

MEL KEEGAN

NARC

3.5



STOP OVER

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**Narc #3.5**  
**STOPOVER**  
**Mel Keegan**

**DreamCraft, South Australia**

STOPOVER

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**STOPOVER**



# 1

In the moments before waking, the brain tried to integrate the sounds of reality into its own dreamscape, and to a point it succeeded. Jerry Stone felt weightless, floating in the cold, clear water of the Hudson River while his eyes followed an arrowhead flight of geese over the south ramparts of the Kernaghan Range, where the aspen and birch were already becoming gold with the season. He knew Jarrat was an arm's length off to his left, messing with the line which hitched the boat to a gnarled old log beneath the surface. They were naked, sun-brown after three days in this retreat, and the only thing in the boat should have been the cooler chest full of beers and char-grilled bug-tails.

The comm buzzed, and Stone cast about for it. Jarrat angled an accusing look at him — as if either of them would be guilty of bringing a comset into the precious realm of their downtime. If it was there, it would surely intrude. Stone flicked a handful of water at him in reproach, but the comm that should not have been there buzzed again.

“You know it has to be Bill Dupre,” Jarrat muttered disgustedly.

“Ignore it.” Stone reached over, caught him up and dumped him into the water, where the surface layer was warm and the bottom was icy enough to take his breath away.



“Ignore it?” Jarrat surfaced, shook the water from his eyes and raked back his hair. “You want to be skinned alive?”

“I want to be left alone,” Stone argued.

“Shouldn’t have brought a comset, then.” Ignoring Stone’s protests of innocence, Jarrat reached over into the boat and rummaged for it. He slid the clip over his ear and flicked the selector. “Jarrat. And this had better be bloody good.”

The comm buzzed a third time, and the Hudson River dissolved into mist. The last Stone saw of the scene was the faint rime of ‘termination dust’ above the treeline on the high slopes of the Kernaghans, before reality froze, tilted, righted itself, and he gave an eloquent groan.

Jarrat’s voice was muffled against the pillow. “We’re on vacation. Go back to sleep.”

But Stone was awake now, and worked an elbow under himself. Over Jarrat’s shoulder he saw the half-dimmed screen in the corner of the cabin, a designer-framed comm relay terminal where a bare fraction of the ship’s in-flight data was displayed when the CRT was not pretending to be a picture.

The *Pacifica* was still eighteen hours short of Rethan, which Stone had expected to see; but the display numbers had shifted into blue. While they slept, the clipper had quit her hyperflight envelope. The drive had powered down, she was cruising on inertia at seventy percent of lightspeed, yet to Stone’s knowledge there were no ports out here, no reason to drop the ship out of hyper.

This time he saw the red glow from the comm as it buzzed. His nerve endings prickled as he reached over and punched for voice-only. “Stone.”

The tingle of his nerves woke Jarrat faster than a kick in the ribs. Their empathic shields were always relaxed when they slept, and since they left the *Athena* two days before, they had not troubled to maintain them. Free time was their only opportunity for the indulgence, and it was rare indeed.

The cabin lights came up a few degrees as they moved. “Trouble?” Jarrat turned over toward Stone. The slate gray eyes were still sleep dark, but every reflex was coming online. “Here? You’re kidding.”

As he spoke, the comm said sharply, “Did I wake you?” Yvette McKinnen had obviously not been sleeping.

“Of course you did,” Stone told her. “The clipper’s out of hyper.”

“You notice that?” McKinnen skipped a beat and the Paris accent thickened. “I thought you’d appreciate a head’s-up. You might want to watch yourselves while I dust off my NARC ID and call Flight, find out what’s wrong ... if it’s trouble, *I* won’t be the target.”

She made a good point. McKinnen had spent her whole career ‘buried’ in R&D, which meant her face was unknown on the street. But it was far from impossible that Jarrat or Stone himself had been recognized as they came aboard.

