

SLEEPER

He jerked awake with a start. A sheen of perspiration glistened on his brow; his heart hammered in his chest. He sat up and tried to calm his breathing that came in ragged gasps. He focused on the familiar walls of the tent, his home for the past two years. Inside his head he still heard the resounding echo of the voice that called him to his duty.

"Citizen: ID Zeta 00666. Activate sleeper program."

His body tingled peculiarly when the activated DNA cells were released in his blood stream. They had remained dormant in his brain for decades. Triumph painted a wide grin on his face as the full force of what just happened sank in. Finally, after all this time they needed him - they called upon him to do what he'd been trained for.

He glanced over at the sleeping form beside him. He wondered if she had noticed his unrest. But she slept peacefully, her hair spread out across the pillow. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth; she was dreaming happily. A fleeting pang of regret clenched his heart for a moment. He'd genuinely come to like her. But duty called; and he would answer.

He recalled the time, years ago, when they first came to him. He'd been a young man then, full of ideals and grand ideas. Their plans for mankind's future appealed to him; he firmly believed they were humanity's last hope. So when they asked him to be their agent he said 'yes' wholeheartedly and without a moment's hesitation. Oh, the bitter disappointment when, once he completed his training, he was told they didn't need him right away.

"Do you know what a sleeper is?" Donnell, his handler at the time, had asked him. When he expressed his ignorance the handler explained.

"A sleeper," he said, "is a dormant agent. Someone who establishes a regular live as an inoffensive citizen and to all outward appearance is an every day kinda guy. We will create a personality and provide you with a past. We'll teach you the skills for your daily occupation. And when we need you, you'll be contacted."

And so they said, so it was done. They implanted a small capsule with genetically manipulated cells in his brain. They told him that, once activated, the cells would help him, adding to his natural smarts. He had lived the life they created for him for long years now. And it was a very credible life. Even Devon Adair's extensive background checks hadn't been able to dig up anything out of the ordinary in his past.

He crawled out of the tent. A soft glow on the horizon heralded the new day that was about to break. He stretched and surveyed the camp. It lay in a small hollow; thickly forested hills loomed on all sides. The camp was still quiet; only Walman was sitting near the glowing ashes of last night's fire, staring ahead and seemingly in deep thought.

He walked to the ATV and checked the batteries. When he found them fully charged he grinned. He threw in some supplies and jumped behind the wheel.

"Wait!" a voice called across the quiet camp. Devon Adair strode towards him, a determined look on her face. Despite the early hour she appeared wide-awake. "Where are you going?"

He sighed inwardly. The woman made a habit of sticking her nose where it didn't belong. He would be glad to be rid of her. And if he were right, it'd be sooner rather than later. Which suited him fine.

"Scouting," he replied. "I figured I'd check the way ahead, see if the vehicles can get through the woods." She blinked at him.

"Oh," was all she said. "Just take your Gear, okay?"

"Of course. Got it right here," he grinned and patted his pocket. Without a further word he gunned the ATV and drove off.

oOo

He activated the communications module and with a soft whoosh he found himself in the VR environment Julia Heller knew so well. The brightness momentarily seared his eyes until his vision adapted to the light. Blue shadows danced at the edges of his perception.

"Well, well, so this is the famous sleeper?" a melodic voice sang behind him. He spun around and gasped in surprise. A stunningly beautiful woman regarded him with a haughty look. Raven black hair brushed her shoulders; her pale white skin was without blemish. Her eyes were cold and unfathomable though.

Those cold eyes appraised him silently from top to toe. He was suddenly painfully aware of his unkempt appearance. The clothes that were torn and mended countless times. Of his hair that desperately needed a haircut. He scuffed self-consciously at the ground with the toe of his worn-out boot.

"I, uh, " he said but it came out as a croak. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"I expected Reilly here."

She laughed a mirthless laugh.

"Reilly? Reilly was a clown," she said. "Just look at the way he mishandled the Heller situation. He had his uses but," with a shrug she dismissed talk about the Council agent, "now we have *serious* business to attend to." He raised his eyebrows in question.

"What do you want me to do?" he eagerly asked for instructions. He was itching to start his work.

"You are close to New Pacifica," she said.

