

The background is a detailed, close-up image of a green printed circuit board (PCB). It is covered with intricate gold-colored circuit traces, numerous small electronic components like resistors and capacitors, and larger integrated circuits. Two glowing purple eyes with blue pupils are superimposed on the board: one in the upper left quadrant and another in the lower right quadrant. The title 'MARKED' is centered in the upper half of the image.

MARKED

BRENNA
LYONS

Marked

An erotic short by

BRENNA LYONS

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Dedicated to The Putzboy Club.

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January 12th, 2262

Alec Lawton sat in the form-fitting leather chair, sighing as the back slid silently downward to accommodate his relaxing body. It was a toy, one of the many conveniences his famous father, Houston Lawton, had provided for him over the short forty years of Alec's life.

He fingered the disc over his heart sadly. It was no toy; neither was it an interesting gadget meant to give him ease or amuse him. It wasn't even his to control. He knew what it was meant to do, of course. Any bio-mechanical engineer worth his salt could have figured that much out, and Alec was without peers. He smiled wryly that he himself had been engineered that way.

Unbidden, her face at the height of climax taunted him, accompanied by phantom flicks of her tongue against the head of his still-engorged cock. It hardened more painfully, and he groaned.

"Hannah," he breathed. He'd wanted it to come out a curse, but he couldn't even fake the sentiment; he wanted her too much to do that.

It was the disc. He knew it. For the last ten days, it had been forcing cross-links in his memory core and the associated human mind he possessed, stimulating his very human endocrine system to flood his body with heavy doses of conflicting chemicals, driving him to distraction, then near-mad in this clawing need for her.

He couldn't remove the disc. The most perfunctory examination would show that it had attached itself to his vital processor functions in those precious few hours his human mind and body had required sleep, and the examinations Alec and Gabriel had subjected it to had been neither careless nor quick and superficial.

Removing the disc would mean death, first for his processor and his augmented mental and physical functionality by extension...then for his human tissues, when the loss of hydraulic control led to the crushing weight of his hardware exerted onto the softer tissues, destroying autonomic functions and, if he lived that long, destroying his spinal column.

The disc could do nearly anything, up to and including forcing a shut-down of his processor. It wasn't a weapon created to blackmail him.

Even if he hadn't been programmed with Houston's cyber morality code—a code that would cause Alec to choose death rather than betray family, company, country, or cause harm—his personal ethics, fully capable of tempering the very polar, binary responses of his machine-self, agreed that death was better than such a betrayal of others.

If Hannah knew enough about his systems to design the disc, she knew it couldn't be used against him that way. It had been designed to kill him...to kill them all.

* * * *

"May I join you?" Her voice was dark and sultry, smoother than a purr, a bold invitation that no man—or cyborg—could have remained oblivious to.

Alec looked up at her, noting the drink she offered in surprise. While alcohol affected his lesser human functions—coordination and speech patterns by extension—his processor kept his primary "thinking mind" clear. As a result, he rarely had more than one drink a night...just to keep up appearances.

The woman holding the drink was more mouth-watering than anything he'd seen in months. Her auburn hair was only shades darker than his own, than the hair that his brothers also possessed. Her eyes were just that perfect shade of Kelly green, almost surreal in their perfection.

She stood at five-point-two inches shorter than he—his processor extrapolated. A lush body that doctors would term "overweight," erroneously from his point of view, completed the picture. In fact, she was nearly his ideal woman, offering her company, a walking dream.

Not that he had wet dreams; his processor saw to that.

"I'd like that," he invited her, motioning to the seat to his right.

She sat, crossing one plump thigh over the other. The drink settled in front of him, and her cleavage drew his eyes. Was she leaning forward on purpose?

"Slow, comfortable screw against the wall?" she asked, naming his favorite drink.

"I'd love to."

Alec snapped his mouth shut, horrified. Where had *that* come from? He ran a diagnostic exam on his processor, but it seemed to be functioning properly. There were no alarms or warning beacons. His track of all active programs was cut short by her reply.

"I was hoping you felt that way."

"Were you?" His normal clear thinking deserted him, leaving him adrift in unfamiliar waters. It almost seemed as if two programs were acting at cross-purposes, an error he hadn't encountered since he was twelve years old, but none of his "oxymoron alarms," as Houston had called them, were warning him off.

Her hand settled on his thigh beneath the table, and Alec's body reacted fiercely to the stimulus. He'd bedded women before; it was part of his cover as a fully-human man to do so, though his processor could easily suppress all sexual urges. He'd even enjoyed bedding them, a natural extension of the processor stimulating his drive at the appropriate time, but he could tell he'd enjoy this a whole lot more.

“Oh, yes,” she whispered, leaning close to his ear and giving him another nearly-heart stopping view of her cleavage. She moved her hand higher, cupping his length.

Alec’s ragged breathing wasn’t being smoothed by his processor as it normally would.

“Are you interested?” she asked, rubbing lightly at the proof that he was.

“My place is upstairs.”

Again, he had no idea where the words had come from. Alec never took women home with him. It was always her place or a neutral location for a fuck, then home for his rest cycle...alone.

She shifted from her chair onto his lap, her buttocks taunting his sensitized cock. Her hand wrapped around his neck, pulling Alec’s mouth down to hers.

Sensations coursed over both halves of his brain: her scent, taste, the feel of her body against his, memories of her cleavage so close to his face that he could have dipped down for a stroke of his tongue, the sounds of her moans, half-muted in his mouth...

Alec broke off the kiss, noting the bartender’s questioning look out of the corner of his eye. He pretended not to see it.

One portion of his mind reasoned that he couldn’t continue this in the bar. Another wanted to finish as soon as laws and ethics allowed. He didn’t dare try to sort out which mind screamed which. The binary solution, delivered by both halves in unison in a nanosecond of time, was to get her into his private elevator. *Now!*

“Let’s go,” he rasped.

She smiled sweetly and nodded, rising to her feet.

Alec wrapped an arm around her, guiding her to the elevator in the employee corridor behind the bar, aware of every curve touching his body.

There was no button at the elevator. It had been designed that way; what someone unauthorized to use it couldn’t call couldn’t be hacked for some nefarious purpose.

There was no need for a call button; his processor and those of his brothers would call the elevator and authorize a destination. Only they could use the elevator, unless they brought guests onto it. Until now, they never had.

The door slid open, and she smiled a stunning smile. “Remote access?” she guessed.

It was a good enough lie. “Yes, it is.” Then why did telling her that lie feel wrong to him? It made no sense. They’d been lying to people about this since toddlerhood, and so had Houston.

They stepped on board, and Alec gave the command for the penthouse aloud. It wasn’t necessary to do so, but the V.A. circuitry with voice recognition for family members had been added for just such an occasion.

