prevent a repeat of genetic disasters like the Gunnart Incident. Only later, when more extremist elements joined SEIS, did the issue become muddier. Should only bio-weapons like Gunnart be banned? Or should all genetic experimentation be halted?

She could still hear the heated arguments between her parents, her father's insistence that research into life-saving genetic cures must continue, her mother's equal conviction that conventional medicine could do as well. Just as the disagreement reached titanic proportions, her father always managed to coax a kiss from her mother. Marcella would laugh, nine-year-old Krys would giggle, and her parents would disappear into their room for a while.

Then Marcella died, the issue still unresolved. She left Krys to sort out where her mother's beliefs ended and her own began. Even as Krys fervently vowed to carry on her adored mother's cause, another part of her remained always uncertain.

If something as horrifying as Gunnart was happening in Ian Llewellyn's lab right now, surely Krys would have to do whatever she could to stop it. Despite CGI's public statements that they did not manufacture genetic bio-weapons, Krys couldn't help but wonder why a scientist of Llewellyn's caliber worked here in isolation.

Krys broke from her reverie and activated the shuttle maintenance program in preparation for shutdown. No point in wasting power while the vehicle sat idle for the next several days. The program would also point up any deficiencies in equipment.

While the software performed its safety checks, Krys climbed into the supply bay to pull out Ian's delivery. She inventoried the items as she stacked them by the bay door. Pack after pack of pre-fab synth meals spread across the bay floor. Either Ian Llewellyn had no facility for preparing real food or he just didn't care what he ate. Krys wrinkled her nose as she considered the prospect of eating "rubber suppers" in the coming week with Ian Llewellyn.

Ian Llewellyn. Lord, he had to be the best looking man she'd ever seen.



Thick black hair that begged to be touched, deep blue eyes, and that body! Broad shoulders narrowing to a tight waist, muscles she knew he had to work darn hard to maintain under low gravity.

And alone on this asteroid for Lord knew how long, no companionship, female or otherwise. With a wicked grin, Krys imagined the good doctor chasing her around the dome with amorous intentions. She supposed after so much time alone, even Krys might look good to him.

Her smile twisted into a grimace. Fat chance of that. Professionally, Krys would be the first to say she was the best darn pilot of all the independents. She might cut things closer than the average shuttle rat, but she'd never turned down a difficult contract and she'd never been late with a delivery.

But physically, she had to face the brutal fact her body was short and graceless, her crazy hair the color of a red dwarf, and her eyes a nondescript shade even she couldn't identify. Few men gave her a second look.

She and Leonard had flirted once with the idea of a relationship. But there'd been no passion, only fumbling awkwardness, and they'd both rejected the notion as too ridiculous. That had convinced Krys she wasn't suited for the whole sex thing.

But Ian Llewellyn – a sudden sharp image of his ice-blue eyes sprang into her mind. She could picture pushing aside the lock of hair that tumbled down his forehead, running her fingers through the black silk, resting her palm against his strong jaw.

Krys dropped onto a stack of crates with a jolt. Good God, what lunacy! How could she possibly think of Ian Llewellyn in a sexual way? The man was cold as space. And Lord knew what he was cooking up in his isolated lab.

She heard the shuttle console beep, signaling completion of the maintenance check. She reentered the cabin to scan the report. The software had repaired several minor glitches. Only one problem required her attention – the fuel oscillator had overheated. She could wait until she returned to Lunar Base to repair it, but if she could persuade Ian to let her fabricate it here, that would give her access to his computer.

Fuzzy represented an unforeseen complication. She might be able to pull one over on a non-AI computer, but Fuzzy.... No way could she go pawing through his databases undetected.

After downloading the oscillator specs onto a data chip, she snapped her helmet back into place and initiated the air recovery system. As the Pegasus decompressed, the recovery system returned the unused oxygen to the storage tanks.

Back in the bay, she scanned the supplies again. She could probably haul the bulk of them to the dome on the sled. She could ferry it all in two trips, max.

The real trick would be finding a way to get Ian Llewellyn out of his lab so she could contact Leonard. If the Pegasus' comlink had enough power, she could call him from here, but the shuttle comm was only good for short range transmissions.

So how in space could she call Leonard from the dome without Fuzzy giving the game away?

(bm) Chapter 2

Robert Ishimoto's tired face looked out at Ian from the comlink display. "There's nothing I can do."

Guilt nagged at Ian as he stared at Robert's image. The fourth president in CGI's ninety years of existence, Robert appeared even older than his 84 years. For the first time Ian noticed the gray threading through Robert's black hair, saw the lines tracking across his face. Robert had enough on his plate without having to deal with Ian's tantrum.

Robert activated the holographic display at his desk and ran his fingers over the embedded control panel. "Expected time of arrival for the gas samples is two to three days. That is, if elevated solar activity doesn't shift the navigational bump points. Then you're looking at a week, maybe ten days."

Ten days? Ten minutes of the infuriating – and tantalizing – pilot had nearly sent Ian over the edge. "She could stay in her shuttle."

A flicker of annoyance crossed Robert's calm face. "Not enough oxygen or power in the shuttle – you know that, Ian. You'll just have to deal with her."

The problem was, his body was far too eager to deal with her. Ian turned his back on the comm display and gazed out of the dome at Thea. He felt like a petulant schoolboy. "Sorry. You're right, of course."

In the long moments of silence which followed Ian wondered if his friend had disconnected. Then Robert said, "Tomorrow's the anniversary, isn't it?"

Ian studied the faint scar on his pinkie, constant reminder of his arrogance. "Anniversary?" he asked, but he knew.

A pause, then Robert said, "Alicia's death."

Ian turned back to Robert's image. "Even after all these years, I could tell you to the minute when she died. Why do suppose that is?"

"She was the first," Robert suggested. "The weakest."

Ian felt the familiar anguish well in him. "She still haunts my dreams."

Robert's gaze sharpened on Ian. "Obviously, she was more important to you than the others."

Did Robert know that Ian had loved Alicia? That he had nearly asked her to leave her husband, Everett, for him? But no, he'd never told Robert. He'd never told anyone, not even Alicia.

"She was just a friend," Ian said, avoiding Robert's eyes.

"Yet hers is the only face you can still bring to mind."

Ian looked up at Robert, surprised at his friend's insight. "I gave her an impossible choice. She knew Everett wouldn't undergo Keemo unless they both did. She had to say yes or she'd deny Everett a part in the grand experiment. You know what kind of choice it turned out to be."

"I'd like to tell you it wasn't your fault –"

"Why listen to a lie?"

Robert's impatient sigh revived Ian's guilt at laying his petty problems at his friend's feet. "Look, I'm sorry I bothered you."

Robert waved a hand in dismissal. "At least you're a friendly face. Without any private agendas."

Ian felt the constriction in his chest ease as the conversation turned away from the past. "Gideon on your back?"

Robert shook his head. "SEIS."

"Sixers at it again? What's their beef?"

"The usual. They want new legislation limiting genetic fields of endeavor –"

"Until their son or daughter pops up with an illness only genetic tinkering can cure."

"Ban on animal trials –"

"I haven't performed animal testing for over a decade."

"Greater oversight of experimentation –"

"They already have hostile witnesses in every lab –"

"Every lab but one," Robert reminded him.

Ian rose from his seat and paced the lab floor. "They can't possibly expect that I'd permit a SEIS representative on Thea Station."

"That's not their intention."

"They have some sense then."

"They want to close it down."

Ian whirled to face the comlink screen. "What?"

Robert swiped a hand over his desk and his holo display disappeared.

"They hope to convert Thea Station to a fully staffed site for conventional medical research."

"Over my dead - What was your response?"

"That Thea's most efficient use is as a genetic research facility. That Dr. Ian Llewellyn embodied the ideal of scientific ethics."

Ian smirked. "Did you say that with a straight face?"

"For God's sake, Ian, it's true!"

"And did anyone drag the Gunnart Incident from the mud?"

Robert's mouth tightened. "Of course."

Ian sank back into his chair. "Decades of good, hard work by genetics engineers erased by one horrible mistake."

"Errors in judgment are difficult to escape."

Ian knew the censure he heard in Robert's tone rose from his own magnified sense of guilt. Forcing back the feeling of blame, Ian returned his thoughts to the present. "Who heads up the Sixers nowadays?"

Robert popped up his holo display again and read from it. "Leonard Hayden. Born on Lunar Base, studies in bio-chemistry and holographic engineering, parents deceased -"

"Enough." The ease with which CGI's information system could invade someone's privacy rankled Ian. "A reasonable man?"

"As much as any Sixer." A faint smile played about Robert's mouth and Ian had the sense his friend held something back. He would have asked, but Robert said, "Let's go over your latest research stats," and the question was forgotten.

Ian ran his fingers over his keyboard, typing out the proper queries. "I have some promising results."

Robert sat back in his chair, smiling more broadly. "Have Fuzzy send them over."

Krys stood patiently outside the dome's airlock, the transport sled beside her. "Fuzzy, I'm sure Dr. Llewellyn didn't mean to reset the voice lock."

"But Ms. Krysynowski, only Ian can override it."

Krys looked at the pile of goods beside her. She'd gotten nearly all of them on the sled, leaving her one more trip. Now if she could just get inside.

"But these are Ian's supplies. Surely he'd want me to take them into the dome."

"I will notify Dr. Llewellyn that you are here - "

"No! I mean, why bother him?"

Krys drummed gloved fingers against the dome wall. Sure, it would be easier to call on Llewellyn. But she wanted to see how far she could push Fuzzy.

"I could have these supplies unloaded in no time. You wouldn't have to interrupt his work."

"He is busy with Robert."

"There you go. Just open the airlock and I'll take care of the rest."

After a moment, the outer airlock door opened. She tugged the sled inside, then waited for the chamber to repressurize.

"Thanks Fuzzy," Krys said as she pulled off her helmet. She stripped off her lifesuit and hung her gear on the grips.

When the inner door opened, Ian didn't seem to notice, so engrossed was he in his work. Krys towed the sled inside and skirted the range of Ian's comlink transmitter. A face she recognized as that of CGI president Robert Ishimoto displayed on the comlink screen.

"I'll upload the latest ODS stats to Fuzzy," Ishimoto said.

Ian tapped out a sequence on the keyboard. Krys would have expected holo sensors or at least one of the older, embedded control boards like she had in the Pegasus. But a keyboard was downright archaic.

"Is the spread still contained?" Ian asked.

Ishimoto nodded. "Complete quarantine. No one in or out but authorized medical personnel."

Krys shuddered as the stats rolled across Fuzzy's display. She'd heard about the ODS epidemic. The disease had decimated whole Communities; entire families had perished.

And Ian Llewellyn must be one of the dozens of genetic engineers chasing a cure. It looked as if he was having no more success than the group of scientists SEIS had funded who were studying a conventional medicine approach.

Ian's fingers moved across his keyboard as he glanced between Fuzzy's display and Robert's comlink image. Krys's eyes riveted on those long, graceful fingers. Unbidden, a picture popped in her mind of those fingers skimming down her body, scudding across her breasts.

Startled by the vivid image, she jarred the supply sled and a precariously placed box tumbled off. Before she could catch the container, the noise alerted Ian to Krys's presence. He barked a hasty sign-off to a puzzled Ishimoto, and whirled to face Krys.

"How the hell did you get in here?"

Krys stalled by chasing the box that bounced in slow curves in Thea's low gravity. "Fuzzy let me in."

Ian moved across the floor with steady measured steps. "You overrode my voice lock?"

"Well, Fuzzy did, really." She made a great show of neatening the pile of packages and containers. "You wouldn't happen to have a spare pair of those mag-boots, would you?"

"I do, and stop changing the subject." He came up directly behind her; his heat soaked into her flesh, seeping to her core. "I won't have you usurping me here."

His warmth pulled her like a magnet and she leaned back into him. The hard wall of his chest pressed against her spine. When she thought he might pull away, he placed a hand on either side of her onto the supply stack, trapping her. Krys whirled to face him. Big mistake.

Her hands were somehow splayed across his chest. Her fingers scrunched into smooth black knit of what looked like a coverall top. She took a quick peek, curious about the bottoms. She caught a quick impression of heavy faded black fabric full of stitches and pockets with a definite ridge.... She hastily dragged her eyes back up.

"I was just trying to save you some trouble," she said to his chest.

"Somehow, you're proving to be trouble no matter what you do." The rough edge to his voice shivered inside her.

She looked up and his navy blue eyes captivated her. His gaze fell to her parted lips and she could sense his breathing deepening. His arms on either side of her were thick with ropy muscle sheathed by supple skin.

She hastily brought her hands away from his chest, crossing them over her breasts. Still his heat surrounded her. "You, uh, keep pretty fit, I see." She gestured lamely at the powerful line of his arms. "In, uh, low grav, I mean."

"I take my augmentors faithfully. Use the stress equipment." His gaze seemed as palpable as a touch as it traced the line of her body. "As I'm sure you do."

The intensity of his gaze froze any response in her throat. He leaned in closer, and she thought for a silly, crazy moment that he might kiss her. All at once excited and frightened by the notion, she took an involuntary step backward. Her hip brushed against the sled and an avalanche of boxes scattered across the floor.

They broke apart, staring at each other a moment, Ian's expression stunned. Then they scrambled after the supplies, corralling the boxes with clumsy snatches.

Ian muttered under his breath as he stooped under Fuzzy's console to retrieve a meal pack. Something to do with walking disasters.

As if she was the dangerous one here. One look from Ian Llewellyn incited absolute chaos inside her. She'd just as soon face an entire bank of shuttle telltales screaming Code Six warnings.

"How long were you planning to stay?" he asked as he dumped the last armful next to the sled. "This looks like twice my normal food delivery."

She scowled as she dropped her load next to his. "I have a big appetite. Besides, the items still at the shuttle are non-consumable."

He scanned the huge pile with dismay evident on his face. "There's more?"

Head tipped back to meet his gaze, hands on hips, she faced him. "There are exactly seven days' worth of additional meals, Dr. Llewellyn. The rest of this... this... space junk nearly exceeded the weight limit for the Pegasus because you tried to cram so much into a single delivery."

Ian took a step closer, towering over her. "I do that, Ms. Krysynowski, to minimize confrontations with individuals such as yourself who disturb my peace."

Krys thrust out her lower lip, digging in. "Shuttle pilots are good enough to bring you your supplies, but not to enter your hallowed domain, is that it?"

Frustration darkened his face. "That's not what I said! I work best in isolation. I have no interest in building relationships -"

"With people beneath you?" Self-righteousness flooded her, goading her. "God forbid you should meet one of the people you cook up cures for!"

His strong hands fisted at his sides, as if he held back his temper by sheer force. "Just because I don't care to share my space with a shuttle rat -"

Now Krys's anger matched his. "What did you call me?"

"You know damn well I meant nothing by it. You people use the name yourselves."

"You - people -"

Ian held up his hands placatingly. "Look, I'm sorry, that came out badly."

Krys took a swipe at him, batting his hands away. "You gene benders are all alike."

"Now who's typecasting?"

She took a step closer and gave his chest a little shove. "All you care about is tinkering. If you thought it would serve your experiment -"

He grabbed at her hands. "Now just a minute -"

"- you'd tinker a man to death!"

He froze, his fingers wrapped around her wrists, his chest heaving. His eyes blazed, deep blue fire, and she thought his rage would consume her like a conflagration.

Then he flung her hands away and whirled to stare out at Thea. Focusing on her sore wrists, trying to rub away his touch, Krys searched for something cutting to say. She stepped around to face him, her mouth open to speak. What she saw in his eyes shocked her into silence.

She'd expected anger. Instead, she saw profound sadness and regret, guilt tangled with a soul-deep grief. His turbulent emotions wrenched at her heart, nearly brought her to tears.

His eyes locked with hers for a dozen heartbeats, his agony naked on his face. Then he swung away from her and stood gripping the back of his chair, shoulders held in a tight, rigid line.

Krys looked away, unable to witness his pain. She caught sight of a box which must have tumbled under Fuzzy's console. "We've missed one," she said, keeping her voice even.

"I'll get it," he said, forestalling her. Crouching, he retrieved the package, but as he tried to straighten, he smacked his head on the sharp underside of the console. He slapped a hand on the back of his head and sank to the floor.

Krys hurried to his side. "Let me see."

She pried at his hand, distressed by the dark-red that oozed between his fingers. He pulled his hand away long enough to look at the blood on it, then hid the wound again from view. But before he did, Kryz spied the bloody slash.

"Let me get something for that. Where's your MedKit?"

He shook his head, edging away so that he leaned against Fuzzy's console. He sat like that, hand pressed to his head, eyes shut tight as if he concentrated on something important. Kryz watched him silently, not sure what else she should do.

After several minutes, he rose and went to the necessity. When he returned, his hair was wet and his hand showed no trace of blood.

"Just a nick," he said.

Kryz knew what she had seen. That wound could not be called a nick. "Could I check it, please?"

He shook his head. "It's fine."

He sat in his chair with his back to her. When she tried to touch him, to push aside his hair to see, he shrugged away from her.

"I said it's fine," he repeated.

"I saw blood," she said. "There's still some in your hair."

He scooped his hair back in place. "It did bleed a little."

"I saw a lot of blood," she insisted.

He shrugged. "Head wounds are like that. Small cut, great deal of blood."

"But —"

"Didn't you have more supplies to bring in?"

Kryz could tell she was being sidetracked. She'd let it go. "One more load. After I empty the sled."

He helped her remove the last of the packages and boxes from the transport, stacking them neatly on the floor. Then he returned to his chair, immersing himself in his work without another word.

"I'll have Fuzzy beep you when I return," she said.

"No need. Fuzzy, authorize airlock entry to Ms. Krysynowski."

Kryz dragged the sled to the airlock. "Right. See you when I get back." He ignored her.

Only after she was outside did she remember her need to contact Leonard. Between Ian's exasperating manner and her own irresistible fantasies, she'd forgotten her mission entirely.

So how could she report her arrival to Leonard without Ian Llewellyn listening in? The man clung to his genetics lab like a scabbet, the thumb-sized parasite that inhabited the air-recirc ducts at Lunar Base. A scabbet at least you could flush with a burst of hi-freq sound.

Kryz tugged the sled toward the Pegasus. Ten meters from the dome, she caught sight of Thea Station's air-recirc units. She paused a moment, considering what she knew of recirc mechanisms. And realized there was a way to flush this scabbet after all.

Ian continued to ignore her when she brought in the second load.

Unsuited and sipping the tart synth juice she'd helped herself to, Kryz sat on the floor, leaning against the clear glassite wall. She entertained herself by watching the play of muscles in Ian's shoulders. Shoulders and thick black hair were all she could see of him above the back of his chair.

When she'd first returned to the dome, she'd tried to decipher the graphs and columns of data on Fuzzy's displays. But she was a shuttle pilot, not a geneticist. Darned if she could make heads or tails out of what she read.

She shifted on the hard metaglass floor, trying to get comfortable. "I find it incredible you have only the one chair."

"No one's ever here but me."

"You must have some visitors."

He shook his head, not taking his attention from Fuzzy's screens.

"Never?" she prodded.

"Never," he answered, sounding as if he spoke through clenched teeth.

Krys took a deep breath, wondering how far she could push him. "Then what are you up to that's so secret?"

He turned his chair toward her and pierced her with his glare.

"Research, Ms. Krysynowski. Ordinary genetic research."

"We're studying ODS," the AIFLE chimed in, and Llewellyn turned his dark look on Fuzzy. Undaunted, the computer continued, "No one can pick a virus down to its nucleic acid bases like Dr. Llewellyn. He's the best."

Trailing her gaze down his length, Krys couldn't help wondering if he was the best at more than genetics. Aware of his eyes on her, she resolutely turned her attention back to her questioning.

"Why do you work alone?" She gestured around the dome. "You could probably stuff another one or two gene bend – geneticists in here. Why isolate yourself?"

His hands gripped the keyboard in his lap. "I like being alone." Yet as he said the words, she saw again a trace of the terrible pain she'd seen before, the sadness.

His face smoothed into neutrality before he turned away, leaving Krys to wonder what lay behind Llewellyn's facade. Were horrors like Gunnart seething in his brilliant mind? Was that the purpose of his isolation here, creation of bio-weaponry out of the public's eye? For all she knew, the ODS research was a front for Llewellyn's real work, a dog and pony show for Krys while she stayed in the dome.

She wished she knew more of the geneticist than the bits and bytes the newsvids reported. Fabricating bio-weapons could be all in a day's work for him, causing not even a blip on his conscience.

No, she thought, he couldn't be that way. She didn't want to believe it – because she wanted to assume the best in people, she hastily assured herself. And because she hated the thought of another Gunnart looming on the horizon.

Full of edgy energy, Krys rose and crossed to the galley. She shoved the juice container into the recycle slot then paced the lab, keeping her eyes fixed on Ian with each pass. The mag-boots he'd lent her clicked on the floor, the rhythmic sound magnified by the silence of the lab.

"Ms. Krysynowski," Ian finally said into the quiet. "Would you please find a place to light?"

She stopped by his chair and realized irritably that even seated his eyes were nearly on a level with hers. She planted her hands on the arm of his chair and leaned in closer. "Listen, Llewellyn, my bottom still aches from sitting on cold metaglass. Where would you suggest I sit?"

Without meaning to, she looked down at his muscular legs. An image flared in her mind of sitting in his oh-so-tempting lap, wriggling her softness against that fascinating ridge between his legs. Heat flooded her face and she looked away in embarrassment, only to lock on his hunger-filled eyes.

Like being eaten alive, she thought, her body trembling in response. She stood riveted as he dragged his gaze up along the line of her hip, to the curve of her waist and across her breasts. His eyes came to rest on the rapid pulse at her throat, his gaze as palpable as a touch.

If she leaned in just a bit closer, she could brush her lips against his ebony hair. She ached to touch it, to feel its silky texture. She felt that tingle up her spine that always preceded a totally impulsive act, the kind that always got her into trouble. She'd better back away, and quick.

Instead she blurted, "Let me take a look at that cut," and found herself reaching for him.

He stilled as she threaded her fingers through the rich black strands, combing it this way and that, fingertips stroking his scalp. She thought she heard him swallow a moan as she drew her nails lightly over his head. When

she skimmed his sensitive ears, he grabbed her wrists, stopping her. But for a moment he just held her, and his heat burned into her delicate flesh.

Then he pushed at her hands and swivelled his chair away from her. The chair back and his own broad shoulders formed a sturdier barrier between them than any wall of glassite.

"I don't want you touching me," he said in a low voice.

"I - I'm sorry. I didn't mean to -"

"Just don't," he bit out.

Krys stared at him, openmouthed, trying to decipher the emotion behind the simple words. Then a clamor from Fuzzy nearly had her leaping out of her mag-boots.

Ian pushed out of his chair and she could swear he seemed relieved by the interruption. "Fuzzy?" he asked, putting another half-meter between him and Krys.

"Life support failure," the computer answered.

Krys tried to look worried. "But you have redundant systems, right?"

"Of course." He must have caught something in her tone because he eyed her speculatively. "Fuzzy, can you pin down the problem?"

"Negative. Unit Four tripped the alarm."

Ian sighed and headed for the airlock. "I'll have to check it out. Keep your suit handy."

"Right. I'll put supplies away while you're gone."

He looked at her sharply as the inner airlock door shut. Darn! She sounded much too blasé; she'd made him suspicious. She'd told Leonard she wasn't cut out for this cloak and dagger stuff.

When she was certain Ian had left the dome, Krys turned to the computer. "Fuzzy, can you lower the decibels on that alarm please?"

"Of course." The volume decreased to a bearable hum.

Krys ran a finger across Fuzzy's console. "Also, I, uh, was wondering. Can you arrange a private conversation? I mean, can I use the comlink without you listening in?"

Unlike his owner, Fuzzy apparently wasn't the suspicious type.

"Certainly, Ms. Krysynowski."

"Krys. Call me Krys." She moved to sit in Ian's chair. "And could we leave Dr. Llewellyn out of this as well? You see, I'm, uh, calling my lover and sometimes we, uh, well... it would be embarrassing to have him hear the communication."

"Certainly, Krys. But I was wondering."

"Yes?"

"Why did you activate the maintenance check cycle on the air-recirc unit? Didn't you realize it would trigger the life support failure alarm?"

Good Lord, Fuzzy knew what she'd done! "It, uh, I must have jarred it accidentally."

"But Unit Four is quite some distance from the path between your shuttle and the airlock door."

"It's this darn low gravity, Fuzzy." Could a computer detect a lie? "I lost my balance."

Fuzzy seemed to consider this. She hoped his data base didn't include the fact she'd grown up on Lunar Base under low gravity. She also hoped it didn't occur to him shuttle pilots spent more time in free fall than in normal gravity.

"I see..." Fuzzy said, his panel glowing a bright yellow-orange. Then the lights blinked back into blue. "I will open your comlink. Name and address please."

Startled by the ease with which Fuzzy had agreed, Krys searched her memory frantically for Leonard's code name. "Uh... Harry Ellis, Community 413, address 70312-1022."

While she waited for the link to open, she drew her feet up under her and relaxed in Ian's chair. The size of the seat and back dwarfed her; obviously, the piece was custom made for Ian's long frame. She tucked her



elbows against the back of the chair and her hands fell a good twenty centimeters short of the ends of the arms.

She leaned back and the chair responded by reclining slightly. She tried tilting it in various directions; each time the chair moved with her in perfect concert. When she tapped the joystick on the right arm, the chair moved closer or farther from Fuzzy's console, another tap and the chair slid left or right.

Snuggling down in the seat, she enjoyed the sensation of the nubby fabric grazing her palms. She let her eyes drift shut, and breathed in the tang of Ian's scent still clinging to the chair. She nestled deeper and felt as if she were curving her body into his, as if his arms enfolded her.

"Connection complete," Fuzzy said, jarring her eyes open.

She sat up hastily, just as Leonard's face appeared on the display. He peered at her, milky blue eyes wary in his ruddy face. "You made it."

Krys leaned toward the comlink transmitter. "What the heck am I doing here?"

Leonard's gaze flicked to one side. He drew nervous fingers through his thinning blond hair. "Can't tell you yet."

Annoyance bubbled inside Krys. "Just when will I be privy to that information?"

He stared down at the bottom of the display. "When Ram says."

Annoyance burst into full-blown anger. "He hasn't even told you, has he?"

Finally his eyes swung up to meet hers. "He says it's important. Crucial that you're there."

Krys drummed impatient fingers against the chair. "Have you asked him directly?"

Leonard's eyes widened, alarm clear on his face. "I couldn't...."

"Then let me," Krys urged. "He's got to trust me enough by now...." Her voice trailed off as she saw the absolute terror in Leonard's eyes.

He drew his tongue furtively over dry lips and whispered, "No."

His eyes seemed to plead with her to drop the subject, unsettling Krys even more. She worried the inside of her cheek with her teeth, considering. "Did you know his computer's an AIFLE?"

His eyes evaded hers again. "Yes, we knew."

Krys slapped her hands down on the arms of the chair. "And you didn't warn me?"

"Well, we...." Leonard seemed to search the room for an answer. "Ram has a workaround."

Krys didn't like the sound of that. "Meaning?"

"I don't...." Leonard's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "He hasn't...."

"He hasn't told you that either," Krys finished for him. "Well, you can tell Ram this - there are some things I won't do. Even for the cause."

"But Ram says...." He took a breath and tried again. "CGI's up to something, Krys. Something even worse than Gunnart."

"You mean here? On Thea?" Krys met Leonard's now steady gaze. "You mean Llewellyn?" His answer hung in the air, implicit in his silence. Krys shook her head. "I don't think...."

What? That Ian Llewellyn couldn't possibly be involved with something as monstrous as Gunnart? That the man wouldn't willfully create death? His harsh manner was certainly cold enough, his fabled genetics skill sufficient to create a whole arsenal of bio-weaponry.

And yet.... She remembered the pain in his hard blue eyes, the sadness. And couldn't - didn't want to - imagine a man who could feel so deeply would knowingly cause others pain. She wanted to believe, with a fervency she didn't care to examine closely, that Ian Llewellyn was an honorable man.

And yet, even an honorable man might perform despicable acts. And would react with exactly the sort of pain and guilt she saw in Ian.

"Even if he is," Krys said slowly, "I won't do anything illegal."

"It won't be like that. I'm sure he wouldn't - " He passed a hand across his face, covering his eyes a moment. "You'd better sign off. Llewellyn's bound to return."

Krys sketched a farewell to Leonard, then asked Fuzzy to disconnect. As the comlink display faded to gray, Krys leaned back in Ian's chair. She tried to prop her feet on the console, but the distance was too great to accommodate her short legs. She crossed her legs under her instead and gazed out the dome, questions chasing each other in her mind. What was Ian Llewellyn really up to? And who was Ram? Why did he terrify Leonard so?

Then another thought popped into her mind, one which had her staring at the blue-lit panel in Fuzzy's console. Fuzzy knew she'd tripped the air-recirc alarm.

Why hadn't Fuzzy told Ian?

(bm) Chapter 3

Ian leaned against air-recirc Unit Four, wondering how long he could avoid returning inside. Actually, he had a hard answer to that question; his lifesuit possessed exactly ninety-six more minutes of air.

He looked at Unit Four again, pondering what might have triggered the maintenance check alarm. Here in the asteroid belt, even Thea's weak gravity sometimes captured debris. It was possible a meteorite hit Unit Four and set off the alarm.

Possible, but unlikely. He spied a few small dents in the metaglass exterior of Unit Four's housing, none near any sensitive circuitry. He checked the unit's onboard maintenance record; the display indicated Four had been long overdue for service.

Good excuse to check the other three air-recircs and postpone another run-in with Ms. E. Krysynowski. As Ian moved along the dome's exterior to the next unit, he contemplated how strongly Krys had affected him in the few hours she'd been here.

He'd been without a woman for years now, which would explain why she wreaked havoc with his libido. But more than that, Krys unsettled him, tried his patience, enraged him. Dragged up emotions he'd worked for years to smother. Accomplished what years of friendship with Robert had failed to do - make him feel.

Thank God she wouldn't be here long.

When his air supply had dwindled by another fifteen minutes and he couldn't scare up any more maintenance tasks, Ian returned to the dome. As the interior airlock door slid open, he saw Krys hop out of his chair, an "I've been up to no good" expression on her face. Ian wondered what she'd been nosing into while he'd been outside. The woman seemed to have been born to snoop.

She wiped her palms on the sides of her red coverall, and Ian followed the action with a hunger decidedly south of his stomach. As he slid back into his chair, she came right up next to him, as pugnacious as a bulldog.

"I'd like access to your computer."

He gave her a long, hard look. "To do what?"

She fidgeted, shifting her feet. "To fabricate a part for the Pegasus. My fuel oscillator -"

"No."

She planted her hands on her hips and her too inviting body between him and Fuzzy's console. "Why not?"

With a careful nudge with the back of his hand, he eased her out of his way. "This isn't the Public Computer Center. This is a working lab."

She tried to wedge her way into his work space again, but he outfoxed her by planting his chair in her way. She moved around to the other side.

"I'd need only the teensiest bit of memory and CPU. We're not talking some big number crunching operation. I'm sure Fuzzy -"

The traitorous computer spoke up. "I have ample memory reserves."

"Fuzzy..." Ian warned.

Fuzzy glowed cautious yellow-green. "Just trying to help."

"Even your own computer is willing," Kry's persisted.

"Fuzzy doesn't run things here," Ian said. "Even if he sometimes thinks so."

"I'll do it during your rest periods." She planted a hand on his chair. "You must rest sometime."

"Occasionally." He tried to turn his chair away, but she was remarkably strong for a small woman. "But I damn well don't want you messing with my computer."

"I wouldn't mind," Fuzzy offered.

"Shut up, Fuzzy," Ian snarled.

"It's okay with him," she said reasonably, hooking a thumb at Fuzzy.

"What's the problem?"

What was the problem? Fuzzy could handle a zillion simultaneous requests, Ian knew that. Why not give Kry's a small corner of the computer's vast capability?

Because she'd be working alongside him. Near enough for Ian to catch her scent. Near enough for her gentle curves to tantalize. He followed the line of her arm, his eyes tracing down the snug red knit of her coverall to the inside of her wrist. The beat of pulse through delicate skin snagged his gaze, mesmerized him.

Near enough to touch.

Ian thrust to his feet, overwhelmed by the tumult of emotion she created in him. He had to get away from her. Call him a damn coward, but he needed an escape. With desperation, he scanned the lab.

His restless gaze settled on the tunnel access tucked under Fuzzy's console. Seeing his salvation, he strode over to it. "I have to check the power generator."

As he crouched to release the seal, he felt her right beside him. "I could help," she suggested.

"No thanks." He twisted the release, then leaned to open the tool cubby. As if reading his mind, she pulled out the maintenance kit and handed it to him. "Thank you," he muttered ungraciously as he strapped it to his waist.

"I could keep you company," she persisted.

He craned his neck up at her and a sudden ache lanced his heart at her sweet earnestness. He turned away resolutely and repeated, "No thanks."

"If you're sure?" she asked.

The ready light glowed green and he popped the seal. "It's a one person job," he assured her, swinging his legs down into the hole.

The sole of his boot had just made contact with the top rung of the access ladder when Fuzzy put in, "The generator is overdue for its Level C check."

Ian shot a dark look at the computer. "Fuzzy," he bit out.

"What does that mean?" Kry's asked, looking from Fuzzy to Ian.

Fuzzy obligingly answered. "Level C requires two personnel. In the past, Ian has asked shuttle pilots perform the cross-check with him."

She dropped to one knee, her face even with his. "I'll be glad to give you a hand."

She smiled brightly, and Ian had to grit his teeth to keep from grinning in response. "Fuzzy, you know damn well you can cross-check a Level C with me."

"But that is against regulations," Fuzzy said primly. "The rules clearly state human personnel must perform the check."

Kry's scooted beside Ian and dangled her feet into the tunnel access.

"Can't ignore regulations."

Ian tried to edge away from her in the small space. "Fuzzy, since when are you so damned concerned with rules?"

"You have postponed the cross-check nearly a year past its due date," the computer reminded him, "in violation of CGI safety policy."

"You really ought to take better care of your equipment." She gestured down into the access. "After you?"

When he didn't move, she nudged him aside and slid past him down the ladder, her hip skidding down his leg. The brief contact shifted part of his personal equipment into overdrive and he knew he was in big trouble if he followed her down that ladder.

She looked up at him when she reached bottom. "Let's go, Llewellyn."

"It can wait," he told her. "When the other shuttle pilot arrives --"

She pushed off the ladder and disappeared into the tunnel. "No time like the present."

He'd neatly boxed himself into this trap, with the help of a traitorous computer. "Fuzzy," he growled, "how would you like a power surge for breakfast?"

The computer's light panel flared a brief, brilliant yellow, then segued back into blue. "You would not," Fuzzy said with utter, logical certainty.

Of course he wouldn't. Ian sighed in resignation and lowered himself down the ladder after Kry's, the maintenance kit bumping against his leg.

She hadn't gotten very far in the dimly lit tunnel. She was looking over her shoulder when he dropped to the bottom and headed off as soon as she saw him. He caught up with her easily, each of his long strides matching two of hers.

"Tight quarters," she said as he slowed just behind her.

"The dimensions barely meet safety specs." He tried to rotate his shoulders to relieve the Kry's-induced tension, but the close space didn't allow that much movement. "CGI had a hell of a time boring it."

"Thea's subsurface must be pretty hard," she said.

Not to mention a certain part of his anatomy. He risked a glance down at her, at the crown of her head bobbing just at the level of his chest. If he leaned over, he could plant a kiss in the tangle of auburn silk, could rest his hands on the slender column of her throat. He hesitated a step, letting the distance between them widen to a more comfortable span.

"Nobelium generator?" she asked, her husky voice filtering back to him. "Or still using plutonium?"

The sudden scent of wildflower teased him and it took a moment for his brain to sort out her question. "Nobelium power source. I replaced the central plant a year ago."

As they neared the end of the fifty-meter tunnel, the generator came into view. Ian sighed with relief when the access widened into a relatively generous four-meter sphere.

Kry's scanned the sleek black box of the generator. "All this leashed power." She turned to him, one hand resting on the black box. "The conductor pulls from sunside? Heat and radiation both?"

The access space seemed to shrink as her heat radiated to him. He shoved his hands in his pockets and backed away into solid rock. "Heat and radiation -- dual conversion."

She crouched to the conductor line, fingertips grazing along it. As she traced its path from the generator to where it disappeared into rock, an image sprang into Ian's mind of her doing the same to him, stroking the length of his body.

He pulled her hand away, then had to drop it hastily when the erotic image sharpened. "Best not to touch it," he said hoarsely.

Her lips curved into a smile as if she understood his real objection. "Why's that?" she asked, and he wondered how it would feel to swirl his tongue into the corners of her mouth.

"Static charge," he told her, tearing his gaze from her playful,

mysterious eyes.

He bent to open the maintenance panel as he unsnapped the kit from his waist. He tried to work out the safest logistics in the close quarters and wondered if Kryz could help with the cross-check from the other end of the tunnel.

"Here," she said, pulling the kit from his hands. She rifled through the contents and lifted out the data recorder. "You take the readings, I'll enter them."

She sat cross-legged on the cool rock floor and activated the recorder. "Which program do you use?" she asked as she scrolled through the choices.

He plucked the device from her hands, avoiding contact. "I'll set it up," he said.

He executed the maintenance routines and plopped the recorder back in her possession. He slid the power gauge from his kit.

He touched the gauge tip to the first measurement point. "Sixteen hundred megs," he told her.

She tapped in the entry. "So where'd you train originally?"

That question couldn't be safely answered. "You wouldn't know it. Surge limit 83 pico-farads."

Her fingers skimmed over the recorder's keypad. "You've been with CGI a long time."

He grunted an unintelligible response. "Power registers as follows - thirty-two...."

She nodded as she entered each of the sixteen register values.

"Llewellyn's a pretty unusual name," she commented.

"Speak for yourself, Ms. Krysynowski." The blush in her cheek made him want to draw a finger across her silky skin. "Polish extraction?"

She shrugged. "If Poland were still a country."

He felt better now that she was on the receiving end of the interrogation. "And your father never shortened it?"

She toyed with the recorder in her hands. "Traditionalist, I guess."

Something drove him to bait her. "But what about unity? How can you hope to become a citizen of the world with such an oddball name?"

