

THROUGH NEON EYES: PROMISE ONE



MICHAEL BARNETTE

*Published by Mojocastle Press, LLC
Price, Utah*

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Through Neon Eyes: Promise - Part One

ISBN: 1-60180-025-8

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Through Neon Eyes Series

DEDICATION:

This story is dedicated to all the great reviewers
who've enjoyed my work:

Wateena of Coffee Time Romance
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Your time and comments are greatly appreciated. If
I've forgotten anyone here, you still have my deepest
appreciation.

Through
NEON EYES:
PROMISE -
PART ONE

The man was clothed in a severely conservative charcoal grey suit that matched the equally conservative cut of his hair. A handsome man, the fit of the suit showed that he also kept himself in good physical condition; his body lean and trim, unlike some of the other men seated at nearby workstations.

Surrounded by the tools of his trade, computers, the cubicles of lesser coworkers and an array of expensive lab simulators, he exuded an aura of power, of importance. To some degree, that was true. No longer just one of the masses, the common workers in the corporate world, Jessman's career was showing promise, as evidenced by the larger cubicle which comprised his work area. He wasn't just a flunky, one of the rank and file anymore. Now that he was with NeuroTech—who recognized the importance of the work he'd done for his prior employer—he'd attained a measure of respect. But that power was a pure illusion created by the things around him, and the number of people working under him.

He was under probation, watch-dogged by senior members of the corporation's research and management team, his position one carefully crafted to instill a sense of gratitude to his new masters. It was also tailored to his emotional needs as much as the suit he wore was tailored to fit his body.

According to the psych profiles, giving him responsibility for the guidance of underlings would make him work harder, drive himself to succeed with

his project. So he'd been given his own lab, and they'd granted him the guidance of his own staff.

Guidance that was sorely lacking at the moment.

A career in the corporate world was an odd thing. Hard to gain, easy to lose.

The head of the project, Jessman was normally a model of efficiency and admirable work ethics.

Today he was far less than efficient, and surely the effort he'd put into his job was far less than admirable.

Nor had his distraction gone unnoticed by his co-workers .

The truth was he'd hardly thought about the project he was working on. Since he arrived, he'd done little more than open the file that contained the accumulated data of two month's work. And he hadn't bothered to enter a single keystroke, hadn't altered a single line of the complex formula for the new polymer gel he and his team were working on. A gel intended to become a substitute for sectors of the human nervous system.

Speed booster. This particular formula was meant for the corporate soldiers that protected the NeuroTech enclave from being the subject of hostile takeover attempts by other corporations like Polycyber or even his old employer, Megalli-Loran.

No, he hadn't really shown team spirit, didn't have the same drive about their project that he'd shown only the day before.

Questions had received monosyllabic answers, some of which had made no sense. Emails and phone calls had gone unanswered. Whispers and stares

regarding his peculiar behavior had gone equally unnoticed.

But he had a good reason for not paying much attention to the boring details of his job. A single blond-haired reason. One with eyes bright as cobalt neon and a slim body that aroused the researcher's primal desires.

No, David Jessman wasn't too terribly interested in his job. He was staring at the computer display in front of him, but he wasn't seeing any of the complex formula that filled the screen. Hadn't paid it the least attention all day. Instead he was remembering something else. The soft touch of lips on his skin, the sweet bliss of fingernails raking along the healing welts on his back, the heated spray of water stinging across those same welts.

When he shifted his position in his seat he could feel the soreness of his ass, the ache of the bruising left by his lover's teeth on his buttock.

His cock strained at the fabric of his underwear, fighting for freedom, seeking the touch of someone that wasn't there.

Bells. Gunwhore and zonewarrior from the Liberty City Freezon, a place that was anything but a tribute to liberty or freedom. Instead, it was a squalid area of poverty, disease and terror, a no man's land where only the strong survived.

The strong like his blond angel of sin and seduction.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't even notice when his colleagues shut down their own workstations, said their goodbyes, and

departed for the evening, a few of them exchanging puzzled looks, worried frowns.

Quitting time, and Jessman was too lost in his own thoughts, his own wants and desires to even notice.

The clock kept going, time ticking away, seconds to minutes, minutes hedging toward an hour of overtime spent lost in a dream. Thoughts of the man who waited patiently for Jessman's return in his apartment.

The phone on his desk buzzed, the sound snapping him out of his reverie, calling his attention to the device on his desk, as well as the time that was clearly displayed in the gleaming white surface.

He stared, then grabbed the phone and put the small receiver into his ear. "Jessman speaking."

"I'm waiting," a dulcet voice, smooth and sweet as honey, dark as night, murmured into his ear.

Jessman's mouth went dry. "I'm coming."

The voice laughed. "You'd better not. I'll be upset if you do that without me."

The call disconnected abruptly and Jessman pulled the receiver from his ear, shut down his computer, grabbed the papers on his desk and hurried for the elevator, his mouth still dry as dust, his cock hard and aching.

The instant the doors of the elevator opened he bolted inside, startling the other people already inside. He carefully managed to use the papers he carried to hide his crotch, but met with only limited success.

He rode the elevator upward with a sense of anticipation seasoned with a bit of anxiety. What if

Bells was angry with him? What if he decided to leave before he got to his apartment as a means of punishing him?

The door of the elevator opened and two people he only knew as familiar faces on his rides to and from work departed. Five more floors to go; only three people left, none of them from his own floor.

He clutched his papers closer to himself, feeling a fool for walking out minus his briefcase that morning. It would have given him something better to hide his stiff dick with than a folder of papers.

But his mind hadn't been on his job then anymore than it had been on his work during the long day. No, he'd been able to think about nothing but the slender blond he'd left behind in his apartment.

Right now was no different. He had the papers from work, but damned if he could remember exactly why he'd had to bring them home, much less what he was expected to do with them. His mind was on something else, the little head doing the thinking for a change, and it was focused on other things.

Or rather, not things, but a person. The too-beautiful man waiting for him.

Gunwhore. Zonewarrior. Bells.

His addiction.

The elevator stopped again and two more people got out, neither of them acknowledging the dark-haired man with the papers clutched so tightly in his hands, dark eyes bright with emotions they wanted no part in. Anxiety. Nervousness. Lust.

It was easy for them to ignore the man, just as it was easy for Jessman to forget their existence, but for

far differing reasons. For them it was easy, since Jessman wasn't part of their world. For Jessman, they were easy to discount because the only thing on his mind was his paid lover. Bells. *His Bells*.

His in thought only. He had no claim on the blond beyond the fact he'd paid, and paid well, for the man's time.

He'd paid, but not gotten what he'd expected. No, what he'd gotten was a trip into a world he'd never known existed. The world of the Sweet Sisters. Pleasure. Pain. He'd learned they were not so different, and he'd gotten quite an education.

It was an education he wanted to continue.

How long could he retain the gunwhore's services before he bankrupted himself? Two or three days at most, and then he'd be working for months to pay off what he owed. That was *if* he could even get an advance against his salary. If his credit had been built up, if he'd had more time to gain some of the things he'd enjoyed at Megalli-Loran, he wouldn't have worried. While they hadn't been the best place to work, he'd had considerable credit in his accounts with them. Considerable credit, and he'd been a well-respected member of their team. Valuable enough that he now found himself here in the NeuroTech corporate tower having been the victim-recipient of a highly skilled hiring team sent by NeuroTech to take him from Megalli-Loran.

Yes, if he'd still been there, he could have bought the blond gunwhore's contract from the fuckbroker that held it. But chances were he'd have never encountered the blond in the first place. Megalli-

Loran wasn't a corporation inclined to allow non-residents inside because of the danger potential such invaders to their closed building presented. No, he'd have never met the gunwhore from the Liberty City Freezone if he'd still been with them. But it sure would have been easier to pay for what he now found he couldn't do without: the gunwhore known as Bells.

The elevator came to a halt and the last person stepped out, leaving Jessman alone with his thoughts. Thoughts of a slim blond—his hair in a tangle of braids, a riot of beads, feathers and his trademark bells—with a vidstar face and the body of a young god.

Or an angel. One of the fallen type.

Considering the path his life had taken in the last twenty-four hours, the last was the most likely. He'd follow the blond's lead into the fires of Hell if that was where they were headed, and he'd do it with the same bemused grin he had on his face.

Jessman sighed and abruptly became aware of the ache in his groin, the firmness of his own cock.

How long had he been in such a state of arousal? The whole elevator ride? The entire day?

His lips quirked into a slightly self-mocking smile.

No wonder the other people had been so eager to escape his presence.

He must seem like some kind of perv to them, standing there with his stiff dick and a load of paper in his embrace. He was laughing when the doors to the elevator opened for the last time. He stepped out on his floor, a floor he shared with only six other apartments.

Yes, he was well thought of here at NeuroTech. The head of his own specialized research department, rather than being the bright mind under the watchful eye of a higher-placed departmental mind and the idiots of middle management.

It was a position of some prestige, but he was still in his probationary period and had to be careful.

Far more careful than he'd been today, now that he considered it.

He'd done nothing of use since he'd gotten to work, and he wondered how much damage he'd done to his tenuous position with his lack of focus. People who shirked didn't hold their jobs long.

Not when every moment of every day was tracked via computer, logged and saved to lightcube for later analysis. Flagged for low productivity. Reviewed.

Yes, today had been a disaster that couldn't be repeated.

Not if he wanted to keep his job, and keep breathing.

People weren't fired from a place like NeuroTech, they were 'dehired' with a bullet, or a silent gas put through the air ducts of an apartment's air treatment system. Losing your job meant losing your life.

The thought sent a chill of fear down his spine and he sighed, realizing there would be an inevitable accounting of his actions. Or rather, his lack of action.

His smile was gone as he headed for the door of his apartment, realizing that he'd been so distracted today he'd forgotten to even have lunch or take most of his permitted breaks.

He was hungry and thirsty, but all he could focus

his mind on was the man awaiting him in that apartment.

Bad as it was, the threat of reprisals for his poor performance today couldn't totally dampen his enthusiasm for the gunwhore.

Shuffling the papers to his other arm, he was about to place his hand on the door lock when the door opened to reveal...

A slim body clad in nothing but a black leather harness, pants and a gunbelt. A harness that clung to the nicely muscled chest in black bands that contrasted with smooth skin. Jessman's eyes went bright with lust, his already hard cock jumped as his gaze fueled his desire to a feverish heat. The harness, the pants and the gun made an erotic picture that took the man's breath away, and stole the last few shreds of rationality left to him. It was too much, hid too much.

Revealed even more.

A sudden shower of white cascaded to the floor, Jessman staring at the vision before him, body gone hot with lust and memories that drove the last lingering doubts from his mind. Yes, last night had been as real as that morning in the shower.

And he'd been promised more.

Like a man enmeshed in a dream, a sleepwalker with no control of his actions, Jessman took a step closer to the gunwhore, arms reaching for what he wanted.

Illusive as mist, the smaller man danced out of his reach to turn when he had the coffee table between them. "Pick up the mess you've made."

Jessman blinked. "What?" The papers from work were the farthest thing from his mind. Even if his erection hadn't shown which head was in control of the dark-haired man's thoughts, his confused expression certainly did.

Bells laughed, the sound soft and low. "You're really out of it, aren't you?" he asked the taller man as he hopped over the coffee table. Glancing at the scattering of paperwork, the cobalt gaze lifting to the man's face, his lust-dazed expression. A slight smile played at the corners of the blond's lips and he reached up to caress Jessman's cheek, his hand feeling cool to the passion-heated researcher.

From his cheek to his hair was a small move, carried out quickly, the fingers taking a firm grip.

A gasp was torn from Jessman's mouth, the hand in his hair forcing him down. He was so lost, wrapped in desire, lashed by the tiny kiss of pain that he craved that he went to his knees without any hesitation.