The doors slid shut, and the elevator started its smooth ascent.

She was suddenly pressed against him. “Can anyone else use this elevator?”

“No one,” he assured her, hoping he was reading her intentions correctly in his scattered state.

Her mouth tipped up to his, and Alec kissed her, lost in passion in a way he’d thought impossible. Weren’t the interlocks supposed to prevent this?

I’ll check the damned software in the morning. Anything that interfered now was unwelcome.

She pulled his tie to mid chest, all but yanking the knot out completely. Button after button slid open on his dress shirt thanks to her nimble fingers. Then his trousers were undone.

Alec ordered the elevator to slow to a snail’s pace. He’d agreed to a slow, comfortable screw against the wall, and she was going to get as close to that as he could arrange.

Her fingers circled the head of his cock, massaging him, and Alec realized he had no hope of delivering the first two portions of that mix. He pulled off his shirt, tie, and jacket together, breaking off the kiss long enough to accomplish it and drop them to the floor.

She pushed his trousers down to his upper thighs, casting an appreciative glance down his body. That was Alec’s breaking point; he dragged her skirt up, groaning at the lack of underwear beneath.

His next coherent moment was sliding to the hilt in her, her legs hooked loosely around his waist, her back to the elevator wall. She ground against him, encouraging him.

Alec thrust wildly into her, becoming more avid...no fevered, as her gasps became moans, then screams of delight. Her spasming body rocked him to orgasm, his sterile fluids pouring into her.

Her face nestled to his sweat-soaked chest, and their breaths came in tandem...not in unison but complimenting each other. It was peaceful yet disconcerting. Surely, there was an error somewhere in his systems.

“What is your name?” he managed. He’d just fucked this woman in his private elevator, and he didn’t even know her name. He’d never bothered to ask it.

The gossip columnists are going to serve my balls for lunch. Sautéed, please.

Oh, well. They’ve been trying to get something concrete on me for the last twenty-two years. At least this encounter had been worth the public trouncing he was sure to take for it.

She smiled. “Hannah.”

* * * *

Alec woke, for the first time in his life, confused at the end of a rest cycle. He felt as if his body and human mind hadn’t rested at all, as if the heat sinks in

his processor were malfunctioning. He forced his eyes open, groggily taking in the sunlight streaming through the windows he'd never ordered shaded.

A hasty check showed the heat sink postulation to be a false lead, and Alec sighed in relief, grateful he didn't have to call in Caleb and Frank to repair him. Such a repair would mean neurosurgery by Caleb, coupled with the parts replacement Frank did so well.

It would also mean up to a week of downtime, while his augmented, accelerated healing repaired all proof that he'd had work that extensive done. The only piece of good news would be that the replacement parts would be of Gabriel's newest designs, and that meant increased productivity and decreased downtime in the future.

The realization that he wasn't simply erect—a male condition that his processor simulated in him every morning and several times a night as part of his cover—but aroused, which wasn't part of the stimulation he was subjected to, stopped him cold.

The sensory input of a woman's body taking him in was so powerful, he cried out in surprise. It continued, the phantom pussy holding him like a glove, leveraging up and down his length.

Alec arched his back, clawing handfuls of his jersey cotton sheets, his heart hammering, his breathing erratic. His eyes slid shut...

And, she was there. *Hannah*. Her body pistoned up and down on his, the smell of her arousal taunting him, real in his mind in a way he couldn't comprehend.

Her voice sent shivers down his spine.

"Let go, Alec. Come for me."

As if I have a choice!

At any other time he would be capable of shutting down climax or even arousal, but much like the three times he'd screwed her the night before, Alec had no control and little conscious thought. Climax roared over him with the physiological and emotional force of a mag train.

A smile curved Hannah's lips, and she shifted her hips back and forth, making him erupt in aftershocks. Relaxation made him weak, and he floated toward sleep in a stupor.

She was gone so abruptly that Alec stiffened in shock, his eyes opening to the still-empty bed, the room...deserted except for himself. He was alone, the jersey cotton plastered to his abdomen with cooling cum.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded of no one.

Logic returned a little at a time, and Alec ordered a sensor sweep of the penthouse. He was alone.

He clearly recalled rest cycle shutting him down while Hannah was in his arms. Why he would make such a suicidal choice aside, how could she leave without him ordering the elevator or disengaging the lock-outs on the outer corridors?

A memory of the sensory illusion he'd just weathered raised another possibility. What if Hannah wasn't real? What if she'd never been real? His own memories now suspect, he ordered the security logs for the elevator.

She was there. She'd been in the elevator with him. He could prove that much. There was no log of her leaving that way, though if she could access the elevator, she could erase the log of her passing.

No, that was too far-fetched to be feasible. And if she could do that, why wouldn't she have changed the first log to hide her presence in the elevator, then?

Then where did she go? How could she leave?

A second check of the penthouse yielded the same results. He ordered sweeps of his lab, his office downstairs, then the building in general, his unease becoming more palatable with each negative response on a woman meeting Hannah's description.

A tickle on his chest cut through his hopeless search for an answer to the puzzle of the disappearing one-night-stand. Alec raised his hand to scratch at it.

His blood ran cold at the feeling of the warm metal disc. His fingers traced it three times; it was the size of a quarter and painfully attached to his skin.

Alec stumbled to his feet and into the bathroom, a vain hope that it was another sensory illusion dashed at the sight of the skin-tone circle placed over his sternal notch.

* * * *

"This is fucking insane," he exploded.

Alec ripped the leads from the disc and started pacing. His emotions rioted, and his adrenaline was off the charts. The fact that his processor could tell him that, but not artificially stimulate an end to the assault, told him clearly enough that the damned thing had taken control, and he had no idea if he could safely remove it.

The arousal hit him so abruptly, it nearly sent him to his knees. Alec braced his hand on the work station, sweat breaking out on his brow and lip, his muscles so taut they trembled uncontrollably. The mad idea to beat her at her own game by...well, beating off was intense. He'd never had to resort to it before, but if it would work—

The sensation of a tongue flicking up his length caused him to cry out harshly. Then it was gone again, and he was left exhausted, shaky, distracted at a time when he needed to stay focused.

The security uplink passed the information that his elevator was in motion. Alec cursed aloud, then accessed the code for the occupant who'd called it.

Gabriel? Gabriel doesn't normally come here without checking first. What is going on today?

Suspicious after Hannah's disappearance, he ordered a visual scan of the elevator's occupant, letting security do the pattern recognition for him. It confirmed his youngest brother's identity.

Alec straightened, buttoned his dress shirt, and smoothed his hair. Gabriel's unannounced visit didn't bode well; until he knew why Gabriel was here, he wouldn't complicate it further. On that note, Alec padded barefoot out of his lab, down the corridor, and to the elevator in his lounge.

