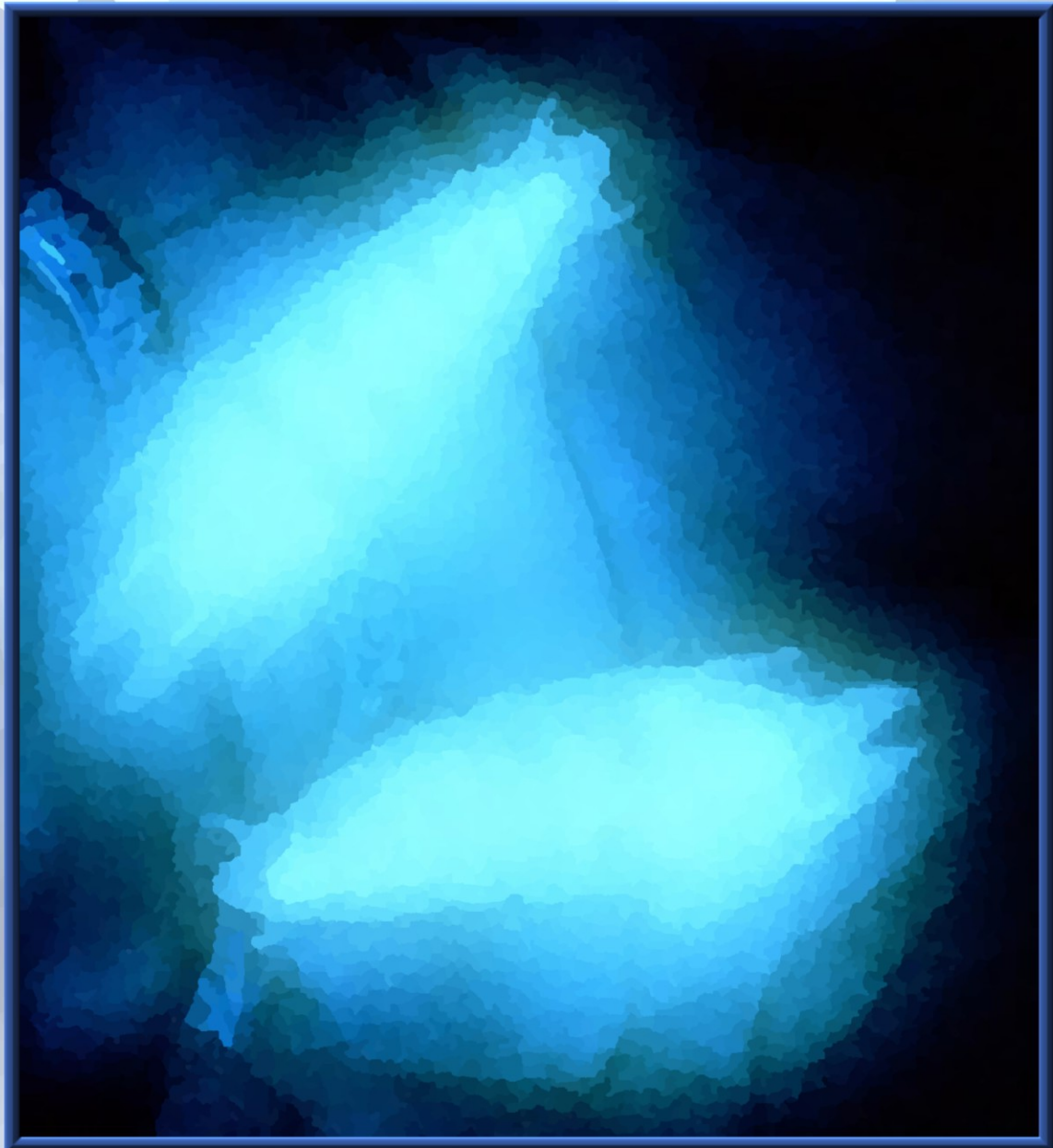


One Rule. Stay in the Light



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: Something has gone horribly wrong. A desperate move on Jack's part makes Riddick aware of it... and of how much she really means to him.

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1.

Under My Skin

Jack slipped quietly into Riddick's room and stared down at him. He was fast asleep, as always. It puzzled her that a man who had been on the run for so long could sleep so soundly, but he had never woken up, not once, on any of the occasions she'd sneaked into his bedroom to look at him. Tonight would be the last time.

He has no idea, she thought to herself, sadness making her mental voice seem to echo in her own head.

His sleep was so peaceful, so unbroken. "The sleep of the righteous," she'd heard it called. So ironic that he could sleep in peace while she tossed and turned and suffered.

No one understood. Imam had *almost* seemed to, at one time, but he'd been consumed by his own inner pain. Her friends at school looked at her strangely whenever she broached the subject, and she'd stopped even trying to. And Riddick...

Riddick slept on, oblivious to her suffering.

She wondered what he would do once she was gone. Would he stay on the station, put down roots, pretend to be a normal guy? Find a woman and raise some kids? Or would he move on to some other locale, perhaps pick up his criminal career where it had been left off?

I'm never going to know. For a moment the agony surged up again, filling her veins. She bit down on the urge to sob. She wouldn't. Not now. Not here. Not in front of him.

Once, she'd dreamed that maybe the pain could be soothed away in his embrace. She'd dreamed of him holding her, touching her, spreading a new sort of fire beneath her skin, burning away the darkness with his caresses. She'd dreamed of magic.

But the darkness was too great, and the caresses had never come. The magic had never existed, and now she was too old to believe in it anymore.

I held on as long as I could.

He'd held her only a very few times, most recently after Imam's abrupt and shocking death had left both of them rattled and confused. There had even been a few moments when she'd thought the nature of those embraces and touches had changed, less protector-and-charge and more man-and-woman.

But nothing had come of it. No fire, no light. The pain had only grown stronger. She was out of time. Out of choices.

Time to go, Jackie Girl, before he wakes up and asks what the hell you're up to.

She didn't bother to disguise the sound of her approaching footsteps as she moved to his bedside table. Why? He wouldn't really wake up anyway. She set the folded note on the bare surface, then leaned down and kissed his cheek. Good-bye. Slowly she turned away and left the room.

Jack's entry into Riddick's bedroom had not gone unnoticed.

He lay still in his bed, his breathing slow and even like that of an actual sleeper. His entire body remained relaxed. He was known for that, actually. Relaxed one moment, in lethal motion the next. But he remained perfectly still, perfectly calm... outwardly.

Within, though, he was in turmoil.

For more than a year now Jack had done this, sneaking into his room with increasing frequency until it had become a nightly occurrence. Sometimes she stayed for just a moment. Sometimes she would stay for an hour or two. She never spoke, never touched him, just watched him pretend to sleep.

And he always pretended.

It had puzzled him for a long time. Riddick wasn't particularly interested in self-analysis. He'd had enough psychiatrists take turns skull-fucking him over the years that he had stopped caring about the underlying motivations of his actions. But his reluctance to confront Jack about her nocturnal visits... confused him. Especially when he realized what lay behind it. Fear.

If he opened his eyes and spoke to her, everything between them would change. And he feared that change. In that moment, they'd both have to deal with what her visits meant, and he wasn't ready for such a

drastic redefinition of their relationship. It had almost happened after Imam's death, but he'd chickened out. Richard B. Riddick, scared of getting close to a woman... who'da thunk it?

She would let him. He was sure of that. If he opened his eyes, within moments he could draw her into his arms, into his bed... But she couldn't possibly be ready for the sort of hunger he felt for her. She was eighteen now, but... still so young. Still so innocent. He had no business messing with innocence.

All he had to do was keep his eyes closed, and things would stay as they were. He could always open his eyes the next night, if he decided it was time. For one more night he would resist the pull of his animal side, which didn't see uncertain youth, didn't see the constraints of trying to live as an Honorable Man; it only saw Female. And it hungered. He had no intention of letting it be unleashed upon her. Carolyn's death had reawakened Loss within him; Imam's suicide four months ago had driven it home. He would not lose Jack, especially not to the beast within.

Whatever it cost him, he would not lose her as he had lost everything else in the course of his life. This time he would *not* fuck things up by listening to the siren call of his inner beast. His eyes would stay closed, and the possibility of further loss would be staved off for one more day. Jack neither needed — nor, he imagined, *wanted* — to know that in his imagination he had explored every inch of her body.

The caress of her lips almost cost him the charade. That was new. She had never so much as touched him in her nightly visits before. Paper rustled on his bedside table and then he heard the soft sound of her retreating footsteps. The latch on his door quietly clicked home, and he opened his eyes. His glance moved to the bedside table.

A note. He picked it up and soundlessly unfolded it.

*Dear Riddick,
I'm sorry. I tried, I really did. But I'm just not strong enough. Please forgive me. You should have left me behind on the planet.
I love you. Good-bye,
Jack.*

He had to read it four times before the meaning sank in, and then his heart plummeted. He knew exactly what it meant; Imam had written a note much like it, at the end.

Not again! Not her!

He lunged out of the bed a second later, the full impact of what she'd written hitting him with lethal force. The casing of his bedroom door splintered as he slammed his way through without turning the knob, and the door cracked against the hallway wall with the sound of a gunshot.

Bathroom or kitchen? Where would she go? What was she planning on using? What little was left of his rational mind pointed out that she wouldn't have brought him the note until she was absolutely ready. He had to find her *fast!*

There. The bathroom door was closed and a thin stream of light spilled out from the crack beneath it. She was inside. The handle wouldn't turn when he tried it but he only hesitated for the barest second, wondering how close she was to the door. Fuck it. Concussed was better than dead. He kicked the fucking thing in.

Jack was sitting on the toilet lid, her arms extended over the bathtub. Blood dribbled from both of her cut wrists as she watched in fascination, mesmerized by her own escaping life force. He grabbed her and pulled her up, lifting her arms above her head to slow the bleeding as much as he could. She didn't even struggle.

He bound one wrist with a towel and then went to work on the other, cleaning it and using temporary stitches on it, then binding it tightly with proper bandaging. Then he worked on the first wrist. All the while Jack stood still, listless, cooperative, like someone already dead. Finally he was done. He picked her up and carried her back to his room. The door wouldn't close but he didn't care. Since the Holy Man's suicide, Riddick and Jack had been alone in the apartment. Nobody was left to have shit-fits about impropriety.

He put her on her back in his bed and climbed in, lying on top of her and glaring down into her eyes.

"What the fuck were you doing, Jack?" he growled, showing more anger than he meant to. "You giving up on me? Don't you fucking dare, girl!"

She ignored him, still in her daze. He slapped her cheek, hard enough to sting, and she blinked and looked up at him, some form of recognition returning to her eyes.

"Answer me, Jack!"

She swallowed. "I'm sorry, Riddick." Her voice was resigned and he knew he couldn't turn his back on her yet or she'd open her wounds right back up.

"Sorry? That's all you gotta say? What the fuck is going on? First Imam and now you! You're stronger than this!"

"It hurts..." she suddenly whimpered. "So much... please... I can't take it, Riddick, please..."