Without a word, Jarrat leaned over, halfway out of the bed, and slid his hand into the bottom drawer. A pair of discreet palm guns were in the back, with the wallets, visas for Rethan — and the ID which would pass command of this clipper into their hands, if the situation demanded it. Stone took one of the guns from him and groped for the slacks he had dumped by the bed four hours ago. Jarrat had thrown back the sheet and was swiftly sorting jeans from sneakers.

Security was supposed to be better than this, and Stone grumbled soundlessly as he checked the gun. It weighed just over one hundred grams, fully loaded with forty drug-tipped darts and a capsule of compressed gas. It would not be his choice of weapon, he admitted, if they had been recognized; but these tiny guns were perfectly suited to such a confrontation. There was no safe direction in which to shoot, with delicate systems behind every panel and the clipper’s unarmored civilian hull all around, and vulnerable.

Still, no confrontation should ever have happened. NARC security had screened both the crew and passenger lists before Jarrat and Stone were booked on the *Pacifica*, through to Rethan. No flags went up, no questions were asked: Cygnus was satisfied with its own security, and the NARC database came up blank.

The empathic shields were still mostly down, and the flare of Jarrat’s swift anger shimmered in Stone’s own nerves, so familiar, the sensation might have been his own. He reached over and set his flat palm on Jarrat’s spine. “It could be nothing. Let McKinnen call Flight. They’re aware they have NARC personnel aboard.”

Two Gold Ravens, a medic and a tech from Budweisser's department on the *Athena* were headed back to Darwin's World, via the cities of Chell and Elysium. Jarrat and Stone would spend seven days on the island of Tarataga, on Rethan's northern tropic, and then they were on the *Cygnus Stardust*, back to Venice. The carrier would be drydocked for maintenance in her base port four days ahead of them, while Yvette McKinnen was booked right through to Earth. She was going home — Paris itself, where the suburbs of the ancient city sprawled over the horizon in every direction and NARC funded several labs in the cyber sector.

A small part of Jarrat's quicksilver annoyance settled, and Stone let him slip away. He swung his legs off the bed, slid them into the black denims and hit the comm. "McKinnen." No answer. "Mac!" The line remained silent, and Jarrat zipped the jeans. "Christ, I don't believe this." He slid the gun into his belt, snug in the curve of his spine, and snatched up a shirt to conceal it. The linen was as garish as anything from Harry Del's closet, better suited to white beaches and room service with an ocean view. It hung loosely from Jarrat's wide shoulders as he flattened out against the panel beside the door and palmed the lock to 'open.'

If there was going to be trouble, they were better out than in. The cabin had assumed every characteristic of a cage. Stone was out of the bed, slacks in one hand, shoes in the other, when the comm buzzed.

"Stand down," McKinnen said tersely. "Get some sleep."

The fist that had been clenched in Jarrat's belly relaxed. Stone felt it as clearly as the adrenaline-prickle of his own skin — and he saw Jarrat shiver faintly as his own nerves registered the prickle. The fight-or-flight reflex was powerful. Sleep was the furthest thought from Stone's mind.

"So why are we out of hyper?" Jarrat was asking.

"Drive trouble," McKinnen told him. "Flight tells me it's 'nothing serious,' but you know what that means."

It could mean anything from a five-minute fix while the techs from Murchison worked on some errant component, to sixteen hours dead in space here, waiting for a salvage tug and a tow to the nearest dockyard. Stone tossed the gun onto the pillow and pulled both hands over his face. Their downtime was wasting fast.

“The Auriga-4 engine,” McKinnen’s voice said acidly, “is a piece of crap. I don’t know why Cygnus still operates them. Probably because they’re too parsimonious to upgrade.”

The carriers, NARC, Army and Starfleet, ran the Auriga-9, which had a reliability the civilian models could only envy. Cygnus was careful to the point of paranoia, and the manufacturer, Murchison Aerotech, was still haunted by the ghost of the *Adelle Challenger*. It was decades since a ship had been lost in a drive ignition accident, but only fools took chances, especially with engine systems as underpowered and delicately balanced as those in civilian service. The *Adelle* was an asteroid miner, an industrial exploration vessel out of Chryse, Mars; and in one blast of stellar proportions she was gone, and two hundred souls with her.