His dark gaze was on Bells' face, searching for any sign of what he should do, what was expected of him now. He was new to the game they were playing, a game that was more compelling than any simvid, any person real or created via computer and piped into his mind via thoughtlink.

"Oh...God, please..."

His face was gently clasped between strong-fingered hands and turned up; a warm mouth touched his lips, kissing him tenderly. A moan vibrated through the contact of their mouths, Jessman shuddering.

"Been thinking about me, have you?" the gunwhore asked him, voice sending a ripple of need through the researcher.

All he could do was nod slightly, his face still cradled in the blond's hands, lips teasing his. He closed his eyes.

The hands left his face, fingers grazing down his body, the touch too light, just more teasing when what he wanted, needed was release, not more torment.

Bells smiled at him, the look showing pity as he gripped Jessman's arm and hauled the man bodily into the nearest chair.

The white leather squeaked as Jessman was pushed down into the chair, the soft padding still carrying the new furniture smell, his hands and body where he touched it feeling the coolness that quickly faded under the heat of his own flesh.

But the contrast, brief as it was, added another layer to the sensations raging through him.

His shoulders were pressed back, his hips grabbed and drawn forward. Like a mindless doll, he just sat there and let it happen.

No, let wasn't exactly the right word. He wasn't letting it happen, he was all but begging for the blond's touch. And if it took begging, he was more than willing to do that also.

Bells could do anything he wanted to and Jessman would accept it, welcome it gladly, without question or hesitation.

For anyone in Jessman's position, one of reasonable wealth, well placed in the corporate world, such blind

trust could be deadly dangerous. But the man was past the point of fear with the gunwhore. He'd faced that down this morning, and consideration was no longer given to the fear that the blond was just in it for money, or other self-serving reasons. Nor did he fear being murdered. If Bells had wanted to kill him, he could have done it many times already, and so far he'd refrained. He'd even admitted to Jessman that was the real reason behind taking the job of being his companion last night. At least, a killjob had been his initial reason. Now, well, not even Jessman really knew what was keeping the blond killer there except, perhaps, that the corporate tower was safer than being on the streets of the Liberty City Freezon. Here Bells could eat and sleep in peace, without the worry he might have to fight.

He stared at the blond, who was regarding him through the cobalt neon of his cybereyes, the slender man standing motionless, only the feathers in his hair moving, fluttering in the faint breeze from the air conditioner. Even his expression lacked emotion, making him look more like some rich man's expensive toy than a human being.

It was a bit uncanny, but it didn't do anything to cool Jessman's lust. He'd seen the man like this before, and was starting to associate it with deep thought on the gunwhore's part.

The eyes blinked, a calculating expression appearing where the blank mask had been only seconds before, the change drawing David further out of his own lust-dazed thoughts.

"Bells?"

A golden eyebrow lifted.

"What's wrong?"

The answer wasn't given verbally. The slender man simply gripped Jessman's thighs, and pushed them as far apart as the wide seat of the chair would permit. Lips curving into an enigmatic suggestion of a smile, the blond's hands glided slowly up the man's firm thighs, stroking over the silken fabric of the pants he was wearing, squeezing the firm muscles beneath.

Jessman swallowed, beads of sweat dampening his upper lip, and forehead, the predatory glimmer of Bells' gaze, the faint smile, the touch of the blond's hands giving him more than a mere inkling of what was on the gunwhore's mind.

Eyes alight, almost glowing, Bells dropped to his knees between David's wide-spread legs, hands arriving at Jessman's crotch at the same time his knees hit the soft carpeting. His fingers closed on the zipper of Jessman's trousers. Paused. The gunwhore was watching Jessman's reaction, waiting for something.

Twitch of a lip, a slight narrowing of the gunwhore's eyes, the tip of a pink tongue darting out to dampen his lips.

Jessman's heart felt as if it had stopped, his breath trapped in his lungs as the zipper was pulled down, a cool hand reaching inside his pants to ease his thick veined shaft free. He moaned at the touch, shivered at the cool hand, the chilly air. He was so hot he wondered why there wasn't any steam rising from his aching prick.

Watching Bells, Jessman saw the cool expression the gunwhore was trying to maintain slip to reveal desire, a hunger for what he was about to do.

Beads of precum formed at the tiny slit in the head of Jessman's cock, the moisture glistening like dew.

But they weren't there for very long.

A warm tongue swept them away, and Jessman nearly screamed from the jolt of pleasure that shocked through his overtaxed nerves. After a day of continuing arousal without any release he was tense, desperate.

The delicate tip of Bells' tongue slid across the head of his cock, lapping at what the gunwhore found there the way a man might savor a meal to his liking.

Jessman groaned, one hand locked on the arm of the chair, the other whipping up to grasp a handful of feather, bead and bell-adorned braids, trying to use them to guide Bells to what he wanted.

But there was no moving the blond if he didn't want to move, the man's body hard as stone, unyielding to the researcher's best efforts.

He could see the faint smile turn into an amused quirk of the man's mouth. Jessman let the braids go, only dimly aware of the soft chiming as the twists of long hair dropped against the zoner's firmly muscled back.

"Bells, please," he gasped, the hand he'd used to pull the younger man's hair falling onto the blond's shoulder, caressing both warm skin and leather, his touch as much a plea as his strained words were. The contrasts of soft skin and equally satiny leather overlying muscle as hard as steel sent a shudder

through Jessman.

The blond gave him no answer other than the languid sweep of his tongue over the head of the dark-haired man's cock, and the light grasp of two fingers and a thumb that served to steady the prick for his own amusement.

It was good, intense, maddening. And it was far from enough.

"Dammit!" Jessman swore. Unable to take the teasing mouth anymore, he did something he wouldn't have dared even a few hours before: he kicked the gunwhore in the ass. Not hard, but the blond's tongue stopped moving, the cobalt gaze regarding him from behind the outrageously adorned veil of his braids.

The gaze, the expression both served to freeze the researcher in place, his dick all but forgotten under the icy lash of the man's evident displeasure.

"I..." The sweat already dampening Jessman's upper lip and forehead became even more pronounced, perspiration forming between his shoulder blades and under his arms as the knowledge of what he'd just done—not so much the kick itself, as the implication behind it—impinged on the common sense he hadn't possessed at the time he'd struck the zoner.

The stillness of Bells' features, the slightly tighter grip on his erection told Jessman he'd committed a grievous error. He'd broken one of the unspoken rules between them without knowing he'd done so. Or rather, without any thought over what kicking the blond might mean in their little games.

The fear he thought to no longer experience with Bells returned full force, a blush of embarrassment coloring his face for an instant before he went pale with terror. Unlike his last encounter involving this man, and the fear he had so easily incited, Jessman's cock stayed quite hard this time.

Maybe he was starting to enjoy that too, the fear this man could evoke. More spice, like the touch of the Sweet Sisters. A touch he found himself craving almost as much as he craved the gunwhore kneeling between his spread legs.

David swallowed painfully, mouth dry as dust, eyes wide with the panic gripping him. "I..."

A hand shot up to touch his mouth, the movement a blur in his vision. Fingers pressed over his lips kept him from saying anything else. Prevented any apology, any attempt at an explanation.

All David could do was sit there, his cock twitching from the anticipation of a punishment as yet unknown. The stiffness of his prick faded slightly and his heart began to hammer under the lash of adrenalin as he waited to see what Bells would do about his breach of the gunwhore's secret rules.

It was like waiting for death, that not knowing.

What if he leaves? What if he never comes back? Oh, God, please don't let him walk out over this. Please. Please!

Never seeing the gunwhore again was the worst punishment Jessman could imagine. Desperation filled David, the thought of losing this boy-man more than he could bear. He started to speak despite the fingers over his lips, but they pressed down, their touch giving him a taste of pain as his tender flesh

was ground into his teeth in warning.

"Every action has a consequence," Bells informed the dark-haired man, his words spoken quietly, a bare whisper of sound; the touch of velvet across skin. Soft, silken, and David shuddered at the sound. "If you kick me, if you hurt me in ways I'm not expecting, you might get more than you bargained for, David."

It was a warning, delivered in a deceptively gentle tone that was at contrast to the fingers on his mouth. They weren't gentle, the warning made clear with the taste of pain, the flavor of blood in his mouth as the edge of a tooth cut the inside of his upper lip.

But the hard stare of the too-bright eyes in the vidstar-handsome face told him more, gave him what he needed know about the rule he'd just discovered.

Hurt me, risk getting hurt in return.

The fingers slid away from his mouth to caress his cheek. "Don't forget what I am, David. Never forget that I'm from the LC. I'm good, but I have my limits and I don't want to hurt you by mistake."

Jessman stared. Bells wasn't mad over being kicked, the zoner was concerned about injuring him by accident. Zonewarrior's reflex action. Get hit, hit back.

He'd been like that in simvid. In a *sim*, inside a complex game via his thoughtlink. Simvid felt real when you were inside. But this wasn't a simvid. He wasn't a zoner, wasn't enhanced to be a fighter, or to survive the horrors of a Freezone. If Bells hit him as hard as the man was capable of, he might not get back up. Someone enhanced to the level the gunwhore was

could kill as easily with bare hands as they could with a gun.

No, if Bells hit him, really hit him, he wouldn't get back up. Not ever.

Dangerous, zoners. Used to the hard and fast rules of the Freezone. Kill or be killed, survival of the fittest as played in the high tech world.

Jessman knew it from vid, Bells knew it from the merciless reality of his life.

David couldn't speak, but he could move, so he caressed his lover's cheek, his hand trembling visibly. The taste of blood lingered in his mouth, as did the slight bruising of the tender flesh of his lips. Jessman would remember the warning; it was burned into his mind, as deeply etched as their first night together was, irrevocably part of who he'd become at the hands of the blond kneeling before him.

"I'm sorry," Jessman murmured as he touched caressed the smaller man's face, fingers gliding over the hard planes and angles, brushing across lips soft as the petals of a rose.

Silver bells rang sweetly as the man nodded an acceptance of the apology.

Jessman gave a tentative smile that elicited a nod from the blond, but nothing more. David watched as the cobalt eyes closed, and he took that as a sign that Bells was enjoying the touch of his hand. He touched the closed eyelids, the tip of his finger ruffling over his eyelashes, Jessman watching as the light from the kitchen changed their color from palest gold to burnished brilliance. A fingertip followed the perfect line of the younger man's nose from bridge to tip,

moved down the curve to the dip of Bells' upper lip.

"You're so beautiful," he said, and leaned forward to press a light kiss to the gunwhore's mouth.

"Am I?" the gunwhore asked, his eyes opening to regard Jessman.

"Yes. Very," the researcher replied as his fingers moved down the blond's throat to caress along the hard line of a collarbone.

His hand was caught, pulled close to the gunwhore's lips, which opened to take one of Jessman's fingers—the one he'd been touching Bells with—into a hot, wet mouth.

Jessman groaned, prick rigid with need, a new bead of precum slipping over the purpled head to slide down the underside.

It didn't make it past the glans. Bells' mouth, releasing Jessman's finger, the tip of his tongue sweeping over the aching flesh. Tasting, but not giving more than that.

"Oh...please!" Jessman begged, hips arching up off of the chair at that too-brief contact. "More I want more."

But all the blond did was sit back on his heels and stare at the desperate researcher. "There you go again, talking about what *you* want. Didn't we have this conversation earlier today?"

Jessman nodded, remembering what he'd been told. It wasn't what he wanted that mattered, it was what Bells, his master, wanted that counted.

"Then what do you want...Master?" He'd hesitated over the honorific just to see what the gunwhore might do.

Fast as a lightning, the blond was in his lap, ass pressed to his crotch, sending a flash of pleasure from dick to brain, returning his cock to aching life as a tongue slipped into his mouth and strong arms encircled his chest, the blond pressing him into the chair.

Mercurial hardly covered the fast mood swings of the blond gunwhore, but Jessman would never complain. Not when sex with Bells turned his mind to gel and his cock hard as stone.