Beneath him her body writhed. He watched as her features contorted. Whatever this was, it was a real malady, something physical. His mind flashed back over the last five years, to similar whimpers heard in the dead of night, many of them right before she would sneak into his room and watch him pretend to sleep. To tiny winces that would mar Imam's expression from time to time, with increasing frequency, until finally he'd walked into the Holy Man's room to find him dead, with his *own* wrists slashed. What the fuck? How long had both of them been in pain? Why had they hidden it? *What the fuck was happening here?*

Jack listened to Riddick moving around in the bathroom. He was muttering as he cleaned up her spilled blood, something about tests; blood tests. She wriggled, testing her bonds. He'd made them tight, escape-proof. What else could she expect? Richard B. Riddick was nothing if not an expert on the art of restraints. He'd worn them all at one time or another and knew how to get out of most of them. "The Houdini From Hell," that was one of the nicknames that appeared in his criminal record.

It was crawling through her again, black fire that scoured cruelly at her nerves. He'd never felt it, she knew that. Every time it had assaulted her, she'd checked to see if he was feeling anything like it... but he always slept like a stone. Now it moved along her body again and she writhed against it. She wanted to tear out her veins, drive it from her, whatever it was, this invader that had lived beneath her skin since the planet...

"Jack? You okay?" Riddick was standing in the doorway, a small glass in his hand. She grimaced as she realized that it was half-filled with her blood, collected from the bathtub. As she watched, he set it down and came over to sit beside her.

"No," she wheezed after a moment.

"Tell me what hurts, kid." His voice was uncharacteristically gentle.

She was caught. She had to speak about it, to *him*. After all of her attempts to avoid doing so.

She'd tried, at first, to tell people. *Something's wrong with me*. Her friends had looked askance at her when she'd attempted to describe the sensations, back when she first really noticed them.

"*Shit, Jackie,*" Maureen had said. "*You sound like one of those nuts who think bugs are crawling under their skin or something! You been doing things I don't know about?*"

By that, her best friend of those days had meant drugs. They'd grown distant to each other soon after. Maureen was a straight-laced girl who wanted nothing to do with a druggie... or a crazy person.

She'd begun to wonder if that was what she was. Crazy. In the light of day and reason, surrounded by her friends and feeling normal, it had seemed like the most logical thing.

It always struck in the dead of night, waking her from her sleep. She would lie in bed, whimpering and wriggling, trying to get comfortable, until finally she couldn't stand it and rose, switching on her light. And then, with wakefulness fully upon her, the pain would ebb once more.

Crazy, she'd tell herself, and shiver. She was turning into her mother.

Nothing had ever shown up on her physicals, although her doctor had prescribed a skin ointment for her one time. She'd been unable to keep from scratching at her limbs, trying to dig out the tickling burn that came to her at night. Finally she'd begun keeping her fingernails cut back to the quick; scratching didn't help anyway.

And even when she'd asked her doctor to check her blood for "anything funny," nothing had shown up.

Riddick, she knew, suffered from nothing of the kind. She'd checked. Rising from her bed on those horrible nights, she would creep into his room and look at him. Fast asleep and completely at peace, Riddick never looked like a man who had taken dozens of lives and was feared and reviled throughout much of the galaxy; he looked to her like the epitome of beauty and grace. But there was never any pain in his face. Sometimes, if she stayed and watched him for too long, her own pain would return. She'd leave in a hurry, then. If Riddick ever knew how crazy she'd become, she told herself, it would kill her.

Imam, after all, had stopped speaking to her when she'd tried to tell him. It had crippled their relationship. They'd only talked, from then on, about inane things, for the final six months of his life. Up until then she'd told him everything and basked in his serene acceptance of her.

She could still see it so clearly. Breakfast time and Riddick was in the shower. She'd brought Imam his coffee and sat down across from him, trying to appear as nonchalant as she could about her question.

"Have you ever... heard of someone... who..." *Shit, even though she'd practiced the words alone for hours, saying them now was damn near impossible!* *"...who feels like something's crawling under their skin?"*

For a moment Imam's eyes seemed to widen. Then he frowned, clasping his hands and resting his chin upon them. "What makes you ask this, child?"

"Well... say... I know someone. And this person... they wake up in the middle of the night and there's this pain, like something's tunneling through them, eating at them from the inside or something. Like bugs—"

"Jacqueline." Imam's voice was firm and strangely harsh. "You are speaking of hallucinations. Madness."

There was, she'd thought at the time, an almost desperate tone in his voice. His face had been hard as stone, suddenly. She'd looked down, unable to meet his eyes, and had stared at his hands instead. His knuckles had been white. His nails, she remembered, had been trimmed down to the quick, much like her own.

She'd never actually known how *he'd* slept. A year after they'd moved into the station, he'd begun locking his bedroom door at night. And from that day on she'd been locked out of his heart as well.

She'd been alone with her madness. Alone with her pain. And now she had to admit to both, to Riddick.

"It's inside me," she tried to explain. "I can feel it crawling. It's eating me. Biting me..."

She shuddered and writhed as it struck at her again as if summoned by her words. The bed creaked as Riddick rose and moved to shut the door. He struggled with it for a moment and then managed to get it to close, blocking out the light from the hallway. Of course. He'd be more comfortable in the total darkness, but—

"No, no, please, open the door, please, it's worse when it's dark!" She was babbling and she knew it but the thing inside her had grown ferocious.

"Shhhh, it's okay, Jack! We're gonna get this fixed, whatever it is, I promise." He was beside her again.

"Please," she begged. "Either kill me or open the door! Please, Riddick!"

"Fine... okay..." He rose from the bed and took a few steps. "Holy *fuck!*"

The alarm in his voice roused her from her pain and she lifted her head. She could barely make out his hulking outline, pure tension in every aspect of his form, as he stared at his dresser. At the glass on his dresser. At the glass of her blood on his dresser.

At the *glowing* glass of her blood on his dresser.

"I don't know where the hell this stuff came from, but your young friend is lucky to be alive at all."

Dr. Dane was probably the best toxicologist on the space station, or any station within ten parsecs. He looked up from the microscope, fixing Riddick with a shrewd gaze.

Riddick waited impassively, hiding his urgency behind iron control. He wanted answers and he wanted them fast. He'd left Jack alone in the apartment, surrounded by as much light as he could power up. He hadn't unchained her, still not at all sure that she wouldn't try to hurt herself again. The light had been far too bright for her to sleep beneath, until he'd found something that could be used as a blindfold and bound it around her eyes. She'd slipped into a peaceful sleep once he'd done that.

Lit that way, she'd looked beatific and luminous, despite the hollow exhaustion on her face. She'd looked like an angel. A fallen, chained, tormented angel, but an angel nonetheless. *His* angel. The only one he had left. She seemed to be in no pain. The pain only moved in the darkness... as if it was his own kin.

"How come this shit never showed up on any of her tests before, Doc? We've been here for five years. She's been in *pain* for at least four of them, and I know she had some blood tests done last year."

"First, it is impossible to test for everything, let alone the unknown. Most of the time when blood tests are run, we do simple red counts, white counts and platelet counts... blood sugar levels and the like. There's no

way to test for all possible conditions. Unless you have some particular malady in mind, based upon symptoms—”

“Okay, Doc, I get that part, but her blood was fucking *glowing!*”

“Only in the dark, Mr. Riddick. The sample I exposed to light went completely inert and showed no unusual properties. And most of the time when we study a blood sample under the microscope, we’re exposing it to light the entire time. The microbes causing this problem are extremely small and easily missed when they’re inactive. Active, however... well, I don’t doubt she was in horrible pain.”

Riddick shuddered, remembering the way Jack had writhed beneath him. She’d wept and thrashed against the bonds until he’d gotten the smart idea to turn the lights *on*. Then she’d gone quiet, soon becoming rational enough to answer his questions about her pain and how long she’d experienced it.

“Tell me again about this planet you were on.”

“I don’t get that, Doc. You’ve already heard all about it. Anyway, how come she and the Holy Man would have this... infection... and I wouldn’t? We were all there.”

“Were you always together?”

“No, of course not.”

“Tell me about the times that you were away from them. What were they doing?”

“How the fuck would I know *that*, Doc? I wasn’t there!”

“Tell me what you do know. Were any unusual substances found? Perhaps in the coring room?”

“No. And anyway, I was in there too. Only time I was away from them for long was—”

You should have left me behind on the planet. He almost had.

He saw it again, Carolyn caught in the light of the skiff, a whiskey bottle held aloft in her hand. A glowing bottle...

“Shit!”

“What is it, Mr. Riddick, what do you know?” Dane was one of the few people who could speak so calmly to Richard B. Riddick... one of the few people, outside of the station’s owners who had granted him sanctuary in the first place, who even knew who he really was, making that calm even more extraordinary.

“Fucking glow-worms!” He turned and stared at the doctor, his manic frustration morphing into manic excitement. “They found ’em in a cave when they were hiding. The three of them pulled ’em off of the walls of the cave and put ’em in two bottles to make *lamps!*”

“Yes, that makes sense,” Dr. Dane agreed, nodding. “The toxin is secreted by microbial organisms, undoubtedly the same ones that existed within your glow-worms. Somehow your friends became infected. Perhaps the creatures bit them... or perhaps they were infected by fluids from the creatures coming into contact with open wounds and abrasions.”

“Well, they sure as fuck had a lot of those,” Riddick muttered. They’d *all* been banged up by the time they’d reached the skiff. “Why didn’t I get infected?”

“All of the creatures were inside the bottles by the time you handled them, and I imagine the torrential rains you described washed any fluids off of the glass.”

So simple for the doctor! Riddick paced, nodding. Okay, it made sense. Shit, Carolyn had probably been infected, too. He hoped her blood had glowed bright enough to burn the shit out of whatever beast had pulled her from his grasp—

It couldn’t have.

“How come it took so long? It’s been five years!”

“I imagine it took the microbes a while to reproduce sufficiently to spread the infection throughout their bodies. When did young Jackie say she first noticed the pain?” Dr. Dane was already back at his desk, ordering beakers and preparing liquids.

“A year after we got off that rock. She said it only got really bad in the last eight months.”

“Poor child. Very well. I will begin searching for an antibiotic that can kill these creatures. In the meantime, you have to keep her surrounded by bright light. Whatever they are, they seem to only become active in darkness.”

“How the fuck do they know? They’re inside her body, how can they tell whether it’s dark or light?”

“Several centuries ago, Mr. Riddick, scientists discovered that the compound Heme, in human blood, was photoreactive. They discovered that the human biological clock was controlled by this compound, not, as was once thought, by light signals to the retina. These creatures are in her blood as well.”

“But that’s still inside her body!”

“Hold a flashlight to the palm of your hand, Mr. Riddick, and tell me if any light shines through. Here... use this one.” Dane handed him a pen-light.

Riddick took it, already knowing exactly what he would see. Moving to a darkened corner of the room, though, he obediently turned on the light and pressed it to his palm, looking at the circle of bright red that appeared on the back of his hand.

“Okay. You win, Doc. I believe you. They’re in her blood, and they wake up when the lights go out. Can we kill ‘em? Without hurting her?”

“I’ll know very soon.”

“And if you find out we can’t?”

“Then young Jackie must stay in the light for the rest of her life.”

She slept for several hours, more peacefully than she had in years, before Riddick returned.

“What is it?” she asked him groggily. “Does Dane know?”

“Yeah,” Riddick said, his rumbling voice oddly soothing. “An infection from the planet. From those glow-worms.”

“The *glow-worms*?” Jack shook her head, astonished. “How?”

