

TOURIST SEASON

by Kathryn Flatt

Miranda Embry admired the most magnificent panorama ever known to man framed in the viewport of her spacious office. Years of long, hard work had won her the Chief of Station position for McMillan Consortium's resort in orbit around the fourth planet of the Cybel system, and satisfaction from the achievement made the view all the more breathtaking. The cloak of clouds surrounding the globe shimmered with every color imaginable, but like most extraordinarily beautiful things in the charted universe, it could also be deadly.

A tone sounded through the station's public address system, drawing her attention to a coming announcement.

"Spaceliner 6244 is ready for docking."

Miranda headed to arrivals to greet one of the passengers, an auditor from the comptroller's office. Graciousness always smoothed the way when they sent someone to verify adherence to regulatory requirements prior to the start of tourist season.

When the first full transport arrived in another day, she and the staff would be too busy for many niceties.

Brandon Storm emerged from the docking bridge at the same moment Miranda entered the reception area. He ducked as he came through the airlock and pushed an unruly lock of dark hair from his forehead. His broad face and deep-set eyes gave him an ominous air, but the attendant who greeted him received a warm, charming smile. He then joined the other arrivals in the security queue.

Miranda pasted on her own smile and fell into step beside him. "Mr. Storm?" She held out a hand. "I'm Miranda Embry, Chief of Station. Welcome to Cybel Regency Resort."

"A pleasure, Ms. Embry," he rumbled as his hand enveloped hers and gripped with a lightness born of conscious restraint.

"You're first visit?" She looked up to make eye contact.

"Yes." He reached the head of the line and slid his identity chip into the machine which flashed a green light as it spit it back out. "I wish it were under better circumstances."

She struggled to cover alarm. "Better circumstances?"

He showed her the same charming grin previously bestowed on the attendant. "Vacation instead of business, but on my salary, it'll take years to save enough to come here for leisure."

Miranda danced past his subtle test to see if she knew more about his visit than she should. "You must be tired after your long trip. Perhaps you would like to get settled in your room."

"Oh, no. I slept most of the way here. If someone can take care of my suitcase, I think we should get down to business as soon as possible."

"Very well." She waved over a porter. "Please see that Mr. Storm's things get to Suite 617." She then gestured to the passageway leading back to her office. "Have you been to any of the other regency-class resorts on your business trips?"

"This is the first, and I must say, I'm impressed by the size of it. I hope I don't get lost."

"The layout is simple. Think of the central core as a giant wheel axel aligned with the axis of Cybel. We're at the top now, and all the lifts run through its length. There are six levels, like big wagon wheels, each with eight spokes attaching them around the core. First level, reception and offices. Second level, health club, infirmary, and entertainment and dining facilities. The last four levels house accommodations and housekeeping. Simple."

"And I take it my room is on the sixth level?"

"Exactly. I'll be happy to show you the way when you're ready to retire for the night. By the way, we keep the local clock here, which puts us at approximately nine p.m."

"No problem. I travel so much, I've learned to adjust quickly to whatever schedule applies."

She ushered him into her office and sat at her desk while he halted in the middle of the room and gaped at the view with bewildered awe.

"Exquisite, isn't it?" she asked.

He blinked as if waking from a quick nap. "I don't think I could find any description half as applicable. I've heard Cybel compared to Jupiter, but that hardly covers it. So much *color*!"

"If you think it's spectacular from here, you should see the surface. If you have time, I can arrange a trip."

He tore his gaze away from the viewport and grinned. "You have a pressure suit big enough for me?"

Miranda laughed. "We have all shapes and sizes covered, Mr. Storm."

He turned the charm on full as he took a seat across the desk. "Let's be friendly. I'm Brandon."

"Very well. I'm Miranda." She folded her hands on top of her desk. "Now then, I assume you'll want to start with our procedure manual and safety precautions."

His smile remained but wariness furrowed his brow. "This isn't a routine inspection, Miranda. I'm here about your mortality figures."

Miranda Embry flinched although Brandon would have missed the motion had he blinked. He knew from his research she was both smart and beautiful but not *how* beautiful. White-blond hair, sea-green eyes, skin like alabaster, she lacked only a pair of gossamer wings to complete the image of a fairy queen. He planned to test her smarts next.

