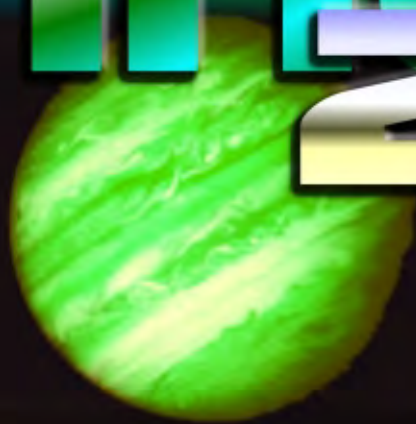


MEL KEEGAN

NARC
2



EQUIPOX

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Equinox

PARC #2

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

EQUINOX

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Equipox

CHAPTER ONE

The wink of a red emergency indicator drew Jerry Stone's attention the instant he opened his eyes. He lay on his left side with his arm twisted beneath him, and he had been out long enough for the limb to have cramped. Memory flooded back like a physical blow.

The skyvan had hit hard, tumbled end over end and slammed into tangled root masses which stopped it before it could slither on over the edge, into a stormwater washaway. Stone's head throbbed. In the darkness his fingers felt for the warm wetness of blood on his scalp, but found nothing. The taste in his mouth was metallic.

He lay on the moulded plastic side of the cockpit, hung half in, half out of the flight harness. The straps had probably saved his life. He could have hit the transparent forward canopy like a projectile, launched from his seat by the force of the impact.

Power was still on. The lift motors had shut down automatically but the electricals were alive and he heard a muted rush of air from the ducts. He knuckled his eyes and fought for focus on the instrument panel.

The red enunciator was indicating a fracture in the canopy, and Stone swore. That accounted for his headache while he could find no physical injury. If he was losing pressure he was lucky to return to his senses at all.

But that could not be right. He rubbed his temples and concentrated on the instruments. Pressure in the cockpit was rising, not falling, but at the same time the oxygen content of his gas mix was going down.

He coughed, forced a breath to the bottom of his lungs. Memory was almost random. Where was he? He felt concussed, but the stunned sensation was more likely the effect of whatever he was breathing. He turned on the chemical analysers and blinked at the complex display.

Oxygen was low. Nitrogen was way too high and the air was rich with esters and acids. Memory stirred wilfully. He had come down in the Outfield, a hinterland of dense tropical forest. The plants bled a mild acid and emitted ethanol vapour in their odd photosynthetic cycle. The atmospheric pressure was high but a human could not breathe it. First came drunkenness, then stupor and suffocation.

In the gloom he felt for the crash kit under the control panel. The impact-proof canister popped into his hands as his senses began to spin dangerously. He fumbled with the breath mask, got it over his nose and ran the straps up about his head. The scrubbing filter would clean out the dangerous gasses; the oxygen cartridge gave him fifteen minutes of air he could breathe without falling on his face. He peered at the illuminated face of his chrono and marked the time.

Oxygen filled his lungs and he lay still, waiting for his mind to clear. The last thing he remembered was the rush of half-seen treetops, red lights peppering his instruments as the flight systems shut down. He had taken a hit in the main drive motor and the ground rushed up fast.

How far had he come? As his throbbing head cleared Stone released the harness and took his weight on his hands. He saw lights in the west, not two kilometres away. This far in the Outfield, the only settlement was Station 9. Shooters on the roof must have seen him launch. He was lucky to get out at all.

They would have watched him impact, and they must have been waiting for a fireball. But the skyvan was intact, and Stone gritted his teeth as he tried the canopy release. He must get out, fast. The same shooters who had knocked him down would soon be out here to finish the job. He had minutes.

The gullwing had jammed. He twisted in the seat, braced himself against the opposite side and kicked both boots into the tough plastex. At the third blow it gave, and a stream of warm, moist air gushed into his face. Through the mask he smelt humus, night blooming fungi and the chemical reek from the aft engine module.

The skyvan was canted on its starboard side, and as he clambered up into the moonlight he saw he had been a whisker away from disaster. The whole side of the van was ripped out, scorched black by the Semtex-3 warhead. Only the firewall between the motors and ride capsule had stopped the blast, or he would have been cut to confetti.

This world's large moon was rising over the forest, gibbous and white against the stars. The sky was clear, indigo. Stone spared the vault above him one glance before he returned to the crash kit.

A pencil torch; two capsules of oxygen to extend the lifespan of the mask; a radio beacon which would transmit for three hours before its powerpack was dead. He stuffed these items into the pockets of his brown leather jacket, then dove back into the wrecked van.

The HK-440 had been in the footwell when he launched. The magazine was half spent — thirty or so 9mm teflon rounds remained after he had dropped the security men at the hangar. Memory was hazy. Stone could recall only disjointed scraps of image and sound. A figure turning to-

ward him, the shape of a canon in the hands of a contract shooter, a voice crying out sharply before he was through into the hangar.

The gun had tucked itself under the instrument panel. He pried it out and checked the red LED ammunition counter. He had thirty-two in the magazine. Not much, when half the Station 9 security squad must be in the air.

He heard the approaching bluster of engines as he slung the 9mm machine pistol over his shoulder by its strap and climbed over the side of the wrecked vehicle. A spotlight lanced down, probing the tangle of trees and vines. By day they would have easily seen the scar gouged out of the ground by the headlong, controlled crash, but in the moonlight the dense forest would cover him, buy him a few minutes.

They would be thermoscanning, looking for the still roasting steel and aluminium of the wreck. Stone took the pistol in his right hand, gave the crazily tilted van a single glance, and ran.

Thirty-two rounds and forty minutes of remaining breathable air did not give him many options. He needed transport, preferably the flying variety. He struggled with his disordered memory as he scrambled over the roots of the immense tropical hardwoods. Where was he? What was the name of this planet?

He had made two hundred metres when the thermoscanners behind him located the wreck. Triple spotlights began to circle outward in a search pattern, and Stone picked up his pace. He was headed in the only direction that made any sense — back the way he had come.

Station 9 lay two kilometres west. If he could find the maglev track he could follow it directly back to the city dome. Forty minutes' air would get him there, if he did not have to fight the forest for every step.

Memory swam dangerously. The maglev track was elevated, on an embankment above flood-level, Stone recalled seeing it on numerous landing approaches. He should soon reach it if he kept making his way west. It was the only chance he had.

Bats and night birds fluttered overhead and he ducked. Insects chirped in the tangled vines. He paused for breath and gazed at the stars. The patterns of the constellations were familiar, as good as a route map. On a heading into those star systems from this navigation perspective, he could name five colonised worlds. But only one had a dense, oxygen-poor atmosphere so rich in esters and acids that a human breathing it was out of his skull in minutes.

'Halley,' Stone panted as he recognised the constellations. 'This is Halley ... south subcontinent, near the equator. Damn.'

Now he knew where he was, for all the good it did him. Five hundred metres behind the company's contract shooters were tired of scanning. He

heard muffled thumps as repeated, random stun discharges slammed over the forest. Anyone standing under the field projectors without a helmet would be comatose in an instant. Even at this distance Stone felt a numb tingling in his nerve fibres.

They would widen the scope of the stun fields to take in more and more of the surrounding jungle. Stone clamped his hands over his ears and dove over a massive snarl of roots and parasitic vines. His foot caught, he went down hard, rolled and was up again with a grunted curse.

As he forced his way through a curtain of narcotic *gammin* flowers, which flurried their white, intoxicating pollen into his face, he saw the elevated maglev track before him. The forest stretched away to north and south, impenetrable, dangerous with life forms he could scarcely imagine. In the west was Station 9, one human outpost in the middle of a million square kilometres; in the east the city of Macao stood on the east bank of the Jumna River, by the spaceport.

If Stone could get his hands on a skyhopper he could be in Macao in minutes, lost in the crush of humanity, at liberty to activate the radio tracer, summon a pick-up.

Jarrat was up there somewhere. His eyes roved among the stars as he began to struggle for breath. His senses were like warm honey, so sluggish and dislocated that it took a full minute for him to realise he had begun to suffocate.

He peered at his chrono and swore. The oxygen cartridge was spent, he was getting little more than scrubbed external air every time he heaved a breath, and the oxygen content was not enough to keep a man awake even when he was just standing still.

His fingers were clumsy, his lungs burned as he snapped out the spent cartridge, snapped in a fresh one and forced his spasming lungs to inhale deeply. His head cleared and he marked the time. In thirty minutes he was out of air, and out of luck.

Behind him, the stun fields thumped and thrummed in ever-widening circles. Before him, the lights of Station 9 beckoned like beacons. Stone stumbled out of the grasping roots and vines of the rain forest and pulled himself onto the embankment.

In the open he was an easy target, but he could make faster time. If he tried to cling to cover he had no chance at all. Every breath rasped in his ears as he turned west and ran. The more distance he could put between himself and the wreck, the better his chances became. If he could get back into Station 9 he could steal an aircraft — not a lumbering, underpowered civvy van, but something with the power to throw itself onto the fringes of space.