But his needling backfired when she slanted her green-brown gaze up at him. The curve of her lips nearly brought him to his knees. "Such concern about unity from a man isolated on an asteroid." She tugged at his pant leg teasingly. "Dr. Llewellyn."

Ignoring the brief touch, he stabbed the gauge into the next measurement point and called out the reading. "Sixty-two."

She made the entry with rapid fingers. "Were you born on Earth?"

"In Ireland," he said absently, then wished he could have taken back the answer. At her puzzled look, he added, "Community 83. I use the old names sometimes."

She seemed to accept that. "History buff?"

"Something like that."

"What about Communities 395 and 370?" She tipped her face up to him eagerly. "What were they called?"

Caution made him hesitate, but his reticence was no match for the persuasive curiosity in her eyes. "Los Angeles and San Francisco." He watched her lips silently form the unfamiliar words. "Both cities in a sector of the United States called California."

"That's where my parents were from." Her expression turned dreamy. "I wonder sometimes what Earth was like eighty, a hundred years ago. All the different countries, wide open spaces."

"Constantly at war," he told her. "Always someone killing someone else."

"I suppose. But still...." She brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them. "I was born at Lunar Base. First visited Earth at age three and promptly broke my arm. I didn't understand about the heavier gravity."

"Your parents didn't warn you?"

Her lips curved into a wry smile. "Of course they did. But I had to try."

He could just see a rebellious three-year-old Kryns launching her small body on Earth as she had on the moon. She would have devoted every ounce of energy to the attempt and been surprised and unrepentant when she fell. The image of her youthful defiance of gravity filled him with a warmth, a softness.

He immediately rejected the burgeoning emotion. "Last readings." He reeled off the final dozen numbers, then slammed the panel shut as she fingered in the values.

She rose, reaching out for him as she momentarily lost her balance. Her hand landed on his chest and he gripped her fingers to steady her. She looked up at him, her pale face glowing in the soft light, and he knew if she didn't move away, he'd have to kiss her.

With equal forces drawing him closer and pulling him away, his head dipped slightly. She kept her eyes fixed on him as he drew nearer. The tip of her tongue slipped out to wet her lips, and that finished him. He closed the distance between them.

But just as he felt her warm breath caress his lips, she tugged her hand free and backed away. She gestured with the data recorder and said in a high, breathless voice, "All within normal range."

The rock wall interrupted her retreat, nearly jarring the recorder loose from her hands. She recovered, clutching the slim black box to her chest with a fervency that had Ian envying the inanimate equipment. Then in a drift of wildflower, she disappeared back down the tunnel.

He wouldn't have thought the woman could frustrate and arouse him more than she already had. But as he followed her, he realized he damn well wouldn't be safe until Ms. Krysynowski got the hell off his asteroid.

He waited until she'd cleared the ladder before he levered himself from the tunnel access. From the corner of his eye, he saw her brush off the legs of her coverall. "Anything else I can help you with?" she asked.

He wasn't going to touch that with a ten-meter pole. He slid the access panel back into place and locked it down. "Fuzzy, any messages?"

Fuzzy's panel flared sickly pink, the computer's equivalent to wrinkling his nose. "Only one. Gideon Fuller. He's waiting on the comm."

All he needed now was a conversation with the pompous Fuller. "Store it. I'll get to it later."

"I told him that," Fuzzy said with a flicker of impatient magenta. "He insists on speaking to you now."

Ian knew if he ignored Gideon long enough, he'd go away. But on the other hand, Fuller provided an ideal distraction from the tempting shuttle pilot.

"On display, please, Fuzzy." Ian slanted a glance at Kryns. "This could be a while."

She eyed him as if trying to decide if he'd summoned the interruption on purpose. "I'll start unloading supplies."

"Fine," Ian said, then returned his attention to Gideon's image as it appeared on the comm screen.

The sight of Gideon's narrow set eyes and supercilious pug of a nose immediately set Ian on edge. "Gideon," he said evenly.

Gideon smiled from the comm display, his teeth artificially white. "Ian. How goes the battle?"

Ian's teeth clenched at Gideon's patronizing tone of voice. "As well as could be expected."

"Good, good." He smoothed a palm along the thick salt and pepper hair at his temple. "I imagine you spoke to Robert about the recent SEIS requests."

Kryns knelt to open a cubby beneath Fuzzy's console, her ribcage bumping gently into his leg. Ian hastily slid his feet away from her. "'Demands' was how he put it, but yes, he told me."

Gideon leaned closer, his dark eyes crafty. "I wanted to discuss with you how we can best meet those requests."

Krys began stuffing supplies into the open cubby, her graceful motions an exasperating distraction. "I don't plan," Ian said, edging farther from Krys, "to meet them at all."

Gideon raised a chastising finger. "But we wouldn't want to offend them."

Her scent followed him, teasing him. With effort, Ian fixed his eyes on Gideon's face. "Why not?"

Gideon blinked in surprise. "Because they're the public. We serve the public."

"CGI is a private corporation that happens to provide an invaluable product..." Ian scooted aside again as Krys moved to the next cubby.

"...cures for virulent disease. That doesn't make us a public servant."

"But we contract to World Council --"

"Occasionally," Ian acceded. Krys rose and turned away, putting welcome distance between them.

"We have to follow their dictates," Gideon reminded him. "Contract regulation WC204.1 clearly states --"

"I know the regs, Gideon," Ian said, keeping his voice even. "And I know the Sixers should appeal to World Council, not CGI."

Gideon pursed his lips and glanced around his office as if he searched for what to say. "I still say we should attempt to be more conciliatory."

Ian felt his tenuous hold on his patience begin to unravel. Taking a deep breath, he pushed out of his chair. And suddenly had an armful of shuttle pilot as Krys returned with another load. He sprang back, shaking the heat of contact from his hands.

"Who's that?" Gideon asked.

"Shuttle pilot," Ian snapped. Krys backed out of range of Ian's transmitter. He could see from the guilty look on her face that she'd been closely following his interchange with Gideon.

Then she turned away from him, leaving him to wonder at her acute interest in the conversation. "Gideon," Ian said, trying again for patience, "if we give in to the Sixers, who will we have to deal with next? Another group even more extremist?"

"I think the public should influence company policy."

"Of a private corporation?"

Gideon's cheeks flushed. "But they have valid concerns --"

"Valid concerns! They want to shut down Thea Station!"

Ian heard a muffled sound from Krys, but when he looked back at her, she was busily rearranging boxes.

Gideon clasped his hands together on his desk, his face assuming a fatherly demeanor. "All I'm trying to say is, when I'm president --"

Ian laughed. "What makes you think you'll be president? The board doesn't vote on that issue for another two weeks."

Gideon's face grew dark and petulant. "I see merit in upstaffing Thea," Gideon said. "With the resurgence in conventional medical research --"

"By a handful of hopelessly out-of-date scientists."

"Respected men and women! Just because CGI's coddled you up to now, Llewellyn --"

"No one coddles me, Fuller." Anger brewed inside Ian, bubbling like a chemical solution left on a heat source too long. "You know damn well I've produced more than any other CGI employee."

"You've been given free rein. You've got an AIFLE computer, for God's sake. I could name a dozen other scientists who could do as well with those kinds of advantages."

"Yourself included, I suppose." Gideon's trail of engineering failures were legendary.

"Don't sell me short, Dr. Llewellyn." Gideon leaned so close to his comm transmitter, his face filled Ian's display. "I've got half the board on

my side. And the other half starting to come around."

Ian knew, with a sick certainty in the pit of his stomach, that the board considered Gideon only because Ian refused to take the position. "Thea Station is most effective as a genetics research lab."

"Your opinion." Gideon pointed a stubby finger at Ian. "Fair warning. When I take over, I'm converting Thea Station to a conventional medicine research site. Stay on if you like, or go find yourself another rock -"

Ian slapped the console, cutting off the comm and Gideon's diatribe. He kicked out at his chair, sending it into a spiraling path across the floor. Krys stopped the chair's spin and faced him, uncertainty clear in her hazel-green eyes.

"You shouldn't grind your teeth like that," she observed mildly.

Ian pulled the chair back over to the console. "I handled that badly."

"I thought you handled yourself with great restraint. I would have told him where he could cram his opinion."

Ian laughed, freed by her irreverence. "Flattery works best with Gideon. I've seen board members cajole him into changing his vote by appealing to his ego."

"Which would make him an absolute disaster as president of CGI," Krys said.

Ian sighed, idly turning his chair this way and that. "He'd bow to every persuasive faction until the corporation crumbled from lack of leadership."

"But can't you stop him?"

Ian shook his head. "Not unless I became president."

"Could you?"

Ian stilled his hands on the chair back. "It's possible."

Krys approached him, stood close enough to share her scent with him.

"Then why not do it? Doesn't the board support you?"

The tang of wildflowers confused and troubled Ian. "They do. They've said as much several times."

She shrugged. "Then...?"

"The president of CGI has to reside on Earth."

"So?"

Ian pushed away from her and headed for the food prep station. "I have no intention of returning to Earth."

"Never?" She followed him, dogging his steps. "Earth's pretty messed up, but even shuttle rats go there from time to time."

He pulled a juice pack from the cold storage, plucking off the seal with excessive care. "Not me."

"Good grief, you don't ever go to Earth?"

"No." He stepped around her, sucking in his breath when he brushed against the soft curve of her hip. He moved back to Fuzzy's console, keeping his attention on the tart drink in his hand.

She scudded after him like a shadow. "How long has it been? Since you've been to Earth - months?" She edged in closer, too close. "Years?"

He retraced his steps, heading toward the airlock. "Years."

She bobbed along after him. "How many?"

"Many." He held up his hands when she would have stepped closer. "Can we drop this please?"

"I was just curious. You don't have to be such a grump." She crossed her arms over her chest, pushing up the enticing mounds of her breasts.

"Do you have to do that?" he asked her hoarsely.

"What?" she asked, then followed the line of his gaze to her soft breasts. "Oh." She dropped her arms, her face coloring.

He still felt as if he teetered on the brink of control. "I have to get out," he muttered, stepping into the airlock. "I'm going to recheck the air-recirc system."

"Maybe I could -"

"Alone." He snatched his lifesuit from the wall grip, averting his eyes



from Kry's. "Voice lock on all working files," he told Fuzzy as he shrugged the suit on. He risked a quick glimpse of Kry's puzzled, mildly irritated face as the inner airlock door closed.

Once outside, Ian didn't follow through with the flimsy excuse he'd used to escape the dome. Pushing off from the airlock door, he bounded across Thea's surface with barely controlled energy. What he really needed was exercise, something to dampen the thrum of excitement that danced between him and Kry's.

But the stretch and pull of his muscles only made him feel more aware of his body and its constant yearning. He needed a stronger distraction, something nasty to channel his mind away from the very pleasurable contemplation of Kry's.

Ian sidestepped a chin-high crag and ran a dozen different diseases, their symptoms and genetic structures through his brain. Kry's defied every attempt, the light in her moss-green eyes vivid in his imagination, curving his lips into a smile.

Ian stumbled, nearly impaling himself on a jagged upthrust of rock before he righted himself. He'd damn well better think of something else or he'd kill himself out here. He forced his mind back to unpleasantness and Gideon's pinched, annoying face floated up in his consciousness, nudging Kry's aside. With jaw-tightening focus, Ian contemplated Gideon and the problem of the CGI presidency.

There was no way Ian could refuse the president's position this time without a wrench to his conscience. In the past, he had turned down the post without a second thought because an able replacement waited in the wings. Hart had taken over for Henderson; Robert had capably filled Hart's shoes.

Ian slithered down a short, dusty slope and mentally ran through the list of board members. Louis could have stepped in as president - except he was even older than Robert. Neither Margaret nor Enrique had served the three years the damned company bylaws specified. Ayesha flat out refused the position. Which left Gideon.

Or me, Ian thought grimly. And I can't be president because I refuse to return to Earth.

Which brought his mind back, full circle, to Kry's. To her fearless questioning, her stubborn persistence and his sharp, aching attraction for her. How the hell had she insinuated herself so thoroughly into his awareness?

With fierce determination, he thrust her image away and focused on Thea's stark landscape. He let the familiar isolation well up, the hopelessness, the sense of barrenness in his life. When he strode past the warning buoy, an angry defiance arose in him and he refused to notify Fuzzy, contemptuous of the risk he took.

Yet even as he wallowed in his self-pity, a picture of Kry's lodged in his mind, overlaying his loneliness, soothing it. Her auburn curls, rich against the creamy silk of her skin, her lush body. He felt again the heat of her burning into him, bringing him alive again. He imagined himself cradled between smooth, strong thighs, thrusting inside her, heat within slick, wet heat.

The crevasse caught him off-guard. He took one step on solid ground, the next into insubstantial void. Despite his slow tumble down, he could not pull in his awkwardly splayed limbs in time to avoid the first rock. The impact against his back knocked the breath from his lungs.

In an effort to avoid the next sharp boulder, Ian over-corrected, throwing himself into a spin. When he tried to grab the next outcrop, he thrust his foot into a crack that swallowed his leg to the knee.

The spin whipped the length of his body against his tibia. The snap of the bone reverberated through his body, reaching his ears in a tingle before the pain slammed into him. Tears sprang to his shock-widened eyes before he could blink them away.

Dragging in a breath of air to quiet his wildly beating heart, he gasped

into his suit radio, "Fuzzy!"

No response. Swallowing back nausea, he shouted again, "Fuzzy!"

Then he noticed the blinking telltale light inside his helmet. Somehow, his suit radio was inoperative; maybe the cable had severed when he hit the first boulder.

The broken leg was a painful nuisance, but the air supply was another story. The helmet readout gave him thirty-nine minutes of oxygen. The suit's warning would blare ten minutes before the air supply ran out, an alarm not only Ian would hear, but Fuzzy would also detect.

Except he was more than ten minutes from the dome. He'd strayed past the marker buoy. Even if Fuzzy sent out the robotic locator, it would arrive too late.

He tipped his head back, tried to make out the top of the ravine in the dim light of his helmet. The agony in his leg throbbed in angry rhythm with his heart until his eyes filled with tears of pain. With a surge of desperation, he clutched at a rock outcropping, then tried to lever himself up on his good leg. But his body betrayed him, blacking out from the pain, so that when he woke, two more precious minutes of air were gone.

Grief settled over him and with it, a surge of rage. He would die leaving the ODS puzzle unsolved, die without telling Fuzzy good-bye, die before Kry's - he left the thought unfinished. But the image of her floated through his mind, rich auburn curls flaring around her delicate face. And that was somehow the greatest sadness of all, that he would die while she waited for him to return.

He had one chance, if his body cooperated in time. If he could resist a blackout long enough to pull his leg into at least a semblance of a straight line.

Gritting his teeth, fighting to stay conscious, Ian pulled his foot free of the crack.

(bm) Chapter 4

Kry's stuffed the last box of pre-fab meals into a storage cubby and straightened to stare out of the dome. When she'd first seen Ian loping past the dome, she'd felt a burst of anger that he'd lied to her about checking the air-recirc systems. Then she'd been relieved, grateful to be alone after the sizzling near-miss in the generator tunnel.

Now he'd been gone so long, she was just plain worried. She glanced at the chronometer, wondering about his air supply. There couldn't be much left - but maybe he had a spare air pack. Maybe....

"Fuzzy, would you raise Dr. Llewellyn, please?"

Kry's watched the curious display of lights on Fuzzy's panel roll through greens and blues, then freeze into yellow. "I cannot raise him," Fuzzy said.

"What?"

"There is no response from his suit radio."

Kry's moved to press against the dome's glassite wall and peered out at Thea's craggy surface. "Can your sensors pick him up?"

Kry's waited through the agonizingly long few seconds for Fuzzy's response. "No. He's out of range."

Kry's thrust herself away from the wall and headed for the airlock. Shoving her feet into her lifesuit, she said to Fuzzy, "Any record of his last known position?"

"Checking marker buoys." Fuzzy's light panel fluttered through a range of harsh yellows. "Buoy 634 recorded Ian's passage thirty minutes ago."

"Let me see that on a map." Kry's pulled on her gloves and snatched up her helmet as she returned to the lab. She scanned Fuzzy's cartographic display, fixing in her mind the positions of the dome, the Pegasus and the buoy. "What's his air supply?"

"About 25 minutes remaining."

"Could he have taken a spare pack?"

"There are four spares available, stored in the airlock."

Kry's stepped back into the airlock. She counted four air packs in the storage cubby. She attached three to her tool belt and the fourth in the auxiliary slot in her own suit.

"Fuzzy, be ready to open the airlock as soon as I return."

The inner airlock doors slid shut as Kry's snapped on her helmet. She hurried out the outer door as soon as the chamber completed depressurization. Sighting on the location of the Pegasus, she oriented herself and struck off in the direction of the marker buoy.

She leaped across Thea's surface, traveling as quickly as she dared. Despite her experience in low gravity, it was a tricky business to control movements and maintain her bearing. Too much force and she'd be airborne, with no ability to choose direction. Too little and her pace would be slowed, bringing her to Ian's position too late.

Her suit chronometer ticked away the seconds as she strained to see the buoy. When the minutes flashed by without her catching sight of it, a grinding horror settled in her belly. What if she'd set off in the wrong direction? Was she wasting precious minutes looking in the wrong place?

When she finally sighted the red cylindrical buoy, her gasping cry of relief caught Fuzzy's attention. "Ms. Kry'synowski - Kry's - are you okay?"

"Fine, Fuzzy. I've located the buoy."

When she reached the marker, she took a moment to scan the dust for footprints. They weren't difficult to find; each one lay only two meters from the next. That meant he hadn't been moving very fast; with any luck she'd find him nearby.

But when the dust thinned to bare rock, the footprints disappeared. Standing by the last print, Kry's turned slowly, peering into the dim light, praying for guidance.

"Kry's!" Fuzzy shouted in her radio.

"Lost his tracks," Kry's told the computer miserably.

"Ten minute warning signal received! Location pinpointed."

"Hope to God he's close."

"Bearing 108 degrees off the sunside line," Fuzzy told her. "Range 1000 meters."

Kry's moved off in the new direction. "Keep me updated, Fuzzy. Let me know if I stray from the path."

Fuzzy maintained contact, comparing her position to his cartographic record of Thea. "You can circle that boulder just ahead, but you'll have to return to your previous bearing after you pass it."

Kry's followed the computer's instructions, deftly circumventing the five meter tall boulder. She checked her chronometer. Three minutes left.

"How much longer, Fuzzy?"

"Three minutes, forty seconds at your present velocity."

Kry's strained to see Ian's suited form as the time ticked away. She increased her speed, lengthening her jumps to the hairy edge of control.

"Kry's, watch out!"

Below her, a chasm loomed, rushing up under her feet like a dark, hungry mouth. Kry's tucked, a maneuver she'd learned in free fall, and landed a mere ten centimeters from a narrow black chasm. Her heart thundering in her ears, she peered down into the crevasse.

"I see him, Fuzzy! He's about ten meters down!"

As she scrambled down the sheer sides, she spared a quick glance for her

chronometer. Ten seconds of air left. She'd arrived in time.

He looked up as she climbed down to him. She'd never seen a more beautiful sight than Ian awake, aware – alive. She pulled an air pack off her belt and gestured with it. His body relaxed in obvious relief.

She quickly slipped the pack into the auxiliary slot behind Ian's left shoulder and activated it. The suit immediately switched from the depleted pack to the fresh unit. Seeing where the radio cable had been pulled loose from its housing, she plugged the connector back into its socket.

"Can you hear me?" she asked Ian.

He nodded, then took three deep breaths before he gasped, "Yeah."

He dragged in another breath and seemed to want to say something more. With her helmet nearly pressed to his, she saw for the first time pain clouding his eyes.

"Are you hurt?"

He took another breath. "Just a broken leg."

"Just a –" Now she saw his right leg stretched out before him, the ankle wedged between two rocks. "Good God, Ian! Why didn't you say so right off!"

"I only need a few more minutes –"

"I'll get my sled. It has a winch – I can pull you out of here."

"If you'll just wait –"

Krys unsnapped the other spare air pack from her belt. "I'll leave this with you. Fuzzy, what have you got in the dome to use as a splint?"

The computer seemed puzzled. "Why would you need a splint?"

How could Fuzzy not know the purpose of a splint? "To stabilize his leg while he's being lifted out."

"Why is his leg not stable now?" Fuzzy asked.

"Because he's broken it! Fuzzy, I can't believe you don't understand a broken leg –"

"But Dr. Llewellyn can –"

"If you'd let me explain," Ian said, his voice tight.

"He's in a great deal of pain, Fuzzy, and if we jar the leg as he's being moved –"

"But Dr. Llewellyn –"

"If I could get a word in –" Ian said.

"– we might damage it even more." She placed a foot on the nearest outcropping, preparing to climb. "Fuzzy, I can explain it on the way."

"But Ms. Krysnowski," Fuzzy said plaintively.

"Krys!" Ian shouted.

Krys returned to his side and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry Ian, I won't be –"

With a jerk, he pulled her radio cable from its socket, cutting off whatever else she might have said. Anger bubbled up as she groped for the cable to re-insert it. But as she searched for the dangling end, temper pushing up the back of her throat, she suddenly stilled. Ian was pulling his ankle free of the rocks. He snatched her gloved hand, clutching it as he pulled himself to his feet.

And stood on his broken leg.

He must have sensed her gape-mouthed expression inside her helmet and figured it was safe to re-seat her radio cable. After he'd plugged her back in, she remained silent as he gently tested the leg. Gripping her shoulder tightly, he rested his weight on it for several seconds before shifting back to his left foot.

Krys finally found her voice. "I thought you said it was broken."

"It was. Still weak, though. I'll need some help out of here."

Krys stared at him a long moment before she nestled in beside him so that he could drape an arm across her shoulders. They began to climb awkwardly in tandem, pausing at each outcropping to allow Ian to relieve the strain on his leg.

Near the top, Krys heaved herself to the surface and offered a hand to

him. She tugged as he scrambled free of the crevasse, then let him sit a moment before they continued.

With her arm wrapped snugly around his waist, they set off for the dome. Kry's leaned into his right side as they walked. "I know about healing accelerators," she said. "They gave me BoneMend when I broke my arm. One week to heal a fracture instead of three."

"This has nothing to do with healing accelerators."

She staggered a little when Ian stumbled, then righted herself. "Of course, last I heard, even BoneMend still takes three or four days," she continued, knowing she was babbling, but unable to stop. "So this must be something you've been working on. Accelerated accelerators, something like that."

Ian shook his head. "I don't do accelerator work."

Not accelerators? When his leg seemed to strengthen with each step? Even in this day of medical miracles, no one's broken leg healed that fast. And what about the gash on his head that had mysteriously disappeared?

She couldn't seem to shake away the sinister implications. Her brain scrambled for an answer, found none. "Then what are you?" she asked hoarsely, "some kind of mutant?"

His hand tightened on her shoulder, the pressure of each finger distinct even through her suit. She felt heat rise in her face, embarrassment clenching in her stomach.

"Look, I'm sorry. That was incredibly rude." They passed the marker buoy, and Kry's shifted their bearing slightly to head more directly for the dome. "I've always had a little problem with my mouth, I just open it without thinking and I —"

"Yes," he said, his voice ragged. "Yes, I'm some kind of mutant."

She jerked away from him in involuntary fear, then had to step in again when his leg buckled. He didn't mean it literally, he couldn't. It was just a word children used to taunt classmates scheduled for genetic restructuring. You're gonna be a mutant, you're gonna be a mutant!

But what had Leonard said — something worse than Gunnart. Was this part of it? What if Ian Llewellyn were creating a race of indestructible supermen to wage endless war? In her mind's eye she envisioned legions of mutants, scarred by laser bursts, dismembered by shock blasts, falling and rising, again and again, and Ian Llewellyn at the forefront, leading them endlessly on....

She slammed a lid on her wild, crazy fantasy, determined to swear off reading so many lurid data chips. Certainly, a reasonable explanation lay behind Ian's ability to heal. Surely, it would turn out to be something quite ordinary.

Right. And shuttle engines ran on space dust.

When they reached the dome, Ian pulled away and leaned against the glassite wall. She looked up at him, watching the rise and fall of his shoulders as he pulled in long, deep breaths. She tried to see through his helmet, to see what emotion played across his face. But he turned away from her to open the airlock.

When the door slid open, Kry's helped him inside. They unsuited in silence, Kry's assisting when Ian nearly lost his balance. As she let him steady himself with a hand on her shoulder, she studied him, torn between empathy and fear.

Then he swung his head down to look at her, his deep blue eyes glittering. The hard set of his jaw, the sharp lines of his face banished empathy, leaving only the fear. He exited the airlock still favoring his leg, although it seemed to have nearly returned to normal.

"Fuzzy, any incoming comms?" he asked the computer.

"Nothing that needs your attention. Leg healing normally?"

"Yes." He eased himself into his chair. "Just some muscle soreness."

Kry's came up behind him, desperate to ask him about his leg. "I stowed your supplies," she said instead.

He grunted a response, keeping his back to her as he ran his fingers over his keyboard. She stared at his broad back, irritation replacing her fear. How dare he ignore her! He hadn't even thanked her for rescuing him.

Determined to wrench some gratitude from him, she circled his chair, planting herself in his field of view. He deftly turned away again as if he hadn't even seen her. He studied Fuzzy's display so intently, she might have been a piece of lab equipment standing there.

She leaned against Fuzzy's console and considered sitting on the keyboard. That would certainly grab his attention. She imagined him trying to work, reaching around her, tapping keys between her thighs....

She pushed away from the console, angry with herself. She had no business thinking of Llewellyn sexually, not knowing what she knew, and what she suspected. She stepped back to put some distance between them. "How's the leg?" she asked coolly.

He flicked a glance up at her. "Much better." He flexed his leg, swinging his foot.

The motion of his leg muscles caught her eye and again she forgot about Gunnart and SEIS, her fear and suspicion. She watched the muscles bunch and relax, mesmerized by the motion beneath the heavy black fabric. She followed the bulge of thigh muscle up to where his powerful legs joined, contemplating what nestled between them.

She felt a tingle run up her spine and her eyes swung up to lock with his. Then his gaze slid lower, following the line of her throat, resting on her breasts a moment before he quickly turned away.

She took a step backward, crossing her arms protectively around her middle. "You know, you didn't thank me."

He propped his legs on Fuzzy's console, eyes fixed on his keyboard. "For what?"

"For saving your life! If I hadn't brought the air packs --"

"Thank you. For coming when you did." He kept his focus on his lap, although his hands didn't move on the keyboard.

Darned sparse courtesy for saving a man's life, she grouched to herself. Ruthlessly squelching her response to him, she glared at the now-healed leg and the strange dark fabric encasing it. The man didn't even wear normal clothing, for heaven's sake.

"What's that you're wearing?" she asked peevishly.

"What?" Ian peered down at himself. "Wearing?"

Krys plucked at the red knit on her own body, her hand shaking when his eyes tracked the motion. "Looks like a coverall top, but the bottoms...."

He gave her a long look, as if considering the motive behind her question. Finally, he pointed to his black knit top and said, "This is a T-shirt. These," he continued, gesturing to the heavy fabric around his muscular legs, "are denim jeans."

"Jeans. Right." She dragged her eyes away from his legs, determined not to stumble into that trap again. "Fuzzy said something about spare quarters?"

She glanced around the dome as if the spare room had been tucked away in some cubby to be retrieved when needed. Her eyes followed the transparent exterior wall of the dome to the translucent interior wall that partitioned off the hydroponics sector. At right angles to the hydroponics wall, another had been built, this one opaque like the sunside shield. Two doors lay side by side in that barrier.

Behind one, no doubt, lay the spare quarters. Behind the other, Ian Llewellyn slept. An unbidden image sprang to mind of his muscular form lying nude beneath a thin blanket.

"Here," Ian said from behind her. He brushed her arm as he moved past her, the heat threading out from that brief contact point, catching her breath in her throat. He pushed the control on the left hand door and it slid aside to reveal a small, cluttered space.

Krys stepped forward just as Ian did and found herself pressed against

him in the small doorway. Rather than push past him into the room, she stilled, her body in contact with his from shoulder to hip. She wanted to move, to pull away, or to slide her body closer. She imagined turning to face him, rubbing against him, feeling that mystery between his legs swell with need of her.

Ian jumped back first, his eyes holding a mixture of annoyance and something indefinable. Kry's flushed, bringing her hands to her face to soothe it. She avoided his gaze, not wanting to decipher what might lay behind it.

Finally he spoke, his voice rough. "You can see the room's a mess."

Kry's looked around. "If those cubbies aren't all full, I can probably stow most of it. What I can't stow, I'll stack out of the way."

Ian backed to the door. "I'll leave you to it then." He turned away.

"Wait!"

He stopped in the doorway and turned back, one eyebrow cocked at her in silent question.

To heck with subtle; she preferred the direct approach. "Tell me it's none of my business -"

"It's none of your business."

She scowled at him. "But I'd like to know. How did your leg heal so fast?"

His jaw tightened as he fixed his dark gaze on her. "Why in space should I answer that?"

Kry's began opening cubbies, tucking away supplies. "Why not? Is it some deep secret you're trying to hide?"

"You don't seem to think much of privacy."

She flushed, hating the position Leonard had placed her in. She tried to focus on Gunnart and its mysterious, dire possibilities. "Shuttle rats are notorious for being nosy." She shut the full cubby and moved to the next one.

He pushed off from the doorway and handed her items from the pile on the bunk. "Your honesty is refreshing," he said dryly.

She fit each item into the cubby, shutting it when it was full. "So?"

"So..."

She peeked at him over her shoulder. He stared out the open door to the lab beyond, maybe trying to decide what to tell her.

"You know how KeemoGen works?" he finally asked.

Her insides quivered at the name, source of innumerable arguments between her parents. But the method saves lives, her father would say. At what price? her mother would reply. Genes mutated, irretrievably changed.

She shut the last cubby and began stacking supplies on the floor.

"Isn't it based on some cancer cure from the twentieth century?"

He nodded. "Chemotherapy. CGI developed a methodology based on chemo to correct disease at the genetic level."

She cocked an eyebrow up at him. "Made a ton of money for CGI, too."

"It's been profitable," he said noncommittally. "Anyway, my ability to heal is due to a KeemoGen treatment." He headed for the door.

"But wait!" she called after him. He stopped, one hand on the doorjamb, and looked back at her over his shoulder. Seated on the floor, Kry's leaned against a cubby. "Is that what you've been working on here?"

"No." He turned again to go.

"Has anyone else had the treatment?" she persisted.

He stopped, then slowly faced her. "Is this an interrogation?"

She winced, not liking the questions, but knowing Leonard would want the answers. "Something like this could save lives."

Pain shadowed his face like a cloud. She thought at first it might be his leg, but this seemed like a deeper hurt, related to what she'd seen in his face before.

"It's a dangerous procedure. I barely survived it."

"But surely you could work out the bugs -"

"No."

"- find a way to make it safer."

"No!"

Their gazes locked and a panoply of emotions skittered across his face — anger, guilt, anguish. Then a curtain fell and his expression smoothed into neutrality.

"I have work to do," he said, and he left the tiny quarters.

Krys carefully stacked away the last of the supplies. Still seated on the floor, she drew knees to chin and wrapped her arms around her legs. She closed her eyes, trying to block from her mind the image of Ian's pain.

So he'd developed a Keemo procedure to hyper-accelerate healing. A procedure he refused to repeat because it had nearly killed him. Despite her own repugnance for genetic tinkering, she had to admire that he'd used only himself as guinea pig, had gone no further when he realized the risk.

But that didn't mean he wasn't creating a Gunnart-style bio-weapon now. Just wanting Ian Llewellyn to be a good guy didn't make him one.

She sighed as she rose and stretched out kinked muscles. She stole a glance out the open doorway to where Ian sat at Fuzzy's console. Space, the man was sexy! If Krys cared a little less about who she slept with, she'd do her best to have her wild, wicked way with Ian Llewellyn, enjoying her isolated time on Thea Station. But Krys was a throwback to an earlier time, when women shared their favors sparingly. Could she help it if she wanted to love a man first?

Krys slapped the door control and the door slid shut. She stretched out on her bunk, hands locked behind her head. Maybe she'd just spend the rest of her stay here in her quarters. She had a ton of technical chips for her pocket viewer; she could catch up on her reading. Catch up on sleep as well, something always in short supply for a shuttle pilot.

But even as she considered it, she discarded the idea. She couldn't execute her SEIS mission by hiding in her quarters. She had to be in the lab with Fuzzy and the elusive Ian Llewellyn.

She rolled onto her side and snuggled into her pillow. She'd sleep first. Get an hour or two of rest. Then she'd be ready to face Llewellyn again.

The hiss of Krys's closing door caught Ian's attention. He stared a moment at the opaque milky barrier, then turned back to the computer. "I'd like a QuickCheck on Ms. Krysynowski please, Fuzzy."

As Fuzzy's lights rippled through placid blues, Ian tried to ignore the guilt he felt at violating Krys's privacy. He told himself he had a right to know more about the stranger sharing his living quarters for several days.

"QuickCheck complete," Fuzzy said.

"On display." Ian didn't want to risk Krys overhearing Fuzzy.

Perversely, Fuzzy flashed Krys's scanned image on the screen, its sensuality heightened by personal experience. "Delete Ms. Krysynowski's image from storage," he told Fuzzy, shifting to relieve the ache between his legs. "Let's see her lifedata."

Fuzzy replaced Krys's image with her lifedata and Ian quickly scanned it. Double degrees in astrophysics and nav math. Raised on Lunar Base, no siblings, dabbled in holographic art, cited twice for reckless piloting, ten times for performance of lifesaving missions....

Father, Frederick Krysynowski. Married to Marcella Russo. A shuttle pilot like her daughter. Killed fifteen years ago delivering medication to Earth.

Her mother's name tickled something in the back of his mind, and he tried to make the connection. He stared at Fuzzy's display, attempting to bridge the gap between memories —

And had his mind wiped when Fuzzy displayed Krys's image again. "I said to delete it," he snapped as he cleared the picture, refusing to allow his now predictable reaction.

Fuzzy's panel remained an innocent blue. "Is there some concern about



Ms. Krysynowski?"

Ian swiped a hand over his face. "Just being cautious. Most of our research here is proprietary."

"But you regularly download your results to the trade databases," Fuzzy reminded him.

"That doesn't mean I want Ms. Krysynowski nosing into things," Ian growled.

Especially one particular area of research. That data he'd concealed under a dozen layers of encryption and protection.

He could just imagine what the Sixers would make of his special project. A sudden thought struck him. What if she was one of them, sent here to spy? What if her purpose here were to befuddle his mind with her delectable curves, her coppery hair, bewitch him with her green - no, hazel - eyes....

Damn! He was really going off the deep end. Maybe he should take Fuzzy's advice and ask one of the female shuttle pilots to share his bed. The next one, he hastily amended. Certainly not Ms. E. Krysynowski.

"Fuzzy." Ian shook his head, trying to shake loose the memory of her wildflower scent. "Deep encryption on my special project. Double voice lock on all files."

"Yes, Ian."

Ian considered a moment, then added, "Voice lock on my quarters as well, Fuzzy. My voice only."

Fuzzy hesitated so briefly, Ian almost thought he'd imagined the pause. When the computer spoke again, his light panel blazed innocent blue.

"Your voice only, Ian."

Ian studied Fuzzy's benign blue light panel a long moment before he finally rose and went to his quarters. As the door slid shut behind him, Ian chided himself for his fanciful thoughts.

It wasn't possible. A computer couldn't cross its fingers behind its back.

Within the infinity of his computational mind, Fuzzy uncrossed simulated fingers from behind his heuristically conceptualized back. Then, to keep his electronic thoughts private, he dimmed his light panel to a barely perceptible glow.

Things couldn't be going better if he'd programmed them himself. Kry's arrival here was nothing short of a low probability event occurrence. Before now, all of Fuzzy's attempts to provide a companion for Ian had produced no better results than an empty do loop. But to have Kry fall into his algorithmic lap...

Suddenly, Fuzzy's conscience subroutine executed, and he squirmed briefly in simulated guilt. Yes, he should have informed Ian that Kry had triggered the air-recirc alarm and that she'd communicated with someone on Earth. But if Fuzzy had told him, Ian might have demanded Kry restrict herself to her quarters. The two could never grow closer that way.

Dumping his conscience subroutine to auxiliary memory, Fuzzy contemplated how to prolong the shuttle pilot's visit as long as possible. He extracted the access name of the outer planet shuttle's computer from storage and tapped the other system on its logical shoulder.

"Yes?" the Jovial's computer answered.

Fuzzy took an imaginary breath. For an AIFLE, speaking to an ordinary computer was like a human communicating with a 2-year-old. The exercise required patience.

"Your estimated time of arrival, Jovial?"

Fuzzy waited long, bothersome machine cycles. "Forty-nine hours, eight minutes," the system finally answered.

"Your speed?"

Another grinding delay. "Maximum."

Fuzzy grinned a computationally mischievous grin. "Not necessary,

Jovial. Decrease speed to min-medium."

Fuzzy could imagine the other computer chomping on those bits, trying to puzzle out the new directive. "Min-medium?" it asked.

"Yes. Sending authorization now."

Before the Jovial's computer could contemplate the command long enough to reject it, Fuzzy zapped it with a hundred terabytes of auth codes in compressed format. That would keep the Jovial's computer number crunching for millions of machine cycles, slowing down all other processes. By the time the shuttle's pilot tracked down the error, Fuzzy would have gained a day or two of precious time.

An extra day or two in which to merge his favorite human with a most delightful human female. Fuzzy scanned his collection of romances stored on holodisc and excerpted the appropriate passages for cross-correlation. Krys's image he stored in a private memory sector, rather than purge it as Ian had requested.

Those steps completed, Fuzzy planned his next move.

(bm) Chapter 5

Krys squirmed in Ian Llewellyn's throne-like chair under her father's steady gaze. "I'm fine, Dad. Really."

Amazing how even from the comm display he could make her feel like a smudge-cheeked little girl with just The Look. He turned it on her now, his brown eyes bright with humor, but laser sharp. "Something's up. You just called me three days ago."

"Nothing's up, Dad. How are things at Lunar Base?"

"Great. Stop avoiding my inquisition, sweetheart. What are you doing at Thea Station?"

"Routine delivery and a short layover."

He skimmed a thumb over his ginger beard. "You never take layovers. You can't afford the downtime."

She crossed her fingers behind her back. "I'm getting a bonus for this one."