“Don’t know yet. He thinks maybe when you guys were putting the worms in the bottles, they secreted something that got into your bloodstreams through whatever cuts and abrasions you had.”

“Bloodstreams?” For a moment the bizarre thought — *I have more than one?* — passed through her mind and she almost wanted to laugh.

“Yeah. Looks like Imam was infected too, and that’s why he killed himself. Dane says Imam’s infection was probably more advanced than yours.”

Jack suddenly wanted to choke. Now, horribly, everything in Imam’s goodbye note made perfect, chilling sense.

When they’d found Imam, he’d been dead for almost a day. He’d gone to bed as usual, locking his door. He had the next day off; Friday, for him, was the holy day of rest, after all, but Riddick and Jack had work and school. His door had still been locked when they came home. It was only when he didn’t appear for dinner, and didn’t answer Jack’s pleas at his door, that Riddick had finally kicked the door down and they’d found his body.

Jack suddenly realized that he’d cut his wrists too, much as she had. *His* blood hadn’t glowed in the darkness of the room, but then it had dried hours earlier, and she’d turned on the light almost immediately anyway. Riddick had held her through her hysterics and then, once she was calm enough, had gone to call the station coroner. She’d found the note a moment after he left the room.

Dear Richard and Jacqueline,

I regret that I have failed you both, as I have failed my God. I have not the strength to endure Allah’s punishment any longer. Please forgive me for this weakness within me. Peace be upon you both. Pray that I find peace as well.

Abu al-Walid.

“Jack?” Riddick’s voice pulled her back out of her memories.

“Why... why was he so far ahead of me?” In her mind she could see every flicker of pain that had crossed Imam’s face. She’d been so wrapped up in her own that she hadn’t realized —

“Dane thinks there are two reasons. First, his skin is much darker than yours. Darker-pigmented skin absorbs less light than paler skin like yours. And then he was always in those heavy robes. That cut out a lot of light, too.”

“Light?” Of course... when she’d awakened at night, in the darkness, with the pain ripping at her, she’d always turned on her bedside lamp... and within moments the pain had subsided. Riddick had confirmed that himself, only hours earlier.

“Yeah, light. Dane says that the microbes in your blood go totally inactive in light, and wake up in the darkness. He’s going to figure something out, some kind of treatment. The good news is, until then, we can keep them from hurting you... we just keep you in the light.”

In the light? But Riddick’s world was in the darkness. How was he going to manage this? How was *she* if she couldn’t have him with her?

“Shit, that’s just so... so fucking perfect,” she finally grated out, not caring if her fury at the world, at that fucking bitch Fate, showed. “Story of my *life!*”

“Something wrong with staying in the light?” He seemed amused, the bastard!

“That’s not where you are, Riddick! I want to be with *you!*” Five years of longing manifested itself in those words. Beside her, hearing it, Riddick went still.

“You will be,” he finally answered her, his voice oddly husky. His clothing rustled and she looked over. He’d pulled his shiv out of the waistband of his pants. His “lucky shiv.” The one he’d made back on that planet. The one he’d used to kill Johns.

What was he doing?

She watched in astonishment as he undid one of the shackles that had imprisoned her. Taking her hand in his, he drew the edge of the shiv over first his thumb, and then hers. His grasp of her hand became iron-hard as realization hit her and she tried to pull it out of his grip.

“Riddick, no—”

It was too late. She watched in a mixture of horror and amazement as he pressed their two bleeding digits together, mingling their blood. His clean blood and her infected blood.

Oh my god.

He drew her hand to his lips and for a moment she thought he was going to give her an honest-to-god courtly kiss, but instead he licked both of their thumbs clean. Lying down beside her, still holding her hand, he smiled ironically.

“Wherever you are, I’m gonna be right there too.” He leaned forward and kissed her lips, his mouth gentler and softer than she’d ever imagined it could be.

Holy shit, she realized, as his arms slid around her body. *Richard B. Riddick just told me he loves me!* Staying in the light didn’t seem like such a bad thing, after all... not anymore.

2.

Father Figure

Jack woke up in the pitch black, not sure where she was. She couldn't see anything, but she could feel a massive body curled around hers, holding her tightly. Her arms ached like a bitch.

*Where am I? Am I back **there**?*

Memory began to seep in slowly. Riddick was holding her. This was his scent, his warmth, his strength. She'd slept in his arms at his insistence after—

Now she remembered why her arms hurt so much! And she knew why she couldn't see. Riddick had blindfolded her. Reaching up, gritting her teeth against the pain the movement woke in her arm, she fumbled the blindfold off of her head. Brilliant light splashed in, stabbing at her eyes.

"Shit, that's bright!" The words came out before she could stop herself.

"You're not kidding," came a low rumble in her ear. Riddick's voice sounded amused and irritated in equal measures.

Squinting against the glare, Jack struggled to turn around and see him. She tried to push against the mattress to turn over and an agonizing lance of pain flew up along her arm. "Oh *shit*!"

Large, strong, impossibly gentle hands grasped her torso, and Riddick turned her around to face him. "Your arms are hurting." He didn't sound surprised.

"Yeah," she whimpered. Eyes screwed shut, biting her lip against the angry throb in both wrists, she let him draw her into a sitting position.

"Got something for that." His voice was different. Softer and less ironic.

Jack flinched for just a second as something feathery touched her cheek, relaxing when she realized Riddick was wiping away her tears with a tissue. "What do you have?"

"Dane gave me some painkillers for you to use. And I've got ice packs in the freezer."

Cracking her eyes a little again, she managed to make out Riddick's calm face above hers. He had his goggles on and they were a little askew. He'd *slept* in them, she realized. He'd have to have. If this light level was hard on *her* eyes it had to be a *killer* on his. At least she was beginning to adjust.

Gonna have to figure out a way to sleep in bright light without a blindfold, she thought wryly. *Taking it off hurts too damn much.*

"Drugs and ice packs, huh? I see I'm gonna have a lot of fun at school today."

Her reputation would solidify in the "psycho" range. Anyone looking at the bandages on her wrists would know what she had to have done—

"You're not going today."

"Huh?" That was a huge relief, actually, but it came as a surprise. Back when they'd first gotten to the station, she'd been such a misfit that she'd dreaded every day of school, balking repeatedly at going and cutting classes whenever she could manage it. *Riddick* had been the one who had come down hard on her about that, not Imam. So this easy nonchalance came as a surprise.

He grinned at her astonished expression. "I already called you in. Talked to the Station Shift Three administrators and they said they'd clear it with the Shift One crew. Nobody's expecting you in classes for the next few days, and I'm on leave at work."

As he spoke, Riddick rose off of the bed and padded to the door.

"What did you tell them?"

He stopped at the door and glanced back at her, amused irony in his voice. "I told them you're sick."

Relief blasted through her. "You didn't tell them I cut myself?"

"Nah. Only ones who know about *that* are you, me, and Dane. No point in getting Suicide Intervention involved, given your extenuating circumstances. Back in a second."

Jack watched as Riddick left the room. She sighed and leaned back against his headboard, taking stock of everything that had happened, everything that had *changed*.

Extenuating circumstances. She wasn't crazy after all. The pain had a real — if admittedly bizarre — source. And a treatment, if not a cure.

Please God let there be a cure, she thought. Her eyes fixed on the cut on her thumb. For both of us.

She still couldn't believe he'd *done* that. Mixed their blood... and then kissed her the way she'd always dreamed he would. She didn't know which part was more astounding.

"I know you're not ready for me," he'd whispered, holding her close, their bodies pressed together. "And maybe I'm reading all of this wrong anyway. It's okay if you don't want me like—"

"I do," she'd told him, her heart racing. "I always have, but—"

He'd chuckled softly, resting his forehead against hers. "But not now. Not when you're in so much pain. It's okay, baby. I can wait. I want you to be sure... and I want you to be able to enjoy it."

Okay, she thought, *that* had been the most astounding thing of all.

What the fuck did I do? Riddick thought, heading for the kitchen.

He knew what he'd done. He remembered it all, remembered it well. And it had to be the most bizarre stunt he'd ever pulled in his life.

He pulled open the freezer door and extracted two ice packs, wrapping them in dish towels. He filled a glass with water, grabbed the pill bottle Dane had given him, and headed back toward the bedroom with the whole mess. Back to Jack.

Jack. His dream, his torment, his center... the most confusing thing in his life. The girl he'd protected and the woman he hungered after, mixed together. Sometimes he wasn't sure which one she was from moment to moment. But despite the way his whole universe seemed to revolve around her... *What the fuck did I do???*

She was sitting up on his bed, a musing expression on her face, as he returned. Looking up, she gave him a brave smile of gratitude. He carried his burden over to the bedside table.

"Lemme get the ice packs on you first. Then I'll help you take the pills." He smiled when she nodded and lifted her hands, holding them out to him.

Carefully, as gently as he could, he settled the ice packs in place over the cuts on her wrists, and wound each towel around her arms to hold them in place. He didn't miss the winces that marred her expression, or the way she bit her lower lip to hold in her urge to flinch away. He'd taken enough injuries of his own to know how much pain she had to be in, poor kid.

"Thanks," she said when he finished. Her voice trembled but he could hear the sincerity.

"No problem, Kid. You ready for your drugs? They're good ones. Only the best from Dr. Dane."

"Yes, please."

He held back the chuckle that wanted to emerge. He'd never thought, when he'd first met her and heard the mouth she had on her, that one day she would be the kind of girl who said "yes, please" to him. But there it was. He had to wonder, though, how much of it was the infection. She'd gone *mousy* on him as time had passed, and as the pain he'd only learned about had grown. Had the microbes in her blood killed her fight? Or had she been fighting so hard against *them* that she'd had nothing left to send out against the other dramas in her life?

The more he thought about it, the more he figured it was the latter. *Gotta get her fighting again. Maybe it'll be easier for her now that she has someone on her side—*

That was why he'd done it. Shit, it still made no sense at all to him, but that was why. After years of looking out for number one only, he'd suddenly joined a *cause*. He'd enlisted for a fuckin' *war*, here. And then he'd done something to make sure he *couldn't* back out, couldn't *chicken* out.

Where the fuck had that kind of devotion come from? How the fuck had she managed to inspire it in him? Okay, yeah, he'd fought for her before... he'd taken on a man with a shotgun once to protect her... but... but....

If he tried to compose a list of her attributes, it just didn't make sense. She was beautiful, sure. Smart. Sweet. All the things that a man liked. But he couldn't figure out *what* in that list might inspire his crazy actions. Until he actually *looked* at her and then suddenly it made some kind of improbable sense.

How long will it be before I start feeling those motherfuckers inside my skin? he wondered. Taking up the pill bottle — *stupid fuckin' childproof cap, Dane, you were not thinking, she can't open this herself in her condition* — he twisted off the top and shook out two pills into the palm of his hand. Setting the bottle down, he turned and lifted them to her lips.

Jack opened her mouth for him and he put the pills on her tongue, resisting the urge to slide his fingers in after them. Damn, this was going to be tough. To his animal side she was, if anything, more provocative than ever.

I am a sick, sick man, he thought, bringing the glass of water to her lips so she could swallow her pills. He tilted it carefully and watched her take deep sips until she had enough. She pulled her mouth away, swallowing, and then gave him another brave smile.