From there he could get a signal through. Jarrat was never far away.

Stone's eyes returned to the stars as he pounded along the side of the embankment. Gravel slithered under his boots. He lost his footing and went down again, rolled back to his feet and did not waste his breath with a curse.

Memory was returning in patches as his throbbing head began to clear. He must have ingested more of this planet's toxic atmosphere than he had realised as he lay unconscious in the wreck. The lights of Station 9 spelled safety, yet Stone's belly churned acidly as he focused on them.

For five weeks he had lived there, and watched his back every second. South side, sub-basement levels, city bottom, deep under the street: they called it Xanadu, but Stone had learned to call it The Pit.

Behind the facade of glitz and glamour was the other face of Xanadu. A "laboratory" patrolled by security drones and contract shooters, where the best, the purest poison was cut and packaged for supply.

Angel.

For five weeks Stone had worked on the fringes of Xanadu. They knew him as a free pilot, a mercenary down on his luck. There was little he would not do if the price was right.

The face of a man called Morrow swam before his mind's eye as he jogged toward the blaze of neon. How in hell had Morrow known the mercenary was a plant, an agent? Had he known Stone's face from some past encounter? Recognition was always a risk when a NARC entered a deep cover assignment. Everything possible was done to minimise danger, and then a man could only pray, and get on with the job.

The lights were close and Stone's legs had begun to ache when he heard the hissing whine of repulsion and manoeuvring motors up ahead. After five weeks in Station 9 he knew that sound, and dove fast into the rank grasses at the base of the embankment.

The drone had him on infrared and thermoscan. A needle of argon laser light sliced into the ground where Stone had lain half a second before. He was still rolling when it scorched the bullgrass and touched off a tiny spot fire. Flames licked close to his boots but he ignored them, pulled the 9mm pistol up into line and squeezed the trigger.

Five shots ruptured the armoured drone into cartwheeling shards and an expanding envelope of boiling gasses. Before the super-hot shrapnel had scythed into the grass Stone was on his feet again.

Outstation 9 was only a few hundred metres away. He could see the columns of the East Side high-rises, and the brilliant neon spelling out the names of Candydream, Kosmos and Chevrolet. Bats squeaked, winging outward across the forest but he ignored them and peered at his chrono.

His lungs were burning again and he knelt in the deep shadow of an outcropping to insert the last oxygen cartridge. He drew a breath to the bottom of his chest and forced his feet under him. Just a few hundred

metres, and he would be through the gate and on the rink. To the left lay the warren of bordellos and casinos, where Xanadu was the richest and the most terrible; to the right, the hangars where he could get aboard a sky-hopper, hotwire his way around the ignition sequence and launch a second time.

Why had he chosen a waddling civvy van last time? What kind of fool had he been? Memory evaded him. He left the cover of the outcropping and bunched his muscles for effort. From here to the gate he would be in the open. His right hand clenched on the pistol, his eyes scanned the darkness overhead for drones.

When it came, the whining hiss of repulsion and manoeuvring thrusters whispered from behind him and he almost missed the sound in the rasp of his own breathing. A bolt of energy shaved his shoulder, so close he felt the heat, and he flung himself to the ground.

He slammed down on his back and fired one-handed as his body absorbed the jarring impact. The pistol was a bitch to hold on target with one hand as it kicked on its exhaust gasses. He held the trigger down, hosed away his remaining ammunition, as close to the drone as he could manage, and then threw both arms over his face as the machine detonated.

He felt the searing heat of the explosion, heard multiple metallic thuds as pieces of the casing smacked into the ground not far from him. When he dared take his arm from his face, the ammo counter read nine rounds, and Stone swore.

The hangar would be guarded more heavily now than when he left. They must have found the body of the contract man he had killed on the way out. The shooter worked for Xanadu though he wore the uniform fatigues of Outstation 9 Tactical. Half the Tac troopers in the outpost worked for the syndicate, which was the reason the Angel was brought in, cut and marketed with such ease.

The sky was clear of drones but Stone was not duped into complacency. Morrow would be monitoring his hunter-killers. He would know exactly where the last had been destroyed, and now that Stone was on his doorstep a squad of contract men would be moving. He clung to cover for vital minutes, watching the dark sky, but saw nothing.

The maglev track ran straight as a ruler into the gateway, under the massive neon Volvo billboard. Shuttles ran between Macao and the Outstations every half hour, and since none had passed him on his run in from the forest, the next must be due.

Stone panted through the last hundred metres and peered at his chrono. He had five minutes of oxygen, then the game was up. The gate was pressure-sealed. A hundred other gates circled the edge of the rink but to gain entry he must have an infrabeam key, and Stone had no such key.

Outstation 9 towered above him, a transparent dome, almost invisible save where the refraction of the neon glare caused rainbows of colour in the night. The sounds of revelry and industry called through the plastex dome, the thundering bass of steelrock from the dance shops and bordellos, and beneath it all, the ceaseless beat of the great generators and aircycling machines.

Pressed against the cool, curved surface of the dome, he dropped to one knee, checked his chrono and the ammo counter. Two minutes. Nine rounds. His teeth bared behind the moulded plastic of the mask. He had always sworn a good field agent never relied on luck, but he was down to sheer luck now.

Moonlight turned the maglev track into a blue-white ribbon, and his eyes widened as they raked the distance. 'Come on,' he muttered, 'where the fuck is it? There has to be one!'

Then, there it was — a dazzle of light on the track, rushing closer even as its retro thrusters slowed it for the approach to the gate. Like a big steel animal riding the rail, just above the charged surface, never actually touching, the shuttle slowed, swayed and stopped just metres from the still sealed gate.

Stone sprinted for the rear of the single car, slung the pistol over his shoulder and closed both hands about the couplers. The shuttle was moving again before he had a good grip and he let the sudden tug pull him up onto the back of the car. Feet perched on the couplers, he flattened against the metal and clung tight to the rounded edge of the car.

The gate opened fast, the shuttle slid smoothly into the vast, hangar-sized airlock, and the gate closed again behind. Stone was gasping now, and fought to focus on his chrono.

According to the digital, the third and final oxygen cartridge was dead. And so was he. The air about him was a wind storm as the cycling machines scrubbed out the dangerous gasses and forced in enough oxygen to bring the breathing mix up to levels tolerable to humans.

His lungs burned, his head spun, and Stone tore the mask off his face. If the air was still bad he was done for, but he was finished anyway. The mask clattered onto the stained concrete under the maglev rail and he let himself slither down from his perch on the couplers.

Just enough oxygen hit his brain to keep him conscious and moving as the shuttle moved off again. It was like running a marathon on the shoulder of a mountain so high the air was almost too thin to breathe. But the inner gate was opening to admit the shuttle and Stone sprinted to keep pace with the machine. The gate would close directly behind it, and if he was shut in the airlock the game was over.

He tumbled through and fell to his knees as the armoured door slam-

med. His ears popped as the atmospheric pressure normalised, but inside the air was so oxygen rich he felt almost drunk. He rolled down off the slight elevation of the maglev track and ducked quickly among the trash-packs which clustered beside the gate.

This shuttle was a garbage carrier. As labourers ambled out to load the trashpacks Stone slipped into the shadowed alleys around the periphery of the rink, between Xanadu and the hangars.

Steelrock battered his ears as he scuttled by a dance shop. Angel dreamheads had passed out along the walls. These were the pathetic victims of the drug which had become a disease, and even in his desperate flight Stone spared them a pitying glance. How well he knew their bizarre blend of joy and despair. It was branded into his memory in pain.

They were flying, consumed by the rapture of the drug. In the midst of the phantasm of power, sex and euphoria, the user did not recall that death had moved a little closer with the dose he had just inhaled. Realisation came hours later, with consciousness and despair. The poison of Angel was insidious, inescapable. Yet the glory of fantasies moulded by lust, driven by the lethal golden dust, seduced so many into the trap that Angel had outstripped any plague.

Tactical Response was impotent, fettered by corrupt provincial law, outgunned by the syndicates. NARC, autonomous and accountable only to its own distant hierarchy, had the last fighting chance in the rimworlds and deep sky alike.

With a bitter wave of pity, Stone stepped over the dreamheads. His eyes raked every doorway. The hangars skirted Revolution Square, snug against the side of the dome. As he padded to the end of the alley he saw the inner pressure doors, busy with people waiting for a skyhauler. Could he make it out with a commercial flight? If he could get a seat, he had the credits in his pocket. Stone slipped the HK pistol under his jacket and stepped into the light and noise.

Faces turned to him. He saw black Tactical uniforms among the crowd and turned his head away. Half the Tac men here worked for Xanadu, and if just one recognised him the company shooters would be on him.

A flak-jacketed trooper lifted his R/T to his lips, and Stone's heart quickened. He hurried his pace, shouldered through the crush to the head of the queue waiting for admittance to the hangar. At the end of the building, past the immense bronze statue of The Revolutionary, was the technicians' gate, used by pilots and engineers. Unless Morrow had already alerted the computer, Stone had the codes to open that gate. He had used it many times before.