He returned the man's embrace, his kisses with eagerness, their tongues exploring, touching.

Jessman was just getting warmed up, relaxing under the onslaught of the blond's impassioned kisses when, true to his nature, the gunwhore slipped away in a blur of movement, a jangle of music from his braids. Cool air invaded the space where an instant ago the heat of another man had warmed him. David sighed, the sound coming out more as a snarl of frustration.

Braids still swinging, bells singing their sweet song, the blond stood motionless in front of the dark-haired researcher, watching him with that enigmatic neon stare that Jessman found so arousing and disturbing at the same time.

"Please, I want you," he said, reaching out to try and take the blond's hand in his.

Illusive as a dream, Bells stepped away, the movement lost in the distortion blurring of Jessman's own low-grade cyberoptics. He wasn't a warrior, the upgrade to his eyes partly cosmetic, partly a matter of improving his abilities as a researcher, as he didn't

need something as antiquated as a tabletop microscope because of those upgrades.

The men regarded one another in silence, Jessman's face pleading, showing his desire for the smaller man, Bells just watching Jessman, expression as unreadable as a statue's cold stone visage.

"You started something here, don't you want to finish it?" the dark-haired man asked, voice coming out in a fear and passion strangled plea. The Sisters ruled his flesh and mind through the blond, conflicting emotions coloring his plea.

Jangling bells, the blurring movement, the hot clasp of a mouth around Jessman's throbbing flesh as he was engulfed, swallowed down until the head of his cock bumped the back of the blond's throat.

The sucking, the tongue that swept over the head, the grip of a hand at the base of his cock which stroked upward as the mouth moved was too much for the already highly aroused Jessman.

Being with this man, gunwhore and zonewarrior, was like making love with a storm and being struck by lightning. Jessman's hips came up off the seat and a scream of unbridled passion was torn from him as he reached a shuddering climax.

Panting from the intensity, David opened his eyes to find Bells standing there, a slight smile tugging the corner of his mouth as he licked his lips.

"Better?"

Jessman nodded and smiled, eyes going to the bulge that was clearly visible under Bells' leather pants.

Bells watched the researcher's eyes narrow, the hint of a wicked thought showing in the smile that graced the man's face.

It was a face he could gladly watch every hour of every day. Handsome, with a firm mouth, nicely sculpted cheekbones and a hard-edged jaw. It was a face he liked to touch, to kiss, to watch as climax colored it with emotion, the fuck-blush tinting David's cheeks.

David was a man he could easily love if he let himself go, if he just surrendered to feelings that were surfacing from beneath the frozen sea of his emotions.

Dangerous. Stupid. Suicidal. Risky.

He thrived on risk. On danger. Death was a constant companion; the Dark Lady's own personal messenger. He never flinched when he felt her touch. A touch that he seemed immune to, the finality of death evading him.

The Dark Lady was there with him always. Forever.

He turned his gaze outward. No sense thinking about the past. A man couldn't live there. He could only live in the here and now.

And here and now was dangerous.

Jessman wasn't a zoner, couldn't protect himself from the people that might come after him if anyone in the LC found out about their relationship. And they would find out. Sooner or later someone would come to try and kill Jessman as a way of striking at him, just as they'd come for Loreli and Jayzee, almost killing mother and child in the process.

Jayzee, all of eight years old, blinded, raped, nearly

dead, her mother just as badly hurt, her bloodied and eyeless face seeing nothing. Not the rage in his eyes, nor the tears streaking his cheeks that night.

He'd tried to get revenge for them, and nearly been killed in the process himself.

Nearly.

But money and tech solved everything.

Loreli had money, and she'd paid for the restoration of her own sight, given the promise that there could be more money.

Polycyber had agreed to save his life in exchange for his agreement to work for them, to be a test subject. She'd made the deal for him.

Now he was living the deal she'd made.

And paying off the debt he owed to her and Jayzee for nearly getting them both dead, just more spare parts for the meatmarket, the thriving underground business of selling organs and tissues to places willing to buy them without any questions.

That too was the past. Fresh in his mind, not shrouded but the dimming of time as so many of his other memories were.

Ones he didn't want to remember, yet they were memories he would never forget.

A face, a name. His cherry-blossom girl, Kimiko.

More of the past he didn't want to think about, her lost love the most bittersweet of part of his prior existence.

Leave it be, just leave it be, he told himself and mentally locked the door on old emotions best not revisited. On a life better forgotten.

On a *Thing* better left sleeping.

He watched as Jessman tucked his wilting prick back into his trousers, zipped up and rose from the chair, the man doing a passable imitation of a zoner's swaggering walk as he approached.

Large hands framed his face, his head gently tipped back for the hungry kiss the dark-haired man pressed to his mouth. Bells could taste the faint metallic bite of blood from the abuse he'd meted out earlier, and he could feel the heat of damaged tissues from the lips he'd bruised. A tongue touched the seam of his lips, seeing entry. He resisted because it pleased him to make Jessman work for what he wanted. He had to hide the smile of amusement when David's kiss grew more urgent, demanding.

Lips parting, he reached up and put his arms around Jessman's neck, giving the taller man a tiny taste of what being in charge would be like, if he ever chose to give the older man the chance to dominate him.

If.

He couldn't give Jessman that much trust.

Not yet.

Possibly not ever.

Then it struck him that he fully intended to become Jessman's lover. To keep coming back to this man, and the realization shocked him, while at the same time a flush of warmth filled him.

Love, lust, or just the desire to have a safe haven?

The answer was something he didn't want to face head-on. But it was a question that kept coming up in his thoughts. Eventually he might just have to admit a few facts to himself. Accept what lurked under his

decision to let David live, to stay with Jessman past the hours he'd paid for the services of a gunwhore.

And this wasn't part of the past he didn't want to remember, it was part of the here and now, part of the what might be rather than the what had already been, and that was just as nerve-wracking in its own way as those broken memory recollections that surfaced from the dark recesses of his past.

A past that was far too long.

He closed his eyes, let the kiss carry him along trying to give him a solid base to hold onto. But it wasn't that easy. Nothing ever was.

He'd lied when he'd told Jessman his age. The truth was, he had no idea how old he was, but he knew he was much older than he'd led the researcher to believe. Much older.

Jessman's arms around him, the taste of his mouth, the feel of his body were a powerful enticement to hold him in the moment. Jessman, his very own pied-piper of dark hair, handsome face and a beautiful body, himself, the rat caught in a trap he'd unwittingly devised when he'd taken the job to kill him. To murder the researcher whose kiss he was now enjoying so much.

Too damned much, really.

Murdering him would have been such an unforgivable waste.

And he'd never been one to waste anything this good.

Megalli-Loran could go fuck themselves, because he was keeping Jessman as his own.

That was a bit of a shock to his mind, too. The

concept that he fully intended to *keep* Jessman for himself. Not as a client, per se, but as his lover.

Another thought occurred to the zonewarrior then. Jessman was in danger of reprisal from Megalli-Loran. Serious danger, since he'd declined to complete the killjob they'd hired him to carry out. Their retroactive dehiring of an employee who'd been taken out of their enclave by another corporation would be something they'd want carried out, even if he personally hadn't done the job. It didn't matter that Jessman hadn't gone willingly. No, what mattered was that he'd been theirs, and NeuroTech had stolen him. A rival corporation now had Jessman's expertise as a polymer gel researcher on their team, he was not in Megalli-Loran's lab busting his ass for them and that must irk them.

There would be other efforts to kill David.

That alone was all the reason Bells needed to stay. At least for a few days, until he could deal with the situation, find out who'd ordered the dehiring and let them know that it might be better for their own health to leave Jessman alone.

David was his, and he'd be damned if he'd let *anyone* hurt him.

That was his job.

Smiling, he broke the kiss to stare up at his lover's face. "Let's get something to eat."

"Eat?" Jessman frowned. He'd liked kissing Bells, and wanted to keep doing it. Food was the farthest thing from his mind, the hard body he was holding much more important to him than mere food when he

knew their time together was limited. Something he knew would be measured in just a few precious hours. Then his pretty boy would be gone, and he'd be alone again.

It was a dismal thought, and Jessman didn't want to dwell on it. He'd have far too much time for that later.

"Yes, eat. I want you to have enough energy for tonight," Bells teased. "I wouldn't want you falling asleep before we're done."

Jessman's mouth went dry at the implication, not from fear but from anticipation.

"What do you have in mind?"

Neon blue eyes seemed to glimmer with wicked delight, but Jessman knew there wasn't any real possibility of that. Cybereyes weren't real, didn't show emotion the same way real eyes could. Bio-gel ones sometimes did, but those were terribly expensive and few corporations had that sort of technology. No, even his highly paid gunwhore lover couldn't afford something that costly.

But looking at the blond, he wondered if he somehow hadn't managed to pull it off, perhaps steal the eyes and have someone in the LC install them. And that brought him back to his greatest question. Who had made his beautiful gunwhore?

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Bells teased as he took Jessman by the hand and led him toward the spotless white kitchen.

"Yes," Jessman replied, not sure if he was answering the blond's question or his own unspoken one.

Opening the freezer revealed a small but enticing selection of prepackaged gourmet meals. None of them appealed to Jessman. The only gourmet meal on his mind was the blond.

"I could order from one of the restaurants downstairs. They deliver," Jessman suggested. "Otherwise one of us will be eating while the micro heats another meal."

The freezer door closed. "Sounds like a plan."

Jessman stepped nearer to the gunwhore, hands grasping Bells' upper arms to keep him where he was, his mouth locking to the younger man's in a hungry kiss. This was what he really wanted. The beautiful boy who was his master. He had absolutely no interest in eating – unless the meal he had was cock – despite not consuming anything but a nutritional drink early that morning.

No, his hunger was for the blond he had pressed to the refrigerator.

Their kiss was broken when Bells twisted away, ducking under the taller man's arms.

Jessman sighed. "I'm really more interested in you than in food."

Cobalt neon stared at him, the man's expression unyielding. "I believe we've been over this."

"Yes, Master," Jessman replied, submitting to the zoner's will with a sheepish smile. He took Bells by the hand, surprised that the gunwhore neither evaded nor resisted the touch. He took a tentative step toward the dining room and was equally amazed when his 'Master' showed every intention of following. The smiling still on his sore lips, Jessman

led the zoner to the dining room table where a few laminated menus sat in a stack in the center of the pristine glass tabletop. "You choose the place, I'll order."

Jessman could hear the man's nod as the bells that filled his braids rang softly. Like the infamous dog of the old-time researcher, Pavlov, the sound of those sweet chimes was beginning to have a remarkable effect on him. But instead of drooling in anticipation of food, his recently expended cock twitched in anticipation of another round of pleasure with the blond wearing the bells.

David found himself chuckling at his own reaction, the researcher finding such a development amusing in the extreme.

A gold eyebrow rose inquiringly as Bells picked up the menus and Jessman's cock swelled, hard and ready for another experiment.

"You're habit-forming," he told Bells.

"Am I?" Bells inquired, his expression bland as milk.

"Most assuredly," David replied, taking the smaller man in his arms to kiss him, feeling the desire heating his blood, thrumming in his cock. The warmth turned to lust's greater heat as the blond pressed closer, a thigh moving between Jessman's thighs as Bells' lips parted to give David access. The stack of menus fell to the carpet, forgotten in the intensity of the moment.

It was as close to submission as the blond had ever gotten with Jessman, and that realization served to heighten the lusty warmth into a conflagration of

passion that raged inside the taller man. There was no denying that he wanted the gunwhore for his own.

Maybe this could turn out into something like an equal relationship rather than master and pet, with him as the pet.

Not that he'd complain about being the zoner's pet and fucktoy.