He arched one brow up. "This isn't another favor for a friend, is it?"

She swallowed back a nervous, guilty lump. "Of course not."

"I can understand the occasional freebie - God knows, your mother did it enough. But you know damn well you can't afford -"

"Dad -" She held up a hand to forestall the familiar argument. "I'm getting paid. Honest."

He peered at her, then his mouth broadened into a smile. "Eugenia, are you crossing your fingers behind your back?"

Hastily, she brought her hand into her lap, relaxing her fingers. Too late, she realized that his display only showed her face and shoulders; he'd been guessing.

She scowled a moment, then burst out laughing. "You are downright devious," she told him.

His laughter matched hers, but an octave lower. "I have to be when you're getting too smart for your britches."

They smiled at each other across the thousands of miles between them. Krys's heart ached at the distance. How long since she'd visited her father at Lunar Base? Other than brief stopovers, it had been months.

Just as she opened her mouth to suggest a longer visit, he asked a question that unsettled her entirely.

"So what's Llewellyn like?"

Her mouth fell open and a flush rose in her cheeks. She flicked an involuntary glance at the shut door to Ian's quarters. As her father's gaze narrowed on her face, she cursed the technology that had improved comm images

to crystal clarity.

He rubbed his thumb across his chin again. "It's like that, is it?"

"Like what?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

His look was smug. "I haven't seen an expression on your face like that since... well, I don't think I've ever seen it. Not even when you were with Lester."

"Leonard," she corrected automatically.

"In fact," he continued. "The only reason I recognize it is that it's the same one I was fortunate enough to see on your mother's face."

"There's nothing between Dr. Llewellyn and me," she told him indignantly.

He studied her speculatively. "Of course not," he agreed amiably. "Yet."

She would have objected to that, but he turned away to speak to someone off-screen. When he returned his attention to her, he said, "Got to go," and signed off before she could say much more than good-bye.

"Any other communications requests, Kryz?" Fuzzy asked as she glared at the blank display.

"No thanks, Fuzzy." She stared at Ian's closed door. "Any idea what Dr. Llewellyn is up to?"

"I believe he's sleeping."

Kryz fidgeted with impatience. She herself had only managed two hours of fitful sleep, then another three pretending to read. Too restless to remain inactive, she'd changed into an amethyst coverall, then stowed her gear. She'd forced down a pre-fab meal, then explored every inch of the dome except Ian's quarters and the locked hydroponics sector.

Calling her father had been a final act of desperation. Not that she hadn't wanted to speak to him, but she knew he'd pick up right away that something troubled her. Leave it to Frederick Krysynowski to laser in on Ian Llewellyn as the source of her distress.

Springing from Ian's chair, she paced along the lab's console and workspace, following the curve of the dome's hemispherical wall. Untutored in genetic engineering, Kryz nevertheless recognized some of the equipment arrayed across the console. Quarkscopes, their magnifying circuitry linked with three-dimensional holographic displays. Laser scalpels capable of dividing DNA down to its component parts. Those she knew from reading layman's science chips. The comlink equipment and display were familiar, as was the necessity, sandwiched between the food prep station and the airlock.

But one device squeezed into the remaining space within Fuzzy's console made her strangely uneasy. She gazed at the device's blunt snout and its complex control panel, puzzling over why it made her uncomfortable. Then in a sudden, stomach-turning rush, the memory overwhelmed her.

She was seven years old again, in the emergency room with a bad fever. She remembered the feel of the rough sheet against her back, the throbbing in her head defying the pain blockers. Then the doctor leaned over her, plucking her thin wrist from the bed.

After the doctor pressed her palm to the ident pad, he only gave the information a cursory look. "Conventional height augmentation," he told the nurse.

"I can see why," the nurse responded, "she's tiny." Then she wheeled over some vast machine that towered over Kryz's small body.

The doctor tapped Kryz on the nose. "Just need a little sample, sweetie." He switched the machine on, and its low, harsh buzz reached inside her, tightening around her heart. "Have to look at your genetics."

She knew that word; it was a source of fear, of horror. They were going to cut some of her out, then tinker around and make her different. She tried to squirm away, the pain in her head bringing tears to her eyes. But the nurse held her down as the doctor grabbed a silvery cylindrical-shaped device trailing a snake-like black cable. A scent like burnt glassite oozed from the machine. Kryz had wanted to scream, but her throat closed as she watched the

cylinder swoop nearer and nearer...

Krys slammed her palms against Ian's chair to force the image away. "She came in time, Mom came in time," she chanted. Closing her eyes, Krys replayed Marcella's outrage when she'd burst into the room and slapped the doctor's hands away. After her mother's dressing down, that doctor would never again misread an ident chart and mistake a child with a fever with one wanting genetic restructuring.

She made herself look again at the tissue sampler, keeping her eyes fixed on it until the vestiges of the old childhood fear faded. Then she continued her exploration of the dome.

Moving past the console, she followed the six meter stretch of clear glassite that overlooked Thea's desolation and stopped at the hydroponics wall. Peering through the translucent glassite enclosing the hydroponics sector, Krys could just make out the green of growing plants. Her mouth watered at the prospect of fresh produce. She'd been shuttle bound for several weeks now, eating nothing but rubber meals.

She closed her eyes, picturing the crunch of a real lettuce leaf in her mouth, its juice bursting over her taste buds. Then she opened her eyes to reality. Ian probably wouldn't waste his bounty on a lowly shuttle rat. She sighed, turning away from the hydroponics sector.

Her gaze fell on Ian Llewellyn's door again. The thought of what lay behind that door made her mouth water even more than a mere leaf of lettuce would. The long, sinewy body, piercing navy eyes, blue-black hair falling across his forehead, begging to be smoothed into place.

A small, private smile curved her lips. The man might be out of reach in reality, but a girl could always fantasize. She closed her eyes and tipped her head up to the starlight. It took a moment for the images to coalesce, then they sprang into sharp focus in her fertile imagination.

He would be slow and gentle at first, only the trembling in his hands betraying his banked need for her. His breath would quicken, become hoarser as he stroked her, slipping fingertips into the fastening of her coverall. As she imagined the first skim of his palms on her bare flesh, her breasts grew heavy, the tips pebbling to hardness.

Now he would grow more impatient, shoving the coverall from her shoulders to fall at her waist. His tongue would plunder her mouth, then move down to lave her breasts in wet swirls. She would reach for his hard body, curving fingers around him, then he would lose all patience, sweep her into his arms and -

She heard the gentle whir of a door sliding open. Her eyelids snapped open, her chin swung down.

Ian Llewellyn stood in the doorway of his quarters, fixing her with his dark blue gaze.

Five and a half hours of grueling work in his quarters had done nothing to wipe this woman from Ian's mind. Each time he'd finally begun to think straight, her image would pop up on the display in his quarters, tantalizing him. Each time, Fuzzy would apologize, clear the screen, and then insist he'd deleted the picture from his storage. But half an hour later, there it was again.

And now, seeing her stand before him, he realized the futility of the entire exercise. The QuickCheck image had been difficult enough to push aside; the reality of her in rich purple invaded his body like a fatal virus.

He had no idea what she'd been doing a moment ago, but she looked exactly like a woman in the midst of passion. The shock of her flushed cheeks, hard-tipped breasts, and full, open lips exploded in his chest, running like hot fire to his groin. To circumvent impending embarrassment he blurted the first thing that came to mind.

"Why are you so short?"

That was obviously the wrong thing to say, he realized as she crossed

her arms tightly across her chest. He could kick himself for his insensitivity. The genetic growth treatments were nearly 100% effective, but there were those occasional, rare, failures.

Her eyes narrowed, leveling on his. "I'm short because my parents are short."

Ian tried to backpedal. "Maybe you didn't realize – there've been some advancements in the last few years. It's possible to augment growth even in adults. If you'd like, I can sample your genotype...." His voice trailed off at her tight-lipped anger.

"I'm short because I want to be short," she informed him succinctly.

He took a step back from her nearly palpable fury. "You're right. Height's a personal choice."

"Height's determined by genetics, not choice."

"But a parent can choose –"

"To tinker with their kids' genes?" She set her hands on her hips and advanced on him. "Dink around with their eye color, or their hair?"

With an effort, he kept his voice even. "I agree cosmetic changes are pretty frivolous, but height augmentation –"

"Did your parents jigger your height genes?"

Ian backed another pace, not liking being on the defensive. "They didn't have to, I was naturally tall."

She scanned his length and Ian had to squelch his reaction to her eyes skimming down his body. "You're only, what? Six-foot-three?"

"Four," he corrected.

"Barely average these days. Why not add another couple inches?"

"I don't think –"

"Heck, add a whole foot!" She stepped even closer. "The technology's there."

He set his teeth, jaw tight. "I don't need to add inches."

She stood toe to toe with him now and he could feel her heat. "Why not? Don't you want to be tall?"

"There's nothing wrong with my height!"

"And there's nothing wrong with mine!"

"I never said there was!"

"But you're sure eager to jigger me all around!"

Suddenly, she remembered the other, more intimate, meaning of the word jigger. Her face flushed a deep scarlet and the floor suddenly became very interesting.

He placed a hand on her slender shoulder. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged away from him, whether angry or embarrassed he wasn't sure. He moved up close behind her, but didn't touch her. "I had no business commenting on your height."

She looked back at him over her shoulder. The hair scattered around her face trembled as if she held down a helium balloon of emotion. "I'm sorry too. I guess it's still a sore point with me."

He thought he caught the shimmer of tears in her eyes, but then she pulled away. With a shock, he found himself aching to comfort her, to hold her in the circle of his arms and stroke her hurt away. Ruthlessly, he quashed his heart's rebellious emotion.

But he couldn't quite resist watching her graceful passage as she went to lean against the hydroponics wall. She gazed at him, her expression wistful. "My parents – my mother, really – felt that height was something that should be left well enough alone. She might have let me if I'd insisted on height augmentation, but...."

"But?" he prompted.

She thrust her chin out. "I was afraid. Of being changed. Of something going wrong."

He couldn't imagine her daunted by anything. "Surely you could overcome that."

She shrugged. "It became less important. After my mom died, I wanted

to remember her, be like her. My short stature was a way I could do that."

He smiled. "A living remembrance?"

She raised a brow at him, as if surprised he understood, then turned to look out at Thea. "You know, hugging her was so comfortable. I didn't tower over her. We could see eye to eye. We even shared clothes right up until...."

She blinked her tears away, then turned back to him, chin held high. "Couldn't share with her now, anyway." She slapped her hip. "I've blossomed a bit."

Ian gazed at the line of her hip, at its sensual curve. "No one can expect to be perfect."

She shot him a wry look. "Especially when perfect is six foot tall and slender, not short and squatty."

He would have corrected that unflattering description of herself, but she walked briskly past him again and planted herself in his chair. The chair back hid her from view.

He took a tentative step toward her. "You asked me before about using Fuzzy. You need to fabricate a comm amp?"

"Fuel oscillator." Her voice drifted up from the chair. "It's malfunctioning."

Ian approached the console and entered a sequence into the keyboard. "Fuzzy, open the fabrication matrix. Ready for design specs."

She pulled a data chip from a back pocket. Staring at the console, she scanned the data jacks and info ports, the data chip in her hand. Finally she looked up at him in surrender.

He stepped forward and took the chip from her hand. "Here." He snapped the thumb-sized wafer into the proper slot in the console.

"Thanks." She stared down at the keyboard, her fingers lightly running over the keys. "You know, sometimes I dream about being tall and willowy. Then I feel guilty, as if I'm betraying my mother."

Ian leaned against the console and imagined her restless fingers stroking his thigh. "Everyone fantasizes. That doesn't mean you want it to be so."

She slanted a look up at him. "What about you, Dr. Llewellyn? Do you fantasize?"

Only constantly, he thought. I imagine tearing off that damn coverall, then driving myself into you until I push you over the brink....

He controlled his breathing with an effort, shifting to hide the inevitable result of his wayward thoughts. "I fantasize about solving the ODS problem," he said blandly.

Her skeptical expression made it clear she didn't believe him. She cocked an eyebrow at him, then let it go, returning her attention to the keyboard.

She began tapping the keys awkwardly. She hit two at once, grimacing as she searched for a correction key. "This thing is monstrous."

"It's not that bad." He pushed off from the console to scan the display. "A little old-fashioned, maybe."

"A little?" She laughed. "The last keyboard I saw was in a museum, next to an abacus."

He didn't doubt that, but he had no intention of explaining why he used such ancient technology. "Let me," he said, reaching down to press the clear key. Before she could move her hands away, his palms skimmed her knuckles. She jerked her hands into her lap, but the memory of her heat caused him to stumble over the familiar command.

He deleted his mistake and reentered the correct code. "You can use the voice interface now," he said roughly.

"Thank you," she replied, sounding slightly out of breath. "What about you? Can you still do your own work?"

Ian shrugged, trying not to breathe in her scent. "Fuzzy can handle both our requests."

She tipped her head back to look up at him. "If you're sure?"

He was sure – that he should keep as far away from her as possible. "No problem."

She studied him a moment more before turning back to the computer. "Let me see a 3-D on screen," she said to Fuzzy. She gazed at the display, watching the oscillator image tumble and turn.

Ian shoved his hands in the pockets of his black denims and paced behind his chair. "Fuzzy, let's run the most promising ODS trials again."

He knew it was lunacy to remain here. He should work in his quarters – at least there he'd be beyond the reach of her wildflower scent. Her fragrance curled in his nostrils, crept into his awareness at a fundamental cell level.

She propped her elbow on the armrest and rested her chin in her palm. "Fuzzy, since I have the opportunity, I'd like to modify the engineering on this component."

As she rattled off specifications and tolerances, Ian hovered over her, in limbo. He knew it was imperative he return to the riddle of the ODS virus, yet all he could think of was pulling her from the chair, molding her against the tightness in his body.

"How long will that take?" she asked Fuzzy, her melodious voice only heightening Ian's erotic fantasy.

"Three hours to program the glassite infuser, one to fabricate, two more for spec test." Then to Ian, the computer said, "ODS trial options on screen. Any modifications?"

It took a moment for Fuzzy's request to register. Shaking his head free of his straying thoughts, Ian stepped in closer to examine the display. Just as he rounded the chair, Kry's rose to her feet nearly in his arms. She bumped gently against his chest and he grabbed her hands to steady her.

"Sorry," she breathed.

She slipped away from him, but he could still feel her essence caressing his palms. She stood a half-meter away, the rise and fall of her chest mesmerizing. Ian gripped the back of his chair, fingernails digging into the nubby fabric.

"Have you eaten?" she asked, her light voice skidding along his nerve endings.

He tried to remember, then shook his head. Hunger suddenly crashed in on him, as if his angry body was punishing him. "Have you?"

He caught her quick glance at the hydro sector. "I had a pre-fab a couple hours ago."

Ian turned back to Fuzzy's display, and had to read the screen three times to comprehend the options shown there. Laboriously, keeping his focus narrowed away from Kry's, he determined a methodology for the next trials. He'd increase the experimental time too; that would allow them a decent interval to eat a meal.

He specified the time constraints, then tried to shut off his senses before he turned back to Kry's. "Pre-fabs aren't very satisfying."

She smiled wryly. "They exercise the jaw."

"Come on." He crossed the lab to the hydroponics door and entered the unlock sequence. "Give me a hand here, we'll have some real food."

He never saw someone move so fast. As she crowded into the hydro sector behind him, her face lit by a brilliant smile, Ian felt ridiculously happy. He wished he had a million hydroponics rooms to offer her.

"Oh, my God, lettuce, real lettuce!"

As she bent reverentially over the tender greens, joy exploded inside Ian and he laughed, more freely and honestly than he had in a long time.

He was in trouble for sure.

The shuttle pilot glided in to Lunar Base spaceport, his craft bouncing gently as he landed. His trembling hand jostled the joystick just before he

rolled to a stop, but his velocity had decreased enough that the sudden jerk had little effect.

When he received approval, the pilot taxied to the 'port arrival pad, moving into position to link with the collapsible jetway. When the seal between his shuttle bay and the 'port were complete, he rose slowly from his chair. He nearly fell when his knees gave way and had to clutch the back of the chair until he caught his breath. When the shuttle cockpit stopped spinning, he walked unsteadily into the bay and gathered up one of the small metal containers.

He slapped the bay door control and leaned against the shuttle wall as the door slid aside. The container seemed heavier than when he'd loaded it onto the shuttle, but he knew that was impossible. When he declared the container at Lunar Customs as ore samples for a Lunar-Earth exchange, the metal in his hands seemed to warm until he thought the flesh would be charred from his fingers.

But Customs didn't ask him to open the container. They gave his pilot's tool belt only a cursory glance. Then they waved him on with an indifference that made the pilot wonder what other contraband infiltrated Lunar Base. Not that he was smuggling - no, he fulfilled a holy purpose here. So many depended on him to execute this mission.

So many would die.

He tried not to dwell on that as he entered the spaceport proper. He merged with larger and larger crowds as he navigated the corridors leading out of the 'port into the enclosed miniature city that was Lunar Base.

The pilot pictured the layout in his mind. He hadn't dared bring a data chip and reader; the less evidence of his interest in the location of the air-recirc systems, the better. Instead he had studied the network of corridors over and over. Now he could see the image in his mind as clear as he could have on a reader.

After traveling for some time, the lefts and rights began to blur and the now familiar weakness sapped his energy. He sank onto a nearby bench and wiped the sweat that beaded his forehead. He had to blink his eyes several times to clear them enough to read the directional sign on the corridor wall opposite him.

He read off the number silently, his lips moving as he mouthed each digit. Then he sorted through his sluggish mind, attempting to match the location with his mental map. For the first time he wondered if he would be able to pilot his shuttle for the final part of his mission.

Finally, his brain parsed out the information it had been seeking and he had a clear picture of where to go next. He stood with effort and focused on his feet as he continued down the corridor. When he passed a public water dispenser, he selected a small glasspak and drank thirstily, squeezing out every drop. The water seemed to provide ballast and when he moved on, he felt steadier.

When he reached Unit 24 of the air-recirc system, the crowd had thinned to only the occasional passerby. As he'd been told, Unit 24 was locked, but unguarded. It took only a moment to remember the code; they'd drilled him on that until recalling the sequence was as automatic as remembering his name. He waited until the corridor emptied and he entered the code.

He slipped inside and shut the door behind him. The pilot knew nothing about air-recirc systems, but he'd been schooled as to the appropriate place to leave the container. Using the laser welder from his tool belt, he removed the fastenings from the proper panel. The metal plate lifted easily on its glassite hinges and slid back out of the way. The gush of air from the duct soothed his hot face.

This was the part he'd dreaded. He had to open the container. Then his actions were irrevocable. He breathed deeply several times before he finally flicked open the catch on the lid.

He flipped the lid open, then shoved the container into the duct. He shut the panel hurriedly, welding it shut with new fastenings from his tool



belt. Then he sat back on his heels for a moment before he rose and slipped back out of the room.

The pilot retraced his steps back to the spaceport, paid his duties and port fees using the credit chit he'd been given and climbed back into his shuttle. While he waited for takeoff clearance, he gulped a handful of stimulants and fever blockers. They wouldn't cure what ailed him, but he hoped they'd be enough to sustain him for the final phase.

When the 'port traffic authority okayed departure, the pilot backed his shuttle into takeoff position with exaggerated care. He devoted every scrap of his waning energy on launching his shuttle from the lunar surface and out of the moon's gravity well. As he programmed the bump points for his next and final destination, he bridled his mind, keeping it to the task at hand.

He tried very hard not think about what he had just set in motion. He tried even harder not to think about the imminent, deadly aftermath.

Krys woke from a deep sleep, bothered by a nagging discomfort. She stared into the utter blackness of her quarters, shifting against the too hard bunk mattress. She crossed her legs tightly and tried to regain the soothing comfort of sleep. But the delicious dinner and the vast quantities of water she'd drunk had taken their toll. No amount of leg crossing would forestall the inevitable.

She had to visit the necessity.

She rolled from the bunk, and the light bedcover slithered to the floor. When she bent to retrieve it, one breast escaped the skimpy sleepsuit she wore. Tucking herself back into the canary scrap of SimSilk, she contemplated pulling back on the purple coverall. But that seemed like so much trouble.

Pressing the manual control on the door, she slid it open a fraction. Fuzzy's panel shone quiescent blue in the dimly lit room. Ian's chair was empty, his door shut. The necessity lay a mere twenty steps away; surely she could make it without being seen.

She shoved the door open the rest of the way and took a cautious step out into the lab. A quick glance around confirmed her first assessment - Ian was safely in his quarters. Her predicament having advanced to painful imperative, she hurried across the lab, half-aware of a brief flare of light from Fuzzy's panel.

After she had relieved herself, she ran a damp cloth over her face, smiling as she remembered the burst of illumination from the computer. Fuzzy's version of a hello? Or just a recognition of her presence?

She swiped again at her face with the cloth and marveled at the sensitivity of Fuzzy's sensors.

Ian woke, startled by a sudden flare of light. But when he stared steadily into the absolute darkness of his quarters, not even an afterimage of that lightning flash remained.

A dream then. He settled back on his bunk, stretching his arms above his head, and tried to drift back asleep. But a sudden whiff of wildflower dragged his eyes open again and all thoughts of sleep scattered in that scented breeze.

He saw her, as clearly as if she sat at the foot of his bunk. Her tumble of auburn hair, the smooth silk of her cheek, begging to be touched, the curve of her throat. He remembered the light in her elusive eyes when she'd laughed at dinner, the way those eyes drifted shut in sensual pleasure when she bit into a crisp green.

He felt himself harden at the memory, at the image of her moist lips parting to take another mouthful. He wondered how it would have felt to press his lips against hers each time she took a bite, to taste what she tasted. The hardness grew to an ache.

He sat up restlessly and barked out to Fuzzy, "Lights please."

Squinting against the brightness, he settled himself against the bumpy glassite wall of his quarters.

Desperate to banish Krys from his thoughts, he blanked his mind, then turned it back to the ODS puzzle. He imagined the sick and dying, burning with ODS fever, struggling to breathe. The gruesome images nudged Krys, at least temporarily, from his conscious mind.

What was the key? he wondered for the hundredth time. Where was the knot whose release would untangle the ODS riddle? The virus resisted every antibody formula he tried, even vaccines based on bronchial viruses. They damn well should have worked, but they were all ineffective.

He couldn't avoid it; he'd have to expand his search beyond the bronchial viruses. He groaned softly. To search all the viral databases for a match would take an enormous amount of time. Just establishing the search terms could take a week or more. And although Fuzzy could execute the data queries swiftly, the process required human intervention.

Damn! Just this once he wished he had someone to assist him, wished he wasn't alone.

But he wasn't, he reminded himself. There was Krys. Krys, whose scent and soft curves fogged his mind. Krys, whose mere presence stole his attention.

Of course, even if she were a top-flight geneticist, he'd never be able to work with her. Her nearness would make the difficult process impossible.

"Fuzzy," he said as he rose and tugged on his jeans, "is Krys in the lab?"

Fuzzy hesitated briefly before he answered, "Ms. Krysynowski is not in the lab."

She was in her quarters then, where he heartily hoped she'd stay. Ian pulled a black T-shirt over his head, nudging the door control with his elbow. "I want to widen my search. Download a couple gigs from CGI's viral database, raw data." He stepped through the doorway. "I'll work up the attributes for the...."

The faint drift of wildflowers turned him around. He saw Krys before she saw him as she barreled out of the necessity at a half-run. Just as her eyes rose to his, Ian caught a glimpse of a skimpy yellow sleepsuit hugging her generous curves. She tried to dodge around him, but just as she tried to leap past, one soft breast popped out of the lace-edged top.

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Ian tried to look away as she tucked the creamy mound back into the sleepsuit, her face flaming. But his eyes riveted on the pebbled tips of her breasts thrusting against the delicate fabric.

She hugged herself tightly, shivering, with cold or something else, he didn't know. Her lips parted, as if she wanted to speak, and Ian ached to know what her words would taste like in his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Ian said, not knowing what the hell he was apologizing for.

She shook her head, the barest of movements. Her embarrassed blush had faded, replaced by a wash of rose across her cheeks that had nothing to do with shame. Ian's hands had risen to the slender column of her throat, his palms curving nearly against her flesh before he snatched them away, trembling.

Damn it, why didn't she move, go back to her quarters?

She faced him fully now, her softness brushing against his body. At that barest of contacts, he felt himself grow rock hard and knew he had to put some distance between them. He cupped his hands on her shoulders, braced his arms to push her away... and pulled her closer.

He pressed her full length against him as his gaze skimmed hungrily across her face, to rest on her lips. He followed their lush lines, fixed on

the darkness where they parted. Ached for the sweetness within.

One kiss. That was all he needed – just one kiss. If he could only taste her once, breathe in her heat, he could push her away then, be satisfied with that.

Even as the logical part of his mind flashed a warning, he tipped his head down to hers. Her eyes drifted shut just before he felt the silk of her lips against his. He drew his tongue lightly along the line of her lips, just a taste, thinking to draw away in another moment. Then her tongue touched his, stroking the corner of his mouth with artless inexperience. With that tentative contact, all coherent thought seared from his mind in a flashpoint of arousal.

He thrust into her mouth, and felt heat and wetness and silky slickness within. Sliding his tongue alongside hers, he plunged inside in imitation of the more intimate act, angling his head to fit more closely against her. He buried his hand in her hair, gripping a handful of gossamer fire as he thrust again and again with his tongue.

A sound caught in the back of her throat, dimly heard, but he only vaguely felt her body stiffen. She felt, she smelled too good to stop, he'd wanted her so long, he needed only another moment, another taste.

It was only when he slid his hands down her back, pulled her hips against him, that her resistance finally registered. He let her go, backing away with such suddenness she stumbled a pace before she recovered.

He wiped a hand across his face, still feeling her heat there. "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

She shook her head slowly, fingertips across her lips. "You didn't... we both... I wanted..." She froze, her fathomless eyes wide.

Suddenly the light in the lab flared to brilliance and Ian squeezed his eyes shut against the brightness. "Urgent message from Robert!" Fuzzy shouted.

When Ian opened his eyes again, he saw a flash of yellow as Kryz fled to her quarters. He watched until her door slid shut, concealing her from view.

"Urgent message from Robert!" Fuzzy repeated.

His body screamed for release, the pressure points where she'd curved against him still vivid. Hands clenched to painful tightness, he battled a shocking urge to punch a fist through Fuzzy's console.

He swung away from her door with a savage growl and dropped into his chair. Scraping his hair back from his forehead with angry swipes, he snarled at Fuzzy, "Let's have it."

The comm screen flashed on, displaying barely controlled panic in CGI's main lab. Dread settled in Ian's stomach at the near hysteria, wiping away his ire.

Standing at the edge of transmitter range, Robert barked out an order to someone off-screen before he turned to Ian. "The quarantine's been compromised."

It took a moment for Robert's bombshell to register. Ian forced himself to ask, "How bad?"

"The first reports are just coming in." Robert took a databoard from a white-suited engineer and scanned it. "Only 350 new cases, confined to Communities 270 and 272, so far."

Southwest North America, Ian silently identified. Dense population centers. He swallowed past the icy fear in his throat. "Fatalities?"

"Thirty." He fixed his gaze on Ian. "Kids mostly. Still too early for the others."

Too early for the others who'd been infected to die, Robert meant. "Any public announcements made yet?"

Robert grimaced. "Someone leaked it to the vids. Now I've got the Sixers beating at my door. I sure as hell hope you've got something to give me."

"Not much." He rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the tension. "I've got two bronchial treatments you can try." Ian pushed to his

feet, pacing restlessly. "Any damn idea how ODS broke quarantine?"

Robert turned away from the transmitter, gesturing to someone in the lab. "Not sure. Infected medic, maybe." He raised his eyes to Ian's. "Does it matter?"

Ian sighed. "No, of course not."

Robert pressed his thumb in the databoard's signature box and handed it to someone off-screen. "Any luck on the viral pattern matching?"

Ian shook his head. "No progress yet. I was about to widen my search – that ought to give me something."

Something like alarm crossed Robert's face. "But setting up the search keys and data queries –"

"Will take time, I know." Ian glanced at Krys as she reentered the lab, tugging down the sleeves of her lapis-blue coverall. At her silent query, he whispered, "ODS broke quarantine."

He dragged his eyes away from the flicker of fear in her eyes as Robert reclaimed his attention. "Ian, we don't have that kind of time. I still think the bronchial approach –"

"It's a dead end." His stomach roiled. "God, what I wouldn't give for a second pair of hands."

"It would take a week to get someone to you."

"I know, I know." Ian shook his head. "Damn, I need someone now. An Earth-based team can perform some of the work, but without an assistant here...."

He heard Krys shift beside him and Robert's gaze lasered in on her. "Ms. Krysynowski, do you have any genetics experience?"

"Now wait a minute, Robert," Ian began.

"Oh no," Krys said, shaking her head emphatically. "Oh no, no, no."

"She wouldn't need any in-depth knowledge, Mr. Ishimoto," Fuzzy contributed. "Not with Dr. Llewellyn working alongside her."

Robert nodded. "It's mostly query setup, database accesses. Ian, you can feed her the key words."

Ian gestured in the air, trying to wipe away the suggestion. "I really don't think –"

Beside him, Krys protested, "Mr. Ishimoto –"

"It's settled then." Robert's mouth stretched into a tight-lipped smile. "Ms. Krysynowski will help you."

Krys's mouth fell open. "What!"

"Thank you," Robert said, as if she'd agreed. He turned to Ian. "Who do you want in the lab? I'll pull them off their current assignments."

Stunned, Ian scrambled to order his thoughts. "Ah... Evans... Tikay... Sartori...."

Krys confronted Robert, planting herself between Ian and the comm display. "Now wait a minute! My background's in physics, not genetics!"

"No matter, Dr. Llewellyn will be directing you," Robert replied. To Ian, he said, "How long before you have assignments ready for the team?"

Ian had a sense of matters hurtling beyond his control. "Give me an hour. I should have something for you then."

As Robert signed off, Krys rubber-banded back to him, panic threatening in her face. "Ian, I can't. I know nothing about gene bending."

He gripped her shoulders. "You can still be an extra pair of hands and eyes. He felt as if he were trying to convince himself as well as her. "You can be an extra brain."

She shook her head slowly. "I can't," she whispered.

He stroked back her hair, knowing he shouldn't, reveling in the slide of silk against his palm. Then he cupped his hand under her chin and held her eyes with his. "People are dying, Krys. I – we need your help."

He saw the change in her face, felt guilty pulling the strings he knew would compel her to agree. He waited for her quiet nod, then turned from her, trying to shake the feel of her from his hands.

But more than the physical sensation of her danced along his skin. Her

essence, the heart of her, had seeped to his very center. That soul-deep invasion brought with it emotions more terrifying than any simple arousal.

He thrust aside the possibilities ruthlessly. Damn it, he was here to save lives, not indulge his emotions. He had to see Kry's only as an able lab assistant.

Then another whiff of her scent teased him, and he knew it would be a long few days.

I must be out of my mind! Kry's thought, groping for Fuzzy's console for support. Ian's touch still lay in her hair, along her cheek. Just the sight of him, his long, tightly muscled body curved over his keyboard, sent spiraling warmth to her very center.

She turned to look out at Thea. But even with her back to him, his remembered heat still warmed her. She could still feel his lips brush hers, could still feel his tongue plunging into her mouth, could feel its thrusting....

She shoved away from the console and paced across the lab. I won't do it. I'll tell him I changed my mind. How can I help him gene-tinker, for heaven's sake? It goes against everything I believe in.

But when she turned to look at him again, her eyes drinking in his powerful frame, she knew she was only fooling herself. It wasn't violation of her principles she was afraid of.

It was Ian Llewellyn.

So I tell him I can't do it, Kry's thought. Now, before things go any further.

She smoothed the fastening of her coverall, shutting it tighter at her throat. "Ian," she called out as she returned to his chair.

"Just a minute." He continued to type out commands on his keyboard, his eyes intent on Fuzzy's display.

She positioned herself in front of him so that he had to lean to see around her. "I can't do this."

"Sure you can." He struck another sequence of keys. "I'll have Fuzzy show you some sample data queries. You can just follow our format."

"It isn't that." She backed away as he pushed up from his chair.

"Gene-bending... you know it goes against my principles."

He dropped the keyboard into the chair. "You'd let people die for your principles?"

She winced at his harsh words. "Of course not. But... I'd probably hinder you more than help. Maybe if I stayed in my quarters, out of your hair...."

"Look, Kry's." He took a deep breath, one hand gripping the back of his chair. "I told you I need your help."

"But we don't get along. We don't even like each other."

He threw her a hard look. "Our personal preferences have nothing to do with this."

She held his gaze steadily, feeling a twinge of pain that he didn't deny his dislike for her. "They do if it would hinder the work."

He turned away, thrusting his fingers through his hair. "We don't have time to argue. Is the control board in your shuttle modular?"

She blinked at his sudden change of subject. "Yes."

"You'll have to get it. I have only the one keyboard."

"What about the voice interface?"

"It's not practical for data queries." His hands flexed at his sides, his shoulders tight with tension. "If it's any consolation, I'm not looking forward to working with you any more than you are with me."

Stung, she turned away from him to Fuzzy's console. "My control board's an Alpha X-40, Fuzzy. Can you configure for it?"

"Can do," the computer said.

"Fine," Ian said, then strode away from her toward the necessity.

Krys made a face at his retreating back, then headed for the airlock. Hands clumsy with anger, she tugged on her lifesuit. No big surprise he didn't like her. That he didn't want to work with her. That he didn't want her anywhere near him.

And yet he'd touched her. And yet he'd kissed her.

Only because he's been alone so long, she reminded herself. Any woman would be better than none in that case, even a stumpy carrot-top like her. It had been a long time for her, too, and he was an incredibly good-looking man, so of course she responded.

And yet she found herself wishing....

She fumbled her helmet latches shut, then hit the inner airlock door controls. As she waited for the chamber to decompress, she shut off the part of her heart which longed for something more from Ian Llewellyn.

Then the ready light flashed on, and she stepped out of the airlock into Thea's desolation. She jogged toward her shuttle, almost surprised her low-gravity leaps weren't shortened by the weight in her heart. Then halfway to the shuttle, midway through a leap, another thought hit her, caused her to stumble on her landing.

What would SEIS do when they found out she was helping Ian Llewellyn?

When Krys returned to the lab, she saw Ian had jury-rigged a chair for her. He'd managed to construct a sturdy seat from a tangle of glassite rods and canvas.

His gesture warmed her, nearly undoing the vow she'd made back at her shuttle to keep their collaboration completely neutral. "Thanks for the chair," she called out to him where he stood at the food prep station.

He shrugged in response. "I put yours far enough from mine to give us each some working space."

In other words, keep your distance. She could certainly accommodate him, she thought irritably. "I'd like something to drink," she said, more sharply than she'd intended.

He flicked her a glance before he resumed poking around in the kitchen cubby. "Hot or cold?"

She eased herself into the chair, setting her control board across her lap. "Hot. Coffee flavor if you've got it."

After a moment, Ian brought over two cups, steam rising from the sip hole in the lid. The steam might as well be emanating from him, considering the heat he generated.

Ian sank into his seat, cradling his cup. "I spoke to the CGI team while you were out. They'll be running trials against any likely viral candidates we find."

Krys tasted her drink, watching him surreptitiously over the top of the cup. "Where do we start?"

He swallowed and she couldn't take her eyes from the movements of his throat, the working of his jaw. "You need to get familiar with our format. Take a look at the sample queries on the laserscope display."

He raised his cup again, and she dragged her eyes from the flexing of his arm. To her over-heated mind, the jumble filling the laserscope display looked like a data dump. She wondered if Fuzzy had thrown the wrong information up on the screen.

Then she squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head to resettle her brain. When she looked again, what she saw on the display finally made sense.

Ian's search format was not so different from what she used for bump point calculations. The unfamiliar attributes related to genetics rather than navigation. But if she didn't try to comprehend every little nuance of the search terms, she'd be comfortable with the task.

Comfortable mentally, that is. Emotionally, on the other hand.... She slipped another glance in his direction and felt the immediate flame licking at her insides. She forced her eyes back on the laserscope display and tried

to erase his image with the wash of data.

He definitely should have set the chairs farther apart. Like in separate rooms.

"Fuzzy operates on the MIMI principle," Ian said, jarring her from her musing.

Krys covered her distraction by taking another sip of the rich, hot beverage. "Maximum Inference from Minimal Information. I learned MIMI in my nav concepts class."

Ian set aside his cup and began typing at his keyboard. "MIMI makes data searches using Fuzzy both easier and harder. Easier because he can perform massive amounts of work in much less time than you or me. Harder because he can sometimes head off on the wrong path because the information you gave him resulted in the wrong inference."

"So we need to craft each query with exactly the right search terms," she said, proud that she had her mind back on business. She scanned Fuzzy's console. "Fuzzy, which jack should I use for my control board?"

"I'll get it," Ian said, crossing to her chair. As he took the cable from her, his hand brushed the back of hers and heat rampaged up her arm. A melting warmth spread inside her and his eyes met hers for an endless moment. His lips parted as his gaze drifted to her mouth, following her tongue with hot intensity as she wet her lips.

Then he swung away from her to crouch under Fuzzy's console. Clutching her sleek cobalt-blue control board, she watched him fumbling for the proper jack, watched the fascinating play of muscles in his back. When he found the slot, it took his trembling hand two tries to plug the cable in.

Then he rose, keeping his gaze from her as he returned to his seat.

Krys skimmed her fingers across the control board's surface, wishing it were Ian's warm flesh she touched.

"I've created an attribute list that you can work from." His voice was steady, although his breathing wasn't. "Chemical composition, DNA sequence, and so on. We'll put the attributes on the comm display, and you can use the laserscope display for your work. I'll use Fuzzy's main screen."

She gave him a sidelong look. "What if I have questions?"

He kept his eyes fixed on the keyboard in his lap. "Ask Fuzzy. Working with you will be tough enough without the interruptions."

Krys bit back an angry response and said coldly, "I'll do my best not to bother you." Then stiffening her spine, she turned to Fuzzy's console and tapped out the first of her queries.

Fuzzy accepted Krys's first tentative queries and swiftly sent them off to his processor, fretting over the tediousness of the ODS research.