He had been seen. Tactical men were pointing as he pushed through the crowd, but he could not stop. A keypad was inset in the fascia of the

gate, with a monitor behind graffitied armourglass. Stone cast a glance over his shoulder, saw the figures in black uniforms striding toward him. If they were genuine Tac officers they were his salvation. And if they were on Morrow's payroll?

Turning his back on them, he punched in codes the computer had accepted only an hour before, and held his breath. His heart hammered, but the machine took them without hesitation and the small gate opened. Stone stepped through and hit the locking control. That would hold them for minutes.

The airlock was dim and red. A perpetual supply of oxygen-charged masks hung in fresh plastic sheaths on the wall at his elbow. He tore one from its plastic, checked the cartridge, ran the straps up about his head and thumbed the control to prime the inner gate. The Tac squad was already trying to hotwire the outer gate — it would not keep them out for long.

But he recalled several skyhoppers and one starship's shuttle in the hangar. He would be out in minutes if he could slip by Morrow's trigger-happy contract goons. If he could steal the shuttle he would hail the carrier for a rendezvous in space. Jarrat would pull the *Athena* out of her high orbit to meet him, he would be home free.

Cold sweat prickled Stone's ribs. He drew the HK-440, adjusted to single-shot operation and flattened against the wall as the inner gate slid open. He glimpsed the ammunition counter as the air stormed about him, equalising pressures. Nine rounds.

The years of Narcotics And Riot Control training calmed his mind and honed his reflexes. As the gate opened he glimpsed the vast, grey-walled expanse of the hangar: a dozen aircraft, scores of technicians, pilots, passengers boarding an outbound domestic shuttle —

Three black uniforms, bodies made bulky by kevlex-titanium flak jackets, anonymous full-face visors. Stone pulled the pistol into line and squeezed back on the trigger. Two shots, three, spat out of the HK before he saw a shape from the corner of his eye.

Not a Tactical uniform. Jeans, white shirt, white athletic shoes; a squib gun held in both hands, dead on target. Stone spun but he knew it was too late. He felt the needle-prick low in his neck and before he could even feel the burn of drug or toxin his senses dimmed into near unconsciousness.

'They just shot him, Captain Jarrat. You can leave it there.' Doctor Yvette McKinnen's voice was shocking in the womb-like interior of the isolation tank. 'Captain?'

'I heard you.' Weightless in blood-temperature air, encapsulated in the lightless bubble, Kevin Jarrat was so dislocated from reality, nothing outside

the tank might have existed. He was naked, roughly horizontal, floating in a negative gravity field.

As the biocyber systems engineer turned off the field he righted, and grunted as his muscles took his weight for the first time in over an hour. He felt leaden. The sensor wires which had been tagged into the skin of his scalp and chest began to sting, though he was still too disconnected by the drugs in his bloodstream to notice much.

McKinnen cracked open the hatch, and though she had dimmed the laboratory lights, any light at all dazzled Jarrat after so long in total darkness. He closed his eyes as she relieved him of the sensors, and took a white towelling robe from her as he stepped out. A shot of blocker chemicals fired into his bare thigh and he leaned both flat palms on the metal side of the tank as he waited for his head to clear.

The methaqualone and dexamphetamine neutralised in under a minute and his thoughts steadied almost at once. McKinnen played a medscanner over his chest to check for toxic shock or withdrawal syndrome, but he felt none of that. His senses sharpened as if he had wound a lens into focus. The drugs were now totally inert.

The lab was quiet at this hour. Several isolation tanks, examination benches, two deactivated robot drones, a sensory simulator and a battery of computers made even the large room seem cluttered. Four monitors displayed endless columns of data. Jarrat gave them a single glance as he belted the robe and lowered himself into a chair. The lab always felt cold after the blood-heat of the tank, and he was grateful for the mug of coffee McKinnen placed into his hand.

'You got your results?' he asked tiredly. These sessions were wearying. After an hour following Stone's every breath, step and feeling, Jarrat felt as if he had run a marathon. Then it would be Stoney's turn in the tank, and Jarrat would make the run for the benefit of the machines.

'Extraordinary results,' Yvette McKinnen said tersely, grudgingly, as she scrolled through a preliminary collation of the data. 'I've never seen the like of it.'

As his eyes began to adjust Jarrat looked into her face. She was forty, a redhead with blue eyes and a thick Paris accent. She had been out from Earth only a month. And she was furious, though she took pains to keep the anger on a tight rein. Jarrat sighed.

'It isn't my project, Doc. If it was up to me, Stoney and I would have been out of here weeks ago. We never wanted to be here in the first place. If you're going to blame anyone, blame the Intelligence engineers who wanted new toys to play with — us!'

She froze the data, picked up her own coffee and perched on the side of the desk to look down at him. Loose white slacks, blue silk shirt and gold

leather sandals gave her a look of effortless, Parisian elegance, but she was a scientist who had been with NARC for almost twelve years. Jarrat never forgot that.

'I don't blame anyone for anything,' Yvette told him, and it was not a lie. Whom could she hold responsible for the hiatus of her own project? She drew a hand through her dark hair and touched his face. 'You look tired. You can leave if you like. It will take hours to process the data.'

'Let me see the preliminary collation.' He swivelled the chair and cradled the hot mug between his hands. 'That was a tough run. Stoney's hurt in three or four places, though he doesn't know it yet.'

The data backed up and McKinnen ran it at normal speed. On the right of the screen was a visual of Stone's run; on the left, a statistical analysis of the data collected from Jarrat's nervous system; across the bottom, a textual transcript of the voice-track Kevin had recorded moment by moment kept pace with the video/data input.

It was surreal. An Intelligence transport took the wrecked skyvan into the testing ground, slung in cargo tractors under the belly of the ship. Stone was already in the craft, drugged, unconscious. The van was deposited on the lip of the stormwater washaway and the aircraft withdrew with minutes to spare before the run began.

Jarrat sipped the coffee and tried to focus on the action on the screens as he listened to his own voice. 'He's waking. Coming to ... disorientation. He's cramped. Been lying on that arm too long. Left arm. Shock ... he's worried. Headache.' That would be the effect of the drugs, though Stone would not know. Dimethyltriptamine and methylamphetamine in combination with the still classified synthetic, PBH, were never without some side effect. But they made the mind simple to programme.

In the minutes after the cocktail was administered, while Stone was half conscious and before the transport dumped him three hundred kilometres into the NARC weapons testing range, he was given the entire programme scenario. His subconscious mind recorded an entire virtual reality while his own memory was suppressed. The temporary amnesia would last until the drug wore off, or until he received the blocker agent.

On the voice track Jarrat's voice slurred as he responded to the combination of drugs in his own system. They damped the peripheral nervous system, while his brain went into overdrive. His limbs might not have existed, his mind was supercharged. 'He's out,' Jarrat's indistinct voice said from the machine. 'Mask on. Tense. Smell the forest ... he's moving. Sweating. He turns quickly ...'

Long range cameras had recorded Stone as he clambered out of the wreck, took his bearings, saw the incoming craft which he believed to be a flier from the Syndicate, and ran. The craft was the same Intelligence tran-

sport which had taken him to the site, but the stun fields discharged over the forest were real enough.

Remote cameras flew too high and too far behind for Stone to see or hear them, but they shadowed him as he found the maglev track and began to hurry. 'Can't breathe,' Jarrat's voice gasped from the machine. 'No air, can't —' In the tank, he was so intent on Stone's every sensation, so oblivious to his own body, he might have *been* Stone. Two minds inhabiting one body; two sets of sensations coursing through one nervous system.

The drones hunting Stone were also real, programmed to fire close enough to be convincing, but not to injure. Stone hit them both with dummy rounds which triggered two small explosions, bright gas and scrap metal. Enough for his drug-enhanced mind to warp into major detonations. On the voice track, Jarrat yelped with his partner's pain as Stone dove, rolled, fired. Then he was in the open, making the last run toward the wall of a warehouse.

'Fear,' Jarrat slurred. 'Heart racing. Panting. Waiting. Pressing back against ... ah! Running.' On the screen, Stone sprinted down the length of the maglev shuttle and clambered onto the tow-couplers.

Jarrat looked away from the screens. He knew the rest. Stone had never been in any genuine danger. It was all a simulation, augmented reality. The mask was designed to make it difficult to breathe when the oxygen cartridges expired, but the native air was not toxic. Stone could have torn off the mask at any moment.

Instead, he played the scenario through and got further than McKinnen had anticipated. The Intelligence squad was waiting in the warehouse for him. Stone saw it as a hangar. He fired several dummy rounds but the kevlex-titanium armour was impervious. In the tank, Jarrat swore as the dart hit Stone's neck, and he sagged to the ground.