Jessman was really getting into the kiss, his tongue exploring, touching the hardness of teeth, the slick softness of the mouth that had so recently pleased him. Their tongues re-engaged in a passionate sparring match in which the blond's tongue touched and slid, but did not advance to claim Jessman's mouth.

Fingers dug into his back, Bells clinging to him in a way Jessman hadn't even dared to dream about. The hold was needy, but not demanding; desperate, but not possessive. He felt the blond change position so that, while his thigh still pressed to Jessman's balls, the blond's leather-guarded crotch was now also pressed to one of David's thighs. The researcher was able to feel the steely firmness of a fully aroused cock grinding against this leg and he knew the cock was bound by the leather harness Bells was wearing.

The memory made him moan with need.

His arms were shoved open and the zonewarrior was gone, the harsh music of the silver in Bells' hair making Jessman's deprived cock twitch. His gaze only caught up to the blond as Bells turned to lean with his shoulders against the bland white wall of the dining room. His cobalt gaze regarded Jessman with cool speculation, his arms crossed over his chest.

Bells' entire pose was one of arrogant self-assurance, a pose that the gunbelt only emphasized for the researcher.

If it weren't for the still highly visible bulge between the blond's thighs, Jessman wouldn't have known his kisses had an effect on the boy, so calm and unruffled was his lover's face.

"Food, then play," Bells stated, his tone as hard as the gun still riding his hip.

Jessman grinned. "Yes, Master."

His reply brought an actual, if tiny, smile to the blond's face.

David stood there, just taking in the breathtaking vision the gunwhore made against the wall of his apartment's colorless dining room. The contrast of his leather adorned body against the stark white wall, the tangle of braids half concealing the beauty of his face—but not the blaze of his inhumanly neon bright eyes—made such a stunning counterpoint that the researcher forgot to breathe for a moment. Another part of that contrast wasn't lost on the researcher; his lover's appearance driving home the fact that they were from two very different cultures, ones that were as separate as if the younger man came from some far off world, one of the so-called lost colonies that were making the news these days.

But he just came from the far side of The Wall that separated Miami proper from the polluted miasma of the Liberty City Freezone. A hellish realm where the laws were made and enforced by those with the best highart polymer upgrades, corporations entered with a wary tread, didn't stay, and never ever tried to

impose their own brand of reality.

He wanted to take the smaller man into his arms, hold him in an embrace he couldn't break and kiss him until he gasped for breath and begged to be fucked, begged to stay with David forever.

Dreams were wonderful, his dick aching at the thought of being able to restrain the blond, to have his cock inside that tight little ass.

But when the dream was over, nothing was different.

He couldn't hope to hold the blond against his will.

And he couldn't hold out the hope that Bells would stay, much less give himself to the older man. It wasn't going to happen, and David's dreams would soon be over. Bells would go back to the Zone, and that would be the end of it.

Zoner and corp researcher.

It couldn't work for them.

Not permanently.

He wouldn't leave the enclave to take up residence in the terrifying hell of the Liberty City Freezone, and he didn't think the zonewarrior would leave...whatever he had back there for the structured existence of the corporate world.

Fire and ice.

Oil and water.

Zoner and corp.

They didn't mix.

But Jessman was determined to hang onto the fantasy as long as he could.

"You must like what you're looking at."

The dulcet voice of his lover brought him sharply

out of dreamland. "Yes, I must admit I do enjoy looking at you."

Again he was gifted with one of the blond's rare smiles. But this one wasn't the usual tiny upward twitch at the corners of his mouth. No, this was a full-blown genuine smile, a smile that showed perfect white teeth.

Such a stunning smile was more than Jessman could take.

He swept the blond into his arms yet again, bending down to kiss him, and this time Bells' lips, tongue, his whole body responded in a way that took away what little breath remained to the dark-haired man.

Still kissing, hands exploring the hard planes of muscle under leather and expensive suit fabric, the pair of men sank to the lush carpeting, feeding on the sweetness of passion.

Jessman was on top of the blond, knees between the smaller man's legs, getting the barest taste of what he wanted with such desperation: the chance to fuck the young zonewarrior. He lowered his head, bit down gently on the leather girt shoulder, finding some bare skin, loving the scent of leather and the pleasant taste of his lover's skin beneath his tongue.

But what he loved more was the sound of the blond's velvet-toned voice as he moaned, arms tightening around the researcher, a hand gripping his hair, not to pull his head away, but to encourage him in his efforts.

It actually felt damned good to let David have the

lead for a while. The man's body on top of him felt good too, but Bells knew he couldn't just let Jessman have what he wanted. Not yet.

There was that little matter of complete trust, which he couldn't give to the researcher—yet. Probably never, he reminded himself. The worlds in which the corpman and zoner lived got in the way of so many things.

There was also the fact that Jessman, as the sub, hadn't done anything to earn the chance to fuck his master.

No, Bells had set up a series of rules. Ones he hadn't bothered to inform the dark-haired man about, preferring to let him break them in order to discover what they were.

That was half the fun for them both. For Bells it was waiting to see how long it would take David to stumble across each rule; and for Jessman there was the punishment involved. Punishment he seemed to enjoy just as much as Bells himself enjoyed doling it out.

But the man's kisses, his hands as they explored his body, the caresses that touched skin and teased through leather, were combining into sensations that felt so good Bells found himself sorely tempted to permit Jessman to continue what he was doing. He wanted to just let it go to completion as they were right now, their roles reversed.

Bells knew it had to be stopped soon or he wouldn't have the willpower to take control back from Jessman. He was already feeling the temptation too strongly, curious to know what it would be like to

be on the receiving end with Jessman's large cock up his ass. Not that he hadn't experienced big cocks, but he had the sneaking suspicion that with Jessman it would be different. The man didn't just want to fuck him and send him away. He could tell from the way Jessman touched him, kissed him that what the man wanted to do was make love, and there was a vast difference between someone that just wanted to use him for release and someone that wanted what Jessman all too apparently desired most: a lover.

A lover, and who he wanted was Bells.

It was a fact that wasn't lost on the blond gunwhore.

And it was so very tempting to give the man what he *thought* he wanted because Bells himself wouldn't mind having Jessman as his own.

However, reality had a way of punishing people for not examining the consequences of their impulsive actions, and Bells for one didn't want to see David bitten by the hard fangs of cruel reality. Not when those fangs were sure to kill.

Yes, the curiosity, the desire to throw his self-imposed rules aside were there. They were as much for himself as they were for David, yet he longed to just forget them and have that big prick buried inside him. The urge was getting much too powerful, too difficult too resist.

Being under Jessman now was giving Bells just the barest taste of what he was starting to want from Jessman. An equal relationship, give and take between them. Letting their roles shift so that they could both fully enjoy what they had together.

Such a pleasant idea, but not one that would be easy to achieve under the circumstances. Corporate researcher, and rival corporation's high-finance experiment. No, this wasn't going to be an easy venture; that was, if he even tried to keep David.

But Bells had long ago learned that anything worth having and keeping was seldom something easily held in the first place. Often a man had to fight to retain the things a man most wanted in life.

And this, his time with Jessman, was quickly becoming one of the most precious things in his life, even if he would never admit it to anyone, especially not to Jessman. Allowing the researcher to know how he felt would only place them both in more danger. Bells had no illusions about the sort of trouble Jessman would be in if people in the LC found out about his attachment to the handsome man. And for David, having his corporate rivals know about such a relationship could be disastrous. He'd met enough corporate exiles, heard enough of their stories to realize that the Machiavellian atmosphere that prevailed inside the shining towers of the corporate enclaves which composed Miami proper were just as deadly, just as dangerous in their own right as the streets of the Free were.

Bells didn't want to run the risk of being the reason David found himself out there in the LC, in a place he was no more suited to live in than a fish would be suited to life in a tree.

No, his emotional attachment to the other man was already too strong to want anything bad to happen to Jessman. Which was probably fairly obvious even to

the researcher, considering what he'd already told David about his original motive for accepting him as a client. But at the same time, the Free was too deadly for him to take Jessman there where he'd be more able to keep him safe. Too many ex-corporate people died of disease—those that didn't wind up shot, stabbed or worse—typically died in a few years from the levels of toxic muck on the streets, in the air, tainting the water. Zoner bred and born people were genetically a more hardy breed, though there was some question as to whether they were still technically human because of that adaptation. Many a slumming corper had gotten messily dead for calling a zoner a *nilhuman*. It was one of the nastiest insults anyone from Miami could level on someone from the LC, and few corpers got the chance to say it more than once where a zonewarrior from the LC could hear them.

Yes, they'd have to be careful not to give any of Jessman's corporate rivals something they could leverage into getting the man demoted, dumped out the nearest exit as an exile or 'dehired' in a brutally final manner. A brutal manner Bells himself had almost been guilty of enacting for Megalli-Loran.

His depressing thoughts had quelled his own ardor somewhat. Enough that he'd be able to take control from Jessman when he deemed it was time. Bells held tightly to the man over him, his fingers splayed across Jessman's finely clothed body. The fabric was soft to his touch, the muscles, the firmness of natural human flesh combined with the feel of the Jessman's mouth on his into a heady blend of passion strong enough to

erode at Bells' newly recovered determination. He wanted the man, but now wasn't the time to permit Jessman have more than a taste of being dominant.

At first he'd thought retaining the dom's role in their relationship would be easy. He'd been forced by his job as a gunwhore to take the submissive part for so long that he'd ached to be the one doing the fucking rather than being fucked. And when he'd gotten the opportunity with Jessman, Bells had gloried in it. He'd been as lost in the direct link between them as the researcher had been at the time and Jessman's willingness to relinquish all control to him became a thrill too great to simply throw away for a few thousand corpdollars. And after this morning, Bells found he still wanted the dominant role.

But he also wanted to feel Jessman's impressively large cock inside him, the hard driving of a prick across the sweet place deep within his body. He wanted to completely lose himself in the pleasure of being fucked by another man, something he never did with his clients. Something he never dared to permit on the other side of The Wall, not even when he was with Loreli in the relative safety of Loreli's zoneside brothel, *The Fractured Mirror*.

The thought of totally discarding every aspect of self-control sent a shudder of anticipation through him. Just to be able to let go, to completely enjoy something without keeping even a fragment of his enhanced senses alert for danger would be like a brief glimpse of heaven. Dim memories of making love, of being free to let go, to simply feel and not worry

about being attacked, killed while his guard was done drifted mist-like through his mind.

The past. Long gone.

Long forgotten.

No, not forgotten, just put aside. Like other things that he had to set aside for the nasty business that was his life.

Yes, it would be easy to just let go, allow David to have what they both really wanted.

But now wasn't the time or place for that.

For one thing, Jessman hadn't earned the privilege, and he wasn't about to go back on the rules he'd made for this whole thing, even if they were only rules in his own mind. David had to find a way to earn the right to fuck his master. And Bells wasn't going to make that sort of thing easy for him to achieve.

Secondly, Bells didn't feel safe here. Sure, it was a lot safer when compared to the LC, but he knew such safety for someone like him was mostly an illusion. If security came for him, there was nothing Jessman could say or do that would prevent them from trying to take him down. Not when this was NeuroTech's tower and he was a test subject of their greatest rival, Polycyber.

But that was something only a select few people at Polycyber had knowledge about, and he didn't think anyone at NeuroTech was aware of who or what he really was. An experiment in extreme biomechanical enhancement. A walking test lab. A blond and neon-blue cyber-eyed lab rat they'd tossed back into the cage of the Free just so see what would happen.

A rat that owed a lot of money to his benefactors, and a payment was due.

Money he didn't currently have because he'd reneged on his contract to kill the man who was currently kissing him so ardently.

Tongue sparring with David's, he was quite aware of his own aching, leather-wrapped cock as well as the feel of a big dick pressing against the leather of his pants.

He made no efforts to stifle the moan of desire, gave no indication of his gloomy thoughts, his body reacting to everything Jessman was doing as if David's intense sexual assault were his entire world, the only thing in his existence that mattered to him.