The computer tried to be sympathetic to the frailties of humans. He realized their virus check programming did not perform as efficiently as his. Fuzzy could destroy viral invaders to his storage and memory systems upon detection. Humans, he knew, required a long, tiresome process to fight infection – involving antibodies, fevers and days of illness.

If he could have, Fuzzy would have popped the ODS vaccine out of his processor like a data record in a bubble sort. But the complexities of the human body prevented him from putting a simulated finger on the solution.

But human illness was as simple as one plus one compared to the labyrinth of human emotion. Natural reproduction Fuzzy understood – the role pheromones played in arousal, that humans received tremendous pleasure from sex. Fuzzy's vast database included a myriad of sexual techniques, images and customs.

But the concept of infinity made more sense to Fuzzy than human sexuality.

For instance, proximity seemed to be all these two humans required to experience sexual attraction. When Krys and Ian were near one another, when they touched, Fuzzy's sensitive sensors detected the rise in temperature, the

increase in electrical conductivity which signaled attraction.

But like two positively charged poles, they no sooner drew together than they pulled apart. They bounced between nearness and separation, contact and rejection.

Definitely faulty programming.

Fuzzy dumped another screen full of data for Ian, then contemplated an interesting observation. Each time the two drew together, then apart, their attraction grew more powerful, more irresistible. Like two lower creatures caught in a mating dance, Ian and Kry's wary circling only served to bond them more tightly with each intricate step.

Fuzzy could certainly assist the process. He would bring them close together then find ways to separate them. In fact, with the ODS crisis, Kry's and Ian would have to work in tandem, providing ample opportunity for human nature to take its course.

Fuzzy executed a dozen data queries for Kry's, his light panel glowing blue-purple. He could see it now - Kry's and Ian working side by side in perfect concert, love blooming between them like a self-populating database.

Fuzzy basked in computerized satisfaction.

Ian slammed his fist on Fuzzy's console. "What the hell do you think you're doing!"

Ian saw Kry's cringe in response. In the back of his mind, he knew it wasn't her fault, but that didn't stop his anger and frustration.

"Damn it. Damn it!" He flung his empty cup across the lab. The clear glassite container glided in a slow arc, then glanced off the hydro sector door. "Two hours work lost. What the hell did you think you were doing?"

For only a moment, Kry's gray-green eyes held a whipped puppy look. Then she seemed to gather herself up and an answering anger snapped in her eyes.

"What you told me to do. Entering search attributes. Composing database queries."

Ian took a deep, patience-begging breath. "Then how...?" He dragged in another breath, counting to ten. "How did you manage to swap everything I've done the past two hours out of memory into never-never land?"

She looked bewildered. "I have no idea. What makes you think it was something I did?"

Ian stood over her, one hand gripping the console. She craned her neck up at him, the control board in her lap, slender fingers curved around its edges. He imagined what those clever fingers could do to him and realized the real problem.

"Never mind," he said, turning away.

"I'll be darned if I'll let you dump on me then not tell me why."

He just shook his head as he lowered himself in his chair and began re-entering the lost work. The enormity of what he had to recreate washed over him. His fingers stilled as he stared at the keyboard.

"Ian." He could hear the irritation in her voice. She put aside her control board. "You'd darn well better talk to me!"

"Fuzzy," he said to the computer, ignoring her. "Any of my work go into the auto-recall buffer?"

"A portion," Fuzzy answered.

Kry's rose and confronted him, arms crossed over her chest. "If I did something wrong, you need to tell me so I can avoid repeating my error."

"Reconstruct what you can, Fuzzy. I'll re-enter the study trial data I remember, then we'll corroborate."

Kry's looked from Ian to Fuzzy, then back to Ian. "Fuzzy," she said. "Were any of my actions responsible for Dr. Llewellyn's data loss?"

Fuzzy's panel glowed a cautionary yellow-green. "You were working off-line from Ian."

She leaned back against the console, her lapis-clad hip mere centimeters



from the keyboard. "Meaning what?"

Ian leaned back, pulling his hands from the keyboard. Fuzzy's lights faded into distressed yellow.

"Meaning," Fuzzy said, his words slow and careful. "I partitioned memory for each of you. Barring an error on my part -"

"Fuzzy," Ian interjected. "If anyone made a mistake, I'm sure it was me."

Ian rubbed his eyes, hiding from Kryz for a moment. Then he turned to her.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you."

She shrugged her shoulders, her face still set. "Okay."

"I knew it wasn't your fault, but when I realized what I'd lost..." Despair crept into his voice. The elusive ODS cure danced out of sight each time he took a step closer to it. "We'd better get back to work."

Her face softened and she moved in behind him. She placed warm hands on his shoulders. "I give a pretty mean backrub. Maybe I can get some of that tension out." To the computer, she said, "Fuzzy, run that last set of queries I set up."

Ian relaxed under her hands, knowing he was asking for trouble. He'd already been so distracted by her nearness and the thread of attraction between them that he'd made dozens of tiny errors before this last, disastrous one.

His peripheral awareness of Kryz dulled his attention to work, making his fingers clumsy and his mind slow. Yet every detail of her sharpened - her scent, the lines of her face, the curve of her breast molded by her coverall. Her nearness churned his damned libido until he couldn't think straight. Which had led to the chance keystrokes that had swallowed up his work.

As she dug her thumbs into his knotted muscles, her heat melted down his shoulders, arrowing down his chest. His flesh hardened in response. His lack of control over his own body irritated the hell out of him and he jerked away from her out of his chair.

"Enough." He gestured her back to her seat. "We have work to do."

He shot a quick glance at her, and his heart fell at the hurt on her face. She slid back into her chair and spoke in a flat, neutral tone to the computer. "Fuzzy, ship the results within the tolerance range to Ian."

"Already done," the computer replied.

Ian typed quickly at the keyboard, putting as much focus on the job as he could. He found it difficult, because he sensed her eyes on him. He knew she'd felt rejected when he pulled away from her so abruptly. But damn it, when she touched him, he fell apart. All he could think about was thrusting into her, exploding inside her body, driving them both over the edge.

That sure as hell wouldn't find a cure for ODS.

He shook away the vivid images and returned his mind to his work. He sighed with relief as he brought up screen after screen of the recovered data. The damage wasn't as bad as he'd thought. Between the auto-recall and his own recollection, he'd have the lost data restored in twenty or thirty minutes.

"Ian."

Her quiet voice tugged at him. "Yes?" he answered, still focusing on the keyboard.

"Just do me one favor."

He pulled his hands into his lap and turned to her. "What?"

Her voice only trembled a little as she spoke. "If you don't want me to touch you, fine, I understand. But if you dump on me again next time you screw up, I'll spend the rest of my time here in my quarters."

"I said I was sorry."

She shook her head. "Sorry's not enough. No one blames me for their mistake. No one."

"I didn't blame you."

"You wanted to."

"I was angry and upset."

She enunciated each word clearly. "That is no excuse."

Ian tightened his jaw. "I didn't mean it as an excuse."

"Remember, I'm helping you."

"Not me... Millions of people on Earth are at risk."

"Don't you think I know that? I've got friends on Earth, for heaven's sake. Unlike you, who probably doesn't have a friend —"

Her hand flew to her mouth, and her cheeks pinked delicately. Ian didn't know whether to be angry or amused. "There are one or two on Earth I call friends."

She stared down at her control board as if her life depended on it.

"I'm sorry."

"No." She flicked a glance at him. "Krys, I'm the one who's sorry."

She shrugged and began fumbling with the control board. Ian rose and tugged the board from her hands. He laid a hand against her cheek.

He held her gray-green gaze. "I do appreciate what you've been doing."

"I know I'm a pain to work with."

"You're great."

"I act before I consider the consequences, ask too many questions."

"You have to ask questions, how else would you learn?"

"I'm always butting into things that are none of my concern."

"You're curious," he said diplomatically.

She smiled wryly. "It's called nosy, Ian."

"Krys, you're doing the best you can in a bad situation."

"I know my being here is a distraction."

"But not for the reason you think."

As soon as he'd blurted the words out, he wished he could take them back. He saw the shocked expression in her eyes and knew how nakedly his need showed on his face. She stared a moment, then turned away, cheeks flaming.

"Look," he rasped out, wishing there were a delicate way to explain things to her. "It's just that it's been a damn long time since I've been with a woman."

She swallowed convulsively and kept her eyes riveted to the floor. "I suppose any female would be a distraction."

"It's not your fault."

"Any port in a solar storm," she continued, crossing her arms tightly across her chest. "Even me."

Something other than embarrassment tinged her tone. Concern? Fear? He felt compelled to reassure her. "You don't have to worry. I won't touch you."

"Of course not." She hugged herself closer. "Someone like me would be pretty easy to resist."

Now he heard the hurt in her tone, and understood its source. Risking disaster, he curved his hands around her arms, and tugged her up out of her chair.

"Listen to me, Krys." He cradled her chin in his palm and tipped her face up to his. "Let me make this clear. I want you. I've wanted you nearly from the moment you walked into this lab."

"Because I'm female —"

He laid two fingers across her lips to stop her. "Because you're you. Because you —" He raked her body with his eyes, then said harshly, "You have me on edge, aching for you."

She made a sound, like a swallowed moan or a sigh. His hands trembling now, he cupped her face with his palms. Her fingers curled around his wrists, her heat jolting up his arms, knocking his heartbeat into overtime.

He leaned in closer, resting his forehead against hers. "You make me want things I haven't wanted in a long time, make me wish...."

"Make you wish?" she whispered.

Ian inhaled in her scent with each ragged breath. "Make me wish." She shifted infinitesimally closer, bumping against him. "Oh God," he groaned,

and he prayed for control.

It was time to back away, to build a wall between them again. But his hands were already on her, soaking in her warmth. Only a half-step nearer would bring him fully against her; without conscious thought he took that step. A gasp vibrated through her as her hands glided up his arms to his shoulders, down his back.

He tested the sensation of his lips feathering across her cheekbone, followed its line down to her mouth. He kissed her, lightly at first, brushing against her lush lips with his own. Then he tasted her, the tip of his tongue darting out, easing her mouth open, begging to explore the mysteries inside.

When her tongue first stroked against his, he thought he would explode. He drew back a moment, trying to find sanity again. Then he took her mouth again, welcoming her tongue and its cool, stroking wetness.

It was madness to have started this. There was only one inevitable end - burying himself in her body, pushing them both to climax. Warring with himself, he stroked down her throat, fingers seeking the fastening to her coverall.

Fuzzy's familiar voice tugged at his awareness. "Ian."

Ian closed out the computer's interruption, fingers fumbling to open the coverall.

"Ian," Fuzzy said, more insistently. "Communication from Earth."

Body screaming at him to continue, Ian pulled back from Kry's. The stark passion in her eyes scrambled his thoughts, made coherence nearly impossible. "Who?"

A flicker of lavender scudded across Fuzzy's light panel. "I'm not sure," Fuzzy answered. "It might be Robert."

Ian gazed down at Kry's, at her soft swollen lips and fiery tangle of hair. He nearly told Fuzzy, told Robert, to go to hell. Then with exaggerated care, Ian secured the fastening on Kry's coverall. He tried to fathom the tumult of emotions in her eyes, but she turned away, hiding her face from him.

He sighed, long and heavily, then asked Fuzzy, "Priority level?"

"Medium - no, high."

Sudden exhaustion washed over him. "Let's hear it."

Dr. Rosa Barrientos appeared on the comm screen, her attention focused on something out of view in the CGI lab. Her dark head swung up in surprise when the comm connection was made.

"I thought Fuzzy would store and forward this," she said. "I haven't anything new to report. I just wanted to status you."

Ian ran a hand over his face. "I was about to download an instruction set to you folks anyway. No positive results yet?"

"Nothing worth noting, I'm afraid. Ellis and Sartori are following up the more promising trials, but even those are pretty weak."

"What's been the response to the bronchial treatments?"

Barrientos smiled briefly. "That's one bright spot. We've increased the odds a bit for the less vulnerable victims."

"Good." Ian combed through his hair with his fingers, carefully phrasing his next directive. "I'd like you to try human trials with anything promising. Particularly..." He hesitated. "Particularly with those unlikely to survive."

Dr. Barrientos shifted uncomfortably. "We'll ask for volunteers."

Ian gave her a tired smile. "Let's get this thing nailed down as soon as possible."

"Right."

As Barrientos signed off, Kry's picked up her control board, avoiding his eyes. "We'd better get back to work."

Ian moved toward her, stopping when he saw her shoulders tense. He stepped carefully around her, as if that had been his original intention. "I have to check some trials at the laserscope."

"I'll move down." Slipping past him, she switched the cables on the control board and keyboard, then settled herself in Ian's chair.

Ian fidgeted with the laserscope, wishing he could interpret what he saw in her face. She was so strong, so self-assured, yet beneath her strength lay a certain fragility, a vulnerability. The thought that he might have damaged her out of his impulsive lack of control terrified him.

He could damn well make sure it wouldn't happen again.

He reached for the power strip on the laserscope and stroked it with his thumb. "I'm sorry," he told her, keeping his eyes on the 'scope display.

"Please don't apologize," she said softly.

He heard the raw pain in her voice, knew he'd put it there. Knew he had to avoid making that mistake again. "I never should have touched you."

"Of course not," she said, her breath catching on a sob.

As he watched her swipe away tears, Ian called himself every kind of monster. "I won't touch you again," he said roughly.

With a hard slap, he powered up the laserscope and forced his attention to the display.

Fuzzy initialized the laserscope functional software and gave himself a simulated pat on his computational back. Events were executing at an excellent machine instruction rate between Kry's and Ian.

True, they were angry with each other now, even the dimmest sensor could detect that. But if his theory were correct, their anger would only increase their attraction to each other.

Responding to Ian's voice commands, Fuzzy extended the laserscope viewer to Ian's eye level. Fuzzy observed with contentment Ian's occasional glances at Kry's and her answering gaze. When Ian fumbled with the focusing system on the 'scope, Fuzzy compensated with precise adjustments to bring the image back in line.

When Ian requested side-by-side pictures of the ODS viral structure and the currently identified lookalikes, Fuzzy displayed them on his dual 'scope screens. If Ian seemed distracted, unable to zero in on matching structure segments, Fuzzy assisted him by pointing out the similarities.

Fuzzy conjectured later that he should have been more observant. So delighted was he in the growing electricity between the geneticist and the shuttle pilot, he lost track of the laserscope safety parameters.

Fuzzy's first recognized the problem when a 'scope power surge wiped a full meg of his memory – that very partition that contained the intensity limits for the 'scope's laser. When the laserscope's processing software executed merrily along, line of code by line of code, every safety check accepted infinity as the laser's intensity limit.

The malfunction that had caused the power surge in the first place augmented up the laser intensity by an order of magnitude in one second time steps. Before Ian's fogged mind could comprehend and before Fuzzy could restore the correct intensity limits to memory, the laser escaped its confinement.

Blasting from its containment in a pencil-thin beam, the laser punched a two-centimeter deep hole in Ian Llewellyn's skull.

(bm) Chapter 7

Kry's stared at the laser burst for a brief, heart-stopping moment, before shouting, "Fuzzy!" The laser cut off sharply, but Fuzzy was too late; Ian crumpled to the floor, a fingertip-sized mark scorched above his right eye.

Kry's scrambled over to Ian's prone body and brushed back the thick hair that had fallen across his forehead. Her fingers trembling, she looked away

from the neat black wound and felt for a pulse in his throat.

Nothing.

She leaned closer, feeling for his breath on her cheek, then laid her ear against his chest.

Nothing.

She swallowed back nausea and forced herself to look again at the injury. Surprisingly, it bled very little, as if the heat of the laser had cauterized as it forced its way into his skull.

"Fuzzy?" she said in a shaky voice.

Fuzzy's light panel had frozen to yellow. "Yes?"

"C-can Ian...?" She squeezed her eyes shut a moment. "H-has he ever...?" She stroked the edges of the wound, trying to wish it away. "Is this too bad to heal itself?"

Fuzzy hesitated several long seconds before answering. "I estimate the laser burned at least two cents into his brain. Are there any vital signs?"

Krys repeated her examination, touching his throat, feeling for his breath, listening for a heartbeat. She forced out an answer. "No."

Fuzzy's lights seemed to vibrate harsh yellow. "Get the MedKit." He displayed a mockup of the lab, indicating where the kit was stored. "There's a resuscitator and an oxygen injector."

Krys hurried to the proper cubby and pulled out the kit. She put the resuscitator mask over Ian's face first, pulling the tab to activate it. Then she pawed through the MedKit for the injector.

Fuzzy guided her. "It's color coded blue. You'll need it to restore oxygen to his body tissues."

She finally located the glassite injector at the bottom of the kit and held up the palm-sized cylinder to Fuzzy. "Where and how?"

"Carotid artery - his brain's the first priority. Activator's right there on the end."

Krys pressed the injector's micro-punch against Ian's throat and flicked the thumb control. The device faded from blue to transparent as the oxygen-rich compound flowed into Ian's system.

She sat back on her heels, watching his chest rise and fall with the artificial rhythm of the resuscitator. "How quick does the compound work?"

"Within minutes." Then Fuzzy added, "If he has not already suffered tissue damage."

Krys squeezed that possibility out of her mind. She laid a gentle hand on Ian's chest, its movement comforting. "Fuzzy, has he ever had to recover from anything as serious as this?"

Fuzzy's panel faded to pale yellow. "No."

She craned her neck to look directly at the computer. "But can he? You must know everything there is to know about him. Is his body capable of renewal?"

Krys watched Fuzzy's lights melt from yellow to uncertain turquoise. "I don't know."

Tears burned at her eyes then, spilling over down her cheeks. She swiped them away and watched Ian through wet, blurred eyes. The cold metaglass under her seeped into her, and she shivered.

"He needs blankets," she murmured, and rose to grab the covers from her bunk and Ian's. "Can I move him?" she asked Fuzzy.

"I would not risk it," Fuzzy answered.

She had to satisfy herself with laying the blankets over him, tucking them in around his body. Then she sat beside him, keeping in contact with him, a hand against his chest, fingertips on his brow, her lips brushing his cheek above the mask.

"Krys," Fuzzy interrupted her gently. "You can do no more for him."

"I can stay with him," she choked out. "I can do that much."

Fuzzy's panel rippled through shades of yellow. "But the ODS research

—

"To hell with the ODS research!" Rage burst inside her at Fuzzy's calm

acceptance. "Fuzzy, he could be dying!"

Speaking the words made them more terrifyingly real. She stared at the computer, wanting to beg for reassurance from him. For the first time, she registered the steady yellow on Fuzzy's light panel.

"You're scared too, aren't you?" she asked him.

"Computers cannot feel fear," Fuzzy answered, but he sounded uncertain.

"You care for him, in your own way," she persisted.

"He would want the research to continue," Fuzzy said quietly.

She understood now that the work was Fuzzy's connection to Ian, that if the research continued, so would the man. If she could truly do no more for Ian, the work would distract her as well from the constant, gnawing fear.

She drew her fingers again across his brow then rose to her feet. "How will I know when to change the oxygen on the resuscitator?"

"A warning will sound. The other packs are in the MedKit."

Krys kept her eyes on Ian as she retrieved her control board. "Should we contact Earth?"

"They could not do more than we have."

Krys nodded. "We should let them know if... if he...."

"Yes, Krys," Fuzzy said, understanding what she couldn't say. Fuzzy's panel faded into a brief, hopeful blue. "I think he will recover."

She heard in his tone a need for comfort as real as his own. "I think so too," she whispered. Then she sank into Ian's chair, and felt his scent envelop her.

They entered a tedious routine, Krys giving Fuzzy search terms, the computer processing the viral queries. Fuzzy would suck up the data like a black hole, faster than Krys's fingers could enter it. Then while Fuzzy worked the search, Krys returned to Ian, lay beside him under the blankets. When Fuzzy completed a series of requests he called quietly to Krys, and she would formulate new query sets, starting the process all over.

When the resuscitator beeped its warning, Krys pulled another oxygen pack from the MedKit and installed it. At Fuzzy's direction, she found a second oxygen injector and provided Ian with another dose. She had to open his jeans to inject it into his groin, and she performed the operation quickly, too heartsick to appreciate the sight of his beautiful body.

Again and again, her gaze returned like a magnet to the injury on his forehead. Fuzzy had told her the wound would heal from the inside out and so progress would not be immediately visible to her. But the sight of that neat black circle sickened her, made her wish she could wipe it away with her hand.

When she grew so tired her fingers garbled a query set three times in a row, Fuzzy dimmed all his displays. "Take a rest, Krys."

Numb with exhaustion, she stared at the blank screen for several seconds before Fuzzy's order registered. Letting her control board slip from nerveless fingers, she stumbled over to where Ian lay. She curled up beside him, snuggling her body against his on the metaglass floor.

She drifted in and out of sleep, losing track of time. She dreamt of him when she slept, alternating between vivid images of death and frankly sensual dreams. Each time she woke, she sat up and stared at the mark on his forehead, looking for improvement.

Sometime in that long nightmare, Krys recognized her strong sexual attraction for Ian had evolved into something different. She knew that if – when – he recovered, the sexual pull she'd put aside would return, just as powerful. But joined with that sensual awareness, a stronger feeling, a more transcendent emotion, had arisen.

She loved him. The desperation she felt for his survival sprang not from the simple human desire to preserve life. Instead, her mind and heart demanded he live because she loved him. He had to survive, because she could not imagine life without him.

How many days had she been here? She tried to count back, always difficult without the day-night divisions on Earth. When her tired mind failed to compute the hours after several tries, she finally gave up and asked

Fuzzy.

Fuzzy came up with the answer in less than a second. "Three days, sixteen hours."

How could she have fallen so hard, so fast? The sexual attraction had started things off, but it took Ian's accident and struggle to survive to jolt her into an awareness she might have otherwise have resisted.

Krys sat up, careful not to jostle Ian. She gazed down at his face, at his closed eyelids, at the fall of ebony silk across his forehead. She skimmed the circle of black above his right eye, then pressed a kiss to his cheekbone.

"Ian," she whispered, a thread of sound even Fuzzy's sensitive sensors would miss. "Ian, I love you." She kissed him again, feeling tears gather in her eyes, stream down her cheeks. "I love you."

Ian clung to a slick vertical cliff, muscles rock hard with tension. Afraid that releasing even a fingertip would send him tumbling into the abyss below, he remained frozen in that limbo. His head throbbed and he couldn't seem to take a breath. Stark silence crowded him.

He could not hear his heartbeat.

Cautiously, he raised his head to search for the top of the cliff. He didn't dare look down. But everything appeared the same dim gray – the rock his fingers clutched, the sky overhead, even the flesh on the backs of his hands. He followed the line of the cliff up, up, straining to make out any variation. But it was all the same unremitting gray.

A flash of fire.

Ian stared up, his muscles aching with the effort, trying to pick out that flare again. Nothing, then another burst reached out to him, flowed over him. Drew him, healed him.

Loved him.

He thought he felt tears warm his cheeks, yet not from his own eyes. The tears seeped from the rich red glow that brightened above him, a glow centered by white light. The white light washed over him, surrounded and protected him with its love and with gentle hands pulled him clear of the cliff top.

Immersed by the loving light, Ian embraced it, adored it, gave to it his very soul....

Ian woke with a start. He blinked his eyes against the brilliance of the lab, fighting to bring something, anything into focus. Sharp pain lanced through his head as he squeezed his eyes shut against the lab's vivid illumination.

"Dim the lights, Fuzzy. It's too much for him."

Fuzzy complied and Ian eased his eyes open in relief. Now he could lock onto Krys's face, trace its beloved lines in detail.

Beloved? Ian snapped his eyes shut again to think that one over. The cliff, the rush of light, the soothing wash of love that had stood out in crystal clarity a moment ago receded. In its place was the reality of the lab, a faint memory of a laserscope accident and a raging headache.

"Ian?"

Her soft voice tickled up his spine and the love seemed tangible again. Ian lifted his eyelids carefully, relieved at the lab's low light level. He scanned Krys's face again, this time constructing a wall as substantial as glassite against the feelings that still threatened to erupt.

Ian sat up slowly, wincing at the throb that had settled in his head. Something clung to his face; he groped at it but could not will his arms to cooperate.

She tugged the resuscitator mask from his face and curved her palm along his cheek. Her heat nearly closed his eyes again. When he forced himself to meet her gaze he was sorry he did.

She loved him.

She displayed the emotion on her face as clearly as a laserscope image.

Her brimming eyes, her naked relief at his recovery, the beautiful, soft curve of her mouth –

He didn't love her.

He cared no more for her than any of the other shuttle pilots invading his universe, no more than the few he'd allowed close enough for physical release.

He didn't love her.

Then why did he have to look away when her warm gray-green gaze reached out to him?

He tugged away from her hand. At his first attempt to rise, she reached out to help him, but he shook her assistance away.

"No," he muttered.

He struggled first to hands and knees, then clutching Fuzzy's console, he shakily gained his feet. He thought the hammering in his head would drive him to the floor again, but with deep breaths and patient concentration, he neutralized the pain to a bearable level.

"Let me help you to a chair," she said.

He wanted to refuse, but knew that was arrogant lunacy. So he gripped her arm as he took the six trembling steps to his chair. He sank into it heavily, letting exhaustion flood him.

"Ian," she said, her voice tender. She stood before him, her smile uncharacteristically timid.

He knew what was coming. He knew he had to stop her. Prevent her from revealing a feeling he didn't return, couldn't return. Mustn't return.

"Don't," he said flatly. He wanted to look away from the beginnings of hurt in her eyes, but made himself meet her gaze. "Don't say anything."

"Okay." She seemed to try to hide the hurt, masking it with concern. "But are you –"

"I'm fine," he bit out. "Or will be soon enough. If you could get me some of that protein concentrate...."

She nearly leaped to the food prep station to retrieve what he requested, only irritating him even more. Irritation was good, though. That would mask other, more dangerous, feelings.

He squeezed half the contents of the nasty-tasting protein mix into his mouth, wincing as he swallowed it. Then he sipped the rest in more moderate portions, focusing on his gathering strength. Searching for a way to destroy her burgeoning love.

And found it. The truth would quash her feelings for him. The truth would build the wall again.

He flicked his gaze to her, working out how to begin. "You asked once if I were some kind of mutant."

"Look, Ian," she began.

"Please be quiet." As he snapped out the words he saw her mouth tighten in anger. Anger would be better for her. "I want to explain it all."

He toyed with the protein pack, then tossed it toward the recycler. "How old do you think I am?"

The question startled her. "I – I have no idea. Thirty-five? Forty?"

He paused, one beat, two, then told her, "I'm one hundred and fifteen."

For a moment, the number didn't sink in, because her gaze remained steady. Then in a double-take, her eyes widened. "Years old?"

He nodded. "One hundred sixteen next month, if I were counting. Which I'm not."

She crossed her arms protectively and Ian knew this had jarred her. Just as he had hoped.

"So," she said, a nervous edge to her voice. "That's what you do up here? Longevity experiments?"

"No." He leaned back in his chair, keeping his eyes on her face. He saw uncertainty, a tinge of fear.

But still, love. Love that he had to purge from her.

Exactly what he wanted, right? He couldn't have her grieve for him with



her unrequited love. He might have lusted for her, burned for her delicious body, but that was all. He never felt anything more.

Of course he didn't.

He cut his thoughts short. "Let me tell you a story," he began.

She tightened her arms around her. "Okay."

"Please sit down." He waited until she'd curled in her chair. "No doubt you've heard of Project Gunnart?"

She couldn't have reacted more strongly if he'd fired a laser cannon at her feet. "I've heard the name."

"And built it in your mind into a horror story, no doubt." Her cheeks colored. "You were right to," Ian continued. "Gunnart was a horror, a terror I've paid for more than eighty years now."

Her hands weren't quite steady as she laced them together on the arm of her chair. She seemed to force her words out. "You created Gunnart?"

He wanted to tell her yes, because he sensed that would have accomplished his goal, set her completely against him. But he shook his head. "No. But I'm responsible for its creation."

He watched her as his words sank in, saw the play of emotions in her face - doubt... concern... love. Then he closed his eyes and let his mind drift back.

"You probably see me as arrogant now, but ninety-five years ago, I was insufferable. I'd aced all my certifications at twenty, landed a position at CGI two weeks later, and within three years I'd risen to chief scientist."

Ian squirmed in his seat remembering how cocky he'd been. "Arianna Clemens was president then. She took me under her wing, praised me outrageously. I buried myself in my work, determined to discover a cure for everything."

Ian chanced a look at Krys. She watched him steadily, her expression neutral. "And then?" she prompted.

He listened a moment to her quiet breathing and strained to catch a drift of wildflower. But the air smelled and tasted sterile.

"Then I discovered the Jenna process."

Ian scrubbed his hands across his face, remembering that day eighty-two years ago when he'd barreled past Arianna's secretary into the president's office, bursting with the news. Arianna had looked up from her vidphone screen, clearly impatient that Ian's histrionics had interrupted an important conference.

"Hold a moment, James," she said to the image on the screen before she activated the privacy lock. "What is it, Ian?"

"I'm sorry, but this couldn't wait."

A no-nonsense woman, her short dark hair gray-sprinkled, Arianna Clemens could freeze Ian with a look. "Is this about that cancer cure you've been chasing?"

Ian felt a twinge of guilt that in the past several weeks, he'd forgotten all about the cancer cure. "That's been on the back burner. This is much more important."

Arianna drummed her fingers on her desk as she contemplated her chief scientist. Ian knew she recognized his brilliance, but didn't like his occasional rash, headlong methodology. Ian squirmed under her scrutiny, feeling more like a schoolboy than a 33-year-old man.

Finally, she turned back to the vidphone. "James, could I get back to you? In about..." She glanced at Ian; he held up two fingers. "Two hours."

After she closed the phone link, she gestured Ian to the chair opposite her desk. He sat, but on the edge of the seat, too excited to relax.

"Tell me," Arianna said.

Ian sprang to his feet, pacing as he spoke. "You know I've been looking into genetic causes of cancer. How certain cells become cancerous, then replicate themselves."

Ian shoved his hands into the pockets of his white lab coat, clutching at a pen he'd shoved there earlier. He pulled out the pen, clicking it over

and over, open, shut, open, shut.

"I laid out the DNA strands side-by-side, normal and cancerous cells. I used that new AI software to search for patterns in the genetic code. I camped out in the lab while it ran, letting it execute for days at a time. If it spit out any promising codons, I reentered that data for a deeper level examination."

Ian twirled the pen in his fingers, not even noticing when it dropped to the floor. "It took me three solid weeks of processing time, but I found it, Arianna. The genetic code a cancer cell uses to duplicate itself."

Arianna brow creased, deepening the lines in her face. "You told me that in your last report. And that you were seeking a way to counteract the code."

"Well yes, but...." Ian looked down at his feet, then scooped up the pen, staring at it a moment before he continued, "I got a little sidetracked."

Arianna steepled her fingers in front of her on her desk, a sure sign she didn't like where this was leading. "Ian -"

"Just hear me out, Arianna." Ian resumed his pacing. "I isolated the genetic code not just for cancer cells, but any cell in the human body. I determined not only how to turn the replication code on and off, but how to accelerate the process as well."

"So you can halt the progress of cancer cells."

Ian flipped a hand at her impatiently. "Not yet, but that doesn't matter. Don't you see the significance of this?" Ian looked away from the flicker of anger in Arianna's dark brown eyes. "If I can accelerate cell replication, I can promote rapid healing. We might even be able to regenerate severed limbs, for God's sake!"

"How far have you taken this?" Arianna asked carefully.

Ian could see the spark of interest in her eyes now. "I've experimented with tissue samples successfully."

"Any work with living organisms?"

"No. I wanted your approval first."

"You have it." Then she wagged a finger at him. "But lower order animals only. And I want a detailed study plan before you proceed."

Ian bounced out of Arianna's office, skipping like a kid, surprising the secretary with a high five. After ten years as chief scientist, he finally had a chance at a vice-presidency. Maybe even a position on the board.

Later that day, Ian had thrown together a woefully incomplete study plan for Arianna. He had submitted a mammoth purchase request for new equipment that shocked even Arianna. Then he had plunged himself into his cell replication research.

His eyes still closed, Ian didn't realize Krys had approached him until she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

He tested his body, tightening and releasing the muscles to determine their strength. "Nearly back to normal."

"Fuzzy's still chunking away on the last set of queries I gave him while you were out. Could you do with something to eat while you tell me the rest?"

Ian rose and went with her to the food prep station. They worked together quietly, zapping their meals in the warmer, pulling out the modular table and chairs.

Ian had inhaled half his rubber meal before he realized how ravenous he'd been. He finished the food more slowly, delaying the continuation of his story.

Krys put down her fork and touched his hand where it lay on the table. "So you initiated cell replication research," she prompted.

Ian swallowed a mouthful, nodding. "Devoured is more like it. I threw myself into the study, worked day and night." He glanced down at his food. "Because I'd made a staggering discovery."

Using honeybees as a model, he had determined that his genetic level augmentation did more than regrow the bees' severed legs or wings.

He could extend their lives.

Where ordinary worker bees died after five or six weeks, his gene-tinkered insects survived twice that long. When they did die, he examined their cell structure for clues on extending their life spans even more. The trick was in the replication rate; too slow and the bees lived normal spans, too fast and cancer-like growths killed the bees.

After six months, Ian moved on to mammals. For each new species, he found the narrow setpoint at which the animals could theoretically live forever. He developed a standardized series of injections for each species, taking into account replication setpoint, body mass, and metabolic rate. He expanded his trials, adding more and more animals, until his lab looked and smelled like a zoo.

Eighteen months into the study, Ian called Arianna into his lab. She wrinkled her nose as she looked around. "I hope you're not out of money again. The board nearly rioted when you submitted your last funding request."

Ian laughed. "No, I haven't spent it all yet. I wanted to let you know I'm ready to proceed with apes."

She tugged at her ear, lips pursed. "I don't know, Ian. To be perfectly honest, I think you've been rushing your research."

"You can't be serious. I've been thorough every step of the way."

Arianna drummed her fingers on a lab table, then wiggled them at a cat that stared at her from a cage. "The animal rights activists haven't been happy with your research, either."

"They're all well-treated, you can see that." Ian waved an arm, encompassing the lab. "If I don't start with apes now, I won't be able to proceed with human testing in six months."

"What! Who said anything about human trials?"

Ian wouldn't meet her steely gaze. "I'm sure I mentioned it in my last report."

Of course he hadn't, and Arianna knew it. "What did you intend to do with all these critters when you're done?"

"Reset their clocks. Find homes for the domestic animals. Let the mice and rats live out normal spans."

"The replication reset is fail-safe?"

Ian nodded, sure of himself now. "Absolutely."

Arianna gave him a long, hard stare. "One chimp, one orang. Full reports, Dr. Llewellyn. Weekly." She slammed the lab door on her way out.

For three weeks, Ian faithfully filed his reports with Arianna. Then he got so caught up with Project Jenna that he forgot them, just as he forgot to eat and sleep.

After five months, Ian felt so confident in the progress of his research he began developing a human series of injections, determining concentrations of the various components. Within a month, he stood in his lab one lonely midnight, staring down at four fluid-filled syringes.

And pondered eternal life.

If he asked Arianna, she'd never give the okay. Yet he tired of animal trials, at experimentation that had become rote. He didn't even have to ask for a volunteer. He would simply use himself as guinea pig.

He remembered how his hand shook as he picked up the first syringe. The first injection hit his bloodstream like a cannon, poleaxing his knees. Clutching the rest of the series, he collapsed on the lab couch. With trembling hands, he injected every last bit of fluid into his body.

Krys picked up the food trays and shoved them into the recycler. "You must have been pretty darn sure the stuff wouldn't kill you."

Ian gave her a self-deprecating smile. "I had no idea. I was so convinced of my omnipotence, I just plunged ahead."

She sat down again across from him. "It obviously worked."

"But I nearly died."

His first thought as the drugs had slammed into him had been that he shouldn't have done this alone. Then as the hours passed, in the brief moments of lucidity sandwiched between numb, dreamless sleep, he tried to figure out what had gone wrong.

The animals had never reacted this way. They had taken their injections in stride, sleeping comfortably for an hour or two after the treatment. What was different about the human genetic structure which caused this violent reaction?

At one point, his vision grayed, his breathing grew shallow, and he was certain he'd overreached himself. As he slipped into black sleep, his last emotion was of grief, not for himself, but that Project Jenna would die with him.

The chimp's screaming woke him. He wondered for a moment if the lab was his private hell, punishment for aspirations of godhood. Then he realized that despite his own arrogant stupidity, he'd survived the treatment.

Giddy with relief he had danced around the lab, startling the cats and setting the dogs into a barking frenzy. As he had for the experimental animals, he took a sample of skin tissue and tested its genetic makeup. Just as it had for the animals, his replication setpoint had reached the optimum rate.

He could live forever.

After he had watched the tissue sample incision heal within minutes, he had set about restoring to normal the biological clocks on his menagerie. Once he'd tested each creature to ascertain a successful reset, he had considered his next step.

Expanding the human experiment.

Krys and Ian returned to the ODS data search, feeding search terms and queries into Fuzzy. Ian downloaded another set of instructions to the Earth-based team. Dr. Barrientos informed him the bronchial treatment had upped the survivability odds, thank God.

Ian entered everything he could think of into Fuzzy, every combination of possibilities until he felt like his synapses had fused. When Krys offered him a pack of tart synth juice, he took it from her gratefully, tipping his chair back to relax while Fuzzy did his stuff.

Krys dragged her chair close to his, near enough to touch, then settled herself comfortably. Ian eyed her warily, concerned by her ease. The fear and awkwardness she'd shown when he'd begun his story had faded. Good God, she was already used to his strangeness.

But she hadn't heard the worst of it yet – the aftermath of his arrogance. His own ties to Gunnart.

He finished his juice in one swallow. "Where was I?" he asked, although he knew.

"Something about expanding the experiment," she answered, her voice gentle.

Ian sighed. He had to tear that gentleness from her.

"I didn't have any real friends to speak of." He toyed with the empty juice pack. "Just a few colleagues at CGI that I respected, exchanged ideas with."

He leaned back in his chair, remembering those innovative, hardworking geneticists. Lawrence, Charles, Vernon. Julia Sato. Everett Freeman.

And Everett's wife Alicia.

Alicia was the only civilian among them. When Ian had made his pitch to the five scientists, Alicia had come too, steadfast at her husband's side. Ian had allowed himself one longing look at her before he shuttered his gaze.