In minutes he was up again as the blocker chemicals neutralised the drugs. This run was complete. On the screen, Jarrat's data curtailed as McKinnen released him from the isolation tank.

She reached over and turned off the monitor, and Jarrat tilted his head at her with a frown. By all accounts the project had almost concluded, which was all the more reason for her to be angry. Her own work was on the shelf, three years' research almost abandoned.

'What do you get out of all that?' Jarrat gestured at the screen. 'The sensory data looks like gibberish to me.'

'Gibberish?' McKinnen smiled thinly. 'Hardly. The machines are analysing the function of the communication between you and Captain Stone. Empathy, artificially engineered by the adept, Harry Del during medical treatment following Stone's exposure to Angel. Weapons Research is still eager to make something of it.' She lifted one fine brow at him. 'So far we

have learned that no form of scanning we know can detect the transmission of impulses between you, but you are both aware of each other, infallibly, to a range of several light minutes, despite the proximity of radiation sources, positive or negative gravity fields. Neither of you is capable of transmitting or receiving actual thoughts, but you both receive feelings, emotions, intuitions and physical sensations as clearly as radio waves.'

'We could have told you that before you started on us.' Jarrat rubbed his shoulder. He had made a run two days before. Though conditions were strictly controlled, he had fallen from a wall in an attempt to evade a drone which, in his private reality, was trying to kill him. He was still aching, and so was Stone.

Even now Jarrat could feel his partner. Stoney was both physically and mentally tired, frustrated and growing angry. Four weeks as lab rats was not what either of them had enlisted for.

The scientist in control of this project was equally as frustrated, albeit for different reasons. Yvette gathered sheets of printout with short, jerky movements and slammed down the stack. 'I shall inform Colonel Dupre that we have all the data we need.' She looked at Jarrat with smouldering blue eyes.

He got to his bare feet. 'None of this was our idea, lady. Stoney and I didn't beg to be sent here. For my money, your own project is probably more applicable than this one.' His voice rose sharply. 'What the hell do Intelligence think they're going to get out of this? Even if they can figure out what makes us able to do what we do, what good it is? There's no way they can apply it to other field agents.'

'You're wrong, Captain.' McKinnen shoved a chair back under the console and began to turn out the lab lights. The computer would work for several hours, collating data which would be boosted on back to NARC Central on Earth, almost three weeks away by hyperflight. Yvette glared at Jarrat over the hood of the machine. 'I thought Dr Del would have told you.'

'Told me what?' Jarrat demanded. She had lost him.

'Ask him.' The woman marched to the door. She was in the corridor when she turned back. 'Tell him I have nothing against his work. I certainly have nothing against empaths — I've worked with them often before, which is why I was torn out of my laboratory in Paris and sent here. But I think Intelligence is making a mistake. A big mistake.'

With that she was gone, leaving Jarrat confused and annoyed. Ask Harry? Ask him what? What was Colonel Dupre up to? The man may be the NARC Quadrant Director, but he did not own his field agents body and soul. Jarrat stood in the empty lab, listening to the whisper of the computer's cooling system. A single monitor was left on, and as he saw a status report he got moving. The transport had just landed. Stoney was back.

CHAPTER TWO

The medic's fingers probed Stone's back and shoulders as if the man did not trust the scanner. Stone leaned over a seat, let the man work as he gazed out at the lights of Venice. From five thousand metres the city looked like a carnival. The spaceport sprawled along the west side, but the NARC transport swung about it, on a heading out of the restricted zone.

The stars were still familiar. Stone gave them a glare. Even in his drugged state he had known these constellations, but this was not Halley, nor was that forest a tropical jungle. And a lucid mind would never confuse the town of Sun Valley with Halley Outstation 9.

The NARC weapons test range was over a quarter million square kilometres of equatorial territory spanning the distance between Sun Valley and Venice. The maglev track bisected the NARC zone but only cargo was carried by rail. Passengers overflowed the area at a safe altitude.

Stone sighed. This was Darwin's World, two weeks from Halley on the same nav bearing into the rim star systems. The rainforest was artificially cultivated, just as the sector of desert was manufactured, and the savanna. NARC field simulations were thorough.

And demanding. Stone winced soundlessly as the medic found his bruised bones. 'I took a fall. Just leave it, will you?' he snapped. 'I'll live.'

The young man gave him an indifferent look. 'I have a report to file, Captain.'

Stone knew. Reports, files, records, whole dossiers had been assembled in the four weeks he and Jarrat had been on Darwin's. Meanwhile, the *Athena* was five days away, about to leave its parking orbit over the city of Chell. Captain Gene Cantrell and Lieutenant Mischa Petrov were in command. Telemetry was forwarded to Darwin's daily, as a courtesy, so Jarrat and Stone were never out of touch with the ship.

Their command status had been suspended, not terminated. Stone wondered to what extent this was candy, intended to seduce them into compliance with the research project. If it was, it had worked, but their patience had begun to wear thin.

A medscanner whirred over Stone's kidneys before the man stepped away. Stone shrugged back into his shirt and glanced at the time. It was just

short of midnight. Kevin would be out of the lab, the carrier's telemetry would be in, and he longed to set spine to mattress.

The transport angled over Venice and banked around on approach to the NARC building which towered over the fringe of the city. Stone went forward to the cockpit, stood behind the pilots and watched passively as the prop, the wrecked skyvan, was dumped unceremoniously into a parking bay. The pilot killed the cargo tractors and the transport bobbed up on repulsion toward the landing space on the roof.

City lights dimmed the stars and the equatorial night air was warm, muggy. As the skyhauler pulled out Stone stood at the north parapet, looking out toward the forest. He saw the maglev track which ran to Sun Valley, but the town he had believed was Outstation 9 lay over the horizon. He breathed deeply, watched the brilliant stern flare of a rimrunner leaving the port on a heading for space, and wished to God he was on it.

The blocker shot had neutralised the drugs, leaving him tired and sore. Stone rubbed his eyes. Jarrat would be just as tired after an hour or more in the iso-tank. Of the two, Stone thought he would prefer to make the run rather than lie in hot blackness, prickled by sensor wires, numb with drugs, mind racing.

As usual, since the run ended he had been "closed" to Jarrat's empathy. They had made this arrangement privately. The experiments were distressing, the aftermath difficult enough to get through without bearing the double burden of confused emotions and physical sensations. The ability to shut out the conflict of incoming feelings was the only armour he and Jarrat had in this project. Stone often wondered what would have become of them if they were "open" all the time. He knew they owed Harry Del a debt.

'Captain Stone?'

He turned toward the voice. It was a young NARC officer, just transferred from the Army, judging by the severity of the haircut, the crispness of the salute. He would gradually relax, become a normal human being. He would never be assigned to field service until he did. On the street, a shorn head and military behaviour were like waving a flag, and would get him killed. The ID tag on his lapel read Cheng, D., but his Asian heritage was indeterminate. Most races were so mixed, names and genes often seemed mismatched.

'Captain Jarrat's compliments. He asks if you would join him directly.'

'Trouble?' Stone thrust his hands into the pockets of his jacket and strode stiffly toward the lifts.

'I don't know.' Cheng stood back to let him step into the car. 'But Cap Jarrat looked annoyed.'

Surprising, Stone thought acidly. Kevin had just come out of the tank.

Annoyed would be an understatement. The lift took him down five levels and deposited him on an accommodation floor. The apartment they shared was small but comfortable, with a taunting view of the spaceport. Stone set his hand on the palmprint lock and the door opened soundlessly.

The apartment was dim since Jarrat's eyes must still be light-sensitive. Kevin was in a short white robe, barefoot, with a glass in either hand. The quilt on the enormous double bed was turned down, and taps gushed in the tiny adjoining bathroom.

'Drink, bath, bed, in that order,' Jarrat said drily as Stone joined him. 'Then you can take a look at the good news.' His tone was cynical.

'News?' Stone sipped the fiery old brandy and snaked one arm about Jarrat's waist.

'Telemetry.' Jarrat moulded against him. 'The *Athena* is on assignment, shipped out of Rethan eighty hours ago.'

'Is NARC delegating another carrier to Chell?' Stone finished the brandy in one draught and dropped his jacket. He winced as his shoulder pulled and was grateful for Jarrat's hands on him. His shirt followed the jacket, and Kevin felt for his bruises with more gentleness than the medic ... then again, Jarrat knew exactly where they were. Shields eased down and the empathy flared warmly between them, a sensation not unlike a caress beneath the skin.

'Dupre told me we're handing Chell back to Tactical,' Jarrat told him as he rubbed the small injury. 'Seems Gene Cantrell has better things to do to do with our ship.'

'Such as?' Stone leaned over the table, stretched and worked his shoulders as Jarrat's hands moved over him.

'Soak, then watch the transmission.' Jarrat swatted his rump. 'You're just bruised.'

'So are you,' Stone said sourly. 'You've got bruises from the last three runs. You were limping yesterday.' He dropped his pants and stepped into the bathroom without looking back. 'And you're as disgusted with this Intelligence bullshit as I am.'