She smiled thinly. "You have me at a disadvantage. I thought our figures were well within normal parameters."

"Eight in the last twelve months is significantly more than most McMillan properties."

"Ah, but this is Cybel, Brandon," she replied, the tension easing. "The Consortium understood the risks when they approved tourist visits to the surface."

"Risks?" He knew them all but wanted to hear her explanation.

"The atmosphere of Cybel is quite poisonous," she lectured. "A pressure suit, properly worn, will protect the wearer from the lethal elements. However, some otherwise harmless components will make it through, and these produce an extremely pleasant odor. Even the best-prepared subjects have been known to remove their helmets in a state of euphoria. We take every step possible to prevent this from happening, which will be explained in detail if you make a surface excursion, but . . . well, people can be unpredictable."

"And exposures are always fatal?" he questioned.

"Not always. We have the best available medical facilities here, but the exposure must be brief and the window for successful treatment is short."

"I see." One more try at obliqueness before he resorted to the direct approach. "Then the treatment worked twice out of ten exposures."

"Actually, it worked three. One death resulted from a heart attack." Her chin lifted. "A large proportion of our visitors are of advanced age, people who have saved for years to see Cybel. Unfortunately, the transitions to and from speed-of-light are tough even on a strong body."

If she suspected his true purpose, she hid it well. "I don't doubt every rule is being followed, every precaution taken, and I'm sure all the documentation to protect the Consortium from legal action is in perfect order."

"Then what is the issue with our mortality rate?" she demanded with a touch of impatience.

He concentrated on her face as he came to the point. "Do you know what a morphlin is?"

She hesitated for the space of one heartbeat. "Of course." Her lips tugged up at the corners. "A morphlin is a mythical creature said to steal souls if I remember correctly." She winked. "The boogeyman reinvented for the twenty-fifth century."

He forced a smile in return. "You've just given the popular definition. The reality is somewhat different."

Her face froze for a moment but then she chuckled. "Okay, Brandon. You've had your little joke. Now, seriously . . ."

"I'm quite serious." He waited until her amusement died. "I've been tracking a morphlin for the last two years."

"Tracking," she repeated doubtfully. "You said the reality is somewhat different."

"I have made myself something of an expert," he told her. "Or at least have gathered more information than most people possess. A morphlin is an intelligent entity which can choose to look like any living creature, hence the 'morph' in the name. Human beings are preferred for their longevity, mobility, and acceptance of eccentricity. It's easy for a morphlin to fit into society with no one being aware of its existence."

"Where do they come from?"

"Unknown. They've been around at least as long as modern *Homo sapiens*. Perhaps they were an offshoot or precursor of the species, or an adaptation or maybe something else altogether. My own theory is they laid the foundation for many mythical creatures, such as demons and vampires."

"But they're not a threat to humankind," Miranda remarked.

"Usually, no."

"Usually?"

"The morphlin's longevity is not a given. It must regenerate itself by absorbing the essence of a human being that is in the process of dying."

"You mean the soul?"

"There are a number of names for it," Brandon allowed. "Soul, essence, life force, intellect, call it what you wish. Legend has it memories are absorbed as well. The morphlin must be in proximity when the person expires, and when it accepts the essence, no one else in attendance would have a clue."

"But if the morphlin keeps regenerating, wouldn't people eventually catch on? I mean, it's going to stay around a lot longer than other folks."

"Ah, that's where the mobility factor enters in. Morphlins tend to be solitary in their lives, living among humans without ever being one of them, but they must move to another place before their longevity grabs attention. Keep in mind they've been doing this for thousands of years with no one the wiser."

"They live forever?"

"As long as they can regenerate every twelve years. Of course, they can do so more often as opportunities permit."

"Sounds like a lonely life." Miranda studied him without a trace of disbelief or amusement, cool and inscrutable. "A little bit ago, you used the word 'usually.'"