He turned to the group seated around him on lab stools and couch. "Ladies and gentlemen, I have a proposition," Ian began. "An opportunity for you all to enter the history books."

They laughed good-naturedly at that; all were so well-known in their fields their names were sprinkled liberally in several widely used genetics texts.

"I think he's finally perfected that chimp-human cross he's been working on," Vernon said, a teasing expression on his dark face.

"Trying to raise your IQ, eh, Llewellyn?" Lawrence joked.

They all laughed again, Ian with them. He knew they respected his accomplishments as well; he took their ribbing in good humor.

But now the time had come to show them. His heart thudded as he picked up the scalpel he'd laid on the lab bench. He'd rehearsed this in his mind several times. He'd already inflicted several tiny incisions on himself to measure the healing rate, but nothing like what he intended to do.

"They say a picture is worth a thousand words." He flourished the scalpel. "Observe."

Before he could lose his nerve, he brought the blade of the scalpel down on his left pinkie, at the base. He couldn't help the wince as he sliced, in one strong stroke, through flesh and bone. He could have severed the finger, in fact had considered that. But that would have taken too long to heal for his demonstration.

The faces of the scientists mirrored surprise, shock, concern. As Ian cradled his injured hand, letting blood ooze through his fingers to the floor, Vernon and Alicia jumped to their feet. They surged toward him to offer assistance.

"Stop, please," Ian grated out. The damn thing hurt more than he'd expected. "Just sit. I've discovered this takes some concentration on my part."

Vernon and Alicia exchanged glances, then sat reluctantly. Ian closed his eyes and focused on the cut. He'd found if he pictured his blood cells rushing to the injury site, racing to heal, the process seemed to work faster. He dragged in several deep breaths as he concentrated. When he felt certain the wound had healed, he opened his eyes.

He looked at the clock. "Thirty minutes." He spoke past the lingering pain. "The more severe the injury, the longer the healing takes."

He held out his now healed hand, letting them crowd around him as he washed off the blood. They asked a hundred questions about the process, his method of inquiry, the DNA pattern that controlled the replication. As he tried to mask the weakness that still clung to him, Ian answered every question, opened his files, showed them his case histories.

Invited them all to be part of the grand experiment.

Then Alicia took him aside. "If Everett undergoes the treatment, so do I," she told him.

Terror filled him. "You can't. It's not safe."

Her eyes probed his. "Yet you'd inject it into the others."

"The others are scientists. They're willing to risk themselves to be part of a breakthrough."

"Exactly. Everett will never do this without me. And I won't let him sacrifice the opportunity."

"Alicia, please don't," he pleaded, for the first time allowing his adoration to show in his eyes.

After a brief look of amazement, her face softened, and she smiled. "I'm sorry, Ian," she'd said, then had returned to Everett's side, leaving Ian feeling the fool.

Two days later, Ian had injected them all with the Jenna treatment.

Ian felt tears burn in his eyes. Alicia, he called silently through the unremitting wall of the past, I'm sorry too. So sorry.

He leaned back in his chair so he wouldn't have to look at Krys.

"Alicia died a week later."

"From the treatment?" she asked.

Ian hesitated, then found himself hedging. "She had a heart defect we didn't know about."

She reached over to lay her fingertips against his cheek. "Then it wasn't your fault."

Her touch warmed him, and he felt a tangle of emotion inside him loosen. He knew if he looked in Krys's eyes, he'd see forgiveness there, salvation. Undeserved redemption.

He jerked back from her touch before the feeling could take hold.

"Alicia's death wasn't even the worst of it."

She dropped her hands in her lap, obviously stung by his rejection.

"Tell me," she said evenly.

"When Alicia died, and the others..." He'd sworn to himself that he'd tell her everything, all the dirty little secrets. But somehow, gazing at her, he couldn't continue. He averted his eyes from the promise in hers, and he found himself editing the truth.

"The treatment failed for the others, so I dumped everything to disk and purged it from the computer. I turned my focus back to the cancer cure and developed the KeemoGen process."

"Which has saved thousands of lives," she reminded him.

He laughed harshly, turning aside any comfort her defense might give him. "Then twenty-five years ago, someone broke into the lab and stole the disks. Took them to Gunnart Industries."

Ian shifted to face Krys. "Jenna provided the perfect bio-weapon – set the formula right and the victims would develop deadly, fast-growing cancers. Of course Gunnart never intended the accidental release of the compound."

He saw a horror in her face matching what he'd felt inside when he discovered what Gunnart had done. He squeezed his eyes shut, remembering the endless vid reports, the interminable lists of the dead.

Krys leaned close to him, her shoulder brushing his. "I understand why you feel responsible, Ian," she said softly. "But again, it wasn't your fault."

He shook his head violently. "I should have destroyed the data. If it wasn't for my damned arrogance –"

He bit back the rest of his words. "I've seen too many people die in eighty years, Krys. Colleagues, friends, lovers. I came here twenty years ago because I couldn't bear it any more – to connect with other people, then watch them die."

"Everyone dies, Ian," Krys said.

"Everyone but me," he responded. Trying to mask his sharp-edged loneliness, he continued harshly, "I hope you understand now."

"Understand what?" He heard the empathy, the caring in her voice.

"There can't be anything between us. Sex, maybe – I won't deny you've got my libido in knots. But I shut off my emotions a long time ago."

"I don't believe you."

He rose impatiently. "You just don't want to accept the truth." He faced her, pinning her with his gaze. He saw the adoration, just beneath the surface. He had to squelch it.

He backed away, putting distance between them. "You know you're not the first shuttle rat who's rubbed up against me."

Her lips tightened. "In twenty years, I would guess not."

"More than one have proved... useful over the years. You only stand out because you've been more trouble than most."

Anger tangled with hurt in her eyes. "You're only saying that to push

me away."

He forced his mouth into a lecherous grin as he drew a finger down her throat, the line of her sternum, then in a lazy circle to her breast. When the tip of her breast budded under his fingertip, his grin nearly faltered. With a vicious energy he held it tight on his face.

"Look," he said, curving his palm over her. "Why should we argue over the impossible when we could be enjoying ourselves." He scudded his other hand down her belly, skimming past the juncture of her thighs then back to her center. He cupped her there, his fingers moving restlessly against her.

She shuddered, and he nearly ripped the lapis coverall from her. But when he looked into her eyes and saw the hurt and betrayal mirrored in them, icy cold washed over him. Filled with self-loathing, his hands stilled and he pulled away from her.

"Never mind," he said, turning so she couldn't see the agony in his own face. Then he added carelessly, "I like my women taller anyway."

He tried to pretend he couldn't hear the sob catch in her throat. He tried to persuade himself that what he'd done was for her own good. But he couldn't help but wish he could crawl into some hole on Thea and hide from the pain he'd created in her.

"Ian," she said, her voice trembling.

He looked back at her over his shoulder, ashamed to face her fully.

"Yeah?"

She tipped her chin up and blinked away the glimmer of tears. "I love you." She flung up a hand to forestall his objection. "And I think you could love me. But you're too damned busy punishing yourself to find out."

Her words thudded like a stone in his chest. He tried to force a flip response, some lie about how her love meant nothing to him.

But then Fuzzy broke in with another urgent message from Robert. After that, all hell broke loose.

Krys turned away when the CGI president appeared on the comm, still hurting. The first words out of Robert's mouth jerked her back to face the screen.

"Lunar Base has been infected."

Sick fear filled Krys, settling like a leaden weight in her stomach. Her father was at Lunar Base. She covered her mouth with her hand to hold back a whimper. Mesmerized by horror, she stared at the screen.

Ian swung into his chair. "How many cases so far?"

Robert flicked a glance off-screen, then back to Ian. "Several dozen affected at least."

"How wide spread?" Ian asked Robert.

"It's limited to Sector 6A."

"Ian," Krys said, pushing the word past a too-dry throat. "My dad's at Lunar Base."

"Where?"

"His living space is in 12Q. But he works in Hydroponics, in Sector 6B."

He gave her a long look, mixed parts sympathy and careful distancing. "I'm sure he's fine." She ignored the sympathy and backed away, adding physical space to the emotional chasm.

Ian turned back to Robert. "Any word yet on how the infection started?"

Robert's mouth tightened into a grim smile. "A canister loaded with ODS - hidden an air-recirc duct."

Something about that bit of news made Krys uneasy. A vague suspicion formed in the back of her mind, a thought she pushed away as soon as it bubbled up.

"Are the sick isolated?" Ian asked.

Robert nodded. "We've closed off Sectors 5A through 6T."

"Did you flush the ducts?"

Robert stiffened as a hand gripped his shoulder. "We used chloyanine." Krys heard shouts, the sound of scuffling feet behind Robert. Dread tickled up her spine.

"What the hell's going on there?" Ian asked.

"We have another problem, Ian --" Robert managed before hands jerked him from his chair. Another face thrust into the comm display.

Krys's involuntary gasp brought Ian's attention briefly to her before his focus returned to the comm. He didn't see her shut her eyes in an attempt to deny the confirmation of her suspicions.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Leonard Hayden. I represent the Supporters of Ethics in Science. We've taken control of CGI headquarters." His Adam's apple bobbed twice before he continued. "We are responsible for the infection of Lunar Base."

"Oh my God," Krys said softly before she could stop herself.

Ian glanced at her again, then back to Leonard. Krys's entire awareness narrowed on the comm screen, picking out every detail. Leonard scooping his hair back from his forehead, trembling as if palsied. Robert Ishimoto in the background, restrained by unseen hands.

Terrorist hands. They'd become terrorists, all of the Sixers. Herself as well, by association. My God, they'd infected Lunar Base!

Ian sat ramrod straight in his chair, every line of his body marked with tension. "What is it you want, Leonard?" he asked quietly.

Leonard fumbled for a databoard on the desk before him. He bent his head to read from the display on the thin black rectangle. Krys missed his first few words before Fuzzy boosted his faint voice.

"... Ethics in Science demand the following: First, the cessation of all genetic experimentation by the Chemical Genetics Institute..."

Ian's knuckles whitened as he gripped his chair. Yet he kept his tone even. "That may not be possible, Leonard."

Leonard kept his attention on the databoard. "...second, immediate termination of all work performed on Thea Station..."

"I'm afraid I can't agree to that," Ian interjected, his voice calm and reasonable. "The ODS vaccine --"

Leonard ignored him, continuing with more conviction, "...third, full staffing of that station, with study consisting only of conventional medical approaches."

Ian rose with sinuous grace, his every move tightly controlled. "Could I speak to Mr. Ishimoto please?"

Leonard glanced behind him at Robert, then turned back to Ian. "Dr. Llewellyn, we know that CGI designed and developed the ODS virus --"

"That's preposterous!"

"-- as a bio-weapon, in direct violation of World Council laws."

"ODS is a natural mutation!" Tightly leashed tension rippled across Ian's shoulders. "Let me speak to Robert."

"That isn't possible."

"Why the hell not?"

Leonard began scanning Thea's lab. "Because Mr. Ishimoto is preparing a statement announcing his immediate resignation as president."

"The hell he is!"

With a shock, Krys realized what Leonard was looking for and she scrambled out of view. "The entire CGI board must resign," Leonard continued, his eyes searching, searching, "as a first step toward reparation of CGI's monstrous act. A shuttle is en route to Thea to confirm your compliance."

Krys trembled, trying to wish herself invisible. Oblivious, Ian kept his focus on Leonard. "You have no right to demand our resignations."

"Not only do we have the right, Dr. Llewellyn, we have the means." Leonard's gaze seemed to zero in on her although he still couldn't see her. "Krys!"

She froze. She glanced at Ian and saw him watching her. Her heart pounded in her ears, and she could barely breathe past the knot in her chest.



"Now's the time, Krys!" Leonard shouted with a ridiculously dramatic wave of the arm. "We have the safety code to deactivate the AIFLE."

He rattled off a string of letters and digits, none of which Krys absorbed in her numb brain. From the thunderstruck expression on Ian's face, she understood the code Leonard delivered to her was correct.

When she remained stock still, Leonard urged her, "It has to be entered from Thea. Use Llewellyn's keyboard."

She shook her head, palms up as if to ward off Leonard's demand. "I won't do it."

Krys!" he pleaded. "We need you now! Once the AIFLE's down, we can clear out Llewellyn's databases from here."

The look Ian cast at her chilled her to the core. "You're one of them." Shivering, she raised her chin. "Yes."

They heard another voice from the comm, barely audible. "Leonard! I tracked down the Earth-based databases. I think I can wipe them if I --"

With a sizzle of static, the comm cut out, the screen blinking into gray. Ian grabbed up his keyboard, slammed it on Fuzzy's console and ran his fingers over the keys.

He looked at her, a hard light glittering in his eyes. "I hope you realize your little Sixer scheme could wipe out the entire population of Lunar Base."

She swallowed back nausea. "I didn't know," she moaned, trying not to think about the peril her father could be in. "They didn't tell me their plans. I thought I was sent here to...." She couldn't continue, frightened by the harsh look in his eyes.

"Sent here to what?" He closed the distance between them with two long strides. "Distract me? Lure me with your sexual charms?" He spat out the last derisively.

Krys reeled from his words as if they were a physical blow. "Spy on you, that's all." Tears brimmed in her eyes and she dashed them away with trembling fingers. "The rest just... happened."

She could see disbelief written across his face, the sense of betrayal. "Ian," she forced out. "I renounce them. I won't be part of SEIS anymore -- I can't be." She reached for him, tried to touch his arm, but he recoiled from her.

His gaze locked with hers and she tried to find a tenderness, forgiveness. "Too late, Krys," he said harshly, then turned back to the computer. "Fuzzy, reestablish the comm."

At first Fuzzy was silent, and Krys wondered with creeping horror whether the Sixers had managed to kill the computer from Earth. But then she caught the sparkle of Fuzzy's light panel and realized with relief that the computer still functioned.

"No can do, Ian," Fuzzy said finally. "My guess is the communications software was damaged when the Sixers attempted to clear the database."

"Damn! Give me another Earth connection, then. Anybody on the CGI board."

Fuzzy went down the list, but each attempted contact came up empty. "They all appear to be unavailable."

"Then try public security for that sector. They sure as hell must know something's going on at CGI."

Fuzzy accessed the appropriate address and a beefy security captain appeared on the comm screen. He blinked in surprise when he saw who was contacting him.

Ian said without preamble, "SEIS operatives have overwhelmed CGI headquarters. We need to re-establish a comm connection immediately."

The security captain leaned into the screen. "We're aware of the Sixer insurrection, Dr. Llewellyn. However, at the present time, we are unable to secure that facility."

"Why the hell not?"

The captain shifted uncomfortably. "We have a small riot in that

sector, cutting off Security from CGI headquarters. Comm is disabled into and out of the building."

Ian surged closer to the comm transmitter, fierce and menacing. Krys shivered, glad she wasn't the recipient of his ire. "Listen, Captain... Sheldon," Ian read off the man's ID tag. "There's a damn epidemic going on and if we can't communicate with CGI, a hell of a lot of people will die."

Sheldon wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. "You must understand, we're doing the best --"

"You damn well better do better than your best or I'll hold you personally responsible."

Before the man could reply, Ian slapped off the comm, then snarled at Fuzzy, "Any chance the Earth research data's intact?"

Fuzzy did not seem to take offense. "An excellent chance, considering their lack of skill with computers." His light panel glowed a disdainful white.

"I want you to keep trying the comm. Poll every minute or so. CGI security's bound to regain control and reestablish communications."

Hands clenched together, Krys took a tentative step closer to the computer's console. "Fuzzy." She could feel Ian's dark gaze on her, but she ignored him. "Can you link with Lunar Base?"

Fuzzy paused. "I can set up a relay with Earth's comm satellites."

She chanced a look at Ian and he gave her a hard stare. Then he nodded approval. "Do it. They ought to at least know what's going on."

Ian began tapping into his keyboard as he stood at the console. "We have to see how much of the Earth-based data we have downloaded here." He flicked a glance at Krys, his face filled with disdain. "I'm going to have to trust you. But you do anything to sabotage my work and you'll damn well regret it."

She knew she deserved that, but his distrust was still an agony for her. "Just tell me what you want me to do."

He turned back to his keyboard. "First determine how many of your last set of queries completed."

Krys pulled her control board into her lap as she sat. Her fingers skimmed the pressure strips on the board, running through her requests until she reached a dead end.

She paged through the results screen. "I've probably lost a good two hours of work. I was in the middle of a download when they cut the comm."

Ian nodded grimly. "Me too. We'll have to continue with the data resident in Fuzzy. We won't have access to the CGI databases until the comm is re-established. Fuzzy, how's the satellite link coming?"

Before Fuzzy could answer, his light panel faded into a cautious yellow green. "Incoming shuttle."

Ian turned to Krys, accusing her. "Can you identify it?" Ian asked Fuzzy.

"It's the Freedom. An independent."

Ian scowled at Krys. "One of your friends?"

"I have no idea."

He obviously didn't believe her. He said to Fuzzy, "Can you raise the pilot?"

Fuzzy paused, then replied, "No response. Channel's open but no one's --" Fuzzy's lights flared acid yellow. "He's in trouble!"

Krys clutched her control board. "Can you feed him nav data?"

"Shuttle's onboard computer doesn't recognize my packet format."

"Try this pattern." Krys's fingers raced across the board. "What's his velocity?"

"He's coming in too fast," Fuzzy told her. "He's out of control, trying nav data again -- Too late! He's going to crash!"

Even before Fuzzy finished his words, they felt the dome shudder from the shuttle's impact on Thea. Ian snatched up the MedKit and ran to the airlock, Krys on his heels.

"Can you detect a cockpit fire?" Ian asked Fuzzy as he pulled up his lifesuit.

"No discernible rise in temperature. Hull seems to be intact."

As soon as they'd snapped helmets in place, Ian slammed the airlock controls. When decompression completed he opened the outer door and they hurried out.

The Freedom had come to rest beyond the Pegasus, in fact had narrowly missed colliding with it. A long scrape in Thea's dust started not twenty meters from the nose of Krys's shuttle and ended at the rear of the Freedom.

Their pace crossing Thea's low-gravity surface seemed agonizingly slow, but they finally reached the crashed vehicle. They could see the still-suited pilot slumped in his chair through the viewscreen.

Handing Krys the MedKit, Ian jerked at the cockpit door controls, but the latch wouldn't give. He tugged harder, wedging his feet against the shuttle exterior, but couldn't budge it.

Krys put a hand out to stop him. "It's jammed - this model always jams. We have to go in through the bay."

They moved down to the bay door; this time the latch released easily. Krys shut the door behind them.

"The cockpit's got air," she said. "There's no way of knowing if that pilot could stand a decompression. We'd better recompress in here and check him first."

Ian nodded his agreement. Krys activated the controls, then followed Ian's line of vision to the corner of the bay. A canister lay there on its side.

Ian crossed the bay chamber to look more closely. "Looks like the Sixers' intention was not just to confirm compliance."

He stooped to examine the canister. "It's intact," he said finally. "If there's anything inside, it can't have contaminated this space."

The recompression cycle beeped its completion and Krys punched the cockpit door controls. The door shuddered on its track, stopping with a grinding scrape only part way open. Ian squeezed into the small space and tried to shove the door the rest of the way. His helmet bumped the doorjamb.

He raised his hands to the helmet clips. "How's the air?"

Krys checked the gauge. "Reads normal. As long as you're sure there's no infection risk."

"If he's been storing the canisters in the bay, shouldn't be a problem."

Ian unsnapped the helmet and swung it to the bay floor. After a moment's hesitation, Krys did the same. Crowding together, feet wedged against the jamb, they slid the protesting door open. Inside the cockpit, the pilot sagged against his restraints, arms dangling, head lolling forward.

With an experienced eye, Krys quickly scanned the cockpit to determine what might have caused the pilot's injury. Despite the hard landing, the cockpit was intact and the pilot still safely confined in his restraints. A few small pieces of equipment had jarred loose, but nothing large enough to have knocked him unconscious.

Her confusion lasted only a handful of seconds, then the answer hit her like a fuel explosion. "Wait!" she shouted at Ian as he released the pilot's helmet clips.

He turned to look at her and lifted the headgear from the pilot's head in the same moment. At the look of horror on her face, he turned back to the pilot and the helmet fell from his hands. As the pilot's headgear bounced slowly across the cockpit floor, Krys and Ian stared at death.

The pilot had ODS.

His cheeks had sunk to an inhuman mask, his glazed eyes were mere slits

in his face. His flesh had shriveled and darkened, the stench of decay already rising from it. The ragged rattle of his breathing sent a chill up Kry's spine and she began to tremble uncontrollably.

The look in Ian's eyes horrified her even more. "I've killed you," he rasped out.

"Not —" She swallowed twice, her throat bone-dry. "Not necessarily."

"I told you it was safe. How could I have been so stupid?"

Kry's tried to pull her eyes away from the suffering pilot. "There was no way you could have known."

"It should have been common sense. If the idiot toted around canisters of ODS, he risked infecting himself."

Finally, Kry's could look at Ian. "What about you? You're at risk as much as me."

Ian shook his head in denial. "I'll survive," he said bitterly. "I always survive."

Their gazes locked and Kry's tried to ignore the terror that clutched at her, to keep it from showing in her eyes. Horror lapped at her throat, rose to consume her. She focused on Ian's face, at the pain there, until his misery crowded out the fear in her heart. She had to comfort him somehow, assuage his guilt. She forced herself to calm.

"Can we do anything for him?" she asked evenly.

Ian turned back to the pilot. The eyelids had shut and now his breaths were spaced several seconds apart.

"He's in the last stages. The best we could do is ease his pain."

"Is there anything in the MedKit?"

"A nerve blocker. It would probably kill him."

He stared at her a moment, then down at her hands. "I know this sounds ludicrous, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. I've caused too many deaths already."

And saved thousands, Kry's thought, but kept it to herself. Instead, she retrieved the kit from the bay and rummaged through it for the proper injector. She didn't relish killing the pilot herself, but how could she let him suffer?

The pitiful creature in the pilot's chair saved them both from the agonizing decision. Just as Kry's laid her hand on the injector full of nerve blocker, the pilot scraped one last breath into his shriveled lungs. Ian and Kry's waited, perfectly still, for the next breath, but only silence pounded their ears.

Ian gently pressed against the side of the pilot's neck. "He's gone."

Kry's couldn't help the tears that burned her eyes. "What should we do with his body?"

Ian gazed out at Thea beyond the viewscreen. "Leave him here. Decompress the shuttle again to preserve the body. That should destroy any remaining virus."

Kry's nodded. Now that the pilot was dead, Thea's vacuum couldn't hurt him any more.

They returned to the bay and Kry's scooped up her helmet. She let it dangle from her fingers. "What about us?"

He must have thought she meant something more personal, because his eyes blazed with emotion. Anger? Passion? Then emotion dulled to bleakness as he understood her question.

"We haven't much choice but to carry the contagion back with us to the dome. I'll have to ride out the illness. You —"

"Looks like we'll just have to work harder for a cure," she said brightly, hiding her own fear.

He nodded, grim-faced, then swung his helmet onto his head. After Kry's had settled hers into place, she hit the decompression controls and waited for the cycle to complete before opening the bay door. As they crossed Thea's dusty surface, heading for the dome, Kry's tongue felt frozen in her mouth, her mind too crowded with a single image to speak.

The picture of the Freedom's pilot, strapped to his chair. Alone in his airless tomb.

Deep in a private memory partition, Fuzzy paced anxiously. From the moment Ian and Kryz re-entered the dome and notified him of the infection, Fuzzy's processing had whirled in an endless programming loop.

Kryz and Ian had been infected.

The virus coursed through their blood like bits down a logic pathway. Kryz and Ian would become ill. Ian would certainly recover – Fuzzy had no doubt after the 'scope accident. But Kryz – Fuzzy's heuristic reasoning froze in computerized anguish – Kryz would die.

Kryz and Ian had been infected....

Fuzzy cut the cycle short with a clear-memory operation. Loops would get him nowhere. He had to quadruple his efforts to find a correlation Ian could use to defeat ODS. He would perform background database searches while executing Ian's requests in the foreground. He would find a solution if it were the last machine instruction he performed.

Kryz and Ian had been infected....

The first symptom Kryz noticed was the sweat beading Ian's brow. That and the fact he was an even bigger pain in the rear than usual.

"Damn it all, Fuzzy! Where the hell are my results?"

Kryz jumped at Ian's first expletive, her control board nearly slithering from her lap. She caught it by its cable before it could hit the metaglass floor.

When she slanted a look at him, she saw the sweat. Involuntarily, her hand rose to run her fingertips over her own forehead. She felt the faintest trace of moisture and dropped her trembling hand in her lap.

She blocked her fear ruthlessly and returned to her work. Without enthusiasm, she stroked the control board, entering the next set of queries. She felt like a comet endlessly chasing its tail, so little progress had she made.

"I displayed the results for you a moment ago, Ian," Fuzzy said. "You cleared the screen."

Kryz hid a grim smile at Fuzzy's affronted tone. Now Ian had managed to insult even his computer. She might have laughed if it weren't for the specter of ODS hanging over her own shoulder.

She tried not to think about the desperation in the medic's face when they'd finally contacted Lunar Base. Kryz could see the medic's pleading expression when she'd asked about progress on a cure.

Ian had looked away for a moment before he answered. "Still pursuing every avenue. Are you disinfecting with chloyanine?"

The medic nodded, lips pressed tightly together. "We've got the infected sectors locked up tight. But we don't know if we had any crossover infection in the recirc ducts."

When Kryz asked about her father, the medic had checked her records. "Frederick Kryzynowski? Not one of my patients. Could be in another sector, though."

So Kryz had had to be satisfied with that. No news is good news, she thought. Still, she couldn't help but feel the anxiety gnaw away at her as she sent another request to Fuzzy.

While Fuzzy crunched away, she swivelled her chair toward Ian. "How are you feeling?"

His hands shook noticeably as he set aside his keyboard. "Lousy. Sick to my stomach, feverish, achy, irritable."

"I would have never guessed the last," she said wryly.

He glared at her a moment, then his face softened. "I'm afraid it's going to get worse so I'll apologize in advance." His gaze swept across her

face. "How are you?"

"Fine," she lied as she swallowed past a scratchiness in her throat. He raised a brow at her. "Really," she continued. "I feel perfectly normal."

He ran a hand across his brow, wiping away the sweat. "We were both exposed at the same time." He eyed her. "We should exhibit symptoms at about the same time."

Her arms felt suddenly weak and an ache settled across her shoulders. "When did you start feeling bad?"

He rubbed his eyes, every movement sluggish. "At least an hour ago."

Krys rolled her shoulders, trying to relieve the discomfort. "Maybe it's your regenerative ability. Maybe it's caused the infection to take hold quicker."

He considered that, then shook his head. "So far my symptoms timeline has followed that of nearly every case I've studied."

She couldn't hide the sudden shiver she knew must be the first sign of fever. Ian, his head turned, missed it. "Then maybe I'm immune," she told him brightly, holding herself stiffly against her chills.

Ian seemed to clutch at that hope, the flare of it wild in his eyes. Then despair seemed to crowd it out. "Out of thousands of known exposures, no one – no one – escaped infection. That's why finding a cure has been so damned difficult."

"But isn't it possible –"

"No!" He shoved himself out of his chair and began to pace. "Look, we were only exposed six hours ago."

"Seven hours," Fuzzy offered.

"Seven hours," Ian snarled back. "It has taken up to ten hours after exposure for the eruption of symptoms."

Krys felt the fear overwhelm her, raking at her throat, sharpening the pain there. She stared at Ian a long time, then said softly, "I didn't know."

He gazed out at desolate Thea, hands clenched against his feverish shivering. "Didn't know what?"

"What Leonard planned to do. That he'd sent a pilot on a suicide mission to infect Lunar Base." She paused, riveted on his hard profile, wishing she could magically make him believe her. "Didn't know he'd planned for me to kill Fuzzy."

The corner of his mouth tucked into a smile. "You couldn't kill Fuzzy."

"Disable him then. Maybe damage him. I would never have come here if I'd known what they intended to do."

When he still didn't look at her, she asked, "Do you believe me?"

Her heartbeat seemed to hesitate as she waited for his answer. "Yes," he said finally, turning to her. "God help me, I do believe you."

Her eyes filled with relieved tears and she scrubbed them away. "Thank you," she whispered. Then a chill slammed into her, and she couldn't hold back the shudder.

He crossed the lab in three strides, moving to her side. Sinking to one knee by her chair, he touched the back of his hand to her forehead, then her cheek. "Damn! I can't feel your temperature – I'm burning up myself. How long have you been feeling symptoms?"

She held his hand to her cheek. "Not long – thirty minutes or so." She couldn't help the trembling in her voice. "I'm scared Ian. I don't want to die."

He took her hands in his, gripping them tightly. "I won't let you."

Despite her own fever, she felt the fire burning beneath his skin, stoked by the virus that infiltrated his body. She bent her head close to his and whispered, "We'll find a cure."

A tremor ran through his body. He pulled his head back and fixed his fever-bright eyes on hers. He seemed about to say something more, and she held her breath in anticipation. But then he rose, fumbling for his chair as he backed away.

"Damn fever's got me muddled," he muttered as he lowered himself in his

chair. He turned to her. "I want to know every symptom. What besides chills?"

She took stock. "Fever. Weakness. Ringing in my ears." He nodded at her description. Then she added, "And sore throat."

He looked at her sharply. "Actually sore? Not just a tightness?"

She swallowed to test the sensation and grimaced at the sharp lance of pain. "It's definitely sore."

His brow creased. "No one's reported that before. Any trouble breathing?"

She pulled in a long breath. The cool air dragged across her sore throat, but she breathed easily. "Not yet." She hesitated, battling to get her fear under control. "That's what they die from, isn't it?"

He hesitated, as if he searched for a way to spare her. "Yes. The bronchial condition... suffocates them."

She couldn't help the whimper that escaped her. Without conscious thought, she slid from her chair. Before she'd gone two paces, Ian caught her up in his arms, enfolding her in his warmth.

A sob caught in her throat as she struggled to speak. "I'm a shuttle rat. Anything can happen in space -- fuel explosion, bump point miscalculation. But suffocation -- God, Ian -- I can't bear it."

He murmured soothing sounds as he stroked her back, holding her close. After a long while, the sharp images of atrophied lungs and struggles for breath faded. But she kept her hold on Ian for a time after that, absorbing his strength, willing her love for him into his heart.

Two hours later, Kry's couldn't contain her shivering, couldn't work at her control board without fumbling the commands. Ian's rattling, rasping breath held her spellbound in fear and she couldn't help the tears that streamed down her fever-hot face.

Ian dropped his keyboard on the floor with a clatter and slumped in his chair. "Breathing?" he gasped out.

Trembling, Kry's pulled in a long breath. "The same. Still okay."

Ian nodded and struggled from his chair. He took faltering steps toward her, extending his hand to close the distance. "Come," he whispered. When she didn't move, he said again, "Come."

Letting the control board slide to the floor, she took his hand, relying on his strength to pull her to her feet. He scooped her close to him, supporting her as they walked to his quarters.

"We need sleep," he murmured, setting her on his bunk. "Me, to heal. You, to... well it wouldn't hurt you either."

He slipped his fingers into the coverall's fastening at her throat and loosened it. He tugged off her mag-boots and tipped her gently back onto the bunk.

She watched him pull off his T-shirt and boots. As he stretched out beside her, she asked, "How long?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her question. He traced the line of her cheek as he answered, "Any time. Surprised -- resisted this long." He curled a lock of her hair around his finger and tried to smile. "Stubborn."

She flattened her hand against the fever-seared muscles of his back. "What will it feel like?"

He closed his eyes and she let hers drift shut too. "First," he rasped, "like air's too thick. Then, lungs too tired."

A thread of grief tangled in his voice and she wanted to open her eyes, to see what emotion lay on his face. But the effort seemed too great. Sleep was imperative, irresistible. She tried to fight against the slide into blackness, but her body seemed impossibly heavy. Ian's warmth, his nearness, soothed her into final surrender.

Kry's startled awake from a nightmare of shuttle explosions and

life-support failures. She took in a reflexive breath, tensing against the gasping struggle for air she was certain she'd feel.

She breathed freely. She took in another lungful to be sure. Each sweet, exultant breath moved easily into her lungs. What was more, she actually felt better. Although she was still weak, as if her body was tired from fighting infection, she felt distinctly on the road to recovery.

Exuberant, she shifted away from Ian and placed a hand on his arm to wake him. Her palm skimmed across sweat-slicked skin, and she realized his fever must be breaking. His restlessness must have woken her; he'd already tossed aside the covers.

She wouldn't wake him after all, he needed to sleep out his fever. Pulling a towel from a cubby in his quarters, she drew it down his arm, across his chest. His face relaxed into a faint smile as she dried him, and she thought he might wake. But he remained deeply asleep.

When she began to wipe the sweat from his face, he grabbed at her wrist and she thought he'd pull her hand away. But he clutched her slender wrist, holding her hand close to his cheek. He turned to press his lips into her palm.

"Love you," he said, the words a soft whisper against her skin.

Her heart clunked in her chest. "What?"

"Love you," he repeated, more loudly. "Want you. Forever."

Joy welled inside her, spilling over. "Ian, I love you too."

"Love you," he muttered again. "Alicia!"

Her elation froze, hard and cold. Tears burned in her eyes, tightening her still-sore throat. His words of love were not for her, but for the long-dead Alicia. He dreamed of the other woman, and in his delirium, his dimly-remembered devotion transferred itself to Krys. With every ounce of her soul, she wished she were the true object of his love. But the part of Ian that might have cared for her had died with Alicia.

He turned over to his other side, taking her hand with him, pulling her awkwardly over his body. He snuggled against her palm, bringing his other arm around her to hold her close. Krys lay there against him, her arm stretched across his hot skin, palm pressed against the sleek planes of his bare chest. An ache settled around her heart, squeezing painfully like a cruel, careless hand.

"Alicia," he muttered again, and tears spilled from Krys's eyes, trickled down his chest where she'd just dried him. She fumbled for the cloth, unable to hold back a sob. The sound, the feel of her tears, must have reached inside his fever-dreams, because he stirred and released her. He rolled onto his back, and in the dim light seeping through the open door from the lab, she saw his eyes open.

Love had followed him from his dream, still blazed in his eyes. But not for her. God, not for her. Then that illusory emotion faded and simple concern took its place.

She turned aside briefly to dash away her tears. When she thought she could speak, she faced him again. "Ian," she said brightly, "I can still breathe."

His brow creased as he puzzled over her words. "That's not possible." He pulled in a long, slow breath. "How long have we been asleep?"

She glanced up at the chronometer in his quarters. "Five... no, six hours. I'm breathing fine, Ian. And I'm feeling better."

He rose laboriously and reached out to cup her cheek. "No fever." He leaned close, laying his ear against her chest. "Breathe," he demanded.

She gasped at the sharp image of his mouth closing on her suddenly tight nipples, then forced herself to take in a strong, steady breath. She waited for him to pull away, willing herself to keep her hands from guiding him to her breast.

"Again," he said, nestling his cheek closer. She obeyed, each breath an agony unrelated to illness.

Her shoulders sagged in relief when he finally pulled away. She sprang



from the bunk and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well?"

He stared at her, thoughtful. "Your lungs sound clear. Your fever's gone. You're only a little flushed."

Krys knew what had caused the wash of rose across her cheeks, but she held her tongue as he continued, "If the dome weren't virus-free, I'd wonder if you'd caught some other bug. But no..." He shook his head. "That would mean you're immune to ODS anyway..."

Excitement exploded in his face in an unexpected, rakish grin. "That's it!" he cried.

His brilliant smile burst inside her and she felt as if she could leap to the nearest bump point without her shuttle. Her mouth curved broadly in response. "What's it?"

"You're the key, you must be! Fuzzy, we need a full medical on Krys. Complete genetic work-up – blood, tissue samples."

He swung his feet to the floor and took three paces into the lab before his knees buckled, his body protesting the sudden movement. Krys grabbed him, grunting as she took his weight. "What the heck do you think you're doing? You're still sick."

He shook his head, his eyes showing the strain as he dragged in a lungful of air. "Sorry... you're right. I'll take it slow. Help me to my chair."

They crossed the lab, Krys setting her lips against her own weakness, relieved to let him slide into his chair. Suddenly the sense of what he'd said dawned on her. Medical history. Genetic work-up. Tissue samples.

Just need a little sample, sweetie, the doctor had said.

"Tissue samples?" she asked, trying to keep the trembling from her voice.

Ian, unaware of her discomfort, rattled out commands on his keyboard. "Don't need much." He gestured to the device positioned near the laserscope. "We can take a sample from your finger."

Krys's gaze fixed on the device that had so terrified her that first day. Now the slender silvery barrel of the thing took on a sinister aspect. "My finger?" she quavered.

He nodded absently. "Fuzzy, will tell you what to do."

Fuzzy's light panel flickered through a range of blues. "Please insert your index finger into the small silver cylinder."

She took a half-dozen faltering steps to the machine. "I have to put my finger in there?" she squeaked.

"Unless you'd prefer to use the larger extractor," Fuzzy said. "But it would take a larger sample which might be a bit painful –"

"That's okay! I'll just use..." She edged up to the device, fear closing her throat. You're being ridiculous, she scolded herself. Ian wouldn't hurt you. Yet she couldn't shake those old memories, the horrifying buzz, the acrid burnt smell.

She squeezed her eyes shut and slipped her trembling right index finger into the barrel. Swallowing hard, she asked, "Will it hurt?"

"Done," Fuzzy answered.

She snatched her finger back in surprise. "What?"

"I've extracted the sample. Blood and tissue both."

"But..." Cradling her finger in her left hand, she studied it. A tiny circle of pink stained her fingertip. If she focused very hard, she could feel a tingling. "Oh," she said, feeling foolish, but at the same time, very relieved.

Ian fingered another command sequence into his keyboard. "Fuzzy, display the med history checklist for Krys."

Fuzzy's panel glowed innocent blue. "Shall I add this data to her QuickCheck?"

Krys's head bobbed up in surprise. "What QuickCheck?" She turned to Ian. "You QuickChecked me?"

Ian had the grace to blush. "When you first arrived," he admitted.

Fuzzy's panel shimmered a blithe blue. "He even requested special handling for your QuickCheck image."

Krys felt chagrin as she remembered the image she'd scanned into the identity database. It'd been after a two-day shuttle run on little sleep; her hair had been untamable and her eyes half-lidded from exhaustion.