“How long is this going to take?” Jarrat asked in a resigned tone with an edge of acid.

“Not long. We got lucky for once.” McKinnen actually chuckled. “There’s an engineer’s tractor, civilian operation, maybe three hours away. They just finished up a scheduled job at Beacon 288, and they’re going to tow us into Sheckley for a fix. Flight Control estimates eight, maybe twelve hours in dock, and we’re good to go.”

“Sheckley?” Stone’s ears pricked.

“Oh, that’s just sweet,” Jarrat growled. “We have a date with the *Stardust*, shoving off from the port of Chell in seven days from right now, and we just traded a half day on Tarataga for a stopover in the most aromatic armpit of space.”

“Sheckley,” Stone repeated, under the comm’s audio pickup. “That’s your old stomping ground.”

Jarrat gave him a dark look. “Okay, Mac,” he said to the comm, “thanks for the heads-up. We appreciate it. Where are you?”

“In the casino with the Gold Ravens,” she told him, “nursing the best hand I’ve held in years. Get some sleep.”

The line had gone dead when Jarrat said, “Fat chance. Sleep on top of a shot of adrenaline? The woman spends way too much time with machines.”

“The woman *is* a machine,” Stone corrected. He tossed the palm gun back into Jarrat’s hand, watched him drop the matched pair back into the drawer, and gave the bed a glare. “You want to go play

poker?” In fact, the adrenaline had hit Jarrat in every fiber. Stone knew exactly what he wanted.

Very deliberately, Jarrat shrugged out of the gaudy shirt and zipped down the jeans. “I could make you a better offer.”

He was in fine condition, lean and hard. Stone let his eyes feast for a moment, and then dropped the slacks and hit the bed. The mattress was still bouncing when Jarrat pounced, straddling him, and Stone looked up at him in the soft sidelight from the lamp. “Sheckley, goddamn it,” he muttered, and sank his teeth into Stone’s shoulder, hard enough to leave a transient brand.

“You were born there.” Stone palmed his buttocks and pulled him in tight.

“Not born there, but I grew up there. I also got out, soon as I was old enough to enlist,” Jarrat reminded. “It’s the ass-end of the universe, Stoney. You don’t want to waste time with it.”

“Still ... your old hunting ground.” Stone lifted his knees to cushion Jarrat’s back. The weight on him was welcome, the press of skin on skin was delicious, and the empathy resonated like bell-chimes in a breeze. Stone’s eyes slitted as Jarrat’s teeth closed on his nipple. Every sensation was long-familiar now, yet the rainbow-spectrum of response in his nerves shattered into delight, still fresh as a rain shower.

Then the tousled head lifted and Kevin gave him a suspicious look. “You actually *want* the ten-credit tour?”

“Never stopped by Sheckley before,” Stone said easily. “Never expect to again ... eight hours to kill, kid. Maybe twelve. You heard the lady.”

“I heard.” Jarrat sat up, and both his hands were busy between them, full and working. The empathy flared, hot and so fast, Stone could barely breathe. He knotted his fingers into Jarrat’s hair to pull him down, buy himself some time to think, and Jarrat breathed against his ear, “The ten-credit tour. The watering holes, the make-out places where sixteen-year-olds disappear to get laid in peace, and the cranies where kids half their age can hide and watch Sheckley’s third-rate idea of Companions strip down and do their stuff.”

In that moment Sheckley was so far from Stone’s mind, it might not have existed at all. Muscles bunched as he rolled Jarrat over,

pinned him to the mattress, and the long legs scissored about him. His mouth silenced Jarrat with a kiss that began hard and deepened as they began to rock together. Kevin's arms wound around him, held him to the task he had set himself, and Stone shivered with a surge of excitement. Jarrat felt it too, and his back arched, almost lifting Stone bodily. They shared a deep groan and Stone's mouth closed on Jarrat's neck, tasting the salt of fresh sweat over the heavy beat of his pulse.