The hot water eased a dozen small hurts he had only been half aware of. He leaned against the side of the tub as Jarrat shut off the taps. Steam rose in billowing clouds, making the air more humid than the tropical night. Kevin sat on the wide enamel side and trailed his fingers in the water.

'Doc McKinnen said she's got about enough,' he mused. 'She'll tell Dupre the project is complete.' He looked down into Stone's face. 'I think she has a lot less than her bosses wanted, but she's more infuriated with the whole programme than we are.'

Stone snorted scornfully as he dumped a palmful of crystals into the water. 'She's got a damned right to be. Her own work was within a year of

practical testing when we happened along. I don't say she'd have shot us dead to be rid of us *and* our empathy, but see it from her perspective. Three years' work down the drain.'

'But who'd have been insane enough to test her gadget?' Jarrat swept back his hair, which was long on his collar, sun-blond, while Stone's was so dark as to be almost black. 'If Central had asked me to test McKinnen's biocyber implant, they wouldn't have liked the answer.'

He was right, and Stone sighed. Yvette McKinnen was a cyber systems analyst. She had developed a brain implant, a transceiver which was being touted as the ultimate monitoring device for agents working in deep cover. But though the device operated on frequencies which were difficult to detect under normal circumstances, its transmission was not totally undetectable. The possibility — some agents said, probability — was that a subspace radio hack would stumble over the signals, decode them, calculate where they were from, and sell the data to the highest bidder on the street. Syndicate moguls would line up to pay handsomely for the information.

If a NARC man was in deep cover, depending on an implant, the day he was even suspected of being an agent, the syndicate in which he was working would only have to scan for the transceiver, and he was dead. McKinnen swore she could find a way to shield the transmission.

NARC was interested enough to fund the project, but even Yvette could see that the strange, natural empathy shared by Jarrat and Stone, the legacy of Harry Del's uncommon ability, was the resolution to a problem of surveillance her own project had only half answered. The bizarre "cure" to Stone's Angel addiction generated almost as many problems as it solved.

'So she's going to pull the plug on the project,' Stone said as he settled deeper into the water and looked up at Jarrat out of heavy eyes. 'Three bloody cheers. That means we're out of here.'

'Unless Dupre decides the dossier is incomplete. They could keep us here for months.' Jarrat took a breath of the hot, humid air. 'I want out, Stoney. I've had enough. I'm starting to feel like a puppet, and I'm hurting.'

'I know.' Stone laid one wet hand on Jarrat's bare thigh. 'I know everything you feel.'

A flicker of amusement and affection blossomed through both of them as shields lowered again. Jarrat smiled faintly. 'You do, at that.' His hand covered Stone's and their fingers laced. 'I'll call Dupre in the morning, tell him we've had enough.'

It was the primary condition under which they had come to Darwin's World. They had undertaken the test programme on a voluntary basis, with the right to veto if or when it became unacceptable. That point had already been passed, days before, and Dupre knew it. Several terse protests had been logged from the terminal in this apartment. None had elicited a re-

sponse from Dupre's office, but the colonel would know how much latitude he had left. The veto would come as no surprise.

Stone sat up and leaned forward in search of a kiss. Jarrat's mouth closed over his, possessive and teasing at once. Stone opened to the empathy, let it take him high as a kite.

Better than a drug, he decided. Better than the Angel had ever been. Jarrat's fingers cupped his nape, rubbed him there as tongues twisted together. Relaxation began to replace the tension of the run, but Stone's reluctant body responded slowly. After the chemical overload and the exertion, it was always the same.

They broke apart and Jarrat's grey eyes were dark, rueful. 'This project is wreaking havoc with our sex life. You're too tired, aren't you?'

'Too tired to be energetic,' Stone admitted as he emptied out the tub and stood. 'But you could take me to bed and be gentle,' he added self-mockingly. 'I wouldn't refuse.'

A large towel was draped over his shoulders and Jarrat stepped out of the steam. Stone rubbed sketchily at his limbs as he followed, and stretched out across the bed as the terminal in the corner of the room came on. The monitor flickered to life and Jarrat dropped in a datacube.

Subspace telemetry took three days to cover the distance between Darwin's World and Kithan, where the carrier had orbited high above the city of Chell. It would be several weeks more before the tachyon broadcast was received on Earth.

As the package began, Jarrat sprawled on the quilt beside Stone, one hand on his partner's backside as they watched. An image of the blue-green planet, Kithan, was overlaid by orbital data pertaining to the carrier's flight status, then the screen faded to black and a short version of the day's business appeared in text form.

Replacement officers from Starfleet; requisitions for equipment; an in-draft of descant troops to replenish the Raven units which had been badly hurt in the Death's Head Angelwar. One of the carrier's reactors was off line for maintenance; the shuttle in which Stone had been shot down was back in the air. Several NARC operatives were on leave, others were at the end of their enlistment. Surgeon Captain Kip Reardon had attended a hangar accident, when an armoury tractor collided with an engineer's cargo sled, and a man was crushed. No irreparable injuries.

The routine business was second nature. Jarrat thumbed the remote to skip through the data. He had seen it often before, and it was not the normal business of the ship which was on his mind.

The hand on Stone's left buttock patted. 'Here it is. Assignment orders, transmitted from Dupre's office, Venice Central, Darwin's, received four hours before this telemetry was dispatched.'

Stone lay propped on an elbow, one arm about Jarrat's waist as he read. 'Effective immediate, terminate Chell assignment, transfer *Athena* to Zeus system, best speed. Assume Elysium assignment earliest possible. Refer to code-access brief.' He looked up at Jarrat's tense profile. 'Did they send the brief?'

'They did.' Jarrat touched the remote. The screen blanked and the text was replaced by a video. 'We ought to be there, Stoney.' He leaned back against Stone's sturdy legs. 'McKinnen must be getting the same data from us, over and over — we're no use to anybody here. Just a couple of dumb lab rats.'

He was furious, tense, and feelings of frustration cut into Stone like a knife. He shut them out with the ease of many weeks of practise before Kevin could exhaust them both. One arm caught Jarrat about the shoulders, pulled him down, and Stone held him tightly as they concentrated on the screen. Every muscle in Jarrat's body was tense.

The background video was a documentary, probably culled from an educational pack. It opened with a diagram of the Zeus system: a G3 yellow star, several barren outer planets, one massive gas giant and sixteen moons, of which two were hospitable to humans. Terraforming had tamed them. Most of the population of just under one billion lived in the colony of Avalon. The capital of the autonomous territory was Elysium, founded ninety-four years before by a corporate empire acclaimed as far away as Earth.

Equinox Industries. The name was intimately familiar to anyone in NARC or Starfleet. Equinox was a major supplier of electronics and software. Even equipment manufactured by rival companies often used the cheaper, compatible components packed under the Equinox label.

A video compilation replaced the data file, and Jarrat thumbed on the sound. An unseen female narrator spoke against a kaleidoscope of images: crowds thronged beneath the towering buildings of Elysium; massive machines stripped the minerals from barren worlds; heavy lifters shunted mammoth cargoes of ore from a pulverised asteroid to the nearby smelter.

The screen depicted an excavator the size of a town and the mass driver which fired its rubble into orbit. 'This,' read the narrator, 'is the heart of Equinox Industries. For almost a century the company has supported the economy of Avalon, providing employment for much of the population.'

'This industrial titan manufactures everything conceivable from virtual reality games to the flight systems controlling the most sophisticated ships flown by Starfleet and NARC. But now this system is exhausted. Little remains to be quarried and for Equinox to survive here it must win a new development contract.'

'With the outer planets and satellites spent, Equinox turns its attention

to Zeus itself. The atmosphere of the giant is fluorine-rich, and could provide continued revenue for the next century. Fluorine remains one of the most powerful fuel sources for the starclippers linking the rim systems with the deep sky.

‘The people of Elysium are uneasy. Equinox has not held the reins of government since Avalon became a sovereign territory sixty years ago. Many businessmen are supportive of Equinox, but rival factions among the people would be happy to see the company leave, which Equinox has threatened to do if rights to the atmosphere of Zeus are not finalised soon.’

Pictures of the city replaced those of the systematic destruction of the planets. Stone studied the edited images of a big multiracial community. Crowds congested the broadwalks; in the sky loomed the dusky green face of Zeus.

‘These people,’ the narrator continued, ‘say their system is reduced to toxic rubble, its population exploited. Their space is filled with meteor-sized debris. Ships operate flak screens every second, or risk fatal collision. Since civil pilots cannot access such military hardware, Avalon’s non-military “freepilots” are effectively captive. Spaceflight in the Zeus system is almost totally controlled ... by Equinox.’

‘Worse, the process of extracting and refining fluorine is tipped to lay a veil of debris into the orbit of Zeus which, over a century, could hinder sunlight, radically altering the climate of Avalon and her populated sister moon, Eos.’