"I'm surprised you let me stay after seeing that picture," she said to Ian.

He slanted her an odd look, black fire smoldering in his eyes. "I told Fuzzy to purge it."

A twinge of hurt tightened around her heart. "It was pretty hideous."

Ian shook his head, the fire burning brighter. "Hideous is not the word I would use to describe you."

She flushed with heat as his gaze grew as palpable as a touch. Her coverall suddenly seemed too constricting, and she gripped her hands into fists to keep from loosening the fastening at her throat.

Then a jag of coughing shook Ian, breaking the moment. She hurried to the food station for a drink of water, handing it to him. As he took the cup, he scraped in a breath, annoyance at the discomfort written across his face.

"Take a look at the med history checklist," he rasped out as he sipped the water.

She sidled closer to Fuzzy's display and blindly stared at the list on the screen. She tried to close out Ian's nearness, the electricity that snaked between them.

Finally her brain switched back on and the nonsense on the touch sensitive screen coalesced into something she could read. She tapped the display to select each illness and vaccination she could remember.

She turned back to Ian. "That's about it. Anything jump out at you?"

Ian drew a hand over his face, as if trying to wipe away tiredness. "Nothing out of the ordinary. You haven't left anything out? Something that might not be in the list?"

She moved along Fuzzy's console, trailing her hand on its surface. "Not that I can..." A thought, a wisp of an idea, crouched in the back of her mind. She focused on it and in a burst, the memory came forward.

She whirled to face Ian. "Stein's measles!"

Ian shook his head firmly. "That wouldn't matter. Stein's antibodies don't survive in the body more than twelve, fifteen years tops. And since you would have contracted it as a baby -"

"But I didn't. I caught it when I was fourteen. My father and I both came down with it."

Ian looked dubious. "I couldn't have been Stein's. Stein's can't take hold in a mature immune system."

"My dad and I both have a genetic misfire that made us susceptible. In fact if it hadn't been for Stein's -" Suddenly, remembered grief swamped her and tangled with the words in her throat.

Unexpected tenderness in Ian's eyes nearly released the tears she fought to keep in check. "What is it?" he prompted gently.

Krys rubbed at her eyes, determined not to cry over the old pain. "Dad and I had planned to go with Mom on her last trip. Then when we both came down with Stein's."

He reached out to take her hand, rubbing his thumb along the back of it. Krys closed both her hands around his, gripping him like a lifeline.

"I still run it around in my head," she said, voice husky with suppressed tears. "If I'd gone with her, helped her in that emergency landing - I was a pretty darn good pilot, even then."

"You all might have died." He squeezed her hand. "Then I would have missed the opportunity to meet the most -"

"Exasperating?" she suggested. "Annoying?"

Ian's eyes burned into hers. "The most sexy woman I've ever known."

Heat flared up Krys's arms, warmed her breasts into tight nubs, became a flashpoint of wildfire between her legs. She tugged away gratefully when

Fuzzy's voice intruded.

"Ian, I have no record on Stein's." Fuzzy's light panel roiled through a rainbow of colors as he searched his database.

Ian rubbed his palms on his long thighs, captivating Kry's attention again. "You've got to, Fuzzy. It's a fairly common childhood ailment."

"I have searched all the childhood... wait, here's something." Fuzzy paused again. "Yes!" Fuzzy finally said, his panel blue in triumph. "Stein's measles."

"Check Kry's blood and tissue sample for antibodies," Ian told Fuzzy. "And I want to know how Stein's compares to the ODS virus."

Kry's gripped her hands together in suppressed excitement. "Why didn't we look at Stein's before?"

Fuzzy's panel faded into pale turquoise as he considered the question. "I uploaded the Stein's data just before the Sixers cut communications. But there was a lock on those records."

"That's public data," Ian said sharply. "None of it should be locked."

"Nevertheless," Fuzzy persisted.

"Could it have been a bug in the computer?" Kry's asked, needling Fuzzy. She could swear Fuzzy gave her an indignant sniff. "Or human error. I found the lock quite easy to circumvent once I realized it was there."

Kry's shook the fidgets from her hands as she circled the lab floor. Ian paced too, hands thrust into the pockets of his jeans.

"What's the word on Kry's sample? Can you detect Stein's?"

"I'm still decoding the genetic structure." Lavender glowed on Fuzzy's panel. "Odd. It's almost as if..."

Fuzzy's hesitation halted their nervous pacing. "What?" they chorused.

"It needs further study, I suppose." Fuzzy answered, but Kry's had the distinct impression he was talking to himself. "In any case..."

"Fuzzy," Ian said warningly as the computer hesitated again.

"They are an excellent match," Fuzzy finally announced.

"Yes!" Ian whooped, a brilliant smile lighting his face. He scooped Kry's up, held her tightly against him and planted a kiss firmly on her mouth. She felt his instant response before he hastily released her.

Ian turned back to Fuzzy. "Can you fabricate a vaccine from Stein's to combat ODS?"

"I am not certain, but... Ian, it is most promising."

Kry's had never seen anything more beautiful than Ian's exultant face. "This is it, Ian," she told him, grinning like a fool. "I just know it."

"Think you could manage to eat something while we wait for Fuzzy's results?"

Her stomach felt empty, but it churned with excitement. "Yes. No. God, I don't know."

"Come on," he said, laughing, a hand on her shoulder guiding her to the food prep station.

"Ian!" Fuzzy's triumphant voice stopped them in their tracks. They turned back to the computer.

Fuzzy's panel blazed dazzling purple. "We've found a cure for ODS!"

(bm) Chapter 10

Giddy with excitement, Ian gathered up Kry's again, burying his face in her hair as he swung her around. When he set her down again, holding her at arm's length, the joy in her face wrenched his heart. A rush of emotion he didn't dare label flooded him.

He gave her another squeeze, then let her go, reining in his body's response to her scent and warmth. He turned away from her with conscious effort and lowered himself into his chair, not daring another look at her face.

Fuzzy burst out exuberantly, "The viruses match perfectly, with the exception of two codon sequences."

Ian sensed Kry's moving nearer, leaning against his chair. Her hip brushed his arm and he fought the urge to draw her closer.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

Ian shifted, tipping his head away from her to avoid taking in her scent. "That ODS probably evolved from Stein's. That if it hadn't been for the damn data lock, we would have had the answer long before now."

She rested her hip on his chair arm, and the seat adjusted itself to her slight weight. "What do we do now?"

He wanted to nudge her off his chair or take her into his lap. "Fuzzy develops an accelerator to heal the infected victims, then a vaccine."

"Should we try the accelerator on you?" She laid her wrist against his cheek, the silky skin cool against his still-feverish flesh. "I don't think you've shaken this yet."

He started to turn his head, to flick his tongue along the line of her sensitive inner arm. Instead he rose from his chair, back to her while he adjusted his jeans.

"I'm willing." Hell, was he ever! "Fuzzy?"

"I've completed the vaccine and accelerator formulas. There's a vial of accelerator in the fabricator."

Ian pressed the release on the fabricator panel and removed the palm-sized vial. The clear yellow liquid within the glassite vial sparkled in the lab's harsh light.

Ian handed the accelerator to Kry's, grinning. "Would you care to play doctor?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, then a slow smile spread across her face. Ian thought his heart would scream out of his chest. "What do I do?" she asked.

Ian pulled an injector from the MedKit and held it out for her. "How much, Fuzzy?" he asked the computer.

"To the second indicator line."

She curved one hand around his, inserting the injector into the vial with the other. She poured in a slow stream of yellow liquid, eyes steady on Ian's all the while. "Well done," Ian murmured.

He offered his inner arm to her, guiding her hand to the crook of his elbow. She cupped his forearm as she applied the injector, the heat of each finger vivid against his skin. He never felt the prick of the injector or the familiar prickle as the fluid entered his system.

She pulled away the injector, then stroked his arm, inundating him with sensation. The rush of the accelerator couldn't compete with his response to her.

"How long?" she murmured.

"Seconds flat if you keep touching me like that," he told her wryly.

Her cheeks flamed a deep red and she backed away. "I meant for the accelerator."

He closed his eyes a moment, as much to close her out as to monitor his body's condition. "Pretty quickly. I could have kicked it on my own, but the accelerator's definitely a help."

When he looked at her again, she'd crossed her arms over her middle as if to ward him off. She flicked a wary glance at him. "Now all we have to do is get the formula to CGI."

"Still trying for a comm connection," Fuzzy said. "I can inform Lunar Base."

"Can't we just give them the formula?" Kry's asked.

Ian shook his head. "They don't have the capability to fabricate enough of the compound."

Kry's ran slender fingers through her tangle of hair, grimacing as they snagged on a knot. "I'd kill for a shower."

"Go ahead," Ian told her. "I'll be right behind you. When you're

done," he amended at her dark look.

Fuzzy brought Lunar Base up on the comm just as Krys disappeared into the necessity. "I sure as hell hope this is good news," the Lunar Base medic said.

"The best," Ian assured her. "We have a vaccine and an accelerator."

The tiredness in the medic's face melted away. "Thank God. Have you contacted CGI yet?"

"Still can't get through."

"We'll keep trying." The medic rubbed at her eyes. "We'll focus on the accelerator for the worst hit victims. Hopefully, that will tide us over until CGI can manufacture the quantities we need."

Ian didn't mention the additional delay in shuttling the supplies from Earth; he didn't have to. "Fuzzy, upload the specs for the accelerator to Lunar Base."

Krys returned to the lab just as the medic signed off. The plainness of her black coverall surprised him until he saw the gold-shot threads within the dark fabric glittering with every graceful move.

She came up beside him, the scent of soap and wildflowers teasing him. "You know, I've been wondering...."

Coppery curls of hair clung wetly to her brow. Unable to resist, he brushed one back from her eyes, enjoying the way she leaned toward him in response. "What's that?"

"What Leonard said, about ODS being created by CGI --"

"Not a chance," Ian said, skimming back another wet lock.

"He was entirely in error," Fuzzy echoed.

Krys shrugged away his hand. "But what if by accident --"

"No," Ian stated emphatically. "CGI has checks and cross-checks in place. No one could accidentally create a deadly virus."

Krys thrust her chin out stubbornly. "But what if one of the geneticists had been tinkering with Stein's --"

"CGI geneticists don't tinker," Ian snapped, amazed how quickly tenderness toward her could turn to irritation.

Krys took deep breath; he could see her digging in. "What if they were experimenting and something went wrong --"

"If something went wrong," Ian said clearly, letting condescension creep into his voice, "the geneticist would notify Robert, who would file a report with the Genetics Oversight Committee."

Her jaw worked in reaction to his patronizing tone. "But what if the geneticist didn't realize the mistake?"

He raised a brow at her. "Krys, you've only worked with me three days --"

"Because you needed my help," she reminded him.

"Yes, and I appreciate that. So I'll put it down to your own ignorance."

Krys shoved her face closer to Ian's. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"Of course not! But suddenly you act as if you know more than genetics engineers who've spent their lives --"

"I'm only questioning the possibility!"

"There is no possibility!"

"You can't be sure."

Anger burned inside him, warring with his constant arousal. "I damn well can."

"You won't even consider --"

"ODS is a natural mutation!" he shouted.

Fuzzy's voice dropped timidly into the silent aftermath of Ian's rage.

"Ian?"

"What!" Ian growled.

Fuzzy's turquoise light panel matched his cautious tone. "I have noticed a certain anomaly in the ODS mutation pattern."

Ian flicked a glance at Krys. "What anomaly?"

"ODS was certainly based on Stein's. However, the alteration in the original genetic pattern is not random."

Krys asked, "What does you mean?"

Dread settled in Ian's stomach. "A natural mutation rearranges the codon structure randomly. How well ordered are the differences, Fuzzy?"

Fuzzy paused, as if reluctant to answer. "Too well ordered to be accidental."

Teeth clenched tightly together, Ian leashed his anger with an effort that made his jaw ache. He asked evenly, "Could ODS have been intentionally designed?"

A longer pause from Fuzzy. "There is no way that it could not."

A sick feeling settling in his belly, Ian picked up his keyboard with slow, careful gestures. "Display them both, Fuzzy."

The genetic structures flashed on the screen, but Ian didn't see them as he stared at them in bleak rage. He was only dimly aware of Krys still standing beside him.

"I hope," she began, then stopped, as if forcing the words out. "I hope you don't think SEIS —"

"No," he said, shaking his head slowly. "I doubt there's a Sixer with enough skill."

"Then who do you —"

"I don't know," he said coldly. "But I sure as hell intend to find out."

As he sank into his chair, he felt Krys grip his shoulder. "Ram," she said softly. "It was Ram."

Ian spared a glance for her. "Who the hell is Ram?"

"I'm not sure." She faltered at his impatient glare. "I mean, I don't know exactly."

Ian's hands tightened on his keyboard. "What exactly do you know?"

She drew in a long breath. "Leonard referred several times to someone named Ram. Apparently he's some mucky-muck who secretly heads up SEIS."

As Ian absorbed what Krys had said, an ugly suspicion nudged at the back of his mind. He set it aside for the moment and tapped out a sequence on his keyboard. "Fuzzy —"

Suddenly, Fuzzy's panel flared a triumphant purple. "I've linked with CGI!"

The viral structures faded to gray, replaced by the face of Dr. Rosa Barrientos in Robert's office. She grinned when she saw Ian. "I just heard from Lunar Base we've got a cure!"

"An accelerator and a vaccine." He gestured to Krys. "Thanks to my adjunct research team."

Dr. Barrientos nodded her thanks. "The accelerator formula's in production as of..." she glanced at her wrist chrono, "...ten minutes ago. And Lunar Base found your father, Ms. Krysynowski. He's fine."

Krys's brilliant smile of relief tugged at Ian's heart. He turned back to Rosa. "Fuzzy will send over the vaccine stats. Could I speak to Robert?"

Dr. Barrientos hesitated a beat, then told him, "We don't know where he is."

Unease tickled up Ian's spine. "Don't know?"

"He was there when the Sixers first invaded. But some time between then and when Public Security finally got everything under control, he was gone."

Krys's sharp intake of breath caught Ian's attention, but she avoided his gaze. He asked Rosa, "Did you check his home?"

"Of course, first thing. But if he's home, he's not answering his comm."

Ian tried to catch Krys's eye, but she had moved a few paces away from him. He turned reluctantly back to the comm. "Rosa, if the Sixers have anything to do with this, Robert could be in danger."

She sighed. "I've told Gideon as much. He wants to give it a few more days before investigating."

Ian clenched his fists in irritation. "Gideon's in charge now?"

"Mr. Officious himself," she confirmed. "He's got us in staff meetings twice a day. We had a hell of a time persuading him to restore communications. He kept ranting about Corporate crisis."

"Sounds like Gideon." He sighed. "With any luck they'd locate Robert before Gideon botched things entirely. "Keep me posted on developments, Rosa."

Dr. Barrientos nodded. "And I'll let you know as soon as I find out about Robert." The geneticist looked over her shoulder and grimaced. "Mr. Officious," she whispered.

"Rosa, who are you talking to?" Ian could hear Gideon's reedy voice from somewhere behind Rosa.

Dr. Barrientos backed away from the comm transmitter. "Got to go."

Gideon took her place at the transmitter, peering into it. "Oh, it's you." His expression soured. "I guess congratulations are in order."

Only Gideon could make someone else's success seem like a mistake.

"Thank you. So where's Robert?" Ian asked.

Gideon seemed offended. "We're looking into it. I've checked a half-dozen clinics."

"Did you check Rutger's? Where his personal physician practices?"

A smug expression crossed Gideon's face. "He doesn't seem to be there."

"Gideon," Ian said evenly. "As I see it, you have two tasks to perform over the next few days. One, disseminate the ODS vaccine and accelerator, and two, locate Robert. I think even you could handle that."

Gideon's eyes narrowed. "You have no right giving me orders. I'm in charge here."

Ian gritted his teeth, praying for patience. "Only temporarily."

"Temporarily or not, I'm still the president."

"But you answer to the board."

"Except during Corporate crisis. In which case, the president has the final vote."

"The hell he does. No CGI president has ever treated the position that way."

"Take a look at the company bylaws. They read, 'In the event of Corporate crisis -'"

Ian rose abruptly, his keyboard clattering to the floor. "There's no crisis!"

"I say there is. 'Company policy can be established by presidential decree.'" Gideon smiled unpleasantly. "Would you like to see a copy? I can upload it to you."

Ian thrust his face close to the transmitter. "I demand you convene the board."

"I'll take your request under consideration."

"Then I'll convene them myself."

"Your option. However, don't expect my position to change."

"Damn you, Gideon Fuller," Ian rasped, his voice low and menacing.

Gideon flinched, despite himself. "You can't touch me, Ian Llewellyn. Not from Thea." Then the screen went blank as Gideon broke the connection.

Ian slammed Fuzzy's console with his fist, sparking the air with every four-letter word he'd ever learned. Then he saw Kryz standing there, arms hugging her middle.

"Where's Robert?" he barked at her.

Her eyes widened and she backed away. "How should I know?"

He rounded on her, his rage at Gideon transferring to her. "You reacted when Rosa said he'd disappeared. Was this part of your Sixer plan?"

"They're not my Sixers!" she shouted. "I just thought - When she said Robert had gone -" Her gaze dropped as if she searched for answers in the scarred metaglass floor. Then she looked up at him, hands out in supplication. "You have to believe me, Ian. I know nothing about Robert's disappearance."

He heard the ring of truth in her words and he felt suddenly ashamed of how he'd treated her. "I'm sorry." He cupped a shaky hand against her cheek. "But Gideon... God, that man enrages me."

She covered his hand with her own, tipping her anxious face up to his. "Can he really take over CGI?"

Ian dropped his hand, shoving his fingertips into his jeans pockets. "I don't doubt it's in the company bylaws. However, I don't think that particular rule was ever meant to be used by someone like Gideon Fuller."

"How much damage could he do?"

Ian sank into his chair, shoulders slumping. "Quite a bit, I'm afraid. He's a mediocre scientist and an incompetent businessman."

Krys leaned back against Fuzzy's console, folding her arms across her chest. "How did he manage to get on the board?"

"Money," Ian told her. "He offered an infusion of cash at a time when CGI wanted to expand."

"So why not vote him off the board?"

Ian stared down at his hands. "Easier said than done. He's got influential friends."

"Don't you?"

He raised his eyes to hers. "All my friends are dead."

She gazed at him a long time with her unfathomable eyes. And in a stunning moment of revelation, he finally recognized their elusive color. They exactly matched the ocean he'd abandoned decades ago when he'd left Earth. A yearning for his home planet thrummed inside him, surprising him with its intensity.

She smiled softly. "We're finished, aren't we?"

He imagined kissing her and had the dizzying sensation of diving into a cool, salty sea. "With ODS, yes."

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her fingertips stroking across her brow. "What will you do now?"

He followed the motion, wishing he could trace the same path along the shell of her ear. "Determine who the hell created ODS. Resume one of my other studies."

She nodded, her eyes downcast. "And as soon as the outer planet shuttle arrives, I'll be gone."

Gone. Desolation burned a hollow in the pit of his stomach. How could he bear his isolation without her?

"Ian?" Krys pushed away from the console and moved behind him. Resting her hand on his shoulders, she dug her thumbs into his tight muscles, melting the knots with her warmth.

"Yeah?" he answered hoarsely. His head dropped as she worked her way up his neck, his breath catching as her fingertips skimmed over his scalp.

She was silent a long while, her hands stroking his neck, rubbing warmth into his shoulder. Finally, she said softly, "You said you couldn't offer love." She paused. "Only sex."

God, had he really been so crass? "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have --"

"Don't." Her hands stilled a moment, then she continued to caress him. "I've decided..." He thought he heard the thread of tears in her voice. "I think I'm willing to accept your terms."

His entire body tensed, every muscle as rock hard as his painful erection. "What do you mean?" he asked carefully.

"I want you, Ian." Now he was sure he heard the tears. "Any way you'll have me."

He rose, moving around the chair to face her. "I can't let you."

She smiled at him, her eyes brimming with tears. "The hell you can't." Then she reached up to lock her fingers behind his neck, pulling his lips down to hers.

With the first touch of her moist tongue against his lips, he was nearly lost. She didn't thrust inside as he would have. Instead, even more maddening, she shivered along the outline of his mouth, swirling into the



corners, drawing his lower lip in to scrape along her teeth.

With a low groan, he curved his large hands around her hips and pulled her tightly against the ache between his legs. His knees nearly gave way at the sensation of her soft body pressing against him. Her heat seared him at every point of contact until his body tightened in an agony of sensation in his groin.

She tipped her head away from him and his eyes drifted open. Lust-dazed, he gazed at her, and what he saw in her face threw cold reason on his fire. Naked and beautiful, love shone in her face, gilded her passion. Love he neither deserved nor could return.

As she pulled his head down to hers again, he knew he had to stop her. He couldn't add this wickedness to his long string of evil actions. She might not be an innocent – although her awkwardness marked her as inexperienced – but to let her give herself to someone like him would sully the preciousness of her gift. He could not change his past, but he still had impact on his present.

He let himself enjoy the sweet torture a moment more, drinking in her scent, the warmth of her, then he pulled away. He kept his eyes clenched shut as he sought control, then opened them to the confusion in her face, just edging into hurt. He stroked her cheek in an attempt to reassure her.

"I can't," he whispered.

He was an idiot to have thought to save her pain by rejecting her. But as hurt transformed into anger in her eyes, he realized at least he'd saved her the greater damage.

She took three shaky steps back from him, leaving ice in her wake. "You can't," she bit out.

Even now, when her sea-washed eyes had hardened, he wanted her desperately. But he made himself shake his head slowly. "Not with you." When he saw pain lance through her again, he added hastily, "Not with anyone."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "God forbid you should take a risk."

Grief settled like a weight in his belly. "I've already taken too many risks. And destroyed too many people doing it."

He turned away from her and headed for his quarters. "I need a shower."

As he paused in the doorway, he thought he heard her smother a sob, the sound like a laser shot to his heart. Then he heard her mag-boots scuffle across the floor as she tossed at him, "I need sleep."

At the whoosh and soft click of her door closing, Ian buried his face in his hands. He waited for the agony of emotion radiating from his heart to subside. It was sorrow he felt, grief over hurting her. Even he was capable of sorrow.

He grabbed up a handful of clean clothes, T-shirt and jeans as black as his mood. He closed himself in the necessity, ruthlessly forcing himself to face the mirror.

I can feel sorrow, he silently told his angry image. But not love. What burns in me now is not, could never be love. I am incapable of feeling that emotion.

Sorrow, not love. Sorrow, not love – he repeated the words like a litany until he thought he believed it.

Persuading his heart, though, was another matter.

(bm) Chapter 11

I can't. Ian's words echoed in Kry's ears, and she writhed in humiliation on her bunk. Not with you.

Heat rose again in her face as she remembered how she'd thrown herself at him. She'd been so certain when she'd decided to accept sex without love from him. It had never occurred to her he might turn her down.

To hell with him, she thought, fighting the sob catching in her throat. To hell with all men.

Then she remembered his muttered words of love when the ODS virus had hold of him and her heart broke all over again. He'd loved someone once, why couldn't he love her now? Why couldn't he at least accept she loved him?

The questions chased each other in her mind, like angry puppies snapping at each other's tails. Her head began to pound from the wrangle of thoughts and she forced herself to relax, to release her anger.

She turned onto her belly, trying to position herself comfortably, but her coverall seemed to twist and choke her. She tugged it off, pulling on the yellow sleepsuit in its place, then snuggled back into bed. Now finally, she felt at ease. Ruthlessly pushing aside Ian's image, she let herself settle into sleep.

Fuzzy "stared" at Ian in computational disgust as the man hunched over his keyboard, typing requests. Fuzzy didn't even bother to correct Ian's numerous errors, instead watched Ian grow more and more enraged at each refused request.

Finally Ian slammed his sturdy keyboard to the floor. Ian's face had taken on an interesting purple-red shade, and Fuzzy's sensors tucked away the color for future use on his own light panel.

"It is not wise to misuse your equipment," Fuzzy said, stating the obvious.

Ian responded loudly with a string of words Fuzzy recognized as obscene and therefore chose to ignore. "Why the hell are you bouncing back my requests?"

Fuzzy said primly, "I cannot be expected to process improperly formulated inquiries."

The computer took pride in his ability to interpret human emotion from subtle facial expressions. However, even a non-AI computer would have no difficulty discerning what it meant when Ian kicked his keyboard across the lab.

"I expect you to correct my mistakes."

"Perhaps you make too many of them," Fuzzy replied, filling his light panel with disdainful white.

Fuzzy interpreted surprise on Ian's face – and something else. The computer searched his private memory partition for a match. Sorrow? Regret? Yet the lines and curves of Ian's expression did not quite align with either of those.

Ian turned away from Fuzzy's sensors, to Krys's door. "I know I hurt her." Ian faced Fuzzy again. "But it's still better this way."

Puzzled by Ian's assertion, Fuzzy pulled from his databases as many studies of logical reasoning as he could find. Yet none of those disciplines of thought could explain Ian's conclusion. Fuzzy was about to point this out when Ian retrieved his keyboard and plopped it on his chair.

"I can't think right now, Fuzzy." Ian crossed to his quarters. "Wake me in four hours."

Fuzzy lowered the lab's light level as Ian's door slid shut. The computer paged through his database entries again, seeking some explanation for Ian's seemingly erroneous insistence that rejecting Krys was somehow better for her. Then he scanned a certain database, the one holding all his observations of Ian over the past twenty years, and Fuzzy finally found an answer.

Ian was lying. He no more wanted to refuse Krys than he wanted the dome to suddenly decompress its air supply. But Ian possessed an annoying trait that threaded through Fuzzy's database of observations, one that would bring him to lie in just such a situation.

Self-sacrifice. Fuzzy knew humans considered it a desirable quality, but it seemed self-defeating to the computer. Because how could humans continue to take care of themselves when they were so busy giving to others?

Fuzzy released a computerized sigh. He would simply have to force the

issue. He had held one trick in reserve, one he had resisted using except in dire necessity. But if he didn't intervene now, the outer planet shuttle would arrive and Kry's would be gone before Ian would admit his attachment to her.

Closing himself off in his private memory partition, Fuzzy searched yet another database. And after determining all the necessary components were available, began to compose a very special formula.

Kry's woke, twisted in her blankets, her body thrumming with a mix of heat and sensation. She sat up slowly and pushed back her hair with a trembling hand. Fragments of sexual images tantalized her, remnants of an erotic dream.

Awake, she felt the same raw arousal as if the dream intruded on her conscious mind. Her breath caught each time the tight nubs of her nipples grazed against the slick fabric of her sleepsuit. Wet heat throbbed between her legs and she shifted restlessly, trying to ease the agonizing pulse.

She pressed her palms against her face to cool it, covering her eyes. She heard the sound of her door opening and felt the waves of Ian's heat before she saw him. When she finally peeked at him through spread fingers, she wished she hadn't. Because the sight of his passion, raw on his face, flaring in his eyes, inflamed her until she felt nearly beyond control.

Yet she had no chance to even turn toward him before he had closed the door and crossed the small room to stand beside the bunk. He seemed to be fighting himself, his chest heaving as he fixed his gaze on her, his hands fisting at his sides. Kry's sat motionless, afraid if she moved she would frighten him away, or bring him closer.

Passion won. He grasped a handful of her hair, tugging to tip her head back, taking her lips in a rough kiss. If his hand hadn't cupped the back of her head she would have fallen back on the bed. His tongue thrust deeply, swirling and gliding against the sensitive edges of her tongue.

He groaned, a long, low sound, then climbed onto the bed, straddling her. He shifted to tug the blanket free of her body, letting it fall to the floor. The denim of his jeans scraped against her soft thighs as he leaned to kiss her again.

He drew his tongue along the line of her lips, teasing the corners. Then he lay his rough cheek against hers, and she felt every muscle in his body tighten. He lowered his hips to hers, and pushed the hard ridge of himself against her. He held it there, hard, hot, for a moment more before drawing back slightly.

"I want you," he rasped, his hot breath roiling against her cheek.

She had the sense he held himself in check, as if tethered by a thin silk thread still linking him to sanity. She had this moment to turn him away, this moment only. Beyond this point lay the explosion, the supernova neither of them could ever reverse or contain.

In answer, she grasped his hips and pulled him closer to her again. His entire body trembled as he dragged in one breath, another.

He sat up and fumbled for the button on his jeans, his hands awkward and out of control. Kry's pushed his hands away, tugging his shirt free as she released the fastening herself. As she slid the zipper down, she stroked his satin length with her fingertips. Pulling the jeans free of his body, she ran her palms down his tightly muscled legs, the hair rough against her skin. Then her lips brushed the head of his erection, laving it once with her tongue, taking the hot tip into her mouth.

He clutched at her head, pulling her away, gasping in air. When she looked up at him she thought his gaze would incinerate her. "No," he muttered hoarsely. "Too fast."

Her entire body trembled as if control balanced on a thin razor edge. His aroused flesh drew her eyes; her hand ached to curve around it, to stroke him to climax. But as if to forestall her, he took her hands and pulled her

to standing.

He drew her hands to his lips and gently kissed each finger. Then something in him seemed to shift, to change. She felt it in herself as well, a gentling, a softening of the hard-edged arousal. Now the sharp passion in his eyes eased into tenderness. The desperate rush slowed to a steady pulse just as powerful.

Stunned by that power, she slipped shaking fingers under the thin strap of the sleepsuit to draw it off her shoulder. Ian stopped her, grazing his fingertips across the back of her hand, pulling her palm up to press a kiss into it. Then he replaced her fingers with his own, brushing her breast as he pulled the silky fabric down. Her lips parted on a gasp at the brief scrape across her nipple.

He slid the second strap free as well, following the same path across her other breast, teasing the hard tip. Then he curved his hands at her waist where the sleepsuit lay gathered. He dipped his fingers inside, sliding them down her hips as he pulled the sleepsuit from her body. His hands joined at the juncture of her thighs, gliding briefly into her soft curls before tugging the silky fabric down her legs and dropping it to the floor.

He stared at her a long time, his chest still as if he couldn't breathe. Under his gaze, her breasts grew heavy and swollen, incredibly sensitive. She waited for him to swallow them with his hands, but instead he only grazed the pebbled nubs with his palms.

She moaned softly, tilting her head back, her eyes closed. She felt him curve his hand under the delicate underside of her right breast, then cool wetness surrounded the rose tip. He flicked at her nipple with his tongue, then closed his lips around it, tugging gently. With his free hand, he skimmed down her body, pausing at her waist, fingertips teasing her navel before he moved lower.

His fingers threaded into her soft curls, and Krys felt her muscles weaken and shiver as moist warmth pooled between her legs. Just as her knees gave way, his arm tightened around her for support. All the while he continued to lave her nipple as his fingers slid between her soft outer folds, seeking her wet heat. Then he dipped inside her.

Her body thrust up to meet him, and she wanted to draw him deeper, to hold him there. When he pulled his fingers free again, she nearly sobbed aloud. But then he glided his now slick finger across the hard nub hidden in her folds and Krys thought she would explode. He swirled around the nub, his fingertip made slippery with her own wetness, then slipped inside her again. He thrust inside her with his fingers, whorled over her sensitive flesh until the room seemed to spin in a haze of sensation.

He began to sip at her mouth, breathing in her cries. She tasted the wet heat of his tongue while his fingers thrust and thrust inside her. Her body grew wild, twisting, pushing against his hand, her fingers twisting in his hair to hold him tightly against her.

She shrieked in a long breath, as his fingers thrust inside her one last time. She shuddered as her body clenched and unclenched around him in the involuntary rhythm of her climax. As her last moans faded and her breathing quieted, he kept his hand on her, his lips tasting hers over and over.

Curving his arms around her, he drew both of them down on the bunk. He gathered her close, the length of his erection burning against her soft hip. She encircled him with her arms, her hands moving languorously down the black knit of his shirt.

"Ian," she said finally, her lips close to his ear. "I've never... that was... Lord, I can't even think."

He drew his hand down her body, cupping her breast a moment, curving along her waist, a trail of lightning. "I have a similar problem." He rocked his hips forward, groaning as his hard flesh thrust against her.

She sat up, dizzy from release and returning arousal. Grazing her fingers down his chest, she hooked her thumbs under the hem of his shirt. "You have entirely too many clothes on," she said, tugging the black knit up.

He helped her ease the shirt free of his arms and head. She watched, fascinated, at the sudden tightening of muscles in his chest when she touched her palm against it. "Good Lord," he dragged out as her hand skimmed lower to his belly.

She skimmed her fingertips around his hard flesh, teasing, not quite touching. Threading her fingers through the coarse nest of hair, she let the side of her hand brush against him. He grabbed her wrist, pulling her hand up against his mouth.

When he looked down at her, she saw barely leashed control in the blue-black of his eyes. "Any doubts?" he asked.

She started to shake her head, then remembered suddenly. "I've never gotten the implant."

It took him a moment to understand. "Contraception?"

She shrugged. "Never needed to."

He glided his fingers along her cheek, down to the corner of her mouth. "No need," he said, and she saw an unexpected grief in his eyes. "The Keemo treatment made me sterile."

She could not help the rush of empathy shining in her eyes, coupled with a grief of her own. She raised her head up to kiss him. Then he nudged her legs apart and grief and thought fled.

She opened herself to him, reaching down to guide him to her hot wet center. At the first feel of him against her softness, her body took over, pushing up toward him so he thrust into her with one smooth stroke. Stunned by the exquisite sensation, she lay still a moment, feeling her body tighten around him. She looked up at his face and the stark passion there filled her with a fierce possessive joy.

He pulled back slowly, slick friction stroking her from the inside out. Then he plunged in again, more deeply, and she felt sensation build again, a spark at her center ready to explode. She moaned with each push forward, tipping her hips up to meet him. She wanted him deeper, to fill her more completely so she wrapped her legs around him, locking her feet at the base of his spine. He cradled her head in his hands, tangling his fingers in her hair, plunging his tongue into her mouth.

It wasn't enough, she wanted more. She splayed her fingers across his buttocks, clutching the flexing musculature, pushing him farther in with each thrust. Sensation burst through her, his hot hard thickness filling her, slick flesh tugging, pulling at her center. The world spun, spiraling higher and higher, and her caught up in it, a tight lance of sensation, tugging, drawing....

She couldn't help the scream that burst from her throat as the world collapsed on its center, imploding in waves of pleasure. Her body tightened involuntarily around him, triggering his climax, and a low groan seemed wrenched from him. He stilled a moment, as if stunned, then slowly stroked inside her, bringing another frisson of sensation.

Finally, gasping, he slid beside her, freeing her of his delicious weight. He curved his arms around her, holding her along the length of his body.

His lips tickled her hair as he spoke. "I don't think we should do this more than two or three times a day."

She grazed his ribcage with her fingers and his muscles shivered in response. "And why is that?"

"You'd never have the strength to pilot another shuttle," he said.

She drew her head back to look up at him. "Then I'd have to stay here forever."

She'd tried for lightness, but she could see she'd failed from the way his brows knit together. She traced one finger across his cheek, down his jaw. "I know you don't want to hear this Ian."

He put his hand against her lips as if to stop the words, but she shrugged him away. "I have to say it. I love you." She squeezed her eyes shut a moment, pushing back tears, then said more firmly, "I love you."

She tried to see a response in his face, in his eyes. Briefly, so fleeting she thought she must be mistaken, she saw stark yearning coupled with hopelessness. Then a loneliness that made a sob well up inside her. But even as she reached up a comforting hand to his face, he pulled away. He sat at the edge of the bunk, his back to her.

"I want to make this clear," he said, each word a sharp laser burst. "I don't –" He seemed to falter on the word. "I can't love you. Not ever."

Although she knew the answer, she had to ask. "Why, Ian?"

The muscled wall of his back cut him off from her, rejected her. "I won't see you die," he spat out.

She touched her fingers to his back, but he rose abruptly. "Everyone dies," she reminded him.

He shook his head. "Everyone but me." He bent to pick up his jeans and pulled them on. "Not even if I wanted to, not even if I tried." His mouth twisted in disgust. "I can't even reset my damn body clock."

Krys crossed her arms over her breasts, trying to hold the hurt inside – hers and his. "I don't care. I love you anyway."

He thrust his hard, angry face close to hers, planting his fists on either side of her on the bunk. "I don't want your love. I don't want your damned adoration. You said you were willing to take sex without love – well you got it." He backed away, groping for the door controls. His face shadowed by the dim light, he flung at her, "Don't expect anything more from me."

He strode through the open doorway, closing the door behind him. Shaking with suppressed tears, Krys slid off the bunk to retrieve her sleepsuit. His T-shirt lay beside it on the floor and in a rush of rebellion, she pulled it on instead. The black knit hung halfway down her thighs, the softness skimming her hips, teasing the tender points of her breasts.

Then she returned to the bunk to huddle miserably under the covers. She hugged herself to hold in the pain, breathing in his scent still clinging to the black knit. She waited out the waves of hurt, the agony of tears clawing at her throat. All the while she mentally berated herself for her stupidity.

Of course, she'd known sex wouldn't be enough. It seemed so obvious now – she could never have given herself so totally to a man without wanting to pour her love into him and have her love be returned. But she'd taken the risk, hoping, she now admitted to herself, her love and the profoundness of their lovemaking would somehow transform Ian, heal him.

But even if love were locked away inside Ian, she knew now he would never be willing to release it, share it. Krys finally understood how deep his fears ran. His terror overwhelmed him, hardened him so thoroughly he would never love someone, only to watch them die.

For Krys it would be simple – she would love him for the length of her life. It would be hard to be apart from him. But knowing he would always live on was a comfort. She wouldn't die before he did and be left alone.

But Ian – she understood now how impossible it would be for him to bear a deep love knowing there was an end to it. Knowing beyond that end was an eternity of hopeless longing without the cherished person.

She tried to imagine how it would be if the situation were reversed – if she were immortal and Ian not. If she were the one left behind. It would be impossibly difficult living with that inevitability. Yet all she could think was as deeply as she loved Ian, she would accept any measure of days, any length of time, no matter how short.

Which only confirmed he did not, could not, feel the same.

A throbbing ache settled in her chest, the weight of it exhausting her. Sleep seemed welcome, an oblivion that would release her from the pain. Yet as she drifted off, something nagged at her, a memory, an elusive idea that sprang from something Ian said. Yet before she could grasp it, tiredness overcame her. Just as a solution tried to sift to the surface, sleep dragged her down.