In a simpler world, in another place and time, maybe that would have been true. But they weren't in a simple world, and in this place and time, they shouldn't even have met. Wouldn't have, if Jessman's sexual fantasies hadn't included fucking a gun-toting whore from the LC. Jessman hadn't stated he wanted a woman, he'd left it to Katerina to select whom she would send to his bed.

She'd chosen Bells, and Megalli-Loran had eagerly contracted him to kill their wayward researcher. How they'd found out he was going to meet with Jessman was anyone's guess. For that matter, Kat might have told them, because half the Free likely knew they wanted a killjob enacted. Either way you looked at it, he'd taken a job, then not done it, which was bad for his reputation.

Not that he gave a damn about his rep at the moment.

After what they'd done... What *he* had done to Jessman, and what the other man had gladly accepted *from* him, Bells had quickly come to the realization he didn't want to kill the handsome researcher. He simply didn't have the desire to put an end to the other man just for the sake of money. No, Bells discovered that what wanted more than anything else was to fuck Jessman over and over until both of them were totally spent.

And that was what he'd done.

It was also what he wanted to do now. Fuck Jessman.

Or *be* fucked. That temptation was strong, curiosity over how good Jessman might be wanting to be sated almost as much his lust for that big cock.

Bells returned his full attention to what David was doing, feeling a hand rubbing his groin, responding by pressing his hips upward. He was showing his enjoyment of what Jessman was doing, moaning to make his pleasure clear, even if his face didn't show what he was feeling. He tried not to let too much of what he felt show on his face, ingrained street-level caution keeping his features as unreadable as possible out of habit.

Gunwhore that he was, he'd developed that skill as a defensive mechanism, like his ability to tune out what a less than desirable client was doing to his body. It also worked in his favor now when the problem was that he found the client far too pleasing.

Being in love wasn't an option. It wasn't in his plan.

But it *was* becoming a fact.

A fact he couldn't keep denying.

It was also a truth he'd have to keep hidden from everyone else. Jessman, his own friends, his pseudofamily—Jayzee and her mother—the rest of the people in the LC, especially from his enemies and the people at Polycyber. From everyone.

Knowing how much he was starting to want the dark-haired researcher, how deeply the man was affecting him, left him with a vulnerability he'd certainly not expected, and most definitely never wanted. Loreli and Jayzee were enough of a vulnerability for him to handle.

And now there was David, on the wrong side of The Wall where he'd be even harder to protect from harm.

Bells' arms tightened protectively in reaction to his thoughts. He heard a gasp, knew he'd hurt Jessman with his inhuman strength and eased up on the researcher's ribs before he shattered them. An act he was fully capable of, just as he could kill a normal human with a well-placed fist or foot. The enhancements had made the small blond so strong he could snap the bones of unenhanced humans with the ease a normal person might break a pencil.

Sometimes he wondered if he was really even human anymore.

But he'd really stopped being human long before he became a lab rat for Polycyber.

And that past was a direction he wasn't going to let his mind take. He'd done that enough already. Right now he preferred to let passion erase the depressing thought that he'd become a Frankenstein, a scientific

experiment with little that was human remaining, his physical body so modified even his genetic code wasn't human anymore.

But he could still feel, still love.

And that was part of being human.

Possibly the only part of the man he'd once been that remained.

The weight of Jessman's body over him, the kisses and caresses were nibbling away at the control he'd regained by thinking of the unpleasant, blacker aspect of what this meant, what love with a man living on the Miami side of The Wall would mean.

It could get to a point where his frequent visits here became suspect, proved an attachment of some sort existed between them. Zoner or corp, someone would eventually catch on to what was happening between the pair of men. Potential danger loomed from so many directions, creating so many possible outcomes that it chilled his passion even more than the dismal track his thoughts had previously taken had managed to accomplish.

And this time David noticed.

The kiss they'd been enjoying so much—and that Bells had also been trying to ignore at the same time—came to an abrupt end as David braced his hands on the floor and pulled away. Bells felt the solid musculature of Jessman's shoulders ripple under the jacket of his suit. Dark eyes the rich brown of bitter chocolate gazed down at him, the man's expression revealing a mixture of flashburn lust tempered with growing concern and no small amount of confusion.

"You aren't enjoying this, so tell me, what am I doing wrong?"

Bells offered the man a trace of a smile. "Nothing." He ran his hands along Jessman's back down to his equally firm buttocks, actually feeling a thrill of pleasure at the hard feel of the other man. He might be corp and a deskjockey, but there was nothing soft about Jessman's body.

The thought crossed his mind that hard-bodied or not, Jessman wouldn't stand a chance in a fight with even an unenhanced kid off the streets of the Zone.

David frowned, "You don't like this, do you?"

Bells laughed, he couldn't help himself. The man's concern over how a gunwhore felt was touching, and it warmed something deep inside the zoner, making him wonder if Jessman wasn't suffering from the same sort of madness: corp and zonewarrior falling in love.

But that would be too damning for them both.

Yet there was the way Jessman was regarding him, so anxiously, genuinely worried he'd done something to upset his paid lover.

In answer to that expression, Bells moved his hands to grip the sides of the older man's face, pulling him down for another exchange of scorching mouth-to-mouth desire.

He stared down into the researcher's dark gaze, knowing they were as unreal as his own, but doing it nonetheless, seeking something he knew he was a fool to even look for from Jessman: some indication of love to back what he'd thought he'd seen before.

Stupid to want. Stupid to believe it could happen.

But he was having a very stupid, very blond moment, and he couldn't help wanting what he knew he would never have.

And even if he got it, how long could it last before one, or both of them, paid for their madness?

Time to take over. He had an earlier promise he intended to make good on, and he never broke his promises.

Abrupt as lightning, he twisted his body, using the power of enhanced muscle, bone and tendon to easily manhandle the bigger man, rolling them over so that he was now on top.

The startling change in their positions was only a surprise in how quickly the blond took control away from him. Jessman had been expecting it all along, waiting for it as he daydreamed about fucking the blond into screaming submission.

Not likely to actually happen, but a pleasant fantasy just the same.

David wasn't disappointed to find himself on the bottom. Not really. He found too much pleasure in the gunwhore's masterful abilities to bring him to a mind-dazzling climax to really mind being topped by the younger man. It felt so good, the combination of pleasure, pain and the taste of fear Bells could instill an intoxicating blend that did more to thrill him than even the best full immersion simvid he'd ever owned. And if he complained about being the one fucked all the time he'd be a hypocrite, since he kept begging for the blond's cock in his ass, not for the chance to be the one doing the fucking.

"I think you're a bit overdressed, don't you?"

There was an expression on the gunwhore's face that notched up the pace of Jessman's already racing heart and drove knife-edged lust right to his groin.

Elven prince, devil's son—Jessman didn't know which Bells was, and he really didn't care so long as he got what he wanted: a hot injection of leather-wrapped prick to fulfill his needs the way no one else had ever done.

"Yes," he agreed, but he didn't try and remove anything himself. Not when the blond was kissing him just under his earlobe, teeth nipping, tongue bringing every nerve ending in his whole body to feverish life.

"Fuck me, please." He wasn't begging. Not this time. Not *yet*, anyway. He was fairly sure he'd get to that point sooner or later, though. Unless his *master* relented and granted him his wish before he reached that point.

An unlikely event at best, Jessman knew that Bells got off on hearing his pleas as much as he found himself getting off on the control exerted over him by the smaller man on their wild rides through the Realm of the Sisters.

"We'll get to that, I promise," Bells replied, his breath a warm tickle across the dampened skin of Jessman's neck, his lips teasing, goosebumps raising on Jessman's skin. "But first, we're going to eat. You might not be hungry, but I am."

Jessman couldn't hide his disappointment as the blond left him, gone and standing a few feet away. He sighed, left alone feeling the chill where Bells had just

been the way the zoner did so often. So often David realized it too was part of their *game*, so he offered no complaints, giving Bells a long-suffering smile.

It still left him breathless, the smaller man's speed, and he wondered how it had been achieved. His area of research—in fact, his current project for NeuroTech—was to improve speed enhancement techniques in order to upgrade NeuroTech's corporate defenders. While their solders were good, the higher-ups were hearing rumors of a secret project over at Polycyber that had increased their security team's speed by a solid ten percent. And ten percent was a huge margin in the polymer enhancement game.

NeuroTech—the number one competitor of Polycyber for the local government's military contracts—couldn't afford to lose the contracts they had because their agreements to supply enhancements to Unified Southeastern America were the only things keeping NeuroTech Miami's profit margin above the red line of impending closure. That was one of the major reasons NeuroTech had grabbed him in the first place, since his work at Megalli-Loran had gotten the much smaller corporation into the military contract game. His chemical alteration of the base polymer gel they'd been using gained Megalli-Loran entry on the big money stage of military applications, something none of Megalli-Loran's other researchers had managed in years. Yet, for all his ability, they'd refused to name him a team head, much less give him his own lab as NeuroTech had instantly done the day he'd first begun work for

them.

But there was an awful lot resting on his shoulders here too. Responsibilities and pressures he hadn't had at Megalli-Loran.

The bottom line was simple. If the Miami enclave of NeuroTech didn't want to go the way of the Los Angeles tower—closed and abandoned, the employees living in the reeking muck of the LAZone among whores, criminals and the castoffs of other defeated companies—they had to at least keep up with Polycyber.

It was on Jessman's broad shoulders that NeuroTech had placed the burden of improving their own existing speed enhancers, and the man was determined not to let them down.

Not when failure might mean living on the streets of the LC, or a bullet in his brain.

A hand was extended and Jessman took it, feeling the power in the lean body of his lover as the man easily pulled him to his feet. He couldn't resist the urge to go with the momentum and he collided with the blond, hearing bells ring as he managed to press Bells' back to the wall.

Fantasy again, and he smiled as he grabbed a handful of braids, tipping the smaller man's head back to steal another kiss, pleased when Bells didn't resist or pull out of his grasp.

When their mouths stopped their mutual exploration, Bells whispered, "You are persistent, I'll give you that."

"What else will you give me?" David asked archly, his breathing ragged with the passions running

through him; desire, need that went beyond the physical and entered emotional territories that were dangerous and stupid.

"About eight inches, after we've eaten something."

Jessman grinned and reached for the closure of the blond's pants. "Eight inches? Sounds like a filling meal to me," he remarked. "But I'm not sure you've got that measurement right."

Laughing, Bells shrugged, smirked and slipped away from Jessman, too fast for him to get a better grip on the man's braids to stop his retreat. The braids he'd had in his hand whipped free, the bells stinging his palm as they were pulled from his grip.

He glanced at his palm, seeing no real damage, but feeling the sting.

"You aren't hurt. Give me a bit of credit for not injuring you accidentally," Bells said as he scooped the fallen menus from the floor, gave a cursory glance at them, then handed one to Jessman.

"Italian?" David asked.

The silver in the man's braids chimed softly as the gunwhore nodded.

"Any preferences?"

"I'm from the LCFree. Surprise me."

"Okay, I'll do that."

"EnCoSet?"

"Yes Mr. Jessman?" the softly modulated feminine voice asked from the fully automated computer set up that ran his apartment's environmental and security systems.

"Place my delivery order for two of tonight's special, a bottle of their best wine and tonight's

dessert with Donna Rosetti's, please."

"Done and acknowledged. Delivery is anticipated in thirty to forty minutes. You have two messages; one text message, one veevee message."

A veevee message? Voice *and* video. Probably from his disgruntled boss who'd looked over his lack of work on the day's audit sheet. He sighed. Today's distraction would have to be explained, but Jessman was at a total loss how to answer the questions he knew he'd be facing in the morning. If his boss wanted to have a private, no-nonsense chat with him about performance requirements, he was going to be hard pressed to create an answer that would satisfy the man. Jessman stared at the menu in his hand and wondered if he'd be able to pay for it come the end of the week. It was a depressing thought.