The doors opened, and Gabriel raised his head. The dark circles under his midnight blue eyes and his disheveled clothing were all the confirmation Alec needed that something was seriously wrong.

In the next instant, Gabriel staggered to one of the leather chairs and literally fell into it, one leg hanging down limp. The chair jerked this way and that, seeking the perfect position to make Gabriel comfortable, but no position accomplished that.

Gabriel groaned, pressing a hand to his chest. "Disengage," he gasped.

The chair halted, the footrest extended, the back elevated to a thirty-six degree angle. Gabriel slumped in it, shivering.

Alec forced his pure horror at the scene back and called on *thought*. "I'll call in Caleb," he offered.

Gabriel shook his head, grimacing. "Not Caleb. You. I need... Alec!"

But, that means this is bio-mechanical. This was very bad news. If Alec took the time to patch Gabriel, would he sacrifice his own chance? In a nanosecond, he knew he'd chance it.

His brother's muscles eased, and he sank into the chair. The smooth lowering of the chair back announced that Gabriel's system had settled, and he'd activated the chair directly.

Alec sank into the chair next to him. "Tell me."

"I don't know what it's doing to me."

"It?" Did he mean a software fault? Why weren't his diagnostics working? What were they telling him?

Gabriel shot him a pained expression. "I met a woman. She—"

Fury like he'd never felt before settled in Alec's gut. A curious tightening around his heart followed. "What was her name?"

"What?"

"Her name!" Alec forced his grip to loosen, abruptly aware that he was standing over Gabriel, his brother's arms trapped in his grasp, prepared to shake the answer out of him. "Her name," he requested.

"Sarah. I don't know what came over me, Alec. I couldn't stop myself. I swear, it was like I was on autopilot or something."

Conflicting emotions submarined his logic, and Alec fought his way back up, suspicion rising strong. Hannah could be an assumed name. Sarah could be. It could be the same woman. "Show me."

"Alec?"

"Use the wireless link-up to me. Show me your memories of her," he ordered. Gods, but he had to know if Gabriel had been with her. He couldn't quantify what difference it made, but it did make one. It made a lot of difference...on some level.

Gabriel's eyes widened, and he shook his head in quick, jerking movements. "I don't dare. If I pass this to—"

Alec yanked at Gabriel's shirt, popping buttons and baring his ribcage. The same flesh-colored disc marred the smooth stretch of his brother's skin.

"I don't know what it's doing to me, Alec," he pleaded.

His stomach churned. "I know."

* * * *

Gabriel couldn't meet Alec's eyes. For some reason he couldn't comprehend, his oldest brother was still demanding Gabriel's memories of Sarah.

Alec removed the leads from the disc, his hands shaking. "You're not going to make me download against your will, are you?"

"Tell me why, Alec."

He paused, setting the leads aside. Alec straightened, staring at the holo-monitor...or rather *through* the holo-monitor, his jaw tight.

"Tell me why, and I'll risk opening the link."

"This is an attack on our family," he reasoned.

"It's an attack on me," Gabriel corrected him.

Alec's right hand went to his shirt, unbuttoning it slowly. He pulled the fabric aside, baring a matching disc. "On us all. Now, I need to know if this is an organized group or one—"

Gabriel launched to his feet, his hands fisted, adrenaline feeding fight or flight and his mind directing fight loudly. He stopped himself from punching Alec in the mouth when his hand was drawn back fully for the act.

For a moment, they stared at each other.

Gabriel reeled back, catching himself on the work table, supporting himself with that grip when his knees threatened to buckle. His heart was pounding, and he couldn't stop it. Was this what a heart attack felt like? Well, there was probably more pain involved in that event.

"What am I doing, Alec?" he asked weakly. Alec's responses in the lounge replayed in his mind. "Is that what it does? Makes us want to kill each other?"

"Replay your thoughts before—"

"I *didn't* think," he shouted.

"Then what did you feel?"

Alec's calm soothed Gabriel. "Anger, fury..." He'd never felt something as soul-wrenching as fury before. "And..." *Something more*. But, what was it?

"Hurt?" Alec suggested. "Jealousy?"

Gabriel considered that. “Hurt. Yes, it hurt, but I’ve never felt jealousy. I didn’t think—”

“We couldn’t. I know. Love and its connected emotions... Do you understand why I need to see your memories now?”

He nodded. It was personal for Alec, like the thought that Sarah might have slept with Alec was personal for him. It shouldn’t be personal, but it was. But, there was still one problem that needed dealt with first.

“What will we do, if they are the same woman? Kill each other over her?”

Alec’s voice was laced with amusement. “I promise to try not to.”

* * * *

The woman appeared out of nowhere. Gabriel had knocked her off her feet before he realized she was there. He ordered diagnostic checks of his processor, confused by how he could bump into anything, how he could be unaware of his surroundings.

Realization that she was staring at him with wide blue eyes shocked him to motion. Gabriel shifted the industry resource magazines onto his left arm and reached down for her.

“I’m sorry, Miss—”

The words caught in his throat. The feeling of her hand enfolded in his eclipsed all else.

Then she was on her feet, willowy body pressed lightly against him. Golden curls teased his cheek, carrying the scents of coconut, vanilla, and musk to him. Gabriel leaned into them, lost in the delightful sensations he couldn’t find a name for.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “I’m okay.”

Gabriel stared at her, unable to form words, nearly unable to think.

“And it’s Sarah, not Miss.”

“Gabriel.” His voice sounded strange in his own ears, as if it was coming from far away. If he didn’t know that drugs were largely ineffective on him, he’d wonder what someone had slipped him.

“Since you won’t release my hand, I thought we should introduce ourselves.”

He unclenched his fingers, stepping back, trying desperately to right his senses.

Sarah’s gaze panned down his body, and a smile lifted her lips. “Well, that’s okay, then.”

“Oh...okay? What?” Gabriel looked down at himself, his face heating at the fact that he was hard. The insistent ache of arousal cut through his confusion. No. This was not okay. Not by a long shot! What was wrong with him?

“Care to drive me home?” she inquired a little too innocently.

That slapped some sense into him. “How do you know I’m driving?” he asked.

“The keys.” She tipped her head toward his left hand.

Gabriel fisted it, feeling the bite of his T-bird keys. He nodded, embarrassed at his near-accusation of her. *What is wrong with me?*

“It’s the least you can do, since you knocked me down,” she suggested sweetly.

He smiled in spite of himself. “I guess it is. This way.”

Sarah didn’t wear a seatbelt. She sat close to Gabriel, her body...or more precisely, his reactions to it keeping him painfully erect.

“Which way from here?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“That’s your choice.”

“My...” *My Gods, I can’t concentrate on a simple conversation.*

“We could go to my place now, or we could go to the overlook and...take care of what we both want to.”