"Yes, only a few more weeks," he replied although it wasn't a question. "It took us a lot longer than we expected." She ignored him and continued as if he hadn't spoken at all.

"We cannot let Devon Adair and her group reach New Pacifica yet. Not until the Colony ship has landed and we are in control of the new settlement. Our agent Taggert and his son Max are on board. When the colonists arrive and Devon Adair isn't waiting for them he can take charge and set up the colony the way we see fit."

He nodded in understanding. He had experienced first hand what a strong willed woman Devon Adair was. Her constant meddling was a pain in the butt. He could only image what a troublesome opponent she'd be during a struggle for control over the Colony.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"You will delay the Advance crew. Use your imagination as to the means how, just make sure you do not arrive at New Pacifica before the Colony ship does."

Mentally he counted the days. Eden project was a couple of weeks away from reaching their destination. If all went well they'd have about a month to set up the beginnings of the new settlement before the Colony ship with the Syndrome families arrived. If he could delay the group just a bit... Slowly a large smile broke on his face and he beamed at the woman.

"I've some ideas... leave it to me," he grinned.

oOo

A very low-spirited group of tired travelers sat around their nightly campfire. The sky

overhead was clouded and the night was dark. A chill rose from the ground in barely visible vapors. The Council agent glimpsed furtively at their dejected faces and struggled to keep his own face serious and downcast. It was hard to keep the smug grin off his face; he was very pleased with himself. His plan worked out brilliantly; Eden project was stuck here in the woods. This should teach that Adair woman!

"Cursed," Baines muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear. He grabbed a branch and poked vehemently in the fire as if to underline his words. "We're cursed." Devon shot the man a sharp look and pulled her sweater closer around her shoulders. She shivered slightly.

"Don't talk nonsense," she snapped. "It's not possible."

"Then you explain it," another of the group said hotly. "The Rover's solar panels are broken, the remaining spare is gone, now the last of our food supplies has spoiled? And you're saying that's normal?"

The agent glanced up and noticed Devon searched around the fire for support but found none; Eden project averted their gaze. He was curious how Adair would talk herself out of this one.

Devon sighed. "The Rover's been known to break down countless times," she tried. "Danziger says it's a miracle it still runs at all. Maybe a Grendler sneaked into camp stealing the spare panel. And the food..." She hesitated. "Someone just forgot to seal the container properly."

"Whatever," Walman snorted. He glowered darkly at Devon. "You think you're so smart; you have an explanation for everything. I'm with Baines. Maybe there's another evil Terrian spirit around." A few of the travelers looked around uneasily.

The agent looked up at that. He raised his hand to his face to hide his smile. An evil Terrian, now there was a thought. Then he remembered his role and spoke up, scowling at Walman across the fire.

"Come on, Walman, Devon's right. A Grendler could have walked into camp easily. I remember you had the late watch last night. And you're not exactly famous for your watchfulness."

"Are you saying this is my fault?" Walman glared and stood up menacingly. Magus grabbed his arm and with an appeasing pat made him sit down again.

"Gentlemen," Yale admonished. "Finger pointing or fighting with each other won't solve

the problem at hand. New Pacifica is still weeks away and time does not stand still."

They were all quiet at the grim reminder that they were about to fail in their quest to reach New Pacifica before the Colony ship did. Success had seemed so close they could almost touch it. Now suddenly their luck turned.

"Well," Julia said as she stood up. "Since we're stuck here for a while I'm going to take the time to give everyone a medical. I'll start tomorrow." She turned and left to go to her tent.

oOo

"Devon, can I talk to you for a moment?" Julia Heller asked their leader. The morning shone bright and it was a beautiful spring day. The camp was quiet, half of the crew were out gathering berries and tubers to replace the spoiled food. Birds sang gaily in the trees surrounding the camp. Uly and True were running around yelling and laughing in their game of tag. The gloom of the adults over their streak of bad luck wasn't affecting the children's good mood.

"Sure, Julia, what's on your mind?"

"All the ahm... misfortunes happening lately," the doctor replied. "I don't believe it's all a coincidence." The agent perked up his ears and remained very silent. He was hidden from their view behind the DuneRail but could hear them perfectly.

"Oh, come on, Julia, you don't think we're cursed too, do you?" Devon cried.