“Better?” Dumb thing to say. It was going to be a while before the pills did anything. But sweetness bloomed on her face in answer.

“Much.”

Dane, old man, you were dead-on about placebos, and all that shit about the mind leading the body. If the day came when Dane *didn't* have a logical answer for something, he might just curl up and die. More than ever, he was glad he'd stayed, accepting the reclusive doctor's protection. Jack needed the best. *And she's gonna have it*.

“So what happens now?” Jack asked. She was looking over the wrappings on her arms with a thoughtful expression.

“Well, Dane wants to see you at noon. He's gonna look over your cuts and take some more blood samples, maybe give you some more meds. We'll see what he says. Maybe there's a quick fix to all of this.”

He doubted it. These things were a brand new species. Years ago Dane had described to him some of the plagues that had swept through humanity during the Colonization Waves, as new organisms were encountered on world after world. One of them, Dystarth Fever, had threatened humanity with genuine extinction. A new virus like this would be hard to treat or cure. They were lucky it wasn't infectious or Jack would have had to go into quarantine on the spot. But Riddick had lived in close quarters with her for five years, and his blood was clean.

Well, it was up until last night, he amended. Dane was going to be pissed off at him.

The wise expression in Jack's eyes when he looked up startled him. She wasn't fooled by his words. But there was a serenity in her gaze that was new. A hint of the old fire that he hadn't seen in years lay within it. She knew she had a hard battle ahead of her, but she was ready to fight it. Because she knew she wasn't crazy. Because she knew she wasn't alone.

What the fuck did I do? The question sputtered through his mind again, and this time an answer came to him. *Either the smartest or dumbest thing I ever did in my life. I rejoined the human race.*

Dr. Ian Dane's section of the space station was very elaborate. His residential quarters were directly connected to both his extensive laboratories and the sickbay complex, which he held complete dominion over. All of the doors would open for his handprint or retina scan instantly, and he could call up the information of his massive database from any terminal.

It had been constructed to his specifications during the building of the station itself, eight years earlier. Most people who passed through the station on their way to the Frontiers had no clue that the quiet, reedy man giving them their vaccinations was one of the most wealthy, powerful people in the known galaxy.

And he wanted it that way. He'd come here to get away from the stares and the publicity. Even after his full exoneration, those had continued until he'd almost wished he *was* capable of murder.

At least it had let him do, with a clean conscience, what he'd always wanted to do. Get away from the bulk of humankind and lose himself in his work. He no longer felt obligated to oversee the family businesses — let his sister and the bean-counters handle those. He had much more important things to do. Be a doctor. Be a researcher. Discover new life forms, and protect humanity from them... and protect them from humanity.

If it weren't for the girl's suffering, he'd have been dancing with joy over this discovery.

But he liked Jackie. A lot. She was a sweet girl — young woman, really — and deserved a better life than the one these creatures had given her. There was a lot more to her than could be seen on the surface, too. There had to be, the way Riddick acted. Nobody'd ever managed to stir him to anxiety before.

He sat back in his favorite chair, pursing his lips as he considered the full meaning of that development.

I know you too well, Riddick. You were standing there, trying to look as calm as ever, but I can see through that. You care. There's finally someone you'd run into a burning building after. Never thought I'd see that day.

Never thought I'd see you actually love someone.

He leaned forward and called up the star charts again, studying the region of space that Riddick's derelict skiff had come out of. Exasperated, he shook his head and grabbed another menthol Kool out of the pack. There were no suitable star systems within that area. Unwillingly, his eyes moved to the Albireo Trinary.

*Not possible. I don't care if all three of them claimed that's where they were. Trinary systems can't support life. Whatever they thought they saw, they were **not** in the Albireo system.*

He reconfigured the program but nothing else came up. *Nothing* in that region of space could have supported life.

"You never *can* do anything by the rules, can you, Riddick?" he sighed. He was going to have to question the girl closely about the planet they'd crashed on, and see if she could remember anything that Riddick had forgotten. Not that she'd be able to come up with anything useful, like coordinates —

Coordinates.

He felt it rush through him, a chill of discovery. *I **have** coordinates.* His fingers almost trembled as he began keying in his request. Then his quiescent speakers crackled to life, and the final transmission from the *Hunter-Gratzner* began to play.

"This is an emergency dispatch from the merchant vessel Hunter-Gratzner, en route to the Tangiers System with forty commercial passengers on board. We have been knocked out of our shipping lane and are currently entering the atmosphere of a planetary body in the following position: X38, stroke 5; Y95 stroke 8; Z21 —"

"I'll be fucked up the ass," he muttered in awe, slipping back into the prison cant he'd sworn he'd never speak again. He didn't need to call up the charts to know what he'd see, but he did it anyway.

The *Hunter-Gratzner* had gone down within the Albireo Trinary.

Jack hadn't been afraid of anything except herself in months.

It had been a lonely way to live, thinking she was going insane, knowing she couldn't tell anyone. Her calls for help had gone unanswered until they were at last silenced. As hope had died, so had fear. Who cared if others *thought* you were crazy when you already *knew* you were? Who cared if something might be dangerous or painful, when you lived with the promise of pain at any moment? And who cared if something might kill you, when the quietude of death seemed like a welcome blessing?

Nobody, when hope was dead.

Funny how she hadn't acted on any of that, she thought. She'd turned quiet. Mousy. Whatever nihilism had come to roost inside her had been a silent type. Her inner fire had died along with hope, until only the fire that crawled through her veins lived on.

But now hope was reborn once more, and Jack was afraid. What would she see, she thought nervously, in Dane's eyes? Pity or scorn for an attempted suicide?

Cutting her wrists had been an act of stupidity on multiple levels, she thought. Oh, she'd *intended* to kill herself, and might have *succeeded*... except she'd forgotten to reckon with Riddick's awareness. It was probably the *smell* of her blood that had jolted him awake and brought him to her.

But it had felt so natural and right. After years of her blood burning through her veins, expelling it from her body had seemed so... sensible. So logical. So —

Riddick opened the door to Dr. Dane's clinic, and once more Jack's fear of her reception flared to life.

She didn't miss the strange, charged look that passed between Riddick and Dane as she was led into the lab. For the thousandth time, she wondered what was between those two. Then Dane's gaze moved to her.

Jack felt tears welling up in her eyes as she saw only gentle compassion. She could have stayed strong in the face of scorn, she suddenly thought, but this... kindness... was undoing her! A hard, painful lump was suddenly lodged in her chest.

And then came his voice, like a soft caress. "How are you feeling this morning, Jackie?"

She burst into tears.

Arms encircled her and drew her into a kind embrace. Dane's embrace. His scent was different from Riddick's. He smelled like old books, antique leather and expensive aftershave. She'd never been close enough to him to notice before. It took her several minutes to compose herself and he held her the entire time.

Finally she was recovered to look up at him and meet yet another kind smile. "I'm okay," she managed.

"Good girl." He led her over to one of the examination rooms, Riddick following them. The two men helped her up onto the table. "Now let's have a look at you."

She watched in morbid fascination as he began to unwrap the bindings on her right arm. Her stomach turned as she saw — really saw — what she'd done to herself.

"Well, my dear, you certainly weren't playing around." His voice held a hint of amusement as he pulled over a rolling cart. "Fortunately you didn't nick the arteries, just the vein. And you didn't cut any tendons. This will heal cleanly. Riddick did a good job with the temporary sutures. I'm going to replace them with stronger ones, though, so that you can use your hands normally once the swelling and pain begin to go down."

Jack nodded gratefully. The wound looked horrible. At least, if he was telling the truth, it'd be okay. She hoped her other wrist was the same way.

Dane removed a syringe from the cart and uncapped it. "This will sting a bit. But it'll numb the area, and I'm sure you'll find that a blessing."

"Okay," she said, surprised at the shakiness in her voice. Riddick climbed up onto the table beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. Jack blinked in astonishment as the numbness spread quickly. Her arm suddenly felt *good* again. Pain-free.

Dane began to carefully close and seal her wound as she watched. He was a perfectionist, she decided with bemusement, carefully tucking the edges of the ragged gash together. There would be very little scarring. As long as she didn't pick at the thing. She'd always been the kind of girl who did that too, picked at scabs. She'd have to get Riddick to watch her and stop her if she started up with that.

"That should do it," he finally said, and began winding a light dressing over her wrist. She grinned, feeling grateful, when he extended it over her hand. The end result did *not* look like the bandaging of a wrist-slasher. It looked, rather, like the bandaging of someone with a sprain.

His smile was conspiratorial as he rolled the cart around and began to work on her left wrist. Riddick moved around to her other side and continued holding her. None of them talked much, but there was no sense of discomfort. Rather, there was a kind of peace that she hadn't felt in almost a year. Since her falling-out with Imam.

Don't project, she admonished herself. Just because he's being nice to you like this doesn't mean you can adopt him as your father.

Finally the bandaging was done on both wrists. Dane stood and began cleaning up the detritus from the operation.

"Now, I'm giving you prescriptions for anti-inflammatories and painkillers. They're the same kinds you would take if you *had* sprained your wrists but they'll work fine with your real injuries. I've notified the school that you sprained them last night in a fall, trying to catch yourself before you hit the ground. But the school nurse has been informed that she is not to involve herself in your treatment. Rhona's a good and trustworthy woman so I told her a little bit about your actual situation. She'll keep silent and call me if you develop any complications."

Dane walked back over, taking her hands in his. His eyes locked with hers.

"For now, we are not going to tell anyone about your condition. People here are understandably paranoid about extraterrestrial microbes and the fact that yours is not contagious wouldn't stop them from overreacting. I've had to alert the GCDC, of course, and forward them the test results on your blood, but they're in agreement that you pose no threat to the station's populace and don't have to be isolated. So for now we're going to— what's this?"

Dane's eyes had dropped to her hand. He was staring at it, frowning. Jack looked too. Realization hit her after a puzzled moment.

He was looking at the cut on her thumb.

When his eyes lifted they went straight to Riddick's and the charge was back in the two men's gazes again. Releasing Jack's hands, Dane grabbed first one and then the other of Riddick's, examining them.

"Son of a b—" Dane stopped himself. "Jackie, will you excuse us for a few moments? Riddick and I need to discuss this."

The glare Dane flung at Riddick was intense. And Riddick actually seemed to *shrink* beneath it for a moment. Jack's jaw dropped as Riddick meekly climbed down from the examination table and followed the infuriated doctor out of the room.

What is it between those two? she wondered yet again.

When Riddick had been a boy in foster homes, he'd never managed to connect. Not with the foster parents, not with his foster siblings. He'd felt no sense of kinship with them, even on the basic "we're all human beings here" level. So whenever he'd gotten into trouble and been called onto the carpet, his responses had been pure slyness and rebellion. Vacillating between "how do I bullshit my way out of this" and "who the hell do you think you are to tell me what to do," he'd never felt any sense of guilt over disappointing or hurting the authority figures in front of him. Until now.

Fuck, Dane's pissed. Shit, I can't blame him.

"Have you gone *completely* out of your mind?" What was left of Dane's calm façade dropped with the closing of his office door and the look he turned on Riddick was charged with more emotions than could be counted.

Riddick took a deep breath. There was no bullshit handy, and even if there had been, he owed Dane better than that.

"Been wondering that myself ever since I did it," he admitted, abashed.