‘Elysium is angry. A rival political faction is headed by Senator Tigh Grenshem, whose object is to rid this system of Equinox. But without this company the colony of Avalon will be impoverished as well as polluted.’

Cityscapes were replaced by multiple stills of Grenshem. His personal file rolled through the left of the screen: fifty-two, widowed eight years before, once worked for Equinox and then left to enter politics. Not a handsome face, but an intelligent one, Stone decided.

The narration continued without pause: ‘With Equinox gone, the clean-up could begin. Grenshem claims his system has other resources. The export of software and flight systems would replace the support lost with Equinox. Tigh Grenshem has fought a running battle with Equinox Director, Randolph Dorne, for over a year. Three weeks ago he solicited Tactical protection after receiving numerous threats of violence.’

Another image and file replaced Grenshem. Stone rubbed his jaw as he looked into the pale blue eyes of Randolph Dorne. Born on Earth of multiple nationality and indeterminate race, he was forty-six, unmarried, no children; his residence was listed as Skycity.

The background video ended and the NARC file began. Colonel William Dupre’s face appeared against the department emblem, a steel gaunt-

let, palm-upward, cradling a white dove. Dupre's brown face was bleak, his soft Barbadian voice brusque.

'Good evening, Gene,' he began, speaking directly to Captain Gene Cantrell, for whom the file was earmarked. 'You'll leave the Chell assignment a month early. Pull out as soon as you can pass all offices into the hands of Tactical, make your best speed for Zeus. You may have been keeping abreast of developments there ... things seem to be coming to the boil faster than expected.'

'I've a brief from Central for you, and a Tolstoy-size dossier for your computers ... take a look at this short version.' His brows arched. 'Make what you can of it. It's a tough one. You'll want to forward this to Jarrat and Stone — feel free. It may turn out to be their business anyway.'

Dupre smiled into the camera, reached out and turned it off. The screen blanked and the transmission from Central began. The quality was poor though it had been cleaned up and enhanced. Subspace dropout was unavoidable. With a familiar sense of bitterness, Stone absorbed the text and voice-over.

'To Col. W.A. Dupre, Quadrant Controller, from C-in-C, NARC Central. Incidence of Angel abuse in Avalon during the past two years is through ten percent, invoking automatic NARC involvement. Surveillance began six months ago. The system's habitable worlds, Avalon and Eos, are Angel saturated, but Intelligence has been able to locate neither a source of manufacture, nor an import route. Carrier assignment is effective immediate upon receipt of this signal. Documentation follows.'

There the brief ended, and Jarrat turned off the monitor. He rolled over, flat on his back, and arched his head into the mattress. 'They shipped out three nights ago,' he said quietly. 'And it's about three days' hyperflight.'

'Cantrell and Petrov are going to be in over their heads.' Stone's fingertips traced the curve of Jarrat's throat. 'Gene hasn't done much field work in years, and Petrov hasn't had the experience.'

Jarrat closed his eyes as Stone's fingers dipped into the neck of his robe. 'Like I said, we ought to be there.'

'So we talk to Dupre in the morning.' Stone's lips brushed Jarrat's forehead as he loosened the garment. His hand moulded about Jarrat's chest and he luxuriated in the hot velvet skin, muscle and bone. His thumb brushed the sensitive peak of the nipple and Jarrat stretched responsively as the empathy blossomed.

'Dupre might not release us,' he warned. 'McKinnen has a hunch her bosses are up to something with Harry Del.'

'With Harry?' Stone lifted his head in surprise. 'He wouldn't be in anything questionable. You know the man better than that.'

'I know him. But McKinnen was adamant. I was saying there's no way

Intelligence can apply anything they get out of us to other field agents. She said I was wrong, she thought Harry would have told us. Unquote.'

A frown creased Stone's brow. His hand played over Jarrat's flat belly but his mind was preoccupied elsewhere. 'They're working on something, some project we haven't been told about,' he guessed.

'That's what I thought.' Jarrat's right hand rested lightly on Stone's and urged it downward.

The prickle of musk, the heat of the velvet-over-steel shaft returned Stone to the present. His fingers curled about Jarrat's cock, worked lazily while his mouth hunted Kevin's tongue. Empathic shields dropped completely, pleasure doubled as sensations echoed and re-echoed through them.

With an eloquent groan Stone went down flat and held out one arm. 'Come on, Kev. I'm bushed, honey. Make it easy for me.'

'Be gentle?' Jarrat teased as he lifted himself onto the bigger, broader body. His long legs splayed about Stone's sturdy thighs and he leaned forward. Cocks crossed like sabres and began to duel. 'This project,' he panted as he began to move, 'is wrecking my love life!'

Stone caught his head, smiled against his lips. 'You wanted to fuck?'

'Of course I wanted to fuck!' Jarrat paused, kissed him and began to move again. 'Just once I'd like to hit the mattress with enough energy to get it right.'

Get it right? Stone's eyes closed, his hips humped in Jarrat's easy rhythm. Pleasure surged about him and bounced back from Kevin's nerves like breakers on a beach. But Kevin wanted more, and frustration was a whisker away. Stone's hands swept down across his supple back, palmed his buttocks and pulled him in tight.

'Stoney?' Jarrat took a breath.

'Roll me over,' Stone suggested, a bass growl.

'You're tired,' Kevin said doubtfully.

'Not that tired.' Stone leaned up to have his mouth, then tipped him off and turned belly down. With a pillow under his cheek he relaxed, spread his long legs and smiled as he felt Jarrat's fingers trickle from his nape, down his spine, into his cleft and zero in on the heart of him. He closed his eyes, and heard the cap twist off a tube.

He was "open" now, not just physically but empathically. As slick fingers entered him he let the feedback overwhelm him and heard Kevin's soft groan of reaction. What one felt, the other felt. It hardly mattered who played the active role. Stone held his breath as Jarrat spread him and replaced his fingers with his cock, and then took a deep gasp as pleasure surged through him.

Hot and heavy, Kevin rested on his back. Teeth worried gently at his

nape, and Stone shivered ... was it Jarrat's nerves which scintillated with delight, or his own? Full of him, overloaded with throbbing pleasure, Stone panted into the pillow. Musk and fresh sweat prickled the nostrils; Kevin's breath scudded moistly over his ear as Jarrat began to work deeply into him.

It never lasted long enough. Limp in the aftermath, he watched with groggy eyes as Jarrat produced a warm washcloth for him. The quilt swathed them, and as Jarrat snapped off the dim lights Stone turned over into his embrace.

'We're leaving. Tomorrow.' His teeth worried Kevin's lobe, branded the base of his neck. 'No more simulations.'

Jarrat's voice was slurred with sleep. 'Dupre won't like it.'

'Dupre,' Stone groaned, 'can do the other thing.' He punched the pillow to comfort and let his eyes close at last.

'You asked for my professional opinion, I gave it to you.' Yvette McKinnen stood rigidly, hands clasped behind her, before Colonel William Dupre's desk. Her dust-green jumpsuit looked almost paramilitary. 'I believe you are making a grave mistake. I have considerable experience with cases of natural and artificial empathy.'

'And your experience,' Dupre said levelly, 'is that such people carry an emotional burden which ultimately destroys them. I understand what you're saying, Doctor —'

'You just don't agree with me,' she finished.

Dupre clasped his hands on the desk. It was a genuine antique, brought from Earth at great cost, a personal whim. In the corner of the office Harry Del leaned on the water cooler, eyes closed, massaging his temples as if his head was throbbing. Baggy slacks and an even baggier shirt gave him the look of a Bohemian artist. Jarrat and Stone sat in the mock-leather armchairs beside the desk.

Their faces gave little away. Dupre could read more from their body language. They were in denim and jackets, clothes suited to travelling, as if they would walk out and keep walking, if they found they had come here only to be ignored.

Both of them were past the point of no return. In fact, they had endured a good deal more than Dupre had anticipated, though less than the Intelligence specialists wanted. Jarrat, always the more fiery of the two, was beginning to look ragged about the edges. He was not sleeping, Dupre guessed, and he was living on his nerves. He needed a week's R&R, or a return to active duty. Stone looked grim, sullen. His temper was not as quick or sharp as Jarrat's but he was on the edge. His last psyche profile indicated that the eruption was imminent, and when it came it would be a

spectacle, since Stone kept his temper on a tighter rein than Jarrat, perhaps for too long.

Without doubt, Intelligence had pushed them hard. Perhaps too hard. Stone was half a hand's span taller than Jarrat and much more muscular. His hair was very dark, and worn short, where Jarrat's was a tousled mane of sun-blond and brown, long on his collar. But Narcotics And Riot Control had not hired them for their undeniable good looks, and the very spirit and skill which had brought them into the department could now urge them out of it.

On the desk before Dupre was a memo from Intelligence. They wanted more. They wanted to increase the work load, double the number and difficulty of the simulations. See how long it took Jarrat and Stone to break? Dupre wondered. Testing to destruction was the way a new weapons system was analysed in terms of strength and weakness. But men were not machines — something Intelligence was inclined to forget.