"Of course I don't think we're cursed," the doctor snapped. "However, I am afraid." She lowered her voice to a mere whisper that he could barely make out. He crept closer to the two women, all the time keeping the vehicle between them to keep from sight.

"I'm afraid it's someone in the group," Julia said. "These events have 'Council' written all over them. They couldn't have tried harder to stop us, Devon. The bomb, the sabotage of the ship, now the 'Rover, the food ... Trust me, I'd recognize their hand anywhere."

Peering between the wheels he could see Devon's eyes widen at this unexpected suggestion.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She also kept her voice low but her consternation was loud in her tone. "You think there's another spy in the group? Like you were?" Devon looked hard at Julia as if she were trying to see into the doctor's soul.

Julia paled at the reference to her past. She gazed at the other woman for a full minute, her eyes fierce. Then she swallowed and continued to speak her mind.

"Yes, I do."

"Have you talked to anyone about this?" Devon asked her.

"No," Julia replied. "Not even Alonzo. I don't know anymore whom I can trust. I don't know why he or she waited so long to take action but..." She hesitated a moment. "I suspect they activated a sleeper agent. Perhaps the person doesn't even know."

He nearly laughed out loud at that and barely managed to keep still. Oh, he did know alright! And rejoiced in it. He couldn't wait to come forward and proclaim his real allegiances, his true loyalties. Tell that Adair woman what he *really* thought of her. Teach her and her bunch of crybabies to whom this planet truly belonged. He chuckled softly as he imagined their faces when they awoke to the facts.

"That's why I want to take DNA samples. A Council agent is bound to have enhanced chromosomes. Any changes in the DNA should show up," Julia's next words woke him from his daydreaming. He remembered the funny tingle he felt when they activated the program buried deep inside his brain. He knew about the DNA cells that were released inside his body. He couldn't let the doctor sample his blood! Cautiously he sneaked away.

oOo

"Our doctor, Julia Heller, suspects something," he told her. He was talking to the beautiful handler in the blue VR cubicle they always used for their meetings. "She wants to test everyone's DNA for changes."

The woman remained silent for a moment.

"Ah, yes," she said at last, "the troublesome doctor Heller. Your DNA probably won't give you away but you best try to evade her. And if she does find out about you, you take her out," she ordered coldly.

"Take her out?" he repeated. "You mean, kill her?" A shiver ran down his spine at the thought. Spying and a little sabotage was one thing, but murder?

"Of course not, you fool!" she raised her voice. "We want her alive. We still have a bone to pick with that sorry excuse for a Council agent."

She paused to get herself under control. Then she continued more calmly, "There's a

spider tunnel about a mile from your camp, on the other side of the southern hill. It's hidden in a grove of pine trees. You can't miss it. You take her there, put her in the flow. We'll be happy to take her off your hands."

oOo

"Please," Julia argued. Her eyes pleaded with him to do as she asked. They stood in the middle of the camp scowling at one another. The agent tried to evade Julia and her needles as long as possible but she finally accosted him right here in front of the Adair tent. He hoped Adair was occupied elsewhere.

"I've taken samples from everyone in camp. You're the last one. I need to know if the planet has affected your DNA. This knowledge may help find a cure for the Syndrome," she repeated the official explanation for the tests.

"I said I'm the same," he growled at her. "No need for medical check ups."

Devon Adair stuck her head out of her tent. She looked curiously at the two people glaring at each other.

"Having a problem?" she asked the doctor.

"Yes," Julia replied. Anger flared in her eyes but he detected a glimmer of fear hiding beneath the anger. "This oaf refuses to be tested."

"Really?" Devon regarded him coolly.

"There are 250 sick children arriving soon. The Terrians can't heal them all. You'll be tested the same as everyone else," she informed him. " Even if I have to get some of the men to hold you down. So what shall it be?"

With a sigh he relented. It was no use fighting Devon Adair when she got that determined glint in her eyes. He'd seen it countless times when she was dealing with stubborn group members. If he resisted, it would only make her suspicious.

He turned and bent his head. He simply had to take his chances with the doctor and deal with the consequences later. With a brisk motion Julia drew some spinal fluid from below the nape of his neck.

"Thank you," she said curtly.