One he didn't want to think about at the moment. Movement at the corner of his vision caught his eye and Jessman looked up from the menu in his hand to see that Bells was watching him his facial expression as unreadable as the cobalt gaze of his cyberoptics. The dark-haired man almost choked as he realized what the blond's right hand was doing, the full length of it pressed firmly to his erection and moving slowly over the sleek leather as Bells had watched him place their order for dinner.

"Should I play your messages for you, Mr. Jessman?"

"Nnn...nooo," he managed to choke out. "That will be all. Voice communication module off."

"Yes, Mr. Jessman. Voice module off as requested," the machine answered before it shut down, leaving

only the security and environmental suites active.

The blond's lips curled, giving Jessman that faint, knowing smile he often displayed. The researcher found it difficult to stay where he was, his gaze held by the slow motion of the hand moving over black leather. Mesmerized. Mind caught in the trap of lust. He pulled his gaze away, looked at the man's face and found himself equally transfixed by that cobalt stare. It too had him fused to the spot, unable to move regardless of the fact his own gaze kept traveling down to watch what the gunwhore was doing with his hand. Without saying anything to Jessman, he let his center of balance shift until he was leaning casually against the nearby wall, his gaze never wavering.

Jessman swallowed the knot forming in his throat. Watching the hand gliding over the leather. Knowing what was underneath made Jessman's own engorged prick jump, saliva flooding his mouth at the thought of tasting the blond's cock. Of sucking that rigid flesh and hearing the gunwhore's soft moans of pleasure.

He trembled as he stood there, eager as a starving dog to get to a meal he could see but not reach. He didn't dare move. Dom and sub. More of the game and its unvoiced rules.

David was learning. He waited for his master's permission because without it, he didn't dare so much as take another step toward the zonewarrior.

"Can you think of anything to do until the food gets here?" Bells questioned.

Considering what he was watching and the thoughts filling his mind, there were quite a few

things Jessman wanted to do before their food arrived.

"Yes, Master, I can," he replied, still not moving. He could have interpreted it as implied permission, that softly voiced question, but he didn't want to risk any punishment. Not when what he wanted was within his grasp—or rather, lay under his master's hand.

"Care to show me what you have in mind?"

Jessman strode to the blond, dropped to his knees, face turned up to Bells, looking for approval or disapproval as he gently pushed aside the blond's hand and reached for the buttons that held the leather closed.

A slim hand caressed his face, moved to take a gentle grip in his hair before caressing through it, fingertips stroking his scalp, sliding down toward the nape of his neck. He shivered at the touch, granted his master's approval. Jessman smiled.

It was only fair, really. Bells had blown him earlier, now it was time to return the favor. And they'd both be fully recovered and ready to go after they'd eaten.

The thought of what might happen after dinner sent another thrill of anticipation through the dark-haired man and he noticed that his hands were shaking as he gripped the first button of the leather pants his master wore.

His master. He would never have believed that such a phrase could send a thrill of desire, of need through him if someone had proposed that possibility to him a few short days ago, and now he couldn't conceive of a day in which he'd stop wanting what he now had

with this coolly dispassionate man.

David opened each button slowly, deliberately drawing it out, teasing, listening to the gunwhore's slightly uneven breathing as each button came open. The sounds were maddening, making Jessman want to prolong this the way Bells drew out the exquisite sexual torments he inflicted on Jessman. Each of Bells' quiet sighs of expectation heightened the researcher's own pleasure in what he was doing, making him bolder. He leaned forward and blew lightly across the man's skin, smiled when he felt the cock under his hands jump in response, grinned as the shuddering sigh of pleasure filled his ears. Grinning like a fool, Jessman gradually revealed the thin trail of gold that started at Bells' navel and led downward to Jessman's personal El Dorado.

He nuzzled the gunwhore's belly, the tip of his tongue trailing over the golden threads; even more daring now as he added another level of teasing. He could smell the warm scent of leather, the sharp tang of gun oil from the revolver riding the blond's hip. He could also smell the musky arousal of the gunwhore, the three things combining to make the scent that was unique to the blond. Like the bells in the man's hair, that scent added to Jessman's own desire, ramping it up another notch. He moaned in appreciation as a slender hand caressed through his hair before gripping it tightly.

The treasure that Jessman sought was almost his, one more button standing between him and his prize. He could see the bulge riding along the fly of the leather pants, but he'd done nothing to actually free

it. Only after the last button was opened did he reach in, his mouth watering at the sight of it as the full length was freed.

Jessman claimed his reward and licked his lips, hungry for the chance to have the zoner, to taste him. He touched a cock wrapped in black leather, only the head uncovered, and he wondered if he could even make the younger man reach climax when there would be so much less sensation.

Bells' hand gripped his chin, turned his gaze upward, "Make me cum before dinner gets here, and you'll get a special reward."

Jessman pulled the tight leather pants down to give himself more room to work, his hands shaking with eagerness. He wasn't sure what kind of reward the blond had in mind, but he was planning on finding out.

He scooted forward on his knees, opened his mouth and took the head of the zoner's cock between his lips, careful not to hit the sensitive skin with his teeth. Not yet, anyway. Bells wasn't ready for the touch of that Sister yet. He sucked and swept his tongue over the engorged flesh, felt a hand close in his hair once more, listened to the pleased sigh from his Master.

Jessman worked eagerly to make the blond cum, tongue and lips stroking across the tender skin of the blond's cock head. His own prick was hard and twitching with every moan his efforts drew from the gunwhore. They were quiet whispers of sound that showed no sign of urgency, no trace of an impending orgasm.

The flavor of the blond's precum exploded across his awareness and he groaned, his own need thrumming through his lower body.

But this time it wasn't about him, wasn't for him. It was for his master.

And it had to be good, because the opposite of reward was punishment.

Time was ticking away, seconds flowing into minutes. A knock on the door would end this, and he couldn't accept a failure. Not in this, not in anything. Jessman wasn't someone that could easily admit defeat, and he wasn't about to start now.

He tasted precum, lapped it away, went for the real deal, sucking without mercy. Reaching up with the hand not helping steady the blond's cock, he gripped Bells' ass. Digging his fingers into the unnaturally hard muscle, he heard a deeper groan, felt the blond's hips buck, his thighs tremble.

And the answer to his dilemma, the challenge he'd been issued, was pain. The Sweet Sisters giving him the tools he needed to make the zonewarrior reach climax.

It hurt his hand, Jessman not used to so much resistance when he gripped something, but he didn't relent.

I've got to do something to make my hands stronger, he rationalized, noting that he could barely dent the firmness of Bells' ass cheeks. Something a lot more demanding than typing on my computer, that's for certain. Back to the gym to see what they've got for this.

He pressed harder, dug the edges of his neatly

manicured nails into the skin and felt the zoner's hips buck slightly. Yes, he'd guessed right. Sister Pain was the right answer. Jessman wanted to smile, but that would ruin the suction he was creating.

The hand he'd been gripping Bells' prick with was pushed aside, the blond taking a grip around his own leather-clad shaft, freeing Jessman's other hand for whatever the researcher chose to do.

This time Jessman's reaching hand gripped something a little more sensitive than a butt, hand cupping the leather-guarded balls, pressing upward, massaging through the soft leather that encased them.

"Clever boy," he heard Bells' arousal roughened voice say right before the cock in his mouth exploded, and he got his reward. Swallowing, relishing the salt-clean taste of it, fingers digging a little harder in the span between the first taste and the second, tongue taking every drop, throat working it down. Warm and flavorful. He closed his eyes, a groan of lust vibrating down the throbbing shaft in his mouth. Bells gasped and bucked harder into his mouth as the last spurt of semen flowed across his tongue.

He sucked gently until the cock in his mouth went totally soft, but he didn't get to enjoy his victory for very long.

Hands pushed him flat to the carpet, a heavy weight holding him there, a mouth closing on his, possessive, demanding, the blond braids ringing as they spread around them, forming a curtain between his gaze and the overhead lights. Cobalt sparks, the brightness coming through the beads, grey mistiness from the feathers, golden glow. Unreal. That dream-

like quality about the gunwhore coming back and haunting Jessman, lingering in his mind the way simvid often did. Like his daydreams about the blond fucking him. First in the wrought-iron bed, somewhere in the Freezone, where he'd gotten his introduction to the Sweet Sisters. Then this morning in the shower with the steam and the white-light pleasure invading his mind.

But the mouth on his, the weight of the slim body, the feel of a knee pressing into his balls, a hip pressing his cock. They were totally real. Exciting. The flame of desire, the burn of need filling him with an urgency that was more powerful than any drug, more addicting than anything the man had ever experienced. Bells. Gunwhore. Zonewarrior. Master.

And him the slave to a type of desire only Bells could awaken in his body and mind.

It was like the touch of light after a long time in darkness as Jessman came to the understanding he'd found part of the answer. It wasn't just his flesh that the gunwhore had touched; it was his mind, his very soul that had reached out in answer to what Bells had done to him. That had been the key. No lover before, not real or sim, had ever touched more than the superficial aspects of sexual desire. Just the mechanics, the biological aspect, was only part of what made sex so good, so pleasing. There were also the mental and emotional aspects, and Bells brought those into the game the way no other lover had ever done with him.

The emotional aspect was growing stronger with every touch of the gunwhore's hand, every softly

whispered word, each passion-induced moan.

The want, the need would never go away. Jessman, resigned to his addiction, was determined to find a way to keep what he wanted. His gunwhore. His belled killer.

He put his arms around Bells and returned the impassioned kiss, his own mouth just as demanding as Bells' was on his.

The flavor of his own semen filled Bells' mouth, mixed with the taste that was purely Jessman himself. He broke the kiss to lower his head, taking in the tang of the man's cologne; musk, spices and the woodsy undertones that spoke of a lot of money spent on smelling good. Beneath it, picked up by the less obvious enhancements he had—those that gave him a painfully acute sense of smell—were a sharp hint of sweat mingled with the groin-tightening odor of sex, the base animal scent of a healthy, well-fed human male. One of the few he'd ever had the pleasure to fuck; most of his corporate peers carried the underlying smell of drugs to combat the side effects of the unnatural world all corporate people lived in. A world minus natural sunlight, fresh air, food that hadn't been processed by machine and infused with the nutrients that would have been lacking after such methods of preparation.

It was even worse in the Zone where everything was tainted, especially the inhabitants who weren't enhanced with nanite-driven filtration systems and blood cleaners that kept the very air and water from doing them dead in short order. Most unenhanced

people didn't live to see their twenty-first birthdays. But then again, babies were being born with blood cleaners in their veins, just Darwinian evolution in action, Zone style.

He'd been immune to such things even before he'd become Polycyber's number one test rat. With the enhancements he had he was immune to everything but an overdose of lead in the form of bullets, or a handful of very rare and deadly toxins.

Hell, he couldn't even get drunk anymore unless he entered a command to his systems to allow the alcohol to affect him, and it was just too much bother to turn it on and off like that, so on it stayed.

But by the same token, he also couldn't get or transmit any diseases or illnesses, not even a common cold, which had its benefits.

Drawbacks too, like the emptiness in his belly and the creeping chill that accompanied a tiny yellow glow in the bottom corner of his right eye. Internal visual, a mini heads-up display that only he could see. That faint glow was why he'd finally insisted they eat before he fell over from energy depletion. Sure, it'd still take hours, but he didn't want to risk it. Zonewarrior paranoia made him cautious. But was it *really* paranoia when you got into gun battles on an almost daily basis at home? Probably not if he were in the LC, but here, yes, it did smack of paranoia. Then again, that contract on David still existed, and some damned fool—other than himself of course—might decide to try for the promised manna of cash for a killjob. He'd been enough of a desperate fool to take them up on it, not caring that it would damage his rep

as a gunwhore to murder his own client. Not until he'd realized what a sweet piece of ass he'd lose.