“We can’t accomplish that at your place?” The fact that he didn’t doubt he was going to have sex with her should have bothered him. The fact that it didn’t bother him should have bothered him more; it didn’t either.

“Only if you feel like dealing with my roommates.”

Gabriel stopped for a red light and then turned to her. He didn’t ask her permission; she seemed to know what he intended before he did, her eyes sliding shut in unison with his.

Her mouth opened to his in a hot, hard kiss. His right hand left the wheel, tangling in her hair, positioning her head to allow him to explore deeper within her. Her breath teased at his cheek and stirred his eyelashes, her body shifting nearly into his lap. Gabriel growled a couple of mangled curses over their stroking tongues.

It took her breaking away, her gaze locked with his, her body retreating to the passenger seat to bring him to enough sense to turn to the wheel and start driving again. He turned into the park.

Sarah purred her approval, her hand settling in his lap. She started unbuttoning his jeans.

That had to end. Gabriel was barely keeping the car on the road as it was. His processor wasn’t overriding his human inclinations and limitations as it should have.

Her hand wrapped around his cock, stroking him, and Gabriel decided his processor’s vacation was a pretty enjoyable experience. Sarah started to lower herself to suck him, and self-preservation kicked in.

“No,” he ordered. With his processor functioning, he’d attempt this, but it wasn’t and he wasn’t suicidal.

She sighed, sitting up, pouting prettily. “I’m hungry, Gabriel.”

“So am I,” he informed her. “Get those panties off. When we stop...” His mouth watered, and he licked his lips meaningfully.

Sarah's smile returned; she reclined her seat fully. Her skirt slid up her thighs to her waist. Gabriel shifted his gaze from the road to her body, over and over, unwilling to relinquish his view of either for long.

She knew he was watching. Sarah made a show of rolling her hips, pushing her panties down her body, revealing that she was shaved clean and smooth for him.

Not for me. But the concept was a hard one to shake. His mind insisted that it was for him.

Her legs came up, one at a time, sliding out of the bit of silk, then returning to the floor, spread as wide as the car allowed. Her gaze flicked to his straining hard-on, then slid shut. Sarah stroked her hands up her inner thighs, spreading her labia for him.

Gabriel noted that they'd breached the ring of trees at the overlook and slammed the car into park. He turned to her, marveling at her control.

Sarah hadn't started without him; her fingers still held her body spread wide. Her hips tipped up, and she gasped his name.

He laid out over the seat, on his side, facing the back of the car, his knees bent, capturing first one side, then the other of her slit in his mouth, sucking them clean, then delving inside.

The recline switch was at his foot, and Gabriel toed it with his tennis shoe, creating a bed of the flattened front seats and the stationary back. He was going to need a lot of room for what he intended, not the least of which was a better angle to dine on her.

And, I'm damned well going to Alec for a diagnostic in the morning.

* * * *

Alec opened his eyes as the feed clipped off, nodding at Gabriel's unspoken rebuke that he'd seen more than enough. "It's not the same woman," he assured him.

Though a conspiracy wasn't exactly good news, they had no reason to kill each other, and that was a relief. They needed to work together not fight each other.

Gabriel managed a strained smile. "I figured that out when your hands *didn't* end up around my throat, thanks."

His sarcasm wasn't helping Alec's nerves, but he supposed Gabriel was due the irritation. "I only watched as long as I did to get an objective view of how they're bypassing our processors and the protective software, in the first place. What is going on before they get their nasty little bug on us?"

To be honest, the sight of Sarah throwing herself at Gabriel did absolutely nothing for Alec. Now, if Hannah did that... He tried to force that thought out of his mind, but the damage was done. He was hard again.

Gabriel spoke up, seemingly oblivious to his state...thank goodness.

“Some sort of disruption or jamming? Damn it, Alec. This is your specialty! Don’t you have some clue? I design the hardware. Of course, I’m in the dark.”

“No. If that were the case, our security features would let us know. In addition, your shielding would dampen it.” He settled in the executive chair that normally sat behind his office desk. It had been molded for him, so it was about a thousand times more comfortable than the lab chairs.

Silence fell between them.

Alec rubbed his hands over his eyes, ordering his processor to stimulate endorphins and vaso-relaxants to nullify the headache gathering steam. The relief was nearly instantaneous, and he thanked the gods that some portions of his usual bodily control still functioned.

“Software,” he mused. The whole thing came down to whatever software was responding and what wasn’t.

“What?” Gabriel asked.

“It almost seems like there’s a program running that supersedes all others, a...hidden program that won’t even show when I use admin privileges. If it was written specifically to keep the processor from accessing certain programs we usually depend on—”

“Someone would have to know a hell of a lot about our code,” Gabriel interrupted him.

Alec flicked the disc on his chest in disgust. “I think we have proof that they know too much for our own good.”

He winced. “Agreed. Far too much. So...what do we do now?”

“I’ve already sent a secure message feed to Frank and Caleb, telling them to stay in protected areas.”

“And not to fuck strange women.”

“If they come face-to-face with the women in question, it’s too late for them. You know that. But I did warn them what we’re up against.”

“Yeah, thirty-eight, twenty-eight, thirty-eight and with the key to turning off our brains in favor of the lowest model of the three we possess...the one we’re not accustomed to using.”

Alec chose not to respond to that. When all was said and done, it was probably a nicer version of what Frank was going to say about this situation.

“In the meantime,” he changed the subject, “I’ve e-mailed your project teams and pulled our failsafe out of the bag of tricks.”

Gabriel winced. “I hate that. They always treat me like an invalid when I go back. We have them convinced I’m not even going to match Houston’s seventy-five years, you know.”

“The family history of Roget’s Disease comes in handy, Gabriel. Since Houston suffered from it, it gives us the cover we need when problems arise. How else would we explain dropping off the face of the Earth for a week?”

“I know it. I just hate being treated as fragile when I know the processor keeps me functioning better than the healthiest person on Earth...usually.”

“Right now, we are fragile. But, more importantly, you’re our hardware designer. While I work on the software issues, I need you on these holo-scans of the discs. Get inside them. Find out how they function. Find out how we can bypass or destroy them without destroying us in the process.”

* * * *

Alec snapped his head up, forcing himself to focus. Had he slipped into a rest cycle? A quick check of his processor logs confirmed it. “Yet another glitch in a long line of them this damned thing causes.”

The memories he’d been reliving in unconsciousness flashed through his conscious mind. He groaned in agony. The worst had come four days later.

Of all of them, Caleb had been used most sorely. If Alec was right, Trina had been their traitor all along.