The empathy fed on itself, and Stone searched for any fragment of reality as his mind spun away. Better than Angeldreams, he thought minutes later as he sprawled into the pillows and drank in the mirrored sensations of possession and surrender. Jarrat was big in him, too wound-up to be still even for a moment, and through his nerves Stone felt the sublime push and pull, as surely as the almost overwhelming sensations which commanded his own body. He embraced the empathy completely, where once he had been afraid of it, and not for the first time he wondered if he were addicted all over again. Hooked, now, on *this*, and on Kevin Jarrat. If he were, it was a magnificent way to go.

# 2

There was no sign of McKinnen. The two Gold Ravens were lounging in the bar adjacent to the docking rings, and Jarrat guessed they had not slept. They were Brad Cooper, Gold Raven 4, and Ron Yu, Gold Raven 9. Both had been injured in the firefight in the warrens under Inquanoc, and they were ordered to four weeks' rest and rehabilitation before they returned to their unit. Kip Reardon might have kept them on light duties on the *Athena*, but Cooper was due leave in any case, and Yu had a five-week-old son he had not yet seen. Their replacements had come out from Darwin's World by Starfleet courier, but the ride home was not priority.

The Ravens were in civvies, and so conspicuous among ordinary civilians, Jarrat had to smile. Like Gil Cronin and Joe Ramos, they towered even over Stone, and they far outmassed the dock techs who had secured the *Pacifica* minutes before. Other bar patrons looked sidelong at them, and whispered speculation would be lively. Army, or maybe Tactical? NARC? Stone was making his way back from the bar with a beer in either hand, and he stopped by the Ravens' table.

"You guys heading into Sheckley?" he asked of Cooper, whom he knew from some previous assignment. Jarrat knew neither of these

Ravens well. Ron Yu's assignment to the *Athena* had begun only after the Equinox bust.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Cooper observed disdainfully. He lifted a large pink gin in one massive chocolate-brown paw. "Got better things to do, Cap. Like getting some decent shuteye."

"And figuring out how we're gonna get even with Mac," Yu added. "Rule 77, Cap Stone: never play no stud poker with nobody who designs AIs for a living. It should be written into regulations somewhere."

"Amen," Cooper breathed.

Stone was still chuckling as he joined Jarrat, and handed him a schooner glass. The bar stocked mostly colonial beer, and Stone had ordered Suzuki. The light amber liquid froze Jarrat's throat as he swallowed, and he glanced back at the status board by the docking rings. Passengers were still not permitted to debark, and he made a face.

"What's the hold-up?" Stone wondered.

"Quarantine," Jarrat informed him tartly. "Like a fleapit checking visiting royalty for bugs. Wipe your feet on the way *out* of this place, mate."

"Good thing we've had our shots this year." Stone tried the beer and grimaced. "God, what is this stuff?"

"You ordered it." Jarrat drained the glass and set it on the nearest coaster. If there was any booze in it, he had not happened upon a molecule. "One good thing about Sheckley," he said philosophically, "they brew their own. And it's not bad."

"Microbrew?" Stone was interested.

"Green Goose." Jarrat stirred as the indicators on the status board shifted from red to amber and the docking rings rolled open with a deep, bass growl.

"Sounds like a nasty ailment." Stone set his own beer aside half full, and was a pace behind Jarrat as they headed off the clipper.

A blue-uniformed Cygnus steward ambushed them just inside the rings. He was Gene Cantrell's age, with a bored, fake smile and a belly which strained the pale blue tunic at the seams. "Your overnight passes for Sheckley, gentlemen, and vouchers for The Pavilion, compliments of Cygnus Lines. Please be back aboard within one hour



after you hear the boarding call. It'll be broadcast station-wide, but we regret, the ship can't wait for you."