"Morphlins tend to assume positions which give them easy access to expiring people," he explained. "Once upon a time, they became doctors, priests, emergency rescue workers, even soldiers back in the day of frequent lengthy wars. But in the last century, technology has replaced ninety percent of doctors and soldiers with robotic devices, reducing the morphlins' ability to regenerate in a discrete fashion and threatening their survival. This has forced them to find other positions of access, sometimes at the risk of revealing their nature to people." Again he watched her with immense care. "The one I am tracking has gone rogue and may be resorting to murder."

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Miranda braced against the force of Brandon's intense scrutiny. "And you think this rogue morphlin is here at Cybel."

Brandon made a respectful nod. "Cybel is an excellent choice. Constant influx of humans willing to expose themselves to its dangers, a staff which changes every six months, and out at the edges of explored space where few travel."

"Then why do you suspect murder? With a twelve year timetable, there should be ample opportunities without forcibly creating them."

"Perhaps murder is too strong a word." He shifted in his chair which looked overwhelmed by his bulk. "Consider this scenario. A group of tourists goes to the surface, one of them

becomes intoxicated by the air, removes his breathing apparatus, and needs emergency treatment. How easy it would be to delay by a few minutes—"

"Actually, only a few seconds could make a difference," she put in.

"Then, in a show of empathy or guilty responsibility, the morphlin could be standing by when the treatment failed, ready to receive the escaping essence."

"Possible," she agreed. Reading between his words, his purpose in coming to Cybel became all too clear.

"It might even alter a pressure suit to ensure planet air came into it to produce the euphoric effect," he hinted.

"Suits are inspected before and after each tour and checked on the wearer before exposure on the planet." Miranda advised as she studied him. "However, that raises an interesting question. Is the atmosphere of Cybel as lethal to a morphlin as it is to an ordinary human?"

"Unknown. While I have amassed a great deal of information, that's one of many questions I cannot answer."

She intended to get a look at his amassed information as soon as possible. "I'm curious about the timing of your visit. Tomorrow begins the period when Cybel's displays are at their best and the euphoria effect heads for a statistical low, and our first full spaceliner will arrive."

"With sixteen crew members and a hundred fifty passengers," he added pointedly. "Forty-two of them are over eighty years of age, very near the point when they can no longer be cleared for speed-of-light travel."

"I see." She glanced at her wrist computer, eager for him to leave so she could check him out before they talked more. "Well, it's been a long day for me, Brandon. How about I show you to your quarters and we reconvene in the morning?"

"Of course," he agreed as he stood. "Forgive me for turning this into a marathon discussion so late in the day for you."

He used his charm so easily, but charm often concealed a devious and malicious mind.

They rode the elevator to his level. "I'll see what I can do about arranging a visit to the surface if you're interested."

"Oh, I'm quite interested, and I appreciate you taking the time to accommodate me."

I'll just bet you do, she thought. "It's part of my job, Brandon. I imagine some of the other new arrivals will be joining us. The tours are quite popular." The lift door opened at Level Six, and she led him to the second suite to the left. "Here we are, and see how easy it is to find your way back?"

He chuckled. "Yes, I think I can manage." He inserted his identity chip by the door which then slid open. "I'll see you in the morning then?"

"Of course. Good night, Brandon."

"Good night, Miranda."

When the door closed, Miranda headed back to her office while entering instructions on her computer to monitor Brandon's room access and communications. He clearly meant to take her down and get the Chief of Station job for himself using the morphlin business as the means, but if he thought he had her cornered, he had another think coming. No way would she allow some overgrown ape with a brain behind his smiling face to oust her from this ideal position and the station which was her home.

Back at her desk, she began combing every resource she could think of to learn more about Brandon Storm and his study of morphlins.

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Brandon caught a three hour nap and awoke refreshed and acclimated to the Cybel day. He ordered breakfast in his room and sat at the table near the window to enjoy the spectacle of Cybel. The view did not compare to the one in Miranda's office, but at least he *had* a view. The synthesized cheese blintzes proved to be excellent.

A device hidden in his suitcase informed him that Miranda had ordered monitoring of his movements and communications, which did not surprise him. Her research into his background would reveal nothing he did not want her to know. He poured tea

and wondered how much she *had* managed to discover and what she suspected.