"This is incredible," Dane snapped, pacing. Riddick found himself retreating to the corner, overwhelmed by the sheer agitated presence of the smaller man. Dane almost crackled with nervous energy. "For God's sake, I knew you'd run into a burning building for the girl but I never thought you'd douse yourself in gasoline first!"

Riddick leaned back against the wall. That image of self-immolation struck at him hard. Was that what he'd done? Something not just stupid but suicidal? Had he rejoined the human race just in time to kiss it goodbye?

He remembered his sense of scorn when, back on that fucking planet, he'd watched the others. Calling after each other. Running after each other. Putting themselves in harm's way on the off chance that they could help each other. He'd felt so superior to them at the time, because he understood something that they didn't—that survival of oneself took precedence over everything else.

Now he felt inferior to them. Now he understood why they'd done those things, why Jack herself had done them. And now, it seemed, he was making up for lost chances with a vengeance.

I'm an idiot. He looked down at his thumb, not sure which idiocy he was referring to.

"This isn't some school-child blood oath here, Riddick! This is serious business! This is a potentially lethal infectious agent and you just exposed yourself to it!"

Ice passed into Riddick's veins, and he looked up at Dane. "You haven't found a treatment."

Dane sighed, deflating a little. "No, I haven't. It doesn't respond to any of our stock antibiotics or antivirals. I even tried some that haven't been used in centuries because all of the modern germs have built up resistance. No joy. Not yet, anyway. There's going to be a great deal of research before—"

Riddick saw Dane stiffen as some sort of enlightenment came to the man. He'd seen that happen before. Hook had called them "Dane Moments." *And here comes another one... please, let it be a solution to Jack's illness....*

Dane abruptly sat down. His face had gone eerily calm. Gazing out in front of him for a long moment, he at last took a deep breath and spoke. "There may be a way to turn this in our favor."

Something ominous was lodged in that quiet tone. Riddick felt a chill move through him and he took a chair in front of Dane's desk. "What's that?"

Dane closed his eyes. "We don't tell anyone what you've done. I don't do any tests or treatments on you. We go with the blood samples I took from you last night, before your ...impulsive gesture... which say you're clean." Dane's eyes opened and locked with his. "And you apply for Mercy Man status."

For a moment Riddick thought the entire station had been grabbed by a gravitational well and was plummeting downward. Then he realized it was just him.

Mercy Man status. Dear God.

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to tell Dane to stop joking around. But the look in the doctor's eyes stopped him. Dane was serious. Deadly serious.

Oh my God.

3.

Mercy Man

Freedom was close; Riddick could taste it.

He navigated his way through the labyrinthine corridors of the Pit with an ease that pleased him, heading for the Mediplex. His blood was almost simmering with his excitement. Two years, and he'd be out of this shithole, back out in the world, with a clean record. Two years and he could start his life over, do it *right* this time.

Two years. Two years. It echoed through his steps and his heartbeat.

The Mediplex lived in a kind of twilight, unlike the rest of the Pit. Light enough for Dane and the other medically-trained convicts to work by, but dim enough to suit the men they worked with, and worked on.

He entered the complex and looked around for his friend...

...His friend? Funny, he'd never had any of those since he was a kid, but Dane was definitely one of the best allies he'd ever come by. Not the kind of guy he'd have thought to strike up an alliance with on his own. It was ironic, and amusing, how an arrangement of convenience had become so much more than that. Dane, he decided, was going to be very happy for him. For one thing, it would probably mean they'd get to work together.

Dane wasn't around. He leaned against the counter in the lobby and waited. Nobody even seemed to be on duty. He could hear raised voices behind the inner doors, talking calmly but rapidly and at high volume. Sounded like trauma surgery to him.

Two years. Two years. With that hammering in his chest, it was absurdly even harder than ever to wait a few minutes.

Finally an orderly emerged, his scrubs spattered liberally with blood. Riddick felt his eyebrows go up.

"Whoa. What's goin' on?"

The man shook his head. Riddick recognized him — Marvin Katzman, cell block D-7. Former ambulance technician, lifer for more than twenty serial rape-murders on Proxima Centauri 4. Riddick generally avoided him. The man's hatred for women was obsessive and ugly.

Riddick *liked* women. Being around them again was going to be one of the huge pluses of getting out of Slam. Hell, most of his early criminal stunts had been about showing off for them —

"Fight in the mess hall," Katzman said, cutting off his thoughts. "Nightcrawler gutted Barrymore. They got him back in surgery now — Dane's trying to see if he can sew the guy's guts back together."

Riddick sighed. Sounded like Dane wasn't going to be free for a while. Part of him — the part marching to the relentless beat of *two years* — was tempted to shrug it off and head out. Find Norris and see who he needed to talk to and what he needed to sign. But the rational survivalist side of him, born in this hellpit, knew better. First he needed the advice of someone he could trust. He'd just have to wait.

Waiting would fuck with his schedule, but he'd just have to live with it. And *dammit*, Nightcrawler was gonna be in Solitary for a week, too. Tonight was going to be insane. Not that this was any surprise... Barrymore had been pushing. Nobody pushed Nightcrawler and lived.

Incoherent shouts erupted from behind the doors. At the sound, Katzman turned and headed back in, leaving Riddick alone again. The shouting went on for several minutes, slowly reducing until it was just one authoritative voice over all the others. Dane's.

"Fuck, that's it, I'm calling it. Time?"

Riddick shook his head. *That's how many now, seven? Just since I got here. I think Nightcrawler's killed more people in Slam than Outside. Glad I'm on his good side...* He looked up as Dane emerged from behind the doors.

Dane was covered in blood, solidly on his arms up to the elbows. Spatters and splashes of it were strewn over his surgical gown as well. He looked exasperated. Spotting Riddick, he shook his head and held up one bloody finger before disappearing into the showers.

Guess that means "wait," Riddick decided. He could do that. He grabbed a seat.

Dane was gone for ten minutes. When he approached Riddick he smelled like soap and shampoo over disinfectant.

He must have really felt dirty.

“How can I help you, Riddick?” Dane’s voice was calm and professional, all of his fury over losing a patient gone. Riddick knew it had to be simmering below the surface, though. There was nothing that Dane hated more than losing the struggle to save a life.

...Which was a funny thing, given that he’d supposedly stabbed his vid-star wife and her lover to death. More and more, Riddick was inclined to believe Dane’s staunch claims of innocence. He’d *seen* the doctor fly into rages a few times now, but the fury had never once been expressed in violence.

“I think I found a way to get out of here,” he said, amazed at the way his heart actually *fluttered*.

Dane frowned. “I hope you’re not talking about an escape attempt. I can show you the remains of the last man who *tried* to escape the Pit, if you want to know why it’s not poss—”

“No, nothing like that. I heard about this program, and I wanted to ask you about it. ‘Cause if it’s legit, it’ll get me out of here.” Riddick took a deep breath and pressed forward. “Have you heard of something called the Mercy M—”

Dane’s hand was suddenly over his mouth. The doctor glanced around the room warily for a moment before releasing him.

What the fuck?

When Dane spoke, his voice was low and rapid. “Don’t say another word about it here. Switch off with Hook so tonight is your night to walk me back to the cell block and we’ll talk about it then. Have you told anybody else what you’re considering?”

Riddick shook his head, speechless.

“Good. Don’t. Don’t say a word to *anybody* until we talk. Now get out of here before someone wonders what you want.”

Despite the soft tone, Dane’s voice drove Riddick to his feet. He left the Mediplex swiftly and headed for the laundry, where Hook would be working.

Two years. Two years. It still pulsed through him, even as he arranged with Hook to switch off protection duties for the night. Even with the sudden doubts Dane had stirred, he couldn’t let go of that beat. He didn’t think he’d survive the Pit past that time, anyway. The fights, the killings... it was only a matter of time before someone decided to take him for the position of Nightcrawler’s right-hand man... or before Nightcrawler himself decided that he no longer trusted his lieutenants and did away with them.

Dane was silent as they walked from the Mediplex to the cell block. Every time Riddick began to speak, he stopped, compelled by the stern look on the smaller man’s face. Finally, reaching one of the “dead zones” where the cameras couldn’t see, they stopped.

Riddick knew that Dane could barely see him through the darkness, but it felt like the man’s unshined eyes were boring into his.

“What I’m going to tell you, you never, ever heard. Do you understand me?” The doctor kept his voice soft, below the pickup level of the surveillance system.

“Okay,” Riddick answered, his voice equally soft. The only other man in the Pit who got this level of meek obedience out of him was Nightcrawler himself. *Shit, he’s in Solitary by now, that means I have to be the Top Man around here on his behalf until he gets out—*

“The Mercy Man Project is *not* something you want to be part of, Riddick. It’s a death trap.” Dane raised his hand as Riddick’s mouth opened to protest, silencing him. “I know what you’ve been told. You submit to the program and you serve two years, and then your criminal record will be wiped from the system, and you’ll be released. All you have to do is let them test vaccines and treatments on you. Right?”

“Yeah, that’s what Norris was saying.”

Dane spat. “Norris. Good to know. You watch what you say around him from now on, okay? What that fucker’s trying to sell to you isn’t *nearly* as hot as what he’s selling to the guards. Got me?”

Riddick kept a smile off of his face. Half the time, Dane sounded like an intellectual when he talked, but prison cant was seeping in and taking over his language more and more. *Another few years and you won’t be able to tell him apart from the rest of us numb fucks*, he thought, and was surprised at the sense of regret that woke in him.

But what he’d said was sobering. “You saying Norris is working for the guards?”

“That’s about the size of it. *Listen* to me, Riddick, very carefully. In order to test those vaccines and treatments on their subjects, the doctors who run the experiments first have to infect them with the *diseases* they’re trying to *cure*. Then they try out their experimental drugs. Some Mercy Men get the drugs and some get placebos. So even assuming the drugs are going to *work*, there’s only a fifty-fifty chance that you’re going to *get* the good stuff.”

A chill moved through Riddick as he listened.

“They’re not testing little things here, either,” Dane continued. “We’re talking about the most virulent diseases they have, the things they can’t test on anybody *but* lifers and death row inmates, without the Human Rights groups going up in arms. Smallpox. Dystarth Fever variants. Pathogens they’ve never seen before and may not find a cure for until *ten years* from now.”

The chill became a shiver.

“If you survive the two years, *and* you’re actually cured of the disease they gave you, they’ll release you, yes. But let’s be absolutely *clear* here. Out of every twenty Mercy Men, only three survive to the end of the two-year period.”

The shiver became a shudder.

“Of those three, only one of them can actually be released. The other two are still sick with — *dying of* — the disease they were infected with, and have to stay in quarantine until they are either successfully cured, or *die*. You have a *five percent* chance of survival in the Mercy Men, Riddick. That’s all.”

The shudder overwhelmed him, rattling his bones. “Why... how come nobody says that when they talk about it?”

“They don’t know. *I* know because the techs make me assist them in some small capacities — mostly when they need to perform an autopsy. They’re mostly virologists, not surgeons, so I’m the one they grab to assist the pathologist. And I’m not allowed to discuss what I know with anyone.” Dane glanced around again, trying to peer into the dark for eavesdroppers. Riddick felt his own eyes following the doctor’s blind gaze, suddenly fearful himself over who might have overheard. “I’m taking an awful risk telling you this, Riddick. So remember, we never had this conversation. You’re just not interested in signing up. Right?”