"Understood." Jarrat slipped the plastex cards into the breast pocket of his denim shirt and angled a glance at Stone. "You sure about this?"

Stone gestured with the cards. "Vouchers for The Pavilion, on the company, who could resist?" They were a pace outside, in a sudden chill and the glare of harsh artificial light when he added, "What exactly *is* The Pavilion?"

"Oh, it's the happenin' place," Jarrat said dryly. "Meaning, if it happens at all on Sheckley, that's where it's likely to be." Five strides across the dock he stopped, thrust both hands into the pockets of his jeans, and permitted himself a small shudder. "I just broke a promise I made to myself fifteen years ago."

"You swore you'd never come back to this neck of this particular wood?" Stone guessed as he zipped his brown leather jacket to his throat. "Damn, they keep it cold here."

"When you're born and bred in this dump, you don't notice it," Jarrat said darkly. "It's also damp in here. The whole place is humid, all of it, all the time. It's easier to tolerate when it's cold."

He was moving then, with Stone on his heels. Without hesitation, he strode right by the signage warning visitors to 'remain on the marked trails.' Not far behind those signs, the lights cut from a garish blast of photons which sizzled the irises to a dimness to which a man had to give himself time to adjust.

They had just stepped off the rink. The two-kilometer 'tocamac' girdled the entire colony, and once, many decades before, ten colony ships might have been docked there at one time. Now, Sheckley was servicing a single ore hauler which had berthed on the other side of the station from the *Pacifica*, and the moment a visitor stepped off the rink, the lights were out and the damp cold began to prickle the sinuses.

From space Sheckley looked like a big minor planet, overgrown with antennae, the porcupine spines of aeriels and comm arrays, the curious phallic protrusions of fueling booms and gantries. It had the mass to command almost one tenth gravity; its Earth-normal gravity was generated by big Arago units buried in the core, and any warmth

one perceived was pumped in, circulated via conduit from the cooling ducts under the reactor housings.

“They spent over a year hollowing out the planet,” Jarrat said over his shoulder as he and Stone ducked to pass under a rank of pipes, each a meter in diameter. “They’d have terraformed the surface if Sheckley’s orbit took it closer to the sun, but you saw for yourself on the way in. She’s too far out to rationalize the work.”

“She’s also the only usable body in this system,” Stone added. “I took a look at the system plot. Two gas giants and field of ice rubble further out, three heavy asteroids in captured rotation, close in and molten, and maybe eight or ten chunks of rock like this one, orbiting between.”

“Out of which,” Jarrat finished, “*this* one has the most stable orbit and the highest natural gravity field. For what that’s worth.” He came to a halt at the head of a deep, ringing steel stepway. “Hang onto your lunch and look down.” Stone’s curiosity shimmered under his skin, but for himself Jarrat was aware of odd feelings, down deep, as if currents were moving in a dark ocean he had not thought of in so long, it might not have been there.

He had forgotten the *smell* of Sheckley. It made the hair rise on the nape of his neck, and his belly tightened. The air was sharp with the tangs of steel, iron oxide, mildew, and the taints of so many chemicals, they blended into a single new aroma. The olfactory sense was a powerful trigger to memory, and scenes Jarrat had not replayed since he was a child sprang out of the recesses of his mind. He seemed to hear the voice of a friend yelling his name, feel the touch of a lover’s hand in the darkness, see the dance of neon around the dens on the rink long past midnight, when hospice kids were supposed to be grounded by the curfew, but many, like himself, were out hunting.

He hauled himself physically away from the memories as Stone peered over into the abyss. “What’s down there?”

“The reactors are right at the bottom. Service spaces above, and right under your feet, the water tanks. Under them, the fuel tanks have eight times the capacity of the water tanks, but most of them are empty. This place doesn’t refuel the rimrunners anymore, and the colony ships don’t pass by. But they used to call us a ‘gas can with lights’.”

Stone's eyes were on him, reflecting the guide lights which marked out the structures in the abyss. "You okay? I didn't think coming back would bother you."

"It doesn't."