The comm panel pinged with a message from Miranda about the promised tour to Cybel's surface, leaving in an hour. She included a personal note saying they could talk more on the trip. He skimmed the release form attached to the notice and pressed his thumb to the screen to sign it.

While he ate, he reviewed her research into his morphlin studies, and respect for her intellect grew. She had made some outstanding logical leaps, rapidly jumping to higher conclusions and always the right ones.

"I'm impressed," he muttered at the screen. "And I salute you." He almost regretted having to bring her down.

His mouth went dry when he reached the last entries of the log of her activities, repetitive visits to the transcripts of the three most revealing interviews from his research. Did she focus on those because they provided the most information, or did it indicate she had figured it out? A fifty-fifty proposition, which meant he must follow the worst-case scenario and be ready to protect himself. He hurriedly finished his meal and prepared to face the day's challenges.

Miranda stood waiting for him when he arrived at the tour center.

"Good morning," she greeted with no hint of suspicion or deviousness. "You *do* adapt well. New arrivals usually look a little haggard for the first day or so."

"My accommodations are most comfortable," he replied as he followed her through a passage. "Are you sure you can spare the time for this trip?"

"I'm free until the next flight arrives. The total tour takes a little over an hour, and since you have concerns about safety, I thought I should tag along so we could discuss them."

They entered a room arranged as a small theater and chose seats in the back row.

"The tour starts with a safety lecture," she told him casually. "One of the guides will explain everything."

Three men and two women also took seats, and he recognized a couple of them as having been on his own transport the day before. He allowed himself a measure of relief; with so many others accompanying them, it seemed unlikely she would try to eliminate him, a bold and risky move even without witnesses. Still, he knew he must exercise caution with so many unknowns in the equation.

A few minutes later, men and women wearing tight-fitting silver pressure suits without helmets filed across the stage and assumed pseudo-military postures. The last one stepped up to the podium.

"Good morning," her amplified voice boomed. "I'm Deborah Johns, leader of today's tour. Has anyone here been to the surface of Cybel before?"

Only Miranda raised her hand.

"First, I will discuss safety procedures." Deborah spoke with the ease of much practice and yet maintained a reassuring, commanding tone. "Each of you will be assigned a personal guide who will be responsible for outfitting you with a pressure suit and escorting you on the surface." She paused as the lights dimmed.

Brandon leaned toward Miranda. "A guide for each person?" he whispered.

"It's safer. One for one assures each tourist the absolute best attention."

A three-dimensional hologram flickered to life and displayed a view of Cybel and the station from some distance in space. A red dot of light blinked at the top of the station.

"The light identifies our current position. Once we're all aboard the drop ship, a laser beam will push us out into space, and the vehicle will functionally ride the beam to the surface." The holo illustrated a boxy-shaped vehicle with a stream of light behind it. "For our return, another beam will push us back to the station. Each trip takes about seven minutes. It is absolutely essential you remain in your seats with safety

harnesses fastened while traveling on the drop ship. We do occasionally experience beam disruptions which can bump us around, but the ship is equipped with maneuvering thrusters for those rare events.

"On the surface of Cybel, we will exit by pairs, tourist and guide, through the airlock. We'll then have approximately twenty minutes to walk about, but *only* within the areas marked by guide posts." The holo changed to show suited figures on Cybel, and more red lights indicated the markers: short posts painted with red and black stripes. "Outside the markers, the surface is pockmarked with sinkholes filled with a quicksand-like substance. These can be quite deep, and the temperature of the quicksand is around zero degrees Celsius. The suits will not protect you from that temperature, but if you stay in the designated areas, you'll be perfectly safe and still have plenty to see.

"The atmosphere of Cybel is extremely poisonous, and while your breathing gear will protect you, you may become aware of an intense sweet odor coming through your filter. This is not lethal, but it can be intoxicating. Under no circumstances should you remove your helmet!" She cast a severe gaze over her audience. "If you feel a compulsion or temptation to do so, talk to your guide *immediately*, and he or she will help you. While we have treatment facilities for accidental exposure, the success

rate is limited, and most people who survive long enough to reach them still perish." Another severe look followed by a tight smile. "Just keep your helmets on and you won't have to worry."

The hologram faded out as the lights came up. "From here, we'll go to the ready room where your guide will help you select a pressure suit. Any questions?"