And he'd be the first to admit that David could kiss like few other people he'd been with, including other professional whores.

Then there was the growing emotional aspect of what they had—or rather, what he felt—for the other man. He couldn't assume Jessman was as much an idiot as he was proving to be, and he couldn't help but try to analyze what he was feeling, try to dismiss it as being a momentary lapse in common sense that he'd recover from in a few more days.

But those kisses, the handsome face, dark eyes...they were like a siren song, and he was damned if he could just plug his ears and sail away.

He twisted and pulled them over so that Jessman was on top, giving the researcher another taste of what could be his if he played the game right.

Give me a reason to trust you, David. Any small excuse, and I can give you what we both want.

Jessman was having a great time kissing the blond who'd let him have the upper hand again until an odd sound reached his ears. It was a ringing sound that was similar but also unlike the chiming music of his lover's hair. It was followed by loud banging. Banging that seemed to be coming from the living room.

"Mr. Jessman, the food has arrived," his EnCoSet advised when he failed to get the door, the delivery person's insistence triggering the deactivated communication unit.

"Dinner," Jessman said as he reluctantly broke the kiss.

"Well, we've had enough appetizers anyway," Bells remarked to David. The blond twisted and Jessman found himself on his back looking up at Bells, who offered a hand to help him up. He took it and was helped to his feet, the ease with which the small blond pulled him up still a shock to the researcher. Of course he was very familiar with the results of bio-enhancements, but...the blond's were beyond anything Jessman had personal experience of, and he was starting to suspect they were of the illegal variety—which stood to reason, as the man *was* a zonewarrior. Maybe this is what military grade polymer gel enhancements can do, he mused, lost in his thoughts as the banging on the door was repeated.

The researcher came out of his own reverie, noticed the smaller man's grin and lowered his gaze to see what Bells was looking at, seeing the jutting evidence of his own arousal. "I like kissing you. Is that bad?" he asked.

"No, it's not," the blond replied as he tucked his own leather-wrapped erection into his pants and started buttoning them closed.

That was another thing that Jessman had noticed with the blond, the fact that he recovered quickly and was ready to go in such a short time. It made him wonder exactly how extensive the pseudo-boy's enhancements were.

The door was hammered again and Jessman hurried off to answer it, finding a disgruntled deliveryman standing there. The instant he realized

his customer stood in the doorway the angry scowl vanished, replaced by a beaming smile. "I have your order, sir," he stated, proffering the large box that contained their meal. Even with it closed, Jessman could smell the wonderful aroma of delectable Italian cuisine served with red sauce. His stomach obviously noticed it too, because it rumbled in appreciation.

"Thank you. I'm sorry about the wait. You can add twenty percent to my bill as a tip for the time it took me to get to the door," Jessman told the man, noting that he was close to fifty, grey-haired, but trim as a teenager. Probably a requirement of his job, stay lean or be fired. Life in the service industry amid a corporate tower was even more restrictive than David's own job. No one would care if he was overweight in his line of work, unless it affected his job performance.

"Thank you, sir," the deliveryman replied, gave a polite bob of his head and held out the electronic device that would charge Jessman's corporate account for what he owed for the meal. Jessman found himself trying to balance the boxed meal with one hand so he could place his right thumb on the small device to accept the charges for the food.

Jessman noticed the faint music of the gunwhore's hair behind him. The nondescript hazel of the deliveryman's eyes narrowed, the man's face gone pale. Then the smile was back, but this time it was pure plastic, his eyes dead. "Have a good day..." he glanced at the name that had come up as the payment processed. "Mister Jessman."

"You too," was the researcher's automatic reply.

He turned to enter the apartment to find Bells standing almost directly behind him. Before he could react, the gunwhore was moving past him, gun coming up in a blur of movement from where it had been riding on the leather-clad hip.

David started to turn back to the deliveryman, but he found himself gently but firmly moved aside, the little shove almost turning him completely around as he struggled to stay on his feet and failed, hitting the carpet with a muted thump, their dinner tumbling to the floor.

Jessman's dark eyes widened as he saw something that instantly turned his blood to ice.

The deliveryman had a gun in his hand, the cyclopean eye of impending death targeting him until the blond zonewarrior stepped between it and Jessman, his too-fast movements accompanied by the ever-present carillon song of his hair.

"There are two ways this can go down, Stone. You can die, or you can walk out of here the same way you walked in," Jessman heard the blond say, wondering how he could make such a statement, as if there were no other outcome possible between he and the other gunman. "You listening to me, Stone, or are you already counting that money?"

"I hear you, Bells. And it ain't just twenty they offering now," the man replied, lapsing into the speech pattern of the Zone. "They offerin' double that."

"It really enough for you to try me? This my moneyboy, Stone, I be out for blood anythin' happen to him. Might do you good, you spread the word

'bout that. You got it?"

Zoner speech coming from Bells, yet his tone retained that dulcet quality despite the harshness of the street talk. It sent a shiver up Jessman's spine to hear that voice wrapping around the zonertalk.

"I got it."

Jessman peered past the gunwhore to see that the older man was holding a gun on Bells. But the hand holding the deadly pistol not as steady as one might expect from a professional killer, the researcher seeing the business end of the pistol wavering slightly.

And unlike his own blond zoner, this man's face wasn't an emotionless mask. No, there was plenty of emotion on the deliveryman's face, and that emotion was pure, undiluted fear.

Scared or not, the other zoner wasn't moving, his gun still held on Bells.

"Good. Go or get dead, Stone. I ain't playin' you. I do you here an' now, dead as meat."

The older man didn't show any sign of backing down, Jessman watching the pair facing off, too fascinated with the situation between zonewarriors to get out of harm's way, or even close the door to ensure his own safety.

"Is it worth dying for?" Bells asked, his voice like honeyed steel. Velvet-sheathed. Gentle. Cold as an Arctic blizzard.

The man started shaking harder, his hazel eyes darting to Jessman.

"Not a good idea, Stone. Not a good idea at all."

For a split second, there was indecision on the would-be killer's face.

Then he had no face. Crimson spray coated the pristine wall of the hallway, a body dropping to the floor. Dead as meat, just as Bells had promised.

The researcher swallowed, blinked, too stunned to react to what he was witnessing as his lover stepped away from the door.

He saw Bells glance down at the corpse he'd just created, face as devoid of emotion as he'd ever seen it. The blond crouched and placed one slim finger to the man's throat, checking for any sign of life. Cobalt gaze narrowing, he put the business end of his revolver to the zoner's skull and pulled the trigger a second time.

Brutally practical, he'd made sure Stone couldn't do Jessman any harm.

Witnessing that, Jessman's mind finally caught up with what had happened, the researcher adding up the numbers and coming up with the answer. An unseen hand, cold as the grave, slid down his spine, the finality of death passing him by as Jessman came to the abrupt understanding of just how close he'd been to dying. The zonewarrior, his paid lover, had just saved his life.

Gunwhore. It was what they did. Fuck their clients, kill to save them from being murdered.

Jessman stared to shake, face gone chalky with the terror inundating his thoughts until he had little rational mind remaining to him.

"Dear God...he came here to kill me," he whispered, his body starting to shake in reaction to the terror surfacing through the fog of shock blanketing his mind.

Bells frowned as he noted how badly shaken David was. Leaving the deader where he'd fallen, he rose and crossed the hallway to crouch down at Jessman's side. One look at his client— *Not lover, don't think of him like that*—told him that the researcher had gone into shock. He put an arm around Jessman's waist and pulled him off the floor, getting him completely into the apartment. Balancing on one leg, still supporting most of the distraught researcher's weight, Bells kicked the door closed, simultaneously cutting off the sight of the corpse and the stink of blood and death. Getting a better hold on the man, he guided Jessman around the coffee table. He eased the taller man onto the couch, noting the way Jessman's dark eyes were staring at nothing.

He's definitely in shock. I guess this has just been too much for him to take. If this puts him in such a state, he'd never survive life in the Free. He sighed, discarding an idea he'd still been considering at some level: stealing David from NeuroTech and taking him to live in the LC permanently. The man would never survive out there. Even if Bells got him the specialized enhancements any corpborn person needed in order to survive the environmental factors of life in the Free, Jessman would never be capable of adapting to the kill or be killed law of the streets.

No, he'd wind up dead the first time anyone aimed a gun at him. Tonight certainly proved that beyond any doubt.

Bells gripped a very small device on one of his braids—one that looked very much like any other

clump of feathers in his hair—and whispered: “EnCoSet, please inform Donna Rosetti’s that our delivery was intercepted, and let the cleaning crew know that there is a mess in the hallway.”

The compact device repeated the order in Jessman’s own voice, down to the exact cadence of the man’s speech pattern. If Jessman hadn’t been so out of it, that little display would have answered a question that Bells was certain probably still plagued him. But as out of it as the other man was, the question regarding the manner in which Bells had gotten him out of the safety of his own apartment the night they’d met would remain unanswered. Bells had no plans to reveal the secret, not when it was an edge he might someday need if Jessman happened to turn on him.

With Jessman in shock, Bells was positive the man wasn’t really paying close attention to anything that was going on around him, which was just as well, he’d really rather not have to do even a few moments of mind-wipe on the man. He liked Jessman too much to use any risky procedures on him, especially since the man made his living with his mind. You never knew what sort of side-effect even a couple minutes worth of mind-wipe would cause.

“Of course, Mr. Jessman,” the computer replied automatically.

He smiled. Computers were only as smart as their programming, and state of the art or not, EnCoSets were riddled with security loopholes, fortunately for him.

Of course, it just meant he had some work to do if

he wanted to make sure no one else could breach David's defenses the way he could. He made a mental note to do some specialized 'upgrades' to the system on the off chance someone else might make a bid on that outstanding killjob with Megalli-Loran. The researcher was enough of a liability to himself, the shoddy protection offered by the EnCoSet didn't need to be an additional Achilles' Heel for them.

Bells leaned over Jessman, touched the researcher's cheek and placed a tender kiss on his trembling mouth. "You're okay, David. I won't let anything happen to you."

There was no reaction, just the dazed stare.

He left David on the couch, pulled a blanket off the man's bed, brought it back and started to wrap it around Jessman. He knew enough about trauma—both emotional and physical—to help, but he was very disturbed by how deeply affected the researcher was over the incident. Yet, he also understood that people in the corporate world weren't accustomed to facing death on a daily basis the way people from the Free were. David's reaction still troubled Bells, because it meant the man was totally incapable of even the most basic self-defense, like running for cover.

And that was a good way for them to both get dead; David because he'd stand there like the proverbial deer in the headlights, and Bells because he'd put himself between David and any danger to keep his lover safe.

It was what he'd promised to do, and hell would freeze before he'd break a promise once he'd made it.

He sighed and stood there regarding the older man.

The fact that Bells was beginning to fall in love with the other man was also becoming a factor in his decisions regarding Jessman.

He shook his head, the bells ringing softly as he mentally berated himself for getting emotionally attached. Stupid stupid, he told himself yet again. But no matter how much he tried, he just couldn't keep denying how he felt. Just a few days and he already cared for David in ways that he'd ever cared for Loreli. Yes, he loved the woman in a way, and he loved her daughter Jayzee as much as if the girl were his own flesh and blood, yet his feelings for Jessman couldn't be denied. He could keep denying them by lying to himself, but what was the point? Telling himself he didn't love Jessman wouldn't change the fact that he *did* love the older man, despite the broad gulf between them and all the inherent trouble it would bring.

"It's okay, David. You're safe," he murmured the reassurance as he bundled Jessman into the blanket. "David, can you hear me?"

The man continued to stare straight ahead as if he were linked into a simvid, watching events not part of the here and now. In a way, that was probably a close approximation of what was happening, since Bells suspected that the events of just a few moments ago were replaying through Jessman's mind in every horrible variation his mind could create from the actual events.