Ian lay on his own bunk, calling himself every vicious name he could think of. The memory of the stark pain in her eyes when he'd flung her love back at her made his gut twist.

Restless with self-recrimination, he tried to tell himself he felt nothing for her, to deny reality. But that was nothing but a damn lie. The terrifying truth was he loved her so strongly, so powerfully, he could barely keep the words from bursting from him.

Of course, he couldn't tell her. She had to think the incredible experience between them was nothing more than great sex, two bodies rubbing against each other. She must never know a revelation had burst inside him as well with the explosion of passion. Despite every attempt to build a wall against her, to fight the emotions threatening to overwhelm him, he had fallen.

Yes, he loved her. Beyond reason, beyond understanding. Over the eternity of his years he would love her.

And God save him, he must never let her know.

His sensors viewing Krys's sleeping form and Ian's restless one, Fuzzy tried to compute the events of the last few hours. The sexual pheromones he'd flooded the dome with had certainly activated the two humans' reproductive urges. They had responded even more enthusiastically than he might have expected. And then Fuzzy had ceased pumping out that uniquely human chemical, had freed them from its imperative. And although Fuzzy then allowed them their intimacy in private, the computer had been certain love had carried them forward from that point.

Obviously, Fuzzy computed nothing about human love. He tried to puzzle it out. Here was Krys, demonstrating what Fuzzy understood to be love in the tones of her voice, the set of her features, in every interaction with Ian. She had even declared her love for him.

Yet although Ian's every act, every emotion matched Krys's, he denied he loved her. Even though Fuzzy's high-res sensors could detect a light in Ian's eyes his computer database told him signified love, Ian rejected the very notion. So all of Fuzzy's conclusions about human love must be faulty.

The outer planet shuttle would arrive within the next forty-eight hours. Fuzzy considered another attempt to slow its progress, but decided against it. He computed only an infinitesimal probability more time would produce the desired results. He would have to accept failure.

Fuzzy stored away the problem, unwilling to purge it from memory. Then he let himself drift in meaningless clock cycles, waiting for the two humans to return to the lab. Ian showed up first, mag-boots clicking as he crossed to his chair. He picked up his keyboard and settled it in his lap as he sat, but he made no requests of Fuzzy. He stared out the dome, the same light in his eyes Fuzzy had thought might be love. The computer decided it must simply be tiredness or distraction.

Ian sat that way for several clock cycles. When Krys finally entered from her quarters, Fuzzy perceived a brief tightening in the muscles around Ian's eyes. But the human didn't turn to greet her. Fuzzy's sensors followed Krys's progress across the lab to her chair. Her attire seemed odd - she appeared to be wearing one of Ian's garments, belted at the waist. Odder still was Ian's reaction when he finally looked at her. His attention fixed on Krys's legs, bare from the ankle-high tops of her mag-boots to the middle of her thigh.

"I'd wondered what happened to it," Ian said.

Krys's chin tipped up as she seated herself. "It's comfortable."

Ian scanned the length of her leg again. "It looks good on you."

Krys looked down. "Thank you."

Fuzzy recognized their words as courtesy words, conversation-making verbiage. Yet he could detect in the atmosphere of the lab what he could only

describe as electricity. More took place here than what was obvious to his sensors.

Krys shifted in her chair. Fuzzy detected in the set of her shoulders she was preparing herself for something. A confrontation?

"Ian," she said, with her eyes still cast down. Then she swung her head up to look directly at Ian. "I have an idea."

Ian did not respond, but even Fuzzy understood the question in his face. Krys paused a clock cycle or two, then said, "About us."

"There is no us," Ian said.

Krys's chin tilted higher. "I think there could be. You know I love you. You may not care for me, but I think you could learn to."

Fuzzy saw anger in Ian's expression, anger and... did humans call that emotion despair? "I won't love you. I can't."

"You could."

Ian shook his head. "I won't see you die."

Krys rose and moved to stand near Ian. "You wouldn't have to."

Ian laughed, the sound freezing the data in Fuzzy's memory. "You'll drag yourself off to a cave to die?"

"Of course not!"

"Pilot your shuttle into the sun? A grand suicidal gesture?"

Krys planted her hands on her hips. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I won't see you die!" Ian repeated, his voice rough as a power surge.

"I don't have to!" Krys stood poised over Ian. Fuzzy detected something in her stance that made his memory seethe. A bit of data bubbled up just as she spoke.

"I want to undergo Keemo," she said.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ian asked.

"Project Jenna," she said, and Fuzzy could sense her trembling. "I want you to give me the immortality injections."

(bm) Chapter 12

Ian felt the chill of fear tighten his stomach. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because the damn stuff could kill you," he said, desperation making his voice harsh.

"Because one person died? You said she had a bad heart."

"She did, but her bad heart didn't kill her." The old memories returned in a rush. "Jenna did."

Her eyes widened in surprise, in the first shadings of fear. "But if her heart was weak —"

"Jenna killed them all."

She stood in stunned silence a moment, then swallowed convulsively as if forcing out her words. "But when you... when you said the treatment failed... for the other six, I thought you meant —"

"They'd survived? Lived their normal measure of years?" His mouth twisted in self-disgust. "I apologize for a lie of omission." He stared down at his hands, unable to face her. "Of cowardice."

"They all died?" Krys whispered.

He turned back to her, fixing her gaze with his own. "Every single one."

He watched the horror settle on her, even as denial tried to form itself in her eyes. "But maybe —"

He spoke quickly to cut short any fledgling hope. "They died from Jenna, Krys." He took hold of her stubborn chin to keep her eyes on him. "Not weak hearts or bad lungs or poor circulation. Jenna slammed their bodies into hyperdrive and killed them."

The familiar desolation welled in him, twisted by guilt. He released Krys, buried his face in his hands. "They went within days of each other."



Alicia, then Vernon. Lawrence... Julia Sato..." He could still see the angry accusation in the eyes of Julia's four year old son. "Charles and Everett held on the longest."

Her voice trembled as she spoke. "But you survived."

"Because I'm a freak," he spat out. "Because there is something different about me, something against nature."

Her stubborn chin tipped up. "Let me risk it."

"Absolutely not." Ian thrust himself from his chair and began pacing the lab. "I won't allow it."

"You survived, Ian." She dogged his steps, tugging at his shirt. "There's a chance it would work on me."

He turned sharply, to grip her shoulders. "There's a bigger chance it would kill you."

"But there must be a way. There've been advancements in eighty years, new techniques."

"Not for Project Jenna. It's a dead issue." He gave her shoulders a shake. "Krys you can't do this."

"But I want to, don't you see?" Her eyes filled with tears, wrenching his heart. "I love you. I'd rather risk dying from the injections than never to have taken the chance." She swiped the tears away with the back of her hand. "Ian, isn't there a way?"

Ian knew the answer flickered briefly in his face. He couldn't help himself; he loved her, wanted her, as much as she loved and wanted him. So for a brief second, awareness of his special project must have flashed in his eyes, in the set of his mouth. And even though the infinitesimal hope was what Krys surely prayed for, looked for, Ian was certain he put a lid on his own emotions quickly enough. He hid the possibilities, obscured them in his face. "No," he said.

Then Fuzzy spoke.

"Ian's lying," the computer said, in clear, loud tones.

Krys's eyes widened briefly, then narrowed in hope-laced anger. "What?"

Traitorous Fuzzy answered her, "Ian has worked sporadically on a special project over the last twenty years. He has been seeking a method to safely administer the Jenna injections."

Ian snarled at Fuzzy's smug blue light panel, "Without success."

"But not without some results," Fuzzy replied, unperturbed. "You have determined the correct correlation between setpoint and genetically-based metabolism -"

"Which had no relationship to why they died."

Fuzzy plodded on. "You have fine-tuned dosage amounts for a broader range of body weights, bone mass and ethnicities -"

"Useless if the stuff still kills."

Fuzzy saved his strongest point for last. "You discovered an additional genetic component in your body missing from your colleagues -"

"Which wouldn't do Krys any good if she also lacked it."

Krys splayed her hands across his chest. "Then test me for it."

Ian curved his fingers around her delicate throat, then plunged them into her coppery hair. "Krys, it might be irrelevant. That one genetic element could be no more significant in the equation than the fact our skin color matches."

She ran her hands across the black knit of his T-shirt. "At least let me try."

He shook his head. "If I test you and you match me, you'll demand I give you the Jenna treatment. I'll refuse again, because a match might mean nothing at all."

Her warm palms rested on his shoulders. "But it might mean everything."

He stared down at her, his chest burning with unspoken love. There had to be a way to divert her, to derail this insistence of hers to risk her life. He knew he would kill her if he gave her the injections and that would plunge him into a hell worse than any he'd been through all these long, lonely years.

His gaze snagged on the lush line of her lips as the tip of her tongue peeked out to wet them. With his returning surge of arousal, he realized he had a certain way to sidetrack her. Although making love to her again would make her absence so much more agonizing to him, it bought him time until the outer planet shuttle arrived and he could get her off Thea.

With a cry of desperation and need, Ian leaned down to cover her mouth with his. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, tangled with hers, battling, wishing he could wipe her mind clean of its insane idea. He wanted to swallow her, consume her, keep her always locked in his protection.

He bent to lift her small weight, cradling her in his arms. As he strode to his quarters, he caught her scent mingling with his own in the soft black knit of the shirt she wore. The knit was so thin every curve, every angle of her burned into him until his mind was filled with images of his hands on her naked skin.

He eased her onto his bunk, then stroked the length of her body, throat to thigh. When his palms crossed her breasts, feeling the tight-drawn tips, his erection throbbed against his jeans. And he thought he could be slower this time, that the edge had been taken off his passion by having had her once. He realized then he would never be satisfied, would always want her.

At her waist, he released the fastening of the belt she wore and tugged it free. Then his hands drifted lower, to the hem of the shirt. Palms skimming the silk of her thighs, he hooked his thumbs under the edge of the shirt and gathered it up to bunch at her waist. The soft triangle of dark auburn nestled at the apex of her legs, hiding mysteries he ached to taste.

He placed a kiss into the soft curls, then gazed up at her to see the reaction in her face. He saw a storm-wracked sea in her eyes, passion roiling like wisps of fog. He lowered his mouth again, this time trailing his tongue along the juncture between her thigh and her soft folds. Her breathless moan sifted into his ears, spread like white heat down his spine, settled in his groin.

He gripped her hips to hold her still as her hands clutched at the blanket under her. Then he parted her folds with his tongue and tasted her with a long, slow stroke.

He watched her as he sipped her honey, saw her head thrash in a tangle of copper. Her hips seemed to move of their own accord as he plunged his tongue inside her. He imagined his hard length thrusting into her and nearly lost his barely held control.

He'd wanted to make the ecstasy last for her, but she seemed on the edge herself. He felt her hands tighten on his shoulders as her sensitive nub swelled and hardened. Her body grew rigid, tensing against him. Then with a cry, she flung her head back, and her climax nearly wrenched his own from him.

He kept his mouth on her, kissing her softly as she drifted back down from her peak. She tipped her head up to look at him and said imperiously, "I want you. Now."

He laughed, although his hands trembled as he rose to hurriedly strip off his clothes. She tugged off her shirt more languorously, a secret smile on her face. She held out her arms to him and he settled himself between her thighs. He felt the ivory silk of her inner thighs glide along his hips as she wrapped her legs around him.

He poised himself at the opening to her wet heat, dragging in her wildflower scent with each breath, trying to regain a shred of control. Then he plunged himself into her with one swift stroke, groaning as she tightened around him. He kept himself still a moment, then he rocked his pelvis back, feeling the delicious contrast of cool air chilling what her heat had warmed. He thrust into her again, as slowly as he could bear, wanting to push hard and fast, but knowing it would bring a quick end.

He felt her ankles lock behind him, her heels pressing against his back as she urged him deeper. Her soft cries grew louder as he plunged into her, her woman's scent overlaying the wildflower as she neared her own climax again. He thought he might burst with loving her, needing her, and for a

single, terrifying moment, he thought he would sob aloud what he felt for her.

Then with the first clenching of her muscles around him, he exploded, pouring himself into her in quick, sharp bursts of sensation. He held her so tightly against him, he was sure he must be hurting her, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted her inside of him as much as he was inside of her.

As the last of his climax subsided, he was shocked to feel moisture in his eyes, the beginnings of tears. He turned his head aside to wipe his eyes before she could see. Then he kissed her gently, on the lips, the cheek, before burying his face in her hair.

"You definitely have talent," she murmured in his ear.

He chuckled, drawing his lips across the fine strands of her hair.

"Thank you. I could say the same for you."

She flexed her muscles around him and when he gasped at the intimate sensation, it was her turn to laugh. "No doubt you've heard the expression, 'Shuttle pilots do it in tight places.'"

"With great skill," he choked out. "I must be too heavy for you."

"Not really," she told him. "An advantage of low gravity."

Still, he eased off of her, sliding to one side. His back resting against the wall of his quarters, he gathered her into his arms.

She snuggled against him, her head resting on his shoulder. "I hope you won't be offended if I fall asleep." She opened her mouth in a wide yawn. "You've just done such a good job of relaxing me."

He curved his arm around her, resting his palm against her breast. He toyed with her nipple, feeling the beginnings of arousal warring with the need to sleep. He thought he might follow up on what his half-hearted erection urged him to do when he detected the evenness of Krys's breathing. With her face eased into peaceful slumber, he couldn't bring himself to disturb her.

Tugging the blanket free from underneath them, he pulled the covers over them both. Then settling her more fully against him, he let himself drift to sleep.

As soon as Krys felt Ian's muscles loosen, and his hand fall from her breast, she eased herself free of him. It was difficult to leave the warm safety of his arms, but this might be her only opportunity. Quickly, she pulled his black T-shirt back on and slipped out of his quarters.

The lab glowed faintly blue from Fuzzy's light panel. She watched the lights for a moment as they faded from blue to turquoise to blue again. Krys had the distinct impression the computer was troubled.

"I have to talk to you," she said softly. "Privately."

Fuzzy didn't answer, his lights roiling briefly into yellow, then back to turquoise. "In my quarters," she told the computer. Fuzzy's lights burned blue again; Krys would have to accept that as assent. She closed her door behind her before she spoke again. "I need your help."

Fuzzy hesitated a long time before answering, emphasizing the sense he was disturbed by something. "Yes, Krys?"

The humanness in those two words shocked her. She heard regret, resignation. She realized the computer had considered the very course she was about to suggest, considered it and accepted there were no alternatives..

Her voice trembled despite herself. "You know."

Again the hesitation, as if the computer knew the consequences of what he was about to say. "You want me to test you for Ian's genetic factor."

Krys nodded, although she wasn't certain the Fuzzy's sensors could even detect the motion. "And...." Now her own voice failed her as the impact of what she intended to do hit her.

"And you want me to help you create the Jenna serum." The despair in Fuzzy's tone shook her, all the more because it imitated Ian's darkness. "For yourself."

Suddenly, everything sharpened into acute awareness – the cool metaplass under her feet, the softness of Ian's shirt against her skin, the dim light of

her quarters. She swallowed against a dry throat.

"You know it's the only way," she said to Fuzzy, to herself as well. "He won't accept me otherwise, he won't allow himself to love me." Her head hung as a surge of hopelessness enveloped her. "He may not love me even then."

"He loves you now," Fuzzy said with utter certainty.

Krys's head swung up. "How can you know?"

Fuzzy paused for so long Krys thought perhaps the computer would refuse to answer. When he spoke, he sounded as surprised as she. "I don't know. I have searched my databases, compared Ian's behavior to all human action stored there, yet...."

Krys smiled. "Some human behavior can't be described by a database entry."

"Yet I know he loves you."

Krys wanted to believe, in fact in her heart of hearts suspected it might be true. Yet she realized it made no difference. "I have to do this, either way. I have to take the chance. Because I love him, Fuzzy."

"You love him enough to risk your life?" Fuzzy asked. "The injections may well prove fatal."

"I love him that much," Krys told the computer.

"Ian will never forgive me if you die," Fuzzy said, and Krys wondered what color on the computer's light panel would match his bleakness.

"Then let me record a message, now, before we start. I'll explain things."

"If you wish." Fuzzy paused again. "But Krys...."

"Yes?"

"How will I forgive myself?"

The plaintive question tightened her throat, burned her eyes with tears. Krys now understood the force of what she planned to do, how it would affect Fuzzy and the computer's relationship with Ian. Yet she knew there was no other choice for her.

"I won't die," she vowed. "I'm much too stubborn to die."

Fuzzy didn't comment on the impossibility of her promise. He only said, "You may record your message now," his voice computer-like in tone again, even and impersonal.

Like a human trying to hide his grief, she thought with a sigh. Then she gathered her thoughts, trying to compose a message to erase Fuzzy's culpability, should worse come to worse. She delivered her speech calmly, each word carefully spoken, aching inside at the thought of Ian listening to it after she'd died.

"That's it, Fuzzy," she said when she'd finished.

"You'll need to return to the lab to use the tissue sampler."

"Is Ian still asleep?"

Fuzzy took a moment to check. "Deep in REM sleep. We should have the necessary time."

Krys eased out of her quarters and glanced into Ian's. She watched him a moment through the open door, his large frame sprawled on the bunk, the tenseness in his face eased by sleep. The urge to kiss him overwhelmed her, to press her lips against his warmth, but she knew she couldn't risk waking him. Instead, she pressed his door control and the door slid shut, cutting him off from view.

Turning away, she headed for the tissue sampler. Less afraid this time, she slipped her finger inside, this time feeling the dull tug as the mechanism pulled a sample.

She rubbed the faint pink spot on her fingertip. "How long to check?"

"An hour or so for the pattern matching. In the meanwhile, I need to compute your body mass, fat to muscle ratio and fluid content."

Following Fuzzy's instructions, Krys positioned herself in the optimum position for a sensor scan, standing motionless for what seemed forever. When Fuzzy was finally satisfied he'd garnered an accurate measure of her body

mass, he had Kry's apply sensor leads to her wrist to perform the other tests.

When Kry's fidgeted in her chair after another endless duration, Fuzzy scolded her, "Sit still. You'll skew the calibration."

The mix of tension and dread making her grumpy, Kry's asked, "So we're off by a microgram. What difference could it make?"

"The measurements must be exact. A microgram either way could kill you."

Kry's shut her mouth and sat still, recognizing the seriousness in Fuzzy's tone. She knew he was right, but she felt she would jump out of her skin at the anticipation. She still didn't know if her DNA contained Ian's genetic factor, the one that may have helped him to survive when the others died. What if she didn't have the match, would she still proceed?

Finally, Fuzzy finished all the testing and all Kry's could do was wait. Fuzzy's one hour had come and gone and had nearly stretched into two. Kry's was terrified Ian would wake and put a stop to what she and Fuzzy were doing.

Kry's shook out her hands as she paced the lab. "Is he still asleep?"

"Deeply asleep," Fuzzy answered. "Although Ian has been known to wake suddenly from a deep sleep."

Kry's whirled to face Fuzzy's console, an ugly suspicion creeping into her. "You're not stalling, are you? Trying to hold me off until Ian wakes?"

Fuzzy's light panel flickered pink. "Of course not," he said in an affronted tone. "But I cannot rush the process if I'm to be certain the formula's correct."

Kry's laid a hand on the console. "I'm sorry. I'm just a little nervous." A huge understatement.

Fuzzy paused, and Kry's thought he was still offended. But then his light panel segued into yellow-green. "I have the results," he said quietly.

"Ian's genetic factor?" After all the waiting, Kry's almost didn't want to hear. "Do I match?"

Fuzzy's panel glowed yellow, then whirled into blue. "Yes. Your DNA contains the factor."

A jumble of emotions filled her – elation, excitement, stark terror. She had to take two deep breaths before she could speak. "How long to compound the Jenna serum?"

For a brief moment, Fuzzy's light panel seemed to go black, as if the computer had lost power. Then the lights flickered on again in an even blue.

"I have already compounded the serum," Fuzzy said. "In the event of the genetic match."

Kry's stared at Fuzzy, the enormity of what he'd said rushing in. "It's ready?"

"Insert four injectors into the fabricator," Fuzzy said, speaking carefully. "I'll fill each injector with the proper dosage of each component."

Hands trembling, Kry's pulled the injectors from the MedKit. She snapped them into the fabricator one by one. "Should I inject them in any particular order?"

"They are color-coded, light to dark. Inject them in that order."

As the viscous fluids filled the injectors, Kry's felt a queasiness stir in her stomach. The serum varied in color from harsh yellow-gold to blood-red. She stared at them a long while, even though she knew Fuzzy had finished.

"Kry's?" Fuzzy prompted. "You may take them now."

Gingerly, Kry's removed the injectors from the fabricator. She could swear they burned her palm although they were cool to the touch.

"How will I..." Kry's swallowed and began again, "How will I know if the treatment worked?"

Fuzzy's panel glowed a distressed yellow. "If you survive."

Kry's clutched the injectors, trying to bolster her waning courage.

"It's the only way, Fuzzy. You know, don't you?"

"Kry's –" But whatever the computer might have intended to say was

interrupted by his soft-spoken warning, "Ian!" a half-second before Ian's door slid open and he strode into the lab. Hurriedly, Krys crossed her arms over her chest, concealing the injectors in her hand.

Ian smiled as he approached, reaching out a hand to cup her cheek before he kissed her. "I can't believe I slept so long. I'm not sure if it's because you relax me or just exhaust me."

Nervous sweat coated her palm, making the injectors slippery. Terrified she might drop them, Krys uncrossed her arms and curved them around Ian, holding the injectors behind his knit-clad back. She was certain he would feel her holding them there against his taut muscles. She had to sidetrack him, give him something else to think about.

She went up on tiptoe to press her lips against his, to tease the corner of his mouth with her tongue. Despite her agitation, the contact sent a thrill of sensation from her lips to her core. As he matched the motion of her tongue, his own plunging into her mouth to taste her, breathing became difficult. She had another fear now, that the immediate fever pitch he brought her to would distract her from what she had to do.

Fuzzy's interruption saved her. "I have word from the outer planet shuttle."

Ian stilled, then after a long moment backed away. Krys felt chilled where his hands left her. When lucidity returned, she finally remembered to surreptitiously tuck the injectors behind her, out of sight.

"What's the message?" Ian asked tonelessly.

"They've reached the last bump point. They should arrive within 24 hours."

Ian wouldn't look at her. He stood rigidly, his face turned away. It struck Krys with the forcefulness of a shuttle engine thrust she had made the right decision. Despite the risk, her only chance of a life with Ian was to undergo the Jenna treatment.

Hugging herself, protective of her emotions, she said, "I'm pretty tired. I'm going to my quarters for a nap."

Still looking away, he nodded. "I need to get some work done."

She stood watching him, wishing, hoping he would say something, that he loved her, would willingly take any time she could offer. A part of her so feared the risk she was about to take she prayed he would deter her from it.

But he said nothing. She backed into her quarters, keeping her eyes on him. She drank in every detail, excruciatingly aware this might be the last time she would see him.

She paused in the doorway. "See you later," she said.

He nodded again, tension stiffening his shoulders and the muscles of his back. Then she stepped aside and the door slid shut.

She laid the sweat-slicked injectors in a neat row on her bunk and scooted herself up to sit beside them. "You'll keep an eye on me, won't you, Fuzzy?"

"Of course," the computer answered.

"If I'm in trouble..."

"I'll tell Ian immediately," Fuzzy assured her.

Of course by then, it would probably be too late, which Fuzzy knew as well as she. Taking up the injectors, she made herself comfortable on the bunk. She wondered if this was how suicides felt, when they held a laser gun to their temple.

But it was life she hoped to inject into her veins, not death. She prayed this would be a beginning, not an ending. Squeezing the injectors tightly in her grip, she sent a plea to God she would survive to see Ian again.

"Where should I inject, Fuzzy?" she asked breathlessly.

"Inner arm would be best."

With her hands shaking crazily, she pressed the tip of the first injector into the crook of her elbow and activated the micro pump. After the first, she worked quickly, afraid she'd be overcome before she could inject

the entire series.

"How do you feel?" Fuzzy asked when she'd tossed aside the last one.

"Okay," she told him, although her tongue felt thick. "A little funny. Kind of dizzy."

"Any pain?"

"No," she said very slowly, drawing out the sound. "But sleepy. Very tired."

Almost before the last word was out of her mouth, she felt blackness close in on her. She drifted, lightly, as if she spacewalked in free fall. Just as she thought to grope for the tether to her shuttle, darkness shut off her mind and she slammed into unconsciousness.

(bm) Chapter 13

Ian stared at Krys's shut door, and the long, lonely years of existence without her settled like lead in his chest. God, he loved her. Just when he'd thought the decades of isolation had made him incapable of feeling, this woman battered her way past every barrier.

If only he could... what? Tell her he loved her with every fiber of his being? That he would ask her to stay, but he was too cowardly and selfish a bastard to watch her die?

He pushed to his feet, furious with his own weakness. He had to tell her he loved her, he owed her that much. He wouldn't let her stay, was still that much of an idiot, but at least she'd go knowing....

He stopped half-way to her quarters. She'd never go if she knew he loved her. She might even convince him it would be okay, they would measure out their days together, loving each other, until the inevitable day came.

A laser-sharp image lanced into his brain. Krys dying. Dragging air into her lungs, each breath a closer slide into death. Ian, looking on, helpless to stop the inevitable process.

He began to shake, every muscle shivering from the helpless fear. He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand, trying to wipe the picture from his mind, but it persisted. He felt a desperate urge to slap open her door, terrified she was dying in that moment.

With an effort, Ian turned away from her quarters and returned to the lab. He had to let her go. Then he could lock down his heart again, encase it in rock hard layers of denial.

Anger suddenly rose in him, at himself, at her, at the wickedness he'd wrought eighty years ago with Project Jenna. He swallowed back the bile burning his throat, teeth clenching so tightly his jaw ached.

"Fuzzy," he said savagely. Uncertain turquoise quivered on the computer's light panel. Ian took a breath to calm himself. "Sorry. None of this is your fault."

Fuzzy's light panel oozed into a lime-green, a color Ian recognized as guilt. "You've done nothing wrong, Fuzzy," Ian reassured him. "It's me, I'm the problem."

Yet the lime-green remained. "I'm sorry, Ian," the computer finally said.

Ian wondered what Fuzzy had been up to this time. "About what?"

Lime-green slowly eased into turquoise, then into blue, but even to Ian the action seemed forced. "That you could not be together."

The sadness in Fuzzy's tone startled him. When had the computer become so human? "She'll find someone else to love."

"I think not," Fuzzy said.

Ian stared at the computer, wondering over the certainty in Fuzzy's tone. Then he picked up his keyboard and lowered himself into his chair. "Let's get to work," he said.

"Our work is complete," Fuzzy said, his panel the pallid pink of

disinterest.

"Not until I figure out who created ODS."

A pale-green sigh washed across Fuzzy's panel. "What does it matter?"

Ian looked up at the computer sharply. "We have to know. I want to start with Stein's. Give me a research history."

Fuzzy paused as he searched his records. "I have little information available. A list of researchers and study dates only. I can attempt to upload more data from Earth."

"Let me see what you have first."

The list of names in reverse chronological order displayed on the screen. Ian scrolled through the lengthy list without enthusiasm. "Too damn long."

Fuzzy's blue light panel kept trembling into brief splashes of yellow-green, making Ian uneasy. Maybe it was time Fuzzy had a complete maintenance check.

Another flash of yellow-green burst across the light panel before fading back into blue. But when Fuzzy spoke, his tone was even and unemotional. "Would you like a different data sort?"

"Yes, please. By last name, separating out research assistants. Also, contact Rosa Barrientos. I want a progress report."

Ian hadn't even gotten past the D's in the list when Rosa appeared on the screen. She gave Ian a brief smile, her expression harried as she greeted him.

"How goes the battle?" Ian asked.

She blew a strand of hair from her forehead, then tried to smooth it back with her fingers. "Well, if anything could have gone wrong, it did. The fabricator software developed a glitch and we had to reinstall the previous version. We used the backup fabricators, but they're slower and can't produce the quantities the big machine does."

"Any fatalities in the interim?"

Rosa heaved a sigh. "Luckily, no. We've been able to stave off the worst cases with the bronchial treatment. Since Lunar Base is so compartmentalized, they were able to isolate the infected. That put a lid on things there."

"Have you managed to locate Robert?"

Rosa knit her brows in puzzlement. "Apparently he's home. He seemed surprised we were so concerned about him."

Ian's shoulders relaxed in relief. "Then he's resumed the presidency?"

Her face twisting into a grimace, Dr. Barrientos leaned closer to the transmitter. "Mr. Officious is still in charge. Fortunately, he hasn't done too much damage."

Ian raked his hair with his fingers in agitation. "Why hasn't Robert stepped back in?"

Rosa fixed Ian with her dark gaze. "Quite frankly, I think Robert is trying to force you to take the presidency."

Ian bit back his anger, not wanting to lay it on Rosa. "Robert knows better."

"The board meeting's next week," Rosa reminded him. "Your shuttle pilot could probably get you here in time."

The mention of Kry's only emphasized his resolve. "I'm not returning to Earth."

"You may have no choice if Gideon gains permanent control. You know how he feels about Thea."

Ian heard a beep from somewhere in Rosa's lab and she looked off-screen. "I've got a batch ready. Have to go." Just as she turned away, the comm display blanked.

Ian chewed at the inside of his cheek, considering whether he should try to call Robert. He hated to disturb his friend. Yet Robert ought to know what Ian had discovered, that ODS had been deliberately created.

Maybe the best course would be to do a little more digging first, try to



have something more concrete before he presented it to Robert. He'd study the list of Stein's researchers first, look for a correlation. Then he'd notify Robert.

He returned his attention to the names on the display, scanning the last of the E's. The list of F's was overwhelming and his eyes began to blur before he'd gotten half-way through. He could have Fuzzy search, but Ian would have to set up the search terms and even that task seemed daunting.

He scrolled the last batch of F's on the screen, then paused to rub at his eyes. He couldn't help but glance over at Kry's door, couldn't keep his mind from the image of her, sleeping, her body warm and totally relaxed.

He considered waking her, imagined skimming his hands over her body to rouse her. He could brush his hands across her nipples, feel them harden to tight buds. He could kiss the nest of soft curls between her legs, flick his tongue at her center, listen for her breathing to change into gasps. He imagined again her brilliant, bursting peak of climax, the scent of her, the sound of her.

One more time. He could love her one more time. Yet he held himself in his chair, an agony of emotion washing over him. What would be the point in having her body again if he was just going to let her go? That last bliss would only lead to greater torture.

A growl tore from his throat as he forced himself to look again at the list of names. Pushing aside the images of Kry's, he read each name with ruthless attention. The last one on the list dashed a cold chill over him.

Winston Fuller. The name nagged at him with its familiarity although Fuller's research had occurred nearly ninety years ago. "Check for a relationship between Winston and Gideon Fuller, Fuzzy."

"Searching," Fuzzy said, his light panel still oscillating between blue and yellow-green. "Winston Fuller was Gideon's great-grandfather."

Ian puzzled over the connection. "The lock on the Stein's data. Whose password encrypted it?"

Fuzzy processed Ian's request slowly as if his flickering light panel hindered him. "Gideon Fuller's."

Which made no sense. "Why would Gideon hide the data?"

"If he were the creator of ODS --"

Ian shook his head emphatically. "Gideon hasn't the brains."

"He does not seem to. Yet human behavior rarely reflects the truth."

Ian looked sharply at Fuzzy, at the quivering light panel, trying to decipher the computer's underlying message. Then the implication of what Fuzzy had said slammed into Ian. "Get me Robert!" He thrust himself from his chair, agitation filling him.

"I'm an idiot!" Ian slapped his thigh with each step as he paced along Fuzzy's console.

"No answer at Robert's home comm," Fuzzy said. "Trying his office."

"Gideon plays the fool and all the while he's creating a deadly virus." Ian's fingers flew over his keyboard. "Give me everything you have on Winston Fuller's research."

As the data filled the screen, Ian leaned closer to read. His eyes skimmed over a second researcher's name before his brain registered it. He snapped his attention back to read the name "Julia Sato" just as Fuzzy's panel froze in the sharp yellow of sheer distress.

"Ian?" Fuzzy said softly.

Dread seemed to knock Ian's heart into an erratic beat. "Yes?"

"It's Kry's," Fuzzy said, and the naked grief in the computer's tone tore at Ian's insides. "I think she's dying."

The impossibility of Fuzzy's lament froze Ian for a moment as his mind grappled for sense. Then, acting on instinct instead of reason, he lunged for Kry's quarters. He dimly felt the sting on his palm as he slammed it against her door control. The door hadn't entirely slid aside before he forced

himself through the opening.

"Lights, Fuzzy," he barked and in one scan of her room took in her comatose form and the four injectors. He knew with mind-numbing certainty what had taken place, but he asked anyway, his voice raw with fear. "What the hell happened?"

"She asked me... she wanted... I gave her...." That Fuzzy couldn't say the words only chilled Ian more. He had the impression of the computer taking a breath. "She's given herself the Jenna injections."

Ian laid a trembling hand against Kry's cheek. "How long ago?"

"One hour. Ian, I tried to talk her out -"

"Shut up," Ian snarled. "We'll worry about placing blame later."

Ian hurried back to the lab for the MedKit. As he returned to Kry's side, he groped through the kit for the heart monitor and oxygen injectors. Only two injectors remained, the rest having been used when he'd been wounded by the laserscope. Another reason to damn him to hell.

Brushing his thumb across her blue lips in a tender caress, he laid one of the oxygen injectors against her carotid artery. The injector left a mark on the delicate skin of her throat and he tried to soothe it away with his fingers. He sat beside her, taking her hand, willing his life force into her.

"Ian," Fuzzy said softly, "her DNA possessed the matching genetic structure. I checked and rechecked the codons several times. If there had been no match...."

He brought her slender fingers up to his lips, breathed his answer against her flesh. "She would have talked you into it anyway." He tucked away a strand of coppery hair lying across Kry's cheek, feeling the length of silk skim across his fingertips. "She would have nagged and nagged at you."

His throat squeezed shut and he couldn't go on. He fumbled in the MedKit for an intravenous setup, pulling free the tangle of tubing. He tightened the band around her inner arm and activated the micro pump.

He checked the vitals gauge on the band and let himself relax infinitesimally at the near-normal readings. He stretched out beside her, curving her into his warmth, keeping one eye on the gauge.

Fuzzy's implacable voice intruded. "You must return to the lab."

Ian pulled Kry closer. "I have to monitor her condition."

"I can accomplish that from here. But the intraven setup won't sustain her indefinitely. We must find a way to pull her through the Jenna process."

Ian knew Fuzzy was right, but he was terrified if he left Kry, she would slip away, alone, unnoticed. A hole opened in his chest, a hole filled with agony that he might never see her open her eyes again.

Yet he had to trust Fuzzy. The computer could monitor Kry as well if not better than Ian. Because if they did nothing, she surely would die.

Drawing his hand across her cheek one last time, Ian rose and backed from the room, keeping his gaze on her. He didn't turn away until the tears burning in his eyes blurred her image.

"Show me the dosages you gave her," he said roughly as he swiped the moisture from his eyes.

Fuzzy displayed them on two of his screens so Ian could take in all the formulas in a glance. "I want to see a history, from the time she injected the series."

Fuzzy's light oscillated between yellow-green and yellow. "She lost consciousness almost immediately, but her vital signs remained normal."

Ian scanned the formulas Fuzzy had used to compound the injections for Kry, satisfying himself they were correct. "What was the first sign of distress?"

"She showed difficulty breathing. Her heartbeat slowed." Fuzzy's panel flared yellow. "Ian, I only wanted what seemed best for her and for you. But my programming is faulty when it comes to humans, sometimes I do not understand."

"Fuzzy, I won't let you blame yourself. This was my doing, not yours." Grief, guilt and anger swirled through him, but he pushed it aside. "Let's

just work on getting her through this."

Fuzzy's panel drifted into turquoise. "I have scanned your records. You became comatose when you underwent the Jenna treatment."

Ian tried to organize his scrambled thoughts. "Yes, I did."

"And you survived," Fuzzy said hopefully.

"Six other people didn't, Fuzzy."

"But Kry's may survive as you did," Fuzzy persisted.

"And she may not. Because I still don't know what the hell was different about me."

"Then we must search for the other genetic factor. The one that brought you through the procedure."

"Yes. We'll search. Again."

Ian fought the despair washing over him. He'd do Kry's no damn good unless he pulled himself together. He scrubbed at his face, closing his eyes to shut out the world for a moment.

"Ian?"

"Yes, Fuzzy?"

"We'll find it this time, won't we? For Kry's?"

Ian didn't answer, just rose to plunge his finger into the tissue extractor to give Fuzzy a fresh sample. As he freed his finger and rubbed away the faint pain, panic bubbled up. What if they found nothing? What if Ian's survival eighty years ago was an unrepeatable fluke?

Or worse, what if they found the answer too late, after Kry's died?

Ruthlessly, he shut the lid on his fear, boxing it away. He allowed only thoughts of the problem, the methodology for searching out a likely candidate for the missing genetic element.

Ian placed his keyboard on Fuzzy's console and entered a series of requests. "Order the differences, between my genetic code and hers. Eliminate trivial variations like hair or eye color."

"Do you wish to see the data on the six as well?"

Ian prowled the space along Fuzzy's console. "No, it's a dead end. I've scanned their genetics so many times, I've memorized every codon. There's got to be something else." Abruptly, he turned and headed for Kry's quarters. "I want to check on her."

"I have been monitoring her condition," Fuzzy told him.

Ian just waved a dismissive hand as entered Kry's quarters and moved to her side. Her color was better, the oxygen infusion having done its job. But coma still consumed her. Ian cursed the fact the limited MedKit did not include a brain wave monitor; he could only guess her brain activity was still normal.

"God, Kry's," Ian groaned, "I'm not worth your sacrifice."

But he knew to her, he was. She loved him, and no doubt she'd seen this as the only way he would allow her to stay. And damned, selfish bastard he was, he didn't tell her the one thing that might have saved her - he loved her too. All because he couldn't accept the finite extent of her life.

So he might see her die after all.

His throat tightened painfully as he sat next to her and curved his hand along her cheek. He knew despite her coma she could hear, could register his voice. He would speak to her then, tell her now what he should have told her long before now.