Those in the audience glanced around shyly, but no one raised a hand.

"All right then," Deborah chirped. "Just remember to listen to your guide and do what he or she says, and we'll have a safe and pleasant trip. Also, feel free to ask questions about Cybel as we are all well versed in the subject." The other silent guides simultaneously executed a right-face turn and marched off the stage. "If you'll follow us please?" Deborah joined the end of the line.

The tour participants began making their way to where Deborah waited at a doorway.

"So tell me, Brandon," Miranda said as they brought up the rear. "If two morphlins met in a bar, would they recognize one another?"

He forced a laugh to cover the start her question gave him. "Now how would I know that?"

"Ladies to the left, gentlemen to the right," Deborah instructed.

Miranda sketched a brief salute as she preceded Deborah to one side of a partitioning wall, and Brandon veered right to be greeted by one of the silver-suited men.

"Mr. Storm? I'm Gustav Olsen, your guide. Call me Gus."

"Brandon." They shook hands.

Gus brought out a measuring laser. "You look about my size for a suit, but let's make sure." He slipped behind him, and Brandon stood with one arm extended parallel to the floor. "Yes, I think a large-and-tall will fit you." Across the room, racks held pressure suits arranged by size. Gus selected one from the near end. "If this one isn't comfortable, we can always combine pieces from different sizes."

Brandon stripped down to his underwear before stepping into the bottom half. A few feet away, another guide helped one of the other tourists into a suit, a young man whose pale face gleamed with perspiration.

"Nervous?" Brandon asked him.

The other man nodded, anxious but resolute. "I've got to do this, though. Got a pile of dough riding on a bet I won't."

"Just relax, Mr. Franklin," his guide soothed. "You'll be rolling in that pile of dough before you know it."

Brandon pulled the top half of the suit on over his head, and the thick helmet ring settled on his shoulders, softening from his body heat and molding itself to their shape.

"Now for your helmet," Gus said after inspecting the fastenings of the two pieces. "The comm links inside are only good for a couple of feet, allowing people to talk to each other without hearing every single conversation."

"What if there's one of those emergencies Deborah talked about?" he asked as Gus picked a helmet from the rack. "How do you get everyone back to the ship?"

"There's a signaling system built in, but we'll explain it before we go out on the surface."

The helmet made a reassuring sucking sound as it came to rest on the receiving collar, and the expansive faceplate provided a wide field of view. Gus walked a full circuit around him, gave a quick nod of satisfaction, and gestured for him to remove his helmet. He held out a hand toward the far end of the ready room. "And we're ready to board."

With Gus behind him, Brandon walked into the airlock passageway feeling much better about the excursion. He might have been wrong about the morphlin tampering with suits to cause "accidental" exposures to Cybel's atmosphere. The choice of his own suit seemed random, and the large collection made the odds of anyone receiving a defective suit slim. He entered the drop

ship to see Miranda already seated and waving him over. He took a couple of deep, calming breaths before joining her.

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Brandon looked at ease when he settled into the seat next to hers, and Miranda assumed it meant he felt confident in his plan, the smug bastard. During the early phases of her research overnight, her first reaction had been to bring him down quick and hard, ending this game of brinksmanship, but as she explored his data on morphlins, she reconsidered. An adversarial approach presented a small probability of success while seeking a mutually beneficial resolution stood a better chance. However, to achieve it would require a delicate touch.

"I must say, your research into morphlins is both extensive and impressive," she began.

"Well, thank you," he said graciously.

"Where *did* you find all those facts?"

Before he could answer, the pilot's voice came through speakers. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Captain Villanova, your pilot. As soon as everyone has their safety restraints fastened, we can depart. Be aware you will experience a slight lurching sensation as the ship leaves the gravity of the station. The same thing will happen when we touch down on the platform below. This is normal, so don't be alarmed. Thank you for your attention."

"How many times have you done this?" Brandon asked as he strapped in.

"This is my third." She sidestepped his attempt to steer her away from questions about his research. "Back to morphlins. Where did you find all that stuff?"

"Stuff might be the appropriate word. I researched legends, stories, talked to people who claimed to have met or seen one."