"Come on, David, snap out of it and look at me."

Nothing. No reaction.

Frowning, he debated his options. He could slap the man and try to bring him out of it with a touch of pain, or he could find another way to snap Jessman out of his state of shock.

He gripped the man's face between both hands, tilted his head back and crushed their mouths together in a brutally possessive kiss that would have scorched chrome.

Panting, he broke the kiss and stared down at the dazed man.

Jessman blinked, gaze lifting to the blond's face, his mouth tingling from the fervor of the kiss he'd just been given. His mouth hurt, but the man standing there watching him took his mind away from the discomfort and the nightmare that had been playing over and over in his thoughts.

This was his lover. His savior. Beautiful. Face full of more emotion, showing genuine concern for him. A cool hand touched his cheek, and he leaned into the touch.

Master and slave.

Gunwhore and client.

"You okay?" that soothing voice asked, the silver in his lover's hair pinging softly as he leaned down, his eyes on a level with David's as he nodded. He was too numb from what had almost happened to him to manage more than that until the blond took his face between his slim hands a second time and kissed him with so much passion that it left him breathless and questioning his own sanity. He couldn't conceive of

anyone being able to kiss like that when there was no emotional bond.

Yet the blond had done it.

When it was over, Jessman sat there looking up at the younger man, wondering what the kiss had meant. Was it just a meaningless way to reassure him, to help him come to terms with the idea he'd survived an encounter with death relatively unscathed or was there more behind it? Something the blond was leaving unspoken between them?

Don't be an idiot. Stop reading meanings where there are none. He's a professional and you're his client, that's it, now change the subject before you get maudlin.

"How...did you know?" he asked, surprising himself when the words came out so steadily, since he himself felt like his brain had melted and run out of his ears. "How did he get in here?"

"I heard his voice and knew it. As for how he got into the tower," the blond shrugged, "It's easier than you think."

Jessman saw Bells frown. "We need to eat, but I think delivery is out for the time being, as I don't trust it not to be poisoned at this point."

At that Jessman looked up, then his gaze went to the box of food still lying where it had been dropped. Red sauce was oozing out onto the carpet, reminding him of blood. He swallowed the lump that filled his throat at the sight, then turned his head so he couldn't see it.

"I'm not hungry," he replied, pallid and too shaken up to have an appetite.

"Well, I have to eat, and you need it too. How

about I heat up something from your freezer?"

The researcher just nodded again, his heart pounding, hands shaking. *I'm in shock*. His mind identified the symptoms, but he wasn't able to do anything but mull over how close he'd just been to dying tonight.

A zonewarrior had come to kill him right outside his very door.

And there had been so much blood....

He'd almost died. Would be dead if Bells hadn't been there to protect him.

And Bells would have to leave, if not tonight, then tomorrow, or the next day.

"You just relax. I'll pour you a drink."

A glass was put in his hand, he heard the clink of ice, but didn't taste the bourbon he gulped down. Even the burn of the liquor was muted.

But nothing, not even the touch of the gunwhore, the fact that he hadn't even been hurt in the incident would erase the fear that lay heavy as lead in his belly.

Death had been so close, its bony hand almost closing on him, and it wasn't over. Megalli-Loran still wanted him dead, and NeuroTech's vaunted security systems, their well-trained guards hadn't done a thing to protect him. Not a damned thing.

Bells watched Jessman, the man pale, still completely terrified.

All things considered, he could hardly fault David for being so scared. The researcher didn't even own a gun, probably hadn't a clue how to use it that didn't

come from simvid— and that was nothing like the harsh reality of picking up a weapon and killing a real living, breathing human being.

No, he had to remind himself that Jessman was from a world that didn't include learning to use a gun as part of basic childhood education. And the man hadn't likely gotten training in anything resembling self-defense, because it was the job of the employer to assure the safety of its workers who were, in the end, valuable commodities that took a lot of money and effort to train for their jobs. Money and effort they expected to have repaid during the lifetime of the employee.

And NeuroTech had gone to a lot of effort to get Jessman away from the company that had trained him.

Megalli-Loran would go to a lot of effort and expense to assure their investment wasn't used against them.

Vicious circle, with the two of them trapped in the middle. David a pawn caught between warring corporations, Bells the wildcard Megalli-Loran hadn't included in their calculations.

Stone's attempt on David's life was proof Bells didn't dare leave his lover alone. Not right now. Not until he could find out who'd ordered the man's death and deal with it in a permanent way. He wanted his lover safe, not in fear for his life, and the best way to assure that was by making an example of someone at Megalli-Loran.

He could hear Jessman's heart pounding, smell the acrid sourness of fear-sweat seeping from his lover's

pores. Teeth clenched in anger, the blond vowed to make it very clear that he wouldn't deal kindly with zoners that threatened his livelihood as a gunwhore by murdering his clientele. He could protect Jessman under the guise of protecting his profits, and no one would be suspicious. The ploy could work, so long as he extended the same warnings to his other regular customers, and it would make sense, since just about everyone in the LC knew about his highend financial obligation. He owed Polycyber in a major way for saving his life, even if every system they'd installed in his body had been purely experimental.

He was still alive, wasn't he?

But there were reasons for that which had nothing to do with Polycyber, and everything to do with the past he didn't care to remember anymore.

Bells dropped to his knees in front of Jessman, gripped the man's shoulders gently and shook him a bit to get his attention. "You're not hurt. Let it go, David."

"But if you hadn't been here...I..."

He silenced the man's words with a kiss, but this time it was gentle reassurance, not the possessive statement to show David that, despite the danger he'd faced, he'd come out alive. No, this kiss was meant to show a commitment, to demonstrate that Bells would keep him safe no matter what it took. He only hoped David understood the message underlying the kiss. A message that said *I'm falling in love with you and I'll kill anyone that threatens you.*

"I'm here, and I'm not leaving until you're safe. I promise," he stated, putting that much into words, his

hands on David's shoulders. He squeezed gently with hands that could easily have snapped David's collarbones like twigs.

The man's gaze still wasn't totally focused on the here and now, and Bells knew of only one way he could really get through the man's shock.

If a lover's gentleness wouldn't get through to Jessman, maybe the slave's Master could.

Hands tightened on muscular arms, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise, Bells snarled at the older man, "Look at me!" He knew how hard and cold his tone was, how harsh it sounded. Domineering, infused with anger, a man's displeasure with his lover, a dom angry with his sub. He saw the reaction from Jessman, the sudden start the dark-haired man gave as the command snapped him out of one terror to replace it with another more immediate fear.

"It's over," Bells murmured, tone gone gentle, his grip easing on David's bruised arms, voice soothing. He'd gotten what he'd needed from Jessman, his attention focused on him, not what might have happened, or what had actually happened. He released the researcher's arms and caressed Jessman's face, leaned in to place a kiss on the man's mouth, tasting the expensive bourbon. "You're safe. Stop dwelling on what didn't happen. You aren't dead, he is and you've got nothing to be afraid of..." He gave Jessman a teasing smile. "Except me, that is."

A hysterical giggle slipped from Jessman and Bells bit down on the man's lower lip, trying to snap him completely out of his unsettled mental state. He heard

Jessman's breath catch, felt him go still. Bells slipped his arms around Jessman and drew him to the edge of the couch. With their bodies pressed together, he started to stroke along David's back, giving comfort, reassurance, speaking in a quiet murmur, "You're safe, David. I promise you that. Stone is dead, and the message will get out in the Free that I'm protecting my clients. I'll see that it does. No one will touch you."

"You'll leave me! You'll leave me, and Megall-Loran will have someone come to kill me!"

He could hear so much fear, unreasoning terror and wondered how much of it was from exhaustion, lack of food and the draining effect that the first encounter with the Sisters tended to have on the newly initiated.

Probably quite a bit, since Bells hadn't taken Jessman for a coward. Not considering how far he'd risen in the corporate world.

Watching Jessman, feeling how cold his hands were, Bells understood that David's unraveling emotional state was caused by a lot of factors, and that Stone's attempt to murder him had just been the last event needed to send the researcher over the brink.

He'd have to take it easy with him for a while, restore Jessman's equilibrium and then they could move forward.

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

"You promise?"

"I said I did."

Jessman relaxed and put his complete trust in Bells. What else could he do? The gunwhore was the only defense he apparently had, since NeuroTech's vaunted security teams hadn't even come to see what the disturbance had been.

He was still shaking with the adrenalin that had flooded his veins, trembling from the terror that had eroded any trace of confidence he'd once had in the security of his home. Closing his eyes, David put his arms around the slender form and held him tightly, feeling the solidity of a zonewarrior, a killer fully capable of going toe to toe with other murderers and coming out on top. Knowing that Bells could protect him as he promised was reassuring. Remembering how Stone had gone pale when he'd seen the smaller man standing there behind him, how he'd backed away from the door at the arrival of Bells, even the way the other killer's hand had shook as he held the pistol...

Those things spoke of dangerous confrontations. Gun battles. Blood and death. Sim memories told Jessman the bare bones of what a real confrontation must be like. Yet he was fully aware that simvid couldn't come close to the real thing because a sim carried no risk of loss, pain, or death.

Death that Jessman had faced tonight.

He shuddered at the memory of his lover stepping between himself and the gunman, his would-be assassin.

It was as if Bells felt no fear, as if pain and the possibility of dying never crossed his mind.

Maybe they didn't.

But the fear had been plain to see on Stone's face as he'd confronted the zonewarrior with the bells adorning his braids.

From Stone's reaction to Bells, Jessman came to the conclusion that the gunwhore had to have a rep. And a reputation that could turn another zoner white as a sheet had to be something you earned by being the most dangerous bastard on the street.

Feral mongrels running in a pack. The nastiest dog was the one that did as he pleased, led the pack and took what he pleased when he chose. Until a wolf came along to remind them they were only flea-bitten curs.

And Jessman got the feeling the man he was holding wasn't a street mongrel. He'd found himself one of those rare wolves that every dog feared.

Loco-lobo, that's what they were known by in a few of the simvids. Cyberwolf.

The top of the heap.

Bells had said he would protect him. Feeling the strong arms, the warmth of his lover pressed to him, Jessman believed, and believing made him whole. He sighed and closed his eyes, just letting the blond hold him because it felt good, made him feel better about himself.

"How am I going to pay you back for this?"

"I'll think of something. Now come on, let's eat."

David gave a mute nod of his head and didn't resist when the gunwhore led him to the kitchen. He ate when a steaming dinner was placed in front of him, too numbed by roller-coaster emotions and too tired from everything to taste the food, to even care

what it was. He didn't protest when he was taken to the bathroom, even peeing on command before he was undressed and put to bed.

He was asleep before the gunwhore had settled down beside him, unaware of the strong arms, the weight of a leg that cradled him possessively or the voice that whispered, "Sleep, David. No one is going to hurt you. I'll keep you safe, I promise."

END: PART ONE

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Michael Barnette grew up in the wilds of Miami, Florida where he enjoyed the nightlife and wide variety of cultures, but not the late night driveby shootings. Deciding on a change of pace, Michael moved to Athens, Georgia where he's lived for several years. He misses the ethnic food in Miami, he doesn't miss the driveby shootings.

The last two years he was in Miami, Michael went from being a poet to writing short stories. One of the short stories he wrote, *Zoner*, was also the first gay erotica he'd ever written. Set in his cyberpunk world setting—which takes place in a future variant of Miami—and using characters established from an unfinished novel he was working on, he submitted the story to Circlet Press. The story was published and has been well received in the gay community, garnering a Spectrum Award nomination in 2003, while the anthology, *Wired Hard #3*, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary award that same year.

Seeing the popularity of erotica—and finding it much easier to sell than poetry—Michael changed his writing focus in 2003 and started researching the types of erotica popular with readers.

The rest, as they say, is history.

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