He still remembered the first time Houston had introduced them to the dark-haired, dark-eyed waif. She’d been twenty-five, fresh from her Ph.D., brilliant, shy, blushed at a look. She’d shied from Frank’s teasing, seemingly disconcerted by his exuberance. It had taken a warning look from Alec to tone his brother’s antics down.

Of course, she’d been most at ease with Caleb. No one questioned why that was. They were both quiet, immersed in work, uncomfortable with the games society played. They shared long discussions on the minutia of the subjects they both enjoyed. When the time came for them to choose women to wed, Trina would have been the obvious choice for Caleb...which only made her betrayal that much more unpalatable.

Houston had taken her under his wing as an assistant; he’d requested, on his deathbed, that Caleb do the same, and his brother had.

Caleb had tried to keep himself safe, as ordered; he’d stayed hidden inside his labs, the lock-outs secured. His only weakness had been Trina. Since he’d known her for five years and never shown more than a passing attraction to her, she’d been deemed a safe companion in his isolation.

That was before her innocent shoulder rub had Caleb lusting for her, before she’d stripped off her clothes and ridden him hard...

She’d left Caleb in a heap in his lab, his clothing half-off his body and the damned disc on his chest. Caleb had even told her he loved her, in the heat of the moment. For that sin, he was experiencing another new emotion...regret. Gods knew, he’d been used the worst.

If Alec’s suspicions were founded, Houston had been used, as well. Had Trina capitalized on her position of trust with Houston Lawton to set his engineered sons up for the kill?

Alec winced at that thought. Just before Houston’s death, he’d called the four of them in for a software/hardware update, invoking the Roget’s card for a full direct chip implant into the protected CPU.

Trina hadn't been present at the surgery, but she'd been in Houston's lab for a year before that update. Had she tampered with the program they'd been given? There was no way to know for certain.

Houston's death hadn't felt like an ending to Alec, at the time. He'd believed they had six or seven decades, at least. The average life expectancy for a healthy male was ninety-five years. Until the disc, the processors had kept their bodies optimally maintained, and it was capable of forcing certain autonomic functions to operate smoothly when the human brain stem started to fail...if it worked correctly. Theoretically, they could have easily lived to be well over a century and a quarter.

Four years later, they were marked for death. Alec and Caleb were barely in their prime, at forty and thirty-eight. Frank and Gabriel weren't even old enough to justify that distinction, at thirty-six and thirty-five.

They were too young to die, but Frank had taken what little chance they'd had out of their hands. "Impatient," he grumbled. Frank had always been impatient.

Now, they were all in solitude, waiting for the end, because of Frank and his damned temper.

* * * *

Frank stormed out of his workshop and out of Lawton Three, the building he'd been gifted as his home and base of operations.

It was a joke that he was considered the head of the repair department. He wasn't a businessman. He was a grease monkey and happy that way. Sure, his augmentations let him trouble-shoot in a tenth of the time it took anyone else...or less. With the schematics for every machine they touched downloaded into his processor and pattern recognition...a full and instantaneous computation of every input and output on the machine and how each error would affect the same... He was a grease monkey.

Even his legal name of Francis was too lordly for him. He was Frank; he'd always preferred Frank.

The street was nearly empty, so he headed in the direction of lights and people. His nerves were keyed up for action, but more than that, he was on a mission of sorts.

He could order his processor to help him calm himself, but Frank didn't want that. He was angry, and he wanted to stay angry until he accomplished what he'd come to do.

Those bitches were taking everything from him. His brothers, the only three humans—*okay, cyborgs*—on Earth who understood him, were marked for death.

Though love was beyond his capabilities, the one major flaw in the augmentation process, he felt *something* for them, and that something was being stolen away. If his brothers were going to die, those skanks might as well kill

him, too. Loneliness wasn't an emotion Frank wanted to live almost a hundred years with.

He'd forced his way into Caleb's memories, despite his brothers' protests on the matter. That had made the very machine-class, black and white decision painless for him. Frank wasn't going down like Caleb had. There'd be no protestations of love from Frank.

"Where are you, bitch?" he growled, stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets.

Frank had no idea what his would look like, but he suspected she'd be a redhead. He had a thing for redheads, as a general rule.

He had no idea where she'd be, either, but it seemed they liked ambushing the Lawton men, so chances were she'd find Frank eventually.

"Interested, honey?"

Frank stopped, meeting the hooker's eyes. There was nothing but the same burning rage in him; the woman stepped back, her eyes going wide.

"No," he replied simply, moving on. This wasn't a night for a simple fuck. The woman he intended to fuck would be fucking him in return, in a more esoteric sense.

At a loss, Frank started meeting the eyes of every woman he passed. The heat of anger gave way to the cold certainty that she was playing with him, and not even his processor seemed capable of mustering enough adrenaline to keep him on the laser edge of rage he wanted to maintain.

Yes, she was playing with him. She'd find him, all right, but she'd find him on her schedule and not his own.

Damn those cock-teasing cunts!

Frank stopped, then turned back, admitting defeat...and came face-to-face with her. He didn't question that she was the one he'd been looking for. The weight of his erection, coupled with the misfiring of glands, resulting in a veritable flood of chemicals into his bloodstream, made that clear enough.

She didn't move toward him. She didn't speak. The unmistakable look of sadness in her dark eyes caused an alien tightening in his chest.

He didn't try to argue the maddening reasons she might be sad. Frank didn't care if she felt sorry for him...or if she was disappointed that he was such easy prey, for that matter.

"What's your name?" His voice came out as little more than a croak.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"I think I deserve to know."

She nodded, her red hair bouncing around her face. He'd known she'd have red hair.

"Well?" he prompted her.

"Stacie."

"Stacie," he repeated, letting it roll off the tongue. It wasn't bad. Still, it was strange how little comfort it was to know the name of his executioner.

She opened her mouth to speak, and Frank surged toward her, sealing his mouth to hers, letting the rioting chemicals in his body lead him. He didn't care what she had to say. They both knew why they were there; the preliminaries were hardly necessary.

Apparently, she agreed with him. The kiss...if something so complex could properly be called a kiss...was like a form of sex in itself. It was hard, of bruising intensity, a battle where each of them sought to master the other.

A spark of common sense intruded, and he released her, gratified to see that he'd stunned her with his response. She was capable of doing the same to him, which meant they couldn't fuck in some close alleyway. When she was done with him, his processor would launch him into rest cycle, wherever he was. Alec had been safely in his bed, but Caleb had been in his lab and Gabriel in his car.

"What is it?" she asked.

Frank looked around at their surroundings, noting the Grand Westmoreland Suites, a convention hotel that he'd used for work several times. Had he headed this way on purpose? Did it matter if he had?

"Frank—"

"Come with me." He took her hand and led her across the street to the lobby.