The vessel began inching forward, eliciting excited noises from the other passengers. A couple of them yelped when the laser guidance took over in spite of being warned. She waited for the hubbub to settle before resuming conversation.

"A bold move, presenting your findings to the Consortium as hard facts."

"One of the Consortium members actually instigated my study," Brandon stated in an offhand way.

An enlightening tidbit. Was he trying to cover himself or hinting? "He brought up the theory of a morphlin on Cybel?"

"No, I came to that conclusion during my research. The Comptroller suggested I come here to check it out."

A likely story, she wanted to say. "I found it fascinating how the number twelve keeps showing up in your report."

He flinched subtly. "Since the regeneration period is twelve years, it stands to reason twelve should be significant to them in other ways."

She held back for a bit, timing her next attack to coincide with landing on Cybel. He would have something to contemplate as they explored the surface.

"I found the names quite interesting," she remarked as they bumped onto the platform, and he responded with a look of out-and-out shock well worth the wait. "David Waverly? Dorothy Lakes? Walter Wasser?"

"May I have your attention, please," the pilot asked before Brandon could respond. "We have landed on Cybel, and you may remove your safety restraints. Please give your attention to Deborah as she explains some additional safety procedures."

Deborah stood and faced them, holding up a helmet. "If you will take a look inside your helmet, I'll point out some important features. The faceplate is ringed by small lights. When your helmet is on and locked, the lights will be white. When the lights begin to blink, it is time to return to the ship. If they blink yellow, it means a fellow passenger or guide is in trouble and we must return as quickly as possible. If they turn solid red, your suit has been compromised and you *must* get back to the ship as fast as you can."

A nervous murmur rippled through the group.

"Stay close to your guide on the surface, and remember, if you feel a desire to remove your helmet, alert your guide. He or she will be monitoring you as well. Let's begin going by pairs

into the airlock which will match outside pressure and verify suit efficacy."

The passengers all stood as Deborah and her charge moved into the airlock.

"I have to link up with Beverly," Miranda told Brandon.
"See you outside."

Gustav, his guide, approached, and she hurried away. Brandon's plan to oust her was going down in flames, and letting him stew about what she might be thinking would set him up perfectly for her proposal.

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At Gus' instruction, Brandon donned his helmet outside the inner door to the airlock as they awaited their turn. When it came and the door shut them inside, the pressure changed with a whooshing sound, and he gave into an urge to "pop" his ears. A green light glowed above the outer hatch as it opened, and Gus gestured for him to move ahead.

Finally he stood on the surface of Cybel, and the beauty of it took his breath away. Overhead, an endless parade of thick, pastel-colored clouds swirled by, lit from behind by golden sunlight. The land around them undulated in soft-looking mounds under the cover of short lavender turf with occasional outcroppings of sharp black rock. Around the clearing described by the black and red safety posts clustered trees with trunks

and leaves like hammered gold. They reminded him of aspen trees, the way the leaves shimmered in a breeze he could not feel through the suit.

Miranda startled him when she came alongside. "Is it all you expected?"

"And then some." All thoughts of their machinations and tactics fell into the background as he admired the wonderland around them until she took his arm. He held back on a cringe, his self-preservation instinct in an uproar.

"Come this way," she instructed and tugged at him before moving away.

He followed with their guides trailing behind. Miranda stopped near the safe-ground markers at the farthest point from the drop ship, and somewhere beneath the awe and wonder, wariness over her intentions vied for supremacy. He lost the battle when he reached her and saw the new panorama beyond her.

A tall saw-toothed wall of black rock in the near distance glittered with bands of fool's gold when Cybel's sun peeked through the scudding clouds. From a cleft between two of the largest rocks, a milky white waterfall poured into a crevice, creating a froth reminiscent of whipped cream. The moment he identified the similarity, he sensed an odor.

"Can you smell it yet?" Miranda questioned.

Freshly mown grass. No wait, after the rain. The scent changed, sweetened: caramel corn at a fair, a field of lavender, the perfume of an expensive prostitute, night-blooming flowers in some tropical place. Each comparison seemed to trigger a new scent, as if the air around him were an intelligent creature which could read his thoughts and create the aromas of a hundred pleasant memories to intoxicate him. A small part of his brain knew the dangers, knew the air outside was deadly, but . . . *I want to stay here. I don't ever want to leave . . .*

"Brandon!"