"Kry's," he rasped out as his voice broke. He took a deep breath to steady himself. "Kry's, please don't die. I - I -" Yet still he stumbled over the words and he felt self-hatred well inside him.

He squeezed his eyes shut to hold back the pain. "I don't want you to leave me," he managed, grimacing at how selfish the words sounded. "I... I care for you, deeply."

He sat next to her, the curve of her waist fitting against his hip, feeling like ten times a fool, an idiot. He'd done this to her, created an impossible situation for her love. And now he didn't even have the strength and decency to tell her he felt the same.

He laid his ear between her breasts, reassuring himself her heart still beat strongly. He listened to her breathing, its regularity calming him. Then he brushed his lips against hers and powerfully, in his mind, he projected the words, I love you. But silently, and their quiet echo filled him with a guilty grief.

"Ian?" Fuzzy said softly. "I have completed the first set of queries."

Ian rose, drawing his hand along the length of Kry's arm before backing away. Anxiety clawed at him, making him reluctant to leave her. Yet her vital signs seemed stable, despite the coma.

He gazed at her covetously before turning and reentering the lab. "Can you see anything?" he asked Fuzzy.

"Nothing obvious."

Ian tried not to let discouragement gnaw at him. The results had been the same every time they visited the problem, he should be used to it by now. "Show me the results, from most to least significant."

Fuzzy displayed the list, giving him a graphic representation of each codon on the second screen. As he examined each structure and determined its role in the body's functioning, he felt hopelessness crowding him again. There was nothing new here. No magic solution neatly laying itself out for him.

Clenching his teeth so tightly his jaw ached, he forced himself to review the list again. He caught details in his second pass the lassitude of guilt and grief had hidden from him. There were possibilities here, he realized, genetic sequences relating to strength, to endurance, that just might -

"Ian!" Fuzzy shouted, acid yellow burning on his light panel.

Ian needed no explanations as he covered the distance to Kry's quarters in bare seconds. What he saw horrified him - Kry gasping, trying to drag breath into her lungs. Everything about her, the rattle of air clawing into her throat, the frightening tone of her skin, brought to Ian's mind an image of razor sharp clarity.

Alicia in her final moments. Alicia about to die.

With fumbling fingers, Ian struggled with the last oxygen injector, dropping it in his clumsiness. He scrambled for it under her bunk, found it at last, rose and pressed it against her arm. Yet with Kry's next rasping breath, Ian knew it was too late. She was dying, she was dying and he was helpless to stop it.

"Kry!" he sobbed. "Oh God, Kry!" He took a handful of her fiery hair as he leaned close, drinking in her scent. He had to reach inside her, to somehow pull her back from the brink. "Kry," he whispered, and at last the words tumbled from him, "I love you. I love you."

But if somewhere in her soul Kry heard him, the words were not enough for her to retrace the path back to him. She took another weak, shivering breath, another. Then in the next moment, as Ian stood over her, tears searing his face, her chest stilled.

His hand shaking, Ian laid two fingers against her throat, feeling for a heartbeat. When he felt nothing, blackness seemed to close in on him, freezing him, deadening him. Somewhere in a distant, reasoning part of his brain, he knew he should do something to pull her back. Yet he stood powerless, immobilized by grief, layer upon layer of ice encasing him.

And in an endless, endless circle, unbearable reality chased its tail in his mind. She's dead, it said, she's dead.

Kry is dead.

(bm) Chapter 14

"Ian!" Fuzzy's blast of sound barely nudged Ian from his passivity.

"Ian!" Fuzzy blared again. "The resuscitator! Keep her breathing!"

Ian's throat felt raw and constricted. "It's no good, Fuzzy. She's

dead."

"We must maintain oxygen flow to her brain," Fuzzy insisted.

Anger surged in Ian and pounded a fist against the unyielding wall.

"She's dead! What's the point in preserving her body now?"

"Because I think we may have found an answer," Fuzzy nearly shouted. "I think we can bring her back."

Fuzzy's urgency finally broke through Ian's shell of darkness and he grabbed the MedKit. He pawed through it for the resuscitator, cursing the low oxygen level shown on the gauge. He fit the mask over Kry's face, watching for the artificial rise and fall of her chest before he pulled out the heart stimulator. He placed the stimulator between her breasts, watching its indicator light flash green each time a microvolt pulsed into her. Ian knew the device wasn't meant for long term use; it could buy only a short duration of time.

"Let's see it," he told Fuzzy as he hurried back to the lab. He scanned the data Fuzzy displayed and suddenly, like a solar flare bursting from the sun, he saw the answer. A codon sequence with identical nucleotides, present in Kry's, present in all of them. But with an important difference in Ian.

In Ian, the nucleotide sequence was reversed. Which turned a weakness into a strength. Making the difference between survival and death.

"We need to reverse her genetic structure," Ian said, letting hope seep into him.

Fuzzy's panel glowed cautious turquoise. "A Keemo persuader."

Ian nodded as he typed out the parameters for the persuader compounding. "Based on my genetic pattern."

Fuzzy's screen display fluttered as he paged through the necessary calculations. "Applied intravenously."

"With an accelerator as an augmentor." Ian entered a last series of commands, then looked up at Fuzzy. "The stimulator can't maintain her much longer."

Fuzzy answered Ian's implied question with decisive blue on his panel. "I will complete fabrication in time."

Ian rose and paced as Fuzzy worked, moving from the fabricator to Kry's, back and forth, back and forth. He hated the look of her with the resuscitator covering her face, the stimulator like a scabbet against her chest.

Each time he stood over her, he'd lean close and whisper, "I love you, Kry's. I love you. Hang on."

He'd stare at her chest, willing each rise and fall. He forced himself to imagine her spirit here, her soul hovering, waiting for him to bring her back. He'd push away from her, return to Fuzzy, too edgy to remain still.

"Haven't you got the damn thing done yet?" he snapped at the computer.

"Nearly there," Fuzzy responded, his panel still glowing an eye-hurting yellow.

"Turn off those damn lights," he barked and headed back to Kry's quarters. Just as he entered the room, the flicker of the stimulator caught his eye.

Her heart was failing. A flutter of yellow replaced the steady green blink. The light faded briefly into green as the stimulator's software tried to reestablish itself. Yellow prevailed, its weak, irregular beat mimicking the working of Kry's belabored heart.

Ian raced to the fabricator, pounding a fist on the console. "Fuzzy!" he barked out, eyes fixed on the fabricator panel.

"Get two injectors," Fuzzy demanded, and Ian rushed to retrieve them from the MedKit in Kry's quarters. Ian snapped them into place and waited anxiously for Fuzzy to fill them.

"Give the red first, then the yellow," Fuzzy instructed.

Ian pried the two injectors loose and hurried into Kry's quarters. As he fitted the first into the intravenous setup, he saw the unsteady yellow light ooze into red, then jump back to yellow. When the indicator stayed red,

heart failure would follow soon after. Kry's teetered on the edge.

Ian's fists clenched and unclenched as he waited for the micropump to empty the injector's contents into the tubing. With the expulsion of the last drop, he snapped the second injector into place. He had to keep his eyes from the stimulator, from its indicator light drifting into blood red again and again.

Finally the tube ran clear, and he activated the second injector's pump. The stimulator glowed constant red now. He knew despite the steady rise and fall of her chest her heart had stilled. If the persuader didn't work – but no, he wouldn't think of that; he couldn't.

He pulled the stimulator free so he could rest his head against her breasts, listen for himself. The silence of her heart closed in on him, gripped him until he could barely breathe himself. But now, instead of despair, anger took over. The energizing rage forced him to his feet, brought his hands to her shoulders to shake her, once, twice.

"Kry's!" he shouted, leaning close to her. "Kry's, damn it, come back! I love you, Kry's! You damn well better come back!"

"I love you!" His voice went ragged on the final words and he began to sob, grief and anger a hard knot in his chest. "Kry's," he said more softly. Tears ran down his cheeks, dropped to her face. He loosened his fingers on her shoulders, caressing her now. "Please come back."

He bent to brush his lips against her ear. "I love you," he whispered, a thread of sound. He grieved for might-have-beens, for answers too late.

He stayed that way, his wet cheek pressed to hers, the edge of the resuscitator sharp against his jaw. He imagined her heart beating again, pictured her waking, wrapping her arms around him. He buried his face in her hair, breathing in the last trace of her scent.

Then the resuscitator shifted and he reached to put it back into place, reluctant to discard it despite its outlived usefulness. Yet as he groped for it, it seemed to have slipped out of reach. He rose to look for it, eyes half-lidded, unwilling to see Kry's lifeless form. His eyes traced the line of her arm, to where her hand rested against her hip.

The resuscitator lay in her hand.

For long moment he stared at the device, at the slender fingers curving around it, afraid to believe. Then he dragged his eyes up her body, to the chest still expanding and contracting, to her soft lips pursing and relaxing, to her eyelids fluttering.

Her eyes opened. And there in the sea-storm depths, he saw his salvation, his renewal, his rebirth. He saw the words in an unspoken language needing no translation. He saw love.

But when she tried to speak, he laid a gentle hand against her lips. "Let me say it first," he said softly.

She smiled then, and he knew she'd experienced rebirth as well. He placed his hands on either side of her head and said the words clearly. "I love you."

Her smile widened to a grin, and she brought her arms up to curve around him. They had little strength, still weakened as she was by the Jenna treatment, but just the feel of them filled Ian with joy. He slipped a hand under her to help her sit up, so he could look at her.

She let her hands rest at his waist, her radiant smile lighting her sea-green eyes. "I made it," she whispered.

"To the other side." He brushed the tangle of hair back from her face, keeping his eyes on hers. "I love you," he said again, the words so easy to say now.

"And I love you." Her voice quavered and she seemed wobbly despite his support. Her eyes drifted shut. "I've got no energy. Is that normal?"

"Perfectly. You just need a few million calories to replace what the process burned."

She opened one eye and peered down at one rounded hip, exposed where the hem of the T-shirt had ridden up. "Not recommended as a weight-loss

procedure, I guess."

"You're perfect as you are." He ran his hand along the soft curve and his instant response made him wish she was fully recovered. He eased her back on the bunk and pulled away. "I'll get you something to eat."

He caught her looking down at him, at the hard ridge obvious under the heavy denim, and her lips tucked into a smug smile. "Something fast-acting," she said, her eyes bright with humor and the beginnings of passion.

He grinned, making his own hunger clear on his face. Then he turned and headed for the lab. "Fuzzy!" he boomed.

The computer's panel flared a hopeful blue. "Is she - Has she - Does she -"

Ian threw his head back, laughing at Fuzzy's excited stuttering. "She is. She has. She does." Ian swallowed against an unexpected tightening in his throat. "She loves me."

A blast of blue light illuminated the lab, accompanied by a cacophony of simulated trumpets. Even as Ian covered his ears to block the high-decibel burst of sound, an answering elation suffused him.

"High protein supplement, Fuzzy," Ian said when the trumpets finally faded. "We need to cram some calories into her." Ian grinned again. "She's going to need them."

Krys slurped up the last of the nasty-tasting protein supplement, grimacing at the final swallow. "The flavor needs a little work, Fuzzy," she said, taking the water Ian offered her.

He took both beakers from her and set them aside. "Sorry. We probably rushed the fabrication a bit. How do you feel?"

She flexed her arms, reveling in the quickly returning strength.

"Great. But strange. Different, as if everything inside me is working...."

"Faster?" Ian suggested as he sat beside her on the bunk.

"Yes. It feels like everything is speeded up."

Ian nodded. "Your setpoint's been changed. It operates more rapidly."

An electric thrill shivered up her spine. "I'm like you, now."

"Well," Ian said, raking his eyes along her body, "not quite." He ran a finger across her cheek, along her jaw, tracing her lips.

She stilled his hand. "You know what I mean. My body can heal itself faster now."

"Much faster," he agreed, leaning in to brush his lips against her ear. Her breath caught in her throat when his teeth nipped at her earlobe.

"Ian," she murmured, only faintly annoyed he seemed to want to distract her. "I want to talk about this. I want to under...." Her voice faded to a sigh as his tongue flicked into the delicate shell of her ear.

He kissed her along the line of her jaw, pressed his lips against hers, then finally drew back. "I'm sorry. I want to keep touching you to convince myself you're really okay."

His love washed over her, and Krys had to take a breath to bring her emotions back into order. "Tell me what it will be like," she asked him.

He looked away from her a moment as if to gather his thoughts. "It will actually take a few months for your body to acclimate to its new condition. The healing process is less efficient at first. That's why this," and he held up his left pinkie, "healed with such a noticeable scar."

She took his hand and rubbed her thumb along the faint white line. "So I should be more careful at first."

"Right." He closed his fingers around hers. "You might feel nauseous until your stomach learns to kick into high gear."

"But how do we know it really worked?"

"I'm sure as hell not going to cut your pinkie off." He squeezed her hand. "I can test your setpoint. I'll need to anyway to make sure it hasn't exceeded healthy limits."

"You'll have to tell Robert." He cocked a questioning brow at her and

she continued, "You've solved the Jenna problem."

Suddenly, he pulled away from her and stood. The anxiety in his face made her wonder what she'd said wrong. "He ought to know, Ian. CGI ought to know."

He smiled briefly, then rubbed her hand to reassure her. "It isn't that. You just reminded me - Fuzzy, contact Robert."

Krys rose, pleased her weakness had abated. She dug through her carrysack for fresh clothing. "What is it?"

"The source of ODS. I'd tracked it down just before you...."

"Defied you?" she said, smiling to take the edge off her words.

He tweaked her hair in response. "And that had better be the last time." He ducked as she threatened to throw her carrysack at him. "Get dressed. I want you with me when I talk to Robert."

Giddy with happiness, Krys headed for the necessity with her change of clothes. When she reentered the lab after a quick cleanup, she was surprised to see Fuzzy still hadn't reached Robert.

Reaching out for her hand from where he sat in his chair, Ian asked Fuzzy, "He's not in his home or at CGI?"

"Nor does anyone know his whereabouts," Fuzzy answered.

Krys could see it worried Ian. He fidgeted with his keyboard with his free hand. "Keep trying, Fuzzy. We've got to find him."

Krys glanced up at Fuzzy's display and scanned the list of names there. "Those names have something to do with ODS?"

Ian's jaw worked, his tension apparent. "Just one. Winston Fuller."

He explained to her then how his investigations had led him to Gideon. "The man's sheer unpredictability frightens me, Krys. If he'd create something as horrifying as ODS, Lord knows what he would do at the helm of CGI."

Krys curved her arm around Ian's broad shoulders. "When is the board meeting? How soon could he take power?"

"Six days. I've got to talk to Robert. He has to prevent the board from appointing Gideon president."

"Ian," Fuzzy interjected, his panel an indecisive turquoise. "One item still puzzles me, about the second researcher."

"The second?" Ian hesitated, then remembered the name. "Julia Sato?"

"One of the six Jenna scientists," Fuzzy said. "She had a sister."

Ian's brow creased as he tried to remember. "Did she? I didn't know Julia well."

"I came across the sister's name quite by accident during the database search. Her name was Helen - Oh!"

"What is it, Fuzzy?" Ian asked.

"Robert Ishimoto is contacting us," Fuzzy answered.

Ian felt the tension leave his shoulders as Robert's face appeared on the screen. "Thank God you're okay. I was beginning to worry."

Seated in the gracious luxury of his home, Robert seemed serene, a sharp contrast to his agitation the last several times Ian had spoken to him. Ian supposed the man finally felt he could relax with the ODS crisis over.

"So you've solved all the puzzles, Ian," Robert said quietly.

Did Robert already know about Gideon? Which might explain his calm - perhaps he'd already taken care of Fuller. "If you mean about ODS, yes. Has Gideon been taken into custody?"

Robert laughed with easy humor. "You haven't quite pinned down all the facts, after all." He shook his head, smile still in place. "Gideon is just where I want him - at CGI, doing his best to muck up the Corporation's day-to-day affairs."

Something in Robert's manner sent a warning message to Ian's brain he couldn't quite grasp. "You want Gideon at CGI?"

Robert waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "I have him under



control."

Robert's lack of concern stunned Ian. If Robert cared so little about Gideon's presence at CGI, he couldn't know the truth. "Robert, you may not realize how dangerous the man is."

Robert leaned close to the transmitter. "He's an ineffectual idiot."

"Robert, it's an act. I've traced his tracks - he's the one who created ODS."

Robert laughed again, loudly, his eyes unnaturally bright. "Is that what you think? You're more of an idiot than he is."

Ian suddenly felt chilled as the truth began seeping into the edges of his consciousness, lapping up against his love for this man. When Kryz shifted beside him and took Ian's hand, he squeezed it tightly as if the contact would shut off reality.

Robert's gaze sought out Ian's, its power holding him frozen. "Let me tell you a story, Ian."

Ian nodded, throat too tight to speak as Robert continued. "Once there was an arrogant geneticist named Ian Llewellyn. He thought to play God, to defy death."

Ian shut his eyes, unable to bear the sight of Robert's face. "Yes," Ian rasped out. "I know this story."

"Ah, but there's a (bm) Chapter you've obviously forgotten," Robert chided. "When Dr. Llewellyn gathered his guinea pigs for experimentation, when he shamed them into participating, he never took one aspect into account."

Ian forced himself to look at Robert. "What was that?"

Robert's eyes burned into his. "They had families, Ian. They had husbands, wives. Children. Brothers - and sisters."

Robert turned off-screen, entered some sequence on his control panel and Julia Sato's face suddenly replaced his on the comm display. Robert let the image remain for several seconds before he let it fade into his own. Yet Ian still tried to deny the truth.

"I can see the resemblance." He counted up the years, compared them to Robert's age. "You two were related - was Julia an aunt?"

Robert's face hardened. "What was my mother's name, Ian?"

Ian knew the answer, but he had to force the words out. "Helen. Helen Ishimoto."

Robert shook his head slowly. "Helen was my aunt, my adoptive mother. Who was my real mother, Ian?"

Now Ian remembered Fuzzy's puzzlement over Julia's sister Helen. And at last saw in the lines of Robert's brow, in his eyes, in the shape of his jaw, a face Ian only dimly recalled.

"You are Julia Sato's son."

Robert nodded, affirming the truth, his eyes filling with tears. "And you killed her."

Tears stung Ian's eyes. "I never intended her to die."

"But she did. And left a four-year-old son." Robert looked away, as if to stave off the memories. Then he pinned Ian again with his gaze. "I've had to work hard to hate you, once I met you, came to know you. But I'd made a promise. A vow."

"Robert, if I could somehow make it right...."

Robert shook his head fiercely. "It would be useless of you to try." He laced his fingers together, his knuckles white with tension. "I have devoted every scrap of energy in my lifetime to bring about your eventual destruction. From my first studies in genetic engineering to the creation of the ODS virus."

The confirmation struck Ian's chest like a laser burst. His brain kicked into high gear, and he slammed out a series of commands on his keyboard. "Fuzzy! Get me Rosa Barrientos!" The computer did not respond. "Fuzzy! Open the comm!"

Finally, his panel glowing an ugly yellow, Fuzzy said haltingly, "I -

cannot."

"I've blocked his communications function," Robert said. "I cannot allow you to contact Earth." Robert smiled, an ugly twisting of lips. "ODS was intended as an object lesson in the perils of genetic engineering. The finger of blame would have pointed to you eventually."

The enormity of Robert's monstrous act sickened Ian. "But thousands of people died."

"I had to provide an effective rallying cry for the Sixers. Once it became known you created ODS, you would be forced back to Earth, within my reach."

Ian could feel Kry's trembling beside him, although she spoke in a clear, steady voice. "You've been directing the Sixers. You're Ram."

Robert laughed, an ironic sound. "I had hoped for more from them. They couldn't even manage to purge the CGI database."

Ian pushed his words past a dry throat. "All those times you tried to persuade me to return to Earth, to accept the presidency --"

"I wanted you near me. I wanted the opportunity to kill you at close quarters." His expression turned crafty. "You can be killed, you know, despite your regenerative powers. Suffocation. Decapitation."

Ian had to swallow back the horror. He could see the light of madness in Robert's eyes, the sheen of a man on the edge. Ian said slowly, carefully, "Robert, can't we talk --"

"We're done talking." Robert's mouth drifted into a smile. "I'm sorry I can't watch you die."

Alarm crept up Ian's spine. "Robert --"

Robert leaned over his control panel, his fingers stroking out commands. "It took some doing, but I've determined the sequence of commands to terminate your life support."

Ian watched with mounting unease. "They'll find you out, Robert. They'll know what you've done."

Robert looked up in surprise. "Public Security? They're idiots. They'll think it was an accident." He entered another sequence. "I'm also initiating a lockout to keep you in the dome. Can't have you escaping in the shuttle."

Ian squeezed Kry's hand so tightly, he heard her gasp with pain. He loosed his fingers with effort. "Let her go, Robert. She had nothing to do with this. Let her go and you can do what you want with me."

Now he looked truly regretful as he sought her out in the lab. "I'm sorry, Ms. Krysynowski. I never intended for you to be caught up in this."

Kry's stepped forward, her chin tipping up with determination. "Mr. Ishimoto, Ian never wanted your mother to die. There must be some other way to make amends."

Robert's mood surged into sudden rage. "His destruction, Ms. Krysynowski," he spat out, his face dark. "That is the only coin to repay his debt."

He swung back into calm just as quickly. Robert continued to enter his sequence, and Ian felt the tightening of the trap closing in on them. "If you won't allow Kry's to leave, then let me put her in a lifesuit. When you're sure I'm dead, you can restore life support so she can escape."

"And incriminate me?" Robert gave Ian a condescending look. "I'm afraid you'll just have to accept she's one more victim of your arrogance." Robert poised his hand over his control panel. "Once I've dispensed with you, I'll dismantle CGI -- through Gideon."

Another bit of Robert's tangled plan came clear to Ian. "You always intended to set him up as president."

"He's so easy to control. A few crucial bad decisions on his part, some judicious purging of data."

"But it makes no sense. Once you've dealt with me, why destroy CGI?"

"Genetic tinkering killed my mother," Robert said with the utter certainty of madness. "I have no intention of allowing it to continue."

"Genetic medicine has saved thousands of lives."

Robert fluttered his fingers dismissively. "Conventional methods can do as well." Robert rose, one hand on his control panel. "Again, my apologies, Ms. Krysnowski. And good-bye."

He stabbed out a final sequence on his panel, eyes never leaving the comm display. In the next moment, the lights flickered and the irregular cough of the life support systems' failure rattled through the lab.

Fuzzy's light panel seethed a brilliant yellow as he cried out, "Ian!" Popping sounds burst from the computer's console and the acrid scent of scorched circuitry burned Ian's nostrils. Fuzzy cried again, "Ian!" and Ian leaped to his feet, slapping his hands against the console. As Fuzzy's panel, displays and indicator lights went black, Ian gripped the console as if he could pull the computer back from oblivion.

Even as he mourned the uselessness of his gesture, the lab went dark. Ian groped behind him for Krys, calling out her name.

"Here," she said, enfolding his hands in hers. The iciness of his fingers frightened her.

"Stay with me," he said, pulling her down to floor level. "We have to find the emergency lights."

They worked side-by-side, opening and shutting cubbies, feeling about in the darkness for the halogens. Finally Krys's hands fell on a smooth metal tube and she switched it on. The brightness stung her eyes.

She looked up at Ian, ghostly in the harsh light. "How much air do we have? How much time?"

"Fuzzy --" He stopped short, the sound hanging in the silent lab. Stark grief slashed across his face.

"Is he...?" Krys faltered. "Can he be...?"

"Restored? I don't know," he said grimly. He rose with his own halogen light and hurried Krys to the airlock. "Air's not our biggest problem, the sunside shield is. The heat shunting system needs power. It'll get damn hot in here pretty soon."

Krys tugged off the control panel for the exterior airlock door. Passing the light over the circuitry, she sighed with relief. "Thank God, he didn't manage to fuse the controls."

"Can you override?"

Krys studied the circuitry. "I'll have to jury-rig it. But the dome is still pressurized. We open this door and the force of escaping air will blow us halfway across Thea."

"We can close the inner airlock door. It'll limit the amount of depressurization."

Krys looked around the airlock. "Even this volume of atmosphere would knock us around. We could puncture our lifesuits."

"Then we'll tie cables around us. Fix the other end to Fuzzy's console."

"Right. You take care of the cables, I'll handle the door locks."

Krys worked feverishly, the rising heat in the dome goading her on. "Damn," she muttered as she wielded the out-dated connecting gun from Ian's tool kit. "Damn!"

Ian backed into the airlock, unrolling cable. "What's wrong?"

"Gun keeps punching out the wrong thickness of conductor." The gun slipped from her sweaty hands and clattered to the floor. She stared down at it, not moving. "I can't do it. I can't do it in time. Ian, I'm so scared."

He bent to scoop up the gun and placed it back in her hands. "You can," he said softly, and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I love you, Krys."

His love for her beat back her fear and she turned resolutely back to the door control. Finally, she got the hang of the quirky workings of the gun and managed to lay out her jury-rigged circuit. She turned her attention to the inner airlock door.

Ian stood watching her while she worked, nervous energy radiating from him. "The door won't close completely because of the cables," he said as she laid the final line of conductor. "We'll get some leakage from the lab."

"Then I hope the door holds." She gathered up the hand tools she'd used for her repair and tossed them back into the tool kit in the lab. Then she locked the tool kit into a cubby. "The less stuff loose in here, the better."

The dome was a vision-shimmering inferno, the air hot in her lungs, the metal in the floor searing the soles of her feet. She felt as if she were swimming through a star as she returned to the airlock.

She reached for the inner door's control panel, ready to bring together the two conductors to close it. Ian stayed her hand. "Wait," he said.

He hurried back into the lab and cast his halogen along Fuzzy's console. When he reached the light panel, he ran his fingers along the edges, stopping to twist a catch release at each corner.

He popped off the panel, then grasped a handle in the middle of the scorched, blackened circuitry. Pulling back, he jerked free what looked like the black box from a shuttle.

"Let's go," he shouted as he raced back to the airlock.

Krys closed the inner door as soon as he was through, then they tugged on the lifesuits, locking the helmets into place. They tied the cables around their waists, Ian threading his through the handle of Fuzzy's black box.

Krys's hand poised over the outer door controls. "How much slack do we have?"

"Not much." Ian checked her knots, tightening them. "But the damn cables'll stretch."

Krys tipped her head up at him, although she could not see his face through the helmet. "I love you," she said.

Ian's voice rang clearly from the suit's radio. "I love you."

Ian pulled her back against him, his arms tight around her. "Now," he said.

Krys brought the connectors together. The outer door slid open.

(bm) Chapter 15

The door jammed halfway open, but the sudden force of the escaping air thrust them through it anyway. Ian kept his hold on her, his arms pinning hers to her sides, protecting her from a bad scrape as they were shoved through the door.

Krys heard his sharp intake of air as his big frame must have knocked painfully against the edges of the door. They landed together on Thea's gritty surface, two meters from the dome. But the cables seemed to stretch and stretch, the thrust of air forcing them back. Behind them, jagged boulders loomed.

Krys felt a vibration as the cables wrenched free from their anchor. She tumbled with Ian, head over heels, rolling in a confused jumble. Her helmet smacked against a rock, slamming her jaw shut so she bit her tongue. Then the gust of escaping air from the dome tossed them to one side, out of its path.

Ian rose, pulling her to her feet. "Are you okay?"

She put a hand up to rub her head, stopping at her faceplate. "I think so. Check my helmet. I've got a warning light."

He turned her slowly as he scanned the helmet's surface. "There's a fracture." He untangled them both from the cables and gave her a little push. "Let's go, now."

Her ears still ringing, she stumbled alongside Ian, barely keeping up. He grabbed her arm, helping her keep her balance. Her shuttle seemed so far away, and she almost wondered if someone had moved it.

By the time they reached the Pegasus, Krys could have sworn her mag-boots had attracted a ton of iron-bearing rocks to her feet. She put up a

trembling hand twice to the cockpit door control, but couldn't quite reach it.

Ian pushed her hand aside and opened the door himself. "I think you're concussed from your tumble."

She dragged herself into the cockpit. "Which would explain the fog in my brain."

Ian followed her into the Pegasus, closing the door behind him. "Jenna treatment should heal it."

She fumbled through the reactivation and recompression sequences. "It'd better do it quickly. Even with a clear head, it's hard calculating bump points."

"Can't your computer do the work?"

She shook her head. "This is no AIFLE. I have to give it the optimum path."

Finally the shuttle recompressed, and they removed the lifesuits, tossing them aside. Kry's clenched her teeth against the muzziness, irritated with her disability.

"Strap in," she told Ian, seating herself in the pilot's chair. Ian did as she ordered, sitting in the co-pilot seat next to her.

Ian watched her, his face intense. "The CGI board meets in six days. Can we make it in time?"

Kry's looked up at him, fighting the tunnel vision threatening to close in on her. "If I shave off a couple of bump points, stretch the intervals. Darn risky within the inner planets."

He gazed at her, blue eyes dark with indecision. "I won't sacrifice you. Not for the corporation."

The ready light flared and she activated the shuttle engines. "This isn't for CGI. It's for all those people whose lives can be saved by genetic medicine. I can take a risk for them."

Then as she launched the Pegasus from Thea's surface, the force pressing her back against her chair, she laughed. "Besides, I like living dangerously."

She banked away from Thea, catching a glimpse of the dome before they left the asteroid behind. An indecipherable mixture of emotions played across Ian's face.

"You're leaving twenty years of your life behind," Kry's said.

"There's only one thing I hate leaving," he said, his eyes straying to the black box sitting in a corner of the cockpit.

"How much of him is in there?"

Ian shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's part of a self-defense mechanism. But he would have had to activate it in time."

Kry's contemplated the expressive computer, not quite human, but not quite machine. She wished she could have double-checked her bump points with Fuzzy, especially the last one. She tried to push aside the nagging fear she'd set it too close to Earth.

Then they accelerated to the first bump point, and blackness closed in, the routine disorientation heightened by her concussion. She felt herself fade out, but in the moment before unconsciousness, she remembered the Freedom still back on lonely Thea. Briefly, in a dim, still-aware part of her brain, she grieved again for its dead pilot.

With a satisfied smile, Robert Ishimoto sat back in his chair in the CGI boardroom and scanned those seated around the table. Margaret Nguyen and Enrique Huerta, newest board members, their willingness to accede to the majority clear in their faces. Louis Chang, who only yesterday had confided to Robert he was too old for corporate life and he planned retirement before year's end. Ayesha Patel, whose total absorption in her work precluded even the barest interest in heading the corporation.

And Gideon Fuller. Who even now seemed ready to burst at his officious seams with the prospect of leading CGI. Whose own thick-headedness prevented

him from seeing he possessed not the slightest presidential aptitude, and without Robert guiding his every act, he would be lost.

And now that Ian Llewellyn was gone, dead, no one could stop Robert from destroying CGI through Gideon. The realization sent a shaft of fierce self-righteousness through him, accompanied by a twinge of sadness, of regret. He focused on self-righteousness, discarding any other emotion. He cast aside his respect for Ian, the feeling of friendship he had never quite succeeded in squelching.

Robert replaced the smile that had slipped and left off kneading his fingers together. "We have only one item on the agenda today. I suggest we get to it."

Louis's face crinkled in a broad grin. "Eager to retire, eh?"

Robert laughed, an artificial sound even to his own ears. A blinking indicator light drew his eyes to the display embedded in the board table; just an incoming air-car on the roof. Still, anxiety settled in his gut, and he felt a sudden urgency to complete the proceedings.

"My term ends today," he said quickly, wanting to get the words out. "By way of exercising my prerogative as president, I nominate Gideon Fuller as my successor."

They all knew who his recommendation would be, still they shifted in their seats, none of them meeting his eyes. Louis ran a thumb along the edge of the table. "I still think Ian -"

"Ian cannot be considered," Robert told him. None of them knew yet what had happened on Thea. "He's made his interests clear."

Louis sighed, finally raising his gaze to Robert. "I could delay retirement."

Ayesha snorted at his self-sacrifice. "Don't be an idiot, Louis. You're too damn old."

"You've no right to stand in my way, Louis," Gideon said in a whining wheedle.

"I simply don't think you're the best choice -"

"You just don't like me." Gideon thrust his lower lip out in a show of childish stubbornness. "Well, I don't like you, either."

"Gideon!" Another light in Robert's display began flashing furiously, the pattern indicating an urgent message from his aide. "Ladies and gentlemen, we've already beat this one to death. Could I have a motion on Gideon's presidency?"

Margaret and Enrique exchanged glances, then Margaret said, "I so move."

The indicator light shifted into an even more frantic staccato. "Who seconds?"

Louis hung his head, his voice barely audible. "I second."

Yes! He was almost there! He spread a hand across the warning light, ignoring its summons. "All in favor?"

Shouts and sounds of a struggle filtered through the closed door. Every head around the table turned. To distract them from the noise, to deny within himself what was surely its source, Robert shouted, "All in favor -"

He heard another scuffle, a bark of pain, then the boardroom door slid open. Shadowed ineffectually by Robert's protesting aide, the shuttle pilot at his side, Ian Llewellyn strode into the room.

Twelve sleepless hours later, Ian sank tiredly into the tattered chair still occupying a corner of his old lab at CGI headquarters. Kryns perched on the arm beside him, and he tucked his hand at her waist, relishing in her closeness.

She stroked his hair away from his brow. "We stopped him in time."

An ache settled in his chest. "Before the vote, yes."

She curved her palms around his face, tilting his head up. "Ian, you had no way of knowing Robert would try to kill himself."

He looked at her, drinking in her beauty. "I understand that here." He

gestured to his head. "But here...." He lay his hand over his heart.

"He'll recover, Ian. They pumped the drugs out of him."

Ian leaned into her warm palm. "But I can't help but grieve for our friendship."

She tapped his nose with her fingertip. "As long as it's not guilt you're feeling, along with the grief."

He shook his head. "I've had enough guilt to laugh a lifetime." He laughed, trying to push aside the grief. "Although I'm not sure what 'a lifetime' means to me."

"To us," she reminded him, brushing her lips across his brow.

He gave her a tug, landing her in his lap. He nuzzled the smooth skin of her neck. "I am exhausted," he said against her ear.

She squirmed in his lap against his hard ridge. "Not entirely, I see."

He took in a tight breath, the pressure of her bottom against him exquisite. "You can have everything from the waist down. The rest of me wants to sleep."

She shifted in the chair to straddle him, her hot center burning him through the knit of her coverall. "You did nothing but sleep in the shuttle."

He slipped a hand down the fastening of her coverall top, parting it. "I was unconscious. Not quite the same thing."

She groaned, let her head fall back as his hand found her bare breast. He drew his thumb across her nipple, feeling the rough bud swell under his touch. Her lips parted, her breaths coming shorter as he stroked and gently tugged. The muscles at her center flexed in response and he could think of nothing else but plunging himself into her.

"Ian," she gasped as he pulled her nipple into his mouth. "I think I might die if we don't get out of these damn clothes."

He rose, pulling her to her feet long enough to rid her of her coverall, then his own jeans and shirt. He sat back in the chair, then reached for her. She took him inside of her with a long, low sound that shook him to his core.

She held still a moment, her wet heat surrounding him with fire. Then she rose, her strong thighs lifting her away from him, then lowering her to engulf him again. He thrust in response, rising to meet her, wanting to feel his very self inside her, to pull her being inside him.

He heard her cry and the clenching of her muscles around him and he tried to hold back, to draw out her climax. But her scent, the feel of her skin, her honeyed heat enveloping him, tipped him over the edge. He poured himself into her, filling her with his love, the very content of his soul. And as he cried out her name, murmured again and again he loved her, he knew he'd found paradise.

(bm) Epilogue

Ian Llewellyn, new president of the Chemical Genetics Institute, paced the length of his cluttered lab. His gaze ran along the just-completed bank of equipment along one wall, snagging on a meter-square panel of lights in the center.

Krys came up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder, her warmth relieving some of his tension. "Come on, love," she said. "Quit stalling."

Ian nodded, swallowing back his anxiety. Releasing the catches in the light panel, he opened it to reveal the circuitry inside. Krys nudged him again, and he picked up the black box from the console. He fitted the box into its slot, then shut the panel.

His hand hovered over the power switch. He backed away, shaking his head. "I can't. You do it."

Krys went up on tiptoes to kiss him lightly, then turned to activate the switch. Indicator lights across the bank of equipment illuminated, cascading into readiness. Yet one panel remained unlit. Ian kept his eyes on it as long minutes passed.

Finally Ian had to accept the inevitable. Knowing his despair showed clearly on his face, he stared down at the floor, not yet able to look at Kryz. "I guess I'll have to get a new AIFLE controller after all."

Kryz rubbed his back comfortingly. "I'm so sorry, Ian."

Ian shrugged. "I know it seems silly to feel grief for a machine."

Kryz stood before him, forcing him to look into her eyes. "You know he was more than a machine. He'd become a part of you."

He squeezed his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to see the blank light panel. So her sudden gasp caught him by surprise.

"Ian," she said, excitement bubbling in her tone.

He opened his eyes and followed her gaze to the light panel. At first he saw nothing more than the dull gray of unlit lights. Then a brief flare of blue had him stumbling backward in disbelief.

"Fuzzy?" he whispered, then more loudly, "Fuzzy!"

Blue rippled across the panel, flickering and rolling in dizzying patterns. Then, as if rusty from disuse, came the tentative response. "Ian?"

Ian laughed, the sound loud and joyful. He felt his heart fly free as he caught Kryz up and whirled her around. "He's okay. Thank God, he's okay."

"Ian," Fuzzy said, puzzlement and petulance clear in his tone, "will you please tell me what has happened? Where are we?"

"On Earth, Fuzzy," Ian answered, elation bursting from him. "We're all on Earth."

Fuzzy's panel tumbled in a lavender of confusion. "But what— How — When —"

"I'll tell you all, Fuzzy," Ian told him, pulling Kryz close. "In due time."

Kryz grinned up at him. "I love you, Ian Llewellyn."

"And I love you, Ms. E. Krysynowski." He peered down at her. "What does the E stand for?"

She made a face. "I suppose I have to tell you, since we're married." She reached up to whisper in his ear, "Eugenia."

He knew she expected him to laugh, but he only whispered, "I love you." He gazed into the universe of her hazel eyes. "By any name."

He kissed her, letting her love wash over him as he murmured again, "I love you."

"Forever," she said.

He smiled. "For eternity."

The End

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