The Westmoreland had automated long ago. Though he could request a human clerk by virtue of his name, he didn't. The last thing he wanted was the delay and annoyance of someone fawning over Houston Lawton's son. In fact, he didn't like that on a normal day, and this day was anything but normal.

Frank slid his identi-card into the kiosk, pausing with his finger hovering over the touch screen button for a standard room. He glanced at Stacie, then away, choosing a honeymoon suite instead. There was little doubt there would be more than a little foreplay going on in that room, and he deserved to die...or to be marked for death in opulence.

Besides, he couldn't take the money with him, and they shared billions between them. If all the physical assets of Lawton were liquefied, they would split more than a thousand times that dollar amount. What was a night in a honeymoon suite compared to that, even with a hotel as exclusive as this one?

A key slid out and their room number flashed on the screen, along with a personal welcome to him. An offer for a bellman followed, and Frank declined by push-button. He took the key and ushered Stacie along with him, putting distance between them in the elevator, unwilling to repeat Alec's performance.

The trek to the room passed in silence. They didn't touch each other, didn't make eye contact...until the door closed behind them.

Stacie reached for him, and Frank brushed her hands away. She shot him a look of confusion and hurt.

Damn it! Why do I care if she's hurt by something I say or do? "My way," he grumbled, by way of explanation. It was the least she owed him.

"Of course."

Frank pulled off his clothes, then hers, tossing them this way and that. For a moment, he stared at her, disconcerted.

He'd intended to grudge fuck her, giving Stacie nothing but his anger and lust combined, nothing but his loathing for her and everything she'd set out to do.

It wasn't possible; he wanted more. If this was the end, he wanted to feel...whatever it was the rogue software would allow him to feel.

He started with a kiss, not unlike the one they'd shared on the street below. He wanted to touch all of her, to taste all of her, to feel her.

Frank stopped short of admitting he wanted to love her. Stacie would be the death of him. Whatever this farce was, it wasn't love.

None of them had felt love before; how could they know they were feeling love? Or jealousy? Or any of the other insane things his brothers attested they were feeling?

What little logic he could muster told him this wasn't love. She was out to kill him. What was there to love in that? It wasn't warm and sweet. It was cold and callous.

Still, he gave himself over to his body's needs, leaving the confusing reactions of the processor out of the equation entirely.

It wasn't the rushed first encounter his brothers experienced. Frank spent his time, indulging in every sensation. His thrusts were slow and deep, driving Stacie to several crests before he joined her.

They lay on the bed, limbs entwined. Frank trailed kisses along her face, tasting sweat, smelling musk, feeling...something he had no name for, something powerful. He wanted the moment to last, but he had to know.

"What happens now?" he inquired.

Stacie locked eyes with him, sighing. "What do you enjoy, Frank?" Her fingertips slid across his wrists, and a wicked smile graced her lips. "I could tie you down and return the favor by ravishing you."

"Makes it easier to put the disc on," he noted, disgusted with himself that he looked forward to her ravishing him. His softening cock went rigid inside her again, and he closed his eyes in the accompanying wash of arousal.

Her lips brushed his, enflaming him further. "Your processor will shut you down for that," she whispered. "Until, then, feel for me."

He nodded, letting her guide him to his back. He wanted to feel. He wanted her to convince him there was something more between them than predator and prey.

Stacie slid off his length, reaching for the decorative ties holding back the drapes on the four-poster. Frank let her tie him down, vaguely wondering how many couples in love had done the same with them.

"You're going to experience quite a bit of sexual stimulation in the next three days," she informed him.

"Three days," he repeated numbly. "Is that how long I have?"

She paused, then knotted the second set of ropes. "It takes that long for the disc to become irreversibly integrated."

He ground his teeth at that. "Then it's already too late for Alec and Gabriel."

Her body nestled next to his, and she searched his face for something. "Why are you here, Frank?"

"Don't ask me that question."

"But—"

"I don't know why I'm here anymore, Stacie. It's not the same reason I set out to—I don't want to think right now. Don't ask me to."

Her lips stroked along his chest, making thinking all the more difficult.

"Stay here for the three days," she requested.

He groaned.

"Do you want to experience it the way your brothers have?" she asked. "Do you intend to fight it?"

"No." He'd come here to die on his own terms, and that one fact hadn't changed. If he had to die, he was going to embrace it.

Stacie eased down his body, her purpose more than clear. "I'll make it worth your while," she promised. "Stay here for the three days. Wait for me here."

"How? How will it be worth my while?" He'd been sucked off before. It had to be more inventive than that.

"I won't tease you. Every time I stimulate you sexually, I'll take you to climax...if you don't fight me."

That struck a chord in him. There was something here that he should understand.

She'd reached his cock, her breath causing him to tighten and lift in search of her mouth.

"The integration is pleasurable, if you let it happen," she breathed.

"For you, as well?" Was that why she wanted his agreement?

"Oh, yes."

Her mouth engulfed him, and Frank put himself in her hands. If she felt it, he'd make sure she missed what he'd give her when he was gone.

* * * *

Hannah lay on her bed, the electronic dildo inside her, writhing at the sensations coursing through the link between them, then climaxing hard. She'd thought the training with simulated responses, before they'd approached Houston's sons, had been thrilling. The interaction with a live Alec was a hundred times better.

She'd thought Stacie had been insane to tell Frank that the link worked both ways, thought the men would use the knowledge against them, but none had chosen that.

It might be Houston's software inhibiting them, but she doubted that. None of them had seriously considered it, which hinted that the transformation was working correctly.

Either way, they were being gifted a treat that none of them would have wagered on in the beginning...three days of a sexual haze. Of course, Stacie had it from the beginning, but Hannah and Sarah had endured a week of the frustration of an unwilling mind stifling a very willing body at the other side of the link.

She winced, removing the dildo.

All of them except Trina were enjoying the reversal. Caleb was hurt emotionally by what he saw as Trina's betrayal of him. His long association with her had facilitated familiar neural pathways, and those had accelerated the process in a way that unnerved him and upset the delicate balance. As a result, Caleb still fought Trina, while the others had embraced the process.

Hannah could hardly stand to see Trina's misery at the fact. Their youngest sister had always been the most fragile of them, crying or retreating at the drop of a hat. Growing up, they'd always protected her. Even Alec and Caleb had insulated her, as Houston had before them.

There was nothing they could do to ease her pain now. Only Caleb's acceptance could do that...if he would give it.

I pray to any gods listening that he gives it. Would Trina forgive any of them, male or female, if Caleb didn't eventually relent? Then again, would Hannah want forgiveness if the numbers had been run so far off base? Not that it was all Hannah's doing. They'd all run the numbers, including Trina.

It was strange. In the beginning, they'd thought Frank would be the one to go down fighting.

Oh, they'd trusted their plan of marking Alec and Gabriel on the same night, using Caleb's perceived safety against him, and letting Frank's personality drive him to them. It had been flawless, that far.