Miranda gripped his right arm, Gus his left. To his surprise, he had raised both hands to his helmet. The shock of nearly succumbing ended the parade of odors, sending the seductive beast of the atmosphere into retreat. He looked at Miranda, her pretty features distorted through the curving faceplates between them, but she appeared honestly worried.

"I'm all right," he said, and they let go of him. He wondered if she would have been as concerned if Gus and Beverly had not been close at hand.

Yellow light suddenly colored his view, and he almost panicked.

"Back to the ship," Beverly ordered.

"Someone's in trouble," Miranda stated and jogged away.

"Don't run!" Gus commanded. "You could fall!"

Again the clouds parted, admitting sunbeams which glinted off the golden leaves of the trees and turned the ground cover iridescent. The memory of his experience both tantalized and repelled, but he also knew he would do anything necessary to stay close to this place.

Brandon walked briskly beside Gus, heart starting to pound. Ahead, Miranda and Beverly reached the airlock with other pairs from the landing party gathering around it.

"What happened?" he demanded as soon as he caught up to them.

"It's all right," Deborah reported, somewhat breathless. "Jim Franklin got the euphoria and went back to the ship, but he tore his sleeve while going through the airlock and got scared. He's all right though. The sniffer in the lock showed no infiltration. We gave him a few minutes of pure oxygen just to be safe."

"We're close to return time anyway," Miranda observed. "The air problem seems particularly acute today. We may have to suspend drops for the day."

Her concern at least seemed sincere. "Does this happen often?" he asked as they waited for their turn to board.

"Usually by this time of year, the effect has diminished much more," she explained and then stepped into the lock with Beverly.

"No one really understands the seasonal effect," Gus advised from behind him. "The hypothesis is it's something in the vegetation. It greatly limits the window for conducting these tours."

When the door opened again, Brandon stepped through the hatch, shaking off the spell of Cybel to concentrate on the Miranda's broad hints given during the outbound trip. He had discarded the idea she created "accidents" on the tours to foster an insatiable desire to regenerate at every opportunity. That and what had happened on the surface totally changed his objective, but he needed to know more of what she knew from her research before he dared push further.

Jim Franklin sat near the back of the ship, still obviously shaken. Brandon placed a hand on the young man's shoulder as he passed. "Looks like you won your bet."

Franklin drew a shaky sigh. "Yeah, and if I had it to do again, I wouldn't do it. Sorry I cut everyone else's trip short."

"It almost got to me, too," he confessed. "Apparently, the effect is rather strong today, so don't blame yourself." Then he moved ahead to sit with Miranda.

"Quite an experience, isn't it?" she asked wryly. "It happened to me my first time. It's almost as if the air *knows* when it's your first visit."

"I felt the same thing. As if an intelligence could read my memories to find the smells that would tempt me most."

"Hmm, I'll bet you have a lot of them."

"I beg your pardon?"

"All your travels," she replied, feigning innocence. "You must have seen quite a few planets while on company business."

He wanted to yell at her to stop teasing, to come out and say what was on her mind, but he could not with all the other people around. In any case, the time for sparring had come to an abrupt end.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion in your office," he suggested. "A few more names that did not appear in my files might be of interest to you."

"Really?"

"Valerie Blaze, Adriana Fiero. Need I go on?"

Miranda went quiet but did not look chastened. She appeared triumphant.

"Buckle up, folks," Captain Villanova ordered. "Departing in one minute."

Brandon settled in. The sudden jolt as the drop ship left the platform brought nervous giggles from some of the passengers, as if they were on an amusement park rollercoaster.

"So now I bet you *really* want my job," Miranda stated somberly. "It's why you came here, isn't it?"

"Yes," he admitted. "But only because I thought you were . . . taking unethical measures."

"But you don't think so anymore."

"Having seen your safety procedures and experiencing Cybel's seduction firsthand--"

A throbbing hum cut off his words as the ship shuddered around them. Cries went up as a warning alarm began to whoop at a deafening level.