His throat was so dry, when he spoke, that his voice cracked like he was a callow teenager. “Right.”

The tension eased a little out of Dane’s slim frame. “Good. Now, let’s go on. Finish walking me home... I know you have a lot to do tonight, with Nightcrawler in Solitary.”

Dane began to turn, but stopped when Riddick put his hand on his shoulder. He looked surprised by the gesture; Riddick knew *he* was surprised, himself, at the fact that he’d made it.

“Thanks, man. I mean it.” Hearing the gratitude in his own voice shocked him a little.

The doctor gave him an ironic grin. “Well, you know I can’t let you die on me... you still haven’t paid off your shine job.”

Riddick joined him in a wry chuckle and they began to walk once more. It would be a long time before he *did* finish paying off the shine job, but he knew that wasn’t why Dane had warned him away. It was much more than that.

And now, he realized, what he owed Dane would never be paid off. Because he owed so much more to the doctor now, more than just a little shine job — he owed Dane his *life*. And even though that was one debt he doubted Dane would *ever* attempt to collect on, it would always be there.

The rhythm had changed inside him. *Two years* was gone, replaced by a new and strange phrase. *A friend. A friend.*

For the first time in his entire adult “me-against-the-world” existence, Richard B. Riddick had something better than an ally in the fight... he had *a friend*.

Riddick swallowed. He stared at Dane in astonishment, still trying to comprehend what the doctor had said. *Apply for Mercy Man status? You were the one who warned me away from it...*

“You’re not... you don’t...”

Dane fixed him with a stern look. “I’m very serious, and I *do* mean it.”

“But you said that was a death trap!”

“In the Pit it would have been. The only treatments tested on volunteers from there are for diseases that have a high mortality rate.” He shrugged. “As far as the authorities are concerned, the Pit is the last stop. It’s Death Row for people who committed their crimes in places where there’s no death penalty... and that’s why they let everyone there run wild. The average life expectancy of a felon in the Pit is five years. They don’t really want to let any of them back *out*. Anyway, there are plenty of volunteers for less dangerous diseases.”

“So how’s it different now?” Dane’s words hadn’t eased the cold knot in Riddick’s belly one bit.

“First, you’re not *in* the Pit. Second, for the past five years you’ve been a model citizen. Every time the station gets a petition to have your asylum revoked, that consideration weighs in more and more strongly. You’ve shown repeatedly that you’re *reformed*. Third, we do have a disease here that needs study and treatment. Jackie’s development of it is already acute enough that we can’t observe early symptoms or test early treatments, so a volunteer who allows us to track its progress from early infection is very useful. And fourth, although we’re not going to *tell* them this yet, you’re already *infected*.”

Dane rose and moved to one of his terminals, punching buttons. He continued to speak as he gazed at the screen.

“Honestly, Riddick, I think we’re going to be working on a cure for more than two years here. That means that once we find it, you’ll have your pardon and you won’t be limited to this station anymore.”

The cold knot unraveled and warmed. Was this actually *it*? His chance to be free, utterly and completely free?

His eyes immediately moved to the door, as if he could see through the walls and into the exam room where Jack waited. He remembered the dreams that had filled his mind years ago when he’d first heard of the Mercy Man Program. The young women he’d be able to find and get to know upon his release...

Young women who looked remarkably like Jack, he realized. Funny thing. He’d never consciously considered that she was his ideal type. But she was. And he’d be able to take her anywhere in the galaxy she wanted to go...

One thing at a time, asshole. This was still a pretty big long-shot.

He shook himself out of the tangent and forced himself to focus on the moment at hand. “What if they grant me the status but then say you have to test something *else* on me?”

“They can’t. I run this station’s infirmary and we already *have* a health crisis, albeit one of very limited scope. That health crisis has top priority, and I have the right to commandeer any Mercy Men on the station who aren’t already enrolled in a clinical trial. We don’t actually *have* any, enrolled or not. That means I automatically have full rights and powers over your regimen the moment you’re approved.”

That’s a lot of power, Riddick thought. He didn’t like to give up that much power over himself. *But I’m already infected. I did it to myself. And...*

His gaze moved to Dane again. Remembering the strange, crushing sense of loss he’d felt when the man had left the Pit, exonerated at last.

“You can’t go, I still haven’t paid off my shine job...” It had been the only way to express what he’d really wanted to say.

A gentle smile he’d never forgotten, telling him that Dane knew what he really meant, had answered. “We’ll just let that one ride.”

He’d thought that they would never see each other again. And yet here they were. It almost made him want to believe in the *merciful* God that the Holy Man had talked about...

I trust him.

“Okay. What do I need to fill out?”

Dane gave him an impressed look. “There are some forms I want to fill out first, requesting a Mercy Man or Mercy Men. That way my request predates your application, and I can say that you stepped forward specifically to volunteer for this. Plus nobody can assign you to another trial if my request has gone through before your application.”

As Dane’s printer began to produce sheets of paper, he returned to his desk. “This far out into the Frontiers, you’ll be the *only* Mercy Man within range of my request, in all likelihood. And you can specify that you’re volunteering for this protocol, too... that’s actually allowed, but it’s not a right they inform inmates of the Pit that they have.”

“So I’m protected, now?”

Dane met his eyes squarely. “You’ll always be protected.”

“And Jack?”

Dane nodded. The promise passed from his eyes into Riddick and relieved him. No matter what happened, Dane would take care of both of them. If something happened to him, she would be safe. Always safe. Dane would see to it.

*Not that I have **any** plans of dying anytime soon...*

“What do I need to do?”

Relief, not triumph, appeared on Dane’s face. “I’ll have my assistant put together the documents we’ll need, and I’ll go over them myself before you validate and submit them.” A new emotion appeared in Dane’s gaze. “I will *not* let you sign anything that could put you in harm’s way.”

Riddick nodded. Something was wrong with the air. It was very dry and it was making his eyes sting. “I know.”

“Good,” Dane said. “Then we just wait for official word that your application is granted. If all goes well, we’ll be able to acquire not only a cure for both of you, but a pardon for you as well. That’ll solve several problems at once.”

“You that eager to get rid of me?” Riddick kept his tone light and humorous, but he did have to wonder. Would Dane be happier with him — and the reminder of times past — gone?

“Of course not,” Dane replied, mild amusement in his voice. “But we both know that spending the rest of your life on this station is *not* the kind of life you want to have.”

Riddick nodded, acknowledging Dane’s point.

When he’d first awakened on the station, the sight of Ian Dane entering his hospital room had genuinely terrified him. No false name, he knew, was going to fool the one man in the galaxy who knew him better than he knew himself. And there was no escaping. Severely malnourished and dehydrated as he was, recovering from the injuries on his left side, he didn’t have the strength to fight anything or anyone, and he was the *strongest* of the trio pulled from the skiff—

My resistance was way down. Jack’s and Imam’s had to be worse. Is that how the damn things got a foothold in the two of them? He’d have to ask Dane.

It had been a frightening moment. He hadn’t been sure, right away, what the lack of security or restraints meant in terms of Dane’s intentions, and he’d been afraid to ask. Dane had had to come right out and tell him the ground rules before he’d understood. Before he’d realized what a friend he really had.

Dane technically did not own the station, but he might as well have. His money had played a significant role in its construction, especially in the medical wings. He’d created himself a world where nobody knew or cared about the murder of his wife, the scandals that had followed, and the nine years he’d spent in prison before the real killer had been unmasked.

“*New Lives Start In The Frontiers*,” the slogans read. Riddick had seen them in his youth, on billboards throughout his stomping grounds on overpopulated Earth. Dane had successfully built one for himself, and the extraordinary part was his willingness to turn around and share that new life with an old — and dangerous — friend.

After all, unlike Dane, Riddick had *not* been sent to prison for crimes he hadn’t committed.

By the time he was actually well enough to consider making a break for it, Dane had already persuaded the station managers to offer Riddick asylum and immunity. As long as he stayed on the station and out of trouble, nobody could touch him. He wasn’t exactly a free man, but it was much better than a cage in the darkness.

Riddick had accepted. He’d expected Jack to ask to stay with him, but it had surprised him that Imam had, as well. The Holy Man, though, had seemed to be adrift. He’d wanted a place to stay while he recovered his faith... and for a while it had seemed like he’d started to.

Then the microbes got to him, Riddick realized.

Riddick wondered if someone more socially-inclined than himself might have caught on to what was happening, when the Holy Man became reclusive and Jack’s vivacity faded. But years in Slam, and years on the run, had atrophied his social skills and even many of his people-reading skills down to a more primitive level.

Hunter-hunted relationships and violent power politics were natural to him, but the more mundane, nonviolent social structures had become foreign. The nuances of family politics had always been something

he observed from the outside anyway, and trying to figure out the alien perspectives of a religious man — and a *girl* — had been extremely difficult.

He'd just mentally shrugged and let it be. Just as he hadn't really pursued a closer friendship with Dane on the station.

They'd seen each other every day and worked with each other frequently back in Slam. But on the station, they'd had nothing in common. Not really. Dane handled the Medical wing and Riddick was just another loader on the space docks. Slam, Riddick assumed, and the ordeals they'd shared together there, was something both of them were trying to *forget*.

In retrospect, he wished he'd made different assumptions and pursued the friendship.

The silence in the room had stretched out, he realized. He wished he knew what to say to break it. There was just too much unsaid, *years* of unspoken things. What if it was too late to say any of it?

Dane saved him. "I haven't been much inclined to spend time with people, since I got out. The things you see, in a place like the Pit — and I'm heartily glad that I couldn't see a good deal of it through the darkness — they change you. They make you less inclined for the company of others. Especially when half of those people still point and stare if they realize who you are. But I should have tried harder." The doctor's voice was gentle and apologetic.

The hard lump suddenly in Riddick's throat forced him to make do with another nod. He knew *exactly* what Dane meant. Few people on the Station knew who he was, but most of those who did treated him like he was... some half-tamed beast that might turn on them. Jack and Imam had been exceptions... and Dane.

"Guess we were both serving time in Solitary, huh?" he managed.

Dane chuckled. "I should have come and seen you more. It just—"

"Didn't occur to you. Me neither." Riddick grinned at Dane and shrugged. "Didn't occur to me that you'd want a reminder of— It's okay. Guess we'll be working together a lot, now. Kinda gonna be like old times."

He hoped Jack wouldn't mind Dane entering their lives on a social basis, in addition to being her doctor. It suddenly occurred to him to wonder how lonely *she* might have become. When *was* the last time she'd invited a friend over?

"A little," Dane agreed, lips twitching. "But at least here, I don't have to be worried that one of the lifers is going to jump me for the codes to the narcotics cabinet... and I can see."

That made Riddick chuckle. Dane *could* have had a shine job. With the wealth his skills gave him in a place like the Pit — enough that he could afford to actually *smoke* the cigarettes inmates paid him in — Dane could have had one of the best. He had claimed, whenever asked, that a shine job might rob him of the ability to function in the bright lights of the medplex, or to see colors well enough to make good clinical diagnoses. But the best shine jobs would have let him keep both abilities. The real reason had been deeper and more tortured.