For the next day he kept a close eye on Julia. And when she began to evade him and directed furtive glances in his direction when she thought he wasn't watching, he knew. He decided it was time to take action and do as he was told. She'd betrayed the Council. And with it betrayed everything he believed in all his life. Now she possessed knowledge that could wreck their plans all over again. No, when he thought about it, it was only fitting that the planet itself would help return her to them - so she could be held accountable for her deeds.

Before he could set his plans in motion Devon Adair approached him. Her face seemed set in stone, it was that serious. The small lines around her mouth were clearly visible as she pursed her lips tightly.

"I want to speak with you," she announced. "Privately."

He glanced around. No one was within earshot although a few people were close enough to see them. He hoped Adair wasn't about to confront him with his true identity. He didn't stand a chance of silencing her right in the middle of camp in clear daylight. Adrenaline surged through his veins and he forced his voice to sound calm.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Julia," Devon replied. He raised his eyebrows in question and breathed a slow sigh of relief. This was unexpected, at least it wasn't about him.

"Julia says she's afraid we have another spy in the group. She claims to know who it is. She refuses to tell me and I don't really know if I should believe her. Maybe she's protecting someone. Or maybe she's being paranoid and it's all just a run of bad luck. And maybe she's back to her old tricks and protecting herself."

"Devon, you don't believe that, do you?" he asked, startled. He didn't even have to feign his surprise. Julia was the last person he expected Adair to suspect; she was too obvious a choice. Joy rippled through him though. This was almost too good to be true. He might have a chance to ward off any suspicions directed at him *and* get rid of the doctor at the same time.

"I don't know," she replied. Her shoulders slumped. "I don't know what to believe anymore. Too much has happened on this journey. Can you do me a favor? Stay close to her until we know one way or the other."

He nodded seriously.

It wasn't hard for him to keep track of the doctor's movements. His work kept him in camp most of the day. And Julia spent all her time locked in the med tent. When she finally left to see to a medical emergency in another section of the camp he sneaked into the tent. He activated her palmtop scanner and typed in a message:

"Need to see you. Meet me at the Red Rocks. D."

He programmed the scanner to flash the message as soon as she activated the tool. The agent knew she'd go to the meeting spot -a rocky patch about a mile away from the camp they named after their rusty color- when she believed Devon wanted to talk to her.

And indeed, by nightfall he saw Julia peer furtively about the camp. When she thought nobody watched her she slunk away into the dense brush surrounding the campsite. He chuckled to himself. She was nothing if predictable in her actions. Then again, he'd spent so much time with her he knew her inside out - like he did all of Eden project.

Unconsciously copying Julia's movements he also glanced around the campground. When no one appeared to pay him any mind he followed the doctor's trail into the woods.

oOo

In the distance he caught glimpses of her luma light moving back and forth through the brush. An occasional snap of a branch marked Julia's progress. He followed her quietly, moving by the light of the stars and the twin moons. He was incredibly light on his feet for a man that spent most of his life in space.

When he neared the rocks the stationary glimmer of light told him Julia was waiting. Waiting for Devon. He moved aside the last few branches and stepped forward out of the undergrowth.

When Julia heard the quiet rustle of leaves she spun around. A startled look crossed her face. When he walked into the light she recognized him. She tensed visibly but forced her lips upward in a smile.

"Oh," she said, "it's you. You scared me. Is Devon with you?"

When he just grinned nastily in reply she began to back away, dropping all pretense of ignorance. Her blue eyes darted this way and that, searching for a way out. Even in the sparse light of the luma light he could see they were dark with fright. Her hands holding the light were trembling. Like a bunny cornered by a fox, he thought.

"Why?" she asked. "Why'd you do it?"

He advanced on her slowly.

"Because you didn't," he replied. "The Council is our only hope. And you betrayed them."

Step by cautious step Julia moved away from him. She came up to a tree and couldn't walk back any further. She whirled and tried to make a run for it. He sprung forward and grabbed her arm. She yelled out in pain. Julia fought him like a cat, kicking and scratching. But she was no match for the bigger man. A single blow to her head knocked her out and she slumped against him unconsciously. Her head lolled forward as he lifted her on his shoulder.

oOo

When he came to the spider cave he switched on Julia's luma light that now hung from his belt. Inside it was pitch dark, the light of the twin moons unable to penetrate and dispel the darkness.