"Bullshit," Stone said quietly. "I guess the whole place is full of ghosts."

"More than you know," Jarrat admitted.

"Tell me?" Stone invited, but Jarrat would say nothing. Stone's hands closed on the metal of a service ladder leading over the side. "Do we climb down?"

"Two levels, then look for the gantry on your left." Jarrat gestured, apparently into thin air. "Something I want to show you."

"If it's still there." Stone turned and with his right foot, felt for the first step. "It's been a long time, Kevin. Fifteen years has to make a difference."

"Not here," Jarrat said cynically. "Nothing changes here, not unless it's made to. There's no weather, no environment, no ecosystem, unless you want to talk about the weird blue-green algae that blooms on the walls under the heating pipes. You don't smell it? Stinks like a pond."

"I smell it," Stone's voice said from two meters below the platform where Jarrat waited. "I can see the gantry. I go left?"

"Yeah, and then wait for me. It's easy to get turned around in here," Jarrat warned, "and there's a lot of dangerous places."

The memories were back, mocking him as he climbed over onto the steps. They were as flimsy as he remembered, without even the benefit of guide lights. The next lights were on the gantry, thirty meters below, and then nothing for two hundred meters, before the service catwalks above the reactor housings. The chill air was constantly moving with the breeze that wandered the whole station. From place to place it would smell of steel and rust, sometimes of spilt fuel or hot jet exhaust, or the pond reek of the algae. Here in the core, all those smells fused into one which in Jarrat's mind was just *Sheckley*.

The guide lights marking out the gantry were mint green for the horizontal formers, blue for the verticals, and hazard points blipped blood red. Stone was waiting for him, his face outlined weirdly in the green and blue, his eyes full of the witchfires of the hazard markers.

“Something you wanted to show me? Here?” He cast about. “I don’t see anything but girders, conduit, pressure valves ... and thin air, with one hell of a long way to fall.”

“You just haven’t been here long enough.” Jarrat gave him a wink, dropped a kiss on the side of his neck as he pushed by on the gantry, and struck out into the airy darkness. “This catwalk circles the whole rink. *The Pacifica*’s docked about twenty meters above us. There’s service ways, crawl spaces, machine bunkers, coolant pipes, air vents, fuel lines, fiberoptic conduits, like an ants’ nest under the docks. Anything goes wrong with the guts of the machinery, this is where you get in and fix it. And because there’s fuel tanks and two-meter flex-hoses feeding the umbilicals up top, you’ve got hard-points.”

“Blast shelters?” Stone’s voice called from a little way behind.

Sound was weird, distorted, bouncing off close surfaces and lost in the massive emptiness of the core. Stone could have been a half kilometer away. Reflexively, Jarrat glanced back over his shoulder. In fact, Stone was a few paces away. He had paused to look over the side, into the almost uterine darkness. Their eyes had fully adjusted by now, and his peripheral vision could pick up the dull red glow issuing from the structures around the reactor housings.

Industrial drones worked there, in hellish recesses, radioactive and acidic. Few humans ever ventured there, and then only in armor to do work that was outside the scope of robots. If anyone fell from these gantries, little would remain to be salvaged for the funeral. More often than not, there was no retrieval. An accident marker would be welded to the gantry, and for a while someone would come by with silk flowers or candles, before they set grief aside and moved on.

“Better than blast shelters,” Jarrat said as he slowed and began to search the darkness for a pattern of lights, head-high, in the steel-and-plascrete wall. “Now, where is it? You know, I think I passed it already. Everything’s a lot smaller than I recall. And dimmer,” he added as he turned back toward Stone. “And colder.”

“Damned cold,” Stone agreed. “Is the whole station like this?”

“It has its bright lights,” Jarrat said, preoccupied as he searched. “A few dens. Danceshops, sexshops, clubs, the dorms, the ’burbs, the mall ... and The Pavilion. Ah, here it is.”