But Trina had been prepared for a docile partner to the end of this madness, while Stacie had been trained for an argument or five. Neither of them had been presented with the planned end result.

It was intriguing, the way their human halves could complicate such a straightforward event, how emotions could so destabilize a predictable personality matrix. Of course, that's what Houston had feared, all along.

Hannah rose from the bed, preparing to bring Houston's dream to its only plausible conclusion. She dressed to kill, smiling at the irony that Alec expected a killing already. As a last taunt, she flicked her tongue over the dildo, sending her warning to Alec that time had run out.

Her cohorts were amassed in the lounge of Houston's old quarters, dressed to their parts.

Stacie arched one crimson eyebrow. "One for the road, Han?"

Hannah chuckled in response. "He's just *so* good, I can't help myself."

“Yeah. So is Frank.” A light blush stained her cheeks.

Sarah huffed in annoyance. “Let’s just move. I want the real thing, if you don’t mind.”

Trina grimaced, seemingly fighting back tears.

Hannah wrapped an arm around her, seeking the right words. “Put him in rest cycle until his brothers are...settled. Once it’s done, he’ll accept everything you have to say. Give him time, Trina.”

“It was underhanded,” she complained.

“It was Houston’s plan...mostly.”

It wasn’t strictly true. Trina had formulated several key elements of the current phase of the plan, and they all knew it. If Caleb went wrong... If any of them did, Trina would never forgive herself.

Stacie snorted in an unladylike fashion. Of course, she’d never been much of a lady, which made her the perfect bait for Frank. “Do you honestly think they would have agreed to this?”

“Do most men?” Sarah finished.

* * * *

A movement caught Alec’s eye, and he startled. He replayed the processor logs from that unplanned rest cycle again, grimacing. The rest cycle had been planned, but not by Alec; it had rendered him blissfully unaware of the fact that the elevator had been activated...and by Houston’s code.

“Hello, Hannah.” He didn’t question that she was the one in the shadowed corners of the room.

She sauntered into the dim light, dressed in a long coat that swung open around her body, revealing the scrumptious little teddy beneath. The CFM heels completed a very tasty picture.

“I missed you, Alec,” she purred.

“Did you?” he challenged. “How could you miss me, when we’ve been fucking like rabbits long distance for three days?”

Her coat slid to the floor, and her hands went to her waist, accentuating her curves. “That was long distance, Alec. As Sarah would say, I want the real thing.”

Anger warred with arousal, making him even angrier. “Tell me something.”

“Almost anything.” Her smile was far too cocky for his tastes.

“Is this a fringe benefit for you or a necessary part of your plan?” He wanted to hurt her, and yet he found the need to brace himself in case he did rising up strong. Alec hid it behind a mask of indifference; the last thing he needed was Hannah *knowing* he cared how she felt.

She crossed the room to him, swinging one leg over his body and lowering herself, straddling him on the chair. The chair lowered, forcing his body into a

slight curl that fit her to him. His delight at the sensation...and visions of her riding him as Trina had ridden Caleb were cut short by her voice.

“For me, it is the ultimate fulfillment.”

Alec scowled at her. “A pretty piece of flattery.” He’d rather her say it was a fringe benefit than lie to him so blatantly. Couldn’t she even favor him with the lesser lie?

“Oh, but it is. Even if you weren’t so talented... So...” Her fingertips trailed down his chest, making him shiver. “Dedicated, Alec. Oh, you are that. Having you inside me has so many added benefits that not even the closest link to that wonderful toy could give me.”

His mind locked on one very terrifying added benefit that direct contact could make possible. He searched the programs meant to suppress the stimulation of sperm production. They were disabled, and his vain attempt at forcing the issue proved fruitless.

How long had his body been producing? Since the disc had been installed? Gods, ten days was a hell of a lot of sperm. Even the three days that Frank had been infected with their technology would be stunning, considering the massive amounts of testosterone nearly poisoning their systems.

Or had they been producing even longer than that? Considering the earlier software implanted, there could have been an innocuous trigger that started the ball rolling days before they met the women sent to kill them...or months.

There was no way to know; it wasn’t something he checked routinely. None of them would. Faults like this were supposed to set off alarms.

But he’d already argued that this wasn’t a proper fault. A fault would come when two programs clashed. One program being given admin over another was a matter of a loop created to circumvent certain protocols. There was nothing to clash, hence no alarms.

Worse, since he couldn’t access the master file, the one causing all the problems, he couldn’t see when it had been activated. There were no logs for him to access. It wasn’t like one program changing a setting. It was untraceable. It was perfect, and it was terrible.

“So, you intend to take the company by using our natural children as inheritors.” He didn’t question it. It answered the question of why they would do this effectively enough.

“Oh, our children will inherit it someday.”

Not if I don’t do this. Not if I choose to shut down my vital processor functions and institute a terminal fault without...

Alec realized the impossibility of his position. He might have been fertile the first time he met Hannah, for all he knew. Even if he hadn’t been, it was twentieth-century science to extract sperm for fertilization from a comatose male...or even a dead one. No matter what he did now, she’d won.

“Release my brothers. I’ll give you what you want. I’ll sign over my portion of Lawton to the four of you, and I own the largest share. You can keep the disc

on me as your insurance policy.” If it would work, Alec didn’t care what it cost him. At least, they’d be alive.

Hannah pressed a kiss to the disc. “They’re fully integrated. I can’t remove them from any of you. Given enough time, your body will cover it with skin so it’s not noticeable. As your processor scans as a medical aid device, it would scan as an advanced form of heart monitor and pacemaker. A Roget’s sufferer would have one. Houston did.”

But, we’re not going to be given that much time. Only until they conceive...or maybe until they deliver healthy children. He didn’t ask that; Alec didn’t want to know if he’d guessed the truth.

Gods, what is Caleb going to do? He’ll be dead nearly immediately, if he’s presented this choice.

Tears stung Alec’s eyes, a wholly disconcerting sensation. He’d never cried. His processor had never considered the human reaction necessary to his cover, and no emotion had forced him that far. “This isn’t necessary,” he insisted. There had to be some way to negotiate with them.

“It is.”

“Why? Damn it, tell me why!”

She seemed to consider that. “You’re not complete. Houston was forced to create you...broken. He didn’t want to do that, but in the end, he knew his time was running out, and he needed heirs to take over for him.”

He’d known the drive to preserve Lawton, at least until the end of their lives, had been foremost in Houston’s mind. The processor could force their bodies to overcome the few genetic markers for Roget’s that he couldn’t gene manipulate out of their make-up. It was the best he could do, and he’d been content with his successes. Or, so Alec thought.