He searched for the tunnel his handler told him about. He found it easily, the hiss of the steady flow leading him. Stiffly he put the doctor's body down to peer into the tunnel. Another current sped up to him and he ducked quickly to avoid being sucked in.

He glanced down at Julia's crumpled form near his feet. She appeared peaceful and pretty in her unconsciousness. For a brief moment he hesitated. Then he recalled her betrayal and his strong features hardened. Ducking to avoid another vacuum tugging at him he bent and pulled her body into the tunnel. He rushed out of the way as the next current thundered in. Her body was surrounded by light for a single second; then the current drew away, taking the doctor with it.

As he gazed at the empty spot her body covered only a moment ago he suddenly heard a scraping noise behind him. He whirled around and a dark shape leaped forward with an angry shout. As the other body slammed into him the agent went down. When he hit the ground the air expelled from his lungs with a heavy sigh. The luma light extinguished and darkness surrounded the two men. The agent tried to roll over and grab the gun in his belt. The other man wrestled him for possession of the weapon but with a lucky kick the agent hurled him off. He fumbled for the light and switched it back on. He pointed the gun at the body bent double on the floor.

"You!" Alonzo gasped when the light illuminated both men and he could see his opponent clearly.

"Yes, me," he replied. He was grinning widely now that he had the upper hand again. "Surprised?"

"A little," the pilot admitted as he cautiously sat up, holding one hand to his bruised ribs. "I know Julia suspected someone in the group started working for the Council. I never expected it to be you." He breathing more easy now and was able to articulate full sentences. "Where is she?"

The agent guffawed at that.

"Don't worry your pretty-boy head about that," he sniggered at the pilot. "Julia's gone. She discovered my secret so she had to go."

"What did you do to her," Alonzo cried. He began to get up. The agent motioned with the gun. The pilot froze in a half crouch when he saw the threatening muzzle pointed at his head.

"I returned her to the Council." He motioned behind the pilot. Alonzo glanced over his shoulder. Another flash of light announced the next inflow. "There's a someone waiting at the other exit to take her back. She'll have to answer to the High Command of the Council for her deceit."

For a second Alonzo stared at him wide-eyed. Horror at what the agent had done to Julia leaped wildly in his dark eyes and they sparkled with hatred. The agent expected the pilot to jump at him any moment now, despite the gun he still had in his hand. Behind Alonzo an increasing roar testified to the continuous flow of the vacuum pulls.

Before the agent could stop him Alonzo turned and jumped into the emerging current. A quick flash and he was gone. The agent stared at the place where the pilot had stood. Then he shrugged. Good riddance. Let them handle it at the other end. He had Adair to take care of.

oOo

The night was almost over when he finally returned to camp. The sky to the east colored a pinkish rose where the sun was about to rise over the horizon. The camp was in an uproar. Search parties set out when they realized several crewmembers were missing. Adair stood in the middle of the camp, coordinating the searchers. When he trudged into camp slowly, a bright young voice called out to him.

"Daddy! You're back!" The small girl that passed for his daughter bounded up to him

with a huge smile on her face. He swept her in his arms and swung her around merrily. She hugged him; her eyes sparkled with relief.

"Hey, True girl," he grumbled.

Devon walked over to him.

"John, it's good to see you back. What happened? Did you see Julia? Or Alonzo? They're both missing."

He made his face droop in regret, his brow darken.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You were right all along. Julia was working for the Council again. And Alonzo was in on it. Maybe he was all along, I don't know." He set down the girl and stroked her hair absently.

"Anyway, they're gone now," he continued. "Reilly picked them up with a shuttle, at the other side of the hills. I was too far to stop them but," and he patted the jumper hanging from his neck, "I could see it clearly. They're gone alright."

Devon sank down on the nearest crate. Dismay, anger, fear, a dozen emotions warred for precedence on her face. Her eyes turned dull as she fully began to realize what he told her.

"Oh my God," she said and repeated the oath a couple of times below her breath.

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her into a consoling embrace. She hid her face to his chest and he heard her mutter, "To think I'd have trusted them with my life..."

"I'm sorry, Adair," he said softly and stared off over her shoulder. Only the sun witnessed the cold grin of satisfaction that played around his lips...

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