A sequence of marker lights, three green, three blue, one dim red, and a bar beneath them, recessed into a panel. Stone was at his shoulder as Jarrat hit the bar with the side of his fist. A shush of moving air, a sudden smell of old electronics, a growl of machinery, and the door ground open. Emergency lights glowed in the chamber, and Jarrat stepped inside, into a three-meter-by-three space he had never quite forgotten.

“Blast shelter,” Stone observed, “nuke-proof, airtight. Supplies?”

“Rations, water, air, for four days.” Jarrat surveyed the chamber with an odd feeling, and wondered what was on his face. “They figured, if they hadn’t dug you out by then, there’d be nobody left to come looking. Accidents happen, way too often. Luckily, the big ships don’t try for a drive ignition sequence until they’re rubbing shoulders with the gas giants, but there were some fueling accidents when I was a kid. Busted lines, ruptured tanks, a few toxic spills, chemistry that’d flay the flesh off your bones. These bunkers are actually for the techs working the rink, and they’re not code-locked, because anyone on the station might need fast access. You might not have time to mess about, trying to key in a code with fingers that are burned off while your lungs are being stripped. And there isn’t a kid on Sheckley who doesn’t know where they are. See?” He nodded at the corner of the chamber. “A bunk, a blanket, a medkit.”

Stone cocked his head curiously at his partner. “You came here?”

And Jarrat nodded while he focused on Stone, refusing to let the memories overpower him. “I’d come here to do a little fizz, when I could get my hands on it. Nothing heavy, you understand, but ... anything to get away from reality for a while.” He worked his shoulders to loosen the tension that was creeping up on him. “I’d come here when I was beat up, use the medkit, get myself squared away before I went back.”

“To the hospice?” Stone asked softly.

“They got all bent out of shape if they thought you’d been fighting.” Jarrat shook his head over the memory. “They figured a bloody nose or a black eye or a busted arm meant you’d been running with the gangs.”

“And were you?” Stone sat on the end of the bunk and frowned up at him.

“Me? No. But some of the others did, and you could also get beat up for *not* running with the bastards. Some of the big kids took it as a personal insult. Look, here.” Jarrat lifted the boxes of rations and flasks out of the corner opposite the bunk, and beckoned Stone to see. The plascrete there was marked, gouged with the tip of a knife. Two sets of initials were inscribed into the wall. KJ and BI. “I used to come here with some other kids,” Jarrat said, bemused by his own wilful memory. “Barry Ingram and a girl ... whose name I can’t even remember. She was older than me, bigger, taller. Not that you’d have known she was a girl, till she dropped the cammo fatigues and kicked off the cockroach-crusher boots. She was the first girl I was ever with. About three weeks before she signed an Army enlistment contract and shipped out on a troop transport.”

“Now, where have I heard that before?” Stone held out his hand; Jarrat took it. “How old were you?”

“Twelve, thirteen,” Jarrat hazarded. “Barry liked her a lot. He was only a year older than me. Said he was waiting for her to come back, and maybe they’d leave Sheckley together.”

He said no more, and after a long silence Stone prompted, “And then...?”

Jarrat stirred with an effort. “She came back in a box, killed in action, in the bust-up on Kelso Prime. Cremated with honors, name up on the boards in the Hall of Fame. A lot of Sheckley kids are there. I was almost one of them, three or four times ... Sheal, you know?” He reached out with one fingertip, tracing the initials he had carved into the plascrete almost two decades before. “Then it was just Barry and me, and we had some good times. Humped each other a lot, drank some very good pilfered beer, until —”

He could not say it, and did not have to. “Until Barry Ingram became an Angel statistic,” Stone guessed.

“Yeah.” Jarrat heard the roughness of his own voice. “It stinks, Stoney. But he wasn’t the only one. There were a lot like him.”

“But not you,” Stone added. “You stayed the hell out of it, away from the gangs, and the Angel, and off the rink, till you were old enough to enlist. You survived, Sheckley and the Army. I know all about the war on Sheal.”