The memo was specific, demanding, but Dupre regarded it sceptically. Authority here, as in any matter, rested in his own hands. He looked up at McKinnen, then at Del who was drinking from a glass beaker. Jarrat and Stone were simmering. Two resignation statements lay beside the memo, and Dupre was abruptly out of options.

He could close the data-gathering part of McKinnen's project, tell Intelligence to analyse what they had and ease up on two men who had just drawn the line; or he could try to coerce, perhaps to bribe Jarrat and Stone back to work. McKinnen would erupt first. She was nearer the edge than either of the "lab rats," probably because they were fatigued by hard physical work and constant narcotic stimuli. And Yvette had just as good a reason to blow up.

Dupre drummed his fingers on the memo. 'Harry, I know you don't agree with Dr McKinnen's statement.'

'How could I agree?' Del thrust his hands into the pockets of his baggy blue slacks and turned to face Dupre. 'I've been an empath all my life, I've spent more years dealing with my own kind than Yvette ever will. With all due respect, Bill, she's dead wrong. Many empaths are the most stable people, so long as they're in touch with their emotions. Ask Kevin or Stoney. They're in control. They won't destroy themselves physically or mentally, not next week, not next year.'

The woman's fists clenched. 'Time and again, Colonel, I have seen artificially induced empathy or telepathy result in mental instability, even madness and suicide.'

'But their empathy is natural,' Del argued. 'To them, it's as normal as breathing and eating, or making love!'

'But up to ten weeks ago they'd never been empathic in their lives,'

McKinnen insisted. 'Natural empathy is *born* in the individual. Anything else is totally artificial.'

Harry rubbed his temples once more. 'Yvette, you're a biosystems analyst, and a good one. But you work with machines, biocyber implants. The instances of instability, insanity and suicide you've seen are due to the human brain's inability to adjust to implants. The machine/brain fusion has never been successfully achieved. There's always danger. Even a simple mechanical fault. An implant "flutters" for any one of a thousand reasons ... the mind maddens. All you can do is sedate the subject, because by the time the fault shows up it's too late. Jarrat and Stone are different. Their empathy is as natural as if they were born with it.'

Dupre held up both hands to stop them. 'Please! You've said all this at least twice. Repetition is getting us nowhere. From what I see, you're at stalemate. Dr McKinnen, you view the work from the biocyber perspective. Dr Del, you see it from the standpoint of natural empathy. If Dr McKinnen is correct, Captains Jarrat and Stone will break. If she is wrong, they're stronger than they ever were. Correct?'

'In principle.' Harry Del smiled wearily. 'Strong or not, Bill, you can break them. Shove them back into that lab, let your Intelligence division test them to destruction, and they'll break. Being empathic doesn't make them superhuman.'

'Yes.' Dupre's eyes flickered over the memo, and he cleared his throat. 'According to your report, Dr McKinnen, you have all the data you need.'

'More than was needed,' she said tartly. 'Repetition, as you said, is unproductive. Intelligence is greedy.'

'And thoughtlessly cruel,' Del added. 'These simulations may be more or less harmless, but for the subject caught in the middle of them, it's a fight for life. Mind and body respond to every crisis with peak effort and the result is physical and emotional exhaustion.' He stabbed a finger at the younger men. 'They've run three simulations per week each since they arrived. It's rest they need. As a doctor of medicine —' he glared at McKinnen, who was an engineer '— I would prescribe sixteen hours' sleep, two days of total rest, and then a return to duty. Something to occupy mind and body productively.'

Dupre sat back, head cocked as he regarded doctor, engineer and field agents one by one. Jarrat and Stone had not said a word in fifteen minutes, but they were missing nothing. Stone's hot blue eyes were fixed on the back of McKinnen's head. Jarrat appeared to be studying the painting of a China clipper which hung by the water cooler. Both men were tense as athletes under the gun. A word, and they would walk, leave NARC, with two identical resignations.

At last Dupre sighed and deliberately put his signature to a document

which had been prepared days before. He turned it toward McKinnen. 'Project ... suspended, Doctor.'

'And Jarrat and Stone?' McKinnen asked curtly.

'Ah.' Dupre stood, hands on hips, elegant in grey slacks and white uniform shirt with the NARC insignia. The field agents watched him warily. 'Dr Del recommends that you are perfectly capable of returning to duty. You agree?'

'Colonel!' McKinnen's fist thumped the desk. 'You have not been listening to a word I say!' The French accent thickened with anger.

'On the contrary,' Dupre said ruefully, his own Barbadian accent languid, 'I've heard every word.'

'And you choose to ignore me in favour of — of an outworld *healer*! You brought me here to humiliate me?'

The outburst was not unexpected. Dupre passed a hand before his eyes. 'I wanted your professional opinion to balance that of Dr Del, and you gave it to me. What conclusions must be drawn from two conflicting opinions are my concern.'

He spoke softly but the woman was already angry. The door whisked open and she was gone, leaving Harry Del to breathe a sigh of relief. He sagged onto the couch and took his aching head in his hands.

'With respect, Bill,' he groaned, 'she *is* wrong. You can take my word for it. Jarrat and Stone are stronger than they have ever been. If they break, it'll be because you let the Weapons Research division destroy them ... and I hope to Christ they would have better sense than to sit on their asses and let it happen!'

'Indeed.' Dupre picked up the resignations, folded them and placed them in Stone's hand. 'I don't think we'll be needing these.'

For the first time since he and Jarrat had made their statement, Stone spoke. 'Then if we're not going back to the lab, are we returning to the carrier? We've been reviewing our telemetry every night, Colonel.'

'Then you know the *Athena* is en route to Zeus.' Dupre perched on the edge of the desk and frowned at Del. 'Sixteen hours' sleep and two days' rest, you said?'

Del leaned back and massaged his neck. 'And a return to productive activity. Put them back where they belong, Bill, before they go stale and it costs you another million credits in retraining.'

The Quadrant Controller tugged at the lobe of his ear. 'You may be right.' He looked into Jarrat's wary eyes. 'You saw yesterday's telemetry?'

'The situation on Avalon is still under Tactical's control.' Jarrat looked sidelong at Stone. 'The carrier won't make orbit for a few hours yet. The problem seems to be, we can't work out how the Angel gets in ... the rest of it is purely political, way out of our jurisdiction.'

'Yes.' Dupre folded his arms. 'If I were to reassign you, don't imagine that I'd completely ignore McKinnen's warnings. I've no experience with empaths, and the outside chance remains that Harry may be wrong.' He smiled at the surgeon. 'Not that he's been wrong to date! But if I put you back aboard the *Athena* you'll be under surveillance yourselves.' He paused and angled a glance at each of them. 'Gene Cantrell will remain aboard.'

Stone's eyes narrowed. He felt the kick of Jarrat's annoyance and carefully tuned him out. 'In what capacity?' he asked quietly.

The colonel's brows arched. 'Observer. Gene will watch, listen and report to me.' Dupre shrugged expressively. 'I'm still not used to all this.' He waved vaguely at the two younger men and Del. 'This empathy. Maybe Harry's right.' He looked away. 'Or maybe I'll be burying you two. I don't know that I want it on my conscience. If I thought you were as unstable as McKinnen thinks, I'd bust you to civilian. At least you'd stay alive.'

'But you know better,' Del added. 'Yvette is a talented engineer, but she's stronger on the cyber aspect than the psyche. Let Cantrell monitor them. Call it a field test. Send his reports to Intelligence. They'd just love to have them.'

'They would.' Dupre sighed heavily and gave Jarrat a shrewd look. 'You know what the boffins want? Harry told you?'

A thread of Jarrat's tension licked through Stone's belly almost like an echo of lust. He shut it out and concentrated on what Kevin was saying.

'McKinnen mentioned something, but Harry hasn't said a word. I guess that means it's classified.'

'Restricted information, at least,' Dupre amended. 'We asked Harry to keep it quiet until we find out if there's any ground to be gained out of it.'

'Like what?' Stone leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

The empath stood and paced between the window and the water cooler as he spoke. 'Your bosses want me to see if I can do it again,' he said caustically. 'Take another two field agents, link them empathically as I linked you, as a form of undetectable surveillance for deep cover assignments. On one hand it's a relief to work with people who are not like the bloody-minded bigots I suffer at home! Here, empathy isn't censured as a certifiable perversion, and that's refreshing.'

Stone was stunned. 'Can you do it?'

'Oh, yes.' Del turned toward him, hands in pockets, brow furrowed. 'The question is, should I? Do I want to risk taking two perfectly sound lives and wrecking them.'

'You didn't wreck us,' Jarrat said quietly, and was answered with a smile.

'Special case. Emergency.' Harry sighed. 'You two were already in love, though not yet lovers.' He frowned at Dupre. 'I'm dead against the

rest of it, Bill. The risks are terrible. I told Jarrat before I did it to them, if he didn't put an exceptionally high price on Stone's life, he'd end by killing him to be free of him. Friendship can turn to hate like that.' He snapped his fingers. 'Living with another person under your skin could become a nightmare.'