Dane had *known* he was innocent. He had known that his sister was battling on to prove it. Getting a shine job would have been tantamount to giving up, accepting his fate and his place in the Pit.

For nine years he'd lived in the almost-total darkness, bartering his medical skills for cigarettes and protection services, while he waited to see light again.

Kinda puts things in perspective now, Riddick thought. And to think *he'd* been convinced he wouldn't make it another year in the Pit without going insane...

Dane rose from his desk. "Anyway, we should get started. There's a lot I need to learn, still, about Jackie's infection, and a good many tests that will have to be run."

Riddick nodded and rose from his chair too. "Yeah, I guess so." He paused, and chuckled ruefully. "Gonna be a long road, isn't it?"

Dane cocked his head and grinned. "True. But why is that funny?"

"Man, I—" Riddick felt heat on his cheeks. "This morning, I had to help her get dressed. You wanna talk about being put to the *test*—"

The memory of helping Jack put on her bra was still with him. His fingers began to itch again.

Dane laughed. "You're going to have to help her with that for the next few days, you know. And worse. She can't get her dressings wet, so you're going to have to help her with sponge-baths."

"Holy *shit*, Doc, I'm gonna die of blue-balls before I even *become* a Mercy Man!"

Now *that* was a genuine guffaw. Dane's eyes sparkled. "If you want, one of the nurses can stop by and help her—"

“No! No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll survive...” Riddick chuckled and shook his head. “...somehow.”

Dane grinned. He picked up a data pad and chuckled again. “Okay, getting back to business, I need you to think about the planet you two — and your other friend — were on. I need as many details as possible about it as you can remember.”

“Why’s that?” Riddick cocked his head. Hadn’t he already told Dane about the planet? Back when they came to the station and again last night, when they were trying to figure out how and when Jack was infected?

“I’ll show you.” Dane moved to a terminal with a large screen and pressed some buttons. A star chart came to life on the screen. “This is the region of space identified in the *Hunter-Gratzner*’s distress call... and here, in the center of it...”

Dane pressed another button and the image zoomed in closer.

“...is the triple-star system called Albireo. A blue single and a red-and-gold binary pair.”

Riddick nodded. “That’s where we were.”

“It can’t be. Riddick, you could fit almost sixty solar systems inside the orbit between the blue star and the binary. A planet centered between them would have to have its own sun to rely on, and from its surface, all three stars would look like just that... just stars.” Dane shrugged. “The kind of star system you described doesn’t exist and couldn’t anyway. A planet would be torn to pieces by the gravitational fields of three stars that were *that* close to it.”

It was testimony to how much Dane had taught him in the first place, during their time in Slam, that Riddick understood him now. “But...” he stammered, feeling chilled. “It’s right there. On your screen. You said it yourself, the coordinates match.”

Dane sighed. “I know. And god knows, we need to find that planet. If none of the antibiotics we have work, that’s where we’ll have to go to find a cure. But the world you’ve described... shouldn’t be able to exist.”

“Where the fuck *were* we, then?” Riddick demanded.

Dane’s eyes were grave. “That’s what we need to find out. As soon as possible.”

Author’s note: When I was a senior in high school, I worked at the local public library as a library page. My duties consisted mostly of re-shelving books that had either been returned by borrowers, or pulled out and left lying around by browsers. One evening I was working in the fiction section when I picked up a book called *The Mercy Men* by Alan Nourse. My favorite rock band at the time was “Sisters of Mercy,” so naturally the title caught my eye and I stopped to read the back cover. It was a prison novel, about a group of men who had been enrolled as “guinea pigs” in medical experiments.

I shelved the book, but the concept stuck in my head. I never actually got around to reading Nourse’s novel (sadly, now out of print and virtually impossible to find) but he is the original source of the concept — I have no idea how my depiction of it compares to his.

4.

Quick Changes

The two men had been gone for so long — and Dane's drugs had turned out to be so good — that Jack had fallen asleep on the examining table. She blinked slowly awake as they came back in. The light on her eyes wasn't nearly as bad this time.

*Guess I **can** sleep without a blindfold. Looks like I'm better off doing so, too.*

Both men seemed calmer, the energy crackling between them now humming on a very different level. But it was still there. Something was up. One look at Riddick's face told her that she was better off not even bothering to ask, though.

Instead she sat up and stretched carefully. "So, is it time for more blood tests?"

Dane smiled. "Just a few. I don't dare take all that much at the moment because I'm not entirely sure how much you lost last night. The specimen Riddick brought me was both diluted and degraded by the time I got it, though, so I do need some, in order to see how these creatures behave."

Jack nodded and then shuddered. The thought of all those little things, swimming through her blood — *Bugs under my skin. Wasn't as crazy as I thought I was. Almost wish I had been* — unnerved her a little. "Okay, sounds good. Anything else?"

"I'm going to give you a basic physical as well. Overall, you appear to be in very good health, and that's a good sign." Dane snapped on his gloves and assembled his blood collection kit even as he continued talking. "It tells me that the likelihood of systemic organ damage is low. These creatures may be *hurting* you, but they don't appear to be *harming* you too badly... if you follow the distinction."

Riddick nodded, his expression thoughtful as he climbed back up onto the table to sit beside her. Jack decided that she'd puzzle over that later, and nodded too. She suspected that Dane knew his words had sailed right over her head by the wry grin he gave her as he sat down in front of the table.

"I'd ask you which hand you write with, but there's not much difference at this point." He gave her an amused wink, as if her suicide attempt was a funny secret they shared. And suddenly it almost felt like it was. She found herself grinning and extending her left arm so he could swab the inside of her elbow.

He filled three vials while she watched in bemusement. The blood looked perfectly normal to her, a little dark, maybe. But there was nothing *weird* about it. It had looked normal the night before, too, as it dribbled into the bathtub. Riddick's hands rested on her shoulders, gently kneading at her muscles, keeping her soothed. It wasn't long at all before Dane was finished.

"That's it." He covered the vials with a dark cloth. "I'll be right back. I want to get the computers started on this as fast as I can."

"Okay." It was all she managed to get out before he'd disappeared out of the room. Jack found herself chuckling at his abrupt departure.

Riddick's basso rumble joined her voice. "Sorry, kid. I think we just came in second to some microbes."

Jack grinned. She had to admit that, now that she knew *what* was wrong with her and how to hold it at bay, she was pretty curious to learn more, herself. Dane's enthusiasm didn't bother her. In fact, it relieved her. He would be putting in a lot of overtime on his research. She knew it with iron certainty.

"That's okay. It's nice to have a moment to catch up... even though I already know you're *not* gonna tell me what happened."

"Sure I am."

She found herself gaping at him. He grinned and put his finger under her chin, closing her mouth. Yeah, their relationship had changed a *lot* in the last day. "So... uh... what happened?"

"Well, I'll bet you can imagine how upset he was that I infected myself."

Jack nodded, remembering the look of pure fury that had ignited in Dane's eyes, and the way Riddick had shrunk from it. *Gotta ask him about **that**, as well, while he's talking.*

Riddick shrugged. "He figured out something that, if it works, might actually mean I can leave the station with a clean record, once we find a cure. It's kind of a long shot, but with me already infected, there's nothing to lose by trying it."

“You mean nobody would be hunting you anymore?”

“If it works out, yeah.”

She frowned. “You don’t sound very confident.”

“Well, Dane’s about the only government official I’ve ever met who’s kept his word to me. If it were up to him, it’d be a done deal, but it’s not. There are a lot of people who want to see me rot away in Slam and they don’t give a shit how many ‘civic duties’ I do.”

“But you’ve changed. You’re not the same man.” That was one of the things Jack had told herself for years. Richard B. Riddick was a very different man than he’d once been. *We’re both different people...*

She needed to believe it about him because then she could believe it about herself.

“To them I’m the same. I always will be. I can’t give them back the people I took from them. And I can’t really blame them for hating me. I’m not going back to Slam for them, but I *do* understand where they’re coming from. Somebody did anything to *you*, I’d feel the same way.”

“So you don’t think it’ll work.”

Riddick was silent for a long moment. “It might. Things are different this far out. Maybe we can work out a deal. If they say I can’t ever go back to Earth, I’m fine with that. Never really planned to go back anyway. But this station is really starting to crawl up my ass and I’d like to get off it... without fifty mercs pouncing on me the second I leave.”

I. Funny how that word seemed to undo all of the good of the anesthetics.

“Where would you go?” she asked after a moment, hoping her voice sounded natural.

“Shit,” he whispered.

Jack turned and looked at him, surprising an expression of bafflement and longing on his face.

“Old habit, Jack. I’m sorry.” The words sounded almost foreign on his tongue. “I meant ‘we.’ I ain’t going anywhere without you.”

Her eyes began to sting. She swallowed, but before she could try to answer him he’d wrapped his arms tightly around her.

That, Riddick reflected, had been stupid.

He *knew* how lonely and cut off Jack had been feeling, and he’d been dumb enough not to watch his mouth. Then again, it was the first time he’d really been aware of how self-involved his language — and his thinking — could be. He’d failed her, repeatedly, in the last few years, too concerned about what a *theoretical* emotional entanglement might do to *him* to pay enough attention to what was happening to *her* before his eyes.

Guess it’s true that you never know how important something is until it’s gone. Or almost gone. He had no idea what he would have done if her suicide attempt had succeeded.

She sniffled and wiped at her eyes, the motion making him feel another stab of guilt. His hand moved, of its own accord, to stroke her cheek. Gentleness was new to him, and it suddenly came to him that he’d been afraid, for years, that he might hurt Jack with a careless touch. Especially those times when he’d found himself wanting to devour her.

Like now.

He wanted to put her on her back and bury himself inside her, comforting her the only way he knew. He wanted to explore her body, map her skin with his hands and his mouth... and damned if he couldn’t. Not until she healed some. He found himself wishing, more than ever, that he’d given into his impulse after Imam’s funeral and taken Jack to his bedroom. Would he have found out about her illness long before this, if he had?

Normally he never dealt in what-ifs, but now they plagued him, the way they’d plagued him after Fry’s death. He *knew*, as he’d known then, that it was his own failure to do right, and do it in time, that had allowed things to come to a head. At least in Jack’s case it hadn’t ended in tragedy.

“Hey,” he whispered to her. “I promise, I’m not gonna leave you.”

The sweetness in her smile speared through him. “I know. You never have.”

Her eyes were arresting. Large and liquid, fringed with dark lashes, they had him captive. He wished he could see colors better; Imam had once told him that they were the green of fine jade, but he wanted to see it

for himself.

Too bad shine jobs ain't reversible.

"So." She reached up, putting one of her hands on his cheek to match the way he was touching her. *Equals*. The message in her touch was clear. "Where would *we* go?"

That's it, baby. That's exactly right. "Anywhere you want."

The next second she shocked him by climbing onto his lap and kissing him.

It took all of his self-control to hold her gently as he kissed her back. He *wanted* to press her down onto the exam table with his body, crushing her to him, but he didn't dare. Not until she'd healed some more.

Won't be the first time she's given me blue balls, he thought with amusement as his tongue touched her lips. He kept his hands gentle, stroking her hair and back. This whole situation was baffling. He'd *never* been in this situation when sex wasn't imminent, until now. Until Jack.

He chuckled into her mouth as their lips parted. "You're gonna kill me, girl."