“I survived,” Jarrat echoed. “But the truth is, Barry Ingram’s the

reason you and I are together right now. I watched him die by inches. I had a ringside seat at the whole event, from the first snort of that pig-shit to the seizure that took him, two years later. I was sixteen when they cremated him. I was the only one who showed up at the service. I was six months too young to enlist, but not too young to get offers up on the rink, if you follow me.”

Stone could guess. “You might have had a ride out of this dump, as a Companion. One of the clippers would have taken you on, and if not, you could have been out on a freighter.”

“As a boytoy,” Jarrat snorted. “God, what a career that would have been!” And then he laughed, though it was a short, acid sound. “You might have visited Randolph Dorne’s sky palace that night during the Equinox bust, and seen me in the courtyard there, with Jesse and the others, covered in platinum jewelry and body paint.”

“If I had,” Stone said dryly, “I couldn’t have afforded you.” He pulled Jarrat into an embrace, hugged him hard, and Jarrat was grateful for it. “Come on, Kevin, let’s get the hell out. It’s just depressing you.”

But though Jarrat was pleased to leave, he would have argued that the ‘ten-credit tour’ had depressed him. It *reminded* him, he thought. It made him take stock of who he was now, and how far he had traveled. Made him reevaluate what he had, and appreciate it a little more.

He took the long way back to the rink, showing Stone many nooks and crannies of Sheckley which visitors never saw. Places where the deck vibrated constantly with the grunts and clamor of heavy machinery, and where the maze of the halfway station seemed to ravel into knots in which a man could be lost, abandoned, forgotten. He would soon perish in the damp, blue-steel cold.

The lights of the rink were welcome to them both as he led the way back to a service chute. He kicked open the grille, dropped two meters onto the deck and stepped aside to make way for Stone. The *Pacifica* was docked two hundred meters away, around the curvature in the tocamac. No one saw them drop out of the chute, just as they had been unobserved heading into the labyrinth behind the warning signs.

“So ends the tour,” Jarrat said acerbically, deftly refitting the grille

while Stone's eyes struggled to adjust to the harsh dock lights. "Anything else you want to see?"

"Taste, maybe," Stone allowed. He lifted a hand to shade his irises and squinted ruefully at Jarrat. "Green Goose."

"The Pavilion," Jarrat groaned.

"Vouchers," Stone said, rummaging through his pocket for the cards, "compliments of Cygnus Lines. Very gracious of them. These have to be good for a free beer, if nothing else."

"Green Goose." Jarrat pointed him in the direction of the passenger elevators, beside which were a ragged assortment of posters for holoshows, live theater, masseurs and masseuses, Companions of every gender and description. Only one poster was animated. Out of it, an androgynous dancer in flesh-toned skinthins smiled coyly over his or her shoulder, and one kohl-rimmed eye winked while a scarlet neon logo painted itself across the dancer's shapely backside: *The Pavilion*. "Like you said, it's lucky," Jarrat remarked as the elevator opened and they stepped into the car, "we already had our shots this year."



# 3

In many ways Stone was impressed; in others, he was appalled. Sheckley was a testament to the indomitable spirit of the pioneers. In the decades when the colonies were opened up by sleeper ship, this halfway station was a critical link in a human chain stretching from Earth and Mars out to Darwin's, Rethan, Avalon, Sheal and beyond. It exceeded the merely spartan; it was purely functional. Sheckley had never been designed for beauty, pleasure, or even long-term habitation.

The engineers who shelled out the planetoid would have been shocked to learn how generations of humans had made their homes here of necessity — stranded in a place where work and education were hard to get, unable to move on or go home, making babies and raising families in the dormer 'burbs' between the rink, the mall and 'upstairs,' where they could enjoy Sheckley's single luxury, so long as they did not stay more than two hours.

Between the cooling vents from the core and the deep space comm arrays was Cayman Park, an armorglass dome just over a quarter kilometer across. Shrubs and trees from Darwin's and Rethan grew there; grasses from Sheal, and a few exotic plants which were

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