'Unless you loved the other person,' Stone added.

'Right.' Harry arched a brow at Dupre. 'I'll make Intelligence a deal. Bring me partners who are committed, handfasted or at least long-time lovers, and I'll try. Otherwise, forget it. You think I want to be responsible for driving people to violence, murder or suicide?'

'You told McKinnen empaths are the most stable people,' Dupre said slowly.

'I said,' Del corrected, '*many* empaths, who are in touch with their emotions, are stable! Jarrat and Stone are in touch, in control and in love. That is their stability. And even in their case I was damned reluctant to do it.'

Dupre toyed with a pen though his eyes were on the field agents. 'All right. You'll place yourselves under Dr Del's care. A few days' rest, first.'

'Then we're on assignment?' Jarrat was on his feet.

'Don't be so puppy-dog eager,' Dupre chuckled. 'A month ago, before you arrived, I told you there's a job coming up that's a ball breaker. This is it, and I don't envy you. I'll fix you a ride with Starfleet that'll get you to Zeus a few days after the carrier. You'll have the chance to study the background documentation en route. The short version you saw last night is superficial.' He waved them away. 'Go. Doctor's orders. Sleep! I'll buzz you when your flight is due.'

Eager to breathe free air, Stone was out of the office before Jarrat and Del, and did not stop till he was on the fifth floor balcony. The view over Venice to the spaceport was impressive. Ships left hourly; soon he and Jarrat would be aboard one of them.

The tropical air was sultry, the sky overcast. A storm was coming in from the south. As Jarrat's arm circled his waist Stone began to relax, and he looked back to find Harry regarding them with a curious expression.

'You'll make it work,' Del said in answer to Stone's unspoken question. 'I've no doubt of that. Bill wants Cantrell to keep an eye on you — fine. Don't resent the man's concern. It's genuine. But you won't make a balls-up of your job.'

'Thanks.' Jarrat looked out over the city. 'When will you be going home?'

'I've a few weeks' work left here,' Harry mused. 'They might find me some lovers like yourselves to work with, but I'll try to axe the experiment before it starts ... it stinks.' He shrugged off the introspective mood. 'I'm

more interested in working with the Narcotics division. The devil's claw concoction of mine, which we used to buy you time, Stoney, is being re-searched. It won't wean an addict off Angel, but it may prolong life, and improve the quality of life.' He sighed heavily. 'I'm hoping to do better. They also asked if I'd try to adjust the brain chemistry of a test subject to render him impervious to Angel, the same work I did for you. The object is to see if we can make it impossible for what happened to you to ever happen again.'

'That,' Jarrat said thoughtfully, 'sounds reasonable.'

'Perhaps.' Del sounded less than sure. 'The trouble is, I can make mistakes if I mess about with the chemistry of a healthy brain. Leave a man allergic to nitrogen, or perhaps he'll get drunk on water! Without the neural damage of Angel addiction to key on, I'm almost lost. Which means,' he added bleakly, 'if NARC wants to experiment, the subject will have to volunteer for addiction and then pray I can do my stuff.' He shuddered. 'I see the value of the research, but it frightens me. I don't know that I want the responsibility. I prefer to work with simple plant narcotics. I'm sure there's a substance somewhere that will counteract Angel.'

Stone slipped his arm firmly around Jarrat. 'If there's an answer, you'll find it,' he said tiredly. With relief came exhaustion, and many aches he had been only dimly aware of. Neither he nor Jarrat had slept more than a few hours at a stretch in weeks. Emotional stress, exertion and chemical loading took a heavy toll.

'I believe,' Harry said wryly, 'the colonel placed you under my supervision! Rest, he said. That was an order.'

An order which was easy to obey. Jarrat was already asleep when Stone stumbled into bed. He laid his cheek on the warm, hard plane of Kevin's shoulder and closed his eyes. The last he knew was the slight vibration through the frame of the vast building as a Starfleet lighter touched down on the roof far above.

The dreams came later.

He ran, but knew he would be caught. Shadowy shapes pinned him down with crushing weight. A capsule broke with a sharp plastic pop, and acrid golden dust filled his head and stole his thoughts.

Angel.

Horror rampaged through his mind. The drug was like sweet poison. Angeldeath awaited him — no one survived the one-way track into the nightmare. But first came the Angeldreams. Fantasies torn from the deepest realm of the subconscious were clothed in sensual flesh that seemed so real. Stone threshed as the bitter dust stung his nose, choked him, but even then the fantasies had stirred to life.

He saw Jarrat again, the focus of his dreams, now as before. The chim-

erical creature with Kevin's face rose from his memory: emerald skinned, winged, his body adorned in paint, gold, rings and chains, he deliberately seduced a man he loved. His beauty inveigled, beguiled, and Stone was lost once more. Engrossed in the golden dust he writhed, frenzied with the drug-induced, fantasy-driven lust which would rage as long as his body held out...

Angel.

The word crept into the midst of the phantasm and Stone recoiled from the incubus he had created. It wore Jarrat's face and body but it was not Kevin. Lips curled back over razor-like fangs, talons ripped his skin as the carnal dream became horror at the mention of a word.

Now he fought, but knew he could not win. Angel was a disease. Some reasoning part of his mind knew it for what it was. A synthetic, a narcotic designed in the lab, so powerful and seductive that it had built empires, and torn them down.

Angeldreams were the kind a man would die for: he might swim in diamond, hear the song of the stars, master the sky with the power of living flight. Rampant with sexual energy, lord of every scene, he commanded any lover his imagination could conjure. No act was impossible, sensuality was infinite.

Until he was so rotten with the drug and the physical punishment wreaked upon his helpless, overworked body, his existence could not be called living. The only escape was death. Stone fought like a madman as the agonies of withdrawal assaulted him. He could inhale another draught of poison, flee into the dreams, one step closer his end. Or he could die here, tonight, in torment.

He was disgusting. Flying, out of his mind, his enslaved body fucked the floor or the bed in its senseless euphoria. He was a user. A rutting Angelhead. In the months to come, the addiction could only deepen, the dreams would fly his mind ever higher while the rest of him decayed. Horror at his own corruption nauseated him and he screamed, hoarse and helpless.

It was not the first time Jarrat had shaken him awake in the night and held him tightly enough to bruise. He gasped air to the bottom of his lungs, buried his face in Jarrat's chest and inhaled the clean, male scent. This Jarrat was living, real and alive, not the beguiling Angel illusion.

'I've got you. You're all right, love.' Kevin was still only half awake, his voice slurred with sleep, trembling with reaction to Stone's terror, which had invaded his own sleeping mind. Strong arms held on tight. 'Same dream?'

'Yeah.' Stone fought off the last clinging tendrils of the nightmare. 'Christ, I'm sorry.' He sat up, chest heaving, skin slick with an icy sweat.

Jarrat stroked his back as they both got their breath back. 'You ought to tell Harry. He'd be able to do something.'

'He's on a NARC research contract now,' Stone said shakily. 'He'd have to report this crap I keep dreaming to Dupre. You want me in a psyche clinic?'

'No.' Jarrat caught him by the shoulders and pulled him down. 'Come here. Tell me about it.'

'Told you last time. It never changes.' Stone lay against him and struggled to control the leftover shivering. Jarrat's mouth covered his and he felt a little warmth seep back into his bones.

'Tell me how to help,' Jarrat whispered. 'Is it like what you did for that kid you picked up, Rikki Mitchell? Is it booze, a meal, sex, you need?'

'I'm not craving. I'm not an addict anymore,' Stone said gently. 'Harry saw to that.'

'Then tell me what to do.' Jarrat's fingers tightened.

'You're doing it.' Stone pulled the sheet over their heads. 'Just don't let go. It's rich, isn't it? Let go of me in the night, and the bogie man grabs me and stuffs my nose with that shit. And I try not to breathe it, but —'

'Stoney.' Jarrat's mouth silenced him. 'You're the only man who ever came back from Angel addiction. That makes you one of a kind. No one else ever lived out what you're going through to know what it's like. The alternative was a slab in the morgue!' He gave Stone a shake. 'Tough it out, try counting your bloody blessings. You have to be alive to feel like hell.'

For the first time Stone glimpsed the absurd privilege of the nightmare. It should have been ridiculous to be grateful for the terror and disgust which assaulted him one night in three, but Jarrat was right. He was alive, and if the price of his life was a cold sweat, broken sleep, it was cheap.

He settled gratefully into Jarrat's embrace and closed his eyes. 'I'm okay now. You can let go.'

'I could,' Jarrat muffled against his neck. 'But I'm not going to. Shut up and get some rest.'

'Romantic,' Stone accused groggily, but Jarrat was already past hearing. Stone banished the dream with an effort of will. He set his head back on Kevin's shoulder and closed his eyes.

This time his sleep was peaceful.

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