The other half of her comment, however... “But, we aren’t broken.” That was what the gene manipulation and the processors were intended to do, though the augmentation helped them in other areas. If anything, they were superior.

“You are. Your feelings—”

“He assured us they were genuine. Our human bodies work the same as—”

“Love, Alec. When Houston created you, he couldn’t give you love.”

Silence fell. Alec couldn’t argue that; he anticipated her argument that a being without love wasn’t worthy of life, that such a power in society and government couldn’t be run by four such as himself. It’s what he’d secretly believed this was about all along. The only part of their plan that had escaped him was the part about taking over the company by using their natural heirs.

He tried to find some measure of comfort in that idea. Houston had believed the company would die with them. It would please him to know that there was a way for it to continue on along his natural line, that it would continue without resorting to adoption. Though they could do the same as Houston had, hiding the augmentations and their failing from society, generation after generation, wasn’t as simple as it sounded. It was daunting.

But Alec felt certain that it would appall Houston to learn how it was accomplished, to learn that a traitor he'd taken under his wing had turned on them all this way. Houston had always felt trust and love were the height of humanity, and it had saddened him that he couldn't provide his sons with the latter.

Hannah continued, oblivious to his upset...or uncaring that he felt it. "Actually, you were always *capable* of feeling love."

"What?" If that was true, why would Houston—

"Can you control it, Alec?" she answered his unasked question before he could fully form it. "You've seen what releasing the controls Houston put on the emotion does to you."

He couldn't find the words to answer that. She had to be lying. There had to be more to their noxious code than turning off a couple of inhibitors to love, to the production of the chemicals that caused the physiological and psychological reactions that made up the emotion of love.

She leaned over him, nestling chest-to-chest, smiling as he hardened against her. "He knew that such a powerful emotion would destabilize your processors, that one broken heart would conceivably mean a terminal fault, so he stole it away. Houston regretted it, of course. The man did hold love on a pedestal above all else."

"How do you know that?" His blood ran cold. "Trina." She did her job as spy a little too well. Alec hadn't been aware that Houston had shared the truth of their existence with anyone.

Her laughter was rich, intoxicating. "No, he figured out his mistakes long before Trina. I was the breakthrough moment for him."

Alec swallowed hard, his head spinning.

"The problem was in finding a way to force the new neural link-ups where he needed them. Starting from scratch would mean destroying you." Her fingers walked up his chest. "*All* of you."

Ice settled in his gut.

She sighed. "But, of course, he loved you. So...he became obsessed with finding a way to *fix* you rather than destroying you. He died before that dream was realized."

"And you turned his dream for us to your own ends," he accused, heartsick that Houston had been played so callously, that they all had. There was no question about it. This betrayal would have killed Houston, much as it would likely kill Caleb.

Hannah raised her head, deadly earnest. "Never. I loved Houston."

His heart seemed to stop beating at that announcement. His shock was so deep that it left him unprepared for the final blow.

"Disengage," she ordered the chair. Hannah leaned to his ear, whispering to him. "November twentieth, twenty-two, thirty-nine. Engage."

Before he could find the words to question her, it hit. Energy coursed through his mind, and Alec was vaguely aware that he stiffened, arching beneath her. Images invaded his mind, holos of one event after another.

Gene manipulation. Houston at a holo-screen, using stylus probes to order changes. Was this Alec's creation?

Four toddler girls chased holo puppies around the playroom Houston had kept for Alec and his brothers at Lawton Tower...three floors below them. It was still there, though unused. Smiling parents chatted in the corner. Houston entered and the girls ran to him, wrapping tiny arms around him and kissing his whiskered cheek.

Houston stood over Hannah, directing her work at a third generation holo-screen not unlike the one Alec now used. At roughly thirteen, she was calculating the path of an electrical circuit without a calculator or paper and pen...much too quickly to be fully human.

Was it their genes Houston was working on in the earlier scenes?

Scene after scene confirmed that Hannah and the others were cyborgs, as Frank called them, using the rustic term for their kind.

As adults, they'd all worked with Houston. Hannah had been assigned to Lawton Three, so she'd never crossed paths with Alec. Sarah and Stacie had been at Lawton One and Four respectively, to accomplish the same effect. Only Trina had been placed with the man she'd one day seduce.

Searing pain tore at him, then disappeared. Alec was aware of little past Hannah bathing his face. He had no clue when she left him to get a cloth, but he was too tired to call up logs to try and track it. It was all he could do to do a time check and note that the assault, whatever it was, had lasted nearly five minutes. Gods, but he was tired.

Her words echoed in his battered mind. "Falling in love is a chemical response, Alec. It's easy to accomplish, whether it's real or not. *Being* in love is based on much more: pattern recognition, shared memories, memory cross-links that trigger the proper emotional responses...stable responses."

And I will never be capable of that. He floated, exhausted, halfway between unconsciousness and awareness. "What was the code you used?" If he knew, perhaps he could find a way to unlock her security features.

"My birth date. The day Houston discovered what he'd been missing in creating you."

He groaned. It was hopeless. It was too personal to hack; he didn't know enough about her to do it.

"We've fixed you. It took us four years to perfect the design Houston initialized for you, but we've helped Houston complete his work, at last."

"Is that all I am?" he managed, aching in body and soul. If this was a broken heart, he wished she'd never "fixed" him.

Hannah cupped his chin up, meeting his eyes. "Love is a two-way street, Alec. Otherwise, it's called infatuation. How could I give you what I didn't have

to give? What I didn't feel? I just had a head start on you, years of Houston sharing chosen memories of yours with me." She smiled sadly. "I had the correct mix of cross-links implanted at birth. Women normally do mature before men do."

Wrapping his mind...*either* mind around that concept was daunting.

"Don't break my heart," she requested. "I didn't give it lightly."

The tear spilling down her cheek made the decision for him. Alec pulled her cheek down to his chest, feeling...just *feeling* her in his arms.

About the Author

Brenna Lyons wears many hats, sometimes all on the same day: president of EPIC, author of more than 75 published works, columnist, special needs teacher, wife, mother... In addition, she's a member in good standing of ERWA, TELL, MWW, RWU, WPM, IWOFA, and Broad Universe.

In her first six years published in novel-length, Brenna has finaled for seven EPPIES (in six separate categories), three PEARLS (taking Honorable Mention second to NY Times Bestseller Angela Knight), two CAPAS, a Dream Realm Award and has taken Spintetinger's Book of the Year for 2007.

Brenna has been termed "one of the most deviant erotic minds in the publishing world...not for the weak." (Rachelle for Fallen Angels Reviews) She writes milieu-heavy dark fiction, mainly science fiction, fantasy and horror (in 20 established worlds plus stand-alones), poetry, articles and essays. She teaches classes in everything from POV studies to advanced editing, networking to marketing. Brenna loves talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>.