Her soft, answering laugh left him amazed at her resilience. "Hey, if I do, you mind if I collect the reward?"

Yeah, this was the woman of his dreams. "I got something better in mind."

She smiled and raised an eyebrow at him. "What's that?"

"I'm thinking after we get done here, we go out for dinner. You pick any restaurant you want. Maybe dancing or a movie afterwards."

"Will we have to dress up?" Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "'Cause you know I'll need help if we do."

His fingers were suddenly *burning* to touch her again. His first look at her breasts, this morning, had been fueling erotic fantasies ever since. "My idea just gets better and better."

She turned around and leaned back against him, smiling and closing her eyes. "You know, I think we should skip the blindfold from now on."

"You able to sleep in bright light?" Some people could; as long as his goggles were on, he was one of them himself.

"Yeah, and it doesn't hurt as much when I wake up, if I'm used to the light level." She wriggled a little, getting herself more comfortable. Riddick's pants were getting tighter and tighter.

"Good point." He was glad that his voice was as gravelly as it already was, or she might have heard it crack. As it was, he could feel it, for the first time since he'd gotten through puberty.

"So, is that what I think it is?" she asked after a moment.

"Is what what you think it is?" He was trying hard to concentrate on thoughts of cold showers and baseball statistics.

Damned if she didn't wriggle back against him again. "That."

Riddick coughed. ***Damn***, woman! "So... what do you think it is?"

The grin she turned on him was pure mischief. He hadn't seen it in years, he realized, since she'd gotten sick. It soothed him more than anything else he'd seen yet... and riled him. "I think there's a great big hard-on pressing against my ass."

He didn't know why that shocked him but it did. He'd gotten so *used* to the mousy Jack that the resurgence of her more vibrant self was—

One huge fucking turn-on.

"Well, then. It *is* what you think it is."

Damn if she didn't wriggle *again*! "So what happens now?"

"Depends on if you keep wiggling like that or not. I'm supposed to be taking it easy on you."

"How easy do you have to take it?" Who the hell had taught her to bat her lashes like that? The little minx...

"Probably wouldn't be a good idea for me to fuck you ragged in here anyway. Leaving aside the whole part of someone walking in on us, I'm trying to arrange a romantic evening for us before we get to that stage."

Maybe even a few evenings... if I can last that long.

"Okay," she said with exaggerated gravity. "Check. No fucking me ragged on the exam table. But... can we play a little?"

He stared at her in astonishment. He hadn't thought she'd *want* to for a while yet. Where was this sudden burst of energy coming from?

"How come you're suddenly so upbeat?"

Jack paused, looking thoughtful. Her lips quirked, making him want to catch them with his tongue. “Well... I’m not gonna die... and I don’t *want* to die anymore... and I’m not crazy... it’s funny. I just feel like *me* again.”

His hands had been resting on her abdomen. Now they began moving upward. “Yeah, I’d say you feel like you.” He cupped her breasts in his hands and hoped she wouldn’t go ballistic on him.

“How can you tell through all those clothes?” *That* quip hit him right in the crotch.

He turned her in his arms again, so that their eyes would meet. The lights of the exam room were painful but he needed to be sure... to know that *she* was sure.

“Jeez, Riddick, put your goggles back down before you burn your eyes or some—” She stopped when his fingertips touched her lips.

“Here, Jack? Someone might walk in.”

“I guess, but... I can’t wait. And I know how hard it is for you to.” The sweet earnestness in her smile made his throat ache and his blood burn. “We can do a little, can’t we?”

Aww, hell with it. If she tells me to stop, I will.

He was amazed by how pliant and helpful she was as he maneuvered her down onto the exam table, on her back. She raised her arms above her head and arched her back, making it all the easier for him to push up her top and bra.

This is what heaven looks like, he thought. Her breasts were small but full, pert from the sudden cool air. He slid his arms around her waist and lowered his head.

“Oooh,” she gasped, as his mouth clasped her nipple. “Wow, this feels wonderful...”

Yes, it did. Riddick closed his eyes and let himself surrender to his hunger for her. Just for a little while. Just...

Just hoping Dane doesn’t walk in...

Dane had all but forgotten about the couple in the exam room.

He hadn’t been able to resist turning off the lights in his office so that he could see the phenomenon again. Lifting the cloth off of the vials, he smiled with delight at the soft glow emanating from the plastic containers. Alien visitors, he thought. He was looking at a whole new species...

A potentially deadly new species, he reminded himself, realizing that he’d spent half an hour ogling them instead of being productive. *On with business*. He hit the intercom for the lab. “This is Dane. Who’s on duty?”

“Michaels, here.”

Dane smiled, glad that his very best tech was the one who had answered his call. “I need you to prep two bio-couriers.”

“Yes, Doctor.” He could hear Michaels already moving about on the other end of the comm. “What size?”

“Small. They’ll each just be carrying one vial of blood in a cryo-pod.” He walked over to the vault and drew out one of the freezer units, carrying it to his desk. “Priority One shipments. Biohazard labels and protocols. One is going to the GCDC and the other to the head office of Dane Pharmaceuticals.”

Carefully, he inserted a vial into the cryopod, adjusting the settings. Satisfied, he closed the unit and switched it on, snatching his hand back as frost covered the surface in an instant. Shaking his hand, he headed back to the vault for the second unit.

“I’ll have them ready in thirty minutes. Looks like you have an interstellar call coming in.”

Excellent. If it was who he thought it was, she was right on time. As always. “Route it to my desk.”

Dane left the second unit in the vault for the time being, and headed to his desk. The comm unit chimed softly as he approached and he smiled. That particular chime only sounded when his sister was calling. He opened the connection.

“Hello, Sarah.”

Sarah Dane was their mother reborn. Chestnut hair streaked liberally with gray flowed over the shoulders of her elegant business jacket. He grinned, recognizing the makeup style she called her “Power Look,” and wondered what Board of Directors she’d been intimidating before her call. Probably several. As the more business-minded of the two scions of a multi-trillion-dollar pharmaceutical conglomerate, she wielded vast

quantities of power both on her own behalf and on his. The lines on her face were barely visible, a mixture of laugh and frown lines that he knew by heart. They creased now into a smile of loving welcome.

“Hello, Ian.” She tilted her head in a way he recognized instantly and that always brought a smile to his lips. “Any progress on getting me a niece or nephew to spoil rotten?”

Dane chuckled. “Not yet, sadly. How about you?”

Sarah grimaced. “I’m about to give up on the idea. The only halfway respectable man I’ve met in a *year*, who isn’t a gold-digger and who I’d actually be able to wake up next to without gagging, wants nothing to do with me because he says I’m a ‘shallow rich bitch with delusions of power.’ The rest are, you know—”

“Married or gay?” Dane smirked. That lament was centuries old.

“You got it. What’s your excuse?”

“My mail-order brides keep getting misdelivered,” he quipped. Sarah grinned back at him and dropped the subject, recognizing his real meaning. It was two decades now since Jessica’s murder, and the thought of another woman in his bed still felt like treason, in spite of everything.

“So tell me about these probes you want.”

Dane grinned and began uploading the coordinates. He’d sent her the message hours earlier, knowing that this would be her first chance to get back in touch with him. “I want to send them into the Albireo System. The coordinates enclosed aren’t actually complete. The transmission they draw from was cut off before it finished.”

“So I see. You’re not actually looking for a planetary body in *Alberio*, are you? Even I remember enough stellar science to know what a long shot that is.”

“I don’t know what I’m looking for. The survivors of the crash swear up and down that they saw a blue star and a red-gold binary rising and setting over the planet.”

“Why is this so important?”

“That planet is the source of a new pathogen.”

Sarah’s whistle was clear and sweet, arcing down like a birdcall. It made him think of summer nights, fireflies, and creek hiking. “How many are infected?”

“Two so far. One committed suicide when the symptoms became unbearable, and the other one attempted to do so yesterday.”

“Poor things.” The sympathy in her voice was real, as it always was. It amazed Dane, sometimes, when he considered how ruthless she could be in business, how much empathy she had for others. “Do you need me to put our labs on it?”

“Samples will be en route shortly,” Dane replied with a smile. He’d known she’d offer. “It’s not very much. The organisms appear to stay in the bloodstream, and my patient already tried to bleed herself dry. I need that planet if I’m going to study this properly.”

“If we are, you mean.”

Dane felt his smile widen. Although Sarah loved what she did, and was one of the most extraordinary business magnates the galaxy had ever seen, she had a researcher’s mind as well. She’d always snatched and devoured his medical thrillers the second he was done with them. “Does this mean I get three probes?”

“That means you get four. That final coordinate is the *real* bitch. If we have to cover stroke-zero to stroke-ninety-nine, you want four probes or you won’t get an answer for more than a month.” Sarah’s lips quirked with triumph; she was one up on her big brother for the moment.

“Really? I thought these new ones were faster than that.”

“They are. But they usually work with better information than this, you know.”

“Sorry about that. From what I hear, it was a really rough landing.”

Sarah glanced down at her desk and punched some instructions into its surface. “Is there going to be any problem with the corporation piggybacking onto this?”

“There shouldn’t be. You’re providing free resources for a humanitarian use. The fact that you’ll be onsite first is a side benefit. The data’s all been reported, but our corporation is the only one volunteering to research a cure.”

Sarah chuckled and shook her head. “I guess they’re forgetting there’s a whole ecosystem there to be mapped.”

“But not exploited,” Dane felt compelled to add.

“Jeez, Ian, *never*. Don’t I already have a dozen lobbyists working on reforming the Mercy Man System for you? You know we’re on the same side.” Sarah looked genuinely affronted.

“I know. It just... needs to be said aloud every now and then.”

The offended look vanished; Sarah knew quite well what he meant. “Yeah. People can forget. Oh, and speaking of the reforms... we’ve had some kind of breakthrough... I think. I’m not sure yet, but it looks promising. Aldridge and Danzig have been filibustering, but they’ve conceded an important point.”

“Oh?” This was good news, indeed. “What’s that?”

“They’ve agreed that what’s being done in the maximum security prisoners is unethical, but they’re upset about the prisoners being able to choose lesser trials for such a huge reward. They don’t want a flood of hardened convicts getting out of the worst prisons and going back to their old ways. There’s no way they’ll agree to letting a multiple-murderer walk free because he spent two years testing vaccines or allergy medicines for possible side effects.”

Dane frowned. Why did this bother him? He understood the position perfectly, and it wasn’t one he was planning on fighting against, but... something about it was very chilling. “And?”

“Their offer is to change the terms of the project for those prisoners. Nothing life-threatening will be tested, but service in the project for those individuals can only be used to get a reduced sentence or more amenities. No more commutations to time served. No more early releases. It’s either that or they rescind the project altogether from the high risk inmates.” Sarah shrugged. “It sounds very fair. Our lobbyists are discussing it in greater detail with them, and approaching the swing-voters.”

“Yes... very fair.” It was exactly what he’d hoped to achieve. But Dane’s mouth had gone dry. “When are they going to vote on it?”

“It’s on the committee docket for two weeks from today. If they approve it, it could be in front of the legislature before the end of the month.”

Two weeks. Dane swallowed hard.

“Looks like you’re going to win this one, Ian. Congra— are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he managed.

Shit, he thought. ***Shit!*** *I have two weeks to get Riddick approved and enrolled, or he might not even qualify!*