"Take it easy, people," the captain shouted. "It's only a proximity alert. An emergency shuttle just passed above us. Nothing to worry about."

Miranda studied her wrist computer. "Medical emergency on the incoming spaceliner. An elderly passenger suffered a heart attack coming out of hyperdrive."

"Are your medical facilities so advanced as to justify rushing him here?"

"Latest and greatest," she said with a wry smirk. "Because of the risks on Cybel, our Robo-Doc is the best on the market. I'm afraid I must abandon you when we touch down. Once I see to the official documenting of the arrival, we can continue our discussion."

"I'm looking forward to it," he replied with a smug smile of his own. She obviously had a plan, and the next move was hers to make.

*

Miranda returned to her office after seeing to her duties: approving the passenger manifest, talking to those closest to the man felled by a heart attack and the crew who attended to him, programming the Robo-Doc to send her updates, filing a report on the incident with headquarters. She then addressed the myriad other details that always arose after receiving a fresh batch of tourists. After a late dinner, she reached for the comm panel to page Brandon, figuring he must have had enough time to think about their impasse.

Instead, her computer sounded an alert, the Robo-Doc signaling a change in the heart-attack patient's condition. She bolted from her chair and dashed to the infirmary.

Brandon stood outside the intensive care unit, hands in his pockets, observing the comatose patient behind the thick glass with a sad, pensive expression. She drew up beside him.

"He's not going to make it, is he?" he asked.

"Not without an organ replacement," she replied. "We have no means to grow them."

"Unfortunate." Brandon cast a sidelong glance her way. "He's seventy-nine years old, a university professor, an advisor to heads of state, an avid traveler. He had a good run."

She studied his reflection for a moment. "Those three names in your research were all you, weren't they? I do the same thing with my names—all twelve letters long."

"Old habits are hard to break," he admitted with a shy smile.

"Do you remember the first time you regenerated? When you found out what you are?"

He drew a heavy sigh. "I have so many memories now, I'm no longer sure which are really mine."

"I remember my first," she said, burying a rush of empathy. "The train I was on derailed and fell into the sea. Everyone around me was dying and I thought I would too. And then they all started flowing into me, and I knew I would live forever."

He stole another glance, his expression blank, and then returned his attention to the monitor as if it measured his own chances for survival.

"How long since you last regenerated?"

"Eleven and a half years," he answered. "Gets tougher all the time. But then, you've managed to land yourself in a prime situation at Cybel."

Time to strike the deal. "I came here as a tourist and knew I'd found a home, but unless something changes, I'll eventually have to leave before someone catches on."

Within the Robo-Doc, a blinking light changed from green to yellow as the patient's vital signs declined.

"I last regenerated six months ago," she confided. "The other heart attack case. I only take them when I need them, Brandon."

"I believe you." His gaze stayed locked on the blinking indicator. "What did you mean by unless something changes?"

A sense of calm descended; they were now on the same side. "There's enough opportunity for both of us here. Working together, we could stay a long time."

"An appealing idea. I'm tired of staying aloof and having to move every quarter century." He turned his head and smiled. "You know, you're the first of my kind I've ever met who admitted it."

"Same here," she agreed. "Once I knew about you, I started thinking about the two of us as a team, covering for each other. The possibilities are astounding."

In an instant, two Mirandas were reflected in the glass, showing he understood.

"I could use the help," she said before creating a Brandon Storm face. "Like a deputy. A risk manager if you will."

"Partners," he countered, changing back to himself.

"It doesn't have to end there," Miranda added, also reverting to her Miranda form. "If we mated, what might our offspring be?"

"Unknown," Brandon answered. "But a fascinating idea."

"I take it you have . . . I mean, with humans?"

"Occasionally this body demands it. What about you?"

"It has its attractions."

He considered for a moment. "I'm not sure reproduction is even possible, but if they turned out like us, I think humankind might be in for a major upheaval."

"A force to be reckoned with. A new evolutionary step."

The flashing light in the Robo-Doc changed from yellow to red.

Miranda touched a panel causing the door to the chamber to slide open. She held out a hand to Brandon and offered a smile. "Be my guest, partner."